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12. Countering the Politics of Fear

Insights from the Life & Theology of Uganda's John Mary Waliggo

J. J. Carney, Creighton University

Abstract

This article introduces Fr. John Mary Waliggo (1942–2008), the foremost Catholic public intellectual in post-colonial Uganda. In his personal life, priestly ministry, and extensive government work, Waliggo built a public theology around the theme of liberation, especially freedom from the paralysis of fear. Operating in the shadow of decades of political authoritarianism and violence, Waliggo argued that historical memory, popular unity, and a vociferous defense of human dignity could help counter the politics of fear that dominated late twentieth-century Uganda. At the same time, Waliggo's extensive involvement in modern Ugandan politics raises the fear of the politicization of the priest.

Keywords: Catholic, Uganda, Waliggo, politics, fear, church and state

Introduction

This year's Kripke conference tackles the theme of "religion and the new politics." I must confess that the "new politics" I address in this article — the "politics of fear" — is really nothing new. Nearly a century ago, Carl Schmitt, one of the progenitors of modern political theology, argued that the "distinction between friend and enemy" lay at the heart of the concept of "the political" (Hollerich 2004, 115).¹ Likewise, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in perhaps his most famous public utterance, exhorted Americans in 1933 that "there is nothing to fear but fear itself." The age-old preponderance of fear may help explain why Jesus's counsel, "be not afraid," is found over twenty times in the New Testament gospels alone.

And yet here in America, it would be hard to overlook the exponential rise in a political climate of fear over the past two decades. I think here of the growth of the anti-terrorist national security state after the attacks of September 11; the crisis in economic confidence spawned by the 2008–09 "Great Recession"; the growing awareness of catastrophic climate change; and the current COVID-19 pandemic. At such a volatile cultural, ecological, and economic moment, it is not surprising that politicians have sought to capitalize on the prevailing climate of fear. As Jeffrey Maciejewski argued in his symposium presentation, the "Trumpian politics" of populist nationalism in particular embraces a passionate rhetoric of fear, seeking to "reinforce a homogenous people and homeland threatened by the dangerous other" (Maciejewski 2020). Nor is the resurgence of this populist politics of fear limited to the U.S. context. Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Poland's Law and Justice party, Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism, and Matteo Salvini's Italian *Liga* have all prospered in part by embracing nativist xenophobia in a time of economic disruption and largescale migration. In the African context I know better, autochthonous citizenship laws are utilized to exclude political rivals in Congo, and xenophobic violence against immigrants has recurred in South Africa. Across the continent, social media fans fear of the political, cultural, ethnic, or sexual other. Such fears often lead us to prioritize our own personal security at the cost of the human dignity of our brothers and sisters. In the words of Kristin Heyer, citing Reinhold Niebuhr, "the universal human experience entails the sin of 'seeking security at the expense of another life'" (Heyer 2012, 15).

Uganda is no stranger to the politics of fear. Between 1971 and 1986, nearly one million people were killed under Idi Amin's dictatorship and the post-Amin civil war (Kasozi 1994, 4). Another half-million were killed during the twenty-year Lord's Resistance Army rebellion that dominated the north of the country between 1986 and 2008 (Behrend 2000; Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). Although Uganda has stabilized over the past decade, one still sees signs of the culture of fear in everyday life. In Entebbe town where I lived with my family during the 2018–19 academic year, my next-door neighbor kept her gates constantly locked, and I lived in a walled compound bordered by the Ugandan Marines. Even as a privileged, white foreigner, I was pulled over seven times by local police. Armed security was a constant presence on the streets, at malls, and in airports. And yet in my research, teaching, and everyday

¹ Schmitt's full quotation is as follows: "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping" (Hollerich 2004: 115).

interactions, I was also struck by the ways in which Ugandans resisted the culture and politics of fear, whether through media, music, humor, or even a spirituality emphasizing divine providence.

