

Interview with Sam Oni

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Interviewers: Melody An, Sean Kennedy, Alden Moore, Megan Rutherford, and Diandra Walker

Interviewer: How do you feel about being denied entrance to the churches where the same people that converted you worship?

Mr. Oni: (Sighs) It was, without a doubt, a very harrowing experience, a very dismaying experience. I had come to the United States of America, come to Mercer...I know you know a lot about me, but not all there is to know about me (Laughs). But I think it inspired a very powerful Christian conviction.

I had worked with missionaries as interpreters whenever they were working and preaching. I came to know them more; I was "born again." I took the faith very, very seriously, and as it is often said about African Christians, we are more Catholic, sometimes we are more Catholic than the Pope. So when I arrived, and it is one thing to have an expectation, but of course I knew I was going to be the first black face on campus, but it's quite another thing to actually have the experience. That's where my trouble started.

Mind you, I didn't have any difficulties on campus other than the problem of loneliness, which is nothing to talk about, especially if you are five, ten thousand miles away from home. But the thing that tested my faith most profoundly was finding that the churches that sponsored missionaries to my part of the world...The first Southern Baptist missionary to arrive among our people was Robert Bowen. He arrived in 1855, now mind you this is one hundred years later, 1963, that I arrived, and you would have thought at least the same kind of hospitality that my people showed to Southern Baptist missionaries would have been extended to me as well. I need you young people to put this in perspective, in 1855 conceptions that exist when you think of Africa, the continent, the jungle, where the savages run wild and if you're lucky enough to get hold of a missionary he is usually a little barbecued missionary, and that's nothing. But contrary to all of those misconceptions Reverend Bowen was accepted well, with great hospitality. He stayed on as a missionary and scores of other Southern Baptist missionaries followed. As a matter of fact, the Southern Baptist Seminary, in a place called Bomusho there are still scores of Southern Baptist missionaries working there.

To answer your question: it was a faith shattering experience to find me, as the Bible says it, "I came unto my own, and my own received me not." My own, some of you are wondering, how can you think of white people as your own people? Well, that's my idealistic perception of life. I think of all of us as all belonging to one family of God. So it was a very jarring, very harrowing, and very stressing experience.

Interviewer: What is your most vivid memory of Mercer University?

Mr. Oni: What I will call my most vivid memory, I think it happened after the fact, after I left in '67, and at one point I vowed never to step foot on Georgian soil or Southern soil again. Whatever vivid memory, whatever powerful memory I had I think more or less was subdued by other kinds of memories, but when I came back in spite of myself, by breaking that vow that I would never set foot on Georgian soil, in 1994 I think it was, I was invited back to commemorate the university in Macon. I came back to, what is it, Willingham Chapel, where I was honored to give the keynote to the 30th anniversary celebration of my integration at Mercer, and it was beyond belief, beyond describing. I walked into the chapel to a standing ovation. I got up to speak to a standing ovation. It is an experience, a memory that I will cherish as long as I live. So, a vivid, cherished memory, happening not directly during my tenure as a student, but happening in the fullness of time in 1994.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you made a difference in your time at Mercer?

Mr. Oni: That is a good question. As a quotation--I like collecting quotations, some of you maybe are like me--but there is one that I try to live by, and it is one that says, "You cannot do all the good the world needs, but the world needs all the good you can do." I think about it, live on it, because you pretend to take our world for granted. I think that it is important that we stop and pause for a moment. What is so special about today?

Interviewer: We're interviewing you?

Mr. Oni: (Laughs) Today is Earth Day, and you know that we all live and drive our cars. The earth, which is like a mother to all of us, we need to pay some attention to it. The impact that I made was not readily discernable. But the very fact that I had the opportunity to come at the time that I did and had the man of courage, Dr. Rufus Harris, then president of Mercer University, to extend an open invitation for me to come. You may now know this from your research and stuff, but it took me a year of waiting while the battle raged. There was a very truculent period where the Southern Baptist Convention in Georgia--the relation between Georgia Baptists and Mercer, the legal definition--the relation was that the Georgia Baptist Convention churches were up in arms in position to my coming. I had done fairly well in High School, and was a student athlete, and was an all around the kind of student that any college would welcome. The battle raged for an entire year, and it wasn't very pretty. They said some very uncharitable things to Dr. Rufus Harris. But at the end of the day, they had to sort of throw in the towel, the people who were opposed to my coming. Not so much out of Christian charity as it was a matter of expedience. Because had they persisted in denying me, they would have also had to think twice about continuing to send missionaries to my country.

