AN AFRICAN MORAL THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Following a brief discussion of inculturation in moral theology, the article appeals to the work of Bénézet Bujo, a pioneer in fundamental African Catholic moral theology, and Richard McCormick to shed light on the theology of inculturation today. The article closes with proposals for a fundamental moral theology that is both truly Christian and truly African.

INCULTURATION IS A MAJOR CONCERN in contemporary African Catholic theology. In fact, *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II's exhortation on the church in Africa, considers inculturation "one of the greatest challenges for the church on the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium."[1] The insistence on inculturation is to a considerable extent motivated by what Africans perceive to be a situation of imbalance in the contact between Africa and the Christianity introduced into Africa by Western missionaries. In the words of one prominent African theologian, "contact between Christianity and African religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, bedeviled by assumptions prejudicial to the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive."[2] The insistent

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[1] Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* no. 59, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html (accessed December 21, 2007).

[2] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1997) 5.

call for inculturation is therefore also a call for dialogue among the African worldview, the gospel, and other forms of Christianity from the Northern Hemisphere, Catholic and non-Catholic, that make up the world church.

All branches of theology in Africa have done and will continue doing work on inculturation in general. My focus here is on moral theology, especially the methodological aspect of the discipline. Although considerable work is being done in Africa in the area of social and sexual ethics,[3] few scholars treat fundamental moral theology. This article is, therefore, a modest contribution on how theologians interested in the foundational questions in moral theology can go about the task of inculturating the Christian/Catholic faith in this aspect of moral discourse in Africa. I divide the article into four parts. Part 1 sketches the notion of inculturation. Part 2 presents an appreciation of the work of Bénézet Bujo, one of the few African moral theologians who have worked extensively on the method and foundations of an African moral theology. Throughout the rest of the article I dialogue with Bujo on other aspects of his work pertinent to foundational and methodological issues. As a result I hope that a more comprehensive picture of this distinguished pioneer in African theology will emerge.

Inculturation is an ongoing concern for the whole church. Born into a Jewish world, the church soon found itself in non-Jewish environments; it has therefore always had to deal with the question of its relationship to the cultures in which it was taking root. This concern persists today and is being addressed by Christians throughout the world. Thus, in the enterprise of inculturating Christianity in Africa, theology—in this case moral theology—must not ignore pertinent insights from other parts of the world church. In part 3, therefore, I present some benchmarks from Richard McCormick on methodology. In the final part I offer concrete proposals on how to go about the search for an ethics that is both truly Christian and truly African.

INCULTURATION

Inculturation, in its most basic sense, implies the attempt to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in any human situation. I am referring here to the situation in which the gospel is addressed for the first time to "peoples, groups, and sociocultural contexts in which Christ and his gospel are not

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[3] William R. O'Neill has provided an ample bibliography of the work of African theologians in these areas; see his "African Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 122–39, esp. 124–25 n. 11.

known."[4] In this sense, inculturation is synonymous with first evangelization. Whenever the gospel is preached for the first time in any context a summons is issued to the context in question to accept the salvation God offers in and through Jesus Christ, an acceptance that must bring about change in the people's perception of reality and in their value system. This summons becomes the basis for the dialogue that often ensues between the gospel and the new host context. The second sense of inculturation follows closely from the first: a process in which the faith embodied in one culture encounters another culture and becomes embodied in it.[5] Inculturation in this sense implies an effort by Christians in a particular place and time "to understand and celebrate their Christian faith in a way peculiar to their situation and context" while still sharing in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.[6] The gospel of Jesus Christ is one thing; the manner of handing it on from culture to culture is another. Thus one of the tasks involved in inculturation is the differentiation of the gospel from the cultural context of its transmission, such that the new host culture can receive it without losing its soul, while giving its own local expression to the gospel. Inculturation is therefore an expression of the awareness of cultural diversity within a region or nation and even across national boundaries.

A third sense of inculturation is provided by Pedro Arrupe, former superior general of the Society of Jesus: "The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) *but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation'.*"[7] Arrupe's definition not only implies that inculturation is a continuous process of dialogue between faith and culture but also depicts the goal of all attempts at inculturation as a symbiotic fusion, as it were, of culture and

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[4] John Paul II, "Redemptoris Missio: Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate" no. 33.2, in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. and intro. J. Michael Miller (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996) 456 (hereafter, Miller).

[5] See Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004) 5–6; Aylward Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 11.

[6] Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 1.

[7] Pedro Arrupe, "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation," in *Other Apostolates Today*, Selected Letters and Addresses 3, ed. Jerome Aixala (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1981) 172; emphasis added.

faith into a new creation that is Christian because it is totally permeated by the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ.[8]

Three important points arising from these definitions are worth emphasizing. The first is that, as Aylward Shorter points out, "we are not only talking about the first insertion of the Christian message into a hitherto non-Christian culture or cultures," although this first encounter between Christianity and a new culture or cultures is extremely important because on it depends everything that follows.[9] The second point is that faith cannot exist "except in a cultural form." It is this reality and not just geography that makes it possible to speak of "American Catholicism," "African Christianity," "Asian Christianity," etc. It means that to speak of inculturation is to speak of dialogue between a culture and faith in cultural form.[10] For this reason, African theology has been calling attention to the fact that Christianity came into Africa in a Western cultural form that is not necessarily part of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that must be unmasked to allow the faith to become African in a way that would be more recognizable and acceptable to Africans. A third point is that inculturation is a two-way process. While it is true that, through inculturation, "the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures," it is also true that, through the inculturation of the gospel in various local churches, "the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life, such as evangelization, worship, theology and charitable works."[11]

That Christianity is always linked to a culture and transmitted in cultural forms that make it recognizable and palatable to a people in their world is both a mark of the adaptability of the gospel and a challenge to evangelizers to prevent its being co-opted by any particular culture. In his two encyclicals dealing with moral issues, Pope John Paul II insisted that one

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[8] This is not to say that inculturation takes over all facets of the human endeavor "for Christ." Vatican II specifically acknowledged that many people are afraid that "a closer connection between human activity and religion will prejudice the autonomy of humanity, of societies and of the sciences." The council sought to allay this fear by first distinguishing true from false autonomy. True autonomy of earthly realities implies that "created things, and societies also, have their own laws and values which are to be gradually discovered, utilized and ordered" by human beings. Thus, every created thing, by virtue of its being created by God "possesses its own stability, truth and goodness, and its own laws and order." These should be respected as should "the methods which are appropriate to the various sciences and arts" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, no. 36, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II,* ed. Norman P. Tanner [Washington: Georgetown University, 1990] 1090).

