

Public Challenges to Christianity in Africa*

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Written for the end of the millennium, this essay considers the future for Africa and what this means for a public Christian witness. It begins by considering Africa's experience of marginalization from the globalizing world economy, noting how this is both historically conditioned and heterogeneous. Problems of governance, power and authority rest within this history, particularly the colonial disjunction between citizenship and subjecthood mirrored in policies of mixed direct and indirect rule (M Mamdani). In such a situation, Christianity cannot confine itself to issues of inculturation and evangelization, but must enter into the public sphere more directly. This is complicated, because Africa is also a continent of contested Christianities, indigenous and exogenous. From this angle of view, the question is how one takes into account critical questions in Africa about resources (human and material), gender and well-being (or illness and disease, negatively). Without attention to such issues, a Christian (or any other) response is likely to at best naïve, at worst disingenuous. The challenges are clear. A key issue is whether African churches or Christian groups have the resources, or the will, to respond to them adequately.

Africa: On the Edge of the Globe?

The pending closure of this century, with the expectation that the coming century requires new patterns of political and economic order in Africa to counteract the terrible effects of failed patterns, inevitably raises many hopes and equally many fears. Let me be provocative and say at the outset that African peoples and nations—already consigned by many in the so-called G7 countries to the margins of history¹—will find great difficulty in coping with what has been widely discussed as a “globalization” process.

To be sure, the meaning of “globalization” cannot be taken for granted, nor can we fail to note the ideological connotations of the term.² It is important to contest the ideological underpinnings of the economic meaning of globalization in particular, and it is important to do so in terms

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¹ At a G7 (USA, Canada, UK, Germany, Switzerland, Japan, France) meeting not so long ago, where scenarios for the 21st century were debated, a consensus emerged that China was likely to dominate developments in the next century. Every other region was regarded as playing a role in determining the shape of the next hundred years barring Africa. Africa was simply ignored as irrelevant on the grounds that it would find itself on the historical back-burner because of problems felt to be endemic to the continent. Such scenarios need not be borne out in fact, of course, and there are clear signs to suggest a more positive future for Africa. Nevertheless, these perceptions are telling and will only be countered by political and economic developments rather than counter-ideological claims.

² The concept of “globalization” is used in several ways, not all of them obviously compatible. But the dominant meaning in economic theory suggests the view that capitalist market economies are the only successful models for sustainable societies. The corollary is that any economy will regress or become uncompetitive which—for whatever material or social reasons—neglects to enter into the global market systems or does so with insufficient commitment or credibility. Development, and thus the alleviation of poverty in the long run, is seen to be a factor of entering into these systems on terms which are effectively established by them and not by the people or government of the nation.

of the human and social capital one has. This puts before Africa a considerable challenge (particularly if the concepts of Africanisation or *ubuntu* are drawn into the equation)³ with no guarantee that the challenge can be met on the basis of local resources.

At the same time, the complex of forces which undergird globalization have another irrevocable characteristic, namely, that of drawing, however indirectly, all societies and regions into relationship with each other—into the so-called “global village.” Among these forces one may cite ecological degradation or reclamation, and the information revolution, as examples of the narrowing of global boundaries.

At the same time, everywhere new boundaries are being struggled over or established. This combination is what gives practical meaning to the now common notions of pluralism, difference and identity, but simultaneously, in direct proportion to the extension of difference, there arise multiple demands to forge greater unities of one kind or another.⁴ The classic philosophical problem of the relationship between the one and the many has powerful political significance in our time, not least in Africa.

It is a shaky world we live in, and Africa is among the shakiest of the contenders for a prominent place in the sun of the 21st century. It will do none of us in Africa any good to stay out of these processes, nor can we allow ourselves to be excluded from them. This produces the kind of pressure which pushes demands for liberal democracy, market economies, and open trade policies upon African nations. The pressure is both real (in the sense that no economy can do the job it needs to do for a developing country and a largely poor population without significant interaction with the powerful economies or corporations of the world) and coercive (in the sense that powerful economies or corporations either offer strong incentives or threaten serious sanctions, or both, to push for changes which will benefit them).

