

The Gospel as Politics in Africa

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Abstract

The reality of political violence in Africa poses a major theological challenge. There is no more pressing challenge for New Evangelization (NE) in Africa than the search for a different, nonviolent basis for social existence in Africa. The essay argues that for NE to meet this challenge it will have to move beyond the trap of “culture” and engage more explicitly the political vision of the gospel. The story of Archbishop Emmanuel Kataliko’s life and work exemplifies what this concretely looks like. Accordingly Kataliko’s story confirms that, pursued under the aegis of reconciliation, NE cannot but become deeply political in that it seeks nothing short of a new vision of society in Africa grounded in the story of God’s nonviolent and reconciling love.

Keywords

Africa, African Catholicism, *Africæ Munus*, Archbishop Emmanuel Kataliko, political theology, political violence, reconciliation

On Christmas Day 1999, when the Rwanda-backed Rally for Congolese Democracy (RDC) controlled South Kivu, Archbishop Emmanuel Kataliko of Bukavu preached a sermon in which he denounced the “empire of greed” and the “insatiable thirst for material things” that fueled the war, looting, and violence in Eastern Congo:

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We are crushed by the oppression of domination. Foreign powers, in collaboration with some of our Congolese brothers, organize wars with resources of our country. These resources, which should be used for our development for the education of our children, for healing the sick, in short, so that we may live more humanely, are used to kill us. Moreover, our country and ourselves, we have become objects of exploitation worse than the colonial era. . . . Everything of value has been looted, wrecked and taken abroad or simply destroyed. Taxes, which would be invested for common good, are misappropriated. . . . Excessive taxes strangle not only large-scale commerce and industry, but also the mother who lives off her small business . . . In the city armed groups, often in military uniforms, burst into our houses, steal the few goods we have left, threaten, kidnap and even kill our brothers. Our brothers and sisters in the countryside are massacred at a large scale . . . Even the church is not spared . . . parishes, presbyteries, convents are sacked. Priests, clergy, and nuns are beaten, tortured and killed . . . the moral decline of some of our compatriots has reached such an absurd level, that they do not hesitate to betray their brother for a bill of ten or twenty dollars.¹

I begin by drawing attention to Archbishop Kataliko's famous Christmas message because it captures well the context, possibilities, and urgency for the New Evangelization (hereafter NE) in Africa. More specifically, Kataliko's sermon and story highlight the challenge of political violence in Africa and locate the need for NE within the context of the search for a different, nonviolent basis for society in Africa. Because this particular need, as well as the overall political crisis of Africa, has not been fully attended to given the cultural emphasis within the project of NE, Kataliko's story offers an opportunity to reaffirm a comprehensive vision of reconciliation as the goal of NE in the context of Africa's turbulent history.

My argument progresses in four steps. First, I trace the development of the project of NE so as to highlight its "cultural" emphasis. Next, I show that the faith crisis in Africa is neither primarily nor predominantly cultural, but political. More specifically it has to do with the ongoing phenomenon of political violence, which is traceable to the colonial heritage and imagination of Africa's modernity. Given this foundational story, the missiological and theological challenge has to do with the search for a fresh vision—a different, nonviolent story as the basis of a new African society. Third, I register that while the search for a new social vision for Africa was noted by the second African synod, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africæ Munus* (hereafter AM) stopped short of offering reconciliation as the comprehensive vision for a nonviolent foundation of society. Fourth, I argue that the search for a nonviolent basis for social existence was at the heart of Kataliko's life and ministry in Eastern Congo. In the conclusion, I draw implications from Kataliko's life and message in the Congo for what the Gospel can offer in the context of Africa's social-political history. In this connection, I note the similarity between Kataliko's vision of the gospel as "excess of love" and Pope Francis's vision of mercy as "the beating

1. See Emmanuel Kataliko, "Lettre de Noel 1999," in *Lettres pastorales et messages de Monseigneur Emmanuel Kataliko (18 mai 1997–4 octobre 2000)* (Bukavu: Editions Archevêché Bukavu, 2001) 80–83 (translation mine).

heart of the Gospel.”² At the basis of both Kataliko’s and Francis messages is a dynamic “spiritual” encounter, which cannot but be “political” at the same time, as it calls for nothing short of new social relationships and possibilities that reflect God’s merciful and reconciling love.

New Evangelization: A Cultural Emphasis

When John Paul II first proposed the project of NE it was in response to a perceived cultural problem mostly affecting Christianity in the West—those “countries and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing” but are now being “put to a hard test” and in some cases have been “even undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of a constant spreading of religious indifference, secularism and atheism.”³

Thus, in an address to the church in Europe, Pope John Paul II noted the “urgent need for a ‘new evangelization,’ in the awareness that ‘Europe today must not simply appeal to its former Christian heritage: it needs to be able to decide about its future in conformity with the person and message of Jesus Christ’” (*IL* 45).

