



Editora Fundação Fênix

# ACCOUNTING FOR THE FAITH THAT IS IN US

*Essays in contemporary*  
**AFRICAN THEOLOGY**



**Org.: Luiza E. Tomita**

**Editors: Patrick Mwanja, CSSp  
and Laurenti Magesa**

Brazil/Kenya, 2022



This book is a result of an enthusiastic answer by African and Africanist theologians to a call by EATWOT (the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), to publish the results of their research, but above all, to share the challenges they have faced, both in the field of the theological academy and in their pastoral and social commitments.

The contributors offer here their theological contribution through local forms of wisdom (where palaver or other kinds of theological processes are involved), the development of faith within cultures, emerging theological paradigms, social-political issues, spirituality, ecology, feminism, contextual thinking, reconstruction, religious pluralism, postmodern challenges, among other themes.



Editora Fundação Fênix



ACCOUNTING FOR THE FAITH THAT IS IN US  
REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN QUESTIONS

## *Série Religião e Teologia*

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In Memoriam  
Rev. Prof. LAURENTI MAGESA  
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## EDITORIAL NOTE

Innovative research remains a significant and indispensable aspect of scholarship. Scholars cannot afford to shy away from or ignore their responsibility of offering solution-giving contributions to some of the perplexing issues and challenges that face humanity today.

This anthology, promoted by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), is a product of research work by African and Africanist scholars who have, in one way or other, contributed to theology locally, regionally, and across the globe.

This particular volume is interdisciplinary in nature and presents thought-provoking essays intended for a wide audience – professional theologians and non-professionals alike. The book will help readers to perceive what is happening in biblical and theological discourse in different parts of the African continent. It offers pertinent, wide-ranging, and ecumenical insights into God's presence in contemporary struggles for justice, peace, reconciliation, human wellbeing, and spiritual growth.

The contributors took the opportunity to offer their input on the contribution to theology of local forms of wisdom (where *palaver* or other kinds of theological processes are involved), the development of faith within cultures, emerging theological paradigms, social-political issues, spirituality, ecology, feminism, contextual thinking, reconstruction, religious pluralism, postmodern challenges, or any other theme they considered important.

It is hoped that readers will find in this book well-informed and courageous reflections on issues that are relevant to theology in Africa (and perhaps beyond) today.

**Patrick Mwanja, CSSp.**

**Laurenti Magesa.**

(Editors).



## INTRODUCTION

*By Luiza E. Tomita*

This book is a result of an enthusiastic answer by African and Africanist theologians to a call by EATWOT (the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), to publish the results of their research, but above all, to share the challenges they have faced, both in the field of the theological academy and in their pastoral and social commitments. For decades, EATWOT African members have published on their theological concerns, social challenges, spiritual concerns, and other circumstantial issues of profound relevance to their reflection on the depth of the sacred and transcendent. In this book, there is a large diversity of themes as the chapters were written by female and male theologians of different contexts and concerns, but all of them very much concerned on the relationship between the Christian religion and the African cultures and the preservation of African values above all. Fifteen articles were written in English and one in French. The last one was written by an Afro-American well known theologian, M. Shawn Copeland. To facilitate reading, we separated the articles in five parts, which may not be an exact identification, but it may help choosing the themes.

In the first part, the article that begins this anthology is a first look through that great window that opens: winds of hope and justice is blowing over Africa. Beatrice Churu and Ettore Marangi explore the possibility for lay Christians to make a transformative contribution to society within the ecclesial community. The first part of the article tries to develop some elements of the theology for Christian transformation, starting from the results of the exegesis of passages from the New Testament. This is how different aspects of Christian transformation emerge. The second part of the work assesses the presence of some of these aspects in the changes that the ecumenical community of St. Martin is introducing in the territory of Nyahururu, Kenya, showing a deeper and more appropriate understanding of its vocation. At the same time, it provides that lay Christians can achieve a stronger identification with the paschal mystery whilst releasing the energies for the necessary service to build up the body of Christ everywhere.

Amid the turbulence of faith and cultural conflicts, Wilfred Sumani claims that African theology needs to mediate the vision of God's salvation, since the time of lament is over, and the mourning veil has to be removed. African theologians are doing an admirable work to help the process of inculturation in the Christian practices inside the African communities, especially in what refers to foreign and domestic political oppression, and this is true especially in a more incultured liturgy. He insists that it is time to surpass the threshold of self-pity and to announce the beginning of the construction of a new Jerusalem to sweep away the grimy waters of conflict, poverty, disease and ignorance so that the land of peace and prosperity may be revealed in Africa by the Africans themselves.

Nations of the North, particularly in Europe and America, are becoming increasingly paranoid about Islam and Muslims, concerned about a possible threat to the internal and external security of nations. Evaristi M. Cornelli questions if the African Religion (AR) also represents a danger compared to the hegemonic religions, Christianity, and Islam. His reflection on religious violence concludes that what makes a religion violent is the ideology of supremacy, its connection to the State, its claim of universality, its proselytism, its practice of threat, its intolerance, which are not the practices of AR. By examining the ideology of supremacy, he underlines that AR cannot be a threat to the security of nations because in fact it has itself suffered from threats and the theology of supremacy, from Islam and Christianity and has not resorted to violence and war as a response.

Persistent observance of the practice of widow inheritance among the Luo of Western Kenya and its condemnation by the Catholic Church has called the attention of Aloys O. Ojore to a pastoral dilemma for Catholic widows in the Archdiocese of Kisumu, who have to obey a levirate custom of sexual rites. The Luo have sex rituals to celebrate seasons like planting and harvesting, rites of passage associated with birth, marriage, the establishment of home, and the death of close family members. The sexual act on any of these occasions is an act of blessing, which maximizes life. In this sense, a widow who does not have a partner would be expected to get one even if just for that specific ritual function. Since such occasions are many, a constant partner is crucial. Observance of life-related rituals is compulsory for all, regardless of one's religious beliefs. It is this unilateral law that leads Luo Catholic



widows into social and spiritual exclusion. The Catholic Church rejects the levirate custom because it contradicts her fundamental teachings on marriage, which is *exclusively* monogamous. In this interesting and detailed study on the subject, the author offers helpful insights and considerations.

In the social sphere, the political powers still oppress the African people, thus Nathanaël Y. Soédé denounces the close connection between the politicians and the Christian religions, which develops a corrupted politics of domination over the people using their religious influence. The churches, instead of Christian practice of justice, openly support despot chiefs of State, through the "messengers of God," or "men/women of God". Therefore, he insists that changes must be made at this level so that the religious order thoroughly rejects political corruption in order to contribute to a fair construction of people and societies in Africa.

What has the "civilization" process meant to Africans which instead of bringing them health and well-being, left them lost and alienated? Agnes Nabbosa analyses the case of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, which led to the Kanungu killings, taking her to the conclusion that the schooling and Christianization of Africans have not solved their problems. Instead, "civilization" that came through Christianity and Western schooling, separated what is human and spiritual and finally left the African people divided and wounded. Globalization and Westernization deeply destabilized Africa and Africans, suppressing the African worldview and distorting their culture. Nabbosa's theology focus on how Church should critically examine its practices and its theological teachings so as to emphasize the need to promote and defend the African cultures.

In order to answer the question: what constitutes the human person, and, by extension, how personal identity may be determined, Kpanie Addy discusses the role of memory as determining personal identity over time, as it survives biological death and is crucial in anchoring post-mortem personal identity. The author highlights not only the plausibility of this position but also asserts that it is consistent with Roman Catholic eschatological doctrine, while it relates to the cult of the ancestors prevalent in most African societies.

Memory is a very important aspect of human spirituality. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda that killed thousands of Tutsis, Hutu, and Twa peoples as the culmination of a long-standing ethnic exclusion is studied by Marcel Uwineza who argues that there is evidence to suggest that for Rwanda's future, memory is of decisive significance, especially when one contemplates the thousands of unburied bones and the possibility of understanding God's presence in this reality. He claims that Rwandese must not allow themselves to be mentioned out of unreconciled memories even by theology, but rather they must have faith and speak about God among themselves.

Patrick Mwanja believes that the sacredness and wholeness of creation and the responsibility entrusted upon humanity to preserve the cosmos is something that cuts across all religions. His article focuses on Christian ecological spirituality as a way of responding to ecological problems and thus contribute to a sustainable future. He advocates for "custodianship", a principle to put in practice the mutuality, reciprocity and interdependence that exists between humans and the rest of the inhabitants of the Earth. The author identifies the ecological crisis caused by humanity's failure to fulfill its responsibility of taking care of God's creation as one of the greatest sins of modern times. He calls everybody to embrace eco-justice, in an attitude of *metanoia*, a radical change of attitude towards the environment.

The ecological crisis and the danger of a collapse is one of the most challenging items in the political agenda. It concerns politicians, economists, and theologians as well. Marcel Uwineza argues that although often underappreciated, African Spirituality has positive and ethical contributions to turn over the environmental crisis, proposing the healing of the universe as an alternative response to the ecological crises. The author gives seven reasons why Africa is the source of pro-life and pro-nature virtues in African Spirituality, which must be thoroughly promoted in most of African school systems.

The current environmental crisis poses a serious concern on the earth's survival: the continuation of life in its current form. Christophère Ngolele asserts that given the urgency of this issue, African identity needs to be revised and its deep meaning should be rediscovered as to its relationship with the surrounding

environment. This should start with the search for the cultural resources that may help each culture to overcome the environmental threats.

Concerned about the missionary vocation in Africa, Laurenti Magesa underlines the importance of taking culture into account in the process of education, especially because the missionaries were often confronted by different cultural challenges, and constantly forced to answer different concrete questions resulting from these environments, such as the negative dimension of tribalism and discrimination, known as negative ethnicity. The talents which should be aimed at by young missionaries in favor of a transcultural mission are outlined: first the ability to integrate faith and life based on the African conviction of the sacredness of all creation; second, the ability to bond with others on a wider scale; and finally, the openness to an ongoing dialogue with tradition.

Woyos drawings, which are neither of the order of writing nor orality, give interesting insights for theological and biblical reading. Using the relationship between African wisdom and Western epistemology in order to contextualize biblical hermeneutics, Paulin Poucouta focuses on the Woyos drawings to analyze the parent-child relationships, the education of the offspring by the parents and the obedience of children to their parents. The author concludes that they are extremely positive to bringing forth the endogenous wisdom which can be the methodological and hermeneutical support to the African reading of Bible.

Richard Rwiza discusses the Ethical Dimension in the African University to promote the integral human development. He postures that education should exert a formative influence on human flourishing. He points out that instead, African universities have mainly been centers for diffusion of western cultures, instead of encouraging and challenging its students to develop their powers of constructive thinking. For this author, African universities have a distinctive role in promoting development, a transition from less human conditions to human fulfillment with resort to ethical values. He therefore encourages the promotion of social reforms, including gender equality and empowerment of women.

Inspired by hermit Saint Antony of Egypt, Jean-Marie Quenum points out that his radical discipleship should inspire today's African Christianity in dealing with the challenges and signs of time. In his opinion, African Christians are called today to

participate in the mission of Jesus, by sharing one's life of personal prayer and the battle against the evil forces of God's creation.

M.Shawn Copeland is a gifted African American writer who shows concern about a very delicate issue which is to connect African and African Americans memories so as to enhance solidarity among them. She uses a hermeneutics of memory and a hermeneutics of suspicion to approach these two groups so that they get to know and cherish one another. She analyses the memories of African Americans and the tragedy of slavery to point out the importance of respect among Africans and African Americans as it refers to their memory and history. Thus she tries to demonstrate that a properly enacted hermeneutics of memory and hermeneutics of suspicion may allow a redemptive critique that nurtures solidarity, first, through excavating the memories of the enslaved peoples, secondly, interrogating Africans and African Americans about their mutual misunderstandings, using three tasks: knowledge, *palaver*, and compassion.

Finally, our thanks go also to two persons who dedicated their precious time to make a revision on the texts: Yolanda Chávez (EATWOT America's coordinator) and Glauco Asís Chávez.

We hope that the look through this great window that opens on Africa through these articles will provide moments of resourceful reflections on the current reality of this vast continent.



**PART I – AFRICAN THEOLOGY FACING SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL  
CHALLENGES**



## CHAPTER ONE

### SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHRISTIAN 'METAMORPHOSIS' FOR THE LAITY IN EAST AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

*Beatrice Churu & Ettore Marangi*

#### **Abstract**

*This research seeks to explore the possibility for Christians to make a transformative contribution to the society and even within the ecclesial community. To this end, after presenting the origin of Social Transformation studies, the first part of the paper tries to elaborate some elements of a theology for Christian transformation, starting from the results of the exegesis of the New Testament passages where terms united by the linguistic root 'form' occur. Thus different aspects of Christian transformation emerge: its protagonists; the nature of the power that brings it about; its enemies and the obstacles that get in its way; its verifiable effects in the present; and its ultimate outcome. The second part of the paper evaluates the presence of some of these aspects in the changes that the ecumenical community of St. Martin is introducing in the territory of Nyahururu, Kenya. The authors took part in an experience of life sharing with the St. Martin community and with the most challenged that the community endeavours to serve through its elaborate system of volunteers.*

#### **Introduction**

The term 'social transformation' is increasingly used to indicate a series of studies designed to improve living conditions of various human groups. The expression has been established in social science literature as a reaction to the experience that different development theories have hardly ever given the hoped-for results, even as they have succeeded one after another on the world stage since the end of the Second World War.

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-01>

The first development theory to be taken into account was the Modernization Theory. This theory considered the Western nations' journey, from feudalism to the constitution of modern States, as the path required for every country in the world that wanted to achieve the same high standards of living achieved by the West. Development was thus conceived as the result of a process of Europeanization or Americanization of the rest of the world. By the 1960s the expectations raised by this development model had proved largely illusory, especially because in the world there was growing inequality among nations and, within the single nations, between the rich and the poor. Moreover, it was becoming clear that this conception of development was inadequate: it was ethnocentric; promoted the elimination of traditional values of many populations; and was based on economic criteria only (Gross Domestic Product, per capita income). A more realistic understanding of development should take a holistic view of the human being and rely on more comprehensive criteria, as was adopted in the case of the Human Development Index since the 1990s.

The theory of modernization was followed by the Dependency Theory, which saw underdevelopment as a deliberate process designed to perpetuate exploitation of the Third World's economies (the periphery) by Western capitalism (the core). Thus it proposed import-substitution industrialization strategies designed to increase national economic and political autonomy. However, the proposals of the dependency theory also ran into difficulties by the mid-1970s. Latin American countries that had applied these new strategies had not been very successful, while some of those who started to apply export substitution industrialization strategies in some Third World areas (especially Brazil and East Asia) questioned the prediction of continued dependency.

In the 1980s and 1990s two competing theories of development became very influential: the Neo-Classical Economic Theory, which tended to become the dominant ideology of global capitalism, trying to make the world safe for global investors and corporations—hence the use of structural adjustment policies by the IMF and the World Bank—and the World Systems Theory, which underlined the importance of studies that identify the various factors that are at work worldwide,



since it pointed out the crucial issue was the development of the world economy itself, where various countries or groups could gain ascendancy on the basis of economic, political or military strength.<sup>2</sup>

However the notion of development became problematic from the late 1980s due to major economic, geopolitical, technological and cultural changes: the trends towards economic and cultural globalization accelerated because of the information technology revolution; globalization and industrial re-structuring led to marginalization, impoverishment and social exclusion for large numbers of people all over in the world; the collapse of the Soviet Union and the partial shift to a market economy in China made capitalism appear to be an uncontested economic model.<sup>3</sup> In this context emerged the notion of social transformation as a framework for understanding the way contemporary processes of global change affect local communities and national societies throughout the world,<sup>4</sup> in order to provide positive recipes for social and political actions and help communities improve their livelihoods and cope with the consequences of global change.<sup>5</sup>

Within the Christian world, it was the Theology of Liberation that was more concerned with highlighting the political, social, and economic dimensions of Christian salvation. This theological current has carried a controversy in its concept of development since its inception—it did not disclose the conflictual nature of reality—and this made it feel closer to the thesis of dependency theory of development.<sup>6</sup> In this article, we do not intend to suggest that it would be better to replace the Theology of liberation with a Theology of Transformation. We would rather, first, accept the challenge posed by this new orientation in social studies, showing that Christian revelation has something to say even when choosing to use the category of 'transformation' to the challenge of tackling the drama of inhuman living conditions that a large section of the world's population lives in; and second, we would show some partial example of Christian transformation of reality, because we think it is appropriate to accompany theological reflection with examples capable

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. S. Castles, "Development," 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. S. Castles, "Development," 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. Castles, "Development," 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. Castles, "Studying," 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the Second and Third Chapters of G. Gutierrez, *Teologia*.

of demonstrating that the results envisaged in theology are actually embodied in real situations.

To reach the first goal, we limit ourselves to focus our work on the analysis of the biblical texts where the word 'transformation' and its cognate terms occur, trying to derive, especially from the context in which these terms are inserted, some of the key elements for a Christian transformation of reality. As for the second goal, we try to illustrate how some of these elements are embodied by some lay Christians – the community of St. Martin's Catholic Social Apostolate (CSA), also referred to as St. Martins – in the Catholic Diocese of Nyahururu in Kenya. Finally, we purvey the information that we believe can improve the contribution that lay Christians are offering, to build a better world here in East Africa.

### **Christian Contribution through the Biblical Keywords Related to the Idea of Transformation: 'form,' 'to form,' 'to transform,' 'conformed,' 'to conform'**

The noun 'transformation,' or 'metamorphosis' in Greek, is actually completely absent from the bible where, however, we find: 1) the noun 'form', 2) the verb 'to form', 3) the verbal form of the noun 'transformation' (meta-morfo,w), 4) the adjective 'conformed', and 5) the verb 'to conform'. We proceed with the analysis of the meaning of these terms in their specific context, in this same order.

### **The Word 'form' in Phil 2:5-11: 'Deformity' at the Heart of Christian Transformation**

The word *morfh*, in ancient Greek is synonymous with *ei=doj*, *ivde,a*, *sch/ma*. However, *morfh*, mostly points to the appearance peculiar to every being objectively present in its singularity; *ei=doj* points to its phenomenal aspect common to the category to which that being belongs; while *sch/ma* points to its purely external features, the mode of presenting itself; it never points to a principle of internal order.<sup>7</sup> The only text of the Holy Scripture that contains the word 'form' and may be relevant to our study, because it refers to a transformation, is the passage of Phil 2:5-11,

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. M. Behm, cols. 482-484.

which, as we will show, exhibits few points in common with the section of the Book of Isaiah related to the Servant of Yhwh (Is 52:13-53:12). In this text the declaration of the beneficial lordship of Jesus Christ on the entire cosmos is a way to express the realization of God's plan for humanity. However, it differs from other utopian dreams of transformation because it entails some moments of negativity. It is the result of a trans/formation that occurs in the person of Jesus through a 'V' movement following the 'a<sub>b</sub>c' sequence: even though existing in the divine condition (morph,) (a), Jesus Christ waives his equality with God; 'empties' himself, taking the form (morph,) of a slave; and finding himself with the external appearance (sch/ma) of men, he lowers himself obeying even to death on a cross (b); for this reason, God over-exalts him giving him the name of 'Lord' (c).

In the hymn, Jesus' obedience does not correspond to anything obscure but his choice to share the meanest condition in which a human being may end up, which necessarily leads him to abandon the privileges of his divine condition. This is in fact the meaning of the expression *εὐταπεινώσεν ἑαυτὸν* that is used in the New Testament to convey the rejection of any feeling of superiority and pride, and consequently the adoption of a form of mildness, firm and resolute, devoid of any form of violence. It is this very obedience/sharing that is the reason of his exaltation (*ὑπερυψώσεν*) by God. For Paul, this transformative process, which can encompass the entire Christological event, is not reserved to the sole person of Jesus; on the contrary, all Christians, in this case the church of Philippi, are invited to take part in it (cf. Phil 2:5).

It is interesting to note that the process which characterizes the entire passage of the Son of God in our midst, in Phil 2, somewhat follows the experience lived by the Servant of Yhwh in Isaiah – at least three aspects allow a comparison between the two texts: the presence of negative moments turned into a positive one in both Jesus' personal story and that of the Servant of Yhwh; the reference to a disfigured human figure (morph,/ei=doj); and the reference to the servant (douloj/paij). In fact, the Servant of Yhwh, sharing Jesus' feelings of humility and nonviolence (cf. Is 42:2-3; 53:7-9) and being in tune with God (cf. Is 50:4-8) as he was, is exalted by God (cf. Is 52:13). In order to exert a beneficial power over others (cf. Is 53:5.10-12), he also goes through a phase of de-formation: his figure (ei=doj), like that of the Son of God,

turns out to be so far (destroyed) beyond that of men that he is totally unable to attract attention (cf. Is 52:14-53:2), "one from whom men hide their faces" (Is 53:3).

From the analysis of the significance of the word 'form' in the biblical passages in some way related to this term, it follows that for a believing community the eschatological transformation appears to be the outcome of the participation in the experience of de-formation undergone by the Son of God through his choice of total sharing of the most alienating experiences lived by humanity. It is very clearly stated that Christian communities are not called to charitably help the most disadvantaged of humanity from the outside and from above, while retaining their own privileges; on the contrary they are invited to identify themselves with the scum of humanity, if they do not already belong to it, and carry out their service to the last, also addressing those threats of death that come from the established powers. It is the total repudiation of the "prosperity gospel" by any denominational pulpit. Only this choice of sharing with the last gives the guarantee of being involved in a process of transformation led by the Father's very power; the reason is Christological: that it is what Jesus Christ did.

### **The Verb 'to form' in Gal 4:12-20: Religious Laws as an Obstacle to Christian Transformation**

The only passage where the verb 'to form' (morfo,w) is present in the Bible is Gal 4:19, where it occurs in its passive form. The passage in question is part of a unit, Gal 4:12-20, where Paul, using his own memories, speaks against the influence that the Judaizing party exerts on the communities of Galatia. Paul once bore them like a mother (cf. also 1Thes 2:7), but now he has to bear them again in pain until Christ is formed in them. The basic idea is that of the formation of a child in a womb. This second 'delivery' is needed for the fact that Christ is still unable to live in these communities in the same manner in which he lives in the apostle (cf. Gal 2:20), for, although the Galatians claim to be Christians, they are unable to free themselves from the legalistic observance of Jewish law.

In this passage the use of the word under scrutiny refers to a transformation that must be accomplished within the believers through the maternal relationship

that the apostle maintains with them, and that is hindered by the fact that the community is pursuing its 'justification' through its attempt to be subjected (cf. Gal 4:21) to the Jewish law. The factor common to this text and the text analysed above is that this transformation is centred on the figure of the crucified and living Christ (cf. Gal 2:19-20). While it is true that Christians no longer face the problem of observing the Jewish law, it is also true that often their lives are still imprisoned by an infinity of "commandments expressed in ordinances" (Eph 2:15). If, for example, we look closely at the life of the faithful in the Catholic Church, we find that it is carefully regulated by a whole set of moral, disciplinary, liturgical and pastoral precepts whose range of action extends from the most common choices that Christian communities must make to those that concern the most private aspects of life. Observance of these norms is sometimes so binding that their transgression can also lead to different forms of separation from one's own ecclesial community, up to excommunication. It can be noted that the pontificate of Pope Francis is leading the Catholic Church towards a completely different direction. At any rate, Paul seems to suggest that all these norms end up aborting rather than promoting Christian life, and that true transformation in the hearts of the believers is the result of primary relationships of faith, based on mother/child relationship in this case, capable of generating the mystical presence of the risen Christ within the believers.

### **The Verb 'to transform' in Its Three Biblical Occurrences**

In the Bible the verb 'to transform' appears three times: in the episode of the Transfiguration (Mk 9:2 and its parallel in Mt 17:2), in 2 Cor 3:18, and finally in Rom 12:2. We will analyse these pericopes in this same order.

#### ***Jesus' Transfiguration/Transformation: The Gift of a Beautiful Experience for the Disciples to Refuse the Use of Force in Their Partaking in Jesus' Mission***

In the Gospels, the verb 'to transform' is present in the episode of Jesus' Transfiguration, in Mark's and Matthew's versions. It seems that Luke does not use the verb 'to transform' because, writing for Hellenistic communities, he intends to

distinguish the 'metamorphosis' of Jesus from that attributed to pagan gods;<sup>8</sup> he prefers to use the expression 'to. ei=doj tou/ prosw, pou auvtou/ e[teron', "the appearance of his face was altered" (Lk 9:29).

All three Synoptics place this episode after the turning point that occurred, in their account of the life of Jesus, at Caesarea Philippi (cf. the link between the two episodes in Mk 9:2), where he takes stock of his mission for the first time, and distances himself from the triumphalist messianism professed by his disciples. In fact, according to the Synoptics, after Caesarea Philippi, instead of entirely devoting himself to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to the crowds, working miracles, casting out demons and welcoming sinners, Jesus begins to talk about his future passion (cf. Mk 8:31; 9:30; 10:32), reinterprets discipleship as taking upon oneself the cross (cf. Mk 8:34), focuses his activities on the disciples—to whom he now gives new instructions so that an attitude of service can replace their desires for human glory and power (cf. Mk 10:3-45)—and uses his speeches to defend himself from the attacks of the people's leaders.<sup>9</sup>

Set in this context, the episode of the Transfiguration—couched in a pattern drawn from the theophany to Moses on the mountain (cf. Ex 24:1.9.16)—is intended to help the disciples understand Jesus' choice to be a messiah seemingly powerless, and therefore vulnerable and subject to suffering and death. This is made clear by the divine voice that concludes the revelation on the mountain, which invites the disciples, in all three Synoptics, to listen to Jesus qualified as "my beloved Son" (Mk 9:7), "my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 17: 5) or "My Son, my Chosen One" (Lk 9:35) with a clear allusion to the figure of the Servant of Yhwh (cf. Is 42:1; 49:7). The figure of a weak and suffering messiah had no precedent in Jewish tradition;<sup>10</sup> moreover, in all religious traditions it is quite common to note that human power often constitutes the image and earthly concretization of the power of the gods. For these reasons, the announcement of the necessity of the cross was to be particularly scandalous for the disciples, hence the decision of Jesus to offer some of them a preliminary experience that would make them foretaste a beauty (cf. Mk

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<sup>8</sup> J. M. Behm, cols. 491-499 and 522-526.

<sup>9</sup> J. Sobrino, *Gesù*, 262-266.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Theissen and A. Merz, *Il Gesù*, 656-657.

9:5 and parallels: "it is beautiful for us to be here"), alternative to that offered by human power. This beauty was concealed in the "exodus [...] he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk 9:31), which according to Luke constitutes the content of the dialogue between Jesus and Moses and Elijah.

The event of Jesus' metamorphosis offers the disciples this type of experience. Evangelists express it with a series of apocalyptic motifs: the references to the resurrection of Jesus (cf. Mk 8:31; 9:9-10; and Mt 17:9); the white (cf. Mk 9:3 and Mt 17:2; cf. Mk 16:5) and dazzling Jesus' robes (Lk 9:29; cf. Lk 24:4); his face shining like the sun (Mt 17:2); 'his glory' (Lk 9:32); the change of his figure as part of the eschatological gifts;<sup>11</sup> the voice from the cloud (cf. 2 Mac 2:8); the reaction of the disciples in fear and silence (Mt 17:6; cf. Dn 10:4-12); and finally the presence of both Elijah, expected for the end times (Mk 9:4.11-13 and parallels; cf. Mal 3:23-24), and Moses, a figure of the promised eschatological prophet (cf. Acts 3:22; Dt 18:15). This characterization of the epiphany represents a clear allusion to the eschatological realization of the Kingdom of God to which the three evangelists had already explicitly referred in a verse before the beginning of the whole episode (cf. Mk 9:1 and parallels). The cross is the best way for God's promised eschatological transformation to be accomplished, and Jesus' transfiguration is an anticipation of it.

The message of the episode of Jesus' metamorphosis, analysed in the broader context of the Gospel, is of great relevance if we think that from the Constantinian shift to the Vatican Council II the church has thought she was all the more the sacrament of Christ in the world the more she became covered with human glory and power. However, the message also has a critical function that goes beyond the Church, against all the attempts of transformation of reality imposed by force and violence, which are doomed to failure—about the dream of Israel represented by the beauty of the Temple Jesus said, "Not one stone will be left on another" (Lk 21:5) and so it was. Instead, in this world\aeon, forces that really transform the reality in the direction of eschatological utopia promised by God manifest themselves *sub contrario*,<sup>12</sup> that is under the opposite of what we should expect; therefore, we also

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. M. Behm, col. 526; cf. *Baruch Syriac* 51, 3-12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Moltmann, *Il Dio*, 246.

are called, like the disciples of Jesus, to change our criteria of discernment and to discover the splendour emanated from realities that seem to be, at first glance, the negation of every beauty.

**Christians' Metamorphosis by the Spirit in 2 Cor 3:12-4:6: Christian Transformation in History under the Sign of Simplicity, Humility and Poverty.**

The verse where the verb 'to transform' recurs (2 Cor 3:18) belongs to a passage, 2 Cor 3:12-4:6, that is part of a broader literary unit (2 Cor 2:14-7:4), where Paul defends himself against the allegations of some 'super apostles', widespread in the community of Corinth, according to which his apostolic ministry would be too 'inglorious' to be able to authenticate his message. The Corinthians do not give him much credit or respect for several reasons: he has nothing to boast about; when physically present he is unable to assert himself; his way of speaking is humble and unprofessional; his poverty, due to his insistence on not being economically supported by the community, is an indication of his little value as a leader.<sup>13</sup> Paul responds to their accusations claiming that the power of God is made perfect in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9); indeed, it is exactly through his participation in the death of Christ that his ministry proves life-giving for others (2 Cor 4:10-12). Actually in his life, as in the life of all Christians (cf. 2 Cor 3:18), is present the lasting glory of the ministry of the New Covenant by the Spirit of God, which is far superior to the transient glory of the ministry of the Old Covenant, of which the bright and veiled face of Moses was an expression (cf. 2 Cor 3:6-13; Ex 34:27-35). If this glory remains veiled to the children of Israel it is because of the veil that weighs on their hearts (cf. 2 Cor 3:15); and "it is taken away only through Christ" (2 Cor 3:14).

In this context, the apostle uses the verb 'to transform' to express the process by which the participation of the Christian—of whom Paul is somehow a prototype (cf. 2 Cor 4:16ff.)—to the "glory of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18) is brought about; it is, of course, a paradoxical transformation since, as the Corinthians observed, the external manifestation of Paul's life is anything but glorious. The believers, through the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. T.B. Savage, *Power*, 54-100.



reflection of the glory of the Lord contemplated on the face of the crucified and risen Christ—who is the same image of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:4.6)—are transformed into this same image through a progressive process of glorification, which “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18) takes them to an eschatological future where glory will be to the full (cf. 2 Cor 4:17; 1 Enoch 50:1; 2 Bar Apoc 51:3.101). This glorious transformation is brought about by “the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18), the Spirit of freedom that acts on the entire Christian community providing her with the gift of ‘parrhesia’ (boldness and freedom of speech), in which those who remain obsessed with the experience of the glory of Moses (2 Cor 3:12.17) are lacking. However, what relationship exists between Paul and Christians’ participation in the death of Christ in the course of their mission, and their glorious transformation by the Spirit? Paul somehow develops this theme in the following verses (2 Cor 4:7-18). Between the two events there is a cause/effect relationship according to the Paschal law of life that springs from death (2 Cor 4:11): while the outer self is wasting away, the inner self is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16), acquiring a tremendous amount of glory (2 Cor 4:17) until the day of resurrection (2 Cor 4:14).

The role played by the metamorphosis of Christians in 2 Corinthians is not very different from that of the metamorphosis of Jesus in the gospel of transfiguration: in both cases the experience of Christian transformation is not immediately accessible to all, but at the same time represents a pledge of hope (2 Cor 5:5), which supports the Christian in the path of the cross towards the definitive fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation for humanity. What is interesting in this passage is the historicizing of the pathway of the cross: it has nothing to do with sufferings related to the fall of human nature, or mystical suffering resulting from a private path of holiness; but is the result of concrete choices that Paul performs in his apostolic ministry. Following the cross means: ‘parrhesia,’ even at the cost of persecutions (cf. Paul’s antithesis in 2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:8-10); the renunciation of signs of worldly glory in an attempt to conquer the others by impressing them; the assumption of a language devoid of rhetoric that allows authentic interpersonal relationships (cf. 2 Cor 3:3); and economic choices based on sharing and gratuity.

***'To transform' in Rom 12:2: Christian Transformation as Nonconformity and Imagination Inspired by the Goodness of God***

The third occurrence of the verb 'to transform' appears in Rom 12:2 which, together with Rom 12:1 (cf. the coordinative *kai*, in Rom 12:2), constitutes the introduction and the leitmotiv of the hortatory section of the Epistle to the Romans (Rom 12-15:13), where are highlighted practical-moral consequences that result (cf. the *ou=n* in Rom 12:1) from the gospel of God's justice, announced in the dogmatic section (Rom 1-11). In this introduction, Rom 12:1 shows what should be Christian liturgy. According to Paul, it abolishes the code of the sacredness, the distinction of the sacred and the profane, since it is constituted as the 'rational' cult (cf. *logiko,j* in Rom 12:1, cult which is made by using one's own brain!), which is realized through the offering of one's own body, that is, one's life in its relation to the world. In this consists the holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is, therefore, a living sacrifice, that is, implemented by living people through the new life that they draw from the Spirit (cf. Rom 6:13; Gal 5:25). Rom 12:2, for its part, shows that this sacrifice is concretely realized through two specific related actions. The first is not to let oneself be conformed to the *sch/ma*, the moulds (cf. *suschmati,zw*, 'to squeeze in to a mould') imposed from outside by the present aeon dominated by evil—from which believers are freed by Christ (cf. Gal 1:4; 6:14; 2 Cor 5:17). The second is to let oneself be transformed (*metamorfo,w*) through the eschatological renewal (cf. the use of terms related with *avnakai,nwsij* in 2 Cor 4:16; 5:17; Rom 6:4; 7:6; Gal 6:15) of one's own faculty of judgment to discern God's will, which is not arbitrary but always coincides with what is good only. Both actions are expressed by a plural present passive imperative, therefore the Romans are invited, as a community, to take a stand vis-a-vis two processes constantly in place, one induced by the forces of evil (cf. 2 Cor 4:4) and the other by the Spirit (cf. Rom 7:6); they must shun the first and consent to the second.

In this passage the 'transformation' that Paul refers to recalls a real process of awareness raising oriented to action, induced by positive energies infused by the eschatological gift of the Spirit. The linkage that so far we have found between Christian transformation and the cross of the crucified and risen One seems absent.

Yet we would misunderstand Paul altogether if we did not consider that such a linkage is the background on which stands the ethical proposal of Paul, evident from the dogmatic part of the letter, which states that the novelty of Christian behaviour has its origin in having been buried with Christ in baptism, and its term of comparison in Christ's resurrection brought about by the power of God (cf. Rom 6:4).

The image of the Christian communities emerging from this introduction to the exhortative part of the letter to the Roman is truly amazing. They are not introverted communities in search of a soul-only salvation secured by cult. Quite the opposite, these communities are extroverted, critically active in worldly reality, where they continually adopt both an attitude of resistance and an attitude of creativity.

### ***The Adjective 'conformed' and the Verb 'to conform.'***

The adjective *summorfoj* is present only in the Pauline epistolary, precisely in Rom 8:29 and Phil 3:21; while the verb *summorfi,zw*, in Phil 3:10, is found only in Christian writings and seems coined by Paul from the adjective.<sup>14</sup> Since Phil 3:10 and 3:21 belong to the same literary unit, they will be analysed together.

### ***The Adjective 'conformed' in Rom 8:29: All the Aspirations of Humanity Transformed in Reality by Passing through the Sufferings of the Present Time with the Spirit of the Risen One***

The theme of 'being conformed' is present in the literary unit of Rom 8:14-30, which belongs to the wider context of Rom 8, dedicated to Christian existence animated by the Spirit.

In this unit, Christian existence, defined as existence as children of God, is seen in its historical and eschatological aspects. The Spirit of God, given as 'first fruits' (Rom 8:23) of the ultimate salvation (cf. Rom 8:24), who leads the believer from the experience of slavery and fear to the freedom of God-Abba's children (cf. Rom 8:15), does not alienate them by transferring them to the afterworld. On the contrary, he

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<sup>14</sup> M. Byrnes, *Conformation*, 223.

makes them partakers of Christ's sufferings, so that they can also share his glory (cf. Rom 8:17-18), which will involve the whole creation (cf. Rom 8:21). The present time is, in fact, characterized by the simultaneous groans of creation (cf. Rom 8:22), the children of God (cf. Rom 8:23) and the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:26), in vibrant and persevering waiting for the final realization of the salvific divine plan.

This plan, which unfolds through a chain of five actions—which range from foreknowing to predestining, calling, justifying and glorifying—has its focal point right in making believers 'conformed' to the image of the Son, the risen Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; Rom 1:4; Col 1:18). The fact that the risen One is here described as "the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Rom 8:29) suggests that this conformation should not be considered a private matter but the origin of the new humanity, marked by the bond of brotherhood and sisterhood, gathered around Christ, the last Adam (cf. 1 Cor 15:45-49).

Embedded in this scenario of the letter to the Romans, the theme of 'being conformed,' used to express the eschatological relationship between the believers and the risen One, is of great significance. In fact, it is made capable of subsuming both the vocation inscribed by God on the human being's 'DNA' since their creation, and all the hopes of the 'crucified' humanity longing for redemption. Therefore, even in this passage, the theme of transformation, or more precisely of conformation, is seen in relation to the event of the cross never separated from its victorious outcome, and paying particular attention to its cosmic and historical dimensions.

For Christians, any plan of social, political, economic, or ecological transformation must be assessed in the light of the cross of Christ, not because of some fundamentalist stance, for which everything must be derived from a series of divinely revealed doctrines, but because the historical story of Jesus of Nazareth seems to hide something essential that reveals the origin and the future of humanity.

***The Adjective 'conformed' and the Verb 'to conform' in Phil 3:1-4:1: the Relationship of Christians with the Risen One Set Them Free from Religious Legalism and, through the Sharing of His Sufferings, Provides Them a New Citizenship***

The literary unit, where there are both the adjective *summorfoj* and the verb *summorfi,zw*, is limited to the verses of Phil 3:1-4:1,<sup>15</sup> and in all probability represents, in itself, an autonomous letter by Paul<sup>16</sup> originated from the deleterious influence exerted by the so-called Judaizing Christians—whom we have already encountered in the analysis of Gal 4:12-20—on the community of the Philippi, a Roman colony. Reading between the lines, these figures appear to be deeply religious people who derive their righteousness, before God, from the observance of the commandments (cf. Phil 3:9); they consider themselves perfect (cf. Phil 3:18), and promote a triumphalist Christianity. Let us follow Paul in his attempt to tackle this problem arisen in the community of Philippi, paying special attention to the two passages where the topic of Christian transformation/conformation is mentioned.

For Paul, the supposed holiness of these Judaizing Christians makes them “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18), their circumcision is nothing but an unnecessary mutilation (cf. Phil 3:2), and their meritocratic righteousness the flip side of their trust placed in themselves, “in the flesh” (Phil 3:3), which makes them worshipers of their own selfishness—in fact “their God is their belly” (Phil 3:19; cf. Rom 16:18). In reality, true worship is that “in the Spirit” (Phil 3:3 in continuity with Rom 12:1; cf. Jn 4:23-24), and true justification that which gratuitously comes from faith in Christ (cf. Phil 3:9; Gal 2:21).

Paul places such justification respectively in relation with: a) the experiential knowledge of Christ, whom he calls “his Lord” (Phil 3:8); b) the knowledge of the power of his resurrection; c) the communion with his sufferings, through a constant process of conformation to his death (expressed precisely through the middle\passive present participle *summorfi,zw* in Phil 3:10), waiting to come to the resurrection of the dead.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Silva, *Philippians*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. Barbaglio, *Le lettere*, 536-539.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Silva, *Philippians*, 163.

Since this process of conformation to Jesus' death is presented as a race course walked by the apostle—which winds through the existential and relational space that extends from being seized by Christ up to seizing him (cf. Phil 3:12),<sup>18</sup> and from one's own past to be forgotten (cf. Phil 3:4-7), up to the future goal to be achieved—it is outlined as a real *via crucis* to be covered using the very energies of the risen One (cf. also 2 Cor 4:10). It cannot be considered as merely a sacramental or interior event, but it should be related to the suffering associated with his mission, his persecutions (cf. Gal 5:11; 2 Cor 4:11), his imprisonment (cf. Phil 1:30), in accordance with what it is said in Acts 14:22: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

Afterwards, Paul invites the community of Philippi as such to take on his own attitude (cf. Phil 3:15), to be his imitator and his co-worker, walking together towards the same goal (cf. Phil 3:16-17). In fact, Paul concludes, the true citizenship for Christians is not the earthly one, guaranteed by the power of the Roman emperor, but the heavenly one, offered by the true Saviour,<sup>19</sup> Lord Jesus Christ, who "by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself" (Phil 3:21), that conferred by God in his exaltation-resurrection (cf. Phil 2:9-11), shall change the appearance (cf. the use of *metaschmati,zw* in Phil 3:21 with *sch,mati w`j a;nqrwpoj* in Phil 2:7) of the body of 'humiliation' (cf. the use of *tapei,nwsij* in Phil 3:21 with *evtapei,nwsen e`auto.n* in Phil 2:8) making it conformed or of the same condition (cf. the use of *su,mmorfoj* in Phil 3:21 with the use of *morfh, dou,lou* and *morfh, qeou/* in Phil 2:6-7) as his glorious body (cf. 1 Cor 15:51- 53). The apostle still speaks of a process of conformation but this time it is about the glorious conformation to the resurrected body of Christ that will be realized only with his Parousia.

From the whole section it emerges that the double conformation to which Paul refers in these two passages of the letter to the Philippians has the risen Christ as his maker and prototype; it is, in fact, the result of the relationship of friendship between him and the faithful, made possible by the acceptance, by the latter, of his offer of grace, that is, unconditional love. The whole process is characterised by an open and progressive assimilation of the believers to the *kenosis* of the Saviour, as it is

<sup>18</sup> Cf. G.W. Hansen, *The Letter*, 250.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. Oakes, *Philippians*, 138-147.

described in the Christological hymn (Phil 2:5-11), and only culminates in the event of the eschatological resurrection. Finally, it is worth saying that this conformation, as a way of salvation, being the masterpiece of the Easter grace, is worlds apart from both that one proposed by a legalistic religion, which makes its adherents submissive by shutting them up in the sacred pen of the observance of falsely divine rites and commandments, and that one proposed by the political power, seductive but evanescent, which can be the basis of an imperialist project such as that of the Roman empire.

### **Elements of Christian Transformation**

It is interesting to note that in the New Testament—in the Old Testament there have been no significant recurrences—the semantic family of terms that are commonly associated with the root 'form' always refers to a positive transformation that goes beyond all the deepest aspirations of humanity, for it coincides with the eschatological realization of God's promises (cf. Rom 8). This transformation is not directed, above all, to structures or specific areas (social, political, economic, religious or cultural), and not even to the individual in search of his or her private holiness. Instead, it is directed ontologically to the human person in his or her relationship with God, with others, and with the world. Just as the metamorphoses that occur in the natural world, it is a transformation that is not realized by degrees but through an intermediate moment of destruction and death, from which a qualitatively new life springs. However, contrary to what happens in the natural world, this event does not happen spontaneously; it is brought about by the free choice to participate in a historical event, which may seem to belong to the past, but in fact constitutes Christians' present: the passion and death of the Son of God. This choice arises from a relationship of grace with the Risen One, who infuses Christians with the same power of his resurrection, the power of the Spirit, which pushes them toward his cross and consequently his resurrection (cf. Phil 3). The Christian answers the paradoxical offer of divine love, in which he or she experiences his or her being infinitely and unconditionally desired and accepted by God, with another offer of love.

For Christians, conformation to the cross is first of all to share the condition of those who are considered to be the dregs of humanity (cf. Phil 2). These are the crucified in history, which the Son of God is united to. This sharing is transfiguring, conforms Christians to the risen-crucified One, and transforms them into new creatures, giving rise to the beginning of the new world.

Sharing and living with the latter has nothing to do with masochism, for the goal is to prepare with them the coming of the Kingdom of God. In this task, the Christian must overcome the most dangerous temptation: to believe in the utility of force (cf. Mk 9).

The power Christians rely on seems to be rather a power of persuasion expressed through: an attitude of sovereign freedom towards every earthly power, the rejection of signs of greatness, the assumption of a mode of communication simple and straightforward, and economic choices based on gratuitousness and essentiality (cf. 2 Cor 3).

This power urges Christian communities to imagine a configuration of the reality where they live—in its multiple dimensions: religious, social, political, economic, ecological—in a way different from that of the dominant thought; therefore, because of their nonconformist choices, they will be subject to persecution and, therefore, will have to adopt an attitude of resistance (cf. Rom 12).

However, the real danger for these communities does not come from persecutions but from religious legalism, because it may dry their principle of inner life (cf. Gal 4).

In the next section of the paper, we seek to verify the presence of some of these elements in the experience of St. Martins where we have encountered a community that attempts to live the call to Christian transformation more radically.

### **Critical Appreciation of St. Martin Catholic Social Apostolate in Nyahururu Diocese, Kenya, in the Light of the Elements of Christian Transformation Emerging from the Exegesis of our Passages**

The choice to study St. Martins as a case of lay participation in the life of the Church was inspired by the nature, organisation and dynamism of St. Martins itself.



It is no doubt a unique example of Catholic lay engagement in the life of the Church in this region. It renders itself for learning many lessons and indeed some can fruitfully be replicated elsewhere. It nevertheless is also an ecclesial organisation with various challenges. It offers, in our view, some considerations on how to become more authentically ecclesial and may also propose a model of organisation of Church.

In this section, we shall endeavour to present and critically appreciate St. Martins, looking at it through the prism of some of the derivatives of transformation drawn from the exegetic section above. We shall limit ourselves to episodic evidence or observations as lived out in this rather outstanding ecclesial setting, leaving the hope for in-depth study to other opportunities.

The very founding experience of St. Martins models the centrality of the cross and resurrection as the core of Christian experience and of the activities of St. Martins. This story is the encounter of a priest – Fr. Gabriele - with a man who has lived all his life in isolation and suffering while being a member of a Christian family. The man, later baptised Thomas, is mentally and physically challenged. Due to any number of reasons, Thomas is hidden away by the family. The surrounding community does not (or pretends to not) know about the existence of Thomas. Even in the occasion of the blessing of everything in his home, Thomas remains hidden, and is not brought forward to partake of the 'passing blessings'. His mother, and by extension, the family and possibly the community, thinks of him as 'a curse'.<sup>20</sup> The priest discovers Thomas by chance, an encounter which turns the community understanding of blessings and curses on its head. Father Gabriele begins a reflection with the community about the presence and plight of handicapped persons in their midst. Out of these simple and shocking moments, St. Martin is born with the first of its engagements being with the handicapped members of the community.

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<sup>20</sup> St. Martin, *Sharing*, 12.

## **Orientation towards the Eschatological Transformation of Reality in all its Dimensions**

This first encounter has four key persons in it. There is Thomas, who has lived all 30 years of his life in a condition of being hidden and wished away. There is his mother, one who no doubt has borne the brunt and the cross of caring for this child, albeit inadequately, without much social support and indeed with a lot of stigma related to the fact of his being handicapped, so much so that she is pushed to the point of hiding him away. There is the community which has sanitised itself in the face of the plight of Thomas and persons of his kind, and yet, which has in its midst many members whose hearts are aching with the pain of the handicapped and with their own sense of powerlessness. And then there is the priest who encounters the suffering Christ in the persons of Thomas and his mother, and cannot find rest until he has connected with the community to embrace together this cross and find the new life that it offers.

The conversations that follow this encounter bring much hope and light. Thomas is baptized, and integrated in the Christian community some days before his death, but in fact his story becomes the founding experience, the seed of an awakening of the community to their possibility and ability to do something to uplift the mentally and physically handicapped in their midst. Everyone involved is uplifted and energized by this Easter hope. Life can no longer be the same in the community. A new energy, a new Pentecost comes upon them as the path of the organic growth of St. Martins, with unlimited possibilities in the hearts of the community members, begins in earnest.

## **Deep communion of believers with the risen Lord made concrete in sharing life with the excluded.**

St. Martins is built and indeed owes its growth and identity to the spirit of volunteerism. To date, the organisation is built on the foundation of the community volunteers—about 1,000 in number—who discover their own vocation in the situations of persons in need. Through their awakened sensitivity and deliberate

cultivation of the spirit of community, the association has grown in its outreach and organisation over its 20 years of existence, specializing in four particular kinds of service to the needy in community—the physically and mentally handicapped, homeless children and children on the streets, HIV and AIDS affected persons and people victims of or affected by domestic violence. St. Martins is organised in these four units with a central administration/coordination department. The central administration department has a director, who is a priest, and three deputy directors, all lay persons. The organisation has worked to give spiritual support and professional capacity-building for the volunteers and, later as the organization has grown, the necessary staff. This organisational component is important but it is not the primary foundation of the life and energy of St. Martins. That prerogative remains with the volunteers, the community. Indeed, as the organisation has grown over the years, it has had to rethink and re-invent its structures to safeguard the centrality of the community and the volunteers' component.<sup>21</sup>

St. Martins has a strong communal prayer culture which is clearly modelled as the core of the life of the whole apostolate. This prayer life is characterised by sharing the word of God and especially on the encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus among the persons with whom the staff and volunteers live and work in their daily lives. During the few days spent in the community, we had opportunity to encounter various volunteers and staff members who witnessed to the personal sense of their vocation, finding God in their service of others in St. Martins as well as experiencing the intervention of God in their personal lives through the privilege of their meeting the people at the lowest levels of the society in the St. Martins works – 'it is in this apostolate that we allow ourselves to be *transformed* by the poor and find true happiness'.<sup>22</sup>

### **Rise of persecution by social forces that rush to the defence of the status quo**

Some members and offices of St. Martins are more aware than others of the external forces against which they battle. This is particularly true of the advocacy

<sup>21</sup> Cf. St. Martin, *Sharing*, 12-21.

<sup>22</sup> St. Martin, *Betania*, 3.

office where procuring justice for the weak is laborious, requiring the wit of serpents along with the innocence of lambs. Yet these are the very battlefronts where the demons of false division between the sacred and the profane are exorcised and transformation is set in motion in the day-to-day lives (Rom 12:2). The community is thus becoming increasingly able to make mature judgement/discernment of what is good. It is becoming more and more able to recognise and reject what is not unto life for them and their members.

**Experience of fullness of 'material' and 'spiritual' life, freedom, courage and communion by all involved**

Like the transfiguration, the real and complete beauty of the human person which is usually hidden is sometimes revealed to themselves and to others in moments of prayer or of the unexpected. Some members of St. Martins staff and some volunteers shared with us about how they had initially played their role in the CSA as a job or an expression of personal social responsibility, without seeing beyond into their own unique beauty or the beauty of those they served. At some given unexpected moment, the action of God breaks through for one and for another, enabling them to understand the privileged position in which they stand, the uniqueness of their personal contribution, and the beauty of belonging to a community brought together by the Spirit of God. As in 2 Cor 3:18, their inner eyes are opened to see more clearly that they are engaged in a mission greater than an 8-to-5 job, howsoever well that may have been delivered. They live the new vision of being on a communal pilgrimage where God is strongly active, doing so much more than they can wish for or imagine (Eph 3:14). Some of these members of St. Martins have the joy to live the sense of wonder at the action of God, which they realise is greater and more fruitful than any human programme of intervention. And so an infectious joy is shared in the community in spite of many struggles and failures. Self-emptying and solidarity with those who suffer are central to the many stories of the lay persons called to serve in St. Martins. St. Martins has published many booklets of stories of

similar experiences.<sup>23</sup> In every case, the encounters are transformative both for the initial suffering person and, especially, for those who move to associate with and serve them. Initially these persons are thinking of alleviating the pain of the suffering, but they soon discover how this friendship with the wounded becomes for them their own healing and their own gate to greater wholeness. Both experience their greater dignity and recognise that they are living a moment of their own salvation. Many of these encounters are true participation in the *kenosis* of Jesus (Phil 2:5-11). They are characterised by responses that are devoid of violence and superiority complex on the part of the ones who come into the life of the suffering person. They begin to share in the living conditions of the most disadvantaged and oppressed and therein uncover their own woundedness and need for healing. As they walk together, they experience healing from loneliness and self-preservation tendencies and are brought into the joy of solidarity. It is observed that 'the gift of the community of St. Martin to the world is their witness that... the weakest member taking the central place is *transformative* for all.'<sup>24</sup>

They find themselves as witnesses of the resurrection lived in their shared reality. The stories of witness in St. Martins read like the encounter on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24) where the disciples discover that their hearts are 'burning within' them.

### **Absence of authoritarian forms of power and participation of all in decision-making.**

The passage of the *kenosis* underscores a number of important characteristics of the Christian community. It negates the necessity for some to lord it over others as superior. Jesus empties himself, and so must all those who are leaders in the community. There is great need in Christian community to live, learn and share the experiences of the centrality of vulnerability to the Christian message. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of caring for the disadvantaged. The poor and the excluded have been a central concern of the community. Yet the tendency has been strongly in the direction of the 'strong' helping the 'weak'. The strong retain

<sup>23</sup> Cf. The Accounts in L'arche Kenya and St. Martin Communities, *Beloved*, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 12-13.

their strength and can always have a condescending attitude towards the weak. The weak can adopt both the attitudes of dependency and in some cases, entitlement. The experience between 'the needy' and 'their helpers' in St. Martins is quite radically different. In their opinion, these are their temptations: 'it is the temptation to refuse weakness, to be strong, to reject the poverty of your cross, it is also my temptation to feel superior, to strive for perfection, to prove my value, to be impatient with the fragilities of others'.<sup>25</sup> In yet another publication, this vision is owned and shared by many: 'We love your (Father's) vision of community where the weak are the most important and the strong become more vulnerable'.<sup>26</sup> Both the weak and those who come to their aid find themselves on the same side, as needy persons, with the risen Lord as healer and transformer of their lives.

More explicitly, in speaking about their (desired or estimated) modes of decision-making, the St. Martins community says, 'St. Martin believes that community involvement can only be effective if the same community is involved at both the planning and decision-making levels'.<sup>27</sup> Even the physically and mentally handicapped, the HIV positive, and the victims of various social injustices experience themselves as protagonists. To be part of a meeting between the volunteers or staff of St. Martins or of L'Arche community – an off-shoot of the St. Martins - with the people they serve is to behold moments of exalted human dignity. In the words of the volunteers: 'It is our own disabilities we accept through them... it is our own *deformity* we recognize in them'.<sup>28</sup> That is possible because it is God who works in them, in their wounds they feel they touch the wounds of the risen One.<sup>29</sup> After Jesus' resurrection, they can pray to him saying, 'after that victory of love every cross is your home, every suffering is your cathedral, and every crucified person is your image still attracting every one of us to you my Lord, forever!'.<sup>30</sup>

Looking at the image of the Christians that emerges from the second Chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, St. Martins, with its motto of 'only through community' stands tall

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<sup>25</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 93.

<sup>26</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 82; cf. ST. MARTIN, *Who Loves*, 92.

<sup>27</sup> St. Martin, *Who Loves*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 72; cf. G. PIPINATO, *Always*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. G. Pipinato, *Always*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 93.

in demonstrating the centrality of all the People of God in the activities of the Christian community. This motto manifests the option to work in support of the needy without removing them from their immediate community and its decision-making mechanisms. Indeed, the understanding is clear that the community takes responsibility for its weak. One might reflect in fact that the real target of St. Martins is not the vulnerable but the ones who are indifferent to the suffering of the others. This is the revolutionary meaning of the motto 'only through community'.

To accomplish this St. Martins has a strong reliance on the network of volunteers. These persons, living in the community, are assigned to specific programs of St. Martins according to their personal interest and sense of vocation. It is important to underscore here the lay people's sense of being on mission and having personal vocation in their participation in the works of St. Martins. Christian understanding of social transformation leans on personal transformation and the engagement of individuals. It is through their self-sacrifice that services, and ultimately loving relationships are cultivated that build up the community and effect slowly the required social transformation.

Organisationally, St. Martins adopts a specific structure in order to underscore 'service with' as opposed to 'authority over' each other. In their own reflection, they adopted a circular and not pyramidal organization chart to highlight their conception of community.<sup>31</sup> Laity and ordained ministers of the church collaborate on equal footing in the decisions of the way forward for the organisation.

On the flip side, one gets the impression that although the laity are the key protagonists of the projects of St. Martins, the judgement about the value of their work for the establishment, which in turn informs funding possibilities, is predominantly vested in the priests. This is a direct product of the practice of external funding which comes through the trust that the foreign partners have in the priests. It is possible that the need to raise funds can make it necessary to maintain an external image that inspires the confidence of funding partners. Yet account has to be taken of the image this reflects back into the community, especially regarding the

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<sup>31</sup> St. Martin, *Annual*, 9.

hope of continuity of the apostolate in the event of diminished engagement of missionaries in some lead positions of St. Martins.

### **Absence of ideological indoctrination**

An outstanding dimension of St. Martins, in light of the prevalent practice in many Church projects and organisations, is the non-discrimination between Christians of various denominations in the employment of staff or recruitment of volunteers in the community. Indeed, there is nothing to indicate that non-Christians would not be welcome to collaborate with St. Martins. The prayer life of St. Martins is also made deliberately to be inclusive of all Christians. Some leaders of diverse faith communities, especially in the larger Christian circle, have learnt much from St. Martins and champion the lessons of St. Martins in their own ministries. The leadership of St. Martins units and even board membership also accept recruitment from like-minded persons of different faiths. This again presents a special model for the community wherein the movement of God's Spirit is not disputed due to human categories. Very appropriately love is put at the centre: it is love that has drawn many people from different faiths to come together and partner with St. Martin... Placing the poor at the centre and making people from different denominations join hands and work together has promoted unity and a sense of communion. It is through this initiative that people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds have continued to experience God's calling to love one another'.<sup>32</sup>

One founder priest lived with the physically and mentally handicapped in the L'Arche community (a foundation of St. Martins, now independent of the CSA), in a community where equality is witnessed to and celebrated. Some of the lay Christians of St. Martins have also embraced this choice to live with the handicapped and to share life with them fully. It is a sign of contradiction in a community where the handicapped have usually been put away, hidden and let languish in lonely isolation. Here they thrive and contribute actively to the wellbeing of others. They experience themselves and are experienced by others as fruitful and precious. The negative

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<sup>32</sup> St. Martin, *Our Father*, 14-15.



attitude of condescension is removed and the incarnational walking together is lived. With the mediation of and encouragement by the St. Martins experience, some members of the society have been able to welcome the homeless into their homes and even to educate and support persons who are not members of their family, with the same love and care as their own. Such stories, of which there are many in St. Martins, are an encouragement that the community is being transformed in the likeness of the Body of Christ.

**Sobriety in resource use and simplicity in external manifestations in line with the language and culture of the humblest people.**

Each of the four service units of St. Martins works with a few staff and a larger number of volunteers. The staff members provide organizational support for the work of the volunteers. The volunteers are members of the local communities who have made themselves available to be point persons for needy people in their community in the specific areas of the services of St. Martins. Being in the community, these volunteers are able to monitor situations, be agents of information and inspiration within the community and thus rally support from within the community to the persons in need. Where extra support and help from the staff of St. Martins is needed, it is channelled through the volunteers who coordinate meetings between the needy persons, the community members and the staff of St. Martins. In some cases, St. Martins central establishment helps provide for needs that a community would not otherwise be able to provide. But the default mode of mobilising resources is through and from the community in line with the traditional values of African culture.

**Conclusion**

The call to follow Jesus is fundamentally an invitation to integrate one's life under the banner of the cross. This comes through in all the passages considered in the first part of the paper. There can be no following of Christ without an embrace of the cross since by its very nature, the Christian way of life is a way of contradiction with popular values of most societies. It is fair and appropriate however, to

acknowledge that while popular values are the ones that tend to drive many people's day-to-day decisions, studies into the cultural foundations of many societies, and their classical wisdom, reveal greater alliance to the gospel values emergent from the study of New Testament passages above. Accordingly, it is proper to say that these transformative gospel values are a radical embrace of fundamental human values. By his radical embrace of and faithfulness to these deep human values, God incarnate in Jesus Christ confirms them as the human way to fullness of life for individuals and for societies, and also manifests the power in human persons, by the help of God's Spirit, to live from this depth of self-integration. His resurrection confirms a profound human intuition into the value of life poured out for others.

Christian community is characterised by active embrace of the suffering of our brothers and sisters in a spirit of compassion and hope, rooted in the cross and resurrection. Obviously, suffering is not sought for its own sake. Yet it is a close companion in the lives of many people, Christians and those among whom Christians live. Thus the absence of suffering in one's life is not an excuse for keeping clear of the suffering of others. Indeed, the very incarnational movement of the Christ which is the foundational Christian pillar is that of Jesus abandoning a glorious existence with the Father in the God-head, and embracing the simplest human condition in order to bring all human beings to the dignity of knowing themselves to be Children of God.

