

# The Challenge of African Christian Morality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract<sup>3</sup>

*To recover our moral sanity, there is an urgent need to retrieve and restore some positive moral foundations and beliefs which were the moral fibre of the society. These moral foundations and beliefs, transformed through serious interaction with the Word of God and inculturated into African Christianity, will save and strengthen the moral stance of the church.*

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## 1. Introduction

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We do not live in easy times. The world and especially the continent of Africa are beset by many political, social, economic, moral and religious problems. The observation that Gary Scott Smith made about the moral crises in the United States of America is very true in Africa.

Abortions, child and spouse abuse, drug addition, alcoholism, sexual aberrations, and crime have steadily increased in recent years. Fraud, economic exploitation, and racism [continue to plague social relations. Underlying these manifestations and contributing significantly to them is a deep uncertainty about

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<sup>1</sup> This article was presented as a paper at the 2008 Theological Higher Education Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is published here with only minor editorial changes because of the conviction that Prof. Kunhiyop's evaluation of the current state of African Christian morality represents a crucial perspective on the needs and challenges facing Christianity on the continent.

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<sup>3</sup> The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

the nature of morality itself and the basis for law. Some have seriously questioned, challenged, and even rejected the traditional foundation for our ethical practices (Smith 1985:112).

In addition to these vices, Africa has many others such as ancestral worship, ritual killings, prostitution, cultism, gangsterism, manipulation and rigging of votes, ethnic and religious violence, cohabitation, trial marriages, Satanism, suicide, rape and gang-rape, incest, HIV/AIDS, divorce, political assassinations, violation of fundamental human rights, failed states, and so on. Hannah Kinoti (1999:73) notes.

Today Africa is at a crossroads and the path has forked. In terms of everyday conduct for individuals and communities there is uncertainty, disillusionment and even despair. There is much grumbling and lamentation. It is not difficult to conclude that people lament and grumble because they possess some knowledge of traditional African morality which ensured the well-being of communities and individuals alike. That morality has been superimposed, and in certain respects rudely crossed, by other influences of the day and age in which we find ourselves. Elderly people lament daily they are meeting behaviour that shocks them: sexual immorality, affectless relationship, scepticism about religious matters, and many things which hasten the old to their graves. Middle-aged people lament about children they fail to control and the youth complain of lack of example from the older members of the society.<sup>4</sup>

Pagan and unchristian practices have resurfaced with a deadly vengeance. According to recent BBC report, in Tanzania there have been at least 19

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<sup>4</sup> Kinito, while describing the lamentable situation of African morality, gives a powerful folk lore: “The hyena in the folk tale was following the general direction of the aroma of barbecuring meat. He knew when he got there he would be given a share of the meat. When his path forked into two he was not sure which one would lead him to the meat. In his uncertainty he put his legs astride the two paths and tried to walk along both. He ended up splitting in the middle. Today Africa is at a crossroads and the path has forked” (1999:73).

albinos who have been murdered and mutilated. People are marketing and using their bodily organs, particularly genitals, limbs, breasts, fingers and the tongue, for magical purposes. The malicious killings for witchcraft purposes are not limited to Tanzania, but have been reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Kenya. Children and even infants have been killed on allegations of being witches or wizards in Nigeria and other African countries. In every shape and form, African Christianity is facing real moral issues that must be addressed quickly. David Wells (1997:179) observed about the American moral state: “Today, the Church finds itself in the midst of a culture whose moral fabric is rotting and whose spirit is troubled.” Conclusively, “Cotemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart” (Kinoti 1999:75). In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe (1958) says it all. He alludes to these powerful and memorable lines are part of a poem by William Butler Yeats (1921, quoted in Drakes 1991).

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.

In both Yeats and Achebe, the picture is clear. The very foundations of our world are shaking and everything is in a state of chaos.

John Mbiti (1982:1) and many other authors have observed that Africa is incurably religious. The two major religions, Christianity and Islam, continue to show remarkable attraction to Africans. The average African today either subscribes to Christianity or to Islam, with a minority holding to African traditional religions. Many of us were born and raised in a Christian environment. I belong to a tribe in Nigeria that is 99.9 percent ‘Christian’. The Bajju all go to church call themselves Christians. Though this is surely good news for the church numerically, it is not quite good news when we look at their life and practice. Though they are nominally Christian, their underlying beliefs, values and practices are rooted in a non-Christian worldview.

