

AFRICAN MORAL THEOLOGY

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[This third section of Notes on Moral Theology is devoted to recent developments in Africa, particularly regarding themes that emerged from the Synod of Africa (1994). The author provides a brief methodological preface before discussing first the role of inculturation in African moral theology. He then analyzes the ethical implications of an inculturated theology of marriage and family life. The third section addresses issues of justice, peace, and social reconciliation. The Note concludes with an assessment of the implications of his study for Western moral theology.]

IF THE CHURCH in the modern world is truly to be a world church,¹ it must, says Elochukwu Uzukwu, have “large ears.”² This section of the Notes on Moral Theology is devoted to soundings by African moral theologians in the local “sense of the faith” (*sensus fidei*)³—a supernatural reality that Karl Rahner called the “‘instinct’ of the faithful.”⁴ After a

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¹ See Karl Rahner, “The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council,” in *Theological Investigations* 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 716–27.

² Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 127–30, and passim. The image is drawn from totem of the chief among the Manja of the Central African Republic.

³ See *Lumen gentium* no. 12, in *Vatican II*, ed. Austin Flannery, inclusive language ed. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1996); *Gaudium et spes* no. 52.

⁴ Karl Rahner, “On the Encyclical ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’” in *Theological Investigations* 11 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 263–87, at 286. See Bishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan’s observation that “A good Christian ought to have a spiritual instinct to be able to determine what is acceptable and what is not” (“The Church in Africa Today,” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, compiled and edited by the Africa Faith and Justice Network under the direction of Maura Browne [Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis, 1996] 216).

brief, methodological preface, I consider, in particular, interpretations of motifs recurring in the historic Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops: inculturation with respect to African marriage and family life; and then issues relating to justice, peace, and reconciliation.

A METHODOLOGICAL PREFACE

Many years ago, the Ugandan poet and scholar Okot p'Bitek warned us against the hubris of trimming African wisdom to fit Western scholarly prejudices, e.g. the "myth of the 'primitive'."⁵ p'Bitek's critique reminds us that the sense or meaning of ethical behavior is never given *tout court*, but derives from the complex patterns of belief encoded in our cultural practices.⁶ In moral theology, as in the human sciences generally, understanding is always a "knowing of the known."⁷ A non-African interpreter must then proceed with even greater modesty, for he or she is implicated in a "triple hermeneutic" of interpreting African theologians' interpretations of the lived *sensus fidei*.⁸ I have accordingly limited the purview of my present inquiry to a set of themes emerging from the local church and prominent in the interpretation of African theologians.⁹ And since such a triple hermeneutic engages the interpreter, I conclude the essay by assessing the implications of African moral theology for Western moral-theological scholarship. In listening to the wisdom of the African Church, we are, in effect, reversing the hermeneutical flow of Western scholarly influence: Were *our* ears a bit larger, what might we learn?

⁵ Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

⁶ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 5.

⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976) 45.

⁸ See Anthony Giddens who argues that "sociology, unlike natural science, deals with a pre-interpreted world where the creation and reproduction of meaning-frames is a very condition of that which it seeks to analyze, namely human social conduct: this is why there is a double hermeneutic in the social sciences" (*New Rules of Sociological Method* [London: Hutchinson, 1976] 158).

⁹ To preserve the family resemblance of interpretations, my analysis is confined to moral themes addressed by sub-Saharan African theologians, including systematic theologians where appropriate. Limiting my inquiry to motifs from the African Synod, moreover, favors Roman Catholic theologians, although pertinent ecumenical contributions are likewise noted. The most widely available texts are written in English and French, yet texts in local languages remain a wellspring of wisdom. For the significance of vernacular texts, see Kwame Bediako, "How is It That We Hear in Our Own Languages the Wonders of God?" in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INCULTURATION

On the feast of the Epiphany (January 6, 1989), John Paul II announced an African Synod on the theme of “The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: ‘You Shall Be My Witnesses’ (Acts 1:8).”¹⁰ After local consultation, the preparatory *lineamenta* (first draft) was promulgated at the ninth General Assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in Lome, Togo, on July 25, 1990, and the concluding *instrumentum laboris* (working paper) issued by the pope in Kampala, Uganda, on February 9, 1993. The Synod was convened in Rome on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 10, 1994, and completed its work on May 8.

Of the major synodal topics, only the issue of justice and peace emerged with greater frequency than that of inculturation.¹¹ Originally a theological

¹⁰ For an assessment of the African Synod’s texts, see *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*. The text includes: “The *Lineamenta* Questions,” representative interventions, “The Message of the Synod,” The Synodal Propositions, and John Paul II’s postsynodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. See also *What Happened at the African Synod?* ed. Cecil McGarry (Nairobi: Paulines, 1995); Aylward Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination: After the Synod Resources for Inculturation* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1998).