Lay Christians rightly give great honour to clergy in Africa, since they are very conscious of their mediating role as representatives of Christ especially in the ritual settings of worship. There is a maturing appreciation in local churches, of the vocations of both ordained and non-ordained Christians. However, the community sense of the Christian vocation continues to suffer from excessive deference of laity to clergy, taking preferential attention from the core of Christian community which, in line with the incarnational core of Christian meaning, ought to be love for the little one, the vulnerable, and the downtrodden. Small Christian Communities have an opportunity to build up their energy around this evangelical core, but too often, they are focused on being a machinery for propagating/devolving parish governance in place of being places of living daily the prophetic call of being 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'.

It is also right to observe that in very many instances, lay Christians do not quite consider themselves to be 'church'. Popular conversation about 'what the church is doing or not doing about one or other thing' can correctly be paraphrased 'what is the clergy, the priest or the bishop doing about the matter'. Accordingly, in such situations where the living of Christian life is reduced to respect of and obedience to the orders of the priest, or where laity feel that Christian social and political involvement is the business of clergy, laity neglect their vocation of listening to the spirit and of becoming prophetic presence in their own settings.

But this situation need not be so. The case study of St. Martins shows how a deeper and more proper understanding of their vocation can bring lay Christians to a greater identification with the paschal mystery that is core to Christian transformation and release the energies for service necessary to build up the body of Christ in every locality.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### "SING A NEW SONG UNTO THE LORD": TURNING A PAGE IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

Wilfred Sumani, SJ

#### Abstract

*One of the characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the culture of the start-up, the ability to identify a problem and to provide a solution that improves the livelihood of communities, especially the poor. This culture requires a lot of imagination and determination. This essay argues that African theologians can harness the social imaginary mediated by the Scriptures to empower Africans, especially the youth, to create and implement solutions dogging the peoples of Africa. African theology cannot continue to look back to a 'glorious' past characterized by virtuous living, nor can the task of social transformation be left in the hands of political leaders.*

#### Introduction

*I am afraid of thresholds, afraid that I will not be able to go forward to what awaits me, and afraid that once I do the world will be changed forever and there will be no way back.<sup>2</sup>*

On the 3rd February, 1960, during his visit to South Africa, the English Prime Minister Harold Macmillan spoke of the "wind of change" that was blowing through the continent of Africa as more and more European colonies claimed the right to self-determination. He added that the duty of the government was to "create a society which respects the rights of individuals - a society in which individual merit, and individual merit alone, is the criterion for a man's advancement, whether political or economic." The ideal of man's advancement on the basis of merit (rather than one's color) echoes the dream Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was to declaim three years later: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will

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<sup>2</sup> Words by a character called Jim Foley in Niall Williams' novel, *Only Say the Word*, 14.

not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 marked the climax of the independence movement in Africa. Yet, the spiraling levels of poverty in many African countries, coupled with virtual political disenfranchisement of the masses, forces us to admit that political independence was half the solution to the wider problem of Africa's enduring dereliction. It is now commonly admitted that people cannot consume democracy unless they leverage the opportunities and values enshrined in democracy to actualize their own advancement. Democracy is not a consumable product in itself but rather an *environment* within which the human spirit can flourish. Political independence is a threshold that leads to the exhilarating and yet demanding task of self-determination.

In many Western countries, democracy has created an environment in which the culture of the start-up is thriving. The 'wind' of the start-up blowing throughout the world holds great promise for Africa's real socio-economic transformation. This emerging culture rides on the crest of imagination. Indeed, any project of reconstruction or reform relies on the ability to imagine an alternative state of affairs galvanized by a firm conviction in the possibility of attaining that which is envisaged. This paper discusses the role of religion in firing up the imagination and mobilizing energies of Africans to realize a better future weaned from the barren complexities of what Dambisa Moyo calls 'dead aid.'<sup>3</sup>

### **New Challenges for African Theology**

So far, the main agenda of African theology has been twofold: inculturation of the Christian faith and liberation of African communities, especially from foreign and domestic political oppression. The labors of numerous indefatigable African theologians have borne many fruits, both ecclesial and socio-economic. Thanks to the voices of theologians pushing for the recognition and integration of African traditions in Christian worship and discipline, inculturation has become a reality in liturgies. Slowly but surely, Africans are increasingly feeling at home in the Church as

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<sup>3</sup> D. Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is Another Way for Africa*.

drums and hymns inspired by traditional African musical genres carry worshippers into graceful dances. At the behest of Vatican Council II, liturgies in Africa are, at least for the most part, celebrated in local languages. Africans can name God and salvation using forms of support (metaphors, images, allegories, analogies) proper to the African genius.

African liberation theology has also added a religious voice to the secular struggle for Africa's political emancipation. Whereas in the past the business of the Church was seen to be limited to the promise of eternal joy in heaven, a more critical reading of the sacred Writ gradually showed unequivocally that the glory of God is humanity fully alive, to cite St. Irenaeus of Lyons' famous saying. The mission of the Church – it is now clear – is to promote the integral development of the human person and the human community. Over the last few decades, the Church's voice in public life has grown more important. Episcopal conferences and mother bodies of various churches have issued landmark statements on the state of affairs in their respective nations. For example, the 1992 pastoral letter of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, entitled *Living our Faith*, changed the political landscape of Malawi from a dictatorship to a democracy. The bishops were convinced that the concerns of the *polis* (political community) were within the purview of their apostolic jurisdiction. Inspired by Pope Paul VI's *Evangelization of the Peoples*, the bishops wrote: "Because the Church exists in this world it must communicate its understanding of the meaning of human life and of society."<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, many church-based organizations have become part and parcel of a vibrant civil society contributing to the conscientization and mobilization of communities to participate in democratic processes.

However, the theological enterprise in Africa has not been without its limitations. Critique of the West and its colonial structures has sometimes waxed hypocrisy, since African theologians continue to enjoy the benefits of Western civilization. While western languages are condemned for their imperialism, African scholars continue to write and publish in these languages, some of which (German, for instance) are not widely used on the continent. Numerous African theologians

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<sup>4</sup> Episcopal Conference of Malawi, Lenten Pastoral Letter *Living our Faith*, 1992.

continue to enjoy the hospitality of Western universities that offer scholarships and professorial positions for African studies. One American once objected to Ali Mazrui's critique of Western society in these words: "If you hate us, then why do you take our money!" This inconsistency between word (critique of Western civilization) and action (perpetual attachment to the fruits of Western civilization) constitutes an embarrassing brand of cognitive dissonance: *We love what we hate; we do not mean what we say.*

Another important limitation of African theology is the lack of auto-critique. Since many African theologians have studied in the West, it is strange that there is very little critical analysis of what it is that made it possible for Westerners to subjugate and colonize African communities. In every war lost and won there are factors that contribute to victory and defeat. Since slavery and colonialism were not the last battles for Africa, failure to critically analyze factors that made Africa lose battles on various fronts is a recipe for further humiliation at the frontlines of clashes yet to come. Already there is complaint of neo-colonialism, whereby former colonial powers are said to plunder the resources of the continent and take advantage of Africa's growing open market to 'dump' therein any number of finished products. In the balance of trade, Africa's fortunes are submerged in the gaping chasm of deficits. Chinese exports to Africa continue to rise while Africa's exports to China are taking a nosedive.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, "the most recent year for which there is reliable data, Africa's 54 countries recorded a \$34bn deficit with China on total trade of \$172bn, according to the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at Johns Hopkins University."<sup>6</sup> If my child always comes back home crying that he has been beaten by bad boys, maybe it is time to send the child to a school of martial arts. As an African proverb says, the mad man's head is the learning ground for barbers.

History repeats itself: just as old African kings lost land to colonial traders because of the former's fascination with Western goods (alcohol, cigarettes, sugar, clothes and guns, to name but a few), today African leaders are giving away the birthright of land and everything that lies in its womb to foreign companies in

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<sup>5</sup> V. Romei, "China and Africa: Trade Relations Evolve," *Financial Times*, 3 December, 2015; <https://www.ft.com/content/c53e7f68-9844-11e5-9228-87e603d47bdc>.

<sup>6</sup> D. Pilling and A. Clasa, "Kenyan President Urges Rebalance of China-Africa Trade," *Financial Times*, 14 May, 2017; <https://www.ft.com/content/947ea960-38b2-11e7-821a-6027b8a20f23>.



exchange for the broth of short-sighted benefits. One day Africa will wake up and discover that the entire continent legally belongs to foreign investors, thereby reversing definitively the gains of independence.

Africa also risks losing its youth to the West. Millions of young people are fleeing the continent because it is no longer the 'Promised Land' but rather the land where death lurks at every corner. Every year thousands of African lives are lost in the Mediterranean Sea as desperate Africans try to cross the 'Red Sea' to the new 'Promised Land' beyond the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Many die in the Sahara Desert even before setting their eyes on the deceptively blue waters of the Sea. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, in 2015 alone 3,771 people died while trying to cross over to Europe. In 2016, the number of deaths rose to more than 3,740.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the high spectre of death, everyday throngs of Africans attempt the perilous journey across the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. This is a challenge for African theology today. Theologians need to grapple with the question as to why politically liberated people now prefer to return to the land of slavery.

Meanwhile, mainstream African theology continues to rehearse complaints against colonial masters and their missionaries, instead of undertaking an in-depth post-mortem of the dynamics of African culture that make Africans find themselves on the losing end in almost every encounter or exchange with other peoples on the planet. To shore up the claim that *Ubuntu* is the mainstay of the African ethical worldview, in the wake of such gruesome counter-instances as genocide, systematic abuse and massacre of women and children, and blatant disregard for the rights of the poor, the 'outsider' is presented as the scapegoat, as if Africans were incapable of committing such savagery by themselves. The tendency to lay the blame of Africa's failure at the door of the outsider makes Paul Gifford wonder as to whether Africans were the only ones untouched by original sin.<sup>8</sup>

Inculturation theology has often fallen into the trap of glorifying the past and the attendant attempt to recover what has been lost due to the "accidents of history" (*iniuria temporum*), to borrow Vatican Council II's expression. Consequently, a huge percentage of research in Africa's theological faculties tends to equate

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/10/580f3e684/mediterranean-death-toll-soars/.html>.

<sup>8</sup> P. Gifford, "Africa's Inculturation Theology: Observations of an Outsider, no. 50.

'anthropological study' with ethnic study. Scholars and students alike feel obliged to mine for the 'gold' of ancient wisdom from their ethnic communities. The conclusion of such studies invariably holds up for emulation the 'old wine' of Africa's pre-colonial traditions. Africans are thus urged to search for the *bosquet initiatique* where pristine African values remain unadulterated. It is in the past – some scholars seem to believe – that Africans will find the *pharmakon* (cure) for the ills of the present age. The view of history as a progressive corruption of human civilization is not unique to Africa. The notion of history as a successive loss of human virtue is also known in India and Persia. It even underlies the very notion of renaissance (rebirth) as return to the sources (in Machiavelli's words, *riduzione verso il principio* – recourse to the origin<sup>9</sup>). The same idea of return *ad fontes* undergirded the patristic and liturgical movements that culminated in the Vatican Council II.

While there is some truth to the view of the past as the depository of virtue *par excellence*, this intellectual posture smacks with nostalgia – a coping mechanism comically illustrated in Woody Allen's film *Midnight in Paris*. The idealized African past is, unfortunately, vacuous, while the values extracted from the practice of our fathers and mothers are in fact the warp and weft of the *humanum* as such. A critical study of reforms shows that any return to the past is primarily motivated by the pressing needs of the present, a phenomenon called *aggiornamento*, updating. When reformers summon the past, they do so not for the sake of nostalgia but often as a precedent to justify innovations that need to be effected today. That is why the past is evoked selectively. The challenges of today cannot be wished away by indulging in the glorification of the past. Africa cannot simply go back to the past; it is impossible! The wagon of history does not have a reverse gear. Just as African ancestors came up with mechanisms to cope with the challenges of their time, today's Africans need to devise ways to deal with our problems. We are no less gifted with the creative genius than our ancestors. History marches on.

It is time to rethink these partial metanarratives and look the Oedipal truth in the eye, blinding though it may be, for only the truth shall set us free. Only by critically interrogating such narratives can Africa forge a truly liberating narrative. Laurenti

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, 22.

Magesa explains how narratives shape people's identities and self-perception: "Narratives represent and shape the groups' identities and spiritualities and their relationship to one another and to God. Shifts in these stories/narratives, particularly also in how they are told, induce change in social and spiritual behaviour."<sup>10</sup> A shift from partial to integral narratives will throw into the foreground our fair share of responsibility in the woes afflicting the continent.

For instance, it is often argued that the endless conflicts in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and South Sudan are instigated and bankrolled by Western powers bent on tightening their grip on the resources of the continent. It is said that Westerners create insurgent groups in Africa in order to destabilize and weaken African governments so as to undermine the legal procedures for the acquisition of minerals. The 2006 German-American political thriller *Blood Diamond* illustrates such tragic dynamics. The Kimberley Process Certificate Scheme developed in the aftermath of the Kimberley Conference of 2000 was meant to curb trade in conflict diamonds.

These narratives cannot be dismissed as mere conspiracy theories. That France's relation to Africa – a phenomenon dubbed *Françafrique* – is heavily motivated by France's determination to control, by hook or crook, Africa's resources has been documented by, among others, Jacques Foccart, Charles de Gaulle's secret advisor for Africa. For decades, Foccart advised the French government as to which African leader to support or eliminate in order to protect and entrench French interests in Africa. In 2010, Patrick Benquet also produced a detailed documentary on France's *mafioso* political activity in former French colonies in Africa.

These facts, nonetheless, do not absolve Africans from their complicity in creating and perpetuating the chaos prevailing on the continent. To implement their hideous policies, foreign powers, guided by the maxim 'policy comes before morality,' need the collaboration of Africans. Western powers need an African to carry a gun and kill an African president whose policies are seen to be inimical to foreign interests. Western countries need the cooperation of African leaders to loot Africa's resources. The trade imbalance between China and Africa is taking place partly

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<sup>10</sup> L. Magesa, "Truly African, Truly Christian? In Search of a New African Christian Spirituality, 87.

because of African consumers' predilection for foreign goods and services to the prejudice of local products. The problem is not that 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Africans are intrinsically less good than their ancestors; Africa's difficulty, rather, consists in the failure to translate political freedom into an environment for the flourishing of the creative genius. Kä Mana calls it "crisis of action." He therefore discerns the urgency to transform the myths that make us dream into problems that make us reflect (think), to convert the problems that make us think into energies that make us act, to change the energies that make us act into new reasons for living and dying, hoping, and believing.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Gospel of Prosperity: Africa's Hope?**

Perhaps disenchanted by the escapist narrative of mainstream religion, millions of Africans are hastening to the wilderness to listen to the new 'gospel' of prosperity peddled by self-styled prophets, apostles, and evangelists. Mega-churches – each claiming to be the place where God works signs and wonders – are mushrooming in every corner of the city. The likes of Temitope Balogun Joshua (T.B. Joshua) of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church (ECG), David Oyedepo of the Living Faith World Outreach Ministry, Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, among others, have become household names in Africa. Their message squarely hinges on blessing (often understood in a materialistic sense) as the hermeneutical principle. They prophesy breakthroughs for their adherents. Following the model of American televangelists, such as T.D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar, the new crop of African evangelists no longer dwells on the spilt milk of colonialism or slavery; rather, they invite their followers to claim and pursue their share of the Abrahamic inheritance.

But to receive one's blessing – so the evangelists say - one has to sow the seed; one has to make an offering to the pastor. The more one sows the more one reaps, it is said. In addition, when one has been blessed (for instance, by finding a job being promoted), one has to pay a tithe to God (in reality, this means giving the tithe

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<sup>11</sup> K. Mana, *L'Afrique va-t-elle mourir? Bousculer l'imaginaire africain: Essai d'éthique politique*, 14.

to the pastor) so that God will multiply one's blessing. Prosperity is considered to be a clear manifestation of one's right relations with God. Pain, suffering and poverty, are presented as signs of a life accursed by God on account of sin, which theology harks back to the traditional Old Testament theology challenged by Job. That is why the apostles of the Prosperity Gospel vaunt their wealth in the assembly of the faithful as a testimony of God's blessings. The faithful are also invited to give testimonies of the efficacy of the prophetic ministry of their pastor, which accounts are often taped and broadcast on social media.

Since God does not bless one who conceals his or her sin – so the evangelists urge on the authority of Proverbs 28:13– confession of one's sin is a prerequisite for receiving one's blessing. Those seeking blessings are also invited to make peace with their family and relations because grudges stand in the way of blessings. In some cases, clients are told to wrestle a word of blessing from a member of the family suspected of withholding God's blessing. Such a belief sometimes creates antagonism in families, a phenomenon bordering on witchcraft accusations.

Those wedded to vices are likewise advised to undergo deliverance before they can receive their blessing. In other words, the virtues of Christian life are enjoined upon the people, but from the standpoint of the utilitarian quest for personal prosperity. The 'we' of the ecclesial body is drowned by the vociferous 'I' of the seeker. This attitude may explain why stable ecclesial belonging is no longer prized; individuals are at liberty to engage in what is called 'church-hopping' – the tendency to move from one church to another in a restless pursuit of blessings, healing, and deliverance.

Is the gospel of prosperity the new song African theologians need to sing? The fact that these new evangelists have many followers (sometimes people fly thousands of miles to meet them) is an unequivocal sign that their message resonates with the hopes and sorrows, struggles and fears of the people. These charismatic preachers command a great following because of their ability to leverage Scripture to deliver 'prophecies' that seem to give hope to the hopeless, to strengthen the bones of the weak, and to make people believe that change is not only possible but imminent. As people leave the halls of worship, they do so fired up with faith –

“the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen;”<sup>12</sup> they return home with the confidence that they are ‘somebody’ in the eyes of God; that there is a blessing in store for them; that they are not condemned to spend their entire lives on the underside of history. In many ways, the preaching of the gospel of prosperity resembles the tenets of the ‘American dream.’

The gospel of prosperity’s attention to temporal needs as part and parcel of the spiritual quest is an antidote to the ‘pie-in-the-sky’ gospel preached for many centuries by mainstream churches. The latter have often cast grace in abstract terms not amenable to verification, forgetting that Jesus forgave sins, yes, but also ordered the paralytic to pick up his mat and go.<sup>13</sup> As Shayne Lee writes about traditional Pentecostalism, “There was a time when being Pentecostal meant eschewing the material blessings of the world by opting for a life of simplicity...Pentecostal and poor were almost synonymous.”<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, neo-Pentecostalism factors in material welfare in the equation of salvation. The blessings of this earth are not divorced from the promises of heaven. Thus, in some sense, the gospel of prosperity is a theology of liberation, for it brings to bear the Kingdom of God on the concrete needs of the people here and now.

Another strength of the gospel of prosperity is that it focuses on the subject in need of empowerment and liberation. The ‘turn to the subject’ throws into relief the agency of every person to transform their own situation. Individuals are encouraged to overcome their challenges through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, in order to make breakthroughs in their lives. Some evangelists publish booklets that provide step-by-step spiritual procedures for obtaining one’s desires. The confidence in God’s help is based on the assurance that “no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.”<sup>15</sup> Even when a sermon is delivered to a crowd, pastors frequently address themselves to imaginary individuals traversing one hurdle or the other. The appeal to the individual may enhance the personalization of the gospel.

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 11:1.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 5:17-26.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lee, “Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar,” 227.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 54:17.

The invitation to a life of virtue as a precondition for blessing may also lead to some personal transformation, while attention to the consequences of individual behavior and attitudes may cure the epidemic of blaming Africa's woes on the 'other' – either the colonial outsider or the oppressive political insider. As Max Weber shows in his study of the impact of the Protestant ethic on the dynamics of capitalism, the quest for salvation can influence the manner people conduct their temporal business. The Lutheran concept of *Beruf* (calling) provided that "the only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world."<sup>16</sup> Since the Reformation had undercut the idea that sacraments procured salvation, Protestants – argues Weber – started looking to other 'signs' to obtain the assurance that they were destined for salvation. Worldly success became one of the signs of one's being saved. Consequently, people applied themselves diligently to labor in order to acquire as much wealth as possible, thereby boosting their assurance of salvation. Similarly, African evangelists of the gospel of prosperity take temporal wealth and health as a sign of God's favour. Many of them are successful entrepreneurs, mobilizing their resources mostly from within the continent.

One of the shortcomings of the gospel of prosperity, however, is that it does not provide a structural analysis of social problems. Prosperity is presented as a miracle not requiring social reform. For instance, in 2003, desperate to salvage Ghana Airways from total collapse, the management decided to hold a prayer vigil. They invited Ghana's London-based evangelist Lawrence Tetteh, an economist by training, to lead a healing and deliverance service, with a view to exorcising the bad spirits that were undermining the company's success. The prayer service, however, did not include a moment of honest analysis of the way the company was managed. The 'anointing' and declarations of the pastor against evil powers were believed to have the power to resolve the problems of ailing company. The findings of a financial lawyer, however, revealed that the airline lacked the requisite operational tools to be viable.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Christ is the Answer': What is the Question? 93-117.

Another objection one can raise against the gospel of prosperity is that it gives too much power to the evangelists and prophets, who seem to have the authority to bless and declare (albeit in the name of Jesus!) prosperity for those who come to them. That is why some desperate people spend a lot of money, travelling long distances to seek blessings from these men and women of God. After the declaration of blessing, people are left reveling in the imaginary world of wellbeing, without being given the tools for getting head. Some pastors are also known to take advantage of their unsuspecting flock. As the Kenyan *Daily Nation* reports, "starting a church is the latest way to make easy money, according to worried government officials. Ruthless church leaders tell vulnerable worshippers to give them lots of money for God's work for them to be rewarded with riches."<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on miracles, rather than verifiable and repeatable methodical processes of self-improvement, makes it impossible for adherents to turn a corner in their lives. Year in and year out, worshippers are assured that they are standing on the threshold of a breakthrough. Like the Lucan hemorrhaging woman who spent all her money on physicians, none of whom could heal her, Africa's desperate poor sacrifice their substance at the altar of the gospel of prosperity and hardly experience any change in their lives. Unfortunately, many people are hesitant to stand up and testify against these false prophets, for fear of being labeled Satanists. The growing traffic in 'blessed objects' (anointing water, anointing oil, anointing face towels, anointing stickers and all manner of anointing things) smacks of a magical outlook on life and is not going to help Africans to develop the art of genuine transformation.

Further, the excessive focus on personal blessings militates against the *koinonical* imperative of the Christian faith. God chose to save people not as individuals but as a community. Every spiritual gift is meant to contribute to the edification of the mystical Body of Christ.<sup>19</sup> The task of every Christian is to build the *oecumene* of fraternity transcending ethnic, religious or geographical boundaries. Nor is material prosperity the be-all and end-all of salvation. The long and short of it is that the gospel of prosperity is not a candidate to Africa's theology of genuine transformation.

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<sup>18</sup> "How Preachers Fleece their Poor Flock," *Daily Nation*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 12.



## Prophetic Theology at the Service of a New Social Imaginary

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the growing popularity of the gospel of prosperity is a clear message that African theology cannot go about its business as usual. People are thirsting for an assuring and empowering word. The narrative of endless suffering and pain in Africa is gradually creating what Walter Brueggemann calls “the firm, settled, technical certitude” that produces a “reduced world”, a “prose-flattened” world, a world “brutal and coldly closed upon us.”<sup>20</sup> The more we rehearse Africa’s tragedy the less we believe in the possibility of change. When we continue to sing the litany of Africa’s failures, we are unwittingly legitimizing and entrenching the culture of impotence. A child who is unceasingly told that he or she is a witch eventually believes that he or she is one.

Theology in Africa, therefore, needs to shift from perpetuating the narrative of pain and penury and embark on the urgent prophetic task of re-imagining the future of the continent by letting rays of hope bring out Africa’s fifty shades of potential for transformation. If the media are addicted to the gloomy picture of the continent (partly because that is what is considered real news), let theologians spearhead the task of dusting the body of the African community and oil it with the Good News of the Resurrection. The Christian story is not a tragedy – it ends with the glorious resurrection of the Crucified. As the saying goes, the best way to predict the future is to create it. And there is no greater resource for reviving Africa’s drooping spirits than the word of God. One would agree with Brueggemann that,

because we live so close to the biblical text, we often fail to note its generative power to summon and evoke new life. Broadly construed, the language of the biblical text is prophetic: it anticipates and summons realities that live beyond the conversations of our day-to-day, take-for-granted world. The Bible is our firm guarantee that in a world of technological naiveté and ideological reductionism, prophetic construals of another world are still possible, still worth doing, still

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<sup>20</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, 3-7.

longingly received by those who live at the edge of despair, resignation, and conformity.<sup>21</sup>

Theological discourse guided by divine imagination challenges the false absolutes that society has created. It makes porous the walls demarcating the realms of the possible and the impossible. The new theological discourse should proclaim from the rooftop that, to quote Wallace Stevens' lines, "It is possible, possible, possible / It must be possible."<sup>22</sup> When the Prophet Isaiah speaks words of consolation to the exiled Israelites,<sup>23</sup> he does so because he sees, aided by faith's telescope, the wonders the mighty hand of the Lord is about to operate. The prophetic oracle "is an act of powerful faith on the part of the speaker but also on the part of the listener. The intent of the assurance is to create faith in the listener. The exile was widely seen to be a season of God's absence, and now this poet dares to assert that God is present in that very circumstance, faithfully at work to bring a newness out of this defeat."<sup>24</sup>

Even as the prophet sees the servant of Yhwh so "inhumanly disfigured" that he no longer looks like a man; even when the servant of Yhwh has "no form or charm to attract us, no beauty to win our hearts"; even when the servant of Yhwh is "despised, the lowest of men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering," the prophet, inspired by the vision of God, holds on to the firm conviction that the servant of God will prosper and rise to great heights; after the ordeal, "he will see light and be content."<sup>25</sup> In times of sorrow, the prophetic theologian runs with the Olympic torch of hope and enflames the hearts of the weak with a sense of expectation. When the people are afflicted with despair, the prophetic theologian searches for little mustard seeds of salvation hidden in the crevices of parched lands. He or she studies with gratitude the gathering cloud, confident that it will one day rain down prosperity, peace and justice. A praxis informed by this theology will endeavor to discern every opportunity in a crisis. That is the core of the Christian message.

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<sup>21</sup>W. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 4.

<sup>22</sup>W. Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," quoted in Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 5.

<sup>23</sup>Isaiah 40:1-11.

<sup>24</sup>W. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, 19.

<sup>25</sup>Isaiah 52:13-53:3.

The audience of prophetic theology are the Africans themselves, especially the weak and the afflicted. For a long time, African theological discourse has addressed itself to outsiders and those in high places. With regard to theology of inculturation, the unstated motive was, as it were, to beg Westerners to acknowledge our humanity; as for liberation theology, the underlying motive was to persuade and convince the powers that be to make policies that respect the rights and dignity of the downtrodden. There is nothing wrong with that. Luke the Evangelist addressed his gospel to Theophilus, probably a highly placed person in Roman society; Justin the Martyr composed his *Apology* for the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, the scope being to convince the latter that Christianity was an honorable religion. But theological discourse cannot be reduced to apologetics and polemic. There is urgent need to turn to the suffering subject, who is also the agent of transformation. One of the hard lessons learned from history is that change hardly comes from above; more often than not, change has to be wrestled from those sitting on comfortable thrones. Thus, the suffering person has to become an agent of change.

### **Agenda 2063: A Prophetic Voice?**

*Agenda 2063* – adopted by the heads of state and government of the African Union at the 24<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Assembly in Addis Ababa in January, 2015 – is a framework document for the continent's integral transformation to be implemented by the year 2063, the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The Agenda has seven aspirations: A prosperous Africa, based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; an integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance; an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law; a peaceful and secure Africa; Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics; an Africa whose development is people driven, relying on the potential offered by people, especially its women and youth and caring for children; an Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner.

Among the continental flagship programs are the following: Integrated high-speed train network; African virtual and e-university; a single African airspace; African passport and free movement of people; the Grand Inga Dam (Democratic Republic of Congo); silencing the guns, and outer space explorations.<sup>26</sup> One of the signs of the African ownership of the program is the commitment to raise at least 70% (70-80%) of the financing needs locally through Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM).<sup>27</sup> The target is that by 2063, Africa's dependence on foreign aid will have been overcome: "Africa by 2063 will take full responsibility for financing its own growth and transformation, with dependency on donors, or commodity exports being completely removed from the factors shaping the continent."<sup>28</sup> African governments and other stakeholders also commit to investing in human capital in order to improve the continent's technological and innovation output. Indeed, "a key driver of Africa's prosperity will be its world class human capital developed through quality education focused on achieving 100 per cent literacy and numeracy, and clear emphasis on science, technology and engineering."<sup>29</sup>

Reading the document sometimes feels like reading Isaiah's prophecies about the Messianic times: there will be no sound of guns in Africa anymore; all will have enough to eat; every man, woman, and child will have access to quality healthcare services, shelter, and education; Africa will no longer be despised by other nations. These aspirations resonate with prophetic oracles: "They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift sword against nation, no longer will they learn how to make war."<sup>30</sup> Or consider Isaiah 65:18-19:

Be joyful, be glad for ever at what I am creating, for look, I am creating Jerusalem to be 'Joy' and my people to be 'Gladness'. I shall be joyful in Jerusalem and I shall rejoice in my people. No more will the sound of weeping be heard there, nor the sound of a shriek; never again will there be an infant there who lives only a few days, nor an old man who does not run his full course.

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<sup>26</sup> African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, 2015, vii-ix.

<sup>27</sup> African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, 2015, x.

<sup>28</sup> African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, 2015, 19.

<sup>29</sup> African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, 2015, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

The social imaginary mediated by Agenda 2063 inspires hope, confidence and optimism in the future and potential of Africa. Things can be different; things will be different. It is possible, it must be possible. It is a dream as sublime as Martin Luther King Jr.'s. It is a beautiful thing when a whole continent dreams together.

### **The Role of the Start-up in Realizing the African Dream**

But a dream is a dream unless acted upon. Transformation cannot simply be wished into existence. Every dream is a task. History has shown that such dreams are too precious to be left in the hands of governments. Every individual and every community in Africa needs to do their part to give birth to this hope conceived by the African Union; hence the importance of the culture of the start-up. Significant developments in the West are often initiated by individuals, now increasingly the youth, who conceive a project and bring it into reality. In Africa, technologically savvy youth need to harness their expertise and design systems that will lead to the realization of the aspirations of the African Union. Mechanical engineers need to build machines that make production more efficient. Africa urgently needs machines to transform raw materials into finished products. Scientists should equally spend sleepless nights searching among our woods for cures to intransigent diseases.

Africa needs to overcome the "crisis of action," the lack of the will to start something new, the inability to translate beautiful ideas into reality. As Kä Mana finds, all the miseries, the impasses and the hopelessness of the African social space are attributable to the blockage of the creative domain, the sluggishness of intelligence, the inability to create.<sup>31</sup> Of old, when people heard the preaching of John the Baptist, they were cut to the heart and asked, "What must we do, then?"<sup>32</sup> This is a question every African should be asking: What must I do to make Agenda 2063 a reality?

In their ministry, biblical prophets also used to ritualize their oracles. Hosea married a prostitute so that his own marriage would be a living illustration of the relationship between God and the people of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Isaiah named one of his sons

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<sup>31</sup>Kä Mana, *L'Afrique va-t-elle mourir*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 3:10.

<sup>33</sup> Hosea 1:2.

Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz to impress upon the Israelites the imminent destruction of Samaria.<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel dramatized the impending besieging of Jerusalem by digging a trench round a brick.<sup>35</sup> These prophetic gestures show that prophet and prophecy are one; the life of a prophet is itself a prophecy. Similarly, faithful to its prophetic *munus*, the Church in Africa needs to ritualize its prophecies by creating 'laboratories' of transformation.

## Conclusion

"[The Lord] put a new song in my mouth," says the Psalmist.<sup>36</sup> It is a song that celebrates God's saving intervention. A person of faith praises the Lord even in the midst of affliction, knowing full well that the Lord shall never abandon his people. African theology needs to mediate a faith-filled vision of the world. The time of lament is over; the mourning veil has to be removed. The threshold of self-pity must be crossed so that African communities can embrace fully the demands of freedom. It is time to announce the beginning of the construction of a new Jerusalem where peace and prosperity shall flow like a river. A "new wind" of positive thinking must start blowing across the face of Africa<sup>37</sup> to sweep away the grimy waters of conflict, poverty, disease and ignorance so that the land of peace and prosperity may be revealed.

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<sup>34</sup> Isaiah 8:3-4.

<sup>35</sup> Ezekiel 4:1-3.

<sup>36</sup> Psalm 40:3.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:

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## CHAPTER THREE

### AFRICAN RELIGION AND THE SECURITY OF NATIONS<sup>1</sup>

*Evaristi Magoti Cornelli*

#### **Abstract**

*This article highlights some of the key reasons that make African Religion (AR) less of a threat to internal and external security of nations. Interrogating AR against key sources of religious violence in the world today, such as cultural history of violence, theology of true religion and experience of existential threats, the paper shows that although in aggressive ethnic groups, AR can be a threat to security, on the whole it cannot pose a threat to the security of other nations because AR has no theology of true religion and it is by nature a very tolerant religion. As the nations of the world, particularly in Europe, America and Africa become increasingly paranoid about Islam and Muslims and as they continue to mistreat and/or prohibit Muslims from entering their nations on account of being a threats to internal and external security of nations, we need to reflect on the religious landscape, in order to show that of the three world religions: Christianity, Islam and AR, it is AR which on the whole does not pose a threat to the security of nations. Attempts to identify violence with Islam while at the same time ignoring violence committed by Christianity must be rejected.*

#### **Introduction**

Discussion involving African Religion (AR) is almost always made complex by the lack of scholarly consensus on the precise meaning of the term religion and disagreements about who exactly is an African. The discussion becomes even more complex when AR is examined in relation to another equally controversial term such as security and nations. In order to determine clearly whether or not African Religion

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is a threat to the security of nations, it will be necessary, therefore, to spend sometime addressing some conceptual issues.

## African Religion

Religion is a contested concept. There is as yet no consensus about its precise meaning among scholars who study it.<sup>2</sup> Even the most distinguished scholars in the field cannot bring themselves to agree on what precisely is the object of their study. This situation obliges us to be selective. In order to have an intelligible discussion, one that does not lead to confusion and unnecessary misunderstandings, it is necessary to choose a definition that can best express the African sense of religion. Thus, instead of asking what the term religion means, we shall be asking: what does the term 'religion' mean to Africans?

Unfortunately, 'none of the African languages has a word for religion'<sup>3</sup>. The word that Swahili speakers use to refer to the same phenomenon is *dini* but as Wijsen has noted, *dini* is an Arabic word. Swahili speakers use '*mila na desturi* which refers to customs and traditions' or *imani za jadi*, ancestral beliefs'<sup>4</sup>. Writing about the Nankani people in Ghana, Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, makes a similar claim noting that the term 'religion' has no direct equivalence or translation in Nankani and that the word *malma*, which the Nankani people use, embraces the idea of culture and tradition. Thus, although African languages have no exact word that matches the Latin based concept of 'religion,' most of the terms used refer either to culture, tradition or ancestral beliefs, aspects which can be summed up by the word, culture. If in African languages the word culture denotes religion, then Magesa is correct to argue that for Africans, religion, is a "way of life" or life itself.<sup>5</sup> This is because the term culture, however defined, refers to the way people live, to the actual life of a

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<sup>2</sup> For the variety of definitions of Religion see, F. Inger and R. Pal, (2006), *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, particularly chapter 2, pp. 15-28. See also the article by F. Dmitry N, (1994), 'Defining Religion: An Immodest Proposal, pp. 309-395. See also M. Otto, *Religion and Social Conflicts*, especially chapter 1, p.3-6.

<sup>3</sup> F. Wijsen, *Religious Discourse, Social Cohesion and Conflict: Studying Muslim-Christian relations*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> F. Wijsen, *Religious Discourse, Social Cohesion and Conflict: Studying Muslim-Christian relations*, 50.

<sup>5</sup> L. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 25.

people.

Describing religion as 'way of life' or 'life itself' begs further questions. For instance, what is life, or more precisely, what is the African perception of life? What does it mean to argue that religion is a way of life? These questions have to be answered if clarity demanded by our subject matter is to be attained. Where Africans are concerned, the term 'life' must not be construed to simply denote a principle that animates the body and which makes it possible for a human being to function. From the perspective of Africans, 'life' is according to Tempels (1959/2006), 'force or vital force'<sup>6</sup>. In African Philosophy and theology, the concept of life as 'force' or 'vital force' has been so widely used that it may seem tedious to repeat it. Yet, if this discussion is to make sense, it is helpful to offer some explanations here.

The concept of 'vital force' denotes forces, or energies that sustain human beings in existence and which prevent bad things from happening to them. It refers to a force or energy that makes both physical and spiritual existence of men, women, and all realities possible. That is what Tempels means when he writes: 'in the minds of Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, vegetable, or inanimate'<sup>7</sup>. Expressed negatively, life for Africans is force that protects us from misfortune or influences, which threaten to annihilate or diminish us.

In the African worldview, vital force or power is diminished by corruption, injustice, dishonest, pain and suffering, as well as failure. That is what Tempels, suggests when he writes that, 'every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of vital force'<sup>8</sup>. Since these conditions threaten our existence, a person has to be protected against them. Magesa, expresses the same point when he asserts that for Tempels, vital power is 'shorthand for the 'sum total of the individual or community's approach to the totality of life... [it is] in essence the foundation of life, the capacity to resist death and the agents of death'<sup>9</sup>. Expressed in simple terms, it can be said that in Bantu ontology, vital force, is power or energy that sustains us into being.

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<sup>6</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> L. Magesa, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 28.

The following claims can now be asserted without much hesitation. For Africans religion is life. Life is vital force, power or energy that sustains us into being. Alternatively, religion can be depicted as a 'Way of life'. When used in this way, however, care must be taken to ensure that it does not only imply patterns of behaviours or habits that an individual or community adopts or acquires at one point in life's development and discard at another. Rather, it has to be seen as an approach, which an individual or a community has to the whole of life. More specifically, religion as a 'way of life' denotes the approach which an individual or community has to the totality of forces, energies or vital powers that sustain us in existence. Negatively, the concept denotes an approach which an individual or community has to the totality of forces that threaten our entire existence as human beings or which diminishes us.

It is important to note the debate that has been going on about the term 'African' or 'Africa'. It has provided some perspectives and ideas that can be misleading. There are two views that are usually presented. The first is the racial conception. This draws attention to color or race of African people and defines Africans as black people in Africa, South of the Sahara and in the diaspora. The racial conception deliberately excludes North Africa for two main reasons: most inhabitants of that geographical area are Arabs. Secondly, Arabs are not adherents of AR, and even if they wanted to, they couldn't since adherents of AR belong to it by birth. That is what John Mbiti, suggests when he writes: 'a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow African Religion in that group'<sup>10</sup>. The second view emphasizes the history of black people and defines Africans as a people with a triple heritage. Popularized by the late Prof. Ali Mazrui, Africans are conceived as people who blend within themselves three civilizations: Arabic, European and African.<sup>11</sup> This means that there are times when an African person understands the world through the western prism, at times through the Arabic prism and yet again, at certain times through the African lens.

There is a sense in which this account is correct and compelling. Based on the historical circumstances of slave trade and colonialism, black people acquired certain patterns of life, and certain ways of understanding the world that originate

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<sup>10</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, 46.

from European and Arabian civilization. The triple heritage conception of an African, however, is no longer held seriously in African Academic circles. The prevailing view in African scholarship today is that both Western and Arabic heritages exist in the African person but as veneers, or cosmetics, only on the surface.

The cosmetic view of the foreign heritages was first clearly articulated by Tempels and has become a common view of many scholars of African culture. According to Tempels, 'beneath the veneer of 'civilization' the 'Negro' remains always ready to break through'<sup>12</sup> and to return to his own self. In Tempels estimation, this can only be possible because when the African accepts other traditions the 'roots of his [African] thoughts are unchanged'<sup>13</sup> by the veneers coated on him. Expressing the same point, Magesa (2010) also observes that for Black people, the European and the Arabic civilizations are what he calls, 'add-ons'<sup>14</sup>, in that they are just added unto the black person, but they do not provide 'controlling sensibilities'<sup>15</sup> because, as he points out, the controlling elements of the African person are provided by the African heritage. This explains why 'under the light coating of white imitation, the majority of black people, remain Africans at the core.'<sup>16</sup>

Putting the different pieces together, it can now be said that the term AR, refers to real life of black people in Africa south of the Sahara. It is a term that denotes real forces or powers, which sustains the life of Black people in existence. It has a connotation of powers or forces that provide black people the capacity to fight death and its agents. As a 'way of life' AR is simply the approach, which black people in Africa south of the Sahara have to the totality of forces, energies or vital power that sustains them in existence. Negatively, AR can be considered as an approach which black people in Africa south of the Sahara, have to the totality of forces or powers that threatened their existence. The implication of this view to our understanding of AR and security of nation is enormous but before examining it, let us for the time depict albeit briefly, the idea of security of nations, which is key to this discussion.

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<sup>12</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> L. Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> L. Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 12.

## Security of Nations

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of a "nation" has been the dominant form of political organization of people living permanently in a defined territory"<sup>17</sup>. Closely linked to a defined territory is the sense of people belonging to it and believing that the territory is theirs. It is in this regard, that the idea of a nation can denote "a community of citizens, a body politic or state people"<sup>18</sup>. Unlike 'states' or 'countries', nations are according to Lowell Barrington, collectives *united by shared cultural features (myths, values etc..) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination*.<sup>19</sup> In other words, what distinguishes a nation from a country or state, or any other groups in society is its sense of purpose, namely the right to territorial self-determination and belief of its members that the territory is their national homeland.

Since the Publication of Hans Kohn's work, the *Idea of Nationalism* (1944),<sup>20</sup> it has been customary to for scholars in political science, to make a distinction between civic and ethnic nations. Ethnic nations are generally composed of a 'population with a relatively high degree of cultural homogeneity or developed simultaneously with those structures'<sup>21</sup>. A civic nation, on the other hand, is composed of many different ethnic groups whose membership in the nation is determined by citizenship. In a civic nation, members are 'unified by their equal political status and their will as individuals to be part of the nation'.<sup>22</sup>

The focus of this chapter is on the security of all types of nations: civic and cultural. This paper focuses on both because security is a concern of all nations and not only one type of nations. In addition, as Kuzio Taras has noted, the distinction between civic and ethnic, though significant, is increasingly becoming blurred

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<sup>17</sup> J. Delbruck, "Global Migration, Immigration, Multiethnicity: Challenges to the Concept of the Nation State," 48.

<sup>18</sup> J. Delbruck, "Global Migration, Immigration, Multiethnicity: Challenges to the Concept of the Nation State," 52.

<sup>19</sup> L. Barrington, "'Nation' and 'Nationalism': The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science," 712-713.

<sup>20</sup> H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origin and Background*.

<sup>21</sup> S. Shulman, *Challenging the Civic/Ethnic and West/East Dichotomies in the study of nationalism*, 555.

<sup>22</sup> S. Shulman, *Challenging the Civic/Ethnic and West/East Dichotomies in the study of nationalism*, 556.

because in almost every nation there are elements and dimensions that include all types of nationalism, such as organic, ethnic, voluntary and civic.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, where African nations are concerned, it is worth bearing in mind that they are by and large civic nations. Being composed of many different ethnic groups, one of the main tasks of post-colonial African political leaders was to construct the sense of nationhood, that is, the feeling of belonging together to a territory, of being united as citizens of one country. In this respect, it can be said that African states preceded African nations. Unlike in the west where the emergence of nation preceded the state,<sup>24</sup> in Africa south of the Sahara, it is the state, which created the nation. The lack of time and space do not allow us to examine the role of religions, particularly AR in the construction of African nations and African nationalism, but is important to note by way of passing that African nations and nationalism are to a very large extent premised on AR.

Our concern for nations, whether civic or ethnic, is linked with the idea of security, which has come to signify not so much the "absence of threats to acquired values"<sup>25</sup> (because threats are always there), but as a condition of "low probability of damage to acquired values"<sup>26</sup>. Thus, for example, in response to damages that can be brought about by earthquake, states usually adopt building codes that make houses secure. Yet construction codes do not by themselves affect the probability of earthquakes but it lowers the probability of damage that earthquakes can unleash.

Acquired values are many and may include military security, regime security, societal security, environmental security, economic security, energy security, trade security, cyber security, and food security, to mention a few. This paper is concerned with the security of nations. Now, the concept of national security has traditionally included political independence and territorial integrity as values to be protected. These sentiments are enshrined in the constitution of many African nations and find expression in Article 3 (b) of the constitutive Act of the African Union, which identifies

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<sup>23</sup> T. Kuzio, *The Myth of Civic States: A Critical Survey of Hans Kohn's Framework for Understanding Nationalism*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> S. Shulman, *Challenging the Civic/Ethnic and West /East Dichotomies in the study of Nationalism*, pp. 554-585

<sup>25</sup> D. Baldwin, *The Concept of Security, in Review of the international Studies*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> D. Baldwin, *The Concept of Security, in Review of the international Studies*, 13.

its objective as “to defend the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of its member s states”.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the idea of territorial integrity has also involved protection of culture, or a people's way of life.

The values which still command the attention of many African nations and which are protected are, political independence and territorial integrity. Nations in Africa south of the Sahara are still concerned with protection of their independence, their freedom and territorial integrity. Like other nations in the world, African nations also believe that there are some nations within and outside the continent, which are bent on threatening the independence, the freedom, and the territorial integrity of their nations. They believe that the threat to their freedom, independence and territorial integrity is also a threat to their way of life, which is their culture.

An important feature of the idea of security concerns itself with the extent of security. For instance, how much security should nations have in order to protect its territorial integrity, way of life, independence, and freedom? Can national security be qualified as complete or a matter of degree? There are scholars, such as Jacob L. Devers, who have argued that security cannot be a matter of degree. He writes:

National security is a condition that cannot be qualified. We shall either be secure or we shall be insecure. We cannot have partial security. If we are only half secure, then we are not secure at all<sup>28</sup>

Realistically, however, complete security is not a prerogative of this world. It is a state that can be achieved in the eschaton, at the end of time when humanity will meet God face to face. For that reason, it is sensible to concur with Wolfers who tends to consider security as a value “of which a nation can have more or less and which it can aspire to have in greater or lesser measure”<sup>29</sup>. This means that security is a matter of degree and is usually premised on the level of threats.

There are varying degrees of security. Threat level can be critical, severe, substantial, moderate, and low. Critical means that an attack is imminent and the

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<sup>27</sup> African Union, the Constitutive Act of the African union.

<sup>28</sup> D. Baldwin, *The Concept of Security, in Review of the international Studies*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> D. Baldwin, *The Concept of Security, in Review of the international Studies*, 14.



response is exceptional in that it requires maximum protective security measures to meet specific threats and to minimize vulnerability, and risk. Severe suggests that an attack is highly likely and requires heightened response. Substantial means that an attack is a strong possibility and the response is the same as in the previous category. The Moderate category suggests that an attack is possible but not likely and the responses here are normal, in that routine protective security measures appropriate to the business concerned. Lastly is the low category, in which an attack is unlikely and the response is the same as in the moderate category.<sup>30</sup> Protection of a nation is task that is usually carried out through either military means, coercive diplomacy or through humanitarian intervention

### **Relation between Religion and Security of Nations**

Religion is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it cuts for peace and security of nations but on the other hand it cuts for war, violence, bloodshed, and hatred between nations. History is replete with examples of wars and violence that were caused by religion. The persecution of the early Christians by Romans, and the persecution of Jews and Muslims during the crusades are examples of what religion did to nations. Currently, terrorist attacks in European nations, United States of America and in some African nations, such as Somalia, Kenya, Nigeria, and in Tanzania, to mention but a few nations, do constantly remind us that religion has not changed. Violence, hatred, and intolerance under the banner of religion are not conditions of the past but still exist even today.

Unfortunately, discussion about religious violence today is narrowed down to one religion. After the event of 9/11 when the twin towers and the World Trade centre were attacked and after similar attacks in Britain, France, and Spain, it has become fashionable to consider Islam not only as a threat to the security of nations but also a threat to the way of life and culture of people in different nations. The current upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiments and hatred in the West and in some measure in Africa is partly due to this perception.

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<sup>30</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org> visited on the 21 October 2017.

Yet, it is not the case that threats to national security only come from certain segments within Islam. Christianity has its own share of threats to the security of nations and continues to do so in subtle and open ways. For instance, the missionary enterprise in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not entirely secure to the nations they evangelized. In Africa, in particular, some of the methods of evangelization, the process by which missionaries sought converts, were not short of physical and psychological violence. The methods used were, to use Magesa's expression, 'criminal paradigms of evangelization'.<sup>31</sup> Converts to Catholicism, for instance, were obliged to abandon their culture and their way of life, a situation that has contributed to the creation of cultural schizophrenia, so rampant in Africa today. In addition, converts to Catholicism were also asked to have double allegiance: one to the Roman Pontiff, the Pope, particularly in matters of faith and morals, and the other to their own nations, especially in secular matters, such as economics and politics. The situation of having to live with double allegiances has not been very healthy. For the most part it weakens the freedom and independence of a nation.

Furthermore, where Christianity has been identified with the state or so powerful and influential, it has not been easy to distinguish between state and religious violence. Needless to say that most of the conflicts in Africa today, are either wholly or partly religious. A few examples may help to prove the point: The conflict between North and southern Sudan is perhaps one of the longest conflicts in Africa. Although the conflict has both economic and political factors, it cannot be argued that religion has nothing to do with it because the North is predominantly Muslim and the South is predominantly Christian. For quite sometime Christians have been fighting Muslims and even after the cessation of south Sudan, Christians are fighting among themselves, a situation that has not only threatened the security of the new nation but is actually destroying the young nation. The State is crumbling from within.

Not so long ago in Uganda, a Christian movement known as the Lord's Resistance Army maimed and killed people with impunity. Founded in 1987–8 by Alice Lakwema and Joseph Kony in northern Uganda, but operating also in South Sudan, the Central African Republic and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the

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<sup>31</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 56.

movement sought to overthrow the secular government of President Yoweri Museveni and replace it with a theocratic state directed by the Ten Commandments. To attain that objective, it abducted, killed, maimed, and displaced thousands of people.<sup>32</sup> They were a threat to the security of Uganda as a nation.

In the Ivory Coast, Muslims and Christians have been at each other's throat for years since 2002. The North which is predominantly Muslim and dominated by poor migrants from Mali and Burkina Faso, felt that it was politically marginalized and economically exploited by the Christian south, which is wealthier. To redress the situation the predominantly Muslim north, under the leadership of Alassane Ouattara, fought against the Christian south, which supported the then president, Laurent Gbagbo.<sup>33</sup>

The situation in the Central African Republic has been similar to that of Côte d'Ivoire just described. The violence that erupted there in 2012 and 2013 started as a political conflict, but it slowly assumed a religious character when Seleka, an armed rebel movement representing Muslims in the north, started killing Christians in the south. Then the Anti-Balaka militia forces in the Christian south also started killing Muslim civilians. The point of all these examples is that both Christians and Muslims are imbued with violence, which can pose a threat to the security of nations.<sup>34</sup>

The question to ask at this point is the following: why is violence part of these two main religions in Africa? Linda M. Woolf and Michael R. Hulsizer<sup>35</sup> have suggested some factors at the root of hate and violence between and within religions. They include cultural history, social psychology, and situational factors. For the sake of time and space, this paper will focus only on the factor of cultural history. The path to violence and hate include stigmatization, dehumanization, moral exclusion, and impunity.<sup>36</sup> A detailed account of these factors would bring special insights to the paper but since this paper is not about the nature of mass violence, we will have to leave it there and move on to the subject matter of this paper, which is to determine whether AR is a threat to security of nations.

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<sup>32</sup> T. Allen and Vlassenroot (eds), *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*.

<sup>33</sup> F. Sogbo, *From Paradise to Troubled State: The Civil War in Ivory Coast 2002-2011*.

<sup>34</sup> L. Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic*.

<sup>35</sup> L. Woolf and Hulsizer, *Intra and Inter-Religious Hate and Violence: a Psychological Model*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> L. Woolf and Hulsizer, *Intra and Inter-Religious Hate and Violence: a Psychological Model* 3-9.

## African Religion and Security of Nations

The central question of this paper must now be addressed at this point. Is AR a threat to security of nations? Is it a threat to the political independence, freedom, and territorial integrity of nations? To frame the question differently, is AR also violent as Christianity and Islam are? To answer this question, we will examine cultural history, theology of true religion, a sense of threat and the impacts they bring to bear on it in terms of security and violence.

### Cultural History

Culture is a term that is so often used that defining it here may seem a bit boring. But if we are to understand whether AR is violent or not, it is helpful to consider the meaning of this term in this discussion. 'Culture is a word that is often used to refer to an integrated system of beliefs, values, customs, and institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs and which binds society together and gives it a sense of identity, security and continuity'<sup>37</sup>. In terms of structure, culture involves a 'total design for living for a people. It is a system of 'understanding and evaluating the world, the environment and one's own context'.<sup>38</sup> African culture and AR are so linked together that they can be considered as synonymous. As Douglas Thomas has noted, 'African religion and culture are so intertwined within traditional African societies that we can speak of African culture as a religion or at least as serving a religious function'.<sup>39</sup> That being the case, the cultural history of AR cannot be separated from the history of African culture or from the life history of the African people.

With respect to violence there are some tribes and ethnic groups in Africa with a history of violence and aggressiveness and others with a history of non-violence. The question to ask is why are some tribes or ethnic groups prone to the culture violence and aggressiveness? There are several explanations for this but the most

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<sup>37</sup> J. Tribel, "Mission and Culture in Africa: A working Report on Tanzanian Experience," 234.

<sup>38</sup> J. Tribel, "Mission and Culture in Africa: A working Report on Tanzanian Experience," 234.

<sup>39</sup> T. Douglas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, p. 11.

obvious ones are three: the tendency to use violence as a means of solving problems and the ideology of supremacy or theology of true religion and the experience of threats. Let us consider each of these elements in turn beginning with violence as a problem solving skill.

Africa has a very long history of violence and aggression. Although violence and hatred existed among people, these were not glorified or exulted as virtues precisely because they were considered as forces that diminish life and which can eventually destroy it. Consequently traditional societies put in place mechanism that shun and prevent violence and hatred and which promote life.<sup>40</sup> In the end, violence and hatred existed in small scale, in and between extended families. Africa's experience of mass violence and hatred is usually traced back to the time of slave trade and colonialism. The history of slave trade and colonialism is well documented so there is no need to repeat it here.

Nevertheless, if we want to know if African culture or religion has propensity for violence and therefore a threat to the security of nations, it is worth noting that it is during the time of slave trade that Africans experienced extreme forms of mass violence, or violence on industrial scale. Millions of Africans were captured by force and subjected to slavery. According to Walter Rodney slaves were not obtained through trade in the normal sense of buying and selling of goods, but through warfare, trickery, banditry, and kidnapping.<sup>41</sup> Judith Listowel has also noted that on other occasions slave traders bribed local chiefs to procure slaves, who when unsuccessful through bribery, raided villages and took captives.<sup>42</sup> It is not necessary at this juncture to get into the debate as to whether or not Africans participated in these acts of violence. Suffice only to point out that the African experience of slave trade contributed significantly to the growth of the culture of violence in Africa south of the Sahara.

Yet, not all African tribes or ethnic groups had equal degree of accepting violence as a way of attaining the good or of solving problems. The degree of accepting violence as a way of solving problems differed from one tribe to the other

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<sup>40</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the church in Africa" 56.

<sup>41</sup> W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

<sup>42</sup> J. Listowel, *The Making of Tanganyika*, London, Chatto and Windus.

and from one ethnic group to the other. In Tanzania, for instance, the Maasai, the Kurya, the Ngoni and the Hehe, are known to be more aggressive and violent than let us say, the Zaramo and Sukuma, who are known to be pacifists.

In aggressive ethnic groups, AR has a history of glorifying violence, and its art, myths, folklores, songs, dance, oral history, proverbs, and sayings, often include within themselves representations of glorification of violence. In this context, battles are described in terms of conflict between good and evil forces, and most of the time the evil forces do not triumph. The implication of this is that in a nation composed of ethnic groups that are aggressive, AR can be a threat not only to the internal security of nations but also to external security of nations. This can be testified by the fact that in Africa, genocides and violent wars occur within nations with aggressive and violent tribes or ethnic groups.

### **Theology of True Religion**

Most of the time, religious violence is premised on the truth values attached to its doctrinal teachings and moral codes. Each religion has its own criteria of determining what is true or false. In Christianity the criteria is God's revelation, as found either in the scriptures (for Protestants - sola scriptura), or as is the case with Catholics, scripture and tradition. In other words, for Christians, scriptures or the bible determines the truth-value of their claims. If a claim cannot be justified by the bible, then it is considered untrue, and therefore false. For Catholics, the truth-value of their claims is justified by either the bible or tradition of the church. If it cannot be justified by any of these, then that claim is false. The same is true with Muslims. The truth-value of their claims is justified by revelation from God, as it is found in the Holy book, the Koran. If the Koran cannot justify a claim, then the claim is false and not worthy to be emulated by the faithful. Since the truth-value of claims by these religions is premised on revelation from God, and since God cannot error, they are then considered as absolute truths and the religion that proclaims them is by virtue of that a true religion.

Closely related to absolute certainty of true claims is the claim to universality. In the case of Christianity, its message has universal validity. The founder is said to

have commanded his disciples not to keep the message to themselves but to take it everywhere in the world. In Mathew: 28:18, Jesus is reported to have said something to that effect his disciples should go all over the world to preach the good news of love and peace and thus make them his disciples. Muslims too believe that they have a divine mandate to convert every creature to Islam because Islam is a true religion by virtue of being founded by God. From the idea of universality arises the necessity of missionary activities, by which missionaries of both religions leave their own nations and culture and go to other nations and culture to make converts. The methods of converting people from other cultures differ but for both religions, they involve peaceful persuasion, intimidation, threats, and force or violence, a situation that creates the threat to national security.

Africa Religion, however, is not grounded in the theology of true religion. To understand this, it is helpful to consider the nature of AR. Unlike Islam and Christianity, AR has no founders like Jesus or Mohammad. This is because AR 'evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their life and reflected upon their experiences'<sup>43</sup>. This means that what guides the life of the people in a particular tribe or ethnic group is what the community has established over time. In the guidelines provided by the respective communities, rarely does one find a mandate from a community instructing its members to go to other nations to convert people and thus increase the number of its members. Community Expansionism of this kind is rare and far between, a situation that makes AR be less of a threat to security of nations.

AR is less of a threat to the security of nations because of its nature and beliefs. Unlike Islam and Christianity, the beliefs of an adherent of AR are not codified or written in documents or books. As Mbiti notes, the beliefs of an African person are 'written in the history, the hearts, and the experiences of the people'<sup>44</sup>. The combination of all these elements makes it difficult for an adherent of AR to be a threat to security of other nations, since his history and the experience of his/her people does not exhibit violence to other nations.

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<sup>43</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 56.

<sup>44</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 17.

An adherent of AR is not bound by any authority which goes back in history'<sup>45</sup>. Persons belonging to AR, just follow what has been handed down to him by the former generations, changing whatever is necessary to suit their circumstances of life'<sup>46</sup>. In this respect, AR is very pragmatic and realistic and as such it has not succumbed to an ideology of authority and power.

AR has no missionaries who go out to other nations seeking converts by all means possible. Part of the explanation for this is that AR 'belongs to each people within which it has evolved'<sup>47</sup>. This means that each tribe or ethnic group developed its own way of life, its own attitude to life. For that reason, notes Mbiti, 'person from one setting cannot automatically and immediately adjust himself to or adopt the religious life of other African peoples in another setting.'<sup>48</sup>To be an adherent of AR, therefore, a 'person must be born in a particular African people'<sup>49</sup>. Since an African person belongs to AR by birth, he or she cannot 'stand apart and reject the whole of his people's religion'<sup>50</sup> because that would imply that one has alienated himself or herself from his/her community, a situation that is almost unthinkable which makes contemplation of unleashing violence to other nations almost difficult.

It is worth noting that AR is not a proselytizing religion, in that 'it is not preached from one people to another'<sup>51</sup> or from one nation to another. One is born into AR. Since one becomes a member of this religion by birth, one is not directly motivated to carry the belief of his/her extended family or ethnic group to another country.

Like Islam and Christianity, African religion is also a revealed religion. But unlike Islam and Christianity, in African Religion, revelation, which is the disclosure of God's will and purpose for mankind, is not contained in written document or a book, it is not definitive and is not confined to the religious leaders.<sup>52</sup> In AR God reveals himself in a variety of ways including people such as prophets and diviners, natural

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<sup>45</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 17.

<sup>46</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 17.

<sup>47</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 14.

<sup>48</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 14.

<sup>49</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 14.

<sup>50</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 14.

<sup>51</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa" 14.