[9] Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* 11.
[10] Ibid. 12.
[11] John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* no. 52.3–4 (Miller 470–71).

task of theologians is to help the church keep a critical eye on cultures. In his encyclical on mission, he speaks of another aspect of inculturation, namely, the dialogue between the faith and the world of the so-called high culture, which he refers to as the modern Areopagus. The pope insisted that "we will do well to pay attention to these modern areas of activity and be involved in them."[12] Thus, inculturation, according to the pope, also means, "the intimate transformation of authentic human values through their integration in Christianity in the various human cultures."[13] Inculturation is therefore neither a matter for the faith in only one culture or sets of cultures, nor is it something of interest only to liturgists and systematic theologians. Rather, inculturation is an ongoing issue for both the older and younger churches,[14] and inculturation as dialogue between faith and culture is a task both for liturgists and systematic theologians, as well as for moral theologians.

THE "AFRICAN" MORAL THEOLOGY OF BÉNÉZET BUJO

Bénézet Bujo has insisted on trying to articulate the foundations of an African ethics that is also Christian. Born in 1940 in Drodro in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter, DRC), Bujo is a priest of the diocese of Bunia and professor of moral theology and social ethics at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. He was educated at Murhesa Major Seminary, Bukavu; Niangara Major Seminary, Njiro; and at the Louvanium in Kinshasa, all in the DRC. He earned his doctorate at the University of Würzburg in Germany with a dissertation on the autonomy of morals and the specificity of moral norms in relation to the insights of Thomas Aquinas on moral norms.[15] In 1983 Bujo produced another work on Aquinas for his *Habilitation*, also at Würzburg.[16] The list of Bujo's pub lications is long.[17] His most mature insights on methodological and foundational questions in African ethics are found in *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South*; *Foundations of*

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[12] Ibid. no. 37.14 (Miller 461).   [13] Ibid. no. 52.2 (Miller 470).

[14] See, for example, T. Frank Kennedy. ed., *Inculturation and the Church in North America* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).

[15] This work has appeared in published form as *Moralautonomie und Normenfindung bei Thomas von Aquin: Unter Einbeziehung der neutestamentlischen Kommentare*, Veröffentlichungen des Grabmann-Institutes zur Erforschung der mittelalterlichen Theologie und Philosophie, n.s. 29 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979).

[16] For more biographical detail about Bujo see Juvénal Ilunga Muya, "Bénézet Bujo: The Awakening of a Systematic and Authentically African Thought," in *African Theology in the 21st Century*, vol. 1, *The Contribution of the Pioneers*, ed. Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 2003).

[17] For a comprehensive listing of Bujo's publications, see ibid.

An African Ethic: Beyond The Universal Claims of Western Morality; and
"Differentiations in African Ethics" in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*. For present purposes I rely mostly on these texts.[18]

In *Foundations of an African Ethic* Bujo frames the thesis that animates his work in African ethics. Like most other African theologians, he begins with the claim that Western culture, introduced into Africa and made more ubiquitous by globalization and modern popular media, is destroying Africa. Even when this "new culture" espouses lofty ideals such as "democracy," it despoils Africans' traditional world. The result of the disparaging and destruction of African culture by the culture of the Western world is the emergence of a monoculture. This situation benefits neither Christianity nor Africa. For, "if the good news of Jesus is to make its home among every people, it cannot identify itself with one specific culture, not even a global monoculture."[19] The imperative for inculturation arises from the fact that Western culture has neither the last nor necessarily the best word on what it means to be human and/or on how to construct the *humanum*; nor does the expression of Christianity with which it is identified constitute the only or best expression of the Christian faith. Like many other African theologians, Bujo opines that Western culture and Western Christianity, in their encounter with the African world, did not believe that Africans had any culture or religion worth preserving. The result was that "genuine dialogue between Christianity and African religions was seen as irrelevant." Thus Bujo's inculturation theology elaborates on the foundations of an African Christian theology and in particular on an African Christian ethic to create a better understanding of the realities that, from a genuinely black African context, can help Africans connect with and live their Christian faith as well as engage in meaningful dialogue with the rest of the world.[20]

One can discern two trajectories in Bujo's search for methodological foundations of an African Christian ethic. The first involves the rejection or critique of certain notions or approaches in traditional Catholic moral theology or of the way norms are determined in some aspects of this tradition; the second is a constructive one involving the search for elements

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[18] Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 1998); *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); and "Differentiations in African Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. William Schweiker (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005) 423–37.

[19] Bujo, *Foundations of an Africa Ethic* xii.

[20] Ibid. xiv.

of the foundation of an authentically African Christian ethic.[21] These trajectories cohere within certain tendencies and trends in recent Western Catholic moral theology that Bujo absorbed in his studies in Europe during the 1980s when debates raged on fundamental issues in the discipline, as will be evident in what follows.

First Trajectory: Critique and Repudiation

One researcher has discerned two phases in the development of Bujo's thought. The first, which includes the period between Bujo's seminary studies in the DRC and his *habilitation* in 1983, is marked by a concern "to found morals on something other than the natural law in view of the dialogue between Christianity and non-European cultures."[22] An important presupposition that Bujo articulates from this period arises from his reading of Aquinas's ethics through the prism provided by the work of the "autonomous ethic" theologians, especially Alphonse Auer whom he admired.[23] The following quotation from one of his later works captures Bujo's presupposition:

The Bible has not invented moral norms—not even Jesus has—but . . . everything goes back to man created in the image and likeness of God and questioned by his word in order to deepen and radicalize the existing, or better pre-existing ethos. The Christian must, starting from the word of God, criticize, stimulate and integrate the human ethos. Even the ecclesiastical magisterium up to now ought to think in such categories, if it does not want to reduce Christians to the level of puppets.[24]

Two important insights influential in the second phase of Bujo's work on African ethics are evident here. One is the notion of ethical autonomy already mentioned. Human beings as creatures of God are capable of generating norms that guide their lives without receiving any other explicit norms through revelation. The second insight is that the involvement by the church's magisterium in the search for norms is not necessary and might sometimes be no more than an authoritarian imposition. Bujo's positions here must be placed in the context of the postconciliar debate on

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[21] Dividing the work of any scholar into periods is always risky since it could imply a very neat demarcation between the periods under discussion. Rarely is such demarcation very neat. I use this method, however, merely to get a handle on aspects of Bujo's work pertinent to my discussion. For indeed, the influence of his early formation as theologian and Catholic priest is still evident in his most recent works.

[22] Muya, "Bénézet Bujo" 109.   [23] Ibid.

[24] Bénézet Bujo, *Le diaire d'un théologien Africain*, Spiritualité du Tiers-monde 1 (Kinshasa: Éditions de l'Église d'en bas, 1987) 24; quoted in Muya, "Bénézet Bujo" 110 n. 10.

how to construct a moral theology that is truly scriptural, Christian, and human.