¹¹ Representative texts of the extensive literature on inculturation in Africa include: *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianisme sans fête: Révélation et domination* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981); Efoé-Julien Penoukou, *Églises d’Afrique: Propositions pour l’avenir* (Paris: Karthala, 1984); Justin S. Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba, 1984); and his “Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Jean-Marc Ela, *Le Cri de l’homme africain* (Paris: Harmattan, 1980); and his *Ma foi d’africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1985); John Mary Waliggo et al., *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1986); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986); and her *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); Alward Shorter et al. *Towards African Christian Maturity* (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1987); Achiel Peelman, *L’inculturation: L’Église et les cultures* (Paris: Desclée, 1988); Lamin Sanneh, *The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); and his *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); and his *Religion and the Variety of Culture: A Study in Origin and Practice* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity, 1996); Bénézet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1990); Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990); José Chipenda et al. *Towards a Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1991); Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); and his “Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions,” in *Paths of African Theology: The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*,

term of art, inculturation signifies, in the bishops' words, the "incarnation of the christian life and message in a particular context."¹² The bishops affirm that "the Gospel itself becomes the principle that purifies, guides, animates and elevates the culture, transforming it in such a way that here is a new creation."¹³ Such a "synthesis between culture and faith"¹⁴ is "a demand of evangelization . . . the fruit of listening, welcoming, or reflecting on and assimilating the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." As a "movement toward full evangelization," the process of inculturation "embraces the whole life of the church and the whole process of evangelization. It includes theology, liturgy, church structures, and life." Finally, "compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the universal church" serve as touchstones of a non-syncretistic synthesis of faith and culture.¹⁵

"[A]ll aspects of christian life must be inculturated"¹⁶ writes John Mary

ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); Eugene Hillman, *Toward an African Christianity: Inculturation Applied* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Kä Mana, *Théologie africaine pour temps de crise: Christianisme et reconstruction de l'Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1993); Josiah U. Young, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993); *Inculturation: IMBISI Study Document* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1993); Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Alward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); Nwaka Chris Egbulem, *The Power of Africentric Celebrations: Inspirations from the Zairean Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996); J. N. K. Mugambi, ed., *The Church and the Future in Africa: Problems and Promises* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997); Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2000). See entries in the journals *African Ecclesial Review*, *Hekima Review*, *African Christian Studies*, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa*, *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, *Téléma*, *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, *Bulletin de théologie africaine*, *Revue des facultés catholiques de Kinshasa*.

¹² See Group Reports, English C, in *Bulletins of the Holy See Press Office*, no. 29 (28.04.1994) 6–14, as cited in J. Carreño, "A Truly African Church," in *What Happened at the African Synod* 54.

¹³ Proposition 28, "Propositions," in *The African Synod* 96–97.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* no. 78 in *The African Synod* 257.

¹⁵ Propositions 30–32, "Propositions," in *ibid.* 97–98; see John Paul II's gloss in *Ecclesia in Africa* no. 62 in *The African Synod* 251.

¹⁶ John Mary Waliggo, "'The Synod of Hope' at a Time of Crisis in Africa," in *The African Synod* 206.

Waliggo, including “christian morality.” Moral theology is “subject to inculturation,”¹⁷ just as the evangelical demand of inculturation, in John Mutiso-Mbinda’s words, must be regarded morally as “not only a duty but a right.”¹⁸ Several theologians demur, however, that the *lineamenta* fails to develop the dialectical implications of a synthesis between culture and faith. While “culture is supposed to be ‘transformed’ to accept Christianity,” far too little, writes Justin Ukpong, is said regarding “a possible re-interpretation of the gospel message in the light of a new cultural experience.”¹⁹ John Paul II’s postsynodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, for instance, maps the kenotic “logic” of the Incarnate Word onto a “classicist” schema of ahistorical moral norms,²⁰ so that it is culture, rather than our interpretation of “Gospel values,” which “needs to be transformed.”²¹

Whether, or in what respects, these values are “synthesized” depends no less on our interpretation of culture. In their dialogue with African Traditional Religion, the bishops acknowledge the propaedeutic value of traditional religious wisdom (i.e. for inculturation).²² Yet as Laurenti Magesa argues in his magisterial *African Religion: The Moral Tradition of Abundant Life*, a heritage of colonial (and neo-colonial) domination and racism has contributed to the “intellectual suppression of the ethical points of view of African Religion.” Viewing the proverbial wisdom of palaver as “primitive” relative to mature, European Christianity or other “world religions,” missionaries and students of comparative religion alike robbed African religion “of its universal character,” thereby minimizing “its role in conversation with other religions.”²³ Such genealogical hubris not only condemns Africans to perpetual nonage, but endlessly defers an incarnation of the Christian message into what is truly “other.”

¹⁷ John Mary Waliggo, “Making a Church That Is Truly African,” in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* 19–20; see also Theoneste Nkeramihigo, “Inculturation and the Specificity of Christian Faith,” *ibid.* 69–71.

¹⁸ John Mutiso-Mbinda, “Inculturation: Challenge to the African Church,” in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* 78.

¹⁹ Justin S. Ukpong, “A Critical Review of the *Lineamenta*” 35.