Interviewer: Did their hostility ever cause you to question your faith?

Mr. Oni: As I said, the four years here, I was the only black on campus, and I tried to, as a Christian, I tried to keep an open mind. I remember the first time I went into the cafeteria, and I went in there and said to myself, "you don't know what to expect, but you cannot be guilty of the same thing you find objectionable." So I picked up my tray of food, and I looked around, and I sat at a table where all of the other students were sitting. So I sat down my tray, and on cue, each student, one by one, walked away.

But that was minor, compared to the experience in the house of God. You might have, in your research, read of the encounter I had here at what is now Newton Chapel. But prior to that, well, Newton Chapel. It's relevant because about three years after, I think a Wednesday or Thursday, and then on a Saturday afternoon, I was living in Sherwood Hall. There was a knock on the door, and I opened the door and an elderly gentleman was there, and he proceeded to introduce himself as Dr. Clifton. Clifton was his first name, Forrester. "I am the pastor of Tattnall Square Baptist Church," he said. "And I've just come to let you know that you won't be welcome to worship in my church on Sunday." And my roommate, Don Baxter, who you also might have read about, we looked at each other in bewilderment. But for me, that shock of recognition, that a man of God would come and say to a fellow Christian that he wasn't welcome to worship...it was jarring, it was jarring. So I said to him, "Well sorry to disappoint you, but you have nothing to worry about, I have made up my mind that Vineville Baptist Church was where I was going to worship."

And the reason for choosing Vineville was that the Reverend Walter Moore had chaired a committee that had recommended to the Georgia Baptist Convention that they go ahead with admitting black students to Mercer University. So I assumed that a man of that state of consciousness would let his congregation think likewise. So come Sunday we go on the bus to Vineville, we got in, went to Sunday School, at the end of Sunday school we went to the sanctuary, the sermon was delivered.

How many Baptists are here? Practically all of you. It is the practice, as it is in many other churches I'm sure, the pastor invited new people that might be thinking of becoming members of Vineville Baptist to step forward. So about a dozen of us stepped forward, and Dr. Moore then asked everybody else to go sit down, except for me. So he proceeded to say, "We are very honored today to have among us a young man who came to us through our own missionary efforts," and mid-sentence he was cut off. A man got up off his feet and very truculently said to him, "Dr. Moore, I'm not going to sit here and watch you destroy this church by bringing niggers into the congregation." And before he was done a woman was up on her feet, all red faced, and the remarkable thing about it is as I replay these memories in my head it was like a movie. Remember it was my first Sunday in America among people who had come to introduce the Christian faith to me. And then another man got up, so three people spoke in a very virulent manner in opposition to me becoming a member of their Baptist church. And as you know, the Baptists make a big thing of being very democratic, so if a person says, "Christ, I want to be your follower," they say, "let me talk to my disciples and vote on

it.” So they put the matter to a vote. “All in favor of Sam Oni’s membership please raise your hand.” The hands went up. “Those opposed please raise your hands.” The hands went up. The pastor and I were the ones facing the congregation, and it was clear that a majority favored my membership, but the diehards wouldn’t give in. So the vote was taken a second time, and still with a similar result. Again the diehards wouldn’t give in. So Reverend Moore asked for a standing vote. It then became clear to all that a slim majority favored my membership, and that was how I was so warmly, so enthusiastically welcomed into the house of God’s worship on Sunday in America.

Interviewer: What was your membership like?

Mr. Oni: Good question! From that Sunday I could feel the tension, it was so palpable you could slice it with a knife. I happened to be the first to sit on a pew, and before long it became incompatible--just the tension, the atmosphere--to be in that worship for me. It didn’t take long for me to take my leave from Vineville Baptist Church. It was difficult.

Interviewer: What was your initial experience at Mercer like?

Mr. Oni: Yeah, it was again a matter of trying to marry expectations to experience. It must have been a Saturday. I arrived at New York, and from New York I got on a train, and I rode the train to Atlanta.