Vincent McNamara notes three discernible historical stages in this effort to build a Christian/Catholic morality that is theological in character.[25] In the first stage the overriding principle was that Christian morality should be understood as a new life of grace in Christ. This theory was built around the axiom *agere sequitur esse.* Grace as an entitative elevation of the soul and its faculties gives the human being "a new esse, a new ontology which was the basis of and which demanded a new kind of moral life."[26] If action follows being, the reasoning went, this supernatural essence demanded a supernatural morality that would be radically different from the merely natural. A second notable effort at constructing a truly Christian moral theology was that of Gérard Gillman[27] and René Capentier, who argued that the distinctiveness of Christian ethics is to be inferred from the biblical stress on charity. The third effort was Bernard Häring's, which attempted to construct a theology around the theme of the law of Christ. These attempts proved largely unsuccessful in their bid to argue for a distinctive Christian morality, because they could not answer the question whether the newness of Christian morality referred to content, or motivation, or stimulus. Was there in fact a revealed morality different from what Catholic teaching had always held to be within the grasp of everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike? If there was not, how can one continue to talk of a distinctively Christian morality? If there was and is, what would be the content of such a morality? One of the schools of thought in recent Catholic moral theology, the autonomous ethic school, denies the existence of any specific Christian ethics.[28] Auer, a prominent proponent of this view, denies any concrete ethical normativity to Christianity. "Neither the individual Christian nor the Church," he says, "has any revelation about what is or is not the concrete expression of the moral demand."[29] Although Bujo would insist that his ethic is not totally synonymous with Auer's, the connection is unmistakable.

Bujo also rejects basing moral justification on natural law, since its appeal is limited to reason: "Does there not exist a legitimate pluralism in

[25]Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1985).

[26] Ibid. 10.

[27] Gérard Gilleman, *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*, trans. William P. Ryan, S.J., and André Vahon, S.J. (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1959).

[28] For an extensive discussion on the various approaches and answers to this issue see Paulinus I. Odozor, *Moral Theology in An Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition since Vatican II* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2003) 101–33.

[29] See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics* 44.

argumentation and the ways in which norms are established, a pluralism that can ultimately lead to divergent (though not contradictory) forms of praxis?"[30] And although he argues that to reject natural-law reasoning is not to call into question "the possibility of universal validity" in ethics, he repeatedly criticizes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Humanae vitae, Veritatis splendor*, and a host of other Church documents for speaking of intrinsically evil acts, that is, those the tradition categorizes as wrong or sinful irrespective of culture or any other extenuating circumstances.[31]

Second Trajectory: Constructing an African Ethic

Whereas the first phase of Bujo's work is characterized by rejection of some of the foundation supporting traditional Catholic moral discourse, the second phase of his work is marked by an attempt to rebuild the moral tradition, especially in its more recent phase in African Christianity, on new grounds that include specifically African materials, including African traditional ethics. According to Bujo, African traditional ethics is based on a relational network that is simultaneously anthropocentric, cosmic, and theocentric. This means that African moral norms arise through a reciprocal relationship among all three of these poles in the process of "palaver," that is, open, communal discourse. Therefore African ethics is essentially communitarian, unlike Western ethics, which tends to be rationalistic and discursive, or Christian/Catholic ethics, which is based largely on natural law. Recognition of relatedness is important for proper appreciation of how Africans make moral judgments. "African ethics . . . is concerned with the significance of the community for the discernment and laying down of norms and for ethical conduct as a whole." This sense of relatedness goes beyond the concrete visible community to embrace the dead as well. And, "indeed even those not yet born constitute an important dimension."[32] This reality of the relatedness of everyone to everyone else and to the cosmic order further implies that black Africa, in principle and in fact, rejects the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* in favor of *cognatus sum, ergo summus* (I am known, therefore we are) as decisive for moral thinking.

For Bujo, the slogan *cognatus sum, ergo summus* enshrines the conviction that human beings become human only in fellowship with others, and that human beings act more effectively to the extent that they are in solidarity with other human beings. The slogan also implies a universal perspective in ethical thinking in black Africa. Thus in black Africa, for example, "hospitality, daily friendship, and dialogue with the members of

[30] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* 12.
[31] See, for example, ibid. 11.
[32] Ibid. 5.

other ethnic groups are vital laws admitting of no exception. One who is not a member of my own group is ultimately also the 'property' of the other just as I myself am, and this means that I owe him respect and esteem. Thus one is ultimately related to all human beings."[33] It is this principle of solidarity rather than metaphysical considerations or natural-law reasoning that is at the heart of the search for moral norms in African ethics.

As already noted above, Bujo's African ethic is an "autonomous ethic" where people, created in the image and likeness of God, in open dialogue with each other, search for the way to respond to the summons of conscience by "palaver" or the "word."[34] The "word" is part and parcel of the search for what is right or true or just or good in African communities. Africans consider the word powerful, for "a word can be medicine, just as it can be poison; it has a life-giving power just as it is capable of bringing forth death. In Africa, words are something drinkable or edible; one chews and digests them. Badly chewed and digested, they can destroy the individual and a whole community, whereas in the opposite case they bring to life."[35] Palaver happens where one discovers "not only norms but personal and communitarian identity" as well.[36]

There are different kinds of palaver: therapeutic palaver that represents "the dialogue between the traditional healer and the patient and his or her circle; family palaver includes the living and the dead, the ancestors, and the yet-to-be-born; and extra-family or administrative palaver." Whereas the sage or the traditional healer is in charge of therapeutic palaver, family palaver, which is the locus for elaborating, grounding, reinforcing, and developing family ethics, is overseen by the elders of each particular family. Administrative palaver "is not just a kind of appeals court dealing only with cases beyond family authority"; it is also concerned with totally new cases that go beyond isolated frontiers and applies to several clan communities as well. Hence administrative palaver has a political dimension and character.[37]

At various places in his writings, Bujo tries to show that, although African ethics shares many elements with the discourse ethics of Habermas and with certain forms of North American communitarianism, it differs from them on some key issues. For example, while discourse ethics is somewhat elitist in that the communication it espouses usually occurs

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[33] Ibid. 5–6.

[34] See Bénézet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (1990; Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 1998) 40.

[35] Bénézet Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics" 427.

[36] Muya, "Bénézet Bujo" 143.

[37] Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics" 427. For a more complete discussion of palaver in Bujo's work see his *Foundations of an African Ethic* 45–63.

among individuals with exceptional intellectual capabilities and who are alive and able to speak, African palaver ethics involves all persons living, dead, and yet to be born, as well as the entire cosmos. More importantly, perhaps, is that, whereas discourse ethics is secular in that it brackets consideration of religion, African ethics has a religious dimension. God and the world of the ancestors are an integral part of palaver.[38] And even though this is the case, African ethics is neither secular nor religious. For although the emphasis is on interhuman relationship, God plays a role as an "unquestioned postulate" who, although rarely mentioned, is assumed to be the one without whom "nothing comes about and nothing survives."[39] Integrating God, the ancestors, and the world in its determination of right and wrong does not deprive palaver ethics of its ability to be critical. However, reason must not be turned into an instrument of oppression or power. Palaver ethics is a consensus ethic and, as such, is open to other experiences in its search for moral truth. It believes that in the search for this truth and in the proclamation of morality, "one must stop imposing from on high one particular ideal of virtues" on other peoples, because many of these ideals are contextually and culturally conditioned.[40] Thus, African palaver ethics holds that one "must always speak in a locally defined manner, out of the 'cultural cave.'" Even though this is the mode of operation in this ethic, it also acknowledges that the right of specific communities to formulate obligatory norms impels them to dialogue with other communities in the search for moral truth.[41]

An Initial Appraisal

In this section I offer an initial critique of the aspect of Bujo's work considered thus far. The first broad question raised by his work is whether it is better to speak of African culture and tradition in the singular or in the plural. This question has received much attention in the literature on Africa; space prohibits my going into it here.[42] I will devote attention mainly to three issues: (1) structurally negative aspects of African traditions and cultures; (2) the question of periodization; and (3) the African as moral actor today and the realities he or she must deal with.