<sup>52</sup> T. Douglas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, p. 11.



phenomenon such as lightening, rain, and thunder and happenings such as dreams. Magesa summarizes well the meaning of revelation in AR, when he says that 'revelation is a continuous and ever present aspect of religious living'.<sup>53</sup> This means that in AR, God discloses himself continuously in the life experience of the individual and the community. As such revelation is not a definitive act or an event that occurred once and which will never be repeated. This understanding of revelation is important because it makes adherents of AR to believe that other cultures and people have their own revelation and as such there is no new revelation that they have to provide to other nations. In a way, it is an attitude that makes adherents of AR to respect revelation in other cultures, an attitude that demoralizes the motivation to go and teach other people values of African culture. It is in this attitude of respecting and lacking motivation which makes AR less of a threat to security of nations.

### **A Sense of Threats**

In addition to the culture of violence and acceptance of the ideology of supremacy, there is also the experience of being threatened that usually leads religions to violence. According to Baldwin, the term threat refers to actions that convey a "conditional commitment to punish or harm unless ones demands are met"<sup>54</sup>. A threat, however, can also be a statement of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone in retribution for something done or not done. A threat can also be a person or a thing or a condition likely to cause damage or danger.<sup>55</sup> It is in this context that one finds references to wars, epidemics, floods, earthquakes, or droughts, as threats to acquire valued.

When individuals and groups are threatened the ordinary and common reaction is to take precautions or establish preventive measures to prevent the threat from being realized or taking place. When for example, there is threat to health due to epidemic like cholera or HIV-aids, the most sensible and common reaction is to enact laws and policies which when followed can prevent the disease from spreading. The

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<sup>53</sup> L. Magesa, "The Mission of the Church in Africa," 23.

<sup>54</sup> D. Baldwin, *The Concept of Security*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Online Dictionary.

implementations of such policies or laws however, do not affect the probability of cholera or HIV, but they do lower the probability of damage to health of people in the community. The kind of measures that groups take to protect themselves from other groups or communities that threaten them vary, but most of time, those who are threatened resort to violence as a way of protecting themselves from the groups that pose threats to their existence.

If there is a religion that has been threatened then that is African Religion. Being the religion of the indigenous people of Africa, African religion has been historically threatened by slave trade, colonialism, Christianity, and Islam. We will focus here on Christianity and Islam.

Throughout history, both Islam and Christianity have targeted adherents of African religion for conversion. The first to do so were Muslims who from the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century sought to get Africans to convert to Islam. Later in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christians also arrived in the continent from Europe, with the intention of converting Africans to Christianity. The primary assumption of Muslims then and today is that Africans are infidels and *kafir*, which means that they are people who do not subject themselves to the will of God and for that reason, they must be fought against until they become Muslims. In his book, *Religious Discourse, Social Cohesion and Conflict: Muslim – Christian relations in Tanzania*, Thomas Joseph Ndaluka, quotes a Muslim journalist who says, 'it is our religious duty to fight against the *Kafir* and their *kafir* system'<sup>56</sup>, referring to the capitalist or, rather, the liberal policies that Tanzania adopted in the mid- 1980's after the abandonment of *Ujamaa*-socialism. According to the journalist, 'God created two samples. He created the *kafir* and Muslims' and notes that between the two, 'God has no business with *Kafirs*.<sup>57</sup>'

It is worth noting that the fundamental attitude of Muslims to Africans is not a hidden secret. In fact, Africans know that Muslims do not have high regard for them. Yet, in today's Africa, Islam is one of the largest religions in the continent. Instead of the derogatory attitudes serving as a call for negative reaction and violence, Africans

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<sup>56</sup> T. J. Ndaluka, *Religious Discourse, Social Cohesion and Conflict: Muslim – Christian relations in Tanzania*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> T. J. Ndaluka, *Religious Discourse, Social Cohesion and Conflict: Muslim – Christian relations in Tanzania*, 83.

have embraced Islam in huge numbers. Why is it that Africans then and Africans today do not react negatively or violently to attitudes that undermine them as a people? Why don't they resort to violence when they experience being threatened by Islam? Part of the answer to this question has already been given in this paper.

For Africans, The Arabic tradition is accepted only as 'add on' or as a 'veneer' that can be shaken off anytime. Islam in that respect is not a controlling element of the African people. The experience of being threatened by Islam has not led to violence because Islam is considered not to have controlling sensibilities and as such adherents of AR do not see any point of going to war for something that is not so deep in them. Considered from this perspective, it can be said that African religion cannot be a threat to the security of nations, not only because it has no ideology of supremacy, but also because none of the religious and non-religious influences have been so ingrained in their lives as to provide the controlling sensibilities. Expressed differently, although many Africans are Muslims, Islam is not the religion that provides the controlling sensibilities of the Africans, as to want to go to war or create violence to other nations because of it.

More importantly perhaps, is the high degree of tolerance, which Africans have. Adherents of African Religion cannot pose a threat to security of other nations because it is a very tolerant religion. Tolerance is a very tricky concept but for our purpose in this paper, it is helpful to use the depiction provided by Doorn van Majorka, who says that:

Tolerance is putting up with something you do not like. Tolerance is not a self-evident phenomenon: it is often fought for, and reached only after controversy, conflict or even war. Tolerance contains an internal paradox of accepting the things one rejects or objects to. To overcome or avoid conflict, one needs to tolerate the very things one abhors, disagrees with, disapproves or dislikes.<sup>58</sup>

The kernel of this passage is that tolerance is about accepting conditions or attitudes that one dislikes or does not approve. Clearly, there are attitudes and practices that Africans do not accept in Islam but they have accepted them even as

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<sup>58</sup> Van D. Marjoka, *Tolerance*, Sociopedia.isa.

they do not approve them. The attitude of converting Africans to Islam is not widely shared even among converts to Islam, because it reinforces the belief enshrined in term Kafir and infidels. It reinforces the belief that Africans have no religion, and that they can only be saved if they abandon their own values and embrace Islamic values. Yet, Africans have converted in huge numbers to Islam not because they believe that Africans are Kafirs and infidels but because they tolerate it. Similarly, there are those who hold the view that Islam is a ruthless and violent religion, particularly with respect to its Sharia laws, especially those which allow sinners to be stoned to death or cutting limbs of those who steal or caught in adultery or those who kill in the name God. Yet, although not approved are tolerated. The ability to tolerate beliefs and practices not accepted contributes a lot to making African Religion less of a threat to the security of nations.

The situation is the same with respect to Christianity. Since the introduction of Christianity in Africa, adherents of AR have been living together relatively peacefully with Christians. On the one hand, they live together in the same families and communities; they inter-marry, participate in burial ceremonies of each other, and cooperate on a number of social, political and economic activities. Adherents of AR, on the other hand, attend schools, colleges and universities belonging to Christians, receive treatments from Christian hospitals, and use infrastructures established by Christians. This, however, does not mean that there are things, which Africans do not like about Christianity or things that Christians do not like about Africans. To be sure, Africans have not liked the superiority complex of the Christian ministers and Christianity itself.

Like Islam, Christianity too was introduced in Tanzania as a superior, modern, and civilizing religion. Closely associated with the colonial enterprise, early Christian missionaries did not believe that Africans were rationally sufficiently developed to have a religion. They did not see any founder or founders of AR; they did not see any written material resembling the Bible or the Quran; they did not see Africans proselytizing or seeking converts to their own way of life; and above all they did not see any visible structure of central governance and authority there. They, therefore, concluded that Africans have no religion.

The religious beliefs and practices observed among Africans were described by the pioneers of Christianity in Africa as superstitious, paganism, animistic, magic and/or fetishist. It was believed that Africans do not worship God but their ancestors<sup>59</sup>. The assumption behind these derogatory perceptions was that AR was inferior to Christianity in that it was not only less developed, but it was also not modern and civilized. Thus, from the very beginning, relation between AR and Christianity can best be described as between an inferior and superior, uncivilized and civilized, barbaric or out-dated and modern religion.

This consideration of AR has not changed. The development of science and technology and globalization may have changed the way we work and communicate, but has not changed significantly the negative attitude of official Christianity towards AR. If anything, the development of science and technology and globalization have made worse what was already a worse situation.

There can be no doubt that Christian missionaries 'descended upon Africa'<sup>60</sup> to preach the Gospel but as Magesa noted few decades ago, they did so with 'incredible violence against African life and property. The blood of African peoples kept flowing like rivers for well over three hundred years'<sup>61</sup>. During that time European missionaries 'raided, robbed and killed Africans'<sup>62</sup> and what is worse is that 'they thanked god for this cruelty'.<sup>63</sup> The missionary's attitude towards Africans and African beliefs and practices and the missionary violence against Africans is well known and has to be acknowledge if we are to remain faithful to our Christian calling and if we are to liberate the continent from oppression. In his own words:

To sugar coat the violence Africans have suffered in the process of Christian mission by interpreting it in the context noble motives it neither possessed nor intended, is to serve the interests of dishonest and un Christian mentality. It is to help attitudes that have no remorse before God for wrongdoing, attitudes that wish to continue to subjugate and oppress the continent'.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 18-19.

<sup>60</sup> L. Magesa, *The Mission of the Church in Africa*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> L. Magesa, L., *The Mission of the Church in Africa*, 56-57.

<sup>62</sup> L. Magesa, *The Mission of the Church in Africa*, 56.

<sup>63</sup> L. Magesa, *The Mission of the Church in Africa*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> L. Magesa, *The Mission of the Church in Africa*, 56.

These are very powerful words. Yet, in spite of all the missionary brutality, Africans did join Christianity in huge numbers. Does this mean that they don't know about the brutality and the attitude of that religion towards them? Why is it that they do not respond in kind with violence? Why is the missionary threat not met with violence and war? The answer is that they do know very well the attitude of Christianity towards them. They still join because they are ready to tolerate the negative elements within Christianity and sometimes even forgive what Christianity has done to them and their way of life. This attitude of tolerance which forms part and parcel of the controlling sensibilities of African people, has had a big role to play in making AR less of a threat to the internal and external security of nations.

In terms of response, it is worth noting that the response had not been violence or war against Christianity. Instead of unleashing violence against the perpetrators of violence and brutality in Africa, Africans have responded in two ways: Theoretically and practically. At the theological or theoretical level, they have argued for liberation and inculturation. The process of inculturation in Africa has emphasized the need of making the gospel relevant in Africa by taking African culture seriously. The model here is the Christ event. Just as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, Christianity too is invited to take the "flesh" of African culture and dwell among Africans<sup>65</sup> (Magesa, 2004). Taking the cue from the African political movements of liberation, such as Negritude and Ujamaa-socialism, but founded on the scriptures, proponents of liberation (Magesa, 1976), have argued for social, political, and economic emancipation of Africans from the yoke of neo-colonialism – in Christian terms, from the domination of European Christian structures, doctrines and practices.<sup>66</sup>

At a more practical level, they have sought to break away from Christian traditions and establish what are variously known as African "independent", "indigenous", "initiated" or "instituted" churches (Mwaura, 2014, p. 248). Common to these churches is the fact that they originated in Africa and do not depend on financial aid from outside. They are ecclesiastically free from the domination of

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<sup>65</sup> L. Magesa, *Liberation Theology*, no. 1.

<sup>66</sup> L. Magesa, *Liberation Theology*, no. 1.

mainline churches. They have a theology and ethos that is distinctly African.<sup>67</sup> The African response to violence perpetrated by Christian missionaries and their agents then, has not been one of violence but peaceful separation or break away. Granted this background it is easy to understand why African religion cannot be a threat to the security of nations. For if AR has not threatened the security of the countries which provided missionaries whose evangelizing mission paradigm in Africa was dehumanizing and violent, and has not threatened the security of missionaries who evangelized Africa, it does not seem likely that it will pose a threat to security of any nation. Those religions in the continent that purport to seek peaceful co-existence while maintaining dehumanizing models of evangelization and conversion of Africans, must pose and try to understand AR. It has something to offer other religions, which have a history of causing internal and external security of nations.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to determine whether African Religion is a threat to internal and external security of nations. In order to do that it was necessary to determine the propensity of AR to violence and war. Examining the cultural history, ideology of supremacy, and existence of threats, we were able to establish that in aggressive ethnic groups AR has a history of glorifying violence, and as such AR can be a threat to internal and external security of nations. Examination of the ideology of supremacy and experience of threats, however, lead to different conclusion from the one reached when examining cultural history. By examining the ideology of supremacy, it was learnt that AR cannot be a threat to the security of nations because it has no ideology or theology of supremacy, which can motivate it to go to other nations to seek converts. Similarly, by examining the African experience of threats, it was learnt that although Islam and Christianity have threatening Africans, adherents of AR have not resorted to violence and war as a response. Instead they have either tolerated their tormentors or broken away from the mainline churches to form the African Independent Churches or developed theological narratives of inculturation

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<sup>67</sup> P. Mwaura, "The Use of Power in African Instituted Churches".

and liberation. A religion that is so tolerant, that is so resilient, cannot be a threat to the security of any nation. Granted this, it was suggested that other religions in the continent that purport to be paragons of virtue, can take a leaf or two from AR.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### LUO CATHOLIC WIDOWS: THE DILEMMA OF EXCLUSION<sup>1</sup>

Aloyse Otieno Ojore

#### Abstract

*Persistent observance of the practice of widow inheritance among the Luo of Western Kenya and its condemnation by the Catholic Church has led to a pastoral dilemma for the Catholic widows in the Archdiocese of Kisumu. Those who reject it are ostracized by the community while those who embrace it are excluded by the Church. This dilemma has remained unresolved for over 116 years since the arrival of Catholicism among the Luo. This paper discusses this levirate custom with the aim of offering some helpful insights and considerations towards mitigating the challenges associated with the practice among the Luo.*

#### Introduction

The Luo are Nilotic Africans found mainly in Southern Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. This chapter focuses on the Kenyan Luo found in the Western part of the country. Death is taken very seriously among the Luo. Consequently, they observe all death rituals due to fear of offending the spirits of the dead and of violating death taboos. Failure to do so attracts drastic sanctions. For example, a Luo widow who refuses to observe death rituals cannot till the soil, plant or harvest her crops. She cannot cook and feed her own children. She remains a tabooed person forever. Her whole lineage becomes a group of outcasts. Anybody who knows them, cannot dare marry from that line because, the broken taboo "may cause death to children or prevent a family from having children".<sup>2</sup>

In order to avoid breaching taboo codes, the Luo have to perform ritual sex to mark "seasons like planting and harvesting, rites of passage associated with birth,

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-04>

<sup>2</sup> O. Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*, 147.

marriage, establishment of homes and death of a close family members".<sup>3</sup> The sexual act on any of these occasions is an act of blessing, which maximizes life. A widow, who does not have a partner, would be expected to have one even if for just that one specific ritual function. Since such occasions are many, a constant partner is crucial. Observance of life-related rituals is compulsory for all regardless of one's religious beliefs. It is this unilateral law that leads Luo Catholic widows into *social and spiritual exclusion*.

When a Luo man dies, it is customary that a cousin or a distant relative should take the widow and raise children for the dead brother in a *levirate* union. The *levir*, (Latin for husband's brother), is never considered a husband to the widow even though he is expected to care for her as a husband. Luo levirate law demands that a widow remains, for the rest of her life, *chi liel*, (wife of the 'grave'- deceased) even if she accepts another man into her life. For the Luo, "although the inheriting man usually has his own wife or wives, traditionally the widow is not seen as entering into a polygamous marriage because the relationship is neither a marriage nor wife inheritance but merely a union of convenience".<sup>4</sup> It is rather a "temporary adjustment in the marriage of the deceased brother to ensure that his marriage achieves its goal."<sup>5</sup> If the *levir* is not yet married, the union with his brother's widow does not stand in the way when he wants to marry his own wife.

The Catholic Church rejects the levirate custom because it contradicts her fundamental teachings on marriage, which is *exclusively* monogamous. Besides, the sixth and the ninth commandments also prohibit sexual intercourse with any other person other than one's spouse. A Christian man taking his brother's widow, without the Sacrament of matrimony, would be committing both adultery and polygamy. The widow is equally guilty of the same. Furthermore, she would have destroyed the sacramental marriage of the Christian *levir*. Both have defiled themselves because they have indulged in "illicit sexual relations contrary to Christian living".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. Adhunga, *Women as Mother and Wife in the African Context of the Family in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropological and Theological Foundations*, 197.

<sup>4</sup> K. Mutongi, *Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner*, 78.

<sup>6</sup> P. Kalanda, "Christian Marriage and Widow Inheritance in Africa," 133.

The dilemma for Luo widows is, therefore, that on the one hand, any Catholic widow who enters into a levirate union is *excluded* from the Sacramental life of the Church. On the other hand, the Luo community *ostracizes* any widow who rejects the custom to remain in the Church. Such a widow is tabooed and excluded from the community life. It is this *exclusion* that this chapter presents and examines.

The chapter starts with the perception of the levirate custom by Luo Catholic widows. This is followed by young widows asking the Church to recognize and accept widows in levirate unions. I present Church response and then subject it to critical theological analysis before applying both the *law of graduality* and the *principal of reception* into the debate. Changing views of marriage are given next calling for examination of old models of widow care in the Church. The chapter then suggests a new model based on the reflections of Luo widows. They suggest a *Christology of Widowhood* in which Jesus Christ is seen as the *ideal husband* of Luo Catholic widows. A new *ministry of widowhood* involving widows is suggested as an effective way of addressing levirate custom. The chapter ends with a brief conclusion. In this chapter, the voices, views, and perceptions of Luo widows are paramount.

### **Perceptions of Luo Widows on Levirate Custom and Church Response**

This chapter emerged from a structured questionnaire instrument administered to 94 widows, 6 theologians, and a focus group discussion. A large majority (79.3%) of widows affirmed that levirate custom is retrogressive and should be stopped because the practice: spreads HIV/AIDS, leads to physical and sexual violence, murder, serious psychological torture and harm, grabbing and looting of property, it denies women the right to choose how to live, violates their religious freedom, reduces widows to objects of pleasure and use by *levirs*. Levirate practice was rejected, *in toto*, by widows who were above sixty years of age. However, a significant minority of 20.7% widows insisted that the custom should be kept for the sake of young widows. These Catholic widows in levirate unions want the Church to allow them to receive the Sacraments based on the following reasons:

First, the *levir* cares for the widow and her children out of his love for his deceased brother. Failure to do so would portray him as selfish and uncaring. Second,

widows cannot control the reality of death that makes them widows while they are still very young. Third, widows find themselves in a culture that believes that death does not end marriage and so they cannot remarry as the Church expects them to do. Fourth, young widows do not want to abandon the home of the deceased, because they know that their children will not be accepted in the second marriage. Fifth, widows in the study said that they were still active in the Church and in their Small Christian Communities (SCC). The Church accepts their monetary offertories, but refuses them Sacraments. Sixth, the Luo abhor adultery, which the Catholic Church forgives in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, while the Church on her part abhors levirate, which the Luo value. Seventh, many Catholic widows have been forced into levirate unions by their relatives against their own wills and conscience.

The Catholic Church refuses to accept the widows' plea insisting that:

Sexual acts can only be acts of true love if they are conjugal acts, that is, if they are accomplished by a man and a woman who have publicly committed their lives to each other, who have promised fidelity and sexual exclusivity, and who are open to the generation of new life.<sup>7</sup>

This teaching on marriage is based on Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." In line with this text, "the Church must forever insist on indissolubility of marriage...and the possibility of a chaste abstinence if this is what love requires in specific life situations".<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, a young Catholic widow may observe temporary abstinence for as long as she is still looking for a suitable partner, or total abstinence for those unable to find any. Single widows who indulge in sexual relations due to human weakness are urged to go to Confession and thereafter hope to live pure lives. It does not matter how often this happens. One way of interpreting the Church position is that as long as young Catholic widows solve their sexual problems secretly and go to Confession thereafter, they can continue to receive Communion. Young Catholic

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<sup>7</sup> S. Kampowski and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *The Gospel of the Family*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> S. Kampowski and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *The Gospel of the Family*, 58.

widows I interviewed felt that this amounts to deliberate abuse of the Sacrament of reconciliation because they know they will fall into sexual sin frequently. Theologians in my study responded to the Church position on levirate unions.

### Theologians Respond to the Church

I gathered views from 3 male and 3 female theologians as well as from published African theological materials. These theologians argued that the levirate unions should be looked at alongside modern debates regarding the understanding of marriage. Stanley Ntagali, and Eileen Hodgetts have noted that “throughout the world, attempts are being made to redefine the institution of marriage”.<sup>9</sup> In their view, the traditional “Christian understanding that marriage shall be a union of one man and one woman for life has been challenged”.<sup>10</sup> The world has shifted from looking at marriage from an *exclusivity* perspective to seeing it as a process, which may be expressed in different forms.

In 2014, many countries in European and Latin American had changed their marriage laws. Ireland, a largely Catholic country, voted overwhelmingly to hold that “marriage may be contracted in accordance with and by law, by two persons without distinction as to their sex”.<sup>11</sup> These countries have modified their laws to include and recognize gay and lesbian relations as new forms of marriage and family. Pope Francis stunned the world when he said that he could not condemn gay and lesbians.

Discussion regarding marriage intensified with the release of *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), in which Pope Francis called for mercy towards those in *irregular* relationships.<sup>12</sup> He implies that in certain circumstances, divorced persons could be readmitted to communion. His pastoral attitude has prompted condemnations and questions from senior Catholic Cardinals. For example, in 2016, Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban asked: “*If Westerners in irregular {marital} situations can receive*

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<sup>9</sup> S. Ntagali, and E. Hodgetts, *More than One Wife: Polygamy and Grace*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> S. Ntagali, and E. Hodgetts, *More than One Wife: Polygamy and Grace*, 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> R. Gallagher, “Current Debates on Marriage,” 34.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*.

*Communion, are we to tell our polygamists and other 'misfits' in Africa that they too are allowed?"*<sup>13</sup>

It seems that the cry from those in gay, lesbian and levirate unions is not "born out of the desire to destroy marriage but, rather, a cry for acceptance".<sup>14</sup> Marriage between a man and a woman is the best general context for the rearing of children, but should it be the only one? Human beings find themselves in situations created by circumstances of biology, death and accidents that alter radically the way they would like to live. Faced with this fact "mercy should be the characteristic of everything the Church does".<sup>15</sup>

The Catholic Church insists that levirate union is sexually immoral. Consequently, the Church recommends that a widow looks for a widower or an unmarried man to wed her in Church. Given the fact that death does not end a Luo marriage, widows in the study stressed that what the Church asks of them is not possible now. A Church marriage between a Luo widow and any other man is considered a levirate union by the congregation. They know the young man is simply going to raise children for the dead and must one day marry his own wife. Such a marriage goes against Canons 1056, 1057 & 1096. These Canons state that a validly celebrated Christian marriage is supposed to be permanent. Why then should the Church bless a union that people know will not last? Temporality is already an impediment to the validity of such a marriage. "The widow in such a relationship does not and cannot make a new marital commitment to her *levir* because her marriage to her deceased husband is still continuing".<sup>16</sup>

The Luo believe that at "the moment of our earthly demise, we and our beloved ones enter into a new life beyond death".<sup>17</sup> Death does not separate them but instead, it re-unites them. A Catholic document perfectly captures the Luo theology of marriage when it says:

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<sup>13</sup> "An African Cardinal asks a good question".

<sup>14</sup> R. Gallagher, "Current Debates on Marriage," 36.

<sup>15</sup> C. Pepinster, "What Comes First is the Saving of Souls," 2.

<sup>16</sup> M. Kirwen, *African Widows*, 165.

<sup>17</sup> G. Maloney, *Death Where is Your Sting?* 8.



A conviction carried out in life is that far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love contracted in marriage, death can perfect and re-enforce them.... Considered on a purely conjugal plane, death ends marriage as a physical union, but what constituted its soul, what gave vigour and beauty, conjugal love with all its splendour and its eternal vows subsists..."<sup>18</sup>

Given this cultural complication, Luo Catholic widows in levirate unions argue that they can still be *one flesh* with their *levirs*, and that they should be allowed to receive the Sacraments. Fr. Eugene Hillman stresses the fact that:

Children in relation to their mother can be "one flesh" with her, by reasons of their unity in general and in maternal love. The relationship between the mother and each child, respectively, may even be regarded as a union of "two" in "one flesh" without hereby excluding the other children from the same relationship with their mother."<sup>19</sup>

Hillman would argue that a married Luo Catholic who takes his brother's widow has added a second woman to his fold. Since this is a socially valid union in the Luo society, he can be united with each of the two women, "respectively, as "two" in one flesh" - both in a carnal sense and in terms of kinship. St. Paul has shown that it is possible to be "one flesh" with several prostitutes in a successive way in 1 Corinthians 6:16-17. Therefore, is it really correct to take the "one flesh" of Genesis 2: 24 to mean monogamy?

The argument that the unity between Christ and his Church can only be represented in monogamy is just one way of looking at marriage. Is it not possible that "the union between Christ and the Church can be symbolised simultaneously in polygamous marriage? Christ standing for the husband, is one; and the Church, as his wife is plural. For, in actual historical fact, God's people believed in the plurality of person."<sup>20</sup> Could domestic, local, national, regional, continental and universal Churches be seen as collectively and individually "wives" of Christ?

<sup>18</sup> Benedictine Monks of Solesmes, *Papal Teachings*, 499.

<sup>19</sup> E. Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches*, 168.

<sup>20</sup> E. Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches*, 168.

Peter Lwaminda explains that marriage is a secular reality and it "has always existed in many forms and at many levels and its dynamic reality has included divine and human laws...."<sup>21</sup> Levirate union among the Luo is one way of looking after women which has been found useful for thousands of years before Christ. Why then does the Catholic Church declare invalid that which the whole society considers valid? Fr. Vincent Donovan warned missionaries and the Church that "the grace of God was always ahead of them and present in the cultures of the peoples in mission territories long before they arrived".<sup>22</sup> *Gradual* education of the people is needed.

### The Law of Graduality and Luo Levirate Practice

The law of *graduality* states that the "Christian is...subject to the normal law of slow but sure growth in moral perfection, that is to the Divine patience and mercy".<sup>23</sup> It is "the notion that people come closer to the ideals of Church teaching over time".<sup>24</sup> During his ministry, Jesus loved and patiently helped sinners to grow *slowly* into his heavenly culture. He even left them before they grasped it as we see in Peter denying him. When Jesus was called Good Master, he retorted, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10: 17 & 17). But it is the same Jesus who also tells us, "You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The ideal is set so high for the believers, but the reality is that we are *perfectly imperfect*. Jesus who knows the frailty of human beings in his pilgrim Church warns against the pharisaic extremism among his followers.

It should be noted that customs and traditions of a people die hard and "cultural development is a long-term process that undergoes slow evolution..."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the Catholic Church has to give people time to grow. The law of *graduality* may be applied where there is no *reception*. Laurenti Magesa explains that "the principle of *reception* refers to the proposition of Church teaching on the one

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<sup>21</sup> P. Lwaminda, "Introductory Talks," 179.

<sup>22</sup> V. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Maasai*.

<sup>23</sup> J. Kariuki, "New Trends in Moral Theology," 150.

<sup>24</sup> C. Lam, "The Synod will seek to integrate divorced and remarried," 28.

<sup>25</sup> P. Onyango, *Cultural Gap and Economic Crisis in Africa*, 28.

hand and assent to that teaching on the other".<sup>26</sup> For example, the Catholic Church has instructed Catholics to avoid using contraceptives since *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. The reality is that millions of Catholics do not obey.

Similarly, Catholicism has been in Africa for several centuries and the Church has been condemning *irregular unions* without success. It will take a long time to educate and convince people to abandon certain cultural practices. But God is patient with sinners. This Divine patience is manifested in how Jesus handles the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman had been married to five men and was in a sixth union when she met Jesus. Jesus does not dwell on her sinful relations but *slowly and gradually* educates her and finally wins her over as a missionary to her own people (John 4:7- 42). The *law of graduality* demands that "pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith, need to accompany them with mercy and patience to the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur".<sup>27</sup> Application of the law has been seen in history when the Church tolerated actions we would consider sinful. Today, "no Christian would argue that slavery is good, but for 19 centuries the Church accepted it and defended it".<sup>28</sup> Even Apostle Paul respected the institution of slavery as seen over Onesimus in Philemon 1:1-25. Luo Catholic widows in levirate unions need a pastoral attitude of patience, kindness, sympathy, forgiveness, love, and mercy, rather than condemnation, exclusion, and threats with eternal damnation. New approaches to marriage are urgently needed in the modern world.

### Changing Understanding of Marriage

In many parts of the world, gay and lesbian relations are now included and recognized as new forms of marriage and family. Cardinals Schonborn of Vienna, Ruben of Colombia, Dolan of New York, McCarrick of Washington, and Bergoglio of Buenos Aires (Now Pope Francis) have been quoted as having affirmed that "there can be same-sex partnerships and they need respect and even civil law protection.

<sup>26</sup> L. Magesa, "The Hermeneutical Contribution of the Principle of Reception with Reference to the Propositions of the Second African Synod."

<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, nos. 27-28.

<sup>28</sup> C. Lam, "Signs of Change," 28.

But that these unions should not be equated with marriage".<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis has made it "crystal clear that, in his view, there are circumstances when divorced and remarried Catholics can receive Communion".<sup>30</sup> People who were initially thought to be living in sin are now welcome to Communion.

While Christians in the developed world seem to be open to gay and lesbian relationships, Christians in Africa reject them in *toto* as grossly evil and immoral. On the same note, Western Christians would find the idea of polygamy and levirate union in which a widow is accepted into an existing marriage revolting and even disgusting. It would appear that a type of marriage that is acceptable in one corner of the world would be considered unacceptable in another. Whose model ought to be the norm, or should we be open to surprises? The Church should appreciate that there are marriages in the world that are radically different from what she teaches, and that levirate union is just one of them. In my view various Churches need to develop *contextual models* of caring for Catholics in *irregular unions*. This chapter proposes one for Luo Catholic widows.

### **A New Model of Pastoral Care for Luo Catholic Widows**

John Trokan defines a model as "a kind of a working map that helps us to do contextual theology".<sup>31</sup> It assists us to understand complex realities. A new model implies the presence of old ones. The six models of widow care that have been used namely: the Jewish, Messianic, Jerusalem, Pauline, Apostolic Fathers, and the Beguine models, can inform the new model this chapter proposes.

#### ***The Jewish Model***

The "Hebrew word for a widow is *almana* from the root *alem*, which means unable to speak or the silent one".<sup>32</sup> At the time of Jesus, Jewish women were forbidden to speak up in public and could only speak via a male relative, usually her

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<sup>29</sup> C. Lamb, "Schonborn Leads Rethink on Same-Sex Civil Unions," 26.

<sup>30</sup> C. Lam, "Signs of Change," 28.

<sup>31</sup> J. Trokan, "Models of Theological Reflection: Theory and Praxis," 146.

<sup>32</sup> B. Bowman Thurston, *The Widow: A Women's Ministry In the Early Church*, 9.

husband or a grown up son. "Consequently, the death of a husband meant not only personal grief, but also radical social upheaval and economic uncertainty".<sup>33</sup> A widow without a son was seen as forsaken and helpless. The very first level of support for widows and orphans was the levirate institution.

Hebrews, like the Luo, have a custom "that when an Israelite died without leaving a male issue, his brother or nearest relative should marry the widow and continue the family of his deceased brother through the first born son of their union".<sup>34</sup> Failure to do so was equal to disobedience to God, an act punishable by death as was the fate of Onan in Genesis 38: 8-11. Levirate practice "not only continued the line of the deceased, but it also reaffirmed the young widow's place in the home of the husband's family in Israel".<sup>35</sup> A Jewish *levir* who did not want to observe the levirate responsibility had to undergo a ritual called *halitzah* (drawing off of the *levir's* shoes) as explained in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Having gone through *halitzah*, the widow was free to marry any man of her choice and her *levir*, had no obligation to maintain her. For the Jews, it was either *halitzah* ceremony or a levirate marriage. However, it is important to note that levirate law has undergone a transformation in Israel. Today, the "rabbinic law has established that in the state of Israel, the obligation of *halitzah* takes precedence over that of levirate marriage; and a brother-in-law who refuses to give *halitzah* to his deceased brother's widow is liable to imprisonment".<sup>36</sup> He is also expected to provide financial support to the widow for the delay in granting her freedom. Oppression of a widow in Israel was a sign of great wickedness (Isiah 1:17, Isiah 1:23, Zechariah 7:10). Therefore, widows, orphans and aliens who no longer had anybody to support them were commended to the charity of the people.

The OT model of care has much to offer to the model I propose in this chapter. Just like the Jews cared for widows, so also the Church in Kisumu should do the same for Luo widows. In Israel the levirate laws were intended to ensure that the *levirs* did not benefit from the misfortunes of widows, but supported them fully. Luo widows complain

<sup>33</sup> C. Kaveny "The Order of Widows: What the Early Church can teach us about Older Women and Health Care," 4.

<sup>34</sup> M. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 770.

<sup>35</sup> D. N. Freedman, et al (eds), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 297.

<sup>36</sup> Z. R. J. Werblowsky et al (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Jewish Religion*, 238-239.

that *levirs* only move in to loot their property and abuse them. The Church and the state in Kenya, should ensure that widows are protected like the Israeli government and religious leaders have done. Care for widows in Israel was continued in the Messianic times as stated in the Four Gospels.

### ***Messianic Model***

In the Gospels, there are instances in which levirate marriage is referred to explicitly or implicitly. The well-known case of a widow in the New Testament (NT) is that of Anna the daughter of Phanuel in Luke 2:36-38. Anna had been married for only seven years when her husband died. At the time she received the child Jesus in the Temple, she was already eighty four years old. For many years, she had remained a widow praying constantly in the Temple. The first clear instance of levirate marriage in the NT is that of the widow married by seven brothers (Mathew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38). Although the question raised is not on levirate, but an attempt to ridicule the belief in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, the levirate obligation is presupposed in the question and in the answer Jesus gives. From the story, it can be argued that "the levirate law was still observed at the time of Christ, and, moreover, that it was so interpreted that all the surviving brothers of the deceased men were bound in order, and hence that the obligation was not restricted simply to the oldest surviving brother".<sup>37</sup>In Luke 7: 11-15, we are told of the poor widow of Nain who had lost her only son. Jesus had compassion on her, raised her son back to life and handed him to him back to her. In his teachings, Jesus condemned the Scribes and the Pharisees for their failure to assist widows and devouring their houses (Mark 12:40). After this condemnation, Jesus praises the generosity of the poor widow who drops in her two copper coins in the collection box (Mark 12: 42). At the end of his own ministry, Jesus paid attention to the care of his own widowed mother. "*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "woman, behold your son. Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother" (John. 19: 26 & 27).* Jesus knew that his mother was about to become a total *alem* soon after his death. He

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<sup>37</sup> C. F. Devine, "The Sin of Onan, Gen 38:8-10," 330.

leaves the Church what I call a *Messianic model* for the care of Christian widows.

In my view, by asking the Apostle to care for his widowed mother, Jesus was inviting all his followers to care for Christian widows represented by his own mother. Consequently, this was not a request to John but a *command to the Church from the Cross*. All Churches have no choice but to obey and implement this *Messianic model*. The clue on how we might start doing this is given to us by the early Jerusalem Christian Community.

### ***Jerusalem Church Model***

The early believers in Jerusalem sold all they had and put their money in a common pool. None of them was in want (Acts 4:32-37). There is strong indication that money and food was distributed among the widows (Acts 6:1). It is likely that widows who had no homes were given shelter as well. When the Hellenistic widows complained about poor care, the Apostles created diaconate ministry to improve services (Acts 6: 2-6). Apostle James was convinced that "true religion consisted in visiting orphans and widows in their affliction (James 1:27). Eventually, Apostle Paul defined and gave shape to the proper care for widows in the early Church.

### ***The Pauline Model***

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:8 & 9). Paul revisits the theme and explains: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment, she is happier if she remains as she is..." (1 Corinthians 7:39 & 40). There are three distinct affirmations provided by Paul. First, death of a partner terminates the marriage bond. Second, a widow is free to remarry a man of her choice. Third, a Christian widow may not remarry a non-believer. Paul's argument seems to be that just as a man is free to marry any woman in the event of his wife's death, so also is the woman in the event

of her husband's death. Consequently, the Luo insistence that a widow cannot remarry someone else outside the home of her deceased husband is unjust.

Paul's views on widows and their roles in the Church are found in his letters to some of his companions. Paul instructs Timothy not to admit young widows into the widowhood ministry (1 Timothy 5:3-16). Younger widows may find chaste life difficult and resort to marriage after a vow to remain single. However, many widows who served in the widowhood ministry became so exemplary that they were made deaconesses. For example, 1 Timothy 3:17 refers to deaconesses with much the same duties as their male counterparts. Their work was designed to support that of the bishops or presbyters. The Order of widows in Timothy's Church has much to contribute to my model. The widows cared for fellow widows, orphans, missionaries and also supported the ministries of bishops and presbyters. Luo widows could do the same. Pauline ministry to widows was continued by Apostolic Fathers.

### ***Apostolic Fathers' Models***

Apostolic Fathers were the immediate successors of the twelve because they had known them personally. Apostolic Church fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Hippolytus of Rome, Jerome and Tertullian of Carthage all had a special place for widows in their Churches. Patricia Miller informs us that "by the beginning of the second century, there was an order of widows in the Church.... This order not only provided financial assistance and social support for older women but also assigned them the duties of charitable works".<sup>38</sup> Because widows were seen to be wedded to God, they belonged to clerical order in the Church of Tertullian in Carthage. Therese Lysaught stresses that in the early Church, widows made pastoral "contributions which were not identical to but on par with those of bishop, priest and deacon".<sup>39</sup> The welfare of widows and orphans was a major responsibility of presbyters in the Church of Apostolic Fathers. The writings of Hippolytus of Rome reveal that "by the early third century, the office of widows was well established and

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<sup>38</sup> P. Miller, (ed), *Women in Early Christianity: Translation from Greek Texts*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> T. Lysaught, "Practicing the Order of Widows: A New Call for an Old Vocation," 58.



...its duties were clearly spelled out".<sup>40</sup> The widows were encouraged to work collaboratively with deacons and to be obedient to the bishop. Apostolic Constitution instructed the bishops and deacons to "be constant in the ministry of the altar of Christ – we mean the widows and orphans...."<sup>41</sup>

The fact that widows are called God's altar means that widowhood ministry was considered a sacred one. It is interesting to note that the regulations for the enrolment of widows resembled those of bishops and deacons as given in 1 Timothy 3:1-3, 8-13, and 1 Timothy 5:9f. Apostolic Fathers "not only supported needy widows but by the second century it elevated them to the status of a clerical order. That order was the most prominent group of women in the first three centuries of the Church".<sup>42</sup> Their ministry was continued in the Late Middle Ages by the Beguines.

### ***The Beguine Model***

Beguines were lay Christian religious movements that arose towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in the lowland countries of Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Northern France. It has "been called the first well known women's movement in Christian history".<sup>43</sup> They did not only come together to avoid forced marriage or the convent, but rather to have the possibility of choosing a life of a single woman within a safe environment. Thousands of widows whose husbands died in the Crusades also found a good support group in the movement.

The communities they founded were usually located near rivers and next to a town or a city to promote their trade in cloth industry, access to manual work, employment as house maids, and to sell livestock and poultry products. "Beguines had vows but only temporary ones; they lived a simple life, but some had considerable property..."<sup>44</sup> In these communities, women of all status lived together. They neither renounced the world nor took the vow of poverty. However, some of them promised

<sup>40</sup> P. Miller, (ed), *Women in Early Christianity: Translation from Greek Texts*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> P. Miller, (ed), *Women in Early Christianity: Translation from Greek Texts*, 60.

<sup>42</sup> P. Miller, (ed), *Women in Early Christianity: Translation from Greek Texts*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguines>. Downloaded on 20/10/16

<sup>44</sup> T. De Moor, "Single, Safe, and Sorry? Explaining the Early Modern Beguine Movement in the Low Countries," 4.

obedience to the Grand Mistress of each community. They “stayed in touch with the world often providing public services such as schooling and health care....”<sup>45</sup> Generally, they were free to move back to their rural homes and get married and were welcome back to their convents at will.

The Beguines lived in freedom without external constraints of male authority, written rules or recognized superiors answerable to priests or bishops. Their claim to communicate with God directly without clerics as intermediaries annoyed Church authorities of the time. These ascetic Beguines saw themselves as God’s vessels who did not need authority from any Church leaders to be able to preach and even prophesy. “For medieval women, who were excluded from the male dominated Catholic Church, their emphasis on prophecy and evangelism, opened a theologically permissive “space” wherein they had liberty to develop their spirituality”.<sup>46</sup> The “ambiguity of their place as women in the Church proved ultimately too unsettling for the male authorities to tolerate”.<sup>47</sup> Living in an era of strong misogyny, the Beguines attracted deep scorn from male clerics who demanded that action be taken against them. The Church persecuted them but they lived on. They declined in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century with the return of rigid patriarchy prompted by the response to the Reformation. They experienced some revival in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century during the Enlightenment Period, but declined after the French Revolution in 1789. This trend continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A few of them persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the very last Beguine called Marcella Pattyn is reported to have died on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2013, taking with her 800 years of beguine life.

The Beguines and Luo widows share some common characteristics: First, the beguines lived at a time when parents and males decided the fate of women in society. Second, the Church of the time did not have a place for women just as it is in Kisumu. Third, they moved off from their home places to settle in nearby towns to have freedom like Luo widows do. Most importantly, the Beguine freedom to come, stay and leave when they wished can help Kisumu widows who need space to grieve, mourn, and get counseling services before they can move back to their families and

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<sup>45</sup> T. De Moor, “Single, Safe, and Sorry? Explaining the Early Modern Beguine Movement in the Low Countries,” 4.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguine>. Downloaded on 20/10/16

<sup>47</sup> <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/beguine>. Downloaded on 20/10/16

communities. Prayer life of the Beguines may also assist Luo widows to develop a spirituality for their own association. Luo widows can learn from the Beguine experience that it is better to work in collaboration with Church authorities to avoid suspicion and persecution. From these six models, we can now propose a new model of care for Luo widows.

### **A New Ministry of Widowhood for Luo Widows**

During my study, Luo widows called for an association based on Jesus Christ as the foundation. The widows kept referring to Jesus as their husband and the father of their orphans. This prompted me to search for a new theological model on which to build the ministry Luo widows were calling for. I am convinced that a theological model that may address a deeply entrenched African cultural practice, like levirate, has to be one that is *anthropocentric*, and *Christo-centric*. It has to be anthropological because it has to take into account, Luo widows' context of suffering, marginalization and exclusion. It has to be a theology which gives back Luo widows their lost dignity and humanity. It gives them a voice to speak up and reject patriarchal structures, which inhibit human flourishing. Such a theology has to be *contextual and feminist*. A sound contextual theology in Africa has to rely on inculturation model as expressed by Magesa.<sup>48</sup>

Inculturation model attempts to make the Christian message feel at home in every human culture. Its aim is to "purify the society, to animate the society, to get rid of the obnoxious things in the society so that there is a new creation".<sup>49</sup> Luo widows in the focus group discussions kept calling Jesus Christ their ideal husband. I searched the Scriptures for justification of such analogy.

In the OT, the covenant ceremony between Israel and Yahweh in Exodus 24 is often described as "a bond of love between husband and wife".<sup>50</sup> Prophet Isaiah 54:5 says, "for your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer..." The whole of Ezekiel 16, portrays Yahweh as a loving

<sup>48</sup> L. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*.

<sup>49</sup> P. K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*, 22.

<sup>50</sup> M. McGrath, and Nicole Gregoire, *Africa: Our Way to Love and Marriage*, 182.

husband who cares for his wife Israel. Isaiah 54:9-10 depicts Yahweh as a faithful husband and Israel his unfaithful wife. The same theme is carried in Hosea 1-14, 2:2, 16, 3:1-5, 9:1,). This image of Yahweh as a faithful husband can be applied to Jesus as well.

In the NT, Jesus is called the bridegroom several times as seen in Matthew 9:15 and in Matthew 25:1-13. Jesus is indeed the bridegroom expected by the five wise and five foolish maidens. The faithfulness of a wife and husband to each other, is compared to the faithfulness of the Church to Christ her divine husband (Ephesians 5:21-33). It is clear that "throughout the history of salvation, the marriage covenant has been understood and explained in the light of the covenant between God... and the people of Israel and of the covenant between Christ and the Church".<sup>51</sup> Following this trend of thought, Luo widows are justified to see Jesus as their husband.

Jesus Christ as true human (John 1:14) has all the qualities of an ideal man that widows long for. Being son of God and God himself, these qualities are present in him in a more sublime manner, than in Luo *levirs*. Jesus as the head of his body the Church, is self-giving and obedient unto death (Philippians 2:5-11), protects his beloved from harm (Mark 4:37-40), is savior (Luke 2:11, John 4:42, Ephesians 5:23), and loves perfectly (John 15:12-15). Jesus suffers with the suffering (John 11:20-33) but comforts the Church (John 14:15-17). Like the ideal Luo husband Jesus is a companion and a friend to those who love him (John 15:14). It is Jesus who is the epitome of faithfulness (John 14). A Luo widow who has lost her husband is a wounded person. She can only turn to Christ the wounded servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 53:5). Fr. Eugene Goussikindey says that "when a life is broken, suffering is unbearable, and death looms-the image of Christ that could illuminate a human journey is that of a God who is companion on the road".<sup>52</sup> The widow sees Jesus as "that person who enables her to combine authentic inner experience of the divine with her effort to harmonize her life with this divine".<sup>53</sup> It is on this image of Jesus that the new model of widow care in Kisumu is based.

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<sup>51</sup> United States Catholic Conference (USCC), *Synod of Bishops: The role of Christian Family In the Modern World*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> E. Goussikindey, "Christology in a Time of Distress," 170.

<sup>53</sup> A. Nasimiyu, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," 125.

## New Widowhood Ministry

Catholic widows in the study expressed their intention to take up various ministries in the Church after training. Upon completion of their courses, the widows may be anointed and commissioned in a colorful ceremony presided over by the bishop and witnessed by the priests, religious wo/men, government officials, Luo Council of Elders and Christians of the diocese. The widows promise publicly to remain faithful spouses of Christ having rejected levirate custom. After their consecration and commissioning, the widows return to their homes.

Back home, they may be fully involved in the secular life running their income generating projects. However, on specified days assigned to them by their association and the parish, they could be available for ministries. *Widowhood ministries* may include: catechesis for adults and children, leading the services in the absence of priests, preparing couples for marriage, visiting the sick and bringing communion to them. They may run homes for orphans, the old, and counseling centers for widows who are mourning and grieving. Other responsibilities might include cleaning the Church, vestments, preparing liturgical dances, animating the choir, and decorating their Churches for worship. Some widows can also serve as chaplains in various institutions, providing a team of highly motivated and committed women ready to serve their communities in any capacity. I propose that they be called the *Daughters of Hannah*. Hanna the daughter of Phanuel spent all her life and time in the Temple glorifying God. The daughters of Hannah would be seen to have chosen to live radically outside the expectations of the Luo levirate law. They should take charge of their affairs without male supervision.

However, they should work in collaboration with priests and the bishop. Accepting women in ministry will not be easy. This is why a practical *feminist liberation theology* needs to be part of their formation. Such a theology liberates women "from suffering ecclesiastical exclusion, and men from ignorance and prejudice against women".<sup>54</sup> "Women are the mainstay of the Church in Africa. At gatherings of prayer and Eucharistic celebrations women are heavily represented".<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> B. Akiiki, "Culture as a Source of Oppression of Women in Africa," 46.

<sup>55</sup> A. Mvongo, "The Church we Want: Ecclesia of Women in Africa," 215.

Pope Francis reminds Catholics that “the Church is female because she is a wife and mother. The Church cannot be understood without women that serve it...”<sup>56</sup> Tina Beattie stresses that the Church will not be “capable of informing pastoral practice and doctrinal development, when women ... are excluded from the conversation”.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the Catholic Church needs to accept women as equal partners of men in building and promoting the Kingdom of God.

The Daughter of Hannah will give the Church new vitality and show Christ's love and care in a world that is indifferent to human pain and suffering. Human societies have undervalued the work done by women down the centuries. The Church has to show that she is different by involving women into various ministries. I believe that the widowhood ministry, I have proposed, will move the currently *ostracized* Luo widows from the periphery, into the core of life within the Catholic Church and the Luo society.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how Luo Catholic widows in levirate unions are excluded from the Sacramental life of the Church. I have shown how widows who choose to remain faithful to the Church are excommunicated from Luo societal life. This *double exclusion* has serious social, economic, psychological, and spiritual effects on the widows. I have shown how those Christians in irregular sexual unions are denied pastoral care, because they are perceived to be living in sin. Christians have to remember that Jesus came to seek, find and save the lost. This mission of Jesus is also the mission of the pilgrim Church. In his interview with Antonio Sparado on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2013, Pope Francis said: “I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds”.<sup>58</sup> Luo widows in levirate unions are wounded victims of a cultural context. Today, no particular local Church can claim to have monopoly of truth, and no specific local culture can claim

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<sup>56</sup> J. Roberts, “Pope Directs the Church towards an attitude of Mercy,” p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> T. Beattie, “Maternal Well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Silent Suffering to Human Flourishing,” 177.

<sup>58</sup> [www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview](http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview)

absolute insights that others have to adopt and live by. Such a claim would be equal to cultural imperialism and cannot be accepted as Christian or Catholic.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE OR RELIGION AND POLITICS?<sup>1</sup>

Nathanaël Yaovi Soede

#### Abstract

*It is customary in Africa south of the Sahara to study the problem of the relationship between secular power and the Catholic Church (and other religious denominations) as well as the question of the intervention of the Church in matters of politics, that is, the participation of Christian citizens and priests in the management of the city, by taking up the anthropological and historical theological problematic inherited from Gallicanism. In this context, the discussions revolve mainly around the classic theme of the relationship between the Church and the State,<sup>2</sup> questioning the relationship between the two institutions. But, is not the issue here poorly stated? At least, let us not complicate the reflection by enclosing it in a history whose realities are distinct from those of Africa. Our hypothesis is that in Africa the question of the relationship between the Church and the State is first of all that of Religion and Politics<sup>3</sup>. The theological debate should focus more on this point. Changes must be made so that the political and the religious orders can contribute to the construction of the people and societies of Africa.*

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-05>

<sup>2</sup> For example: P. Hamburger, *Seperation of Church and State*; Henry Okulu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* ; Carl Hallencreutz et Ambroise Moyo, *Church and State in Zimbabwe* ; Henri Vidal, *La séparation des Églises et de l'État à Madagascar (1861-1968)*, Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1970 ; Odon Mokwango Kakesa, *L'Église et l'État: La pratique catholique de l'éthique politique au Zaïre (étude des documents de l'épiscopat 1990-1995)*; Jean-Claude Djereke, *L'engagement politique du clergé catholique en Afrique noire*; Prosper-Aubin Mouyoula, "Les relations Églises-État au Congo-Brazzaville (1946-1996)", in Philippe Delisle et Marc Spindler (sous la dir. de), *Les relations Églises-État en situation postcoloniale: Amérique, Afrique, Asie, Océanie XIX<sup>ème</sup>-XX<sup>ème</sup> siècles*, 249-276 ; Joseph Roger De Benoist, "Laïcité et laïcisme au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle", 231-248.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Ahanhanzo Glele discusses the relationship between religion and politics in the sense of "relations between state power and religious authorities" and "relations between state and religion." See his book, *Religion, culture et politique en Afrique noire*, 28 et 49. Eloi Messi Metogo also speaks of "State and Religion", see Chapter 6 entitled "L'État et la religion" in his book *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique. Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique*, 149-172. The problematic of Religion and Politics in the sense in which we understand it is more encompassing and refers, as we shall show, to a conception of politics which embraces all persons and all realities relating to the organization, management of society and to the human flourishing of its members. By Religion we mean religion in the general sense of the word.

*To study this problem we will answer the following questions: What is the relationship between Politics and Religion in African traditional culture? What is the nature of the relationship established in Africa between the colonial order and Christianity, traditional political power and the ancestral religion of African societies? What is the response of the Church and African traditional authority to the problem raised by the colonial relationship between Politics and Religion? What paths can contribute, from the perspective of inculturation, to reflecting on the different challenges that emerge from this situation? Faced with the recurring nature of the challenges in question, what feelings must animate Africans, especially the baptized, so that their answers can contribute to human development and to an authentic commitment of all the religions of the continent to the construction of our nations?*

### **Religion and Politics in Traditional Africa**

In its centuries-old culture, the relations that Africa establishes with politics have their roots in the Egyptian-Pharaonic civilization. According to the works of Christian Jacq, in this country of the Nile, the priests are on the side of Pharaoh, to enlighten him in his task of builder of the city; they guarantee him the conditions of wisdom and divine favors necessary for the promotion of group life and social harmony.<sup>4</sup> The gods cooperate with Pharaoh and hold him by the hand "to nourish his action."<sup>5</sup> Maurice Ahanhanzo's study, based on the cultural data of several African societies, shows, inter alia, that in sub-Saharan Africa's relations between Religion and Politics are in keeping with the autonomy of the two orders.<sup>6</sup> He gives examples of different peoples of the continent to illustrate his thinking, especially those of the Aja-Fon and Aja-Ewe cultural groups (South Benin, Togo and Ghana). He reports the case of a king of Abomey (Rep. of Benin) who chastised by capital punishment a religious leader who wanted to abuse his authority to oppose his power<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular, Christian Jacq, *La sagesse égyptienne. Une approche de la culture et de la spiritualité pharaonique*, Paris: Ed. du Rocher, 1981; *La tradition primordiale de l'Égypte ancienne selon les «Textes des Myriades»*.

<sup>5</sup> C. Jacq, *La tradition primordiale*, 280.

<sup>6</sup> M. Ahanhanzo Glele, 280.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ahanhanzo Glele, 48-64.

This relationship is explained on the anthropological basis of existence. Like all that structures and orders the history of humankind to its fulfillment, Religion and Politics represent cultural and social orders that must contribute to the acquisition of "being-life," life in fullness. We are in an African vision of the world according to which everything that exists in the cosmos must participate in the order of life and help the "living-being" (the human being in terms of life)<sup>8</sup> as an effective partner in life.

A religion whose worship does not allow the living-being to overcome the forms of death that disturb human existence does not meet its goal. The adherent may abandon it for others. He/she can resort to any worship no matter what it is provided it is efficient, but does not lead to witchcraft.

During the wars of conquest, kings brought home the religions of other ethnic groups to enrich their pantheon. Religious freedom is thus firmly anchored in African culture. It is based on the quest for life, a life that is total victory over death. Fosters relationships. From the point of view of relationship, the living-being must open up to others and to the divine, and therefore, to any religion capable of offering one the life one seeks. In a study by Messi Métogo, we find the impact of this culture on many Africans in the field of social life.<sup>9</sup>

From the preceding analysis, it appears that there is a link between Religion and Politics. Since politics is understood in the sense of all that concerns social organization and collective management, being-life as a political being seeks in religions the powers of a fulfilled life in society. Situations of crises and social dramas are circumstances in which the political leader institutes and multiplies religious practices for the survival of the group. In these circumstances, the leader knows how to make known to the people, through oracles and ancestral tradition, the moral demands for the change and the revival of the history of human development required of the members of the group.

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<sup>8</sup> On the person named in terms of living-being, see Nathanaël Yaovi Soede, *Sens et enjeux de l'éthique. Inculturation de l'éthique chrétienne*, 96-102.

<sup>9</sup> E. M. Metogo, 98-106.

### The Test of State Power and Christianity

The African adheres to the Christian faith and confronts the problems of society with a mentality structured by the relation of the living-being to Politics and Religion. Thus, faced with situations of crisis and misery, the African expresses his/her relation to the divine in the perspective of his/her ancestral tradition. But the colonial political order in Africa did not aim at organizing and promoting the life of the community in interaction with Religion. The era of independence and political pluralism did not break the deadlock.<sup>10</sup> So did Christianity. In this context, we find ourselves in a double situation: on the one hand, the new political order establishes itself as an official administrative structure and, along with it, the Christian (especially, for our consideration, Catholicism) which, through its works and its teaching, represents an institution and a moral authority generally recognized by everyone. On the other hand, the old order (ancestral religion and traditional power) remains invisible, but no less influential. It circulates and imperceptibly impregnates everything that appears in attitudes, behaviors, and relations to the new order.

The two forms of political management co-exist, overlap, or dominate each other, depending on the circumstances, within the same country. The new order of state has military force and structures which allow it to easily dominate the old order. The latter, strongly culturalized, determines the attitudes of the people and represents within families, ethnic groups and village, a rallying place, identification, and integration. It exists under its two modes of ancestral political organization and religion. Its two powers maintain between themselves their usual relations. In villages and hamlets, the chiefs and priests of ancestral worship cooperate to guarantee the balance and the life of the group. The administrative order and the Christianity established in Africa know how to solicit them in order to effectively solve social problems and be integrated in the cultural realities of the environment. Both use the old order to unlock difficult situations.

Politicians like to use the influence of the ancestral political and religious order to achieve their end. We find ourselves in a context where a culture of utilitarianism,

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<sup>10</sup> A. Kourouma, *Le soleil des indépendances ; En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*.

lying and complicit silence is developing for selfish purposes. The leaders of the traditional order open themselves up to or distance themselves from the State and the Church according to whether they are tolerant or not. In the spirit of the culture of the quest for life, the leaders of the old order resort to the two powers, support them, cooperate with them, or move away from them according to needs.

In this context, this latter hardly succeeds in offering its children the resources necessary for their collective life. Paradoxically, the state, the political power that gives itself absolute authority, has become a structure of impoverishment for some and enrichment for others. The African State is less a space for the administration and management of the common good than a field of corruption, strategies, and tactics to maintain positions where money can be accumulated<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Response of the Church and Traditional Power**

How does the Catholic Church respond to the problem of the absence of new political power in the issues of promoting life in Africa? How do the two bodies deal with the question of the relationship between religion and politics? These questions will be answered with an emphasis on the work of the Church.

The Church of Africa was born dependent on that of the West in all points of view. It is, according to Hebga, under the tutelage of the Latin Church.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the question of the relationship between Religion and Politics is a resumption of the Western controversial, which studies this problem mainly in terms of the Church-State or Church-Politics relationship. In the Western Gallic perspective, it mainly takes into account the separation of the two powers: state power and religious power. The debate thus focuses on the neutrality of the state in religious matters and on the contribution of the Church to education and national development in strict respect of political authority. On this last point, the Church reflects on secularism in order to respond to the problem of religious freedom,

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<sup>11</sup> J. Giri, *L'Afrique en panne: vingt ans de « développement »*; Jean-François Bayart, *L'État en Afrique. La politique du ventre*.

<sup>12</sup> M. Hebga, *Emancipation d'Églises sous tutelle: essai sur l'ère post-missionnaire*.

the relation of the State with the Church or Church and Politics and the participation of the Christian or the priest in political life of a country. Those ideas determine the framework of Catholic thought. However, the question of whether the issue of political discourse should be closed at this level arises. Is it not necessary to discuss the subject from the cultural and historical data of the continent?

A positive answer to this question does not rule out the fact that analyzes are part of the classical problem, as the problem of secularism or religious non-denominationality of the State<sup>13</sup> still exists today on the continent.

The State inherited from colonization in Africa is that which has passed from the monarchy to the republic, and the church that was born of Christianity to become one that affirms the neutrality of the state in religious matters. This dependence explains why the theological thought of the African Church on Politics and Religion differs little from that of the Church of France and other European countries.

In such a context, African theologians must take into account the complexity of political and religious problems: it is no longer a relationship between Christian Faith or Church and State, but one between Religion (or religions) and Politics. African nation-states are the ground where Western-initiated secular debates have been accompanied simultaneously by political practices and strategies of recourse to traditional, Christian, and Muslim religious power.<sup>14</sup> At the head of the State and all the posts of administrative responsibility, the African leaders have always been composed with Religion. They turn to religion to acquire divine powers, have the support and collaboration of traditional and religious leaders' adepts of the ancient belief, Islam, or new religious movements. Politicians in Africa go to various religions to be supported and kept in power by those who, by their authority, highly determine the decisions and behaviors of family and ethnic communities. In this perspective, they grant gifts and favors to notable religious leaders.

The State develops relationships with the Catholic Church within the framework of secularism which the latter advocates while it still seeks to manipulate it. The most striking cases are those of countries where the Catholic Church becomes

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<sup>13</sup> N. Y. Soede, "La non-confessionnalité religieuse de l'État, facteur de développement et de cohésion", p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> J. R. De Benoist, "Laïcité et laïcisme", p. 243-248.



a tool in the hands of the Head of State. On the basis of the advantages it gives to the clergy and the episcopate (honor, money, building of churches, purchase of cars, etc.), the State "politicizes" the Church. Several studies show that priests and bishops relying on the "politics of the belly" could not denounce the abuses of the power and the one-party politics oppressing the populations to whom they are sent to serve as prophets of justice and love.<sup>15</sup> Thus it happens that "men/women of God" openly support despots and, like everyone else, do not hesitate to call them the father of the nation, the national helmsman, the wise, the chosen of God, etc. They often resign before situations of injustice and oppression of their people.

Traditional chiefs, for their part, seek to obtain advantages or to exploit, for purposes of self-enrichment, the State which relegates them to the periphery compared to bishops and priests. Politicians strive to promote their relations with the priests of the ancestral cult as at the same time responding, according to the interests of the moment, to the solicitations of state power.