I was very active in the YMCA, and in those days the “C” in the YMCA was really the heart of the organization, and the “C” stands for what? Christian. Young Men’s Christian Association. That was long before it became a place where you went to build your muscles and all that, which is why people go to the Y these days. So I became very active, I became president of the student YMCA, and when I got word that I had been accepted to come to Mercer University, I didn’t have the means of paying my way. The German YMCA had sent the equivalent of a missionary to the YMCA in Ghana, and he and I had become friends. He was impressed enough by me that he wrote a book about me. He sent the book--it was published in German. I told Fritz about it, and he said, “Don’t worry, the German YMCA already knows about you, and I am going on leave, and I will present your matter to the German YMCA.” A couple weeks after he left, they said that the German YMCA will pay your way to the United States, but they will also pay for you to come spend the summer in Germany speaking at summer camps, and again they took their summer camps very seriously. It was all faith based and Christian centered. So the young people who read the book were very excited to see me and share some time with me. When it was time for me to leave Germany for the United States, I got a letter from the President of the German YMCA to the President of the American YMCA in his office in New York. So I went in there, I introduced myself and I stayed in Manhattan, not too far from Times Square. I mean again, fresh out of Africa--just overwhelmed at the skyscrapers. I nearly twisted my neck off. It was a phenomenal experience.

When it came time for me to leave for Georgia, the Presidents of the German and American YMCAs gave me a letter to the YMCA in Atlanta. I went to Atlanta YMCA, and I recognized Mr. Kennedy. So I gave him the letter, he read it, went back to his office, and it was supposed to put me up, to give me a place to stay before I was to proceed. He went back to his office. He came back later, and he said, "Well, I'm sorry, you won't be able to stay here." But he recommended that I go to the ITC, that is the International Theological Center, and that is where I stayed.

And I proceeded by train after a few days in Atlanta. Joe, "Papa Joe," anybody knows who Papa Joe is? He met me at the train station, brought me to campus. And the thing that struck me when I arrived--I was staying in Sherwood Hall--was the number of black people on campus. I thought this was black and white people mixed, but they were all working as handymen, or whatever, the cleaners and things like that. So that was the first impression, it took me aback. I thought the nature of segregation in America: everything was kept strictly separate and segregated. First day not much happened.

Interviewer: Do you think being foreign hindered your acceptance by the other African American students at Mercer?

Mr. Oni: Good question, indeed. An excellent question because being foreign had something to do with it. The assumption is that we're all "black" (laughs), and I put that in quotations. I have difficulty with black and white. I see myself as a member of the human race.

But African Americans knew very little about us. Some have seen the Tarzan movies. Anyone here seen Tarzan movies? And many of their knowledge about us Africans being black, and many of them also felt there is still tension between African Americans and Africans. Felt a little superior, after all they live in the civilized world in America, and the Africans were trapped in the jungles and ran around half naked and all that stuff. So there was that, that understated subtle kind of tension, and as I said it still exists.

But I think that some of the difficulty African Americans had with Obama was just that. He is "black," all right? But that father of his didn't come from Perry, Georgia, or Kansas City, Missouri, where his mother had come from. Where was his father from? Kenya! And that was what others, what was his name, Jesse Jackson had a kind of reluctance, too. And there was the one with the fancy hair, yeah, Sharpton, had initial difficulties. A part of that also had to do with the fact that, "Look, here we have been part of the civil rights struggle and here you come you whippersnapper. I don't know where and now with a father from Kenya. It would have helped if your father had come from say Jackson, Mississippi or something, and we'll forgive your mother for being from Kansas."

But that was the kind of tension that still exists. Although the tendency is to see all black people as part of one family, and that is almost, now what I am speaking of, the black diaspora. The scattering of people, and there is that. The people from Africa, the slavery

bringing them into the New World, and all parts of the New World you'll find them. In Cuba, a powerful black influence in culture, particularly in music. There's a part of Brazil called Bahia, have any of you been to Brazil? Are you from Brazil?

Samir: My Dad is from Brazil.

Mr. Oni: part of Brazil called Bahia. You'll find our people, Yoruba people. The culture is phenomenal, the way the culture has been preserved. They worship Uribur Pantheon Weshonshongoya, and the music. Of course they speak the Yoruba language with a thick accent. Some people who have looked into these matters have said why you find the retention of Africanism, the aspect of African culture in South America more than you will find anywhere in North America and the United States of America is because the people there let the Africans be Africans, even though they were slaves there. They were able to find an equivalent in St. Peter; they were able to find the equivalent in worship, fascinating stuff. The Protestants in the North, however, were a bit more puritanical, shall we say? Therefore, they would not be receptive of anything that differed from their own conception of their Christian faith.

Interviewer: How did coming to Mercer affect your career choices?