A Christian is a follower of Christ and should be positively different. But the situation is very different on this so-called ‘emerging Christian continent’. This seemingly African religious continent is also beset with serious problems. In short, the challenge of African Christianity can be looked at in terms of

moral life and practice. There are many questions and issues that concern the Christian and the church in Africa. The problems associated with African Christian morality are a microcosm of African Christianity in total. African morality significantly mirrors its worldview, beliefs and values. Questions of right and wrong are answered by the theological concepts of ontology, spirituality, anthropology, and so on. As I have tried to argue elsewhere, theology and ethics are intimate bed fellows in Africa (Kunhiyop 2008). Any attempt to disassociate one from the other will lead to incoherence and irrelevance. A discussion on morality necessarily touches on theology and vice versa.

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## 2. Identifying the real issues

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### 2.1. The questions are *not* ...

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The question is not whether Africa is becoming statistically a more Christian continent than the global north. This is a well-documented trend. Philip Jenkins (2006:9) believes that the evidence of numerical growth to the southern Christianity means that gravity has shifted to the South. He even predicts that as we move toward the year 2025, Africa and Latin America should be in competition for the title of the continent with the largest number of Christians. But, in the long run, as we move towards 2050, Africa wins; Christianity becomes predominantly a religion of Africa and the African Diaspora in North and South America and the Caribbean. Along with other historians and church-growth experts, Andrew Walls, the distinguished church historian has written and spoken on many occasions about this fact. Many years ago, he also prophesied that the gravity of Christianity would indeed shift to Africa. We are impressed with these prophecies and believe and pray that these predictions will come to pass.

However, will this numerical growth bring about significant life and belief-system change? If there are just external conversions without internal, worldview changes, then the moral life of the African Christian is still on shaky foundations. Ideas, more than numbers, shake the foundations of a belief system. How many disciples were said to turn the world upside down? Surely not a million; it was probably a few thousand. What made the change

were the ideas of Jesus—that salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ. This new allegiance in the lives of the new believers was really what signified real change. Sometimes I suspect that an overemphasis on this paradigm shift is a red herring. Yes, we should rejoice in the fact that many are becoming identified with the Christian religion, but the issues are deeper and more complex.

The question of African Christianity is not whether or not there are churches in every nook and corner of the continent. Again, a cursory tour of many large cities in Africa would indicate the existence of thousands of churches. If we are looking for the presence of churches in Africa, we shall have no trouble finding them. The question is *what kind of Christianity is lived out and experienced in by those who attend these churches?*

The question is not whether or not we are able to see many Christian practices across the continent. In many African cities, you can see thousands of Christians going to church on Sundays, giving their offerings, building Christian schools and universities. Although these are desirable things, they may blind us to the more important issues regarding the growth of Christianity in Africa.

The question is not whether or not we can discern some external conformity to Christianity life and ritual, baptism, speaking in tongues, Bible knowledge and reading, taking of sacraments, Christian weddings, and so on. Again, the evidence of these abounds in African Christianity.

## **2.2. The real questions are ...**

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What kind of Christian morality is emerging or evolving in this statistically Christian continent? What are the evidences and consequences of this form of Christianity? How does the African Christian moral experience square with the requirements of biblical Christian morality? What really is the moral authority of Christians? Is it the media, the internet, reason, tradition, secular value, Scripture (Bible)? Though the Bible is believed to be an authoritative source, to what extent is it a moral authority?

What are other moral evils that we see rearing their ugly heads in this statistically Christian continent? If Christianity is the norm, why then the rise of homosexuality, Albino killings, witchcraft, cultism, bribery and corruption, dictatorship, genocide, religious and ethnic tensions in Christian communities. In the name of civilization and freedom, we have gay rights, women's rights for abortion, and so on. Why do the witch doctors still have a hold on many Christians in Africa?

Why have African Christians, in moments of crisis, failed to live up to their Christian profession? I think here of many so-called politicians who have compromised their faith while in leadership. Some even deny the Master who bought them with his precious blood. This brings to mind Tombalbaye of Chad, who ordered the killing of many pastors in one day, including the pastor who baptized him. Why do many African Christians, in moments of crisis, revert to pagan practices? African movies accurately portray Africans' persistent struggle with the spirit world to solve their daily life struggles.

These are pertinent issues that bother me as a churchman and scholar. The resurgence of pre-Christian and pagan practices makes it a matter of grave concern and immediacy. The question is whether there has been a fundamental change in worldviews, beliefs, values, and loyalties—matters of ultimate concern.

How significantly different is the Christian from a non-Christian moral experience? To consider Africa as a Christian continent, we need more than the exclamation that "by 2025, Africa and ... will vie for the title of the most Christian continent" (Jenkins 2006:9). We must ask what needs to be done to establish a true African morality. What will it take to entrench Christian morality among African Christians?

How will an authentic African Christian look like? What are the similarities and dissimilarities with the American and European Christianity? Just as the issues that bothered the Galatian Christians were different in kind from those affecting the Jerusalem Church, so also the issues African Christians face are different from those of their American and European brothers.