Public issues in Africa, therefore, go beyond any national identity, and certainly they must be analyzed in terms which do not depend primarily on concepts of colonialism or neo-colonialism as these were understood in the 'fifties, the 'sixties, and the 'seventies. Nor can they be understood through predominantly cultural lenses because, important as these lenses are to recovering and asserting African identities, they will fail to see adequately the fundamental material contradictions which beset Africa and shape the lives of so many millions.

At the same time, fourth generation development theories—so-called “people-centred” notions of development⁵—tell us that previous approaches to development will not work unless the lifeworld meanings and representations of a people or community are not harnessed in bonding local wisdom and experience with the macro-economic and social attacks on poverty. In South Africa, this kind of link has been perceived by someone such as Deputy President Mbeki who said at a recent consultation on spirituality and nationhood that while political and socio-economic transformation is non-negotiable, it is not enough: “... it cries out also for spiritual power and resources to heal, to reconcile, to rebuild and to restore humanity.”⁶

³ We should note here that both concepts remain politically and economically dangerously imprecise, even if they are philosophically more developed (a recent reading of the concept of *ubuntu* may be found in Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, Cape Town: UCT Press, 1993).

⁴ So, for example, South Africa has to redefine itself at every level as an independent nation, but simultaneously, it has to take seriously its participation in the SADC as an interdependent nation.

⁵ Cf. Korten, *Getting to the 21st century : voluntary action and the global agenda*, West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1990.

⁶ Address by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, *From Liberation to Transformation*, WCRP Consultation, Johannesburg, 14 June 1997. Mbeki begins the address by referring to the biblical text, “What shall it profit a man (sic) if he should gain the whole world and lose his soul?” One example from a biblical scholar of an approach compatible with this vision may be found in Justin

Rebuilding in Africa is not of course something that happens *de novo*, nor can it be done as if there were no prior consequences of history constraining what is possible. It is therefore important to take into account the history of the last centuries with its effects, for some of these effects are enduring, shadowing every current challenge.

One way of looking at these effects revolves around the notion of modernity and its impact of what might be called “pre-modernity” in Africa. Thus Balcomb analyses Africa’s ills from the point of view that modernity imposed a cultural, political and economic hegemony on Africa which was and in many respects still is alien to African experiences, practices and philosophies, leaving with us the question of whether or not African is “on the adventure of modernity as a galley slave or a passenger who travels in hope?”⁷ His hopes in the face of a tendency to believe that Africans have mainly been galley slaves lead in the direction of Derrida’s contention that the demise of modernity would be tied up with the emergence of the “other” on the world stage.

The cultural and philosophical implications of this position for a challenge to globalization ideologies seem to me important, but equally, without some deeper complementary analysis of the material conditions and possibilities of life for Africans in the context of modernizing forces (however much this may have become problematic both theoretically and practically), when all is said and done more will be said than done about the realities of poverty, war, ecological degradation and the like in Africa. The political parameters of this context, I think, is best analyzed along the lines suggested by Mahmood Mamdani in his analysis of contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism.

Mamdani offers a persuasive argument that many problems of governance, power and authority in Africa are derived from colonial patterns of a mix of direct and indirect rule on linked to rural/urban divides. The effects of this mix is to produce a political disjunction between citizenship and subjecthood.⁸ Urban areas, he argues, were directly ruled along modern lines, with civil society and citizenship governing the way in which politics functioned. Alongside direct rule, colonial authorities established patterns of indirect rule—also called “association” among the French—which were applied to rural, tribal areas, usually with some form of “customary law” in place and the notion of the subject as dominant (under a local “tribal authority”). These are the two dominant forms of the incorporation of local populations into the arena of colonial power, the former in Mamdani’s view being a form centralized despotism and the latter a form of decentralized despotism, producing complementary ways of native control. In the process civil society is racialized (predominantly an urban experience) and native authorities are tribalized (predominantly a rural experience of the peasantry).⁹

This classic disjunction, of which South Africa and apartheid now becomes not the unique case in Africa but in fact the generic form of the colonial state (a crucial point in Mamdani’s entire argument), is reflected in the disjunction between contemporary reformers in Africa. Modernists, Mamdani argues, seek a political solution to Africa’s problems in the development of a vigorous civil society in which rights are protected, while Africanists wish to place

S. Upkong, *Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics*, Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, Vol. 91, 1995, pp. 3-14.