In this paper, I will lift up the voice of one of these elders of resistance, the late Fr. John Mary Waliggo (1942–2008). As post-colonial Uganda’s foremost Catholic intellectual, Waliggo had an outsized influence on fields as diverse as church history, theology, social ethics, and law. Within the church, he was a renowned teacher, scholar, and priest known for his pastoral sense and gregarious love of people. In public life, he was most famous for his central role in steering the 1995 Constitution to completion as well as his leadership in Uganda’s Human Rights Commission. In both his life and his thought, Waliggo witnessed to the importance of countering the political, ecclesial, and social fears that inhibit Christians from living into what he understood as the hopeful freedom of the Christian gospel. The ambiguities concerning his own politics, as well as concerns with the politics of memory that he advocates, remind us that Waliggo’s vision is an aspirational one, and not without its own shadows.

“Study in Freedom; Don’t Hide Yourself!”: The Life Witness of John Mary Waliggo

John Mary Waliggo was born in 1942 in Bisanje, a small village in Buddu province, the traditional Catholic bastion of Buganda kingdom (Ssettuuma 2017; Ssettuuma 2008). Buddu had been settled by thousands of exiled Catholics in the aftermath of the 1888–93 wars that pitted politicized factions of Anglicans, Catholics, Muslims, and Traditionalists against each other (Médard 2007, 427–504; Waliggo 1976). Waliggo’s extended family included members of all of Uganda’s major religions, although his mother, father, and maternal grandmother were devout Catholics. His grandmother was an especially important influence. The daughter of a Toro chief in western Uganda, she was briefly enslaved during the conflicts of the 1890s. Freed in part due to the intervention of White Father missionaries, Waliggo’s grandmother later served as a cook in the local minor seminary at Bukalasa, where she envisioned her work in terms of “raising up priests who will fight slavery” (Ssettuuma 2017). His grandmother’s lifelong association of Catholicism with resistance and liberation was very influential in Waliggo’s own development, as was his conviction that his mother had been unjustly denied professional opportunities due to her gender (Bugembe 2019).

Growing up around Bukalasa, Waliggo was drawn to the priesthood, and he entered the minor seminary in 1953 at age eleven. Here he experienced a common fear in modern Uganda — the fear of financial insecurity. His family lacked money for school fees, and Waliggo worried constantly that he would be expelled. For this reason, he used to hide behind a larger student every time the administrator showed up to collect tuition. This priest finally called him out one day. “John, study in freedom! Don’t be afraid. Don’t hide yourself!” (Ssettuuma 2017). The priest took a liking to Waliggo and ensured he could stay in seminary at a reduced rate. More importantly, the association of freedom with the casting out of fear became a lifelong mantra for Waliggo. According to his nephew, the theologian Fr. Benedict Ssettuuma, Jr., Galatians 5:1 was one of Waliggo’s favorite scriptural verses: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery” (Ssettuuma 2017).

It was also during his seminary years before and during the Second Vatican Council that Waliggo began to question the image of the fearful, wrathful God that had been inculcated

into him growing up in the conservative religious milieu of Buddu. Influenced by progressive missionaries such as Adrian Hastings, later to become one of the great historians of the African church (Hastings 1994), Waliggo started to read theology more through the lens of “liberation based on critical social analysis” (Ssettuuma 2008, 27). During this time, his own personal theology also shifted. As recounted by one of his friends, Waliggo concluded that “God is not there to punish, as God is love. We should not be threatened by God. We should respect but not fear God” (Rweza 2019). Such inclinations grew after Bishop Adrian Ddungu, his local ordinary in the Diocese of Masaka, sent Waliggo to study theology in Rome in 1966. Arriving right after Vatican II, Waliggo served as president of the international seminarians’ association and organized seminars on African theology that drew the likes of Karl Rahner and Jean Danielou (Kanyandago 2006, 220). Conversations with Latin American seminarians enabled him to recognize some of the shared structural and social challenges of underdeveloped countries. Always pushing the boundaries, he conducted research on the Roman church’s “apostolate to prostitutes,” a project which he later claimed “nearly cost me my vocation” due to the behavior he uncovered among high-ranking prelates in Rome (Ssettuuma 2008, 34). Such hierarchical hypocrisy gave him pause on whether he should go through with ordination. His spiritual advisor, Father (and future cardinal) Emmanuel Wamala, helped place his priestly vocation in Christological perspective, a perspective that ultimately helped Waliggo overcome his fear of serving a fallen church: “We are for the Church, but there are so many weaknesses in the Church. We are for Christ above all” (Nanseera 2019).