In his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI followed John Paul II in highlighting the cultural problem of secularism and religious indifference affecting Western churches. And even though Benedict was able to extend the call for new evangelization to the churches in Africa and Asia, the impetus behind this call was that even these “young” churches were, because of increasing globalization, faced with similar cultural challenges. Thus, in proclaiming a Year of Faith, creating a Pontifical Council for the Promotion of NE, and calling a special synod to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Vatican II, Benedict proposed NE as a project for the whole church, which finds herself within a new “cultural environment”:

New evangelization is precisely the Church’s ability to renew her communal experience of faith and to proclaim it within the new situations which, in recent decades, have arisen in *cultures*. The same phenomenon is taking place in both the North and South and the East and West; in both countries with an age-old Christian tradition and countries which have been evangelized within the last few centuries. The coalescing of social and *cultural* factors—conventionally designated by the term “globalization”—has initiated a process which is weakening traditions and institutions and thereby rapidly eroding both social and *cultural* ties as well as their ability to communicate values and provide answers to perennial questions regarding life’s meaning and the truth. The result is a significant fragmentation of *cultural*

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2. Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015) (hereafter cited in text as *MV*), https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html (all URLs herein accessed March 12, 2016).
 3. See John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (December 30, 1988) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html. See also Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, *Instrumentum Laboris* (June 19, 2012) 13 (hereafter cited in text as *IL*), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.html.

unity and a *culture's* inability to hold fast to the faith and live the values inspired by it. (*IL* 47, emphasis mine)

I highlight the “cultural” emphasis in this formulation as it helps to show the relation between faith and culture as the immediate challenge that the call to NE addresses. As the synod on NE noted,

NE calls for particular attention to the inculcation of faith that can transmit the Gospel in its capacity to value what is positive in every *culture*, at the same time, purifying it from elements that are contrary to the full realization of the person according to the design of God revealed in Christ.⁴

While this is no doubt the case, the cultural emphasis in the project of NE has meant that the political context of NE has not received as much attention. This is especially true in relation to Africa, where NE has been dominated by issues of inculcation and “African culture.” The discussion by Bede Ukwuije provides a most illuminating confirmation.⁵ In a highly lucid and informative 2013 essay he notes that

the renewal of faith in Africa has to take the cultural crisis Africa is going through seriously. This cultural crisis has to do with the crisis of meaning, which is embodied in different realities, more especially in ethnocentrism, the explosion of witchcraft and the subtle spread of secularism, propagated by the development of functional religion. (*ibid.* 212)

He proposes the need for NE “to embark on a critical inculcation which will involve the re-thinking and transformation of African cultures” (*ibid.* 218).

I do not deny that ethnicity, witchcraft, and the subtle spread of secularism are major challenges in Africa. Neither do I deny that that a “rethinking of African cultures” is necessary. My concern, however, is that characterizing the crisis of faith in Africa as primarily a “cultural” crisis tends to obscure the social-political context of modern Africa, more specifically the reality of political uncertainty and violence across much of the continent. In fact, I believe that more than any cultural challenges, it is the political culture of violence in which African Christians experience and live their faith that provides the most critical challenge to the Gospel. This of course is not to deny the need of NE in Africa. It is to locate the need and urgency of NE within a fresh vision of the Gospel and of a new African society. This is what Emmanuel Kataliko offered to the people of Eastern Congo through the story of a God who

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4. *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin: XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (Oct 7–28, 2012) prop. 5, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html.
 5. Bede Ukwuije, “Faith in Africa in the Context of the New Evangelisation” (paper presented at General Assembly of Africans and Malagasies at the Service of the Generalates in Rome, Rome, May 25, 2013), http://www.sedosmission.org/sedosarticles/documents/b_bede_ukwuije_en.pdf.

responds to evil and violence through “the excess of love.” Such a message, as we will see in the fourth section would have not only far-reaching social implications, but points to a vision of society grounded in nonviolence. In order to appreciate the at once “fresh” and “radical” nature of Kataliko’s message, one has to locate it against the background of Africa’s social history, which has been marked by violence.

The Sacrifice of Africa: Salvation from King Leopold’s Ghost?

Recent developments in a number of African countries confirm that the realities of political uncertainty, violence, and insecurity are endemic in much of postcolonial Africa. The Rwanda Genocide of 1994, which killed close to a million people, is still a fresh memory. Much closer in time, developments in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Southern Sudan, and the Central African Republic have led to civil wars that have displaced millions and left thousands dead. More recently still, the crisis of President Nkurunziza’s third-term project in Burundi has sent tens of thousands of Burundians in exile, and left millions more fearing a return to the genocidal wars of a decade or so earlier. While these may appear as isolated incidents, they reveal something of the underlying imagination that drives politics in modern Africa where the competing economic and political interests of a limited elite shape a social history of poverty, civil wars, total disregard of basic rights, and a general sense of desperation and helplessness. Within this context, millions of young, vulnerable, unemployed youths become an easy target for recruitment or abduction into the militia forces. And as is often the case in Africa, the fighting sooner or later takes on an ethnic dimension. But as I have argued elsewhere, ethnicity is not the major problem in Africa. The problem of ethnicity has to do with the underlying visions of society, identity, and well-being that drive modern Africa, within which the realities of violence, ethnicity, and poverty are perpetually invoked and reproduced.⁶

Recent developments in the Congo confirm this conclusion. With more than 30 million Catholics (over 60 percent of the population), the Congo has the largest Catholic population in Africa. But for the last 25 years, this second largest African country, the size of Western Europe, has been the center of a series of wars and fighting that has left millions displaced from their homes, over 5.4 million dead, tens of thousands of women raped,⁷ and its 67 million people among the world’s impoverished.