⁷ Anthony Balcomb, *Modernity and the African Experience*, Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa, Pietermaritzburg, Vol. 3, no. 2, June 1996, pp. 12-20.

⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers/Cape Town: David Philip, 1996.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

communitarian politics at the center where culture is defended. Mamdani himself believes that both options must be sublimated under a critique of each. Deracialization has been a dominant interest in postcolonial states. But it is not enough. Mamdani's potent argument is that

To understand the limits of deracialization of civil society, one needs to grasp the specificity of the local state, which was organized not as a racial power denying rights to urbanized subjects, but as an ethnic power enforcing custom on tribespeople. The point of reform of such power could not be deracialization; it could only be detribalization.¹⁰

Democratization in Africa is therefore for Mamdani a vital and burning project which is a long way from complete, and its incompleteness is not because Africa resists it, but because the legacy of colonial policy prevents it. Democratization in Africa really should have "entailed [both] the deracialization of civil power and the detribalization of customary power...."¹¹ If Mamdani is correct in his analysis, then the issue of culture and inculturation must take on a very different form than it is often given. Detribalization seems to imply a movement against attempts to re-establish tribal authorities and practices, as well as tribal identities. Indeed, as many black South Africans can testify, tribal identities are often fictions, to some extent fabrications of colonial mythologies of subjecthood and policies of indirect rule, besides anything that might happen to such identities under the impact of modern economic and social exigencies.

The nature of power in both the urban and the rural spheres has to be transformed simultaneously for any resolution of the dichotomy which bedevils South Africa as well as much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. To do this requires policies and practices which emphasize neither representation at the cost of participation, nor participation and the cost of representation, in the construction of democracy. Similarly, autonomy—the legitimacy and particularity of the local—must be accompanied by alliances which transcend the local. The third related dichotomy, between the civil and the customary, requires a democratic appreciation of both. But the beginning of such appreciation lies in the need to "disentangle authoritarianism from emancipatory possibilities in both."¹²

All of these comments and considerations are designed to lead to the point where we may identify issues of importance to an contemporary ethical position based on a religious conviction, and thus to illuminate the possible significance of religion, specifically the Christian tradition, in addressing the public life of African nations and peoples.

This would require, in the first instance, that Christians feel themselves addressed by the issues which face Africa in the public sphere. That, in turn, demands that Christians go beyond matters of inculturation and evangelisation, at least where these are understood narrowly to mean drawing people into specific patterns of belief and practice separate from the public sphere as a whole—an African religiosity of the kind Karl Barth criticised so powerfully in the first part of this century in another context.

Contested Christianities

First, however, let me issue some general cautions in respect of Christianity in Africa. Christianity has a long history in Africa. Indeed, one may claim with considerable force that

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹² Ibid., p. 299.

Christianity is original to Africa well before it appears in what is now Europe. One cannot write fully about Christianity in the public life of Africa without taking into account its complex past in such origins and in the later European and North American missionary movements. But there is a larger issue than this.

In his preface to the UNESCO eight volume *General History of Africa*,¹³ Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow notes that African historiography, long dominated by northern scholars, tended to use one or other form of the generic notions of “black” and “white” to analyze the continent. Not only did this reproduce racial categories of superiority and inferiority, but “this pattern of spurious identification relegated the history of African peoples in many minds to the rank of ethno-history, in which the appreciation of the historical and cultural facts was bound to be warped.”