Waliggo was ordained in 1970 and immediately sent to Cambridge to pursue a Ph.D. in history under the renowned Africanist John Iliffe. After defending his dissertation on Catholic history in Buganda (Waliggo 1976), he again faced a decision. Five years after coming to power in a military coup celebrated across much of southern Uganda, Idi Amin had overseen the new nation’s devolution into an economic basket-case and what one former minister infamously called “a state of blood” (Kyemba 1977). With several important exceptions, religious leaders stayed quiet during the 1970s, fearing for their and their congregations’ security in the face of Amin’s brutal and capricious violence. Although Waliggo had written on political controversies under a pseudonym during the 1960s,² he initially hesitated to return to Uganda, choosing instead to spend six months researching in the White Fathers’ archives in Rome. In early 1977 — around the same time that Amin executed Anglican archbishop Janani Luwum for his outspokenness (Muhima 1982, 110–11) — Waliggo made the decision to sneak back into his home country. He later claimed that returning to Uganda in 1977 “made me turn from history to human rights activist . . . I decided to fully utilize my theology and study of history to fight for justice and peace, democracy and human rights in Uganda” (Ssettuuma 2008, 48). Amin’s agents began tracking Waliggo. In September 1977, he fled to the Ssesse Islands in Lake Victoria, which offered far more difficult terrain for government agents to navigate and a local tradition of protecting political refugees. Ever the scholar, he used this six-month exile period to conduct ethnographic research on traditional religious practice on all sixty-four of the populated islands. He returned to mainland Uganda in 1978, keeping a very low profile in a rural parish in Rakai in the Diocese of Masaka.

² Unfortunately, these early writings have been lost (Ssettuuma 2017).

Waliggo embraced the relative political opening that followed the toppling of Amin's government in April 1979. In the runup to Uganda's first democratic elections in nearly two decades, he conducted political education forums and wrote an influential pamphlet entitled "Vote Maturely," calling on Ugandans to reestablish a civilian government and support free and fair elections (Waliggo and Mayanja 1980; Mayanja 2018). The Ugandan people indeed voted, and early returns from December 1980 parliamentary elections showed an apparent victory for the Catholic-dominated Democratic Party (DP). But factions in the military rigged the final outcome to ensure the victory of Milton Obote and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) (Kasozi 1994, 143). In the aftermath, the country descended into a scorched-earth civil war between Obote's government and Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). Waliggo wrote clandestinely during the war and likely had a hand in some of the Catholic bishops' more prophetic pastoral letters, including "I Have Heard the Cry of My People" (1980), "Be Converted and Live" (1981), and "In God We Trust" (1982). More controversially, Waliggo also began to lobby for the Catholic Church to enunciate a "theology of last resort" that would authorize violent revolution in the face of what he saw as Obote's entrenched authoritarianism (Waliggo 2002c, 1034). Obote's agents sought to arrest him in January 1983, and Waliggo fled into exile disguised as a Catholic nun (Ssettuuma 2015).

Waliggo remained in exile in Nairobi, Kenya, for the next four years. During this period, he taught at the newly founded Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa, later renamed the Catholic University of East Africa. Here he served as the first chair of the Department of Church History and general editor of *African Christian Studies*, a journal that grew into one of the leading organs of African theology on the continent (Magesa 2014, 80–82). But whatever his love of academia, Waliggo did not want to stay permanently in exile. After Museveni's triumph in January 1986, southern Uganda stabilized, and Waliggo wrapped up his work in Nairobi and came home. In doing so, he overcame a fear that may resonate with many of the contributors and readers of this volume – namely the fear of losing the security of a comfortable academic position.