²⁰ See Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” in *Theology of Renewal*, vol. 1: *Renewal of Religious Thought*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 34–46; and “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Mindedness,” in *Law for Liberty*, ed. James. E. Biechler (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967) 126–33.

²¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* nos. 60–61 in *The African Synod* 250–51.

²² Proposition 42, in “Propositions: Synod Documents” in *The African Synod* 101.

²³ Magesa, *African Religion* 5, 19; see also 287–88.

AFRICAN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Redressing such bias, writers such as Magesa sketch the lineaments of an authentic African moral theology. Enriched by the “surplus of meaning of African Religion,”²⁴ their inculturated theology attests to the ethical primacy of “abundant life”—a leitmotif running through their treatment of African marriage and family life. So central is life’s preservation and perpetuation that, John Paul observes, “[n]ot only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church* as *God’s Family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa.”²⁵

The ideal of abundant life serves as a rich, polyvalent symbol in traditional moral wisdom, integrating what in the West have emerged as discrete cognitive, moral, and expressive modes of knowing or “value spheres.”²⁶ African moral wisdom is irreducibly religious, just as “religion is far more than ‘a believing way of life’ or ‘an approach to life’ directed by a book. It is a ‘way of life’ or life itself, where a distinction or separation is not made between religion and other areas of human existence.” As such, traditional religion, writes Magesa, “is much more morally/ethically-based than doctrinally-based.”²⁷ In a similar vein, the intergenerational transmission of the “forces of life” or “vital forces,”²⁸ uniting those living with the ancestors (remembered dead) and those yet to be born, reflects the inseparability of the “spiritual” and “natural” domains.

The integrative symbolization of what John Mbiti describes as the “natural, moral and mystical order” likewise militates against the individualist reduction of agency in much modern moral theory.²⁹ As the great “Primal Ancestor” (*Unkulunkulu* [Zulu], *Omukama* [Ganda], *Nyame* [Akan] et al.), God not only sustains the created order, but orders creation in communion and ever-renewed relationship.³⁰ In a moral mimesis of God’s grandeur and graciousness in Creation, “sociability in the sense of hospi-

²⁴ Ibid. 13.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* no. 63 in *The African Synod* 251–52. See Orobator, *The Church as Family* 17–47.

²⁶ See Jürgen Habermas’s analysis of “Occidental rationalism” in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981) 157–85.

²⁷ Magesa, *African Religion* 25, 23. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology,” in *African Theology en Route*, 109–16; Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. John O’Donohue (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1986) 17–37.

²⁸ The terminology derives from Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1948).

²⁹ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975) 39.

³⁰ See Magesa, *African Religion* 40.

tality, open-hearted sharing,” constitutes the primary ethical demand of traditional religion.³¹ As Engelbert Mveng observed:

The individual is not a person in the African understanding of the latter term; it is simply the projected outline of a person. The human being is defined as a person insofar as it is a network of interpersonal and cosmic relationships. It is the recapitulation of both the cosmos and humanity. Human beings are linked to each other and the world; they are an extension of both. Every human initiative effects fulfillment, insofar as the cosmos once again attains freedom and awareness; and it also sets in motion the whole world system that pivots about our being. The African notion of the person is dynamic. One is all the more a person insofar as one is integrated into the world and society.³²

Traditional rites of initiation and passage weave one ever more finely into the fabric of “interpersonal and cosmic relationships.” Such a comprehensive, communitarian anthropology, concluded Mveng, has immediate ethical consequences: “Moral responsibility means taking charge of one’s destiny, a destiny that is inextricably bound up with the destiny of both the cosmos and the human community.” The sublation of “abundant life” in the Incarnation of Jesus thus “realizes a *new creation* that contains a new humanity, a new heaven, and a new earth”³³—a new destiny, one might say, that is expressively realized in an ethics at once religious and natural (i.e., one mediating between a “faith ethic” and an “autonomous” morality).³⁴

Against this interpretative backdrop, the Synod Fathers cite the traditional proverb that “marriage is the main post of the hut.”³⁵ “For African peoples,” writes Mbiti, “marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time met here, and the

³¹ Ibid. 62; see also 285–88.

³² Engelbert Mveng, “Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language,” trans. John Drury, in *African Theology en Route* 139. See Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. K. A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1969) 139.

³³ Mveng, “Black African Art” 139. One observes the affinities of Mveng’s “cosmic liturgy” with Rahner’s foundational interpretation of “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Theological Investigations* vol. 5, trans. Karl H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 157–92. Yet to a far greater degree than Rahner, Mveng integrated the esthetic and social implications of the Incarnation.

³⁴ See Bénédet Bujó, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South*, trans. Cecilia Namulondo Nganda (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1997) 15–89; Joseph Kariuki, “New Trends in Moral Theology,” in *Towards African Christian Maturity* 137–56.

³⁵ *Instrumentum laboris* no. 68, cited in Arethas Shirima, “African Marriage and Family,” in *What Happened at the African Synod* 72.

whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized.”³⁶ To the natural sacramentality of marriage, there corresponds, in Mveng’s words, the ecclesial sacrament as “the cosmic manifestation of the incarnation.”³⁷ As Synodal interventions testify, however, the ecclesial correlation of these moments remains a vexed issue.

