

Breaking the Mental Shackles

By TERRY ELLIS

Contributing Editor

Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986, has been called Africa's most versatile writer — a poet, playwright, novelist and essayist. Today he's also an angry man. He sees the African leaders of Nigeria following in the oppressive footsteps of colonial leaders. He calls his homeland "the open sore of the continent." But he cannot turn his back. He speaks out. And so he has nurtured his creativity in prison and now in exile under charges of treason.

Soyinka continues to walk the high ground, convinced of the people's ability to create a different future for Africa and for the world. This fall when Czech philosopher-president Vaclav Havel hosted a global conference in Prague to study the need for a "change in the sphere of human conscience," Soyinka was one of those invited. He joined such global thinkers as the Dalai Lama, Elie Wiesel of the United States, Helmut Schmidt of Germany and Frederik de Klerk of South Africa.

At that time, Soyinka eloquently argued that what the world needs now is the mind's liberation: "If the fall of the Berlin Wall is to escape trivialization, [it must stand] as a permanent rebuke of closure and exclusion, a repudiation of mental shackles, and an affirmation of the virtues that stamp the human mind: a hunger for knowledge, for experimentation and discovery, and a refusal to accept orthodoxies as unassailable...."

While in exile, Soyinka continues to speak out in political forums. He testified before Congress in September, urging the United States to intensify political and economic pressure on Gen. Sani Abacha, Nigeria's military leader.

Soyinka's heart and thinking are grounded in the future — in a more peaceful and prosperous Africa for the next millennium. And for that, his opponents have criticized him as utopian.

Ultimately, he reaches for a world of harmonious communities, and he traces the divisiveness to those all too human, primal questions "Who am I?" "What am I?" "Why am I?" The answers throughout history weren't necessarily the problem. It was the implied antithesis, he reasons. And religions have created some of the most powerful of these antitheses.

"I believe, therefore I am. You disbelieve, therefore you are not; therefore you count for nothing. You are subhuman. You are outside the pale of humanity, outside the concept of community," Soyinka writes in his essay "The Credo of Being and Nothingness." "On our home front we have watched helplessly as this escalates to the periodic slaughter of 'infidels.'"

Soyinka points Africans to the roots of their own spirituality. Specifically, he notes, nowhere in the religious teachings of the Yoruba, his own people, are found divisive concepts of being.

"It is not weakness in the character of this religion, however, it is not even tolerance," Soyinka writes. "It is simply — understanding. Wisdom. An intuitive grasp of the complexity of the human mind, and a true sense of the infinite potential of the universe."

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