Waliggo returned to Uganda in 1987; companions later said that he kissed the soil as soon as he crossed the border (Ssettuuma 2017). Having read several of his previous works, Museveni asked Waliggo to help shape Uganda's constitutional revision. In accepting the new leader's offer, Waliggo overcame the fear of "the politicization of the priest," an accusation that would be lobbed against him for much of the rest of his life. The Ugandan process was notable for its wide participation: over 25,000 submissions were sent to the constitutional commission, and around 30,000 Ugandan community leaders participated in constitutional seminars (Tripp 2010, 78–79). As a constitutional commissioner between 1989 and 1993, Waliggo was an integral player in this process, crisscrossing the nation to conduct public forums seeking input on constitutional priorities. Waliggo supplemented this roadwork with a daily radio call-in show on constitutionalism (Kaggwa 2019), and he also drafted two Catholic bishops' letters on the constitutional process: "Towards a New National Constitution" (1989) and "Political Maturity: Consolidating Peace and National Unity in Uganda" (1995) (Nanseera 2019; Rweza 2019). After the Constituent Assembly was launched in 1993, Waliggo was named as secretary. Working with a small team of seminarians, he reduced the 8,000-page draft constitution to a feasible 800 pages, taking refuge again in the Ssesse Islands to complete this herculean task in a mere two months (Ssettuuma 2017; Waliggo 2002j).

The main cause for the fear that subsumed Uganda in the late twentieth century was the violence of security forces. So although Waliggo had planned to step back from public life after the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution, he agreed to stay in government to work at the new Ugandan Human Rights Commission (UHRC). At the UHRC, Waliggo oversaw the “Education, Training, and Research” division (Uganda Human Rights Commission 1998, 4). In this role, he instituted new human rights curricula for schools and, even more critically, human rights training for Uganda’s police, army, prisons staff, and intelligence services. Waliggo focused in particular on sensitizing security personnel to the problem of torture (Sekaggya 2019). In this regard, one of his important legacies was the development and promulgation of a human rights training manual for Uganda’s police. In 1999 alone, the UHRC trained over 1,400 police in “rights-based policing,” and human rights desks were soon established in the police, army, and prisons. Shortly thereafter, human rights became an examinable subject in police training (Uganda Human Rights Commission 2000, 23; Uganda Human Rights Commission 2004, xiii; Saboni 1999). As Waliggo and his colleagues noted, “the development of human rights training manuals for the security organs is a major achievement given that these organs have historically been the major human rights abusers in the country” (Uganda Human Rights Commission 2002, 42). Waliggo recognized that people often have legitimate reasons for their fears, and one must address the root causes rather than just exhort them to be courageous.³

Even as he spearheaded Uganda’s human rights work, Waliggo maintained a hectic schedule as a priest, scholar, public speaker, and teacher (Kanyandago 2006, 218). After a life of relatively good health, he fell suddenly ill in 2007 and was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Although some friends speculate that he was poisoned due to his sensitive work with the UHRC, a more likely cause was his lifelong chain smoking. He died on April 19, 2008, on a flight from South Africa to Uganda, killed by a blood clot induced by his cancer medications (Rweza 2019). He was buried at Bukalasa Minor Seminary, the place where his grandmother had first raised priests who could fight slavery.

Countering the Politics of Fear: Three Key Insights from Waliggo

In addition to his remarkable public life, Waliggo was a prolific scholar who wrote voluminously on history, theology, social ethics, and traditional culture. His unpublished articles and speeches from 1989–2002 stand at over 1,000 pages, and even during his most active years of public service, he continued to write books and contribute to international scholarship on Africa and Uganda (Waliggo 1988; Waliggo 1995a; Waliggo 1995b; Waliggo 2002). I will limit my reflections here to three key dimensions of his political theology that especially shaped his resistance to the artisans of anxiety.