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[38] For an extensive discussion on the differences between discourse ethics, North American Communitarian ethics, and African palaver ethics, see ibid. 63–71.

[39] Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics" 424.

[40] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* 33.

[41] Ibid. 8.

[42] See, for example, Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) esp. 14–18. See also Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMCO, 1987) 5–10.

Regarding the first issue, one of the many strengths of Bujo's work is that it forces us to remember that, as Alasdair McIntyre and others have pointed out, traditions supply the basis on which to make sense of reality and by which we determine what actions are rational and right or irrational and wrong. What Bujo has not sufficiently adverted to, however, is that African traditions as living traditions are extended arguments about the good and are, as such, an ongoing construction. This is not to say that there are no constants in African traditions and cultures. Indeed, there are numerous benchmarks that give African traditions character and identity. Bujo himself has identified many: among them the life-giving and life-enhancing impulse and structure in the tradition; the role of ancestors as custodians of life and "participants" in the determination of norms; the anamnetic role of the community in which the memory of the people resides; the role of stories, music, dance, the arts, and sacred persons in articulating and inculcating virtues and in the preservation of community ethos and identity.

My concern with Bujo's presentation on the role of African communities and cultures in the search for moral truth is that it is a bit one-sided. This fact is evidenced by idealizing Africa's past and giving insufficient attention to the current structurally negative and damaging elements in those traditions. For example, Bujo argues that in black Africa, "hospitality, daily friendship, and dialogue with the members of other ethnic groups are vital laws from which no one is excepted. One who is not a member of my own group is ultimately also the 'property' of the other just as I myself am, and this means that I owe him respect and esteem. Thus, one is ultimately related to all human beings."[43] This assertion expresses much that is true and much that is questionable. African hospitality is legendary. So too is African solidarity with family, friends, and kinsfolk. But, whether such solidarity rises to a universal norm in traditional African societies is open to question. In fact, it could be argued to the contrary that many traditional African societies do not appear capable of granting or willing to extend to persons beyond their immediate purview the recognition of full personhood and hence the same hospitality and friendship they would show to members of their families and clan. The slave trade in many ways benefited from this fact. The history of Africa is replete with stories of raids by one village or clan or ethnic group on another in search of slaves. We are only beginning to come to grips with the enormity of the roles Africans themselves played in this horrendous trade: first between Africa and the Arabian world and later between Africa and Europe and the Americas. The slave trade is a counterargument to the claims like the one Bujo makes

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[43] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* 5–6.

above. Another counterargument is the ethnic strifes that have become a hallmark of the modern African world. As the Nigerian pogrom of 1966, the Liberian/Sierra Leonean massacres, the Hutu/Tutsi genocides, and all other such cases show, one common factor in all of them is the question of ethnic superiority and the unwillingness to confer equality on some people who are not of one's own family or stock. The point here is not to join in the devaluation of the contributions of African societies and cultures to the search for universalizable moral truth, but to advise caution and a more critical attitude to the facts about African history and culture.

My second question about Bujo's work apropos of African cultures and traditions is that of periodization. Which period in African history or tradition must be the focus of retrieval and of our theologizing? One could argue that we should talk of African tradition only as it is now. The problem with this approach, however, would be that "tradition as it is now" may be a superficial appreciation of an ethos arising from a shared history. Where we are today may be a betrayal of who we are. Current dominant Christian practices, for example, may be a betrayal of the true Christian ethos. Although we should not press this point too hard, as if any one age were authentically Christian, it is possible, on the basis of our founding principles, inherited values, and history to describe a particular Christian era as one of decline, arising from what Bernard Lonergan would call major inauthenticities or aberrant "Christian" practices. Think of the Crusades, or the participation of the church in slave-trading, or the Inquisition. In Nigeria, the Igbo tradition, for example, can also point to similar moments of inauthenticity in its history. The present craze for chieftaincy titles and the yearning for a return to feudalism more associated with some of the neighbors of the Igbo might be considered a betrayal of a deeply held republican ethos among the Igbo. This tradition, like many others in Africa, is in transition. Contact with Christianity and other thought forms and practices coming from other parts of the world has left these traditions searching for their souls. The challenge facing any agent of inculturation is to discern correctly who the dialogue partner is. What Bujo has done in his stress on African traditions and culture is to call attention to the enduring values that can constitute the basis for an African Christian ethic.

Regarding the third issue, the African as moral actor, Bujo's views on the role of palaver in African ethics bring home quite clearly how community-conscious Africans are and how community-oriented African ethics is. Bujo himself has addressed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the character of African ethics with its emphasis on community with regard to questions about individual freedom and personal responsibility, sin and conscience, etc. However, the search for moral truth by the process of palaver is not without concerns in other areas as well. One concern I have

is that Bujo has not given enough consideration to the elements of the demonic in the process of palaver. I want to illustrate my point with two stories, one from a real-life situation, the other from Igbo folklore. This first story is about an incident I witnessed in a town in Eastern Nigeria where I worked as a young seminarian. The town had recently experienced a spate of robberies. The town union, which in many parts of Eastern Nigeria functions as a de facto town assembly, decided to do something about the situation. One step was to invite all able-bodied townsmen in every part of the country back home for a covenant ritual (*Igba Ndu*). Part of the covenant was that every able-bodied male (10 years and above) was to swear an oath based on these terms: (a) that he has never stolen, (b) that he would never steal, (c) that he would not invite others to steal, (d) that he would not join others to steal anything anywhere, and (e) that he would not maliciously or willfully take lives or injure anyone or force anyone to give up his or her property. Before the ceremonies started various people from the town rose up to speak in the true spirit of palaver, as described by Bujo, generally in support of the covenanting process and in the hope that this action would eradicate the robberies. At some point in the process a man stood up and signaled only partial acceptance of the terms. He wanted the community to expunge from the list any of the conditions that would hamper anyone from the locality who wanted to "do business" elsewhere from doing so. It was plainly understood by everyone present that "doing business" here meant cheating and stealing from other people who were not members of the clan. The man who made this proposal was quite rich and eloquent and had two sons who have since been apprehended by the police for armed robbery. His motion would have carried had not another man, known to be an upright and honest Christian, stood up to oppose him. It was only then that others had the audacity to speak up against this man.