### **Inculturating Thinking on Politics and Religion**

What conclusion can we draw from the preceding analysis? The different points of our presentation would invite the Church of Africa to inculturate its thought on the State with perspectives of theological analyzes that respond to the real challenges of Power and Religion on the continent. Africans want, through Religion, to establish a relationship of integral promotion of life with the divine. They exist to fulfill what constitutes their being in their relationship to the world.

The Church as the sacrament of salvation<sup>16</sup> is called to find in all things in the relation to the African the divine, in his quest for life. The migration of African Christians to African Traditional Religion, African initiated churches, sects, and other religions cannot always be explained as syncretic behavior or lack of

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<sup>15</sup> C. M. Toulabor, "Mgr Dosseh, archevêque de Lomé", in *Politique africaine* 35 (1989), p. 1-9 ; Jean-François Bayart, "Les Églises et la politique du ventre. Le partage du gâteau ecclésial", in *Ibid.*, p. 3-24. Il est utile de lire tous les autres articles de ce numéro de *Politique Africaine* ; Ka- Mana, *Christ d'Afrique*, p. 163-164 ; Jean-Claude Djereke, *Ibid.*, p. 47- 59.

<sup>16</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

inculturation of the liturgy. It rather reflects the often disappointed expectations of Christians who want the Church to become the place of fulfillment of the object of Religion in African culture: to offer life of communion with all Life in order to realize itself in concrete history as a victorious against all forms of death.<sup>17</sup>

African aspirations, in fact, refer the Church to its identity as witness to the salvation of God-Life-Victory over death; they remind the Church of her fundamental purpose. They incite her to correspond to it in order to be able to receive the inheritance of eternal life. Whenever they are manifested in the lives of people who go from one religious practice to another, African aspirations appear as an evangelical memory of the Church. They remind her of her vocation: to announce and make people experience the liberation of God today, and lead them to its total fulfillment at the end of time.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, reveals the Father in His person as Love, in the power of the Spirit<sup>18</sup> (Jn 15, 10; Jn 4, 8). When we take into account that Love is synonymous with Goodness, and thus translate the saying *Bonum diffusum sui* by *Amor diffusum sui*, teaching us that "God is Love", does not Jesus Christ let us discover that when the Church proclaims the Gospel, "God-Love" spreads love everywhere? Love, the Word of life, would thus multiply its seeds by itself and make them grow. "God-Love" recognizes Himself in those who, though not necessarily in the group of His disciples, manifest the marvels of His presence in the midst of their sisters and brothers through the love they have for them. At the same time He feels the treachery of those who, although belonging to the number of His disciples, do not free the poor from the oppressions of violence, injustice,

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<sup>17</sup> This idea is generally expressed in terms of the response to societal problems, see Centre D'etude Des Religions Africaines, *Sectes, cultures et sociétés. Les enjeux spirituels du temps présent, Actes du quatrième Colloque International du CERA en collaboration avec la Fédération Internationale des Universités Catholiques (FIUC) (Kinshasa 14-21 novembre 1992)*, Kinshasa: Facultés Catholique de Kinshasa, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> On the salvific nature of other religions, see in particular GS 3, 18; AG 11, 15. As far as patristic is concerned, we rely in this debate on Saint Justin, who introduced in the reflection the expression "seeds of the Word" (2 A 1, 8) to characterize what is good in other religions. Joseph Ratzinger shows that he expresses this thought about pagan philosophies. In the field of religion where his teaching is used today, Justin makes it clear that religion does not ignore rationality, reason in the relationship it gives men to establish with God, cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Foi, vérité, tolérance: le christianisme et la rencontre des religions*, Paris: Parole et Silence, 2005. See on this point the article "Saint Justin et les semences du Verbe", in <http://www.saintsepulcre-france.org/index.php/spiritualite/formation-spirituelle/formation-spirituelle-2015-2016/644-spiritualite-2015-2016-5>.

slavery, hatred, misery, etc. (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 7: 21-23).

The phenomenon of spiritual nomadism would invite the Church to make Christians genuine witnesses of the "God-Love". We must not forget, however, that the Disciples of Christ who go from one Church to another, from one religion to another in search of a magical solution, do not assert themselves as responsible and baptized faithful to the historical and spiritual requirements of the Gospel. We find that these Christians maintain a relationship strongly marked by a materialistic conception of life.<sup>19</sup> The quest for life often encloses their existence in "eating", in the concrete from which they can derive immediate advantages. Here we find ourselves in the existential field where many Africans are turning, in everyday life, to concrete things, to goods that they can enjoy at the present moment, in disregard of creative work and human values of abnegation, of gratuitousness and of self-giving for the collective future.<sup>20</sup>

The problem of the relationship between Politics and Religion becomes here the problem of the relationship between the African and the world which he must consider not as a land from which we must collect goods but as a land to toil,<sup>21</sup> to transform in creativity and to manage in gratuitousness to develop it for the benefit of all. The culture of gathering unfortunately extends to the field of Politics and Religion where people come rushing in, in search of solutions for their material and human needs.

For all of us Africans to enter into this space only for the promotion of the common good, we must deeply realize that our vocation as men, women, citizens, believers and Christians makes us less willing to go from religion to religion, from religious practices to religious practices, from political parties to political parties, than being agents of transformation of mentalities and practices because of which Africa seems to be more affected by its situation than assuming it for the purpose of opening the horizon of its development. A new relationship to money and material goods would create the basic conditions for the changes to be made. We cannot make the necessary breaks without the recognition of the values of genuine human

<sup>19</sup> N. Y. Soede, "Le Nepad a besoin d'Africains nouveaux", 60.

<sup>20</sup> See in particular Nathanaël Yaovi Soede, *Sens et enjeux*, 117-120.

<sup>21</sup> Read on this subject the relevant paper of Zacharie Bere, "Il établit l'homme dans le jardin pour en cultiver le sol et le garder", 25-37; Edoh F. Berdjra, "Environnement et développement", 51-52.

well-being. In this sense, political leaders, traditional leaders, citizens, leaders of worship and believers will have to admit that societies that cultivate forgery and establish corruption misunderstand fundamental human and religious ideals and go adrift.

### **Assessment of the Situation: Shame and Ethical Responsibility**

The behaviors of gravediggers of human development are not peculiar to African nations and Churches; they are found on all continents. We must not therefore give way to afro-pessimism. However, realism compels us to agree that the case of Africa is special because it aggravates social problems by reason of the negative effects of the Slave Trade, colonialism, and neo-colonialism on the African populations. It must be admitted that Africans do not sufficiently take into account the situation into which their nations are plunged in order to bring about the ethical eruptions indispensable for the transformation of their people. Without resentment, individuals, groups, and organizations of all kinds in Africa develop policies of self-enrichment at the expense of people and nations, and these are delivered to all sorts of subhuman miseries, scourges and endemic and deadly conflicts. Africans do not seem to be resentful of this situation, but feelings can become, as Hans Jonas teaches us, the impetus for ethical responsibility in the face of phenomena that obscure the horizon of life.<sup>22</sup>

The feeling that caused many Africans to remain insensitive in the context of crisis in their societies is shame. In African cultures, responsible people knew what it is to be ashamed. Shame reflected their awareness of the requirements of human dignity. The ancients knew the value of human dignity and were able, by pride or fidelity to themselves or to an ideal, to refuse to perform execrable acts to the point of preferring death in the case of acts that would provoke a situation from which they would not be able to recover. For them, the human being as living-being is the one who knows what shame is, a feeling that incites one to be faithful to the project of the promotion of individual and collective life. Through the feeling of shame one becomes

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<sup>22</sup> J. Hans, *Le principe responsabilité. Une éthique pour la civilisation technologique*, p. 301.

aware of what is contrary to the genuine realization of one's personhood and the destiny of every living-being and one is never prepared to act in ways that would oppose it.

Shame is the courage to represent in front of oneself the ineluctable death to which one condemns oneself and others when one engages in an act that is opposed to life. The feeling of shame means that a human being is a living being. In a person, being is living, promoting life, making it triumph over death (misery, pauperization, injustice, oppression, sin, etc.), and reaching the goal of self-fulfillment: having abundant life.<sup>23</sup> So, being the opposite of life is contradictory to it and means killing oneself. Such a situation is one of pity, a shame. People can avoid this as soon as they are able to be ashamed of any kind of poverty which provokes social crisis and misery.

For one who is not opposed to life, shame arouses emotion or, we might say, e-motion (*ex-motus*). So, in Africa, a responsible person who is ashamed is able to activate a movement (*motus*) which leads him/her out of an uncomfortable situation. The e-motion of Christ who wept over Jerusalem reflects the suffering of God made man who does not recognize himself in his creatures, in the inhabitants of the holy city chosen to be witnesses through whom all will know his Name (Lk. 19: 41-55). This suffering is also that of God in solidarity with humanity, of God made man who feels in him what every son and daughter of the chosen people must feel to be converted. Jesus asked the women of Jerusalem to weep over themselves and their children (Lk. 23:28). He invited them to express their feeling in an authentic way to make it an e-motion.

The baptized person who welcomes the words of Jesus to the women of Jerusalem feels in the Spirit a fire that burns within him/her and irresistibly leads him/her to make his/her living-being a gift of self for the cause of his/her people, the Church, and the whole of humanity. He/she feels in his/her person the power of the Spirit of Christ received at baptism, rises to be the witness of "God-Love" in the midst of his/her people.

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<sup>23</sup> L. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 1997.

The suffering of the victims of conflicts and wars, the suffering and helplessness of young people driven from the borders of Europe and the Maghreb, the scourges that provoke such humiliations, the diversion of state resources, unemployment, electoral fraud, the interpretation and the partisan revision of the National Constitutions, the political blockades of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and so on should, should give to the African baptized a sense of shame that leads to Christian emotion.

Christian e-motion makes the baptized African, in the power of the Spirit, of the Son and of the Father, capable of engagement as an actor of God's love, life and liberation among the population's helplessness. At the school of his Master, the disciple does not retreat before the salvation of his/her people today, here and now. He/she resists the words of those who claim that it is vain to want to change the mentalities and practices of the people in the world, especially in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

The Church, which is opening up to the historical challenges of Politics and Religion in Africa, promotes the construction of both African States and a Christianity based on a solid foundation of promoting Life. This Christianity, together with the other religions, especially with the African Traditional Religion, establishes relations which bring them together to constitute a platform of fundamental religious attitudes and of ethical responsibilities to develop among their followers. So, believers will truly serve the cause of "God-Love" for the renewal of the African people. It is the responsibility of religions to develop in their believers a spirit of ethical responsibilities.

The Global Ethic proposed by Hans Küng<sup>24</sup> can here take the form of a Charter of Religions in Africa for the political responsibility of believers. Such a charter would make religions capable of releasing people collectively towards freeing themselves from everything that does not fully bring them to the service of human liberation. The relationship of religions with political power would thus contribute to a greater

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<sup>24</sup> H. Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*.

response to the major challenges of the African State, namely, those of managing the public good and the demands of development, taking into account the cultural resources of the continent. The challenge will be to help, among other things, the post-colonial political order to create the institutional conditions for integral development: the integration of traditional power structures into the present system of organization and government in our countries.

A church concerned with the relationship between Religion and Politics takes into account the data of African culture. It joins people in their quest for life; it awakens them to what is contrary to the authentic realization of their desire and leads them to enter into a process of conversion. In this field, it is urgent that the Church and all religions become more of a living conscience of society. It behooves them to act like a "watchman",<sup>25</sup> a vigilant and credible prophet who does not allow the ideologies of conquest and the management of political and financial power for selfish purposes to become decisive values in interpersonal and international relations. Practices of complicit silence and acts of compromise in the face of situations of injustice and misappropriation of the common good represent concrete places from which to start to bring efficiently establish a constructive relationship between Religion and Politics and between State and traditional Power on the continent.

As far as it is concerned, the Church of Africa should not be afraid to use the prophetic language of Isaiah (Isaiah 1: 4-31, 3: 13-26, 5: 20-24, 58: 1-59: 21), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1: 10; 5: 1-6; 17: 1-11) or Amos (Amos 2: 6-16; 6: 1-7; 8: 1-12; 9: 8-15). A theology and spirituality of human success and politics in Africa is necessary for the multiplication of models of men and women respecting the social demands of Christianity and other religions. In this context, the religious leaders have a great role to play. They cannot fulfill their mission without themselves entering into a process of personal conversion in relation to attitudes that would favor the promotion of a constructive relationship between the African Cultural Societal Order, the State and Ecclesial Order. Cardinal Malula was not afraid to remind priests of the distances they must take in relation to the goods of this world to be messengers of

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<sup>25</sup> P. Poucota, *Lettres aux Églises d'Afrique. Apocalypse 1-3*, 145-149.

the Good News that our societies need in an Africa sick of the behavior of its own sons and daughters.<sup>26</sup> Is it not really the aim of any movement towards Politics and Religion, or any exercise of power, to know how to distance oneself from self-centered wealth, prestige, and the instinct of domination and enjoyment? There is no doubt about it. Beyond the priests, every African person is invited to constitute the ethical and spiritual basis of all political action, all belief and all religious practice.

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<sup>26</sup> Cardinal Malula, "Essai de profil des prêtres de l'an 2000", in *Documentation Catholique* 1961(1988), p. 463-469; Léon de Saint Moulin, s.j. (rassemblées et présentées par), *Œuvres complètes du cardinal Malula, Volume 3, textes concernant l'inculturation et les Abbés*, Kinshasa: Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1997, p. 360-363.



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**CHAPTER SIX**  
**GLOBALIZATION AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: A CASE-STUDY OF KANUNGU**  
**IN WESTERN UGANDA<sup>1</sup>**

*Agnes Nabbosa*

**Abstract**

*When the West came and 'civilised' the Africans, the latter's culture was replaced, leaving them lost and alienated. The case of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, leading to the Kanungu massacre helps in recognising that the schooling and Christianization of Africans have not solved their problems. The 'Civilization' that came through Christianity and schooling, separating what is human and spiritual, left the African divided and wounded. The objective of this article is to show that the diffusion of almost everything African by globalization or Westernization deeply destabilized Africa and Africans.*

**Introduction**

Globalization is a very complex phenomenon. In this paper, I would like to show that it is not just an economic reality characterised by the dominant free market economy and fast means of communication. According to me, it is a continuation of the Western cultural claim of its superiority to impose its institutions as universal models. In this respect, I would like to show that the phenomenon of new religious movements in Africa, and more particularly in Uganda, has created favourable conditions for them to thrive, especially by denying cultural differences.

Similarly, although there are many attempts by African Christians to practice theology, there is as yet no clear and distinct theology one can call "African Theology".<sup>2</sup> On the official level, theology is largely still very western. In this sense, therefore, one can say that theology participates in the globalising process.

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<sup>2</sup> One can get an idea about the state of African Theology from Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993; Sam Tinyiko Maluleke, "Black

There are numerous dimensions of globalization, but, at the base of all this, the west still claims to be the model in several areas, and this has often resulted in cultural imperialism. Globalization therefore can be equated with "Westernisation", that is "Europeanization" and "Americanisation". This western cultural imperialism sometimes turned very violent, because as B. R. Norgaard notes, western ways of perceiving things were thought to be superior and those who were not ready to accept this could be suppressed.<sup>3</sup>

After giving some explanation about what globalization is, I will explain how the Kanungu incident in Uganda, in which more than 500 people of a religious sect burnt themselves in March 2000, can be linked to globalization. This case study illustrates how new religious movements can be linked to globalization. Although not all new religious movements have affected the lives of Africans negatively, I will concentrate on those whose messages have had a bad influence on their followers. I will use the case of the Kanungu tragedy to show that it has its root causes in cultural alienation and end by proposing some recommendations.

### **The Phenomenon of Globalization**

Globalization is an economic and social phenomenon. It originates from the west and the northern hemisphere. It is characterised by what is largely called the "global village" idea, especially in the field of communication, because information from one corner of the world reaches other parts quickly. Although it is believed that globalization brings to all people the fruits of scientific technological and economic progress, this is not the case, since the gap between the rich and poor is increasing. The 1998 UNDP Human Development Report notes that the consumption of an average Sub-Saharan African home has regressed by 20% compared to twenty years ago, whereas in North America and Europe people are spending \$37 billion a year on

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and African Theology after Apartheid and after the Cold War – An Emerging Paradigm", in *Exchange* 29/3 (2000), pp. 193-212; The Ecumenical Symposium of Eastern Africa Theologians (ESEAT), have so far published 9 volumes on different aspects of African Theology since 1989.

<sup>3</sup> B R Norgaard, *Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Co-evolutionary Revisioning of the Future*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 8-9.

pet food, perfumes and cosmetics.<sup>4</sup> From a socio-cultural point of view, the West presents itself as a model for the whole world; this is an important characteristic of globalization, mainly in the political, economic and other areas, where cultural differences are supposed to disappear in the "global village". This usually goes with the denial of the cultural differences in religion, including the ways of worship. People are supposed to copy or imitate the western model<sup>5</sup>

The problems that globalization poses are not limited to Africa. Several critiques and strong opposition have been expressed about the way it affects the rest of the world, especially by denying differences.<sup>6</sup> The international institutions which promote globalization, including the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have also come under attack and demonstrations have sometimes blocked deliberations of these organisations.<sup>7</sup> More recently, there were attempts to disrupt the meeting of Davos in Switzerland where the "blessings" of globalization are counted each year.

The western cultural imperialism firmly rooted itself in Africa beginning with the period of slave trade, exploration, and colonialism, and through western schooling, political, economic systems and the western evangelising enterprise.<sup>8</sup> This generally resulted into the negation of African cultures and their religious experiences.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On this see L Elliot and V Brittain, "The rich and then poor are growing further apart", in *The Guardian Weekly*, 20 September 1998, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Phillip P. W. Rosemann, *Africa as the West: Problems, Challenges and Chances*. Monograph Series, Mtafiti Mwafrika, 1, Nkozi: The African Research and Documentation Centre, Uganda Martyrs University, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The literature in this regard is abundant but one can consult among others: John Gray, *False Dawn: the Delusions of Global Capitalism*, New York: The New Press, 1998; J. Mander and E. Goldsmith, (eds.), *The Case Against the Global Economy: And for a Turn toward the Local*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> See for example: *Third World Economics* magazine reported on the disruption of the WTO negotiations in Seattle, USA in December 1999 in its issues of 16-31 December 1999, 1-15 January 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Amaladoss, ed., *Globalization and Its Victims as Seen by the Victims*, Delhi: ISSPCK & Vilyajyoti Education & Welfare Society, 1999, especially chapter 5 by Leon Diouf, "Globalization and Its Culture Underpinnings", pp. 104-121; Walter Fernandes & Anupama Dutta, *Colonialism to Globalization: Five Centuries After Vasco da Gama*, vol. I, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars from all over the world held an "International Consultation: The Jubilee Contextualized in Marginalized Africa", which was organized by The Institute of Missiology of Aachen with Uganda Martyrs University at Nkozi, Uganda, in May 2000. The different papers presented during then consultation touched on how Africa has been marginalized by the West, and are being edited for publication by Peter Kanyandago, e-mail: pkanyandago@umu.ac.ug

Through various contacts between Europeans and Africans, the introduction of changes was presented as an occasion for having a better life through becoming Christians, being schooled and entering into the modern era with modern development. It is now clear that many Africans are disappointed and frustrated because they have not enjoyed the promised benefits. Diseases, political turmoil, and poverty are now making them to act desperately. This situation is made worse because Africans have abandoned some of their cultural practices, which could have helped them navigate through these crises. In the end, whoever presents her/himself as a saviour gets followers, especially in urban centres.

The phenomenon of New Religious Movements is to be understood against this background. Many of them present the world as a place of suffering which must be left to go to heaven. A fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is often accompanied by apocalyptic messages announcing the eminent end of the world. In the case of Kanungu, the adepts were told to sell their property, couples were separated and had to abstain from sex, and parents were asked not to send their children to school. It is important to note that these beliefs cannot be traced in African spirituality or cultural experiences. But many Africans are joining New Religious Movements because they are culturally alienated after Christianity<sup>10</sup> and modern education have failed to fulfil their promises of a better life, progress and development that could bring earthly and later heavenly happiness. It is not surprising that leaders of these movements often happen to have had important positions in the mainline Churches. The problem however is that the New Religious Movements practically promise the same things as the Churches they abandoned for a better alternative. But they are also culturally alienating.

### **Background to the Kanungu Tragedy**

The group that committed suicide at Kanungu was known as Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (hereinafter referred to as MRT).

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<sup>10</sup> One should make a distinction between Christianity and the Gospel or Good News of Christ. Each people's attempt to live the Good News can be called Christianity, and of course each attempt is subject to cultural and historical context of the people concerned.

The doctrine of the movement is presented in the book: *A Timely Message from Heaven: The End of Present Times*.<sup>11</sup> In this book, one is told that there is human suffering, wars and famines because people have turned away from God. The book also contains messages supposed to have been directly revealed by God to some privileged leaders of the MRT. The MRT had thousands of followers who were located in several centres, mainly in the south-western part of Uganda. The headquarters where there was mass suicide was in Kanungu, Kinkizi, and in the Rukungiri district. The leaders were mainly from the Catholic Church, a couple, a laywoman and two priests. The followers came from different sectors of society. One can generalise and say that the leaders and some adepts had something for which to reproach the Catholic Church. The majority however were ordinary people who had problems which they hoped could be solved by joining the MRT.

The members of the movement fasted and prayed a lot, obeyed the leaders, and were discouraged from talking to each other. As has been mentioned, couples were separated, children withdrawn from schools, property sold and the proceeds handed over to the leaders while waiting for the end of the world said to have been coming at the beginning of the year 2000. The leaders included Credonia Mwerinde, a woman said to have been a barmaid and prostitute, Dominic Kataribabo and Joseph Kasapuri, both former Roman Catholic priests, and Joseph Kibwetere, a staunch Catholic and former businessman and politician. The parents of Kasapuri, Mr and Mrs Kamagara, had been very devout and appreciated Catholics in their Parish of Kitabi, where the wife was a composer of Church songs. The followers had to strictly obey these leaders. The leaders claimed that they had direct contact with God from whom they received messages, which could not be discussed.<sup>12</sup>

On the day of the mass suicide, on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2000, members of the MRT are said to have doused themselves with petrol, paraffin and acid before setting

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<sup>11</sup> *A Timely Message from Heaven: The End of the Present Times: In Hoc Signo Vincas, In this Sign You Will Conquer, Come All of You to the Ten Commandments of God*, 3rd ed., Karuhinda: Ishayuuriro rya Maria, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> At the back of the title cover of their book one finds this notice in capital letters: DELIVERED THROUGH THE SEERS WITH ORDERS TO INAUGURATE A MOVEMENT FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GOD.

themselves ablaze in their Church.<sup>13</sup> Several mass graves were discovered near and far in Kanungu.<sup>14</sup>

## Analysis

The Kanungu incident cannot be isolated from other similar happenings in Uganda and the world at large. The Lord's Resistance Army, an offshoot of the violent Holy Spirit Movement of the 1980s under the Prophetess Alice Lakwena tried to use armed struggle to overthrow the Ugandan government of Museveni and restore Ugandan people to the faith. Government authorities raided the apocalyptic World Message Last Warning sect made up of people from Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo in September 1999 because it kidnapped children and sexually abused minors. In November the same year, the anti-riot police had to disperse a gathering of about 500 people who were listening to a "young prophetess," 19-year-old, Nabassa Gwajwa. She claimed to have died in 1996, and God sent her back to preach repentance to her people, the Hima and Tutsi, before the turn of the millennium. Desteo Bisaka, for his part, heads of a movement called the Association for the Healing Place of God of All Armies (*Itambiro ly'Omukama Ruhanga Owamahe Goona Ery'obumu*). The followers of Bisaka kneel down to greet him and he is also called *Owobusobozi* (One with power).<sup>15</sup>

What is striking in the case of Uganda is that it is very difficult to find an explanation of this phenomenon in the cultural practices of this area. It is therefore possible that this phenomenon is a result of acquired behaviour. The experience reflects what was happening elsewhere. On 18 November 1978, when Rev. Jim Jones

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<sup>13</sup> It was later confirmed by the state owned paper that one of the leaders bought acid. See *The New Vision*, "Kataribaabo 'Bought Acid'", 23 March, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> The incident was reported in local and international media. One can for example see *The New Vision*, 20 March 2000, p. 1 and 2. References of the international press can be found on [www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/m08.html](http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/m08.html). The African Research and Documentation Centre of Uganda Martyrs University, Uganda, has compiled two files of photocopies of articles about the Kanungu incident, entitled: The Kanungu Suicide from *The New Vision* (Kampala), *The Monitor* (Kampala), *ANB-BIA* (Brussels), *The East African* (Nairobi), *All Africa News Agency*, *The Guardian Weekly* (London).

<sup>15</sup> Sam Mugisamu, "Bisaka of Healing Places of God drives a Pajero and resides in an executive mansion: He heads Kibaale cult", in *The New Vision*, 4 April 2000, p. 22.



and members of his People's Temple committed suicide, more than 900 died.<sup>16</sup> On 19 April 1993, 90 members of the Branch Davidians died in flames in Waco Texas. On 26 March 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult also committed suicide.

The chief leaders of the MRT had held Church responsibilities or were seen as leaders in their communities.

The MRT should be linked to the coming of western culture into Africa through the realities of school education and western Christianity. Both of them came to civilise the Africans, and this meant that Africans had to stop being "African" to a certain extent. While school education was meant to liberate the mind and bring progress and development, western Christianity was intended to liberate the soul, and, therefore, the eventual formation of a spiritual person who would do everything aimed at the attainment of heaven.

The effects of these two can be seen in the two of the MRT leaders. Dominic Kataribabo, a former priest, and Joseph Kibwetere, a well-educated layperson who had founded a senior secondary school, had benefited from school and seminary education. Kataribabo had studied Philosophy and Theology. Both of them had embraced Christianity. It would appear that Kataribabo had hoped to become a Bishop, while Kibwetere had tried to develop himself in education, business and politics, but apparently these did not bring him the satisfaction he was looking for. It is said that in the MRT he had claimed that he was the first married Catholic Bishop! A common thing that can be deduced from their personal experience is that they were disappointed by not getting the power they wanted. They ended up becoming "powerful" outside the official Catholic institution which formed them, by manoeuvring and deceiving simple people who believed in them.

### **Root Cause: Cultural Alienation**

Without pretending to offer a complete explanation, one can say that cultural alienation is at the basis of the beginning of the MRT. A culture of a people is the

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<sup>16</sup> See "Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God". Accessed: [www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/m08.html](http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/m08.html).

whole life for that people. If that culture is tampered with in some way, it is the whole life and survival of the people which are affected. Western Christianity and education have certainly distorted the African worldview; they put more emphasis on the individual. In catechism classes, catechumens were told that the most important task of an individual is to save one's soul. The African worldview however is based on the "relationship imperative", as Laurenti Magesa has pointed out.<sup>17</sup> Africans attach a lot of importance to the community, but the MRT chose to separate families and couples. The African worldview has a holistic approach towards life and does not separate the spiritual from the material, or life here from life hereafter. The MRT distorted this by preaching the end of the world; no wonder this ended in violence. Denial of a people's culture leads to violence of some kind. Although the MRT was seen as a breakaway from the Catholic Church, it maintained and pushed to the extreme some of the characteristics of western Christianity.

So the African worldview has been disrupted by another worldview, the western one which is dichotomous: there is separation between soul and body, and between heaven and earth. Religion and life are separate and a human being lives in tension so as to achieve heaven. The earthly life is despised because the perfect life is in heaven. Spiritual values such as humility, simplicity, poverty, obedience, love, etc. are at the center of western Christianity. Hierarchy is very important. The African worldview, which takes religion to be life and life to be religion through relationships has been discouraged and termed satanic. The western worldview, which separates life from religion and is tended towards heaven, has been encouraged and has suppressed the African worldview.

What we see as New Religious Movements and their negative impact on the lives of the people is nothing other than a failed attempt to replace African life with western Christianity and values. It is an expression of the violence done to the African people. The promises of liberation and salvation by western Christianity have not materialised, and so people resort to solutions that can allow them "to go to heaven" in another way, using exactly what they are trying to escape from.

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<sup>17</sup> See his *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 64-71.

One can ask whether African theology has tried to address these issues, but what is clear is that the tragedy of Kanungu and similar others show that the Church and Christianity in Africa still have a lot to do to eradicate practices and doctrines that might lead to violence.

## **Conclusion**

From the Kanungu experience, some observations are relevant. There is need to critically examine Church practices, teachings and the theology that is taught in our institutions of formation and higher learning so that the need to promote and defend African cultures is emphasised. Attempts to inculturate the Gospel seem to be meeting with opposition from Church leaders, and this could be an indication that they are also "de-culturated".

Whereas it is easy to blame the leaders of sects and cults for controversial and happenings in society, the mainstream churches need serious internal examination, for they seem to be the root cause of the behaviours of the breakaway groups. This is all the more necessary considering the way ecclesiastical power and authority is exercised. There is need to encourage more democratic practices and structures in this regard.

The experience of Kanungu as a doomsday movement is found in other parts of the world. This is an indication that some aspects of western civilisation have failed to fulfil the promises they make, elsewhere. Westerners should meet and deal with Africans on an equal footing as the best way of enriching each other. Perhaps African Theology can address some of these issues in a more serious manner.

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## **PART II - MEMORY AND SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICAN CULTURE**



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### "REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM": AN INQUIRY INTO THE NEXUS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY, MEMORY AND AFTERLIFE<sup>1</sup>

Kpanie Addy, SJ

#### Abstract

*A key issue that both theological and philosophical anthropology and philosophy of mind deal with is what constitutes the human person and, by extension, how personal identity may be determined. Focusing primarily on the memory criterion as determining personal identity over time, the paper will investigate the position that memory survives biological death and is crucial in anchoring post-mortem personal identity. The paper highlights not only the plausibility of this position but also asserts that it is consistent with Roman Catholic eschatological doctrine. The paper ends by noting how the conclusions of this inquiry relate to the cult of the ancestors prevalent in most African societies and support the intuitions grounding the observance of this cult.*

#### Introduction

A number of questions clarify the problem of this essay. Holding as a presupposition a Christian, and specifically Roman Catholic belief in the afterlife, supposing I died tonight, by what means might I determine that I was the person whose earthly existence ceased the night that I died? In other words, presuming the existence of an afterlife, how might the 'I' of that afterlife be linked with the 'I' of my present earthly life? Simply stated, how might survival of personal identity in the afterlife be established?

The questions posed above, extremely metaphysical though they are, and perfectly at home within the domain of philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion, are not without warrant in the area of Christian anthropology and eschatology. There

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-07>

surely is no incongruity to posing questions about personal identity and the afterlife in relation to Christian anthropology and eschatology respectively. The difficulty perhaps lies in drawing the two areas together in inquiring about how personal identity survives biological death. Yet the question must, of necessity, be posed. For, if there is no connection between the 'I' of my present earthly life and the 'I' of the afterlife in purgatory, hell or heaven, if there is no continuity in personal identity beyond this side of the grave, Roman Catholic eschatological theology concerning the last things is rendered nonsensical. How, for instance, could Hyacinthe be said to be enjoying the beatific vision if the celestial Hyacinthe was not continuous with the Hyacinthe of earth and, more critically, aware of this continuity? Without a personal post-mortem awareness of continuing identity, how could one speak of an *afterlife* in the first place? Accordingly, implicit in the very notion of an *afterlife* is the question of the survival of personal identity beyond biological death, thus underlining the centrality of the question of how it might be established.<sup>2</sup>

To the above questions, one answer suggests itself: memory.<sup>3</sup> This essay will probe the question of the continuity of personal identity in the afterlife by focusing on memory, seemingly the most plausible response in current literature that appears to tie in with the Roman Catholic eschatological position. Our inquiry, drawing largely on insights from both philosophy of religion and mind, will consider memory as a response falling under the compass of the Psychological Approach to what is termed the Persistence Question in personal identity, an aspect of which we are dealing with, albeit focused on the afterlife. An alternative response to the Persistence Question, termed the Somatic Approach, will be briefly exposed for the purposes of enriching our study. It will be argued that this approach is deficient as a response to the question at hand. Notwithstanding its problems, some of which will be outlined,

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<sup>2</sup> As one scholar puts it: "whatever the details of the conception of an afterlife, a particular *philosophical* question arises: In virtue of what is a person in an afterlife identical to a certain person in a premortem state?" See Lynne Rudder Baker, "Death and the Afterlife." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*. Ed., William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 368.

<sup>3</sup> Memory is intuitively appealing. Consider the observation: "memory is crucial for judgment and imputation. Sentences passed on Judgment Day will be justified by the consciousness resurrected persons will have of being the same as those who committed the actions for which they are rewarded or punished." Fernando Vidal, "Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 2002), 951. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/341240>. Accessed: September 3, 2013.



memory and the Psychological Approach which it typifies seems to respond most satisfactorily to the question of how personal identity continues in the afterlife. Furthermore, Scripture and theological opinion support this view, as we shall demonstrate. We shall conclude our inquiry by showing how, through the cult of the ancestors, African religion demonstrates reasonable intuitions about the role of memory in the afterlife. We begin, however, by outlining some fundamental presuppositions of this inquiry.

### Basic Presuppositions

The first basic presupposition is that this inquiry is undertaken within a scope defined by the eschatological teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, this study draws on views articulated from this particular religious standpoint. In this vein, certain assertions contained in the *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) appear germane to indicate at the onset.

The first statement reads: "When dealing with man's situation after death, one must especially beware of arbitrary imaginative representations: excess of this kind is a major cause of the difficulties that Christian faith often encounters."<sup>4</sup> The letter goes on to state that:

"[n] either Scripture nor theology provides sufficient light for a proper picture of life after death."<sup>5</sup> The letter further recommends that Christians uphold two essential points: "on the one hand they must believe in the fundamental continuity, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, between our present life in Christ and our future life...on the other hand they must be clearly aware of the radical break between the present life and the future one, due to the fact that the economy of faith will be replaced by the economy of fullness of life."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sacred Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith. *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*. Rome: 1979. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19790517\\_escatologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19790517_escatologia_en.html). Accessed: September 3, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> CDF, *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*.

<sup>6</sup> CDF, *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*.

These points are instructive and help guide our study. Our inquiry will thus avoid “arbitrary imaginative representations” and wanton speculation. Furthermore, conscious of the fact that not even Scripture adequately sheds light on the post-mortem life of the human person, we can only be tentative about our conclusions which bear on that realm identified as “the economy of fullness of life.” The impulse to undertake this inquiry however gains impetus from the Church’s recognition that regardless of the radical break between the present and future life there is a fundamental continuity between both, about which we are concerned. Pursuing this concern, therefore, is not to give in to idle speculation but places us squarely within the theological venture: *fides quarens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding. Understanding this particular aspect of Christian faith about the ultimate destiny of the human person, to my mind, necessitates drawing on the resources available to us in the present life in order to attempt to explicate the how of fundamental continuity. Reason suggests that no matter how dynamic the Holy Spirit operates in establishing fundamental continuity, this fundamental continuity must be in some way rationally explicable and more importantly, and logically,<sup>7</sup> draw on aspects from the present life in constituting the anticipated future life. The question is: what aspects? Some response, no matter how tentative, must be available to us; simply to relinquish the quest by invoking “the power of the Holy Spirit” seems a huge disservice to theology. This viewpoint then is the second presupposition grounding this inquiry.

Finally, there is a presupposition touching on methodology. Conceding the force of arguments in favour of the phenomenological approach to studying religion, not least its appropriateness to our present postmodern society, it must equally be admitted that with respect to some issues of faith and religion it is severely limited. One such issue, in my estimation, pertains to eschatology and particularly the elements constitutive of Roman Catholic eschatological doctrine. How does one, following methods of phenomenology which above all privilege observance of phenomena, arrive at conclusions as distinct as judgment, heaven, hell, or purgatory?

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<sup>7</sup> The following statement underscores the significance of logic to this issue: “Only if a premortem and postmortem person can be one and the same individual is resurrection even a logical possibility” See Baker, “Death and the Afterlife,” 389.

These elements, while derived from divine revelation, have not only been developed and clarified but are also generally explicable following a methodology founded on metaphysics. Metaphysics and philosophy in general, in contrast with phenomenology, facilitate addressing and clarifying questions of eschatology. Accordingly, we turn now to insights from metaphysics and philosophy of mind on personal identity and the Persistence Question.

### **Personal Identity and the Persistence Question**

In "Personal Identity," Eric Olson undertakes a skilful analysis of the question of personal identity, and thus in what follows I rely on his insights. Olson begins by identifying a range of questions that bear on the subject of personal identity and reveal that personal identity is, in fact, a multi-faceted issue of a number of loosely related problems. Among such questions include the following: 1) "What determines which future being, or which past one, is you?" classified under the Persistence Question; 2) "What evidence do we appeal to in deciding whether the person here now is the one who was here yesterday?" classified under the Evidence Question; 3) "What features make something a person, as opposed to a nonperson?" classified under the Personhood Question; and 4) "How different could I have been from the way I actually am?" which we may classify as the Counterfactual Question.<sup>8</sup> By these and other questions, Olson exposes the complexity of the concept of personal identity as a result of which it eludes fixed definition. Rather than attempting to get a handle on the overall notion of personal identity, therefore, the prudent approach is to deal with whichever of its problems or questions is most pertinent to one's concerns. In our case it is the Persistence Question, ingeniously laid out by Olson in a manner that reflects our own concerns as follows: "Imagine that after your death there really will be someone, in the next world or in this one, related to you in certain ways. What, if anything, would make that person you – rather than me, say, or a new person who

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<sup>8</sup> Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity." *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Mind*. Eds., Stephen P. Stich and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), 352-55.

didn't exist before? How would he have to relate to you as you are now in order to be you?"<sup>9</sup>

Before outlining Olson's treatment of responses to the Persistence Question, some caveats he mentions about this question merit our attention. Firstly, he notes that there is a tendency among scholars to conflate the Persistence Question and the Evidence Question. Although related, the two issues need not be confused, for, as Olson notes: "What it takes for you to persist through time is one thing; how we find out whether you have is another."<sup>10</sup> Illustrating this point, Olson continues: "If the criminal had fingerprints just like yours, the courts may conclude that he is you. But even if it is conclusive evidence, having your fingerprints is not what it is for some past or future being to be you."<sup>11</sup> While the two questions are distinct there is an obvious relation between them that is evinced by the fact that among the sources cited as evidence of personal identity are memory and physical continuity, both of which, as we shall see, feature in discussions of what it is for something to persist through time.

Secondly, Olson underlines two things: the Persistence Question is about numerical identity and numerical identity is different from qualitative identity. To flesh out these two points, beginning with how the Persistence Question relates to numerical identity, we quote Olson:

To say that this and that are numerically identical is to say that they are *one* thing, rather than two. If we point to you now, and then point to or describe someone or something that exists at another time – a certain aged man, say – the question is whether we are pointing to one thing twice, or pointing once to each of two things. You are numerically identical with a certain future being in that a picture of him taken then and a picture of you taken now would be two pictures of one thing.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 352.

<sup>10</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 353.

<sup>11</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 353.

<sup>12</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 355.

The above citation adequately clarifies numerical identity. To say, then, that the Persistence Question is about numerical identity means that when someone persists through time, it is that *one* someone, Hyacinthe, at time  $t^1$  who exists at another time,  $t^2$ . What does it mean to say that numerical identity is different from qualitative identity? On this point also Olson is equally lucid. He writes: "Things are qualitatively identical when they are exactly similar. A past or future person needn't be exactly like you are now in order to be you – that is, to be numerically identical with you. You don't remain qualitatively the same throughout your life: you change in size, appearance, and in many other ways."<sup>13</sup> Bearing this in mind, we realize that our concern in the Persistence Question is not with qualitative identity. This is not only because of the obvious fact of physical change that occurs in us and renders us qualitatively not identical with our former or future selves. But also because "[s]omewhere in the universe someone else may be just like you are now, down to the last atom and quirk of personality. Nonetheless, you and she wouldn't be one and the same. (You wouldn't be in two places at once.) *Two* people, or two cats or two toasters, could be qualitatively identical."<sup>14</sup>

Olson's final caveat may be briefly stated. It pertains to how the Persistence Question is posed. He considers it inaccurate and prejudicial to state the question as follows: "Under what possible circumstances is a person existing at one time identical with (or the same person as) a person existing at another time?" Olson's arguments in support of his position need not detain us here, given their highly technical nature. Suffice it to mention that they turn, for the most part, on assumptions entailed in the usage of the term 'person'. Accordingly, in his view, the Persistence Question is more appropriately stated as follows: "Under what possible circumstances is a person who exists at one time identical with something that exists at another time (whether or not it is a person then)?"<sup>15</sup> Bearing these clarifications in mind we may now touch on some proposed solutions to the Persistence Question, all the time attentive to our foremost concern of how post-mortem continuity of personal identity might be determined.

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<sup>13</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 355.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 356.

<sup>15</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 357.

## Responding to the Persistence Question

Accounts for personal identity through time, as Olson explains, generally fall under three groups. The first is what he refers to as the *Psychological Approach*. This consists of the view that “some psychological relation is either necessary or sufficient (or both) for one to persist. You are that future being that in some sense inherits its mental features – personality, beliefs, memories, and so on – from you. You are the past being whose mental features you have inherited.”<sup>16</sup> This view, or at least versions of it, has been prevalent among scholars since John Locke’s elaboration of an account of personal identity in this line in book II, chapter 27, of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Our intuition about memory’s role in determining continuing identity in the afterlife means that we will focus more on this later.

The second account is what Olson calls the *Somatic Approach*. This view, as the name suggests, is one that privileges bodily continuity. Accordingly, on this account, “our identity through time consists in some brute physical relation. You are that past or future being that has your body, or that is the same animal as you are, or the like. Whether you survive or perish has nothing to do with psychological facts.”<sup>17</sup> The problems of this view in relation to our concerns will no doubt be immediately apparent, especially when the eschatological notion of the intermediate state is recalled. We shall return to flesh out this problem shortly.

Finally, there is an account of personal identity through time which denies that there is, in fact, something that it takes for us to persist. This view holds that while mental and physical continuity are evidence for identity, they neither guarantee it nor are they required. The assertion of this account is simple: “No sort of continuity is absolutely necessary or sufficient for you to survive. The only correct answer to the Persistence Question is that a person here now is identical with a past or future being if and only if they are identical. There are no informative, non-trivial persistence conditions for people.”<sup>17</sup> Rightly then does this view earn the tag, the *Simple View*.

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<sup>16</sup> Olson, “Personal Identity,” 358.

<sup>17</sup> Olson, “Personal Identity,” 358.

<sup>17</sup> Olson, “Personal Identity,” 358.

This position on the question, to my mind, appears circular, at least in the way in which it is formulated. Pursuing *Anticriterialism*, the alternative name of the Simple View will do little to advance our inquiry. Hence, it is only mentioned to be shunted aside.

Having completed this overview of the three main sorts of answers to the Persistence Question, we shall briefly focus now on the Somatic Approach before proceeding to memory as a constituent of the Psychological Approach. Our reason for touching on the Somatic Approach is twofold. First, having already dispatched the Simple View as inadequate, the Somatic Approach emerges as the sole credible contender to the Psychological Approach for providing an adequate account for continuing identity consistent with our concerns in this paper. It thus merits our attention. The second reason is that if the Somatic Approach fails – and I argue that it does and will attempt to demonstrate this – this leaves us with only the Psychological Approach as the viable account, a stronger reason although not conclusive for grounding our position.

One final point to note: There are numerous arguments for and against either account in the literature; philosophers of religion and of mind have spilt much ink considering the strengths and weaknesses of various responses to the Persistence Question. For the most part, I will side-step these arguments. Not only are they highly specialized and complex, they are primarily philosophers' arguments, frequently typified by the highly speculative thought experiments by which such professionals ply their trade. Ours, on the other hand, is at the bottom a theological inquiry, albeit relying on some philosophical insights. Thus, in what follows, I shall analyze the positions elaborated by philosophers on both the Somatic and the Psychological Approach/Memory Criterion in relation to theological viewpoints and doctrinal positions of the Church about the last things. The measure of plausibility is hinged on congruence between philosophical insight and theological position.

### **The Somatic Approach and the Problem of the Intermediate State**

In order to deal expeditiously with the inadequacy of the Somatic Approach to account for post-mortem continuity of personal identity, I have chosen to include in

this discussion an aspect of Roman Catholic eschatological doctrine referred to as the intermediate state. "What is meant by the doctrine of the intermediate state," Karl Rahner writes, "is that between the death of any individual person, if it takes place before the general eschatological perfecting of all men, and the final consummation of all history (which we generally call 'the resurrection of the flesh' and 'the Last Judgment') there is an intermediate temporal state."<sup>18</sup> Otherwise stated, the intermediate state refers to the existence of a person between his biological death and the general resurrection at the end of time. It is a doctrine bearing relation to other doctrines such as particular judgment and the last judgment. This doctrine finds its principal elaboration in *Benedictus Deus*, the 1336 constitution of Benedict XII (pope 1334-42), according to which "the glorification of the body does not take place 'simultaneously' with the personal state of the beatific vision, or purgatory or damnation, which ensue immediately after death."<sup>19</sup>

Granted that Roman Catholic eschatological doctrine does not only include but in fact, emphasizes the body in the afterlife – "I believe in the resurrection of the body" being one of the articles of the Apostles' Creed – the doctrine of the intermediate state immediately raises a red flag about the adequacy of any account of post-mortem survival of personal identity premised on bodily continuity. To recall the basic understanding of such an account, it states:

"You are that past or future being that has your body, or that is the same animal as you are, or the like." The logical buttress of this position is that: "When you see yourself or another person, you see a human animal. And as we have seen, the apparent fact that human animals can think provides a strong argument for our being animals. If we are animals, though, then we have the persistence conditions of animals. And animals appear to persist through time by virtue of some sort of brute physical continuity."<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, from a Roman Catholic perspective, an account of post-mortem survival of personal identity fastened on some form of bodily continuity is not implausible when considered in conjunction with the resurrection of the dead. The 1992 document of the International Theological Commission (ITC) is

<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Jesus, Man, and the Church*. 17 Vol. Trans. Margaret Kohl. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Olson, "Personal Identity," 364.



instructive in this regard:

[W]e must note that in the Creeds there are dogmatic formulas of a very realistic kind referring to the body of the resurrection. The resurrection will take place "in this flesh, in which now we live". Therefore, the body that now lives and that will ultimately rise is one and the same. This faith shines forth clearly in early Christian theology. Thus Saint Irenaeus admits the "transfiguration" of the flesh, "because being mortal and corruptible it becomes immortal and incorruptible" in the final resurrection; but this resurrection will take place "in the very same bodies in which they had died: for if (the resurrection were) not in these very same (*scil.* bodies), neither would those who had died be the same as those who would rise." The Fathers therefore think that personal identity cannot be defended in the absence of bodily identity.<sup>21</sup>

However, one must be quick to point out that this plausibility exists *only* in relation to the general resurrection of the dead,<sup>22</sup> which, as scriptural testimony affirms, is a future event whose occurrence will mark the consummation of history (1 Cor. 15:23; Jn. 6:54; Jn. 6: 39-40; 1 Thess. 4: 16-17). Yet, in view of Roman Catholic teaching about the intermediate state, we are assured that all the souls of the just "immediately (*mox*) after death and, in the case of those in need of purification, after the purification mentioned above, since the ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven, already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment, have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven,"<sup>23</sup> some conclusions emerge. First, it rules out bodily continuity or the Somatic Approach as the *fundamental* way in which personal identity persists in the afterlife. The qualifier, *fundamental*, is noteworthy. The Catholic position may be seen as suggesting that while bodily continuity may not be primary, it is no less constitutive of how personal identity will be determined in the afterlife. The fullness of personal identity will be

<sup>21</sup> International Theological Commission. *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*. Rome: 1992, no. 1.2.5.

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1990\\_problemi-attualiescatologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1990_problemi-attualiescatologia_en.html). Accessed: September 3, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> An alternative view, resurrection *in* death, which holds that resurrection occurs at the moment of death, is rejected by the Church.

<sup>23</sup> *Benedictus Deus* (1336).

realized, so it seems, when, at the resurrection, "the body that now lives...will ultimately rise."<sup>24</sup> This is the second conclusion we may draw. The third and final conclusion is to note the direction in which the Catholic theological position focuses us. It draws a distinction, evoking Platonic dualism, between the body and the soul, and relates the post-mortem continuity of personal identity primarily and immediately with the soul and somewhat secondarily with the body, albeit glorified at the resurrection.

Our conclusions are fittingly summarized in the following statement of the ITC:

One can easily grasp from this twofold doctrinal line of reasoning in the New Testament that the whole Christian tradition, without any important exceptions, has, up to our own day, conceived of the object of eschatological hope as embracing two phases. Between the death of people and the consummation of the world, it believes that a conscious element of people subsists which it calls by the name of "soul" (*psyche*), a term used also by Holy Scripture (cf. Wis 3:1; Mt 10:28); this element is already in that phase the subject of retribution. At the parousia of the Lord which will take place at the end of history, there is to be expected the blessed resurrection of those "who are Christ's" (1 Cor 15:23). From that moment, the eternal glorification of the whole person who has now been raised begins. The survival of a conscious soul prior to the resurrection safeguards the continuity and identity of subsistence between the person who lived and the person who will rise, in as much as in virtue of such a survival the concrete individual never totally ceases to exist.<sup>25</sup>

Where does all this leave us in our inquiry? To be sure, a new category, namely, the soul, has emerged as crucial to our study. Yet, as it stands as a concept, undefined and lacking in content we could as well refer to a conscious *oomph* that "safeguards the continuity and identity of subsistence" between the pre- and post-mortem person. It thus necessitates unpacking, preferably in a way that, while being intelligible, avoids the abstruse elaborations of scholastic philosophy about the soul

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<sup>24</sup> This raises questions of its own that we only mention here and indicate as issues for future research: Will the body of a person crippled at birth continue to be crippled in the resurrection?

<sup>25</sup> ITC, *Some Current Questions on Eschatology*, no. 4.1.

and its powers. I will attempt this presently. To my mind, Joseph Ratzinger's exposition on the concept of soul, which I shall rely on, elucidates the memory dimension of the soul, thereby backing up the view that persistence of personal identity in the afterlife is fundamentally determined with reference to memory and possibly other related features of the Psychological Approach.

### **The *Psyche* in Relation to the Psychological Approach**

Semantically, there seems an obvious relation between the soul – in Greek, *psyche* – and the Psychological Approach. We must however be cautious of making facile correlations, not least in view of the complexity of meaning associated with the term, soul. In probably her most explicit attempt to define this term, the Church, drawing principally on Thomistic philosophy, defined the rational and intellectual soul as the form of the body.<sup>25</sup> Understanding this formulation requires an extensive discussion of the philosophies of both Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, a discussion to be sidestepped, however, given space limits. Moreover, such an elucidation offers little hope of advancing our study.

In contrast, Ratzinger's exposition on the soul is incisive. He writes:

What gives rise to man's longing for survival? Not the isolated I, but the experience of love. Love wills eternity for the beloved and therefore for itself. The Christian response to our problem is, therefore: Immortality does not inhere in a human being but rests on a relation, on a *relationship*...Man can therefore live forever, because he is able to have a relationship with that which gives the eternal. "The soul" is our term for that in us which offers a foothold for this relation. Soul is nothing other than man's capacity for relatedness with truth, with love eternal.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, Ratzinger's understanding of the soul as situating man's relationship with truth and love encompasses not only classical, scholastic ideas of

<sup>25</sup> The General Council of Vienna (1311-1312).

<sup>26</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 259.

the soul as the seat of intellect and will but also permits broader conceptions beyond these. One such conception is memory. To expand on this point briefly: Within normal earthly experience typified by temporality, no relationship exists continuously; relationships are necessarily interrupted, the closest relationships imaginable, such as exist between spouses, even broken by sleep. Every encounter in an existing relationship, therefore, entails recall, constituting oneself with reference to a shared past with the other in an on-going but necessarily interrupted relationship. Outside of this recall, this remembrance by which reference to the other is constituted, one does not *have* a relationship.<sup>27</sup> Relationship entails memory.

Following Ratzinger therefore, if the soul provides the foothold of relationship (of a particular kind) and relationship entails memory, then memory is constitutive of the soul. The notion of the “soul mate” captures this point well. In ordinary parlance, one’s soul mate refers to that person with whom one is most bonded usually in love, such bonds wrought through and grounded in many shared and/or intense memories. Staying with Ratzinger, the idea that immortality rests on a relationship secured by the soul, which, we have argued, shows a capacity for memory, fits snugly with two views we have seen earlier. Firstly, it coincides with the Church’s position, which ascribes immortality to the soul and attributes continuity and identity of personal post-mortem subsistence to the survival of a conscious soul in the intermediate state. Secondly and with particular significance to our inquiry, it confirms our intuitions that continuity of personal identity in the afterlife will definitely be determined by some form of memory as generally advanced by proponents of the Psychological Approach to the Persistence Question. Notably, biblical testimony further buttresses this viewpoint.

### **Scriptural Support for the Memory Criterion**

Two examples from sacred Scripture will suffice to support our viewpoint, although we must bear in mind the caveats expressed by the CDF about Scripture’s

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<sup>27</sup> The distinction between having a relationship and being related must be underlined. Thus, taking a commonplace example, I may have a cousin to whom I am related but fail to have a relationship with him.

inadequacy to completely elucidate post-mortem existence. The first draws on Luke 16:19-31, where Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Significant in that parable is the prominence of memory: 1) The rich man, usually referred to as Dives, recognizes Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, presumably from his pre-mortem memory of Lazarus;<sup>28</sup> 2) He equally remembers that he has five brothers in his father's house that he would like Lazarus to be sent to warn; and 3) Abraham exhorts Dives to "*remember* that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish" (16:25).

For our second example we turn to Christ, although acknowledging that his resurrection, exemplar and model of ours, is essentially unique and involves nothing of an intermediate state. That said, the resurrection accounts in both the synoptics and John's gospel are marked tremendously by the fact of the memory of the risen Lord. The relatedness of the risen Lord with the pre-resurrected Jesus is reflected by both speech and actions in ways fastened on memory. For instance, he remembers his brethren (Mt 28:10; Jn 20:17), Galilee, the place of his main apostolic engagement (Mt 28:10, 16; Mk 16:7), and individuals even by their names, notably Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:16) and Simon Peter (Jn 21:15). Credence to the view of the persistence of memory in the afterlife is further sustained when one recalls the dialogue between Jesus and the good thief. Jesus's assertion that "today you will be with me in Paradise" provides assurance to the good thief in respect not only of an authentically universal human longing for redemption and survival but fundamentally of redemption and survival that is particular, unique, and personalized; hence the plea: "remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42).

### **Persistent Questions and Contentions**

Our inquiry draws to a close, but not before noting some questions and contentions that remain to this point. Firstly, our inquiry's conclusions, that memory,

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, this raises the first of two troublesome issues about this example: How did Dives recognise Abraham, presuming he had no prior pre-mortem encounter with him? The other one is: the revelatory value to be attached to the eschatological elements of an account stated in the form of a parable.

as an aspect of the soul, is constitutive of our continued identity in the afterlife, require us to pay attention to the difficulties associated with the memory criterion. Some scholars have skillfully outlined a number of these.<sup>29</sup> Here, I draw attention to two realistic problems that have exercised my mind but with no resulting solution: That of toddlers and infants with undeveloped psychological and mental faculties and dementia sufferers who have lost most, if not all, powers of memory. For such, particularly the former for whom we cannot even posit some miraculous restoration of memory in the afterlife, how will continuing post-mortem personal identity be constituted? There seems to be hardly any real sense of the 'I' necessitating persistence in the first place. This represents an area for further study.

Equally pressing is the question of the nature of memory that traverses the terrestrial plane into the afterlife and by which one's pre-mortem and post-mortem life is established as continuous. What will be its constituents? Will one remember good as well as bad things, joys as well as sorrows? I shall try to respond to this issue in conjunction with a possible objection that my reading of Ratzinger's account of the soul as "man's capacity for relatedness with truth, with love eternal" is inaccurate; that it allows far more than is permissible given the specificity of Ratzinger's formulation, limiting the soul's relatedness to eternal truth and love.

Unarguably, God is eternal truth and love. As explicitly stated in John's gospel, truth is personified in Christ (14:6). The soul's relatedness to eternal truth and love is realized, therefore, not only in a person's intellectual and volitional responses to God in Christ but also in a person's recollections of encounter with God in Christ. Such encounters are probably most profound in personal prayer. Thus, the 'I' of pre- and post-mortem existence is experienced as continuous, above all else, by the manner in which the inter-personal, contemplative gaze of the beatific vision or loss of it will be linked to personal prayer or rejection of it. That said, insofar as anything – persons, places, events – genuinely participates in or provides authentic intimations of truth and love eternal, it seems to me that these too will constitute aspects of memory by which pre- and post-mortem identity is rendered continuous. Accordingly, in the

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<sup>29</sup> For an insightful discussion of some of these difficulties see Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection." *Religious Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sep. 2007), 344-45 and Lynne Rudder Baker, "Death and the Afterlife." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*. Ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005),

afterlife, one may joyfully anticipate remembering family members, friends, colleagues, and indeed even events that have been instantiations of the eternal truth and love of God. This view, stunning though it may seem by its appeal to particulars, is profoundly scriptural. The account of the last judgment in Matthew 25: 31-46 serves to confirm this view.

## Conclusion

The remarkable observation of the preceding point directs our attention to one last intuition, with which we shall conclude this essay. One of the distinctive features of African religions is a highly developed conceptual scheme with concomitant ritual practices in relation to certain departed members of the community, often expressed by the term the "cult of the ancestors". Significantly, one of the fundamental points of African religious belief regarding the ancestors is that although they are physically absent, they have not necessarily severed connection with terrestrial existence, even from their spiritual abode. Indeed, the ancestors are regarded as retaining their identity as members of the clan who continue to keep close contact with living members of the group to which they previously belonged on earth. The ties of kinship held as continuing between the ancestors and the clan are recognized, fostered, and sustained through such rituals as prayers, libations, and food offerings. These departed – the ancestors – are remembered just as much as it is believed that they in turn remember. Undoubtedly, in light of the conclusions we have drawn in our inquiry about the significance of memory to the persistence of personal identity in the afterlife, we surely must acknowledge the intuition grounding the "cult of the ancestors" in African religions as truly inspired.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MEMORY: A THEOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA<sup>1</sup>

Marcel Uwineza, SJ

#### Abstract

*Every wound leaves a scar and every scar speaks of a hi-story; it reminds that you are alive (Buri gikomere gisiga inkovu, kandi buri nkovu ivuga amateka, ikwibutsa ko uriho). The wisdom of this Rwandan saying has never been as needed as it is today, particularly with regards to the tragic history of Rwanda that led to the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi and the scars it has left to the whole country. Since a family that does not remember vanishes (umuryango utibuka urazima), I here argue that memory transcends national boundaries; it is a theological imperative. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that for Rwanda's future, memory is of decisive significance. Rwandese must not allow themselves to be talked out of unreconciled memories even by theology, but rather they "must have faith with them and with them speak about God?"<sup>2</sup>*

#### Introduction

The genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994 was rooted in "ethnic" divisions among the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa, which was heightened during Rwanda's colonial era [1890-1962]. The effects of this divide were felt painfully in the country for many decades leading up to the atrocity. Both Belgian colonial masters and Rwanda's post-independence leadership instituted animosity between Rwanda's social classes and regions. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsis came as the culmination of the long-standing ethnic exclusion. During the genocide – which occurred over the course of about three months, beginning in April of that year – close to a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus - those who opposed ethnic cleansing - were killed. Afterward, the country was in ruins: dead bodies were everywhere, leaving

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-08>

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, 1-2.

innumerable widows, orphans, and refugees. Every Rwandese was wounded, regardless of one's "ethnic" affiliation, though the wounds varied by degree. Prisons were filled with perpetrators of genocide. In villages, people lived with suspicions; those who had survived were not sure whether they would live to see the next day. Even after the genocide ended, Rwanda was still a dangerous place, "as forces from the former government attacked across borders from bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the west, killing civilians and soldiers. 'The hills were alive with the sounds of bazookas.'"<sup>3</sup> The genocide and its aftermath have left dangerous memories that will take many years to heal.

This essay analyzes the vital role of memory in post-genocide Rwanda. Creatively, it reflects on what Rwanda can learn from its million human (dry) bones scattered around genocide memorial centers and around the country. It takes time to sort through and rebuild infrastructure in a post-war world, but it takes even longer to heal human hearts, minds, lives, and hopes. To mend them, one has to know where one has come from. An African proverb thus says, *if you do not know where you are going, at least know where you are coming from*. This paper looks at how memory allows us to know where we came from and to see reality differently; it thus offers a theology of memory for generations to come. Lastly, the paper will discuss some initiatives of Catholic Reconciliation in Rwanda.