6. See the full argument of my *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

7. A 2011 study in the *American Journal of Public Health* indicated that 1,152 women were raped every day—a rate equal to 48 per hour. Jo Adetunji, “Forty-eight Women Raped Every Hour in Congo, Study Finds,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo>. The study, carried out by three public health researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and the World Bank, showed 3 percent of women across the country were raped between 2006 and 2007, and that 12 percent of all women had been raped at least once.

It is not easy to untangle the complex set of factors, motivations, and history of what has come to be known as the “Congo Wars” that at their height involved the armies of nine countries, multiple groups of UN peacekeepers, and over 20 armed groups. However, in *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*, Jason Stearns provides some good anchors and a helpful starting point. He offers a vivid and moving chronicle of the Congolese Civil Wars, which began in 1996 in the wake of the Rwanda Genocide, and which brought an end to Mobutu’s 31-year reign and the installation of Desire Kabilas. Particularly helpful is not only that Stearns sheds light on the key actors (especially Rwanda and Uganda), including their complex calculations and agency during the war, but, even more importantly, he is able to locate the fighting within the context of the Congo’s political history.

It is the Congo’s social history that accounts for instance for the fragile nature of the state. As Stearns notes,

Since 1970 until today, the Congolese state has not had an effective army, administration, or judiciary, nor have its leaders been interested in creating strong institutions. Instead they have seen the state apparatus as a threat, to be kept weak so as to better manipulate it. This has left a bitter Congolese paradox: a state that is everywhere oppressive but that is defunct and dysfunctional.⁸

However, the institutional weakness of the Congo state does not reflect a failed state; it is a reflection of the colonial legacy according to which the Congo was turned into the private business empire of King Leopold—a policy that was continued by the Belgian government, and by Mobutu after that. In other words, the institutional weakness of the state advances the politics of plunder and greed that has from the beginning formed part of the imagination of modern Congo.

This is also holds true regarding the reality of war and fighting in the Congo. The violence at the heart of Leopold’s project has been well noted.⁹ What now becomes clear in light of Stearns’s book is that the senseless violence and massacres in the wake of the Congo Wars are a perpetuation of Leopold’s “rubber terror,” even as they bring that violence to new, unprecedented height. The new height was especially realized during the so-called second war (1998–2003) when the entire country, especially Eastern Congo, became militarized. At one point in the war between Kinshasha and Rwanda, Kabilas dropped tons of weapons and ammunition at various airports in the jungles of the Eastern Congo for the Hutu militia as well as for other indigenous militia groups known as *maji maji*.¹⁰ Rwanda responded in kind. The result was that throngs of discontented and unemployed youth joined militias on either side of the

8. Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011) 126.

9. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). See also my *Sacrifice of Africa* for a full discussion.

10. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters* 250.

proxy war. But instead of fighting a war, these militias simply “set up roadblocks to tax the local population.” In the same way “family and land disputes, which had previously been settled in traditional courts, were now sometimes solved through violence, and communal feuds between rival clans or tribes resulted in skirmishes and targeted killings” (*ibid.* 250–51). Soon governors created their own local militias. But instead of “improving security, these ramshackle, untrained local militias for the most part just exacerbated the suffering by taxing, abusing, and raping the local population” (*ibid.* 251). It is within context that one has to understand the ethnic dimension that the fighting in Eastern Congo would soon take on, especially in Ituri where Lendu and Hema tribes slaughtered each other with reckless abandon.

I have found it helpful to briefly draw attention to Stearns’s *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters* so as to highlight the social history within which violence, including the “ethnic” conflict between the Hema and Lendu, becomes thinkable. To abstract the conflict from the wider history and turn it into a problem of ethnicity is to fail to understand it, but it is also to misleadingly focus on “African culture” as the problem. But I have also drawn attention to the story of Congo because it provides a glimpse into the kind of political imagination that drives much of Africa. For in many ways, the Congo serves as a mirror of African society. To use Frantz Fanon’s famous image, “Africa has the shape of a pistol, and the Congo is the trigger. As goes the Congo, so goes the rest of Africa.”¹¹