First, as a historian, theologian, and public activist, Waliggo argued that *memory* could counter the politics of fear. In essence, exploitative political regimes aim to cultivate either communal amnesia or historical romanticism — they either do not want their citizens to remember at all, or they only want them to remember in a certain way. To counter this,

³ To be fair, Waliggo’s passion for human rights training and reform of police and security services did not lead to a massive cultural shift in policing. This is evidenced by the continuing abuses of security services, especially during Uganda’s 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 presidential election cycles.

Waliggo claimed, historians and theologians alike should pursue a “history from the grassroots . . . a people-centered history, which takes into account the cries and pains of the existential situation of the people” (Ssettuuma 2008, 30; Waliggo 2002f). Waliggo thought that it was especially important for church leaders and theologians to develop a critical historical consciousness, making “serious theological reflections” on Uganda’s tortured history of gender discrimination, wars, tribalism, and massive loss of life rather than just brushing this under the rug (Ssettuuma 2008, 54). For Waliggo, scholars should not whitewash the church’s history to protect the institution’s reputation. Rather, the church historian’s mission is to remember the victims of past oppression — whether at the hands of the church, the state, or society — so as to remind the church that its fundamental mission is to liberate the oppressed. For Waliggo, the path to Easter Sunday always runs through Good Friday — one had to recall, name, and specifically condemn the sins of the oppressive past as a first step on the path toward a more liberatory future. On an individual level, Waliggo also saw memory and historical reflection as crucial to liberating the person from the tyranny of anxiety, as one learned that God’s ultimate will is one of freedom rather than fear. In his words, “every human person and especially every Christian must be a person who remembers. It is in remembering that we continually discover our liberation by God from all types of slavery, oppression, and suppression. We also discover the men and women God uses in our liberation” (Waliggo 2002a, 885).

Waliggo’s counsel to “remember to liberate” echoes the influential 20th-century political theology of the German Catholic Johann Baptist Metz, especially Metz’s call for a “farewell to the forgetfulness of the forgotten” and what Metz termed the *memoria passionis* (Metz 1998, 41, 26). Metz argued that church history and theology must never become overly teleological via overlooking, downplaying, or justifying past suffering in the name of social progress, Christian evangelization, patriotic nationalism, or some other noble cause. Yet for Metz, we remember this human suffering within the determinative memory of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, offering a horizon of eschatological hope rather than existential despair: “the history of salvation is that world history in which there is hope even for past suffering” (Metz 1998, 37). Similar to Metz’s concept of the “dangerous” or “emancipative” memory (Metz 1998, 91), Waliggo believed that remembering the victims of past oppression could unleash fruitful forms of solidarity with today’s victims.

At the same time, Waliggo could do more to grapple with the challenges of memory. This would include devoting more attention to how victims can productively remember without retraumatizing (Herman 1992, 175-95), as well as how to forestall victim-groups using memory to justify their own violence and oppression against perceived enemies. Simply put, memory does not inevitably liberate; it can also imprison. It does not necessarily lead to more inclusive solidarity, but often to exclusive solidarities framed by rival memories invoked as a pretext for further violence. In the words of Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, “Instead of simply protecting a person, memory may wound another. Instead of generating solidarity with victims, it might breed indifference and reinforce cycles of violence. Instead of truthfully acknowledging wrongdoing, it may bolster a victim’s false self-perceptions and unjust demands. Instead of healing wounds, it may simply reinjure” (Volf 2006, 33). Waliggo is right to challenge both historical romanticism and cultural amnesia, but he could do more to explore

the complexity of “remembering rightly” in a country like Uganda, torn between rival regional, political and ethnic memories.