My second story, from Igbo folklore, tells of a situation where things had been going badly in the animal kingdom—there was disease, famine, and death everywhere among the animals. They decided to meet and to see what could be done to change the situation. Every animal was present for the meeting except the hen. Other animals who had passed by the hen's house on the way to the meeting had reminded her that it was time for the community assembly. The hen replied that she was too busy to attend the meeting but would abide by whatever the community decided. At the meeting word came from the gods that they were angry and that all the diseases, famines, and deaths were manifestations of the gods' anger toward the animals for a certain transgression. Life would become normal again if the animals would decide to make a sacrifice of one of themselves to placate the gods. The animals deliberated long and hard and could find no one who would volunteer to die for the rest. Someone then remembered that the hen had indicated that she would abide by whatever the animals

decided. Someone immediately proposed the idea to offer the hen as sacrifice to the gods. The motion carried, so the hen was sacrificed as "a willing holocaust."

There are many lessons to draw from these stories. Perhaps the most obvious one is that palaver is not a fool-proof approach to the determination of moral norms, because it is open to being hijacked by demagogues and to distortion by community and individual biases. One could reasonably argue in reference to the first story that the inability of the rich and powerful man in this story to have his way is itself proof that the process works. However, one would also have to wonder what might have happened had the other courageous man not been present to insist that taking another's property against that person's reasonable wish is wrong anywhere and at any time. In the second story we do not have the dissenting voice that is influenced by other considerations. Instead, the determining factor in the search for what is right is selfish interest disguised as community interest. It is the Caiaphan principle at work: better that one man should die than that a whole nation perish (Jn 18:14); if it takes a whole community ganging up against one person to achieve this goal, so be it. The point is that palaver alone cannot insulate any human community from the point in ethics where "everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining,"[44] even the most fundamental human rights, such as life and conscience.

MCCORMICK AS GUIDE FOR THEOLOGICAL INCULTURATION

No one tradition or culture has all the answers to common human problems. Therefore, moral theology in a church that, like the world itself, is becoming more and more "a single place" must be a critical theology that is attuned to ideas in other parts of the world church.[45] In this section I piece together some insights from the work of Richard McCormick that I find helpful for any theology of inculturation, including the inculturation of Christian ethical discourse in Africa. McCormick has grappled with many of the foundational issues that impinge on African moral theology of inculturation. His work provides important lessons for moral theologians working anywhere on these issues.

One of the more significant Catholic moral theologians of the 20th century, McCormick is remembered by many for his contribution to the debate on proportionalism. Depending on where one stands on the question

[44] John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 20 (Miller 2809).
[45] Paulinus I. Odozor, "Classical Catholic Moral Theology and the World Church: Some Suggestions on How to Move Forward," *Louvain Studies* 30 (2005) 282–90.

of norms, this memory can enhance or hinder the appreciation of this insightful moral theologian. I contend that McCormick's work is also a rich source of insights on how we can engage in the task of inculturation from the point of view of Christian ethics.

I see three impulses behind McCormick's work: (1) the desire to share the richness of the Catholic moral tradition with a larger audience; (2) the desire, in line with the revised ecclesiological and moral theological perspectives of Vatican II, "to re-examine some traditional formulations that were authoritatively proposed to the Catholic community"; and (3) the desire to contribute constructively to current debates on matters of concern to contemporary human society.[46] These desires explain both the extensiveness of McCormick's writings and his interests. For, wherever there was a new development that required a moral evaluation during much of his career as a moral theologian, McCormick was there trying to see what critical insights and practical moral suggestions he could offer. As Lisa Sowle Cahill pointed out years ago, McCormick saw moral theology "as a critical mediator between church and culture."[47] Martin Marty notes that McCormick's whole life had been "given over to opening up the Catholic treasury, trying out its artifacts and achievements in the contemporary world, risking its values in a world that might need them more than it knows."[48]

As far as I can tell, McCormick never used the word "inculturation" in his work. This notwithstanding, he has left us with significant attitudes and insights on how to engage inculturation from the point of view of moral theology. Although the cultural milieu out of which he worked differs significantly from African milieus, and although the questions and issues raised for those milieus may be completely different, the principles of his theology generally apply across the board. McCormick's contribution to inculturation in moral theology is most evident in two areas: in matters pertaining to public policy and in issues concerning the ethical problems of life and death, and the influence of new technological innovations on culture pertinent to life. The basic insights that guided his work on these issues in his North American context can also animate the work of African theologians in their search for foundations to anchor African Christian moral discourse. In what follows, I provide six important inspirations from McCormick's work for inculturation in moral theology.

[46] Richard A. McCormick, *How Brave a New World: Dilemmas in Bioethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1981) x.

[47] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "On Richard McCormick: Reason and Faith in Post-Vatican II Catholic Ethics," *Second Opinion* 9 (November 1988) 108–30, at 109.

[48] Martin E. Marty, foreword to Richard A. McCormick, *Health and Medicine in the Catholic Tradition: Tradition in Transition* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) xi.

Lesson 1

The first lesson to learn from McCormick is that inculturation must be built on strong Christian theological convictions. In this, he endorses Paul Ricoeur's dictum that no one speaks from nowhere. McCormick was conscious of himself as a Catholic moral theologian and spoke confidently about the soundness of this tradition. In his discussion of public policy, he expressed the basis of this confidence slightly differently from how he expressed it in other areas. The question for him in this area is precisely the way moral theology can contribute to the formulation of public policy. Given the widespread opinion in Western democracies that one cannot and should not try to legislate morality, the question is whether Catholic ethics can or ought to try to influence public policy. McCormick believes it "a dangerous half-truth" to say that we cannot or should never try to legislate morality. He points out that we legislate morality all the time. The question, therefore, is not whether but what morality should be legislated.[49] However, even though every good public policy depends to some extent on morality, one must also be aware that morality and public policy are distinct. They are related in that morality is concerned with the moral rightness or wrongness of human conduct and public policy is rooted in existential human goods. On the other hand, morality and public policy are distinct "because public policy is concerned with the common good, the welfare of the community. Only when individual acts have ascertainable consequences for the maintenance and stability of society (welfare of the community) do they properly become the concern of public policy."[50]

All through his writings McCormick is taken by the role faith (revelation) plays in shaping reason, thereby contributing to the formation of human attitudes and dispositions. The phrase, "reason informed by faith," which is a staple of Catholic moral discourse, implies that reason is shaped, not replaced, by faith. Revelation and personal faith influence ethical decision at a most profound level of our being. Thus, "one's choice of issues . . . and the dispositions she or he brings to these issues can be profoundly affected by one's personal appropriation of revealed truth, by one's prayer life, by one's immersion in the values of poverty, humility, compassion, characteristic of the Gospel"—in other words, by what McCormick often referred to as the Christian story.[51]

The Christian story, as McCormick summarized it, takes its bearing from what McCormick (quoting Joseph Sittler) so often described as "God's

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[49] McCormick, *Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas since Vatican II* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1989) 199.
[50] Ibid.   [51] Ibid. 196.