Bishops Raphael Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki of Kenya and Ephraim Silas Obot of Nigeria voiced the common complaint that the African Church has failed to integrate traditional and Christian rites of marriage. The complex process or stages of traditional marriage uniting not merely husband and wife, but their respective extended families, typically precede the rite of Christian marriage. Yet, laments Bishop Mwana a’Nzeki, though “many of our Christian faithful have finalized their marriage in the traditional way according to the African custom of their own tribe,” they are denied sacramental blessing. And since traditional marriage is not canonically recognized, “they are considered by the church to be living in concubinage.”³⁸ Recalling Bishop L. A. Sangare’s plea for greater local episcopal authority to legislate on marriage issues, Uzukwu contends that “integration of African customary and Christian marriage” is best served, not by yet another study commission on polygamy, childlessness, inheritance, Levirate marriage, etc., but by ecclesial “decentralization” in a truly inculturated *communio ecclesiae*.³⁹

Ecclesial structures, moreover, often neglect or minimize the rich repository of women’s wisdom, even on issues which most affect them. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, one of the best-known African feminist theologians, comments sagely, “the theology deemed appropriate for African men is not always appropriate for women. An Akan proverb says *Nea oda ne gya na onim senea ehyehye fa* (‘it is the person sleeping by the fire who knows the intensity of the heat’).”⁴⁰ Like the proverbial scribe who can draw from wisdom’s storehouse what is old and new, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Teresa

³⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) 174; see also Magesa, *African Religion* 115–48.

³⁷ Mveng, “Black African Art” 140.

³⁸ See *Bulletin* no. 13, cited in *What Happened at the African Synod* 73; see Proposition 35, in “Propositions: Synod Documents,” in *The African Synod* 98–99; see also Cardinal Thiandoum’s *Report after the Interventions* no. 6. The converse problem arises when partners in a canonical marriage divorce and are remarried.

³⁹ Uzukwu, *A Listening Church* 58–59, 146–48.

⁴⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christian Feminism and African Culture: The ‘Hearth’ of the Matter,” in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 442; cf. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* supra, a recent publication of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, “Church Women of Africa: A Theological Com-

Okure, Bernadette Mbuy-Beya and others seek to mediate “the Christian message into African cultures” in a “creative process in which a new Christian culture gradually emerges.” Nasimiyu-Wasike writes of polygamy (polygyny): To “dismiss the African women in polygamous unions as non-wives” for the sake of the husband’s baptism, “is to fail to recognize the concept of marriage in the African traditional beliefs.” Indeed, such a “resolution” merely perpetuates the patriarchal bias embedded in the institution of polygynous marriage. Yet as the latter criticism testifies, transmission of abundant life is never simply mere reproduction. Gospel values of equity, respect, and liberty must leaven traditional wisdom, e.g., in interpretations of traditional (and Christian) creation myths that recover “the original will of God for . . . equal partnership and mutual relationship between men and women.”⁴¹ Only thus, says Okure, will women be “restored to their rightful God-given place in [African] society.”⁴²

A similar “contextual approach” reveals the tragic irony resulting when HIV/AIDS renders the means of perpetuating life inimical to its preservation. Recent reports from the UN testify to the enormity of the crisis in sub-Saharan Africa,⁴³ yet an effective response is often wanting inasmuch as traditional interpretative resources are neglected or disparaged by the prevailing religious, ethical, and scientific discourses. Rather, then, than rejecting the explanatory force of witchcraft (*uchawi*, in Kiswahili⁴⁴) in the “perception of disease aetiology,” Magesa imaginatively applies it to promiscuous behavior imperilling the community’s “abundant life.”⁴⁵ Bujo similarly argues against “one-dimensional and individual oriented” approaches (e.g., condom distribution) that effectively separate sexuality from responsibility for the common good.⁴⁶

munity,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 3–13.

⁴¹ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Polygamy: A Feminist Critique,” in *The Will to Arise* 114–16; see Bette Ekeya, “Woman, For How Long Not?” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 139–48; Teresa M. Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa,” *ibid.* 261–68.

⁴² Teresa Okure, “The Will to Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40–56,” in *The Will to Arise* 229.

⁴³ See unaid.org/africapartnership/whatis.html.

⁴⁴ See Magesa, *African Religion* 179–91.

⁴⁵ Laurenti Magesa, “Recognizing the Reality of African Religion in Tanzania,” in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, ed. James F. Keenan (New York: Continuum, 2000) 76–84. See likewise the contributions by James Good, Stuart C. Bate, and Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor.

⁴⁶ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* 181–95.