It is thus important to begin by acknowledging that Africa—enigmatic to some, romantic to many, pathetic to still others—has a long and seminal history, its huge geographical sweep playing host through the centuries, indeed millennia, to the ebb and flow of a vast range of sometimes intermingling, sometimes independent human dramas.¹⁴ The recognition in an earlier work by Georges Balandier¹⁵ that Africa is an ambiguous continent, filled with cultures in collision, is reinforced by the long durational studies of Africa contained in the *General History*.

It is not therefore just the complex history of Christianity in Africa that makes our analysis difficult. The heterogeneity of Africa itself which emerges in the volumes of the *General History* makes any assessment of the relationship of Christianity to the public life of nations and societies complex beyond the point where one may say anything in general about Africa with confidence. This is particularly true when one considers the intricacies of early indigenous experiences of Christianity in Africa, including the rise of the Coptic Church¹⁶ (which still uses the only existing form of a pharaonic language, and was among the first churches founded after the Jerusalem church) and the challenges of the Docetist movement to Augustinian and Latin Christianity,¹⁷ in relation to the missionary Christianity of more recent times. There are huge ambiguities and contradictions in these experiences, and in the way one approaches the history of Christianity in Africa.

For these reasons, I will not attempt to discuss the general sweep of Christianity’s relationship to public life in Africa, despite the title of the essay. Rather, drawing on a limited selection of sources, I wish to raise to prominence a few contemporary debates in Africa in which Christianity might show its colours—contested and contradictory colours—in its engagement in public life.

¹³ *General History of Africa*, UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 1985-1992, p. viii.

¹⁴ The recent discovery near Cape Town of footsteps that may well belong to one of the original women of the human race (thus already named “Eve”) further strengthens the widely held theory that Africa is older, in terms of human history, than any other continent.

¹⁵ Georges Balandier, *Ambiguous Africa: Cultures in Collision*, (French original: *Afrique ambiguë*), trans. Helen Weaver, New York: Pantheon Books, 1966.

¹⁶ See Partrick, Theodore Hall, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: a history of the Coptic Orthodox Church*, Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996. Also Wakin, Edward, *A lonely minority; the modern story of Egypt’s Copts*, New York, Morrow, 1963. From a Coptic perspective, cf. Iris Habib el Masri, *The Story of the Copts: the true story of Christianity in Egypt* (2 volumes), Kenya: Coptic Bishopric for African Affairs, 1987.

¹⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church; a movement of protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952.

The Angle of Vision: Selected Categories of Analysis

South Africa, of course, is the platform from which I look out on Africa. Given the relative isolation of South Africa from the rest of Africa over the last decades, and its people's necessary but peculiarly South African obsession with racism, it is not always easy to figure out what the meaning of events in the rest of Africa is without casting our own categories and experiences like a long thick cloak over our interpretation of them.

Nevertheless, we may isolate certain issues which have been prominent in debates in South Africa, and Africa more widely, which reflect the attempt of its peoples to come to terms with public realities.¹⁸ As in other parts of the world, where the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the forces of market globalization have led to a reassessment of how to engage as a nation with other nations in a context where nationhood has come into question, Africa has begun to rethink the meaning of democracy and governance. This rethink takes place, however, in a context of wholesale dislocation and widespread wars, many of the wars being grounded in ethnic mythologies in the sense that Mamdani has noted, and a deepening competition for resources.

The question of resources also brings to the fore the capacity of African nations to feed and sustain their populations in the face of ecological degradation. Indeed ecological issues, dismissed in some quarters as the concern of the affluent, properly understood are about the just and caring nurture of the resources upon which so many people—especially those who are poorer and those who are rural—depend. Africa, if it is anything, is poor, and still largely rural. Even in South Africa, the most industrialized nation south of the Sahara at least, the disjunction between urban and rural realities is great, and the reality of poverty overwhelming.