Second, for Waliggo we overcome fear by *standing together in an inclusive solidarity* that crosses ethnic, national, and cultural lines. Atomization is one of the key strategies that repressive regimes use to prey on communities, namely by convincing people to identify in rival tribes organized around exclusive ethnic, political, or religious claims. Uganda’s colonial and post-colonial history had seen this tribalism play out in spades, from the politico-religious wars of the early colonial period to the ethnic and regional rivalries that stoked so much conflict after independence. Reflecting his own mixed family background, Waliggo was a lifelong supporter of Christian ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue (Waliggo 2002e). As a professor at the Catholic University of East Africa in Kenya, he staunchly opposed the ethnic favoritism that often played out on faculty (Magesa 2014, 81). Even as a Muganda himself (a member of the Baganda, the largest ethnic group in Uganda), he confessed that past Ganda elitism and sub-imperialism had cultivated justifiable resistance among Uganda’s many other ethnic groups (Ssettuuma 2017). He also recognized how tribal divisions often undermined the church’s own collective witness in post-colonial Uganda. Not surprisingly, his preferred ecclesiological image was the more unified Vatican II vision of the church as “all the people of God — all the baptized people” (Waliggo 2002b, 457). In this spirit, Waliggo argued that God calls us to a radical love of neighbor that crosses ethnic, national, and party lines. More impressively, he voiced these views in contested political situations. For example, although he was working for the government in the 1990s, he criticized the NRA’s wartime abuses in northern Uganda, arguing in a NRM newspaper that “the right to peace and security for citizens of parts of the north and west has not been guaranteed . . . the right to personal liberty has been undermined by over-enthusiastic agents of the State, under the unacceptable excuse of cracking down on terrorism and lawlessness” (Waliggo 2002h, 701–2). Waliggo recognized both the importance and the challenge of intra-regional, north-south solidarity in Uganda for unifying both the country and the church.

Third, Waliggo argued that teaching people their own human dignity and supporting a “pro-life, pro-people politics” were crucial to countering the political culture of fear. This is why Waliggo argued that the “root cause of all injustice in Africa” was not first and foremost bad political leadership, economic inequality, or even neocolonialism, but rather people’s “ignorance of their God-given dignity and human rights” (Waliggo 2002f, 1173). For Waliggo, if you know your innate worthiness as a human person loved by God, you will stand up for your rights. If you have no sense of self-esteem or remain locked in fatalism that sees your suffering as “God’s will,” you will cower and keep quiet. Waliggo saw this fatalism as a result of colonialism, yet he also pointed to deeper spiritual and cultural roots: “Africans are used to explaining all their misfortunes, poverty, ignorance, oppression as the will of God” (Waliggo 2002d, 680).⁴ Ultimately, one counters the negative social forces of fatalism, divisionism, and scapegoating through encouraging integral liberation that supports the flourishing of the

⁴ Despite his deep appreciation for traditional culture, Waliggo was quite critical of male chauvinism and Ganda practices like female circumcision, polygamy, the exclusion of women from land inheritance, and what he called a “culture of oppressive silence” among women and children (Waliggo 2002d: 679). Women’s rights were not a peripheral issue for Waliggo who, late in his career, wrote an entire book on the subject (Waliggo 2002k).

holistic human person. In this sense, Waliggo's public theology is oriented around what he sees as the heart of the African worldview: a politics of life that reflects God's will for life. In his words, "whatever promotes life, transmits life, manifests life, enriches life, saves life, protects life, ensures life, heals life, is good and must be longed for by all. Whatever does the opposite is evil and must be avoided by all" (Waliggo 2002i, 933).