JUSTICE, PEACE, AND RECONCILIATION

Our preceding discussion of polygamy and AIDS brings into relief the methodological question of the nature and scope of moral argumentation adumbrated in section one. Polygamy and AIDS, for instance, may be viewed from an ethical (communitarian) point of view which privileges local narrative tradition and cultural belief. Traditional sanctions of polygamy remain sacrosanct, as would the explanatory role of *uchawi*. In a similar vein, “female circumcision” would be assimilated to the “language game” of rite and ritual initiation. Conversely, the very same practices may be interpreted from the moral point of view such that invariant moral norms or universal precepts are merely applied in differing cultural contexts. Interpreted thus, polygamy is inconsistent with modern (Western) notions of marital equality and human rights; the etiology of AIDS viewed in secular, biomedical terms; and “female circumcision,” redescribed in the discourse of rights as “genital mutilation.”

The question of an inculturated moral theology thus joins the broader methodological dispute represented in Western moral epistemology by “thin” (neo-Lockean or neo-Kantian) theories of abstract, universal human rights, on one hand, and “thick” (neo-Aristotelian or neo-Hegelian) narrative ethics of the common good on the other.⁴⁷ Yet, as the interpretations of Magesa, Bujo, or Nasimiyu-Wasike attest, the epistemic antithesis of (universal) morality and (culturally particular) ethics underwriting Western liberal and communitarian politics need not be adopted uncritically on African soil. Rather, their use of rights language reflects a remarkably rich rereading of the tradition in which the notion of subjective rights “lives on and transforms itself” in translation—a translation, in Jacques Derrida’s words, that then “will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself.”⁴⁸

Although critical of inequities borne by women in polygamous marriages, Nasimiyu-Wasike nonetheless attends to the cultural role and functions played by the institution within the larger web of social relations.⁴⁹ Magesa, as we have seen, redeploys the traditional rhetoric of witchcraft in an imaginative variation of tradition; while Oduyoye, cognizant of the polysemy of cultural narratives, seeks to “explore traditional matriarchal values to determine which aspects might be woven into new forms of

⁴⁷ See Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1994).

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “*Des Tours de Babel*,” in *Difference in Translation*, trans. and ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985) 165–207, at 188.

⁴⁹ For the social role of polygyny, see Magesa, *African Religion* 136–40.

[equitable] relations between men and women.”⁵⁰ For Oduyoye, criticism must emerge within the hermeneutical circle or spiral of cultural understanding and transmission: “African women who are studying or challenging such practices [as female genital mutilation] tread lightly in their desire to learn and to participate in what they see as a necessary transformation of the practice.”⁵¹

In each case, their invocation of rights does not so much displace traditional wisdom as provide a critical hermeneutic for its “translation” or reinterpretation. Indeed, the internal complexity of cultural attitudes and beliefs precludes a univocal reading: dissident voices, woven into narrative, may be coaxed, e.g., through the rhetoric of rights, to speak as tradition “lives on” precisely in “transforming itself.” Yet if rights configure what Oduyoye describes as a “reweaving” of cultural patterns of belief, so too, rights are themselves rewoven, i.e., inculturated precisely as rights.⁵² African “inculturation theology” and black “liberation theology,” though distinct in origin, thus increasingly appear as the warp and woof of a single fabric.⁵³ Synodal interventions, for instance, viewed both the promotion of inculturation and of basic human rights as integral to evangelization. In the words of Peter K. Sarpong, Bishop of Kumasi, Ghana, a “good understanding of inculturation exposes acts of exploitation and injustice as culturally condemnable, deplorable, and indefensible.”⁵⁴

Several African moral theologians have emphasized distinctive features of an African translation of human rights rhetoric. Uzukwu argues that African appropriation of human rights rhetoric must be “guided by the African relational notion” of the person: “African anthropology . . . parts company with . . . modern Western [individualism] to insist that communicability is of the very essence of the person. The autonomy and rights of the individual subject are enjoyed in relationship, in communication.”⁵⁵ Bujo writes similarly that in African tradition the uniqueness of moral persons rests not in abstracting the Individual from the ensemble of social

⁵⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology in an African Perspective,” in *Paths of African Theology* 176.

⁵¹ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa* 165.

⁵² *Ibid.* 208–18.

⁵³ See Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*; Josiah U. Young, *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986); and J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995); Simeon O. Ilesanmi, “Inculturation and Liberation: Christian Social Ethics and the African Theology Project,” in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1995) 49–73.

⁵⁴ Peter K. Sarpong, “Conclusion,” in *The African Synod 222*; for traditional “political” values, see Magesa, *African Religion* 245–83.

⁵⁵ Uzukwu, *A Listening Church* 41, 44.

relations but precisely in “the communitarian dimension of life.” The discourse of human rights, accordingly, must reflect the natural “interdependence between the individual and society.”⁵⁶ In Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s words, an ethics of *ubuntu* signifies that “‘a person is a person through other people’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong’. I participate, I share.”⁵⁷

Socially extended and mediated across generations, the ideal of abundant life provides a template for reinterpreting rights rhetoric in terms of such complex interdependence.⁵⁸ Simeon O. Ilesanmi argues that a “religious vision of the ‘fullness of life’ ” undergirds the fundamental “interdependence of rights,” enabling “us to see and address problems preventing the continuation of life, whether political, social, and/or economic.” An African reconstruction of rights rhetoric thus serves to overcome the putative dichotomy between “so-called negative rights and positive rights.” Human rights, that is, impose correlative duties, not only of forbearance, but of generating structures that protect, ensure, and promote the enjoyment of basic social goods.⁵⁹

Such an integral and comprehensive conception of basic human rights, moreover, reveals the internal interdependence of the “politics of rights” in Western political liberalism and the communitarian “politics of the common good.”⁶⁰ An inculturated understanding of rights on African soil thus

⁵⁶ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* 147–48.