I have drawn attention to the story of the Congo also because it helps to put the missiological and theological challenge into sharp focus. For given the social history, the same question that was put to the missionaries at the height of Leopold’s rubber terror in the Congo, namely whether the Christian savior had any power to save from Leopold’s rubber terror, is the same challenge confronting Christianity in Africa today.¹² This is the question that makes the project of NE urgent in Africa given the widespread reality of violence across the continent. But if my argument is correct that the imagination of violence is wired within the imaginative landscape of modernity in Africa, then the need for NE is not simply a quest for new strategies and skills to help manage the violence in Africa. It is a quest for a new political imagination, which is to say a quest for a different vision of society than the violent and self-serving “politics of the belly” that drives much of modern Africa. For as Jean-Marc Ela had already noted in the 1980s, the mission of the church in Africa must be placed within the context of the search “for another history, another society, another humanity, another system of production, another style of living together.”¹³ And while the need for a new

11. Quoted in *ibid.* 45. See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove 1963). See also Michela Wrong, who describes the Congo as a “paradigm of all what was wrong with post-colonial Africa” even as the Congo has taken all the contradictions and faults of any normal African country and brought them to their logical extremes. Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu’s Congo* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 10.

12. Katongole, *Sacrifice of Africa* 20.

13. Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 84.

social history in Africa was noted by the second African synod, the latter stopped short of offering the Gospel as the foundation for a new history. That this was the case had partly to do with the worry of getting the Gospel too much entangled in politics. But as Kataliko's life and message will confirm, the Gospel is inevitably political. The decisive question is the kind of politics that the story of God's love generates.

The Search for Another History: Promises and Limitations of *Africæ Munus*

Both the second synod of bishops for Africa and the post-apostolic exhortation *Africæ Munus* acknowledged that NE “is an urgent task for Christians in Africa because they too need to reawaken their enthusiasm for being members of the church.”¹⁴ The need for NE was affirmed against the backdrop of Africa’s political crisis, which was noted by the synod:

The thirst for power leads to contempt for all the elementary rules of good governance, takes advantage of people’s lack of knowledge, manipulates political, ethnic, tribal and religious differences and creates cultures where warriors are considered heroes and people need to be paid back for past sacrifices and wrongs committed. (*IL* 11)

It is within this context that *Africæ Munus* noted the “anthropological crisis” (*AM* 11) arising in part out of “Africa’s painful memory of fratricidal conflicts between ethnic groups, the slave trade and colonization.” Given this crisis “that has left Africa painfully scarred,” Pope Benedict reaffirmed:

What Africa needs most is neither gold nor silver. She wants to stand up, like the man at the pool of Bethzatha. She wants to have confidence in herself and in her dignity as a people loved by her God. It is this encounter with Jesus which the church must offer to bruised and wounded hearts yearning for reconciliation and peace, and thirsting for justice. (*AM* 9)

I read this conclusion by Benedict as a confirmation of the urgent need for a new story in Africa, one that “heals, sets free and reconciles” and thus is able to engender, in the already cited words of Jean-Mark Ela, “another history, another society, another humanity, another system of production, another style of living together.” The various recommendations of *Africæ Munus* for the African church to pursue reconciliation should accordingly be seen as a constitutive dimension of this quest for another vision of sociality in Africa. For as Benedict notes, “Evangelization today takes the name of reconciliation, ‘an indispensable condition for instilling in Africa justice among men

14. Pope Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus* (November 19, 2011) 171 (hereafter cited in text as *AM*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africæ-munus.html.

and women, and building a fair and lasting peace that people of good will irrespective of their religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social background” (AM 174).

While these indications seem to suggest reconciliation as the foundation for a new political vision for Africa, there is a fundamental tension in *Africæ Munus* that leads to hesitations and in some instances even a pulling back away from a comprehensive vision of reconciliation in favor of a more standard approach. The hesitation is evident on at least two levels. First, while *Africæ Munus* issues an explicit appeal for the church and Christians “to pursue” reconciliation, justice, and peace, it does not provide a comprehensive framework that displays reconciliation as a “gift”—God’s gift to the world, to Africa in particular. Accordingly, the preoccupation with the church’s “mission” and with “pastoral guidelines and strategies” in *Africæ Munus* easily lead to an impression that reconciliation is just one pastoral agenda among many—no doubt an urgent and timely one. A final message from the synod confirms this by urging bishops “to put issues of reconciliation, justice and peace high up on the pastoral agenda of their dioceses.”¹⁵

But reconciliation is not just another priority area of the church’s mission. It is God’s gift of “new creation” to the world (2 Cor 5:17 NIV, used throughout)—and an invitation to enter and experience the world of new creation, which God has made possible through God’s reconciling love. For as Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor 5:17–18). In the context of Africa’s turbulent political history, the invitation offers not simply concrete alternatives in the wake of violence, but a basis for a new society founded on God’s nonviolent and reconciling love.