Mr. Oni: Oh, I wanted to be in Ghana--I feel like I was in much competition in Nigeria; I mention that because I was born in Ghana of Nigerian parents so I kind of claim both countries and cultures--but I wanted to be Ghana's representative to the United Nations, "Ambassador Sam Oni!" (laughs) Then making a great speech on asking why the imperialists should be driven out of Africa or why the Communists should not be given an inch of footing in Africa. All along, I wanted to write, so when I left to the University of California in Berkeley, it was for the school of journalism. It was an erroneous assumption that if you go to a school of journalism you could learn to write. I found out the first quarter was learning the style of the New York Times or the National Tribune, that was disappointing. I ended up teaching almost by default. It's a lie; people...the people who tell you that teachers in primary school would get their reward only in heaven. It's great to see bright young people like you come in and be transformed, as you will be transformed by the end of this semester—to be able to look from a different perspective. That's a very rewarding part of teaching. So it contributed, not directly, because by then I had done a lot of good things, not at Mercer necessarily, but there's no running away from it, the foundations lay here.

Interviewer: If you wanted to create a monument, how would you design it? What would you focus on in it?

Mr. Oni: The children in the civil rights movement. See, history is a crazy animal; you end up picking heroes individually. We all know about Lincoln, we all know about MLK, but there are people whose contribution--unsung heroes. And that is in every aspect of history. When you talk about great generals, you have Robert E. Lee, the great hero—

ha, what do I know?—but whether it be Robert E. Lee or McArthur, what about the soldiers? The infantry unit, who actually did the fighting and sacrificed their lives?

So, that's a profound question because I have often thought about it, and you will find the leaders that emerge from such enterprises. Also, Martin Luther King, of course, was black, got shot. But the one of his lieutenants, Andrew Young, parlayed his experience in the Civil Rights Movement to run for Mayor of Atlanta, and then congressman, and then ambassador to the United Nations (laughs), and now a successful businessman. What can I tell you about Jesse Jackson, who's managed to blackmail in reverse, corporate America into shelling out money for his operation PUSH?

So the heroes who really emerge--not to make light of their great sacrifices and contribution--but I would in regard to the Civil Rights Movement. You've seen documentaries, I'm sure, of the Civil Rights Movement: the fire hoses, the police dogs. I went to Selma, Alabama, I think it was about two months ago now, and when I was invited I jumped at it because I remember it was soon after I arrived at Mercer in '63. I ran into all kinds, of all sorts of lunacy was let loose in this country, many men were killed. You know of the three civil rights workers killed, Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner. There was a woman who came out of Milwaukee, I may be thinking of, but I think she's Liuzzo, Viola Liuzzo, white woman, brave, from Michigan, was murdered. The four little girls in Birmingham, yeah, they were simply in church and trying to worship, and somebody thought the best way was to set off a bomb. Horrific stuff. I arrived, and the first jolt was Kennedy, I was in the student area watching stuff.

I had always been fascinated with the BBC. The BBC is what? British Broadcasting Corporation. I just became addicted to BBC. I was poor, and I couldn't afford to buy a radio, so there was a kind of PA system set up in the village square. I rushed to hear radio newsreel, news on the hour, and things like that. I developed this passion for world affairs and current events.

Yeah those children and others; Kennedy died. I was sitting in the student area watching the television and some fellow white students were laughing, I guess for celebration, when Kennedy was assassinated. So we went to Selma to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It was a moving experience because I remember sitting in the student area watching television, just paralyzed, in shock to what the state troopers and the policeman-- shooting tear gas and throwing batons. So I found a chance to pay respect to those who lost their life. Black Sunday it was called. Just for the right to march from Selma to Montgomery, to petition their own government. So we did that and that was so the children.

Back to your question, building a monument for those brave souls and the world. By the way, I wanted to share with you: does anybody know how to spell the word responsibility?

Sean: (Attempts to spell it)

Mr. Oni: Just to digress, what does the word responsibility mean?

Mr. Oni's Nephew: Accountability.

Mr. Oni: Anybody else? Let me give you a very simple one that's clearer: it's the ability to respond. That's one version of it. Responsibility: the ability to respond. And this is what has motivated all the great leaders, whether you are thinking of Ghandi Anybody heard of Ghandi? That made an impact on the world. Their capacity to say, "The situation is not right and needs correcting," and they move to respond to it. So that is what motivates you to do what you said. There are some children around Mercer campus that may need help with their math or English, and you volunteer. The ability to respond, think of that. And today is Earth Day, and we need to think of that. Think globally but act locally. Think globally; in other words, this Earth in which we inhabit belongs to all of us. And we share the responsibility for it, the ability to respond for its wellbeing.