⁵⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999) 34–35, 127, 154–55; see Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997); Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 141.

⁵⁸ To a limited degree, the Banjul Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on June 27, 1981, offers such a “communitarian” interpretation. See H. O. W. Okoth-Ogendo, “Human and Peoples’ Rights: What Point Is Africa Trying to Make?” in *Human Rights and Governance in Africa*, ed. Ronald Cohen et al. (Miami: Florida University, 1993) 76.

⁵⁹ Simeon O. Ilesanmi, “Civil-Political Rights or Social Economic Rights for Africa? A Comparative Ethical Critique of a False Dichotomy,” in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1997) 191–212, at 210–11. See also his “Human Rights Discourse in Modern Africa: A Comparative Religious Ethical Perspective,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (1995) 309–16; Harvey Sindima, “The Community of Life,” *The Ecumenical Review* 41 (1989) 543–49; and *Human Rights in Africa: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im and Francis M. Deng (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1990); Aquiline Tarimo and William O’Neill, “What San Salvador Says to Nairobi: The Liberation Ethics of Ignacio Ellacuría,” in *Love That Produces Hope: Essays on the Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Robert Lassalle-Klein and Kevin Burke, forthcoming.

⁶⁰ See Michael Sandel, “Introduction,” in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University, 1984) 4, 6, 10. A conception of rights is

redeems the presumption of modern Roman Catholic social teaching, figuring prominently in synodal texts, that the ethical ideal of the *universal* common good is to be understood precisely in terms of the structural prerequisites of a basic rights regime, e.g., provision of basic social guarantees to welfare, health care, and gender equity in redressing the social devastation of HIV/AIDS.⁶¹ Where, conversely, such basic prerequisites are systematically undermined, whether domestically by corrupt, autocratic rule or globally by the inequitable debt or refugee burden borne by African states,⁶² suffering may be so extreme as to constitute what Mveng terms the “structural sin” of “anthropological poverty.”⁶³

An African inculturation of rights rhetoric accordingly cedes lexical priority to those rights most necessary for attaining basic well-being and “the continuation of life,” providing backing for the Church’s fundamental “option for the poor.” In an intervention reflecting the complex, interdependent character of rights, Telesphore George Mpundu, Bishop of Mbala-Mpika, Zambia, argued that the way of life entailed by evangelization in Africa “embraces a spiritual compassion with the suffering, a social solidarity to empower the poor and oppressed, a political effort to change unjust structures and a cultural commitment to non-violence.”⁶⁴ Jean-Marc Éla writes eloquently that “[n]ew paths of evangelization open up to Christians wherever they and their churches make an effort to redefine themselves in terms of service to persons stripped of their rights.” Indeed: “Our primordial sacrament should be the poor and the oppressed, those disturbing witnesses of God in the warp and woof of our history. African reality imposes on the church a kind of *pedagogy of the discovery of situations of sin and oppression*—situations that rear their heads in contradiction with the project of the salvation and liberation in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁵

Notable among such situations, writes Nasimiyu-Wasike, is the subju-

integral if it exhibits the interdependence of basic rights and duties, and comprehensive if it comprises all basic rights and duties.

⁶¹ See Propositions nos. 44–56 in *The African Synod* 101–56. For an illustration of the local Church’s social teaching, see *The Conscience of Society: The Social Teaching of the Catholic Bishops of Kenya 1960–1995*, ed. Rodrigo Mejía (Nairobi: Paulines, 1995).

⁶² See Propositions nos. 49, 53 in *The African Synod* 103–5.

⁶³ Engelbert Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World,” in *Paths of African Theology* 158. See Laurenti Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” in *ibid.* 151–63; Jean-Marc Éla, “La Foi des pauvres en acte,” *Telema* 35 (July–September 1983) 45–72.

⁶⁴ Telesphore George Mpundu, “Some Interventions on Justice and Peace,” in *The African Synod* 110.