More controversial is Waliggo's close association of these ideals of inclusive solidarity and "pro-life, pro-people" politics with the ruling National Resistance Movement. Beginning in the late 1980s, Waliggo's national activism entailed a very close relationship with Museveni and the ruling NRA/NRM government. Until his death, he never broke with Museveni. For example, he did not publicly support the 1999 referendum to reintroduce multi-party politics, and he did not publicly oppose the crucial constitutional modification that enabled Museveni to run for a third presidential term in 2006 (Waliggo 2002g; Rweza 2019).⁵ Waliggo believed that genuine policy results were achieved through behind-the-scenes engagement and "quiet diplomacy" rather than public confrontation (Kaggwa 2019). Reflecting this spirit, he once told a friend, "while I am there [in government], let me be the candle" (Wasswa Mpigi 2017). His stance also reflects a Ugandan conception of "prophetic politics" that emphasizes how the religious leader should retain a working relationship with ruling authorities rather than criticize at a distance (Ssettuuma 2015; Kaggwa 2019). In biblical terms, Waliggo was more like the prophet Nathan than the fiery outsider John the Baptist; he strove to influence government from the inside, speaking hard truths privately while maintaining a close working relationship with "the king." This type of approach lends itself to obvious risks of politicization, and Pope Benedict XVI offers salient cautions in his post-synodal *Africae Munus*: "To yield to the temptation to become political leaders or social agents would be to betray your priestly ministry and to do a disservice to society, which expects of you prophetic words and deeds" (Benedict XVI 2011, 108). I would argue that Waliggo should have distanced himself more publicly from the government during the final decade of his life when Museveni's and the NRM's authoritarian tendencies became ever more evident, including the beating, exiling, and arrest of opposition politicians (Reid 2017, 83). As one associate recalled, "he [Waliggo] went into politics and found it hard to come out."⁶

Conclusion

Fr. John Mary Waliggo was Uganda's foremost Catholic intellectual in the late 20th century. A renowned theologian, social ethicist, and church historian, Waliggo made impressive contributions to public life in Uganda, including revising the national constitution and leading the government's human rights division. As a person, priest, and public servant, Waliggo strove to counter the hegemonic "politics of fear" that dominated Ugandan social, economic, and political life after independence. He believed that memory — especially remembering the oft-forgotten victims of history — offered a critical means to counter the oppressive politics of amnesia and romanticism. Likewise, he argued for an inclusive, pan-ethnic solidarity marked by what he termed a "pro-life, pro-people" politics. Waliggo did not

⁵ In January 2021, Museveni contested and officially won his sixth presidential term. Working with a large majority in the Ugandan Parliament, his NRM party in 2017 disposed of the "age limit" constitutional clause that banned candidates over the age of 75 from contesting presidential elections.

⁶ This quote is unattributable on request of the interviewee.

leave his contributions on a rhetorical level, and over the final twenty years of his life he actively engaged in the upper echelons of government. This entailed a close relationship with President Museveni and vociferous support for the ruling National Resistance Movement. As a former close associate commented, “He used to pray, ‘God please help the NRM!’”⁷ To a degree, Waliggo’s partisanship undermines his otherwise powerful political witness.

There may be a deeper truth in Waliggo’s ambiguous witness, however. Namely, there are no purist alternatives. Uganda is better off with a revised constitution, a national human rights office, and a socially engaged episcopacy, and Waliggo played integral roles in bringing all three to fruition. To stay out of politics would have had its own high cost, and itself would have reflected a tacit endorsement of the status quo. Waliggo was a remarkable scholar who wrote voluminously, but his “theology is preceded by action” (Kanyandago 2006, 228). In contrast, theology unaccompanied by action is sterile, idealistic, and does not reflect an incarnational God who took the risk of fully engaging in the joys, hopes, fears, ambiguities, and pains of human life. So yes, Fr. Waliggo’s political witness raises legitimate fears, especially for Western observers historically enculturated to view any blending of religion and politics as a violation of sacrosanct principle. Yet for Waliggo, the greater risk would be to allow fear to lead to silence and paralysis, preventing one from flourishing and aiding the flourishing of others. It is up to each person to discern how to respond to God’s call to freedom.⁸

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⁷ Taken from an April 2019 interview in Kampala, this quotation is unattributable on the request of the interviewee.

⁸ This article draws on material included in my recently published *For God and My Country* (Carney 2020). Research for this project was made possible through generous grants from the Kripke Center, Creighton’s George F. Haddix Faculty Research Fund, and the U.S. Fulbright Foundation. I also extend a special word of gratitude to Fr. Benedict Ssettuuma for sharing John Mary Waliggo’s unpublished papers with me, and I thank Fr. Ssettuuma and the many other Ugandans who spoke with me about Fr. Waliggo over the course of four years of research.

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