relentless gift of himself" in Jesus. Jesus Christ is God's absolute gift of Godself to the world. The believer's response to God's love, to God's stunning deed, is total and radical self-commitment. For, in the words of Sittler, to be a Christian "is to accept what God gives." For McCormick, faith in Jesus as God's self-gift entails that (a) the event of the life, teaching, and mission of Jesus is "an absolutely originating and grounding experience"; (b) Christ is both law and law giver; (c) God's deed in Jesus reveals and presents to us "a new (Christocentric) basis or context for understanding the world"; (d) Jesus as new fact and center of thinking finds "its deepest meaning in the absoluteness and intimacy of the God-relationship"; and (e) "the empowered acceptance of God's engendering deed in Jesus (faith) totally transforms the human person."[52]

"Stamped" at such a profound level, the Christian is able to construe the world theologically. Thus, for example, the Christian is able, through reason informed by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to come to an appreciation of life as a basic but not absolute good, the essential equality of all human beings, and the need for a special care of the poor and the needy in our communities. The fact that Christ has overcome death and lives, that we are pilgrims now guided by him and will also live with him hereafter, yields a general value judgment on the meaning and value of life as we now live it. This value judgment has immediate relevance for the care of the ill and dying. "It issues in a basic attitude or policy: not all means must be used to preserve life. . . . There are higher values than life in the living of it. There are also higher values in the dying of it."[53]

McCormick never for a moment believed that the Christian faith was the only source of moral truth, or that insights from faith were without resonance in other contexts of moral evaluation. As I have put it elsewhere, "even though Christian faith is not an arcane source of moral judgements, it has a good deal to contribute to the formation of human attitudes and disposition."[54] Says McCormick, "The themes I have outlined are thought to be inherently intelligible and recommendable. Thus, for example, the Christian story is not the only cognitive source for the radical sociability of persons, for the immorality of fornication and abortion, etc., even though historically these insights may be strongly attached to the [Christian] story.

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[52] Richard A. McCormick, "Theology and Bioethics: Christian Foundations," in *Theology and Bioethics: Exploring The Foundations and Frontiers*, ed. Earl E. Shelp (Boston: Reidel, 1985) 101–2.

[53] Ibid. 97.

[54] Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Richard A. McCormick and the Renewal of Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1995) 167.

In this epistemological sense, these insights are not specific to Christians. They can be shared by others."[55]

Some African theologians engaged in the work of inculturation start by regarding culture as the normative principle. They often point out how much damage the West has done to African culture through colonialism and a Christianization that was more or less Westernization in disguise.[56] To remedy this situation, they make every attempt to give priority to African culture in the dialogue between culture and faith. What can sometimes ensue from this effort is an uncritical presentation of culture suggesting that, because something is seen as coming from one's culture, it must be good or adequate and without need of further challenge, even by the gospel. On the contrary, the point of inculturation is that, as McCormick points out, the believer who is already caught up in "God's engendering deed" in Jesus sets out to find ways to make the news and effects of that deed take flesh in his or her cultural milieu, so that the Word would indeed take flesh among his people. There are two important insights here: (1) The Christian faith, not cultural pattern, should provide the theologian with the primary lens through which to view life and reality in general. Only in this way can the theologian perceive the strengths and the distortions and evil in any culture. The theological work of inculturation must be unmistakably Catholic and theological and not just merely another exercise in cultural anthropology. (2) As McCormick points out and as Bujo's work amply demonstrates, the Christian story is not an arcane or exclusive source of moral insight, even though, for the Christian, it should be the primary criterion for measuring the soundness of any other source.

Bujo, like McCormick, assumes a theocentric foundation for ethics: "though the human person stands in the centre of African morals, the position of God is distinctly emphasised."[57] The question here is, which God? In Bujo's theology, two notions characterize God: creator and defender of the moral order. Beyond the assumption of the fact of the incarnation, Bujo does not extensively discuss God's nature and purpose in the world. Instead, Bujo's work is comprised mainly of discussions that assume total commensuration between the notion of God in African religions and Christianity. For example, referring to the Masai belief in God to show that

[55] McCormick, *Critical Calling* 203.

[56] See, for example, David Tuesday Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001) 336–49; Musa W. Dube, "Readings of Semoya: Botswana Women's Interpretations of Matt 15:21–28," *Semeia* 73 (1966) 111–29.

[57] Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimensions of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 1998) 25.

Africans believe in God Bujo asserts: "The Masai are monotheistic. For them God is a spiritual being, creator of all things, almighty, ubiquitous, omniscient, merciful and eternal. Because he rules everything, he is also the guardian of moral laws and of morality in general."[58] This understanding of God is Bujo's working model of God. I do not find sufficient emphasis in his work on the triune nature of God and what this might imply for African Christian moral theology. Missing is the radicalness of the God of Jesus, the God who so loves the world that he dies on the cross for *all* humanity, the father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–31), and the God whose radical gift of self in Jesus Christ makes us more and invites us to be more. Authentic African ethics cannot be built on minimalist assumptions about God found in African culture as in all cultures. Rather, African ethics can be an effective transforming ethos only when it takes into full consideration the implications of God's stunning deed in Jesus. The God of Jesus is new to every culture, including African culture. Attention to this newness has been and can still be transformative of human lives and human societies everywhere, including Africa.

Lesson 2

A second important lesson from McCormick is that the theologian of inculturation must have a deep knowledge of the culture in which he or she is working—that is, a deep appreciation for its strengths and an honesty about it weaknesses. McCormick had a keen interest in and deep knowledge of his cultural milieu, especially with regard to the ethical issues of life and death. In a 1975 publication he listed the various traits of this culture:

Our culture is one where (1) technology, even medical, is highly esteemed; (2) moral judgments tend to collapse into pragmatic cost-benefit calculations, (3) youth, health, pleasure, and comfort are highly valued and tend to be sought and preserved at disproportionate cost; (4) maladaptations, such as senility, retardation, age, or defectiveness, are treated destructively rather than by adapting the environment to their needs. These factors suggest that the general cultural mentality is one that identifies the quickest, most effective way as the good way. Morality often translates into efficiency.[59]

In later publications, McCormick added more characteristics such as the cultural tendency to deny mortality, a eugenic mentality that tends toward preferential breeding of superior human individuals or genotypes, and the absolutizing of autonomy.[60] To be sure, McCormick was not entirely negative about his culture, but he maintained a critical stance toward it.

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Richard A. McCormick, "Fetal Research, Morality, and Public Policy," *Hastings Center Report* 5.3 (1975) 26–31, at 30.

[60] McCormick, *Corrective Vision* 165–75.