We're being very selfish aren't we? It's critical. So I digressed a bit. So continue with your questions if there's still some questions.

Interviewer: What professor at Mercer had the biggest impact on you?

Mr. Oni: Oh, that is difficult because I left here--again that question might have been-- the response to it might have been affected, undermined by the state in which I left Mercer. That was in a very bad way. It wasn't anger; it wasn't disillusionment; it was all of it wrapped up. I believe they gave you a copy of my speech as part of your freshmen package? If you do not, I brought a few, and your professor could make copies. I'm not going to be responsible for handing these out because I don't want to make enemies. I don't have enough copies (laughs).

Papa Joe had called me and said, "Sam, where have you been?" I said I had been in California, and then I had moved to Nigeria some months ago. He said, "I had been looking for you." I asked why. He said, "Well, we looked all over the place for you. We had to get a detective." Now, I don't know about you, but if somebody had said they had been looking for you and they had to use a detective, it makes you sit back and say, "Maybe it had finally caught up to me." (laughs). So I said, "Why?" He said, "Sam, I have a good cause." Remember, I had left there vowing to [never return]. He said, "We've decided to celebrate the 30th anniversary of your time at Mercer. We'd like you to come and speak." So we met at last, and as I said I have an experience permanently emblazoned on my conscience.

But back to the question, the professor. I'm not quite sure there was a Professor Bond in sociology. He's long gone now, retired. I served as a lab assistant as a major in sociology.

And Margaret Woodruff, that's a good one. I think it was Psychology. But those two seem to come to mind. But much of it was as if I tried to blot out some of the experience here.

Interviewer: In the grand scheme of things, would you have done anything differently?

Mr. Oni: No. When I was going through it, it was a very harrowing experience. You know when I made the statement I would never set foot on Georgian soil or southern soil, that was in the thick, the heat of the moment. But you look back and you say, when you consider the end result, in the scheme of things.

I founded an organization called Project Plowshare for Africa, and that was to take. Do any of you remember the famine in Ethiopia? It was about 20-25 years ago, so none of you may remember, though some of you may have read about it. And I was moved to respond to it by saying, "We Africans, too, ought to begin to address our own problems." I founded a project called Project Plowshare for Africa, and the aim was to take development ideas, basic workable ideas to the rural areas in Africa, and to help others develop their crop and so on. And I took that. It worked to a certain degree, but the circumstances in the continent as a whole.

I had been working under a military dictatorship. For the American mind, the military dictatorship seems so alien, but the military takes over the government, so you do what you can wherever you can. But I feel that my life from the experience, everything that came after was built on the foundation. But I look at the young black students, the young Africans, those that are beneficiary of the scholarship that Mercer set up in my name that brings African students to Mercer. How can you not be thankful for that, for having endured and survived? "Never say never" is good advice. Because when you move away from a situation that you say never to, you being to have a different perspective. That was inspiring and worthwhile adventure.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for being here with us.

Mr. Oni: Thank you. You are all an inspiration. The truth is that time marches on, and no one is going to live forever. So as people like me step off the stage of the world and the care of it, the children and the future take on this enormous responsibility. Cultivate the ability to respond. Another suggestion is to develop an attitude, and attitude of gratitude. That's helped me to see my Mercer experience so much differently. I like to be the number one cheerleader for Mercer University. It's an excellent school, in case you haven't heard (laughs), and a new love affair. It used to be Berkeley. When I left here I was a wreck, but when I got to Berkeley I found open acceptance. I have this mad love affair with the city of Berkeley.

But seriously the world will not be saved by each of us sitting on the fence and floating around--that ability to respond coupled with an attitude of gratitude. So let me end by

asking if there are any Indians here? I learned from some Indian friends that you bring your palms together and you take a slight bow. You utter the word "Namaste." I was curious enough to ask what that word means. It means that I acknowledge the divine in you. I honor the divine in you. If you are thinking that is farfetched, have you ever read the story of creation? In Genesis, when God shaped and molded that form, he breathed into everything to give it that spark of life, into its nostril, the spark of life. So the divine is in you, it's in you, it's in me. And once you recognize that, you ask what is the argument about? We are all one, in a family of God. Together we can heal the world and by healing the world we can heal ourselves. Namaste.