The second area where *Africæ Munus* seems to pull back from a dynamic vision of reconciliation as the basis of a new society in Africa is in the sharp distinction that Benedict draws between the “spiritual” and “political” realms. I suspect he does so in order to protect the call for reconciliation from sounding too political. For instance, even as he notes that reconciliation is of great importance to the task of politics, he qualifies this by noting that reconciliation itself “is a pre-political concept and a pre-political reality” (AM 19). He also rightly notes that the Gospel brings about a “revolution,” but immediately qualifies this by stating that “Christ does not propose a revolution of a social and political kind, but a revolution of love brought about by his complete self-giving through his death on the Cross and resurrection” (AM 26). Even as the pope offers recommendations to Christians at various levels of society to take their faith seriously as the foundation for building a more just and peaceful African society, he says that “the building of a just social order is part of the competence of the political sphere” (AM 22) and warns that “the church’s mission is not of a political nature but it is to open the world to the religious sense by proclaiming Christ” (AM 23). Throughout *Africæ Munus* Benedict tries to walk the tightrope

15. *Message to the People of God of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* (October 23, 2009) 19, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html.

between a vision of reconciliation in its holistic and revolutionary dimension and a spiritual vision of reconciliation, based on the realization that the political realm lies outside the church's competence.¹⁶ The tension remains unresolved, even though in the end, in an interview after the closing mass at the synod on October 26, 2012, Benedict pointed to pastoral praxis as the ground where the full implications of a Christian vision of reconciliation are worked out:

A pastor's language, instead, must be realistic, it must touch upon reality, but within the perspective of God and His Word. Therefore this mediation involves, on one hand being truly tied to reality, taking the care to talk about what is, and on the other hand, not falling into technically political solutions: this means to demonstrate a concrete but spiritual world.¹⁷

The attention to pastoral praxis is a very welcome one. For attending to the pastoral praxis within the historical context of Africa not only confirms the need and urgency of a new political imagination, it will also confirm that the “revolution of love brought about by his [Jesus's] complete self-giving through his death on the Cross and resurrection” (*AM* 26) totally reshapes the social and material conditions of a society. This is what makes the Gospel good news in the context of Africa’s turbulent political history, which calls for a new social imagination. It is this search for a new, nonviolent basis for society that drove Kataliko’s ministry in the Congo. And so, in order to explore the full political implications of NE as reconciliation, we need to attend to his story.

Kataliko and an “Excess of Love” in the Congo

Emmanuel Kataliko was installed as Archbishop of Bukavu in May 1997 at a very turbulent time in the Congo’s political history. His predecessor Archbishop Christopher Munzihirwa had been assassinated seven months earlier. It was two days after Mobutu

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16. In an interview after the closing mass at the synod (Oct 26, 2012, Rome), and in *AM* 17, Pope Benedict points to the tension: “The theme ‘Reconciliation, justice and peace’ certainly implies a strong political dimension, even if it is obvious that reconciliation, justice and peace are not possible without a deep purification of the heart, without renewal of thought, a ‘metanoia’ without something new that can only come from the encounter with God. But even if this spiritual dimension is profound and fundamental, the political dimension is also very real, because without political achievements, these changes of the Spirit usually are not realized. Therefore the temptation could have been in politicizing the theme, to talk less about pastors and more about politicians, thus with a competence that is not ours. The other danger was—to avoid this temptation—pulling oneself into a purely spiritual world, in an abstract and beautiful world, but not a realistic one.” http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_23_ii_speciale-africa-2009/02_inglese/b34_02.html.
 17. Pope Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during Luncheon with Synod Fathers* (October 24, 2009), https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091024_pranzo-padri-sinod.html.

fled Kinshasha and two days before Laurent Kabilo took power. A year later Kabilo would fall out with his Rwandan and Ugandan allies, plunging the Congo into the second Congo war.¹⁸ The Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), a Rwanda-sponsored rebel group, controlled Bukavu and the whole of Southern Kivu and was exercising heavy taxation on the city. Overall, by 1999 the economic, political, and security situation in and around Bukavu was becoming dire. Numerous *maji maji* groups (local indigenous militias) had formed, massacres were common, as were incidents of pillage and looting. It was against this background that Kataliko preached his famous 1999 Christmas message denouncing Rwanda's occupation and the "empire of greed"—the "insatiable thirst for material things" that fueled the violence and looting in Eastern Congo.

Kataliko's sermon (referenced at the start of this article) struck a chord not only with Catholics in Bukavu, but with Protestants, Muslims, and the entire civil society of Bukavu. A one-week strike was called to protest the high taxes by the RCD and the continued presence of Rwandan and Ugandan forces in Eastern Congo. The strike closed schools, health clinics, NGO offices, markets, and transportation, and thus brought the city to a halt. The RCD responded by arresting Kataliko and exiling him to Butembo, his former diocese, accusing him of political involvement, inciting civic unrest, and promoting ethnic divisions.