Cultural criticism has to be an important ingredient in inculturation. Otherwise, the theologian runs the risk of succumbing to culturalism, an uncritical appreciation that can go so far as to insist that the gospel be judged by the culture, rather than the other way around. As John Paul II observed, "since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be healed, ennobled, and perfected" by the gospel.[61] Cultural criticism must, however, proceed from a deep knowledge of the culture. Bujo knew African culture well. He also offers interesting and penetrating critique of practices in various parts of Africa such as female circumcision, polygamy, sorcery, retaliatory actions (as between the Hutus and the Tutsis in the Great Lakes region), an exaggerated community influence in personal choices in marriage, and "social parasitism" perpetrated by some Africans in the name of the extended family or African hospitality.[62] I believe, however, that it is time we African theologians begin to speak of African culture more in the plural than in the singular, given the vastness of the continent and the many and varied peoples who inhabit it.

Lesson 3

Anyone involved in the work of inculturation must also have more than a fleeting knowledge of the Christian/Catholic tradition. In an interview at the University of Notre Dame in 1992, McCormick told me how well versed he was in the moral tradition of the Catholic Church in all its aspects, beginning with the manuals tradition: "I started moral theology at a time when we had to teach from the manuals. I got to know the manuals very thoroughly. I read six or seven manuals for every single presentation of every single subject. I got to know the tradition as it was presented in those manuals very thoroughly. I am grateful for that because it exposed me to a point of view which I think had an awful lot of good balance to it."[63] Walter Burghardt verifies this testimony:

Richard McCormick knows the Catholic moral *tradition*—and much more of our broader theological tradition—from scripture through medieval scholasticism to the twentieth century. From long experience and contemplation it is resident in his bones and blood. I trust he will be a living reproach to a generation of scholars who know Augustine only as a born-again Catholic who foisted on the western world a hellish doctrine of original sin and a pessimistic view of marriage; who cannot spell Chalcedon, even though a quarter century ago Harvey Cox argued that apart from Chalcedon technopolis is unintelligible; who can anathematize Aquinas and scuttle scholasticism without ever having read a word thereof; who sneer at the mere

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[61] John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* no. 54.1 (Miller 540).
[62] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Christian Ethic* 132–37.
[63] Odozor, *Richard A. McCormick* 8.

mention of "medieval," as if the middle ages were darker than our own; who could not care less about a papal pronouncement, much less peruse it.[64]

Bujo's knowledge of the Christian/Catholic tradition is also very deep. Thus, when he disagrees with it, he knows very well what he disagrees with. Although much of the Christian tradition has been forged within contexts foreign to Africans, one must at least know what the tradition teaches in order to dialogue with it or improve it or even modify it for African appropriation, otherwise one runs a number of risks, including chasing after red herring, reinventing the wheel, or even outright heresy.

Lesson 4

McCormick's work of inculturation involved him in active and ongoing conversation with the culture creators of his day, the new areopagites. He served on many committees and boards—the American Hospital Association, American Fertility Society, National Hospice Organization, Catholic Health Association, the President's Commission on Bioethics, the Ethics Advisory Board of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, etc. He was president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and in 1969 received the Cardinal Spellman award as Outstanding Theologian of the Year. From 1965 to 1985 he was the sole author of the first, semiannual, but later annual "Notes on Moral Theology" for *Theological Studies*. McCormick reflected on his involvement in these spheres in these words: "During those more than three decades it has been my privilege to be involved in thousands of difficult 'cases,' in many committees and advisory boards and in the lives of many individuals and families. . . . Since 1965 I have composed 'Notes on Moral Theology' for *Theological Studies*, a task that has brought me enlightenment, humility (I hope) and the friendship of colleagues around the world."[65]

There are two issues here: (1) By dialoguing with ethicists, scientists, philosophers, and other scholars involved in boards and committees, as well as with politicians, McCormick was aware that there are those who set the pace and those who merely follow, those who set the ethos and those who merely benefit from it. As John Paul II stated with regard to what he referred to as "the immense Areopagus of culture, scientific research and international relations which promote dialogue and open new possibilities," we "would do well to be attentive to these modern areas of activity and be involved in them."[66] Before him, McCormick too advised that

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[64] Walter J. Burghardt, "The Role of the Scholar in the Catholic Church," in *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future: Essays in Honor of Richard A. McCormick*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 1990) 27.

[65] McCormick, *Critical Calling* ix–x.

[66] John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* no. 37.14 (Miller 526).

anyone involved in the work of inculturation needs to be attentive to the work of this very important segment of society—the creators of culture—to learn their language, cultivate their friendship, and meet them in their forums.

Lesson 5

The second issue that follows from McCormick's involvement with the areopagites of our day is that inculturation is not only about the past. It is especially about the present. Inculturation as an attempt to dialogue with a given culture and tradition must be carried out with that culture in its living and breathing form. Let me qualify this. Current cultural practices can harbor significant distortions of a people's way of life and may need reform and renewal. Yet it is *this* same culture as known and lived by *this* particular people today that harbors or generates the values today's people hold important and by which they construe reality. Therefore, it is with *this* culture as carrier and index of life here today that we must be in dialogue. The past might participate in this discussion so as to inform, illumine, or guide the present. McCormick's example here is instructive. He was in constant dialogue with the deeply held assumptions of the societies of his day, although he was also aware of some deep-seated assumptions, a carry-over from the community's history, as it were, that continued to inform the societies of his day for good or for ill. Some African theologians involved in the work of inculturation seem glued to the past and have little regard for the present. They then cloak this "past" with an aura of sacredness as if nothing were wrong with it and everything was Christian. On the importance of African ancestral tradition Bujo writes: "One can no longer talk about sacraments without including the African ancestral tradition in this doctrine. In my opinion, a genuine African Christology, an ecclesiology, and a doctrine of grace have to take this tradition as their starting point. Even the doctrines on God and the Trinity, together with eschatology—to say nothing about ethics—find their starting-points here."[67] Statements like this simply say too much about Africa's past and present potentials and can be a hindrance to proper and thorough catechesis in that they assume the presence of what is not there and by so doing make it difficult to present what is in fact uniquely Christian doctrine. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that Africa was not a very religious place and very fertile ground for Christianity. Historical developments have proven that African traditions and cultures contained unique elements that made the continent a good and fertile ground for the faith and that continue to help in the growth of that same faith. One must be cautious in asserting the com-

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[67] Bujo, *Ethical Dimensions of Community* 19.

patibility of African ancestral heritage with the gospel. For, often things are not as easy or as compatible as they might appear. I will return to this issue later.