Yet Africa is not simply a “basket case.” It is a continent in which hope flourishes too, in which new experiments offer the promise of growing economies and stabilizing politics, in which lie many material and human resources still to be tapped. Talk of an “African renaissance” is easily scoffed at, but to the extent that such talk genuinely reflects a wakening desire among key political, economic and social leadership to found a new praxis for the twenty-first century, it is not only a sign of hope but also a discursive element in generating hope and a willingness to search for innovative and imaginative ways into the future.

Running through many of these issues, like a thread which threatens to unravel a whole garment, lies the issue of gender. African patriarchy or “kyriarchy”¹⁹ is no less complex and intractable as is patriarchy anywhere else. Though, again like patriarchal foundations elsewhere, it remains dominant, challenges to this reality are growing, as is the need to recognize the important role and place of women in sustaining productive and reproductive relations among the poor in particular.²⁰

¹⁸ By “public realities” I refer here to those forces, dynamics and processes which impact broadly upon whole groups or societies of people, and which are consciously recognized through institutions and in debates as being of significance to the well-being of a society. They include activities driven by political, economic and civil interests. They are public to the extent that they are a conscious part of the regulation of social life.

¹⁹ The term “kyriarchy” is used by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to designate the way in which hierarchies of dominance are located simultaneously in social structures as well as gender structures, in which the question of who is “lord” stands paramount. Patriarchy, in her view, is a concept which insufficiently highlights the way in which gender and other forms of social domination are implicated in each other. Cf. *But she said: feminist practices of biblical interpretation*, Boston : Beacon Press, 1992.

²⁰ Current development theory, a specific response to the failure of past models of development to come to terms with problems of poverty, strongly emphasizes the gendered construction of poverty in most, if not all, poor nations or regions. Accordingly, development theorists and activists are beginning to stress the importance of understanding how women become critical to defining and participating in programmes to alleviate poverty. A brief introduction to the relevant issues may be found in *Poverty in the 1990's*, London: Open University Press, 1995.

The issue of gender, however, clashes directly with certain notions of tradition, particularly where tradition is understood in essentialist terms or where it stands for an anti-modernist politics and practice. The dialectic between modernity, expressed most clearly in Enlightenment rationalism and capitalist relations of production, and tradition, asserted in the face of the deconstructing or even destructive effects of modernity, is more than a theoretical construct. It is a battle, and the languages of tradition and modernity readily become battle-cries. In theology, this tension is most evident in debates about inculturation versus liberation.²¹ This battle has its effects on public life as well, as is most evident in the province of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa, where Zulu traditionalism, wrapped up in the language of cultural liberation, confronts market forces, a democratic bill of rights, and an rapidly urbanizing population with deadly consequences on all sides.

African philosophies and theologies frequently emphasise the importance of healing, not just for the individual but for communities as such. Applied to nations and other similar aggregates of people, healing and disease must also be seen as part of the public reality of Africa. Indeed, it is quite inconceivable today to consider Africa without taking into account the massive and devastating effects of illness, particularly in the threat and reality of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. This too is on the agenda of Africa.

But illness is of another kind too, and we may speak of it, even if imprecisely and problematically, as an illness of the soul. In South Africa the symptoms of this illness, whatever its causes in history and in the nature of contemporary political economies, lie in the social effects of activities associated with powerful criminal cartels, drug dealers, sex industry rings, child-abduction, fraud and embezzlement, and the like. Rape, abuse of women and children, murder and robbery, theft and deceit all seem to be on the increase as older values and stable family and communal structures break down or are destroyed. It is in this sense that the “soul” is diseased, and its public sores exposed as gaping wounds and dying flesh.

Contrary practices, values and institutions have to be established, strengthened or rebuilt in order to deal with such realities. Perhaps at this point we may see most clearly why Christian churches, congregations, activists and thinkers cannot refrain from engagement in the public sphere.

Too Many Challenges, Too Few Who are Willing or Able?

I have provided an initial accounting of some of the major challenges which face us in Africa. We must also ask what the constraints are that must be understood and with which one must work. The central question I wish to raise here, however, is this: How is Christianity—a fractured, contested and sometimes besieged religious tradition—to find its place in public life in Africa?