⁶⁵ Jean-Marc Éla, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” in *Paths of African Theology* 143–44.

gated status of women in “patriarchal dominated societies.”⁶⁶ Bernadette Mbuy-Beya elaborates upon the social and ecclesial implications of the struggle “for the liberation of women,” against multiple forms of violence and deprivation; while Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana decry both racial and “gender apartheid” in society and the churches. Their “pedagogy of discovery,” moreover, typically unfolds in narrative form, recounting the theology of ordinary women which, says Nasimiyu-Wasike, is not “written and articulated,” but “lived and practiced in everyday activities and experiences.”⁶⁷

The hermeneutical implications of a narrative practice of rights are underscored by two historic events framing the synod’s deliberations: the Rwandan genocide that began on Easter Wednesday, April 6, and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected President of South Africa on May 10. In predominately Catholic Rwanda, a legacy of uncivil strife culminated in the massacre of over half a million Tutsi as well as Hutu opposing the genocide. Three quarters of the Rwandese Tutsi population fell victim to the genocide; the elderly, children, the infirm, all were killed; nor was there haven.⁶⁸ The horror was unmitigated, but not inexplicable, for the killing was due less to atavistic enmity than a racist mythology, nurtured in the colonial period and abetted by Belgian and later French *Realpolitik*.⁶⁹ Although favoring elite interests, the totalizing myth of Hutu supremacy divested the imagined “other” of moral standing so that the massacres by the militia (*Interahamwe*) seemed banal.

Over against such an extreme expression of a communitarian ethos, Rwandan theologians Augustin Karekezi, Théoneste Nkeramihigo, and Octave Ugirashebuja invoke rights rhetoric to extend the “common good”

⁶⁶ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Response to Rev. Dr. Alward Shorter’s Paper,” in *Towards African Christian Liberation* (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1990) 25.

⁶⁷ Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, “Human Sexuality, Marriage, and Prostitution,” in *The Will to Arise* 166; Thoko Mpumlwana, “My Perspective on Women and Their Role in Church and Society,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World* 164; Roxanne Jordaan, “Black Feminist Theology in South Africa,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World* 150–56; Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christology and an African Woman’s Experience,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* 76.

⁶⁸ See Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University, 1995) 237–68; Human Rights Watch, *Leave None to Tell The Story* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999) 1–30. See Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux: 1998); Africa Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance*, rev. ed. (London: Africa Rights, 1995); Stef Vandeginste, “L’approche vérité et réconciliation du génocide et des crimes contre l’humanité au Rwanda,” in *L’Afrique des Grands Lacs. Annuaire 1997–1998* (Paris: Harmattan, 1998).

⁶⁹ See Alain Destexhe, *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Alison Marschner (New York: New York University, 1995) 47.

of the family or ethnic group to the moral community of *all* affected, Hutu and Tutsi alike.⁷⁰ The narrative embodiment of rights permits a limited commensurability of discrete traditions, where genocide is fittingly described as such. Only with such moral remembrance says Karekezi, can we speak of reconciliation and “a future with hope” (Jer. 29:11).⁷¹ In a similar fashion, rights figure in the unfolding *narrative* of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As the ethical expression of *ubuntu*, the rights rhetoric inscribed in victims’ stories deconstructs the supremacist narrative of apartheid even while serving to reconstruct a common, interracial/ethnic narrative of citizenship: In unearthing “the truth about our dark past,” writes Tutu, their stories “contribute to the healing of a traumatised and wounded people—for all of us in South Africa are wounded people—and in this manner . . . promote natural unity and reconciliation.”⁷²

IMAGINING OTHERWISE: CONCLUSIONS

There are, of course, many other themes not treated here, and still more variations played upon them by moral (and systematic) theologians not mentioned or discussed at length. Our rehearsal of the foregoing motifs is, at best, a prelude not a coda. Yet even so, as a “listening Church,” we may be instructed by the subtle inflections of African moral theology. Let me conclude by noting three lessons for moral theology, offered in the spirit of African palaver: (1) the narrative (communitarian) construction of rights, (2) the surplus of religious meaning, and (3) the retrieval of nature in Christian ethics.

(1) As I observed in my section on African marriage and family, the metaphor of abundant life reveals the coherence of tradition precisely in being “handed on” anew. The renewal of life rests not in a repristination of the pastness of the past, but rather in its novel “translation” as identity is mediated in difference, e.g., in the naming ceremonies that embed a person

⁷⁰ See *L’Eglise Catholique à l’épreuve du génocide*, ed. Jean-Pierre Karegeye and Faustin Rutembesa (Montreal-Butare: Africana-Presses Universitaires du Rwanda, 2000).

⁷¹ Augustin Karekezi, “In Memory of the Victims of the Genocide in Rwanda” (Kigali, Rwanda, 12 April 1995) 5; See David Hollenbach, “Report from Rwanda: An Interview with Augustin Karekezi,” *America* 145 (Dec. 7, 1996) 13–17.