### **Why Do We Remember?**

Memory is instrumental in the formation of human identity and a number of scholars have argued for its significance. To be human is to be marked by our capacity to remember. Upon visiting Yad Vashem (Israel Memorial Monument), I witnessed how the State of Israel keeps the memory of the six million vanquished Jews to make it clear that the Shoah<sup>4</sup> did not happen in darkness but in broad daylight

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<sup>3</sup> "Rwanda: A Hilly Dilemma," in *The Economist*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> "The biblical word Shoah has been used since the Middle Ages to mean 'destruction.'" It has been used as a "standard Hebrew term for the murder of European Jews as early the 1940s." The word Holocaust originally referred "to a sacrifice burnt entirely on the altar," but it is now generally taken as "a term for the crimes and horrors perpetrated by the Nazis." For further details, see The Holocaust Research Center, "The Holocaust: Definition and Preliminary Discussion," [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center/the\\_holocaust.asp#!prettyPhotoAcce](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/the_holocaust.asp#!prettyPhotoAcce)

and to understand that each victim reveals the extent of the loss. Israel safeguards the memory of vanquished Jews to show the world that they mattered. Yad Vashem warns any assassin of memory that each of the exterminated Jews deserves to be remembered. For Paul Ricoeur, memory arises in the manner of affection: we partly remember because there is a particular love or hate associated with the thing remembered.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson notes that “remembering the great crowd of female friends of God and prophets opens up possibility for the future; their lives bespeak an unfinished agenda that is now in our hands; their memory is a challenge to action; their companionship points the way.”<sup>6</sup> The point is that to say that memory is not important would be a misnomer. This explains my defense of memory in the context of Rwanda’s dangerous memories, bearing in mind that a few –I would say – assassins of memory are gathering momentum to trivialize Rwanda’s tragic past.

Considering the origin of the concept of “memory” and hence “the Hebraic term *Zakhor*, it is striking that it means not only “you will remember” but “you will continue to tell”, to recount, to testify.”<sup>7</sup> The importance of remembering crimes like genocide is simple. It is “because such past events do not belong to the past ... Past occurrences of genocide do not belong to the past but are, on the contrary, extremely current. They have shaped our societies into post-genocidal societies in which the trauma of these genocides is very much present.”<sup>8</sup> The call to remembrance is not just about turning toward the past. It is also an injunction to the present and to the future. It is a reminder that for many people the present hurts. “To remember is to be present. But it is also to act and to act, today and tomorrow, is to build a society in which this monstrous and criminal enterprise will simply be unthinkable.”<sup>9</sup> Remembering the recent victims of terrorists’ attacks in Paris, Abidjan, Garissa, and Brussels has this goal. In this light, we cannot afford to forget. Memory is not an

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ssed May 6, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> P. Ricoeur, “Académie Universelle des Cultures,” xxx.

<sup>8</sup> Fournet, *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide*, xxx.

<sup>9</sup> The French version is as follows: “Se souvenir, c’est être là. Mais c’est aussi agir ... Agir, aujourd’hui et demain, c’est construire une société dans laquelle cette entreprise, monstrueuse et criminelle sera simplement impensable.” See Jacques Chirac, “Discours Prononcé lors de l’Inauguration de la Nouvelle Exposition du Pavillon d’Auschwitz” in *Libération*, January 27, 2005.

option.

The duty of remembrance can function as an attempted exorcism in a historical situation marked by conflict and abuse. Elie Wiesel notes that “memory creates bonds rather than destroying them, bonds between present and past, between individuals and groups ... it is because I refuse to forget that their [other people's] future is as important as my own.”<sup>10</sup> Even Yahweh commanded the Israelites to remember. Their memory was to be a reason for celebration of what Yahweh had done for them, and at the same time, a responsibility not to be held back by the bonds of slavery.

Memory plays various important functions. In this essay, I highlight only some. First, memory challenges us to move forward and establish strong connections between memory and truth because selective or false memories can become oppressive ideologies in the future. The drive for memory helps recover the narratives of those who have suffered unjustly. To remember entails living in more than one world, “to be tolerant and understanding with one another. Without memory, people's image of themselves would be impoverished.”<sup>11</sup> Through memory, we understand that Auschwitz and the genocide in Rwanda were not accidents in history; they were conceived, planned, managed, and justified by people. In his book on *The Banality of Evil*, Bernard J. Bergen rightly notes: “The “murder of the Tutsis and moderate Hutus was an event in Rwanda's history in which the entire world was, at best, an observer secretly deriding pleasure from a pornography of death, or, at worst, Hutu government bringing to culmination the long history of negative ethnicity.”<sup>12</sup> This memory of such indifference is imperative in that it demonstrates what happens when people and communities keep silent in the face of evil.

Second, a critical appropriation of memory allows humanity not to lose what most people believe best: the intrinsic dignity of the human person, fostered by the love of one's neighbors, even if they prove to be enemies. From a theological anthropology perspective, Irenaeus' best-known insight affirms the worth of the human person: *Gloria Dei, vivens homo. Vita autem hominis, visio Dei* (the glory of

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<sup>10</sup> E. Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, 201.

<sup>11</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> B. J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and “the Final Solution”*, x.

God is a living human person; the life of man is the vision of God.)<sup>13</sup> God receives glory when humans are truly alive. For Edward Schillebeeckx, this patristic quotation shows that "God's honor lies in man's [sic] happiness and the raising up of the lowly and the oppressed: but in the last resort the honor and the happiness of man [sic] lies in God."<sup>14</sup>

Third, memory strengthens people's faith to go the extra mile despite the futility of suffering. Miroslav Volf's faith helped him overcome the horror of abuse and interrogations inflicted on him in Croatia. Instead of returning evil for evil, Volf heeded the apostle Paul and tried to overcome evil with good. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:21) This was a realization that after all, the God who is in Christ, who died for the redemption of the ungodly, redeemed us all.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, memory functions as a reminder of how we all fail and how we all stand in need of forgiveness. "Indeed, there is not a righteous man [sic] on earth who continually does good and who never sins." (Eccl 7:20) Because of the memory of our failings, we can be compassionate to others and it is possible to develop alternative attitudes and perspectives to overcome the horrors of those who have abused us. "A victim who remembers the wrongs suffered at the foot of the cross does not do so as a righteous person but as a person who has been embraced by God, his own unrighteousness notwithstanding."<sup>16</sup> Rwandan genocide survivors, too, are wrongdoers at least in imagination. We all stand judged by our solidarity in sin or solidarity in silence in front of those who suffer. There were many times I wished I had a gun to inflict harm on those who killed my family! The missing ingredient was a conducive context. A positive interpretation may put it this way, "there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."<sup>17</sup>

Fifth, memory is central to human identity. The rejection of the memories of

<sup>13</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 9. I will discuss further this idea as I read Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*.

<sup>16</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> E. Wiesel, "Nobel Lecture: Hope, Despair and Memory," (December 11, 1986), [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html). Accessed April 1, 2016.

what we have done or what has been done to us means partly the rejection of our true identity. It means living in self-denial. However, humans are not shaped just by memories; they also shape the memories that shape them, otherwise, they become slaves of the past.<sup>18</sup> Since we can react to our memories and shape them, we are larger than memories.

Geraldine Kanyana, my cousin, offers a moving example. A gang of militia raped her during the 1994 genocide injuring her private parts and tearing apart her vagina. They also infected her with HIV. She was devastated by this horrible experience, but she survived the genocide. The memories of this experience weighed her down. She hated her body, which had been made into an object of both pleasure and humiliation. She felt as though she was a "thing." The raping *Interahamwe*<sup>19</sup> made her feel as though she was just an object. She lost the meaning of her life.<sup>20</sup> While Volf proposes that, "a person with a healthy sense of identity living in freedom and security will let the future draw her out of the past and the present and will play with new possibilities and embark on new paths,"<sup>21</sup> the reality of such embodied sexual violence which strips a young woman of her fundamental identity and integrity, affirms the universal application of such a claim. For some survivors of the 1994 genocide, their sense of identity was stripped away. This is why they seek the healing of memories. Memory is thus a categorical imperative for them. Admittedly, not everyone is totally shaped by the past; some are able to constructively learn from it and shape the present and the future. Geraldine decided not to live in her past, but to shape her present. She pursued her education and earned a master's degree. She is the currently principal of a high school in central Rwanda. She boasts that her tragic past has formed her into a better person. Whenever I meet her, I understand how the human person is more than the memories he or she holds in their mind, heart, and body. The past may be deep, but it is a chapter of a life-long book. The script of the whole book is not fully written; there are other pages to be written from what we

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<sup>18</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Interahamwe* were a youth militia trained to kill during the genocide. *Interahamwe* literally means those who fight together.

<sup>20</sup> Geraldine is one case among more 250,000 women who confessed to having been raped during the genocide.

<sup>21</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 25.

do with our present.

Lastly, the memory of suffering leads to solidarity. It awakens us from the slumber of indifference and goads us to fight against the suffering and oppression around us. "To struggle against evil, we must empathize with its victims."<sup>22</sup> Solidarity has its origin in the love of neighbor and is informed by the memories of the suffering of those who have gone before us. It is also solidarity with the dead, the forgotten. "Love of neighbor is not something different from the love of God; it is merely the earthly side of the same coin,"<sup>23</sup> says Metz. It is a concrete solidarity with the least of our society and solidarity with Christ who redeems us and did so even for those who have died before him which explains his descent among the dead. It is a particular solidarity with the thousands of Rwanda's dry bones.

### A Reflection on the Memory of Bones for Rwanda



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This part of the article continues our reflection on memory with concrete facts: Rwanda's bones. Rwanda chose to bury most of the victims of the genocide in open mass graves. In visiting Rwanda, one is struck by the horrifying nature of the genocide as one encounters thousands of dry bones. It makes one remember the image of the valley of dry bones in the book of the prophet Ezekiel 37. It is often unbearable for visitors who are not used to visualizing the bones of dead people, let alone dealing with death in our modern society. Rwandese have sadly gotten used to living with the bones of the dead. It is our daily routine. We still find them when digging in the farms where people were killed. We find them in pit latrines where many

<sup>22</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 31

<sup>23</sup> J. Baptist, Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Photo taken by the author in one of his visits to Nyamata Catholic Church, now turned into a national genocide memorial.

were thrown, including my two brothers and sister. Some bones come up from the rivers, washed ashore on the banks, counting those of my grandmother.

What do these bones do to Rwanda's memory? They are reminders of the dangerous memory and tragedy of the genocide. They close the mouth of the assassins of memory. They belong to people with whom we shared meals, exchanged firewood and fire with, and with whom we sealed pacts, *duhana inka*<sup>25</sup>, and people with whom we shared the Eucharistic table. They are not bones of strangers, but of loved ones and neighbors. These are the bones of scientists, teachers, mothers and children, university students and professors butchered by soldiers and militias loyal to a genocidal regime that systematically desired to exterminate part of Rwanda's population. If anything, these bones mark the imperative of memory.

The Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop describes the daily practices of Rwandese who visit the remains of their still unburied relatives as follows:

Loneliness was also the young woman in black who came almost every day to the Polytechnic. She knew exactly which of all the tangled skeletons lying on the cold concrete were those of her little girl and her husband. She would go straight to one of the sixty-four doors of Murambi and stand in the middle of the room before the intertwined corpses: a man clutching a decapitated child against him. The young woman prayed in silence, and then left.<sup>26</sup>

The woman in this narrative represents thousands of people who share her situation. But the question is: in the midst of thousands of dry bones, how does one begin to articulate a contextual reflection and speak about God? How is resurrection to be understood in the context of Rwanda's valleys of bones?

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<sup>25</sup> In Rwanda and Burundi, when someone gives you a gift of a cow (*inka*), one is implicitly saying that one is even ready to die for you. *Guhana inka* was a symbol of one's ultimate love for another. The genocide challenged the depth of this practice.

<sup>26</sup> B. Boris Diop, *Murambi, The Book of Bones: A Novel*, 176-77.





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Rwanda's mass graves serve as reminders of a haunting silence. Martin Luther King, Jr. says it well: "in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."<sup>28</sup> When friends and neighbors are silent, especially when one needs to hear their voices most, when one needs someone to take a stand and speak up in support, the memory of such silence hurts and haunts, and the failure to respond on the part of a "supposed" friend cannot be easily forgotten. Apathy, lethargy, busyness, and outright indifference kept many Rwandeses and the international community from taking a stand and action against the genocide. Rwanda's multitude of bones bears witness to this.

Rwanda's dry bones attest to a love that does not die. With every visit, survivors who by way of love and memory continue to communicate with their deceased loved ones. For some visitors, all bones look the same, but relatives, who come to visit the sacred remains, reconnect with their loved ones. Some kiss them while others speak to them, saying: "we have been given a chance to live more days, we shall make you proud." This memory informs and shapes survivors' lives. For Laurenti Magesa, for most Africans, there is an unbroken relationship between the living and those who have died. "What happens to the living humanity and the universe in general flows through the ancestors from God and back to God – in both its positive and negative aspects – and cannot, therefore, be conceived apart from the ancestors."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth A. Johnson argues that "remembering the dead ... honors the mystery of divine grace that pervades the lives of people living today... the grace that brings people to fulfillment in God is already operative here and now

<sup>27</sup> A friend gave me this photo.

<sup>28</sup> M. L. King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," in *American Rhetoric top 100 Speeches*, Accessed March 13, 2015, [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin\\_luther\\_king\\_jr.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin_luther_king_jr.html).

<sup>29</sup> L. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 112.

...[and] a community that remembers ... begins to act with ethical responsibility for all creatures who share in the communion of the holy."<sup>30</sup> These scholars affirm why memory has a theological imperative to it.

Rwanda faces the mystery of the human person and of God before its broken and dry bones, once embodied in human flesh. For Mario Aguilar, "Bones have a materiality that makes them texts of social reality but also theological texts in which the same image of the crucified can be found."<sup>31</sup> The crucified Jesus is found too in the unidentifiable bones of Rwanda. The bones of Rwanda represent modern day crucifixion or Jon Sobrino's crucified people.<sup>32</sup> The unburied bones of Rwanda represent "the mystery of God who accompanies the victims and later embraces the guilt, pardon, forgiveness and reconciliation of victims and killers."<sup>33</sup> They represent a defenseless and vulnerable God who, according to Edward Schillebeeckx, "[b]y creating human beings with their finite and free will, God voluntarily renounces power. That makes God to a high degree 'dependent' on human beings and thus vulnerable."<sup>34</sup>

Rwanda's dry bones remind the abiding presence of God's presence encountered in a silence that laments: "How long, Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge [our relatives?]" How long? "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" (Hab 1:2) The voiceless bones offer every visitor who comes to them the possibility to pause for prayer and reflection. That is what the image above discloses. If in the Latin American context actions of "solidarity with the poor and the marginalized expressed the presence of God, the context of Rwanda remains a mystery encircled in the silence of bones and the possibility of understanding God's presence remains with those who are close in spirit to the reality of thousands of unburied bones in Rwanda today."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> E. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 252.

<sup>31</sup> M. Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> J. Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*.

<sup>33</sup> Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, 39

## Understanding Jesus' Resurrection in the Face of Rwanda's Tragic Past

To remember rightly the wrongs that Rwandese have suffered is to remember them through the lens of the memory of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and to remember them in his community. From a theological perspective, "no matter how hopeless a situation might seem, God will ultimately vindicate the afflicted and judge the wrongdoers involved. Wrongdoing does not have the final word."<sup>36</sup> We are destined for better things. We are made for something different. Despite poverty, discrimination, racism, and genocides, history shows that this is not the end of the story. This is our eschatological hope. If humankind agreed that all these evils were acceptable, then we should be seriously worried. But in fact, it seems impossible that anyone, in good conscience, could stand up publicly and say, "I support Nazism," or "I support the genocide in Rwanda." Instead, there is something in us that thirsts for knowledge and for the discovery of the truth.

The resurrection of Christ means that we believe that death is not the end. Suffering, hate, death do not have the last word. At Jesus' death, he felt excluded and abandoned. He was even crucified outside the gate, as a sign that he was excluded from his people. Because God treated Jesus as we deserved, our faith in the risen Christ makes us hope that God will also treat us as he treated his risen Son. This opens a space of commitment in the present, knowing and believing that at the end life shall prevail. Consequently, this eschatological hope implies and does not preclude temporal commitment. This is illustrated in the "resurrection" of the Rwandan people after the genocide, the commitment to education and care for the environment, the thinking of the next generations. Life does not end with us.

Theologically, recognizing the truth about our goodness matters more than ever. We are made not only like God but also for God. Planted in the center of our being is a longing for the transcendent. Anything less than the transcendent will not suffice for us; hence people strive for more (the Ignatian *magis*). In the end, our hope is, God will make right even with those who have died.<sup>37</sup> That is a tremendous distinction and gift of Christian hope. This hope is not only for me but is a hope for

<sup>36</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> J. B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, 32-33

the salvation of others.

What the memory of Christ's suffering and death teaches Christians is that through him God liberated us from exclusive and narcissistic concerns and empowered us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to extend ourselves in grace toward others, even those who have wronged us. "It is a lesson to extend unconditional grace to (fellow!) Wrongdoers irrespective of any and all offenses committed."<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that we ignore what happened to those who perished. Instead, the quest for forgiveness demands that wrongdoers admit and distance themselves from their misdeeds, "and where possible restore to their victims what the original violation took away."<sup>39</sup> It is this quest for forgiveness that hopes for the repair of broken relationships, thus reconciliation. The memory of forgiveness in Rwanda must have this as a cornerstone. Failure to do so may mean suspension of lasting forgiveness.

A theology of memory demands that truth be upheld as an obligation for justice. "To remember untruthfully is not only to continue but also to deepen in memory the conflict created by the initial injury."<sup>40</sup> This implies that memory founded on truth renders justice both to the victim and to the perpetrator and thus becomes a step towards reconciliation. It ought not to be a memory of the victors, but also a memory of the vanquished. As Volf explains, "peace can be honest and lasting only if it rests on the foundation of truth and justice."<sup>41</sup> Though it may be difficult to arrive at the whole truth about certain crimes, at least some degree of truthful information must be sought. It is dangerous to give up the quest for the truth about the past. Such was the mistake of Alfredo Cristiani, in 1992, president of El Salvador and his government, as they thought that a blanket amnesty for all those involved in the Salvadorian war was a more prudent solution to get the country moving forward. In the long run, this strategy proves less effective for future generations.

Hope might paradoxically be found in the silences that the bones mediate. Through the *voiceless* bones, God exhorts Rwandese to deeper conversion. Theologically, these bones affirm that God in Jesus Christ was a victim as "he had

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<sup>38</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 56.

<sup>41</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 56.

been at the cross; he was in all of those who showed their love even at the moment of death ... the victims of this world are the place where God is known, but sacramentally."<sup>42</sup> They further attest to the fact that any theology that does not take history into account "denies the importance of the subject in theology; [and], a theology that liberates provides a narrative about God who can be found within the messy lives of human beings."<sup>43</sup> Rwanda's silent bones lend voice to a theology that speaks to victims and perpetrators, a theology that contributes to strengthening the Church's preferential option for the poor, an option which is, after all, God's option, because in Jesus, we meet God who shows mercy, gives freedom, and advances justice to the poor.

How is the breath of God experienced in Rwanda's *valleys* of dry bones? First, the breath of God can be felt in those who hid us, the Hutus who desired to see us survive. Second, it can be acknowledged in those who were killed, the Hutu martyrs of Rwanda, who decided not to be bystanders when their neighbors were being slaughtered. Third, it is experienced among young Rwandese who have decided to use their spared life and time and use it well, becoming builders of and bridges of reconciliation. Martin Luther King, Jr. was right to say we must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope. "With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."<sup>44</sup>

Rwanda has had *valleys* of bones and there is nothing we can do about it; yet there is a force, which goes beyond our own. Following David Meyer, Jewish rabbi and scholar, I argue that the courage that survivors and perpetrators have undertaken to live together and/or to coexist after the horrors the latter inflicted on the former can be explained only by the breath of God who continues to be true and present even in the messiness of our life.<sup>45</sup> It is this breath that blows infinite hope into our hearts.

In the last twenty years since the genocide, God has led me through a school of heart and forgiveness. I met one of the killers of my brothers and sister. Upon

<sup>42</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> M. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> King, "I Have a Dream."

<sup>45</sup> D. Meyer, *Croyances Rebelles: Théologies Juives et Survie du Peuple après la Shoah*, 330.

seeing me, he came toward me. I thought he was coming to kill me too. But I could not believe what happened: as if in a movie, he knelt before me and asked me to forgive him. After a time of confusion, asking myself what was happening, by a force which I could not describe, I took him, embraced him, and said: "I forgive you; the Lord has been good to me." We both shed tears! Ever since that moment, I have felt free. I breathe new fresh air.

This experience confirms what Jacques Derrida says, "true forgiveness consists in forgiving the unforgivable ... if forgiveness forgave only the forgivable, then ... the very idea of forgiveness would disappear."<sup>46</sup> In other words, the gift of forgiveness proves the magnanimity of the human heart and soul and the grandeur of God. Indeed all is forgivable except the crime against the spirit, that is, against the human heart's reconciliatory power of forgiveness. This heart is molded by an encounter with the Risen Christ.

Post-genocide Rwanda needs to develop a spirituality of the resurrection, which in turn leads to healing and reconciliation. After his resurrection, the risen Jesus first walked with his disciples who had been devastated by the events of their Master's crucifixion. For Robert J. Schreiter, "By walking with those who have been hurt, we come to know their stories so well that we become freed from our perspective and are able to enter into their worlds as fully as possible."<sup>47</sup> Jesus' walk with his heart-broken and despondent disciples manifests the ministry of compassion. Jesus' wounds became part of a healing ministry. When he showed his wounds to the Apostle Thomas, "the wounds of Thomas' heart [were] placed in the larger and deeper wounds of Jesus' hands and side."<sup>48</sup> Amidst valuable interpretations of Jesus' resurrection appearances, Schreiter thinks that they are moments of reconciliation. For most wounded Rwandese, victims of the genocide, and perpetrators alike, this spirituality of resurrection offers an invitation to walk with the Risen Christ and to share our stories as we walk with each other. This might be included in our way of celebrating Easter in Rwanda, which often falls during the period of the yearly commemoration of the genocide.

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<sup>46</sup> S. Critchley and R. Kearney, preface to *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, vii-viii.

<sup>47</sup> R. J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, 73.

<sup>48</sup> R. J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, 73.

From the foregoing, one might argue that theology has the capacity to empower a Christian life. Theologians tell humanity that salvation has been won in the Risen Christ because “God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”(1 Tim 2:4), but God cannot save us against our will. The good news is that beyond our sin, we are people of the resurrection. “We are not limited by a horizon of death and by a few memories of us held behind, but we believe in the life beyond this, in union with God.”<sup>49</sup> However, theology is not enough. Other sciences also have great contributions to the rebuilding of lives in post-genocide Rwanda. Improvements in government and leadership, cultural values, technology, and education, clamping down on corruption and accountability to Rwandese continue to give many people reason to hope. Respect for human rights and the liberty of expression need critical attention.

### **Some Initiatives of Catholic Reconciliation in Rwanda**

The efforts of Catholic reconciliation in contemporary Rwanda has taken various forms and cover five areas of pastoral work in post-genocide Rwanda: prison ministry, parish reconciliation, justice and peace initiatives, spiritual healing, and the bishops' apology for the sins of the sons and daughters of the Church during the 1994 genocide. This list is certainly not exhaustive. Yet for the purpose of this article, I focus only on the first two initiatives of reconciliation.

The prison ministry – commonly known as the Good Samaritans - led by Anne-Marie Mukankuranga was born out of her near-death experience. Together with her husband Emmanuel Munyangendo (both Tutsi) narrowly escaped death led by a group of local Hutus in southern Rwanda. After surviving the genocide, Anne-Marie saw her experience as a *kairos* (divine moment) that has energized her ministry in prisons. She notes: “I was not afraid after this. I am in the world as someone who can die tomorrow ... Because I have suffered, I can help others.”<sup>50</sup>

As Rwanda's jails were full of accused perpetrators of the genocide,

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<sup>49</sup> Roger Dawson, “Dangerous Remembrance,” *Thinking Faith* (November 11, 2013), accessed April 1, 2015, [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20131111\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20131111_1.htm).

<sup>49</sup> J. J. Carney, “A Generation after Genocide: Catholic Reconciliation in Rwanda,” 795.

Mukankuranga was paradoxically among the first to visit prisoners. Despite pressures from her family and prison officials, her work has born fruits. I worked with her in Remera parish in Kigali (Rwanda) and I experienced how prisoners were regaining hope and faith. Mukankuranga felt called to “‘bring the church to prison,’ [working with priests to celebrate masses for prisoners] as early as October 1994”<sup>51</sup> at a time when many wounds were still very row. Her ministry incorporates many lay collaborators and it is an apostolate to the marginalized. “The Good Samaritans do not wait for the marginalized to come to church; they rather bring the church to the legions of prisoners, widows, and orphans that populate post-genocide Rwanda ... [they] echo Pope Francis’ call for the Church to be a “field hospital for battle.”<sup>52</sup>

Another ecclesial initiative is Rwanda’s *synod idasanzwe* (extraordinary synod). As the Rwandan Catholic Church neared its 100<sup>th</sup> jubilee in 2000, the bishops of Rwanda felt there was a great need to lead the church into an examination of conscience and sought to reflect on the meaning of the genocide for the Catholic Church. Synods were convened across dioceses and they were named *gacaca nkirisitu*, following the example of Rwanda’s traditional judicial process – commonly known as *gacaca*.<sup>53</sup> These synods brought families together and Fr Ubald Rugirangonga of the diocese of Cyangugu championed the process.

*Gacaca nkiristu* invited perpetrators to abstain from the sacraments for six months and “during this time, they participated in a weekly catechetical program” to reflect on the connections between “human rights, sacramental practice, and the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>54</sup> Perpetrators were exhorted to share the truth of their actions during the genocide. They informed survivors where the remains of their deceased relatives were buried. Parishes organized retreats and at the end of the six months, there were opportunities for perpetrators to ask for forgiveness and they joined the survivors in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation and of the Eucharist. “After Mass, the community shared a celebratory feast with the perpetrators, victims, and their families symbolizing [the coming together of former

<sup>51</sup> J. J. Carney, “A Generation after Genocide: Catholic Reconciliation in Rwanda,” 796.

<sup>52</sup> See A. Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis”.

<sup>53</sup> This is a traditional legal mechanism to resolve some community conflicts. It is named *gacaca* because people sit together on the grass (*gacaca*).

<sup>54</sup> Carney, “A Generation after Genocide,” 798.



enemies] in peace and harmony.<sup>55</sup>

The challenge of living together in Rwanda surely surpasses these few initiatives. Yet what theologically comes out of them is the importance of “ritual in mediating the journey of reconciliation.”<sup>56</sup> It is astounding to see how Rwanda’s *gacaca nkirisitu* deepened people’s understanding of the sacrament of reconciliation, showing the inseparable link between the love of God and the love of neighbor. Both the Good Samaritans and *gacaca nkirisitu* sought to move wounded Rwandese from hostility to hospitality, from exclusion to embrace, emphasizing the “sharing life together” across hostile boundaries.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has studied memory as an imperative to preserve life. The aftermath of war and genocide leaves detritus of many kinds: intellectual, psychological, environmental, spiritual, and physical, etc. Fractured lives, shattered hopes, deep deprivations, and widespread epidemics of all kinds rip through already eviscerated cities, and lives lie vulnerable seemingly beyond repair. Rwanda had a share of all this.

Memory is imperative for reimagining the human person. To lose memory of Rwanda’s tragic history and to lose the ability to expose the truth behind history is like having a book, one removes a page, and then another the following day, and in the end, there is only a cover with nothing inside. The memory is finished, with no curiosity, and no regret. We must continue to shout: “Do not forget, it is for your life and for ours.”<sup>58</sup> I remember our ancestor Job who lost everything: children, friends, and property, and yet found the audacity to speak about God and to begin again. Memory helps us realize that our life is like a canvas. We have a choice to keep painting the old one or to learn and recreate a new one.

<sup>55</sup>Carney, “A Generation after Genocide,” 799.

<sup>56</sup> Carney, “A Generation after Genocide,” 806.

<sup>57</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

<sup>58</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Pourquoi se Souvenir?* 290.

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**PART III – ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, ITS EFFECTS AND  
CHALLENGES**



## CHAPTER NINE

### ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AS THE SIN OF MODERN TIMES: TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL SPIRITUALITY<sup>1</sup>

*Patrick Mwanja, CSSp*

#### **Abstract**

*Belief in the sacredness and wholeness of creation and the responsibility entrusted upon humanity to preserve the cosmos is something that cuts across all religious divides and beyond. In his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis appeals to the Catholic Christians and all people to meet "the urgent challenge to protect our common home" (*Laudato Si'*, n. 3). This article focuses on Christian ecological spirituality as a way of responding to the ecological problems that the world is facing and contribute to a sustainable future.*

#### **Introduction**

It is a fundamental belief and an article of the Hebrew and Christian faith tradition and revelation that the entire cosmos has its origin in God and the ultimate destiny of creation is in the fullness of God that is fully attained through Jesus Christ, the measure of all things.<sup>2</sup> According to the faith we profess as Christians, the world and everything therein is created and sustained in being by a good benevolent God and therefore sacred and inviolable. The first chapters of the book of Genesis states that God created the heavens and the earth and God "saw that everything he had created was good."<sup>3</sup> Indeed the Bible is filled with the reflections on the relationship between God and creation with humanity as its apex. According to the Genesis creation accounts, it is implied and affirmed that God's creation is not by chance or accident; it is something willed by God. Creation is as a result of a

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-09>

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* on Care for our Common Home.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:31.

decision... a free choice based on love... As a result, "every act of cruelty toward any creature is contrary to human dignity."<sup>4</sup>

Further, the human person is also a product of God's creative design and he forms the crown of this creation since he is created in the image and likeness of God, bearing thus an inviolable dignity. As the summit of God's creation, human being reflects the divine image in a most excellent way as he is capable of entering into dialogue with God, the world, and others as well as having the capacity to reason and to act in freedom, thus becoming co-operators with God in the opus of creation.<sup>5</sup> As such humanity has been charged with the responsibility to take care of creation on God's behalf.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, care for "mother Earth" is not just one of the many responsibilities human beings are entrusted with but one of the most fundamental, and on it rests the survival of the entire cosmos. As rational beings, humanity has a primary responsibility to care for the earth that follows from their dignity and presupposes it.

Looking at the attitude of Christians today, it has become apparent that the task of identifying with Earth and standing with Earth as a partner in the struggle is made all the more difficult because of a Judeo-Christian heritage which has exalted humans as being "little less than God"<sup>7</sup> with "all things under his feet",<sup>8</sup> and Earth as mere matter that can be trodden underfoot or as a cache of resources that can be exploited for human wealth and profit. As one of the effects of original sin, "visible creation has become alien and hostile to man."<sup>9</sup> In spite of growing ecological awareness, and in spite of environmental disasters, this arrogant attitude persists in our minds and theologies like a penetrating poison. It has become evident that the Christian faith that Christians profess at Mass every Sunday is profoundly challenged today by the enormity of the ecological crisis. In the Creed Catholics affirm their faith in God the Father Almighty, "maker of heaven and earth". Yet this earth of ours is under increasing threat of serious degradation and some critics blatantly and openly

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<sup>4</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2418.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* on Care for our Common Home.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:27; 9:6.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Psalm 8:5

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Psalm 8:6.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 400.



accuse Christianity of playing a major role in its deterioration. Already over fifty years ago in 1967, Lynn White Junior,<sup>10</sup> an historian from the University of California, published an article in which he famously pointed a finger at the Judeo-Christian tradition, blaming it for the ecological crisis because of its encouraging a spirit of conquest in regard to the natural environment, exhorting human beings in Genesis 1:26-28 to be «masters» and to “subdue” the earth. In his own words, Lynn White, who blames the sin of the degradation of the environment on Christian faith, asserts:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.... In Antiquity, every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit...Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects....To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.<sup>11</sup>

Though this criticism could be exaggerated and over-stated, it is clear that many Christian believers today have totally misunderstood the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis and have misinterpreted the command to have “dominion” over the earth, twisting it into an ideology of mastery whereby mastery is understood as exploiting the goods of the earth to satisfy the selfish desires of man. It is a sad fact that Catholicism was not always clear about what dominion does and does not mean, sometimes thinking that dominion grants man the right to “lord it over” creation in a manner incongruous with God’s own manner of governance. Protestantism as well and especially the Puritans made use of the first Genesis creation story to justify human domination of the natural world. The Calvinists did the same, and this has contributed to the contemporary view that human beings have the right to exploit

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<sup>10</sup> White, Jr L., *The historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, Science, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> L.White Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, Science, p. 155.

natural resources. Both Catholicism and Protestantism have generally fostered individual enterprise and rights, utilitarianism, and the pursuit of happiness, even what is commonly referred to as hedonism.

This is the kind of ideology that Pope Francis rejects in the third chapter of the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* where he reflects on God, creation, and the role of humanity in God's divine plan for creation. The pontiff attributes the current environmental degradation and ecological crisis to human being's failure to affirm the goodness and the sacredness of creation that the first book of the Bible affirmed from the outset, thereby inviting us all to undergo ecological conversion and return to a cosmological vision that recognizes the divine image in everything that God has created. The pope blames the modern anthropocentrism which taken to excess reduces nature to an "object of utility", "raw material to be hammered into useful shape" or to a mere "space into which objects can be thrown into complete indifference."<sup>12</sup> This happens when man forgets his call to use the earth with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given. It is a total misunderstanding of man's position and role in the this world because instead of carrying out his role as co-operator with God in the work of creation, he sets himself up in place of God and ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature."<sup>13</sup> In one of his homilies, Benedict XVI said: "The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction."<sup>14</sup> These are just a few of the many voices who have argued against wrong interpretations of the bible and Christian teachings.

The correct interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 in no way gives human beings a free licence to do what they like with the rest of creation.<sup>15</sup> Rather humanity's dominion over creation must be properly understood in terms of good stewardship and care for what God has entrusted man with. Consequently humanity's "dominion" means responsible stewardship since it must serve the good of human beings and all of creation as well. It is a stewardship that upholds the common good, while at the

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* on Care for our Common Home, n. 115.

<sup>13</sup> J. Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, n. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict XVI, *Homily at Inaugural Mass*, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. P. Marsh, *Man and Nature*, p. 36.

same time respecting the end for which each creature was intended by the creator from the very beginning. If human beings' exercise of dominion disrespects the original intention of God and destroys nature's creative potential, it is distorted and constitutes an offence against God's original plan for creation and is evil.

### **Some Facts about Ecological Crisis Today**

The amount of ecological exploitation and damage caused to the environment today is dramatic and cannot be overlooked or ignored. Clearly, in the twenty-first century, alone human beings have done more damage to the planet than in the previous 160,000 years. Between 1975 and 2017 one fifth of all living species have disappeared! In the last 60 years we have lost 20% of the cultivable land surface and of the tropical rain-forests. Tragically, the forests of the world are vanishing at a rate of twenty million hectares a year.

It is remarkable that Climate change and global warming have actually been on the international agenda since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. But it's really scary that nothing much has happened since then presumably because the presidents who were present at the summit must have thought that it would take very many years before the disasters of climate change would kick in and it would be other peoples' problem to deal with and not theirs. But now the picture is changing drastically and at a very fast rate and a few of the world's political leaders seem to have woken up to the impending catastrophe. There are some governments now who have realised that global warming is probably the biggest single challenge facing them that climate change is rapidly emerging as one of the most serious threats humanity will ever face!

A striking development of the last few years has been the heightened awareness of the urgency for all of us to do something to save our planet from irreversible degradation. Clearly, ecological alarm bells are ringing around our globe as never before about the poisoning of our environment, about global warming, and about climate change. The main global problems attacking our environment presently are acid rain, atmospheric pollution, the destruction of the ozone layer, deforestation/desertification, and over-population. Acid rain derives from

uncontrolled industrialisation. Sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide in the atmosphere are transformed into acidic particles deposited on vegetation, and in rivers and lakes, causing contamination of food stuffs and respiratory diseases in living beings. Every day about 650 million people are exposed to harmful amounts of sulphur dioxide. How much contaminated waste pours daily into our rivers and seas? Pesticides are poisoning our environment. Are we poisoning our neighbours?

The greenhouse effect and atmospheric pollution result from the burning or consumption of fossil fuels (oil, coal, and gas) which give off carbon dioxide and other gases. This fact, together with the on-going deforestation produces a greenhouse effect leading to atmospheric pollution which has diverse effects on the environment. In the last few years, the temperature of our atmosphere has increased by at least 0.6 degrees centigrade, leading to what we call Global warming. There is an expected increase of 1.5 to 5.5 degrees Centigrade in the next years. It is an undoubtable fact that greenhouse gases are hitting record highs; the steady rise in atmospheric levels of the greenhouse gases blamed for climate change shows no signs of abating. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide rose by about half a percent in 2005. It said levels were likely to keep rising unless emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, and nitrogen oxides were slashed. There is no sign that N<sub>2</sub>O (nitrous oxide) and CO<sub>2</sub> are starting to level off and to make CO<sub>2</sub> level off we will need more drastic measures than are in the Paris Protocol today. It looks like it will just continue like this for the foreseeable future.

Scientists say the accumulation of such gases - generated by burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas - traps energy coming originally from the Sun, causing global temperatures to rise, hence the undeniable present global warming. This is already leading to the melting of polar ice caps and glaciers in the Arctic and Antarctic poles, rising sea levels, and more extreme weather events such as storms and floods. The rampant bush fires registered in places like Australia and the hiking of temperatures to over 47 degrees is scary as this could provoke incalculable disasters linked to drought and to the melting of ice in the Arctic and Antarctica. If for example, the ocean rises even by less than a metre, 10% of Bangladesh will be flooded leading to the flight of 8 million inhabitants and untold suffering. Many animals and plants, unable to adapt, will certainly disappear.

The ozone layer is a stratum of the atmosphere just 30 to 50 kilometres above the earth's surface; it protects life from the ultra-violet radiation responsible for skin cancer and the collapse of the immune system. Although the concentration of ozone in the ozone layer is very small, it is vitally important to life because it absorbs biologically harmful ultraviolet radiation emitted from the sun and prevents it from reaching our planet's surface. If the earth's ozone layer was meant to protect all life from the sun's harmful radiation, unfortunately, human activities have damaged this shield and now the layer has been greatly depleted. Less protection from ultraviolet light will, over time, only lead to higher skin cancer and cataract rates and crop damage. The emission into the atmosphere of industrial chemicals (*chloro-fluoro-carbons*, CFCs) found in dry-cleaning solvents, refrigerants, deodorant-sprays, anti-perspiration sprays, hair-sprays, dry-cleaning, solvents and various insecticides, leads to holes appearing in the ozone layer and to its eventual destruction. Ozone levels fall by over 60% during the worst years. It is estimated that for each percentage point of reduction in the ozone layer, there are ten thousand new cases of skin cancer in the United States alone.

Overpopulation is also another factor contributing to the ecological crisis today. It is clear that the population of the world is growing at an alarming rate. In 1950 there were only two and a half billion people in the whole world! In 1975 there were almost four billion, and in 1987 five billion. By 1999 world population had risen to six billion! In the last thirty years, the global population has increased by 34%. Today in 2017 it is over 6.7 billion and is projected to grow to nine billion by 2042.

As the statistics can show, it took humankind ten thousand generations to get to two billion inhabitants. Now only one generation is needed to increase by three billion! Not very long ago BBC Radio announced that the population of Africa has now reached 1 billion for the first time ever! The question that lingers in my mind is: Will the earth's eco-system be able to sustain so many people? The growth rate in the developing countries of the South is about 3 to 4 percent a year and can feed about 1.3 percent. The fact is that the human population is living far beyond its means and inflicting damage to the environment that could pass points of no return. The rate of extinction of species, and the challenge of feeding a growing population are putting humanity at risk. It is obvious that the human population is now so large that the

amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available at current consumption patterns. The land available to each person is shrinking significantly.

The above data give some idea of the size of the global crisis facing our planet. Today the ravages are on a planetary scale affecting adversely soil, air, water, climate, flora, fauna, and the global quality of life.

A “business-as-usual” approach to climate change – carrying on as if nothing were happening – would be disastrous. It would lead to extreme weather conditions, melting ice caps, rising ocean levels, and massive extinction of species, and many of the negative changes would be irreversible. Indeed, if we continue along our present path we will come to the point of having irreversible impacts on nature and on human life.

Perhaps in 2017, the damage is already irreversible. There is no time to delay; unless the international community unites in cutting greenhouse gas emissions, reducing carbon dioxide release, humanity will suffer irrevocably. Climate change demands merely a life-style change on the part of those living in developed countries – but for the millions of impoverished ones living in places like Bangladesh, the impact of flooding threatens their very lives and livelihood. While climate change is a technical, scientific, and economic issue, ultimately it is a *moral* one. Unless attitudes change and *conversion* takes place, the well-being of millions of people today will continue to be undermined, and future generations will be condemned to live on an inhospitable planet.

### **Towards a New Vision of Creation and Sense of Right Stewardship**

Today more than ever, there is a need for change of attitude towards the environment. There is a need for an eco-justice and an eco-theology that explores and is influenced by the reality and consciousness of human existence in an inter-related and inter-dependent biosphere and universe. There is a need for a *creation-centred* theology that recognises that the *biotic* community – the community of all life – lives in a created cosmos and is engaged not only with the intricacies of that existence, but also with the Creator-Spirit who continues to create the cosmos and guide it toward the full source realisation of its envisioned potential. There is a need

for a cosmic view that conceives human beings to be spiritual beings who can listen to the message of all things; who can rejoice with them; who can praise and thank that Intelligence that orders and that Love that moves all; and who sense that they are ethical beings responsible for the portion of the universe in which they live, namely, the earth.

This cosmic vision requires a new civilisation and a new kind of religion and a new kind of theology, one able to reconnect God and the world, world and human beings, human beings, and a spirituality of the cosmos. This kind of spirituality leads naturally to eco-justice approach to the cosmos according to which the earth is understood to have just as much a right to justice, as those human beings who currently inhabit this planet. The *eco-justice approach* will always make the earth a *partner* to collaborate with. If ordinary social justice means we cannot remain detached and aloof but must participate and join in the struggle of those we see to be oppressed, eco-justice also demands that we take sides that we stand *with* the Earth as an oppressed party, that we join Earth in the struggle for justice for the entire Earth community. We have to take up the cause of Earth. Our task is to identify with Earth.

The world today is called to embrace the antithetical *kinship* attitude according to which human beings are related to all members of the Earth community as our *kin*, an intricate and ancient family tree that comprises all parts of Earth since its origins. According to scientists, all creation shares a common origin from a primeval atom which exploded almost fifteen billion years ago bringing everything that exists into being.<sup>16</sup> The principle of kinship will be the antithesis of dominion as misunderstood to mean selfish exploitation of nature for the good of man. In the place of such understanding of dominion, *kinship*, *citizenship* and *companionship* are far more appropriate than domination and rule. Elizabeth Johnson summarises this beautifully:

Appreciating the deep patterns of affiliation in the cosmos, the kinship model knows that we are all connected. For all our distinctiveness, human beings are

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<sup>16</sup> A. Peacocke, "Theology and Science Today", 32.

modes of being of the universe. Woven into our lives is the very fire from the stars and the genes from the sea creatures, and everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being. This relationship is not external or extrinsic to who we are but wells up as the defining truth from our deepest being....All thinking must begin with our cosmic genetical relatedness<sup>17</sup>.

The kinship model of humankind's relation to the world reminds us that we are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it. As Pope Francis puts it, "everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river, and mother earth."<sup>18</sup> According to the subsequent story of evolution, it is clear that humans share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Human beings are genetic kin to all other creatures in the great community of life. This calls for us to recognise a kind of cosmic fraternity, that there is kinship within the Community of God's creatures and so our relationship with nature should be more than an "I-It" and instead tend towards an "I-Thou" kind of interaction.

### **Ecological Conversion as the Way Forward**

Benedict XVI in a message during one of the World days of Peace said that "the ecological crisis offers a historic opportunity to develop a common plan of action aimed at orienting the model of global development toward greater respect for creation and for an integral human development inspired by the values proper to charity in truth."<sup>19</sup> The task of identifying with the earth and standing with it as a partner in the struggle remains a singular duty for every person today, whether Christian or not Christian. Talking about the attitude of the African traditional worldview towards creation, Wangari Maathai, a Nobel Prize winner, underscored an

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<sup>17</sup> E. Johnson, *Woman, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*, n. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*.



attitude of respect and reverence for the created world since Africans believed that God had nature as his dwelling place until the missionaries came and convinced people that God does not live in natural phenomenon like in mountains and rivers but in heaven thereby giving people the licence to tamper with nature.<sup>20</sup> For Maathai, God's creation is sacred and inviolable and that explains why she spared no effort in the preservation of the environment in Kenya and beyond. The spirit of care for and preservation of the environment forms a significant component of African spirituality and this is the content of the argument of Magesa in his book "What is not sacred? African Spirituality."<sup>21</sup>

The vision of scripture, of saints like Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen among other holy men and women, should inspire any ecological spirituality today. Indeed Francis' model of «companionship» and "fraternity", the patron saint of ecology, and Leonardo Boff's call for "a new society with an eco-centric consciousness" are options to be embraced today. The principle of eco-justice is calling for a radical change of heart in the way humans relate to Earth. Famously, Pope John Paul II never tired in calling for an "ecological conversion" as is evidenced in the quotation below.

Unfortunately, if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that "flowerbed" which is the earth, our dwelling-place.

We must therefore encourage and support the "ecological conversion" which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Man is no longer the Creator's "steward", but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. W. Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 173.

<sup>21</sup> L. Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, *General Audience*, January 17, 2001.

The Pope called on Catholics “not to behave like dissident predators where nature is concerned but to assume responsibility for it”. In fact, Pope John Paul II was the first to offer the Church a papal document devoted exclusively to environment and development issues, entitled *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation* published on 1 January 1990. It is in this document that John Paul declares that “Christians, in particular, realise that their duty towards nature and Creator is an essential part of their faith”<sup>23</sup>This teaching is arguably the best kept secret in the Catholic Church!

The following are some five principles of creation spirituality that I would identify that should govern Christians' view of the cosmos today.

### **The Principle of Intrinsic Worth**

The reduction by man of all non-human creation to a being only of instrumental value has led to massive environmental degradation. The first principle that I would therefore wish to propose is that of the intrinsic worth of every created being in the cosmos. This is one of the key principles if justice is to be done to ecology by humans. The principle of intrinsic worth means human beings recognise each living organism in the universe for its intrinsic value and not for what he/she wants to experience from it. It is a principle according to which the Earth and all its elements – no matter how small or apparently insignificant – is appreciated for the intrinsic worth it has. In other words, the value of a thing is not dependent upon whether it has been endowed with unusual beauty - as humans may define beauty - or whether it is found useful for particular human purposes but for what it actually is. Here, utility for humans is no longer used as the criterion of value; all organic or inorganic entities have intrinsic value in their own right regardless of how we relate to them. The reason is that all organisms are created by God and derive their value from this intrinsic relationship to God rather than from any use human beings might have for them.<sup>24</sup> Responsibility for every Christian is an acknowledgement of the intrinsic worth of creation, and this includes the environment, as an aspect of the common good.

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<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation*, 1 January 1990.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Centisimus Annus*, no. 37-38.

## The Principle of Inter-Connectedness

According to this second principle, the whole universe is intricately relational and interconnected. It states that all reality is interconnected; everything links with everything else; nothing conceivable is isolated. It can be argued that *inter-connectedness* is the foundational principle of all ecological spirituality. This principle states also that over and above the interconnectedness of everything that is created, there is also the principle of *interdependence between human beings and other beings within the cosmos*. This means that human beings depend on other kinds of beings just as others depend on human beings and so that all are dependent on each other. The dependence of creatures is not just on God but also on each other.

The ecological spirituality paradigm of reality therefore recognises that there is no isolating space between phenomena, but that all are connected. The Earth possesses an almost limitless set of interlocking systems. All parts of the Earth are connected in multiple and mysterious ways. Inter-relationship says that everything is on a continuum. Thinking on a continuum has profound implications for both human dignity and the integrity of creation. It means that all humans are intimately related to one another, whether they be male or female, black or brown or white, able-bodied or physically challenged, rich or poor, Muslim or Christian. The centrality on inter-relationship means that regardless of whether other human beings like us or not, and whether we like them or not, they *are* our relatives, our closest relatives, our nuclear family, if you will. It means that all other creatures are our relatives as well, even if distant cousins. One cannot love God without loving all that God has created. The continuum of life is a reflection of the oneness of creation. We are all in this together.

The ecological spirituality paradigm of the total interconnectedness of reality remains a challenge that has not yet been fully appreciated.

## The Principles of Voice and Resistance

The principles presuppose that nature has been rendered a mute object. Human beings have silenced the voice of Earth and the non-human Earth community.

While there may have been exceptions, like Francis of Assisi, who is known for his respect and value for creatures, the Christian tradition of the West has usually turned a deaf ear to the voice of Earth. Moreover, some biblical writers hear a voice of praise «Sing to the Lord, all the Earth», with all the trees of the forest «singing for joy» (Psalm 96:1), while others indeed hear a suffering Earth crying out in resistance against Earth's violations by humans. Already in Genesis 4, the ground opens its mouth in sympathy to receive the blood of Abel which then cries out for justice (4:10-11).

The suffering of creation is quite explicit in the oracles of Jeremiah. The violation and defilement of the land by God's people is felt deeply by Jeremiah, by God and by the land itself. Jeremiah hears the land crying out to God (Jer 4:23-28; 23:9-12). The ultimate suffering of the land is reflected in the famous vision of Jeremiah as he watches the earth being transformed back into a chaotic wasteland, the very *tohu wabohu* that preceded creation (Jer 4:23-26). In response to this vision, Jeremiah foresees a day of such desolation for God's land that the land and the sky will perform rites of mourning (4:27-28). As Leonardo Boff, in his famous book, reminds us, there is a "Cry of the Earth" – the cries of the Earth suffering under human domination. We need to discern whether Earth is also a subject that resists wrongs and strives for a new future. The "groaning" of creation in Romans 8 points in this direction as does the way the land "vomits" out inhabitants who defile the land (Lev 18:24-30).

The principle of voice assumes first that Earth is a *subject* intended to be heard rather than an object destined to be analysed. In reality, Earth is multiple subjects with multiple voices to be heard and listened to. This principle also holds that Earth as a subject is to be viewed as a living organism rather than a voiceless machine governed by rigid "laws of nature".

The suffering of creation today is far more extensive and serious. The cries of the fallen forest, the dying deserts, and the acid air now envelope the earth. It is an axiom of *social* justice that the true nature, depth, and force of any injustice can only be understood by those experiencing that injustice. Their voice must be heard first, taken with the utmost seriousness and made an integral part of the process of justice. Theology is hereby challenged to find ways of hearing the muffled cries of Earth resisting human oppression.

### ***The Principle of Purpose***

This principle implies that human beings must conceive created beings according to the end for which they were intended by the creator. It is a reflection of what ultimately is the purpose of planet Earth? What is its objective, what is its goal? The bible gives direction on this when it helps man to raise question such as human beings and other creatures "in transit" here heading for another destination? Is Earth only a transition place, a kind of refugee camp for those on their way to heaven? Is heaven our real home and Earth only an alien stop-over country for pilgrims? Do we have no permanent abode here? Is Earth only to house humans for a while? Is this planet only a "vale of tears" where we are in "exile", mourning and weeping (as suggested by some Catholic prayers)? Is Earth just to demonstrate God's creative skills and prowess? Are we all *en route* to a better place with this planet destined to end up as cosmic waste after some spectacular apocalyptic fireworks display at the end of time? Viewing the earth as just a place of transit to a better world is surely devaluing it.

Surely, the universe we live in is not just a service station we stop by on our way to heaven. Rather the Earth is an entity in its own right, a subject with its own design and purpose. It is not merely a temporary abode for humans, given for the benefit of the human species.<sup>25</sup> Earth, in and of herself, is a wondrous mystery, whose design is wisdom and whose purpose is life.

### ***The Principle of Mutual Custodianship***

How will justice be done for Earth? What kind of relationship between Earth and humans is likely to affect healing and reconciliation? The answer perhaps lies in the word "*custodianship*".

The principle of mutual custodianship seeks to understand the mutuality, reciprocity, and the interdependence that exists between humans and the rest of inhabitants of the Earth. It is a fact that the Earth has been taking care of humans just

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:9.

as humans have been taking care of the earth. It is true that humans get their oxygen, food, water, chromosomes, etc from the earth. For so long the Earth has been the "custodian" of human life, providing us with water, oxygen, food, chromosomes. Human beings too are custodians of the Earth hence *mutual* custodianship.

In fact, Genesis 1:26-28 with its talk of "subdue" (*kabash*) and "rule" (*rada*) still smacks too much of a hierarchical dominion model. "Ruling over" for us really means "taking care of" the Earth. Earth is essentially *kin* with us – not simply something that has been "put under our feet". The verb to "till" in Hebrew is the same as the verb to "serve". Humans are to serve the soil; to *serve* and *preserve* it. Exploitation (consumption without limits) and vandalism (pointless destruction) have to be replaced by custodianship and stewardship. The concept of kinship with Earth and the model of mutual custodianship offers thus one option that is consistent with the ecological spirituality paradigm that considers human beings as part of a wider community of created beings that are called to co-exist in inter-dependence and mutuality.

## Conclusion

The article identifies the ecological crisis caused by man's failure to fulfil his responsibility of taking care of God's creation as one of the greatest sins of modern times thus calling people to embrace eco-justice in dealing with the environment. The article advocates for ecological conversion, an expression of *metanoia*<sup>26</sup> a radical change of attitude towards the environment. This change of heart in relating with creation cannot be an optional or secondary aspect of Christian experience but is an obligation.<sup>27</sup> Achieving ecological conversion is in tandem with the overall goal of personal conversion to achieve which we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart. Indeed as Pope Benedict XVI said, "the external deserts are growing, because the internal deserts

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<sup>26</sup> Metanoia is a Greek word that implies a total change in the way a person thinks and behaves.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*, n. 217.

have become so vast."<sup>28</sup> Care for God's creation is an imperative for all. It is the moral responsibility of everyone, regardless of whether one is Christian or not. To echo the words of Benedict XVI in an address during the World Day Peace, January 1, 2010, "we are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity it is important to everyone to be committed at his or her proper level, working to overcome the prevalence of particular interest."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of his Petrine Ministry (24 April 2005): AAS 97 (2005), 710.

<sup>29</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1, 2010 in <http://www.chausa.org>.

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## CHAPTER TEN

### THE ROLE OF AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

Marcel Uwineza, SJ

#### Abstract

*The NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies has made it clear that for the third time, "the earth hit in 2016 record heat" (The New York Times, January 19, 2017). This poses threats to society, nature, and future generations. Poor nations suffer the most. Erosions and fires are on the rise. Drought and starvation afflict some parts of Africa. Although it is often underappreciated, African Spirituality has positive and ethical contributions to make to the environmental crisis. This is the task of this article.*

#### Introduction

No one throws a stone where he or she has placed a container of milk (*Ntawe utera ibuye aho yajishe igisabo*). The wisdom of this Rwandan saying has never been as needed as it is today, particularly with regard to the depletion of the environment. We continue to throw stones that destroy our "common home."<sup>2</sup> I use this proverb to underline that African ethics are founded on taboos or proscriptions that spell out what ought to be done and not to be done in order to "preserve balance and harmony within the community, among communities, and with nature."<sup>3</sup>

This article seeks to demonstrate the contribution of African Spirituality to our efforts to deal with ecological crisis. As most studies on climate change and environmental crisis have been generated or dominated by the West, and yet the crises continue to degenerate, I join other theologians like Laurenti Magesa to argue that African Spirituality offers an alternate ethic to the ecological crises. I also follow Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator who notes: "upon careful scrutiny, the wisdom of

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<sup>2</sup>Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, no. 21.

<sup>3</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment: Some Principles, Theses, and Orientations," 119.

African spiritual tradition ... offers resources for cultivating sound ecological virtues and commitment."<sup>4</sup> The creativity of this work will be mostly its ability to show how African Spirituality, with some illustrations from Rwanda, re-invites us to an *aggiornamento*, a *ressourcement*, to use traditional African resources in deep appreciation of and conversation with Pope Francis' exhortation to care for our "common home."

Ecology represents a new frontier for theological ethics. Yet given the complexity of environmental degradation, there is a need for different regional spheres to learn from each another. No individual or community can claim to have all the answers. What is clear is that the escalating destruction of the environment is mostly due to human activity. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis writes, "the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."<sup>5</sup> As the earth cries out, there are multitudes of poor men and women who are especially affected by the cracks in the planet. There is an urgent need for reconciliation with creation and solidarity in trying to find common and practical solutions to minimize the increasing devastation of the planet. Laurenti Magesa, one of Africa's prominent theologians, remarks, "Jointly recognizing the threat to [the earth's] survival ... humanity can work collectively to find an adequate response to this predicament of imminent disaster."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Michael Amaladoss, Indian Jesuit theologian, points out that "togetherness spells the way of dialogue that is in our day 'an essential ingredient for [our human] pilgrimage here on earth.'"<sup>7</sup> In other words, there is a moral duty to work together, to create environmental protection networks and taskforces. There is also an invitation to sincere openness, self-restraint in our use of the earth's limited resources, and tolerance with one another as humanity seeks to heal the planet. Pope Francis warns us that: "if we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>A. E. Orobator, "'An Immense Pile of Filth': Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation," 1.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 21.

<sup>6</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 119.

<sup>7</sup> M. Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 63.

Techno-science alone cannot resolve the ecological threats to human and universal existence. There is a need for “a comprehensive transformation at all levels of human existence” on the local and global level. Practically, economic structures must be renewed to take account of the equilibrium in “possession and use of material resources of the earth to meet the universal fulfillment of all;” political ideologies must continually be transformed to become amenable to the rights and dignity of every person; social relationships must be geared toward dialogue and mutual understanding or “universal solidarity” in constructing policies; and an honest spirituality must develop everywhere.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we are all in this together, as the saying goes, because we share a destroyed environment and no one is immune from its consequences.

Before embarking on the contribution of African Spirituality to the ecological crises, let us first look at the challenge the world faces.

### **The Earth and Humanity at the Threshold of Collapse**

Our global village is in bad shape and is seriously wounded by the environmental degradation the effects of which are felt in the form of climate change. In her book, *The World as Creation: Creation in Christ in an Evolutionary Worldview*, Emily Binns warns that the worst is yet to come; we have yet to experience the full magnitude of the climatic changes the greenhouse effect will inflict on us. “Famine and social disruptions are unavoidable consequences to befall us following the present carbon dioxide emissions, and the sulfur oxides which are bringing us acid rains and the pollution of the seas that are killing our fauna.”<sup>10</sup> Five of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific are already underwater. The Sea has swallowed some coastal towns in Ghana and the Marshall Islands are in imminent danger of disappearance. The current president of the World Bank, Kim Jim Yung adds a voice of warning, saying that the year 2014 was among the warmest on record in the past

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 205.

<sup>10</sup> E. Binns, *The World as Creation: Creation in Christ in an Evolutionary Worldview*, 71.

fifteen years. He points out that “the world is approaching extreme temperatures that touch the physiological limits of what humans and animals can withstand.”<sup>11</sup>

Global warming has opened other devastating effects such as floods and droughts in different corners of the globe. In 2014, Malawi experienced floods that inundated people's farmlands and destroyed crops. “In March 2015, 600,000 people were affected; 64,000 hectares of land were flooded. This was followed by outbreaks of cholera and other diseases.”<sup>12</sup> Malawi is just one example. There are many examples in other parts of the world. In May 2016, the towns neighboring the capital city of Rwanda (Kigali) were inaccessible because of floods. Regrettably, those who suffer most from the effects of global warming and flooding are mostly the vulnerable, poor nations. As the African saying goes, *when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers*. When nature fights back against human exploitation, it is the less fortunate, those with little means to afford themselves good housing, healthcare, education, security, etc., who bear the consequences.

The concern for healing the universe arises from the fact that the earth and humanity within it is in impending danger of collapse. “If human attitudes and behavior toward the world do not change, then this will have an impact sooner rather than later.”<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis highlights several areas of human behavior that need immediate change to save the environment. There are different forms of pollution that lead to climate change and the resulting loss of biodiversity that is essential for ecological health and human survival. There are misuses of and subsequent depletion of natural resources, such as water, that are indispensable to life; “and social inequalities and injustices between individuals and within and among nations that threaten local and global peace.”<sup>14</sup> Are there any positive contributions from African Spirituality? The following pages give some answers to this question.

### **Contribution from African Spirituality**

African Spirituality seeks to link (*religare*) the African person to God by means

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<sup>11</sup> K. J. Yung, “Plan for the Planet: Confronting Climate Change”.

<sup>12</sup> K. J. Yung, “Plan for the Planet: Confronting Climate Change”.

<sup>13</sup> L. Magesa, “African Spirituality and the Environment,” 120.

<sup>14</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 205.

of African patterns of life or culture as its starting point. It is a spirituality rooted in the totality of how Africans view the world and conduct themselves in it. It is an integrated combination of a system of beliefs about everything and behavior towards everything in existence. It refers to thoughts and actions of individuals and the entire society. This spirituality cuts across many African countries as one finds similar patterns of living in different cultures.<sup>15</sup> It has a religious significance on account of the spiritual power with which all creation is endowed. In short, it is a spirituality that reminds humanity that creation is essentially sacred.