In accusing Kataliko of political involvement, the RCD wanted him to stick to his "pastoral duties" and care for the "spiritual needs" of the people.¹⁹ Kataliko insisted that that was exactly what he was doing. And so, even from exile, he continued to write pastoral letters to his congregation. However, from these letters it becomes obvious that even though Kataliko never described his ministry in "political" terms, the message of Christ crucified that he shared with the people was in itself a deeply subversive "political" message in that it invited Christians into a different vision of politics and of society than the one pursued by the RCD and the other warring factions. No doubt it was a profound spiritual message about the story of God's excess love manifested on the cross. In a Lenten message from Butembo (March 15, 2000), Kataliko wrote,

In these difficult times, let us not doubt the love of God for us. "If God is on our side, who will be against us?" (Rom 8:31–39). But know the logic of the Gospel is a logic not of power, but of the cross. "God has chosen the weak of the world to undermine the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). The only response to the excess of evil is the excess of love.²⁰

18. For more on this history, see John Kiess, "When War is Our Daily Bread: Congo, Theology and the Ethics of Contemporary Conflict" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2011). I am particularly indebted to Kiess, who first drew my attention to the story of Emmanuel Kataliko, and whose work provides in the story and leadership of Kataliko a most compelling account of Christian agency, reasoning, and alternatives in the midst of fighting.

19. See *Les écrits . . . de Mgr Kataliko*, ed. Daniel Kamable Kombi, Agustin Kahindo Snege, and Jean-Piere Kabuyaya Mbeva (Kinshasha: Kombi & Sons, 2000) 41–49. Translations my own.

20. *Les écrits . . . de Mgr Kataliko*, 50.

The excess of love that Kataliko notes here is the logic of the cross. This for Kataliko is the way that God responds to evil, suffering, and violence in the world, by his willingness to become a victim rather than a perpetrator of violence. God conquers the violence of the world through suffering. In his Lenten letter the previous year, of God's suffering servant of Isaiah (Isa 50:6–7) he writes,

Although wounded, he did not wound others. Although he was subjected to injustice, he did not respond with injustice. Although he was humiliated He did not humiliate those who were weaker than himself. Although he was suffering, he resisted, keeping in his heart the dream of a society founded in justice, without oppressor or any oppressed. (Isa 42:2–4)²¹

As this statement shows, the dream of God's suffering servant is at the same time a unique social vision, a vision of society "founded in justice, without oppressor or any oppressed." Jesus as God's suffering servant confirms this vision of "crucified love" as the basis of our life in God and with one another. Kataliko continues in the same Lenten message:

In this lifelong battle, He knows that in this world justice and love cannot exist unless they are crucified. He thus accepted to be hung on the cross, this instrument of torture reserved for slaves that the son of God transformed into a means of liberation and redemption. His courage came to Him in the certainty that to live with love, to practice justice, and to tell the truth is the only way to have God on your side.²²

The practical implication that Kataliko drew from this realization was that it is through this "crucified love" that God "reconciles" the world to himself—inviting fallen humanity into his love even as he (God) stands in solidarity with suffering humanity. In doing so, Jesus becomes the source and model of all our human and material engagements, and for this reason, the practical dimensions of everyday life are not outside the story of God's love for humanity; they are a reflection and an extension of God's love and solidarity. This explains Kataliko's own passionate concern for human dignity and for "development." When he was bishop of Butembo, he was personally involved in the building of roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and a university. And when he was transferred to Bukavu, in his very first pastoral letter (1997) he mobilized the population to repair the city drainage. The practical and mundane concerns were part and parcel of the logic of the "excess of love."

But in the same way that the practical details of life are not mere mundane matters, so the church's spiritual and liturgical practices are no mere spiritual or pious exercises. They are concrete opportunities that introduce and form Christians into the story of God's reconciling love. For Kataliko, therefore, liturgical practices and seasons are a way of entering into this different, nonviolent logic—God's way of responding to

21. "Courage, j'ai vaincu le monde' (Jn 16, 33)," Lettre pastorale de Carême 1999, in *Lettres pastorales et messages de Monseigneur Emmanuel Kataliko* (18 May 1997–Oct 2000) 58.

22. Ibid. 58.

evil with an excess of love. They are an invitation into a different history—for Kataliko, the true and only history of the world. Entering this different history is what allows one to see that for all their pretensions, it is not Kabila, Kagame, Kagutu, or the generals that control history, but the crucified God. Accordingly, the different liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter became opportunities for Kataliko to re-narrate the fighting christologically (thus his pastoral letters) and situate the crisis in Bukavu within the wider drama of the incarnation.²³ Moreover, it was the re-narration that allowed Kataliko to see clearly and name different forms of “servitude” (plunder, violence, greed, oppression, etc.) in the Congo; it also revealed concrete options and practical alternatives to resist such various forms of servitude. Thus, in his September 1998 pastoral letter, he offered these practical alternatives:

In the face of violence, let us endeavor to resist with all the strength of our faith, without letting ourselves be taken in by an equal spirit of violence . . .

In the face of poverty that weakens us, let us react with an effort made in solidarity . . .

In the face of famine that threatens us, let us strive to respond with an even greater engagement in work, without letting ourselves be paralyzed by fear and lassitude . . . Everyone should work to make sure they meet the needs of their families . . . Merchants should not succumb to the temptation of profit from the general distress by raising prices of essential goods; farmers should redouble efforts . . . to cultivate the fields and thus produce the necessary food for their subsistence and that of their brothers and sisters in the city.²⁴

These concrete alternatives constitute for Kataliko “the work of peace,” which does not wait till the end of the war, but goes on as everyday work even in the middle of the war. What is significant of course is that for Kataliko these are not free-floating “strategies of peacebuilding.” They are the practical, social, and political implications of the story of God’s excess love.