That this question finds no easy answer is clear. The scale of many of the issues mentioned above, as well as their intensity in particular contexts, easily overwhelms religious bodies, let alone others. This reality may only be addressed, I suspect, by pooling resources in cross-denomination, cross-religious, and cross-national coalitions and networks.

There is of course a role for the senior leadership of churches, charismatic figures in particular. The role the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, played during the last years

²¹ Martey, Emmanuel, *African theology: inculturation and liberation*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993; Shorter, Aylward, *Christianity and the African imagination: after the African Synod : resources for inculturation*, Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996; *Inculturation: the faith that takes root in African cultures* : IMBISA study document. Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1993.

of apartheid demonstrates what is possible and vital, as does the emerging role of the new Archbishop, Njongonkulu Ndungane, in calling for concerted action on poverty in a new context fraught with difficulties wrought by the exigencies of reconstruction under the aegis of globalizing market forces with a heritage of social damage to overcome. Similarly, in relation to democracy and the reshaping of humane values in Liberia, the Archbishop of Monrovia, Michael Francis, has recently published a pastoral letter calling on the nation to overcome its deep political crisis. The Roman Catholic bishops of Kenya, meeting in Nakuru, have also condemned the state violence in Nairobi and Mombasa and asked that elections be postponed indefinitely to accede to popular demand and allow for dialogue on state reform. One may recall similar examples all over Africa.

But if the experience of South Africa teaches anything, it is that statements, declarations and actions which emanate from church hierarchies, vital in their place, which are not directly associated with programmes, policies and processes at local level, leave a legacy for church life which neither feeds the participatory impulses of democracy nor builds the skills, voices and wisdom of local people into the generation of policy and appropriate practices to overcome the deficits we have mentioned earlier.

It is extremely difficult to build an alternative. Yet it seems an alternative is not the responsibility of politicians, financiers, industrialists and the like alone. It is also a religious alternative, in a holistic sense, that is, a matter of values and practice, of spiritual resources and material transformation. I would like to highlight only one possibility here, one with enormous implications, and equally huge constraints on it—an fragile possibility because of an ambiguous Church. It is the possibility of addressing some aspects of the problems identified by Mamdani as discussed above.

Let me recall: Mamdani asks to work at overcoming the dualisms between representation and participation, citizen and subject, the civil and the customary, autonomy and alliance, and to do in a way which distinguishes between authoritarian and emancipatory impulses in all aspects. He sees this work as vital to Africa's health.

It seems to me, if I take South Africa as my touchstone in the first instance, that the demographic realities of Christianity—its spread, however contested or plural, into the widest range of communities—suggest that Christians have a particular responsibility to understand at work at what it would mean to democratize our society in the sense of Mamdani.

Not only is the gospel Christians proclaim incarnational and essentially holistic (as the best theological claims of the tradition have always held), but it is equally powerful in its assertion of the autonomy of individuals—their divine right to shared participation in offerings of a world created good—in conjunction with each person's bondedness to the dignity and personhood of the other. In many ways, Christianity also proclaims the value of the ordinary person, the outcast, the marginalized, the ill and the dehumanised, linking this value to the emancipatory transformation of society (most often captured in the image of the *basileia*).

One could easily add to this litany the kinds of perspectives and values which would support what Mamdani seeks. The point is that the churches—whether missionary in origin, settler-based or African initiated—possess sets of values and powerful symbolic representations of the real which may be fruitfully brought to bear on the process of democratization. This is not usually seen as a religious task, but there is a strong case to be made that the liturgy of the altar does not end at the “door” of the church but extends into daily experience and practice as a liturgy of life. Detribalization and deracialization are eucharistic imperatives, as is the renewal of personal and communal life, private and public worlds, in non-dualistic fashion.

The challenge is clear. The will and the capacity to meet it? That is not my task to judge, and whatever judgements are made about this, will be given in and through practice.