⁷² Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* 86–87; South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, 5 vols. (Cape Town: The Commission, 1998). See *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Black Theology from South Africa*, ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986); Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992); *Doing Ethics in Context: South African Perspectives* ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John De Gruchy (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994).

in community, as “a unique and inexchangeable being.”⁷³ In my section on justice, peace, and reconciliation, moreover, I argued that African moral theologians have translated the respect enjoined by such “uniqueness and inexchangeability” in a communitarian reconstruction of rights rhetoric—one ceding lexical priority to the moral imperatives of *abundant* life (basic, negative and positive claim-rights). So conceived, rights are schematized narratively in what is “said,” even as what we “say” in narrating is governed by “deep grammar” of basic rights.⁷⁴

We need not, then, assume an antimony of a “thick” narrative ethics beholden to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* and a “thin” metanarrative of rights of Kantian provenance (*Moralität*). For in depicting rights as the deep grammar of reweaving tradition, e.g., in attending to victims’ voices in the TRC, we establish the grounds for the “family resemblance” of our differing cultural narratives. What we hand on completes itself by enlarging itself, so that moral criticism within and across our narratives is disclosed as an internal virtuality of tradition itself. Neither thick nor thin, the rhetoric of rights is inculturated in the praxis of narration, just as our particular cultural narratives are amenable to moral critique. But if this is so, the further question arises whether rights are fittingly described in religious terms as gospel values.⁷⁵

(2) The question presents itself in the context of that airy term, “globalization,” which often seems little more than a cipher for what Habermas terms “Occidental rationalism.” As Habermas, following Max Weber argues, western modernity’s ascendancy is characterized by the differentiation of cognitive, ethical, and expressive value spheres: marked by procedural formalism and abstract universality, modern morality is thoroughly “disenchanted.” To be sure, as in the “autonomy school” of moral theology, particular religious narratives may provide laudable motivation, but the norms governing moral conduct (the content of the *humanum*) are logically and semantically independent of distinctive religious attitudes and beliefs.⁷⁶ Now, the surplus of religious meaning in African moral wisdom sheds light here as well. For if, as I argued in (1), the moral grammar of narrating (saying) is distinct, but finally inseparable from the narration (what is said), then it becomes possible to maintain both that our morality is irreducibly religious and that it bears a family resemblance (as concretely

⁷³ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* 148; see also 25–28, 147–56.

⁷⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958) pt. 1, pars. 497, 664.

⁷⁵ See Mageša, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today” 157–62; Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 102–12.

⁷⁶ See William O’Neill, *The Ethics of Our Climate: Hermeneutics and Ethical Theory* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1994) chap. 7.

universal) to other religious or secular ethical narratives.⁷⁷ Comprising a concrete “way of life” or ethos, ethics shows forth its moral grammar, but ethical narratives cannot be reduced to rights any more than language can be reduced to grammar. Grammar emerges performatively, in the telling or saying, just as rights are exhibited in distinctively religious narratives. Religion, moreover, not only funds our interpretation of morally relevant action, but may likewise provide *ultimate* backing for rights as warrants. The practical vindication of rights thus leaves open the possibility of a transcendent foundation, as in Christian belief that moral persons are created in the *imago Dei*. In the words of Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania, “we say [we] are created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, tearful, oppressed, wretched—which is the lot of the majority of those . . . created in [God’s] image.”⁷⁸ Indeed, as Tutu’s writing testifies, religious belief may finally be indispensable for imparting both meaning and validity to our rhetoric of social reconciliation and forgiveness.⁷⁹

Finally, (3) just as we may refuse to separate the religious from the ethical domains, so African wisdom holds the promise of restoring “nature” to ethical and religious critique. The question is especially exigent in the case of ecological ethics, for western interpretations seem fated to founder on either an anthropocentric (Kantian) morality of rights that identifies intrinsic goodness with the rational will, or a utilitarian ethics that denies the absolute value Kant accorded human nature. And yet, natural law need not be interpreted as Kantian *Naturrecht*—as for Aquinas, the natural law represented our human participation in the divine, eternal law, so in African traditional wisdom, human fruition occurs *in*, and not in abstraction from, a religious “communion with nature.”⁸⁰ Human conduct must, then, honor the *intrinsic* goodness of creation (and, hence of all creatures), even as such respect reveals the *absolute* dignity of moral persons in harmony with nature. If, moreover, we think of natural law as signifying finality, in sense of what is given, as well as what is to be attained, it becomes possible to envision an internal relation between the “givenness” of natural rights ordering human relationships, and the cognate givenness of duties to honor animate and nonanimate nature appropri-

⁷⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pt. 1, pars. 67, 179.

⁷⁸ Julius Nyerere, “The Church’s Role in Society,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987) 117–28, at 119.

⁷⁹ Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* 71–73, 85–86.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 21. See Bujo’s contention that “Nature plays a decisive role in the process of becoming human. No one can actually be free and articulate one’s humanity if one does not live in harmony with nature” (*The Ethical Dimension of Community* 148–49, and 208–25).

ately.⁸¹ As in traditional African wisdom, Christian creation narratives ground a respect for nature which, in turn, finds fulfillment in our destinies (religious and moral).

In these pages, I have argued that Magesa's metaphor of abundant life belies Occidental modernity's "myth" of fragmented cognitive, moral, and expressive (religious) value spheres—lessons, perhaps, for a postmodern age. We may, of course, dismiss these lessons as "primitive" or "premodern," falling prey to the hubris p'Bitek decried. Yet the metaphor's fecundity bids us imagine otherwise: a Church "with large ears," prophesying to a world still crucified, "a future with hope."

⁸¹ See Alexander Passerin d'Entrèves, *Natural Law*, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1970) 16–17.