Conclusion

Let me close by highlighting four implications that emerge from our discussion, which confirm the immense political possibilities of the gospel in the context of Africa’s social history.

23. As John Kiess notes, Kataliko does not approach the war as a separate sphere of human action with its own time and law, but instead shows how the church’s liturgical time of birth, passion, and resurrection remain the determinative lens for Christians throughout rebel occupation. See *When War is Our Daily Bread* 150. As the season of Advent transitions to Lent, Kataliko moves from the theme of birth, which sprung the church into action on the streets of Bukavu, to the theme of suffering and the church’s entry into the paschal mystery of Christ (*ibid.* 168).

24. “Soyez forts et courageux,” September 24, 1998, in *Les écrits . . . de Mgr Kataliko* 27–29.

First, what our discussion of Kataliko makes obvious is that even though Kataliko understood the Gospel as a “spiritual” message about God’s excess love that led Jesus to the cross, he understood this message to be at the same time the primary lens through which to understand our lives here and now. The story not only provided the interpretative lens through which Kataliko read the history of the Congo, but shaped his life as a pastor, lay behind his interest and involvement in various efforts for human dignity in Butembo, and drove his passionate advocacy on behalf of the embattled people of Bukavu. In the latter case, the story not only offered courage to denounce the greed that fueled the fighting in Eastern Congo, it opened up concrete possibilities of non-violent alternatives in the face of violence, which he offered to the people. That the alternatives he offered were concrete and specific confirms that for Kataliko the Gospel did not exist in its own sublime realm of “spiritual” matters, but was always incarnated in the messy world of particular histories and contexts. Perhaps this is what Pope Benedict had meant by noting that a pastor’s language must be “realistic” and thus “demonstrate a concrete but spiritual world.”²⁵ However, operating within a neat distinction between the “religious” and “political” realms, Benedict could not envisage, in the same way that Kataliko did, a whole new social reality being opened up by the story of God’s reconciling love. What Kataliko’s message and story shows is that when one stands within the story of God’s reconciling love, the very boundaries between religion and politics are put into question.

Second, while the generals might have been right to accuse Kataliko of meddling in politics, they completely underestimated the kind of politics that the story of God’s excess love had opened up for Kataliko. While the generals viewed Kataliko’s engagement from a narrow partisan lens (and saw him as a “politician”), Kataliko was involved in a far more subversive political project. His project involved nothing less than a redefinition of politics from the vantage point of the story of God’s nonviolent and reconciling love. The immediate social and practical implications of this redefinition was that for Kataliko politics was not about power in the sense of domination, force, and plunder, but power as self-sacrificing service on behalf of others. This is the sense of politics that David Karamba, a young Kenyan who helped his village build a sustainable education fund, is referring to when he notes,

If politics is trying to win by making the other person look worse off, then I will never be a politician . . . But if politics is building schools, if politics is setting up infrastructures getting to make sure that everybody has certain rights like education and health—if politics is trying to optimize what you have in the system in terms of public resources, then that’s the kind of politics I would like to do. And I am already a politician in that sense.²⁶

This is the kind of politics that Kataliko pursued. But for Kataliko of course, this vision of politics and his engagement of it was simply an outworking of the practical

25. *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during Luncheon with Synod Fathers* (Oct 24, 2009).

26. Cited in Dayo Olopade, *The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) 213.

implications of the story of God's excess love within a particular time and place. For a people trapped into a social history of violence, looting, and exploitation, Kataliko's politics offered them not only language to name their servitude, but possibilities for nonviolent forms of engagement, solidarity, and peaceful co-existence. It is therefore not surprising that Kataliko's message struck a chord not only among Catholics, but with Muslims, Protestants, and the entire civil society of Bukavu.

Third, the fact that Kataliko's message struck a chord beyond the Catholic community reveals interesting parallels between Kataliko and Pope Francis. Even though Pope Francis has not adopted "New Evangelization" as the banner of his pontificate, he has provided a fresh vision of the Gospel and the urgent work of evangelization in our time through his focus on mercy. Mercy, he has noted, is "the beating heart of the gospel," the "bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sins" (*MV* 2). But just as Kataliko was to discover in the story of God's excess of love a rich social political vision, the story of God's mercy foregrounds Francis's ecclesiological vision and dynamic social political engagement. Comparing the church to a field hospital, Francis has noted, "This is the mission of the Church: to heal the wounds of the heart, to open doors, to free people, to say that God is good, God forgives all, God is the Father, God is affectionate, God always waits for us."²⁷ Behind this statement is the vision of the church as a redemptive community that heals social wounds and divisions. It is a similar sentiment that lies behind Francis's declaration of the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy as an opportunity to reinvigorate the church in her mission as the sacrament of God's mercy in the world and to invite the church and humanity as a whole into a fresh experience of the richness of God's love and mercy in its spiritual, social, and political dimensions. The social-political implications of this invitation became particularly apparent during the pope's recent trip to Africa, especially his visit to the war-torn Central African Republic (CAR). Whereas he spoke to many audiences and offered much encouragement toward an end to violence and peace in CAR, none was as powerful as when on November 29, 2015, Francis opened the Holy Door of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral at Bangui for the beginning of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. This marked a first time for the jubilee holy door to be opened outside Rome, and the fact that this was ten days before the formal opening of the Jubilee Year of Mercy in Rome on December 8, made the event at Bangui even more significant. It confirmed Francis's vision that God's mercy was not simply a sentimental consolation or mere spiritual platitude, but the most decisive intervention and alternative to the madness of war. "The Holy year of Mercy comes early to this land," Pope Francis told the gathered congregation, "a land that has suffered for many years."²⁸ During the homily, he reminded the congregation that one of the many gifts of God's