Does African Spirituality then have something to offer to remedy the ecological crisis? In matters of ecological depletion, Africans are no exception. We have many instances of abuse and misuse of natural resources of land, water, gas, animals, and forests because of excessive greed, careless farming and overgrazing, and deforestation. A large percentage of Africa's population relies on forests for their livelihood and subsistence farming for survival. "More than 70 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa depends on forests and woodlands for its livelihood; one fifth of rural families' daily needs come from forests. Woodlands and forests supply approximately 60 percent of all energy. Forest-related activities accounts for a large part of the GDP of most of the continent's countries."<sup>16</sup> People cut down the forests in order to expand their farming land to feed their growing families. Some collect firewood and/or make charcoal, timber to build their shelters and storage bins, and to make utensils. Others use some herbs and trees for herbal medicines. It is needless to mention that these, when not properly controlled, deplete resources upon which humanity depends for its existence. The increased depletion of the universe is probably what Catholic theology means when it refers to the wounded or broken humanity in us. It is one manifestation of the "original sin," from which no one is exempt. When it comes to creation, it seems clear that we all have solidarity in sin because of the human abuse of creation. "Refusal by humanity – motivated by original sin – to honor boundaries in its relationship with creation

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<sup>15</sup>From my conversation with Laurenti Magesa on March 25, 2017. Magesa is one of the Africa's prominent theologians.

World Bank Africa Region, *Forests, Trees, and Woodlands in Africa: An Action for World Bank Engagement*.

inevitably presages the consequent annihilation of creation and human destruction."<sup>17</sup>

What are the resources within African Spirituality to deal with this degeneration? In the following paragraphs, I propose seven symbols and themes from African cultures that, if properly understood, appropriated or changed, can foster our ecological awareness and preservation.

*First*, the umbilical cord is significant and can be used to foster humanity's mutual dependence to nature. It links a baby to its mother in her womb. The growing fetus cannot survive in its mother's womb without the umbilical cord. "In many African cultures, when it is cut after the birth of a child, the umbilical cord is buried in a special place in the homestead, to signify the belonging of the new-born not only to the clan and its spirits, but also to the ancestral soil from which it should normally not be alienated."<sup>18</sup> Just as a woman carefully carries the fetus linked to her through the umbilical cord, we are linked to this universe the ruin of which entails our own destruction. Most African cultures have the umbilical cord buried in the ancestral land in order to signify that both the mother and the new baby are inalienably and inseparably linked to the "living-dead," the ancestors. If the umbilical cord is carelessly thrown away, this suggests disregard of this link. Therefore, when Africans say, "there is no place like home," this is not a simple statement from one who misses one's relatives or native food. Instead, most Africans refer to this link to the land of their ancestors and their community. It is what is missed most! It is what makes "home" special.

The connection of the umbilical cord to one's land has an ecological dimension. It connotes humanity's connection with the universe. To carelessly handle or to lack respect for the umbilical cord means the destruction of humanity's link with the universe. For Magesa, it "implies the death of humanity in the long run. By destroying nature, humanity slowly loses belonging. It has nowhere to belong to, no other place to call home, and no ambiance to deeply and meaningfully connect with in life and with which to enter into communion after death."<sup>19</sup> Indeed this is an

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<sup>17</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 121.

<sup>18</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 122.

<sup>19</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 122.

invitation not to throw a stone where we have placed our umbilical cord, like where we place our treasured milk, or by analogy it is an invitation not to worsen the cracks within our "common home."

*Second*, in many African cultures, God is both connected with and transcends creation. God "influences history not from without but from within."<sup>20</sup> Oneness, harmony, mutuality, and interdependence are central to most African cultures' conception of existence because everything that exists as a being-with-others. Life in the universe is so interlinked that to upset one aspect of it is to begin to put an end to the whole of it.

Additionally, the physical world is the place where the divine dwells. Most African traditions hold that the earth is a footrest of the divine. "Nature is a privileged locus for encountering the gods, goddesses, deities, and ancestral spirits."<sup>21</sup> Rwandans go further to note that God spends the day elsewhere, but sleeps in Rwanda. This is to highlight the fact that God is not remote from God's creation. According to Margaret G. Gecaga, this spirituality of locating God within the physical universe allows humanity "to unlearn to view the physical world 'as a sphere of profanity and darkness.'"<sup>22</sup> In other words, African cosmology shuns dualistic tendencies that separate the sacred from the profane. For Laurenti Magesa, "the spiritual, including God's own spirit, exists only in the physical as an indistinguishable and inseparable composite."<sup>23</sup> African traditional beliefs share a commitment with Ignatian spirituality, namely that as part of the creation, in and to which God is present; we actually have both the ability and the calling to find God in all things. Ignatius of Loyola invited those who undertake the *Spiritual Exercises* to "reflect how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man [*sic*] bestowing understanding ..." <sup>24</sup> This reflection must be accompanied by or lead to moral responsibility to care for the world as we rejoice in the wonders of creation, the

<sup>20</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 72.

<sup>21</sup> Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> M. G. Gecaga, "Creative Stewardship for a New Earth," 33.

<sup>23</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 127.

<sup>24</sup> L. J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, no. 235.

marvels of human life, the beauty of the stars, the forests and the macro- and micro systems of our universe. Consequently, African societies make an urgent invitation to us to stop the damage we do to the air, the earth, and oceans, etc. We are urged to "expand our horizons in understanding justice which comprises Human-Earth relationship."<sup>25</sup>

*Third*, solidarity is a central theme in African indigenous ways of life with practical implications. "In traditional African political and economic structures, no one died of hunger when some community members had plenty. This principle undergirded the sense of communion in the community, often dubbed 'African socialism' and represented above all by the Chief-Provider."<sup>26</sup> The African role of a chief as a provider for his community is a symbol to be used for the preservation of the universe. This traditional symbol of Chief-Provider admittedly connotes some measure of paternalism, but in its positive African interpretation, it is rather a symbol of human equity, as a chief seeks to provide the necessities of life to all his sons and daughters. Since in many African societies the chief was by and large the wealthiest person due to his different entitlements, whatever the chief owned belonged to the community in the sense that his first obligation was to care for whoever was in dire need. His first role was to be a provider for his people.

There are some universally broad social justice implications that follow from this solidaristic reading of the symbol of "chief-provider." This commitment to solidarity challenges wealthy nations to assist the needy of our world. It challenges the wealthy and powerful men and women of Africa to attend to at the needs of their neighbors and change their life styles. Theologians are also challenged to do theology that bears relevance to the suffering poor. Edward Schillebeeckx writes, "What does it mean that I, as a [theologian] who believes in God, claim to find salvation in my belief in God when two-thirds of humankind is unfree, enslaved and starving to death?"<sup>27</sup> One of the answers is that we cannot do "ivory tower" theology detached from the living conditions of God's people and the universe we inhabit. Our salvation entails saving the world as well as ourselves. In his book, *What Is Not*

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<sup>25</sup> F. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, 153.

<sup>26</sup> L. Magesa, "African Spirituality and the Environment," 123.

<sup>27</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, 54.



*Sacred? African Spirituality*, Laurenti Magesa rightly remarks, “the basic needs of the majority must temper the insatiable wants of some.”<sup>28</sup> This has ethical and ecological implications. It urges respect for the dignity and rights of the poor and protection of the limited resources of our universe. In his *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis invites the world, Africans included, to reexamine our ways of living and how they, hurt not only the poor of the earth, but also the earth itself. Francis invites us to nurture what Thomas Berry calls “a more benign mode of presence,”<sup>29</sup> through which we confess that “never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years.”<sup>30</sup> More than ever, we need to expand our horizons in a merciful and loving concern for the natural world. We cannot truly love one another without loving and respecting the earth.

*Fourth*, in an era of intense individualism and ecological crisis, we have to reinterpret human relationships. Known as a continent where communal life is cherished, our African humanity invites the world to learn to go beyond solidaristic relationships to mutuality with the universe. Life encompasses all created reality which includes plants, animals, and nature. “‘Life’ is the guarantee of wholeness and universal harmony within and between the material and the spiritual realms.”<sup>31</sup> The point is that there is an unbreakable relationship between nature and the society that lives in it. “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it, and thus in constant interaction with it,”<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis states. In other words, one can live meaningfully only by mutually and reverently relating to nature. Wangari Maathai put it beautifully:

Nature is not something set apart, with or against which we react. It is not a place to fear as something within which we might lose our humanity or, conversely, a place where we might gain perspective and simplicity away from the corruption and treachery of the court or the city. It is instead, something within which human beings are unfolded.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> L. Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 155.

<sup>29</sup> T. Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Orobator, “An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 8.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 139.

<sup>33</sup> W. Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 94.

Moving beyond solidarity to mutuality means treating nature as a partner to humanity. This recalls what Bénézet Bujo names “world ethos” and “salvation ethos” which is an ethic of respect for the environment on the part of humanity and more importantly, it refers to the understanding that “the African’s whole world is religious.”<sup>34</sup>

*Fifth*, the biblical theme of ‘covenant’ resonates with many African societies. In traditional Rwandan society, *kunywana* (covenant) is a powerful sign of friendship whereby two families who enter into a covenantal relationship promise to one another that they will be there for each other for better or for worse. According to Orobator, covenantal relationship has various dimensions. Primarily, it “presupposes mutuality and shared interest between ‘humanity and nature.’ [It] cannot be an impersonal pact. It is deeply inter-personal.”<sup>35</sup> As there is no covenant without “a certain feeling” for the other; South African theologian Peter Knox is right to say that “without taking a mystical approach, a first step toward the salvation of our planet must be developing a kindred feeling for the planet and every one of its inhabitants.”<sup>36</sup> Covenantal relationship presumes mutual responsibility and longevity.<sup>37</sup> Each party knows that for the relationship to work there have to be ways of working together and there is permanency in this relationship. Likewise, humanity’s connection to nature entails responsibility and long-term commitment. Humanity “honors, protects, and reverences [nature], while the latter sustains humanity in a variety of ways.”<sup>38</sup> It is a give-and-take (*guha uguha*) relationship. This is close to Pope Benedict XVI’s argument that our individual and communal understanding of self has a lot to do with our understanding of our environment: “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.”<sup>39</sup> As a result, covenantal relationship should be expanded to include humanity’s pact with the environment.

*Sixth*, many African societies give great respect to role models or ancestors, those who have died after living righteous lives. In Rwanda, we say that a community

<sup>34</sup> B. Bujo, *African Religion in Its Social Context*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Orobator, “‘An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 11.

<sup>36</sup> As cited by Orobator, “‘An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 11.

<sup>37</sup> As cited by Orobator, “‘An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 11.

<sup>38</sup> As cited by Orobator, “‘An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 11.

<sup>39</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no.51.

that has no role models is cursed (*umuryango utagira abawuhagarariye ube uvumye*). African role models stand for life and also “stand against all forms of oppression and suppression of human dignity.”<sup>40</sup> This oppression includes excessive exploitation of the planet. We need to endorse and encourage models, heroes and heroines of the environment. Wangari Maathai, Kenya's environmental Nobel Peace Prize (2004) remains an outstanding model. She cultivated interest in the care for “our common home.” She promoted tree planting in many parts of Kenya and threatened to sue the Kenyan government when it wanted to use *Uhuru* Natural Park (right in the middle of Nairobi) as a construction site. The Norwegian Nobel Committee sums up her unwavering commitment: “Professor Maathai ‘stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa.’” The Nobel committee praised the “holistic approach” of her work and called her “a strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace and good living conditions on that continent.”<sup>41</sup>

*Seventh*, African Spirituality gives great respect to creatures. Some trees and rivers are considered sacred in their relationship to humans. Orobator writes. “In our natural environment there was hardly a thing that did not command some measure of respect. The ancestral tree was an object of reverence – in fact, it was the sacred place of worship and ritual performances.”<sup>42</sup> Nature has therefore its sacredness which calls for reverence because as Wangari Maathai points out, “this or other trees are ‘understood by their communities as nodal points that connect the world above with the world below ... places where one’s ancestors and/or their spirits reside.’”<sup>43</sup> The point is that in African traditional beliefs, we find traditional and spiritual resources and an imagination that can contribute creatively to caring for our common planet. Since nature gives assurance of sustenance to humanity, then our understanding of life must be “expansive and inclusive” of all reality in order to encompass nature including animals, plants, and geo-ecological life such as “land, rain, and crops.”<sup>44</sup> This implies that the whole created order must be protected, not

<sup>40</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no.51.

<sup>41</sup> National Geographic, “Wangari Muta Maathai: A Life of Firsts” (September 26, 2011).

<sup>42</sup>Orobator, “‘An Immense Pile of Filth’: Human Ecology and Communitarian Salvation,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> W. Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 132.

only because of what people get from it, but as a matter of religious commitment and conviction.

*Finally*, teachers have a moral responsibility to help students to acquire and exercise "prudence, justice, courage, unselfish and aesthetic attitudes, self-discipline, respect for others, and nature; and commitment to the common good."<sup>45</sup> These pro-life and pro-nature virtues are already present in African Spirituality, but more than ever they need to be vigorously promoted in most of Africa's school systems. They increase students' awareness of the full meaning of the linking web of human life and nature. Additionally, prayer can also be a transforming and educational tool. Village days of prayer as well as provincial and national days of prayer for the protection of the environment need to be given greater vitality. In some places, they do not even exist. Village elders, leaders, and other stake holders must be encouraged to come together to draft these prayers and disseminate them in African villages to pray for the change of mind and heart toward proper use of the environment. As the saying runs, a community that prays together stays together, and this togetherness includes nature. A community that cares for the nature in which it finds itself cannot throw a stone where it has placed the container of milk. This container is nature itself!

## Conclusion

He who does not know who bore him insults his mother (*utazi ikimuhatse atuka nyina*). The wisdom of this Rwandan saying rings so true in our Era of ecological crisis. Individual and communal mistreatments and abuses of the ecosystem are a grave sign that we have disregarded the fact that nature nurtures us, as a mother nurtures her sons and daughters. We need repentance from this original sin.

Using some symbols from African Spirituality, this article has argued that the way most Africans treat the environment is influenced by their traditional belief systems. Certainly there is much to criticize regarding African Spirituality but it is

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<sup>45</sup> E. Wabahnu, "The Ecological Crisis and the Normative Ethics of Being," 46.

easy for such critics to ignore African Spirituality's many positive contributions. In this paper I have argued that African Spirituality offers positive resources to be employed in our common task to care for our "common home." Our mother-earth will only rejoice by reducing the number of stones we throw at her. This necessitates individual, communal, legal, and political will, but it also calls for the rootedness and the kind of *ressourcement* in our cultures. In all our arguments in this paper, it is clear that African Spirituality and its symbols offer opportunities and questions, which will always be worthy considering and asking.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### AFRICAN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

Christophere Ngolele, SJ

#### Abstract

*The problem I discuss in this paper concerns the serious threat to the earth's survival that our current environmental crisis poses. This crisis threatens the very possibility of the continuation of life in its current form. Given the urgency of this issue, the African identity needs to be revised and made willing to rediscover its profound meaning in relation to the surrounding environment. Various sources confirm the exigency of this crisis and the disproportionate burden born by the Global South. In this respect, each people should make it a point to rediscover the cultural resources that help one's culture to address the environmental question. Similarly, in his encyclical, the *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls for a multifaceted dialogue that includes different sciences, cultures, and religious traditions. Here, African culture stands as an appropriate interlocutor, since a deep investigation of African identity helps to recover relationality as an important dimension of human identity. A keen discussion of the African culture is the major contribution of this work, as it leads to the proposition of environmental ethics that will no longer be based on the paradigm of dominion or even stewardship. As the outcome of this paper, I propose an environmental ethics that is based on recognition and sacred care, since human beings are called to rediscover the right relationships that were intended by God in whose image and likeness they are created.*

#### Introduction

African identity is a matter that requires discussion at several levels. From historical studies done by ethnologists to more recent works on Africa, the question regarding the identity of the African people has been strongly debated. During the

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-11>

time of the explorers and imperial conquests, human identity was sometimes simply denied to the African people, who were at times associated with animals. Even in some religious circles, African people were not recognized as having souls, thereby legitimating movements such as slavery. As Aquiline Tarimo notes, "For centuries, African cultures have been systematically regarded as primitive and inferior by Western civilization. It was assumed that Africans had no culture, religion, thinking capacity, or civilization. Others went as far as saying Africans had no soul."<sup>2</sup>

Surely, the situation has significantly evolved, since it is no longer a matter of whether Africans are human beings or not, but a matter of how important they are. Nevertheless, since the way this question is addressed differs from one epoch to another and from one domain of investigation to another; it is worth engaging oneself in an exploration of what could be understood as "African identity" with the commitment to looking at the different perceptions, in order to grasp both what the non-Africans had in their encounter with the African world, and what Africans themselves say about their own identity.

The state of the degradation of the environment is such that it can no longer be ignored. The gravity of its effects particularly on the most vulnerable, demands a global and collective response. The devastating effects of the environmental crisis in the world at large are manifested in many undeniable ways. One will recognize that "our planet is poised at the brink of a severe environmental crisis. Current environmental problems make us vulnerable to disasters and tragedies, now and in the future. We are in a state of planetary emergency, with environmental problems piling up high around us. Unless we address the various issues prudently we are surely doomed for disaster. Current environmental problems require urgent attention."<sup>3</sup> At the global level still, facts such as the rise of the sea level, temperature, the change in flow of seasons are, but just a few proofs for the gravity of the issue and anxiety that attends it. In the context of Africa, the environmental crisis becomes more dangerous than the many already known causes of death and suffering. Just to cite a few facts: some sources of economic activity and determinants factors for the flourishing of human life such as Lake Chad are being drastically extinguished,

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<sup>2</sup> A. Tarimo, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.conserve-energy-future.com/15-current-environmental-problems>.



resulting in great sufferings for the people whose life depends on these resources and the uncertainty for the continuity of life in future. While speaking of the Congo forest, Wangari Maathai notices that "keeping this ecosystem healthy and using the resources it contains in a manner that's both sustainable and equitable without destroying it are not merely of concern for central Africa, but for the continent at large."<sup>4</sup> As always, it is true that in the context of the environmental crisis the world is undergoing, the most affected are the poor, those unable to protect themselves against calamities, and many other kinds of natural phenomena. Given the fact that Africa hosts one of the largest populations of poor in the world, Africa is then one of the most affected continents in many ways.

In this context, the necessity of a global dialogue in order to redress the environmental crisis becomes much stronger. Therefore, the call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* for an extended dialogue becomes critical and undeniable, and hence, the necessity of hearing often-neglected African voices.

This paper aims to show how a consideration of African identity is so critical in solving the environmental crisis we are undergoing. The overall goal of this paper is to raise new questions through an examination of concerns about African identity. It is about demonstrating how critical the African identity is, whereas dominant Western approaches to environmental ethics often turn on a dualism of subject and nature compelling a choice between an anthropocentric or biocentric ethics; African anthropology offers a third, mediating perspective. For African anthropology, persons are internally related to the sacredness of all creation, giving rise to a holistic ethics of care and recognition. More specifically, responding to the sacredness of nature is an ontological necessity for African identity.

To reach the point of this paper, I will first consider the question of African identity from the perspective of both African and non- African writers, and then offer a reconstructive interpretation of African identity. I will lastly show the implications of such a reconstructive interpretation for our environmental crisis today.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, 37.

## What is African Identity?

African identity should be understood in its complex totality. Africa is a huge continent, diverse in its people, geography, culture, and beliefs. Notwithstanding, one should never take this complexity as an excuse not to investigate this important question. There is an amazing description of African identity, understood as “Ubuntu” by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “[A] person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”<sup>5</sup>

Being human in the African worldview carries the whole sense of the African identity. Such was the case in African societies before their encounter with Western influences. African identity could best be described through consideration of the complex relationships surrounding the African person. In this sense, John Mbiti underlines that among Africans, “to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, African identity incorporates the web of relationships of the community, and includes the dimension of belonging with other human beings in the same cohort and sharing the same worldview. To be counted as part of the human community, one should be involved in the communal passage toward transcendence, God, through all the mediations possible, the ritual aspect addressed by Mbiti. This is the only way one can reach fulfillment. In the African perception, “total realization of the self is impossible without peaceful co-existence with minerals, plants, and animals.”<sup>7</sup> The same harmony is shown in the way one respects ancestors’ spaces and obligations, since “divinities and nature spirits, the spirits of ancestors are thought of as intermediaries between God and man.”<sup>8</sup>

In many African languages, the human being is always described as charged with transcendental meaning. Gabriel Setiloane explains:

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<sup>5</sup>Cited by M. Battle, “Ubuntu: I in you and you in me.” Blurb on back cover.

<sup>6</sup>J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, second edition, 2.

<sup>7</sup>B. Bujo, “Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective”, 281.

<sup>8</sup>D. Westerlund, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of African Religions”, 17.

The human person is like a live electric wire which is ever exuding force or energy in all directions. The force that is thus exuded is called *seriti*. It is like an aura around the human person, an invisible shadow or cloud or mist forming something like a magnetic or radar field. It gives forth into the traffic or weltering pool of life in community the uniqueness of each person and each object. While physically its seat is understood to be inside the human body, in the blood, its source is beyond and outside of the human physical body.<sup>9</sup>

This understanding of African identity brings forth the complex links that the African person has with the created world, from which his or her being is inseparable. Therefore, one cannot understand the African people without reference to the reality of life surrounding them that constitutes life in its fullest sense.

African people consider life in abundance as the ultimate goal of their existence and actions. It is therefore a challenge for biblical scholars to make a genuine reading of the Gospel of John 10:10 in view of the African culture. Whereas Jesus says that He came "so that they may have life, and have life in the fullness," the first missionaries among the Bantu missed perceiving these basic principles embedded in the culture they were evangelizing. As Placide Tempels notes, "the Bantu say in respect of a number of strange practices in which we [Europeans] see neither rhyme nor reason, that their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force to life strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity."<sup>10</sup> One cannot speak of the African person without addressing the longing for life, which includes sacred care and recognition of creation.

If western rationalism places the human beings at the heart of creation as the masters, the ones who should use or destroy whatever is created for their own interest, the African perspective instead includes the sacred aspect of creation. The created world merits existence for itself. Recognizing this right of the created world independently from the various needs of human beings is a very important part of the human person's identity from the African perspective.

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted by A. Shutte, "Ubuntu as the African Ethical Vision", 89-90.

<sup>10</sup> P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 44.

There are several notions used in Africa to signify the human being. The concept of *Ubuntu* or *Mukama* from the Shona people in South Africa is well-known. Similar ideas are expressed in many languages across Africa. To mention just one example, among the Téké people of the Republic of Congo, the notion of *Omvulu* is used to express the human being. *Omvulu* brings the idea of the human essence, what is ontologically deepest within a human person, the wholeness or the inner part of a person that comprises spiritual, physical, and other relations with all creation. For the Africans, the human person cannot simply be understood as a rational animal or "*res cogitans*." The human person is rather a complex of relationships at the very fusion of existential horizons.

In a globalized world, people's perceptions of those who are not like them vary according to the quality and openness of the one qualifying the "other." In Africa, colonizers and missionaries built their own opinions about the African peoples, culture, and religion; some of which praised but others were very negative about them. What negative notions did some colonizers and missionaries bring to Africa and African identity?

### **Some Missionary Perceptions**

Many African scholars have detected an attempt among the missionaries to annihilate African culture. This is true of Christianity and to a lesser extent Islam. Their encounter with the African people was rarely built upon the recognition of who the Africans are, nor on an appreciation of their values. Rather, it was domination and rejection that predominated, assuming that nothing of religious value ever existed in Africa. As Mbiti rightly puts it:

We have seen that in their invasion of traditional African societies, Christianity and Islam have come loaded with Western and Islamic culture and institutions. But they did not land on empty ground: they found African peoples deeply immersed in their own traditions and culture. The encounter between the two sides has resulted in the process of acculturation, producing almost what L. S.

Senghor calls 'half-caste cultures'.<sup>11</sup>

Diagnosing the problems faced by Africans today, Wangari Maathai brings another dimension of the missionary and colonial impact on Africa which is not often discussed: their responsibility in the self-degradation of the African people. They removed from Africans the pride and confidence of being a people of worthy cultures and valuable institutions. In leadership, for example, Wangari notes:

Another reason - both more nuanced and yet perhaps even more devastating - for the dearth of good leadership in Africa was the destruction of Africans' cultural and spiritual heritage through the encounter with colonialism. This experience, commonly shared among colonized people, is not widely acknowledged in analyses of the problems facing the continent of Africa, which tend to be economic or political in orientation.<sup>12</sup>

Christian missionaries held several presuppositions that did not recognize African values relative to their ethical life. For the missionaries, whatever differed from the Western understanding of natural law was not worth any ethical consideration. As Bujo reminds it, "Christianity came to Africa via the West claiming to be absolute – complete and perfect, the natural law. Its proponents saw as irrelevant the indigenous African religion and ethics that for centuries had given people hope for a better life. They worked to obliterate them and replace them with their new, more powerful, foreign religion and morality."<sup>13</sup>

For many scholars, there was a tendency on the part of Christian missionaries to adopt a perspective of *tabula rasa* everywhere in Africa, refusing to recognize the existence of principles and traditions that had kept African people in harmony, following the paths of their ancestors. This denial of African identity did not foster an attitude of self-confidence among Africans, the ability to express their grandeur in what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls the "*rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir*" (the two way traffic encounter of give and take). For Senghor, it is necessary to create a

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<sup>11</sup>J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 258.

<sup>12</sup>W. Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 34.

<sup>13</sup>B. Bujo, "Is There a Specific African Ethic?", 117.

just, mutually respectful encounter between peoples and cultures. Each one needs to acknowledge the contribution that the other brings. We should create conditions for a courteous encounter where we listen to one another.

Charles Darwin, for example, after only two months in an African territory in the 1830s, reported that “the tribes there were among the most primitive of all peoples and quite without any religious ideas or practices.”<sup>14</sup> He said the same things about the people of Southern Sudan. Darwin goes on referring to the Africans he encountered, “They are without ... any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness in their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition.”<sup>15</sup>

Such pejorative presentations of the African person affected African identity negatively, and are still present in the subconscious of many. Whereas religions from other parts of the world are respected, and even called ‘world religions,’ those from Africa are often characterized as ‘primitive religions’ or ‘tribal religions.’ These appellations hold within them a strong misrepresentation and rejection of all the values linked to these religions. Encounters marked by such hostility cannot bear fruits among the different cultures; they are, instead, occasions for confrontations and conflicts.

The disrespectful and offensive clichés about the African peoples did not end with the missionaries coming from overseas; similar distortions are also perpetrated by some of the African scholars influenced by Western thought. Even John Mbiti’s work, exemplary in other respects, falls prey to such a bias. Thus Mbiti affirms without sufficient qualification, that the African notion of time does not include the future. Such affirmations motivate a series of statements, such as: the African intellect is not projected in the future; the African mind and thought, and, therefore, life-prospects are limited to the present; they are more nostalgic than future-oriented. All of these suggest that Africans are not engaged in history and that they are incapable of creativity. Unfortunately, Mbiti seems to endorse this falsification. To quote his words directly, “the question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are inevitably or

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<sup>14</sup> H. Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> H. Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*, 6.

immediate to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'No-time'.<sup>16</sup>

To be clear, the terms "Western" or "missionary" should not be taken as strictly limited to white people coming to Africa. They are generic concepts that apply to both non-Africans and Africans who are conquered by Western civilization, and who have turned strongly against African culture or religion, a category within which many are still active, perhaps even more so today than ever before. In many cases, such an approach on the part of Westernized Africans, is motivated and encouraged by the very little – or lack altogether – of knowledge about one's cultural identity. Nevertheless, apart from scholars who are misled by their lack of knowledge of what African culture really is, there are Africans and non-Africans who recognize the values and necessity of understanding African culture and have been defending it. What do these latter say about the African identity and attempt to reconstruct it? This following section will listen to the voices from Africa and abroad, pleading for the recognition of African cultural richness.

### **Reconstructed Identity of an African**

The works of several African theologians seem to be an attempt to reconstruct African identity. What new way do some African scholars suggest in looking at Africa and Africans, with corrected lenses that missionaries and colonizers missed? This work of reconstructing African identity is so critical as Engelbert Mveng observes: "if the creative genius of black people dies, it will be the end of our people. Our survival requires the restoration of our cultural sovereignty."<sup>17</sup> As Jacob K. Olupona rightly notices it, "the two monotheistic traditions, Islam and Christianity, to which most Africans have converted over the century, have developed a hostile attitude to this tradition; Islam relegates it to *al-Jahilliyya*, the time of barbarism, and Christianity views it as pure paganism."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, in the attempt to reconstruct African identity, these scholars are not themselves without exaggeration.

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<sup>16</sup>J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

<sup>17</sup>E. Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language", 141.

<sup>18</sup>J. K. Olupona, ed. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, 1.

In *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti brings out a new dimension in understanding the African people, for whom the complexity of their religious experiences matters in trying to understand who they are. For Mbiti, Africa's encounter with several religious traditions in recent centuries has had an immense impact on the life and identity of African people and on their religion, in particular. Religion is very important for Africans. In Mbiti's view, "it is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon."<sup>19</sup>

It is from the religious perspective that African communities celebrate life. Events that take place in this process should capture our attention in defining African identity. In acknowledging these complexities in African identity, we should be able to read old practices with new eyes and draw meaning out of them.

The same challenge is raised by Jean-Marc Ela, for whom "the meaning of the festival, deeply rooted in the people's mentality and their socio-religious practices, forces us to reinterpret it as a response of faith to the message of the Beatitudes."<sup>20</sup> Ela is strongly aware that African Christians should take major responsibility to correct the injustices done to their identity. He says, in this respect, that "Today we need to reactualize the Christian mystery within a cultural structure, where 'symbolism expresses the destiny of humanity everywhere as a struggle between life and death.' Both the gospel and Africa require that of us."<sup>21</sup>

African identity is to be understood in a holistic way. From the African perspective, one will not be able to reach fulfillment if they do not open their life to the universal dimension. The same need for relationality as a means for one to flourish is also expressed in the African Feminist Theology from various perspectives. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye shows, "women's experience of being persons primarily in relation to others- as mother or as wife-predominates in Africa. A woman's social status depends on these relationships and not on any qualities or achievements of her own."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, to understand the African perspective, one must get rid of the dualistic viewpoint profoundly grounded in Western thought, which is reactionary

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<sup>19</sup>J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 256.

<sup>20</sup>J.-M. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 6.

<sup>21</sup>J.-M. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 43.

<sup>22</sup>M. A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, 122.



and a failure to understand the African identity that Bujo clarifies – the holistic conception in the mind of an African person. For Bujo, “Africans are traditionally characterized by a holistic type of thinking and feeling. For them, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; they regard themselves in close relationship with the entire cosmos.”<sup>23</sup>

There is also something else that needs to be considered when speaking of African identity today. It is true that we should always go back to our sources and develop from them, but contemporary Africans are the ones we are nurturing. In reconstructing African identity, one should not fall into the temptation of duplicating African culture as it was centuries ago. Equally, we should not speak of African culture by reducing Africa to the culture of today, as if Africa started with the modern age. It is important to take into account the living experiences of people in Africa today, using the past as well as the present in order to build a bright future for all. In this sense, the exhortation of Magesa carries weight, for “if we are to understand the deep meaning of spiritual identity and to come to terms with its implications for Christians in Africa, we might want to keep in mind the wisdom of maintaining the continuity between old and new realities in human life rather than succumbing to the temptation of creating a radical break between them.”<sup>24</sup>

If African people can take pride in themselves, it should be visible in their actions and the way they apply in their lives the values they hold – all the way from their ancestors to today. One critical area where these values are needed more urgently than ever, involves environmental protection. The following section is a brief attempt to discuss the implications of African culture/religion in the protection of the environment.

### **Environmental Crises as a New Opportunity to Rediscover African Identity**

The discussion about rediscovering African identity should include as a crucial element, the importance of relationships. African identity is never complete if all the dimensions with which an African person should relate are not incorporated. This is

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<sup>23</sup> B. Bujo, “Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective,” 281

<sup>24</sup> L. Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 106.

what Bujo implies when he observes that “experts now accept that Africans can only be understood in reference to their basic attitude towards life. Likewise, only from this standpoint can their relationship to the cosmos be explained.”<sup>25</sup>

Inviting the African identity in the debate around the environmental situation does not imply that the question of the environment is essentially an African question. Likewise, it should not be taken as if the climate change or the environmental degradation is a new phenomenon. In history, the climate change has always been a constant and evident reality. Each generation had dealt with the issue in a very particular way, depending on the challenge faced by their time. And one should keep in mind that “the issue of the human relationship with and impact on the environment is an old one, spanning centuries of human civilization and knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> While dealing with the African relationship with the created world, one should understand that the connection African persons have with nature is not based on mere personal profit, such that nature should provide them with the goods they need. Rather, the connection between an African person and nature is more deeply grounded, it is an ontological necessity. There is an obligation embodied in the entirety of the African faith: nature is sacred, a dwelling place for ancestors and other divine spirits. Far from being a commodity to be used, nature is a mystery. This is why, in many African cultures, people go to nature in order to initiate young ones. It is in nature that the secrets of life are revealed; elders and wise people collect leaves and roots to cure the sick; perform ceremonies and celebrations. It is under the trees that reconciliation rituals take place. Nature is a privileged witness to the work of reconciliation in the human community. It is in tune with this that Magesa asked the question which forms the title of his book: *What is not Sacred?* According to Magesa, everything that exists bears a spiritual meaning and weight.

In the African context, every person wants to someday become counted among the ancestors. “[T]he human community in Africa consists of the living, the unborn and the ancestors (the deceased).”<sup>27</sup> But to become an ancestor, one must live a life

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<sup>25</sup> B. Bujo, “Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective”, 281.

<sup>26</sup> M.B.K. Darkoh and A. Rwomire, “Introduction: Ideas on Human Impact on Environment and Prospects for a Sustainable Future in Africa”, 2.

<sup>27</sup> C. Kamalu, *Person, Divinity & Nature: A Modern View of the Person and the Cosmos in African Thought*, 31.

of quality and morality, as measured by the way one respects all aspects of the relationships he or she has. In this regard, one is judged as being moral if he or she relates with the created nature with a sense of responsibility expressed by the recognition and sacred care, bearing in mind the good of the coming generations. It is the way one assumes the role they should play toward nature that qualifies them to be counted among the ancestors worthy of remembrance. That role is about how the person recognizes and shows sacred care toward created nature. Nature, being the place of life, is also the place for the expression of human morality. This is to say that one cannot mismanage creation and still be respected by society.

At the very least, one should care for nature out of fear of the ancestors who are alive and active there. As Bujo remarks, "African ethics is based essentially on the community model that includes the living and the dead."<sup>28</sup> In this community, awareness is helpful since it holds some influence on those who are morally weak and not capable of strong decisions in giving up some privileges to preserve the entirety of nature.

An honest look shows that the African culture/religion, with its understanding of the human person in all dimensions, has something to teach the whole human community about the spirit of our relationship with created reality. If creation is not something external to an African person, then the sense of the environment should not be reduced to a utilitarian aspect. It is not because the environment is useful to me that I should protect or maintain it. Rather, I should recognize it as a valuable partner, regardless of its usability or appeal. Wangari remarks that "for many native peoples, such as the Aka of the Congo and other forest dwellers, the forests have not been fearful places that they must conquer or where they cannot go, but their entire world, the source for their food and medicine, clothing shelter. To the Aka, the forest- and indeed what the world calls the 'environment'- does not exist beyond or outside the human realm."<sup>29</sup>

The link between the African people and the environment is not just something of the past; it is both a condition for recovering their identity as well as for survival and flourishing. In this context, it is worth noticing what Pope Francis states in

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<sup>28</sup> B. Bujo, "Is There a Specific African Ethic?" 117.

<sup>29</sup> W. Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 93-94.

*Laudato Si'* on the importance of the land for the indigenous people for whom "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values."<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

This reflection on African identity has shown a gap between what is said about Africa and its peoples and what Africa and who Africans really are. The reflection is important not because of the depth of its responses, but because it raises questions which are familiar but rarely discussed. In raising these questions, my goal is to start reflecting on what we in Africa could do to learn from our rich traditions, to build a bright future for ourselves and for the coming generations, to whom we should be accountable. This is an attempt to promote a culture of life and life in abundance in the sense described by Jean-Marc Ela: "a way of living that is continually challenged by the critical events which shape a people's history."<sup>31</sup>

It is evident that among the "critical events" faced by the human community today there is the continuous degradation of the environment. Should we not take it upon ourselves as an obligation to reflect genuinely and critically about the future of life on this planet? We should be able to ask ourselves what human life would be if this earth was unable to continually generate life. Furthermore, we should ask ourselves if we humans have the right to appropriate the existence of the environment. Are we not compromising our humanity by denying the uniqueness of the environment? Human life will never become better, and our identity complete, if we do not create a harmonious relationship with nature that surrounds us. Pope Francis is bringing to our attention the necessity to ask ourselves some radical questions: "what is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n.146.

<sup>31</sup> J.-M. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, XV.

generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity."<sup>32</sup>

The call of Pope Francis echoes in the African ears in a special way and needs close attention in order to revive the African personhood and identity. In the context of Africa, dignity is not reduced to human subjects, thus a replication of the well-known dualistic western approach. Dignity arises from a harmonious interplay between human beings and the rest of the created nature, resulting in recognition of created species as holding in themselves a value. This recognition is expressed in the sense of sacredness in the created nature. As Magesa beautifully expressed it, "the complex links that the African person has with the created world, from which his or her being is inseparable..."

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<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 160.

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See <http://www.conserve-energy-future.com/15-current-environmental-problems>.

**PART IV – EDUCATION, ETHICS AND MISSION IN AFRICA**





## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN VOCATIONS ANIMATION IN AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

*Laurenti Magesa*

#### **Abstract**

*All baptized Christian faithful are called to preach the Gospel wherever they are, that is, to be missionaries. But there are a few among them who receive the specific vocation to dedicate their lives completely to this mission, to the extent of leaving their homelands and going to new places. These need special training where culture plays an important role. This article explains the significance of culture in institutes of formation if trainees are not to feel isolated from themselves, something that has negative consequences in missionary work.*

#### **Importance of the Role of Religious Vocations**

Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are vital for the continued existence of the church, despite the many changes that have taken place in the conception and structures of the church since the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65). These commitments act as a witness to the world of what we call “kingdom values,” the values of Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Reconciliation, and Peace.

This is so on account of the special and specialized charisms or gifts that, in Catholic Christianity, the priesthood and religious life bring to the church and through the church to the entire world. A quick look at the history of Christianity anywhere, but certainly in Africa, reveals that, even with some human shortcomings here and there,<sup>2</sup> without such religious self-offering by both women and men, the church’s

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-12>

<sup>2</sup> As for example, the now well-known damage to the image of these vocations caused by the sexual abuse of minors by priests and religious in different parts of the world.

witness of these values, so sorely needed in our world today, would surely be so much less brilliant.

Today, Africa plays a unique role in this regard of witnessing to the gospel message “even to the very ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II makes no secret of his joy about the presence of the missionary spirit in the African church. He writes that it is for him “a source of great comfort to know that the Missionary Institutes which have been present in Africa for a long time are now ‘receiving more and more candidates from the young Churches which they founded,’ thus enabling these same Churches to take part in the missionary activity of the universal Church.”<sup>3</sup>

Continuing, the Pope applauds and thanks God “for the new Missionary Institutes which have been established on the Continent and are now sending their members *ad gentes*.” As the Pope sees it “This is a providential and marvelous development which shows the maturity and dynamism of the Church in Africa.” It is the Pope’s view that the missionary spirit that is emerging in Africa is a witness to “the unity of humankind” which begins in the church itself. “By responding to her vocation to be a redeemed and reconciled people in the midst of the world,” the Pope explains, “the Church contributes to promoting the fraternal coexistence of all peoples, since she transcends any human distinctions.”<sup>4</sup>

Granted that the missionary vocation in the African church is a *kairos*, an opportune moment to be grateful for to God, it makes its own demands in the present context. In this reflection, I’d like to offer a few thoughts on the significance of one of these requirements: the importance of culture in the missionary vocation in Africa. What role does culture play as individuals offer and dedicate themselves entirely to the service of God as diocesan priests and members of Religious Institutes? What are some of the factors that come into play in the process?

At least one thing is clear and must always be kept in mind: vision precedes practice in the process of mission. More precisely, in the Christian context, the type of *mission is born out of theology* and not vice versa. Any style of mission we engage in reflects the theology we hold. Even though the practice of mission may give rise to

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 134.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no 137.

a certain kind of theology, the latter will be essentially either a modification or development of the theology that motivated mission in the first place.

To be aware of this fact is essential today: it is to be conscious of not only how mission is done, but of the forces that drive the process. It is to try to understand what particular cultural experiences or conditionings embedded in our theological conceptions influence our missionary performances. These may help or easily blind the evangelist (for this is what the priest or religious is) from recognizing the value of different particularities other than one's own. This, as a consequence, may prevent the realization of the ultimate goal of mission – the promotion of the “fraternal coexistence of all peoples” or the Reign of God that Pope John Paul II speaks about.

The significance of a specific theological perspective for mission is not new. When Jesus commissioned the first disciples he had a clear theological vision in mind. We can discern it from the various accounts of his life and teaching in the New Testament. Jesus's perspective of mission is summarized succinctly, above all, in the final passage of the Gospel according to Matthew, one that is quite familiar. From the beginning of the Christian movement this passage has provided the basic reason for mission activity: “Teach them to obey all that I have commanded you” (28:19-20).

Very early on in the church, the Apostle Peter expands on his earlier theological confession in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16) by uncompromisingly defending this foundational theology of mission. He does so initially in his address to the people assembled in Jerusalem after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples to strengthen them (Acts 2:14-36), but later definitively when he and the other disciples come under orders from the Jewish religious authorities to cease and desist from transmitting the message of Christ. The disciples' position cannot be clearer: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

Of course, it is also clear from the Book of Acts and the Epistles in general that from the very beginning, the *practice of mission* gave different and very significant slants to this basic conviction. This was necessary as different questions arose, questions arising from practical circumstances that Jesus had not had to confront in his life, in such a direct way. From the New Testament, we know that the most significant of these questions happened to be cultural. The Christian movement,

being as it was at first an exclusively Jewish faction, the issue that arose shortly after Pentecost was what to do when non-Jews (the uncircumcised or Gentile peoples) wished in good faith to become followers of Jesus and were willing to obey all that Jesus had commanded?

### **The Imperative of Cultural Inclusiveness in Mission**

It was Paul of Tarsus who faced this extremely difficult mission-question head-on and gave rise to the mission theology of cultural inclusiveness within the primitive Christian communities. By his bold translation of Jesus's original and enduring sense of mission as encompassing positive values from all cultures, Paul may be accredited, both sociologically and theologically, with the initiative of the outward expansion of the church from the narrow Jewish cultural confines to a universal mission. The "catholicity" of mission is a fruit of Paul's pioneering vision.

In response to Jesus' original imperative to mission, founders of Religious Congregations and Societies also tapped deeply into Paul's ingenuity to spread the gospel beyond their own geographical and cultural confines. In Africa, for example, missionaries were immediately confronted by different cultural environments other than what were their own. They were constantly forced to answer different concrete questions resulting from these environments. This forced the more perceptive among them to modify or even change their original theological perspectives which were often prejudicial and antagonistic toward African cultural realities, just as St. Paul had done.

On account of the complex relationship between theology and practice in mission in giving rise to and defining approaches to mission that St. Paul exemplifies in his ministry, it will be useful to take a quick look at how models of theology and the practice of mission have developed in Africa since the beginning of the missionary enterprise in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What were the first missionary visions of mission to Africa? What changes have occurred? How have the changes in turn necessitated new developments in the conception and practice of mission? What new models of mission have evolved? The premise here is like that of St. Paul; it rests on the significance, indeed, the primacy of culture in mission activity.

Underlying the missionary activity of St. Paul is the conviction that human beings are products of their cultures and receive the gospel message primarily as such. As is generally accepted today, people are shaped by the physical or material as well as non-material environment in which they are born and raised. The latter includes the thought forms, language, and symbols into which and by which we are socialized. Although these do not bind or determine them in an absolute way (as St. Paul seems to have understood), they deeply shape how they perceive reality, themselves (that is. their identity), their relationships to other people of the same culture, their perception of and relationship to people of different cultures from their own and, very significantly, their perception of, and relationship, with God. And all of these processes are interrelated.

Of course, as Pope Francis explains at some length, although the gospel must be clothed in cultural expressions, it transcends any human distinctions and cultures.<sup>5</sup> Christian missionaries, as ministers of the gospel, must to a certain extent transcend some particularities of their cultures so as to engage meaningfully in trans-cultural, inter-cultural, or cross-cultural dialogue and relationships. Indeed, this is the essence of the call to mission, as St. Paul realized. But at the same time, it is necessary to be aware that we cannot totally empty ourselves of our cultures, and that we will always remain visitors before the cultural "other." St. Paul declared proudly more than once in a single episode that he was a Jew and that he was thoroughly versed in his Jewish culture and religion [Acts 21:39, 22:3], even if he was called to become "everything to everyone" [1 Cor. 9:19-23]). This indicates the complexity as well as the beauty of mission because, at its best, it desires and allows the missionary to enter intimately into respectful contact with the culturally different "other." Thus a fuller understanding of God as the ultimate "Other" is enhanced.

Genuine Christian mission is therefore always a two-way process; it involves the dynamics of giving and receiving. While the missionary cannot but offer the experience of the gospel as received and interpreted in his/her own particular cultural meditation, he or she must be prepared to receive those genuine values already indwelling, by the grace of God, in every culture. These values contribute to the

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<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 115-121.

interpretation of the gospel in a new way so that with both influences taken seriously into account – the “I” and the “Thou” – the understanding of the gospel grows in a spiral-like fashion to ever higher dimensions.

### **Historical Models of Mission in Africa**

Most of the historical paradigms of mission theology in Africa are well known, but it is important to reiterate them in order to see how they influenced the situation of vocations promotion to the priesthood and the religious life in the continent. Although the portraits we are drawing of them here may look like caricatures, the description of their basic outlines, and especially the results they prompted in terms of vocations advancement to religious life, are essentially accurate. The paradigms in question may be categorized into three main theological perceptions, visions, or patterns, consecutively in tandem with historical political events. These are:

1. Mission as salvation of the heathens (being the legacy of the slave trade) ;
2. Mission as civilization (the project and aim of colonial rule); and
3. Mission as dialogue (envisioned in post-independence Africa and by Vatican II).

### ***Mission as Salvation of the Heathens***

At the very beginning of missionary work in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the controlling theological paradigm of mission was the salvation of the heathens. It was a bigoted paradigm, to say the least, a consequence of the ideology of the period of the slave trade when the nagging question was whether blacks were truly human, or their cultures (if they had any to speak of) equally endowed with the presence of God like the European ones. During this era, mission was understood in an exclusively spatial sense. For Africa, it entailed Europeans leaving Europe to go save the blighted souls of Africans. In this view, Africans were the alleged descendants of Ham, who would forever be lost in hell on account of the biblical curse cast upon them<sup>6</sup> unless

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<sup>6</sup> See Gen. 9:21-25.

they heard the gospel as articulated in Europe.

To this end, in 1873, Pope Pius IX attached a 300-day indulgence to a prayer he composed and recommended to be said for divine mercy on the souls of “the poor Africans.” The prayer represents a perfect example of a negative theological hypothesis concerning the African people in the divine plan of salvation. The Pope described Africans as spiritually the “the most wretched” on earth. According to the prayer, unless Africans are helped to discard “their idols” they would be condemned to remain perpetually in their existing condition of “darkness and the shadow of death.” The introductory part of the prayer runs this way:

Let us pray for the most wretched Ethiopians [Africans] in Central Africa, that Almighty God may at length move the curse of Cham [Ham] from their hearts, and grant them the blessing to be found only in Jesus Christ, our God and Lord.<sup>7</sup>

The famed British colonial administrator, Lord F.J.D. Lugard (1858-1945), one-time Governor-General of Nigeria, likewise had no lack of choice phrases to describe Africa and the Africans along similar lines. He labeled Africa “the abode of barbarism and cruelty” and Africans as almost beastlike, without “self-control, discipline, and foresight.” Writing in 1922, Lugard was of the opinion that “Through the ages, the Africans appear to have evolved no organized religious creed, and though some tribes appear to believe in a deity, the religious sense seldom rises above pantheistic animalism and seems more often to take the form of a vague dread of the supernatural.”<sup>8</sup>

I cite these few examples because they make it easy to see that, with such fundamentally cynical views about an entire race as the foundation for mission, it was the exceptional Religious Institute or member of a Missionary Congregation or Society with extraordinary courage, who would even think of, let alone advocate, that African young women and men might be admitted to the ranks of the priesthood or

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<sup>7</sup> *Oremus et pro miserimis Africae Centralis populis Aethiopum, ut Deus omnipotens tandem aliquando auferat maledictionem Chami a cordibus eorum, detque illis benedictionem, unice in Jesu Christo, Det et Domino nostro consequendam.* <http://www.blacklds.org/1873-catholic-prayer-for-descendants-of-cham>. See also <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/religion/What-Is-the-Bible-s-View-Are-Blacks-Cursed-by-God-123211>. Retrieved on 18/10/2017.

<sup>8</sup> F.D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 70.

religious life on an equal footing as anyone else. It is not that this did not happen entirely, but it was rare and, when it occurred, was often circumscribed by stringent, discouraging conditions.

### ***Mission as Civilization***

Closely associated with the theology of mission as salvation of the heathens was the perception of mission as civilization, the civilizing mission or the “White Man’s Burden” of R. Kipling’s hymn to U.S. imperialism. This approach to mission touched more directly than the former the patterns of thought, values, and behavior – or, in a word, the culture or cultures – of the African peoples. By this time Europe had conceded that Africans also did have “cultures,” but they were invariably characterized as “primitive,” “savage,” “barbaric,” and “pagan.” Like the colonial agenda, the missionary objective was generally to abolish them, replace them with European values, and thereby “civilize” the people. This was the “white man’s burden” that both colonial civil and missionary church authorities thought they had to carry.

The missionary objective was not to save the Africans *through or within* their cultures (as was the exceptional vision of founders of Missionary Institutes like Daniel Comboni of the Comboni Missionaries, Francis Libermann of the Holy Ghost Fathers, and a few others). On the contrary, the strategy was, whenever possible, to save Africans *without or outside* of them. This was the *transplantation* method of mission. Unconsciously, missionaries then identified Western civilization and its particular interpretation of the gospel with the gospel of Christ itself, tolerating no alternative interpretation from the experience of Africa.

For the transplantation approach, faith in Christ had to be expressed and lived in Africa exactly as in Europe. It was a take-it-or-leave-it-one-package deal, complete with such concrete, environmentally and culturally conditioned liturgical signs and symbols like bread and wine, snow, and so on. The answer was an a priori “no” to any attempt to understand Christian dogmas and ethical practices through African spiritual and religious experience. Inculturation would have been then an unforgivable sin.



The dispensaries and schools that missionaries established everywhere they went were intended for this purpose. They were good things for the wrong reasons. No wonder then that the catechetical process in many places in Africa was generally described in terms of "reading," equated with civilization. Reading underlined the importance of the written word over orality. The power that the spoken "word" held in the African oral tradition was thereby almost totally dismissed.

Consequently, when African members joined Religious Institutes, few, if any, Religious Communities thought of modifying their patterns of life to accommodate the deep-seated African psycho-social and cultural significance of the spoken word, including the associated values of personal presence, hospitality, general conviviality, a sense of social egalitarianism, and respect for elders and ancestors in the day-to-day life of their communities. One could even add that in some Congregations, similarly treated were African foods and the manner of dress. Because most of these were again transplanted from Europe, it is not difficult to imagine that many African members of Religious Communities must have silently suffered a constant sense of frustration, distress, and resentment.

However, to harbor any of these feelings risks several dangers, the most serious of which is alienation of the individual from him/herself. If a person joins religious life for reasons other than full knowledge of, or commitment to, the charism espoused by the Institute in question, it quite often leads to persistent inner distress and unhappy, belligerent behavior. Such an individual harbors constant nagging feelings of inferiority which make him/her despondent and resentful. But as St. Augustine warned, "Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies."<sup>9</sup>

### ***Mission as Dialogue***

The Second Vatican Council, however, would profoundly begin to change the previous views of mission in Africa and throughout the world on both the theoretical-theological and the practical-pastoral levels. The conciliar documents *Ad Gentes* (on

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<sup>9</sup> <http://flathillfaith.com/2012/09/augustine-on-resentment/>. Retrieved on 18/10/2017.

the missionary activity of the church), *Nostra Aetate* (on the church's relationship to non-Christian religions), and *Dignitatis Humanae* (on religious freedom) were key to this revolution.

In *Ad Gentes* (no. 13) the council reverses what would have been standard practice in the previous models of mission, such as "forcing anyone to embrace the faith or alluring or enticing people by unworthy techniques." Since it was previously believed that non-Christian cultures did not have any ray of divine truth, it seemed only right that they be brought to it by any means necessary in obedience to Christ's mandate. On the contrary, *Dignitatis Humanae* (no. 10) likewise turns this assumption completely on its head, stating bluntly that "in matters religious every manner of coercion ... should be excluded," whether physical or psychological. The document establishes conscience and free will as the sole principles in religious conversion.

With regard to culture, *Ad Gentes* (no. 22) was equally radical and revolutionary. It urges local churches "to borrow" anything from "the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences" that can enhance the understanding of God and the message of Christ. By doing so, the document suggests, or rather unequivocally affirms that

... it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life (AG, no. 22).

In the same vein, *Nostra Aetate* (no. 2) asserts that "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in ... [other] religions" but that she "looks with sincere respect" upon them and their God-oriented practices. Although in some circles of the church this still sounds improbable, it has been endorsed in no uncertain terms by the two Vatican synods on Africa (or African synods), in the apostolic exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* by Pope John Paul II (1994) and *Africae Munus* by Pope Benedict XVI (2011).

Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa* pleads for Christian dialogue with African Religion, one that avoids any kind of disrespect or any negative attitudes. As the Pope puts it: "The adherents of African traditional religion should ... be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided." The Pope advises that "For this purpose, suitable courses in African traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious."<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI describes African Religion as the "cultural and spiritual soil from which most Christian converts spring and with which they continue to have daily contact." His suggestion? "It is worth singling out knowledgeable individual converts, who could provide the Church with guidance in gaining a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the traditions, the culture, and the traditional religions. This would make it easier to identify points of real divergence [as well as those of actual convergence]."<sup>11</sup>

### **New Models of Mission**

From the perspective of Vatican II and that of the African synods, new models of mission inevitably follow. Their main characteristics include a commitment to *presence to and sincere and respectful conversation with the other; collaboration in social ministry; and healing of persons through mercy and compassion*. The major components or orientations of these new models of mission involve two movements or motifs relevant to the circumstances of the contemporary African church: namely, Inculturation and Liberation.

As more and more Africans become members of international Religious Institutes, a serious question confronts them: How have or can the charism of a given Institute be interpreted in the social, economic, and political context of Africa? Concretely, what specific areas of social life and spirituality need to be cultivated, changed, or complemented, taking into account the mix of persons and cultures constituting membership of the particular Congregation or Society? These and similar questions arise because, as Pope John Paul II explained, "The rapid and

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 92.

profound transformations which characterize today's world, especially in the southern hemisphere, are having a powerful effect on the overall missionary picture."<sup>12</sup> One of these deep transformations, I suggest, is the revival of cultural traditions and religious values that were once summarily despised and dismissed in Africa.

Unlike only a few decades ago when the Religious Institutes and the church as a whole operated theologically and pastorally on a mainly Western cultural model, today more and more Africans want to be proud of their cultures and often harbor feelings of resentment or even anger when these are dismissed or denigrated. Many of the youth from which Religious Institutes get their new members form part of this group of people. It seems that lack of serious attention to these feelings, or refusal to consider cultural variables either in vocations promotion or in the way life is lived in priestly and religious communities, is likely to harm individuals emotionally. It may also cause unnecessary tension, and may in the long run seriously destabilize the cohesion of, and harmony in a Religious Community.

While certainly not wanting to water down in any way the values a particular Institute stands for, contextualization or inculturation of religious life in Africa is necessary to free African priests and religious psychologically and emotionally from these debilities. The time has come to share the riches of African culture to enhance the horizons of any Religious Institute with a considerable number of African members. Of course, unity is always of the essence of both the church as a whole and Religious Communities in particular. Yet care must always be taken not to interpret unity too narrowly as uniformity. Uniformity "in the long run" frustrates the psychological and spiritual growth of both the individual and the community. The principle articulated so many centuries ago (some claim by St. Augustine of Hippo) is still valid: "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity" (*In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*).

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<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 37,

## Vocations and Culture

In intercultural religious living, the role of culture cannot be emphasized enough. We have so far spoken about culture and taken its meaning and implications almost for granted. A more careful word is now in order to explain the notion and its implications.

Culture is not an abstract reality detached from people. Culture is intimately connected with individuals and societies and their environment. It is hardly possible to conceive of a person without culture. This is what Vatican II affirms. According to the council, “‘culture’ stands for everything by which human beings refine and develop their various capacities of mind and body.” It is only through culture, the council says, that “the human person ... [can] reach true and authentic humanity” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 53). Pope Francis has recently elaborated on this understanding of the council on culture:

The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture. The concept of culture is valuable for grasping the various expressions of the Christian life present in God’s people. It has to do with the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a people’s life. Each people in the course of its history develops its culture with legitimate autonomy. This is due to the fact that the human person, “by nature stands completely in need of life in society” and always exists in reference to society, finding there a concrete way of relating to reality. The human person is always situated in a culture: “nature and culture are intimately linked”. Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.<sup>13</sup>

In 1982 at its conference in Mexico, UNESCO<sup>14</sup> asserted similarly

- that in its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a

<sup>13</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 115.

<sup>14</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs;

- that it is culture that gives man [sic] the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgment and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings, and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.<sup>15</sup>

Konrad Raiser, the onetime Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC) explained that culture "is the second 'nature' of human beings in their social relationships" inasmuch as it "refers to the delicate fabric of habits, symbols ...rules of behavior [and] moral values" by which life is ordered.<sup>16</sup>

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (1978) also described culture comprehensively as "an integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc.) and of institutions which express those beliefs, values, and customs ... which bind a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity."<sup>17</sup>

If this is what culture is and means, and if the relationship between individuals and their cultures is so fundamental to self-realization and identity as a person, then it is clearly perilous to bypass, ignore, or ridicule any culture in the process of living our Christian vocation. We can worship God in truth only as cultural beings. We can live in harmony with others in the community also only as such. Are not these the two pillars of religious life?

Thus, the evaluation of and decisions about the suitability or otherwise of a candidate to the priesthood and religious life must be taken within the cultural context This should be the case whether the assessment concerns intellectual

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.culturalrights.net/en/documentos.php?c=18&p=190>. Retrieved on 20/10/2017.

<sup>16</sup> See M.P. Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 151-154.

<sup>17</sup> Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 152.

capacity, emotional stability, honesty, respect, sociability, sexual maturity, and so on. Unfortunately, very little serious study has been done in Africa by behavior sciences to establish the cultural idiosyncrasies of the African. In general, what we use to make these important decisions up to now consist of Western behavioral criteria which African candidates to religious life are coerced and consequently strive to imitate, often at great emotional cost.

### **Some Practical Issues**

There are two or three issues that may face the Vocations Promoter in Africa. One relates to those prospective candidates to the priesthood and religious life who may be barred *a priori* on account of Roman canonical "irregularities" about circumstances beyond their control.

The practice at one time in some parts of Africa was not to accept offspring from polygamous families to religious life or the priesthood, however interested or qualified the individual might be. The parents' marital situation seemed to somehow affect negatively the aptitude of the children and exclude them from religious life. The practice was apparently based on the assumption that the parents' "irregular marriage" would set a "bad example" and similarly affect the children even when the latter intended to choose a different style of life altogether, namely, consecrated life in the church.

With time, however, this kind of supposition of "guilt by association" was questioned and the barriers were generally transcended. Similar examples of the same experience are found in the Old Testament. The prophets Jeremiah (31:29-30) and Ezekiel (18:2) do not approve of the proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Instead, they insist that "whoever eats sour grapes, their own teeth will be set on edge." This was also the position of Jesus himself, who affirmed, on an even loftier level, that the condition of the man born blind (Jn. 9:3) could be an occasion to demonstrate what God can do for humanity.

A new challenging situation today related to that of the canonical irregularity of polygamy concerns the offspring of single-parent homes, especially single

mothers, but also, increasingly, single fathers. May these be baptized as babies? In different dioceses there are different pastoral practices about it: some admit them to baptism unconditionally while others attach conditions to it, such as that only the first child may be baptized. Still, others do not baptize them at all, waiting until they are adults to decide for themselves. But more specifically for our topic, if an adult young man, child of a single mother or father, expresses the desire to join religious life, what should be done?