Lesson 6

A sixth general lesson from McCormick as theologian of inculturation is that inculturation must be a limited enterprise. Every person created in the image and likeness of God is infused with the spark of divine light; therefore every culture, as the creation of human beings, is also infused with God's grace. Thus, while the church seeks to bring Christ to a particular culture because it contains seeds of truth, inculturation also helps make clearer to the church certain aspects of the truth of what is human and humane. Thus, inculturation as dialogue with any given culture can never imply a total assault on a people's way of life with a view to replacing it. McCormick was justifiably proud of the contribution of American society to the church's clarification of its position on religious liberty. Thus, although he assumed that the church has much wisdom to offer the world on many issues, he also believed that wisdom is not only a gift; "it is above all a responsibility to learn and to be in discussion with other relevant and interested parties" on any given issue.[68] Therefore, for the church to absent itself from discussions aimed at seeking solutions to common human problems "or to enter them ill-informed, to share in them from a position of authoritative arrogance as if the Church were in prior possession of concrete answers—all such approaches would dim the 'new light' and almost assuredly compromise 'solutions which are human.'"[69] Implied here are two considerations for African theology. The first, as noted above, is that cultures evolve. Thus, contemporary Africans are a different set of people from their forbears, because they have been informed by a different set of realities and experience. The second is, as the American adage puts it, "if ain't broke, don't fix it." The "new Africans" have new ways of doing things and are part of a cosmopolitan culture that has, in spite of its shortfalls, much to offer in terms of faith and belief. In so far as these are not against faith, morals, and humane living, there is no need to worry about the fact that they are not originally "African."

McCormick's relevance for the work of inculturation on the questions of fundamental moral theology in Africa, as indeed everywhere, is therefore obvious. Although he was also known for his work on practical questions in moral theology, he was always conscious that what the theologian says

[68] Odozor, *Richard A. McCormick* 150.
[69] Richard A. McCormick, "Genetic Technology and our Common Future" *America* 152.6 (April 27, 1985) 341.

on these practical moral issues must be based on sound theoretical constructions. This theory must aim to be true to the gospel; it must be worked out in conversation with the church's tradition; it must be based on sound human experience; and it must be critical of both culture and the Catholic tradition in the search for sound bases for its assertions and claims. These are the principles that animate the suggestions I offer below.

MORAL THEOLOGY, TRULY CHRISTIAN, TRULY AFRICAN: SOME MODEST PROPOSALS

As a contribution to the ongoing debate, I conclude with some suggestions on inculturating moral theology in Africa. First, I propose that African Christian ethics cannot afford to dispense with the natural law as a means for moral justification. Bujo rejects what he regards as the rationalistic approach of natural law and the process this "rationalism" takes to justify certain conclusions about certain moral questions such as polygamy and homosexuality. He questions whether truth "may be grasped by one kind of methodology, via a 'one-way' street."[70] The answer is, of course, no. He also points to certain conclusions Aquinas reached on the equality of men and women, on polygamy, and on masturbation as indications of the limits of natural law as a means of moral justification.

There are certainly many examples of the bad and ideological use of natural law in all of the church's history. But as Martin Rhonheimer points out, it would not be correct to ascribe the philosophical shortcomings or the mistaken attempts at moral justification by some authors, including Aquinas, to the works of the natural law tradition as a whole. "Mistaken or provisional hypotheses can occur in every field of knowledge, and can create the condition for progress by encouraging a deeper investigation of certain difficulties."[71] African Christian ethics must engage in a proper, ongoing, and careful articulation of the essence of the natural law as guide and conversation partner in the arduous task of searching for moral truth. This search for the essence of natural law reasoning could begin with a reflection on the famous no. 16 of *Gaudium et spes* of Vatican II. The council states that "deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves but which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this

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[70] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Christian Ethic* 12.
[71] Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomistic View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbray (New York: Fordham University, 2000) 309.

law, and by it they will be judged."[72] Even though the council does not explicitly call this law natural law, there can be little doubt about its inference. As Joseph Boyle points out, "this conviction of Vatican II expresses the core of natural law as understood within Catholicism—namely, that within the foundations of the conscience of all human beings there are nonconventional, nonarbitrary moral standards which make possible genuine moral self-criticism, and so true moral knowledge even for those who have not received the moral instruction of divine revelation."[73] Three pertinent points from this understanding of the natural law are important to the search for Christian ethical foundations for ethics even in Africa: (1) it is possible to know right and wrong; (2) it is possible to freely choose right from wrong; and (3) there are moral standards "which are not simply the results of personal preference or choice or of social conventions."[74]

The idea of moral standards that are exempt from cultural determinations can sometimes appear as culturally insensitive imposition. But they ought not appear so. In an ethics that is also Christian, the search for such standards is ongoing and must be carried out in partnership with revelation and culture. For example, revelation supplies key truths about the human person such as: Creation in the image and likeness of God and the consequent truth that the person possesses a dignity not conveyed by society or status and not based on gender, race, ethnicity, or any other such characterizations of human existence in this world; fidelity in relationships is an essential human attribute; and human action in this world has a telos beyond this world. Africa needs these and similar standards. I do not imply here that Africa has no moral standards. I mean that those standards, like standards anywhere, need the universal justification of natural law and the searchlight of divine revelation. Ethics is more than an attempt to find compromises. It also involves a summons, as Vatican II says, to rise above one's cultural and personal inclinations to do more and be more, to reach beyond oneself for something higher.

As Bujo says, African ethics is anamnetic; that is, "the ancestors' words and deeds, the norms they set, are made available to the current generation so that it has life and continues to look after the deceased, and so that it prepares the future of the not-yet born."[75] Bujo adds that, through regular evaluation of the ancestors' words and deeds, the community, not indi-

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[72] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World no. 16, in *Basic Sixteen Documents* 178.

[73] Joseph Boyle, "Natural Law," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1987) 704.

[74] Ibid. 705.

[75] Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics" 433.

vidual conscience, acts as the "highest court of appeal" for moral decisions. Thus, "communal conscience, above all, measures and determines the individual conscience."[76]

African Christian/Catholic ethics must also be anamnetic—in a more inclusive way than that identified by Bujo as being the case in African traditional ethics. First of all, the subject of remembrance must begin with Jesus Christ and the saints of all ages and places, including, of course, the African ancestors whose lives and deed are worth remembering. In this way, the African Christian has a host of witnesses to rely on in the journey of life. But African ethics must also be anamnetic in another way. It must recall in shame the deeds of those African ancestors whose ruinous neglect—the "particularist greed" manifested in four exhausting centuries of bloody exportation of their kind and in four centuries of political disorientation and social disorganization in the face of European incursions into Africa—has left the continent in shambles. As Chinweizu has prayed, "May their souls sleep without rest in our memories to warn us away from any repetition of their ruinous neglect."[77] But African Christian ethics as an anamnetic ethics must not stop at merely exposing the misdeeds of the past. It must also be a constructive ethics of reconciliation. Too many people in Africa are going about with memories wounded by historical wrongs, real or imagined. It must therefore be the task of Christian ethics as theology to help find ways of healing memories in Africa through conflict resolution.

In the end, African ethics as Christian ethics must be an ethics of discipleship. As William Spohn observed, this means that Christian ethics in Africa, as anywhere else, must be an ethics that takes seriously what Jesus took seriously. For Africa this would include, but is not limited to, practicing forgiveness as a central Christian moral imperative; love as the center of Christian ethical life; attention to the poor and the marginalized; the recognition of the equal humanity of all persons, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, or religion; and continued vigilance over the culture to ensure it does not harbor, condone, or nurture any tendencies harmful to the welfare of the human person integrally and adequately considered.[78]

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975) 54.