27. Pope Francis, "The Church Should Be Like a Field Hospital" (homily delivered at Casa Santa Marta, Vatican City, February 5, 2015), <http://www.romereports.com/2015/02/05/pope-francis-homily-the-church-should-be-like-a-field-hospital>.

28. "The Pope opens the Holy Door of Mercy in Bangui, 'Spiritual Capital of the World,'" *News.va*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.news.va/en/news/the-pope-opens-the-holy-door-of-mercy-in-bangui-sp>.

merciful love is that it invites us to love our enemies, “which protects us from the temptation to seek revenge and from the spiral of endless retaliation.”²⁹ He then appealed to Christians to live out this gospel of mercy: “In every place, even and especially in those places where violence, hatred, injustice and persecution hold sway, Christians are called to give witness to this God who is love” (*ibid.*). While Francis spoke mostly to Christians inside the cathedral, outside he carried the same message of peace grounded in the story of God’s mercy in his meeting with Muslim and Evangelical leaders: “To those who unjustly use the weapons of this world, I launch this appeal: Lay down those instruments of death . . . Arm yourself instead with justice, love and mercy, the authentic guarantors of peace” (*ibid.*). In this connection, he paid tribute to an interfaith platform created by the archbishop, the amam, and the pastor in Bangui³⁰ whose efforts were recently recognized by the United Nations.³¹

There are a number of similarities that one can draw between Kataliko’s “excess of love” and Francis’s “gospel of mercy” that confirm the inherent political character of the Gospel. On the plane back to Rome from the Central African Republic, a reporter asked Pope Francis whether his tribute to the interfaith peace platform meant that religious leaders should intervene more in the political sphere. Francis’s response: “Intervening in the political sphere: if that means ‘being a politician,’ then no. Let them be a good priest, imam or rabbi: that is their vocation. But in an indirect way we do get involved in politics when we preach values, true values.”³² Veiled in Francis’s response is the realization, which Kataliko’s life and message confirm, that the more the religious leaders contemplate and take seriously their religious calling and message, the more they are able to discover its rich political potential. What both Kataliko and now Francis show is that the story of God’s excess love (Kataliko) and mercy (Pope Francis) offers not simply skills, techniques, and motivations to manage the current political realities, but the possibility to “cross over to another shore”³³ (Francis) and thus “enter” into a completely different story, one that engenders a different politics or, in the memorable

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29. Pope Francis, “Homily, Mass with Priests, Religious and Seminarians, Central African Republic,” (homily delivered at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Bangui, Central African Republic, [homily delivered at Casa Santa Marta, February 5, 2015], Nov 29, 2015), <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/f1AfricaCARcathedralMass.htm>.
30. For more on the Central African Interfaith Peace Platform, see “Faith Leaders in the CAR Launch a National Interfaith Peace Platform,” *Conciliation Resources*, April 2014, <http://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/news/faith-leaders-car-launch-national-interfaith-peace-platform>; see also Geneva Liaison Office of the World Evangelical Alliance, “The Contribution of the Interfaith Platform to the Reconciliation Process in the Central African Republic” (working paper, World Evangelical Alliance, June 2014), <http://worldea.org/images/wimg/files/The%20contribution%20of%20the%20interfaith%20platform%20to%20the%20CAR%20reconciliation%20process.pdf>.
31. See “Interfaith Peace Platform Wins UN Peace award,” *Conciliation Resources*, August 2015, <http://www.c-r.org/news-and-views/news/interfaith-peace-platform-wins-un-peace-prize>.
32. Pope Francis, interview during in-flight press conference, November 30, 2015, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/f1AfricaflitRome.htm>.
33. Pope Francis, “Homily, Mass with Priests, Religious and Seminarians, Central African Republic.”

words of Jean-Marc Ela, a “different world right here.”³⁴ In an Africa dominated by the politics of power struggles, violence, and all forms of exclusion, there seems to be no more urgent task than inviting African peoples into a different history. This is the task that calls for new evangelization efforts on the continent, for which Kataliko, and more recently Pope Francis, provide compelling examples.

Author biography

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34. Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 53.