It would seem that if society has mostly moved beyond the discriminating position against children born of polygamous unions, the church ought to show the lead in the case of children of single parents. To exclude *de jure* or *de facto* these children from the religious vocation simply on account of the circumstances of their birth, circumstances in which they themselves played no role whatsoever, seems unjust. In consultation with the Jesuit historian of Christianity, Fr. Festo Mkenda, he argued:

What exactly is the reason behind this reluctance? I would probably name it by suggesting that it is an unfounded fear that, because of their being brought up by a single parent, such children automatically and of necessity lack something in their moral and psychological aptitude. This fear is unfounded because (at least as far as I know) there has never been a comprehensive study statistically proving this view, although it seems to be generally assumed by/in the church. Moreover, this view undermines the formative work of God himself and his ability to transcend human limitations (to write straight on crooked lines, as it is often said). Finally, this view fails to take into account the African broad circle of relationships (the extended family), where a son or daughter of my sister could find a father figure all over the place, including from among maternal uncles. To me, fatherhood (or motherhood, for that matter), is a far more cultural than biological reality.<sup>18</sup>

Mkenda continued to suggest that accepting these candidates would even be of service to theology and the church. As he put it:

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<sup>18</sup> Remarks of Fr. Festo Mkenda, S.J. on May 21, 2016.



I would also mention that, getting children from single parent homes into the priesthood and religious life might be the best way to ensure that experiential knowledge about such homes can inform religious life, spirituality and, more generally, theology. In that way, a more agreeable understanding of single parent families will emerge within the church and a better approach to their pastoral care developed. Single parent homes are a reality that the church can no longer wish away, and the sooner we prepare ourselves to live with it the better for the future of the church.<sup>19</sup>

Here, let us offer an important caution concerning the motivation of vocations promotion on the part of some individuals and Religious Institutes. There is worldwide awareness now about the crime of human trafficking. It serves no purpose to hide the fact that the economic poverty of Africa makes prospects of living and working in the West very attractive indeed for many a young African person. That many Africans risk and lose their lives to get there in search of greener pastures is well-known. Religious Institutes must be extremely careful in vocation promotion to avoid giving this impression of remotely using people for reasons different from pure dedication to serving God. Anything akin to human trafficking must be shunned however innocuous it may seem on the surface.

Finally, in stressing the importance of culture in human and religious life the fact cannot be overlooked that there also are some negative dimensions of culture whose effect is to diminish rather than enhance the humanity (*Ubuntu*) of the human person in Africa. One such element is the reality of tribalism or negative ethnicity. Because religious men and women and priests are not immune to this vice, they need to confront it directly in the candidates to the priesthood and members of Religious Institutes. Just like the disease of racism, even unwitting tribalism can be transposed into the life and functioning of Religious Communities making them dysfunctional. Liberation from racism and negative ethnicity formed part of the vision of Vatican II and the two African synods. The effort should continue.

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<sup>19</sup> Mkenda on May 21, 2016.

In conclusion, what qualities, then, should we be looking for in African young people wishing to lead a religious life? There are some constants that should not be compromised for the religious vocation in favour of transcultural living. Briefly, these include the ability to integrate faith and life based on the African conviction of the sacredness of all creation; the ability to bond with others on a wide scale, something that should be instilled in the process of formation as a "rite of passage"; and openness to ongoing dialogue with tradition, based on the African value of respect for elders on the one hand, and change, sensitive to changing times on the other.

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**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**  
**RELATIONS PARENTS ET ENFANTS: PICTOGRAPHIES WOYOS ET**  
**SI 7, 23-25. 27-28<sup>1</sup>**

*Paulin Poucouta*

*«Si tu as perdu ton chemin, il ne faut pas courir en avant,  
mais revenir jusqu'au point que tu reconnais» (Dicton africain).*

**Abstract**

*Many African thinkers, among others Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Alioune Diop, Engelbert Mveng, have reflected on the relationship between African wisdom and Western epistemology in order to contextualize biblical hermeneutics. Professor Paulin Sebastien Poucouta in this article discusses the theological and biblical understanding that arises from Woyos drawings, which are neither of the order of writing nor orality. The focus of the drawings is on the parent-child relationships, the education of their offspring by the parents and the obedience of children to their parents. Professor Poucouta uses the book of Sirach, particularly 7: 23-25. 27-28 as a parallel to note the greatness of the new family that Jesus inaugurates and which differs from the old African, Jewish or Greek family structures which were marked by authoritarianism and inequalities.*

**Introduction**

En 1990, l'historien et homme politique burkinabè, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, s'interrogeait sur le développement de l'Afrique. Pour lui, le drame du continent, c'est d'avoir tourné le dos aux valeurs et aux savoirs traditionnels. Ki-Zerbo posait ainsi la délicate question de la rencontre des sagesses, de la production des savoirs, aussi

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<sup>1</sup> DOI – <https://doi.org/10.36592/9786581110871-13>

bien dans le cadre interdisciplinaire qu'interculturel où se tissent les liens entre « l'ancien et le nouveau »<sup>2</sup>.

Dans le domaine des sciences théologiques, dès la renaissance de la théologie négro-africaine contemporaine en 1956, avec le livre initiateur, *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent*, s'est posée la question de la rencontre entre sagesse africaine et sagesse hébraïque, qui se concrétise dans des lectures de la Bible en contexte africain<sup>3</sup>. Le congrès de Jérusalem initié par le jésuite camerounais Engelbert Mveng ira dans le même sens<sup>4</sup>. Il avait pour thème: « L'Afrique noire et la Bible ». Le congrès de Jérusalem se prolongera en terres africaines par des Journées Bibliques Africaines et la naissance de l'Association Panafricaine des Exégètes Catholiques<sup>5</sup>.

Ce souci de contextualisation marquera de nombreuses études bibliques en Afrique. Il s'agit de lectures rigoureuses et critiques, mais qui donnent la priorité à la perspective existentielle et éthique en contexte africain. Ces lectures plurielles s'expriment à travers divers langages et diverses méthodes<sup>6</sup>. Nous nous proposons ici d'ouvrir la problématique à la fécondité théologique et biblique que suscitent des savoirs endogènes, telles que les pictographies woyos. Celles-ci, en effet, peuvent être le soubassement méthodologique et herméneutique de lectures africaines de la Bible.

Notre proposition comprendra deux moments. D'abord, un regard sur les savoirs endogènes que constituent les pictographies, en l'occurrence ceux concernant les rapports parents-enfants, et leur éventuelle pertinence pour aujourd'hui. Ensuite, une proposition de lecture de la thématique à la lumière du livre du Siracide (Si 7, 23-25. 27-28) et de son actualisation chrétienne. Notre conclusion convoquera rapidement le cardinal Albert Joseph Malula qui faisait de l'excellence et de l'émergence la synthèse des exigences des sagesse africaine et biblique.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Hountondji (dir.), *L'ancien et le Nouveau. La production du savoir dans l'Écriture d'aujourd'hui*, Cotonou, Centre Africain des Hautes Études, 2009, p. 372-373.

<sup>3</sup> Collectif, *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent. Cinquante après...*, Paris, Karthala / Présence Africaine, 2006<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Mveng / R. J. Z. Werblowsky (éd.), *Black Africa and the Bible. L'Afrique Noire et la Bible*, Yaoundé, PUCAC, 2013<sup>2</sup>. Voir particulièrement l'article d'Isidore de Souza, « Bible et Culture Africaine », p. 86ss.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Association Panafricaine des Exégètes Catholiques, *Sagesse humaine et sagesse divine dans la Bible, Actes du douzième congrès*, Nairobi, Jean Bosco Matand Bulembat (éd.), 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. Poucouta, *Quand la Parole de Dieu visite l'Afrique. Lecture plurielle de la Parole de Dieu*, Paris, Karthala, 2011. En anglais, *God's word in Africa*, Nairobi, Éditions Paulines, 2015.

## La sagesse africaine en pictographies

En Afrique, les tiraillements entre savoirs endogènes et exogènes se résument assez souvent dans la tension entre oralité et écriture:

« (...) si les savoirs traditionnels sont générés par des cultures orales, alors que les savoirs modernes relèvent de cultures et de pratiques scripturaires, il est à prévoir qu'ils présenteront des traits spécifiques dans leur production, leur agencement et les modalités de leur transmission »<sup>7</sup>.

Mais entre oralité et écriture, les pictographies ne peuvent-elles pas constituer des voies médianes, une sorte d'oralitude, de parole écrite.

## De l'oralité à l'oralitude

Pour évoquer l'avenir de l'Afrique, Joseph Ki-Zerbo prend l'image de l'arbre: « (...) enraciné, il passe dans les profondeurs de la culture sous-jacente, mais il est ouvert vers des échanges multiformes, il n'est pas emmuré et scellé »<sup>8</sup>. Le développement et la culture reposent sur des ressources intellectuelles, sociales, économiques et scientifiques que Paulin Hountondji appelle « savoirs endogènes»:

« On appellera savoir endogène une configuration culturelle donnée, une connaissance vécue par la société comme partie intégrante de son héritage, par opposition aux savoirs exogènes qui sont encore perçus, à ce stade au moins, comme des éléments d'un autre système de valeurs »<sup>9</sup>.

Néanmoins, cette sagesse endogène, base matricielle des données culturelles et sociales africaines propres, se transforme et se métamorphose au contact des valeurs extérieures qui l'enrichissent. Ils peuvent mieux se codifier dans leur rapport dialectique à la modernité scientifique. Ils constituent une expérience universelle et

<sup>7</sup> Mamoussé Diagne, « Logique de l'écrit, logique de l'oral ; conflit au cœur de l'archive », in P. Hountondji (dir.), *L'ancien et le Nouveau. La production du savoir dans l'Écriture d'aujourd'hui*, p. 354.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ki-Zerbo, *A quand l'Afrique ? Entretien avec René Holenstein*. Paris, Éditions de l'Aube, 2003, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> P. Hountondji (dir.), *Les savoirs endogènes, pistes pour une recherche*, Paris, Karthala, 1994, p. 15.

exigent de nouveaux outils intellectuels et conceptuels au plan méthodologique, pour la compréhension de ces réalités qui évoluent dans le sillage aussi bien de l'écriture que de l'oralité. Ils peuvent être facteur d'émancipation, parce que vectrice de valeurs et de normes morales, sociales, intellectuelles<sup>10</sup>.

En d'autres termes, si les littératures traditionnelles d'Afrique s'inscrivent toutes dans une civilisation de l'oralité, ceci n'implique ni ignorance ni exclusion de l'écriture. Néanmoins, même lorsqu'elle laisse des traces écrites, la littérature traditionnelle n'est pas destinée à être consommée à la lecture, mais à être récitée, en présence directe d'un auditoire, afin d'assurer la cohésion du groupe et la conscience communautaire.

Pourtant, l'oralité reste fragile sans le support de l'écriture. N'écrit-on pas les contes, les proverbes? On ne peut nier l'importance et la force de l'écriture, comme support de la Parole. D'ailleurs, la société traditionnelle elle-même est soumise à la corrosion de l'écriture, dans la dynamique de l'oralité.

### **Les pictographieswoyos**

Ainsi, si l'oralité porte la sagesse africaine, celle-ci peut avoir comme supports diverses écritures, égyptiennes et bamoun, ou encore les pictographies.

*Les hiéroglyphes égyptiens* de la vallée du Nil constituent l'écriture de l'Afrique ancienne la plus connue. Idéographique ou analytique elle a évolué en éléments phonétiques. Elle utilise à la fois des signes idéographiques (idéogrammes) et phonétiques (phonogrammes). L'écriture *bamoun*, de l'Ouest Cameroun, faite de signes, s'est, elle aussi, transformée en forme phonétique sous l'influence de la colonisation.

La pictographie, elle, utilise des dessins figuratifs pour communiquer des messages. De nombreux peuples d'Afrique Noire ont utilisé ou utilisent encore des pictogrammes. Ainsi, les Ashanti du Ghana et du Togo, les Ewéet les Fon du Togo et du Bénin, de même que les bawoyos des anciens royaumes de Ngoyo-Loango et Kakongo, comprenant aujourd'hui le sud de la République Démocratique du Congo,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Ki-Zerbo, *Repère pour l'Afrique*, Dakar, Panafrika/Silex/ Nouvelles du Sud, 2007.

l'enclave du Cabinda, le sud du Congo Brazzaville (plus précisément la région de Pointe-Noire et de Loango), ainsi que le sud du Gabon (région de Mayumba).

Nous nous intéressons ici aux pictographies woyos que nous connaissons le mieux. Autant art que science, cette écriture sans alphabet permet de représenter des valeurs spirituelles et éthiques et de les véhiculer dans le concret de la nature et dans le quotidien de l'existence.

Cette écriture aurait été initiée par la reine *Mwe-Ngoyo*, regroupant autour d'elle des artisans graphistes, maîtrisant les signes graphiques, bons connaisseurs de la tradition et également excellents observateurs de la société. Ils constituent un véritable espace initiatique et herméneutique.

Les pictogrammes sont des symboles proverbiaux gravés sur des couvercles de bois ou d'argile que l'on pose sur des récipients de cuisine. Au lieu de dire ou de déclamer les proverbes, on les gravait sur ces couvercles qu'on transmettait aux intéressés. À tel point que si l'on ignore les proverbes, les pictogrammes restent incompréhensibles. Certes, leur interprétation n'exige ni protocole ni cérémonie spéciales, mais elle est exigeante<sup>11</sup>.

### **Rapports parents-enfants en pictographies**

En raison de l'actualité ecclésiale du thème de la famille et de la difficulté des rapports générationnels, nous proposons de scruter deux pictographies qui évoquent les relations parents-enfants, en particulier.

Le premier devoir des géniteurs c'est de transmettre la sagesse traditionnelle, par l'éducation des enfants. En effet, ceux-ci doivent tout apprendre des aînés et respecter scrupuleusement les règles de la société qu'il est appelé à transmettre à son tour. Ici, on insiste sur l'éducation des filles. En effet, il n'existe plus à proprement parler de rite de passage pour les garçons woyos. Par contre, l'obligation d'une initiation pour la jeune fille reste relativement stricte, pour la préparer à assumer ses responsabilités de mère. Elle doit passer par un temps de réclusion, aujourd'hui de durée symbolique. Elle y est initiée aux règles fondamentales de l'organisation

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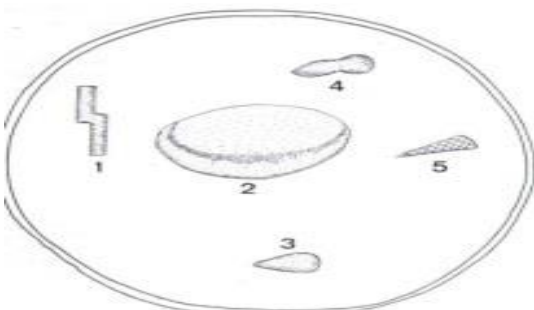
<sup>11</sup> Cf. Cl. Faïk-Nzuji, *La puissance du sacré. L'homme, la nature et l'art en Afrique noire*, Bruxelles, La Renaissance du livre, 1993, p. 132.

matrilinéaire, aux techniques culinaires, à la vie sexuelle, aux obligations sociales, à certaines particularités culturelles, telles que l'art de communiquer par des symboles graphiques.

Mais si les parents sont tenus de se préoccuper de l'éducation de leur progéniture, à leur tour, les enfants se doivent d'honorer leurs parents par leur obéissance. Ce qu'exprime un couvercle qui porte un coq ou une perdrix. Voici le proverbe qui y correspond: « Le coq est ton ennemi ; la perdrix, également ton ennemie. Qui te réveillera de ton sommeil? »



Dans nos villages, la fin de la nuit est annoncée par les chants du coq et de la perdrix. Si l'on se brouille avec eux, qui vous tirera du sommeil ? La perdrix et la poule symbolisent les sages et les parents. Si on n'écoute pas leurs conseils, qui nous réveillera de notre ignorance et nous indiquera le droit chemin de la vie ?<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Cf. F. S. Sumbo, *641 couvercles à proverbes du Cabinda (Mafuku-ma-nzungu)*, Merignac, Les Éditions du CENAREST, 2009, p. 173.180.



De plus, les enfants sont appelés à s'occuper de leurs parents. Pour le dire, on a gravé sur un couvercle une arachide et des instruments aratoires:

Le couvercle renvoie au proverbe suivant: « On abandonne l'arachide abandonnée dans le champ; mais une fois poussée, elle se multiplie en grande quantité dans la plantation où elle a été récoltée »<sup>13</sup>.

Ce qui signifie que l'arachide abandonnée par mégarde dans un champ n'est pas perdue. Elle finit par se reproduire. Elle symbolise les parents. Si grands que soient leur pouvoir, leur richesse et leur savoir, les enfants ne doivent jamais ni les mépriser ni les sous-estimer ni les négliger.

### **Pictographies et lecture de la Parole de Dieu**

Mais dans une Afrique où les sages « ont été dépossédés »<sup>14</sup>, pour être réellement opérationnels, les pictogrammes, comme support de la pensée exigent un travail de créativité qui tienne compte de l'écriture phonétique et de l'environnement multiculturel actuel. Les pictographies ne peuvent ignorer les Nouveaux Réseaux Sociaux. En effet, les savoirs endogènes, réappropriés de manière critique, créatrice et pragmatique, doivent s'intégrer dans les canaux interculturels et pluriels de production du savoir, en l'occurrence du savoir théologique et biblique. Peut-être est-ce possible dans la dynamique de lectures africaines de la Bible?

De fait, la Parole de Dieu est un lieu pluriel où s'invitent des hommes et des femmes, de différentes disciplines. Ce qui amène à un dialogue avec la philosophie, les sciences socio-anthropologiques, les diverses disciplines du langage et de l'histoire. De plus, les symboles sont souvent convoqués dans les lectures contextuelles de la Bible. Les Africains ne sont-ils pas à l'aise dans ce langage fait d'images, de proverbes, de mythes, de poésie?

C'est en ce sens qu'il nous semble possible de solliciter les pictographies. En effet, les écritures anciennes nous rappellent l'importance de la peinture, de la

<sup>13</sup> Cf. F. S. Sumbo, *641 couvercles à proverbes du Cabinda (Mafuku-ma-nzungu)*, p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas L.V. / Luneau R., *Les sages dépossédés*, Paris, R. Laffont, 1977.

sculpture et de l'image dans la transmission de la Parole de Dieu. Suggestives, elles provoquent à l'utilisation des moyens de communication les plus divers, y compris les nouvelles techniques de communication qui sollicitent des supports imagés.

Ainsi, les réseaux sociaux modernes peuvent être d'excellents adjuvants des pictographies. D'ailleurs, soumis à la mutation, le support parémiologique, comme tout autre support, reste ouvert à ces multiples herméneutiques<sup>15</sup>. L'essentiel est de se convertir à l'esprit communicationnel des symboles plastiques que constituent les pictographies pour transmettre aujourd'hui la Parole de Dieu relue à la lumière des savoirs endogènes africains et du quotidien.

Le synode sur la Parole de Dieu et la deuxième assemblée spéciale pour l'Afrique ont donné de l'importance aux Nouvelles Techniques de Communication à évangéliser et comme moyens de transmettre l'Évangile. Mais déjà, le premier synode africain sur la mission de l'Église d'Afrique pour le 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle, avait consacré un de cinq thèmes aux moyens de communication. Dans la perspective de l'inculturation, les Pères synodaux avaient demandé avec insistance de ne pas sous-estimer les formes traditionnelles de la communication mais au contraire de les investir:

Les formes traditionnelles de communication sociale ne doivent jamais être sous-estimées. Elles sont encore très utiles et efficaces dans de nombreux *milieux* africains. En outre, elles sont « moins coûteuses et plus accessibles ». Elles comprennent les chants et la musique, les mimes et le théâtre, les proverbes et les contes. En tant que véhicules de la sagesse et de l'esprit populaires, elles constituent une source précieuse de thèmes et d'inspiration pour les moyens modernes » (Ecclesia in Africa, 123).

## II. Les pictographies à la lumière de Si 7, 23-25. 27-28

Nombreux sont les textes bibliques qui abordent la question des rapports parents - enfants, particulièrement les livres sapientiaux. Néanmoins, nous avons choisi de nous plonger dans le chapitre 7 du Siracide, dont les recommandations ne sont pas sans rappeler celles que portent les pictographies. Une lecture parémiologique de Si 7, 23-25.27-28 nous permettra quelque peu de concrétiser nos

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<sup>15</sup> Cl. Faïk –Nzuzi, *La puissance du sacré. L'homme, la nature et l'art en Afrique noire*, p. 120.

intuitions.

## 1 Si 7: Un ensemble de proverbes

Écrit en hébreu, le livre de Ben Sira le sage a été traduit en grec par le petit-fils de l'auteur. Rédigé entre 190 et 180 av. J.C., il fait partie des écrits deutérocanoniques de l'Ancien Testament. Le livre n'est pas toujours aisé à décrypter. Certes, depuis une vingtaine d'années, les études textuelles, littéraires et théologiques sur l'œuvre ont connu un véritable regain d'intérêt. Mais ces travaux n'ont pas toujours permis d'en éclairer correctement l'exégèse et l'herméneutique.

Collection de proverbes et d'interdictions, des commentateurs y épinglent une première section comportant des conseils divers, 7, 1-21<sup>16</sup>. Pour d'autres, par contre, cette section s'arrête au verset 17. J.G. Snaith y voit une série de conseils de morale sur la vie sociale<sup>17</sup>. J. Marböck, lui, est plutôt sensible à la dimension religieuse et théologique de la sagesse. Mais est-il possible de séparer les deux perspectives, même si elles sont distinctes?

La seconde partie, plus précise, nous découvre les particularités stylistiques de l'auteur. En effet, contrairement au livre des Proverbes, Ben Sira a tendance à regrouper les sentences autour d'un thème. En Si 7, ces regroupements interviennent surtout à partir du verset 18, autour de personnages que l'auteur fait défiler tour à tour: l'ami et le frère (v. 18), l'épouse (v. 19), l'esclave (v. 20-21), les troupeaux (22), les enfants (garçons et filles) (v. 23-25), l'épouse (v. 26), les parents (27-28), Dieu et les prêtres (29-31), les pauvres et les éprouvés (32-35).

Le texte se conclut au v. 36 par un proverbe d'allure générale. Faisant inclusion aux trois premiers versets du chapitre, reprenant le milieu du texte (v. 16), ce verset montre que les chemins de la sagesse consistent à éviter le mal et le péché en toutes circonstances. De plus, par leur généralité, l'entrée de la première section (7, 1-3) et la fin de la seconde (7, 36) qui se répondent servent l'une d'introduction et l'autre de conclusion à l'ensemble du chapitre.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H. Duesberg / P. Auvray (traducteurs), « L'Ecclésiastique », *La sainte Bible*, Paris, Cerf, 1953, p. 46-50.

<sup>17</sup> J.G. Snaith (commentateur), *Ecclesiasticus or the wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1974, p. 41-44.

## La structure de Si 7

En tenant compte du genre littéraire, des éléments stylistiques et grammaticaux, ainsi que de la division bipartite ci-dessus évoquée, nous reprenons en gros l'architecture de Si 7 proposée par Johannes Marböck<sup>18</sup>. Elle peut se schématiser comme suit:

0. Introduction: fuir la méchanceté et l'injustice (7, 1-3)

1. Dimension religieuse et théologique de la sagesse (7, 4-17)

- a) fuir l'ambition et l'intrigue (4-7)
- b) fuir le péché et le manque de foi (8-11)
- c) fuir le mensonge et le verbiage (12-14)
- d) ne pas fuir le travail de la terre (15)
- e) nouvel appel à l'humilité (16-17)

2. Exigences sociales de la sagesse (7, 18-35)

- a) l'ami et le frère (18),
- b) l'épouse (19),
- c) l'esclave (20-21),
- d) les troupeaux (22),
- e) les enfants (garçons et filles) (23-25),
- f) l'épouse (26)
- g) les parents (27-28),
- h) Dieu et les prêtres (29-31),
- i) les pauvres et les éprouvés (32-35)

Conclusion: Fuir le mal en tout (36).

Cette architecture donne les deux dimensions du message du texte: religieuse (1-17) et sociale (18-36). Nous porterons notre attention sur les sections évoquant les rapports parents et enfants, à savoir 7, 23-25 (devoirs des parents) et 7, 27-28 (devoirs des enfants).

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<sup>18</sup> J. Marböck (traduction et commentaire), *Jesus Sirach 1-23*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien, Herder, 2010, p. 124-134.

## Les devoirs des parents (Si 7, 23-25)

### *Éduquer les enfants (Si 7, 22-23)*

Pour Ben Sira, reprenant la tradition juive, les parents, particulièrement le *pater-familias*, ont la lourde responsabilité d'éduquer leur descendance, sévèrement et durement. Ben Sira montre le cadre familial qui doit être celui de l'éducation de tout enfant, celui où la sagesse juive se perpétue de génération en génération<sup>19</sup>.

Le thème de l'éducation n'est pas propre au Siracide. Il se retrouve dans l'ensemble de la littérature sapientielle. Ainsi, le livre des Proverbes, toujours concret, insiste sur l'importance des châtiments corporels pour faire plier les enfants:

« Baguette et réprimande procurent la sagesse, le jeune homme laissé à lui-même est la honte de sa mère. Quand se multiplient les méchants, le forfait se multiplie, mais les justes seront témoins de leur chute. Corrige ton fils, il te laissera en repos et fera les délices de ton âme » (Pr 29, 15-17).

Ben Sira épouse donc les principes d'éducation traditionnelle: « As-tu des enfants? Fais-leur éducation et dès l'enfance fais-leur plier l'échine » (Si 7, 23). Faire fléchir la nuque et courber l'échine sont des signes d'absolue soumission, de vassalité. Ce sont des gestes que l'on imposait à ceux qui avaient été conquis au terme d'une guerre. L'auteur utilise un véritable langage martial. Autrement dit, l'enfant doit être dressé. Et cela, dès l'enfance, pendant que le caractère est en voie de formation. Plus loin dans le livre, l'auteur donne les raisons d'une telle dureté:

Fais-lui courber l'échine pendant sa jeunesse,  
Meurtris-lui les côtes tant qu'il est enfant,  
de crainte que, révolté, il ne te désobéisse  
et que tu n'en éprouves de la peine.  
Élève ton fils et forme-le bien,  
pour ne pas avoir à endurer son insolence » (Si 30, 12-13).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. G. Schmidt, *Wisdom's Root Revealed. Ben Sira and the Election of Israel*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2009, p. 110-112.

Le texte hébreu et la version syriaque ajoutent en 7, 23, l'invitation à marier le jeune très tôt. Pour de nombreux critiques, cette exhortation est une interpolation maladroite et tardive d'un passage qui aurait sa place en Si 30, 12. C. Mopsik ne partage pas cet avis. Pour lui cette recommandation « figure dans l'ensemble des versions en hébreu et en syriaque, son sens est conforme à l'esprit du temps et il est pertinent dans le contexte de ce chapitre. D'ailleurs, selon la doctrine rabbinique, l'âge recommandé pour le mariage des garçons est de dix-huit ans (cf. *Michnah Avot* 5, 21 ; *Qidouchin* 29b-30a) »<sup>20</sup>.

En somme, même si le texte grec n'aborde pas l'idée de mariage des enfants et parle beaucoup plus de la discipline, l'éducation vise l'insertion dans la société dont le mariage est le moment le plus important.

### ***Éduquer plus sévèrement la fille (24-25)***

Le lien entre l'éducation et le mariage se sent encore plus fortement lorsqu'il s'agit de la fille (7, 24-25). Ben Sira demande de s'occuper de son éducation, de façon particulière. L'expression grecque πρόσεχε τῷ σώματι αὐτῶν est diversement traduite. Mot à mot, elle se rendrait par « veille sur leur corps, le corps des filles ». D'autres traduiraient tout simplement « veille sur elles ». D'autres encore précisent: « préserve la pureté de leur corps », ou « aide-les à rester chastes ». Il s'agit certainement ici de veiller à la virginité pré-nuptiale de la fille, pour l'honneur de la famille. Pour cela, des mesures draconiennes sont prises pour limiter sa liberté. Et c'est là, particulièrement le rôle du père. L'expression grecque μηίλαρώσης πρὸς αὐτὰς τὸ πρόσωπόν σου pourrait se rendre par: « ne leur montre pas un visage riant, hilare ». Ce qui pourrait signifier « il doit se montrer strict et sévère ». En langage africain, on dira « ne lui montre pas tes dents ».

Ce souci d'éduquer sévèrement la fille relève de la coutume de l'époque, pas seulement en Palestine. Pourtant, l'anxiété pour le mariage de sa fille et la sévérité recommandée par Ben Sira semble extrême: pas d'amour ni d'indulgence envers sa fille. Ici se traduit l'angoisse perfectionniste du vieux sage qui se relève tout au long

<sup>20</sup> Cf. C. Mopsik, *La sagesse de Ben Sira*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2003, p. 109-110, note 5.

du livre comme le note J.J Collins<sup>21</sup>.

En effet, l'éducation de la fille cause bien de tourments au père (Si 42, 9-11). Il vaut mieux l'élever dans la crainte que de subir le déshonneur que son comportement malséant pourrait apporter à son père. Le jour du mariage constituera un véritable soulagement pour les parents, surtout pour le père qui arrange les noces de sa fille, sans qu'elle ait un mot à dire. Pourtant, il ne s'agit pas de la marier à n'importe qui, mais à un homme sage. Alors, il aura accompli une grande œuvre qu'il peut fêter somptueusement (Si 7, 24).

Certes, Ben Sira ne parle ici de la mère. Pourtant, elle est autant préoccupée de l'avenir des enfants que le père. Par son exemple et ses conseils, elle prépare la fille à son futur rôle d'épouse et mère, et le garçon à ses devoirs religieux. Mais, elle n'a pas le dernier mot. Même dans l'éducation, on sent la sagesse 'androcentrique de l'auteur que M. Gilbert résume ainsi:

« Dans l'épouse, Ben Sira ne voit jamais la mère ; au jeune homme qu'il conseille, il parlera de tes enfants, de ta fille, alors que nous dirions aujourd'hui plus normalement vos enfants, votre fille ; c'est le mari d'ailleurs qui choisira un époux, sensé bien sûr, pour sa fille » (Si 7, 25)<sup>22</sup>.

### **Les devoirs des enfants (vv. 27-28)**

Si les parents ont des devoirs vis-à-vis des enfants, ceux-ci en ont eux aussi à l'égard de leurs géniteurs, même si les versets 27 et 28 manquent dans le texte hébreu, en raison très probablement d'une erreur de copiste, dont le regard est allé du verset 27 au verset 29, trompé par la formule « de tout ton cœur ».

Ben Sira se réfère ici au décalogue: « tu honoreras ton père et ta mère » (Ex 20, 12 ; Dt 5, 16). En Lv 19, 2 ce commandement suit immédiatement l'invitation à la sainteté. On en mesure donc l'importance dans le judaïsme autant palestinien qu'hellénistique.

<sup>21</sup> J. J., Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, Edinburgh, T. T. Clark, 1998, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> M. Gilbert, « Ben Sira et la femme », in *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, 1976/4, p. 442.

Le verset 27 appelle au respect non seulement du père, mais aussi de la mère. Certes, plus haut, en 3, 1-16 qui traite du respect que le fils doit à ses parents, « on constate que sur 32 stiques, six seulement parlent du respect dû à la mère et celle-ci est toujours nommée après le père »<sup>23</sup>. Néanmoins, Ben Sira accorde la place qui lui revient à la femme, l'appelant avec affection « ta mère ». Alors que pour le père, on ne donne pas les raisons du respect, pour la mère, l'auteur évoque ses souffrances. Le texte latin, plus précis et plus concret, parle des gémissements de la mère. Le respect dû à la mère vient plus précisément de sa maternité.

Le verset suivant (7, 28) évoque conjointement les deux parents sans lesquels on ne serait pas en vie et qui nous ont éduqués. Que peut-on leur offrir en échange de ce qu'ils sont et ont fait pour nous? Les versions latines et syriaque lisent en 7, 28a: « Souviens-toi que sans eux, tu ne serais pas ici ». En 7, 28b, le latin (v.30), change l'interrogation en proposition pratique: « et fais pour eux comme eux-mêmes ont fait pour toi ».

Ainsi, les enfants respectent les parents non uniquement par devoir, mais surtout par gratitude, thème fortement souligné dans le texte. Père et mère ont droit à la même gratitude en raison du don inestimable de la vie qu'ils font à leur enfant<sup>24</sup>. Mieux, l'amour filial à l'endroit des parents enracine dans la tendresse et le pardon de Dieu (Si 3, 3-6.12-14). Cette référence au Seigneur entend souligner que Dieu est le socle sur lequel s'édifient les rapports parents-enfants. La famille est alors un lieu théologique qui repose en Dieu, source de communion et de bonheur aussi bien les parents que les enfants. La maisonnée de Nazareth en sera le paradigme accompli.

### **Conclusion: une sagesse de l'émergence**

Dans une Afrique profondément métamorphosée, ouverte à la mondialité<sup>25</sup>, il n'est pas possible de reproduire certains aspects de l'éducation prônée par la sagesse africaine et par Ben Sira. Il s'agit de conceptions qui restent tributaires des traditions aussi bien orientales qu'africaines. Il convient de les relire à la lumière des

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<sup>23</sup> M. Gilbert, « Ben Sira et la femme », p. 430.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Balla Ibolya, *Ben Sira on family, Gender and Sexuality*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2011, p. 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Grannec Ch., Landron O. et Trigeaud S.H., *Le dialogue interculturel et interreligieux à l'heure de la mondialisation*, Paris, Parole et Silence, 2014.



corrections qu'imposent les sciences humaines et le Nouveau Testament.

C'est cette herméneutique christologique qui doit guider une lecture parémiologique de Si 7. En effet, la famille nouvelle que Jésus inaugure entend se démarquer des structures familiales africaines, juives ou grecques anciennes, marquées par l'autoritarisme et les inégalités. Il fonde une famille dont Dieu est l'unique Père pour tous, même pour le *paterfamilias*. L'amour trinitaire doit brûler et animer toute famille humaine. En insistant sur l'amour des parents pour leurs enfants, garçons et filles, paradigme de la tendresse de Dieu en Jésus-Christ, la sévérité est désormais subordonnée à l'amour.

En raison de l'importance que l'Église accorde à la jeunesse, de nombreux pasteurs scrutent les sagesses africaine et biblique sur l'éducation. Ainsi, animé par sa spiritualité de l'émergence, le cardinal Joseph Malula se préoccupait de donner aux jeunes une formation holistique, faisant d'eux des chrétiens africains pleinement responsables. Il s'inspirait pour cela de l'initiation traditionnelle, éclairée des exigences évangéliques. Dans les forêts initiatiques d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, les préceptes de la sagesse africaine, radicalisés dans le dire et le vivre de Jésus, plongés dans le mystère pascal, deviennent invitation à l'excellence et à l'émergence au cœur de la famille, de l'Église, de l'école et de la société:

« (...) Sachez donc faire votre choix. Un bon choix. Celui des choses qui vous élèvent et vous font émerger avant tout par vos qualités morales, intellectuelles et spirituelles. Choisissez de suivre le chemin de l'honnêteté, de la vérité, de la pureté, de la justice et du service des autres. Vous serez alors de vrais disciples du Christ, qui est notre Chemin, notre Vérité et notre Vie. Choisir ainsi de se mettre à la suite du Christ, c'est refuser la médiocrité, toute médiocrité »<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> L. Saint Moulin (de), *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, 6, Kinshasa, Facultés Catholiques, 1997, p. 161.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE ETHICAL DIMENSION IN THE IDEA OF AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>

*Richard N. Rwiza*

#### **Abstract**

*The central mission of a university remains education, training, and research. One of the main challenges in education is that of training persons to think clearly and act ethically. There is an intimate link between education and ethics. No one interested in integral human development can afford to neglect the link between education and ethics. Education is one of the distinctive indicators of the level of human flourishing. Education contains a formative influence on human flourishing. Life in the university is one of the crucial and pressing issues today. This article intends to clarify what it means to be educated. Moreover, it poses critical remarks on ivory tower conception of the university. Lack of education is costing much. However, to have education without common sense is unethical. This article aims at examining the ethical dimension in the idea of an African university.*

#### **Introduction**

Education tends to fall into crisis when it misses the ethical dimension. Ethics must in the final analysis define the character of education. Ethics and education constitute a unique link that is hard to overlook. They are human phenomena, which reflect on issues affecting persons in a critical manner. Education is a common point of reference in determining human integral development. By promoting higher education, African universities facilitate the realization of a great value for the people of Africa. Education has a formative influence on the mind and character of persons. Education is for life. Our ethical dimension intends to reflect on morally significant values in university life.

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The idea of an African university refers to institutions that are not only built, owned, and situated in Africa, but are of Africa, drawing their inspirations from Africa. An African university ought to be intelligently committed to African philosophy. However, creating an African university does not mean the rejection of all that is foreign, but a fuller realization of the African identity. Such a university must be localized. This contextualization can be promoted through curriculum development. That is, the process by which choices are made and designed in view of learning African experiences. In African universities, such a process requires creativity. The crucial issue is, although many African universities have taken root in Africa, the current reality of these universities, continues to disseminate the traditions, values, and practices of Western civilization. This paper is an ethical discourse. It starts by defining the idea of a university. Then, it discusses the distinctiveness of an African university. The paper points out the role of ethics in managing university crises. Finally, it considers the relevance and urgency of the ethical dimension in an African university.

### **The Idea of a University**

The idea of a university can be conceived in the context of the vision of Cardinal John Henry Newman in setting up the Catholic University of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> It is about the life of a university. The idea of a university addresses some of the crucial issues in the sphere of education and the place of religion in the public square. The challenges of higher education include secularization. That is, a way of university life pursued without reference to religious realities. In a sense, such secularization in high education has taken place where the functions of religious institutions are assumed over by the state. The understanding of university life without the idea of God has in a sense resulted or contributed to the missing dimension of religious ethics.

The idea of a university faces also the challenge of considering higher education merely in utilitarian terms. In this perspective, the value of education is

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<sup>2</sup> J. H. Newman, *The Idea of A University*. The Original edition was published in 1907. The idea of a university was based on the vision of Cardinal John Henry Newman provided in setting up the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854, now University college of Dublin.

measured only in economic terms. According to J. H. Newman, the basic aim of education is to improve the cultural education of people. To have persons who are free and responsible. This is an appeal for 'holistic culture.' It implies "a union of the life of the intellect with the cultivation of the other human faculties and graces."<sup>3</sup> The central issue here is the development of the whole person that is the moral person. There are two constituent principles in the realization of the ethical value in human acts: the intellectual constituent and the volition constituent.<sup>4</sup> The will can decide on something and seek it only if it is first known. Cultivation of the intellect is important. When the intellect has once been properly trained and formed to have a connected view of the grasp of things, it will display its power with more or less effective according to its particular quality and capacity in the individual."<sup>5</sup>

A university is 'a place of teaching universal knowledge.' To fulfill this objective, the Church is necessary, in view of its integrity. As J. H. Newman argues:

When the Church funds a University, she is not cherishing talent, genius, or knowledge, for their own sake, but for the sake of her children, with the view of their spiritual welfare and their religious influence and usefulness, with the object of training them to fulfill their respective posts in life better, and of making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge like economy is global as no people have the monopoly of wisdom, innovation, and the exclusive benefit of the achievements of technology and science. Such a universal dimension points to the need for independence and solidarity. According to the idea of a university, a university by its very nature professes to teach universal knowledge. Theology is a branch of knowledge. It is surely a sphere in universal knowledge.

The challenge faced in the concept of a university is that of missing the concept of education in favour of secondary notions of instruction and training.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Idea of the University*, IX.

<sup>4</sup> K. H. Pescke, *Christian Ethics*, 248.

<sup>5</sup> H. Newman, *The Idea of the University*, XVIII.

<sup>6</sup> H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, XII.

<sup>7</sup> J. McKdernan, "The Idea of a University: an Essay in support of Professor Tom Garvin's Thesis of Grey Philistines Taking over our Universities."

Training is a process that implies the acquisition of skills and the enhancement of performance capacities. Instruction refers to learning facts and new information, the results of retention. Education is a process of induction into the forms and fields of knowledge. In this perspective knowledge for its own sake is a relevant purpose of a scholar in a university.

The mission of the university remains education, training, and research. As regards to services to the community, it is advisable to promote contribution by sustainable development and improvement of the entire society. The purpose of a university is to teach universal knowledge. That is embracing all knowledge with interdisciplinary dialogue, to train a liberal, synthetic and critical inquiry. It is not enough for academicians to teach. They have also to be involved in research and communicate the results of their research. This can be done through publications. Scholarship has a distinctive role in the promotion of academics in universities. As Jane Onsongo states, "Scholarly research is regarded as an essential academic endeavor and one of the major characteristics that distinguish universities from other institutions of learning."<sup>8</sup>

There is a need to find out the reasons for university decline. There is an understanding of the university as a community of scholars searching for and propagating knowledge for its own sake. This is the ivory tower conception of the university. Society sees universities as some form of exclusive facilities for privileged people. It does not see itself as a stakeholder and cannot comprehend their problems."<sup>9</sup> This makes universities irrelevant to the society which they are supposed to serve.

In pragmatic terms, intellectuals are challenged to be in touch with reality. This implies a constructive and critical engagement with people to respond to their existential concerns. The services rendered through the intellectuals' respective professions should be community-based. In this way, African intellectuals can move from the Ivory Tower and become artisans of a new Africa and a new world order.<sup>10</sup>

The university is basically an idea. It is a systematic and operational device.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Onsongo, "The Role of Research and Publication in the Promotion of Academics in Kenyan Universities," 13.

<sup>9</sup> F. Egbokhare, "University Decline and its Reasons", *Imperatives for Change and Relevance*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baitu, "The African Intellectual...", 3-4.

As Ogbo Uguango notes, "The activity that unites all these items is what is referred to as the university. This is why all the activities are connected, such that the functions take places in the community are intended to serve the same purpose of achieving a common result referred to as university training."<sup>11</sup> The idea of a university implies seeking knowledge for advancement. It is a place for learning a certain culture. In this cultural context, African university has a role to restore the dignity of a person, who has been marginalized. "The university invents, creates, and expounds ideas and ideals in the highest and truest sense of the term. It is indeed, man's desire to fulfill the divine call to know at its peak."<sup>12</sup>

Universities have facilitated tremendous progress of science and technology with the dimension of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) and Biotechnologies. Freedom of scientific and technological developments has to be recognized. It is part and parcel of academic freedom. But such research and development ought to be performed within the framework of ethical principles and respect for human dignity, human rights, and basic freedoms. "While providing both achievements and prospects these technologies pose grave threats to the entire human race and there have been calls for a code of ethics for scientists."<sup>13</sup> One of the distinctive elements of a profession is its dedication to compose its own code and call upon its members to follow it. This dimension promotes professional ethics. A profession is not only a way of making a living, it is the carrying out of an occupation to which standards of competence and responsibilities are attached. Professional integrity implies certain standards. Professional ethics concerns the particular kinds of conduct recognized as necessary to this integrity in a specific profession such as the academic profession.

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<sup>11</sup> O. Ogwuanyi, "The University and the African Crisis of Morality, 101.

<sup>12</sup> O. Ogwuanyi, "The University and the African Crisis of Morality, 101.

<sup>13</sup> A. L. Ndiaye, "African Universities and the Challenge of Knowledge Creation and application in the New Century." See also: UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, 2005, art. 2.

## The Idea of an African University

Creating an African university implies dedicating the university, first and foremost to the African context.<sup>14</sup> It means contextualizing its external appearances in order to assume the African identity. There is a need to be in touch with the context of our academic institutions. Here comes the crucial issue of culture which is the whole way of life of human society. Culture is a product of a people's tradition and its interaction with other societies. In terms of identity, The African Synod noted: "But the culture which gives its identity to our people is in serious crisis. On the eve of the twenty-first century when our identity is being crushed in the mortar of a merciless chain of events, the fundamental need is for prophets to arise and speak in the name of the God of hope for the creation of a new identity."<sup>15</sup>

Students in African universities are exposed and are very vulnerable to new ideologies and cultures that lack human and religious values. In shaping the mentality of the modern person, means of mass communication have a distinctive role. As Cecil McGarry observed, "It is a culture that glorifies violence, escapes from responsibility and sexual license. A materialist or consumer dominated mentality is being propagated which does not promote genuine human growth in the young and can be a factor in alienating them from the Gospel message."<sup>16</sup> The media has profound influence on individuals, families, and society as a whole. African universities are located in Africa; they are part of the African societies. They have to be in touch with the society in which they are located.

There is a pressing need for the African intellectual to be actively involved in the eradication of poverty, ignorance, and disease. The basic aim of such involvement is to raise the living standards of people in Africa. According to J. Baitu: "an intellectual, therefore, is a person with the ability to reason out things; one who is guided by rational ability rather than feelings in searching for relevant and adequate solutions to complex problems affecting the realization of the full human life's potential. In this context: "the mission of intellectuals bears two dimensions

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<sup>14</sup> J. Ki-Zerbo, "Africanization of Higher Education Curriculum," 20-26.

<sup>15</sup> The Message of the Second African Synod, no. 5.

<sup>16</sup> C. McGarry "The Role of the Catholic University, Theological Colleges and Major Seminaries within the Local Churches for the AMECEA Region" 37.



that of encompassing a passion for on-going education and of caring about people from the margins of society." <sup>17</sup> This mission implies promotion of integral development. Such development cannot be restricted to economic growth. It has to be authentic human development that starts from the obligation of each person to attain self-fulfillment. As Pope Paul VI noted in *Populorum progressio*: "Development cannot be limited to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every person and of the whole person."<sup>18</sup> African universities have a distinctive role in promoting development, a transition from less human conditions to those which are more human.

University education ought to be in touch with the crucial issues facing humanity. There is a need to modify the curriculum for relevance to the needs of modern Africa. To a greater extent, university education no longer provides 'career advantages' to its graduates. There are programmes provided which are not responding to the needs of society. The challenge is to promote skills, which would make the graduate have immediate relevance to the needs of modern Africa. What is needed is creativity and innovation. "The crucial reason is the failure to approach university education in a manner that makes the graduate flexible, broad-minded, imaginative and creative, and also quite appreciative of their role as citizens, namely, people who have embodied those beliefs and attitudes that make a worthwhile communal life possible."<sup>19</sup> An alternative option is that of paying attention to educating graduates who have the capacity to relate existential issues facing modern Africa. University education has to prepare students for responsible citizenship. That is for life in an orderly community, sustained by ethical values and a sense of accountability.

In considering African university rankings the issue of research is central. "It is therefore necessary to monitor the quality of research staff engaged in (science-based) teaching and training programmes."<sup>20</sup> Currently, South African universities

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<sup>17</sup> J. Baitu, "The African Intellectual: Leading the Continent to Craft a New Humanity for itself and for the World," p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum progressio* AAS, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Olusegun Oladipo, "Liberal Versus Practical orientation of Curriculum Development," 9.

<sup>20</sup> Top 50 African University Rankings" The five top African Universities are from South Africa: 1. University of Cape Town, 2. Rhodes University, 3. Stellenbosch University 4. University of Pretoria

have scored the top position in the university rankings within the African continent. Eight of South African universities are among the top ten. Africa's strongest research universities tend to attract more resources, the best students and highly qualified (distinguished) staff. Universities have been struggling with the means to retain their staff members, sustaining research facilities, providing fair salaries, and providing education that is in touch with current needs. Let it be noted that the issue of quality research is cross-cutting in ranking universities.

The issue of quality has to be extended to curriculum planning. This process needs creativity and leads to innovation in order to sustain quality and relevance. Curriculum is a systematic process of selecting and refining education experience for use in teaching. African universities have a distinctive role in the curriculum development process at various educational levels. Curriculum implies all that is designed by a university. "Curriculum planning is the process of gathering, sorting, collecting and synthesizing relevant information from an identified source in order to design those experiences that would assist learners in attaining the goals of the curriculum."<sup>21</sup> African universities can no longer afford to be conceived as 'ivory towers'. They ought to be centers of excellence and learning. Such qualities point to the need for universities to be involved in the implementation of relevant education programs that promote ethical values and the culture of life that is rooted in the ethics of life.

The promotion of academics in universities is mainly determined by research and publication. 'Publish or perish' is a commonly used expression in the academic spheres. As Jane Onsongo puts it "the slogan implies that without concrete evidence of research and publications, an academic is unlikely to be promoted or given tenure, and he or she does not stand a good chance of keeping his/her job at the university."<sup>22</sup> It can be enlightening to find out the consequences of the systematic inquiry that leads to searching for a dimension that was previously unknown. African universities are challenged to be creative and come up with original investigations.

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5. University of the Witwatersrand. (Interne source: "Top 50 African University Rankings", Accessed 20 March 2011).

<sup>21</sup> P. A. Ogula & J. K. Onsongo, *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> J. Onsongo, "The Role of Research and Publication in the promotion of Academics in Kenyan Universities, 15.

This can be an African contribution to global knowledge and understanding. Research done has to be relevant to the current needs. Through research that universities can offer and disseminate knowledge. Moreover, university teaching can be developed and improved through research. It is a means of promoting the reputation of an academic institution and its researchers.

### **Managing University Crises**

Although some institutions use conflict as a source of innovation, to a greater extent conflict has led to the downfall of organizations, and in the case of universities, conflict impairs learning, teaching and research processes.<sup>23</sup> African universities are challenged to manage their crises. In many African countries the university system is in crisis. "Among the causes of this crisis is the maladjustment of the graduates to market needs. This factor combined with the unemployment crisis is the basis of the current disenchantment among the youth."<sup>24</sup> In this context, African universities are challenged to reconsider and redefine their own strategies to meet their expectations. Among the crises affecting staff members, there is the problem of brain-draining research and expatriation of African researchers to the green pastures in developed countries. This crisis leads to local researchers to work on subjects of interest to the developed countries. In the global context, African universities still hold a marginal role in the creation, management, and dissemination of their research. It is important to have strategies for networking. The point is that of defining university's research activities by establishing partnerships with other institutions.

African universities have mainly been centers for the diffusion of western cultures. In a sense, lack of adequate resources has limited the capacity to make a notable impact on the technical and technological aspects of production and services. "African universities were expected to be the torchbearers of African values and systems of power, production, mediation and distribution, but in the majority of

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<sup>23</sup>T. S. A. Mbwette & A. G. M. Ishumi (eds.) *Managing University Crises*, DUP, 2000.

<sup>24</sup>A. L. Ndiaye, "African Universities and the Challenge of Knowledge Creation and Application in the New Century," 3.

cases they have recycled values and system of power, production and distribution in other countries."<sup>25</sup>

Universities are challenged to create an educated person: who is a possessor of knowledge, information, and skills. The clear dimension of an educated person is that: "He has at his immediate disposal a body of information and/or technological skills which he can use directly in the performance of a job by which he earns his (or her) liking."<sup>26</sup> An educated person is mature. Such adulthood is the basis of management. Such a person lives his/ her life in an intelligent and creative manner. "He approaches his problems with the polished inner resource of his mind rather than with the raw savagery of his annual instincts. He recognizes that as he grows his personal capabilities may expand."<sup>27</sup> In this context, education is a process of maturation. It provides a key to society's solutions. It follows that the role of intellectuals is to be part of the solutions to society's problems. "Universities have only one mission – to train educated citizens. If education, as we saw, is awareness of one's environment and society and awareness of alternative methods of improving such environment or society, then university success or failure should be measured mainly on these criteria."<sup>28</sup>

Academicians should perform their obligations in line with academic ethics. They should fulfill their role as free and responsible persons. This implies competence, integrity, and the best of their abilities. Academic freedom and responsibility are complimentary. We cannot honestly claim freedom of scholarship without being prepared to assume responsibility for our scholarship. "We are all closeted in our offices and laboratories doing our research and writing our papers, largely oblivious to the suffering and deprivations that most of our people are undergoing." It has to be noted that an African university has a high responsibility towards themselves and their societies.

The university is an institution where people's minds should be trained for clear thinking for independent thinking, for analysis, and for problem solving at the highest level. There is a threefold role of the university: to transmit advanced

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<sup>25</sup> P. B. Mihiyo, "Understanding and Managing University student crises: A General overview," 1.

<sup>26</sup> W. Hansen, "The University-House of Truth," 4.

<sup>27</sup> W. Hansen, "The University-House of Truth," 4.

<sup>28</sup> P. B. Mihiyo, "Understanding and Managing University Student Crises," 35.

knowledge from one generation to another. This serves as a springboard for further research or as a basis for action. Second, to advance the frontiers of knowledge 'through its possession of good learning resources. Third, to provide high-level manpower to society. In J.K. Nyerere's perspective, a university which attempts to prohibit any one of the three functions would cease to be a university. The basic point is that African universities have a high responsibility towards themselves and their societies. African university: "It must encourage and challenge its students to develop their powers of constructive thinking. It must encourage its academic staff to do original research and to play a full part in promoting intelligent discussion of issues of human concern. It must do all these things because they are part of being a university; they are part of its reason for existence."<sup>29</sup>

One of the crucial issues facing African universities is that of maintaining academic excellence. It is conceived in a narrow sense as marketability of courses and 'out puts'. Such a utilitarian approach or process leads to a point where the production of 'marketable goods' – courses and graduates, is offered prominence over academic excellence. "This situation becomes an excuse for some academics to pursue private interests to the neglect of public and social responsibilities and, increasingly, there arises a category of academics that live off the academy rather than for it."<sup>30</sup> Universities have a unique freedom which offers them the capacity for longer-term research. Basically, the university is a site of knowledge. This implies the role of basic research. As C.S.L. Chachege states:

The social responsibility of intellectuals lies in the rehabilitation of those academic practices which are sensitive to human predicaments, committed to responding to societal needs by engaging in critical inquiry and analysis and dedicated to championing social reforms and organizations capable of fulfilling the needs of the human community as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> J.K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Development*, 192-3.

<sup>30</sup> C. S.L. Chachege, 9ed.), *Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibilities of Academics in Tanzania*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> C. S.L. Chachege, 9ed.), *Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibilities of Academics in Tanzania*, p. 19.

In promoting social reforms, African universities have a role in the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women. Universities in Africa are the highest institutions through which knowledge is nurtured, created, and transmitted. "Universities must start with their own structures before addressing gender disparities in the external society. However, since university communities mirror the society in which such institutions are found, it becomes possible that the two fronts of gender disparity be simultaneously addressed."<sup>32</sup> There is a need to research the socio-cultural structures of gender disparity. Women ought to be involved in policy and decision-making.

### **The African University of the Future**

While the revolutionary incites to a radical revision of university structure; the ethicist calls for reflection on the crises of reconstructing the idea of an African university. African universities can be seen as mirrors of society, but also as images that when retracted back could influence development.<sup>33</sup> Envisioning the African university of the future we have the image of a university that would promote the common good. It would serve all – not just the affluent few. Such a university would involve both nontraditional and traditional students who would aspire to be creative thinkers in various spheres. The quality of such universities would be evaluated by how well their graduates contribute to the socio-cultural, economic, and ethical values of society. There is a challenge here of the inclusion of people who have been marginalized. "The challenge of envisioning Africa higher education requires both knowledge of the experience so far and the imaginations to come up with a more viable vision than those that have been pursued so far."<sup>34</sup>

If strategies for integral human development are not coming from scholars in African universities, people shall be forced to import other strategies. There is a

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<sup>32</sup> M. Kadanye, G. Kegode & R. Kirir, "The Role of African Universities in Promoting Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women: A Philosophical Critique," p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> The Ford Foundation, *Envisioning the African University of the Future: A Report of a Retreat on Higher Education*, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> The Ford Foundation, *Envisioning the African University of the Future: A Report of a Retreat on Higher Education*, 3.

widening gap between public expectations and the actual results of many African universities. "African intellectuals especially those at African universities, must take a lead in building a new Africa. To do this they must engage themselves in a most massive and serious process of re-educating themselves about Africa indigenous knowledge system, the principles and patterns of African civilization, whose knowledge they have largely lost."<sup>35</sup>

The common trend in Africa is that the academic capital is growing dramatically faster than economic capital. Human capital refers to skills and experience that enhance productivity. "75 percent of the out-of-school youth do not have regular, full-time employment."<sup>36</sup> This is an indication of 'an employment crisis.' Education system should help students to think critically and constructively not merely to absorb facts as in a 'banking model of education.' It has to be education for empowerment and for life worth living. "There are too many graduates who are not fit for employment because of the whole nature of the pedagogy and epistemology and the various modes of training."<sup>37</sup> Employers are searching for a new type of graduate who is able to think for themselves, integrate into the fast moving global environments, learn new ways of working and propose creative solutions to realistic issues facing humanity.<sup>38</sup>

On a positive note, there are some religious owned universities that have been successful and attracted students to join them. One of the key to success is their vision and mission that are rooted and founded on ethical values.<sup>39</sup> Universities are capable of reproducing graduates who somehow go out and find their way in society. But in a sense, they eroded some of those ethical values. "So you create students who cannot even be trusted by their own parents. So parents would look for an Islamic university or for a Christian university or some other university, because at

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<sup>35</sup> The Ford Foundation, *Envisioning the African University of the Future: A Report of a Retreat on Higher Education*. 23.

<sup>36</sup> L. Mwaura, "Aim students with skills to create jobs," in *Business Daily*, March 11, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> The Ford Foundation, *Envisioning the African university of the Future*, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> S. Trudeau & Keno Omu, "Africa's Universities are not preparing graduate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workplace".

<sup>39</sup> CUEA, *Policy and Procedures on Award of Excellence*, Approved by the university Council, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007, revised 2013. CUEA recognizes excellence in teaching, research, scholarship and service through variety of awards. These awards are granted annually to those who have made outstanding contributions to the betterment of the university community and beyond.

least they think that this person might be somebody who believes in some sort of higher values that would make that person trustworthy to society."<sup>40</sup> The basic aspiration implied is the ethical dimension in education.

## Conclusion

University education is for life; hence it ought to be rooted and founded in the ethics of life. The idea of a university implies seeking knowledge for advancement. It is a search for knowledge that cultivates a certain culture. Such education invents, creates and expounds ideas and ideals. In searching for knowledge, universities have promoted tremendous progress of science and technology. The culture which gives identity is in serious crisis. Hence, the search for identity ought to be guided by ethical values. African universities are located in Africa. They have to be in touch with the African societies in which they are located. One of the distinctive roles is to promote integral human development. The ethical dimension aims at promoting the humanization of a university as an academic institution. The focus is on human needs and on human fulfillment with recourse to ethical values. University education has to prepare students for responsible citizenship. That is, educated citizens, who are possessors of knowledge, information and skills Education is a process of maturation. In this process the ethical values are central. The university is a place where people's mind should be trained for clear thinking; for independent thinking and for problem solving at the advanced level.

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<sup>40</sup> *Envisioning the African University of the Future*, p. 60.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### AN AFRICAN'S ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS, THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

*Jean-Marie Hyacinthe Quenum, SJ*

#### **Abstract**

*The main focus of this contribution is the encounter of the best known hermit Saint Antony the great of Egypt with Jesus, the Savior of the world, two hundred years after Jesus' life time. This encounter with Jesus, the Savior of the world through radical discipleship transformed the desert of Egypt into a city of God where hermits living nearby were organized by Saint Antony the great into partly shared existence. This radical discipleship which is indigenous, vernacular, graced ascetic, communitarian and Spirit-filled can inspire today's African Christianity in dealing with the challenges and signs of the time. The importance and richness of Saint Antony the Great's encounter with Jesus, the Savior of the world draw attention to the specific vocation and mission of the Church in Africa of our post-modern and multi-cultural world.*

#### **Introduction**

Like the influential Ethiopian eunuch evangelized and baptized by the Deacon Philip in the Acts of the Apostles 8: 26-40, many African Christians during every step of their life faith journey, have had various religious experiences of encounter with Jesus, the Son of God made man and the Savior of the world.

We will be interested in the life faith journey and work of Saint Antony the great, Father of the monks, in our approach of African Christian encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world.

Saint Antony the great, (251-356) as a Desert Father chose to imitate Jesus more closely by configuring his life to the Word of the Gospel heard in the new Coptic translation of his time. Saint Antony the great lived a new experience of docility to the

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Holy Spirit through prayer, solitude, silence, humble manual work, penance and spiritual guidance, leading to fraternal communion in monastic life.

The personal encounter of Saint Antony the great with Jesus, the savior of the world in PISPIR and in the eastern desert of Egypt generated an abundant divine life within him and around him. Empowered by the Spirit world, Saint Antony the great has lived and announced the Gospel from his experience of spiritual warrior as hermit and monk. As an authentic and humble witness of monastic life, Saint Antony the great promoted a spirituality of simple heroic daily living with a new style of interpersonal relationships within the monasticism of his time.

Saint Antony the great encounter with Jesus saved him from the flesh temptations, distractions, discouragement and the vain glory of worldly Constantine Hellenistic cosmopolitan Church life. The radically evangelical life of Saint Antony the great has been in his time fruitful, prophetic and full of divine wisdom acquired through graced ascetic life.

Saint Antony the great has transformed the desert of Egypt into the city of God vibrant of Coptic Christianity which is indigenous, vernacular, rural, graced ascetic, communitarian and Spirit filled with the centrality of the Word of God heard and responded to in a radical discipleship.

How do the graced ascetic life and the radical discipleship of Saint Antony the great respond to the challenges of religious education in today's African Christianity? What are the socio-cultural contexts in which today's African Christians gain an insight about Jesus, the Savior of the world as the starting point of their radical discipleship? How is the life of Saint Antony the great, the model for African Christianity which is indigenous, vernacular, graced ascetic, communitarian and Spirit filled? The aim of our theological reflection is to link the alternative way of living the Gospel by Saint Antony the great in the society of his time to a quest for an African Christianity which is humanizing and committed to solidarity, justice and peace. A new paradigm of African Christianity based on everyday life of the sick, the poor and of vulnerable women is hoped for as a radical following of Jesus. This radical following of Jesus will be a prophetic attempt to be in communion with the suffering humanity in Africa.

By participating to a creative and transforming love of God descending in Africa through, Jesus, the Savior of the world African Christians will bring about a new lifestyle of sharing the mission of their redeemer by committing themselves for justice, peace and solidarity.

### **Today's African Christianity and the Need of Graced Ascetic Life and of Radical Discipleship under the Spiritual Guidance of Elders**

The life faith journey of Saint Antony the great is the illustration of the evangelical words: "Whoever wants to come after me, must deny himself, take his cross every day and follow me" (Luke 9, 23).

Saint Antony the great life is a constant exercise of generosity and the quest for spiritual excellence leading to interior freedom and transformation. The personal encounter of saint Antony the great with Jesus, the savior of the world, two hundred years after Jesus' lifetime, is a calling to abandon everything he owned for the sake of radical discipleship. By leaving the Constantine and compromised Church of his time free of blood martyrdom, Saint Antony the great enkindled and ignited his passion for the Gospel in his quest for a true interior freedom and transformation. His walk in life in the history of humankind has been to follow literally Jesus who led him step by step towards a balanced life of hermit and monk.

Saint Anthony the great did not marry. He was not a priest and he did not strive for better social position in life. Inspired by the words of Jesus in Matthew 19: 21, Saint Antony the great considered himself as the Rich Young man to whom Jesus was addressing this instruction: "if you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me". Saint Antony the great gave away his inherited properties, as he was born in a wealthy family, sold his belongings and distributed the money to the poor, and went into the wilderness of Egypt in quest of the authentic treasure: the communion with the Trinitarian God of Jesus Christ in radical discipleship. To battle against the powers of evil, Saint Anthony, the beginner in graced ascetic life, was trained by the hermits and monks of the desert of Egypt, sufficiently experienced in the ways of living the Gospel in the hostile settings of the wilderness. These hermits and monks

were African Christians committed to the life of prayer and penance outside their village's territories. They lived on manual work and were personally involved in God's experience through the mystical impulses of the Holy Spirit. They were for Saint Antony the great, experienced Christians who taught him the virtues of steadfast endurance, of humility, of patience and of gentleness. Their words were sought for the practice of contemplative prayer and the strenuous discipline of life.

Saint Antony the great relied on the words and examples of the Desert Fathers who taught him how to be guided in order to be the disciple of Jesus accomplishing his will through spiritual battle against supernatural temptations and human weakness. The experience of an encounter with Jesus happened as Antony the great confronted the forces of evil which were preventing him to mold his solitary life to the life of the savior of the world. Leading a poor life in mountain caves near the Red Sea and in tombs, Saint Antony retreated in meditation and contemplative prayer, grew in evangelical perfection and purity of life by following the examples of the desert men of experience as the living rule of his hermetic and monastic life.

Saint Antony the great ordered his life by putting into practice the living example of the elders of the desert of Egypt. Saint Antony the great encountered, Jesus, the Savior of the world through the living examples of the Desert Fathers of Egypt. Their way of living their relationships with their Savior, Jesus the Christ was through disciplinary practices: Geographical separation, seclusion in discomfort, little food, little sleep, intense and continuous persistent prayer life, rumination of the Word of the Gospel, spiritual guidance of the senior hermits and anchorites, manual work and spiritual warfare against lurid and often sexual forms of temptations.

In today's religious education, African Christians ought to learn from Saint Antony the great the value of personal prayer. Personal prayer is not a mere practice of pious devotions. Personal prayer is a call to participate in the mission of Jesus, the savior of the world by sharing in the Spirit his obedience to his Father. Personal prayer requires the necessity to cut off oneself from the noisy daily life. By taking advantage of silence and solitude in the midst of daily life, an experience of prayer is possible. From time to time, it will be profitable for African Christians to abandon radio, television, portable, video-games, Walkman, cell phones for a deeper search of silence and solitude in prayer. The desert experience within a daily life is necessary

for spiritual growth. Prayer life in Christian perspective is always an attention to the word of God. Only silence and solitude can help to live the experience of a prayerful encounter with Jesus, the Savior of the world and the Word made flesh in human form. The whole life of Saint Antony the great is the search for a peaceful encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world, in silence and solitude.

Jesus, the Savior of the world is encountered by sharing in his suffering. Saint Antony the great was tested by the evil spirits of the desert and by the wild animals. By resisting the evil spirit of the desert through mortification, Saint Antony the great won a victory over them by transforming the desert into a sacred place of God's presence. Likewise, African Christians are called today to transform their household, their working places and markets into places of the sacred presence of God

In today's African Christianity, the role of Elders in faith and ethical life should be emphasized. What the elders say and do will be an example that can inspire and rekindle the fervor of the beginners in Christian discipleship. African Christianity would be alive and fruitful through the personal quality of dialogue between elders and beginners. Elders would be the models of African Christians by putting into practice the insight they gain from their encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world. By educating by their actions, the Elders of African Christianity will promote a personalized and adapted Christianity to the needs and capacities of the disciples of Jesus, the savior of the world.

Jesus, the Son of God made man and the savior of the world comes to the lives of many African people impoverished and wounded in times of great needs and untold suffering and misery through various manifestations of Christian love and commitment against sickness, malnutrition, ignorance, unemployment, under-employment, poverty, stigma, gender imbalance, discrimination and unjust social structures. Sickness, malnutrition, ignorance, unemployment, under-employment, poverty, stigma, gender imbalance, discrimination and unjust social structures are the evils to be fought against as they diminish the quality of human life. These evils marginalize the majority of people and deprive them from material wealth, social power and economic opportunities.

Antony the great went to the Desert for a new experience of God with the fresh passion for spiritual warfare against evils of solitary life such as: boredom, laziness,

pleasure of the flesh, imaginary illusions, divided and conflicted self, lack of interior peace. Antony the great was searching for the fullness of life through a virtuous life that makes possible communion with God, with his hostile environment and with the people around to minister to. The successful quest for communion of Saint Antony the great reached the peak of graced achievement at the age of 54 with the interior transformation that allowed him to initiate a community life for monks and for which he was spiritual leader for more than 50 years.

The African Christian spirituality of Saint Antony the great is that of Jesus, the Savior of the world. It is the spirituality of the Gospel lived with the help of the Holy Spirit of God that endows the radical disciple of strength against the forces of evil. Evil is present everywhere in the good creation of God. The radical disciple of Jesus, the savior of the world is called to love and follow Jesus by doing what he would do today.

In today's Africa, we need people of the stature of Saint Antony the great to fight the evil forces related to sickness, malnutrition, ignorance, unemployment, under-employment, poverty, stigma, gender imbalance, discrimination and unjust social structures. In the historical context of post-colonial nation-states, African Christianity must become more indigenous, more vernacular, more communitarian and more Spirit-filled.

Jesus is to be found in the sick, in the illiterate, in the poor, in the stigmatized, in the vulnerable women, in the discriminated and in all who are suffering from unjust social structures. "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, now you do unto me" (Matthew 25:40) has been a reminder of Jesus' presence in the midst of African wounded people. Jesus, the Savior of the world is still inviting the suffering people of Africa, those who are vulnerable and rejected to come to him so that they may find in him, courage, hope, peace and rest (Matthew 11: 28).

African Christians are the channels by which Jesus continues his mission of promoting growth of all, social justice for all and equity for all. Jesus, the Son of God made man came into our world so that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). The sanctity of God's life in African socio-cultural contexts is threatened by illness, poverty, brokenness and suffering. Whoever tirelessly toils with passion against sickness, ignorance, poverty, stigma, discrimination, gender imbalance, and



unjust social structures that dehumanize and depersonalize African people comes to an insight about Jesus, the Son of God made man and the savior of the world.

Jesus, the Son of God made man is the brother of all human beings in hopeless situations. As the risen Christ, Jesus stands by the sufferers and continues his mission of mercy, compassion and love through the radical discipleship of African Christians. Radical discipleship advocates for an inclusive and integral development of all by stressing human concerns, fellowship, social justice and a world free of pain, misery, hunger, disease, violence and wars.

Jesus' struggle against evil powers and his victory over supernatural temptations, sin and death is the ground for African hope. Jesus, the Savior of the world invites his followers to care for the poor, the captives, the shunned and the rejected (Luke 4: 18-19). Jesus, the Savior of the world is still relevant to the pluralistic and multi-cultural Africa full of various forms of poverty and exclusion. Jesus' work of salvation still strengthens human dignity and empowers for social change.

The Gospel can germinate the seed of alternative society based on memories of Jesus expressing God's love for the cherished children of God. Through the Church, mystical Body of the risen Christ in which flows God's grace of incarnation and salvation, African converts could be integrated in the inclusive community of the Savior by their commitment for a just and ordered society called the Kingdom of God. The experience of the encounter with Jesus, the Son of God made man and the savior of the world often leads to a new look of the Africans on how God has been at work in their lives in times of hopeless situations.

This awareness of God's activity in the Africans' lives implies for the individuals a change of heart leading to hope, strength, healing and love. To receive and embrace the Gospel for newly evangelized and baptized African Christians enable to a radical new style of life based on fraternal and compassionate companionship with the sons and daughters of God. The religious experience of encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world introduces the newly evangelized and baptized African Christians into a new life of faith, hope and love based on appropriate actions that show love and concern to people in times of great needs.

Among the great Christian emblematic figures of early African Christianity such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine and Antony the great, we propose for African evolving Christianity the inspiring model of radical discipleship of Antony the great<sup>2</sup>. Antony the great was an evangelized and baptized disciple of Jesus who promoted in eastern desert of Egypt an African Christianity which is indigenous, vernacular, graced ascetic, communitarian, Spirit filled and relying on the victory of Jesus as the savior of the world. What are the socio-cultural contexts in which Africans gain an insight about Jesus, the savior of the world as the starting point of their profound conversion and how the life of saint Antony the great could be for today's Africans an inspiration for a radical discipleship? What insight can we gain from Africans' encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world?

### **The Socio-cultural Contexts in which Africans Gain an Insight about Jesus, the Savior of the World as the Starting Point of their Profound Conversion**

The socio-cultural contexts in which Africans live compel them to seek beyond their present-day challenges a ray of hope in Jesus, the Savior of the world. African desperate situations provide occasions for personal encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world. Hearing the words of Jesus in the Gospels, for Africans, is always an insight into his work of salvation. The down-to-earth approach of Jesus to salvation is relevant to African situations in need of strength from more communion and solidarity.

Only Jesus, the Son of God made man and the Savior of the world can open an absolute future for African situations. The lack of peace and security in most African countries especially in Democratic republic of Congo and in South Sudan is an enormous challenge to the rule of law and good governance.

Fratricidal recurrent wars in Mali and Somali are a threat for regional peace. A day-to -day tragic violence disrupts the course of peaceful life. The lack of distributive justice and sense of common good in most post-colonial states are destroying the quality of life of African individuals, families, communities and

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<sup>2</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*.

societies. The erosion of family values by irresponsible and unhealthy behaviors are bringing untold pain and suffering to the people of Africa.

Fragile economies are made vulnerable by the mismanagement of the material, human and financial resources. The signs that Africans are failing to build up a well ordered and harmonious society according to God's design are visible everywhere. African contemporary world is upside down. Broken relationships are the root causes of dysfunctional families and absence of responsible love relationships among citizens. Our beloved continent has become a place of survival instead of being a land of opportunities and growth for all. To face present day challenges of religious education, African Christians need to reclaim the patrimony of Saint Antony the great of graced ascetic life for the sake of contextualization. The contextualization of the patrimony of Saint Antony the great of graced ascetic life should respond to the problems, challenges and aspirations of African people.

Saint Antony the great can inspire the suffering peoples of Africa. His heroic way of living and his spiritual warfare are a call for action against the contemporary forces of evil. Inspired by the communitarian spirit of Saint Antony the great, as Father of monasticism, an African Christian must practice solidarity by rejecting all forms of individualism that lead to self-interests. A social commitment to be kind to one another must replace mob justice, witchcraft, spirit of revenge and wars. Above all, it is important for African Christians to search for spiritual excellence through piety towards the Trinitarian God of Jesus Christ. He only can grant the spiritual strength that comes from continuous prayer and imitation of Jesus, the savior of the world and the friend of the marginalized.

### **The Life of Saint Antony the Great as an Inspiring Model of African Indigenous, Vernacular, Communitarian and Spirit-filled Christianity**

Antony the great emerged in his time as a radical disciple of Jesus, Savior of the world. His battle against evil powers based on the victory of Jesus, the savior over temptations, sin and death made him one of the famous Desert Fathers. Saint Antony the great valued the people of the Desert of Egypt and their cultures.

In Egyptian monasticism, the Word of God was proclaimed and shared in Coptic language. Saint Antony the great incarnated the Gospel in the Coptic culture. The liturgy of the monks was vernacular and their way of life was indigenous. The graced ascetic life of Saint Antony the great is still relevant to African Christianity which is indigenous, vernacular, communitarian and Spirit filled.

Graced ascetic life in today's African context means that only people who have experienced the love of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit can be agents of change in our suffering world. By participating in the divine life of Jesus and by sharing his compassionate mission towards all the marginalized, African Christians, like Saint Antony the great could become the prophets of hope for an inclusive and integral development.

In African Christianity, it is desirable that Elders may be the models of faith and ethical life. Like Antony the great, they will be followed because they are the imitators of Jesus, the savior of the world. Their Words and actions inspired by the Gospel will attract personalized obedience to the Word of God. And Elders will have a tremendous impact in the foundational process of the Kingdom of God in Africa.

### **Concluding Remarks**

An encounter with Jesus, the savior of the world is never an isolated phenomenon. To follow Jesus, the savior of the world is to bring the Gospel to the people God has given us to actualize the insight of our encounter with his Son in his Spirit. The radical discipleship of Saint Antony the great has allowed him to bring together the Coptic people of the Desert into the body of Christ in original and indigenous monasticism. African Christians are called today to participate in the mission of Jesus, the Savior of the world by sharing his life of personal prayer and his battle against the evil forces of God's creation.

By becoming loving people by God's grace, African Christians can contextualize the patrimony of Saint Antony the great by caring for the suffering humanity. Sick, poor, vulnerable women, marginalized, afflicted and oppressed people are in today's African Christianity the battlefield of the disciples of Jesus for an inclusive and integral development.

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**PART V – SOLIDARITY AMONG AFRICANS AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS**





**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**  
**TO REMEMBER US WHOLE: PAIN AND PROMISE IN THE CALL TO SOLIDARITY**  
**BETWEEN AFRICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS<sup>1</sup>**

*M. Shawn Copeland*

*We have begun as Christians, as Catholics are wont to begin - in prayer, seeking God's blessing and direction.*

*Bishop Gbuji has presented us with kola nut, a traditional symbol of greeting and welcome, known in many places on the Continent, but so characteristic of this part of Nigeria.*

*Rarely have African Americans had the privilege to be in the presence of traditional rulers and so many chiefs, so I intend no offense and ask as a child of the diaspora to claim a privilege that may not be my own.*

My topic is delicate and difficult, for Africans and African Americans to move toward solidarity we are in need of assistance. So I call upon our Beloved Dead, most especially those who died in the Middle Passage, those who died in slavery even as they prayed and worked for freedom. I call upon the Ancestors; because of them, we are. Finally, I call upon my familial Ancestors for wisdom to say what should be said so that their lives and example may shine forth once again in the land of their origin.

My topic is, at once, delicate and difficult: It is delicate because even the most casual encounters between Africans and African Americans take place against the background of the ignominious memory of the Atlantic slave trade. This brutal traffic in black flesh remains a paramount historical example of human oppression and greed, terror and innocent suffering.<sup>2</sup> That history recalls breaches of relationship and anguish of enormous communal, existential, and moral magnitude. At the same time, the efforts of a family or a people to heal broken relationships, often, involve even more pain. It is never easy to acknowledge wrongs committed or to relinquish pain and resentments in which we may have found unhealthy comfort.

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<sup>2</sup>In the past decade, African Americans have adopted the term, 'Maafa,' a Kiswahili word meaning 'disaster' or 'terrible occurrence,' to refer to the more than 500 hundred years of suffering of the enslaved peoples of African descent through the Middle Passage, Enslavement, Imperialism, Colonialism, and Exploitation.

My topic is difficult because any attempt to 're-member' dispersed African Americans and Africans,<sup>3</sup> to put *us* back together again, calls not only for a hermeneutics of memory, but also a hermeneutics of suspicion. A hermeneutics of memory assumes, although not uncritically, 'a once upon a time'—a time of union and relation that has been torn asunder. A hermeneutics of memory also calls for more—for what Historian of Religions Charles Long calls an "archaic critique," a "crawling back through one's history" to apprehend and understand the past and our experience of it.<sup>4</sup> This crawl can never be some simplistic grasp of the past—as if we could reconstruct *the way it really was* or as if the past could be an object completely distanced from the human subjects responsible for and accountable to it. Rather, this archaic critique involves a precarious and subtle grasp of dangerous, that is, the pliant as well as transformative, memories.

A hermeneutics of suspicion calls all this into question—the past and our grasp of it, the function and exercise of memory, the very nature of the relatedness of African Americans and Africans in all their rich cultural-linguistic diversities. To make this more concrete, let me offer two illustrations, one from each side of the Atlantic. On *this* side of the Atlantic, consider African reaction to African American recognition of Africa as 'our homeland.' Africans often meet our exuberant identification with the most emotionally penetrating and culturally specific of questions, 'Where, then, is *your* village?' African Americans can provide no satisfactory answer. Few of us have been able to chart our genealogical lineages to specific peoples and cultural-linguistic groups on the Continent. There are, of course, a few conspicuous exceptions: Alex Haley, whose partial reconstruction of his Gambian ancestry was retold in the historical fiction of Roots,<sup>5</sup> and African American communities living on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and the Carolinas have delineated The question, 'Where, then, is *your* village?' never arises from cruelty, yet it cruelly pierces the heart and exposes the deep psychic wound of African Americans for cultural

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<sup>3</sup>Although the phrase 'African Americans' easily may be extended to include all African-descended peoples living in the Americas (i.e., the Caribbean and Latin America), I use it here to refer to citizens of the United States. Further, I will interchange this phrase with that of 'black.'

<sup>4</sup>C. H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 9.

<sup>5</sup>A. Haley, *Roots*. Through examining the records of slave ships, Haley was able to trace his origins to the West African village of Juffure in present day Gambia.

roots, for belonging, for human acceptance. 'Where, then, is *your* village?' It is a question that the vast majority of African Americans shall never be able to answer, and that inability summons up for us an abstract, romanticized Africa—the Africa of our broken hearts' desire, the Africa of our real and distant origins, the Africa that symbolizes our humanity, the Africa of our deepest possibilities and freedom. 'Where, then, is *your* village?' Yet, what account can Africans give for the enigma of our absence? Now consider this same question from the *other* side of the Atlantic: When Europeans or European Americans ask, 'Where do *your* people come from?' We cannot claim Abeokuta or Onitsha, Jos or Kano, Uromi or Afikpo. History has limited African American geographic origins quite sharply. 'Where do *your* people come from?' We reply with US states and cities: Macon, Georgia; Knoxville, Tennessee; Pritchard, Alabama; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. 'Where do *your* people come from?' How can white Americans explain the enigma of our presence? Charles Long has observed aptly that blacks constitute a structural embarrassment for the United States: in a land that boasts of its immigrant heritage, our arrival was involuntary; in a nation dedicated to freedom and liberty, black existence was legislated as perpetual enslavement. Americans of all races, but whites in particular, want to forget US participation in the slave trade. Many Americans are apt to insist that they and their great great-grandparents had no role in the slave trade. Quite so; but this assertion stands only as a partial truth. It overlooks the forced unpaid labor of the enslaved peoples whose bodies and blood, sweat and tears laid the foundation for the material, technological, and economic prowess that the United States commands. So it is, then, that African Americans live out an *ambiguous* situated-ness. We are trapped between belated, often disingenuous, acknowledgement of our contributions to US society and culture and the nation's simultaneous refusal to embrace us in our clear cultural and linguistic affiliations to peoples in Sierra Leone.

The question, 'Where, then, is *your* village?' never arises from cruelty, yet it cruelly pierces the heart and exposes the deep psychic wound of African Americans for cultural roots, for belonging, for human acceptance. 'Where, then, is *your* village?' It is a question that the vast majority of African Americans shall never be able to answer, and that inability summons up for us an abstract, romanticized Africa—the

Africa of our broken hearts' desire, the Africa of our real and distant origins, the Africa that symbolizes our humanity, the Africa of our deepest possibilities and freedom. 'Where, then, is *your* village?' Yet, what account can Africans give for the enigma of our absence?

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In what follows, I want to suggest that this two-fold hermeneutics of memory and suspicion may nurture a redemptive critique that opens us to receive the divine

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<sup>6</sup> The relation of the United States to the vast and complex African Continent is the proper subject of the U. S. Catholic bishops' statement, *A Call to Solidarity with Africa*. However, the ambiguous situated-ness of African Americans and our angular relation to the United States surfaces briefly on pages 4 and 11.

gift that solidarity is.<sup>7</sup> Our reception of and response to this gift conditions the possibility of the emergence of a new horizon within which Africans and African Americans may seek to know and cherish one another; in which we may take up anew our common and differentiated responsibilities of remorse, confession, and recompense; in which we and our relatedness to *all* other human persons and the whole of creation may be transformed.

I will elaborate this in three sections. The *first* draws upon the most dangerous of diasporic memories, the memories of the enslaved peoples. These excerpts are taken from the *Slave Narrative Collection*.<sup>8</sup> Under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration (WPA), anthropologists, cultural workers, and writers, interviewed emancipated slaves between 1936 and 1938. While chattel slavery neither exhausts nor determines African American history, culture, and experience, it has shaped it decisively. Thus, it is not possible to tell the African American story without engaging the memories of the enslaved peoples. The *second* section follows a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to confront and interrogate some of the negative images and myths that have fueled African and African American *misunderstanding* and estrangement. These range from Nnamdi Azikiwe's idealization of the United States as "God's country"<sup>9</sup> to the notion that black Americans always have enjoyed the full equality of their citizenship, from the myth of Africa as 'the dark Continent' in need of civilizing to the myth of Tarzan, the lost white

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Gilroy also has posed a notion of a hermeneutics of memory and hermeneutics of suspicion nurturing a redemptive critique, but to a very different and non-theological purpose in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 71.

<sup>8</sup>Norman R. Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection* (1936-1938). The earliest major projects to collect and preserve the eye-witness accounts and experiences of Africans who had been enslaved were begun almost simultaneously, but independently, in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at Hampton Institute in Virginia, Southern University in Louisiana, and Fisk University in Tennessee. At Southern, interviews were taken under the direction of John B. Cade and culminated in the publication of an article entitled, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," in the *Journal of Negro History*. The two volumes of the Fisk University study have been included in the 19 volume collection edited by George P. Rawick and entitled, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Interviewers state that approximately 2 percent of the total population of emancipated African peoples in the United States in 1937 was interviewed. The *Slave Narrative Collection* consists of more than 10,000 pages of typescript and contains 2,000 interviews. Almost all the men and women interviewed had experienced slavery within the states of the Confederacy and still resided there; very few had been freed before the Civil War. Recently, the Library of Congress has made the entire *Slave Narrative Collection* available over the Internet at:

<http://memory.loc.gov:8081/ammem/snhomehtml/snhome.html/>

<sup>9</sup>N. Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*, 196.

boy who befriended animals and reigned over hapless Africans. Even if these images make us queasy and uncomfortable, we must consider them if Africans and African Americans are to come to know one another as we are in our full human complexity and cultural diversities, if solidarity is to be a genuine possibility. The *third* section sketches a notion of solidarity that takes seriously our distinct histories and experiences, that finds our unity in diversity, that calls us to re-envision one another through grace in love, and that collaborates in social praxis.

### Dangerous Diasporic Memories

One point of departure for dangerous diasporic memories lies approximately 600 kilometers West of where we meet—Gberefu Island and the nearby port of Badagary. From this old slave port and others like it for four centuries Africa's daughters and sons bled into the Atlantic.<sup>10</sup> Over the past three decades historians have begun to uncover the massive oppression and suffering of the captured Africans.<sup>11</sup> Thus, I need not to recite here in detail the horrific events of betrayal, kidnapping, and sale—the forced march, the anxious wait in dungeons, debilitating disease; then, the Middle Passage—the shocking assault on the human psyche, the torturous sea voyage, the beatings, the powerlessness of the men before the use of the women and young girls for sex by the ship's officers and crew.

Yet, filial piety imposes the obligation to call the names of some of the peoples caught up in this grave disaster. For surely it is disrespectful and, therefore, most

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<sup>10</sup>The exact numbers of Africans who were captured and/or died in the infamous Middle Passage or in ways related to their capture, embarkation, and enslavement may never be known. Some scholars estimate that in the course of a two-hundred year period, 500,000 Africans or about seven percent of those caught up in the entire transatlantic trade were brought to what is now the United States. Philip Curtin in *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* placed the number of blacks transported across the ocean at 8 million. Nearly thirty years later, Hugh Thomas in *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* put the number of Africans that arrived in the Americas at approximately 11 million. Other scholars place estimates at between 10 and 15 million. But most agree that nearly as many Africans died over the course of the Middle Passage as reached the end of the voyage, thus, placing the total number of victims between 20 and 30 million. Joseph E. Holloway concludes: "If one considers those who perished in the stockades and on the cargo ships in estimating the volume of traffic to the New World, the total may well be over forty million," "The Origins of African-American Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*, Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*.

unwise to fail to honor them. Joseph Holloway has remapped the cultural zones of Africa in order to determine more precisely the ethnicity of the enslaved peoples. From the Senegambia came men and women and youth who knew themselves to be Wolof, Bambara, Mandingo, Malinke, Fulani, Bola; from the Sierra Leone coast came the Temne and Mende peoples. From the Liberian coast came the descendants of the Vai, the Gola, the Kisi, the Bassa, the Grebo. From the Bight of Benin came the daughters and sons of the Yoruba, the Nupe, the Fon, the Ewe, the Fante, the Edo-Bini. From the Niger Delta came those whose Ancestors were Ibani, Igbo. From the LLLKKCentral African coast came the Bakango, the Malimbo, the Bambo, the Luba, the Ovimbundu.<sup>12</sup>

These diverse and varied peoples, our peoples were pressed into a system that in nearly all instances repressed and sought to eradicate their particularities—their histories and languages, cultural customs and mores, cognitive and moral orientations, aesthetic and social values, ties of affiliation and affection, rites and religions. Thus, putatively stripped of identity, the enslaved peoples underwent what Long has named ever so subtly and ironically, the “ritual of blackness.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet, even as these very ancient and disparate peoples were sold away from their lands and loved ones, even as they were *thrown together* by modern chattel slavery, even as their beauty and genius were reduced by raw empiricism to race, they became a new and *black people*.<sup>14</sup> This achievement was long, difficult, and bloody in the making; slavery was the anvil on which they were forged; religious consciousness was the medium of their self-transcendence.

Interviewed in Montgomery, Alabama, at 100 years of age, Delia Garlic stated quite plainly and emphatically:

<sup>12</sup> Holloway, “The Origins of African-American Culture,” 2-13; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 5-7; Martha Washington Creel, “A Peculiar People:” *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*, 29-50; Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800*, 32-33, 65-67.

<sup>13</sup> C. H. Long, “Structural Similarities,” 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> In the words of Octavio Paz, the impact of Western modernity on the world has produced: “certain twilight zones . . . inhabited by semirealities: poetry, poets, women, homosexuals, the proletariat, the colonized peoples, the colored races. All these purgatories and hells lived in the state of clandestine ferment. One day in the 20th century, the subterranean world blew up. This explosion hasn’t yet ended and its splendor has illuminated the agony of the modern age,” *The New Analogy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Herbert Read Lecture, 25 qtd. In Long, “Structural Similarities,” 20.

Slavery days were hell. I was grown up when the Civil War came, and I was a mother before it closed. Babies were snatched from their mothers' breasts and sold to [slave] speculators. Children were separated from sisters and brothers and never saw each other again. Of course they cried. Do you think that they would not have cried when they were sold like cattle? I could tell you about it all day [long], but even then you could not guess the awfulness of it.

It is bad to belong to folks who own you soul and body, who can tie you to a tree, with your face to the tree and your arms fastened tight around it, who can take a whip and draw blood with every lick. Folks a mile away could hear those awful whippings. They were a terrible part of living.<sup>15</sup>

Gus Smith posed a different view of slavery on the 1,500-acre farm owned by Bill Messersmith. Interviewed at Rolla, Missouri, at the age of 92, Mr. Smith told of being well- clothed and well-fed, of holiday dances and quilting parties, of a master [who] let us come and go pretty much as we pleased. In fact we had much more freedom [than] most of the slaves had in those days. He let us go to other places to work when we had nothing to do at home and we kept our money we earned . . . .<sup>16</sup>

But Mr. Smith also noted that the conditions under which he lived in bondage were quite unlike those of many other slaves.

Our closest neighbors [were the] Thorntons. Old man Thornton . . . was a rough man . . . . He was mean to his slaves. He whipped [them] all [the] time. I've seen their clothes sticking to their backs, from blood and scabs, being cut with [the] cowhide. He just whipped [them] because he could.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The *Slave Narratives* were transcribed and written phonetically by interviewers to reflect the quaint construction, grammar, and pronunciation of the generally unschooled men and women interviewed. Rather than read these as written, I have transcribed each passage into Standard American English, setting the original in the notes. "Slavery days were hell. I was growed up when de War come, and I was a mother before it closed. Babies was snatched from dere mother's breast and sold to speculators. Chillens was separated from sisters and brothers and never saw each other again. 'Course dey cry. You think they not cry when dey was sold like cattle? I could tell you about it all day, but even den you couldn't guess de awfulness of it." "It is bad to belong to folks dat own you soul and body, dat can tie you to a tree, with yo' face to d'tree and yo' arms fastened tight around it, who take a curlin' whip and cut de blood every lick. Folks a mile away could hear dem awful whippings. Dey was a terrible part of livin,'" Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 129.

<sup>17</sup> Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 130-131.



Mingo White told his interviewer that he was a “pretty big boy” when the Civil War began.<sup>18</sup> He said that he was born into slavery in Chester, South Carolina, and at about the age of four or five was sold away from his parents to slaveholders in Alabama. Mr. White reflected on the hardships he endured as a child:

I had to work just like a man. I went to the field and hoed cotton, pulled fodder and picked cotton with the rest of the hands. I kept up too, to keep from being whipped at night when we got home. In the winter I went to the woods with the men folk to help get wood or get sap from the trees to make turpentine and tar. The white folks were hard on us. They would whip us for the least little thing. It would not have been so bad if we had had comforts, but to live as we did was enough to make anybody want to be dead. The white folks told us that we were born to work for them, and that we were doing fine at that.<sup>19</sup>

But, Mr. White countered, “Somehow or other we had the instinct that we were going to be free.”<sup>20</sup>

. . . when the day's work was done the slaves would be found locked in their cabins praying for the Lord God to free them like he did the Children of Israel. If they did not lock the door, the master or the [slave] driver would have heard them and whipped them.<sup>21</sup>

Fannie Moore commented on the refusal of slaveholders and other whites to educate the slaves.

<sup>18</sup> Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> “I had to work de same as any man. I went to de field and hoed cotton, pulled fodder and picked cotton with de rest of de hands. I kept up, too, to keep from getting' any lashes dat night when us got home. In de winter I went to de woods with de menfolks to help get wood or to get sap from de trees to make turpentine and tar.” De white folks was hard on us. Dey would whip us about de least l'il thing. It wouldn't'a been so bad iffen us had had comforts, but to live like us did was 'nough to make anybody soon as be dead. De white folks told us dat us born to work for'em and dat us was doin' fine at dat,” Yetman, ed. *When I Was a Slave*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> “Somehow or other us had an instinct dat we was goin' to be free,” Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> “. . . when de day's work was done de slaves would be found locked in dere cabins prayin' for de Lord to free dem like he did de chillen of Israel. Iffen dey didn't lock up, de marsa or de driver would of heard'em and whipped'em,” Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 142.

None of [the slaves] had any learning; we were never allowed to even pick up a piece of paper. My daddy got a Webster book and then took it out to the field and he taught himself to read. The white folks were afraid to let the children learn anything. They were afraid that [the slaves] would get too smart and become difficult to manage. They never let them learn anything about anything.<sup>22</sup>

These excerpts open, albeit ever so slightly, a window on the contradictory circumstances of chattel slavery. We learn that some slaveholders provided the enslaved people with adequate food, while others made available only meager provisions; some slaveholders used the whip sparingly, while others did so with license; and nearly all slaveholders denied slaves the rudiments of reading and writing. We learn something of the enslaved peoples' yearning for familial bonds, education, and freedom; something of their suffering and their sense of a different destiny. For at least the first two centuries of black peoples' enslavement Africa was more than a wisp of memory. Fannie Moore knew her father's mother who she said "was brought over from Africa. . . . All her life she had been a slave."<sup>23</sup> Henry [Brown] said that his father's mother and father "came right from Africa."

They were stolen and brought here. They used to tell us of how white men had pretty cloth on boats and they were to exchange some of their ornaments for it. When they took the ornaments to the boat, they were kidnapped and taken to the hold of the boat and locked in.<sup>24</sup>

When the importation of slaves was outlawed in the US in 1808, it severed black peoples' on-going connections to the peoples and cultures of the Continent. Yet, Africa's deepest imprint on her dispersed progeny would not be effaced: despite

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<sup>22</sup> "None of [the slaves] have any learnin', weren't never allowed to as much as pick up a piece of paper. My daddy slip and get a Webster book and den he take it out in de field and he learn to read. De white folks afraid to let de chillen learn anythin'. They afraid dey get too smart and be harder to manage. Dey never let 'em know anythin' about anythin'," Yetman, ed., *When I Was a Slave*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Yetman, ed., *When I was a Slave*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> "My grand pa 'an grand ma on pa side come right from Africa. They was stolen an' brought here. They use to tell us of how white men had pretty cloth on boats which they was to exchange for some of their o'nament'. W'en they take the o'nament' to the boat they was carry way down to the bottom an' was lock' in," *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938: South Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, Part 1, 122-123.

massive, transgenerational oppression and cultural fragmentation, the enslaved peoples continued to manifest the religious and aesthetic virtuosity of their Ancestors.

Historians generally agree that on the plantations, religion was the sphere in which the enslaved peoples were able to exercise some measure of autonomy and freedom in intelligence, action, and creativity. Still, they did so often at the risk of grave punishment.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the formal Christianization of the enslaved peoples remains a disputed question. Scholars cannot isolate the precise points at which authentic efforts at evangelization lead to the appearance of black Christian churches.<sup>26</sup> What we do know unequivocally is that the preaching of salvation in Jesus of Nazareth inevitably had a decisive impact. My own research leads me to conclude that the religious sensibilities of the enslaved peoples projected a sacred reality (or cosmos) in which Christianity was sublated by the reconfigured, blended, and remembered fragments of diverse Traditional West African Religions. At the same time, because so very much of the interior life of the enslaved peoples—their feelings and hopes, religio-cultural practices, and reflections—was *masked* or hidden from the master class, indeed, from nearly all whites, no one can pronounce with certainty the burial of the African gods and the disappearance of the traditional religions.<sup>27</sup>

While African American (or Negro) Spirituals illumine our appreciation of black religion as African American Christianity, these songs bear unmistakable traces of

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<sup>25</sup> See John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed, 3-48; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 161-279, and Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 3-80.

<sup>26</sup> Mechal Sobel in *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* has documented the existence of at least thirty-seven independent black churches between 1758 and 1822; see also Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South*, and Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. Catechisms prepared for slaves notoriously bent Christianity to aid slavery. Albert Raboteau in *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* has pointed out the checkered catechizing of Catholics (112-114). And in his *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, James Cone quotes from a Protestant example: Question: What did God Make you for? Answer: To make a crop. Question: What is the meaning of 'Thou Shalt not Commit Adultery? Answer: To serve our Heavenly Father, and our earthly master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything (23).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 43-92; There is caution in the old slave moan: "I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned / Dere is trouble all over dis worl' / Ain' gwine lay my 'ligion down, / Ain' gwine lay my 'ligion down." We shall never be completely certain just *which* religion they refused to surrender.

Africa.<sup>28</sup> When questioned about the method of composing their religious songs, enslaved men and women often replied: "The Lord just put [the songs] in our mouths . . . the Lord puts every word we say in our mouths."<sup>29</sup> But, one emancipated woman from Kentucky insisted that the spirituals were formed from the material of traditional African tunes and familiar songs.

We older people used to make the songs up on the spur of the moment, after we wrestle with the Spirit and come through. But the tunes were brought from Africa by our granddaddies. They were just familiar songs . . . they called them spirituals, because the Holy Spirit revealed them to [the people].<sup>30</sup>

But, perhaps the enslaved peoples' most magnificent tribute to Africa as home and freedom is the legend of the Africans who could fly.<sup>31</sup> Folklorist Virginia Hamilton remade this tale for children and essayist Julius Lester published a version shaped

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<sup>28</sup> Although there is eyewitness testimony regarding religious and secular songs created by enslaved Africans in the late eighteenth century, widespread discovery of the 'spiritual' coincides with the Civil War. James Weldon Johnson, poet, literary critic, and foremost collector of these noble black psalms, believed that many were the work of highly gifted individuals, whom he celebrated in the poem, "Black and Unknown Bards." Dena Epstein's article on "Slave Music in the United States Before 1869," fills in the early origins of the spiritual in Afro-Portuguese music of the fifteenth century. She cites lamentation singing by Africans captured by the Portuguese in 1444 and brought to Portugal, as described by Gomes Eannes de Azurara in *Cronica Do Descobrimiento E Conquista De Guiné* (translated by Sir Arthur Helps in *The Spanish Conquest of America, and Its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of the Colonies*). Epstein finds additional evidence of the African propensity for dancing, singing, instrumentalizing, and poetizing, and joining all four elements together in an interview with Charity Bower, an ex-slave, born in Pembroke, North Carolina, about 1774. Further, Epstein states that as early as 1773 some slave songs were reported as being obscene and warlike [to their white listeners] and other songs as plaintive and expressive of the misery of the slaves. In 1778 Dr. Rush wrote that slaves songs were not marks of happiness but "symptoms of Melancholy Madness, and therefore. . . certain proofs of their misery." Between 1774 and 1777, slaves observed playing on a gourd (a kind of guitar) and through droll music relating "the usage they have received from their Masters or Mistresses in a very satirical stile and manner," qtd. in John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, 401; see also, Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> "De Lord jes' put hit en our mouf . . . de Lord puts ebry word we says en our mouf," in M. V. Bales, "Some Negro Folk Songs of Texas," in *Follow De Drinkin' Gou'd*, ed., James Dobie, 85.

<sup>30</sup> "Us ole head use ter make 'em on de spurn of de moment, after we wressle wid de Spirit and come thoo. But the tunes was brung from Africa by our granddaddies. Dey was jis 'miliar song. . . . dey calls 'em spirituals, case de Holy Spirit done revealed 'em to 'em," in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 244-45.

<sup>31</sup> There are several variants of the tale of flying Africans, indeed, this African prowess is a phenomenon that appears in other places in the so-called 'new world,' frequently, along with references to a magic hoe that works at the command of the enslaved people or that remains working in the field after the people have flown away. For another African American variant, see Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., *The Book of Negro Folklore*, 62-65. The theme of flying peoples of African descent permeates Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, and the phenomenon is discussed in Monica Schuler, *Alas, Alas, Congo: A Social History of Indentured Africans in Jamaica*.

by the black cultural nationalism of the early 1970s.<sup>32</sup> However, the appearance of the legend of Africans who could fly in the Slave Narratives, the unvarnished way in which the emancipated peoples speak of them, the ordinary settings in which the tale is transmitted, the identification of elders as eyewitnesses allow the legend unusual authority. Here are three of these accounts:

Carrie Hamilton told her interviewer:

I have heard of those people [Flying Africans] . . . My mother used to tell me about them when [she and I] sat in the city market selling vegetables and fruit. She said that there was a man and his wife [who] were fooled aboard a slave ship. First thing that they knew, they were sold to a planter on St. Helena. So one day [when] all the slaves were together, this man and his wife said, "We are going back home, goodie bye, goodie bye," and just like a bird they flew out of sight.<sup>33</sup>

Serina Hall offers what I consider to be one of the most tender of the variants of the tale of Flying Africans:

My mother told me many times about a man and his wife who work could conjure. Anytime they wanted to, they would fly back to Africa and then come back again to the plantation. They came back because they have some children who did not have the power to fly and, so, [they had] to stay on the plantation. One of the daughters wanted to learn to fly and to work conjure. The father told her she had to learn the password . . .<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* as told by Virginia Hamilton, 166-173. Julius Lester, *Black Folktales*, 147-152

<sup>33</sup> "I hab heah uh dem people [the flying Africans]. . . . Muh mudduh use tuh tell me bout em wen we set in duh city market sellin vegetubbles an fruit. She say dat deah wuz a man an he wife an dey git fooled abode a slabe ship. Fus ting dey know dey wuz sole tuh a plantuh on St. Helena. So one day wen all duh slaves wuz tuhgedduh, dis man an he wife say, 'We gwine back home, goodie bye, goodie bye,' an jis like a bud dey flew out uh sight,' " in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, The Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration, 29.

<sup>34</sup>"Muh ma tell me many times bout a man an his wife wut could wuk cunjuh. Anytime dey want tuh dey would fly back tuh Africa an den come back agen tuh duh plantation. Dey come back cuz dey hab some chillun wut didn hab duh powuh tuh fly an hab tuh stay on duh plantation. One uh duh daughtuhs wanted tuh lun tuh fly an wuk cunjuh. Duh faduh tell uh she hab tuh lun duh passwud," *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, The Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration, 81..

Finally Prince Sneed offers this version:

My grandfather said that old man Waldburg down on St. Catherine owned some slaves [who] weren't [acclimated to slavery], [so] he worked them hard. One day they were hoeing in the field and the [slave] driver came out [to inspect]. Two of these slaves were under a tree in the shade, and their hoes were working by themselves. The driver said, "What's this?" And the slaves quickly said, 'Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe.'" Then they rose off the ground and flew away. Nobody ever saw them again. Some [folks] said they flew back to Africa. My grandfather saw that with his own eyes.<sup>35</sup>

For those of us in thrall to scientific causality, technical rationality, and scholarly objectivity, these stories belong only to the realm of the fantastic. But these particular narratives always give me pause. Conjured by a people chained in slavery, they represent release of desire and intelligent imagination, understanding of the meaning of freedom, love of family, the human spirit's resistance to foreclosure. Further, these narratives construct a counter-image to that of disempowered, ignorant, degraded slaves. Even if deceived, the Africans are clever; secret knowledge and power remain at their disposal. Once they grasp the full weight of their condition, they draw upon that knowledge and exercise that power to extricate themselves from bondage, and by extraordinary means. They fly away home to Africa. Unlike Icarus, who dared flight for curiosity and adventure, the Africans fly for survival, for liberation, for life. Their dramatic departure mocks slavery's chains and impresses an indelible memory on the hearts of those who cannot break gravity's bondage.

These memories call for a new mediation of sorrow and remorse, compassion and recompense as well as and a new way through which we may begin to feel and shoulder each other's suffering, dislocation, and pain *as if it were our own*.

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<sup>35</sup> "Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Du dribuh say, 'Wut dis?' an dey say, 'Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,' quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye," *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, The Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration, 79.

## Images of African Africans and African Americans

Writing thirty years ago about the relationship between Africans and African Americans, noted sociologist of the black lifeworld, St. Clair Drake concluded that “[d]espite the ever-present consciousness of Africa, very few [African] Americans since the Civil War have had any face-to-face contact with Africans.”<sup>36</sup> Most of the encounters that did occur between Emancipation (1863) and the close of the Second World War took place in the United States on the campuses of black educational institutions between African students and African American teachers. Africans from the West and Central Eastern parts of the Continent as well as Southern regions studied at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Hampton Institute in Virginia, Wilberforce College in Ohio, and Howard University in Washington, D.C.<sup>37</sup> African Americans made their way to those same regions as Christian missionaries (usually associated with historic African American or black Christian churches), teachers, physicians, sailors, and adventurers.

Earliest attempts at African and African American contact were fraught with difficulties. Nineteenth century colonization and back-to-Africa movements, generally organized under white auspices, attracted little African American interest. On the one hand, most blacks rightly perceived these schemes as attempts to deprive them of US citizenship and the benefits of their labor. On the other hand, from a distance of two centuries, practically, Africa meant little; fearful and disoriented like the Israelites of old, the enslaved peoples preferred the fleshpots of Egypt. Indeed, the disdain with which the emancipated slaves treated the indigenous peoples of Liberia demonstrated the psychologically destructive nature of chattel slavery, for it coaxed blacks to interiorize self-hatred, to repudiate blackness, and predisposed them to imitate white people, customs and mores.

Even today, few Americans, black or white, have been instructed adequately about the Continent and its varied peoples. This deficiency leaves Americans

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<sup>36</sup> St. Clair Drake, “Negro Americans and the Africa Interest,” in *The American Negro Reference Book*, ed. John P. Davis, 664.

<sup>37</sup> Y. Gershoni, *Africans on African-Americans: The Creation and Uses of an African American Myth*, 112-144.

ignorant: most of the time, most of us think of Africa and its people as a nether world, a dark and dangerous place whose peoples are unable to execute intricate programs or projects except with Western intervention.

Most of what average Americans know about Africa comes from the popular media. Televised news reports, journals, and papers rarely show us modern, technologically adept Africa; rather they publish photographs and reports of drought, famine, starvation, disease, and poverty.

Hollywood specializes in disturbing, distorted, often racist, images. "Tears of the Sun" is but the most recent example.

When we African Americans maintain that our participation and leadership are essential to the task of restoring Africa, when we insinuate that this work lies beyond the capacity of Africans and their traditional values, we repeat views promulgated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Edward Wilmot Bylden and Nigerian Protestant Bishop James Johnson.<sup>38</sup>

When Africans hold African Americans in contempt for the circumstances of our birth, the paucity of our educational and professional attainments, the state of our morality, they echo assessments made decades earlier by Casely Hayford and Kobina Sekyi.<sup>39</sup>

More contemporarily, because white Americans frequently invite Africans to the United States and find means of support, many Africans have become accustomed to seeing black Americans through white eyes. As a group white Americans know very little about African American history, cultural and social experience, and a substantial number of them are not motivated to learn. And although institutions and systems of the dominant culture exploit black creativity and intelligence, whites tend to emphasize black aberrant behavior. Pointing to the work of black critics and scholars<sup>40</sup> who thematize radical discontinuity between Africa and African Americans, most white Americans rarely include black Americans in

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<sup>38</sup> Y. Gershoni, *Africans on African-Americans: The Creation and Uses of an African American Myth* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 60-61.

<sup>39</sup> Y. Gershoni, *Africans on African-Americans: The Creation and Uses of an African American Myth*, 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> I am thinking here, particularly, of Stanley Crouch.



social or ecclesial projects that relate to the Continent and its peoples. They assume that blacks are not interested or have little, if anything, to offer. These interpretations, often filtered through a racist lens, do little to foster positive relationships between Africans and African Americans.

African Americans, who manage to free our minds of the regnant images of Africa, tend to romanticize and to freeze Africa in its pre-colonial period. We purchase and display ancient carvings, while eschewing modern African creativity; we own and wear indigenous dress cut on the Western bias; we read assiduously about Africa and Africans, but are reluctant to engage real live flesh-and-blood Africans. We African Americans want a static Africa, a vague homeland that we can enter and exit with as little difficulty and duty as possible. We forget that Africa is dynamic and changing. We forget that Africans are distinct in culture and tongue.

Africans, who manage to dismiss the negative images of African Americans, are often baffled and annoyed. African Americans mix cultures and religio-cultural elements with abandon. We emboss Adinkra religious symbols on stationery, conflate the ingredients of a Yoruba ritual with those of an Ashanti ceremony. We ask impolite questions, talk (or so it appears) incessantly about slavery, clap and shout at the least provocation, and seem adept at a single rhythm and volume. Africans want African Americans to be progressive and informed, thoughtful and reflective. Africans forget that we have had to remake ourselves from fragmented memories of rituals, words, gestures, songs, dances, and hopes. Africans forget that black peoples have endured bondage on the North American Continent for over 300 years and enjoyed statutory freedom for less than half that period.

We African Americans cannot remake Africa or Africans in our image; Africans cannot remake us in theirs. Attempts to do so betray any possibilities for solidarity.

### **Solidarity between Africans and African Americans**

The English word solidarity comes from the French, *solidarité*, and is derived from the reflexive verb, *se solidariser*, meaning to join together in liability; to be mutually dependent [upon], to make common cause [with]. The first definition of solidarity listed in the Oxford English Dictionary reads: *the fact or quality, on the part*

*of communities, etc., of being perfectly united or at one in some respect, especially in interests, sympathies, or aspirations. The second definition states: community or perfect coincidence of (or between) interests.*

A commonsense understanding of solidarity adverts to obvious or explicit relation or interest or connection. But this appropriation neither raises nor tackles questions about the cause of that relation or connection. Moreover, this understanding of solidarity overlooks the conditions of its possibility. On the one hand, mere commonsense understanding and use of a rhetoric of solidarity may provoke expectations or hopes in a certain person or group in regard to another person or group who may or may not be able or willing to fulfill those expectations or hopes. On the other hand, merely to have race or cultural-ethnicity in common cannot ensure bonds of solidarity. Rash and unfounded claims to such unity may result in great harm. Such claims reduce solidarity to a cliché and undermine the hard work so necessary to its realization.

Solidarity entails concrete praxis, that is, acting or doing in light reflective analysis. This praxis, this acting and doing, cannot be carried out on *behalf of the other or for the other as if the other were a minor without knowledge or competence.* The praxis of authentic solidarity requires that we act *with and beside the other.* At the same time, from a theological perspective, a political theological perspective in particular, solidarity calls for more than a list of social programs or policies, more than geo-political and economic strategies to which interested parties consent, although it can (and ought) to include such programs, policies, and strategies. Because solidarity is a gift of divine grace, it calls for more. Yet, like any gift it can be ignored, refused, or misused. Let me suggest three tasks that contribute to sustaining solidarity.

*First,* solidarity calls for a profound shift in our attitudes toward one another. One means to such a shift is found in knowledge. In order to erase the negative images of Africa and Africans that we continue to harbor, African Americans must confess to God and to our African brothers and sisters, the sins of ignorance, apathy, and rejection that we have committed against Africa and Africans. We must express our remorse by taking responsibility to develop a nuanced grasp of Africa as the Continent is today—varied in geography and history, people and cultures, languages

and religions; simultaneously urban and rural, modern and pre-modern; complex in economics and politics. This will require that we relinquish any romanticized view of Africa, that we seek occasions to engage flesh-and-blood Africans, that we do so with respect and sincere interest, and that we protest and resist images of Africa as a problem to be solved, and that we take full advantage of opportunities to visit African nations. Our remorse may be expressed through finding or supporting or creating avenues that promote accurate knowledge of African countries and peoples, in listening to and working with Africans to develop practical projects for collaboration.

In order to eliminate lingering negative images of African Americans, Africans must confess to God and to their African American brothers and sisters their sins against us. What those sins are Africans must decide: no one can confess for another. But surely, you may become more familiar with the complexity of our suffering in America—chattel slavery and peonage, rape and lynching, segregation and discrimination and their on-going impact. Surely, you may question your stereotypes and images of African Americans as these are promoted through the media and the lens of the dominant white culture. Again, only Africans can express African remorse. But, surely when you meet white Americans in your various vocations, positions, and occupations, ask, "Where are African Americans?" Ask our white colleagues to invite black participation. African Americans have intellectual, creative, financial resources, even if limited; we are able to contribute something, even if our gift is small.

Africans and African Americans must come to more accurate and more intimate knowledge of one another, to approach one another as persons of infinite worth. Self-critical examination of our attitudes and search for truth about one another pave the way for a *second* task in the realization of authentic solidarity—conversation, *palaver*. Sharing dangerous diasporic memories, telling our stories, speaking truth, confronting painful errors create the possibility for real palaver, for genuine conversation. Palaver is the highest form of dialogue. It takes place between human persons in full mutual recognition, regard, and honesty. Through recounting

our hopes and fears, griefs and joys, suffering and triumphs we reaffirm the basic communal character and interdependence of all human life.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Benezet Bujo reminds us that palaver engages the whole community, visible and invisible. Each human person participates because none of us can “construct the meaning of his [sic] life on his [sic] own.”<sup>42</sup>

[T]he human person, positioned within the tension between life and death, must excavate the truth existentially and sapientially through the total active commitment of his own person. The word “excavate” is meant to emphasize that the palaver does not limit itself methodologically to the discursive element (ratiocination), but makes use of all the realities of human existence, since it envisages the human person holistically.<sup>43</sup>

Through palaver words are offered, tested, received, chewed, digested to determine whether they bring healing or harm to the community. Because each human person can possess but a fraction of the word (truth), sharing is necessary for community, for solidarity.

Bujo ties palaver to human self-realization: “A good and correct word to which one listens well, a word correctly chewed and digested, is constitutive of the human person.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, palaver is doubly constitutive. Since the process of self-realization takes place in the context of community, it engenders a mutual recognition of persons and narratives (memories and stories). Thus palaver constitutes both the individual human person and the community.

Inasmuch as speech is a crucial medium of human interaction, the personal character of palaver forms the “site of a potential dispossession of self for the sake

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<sup>41</sup> We may call upon the African principle, “Because we are, I am; because I am we are.” This we includes the living, the Ancestors (the living Dead), and those yet unborn. At the same time, Africans extend this we to include the whole of humanity. This inclusiveness emerges in the African American Christian principle: “All human beings are children of the same God and equal in the divine sight.”

<sup>42</sup> B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, transl. Brian McNeil, 79

<sup>43</sup> B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, transl. Brian McNeil, 79-80.

<sup>44</sup> B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, transl. Brian McNeil, 186.

of the other as *kenosis*" or selfless self-giving.<sup>45</sup> To refuse the "responsibility and answerability"<sup>46</sup> of palaver denies the presence of the other, endangers the emergence of community, and frustrates solidarity. Interlocutors violate the integrity of palaver whenever they attempt to conceal, deceive, or criticize destructively. Genuine palaver enriches; it leads to mutual understanding, delight and joy.

The fruit of compassion grows from knowledge through palaver; hence, a *third* task of solidarity. Compassion ought not be confused with pity or tolerance, with altruism not the sickly patronizing charity that displaces justice. Rather, compassion is a social virtue.<sup>47</sup> It is rooted in the mutual recognition of self and other, the significance or, better, necessity of community for personhood, the basic human capacity to understand the mind of another, and our human ability to place ourselves in relation with others in their experience of concrete oppression and suffering.<sup>48</sup> Compassion freely and intentionally locates the self and the future (the destiny) of the self in relation with the other.<sup>49</sup>

Compassion makes it possible to meet our final obligation—recompense. The historical sin of slavery links us inextricably—Africans, African Americans, European Americans. But, the weight imposed by our joint, separate, and several histories is such that we cannot fulfill this obligation alone. Without the intercession and guidance of the Ancestors we cannot find the courage or humility to look with eyes of compassion upon one another. For compassion is needed if we are to grasp the agony of African Americans caught between African condescension and European American abandonment; compassion is necessary if we are to understand the struggle of Africans to extricate themselves from a "Manichean tradition" not of their making;<sup>50</sup> compassion is vital if we are to apprehend the effort of white Americans to confront and relinquish a privilege built on the humiliation of others. When we

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<sup>45</sup> O. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*, 254.

<sup>46</sup> O. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> M. Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," 27-58.

<sup>48</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 21-23.

<sup>49</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> W. Soyinka in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* writes: "In attempting to refute the evaluation to which black reality had been subjected, Négritude adopted the Manichean tradition of European thought and inflicted it on a culture which is most radically anti-Manichean. It not only accepted the dialectical structure of European ideological confrontations but borrowed them from the very components of its racist syllogism," 127.

approach one another with reverence, listen to one another with attention, act toward one another with regard, we begin to take up our joint, separate, and several obligations in the realization of recompense. Now such an other-centered dynamic of compassion may be mediated by philosophy or culture or art; but as Roman Catholics, the Eucharist offers a singular mediation of compassion.<sup>51</sup>

The word *Eucharist* is saturated with meaning. The etymology of the Greek verb *eu-carist-ein* denotes the "proper conduct of one who is the object of a gift," conduct that goes well beyond ordinary attitudes or gestures of gratitude.<sup>52</sup> Catholic teaching holds that the Eucharist is a sacrament, that is, a revealing sign (*sacrum signum*); sacraments disclose what is hidden or opaque. If as Augustine has argued that the Eucharist is "the symbol of what we are,"<sup>53</sup> that is, one in Christ Jesus, then the social consequences of Eucharist cannot be denied. Women and men must become what they receive, do what they are being made. Thus, Eucharistic becomes for us the revealing sign sacrament of a new and compassionate life of solidarity.

The eucharistic meal lies at the very heart of Christian community and recalls the selfless self-giving of Jesus of Nazareth who declared, "I am the bread of life . . . whosoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6: 35, 51). The selfless Jesus prepares a table for us; gather us around him in order that we might see him and one another as the Father sees us, and that through the love of Father and Son, through the power of the Spirit, we might be formed for new life, for compassion, for the gift of solidarity. Our conversion to this new life will be neither immediate nor undemanding; it exacts from us a self-giving that meets and resists any temptation to what theologian Johann Baptist Metz calls "subordinationist and paternalistic" relations. If we truly nourish ourselves from the bread of life, from the food of Christ's love, then our Eucharistic community "will become the symbol and provocation for a new and unprecedented praxis of sharing" among ourselves and with all other persons of good will.<sup>54</sup> For, inasmuch as we have been offered the divine gift of solidarity, the recompense of

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<sup>51</sup> D. F. Ford reminds us that the Eucharist is "the principal act of worship of the majority of the billion and a half or so Christians in the world today," *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, 197.

<sup>52</sup> J. Betz, "Eucharist," 448, in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, Sermon 272 (PL 38: 1246-1248); Sermon 227 (PL 38: 1099-1101).

<sup>54</sup> J. K. Downey, ed., *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, 58.

compassion that we owe to one another will exceed ordinary attitudes and gestures of reparation. To enact such recompense calls us to relinquish our existing prosperity and property, our apathetic middle-class ideals and comforts, our security and acquisitive materialism—to relinquish a life founded on domination.<sup>55</sup> Further, such recompense refuses to trivialize through sentimentality the historical sufferings of others. Because it reorients us and all that we do toward genuine life, recompense costs, and it costs each one us. For recompense initiates a praxis that disrupts business as usual—for ourselves and, therefore, for others.

So far, in this presentation I focused on what ought to precede a praxis of solidarity, instead of practical strategies. But, I can make a few observations. As compassion opens us to new relation with one each other, Africans and African Americans will incarnate solidarity in accord with our differing and sometimes conflictual experiences. At the same time, we may tap into common projects stemming from common interests. Such projects need not treat problems, although we have several severe social problems in common—HIV/AIDS and inadequate mass health care, economic underdevelopment, education and appropriate political participation. Still opportunities for collaboration, particularly for us as Roman Catholics, are plentiful. To pose just one example provided by the scandalous death of African American Catholic systematic and moral theologians and biblical scholars. The need for faculty in these areas has led the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) at Xavier University of Louisiana to seek assistance from our African counterparts. James Okoye, Paulinus Odozor, and Chris Egbulem have been gifts to our faculty and student body, but just as importantly these interactions have nurtured valuable and mutual friendships. Likewise the participation of African clergy and vowed religious women as students in the Institute has enriched our students, who are of African, Asian, and European descent. These exchanges contribute substantively not only to demolishing stereotypes, but also to building bridges of shared faith, intellectual work, pastoral concern, and companionship.

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<sup>55</sup> J. K. Downey, ed., *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, 58.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that a properly enacted hermeneutics of memory and hermeneutics of suspicion may allow a redemptive critique that nurtures solidarity. First, through excavating the memories of the enslaved peoples, then, interrogating African and African American mutual *misunderstanding*, I hoped to clear a space in which we might grasp the possibility for the realization of the divine gift of solidarity. In order for us to sustain this gift, I posed three tasks: knowledge, palaver, and compassion. I concluded by focusing on the singular power of Eucharist to mediate compassionate relations and foster authentic social praxis. Yet, the crucial social consequences cannot overtake the *real presences* that Eucharist effects. At the table that Jesus prepares, we all are assembled: a renewed community of faith, the living, the dead, and the Ancestors (the living-dead). In our presence, the Son of Man<sup>56</sup> gathers up the remnants of our memories, the broken fragments of our histories, blesses and transforms them in order to re-member us, to restore us, to make us whole.

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