Whereas we are able to see the numbers and rapid religious change, the question must be asked if indeed Christianity and, in particular, Christian morality, has permeated African thinking and altered the worldview of African Christians. How closely do the beliefs and practices of the millions of converts to Christianity line up with biblical Christian beliefs and ethics? Above all, what would it take to make African Christianity biblical and authentic?

These are the real questions that concern African Christianity and its morality. How we answer them will help us to think relevantly about the issues at hand. Rather than attempt to answer each of these questions. I will just try to cover the basic issues.

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### 3. Paradigm Shift in African Christianity

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As Jenkins has cogently argued, there is a certain gravitational shift of Christianity to the global south. The title of the book, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, makes it abundantly clear that this paradigm shift has taken place. A paradigm shift usually means a radical shift and change in the way things have been done. Failure to understand and accept this paradigm shift will smother and hinder authentic African Christianity.

Though I generally agree that Jenkins has demonstrated his thesis, the point must be made that a true gravitational shift must involve a shift in the worldview of the people. Worldviews play a profound role in shaping life and morality. A worldview deals with basic assumptions about reality. A worldview brings out assumptions concerning the organization of the universe, human life, purposes, values, norms of behaviour, time/space, causation, the natural world, interpersonal relationships, and so on. This assumption of reality is basic and profoundly affects our behaviours and actions. Clifford Geertz (1973:89), a leading American anthropologist has defined worldview as:

An historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes

toward life. Further that it acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations ... by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

In summary, Geertz is saying that worldviews are: (a) historically transmitted and inherited conceptions of meanings; (b) models of reality, that is, they describe the nature of reality; (c) They describe models of actions. (4) They explain and provide motivations for behaviour. Actions are not ends of themselves, they point to something deeper. (5) They are very persistent and pervasive affecting every aspect of life. These beliefs, convictions and values do not die quickly. When we are dealing with cultural and religious beliefs, we are dealing with very strong beliefs that exert powerful influences on our lives. We often bring these to bear even on our interpretations of our new faith. The gospel that was brought to the Africans was brought within a specific worldview. Though it was cast within a Christian message, it must not be confused with the gospel message. It must be realized that a paradigm shift necessarily involves a worldview shift. The Greek philosophical framework that has determined Western theology for centuries must give way to African mind set. The modern, rationalistic, scientific, compartmentalized, sceptical and postmodern mindset must be discarded in favour of an authentic African worldview which is different in many ways than one. The imposition of Western perception of Christianity on African Christianity is wrongheaded. The current tone of Christianity in contemporary African we are witnessing makes me feel that authentic Christianity must seek to take captive the African worldview. The posture which sees every belief and practice in pre-Christian as evil and pagan has not only been unproductive (old habits do not die easily), but has in effect thrown the bath water with the baby. There were good traditional beliefs and practices (e.g. respect for elders, community, respect and value for the unborn), that was good and respectable and needed to be retained.

My thesis is stated as follows: In order to recover our moral sanity, there is the urgent need to retrieve and restore some positive moral foundations and beliefs which were the moral fibre of the society. These moral foundations and beliefs, transformed through serious interaction with the Word of God and



inculturated into African Christianity will save and strengthened the moral stance of the Church.

Before we start dealing with restoring some moral foundations and beliefs, there is need to briefly state some background issues such as how Christianity was transmitted and other related issues.

Christianity was introduced to Africa in the modern era by Westerners. The message did not come alone but came through the mouth, hands, tastes, feelings, etc of another person. Ultimately, what came out of the messenger also relayed and still relays the tastes, worldview and total package of the carrier. This received worldview though it came from Christians was not perfect. The message from the messenger had cultural wrappings. The messenger passed the message with the wrappings as if they were one and the same. What happened was that the wrappings of the message were always misunderstood by the receiver. There was a deliberate effort to dislodge and replace African worldviews with a Western mindset. Some of these wrappings include interpretation/reading of scripture. the scientific reading of Scripture, philosophical method of dealing with problems, proof-texting, denominationalism etc.

Compartmentalization of life and issues. The introduction of Christianity by the West introduced a new way of reality. Life was compartmentalized into theory and practice, classroom and practical life, knowledge and wisdom, abstract and practical etc. This compartmentalization was fundamentally alien to Africa. Life to the African is basically interpreted holistically. The radical split between the now and then, body and soul, religion and morality/economics is alien to Africa. A study of God which is removed from the reality of life or just mere academics does no good for Africa.

Negative individualism which asserts individual moral freedom in total disregard to the community. It is a “belief that we inhabit our own private universe in which we are accountable to no one but ourselves in moral matters” (Wells 1997:149). In my opinion, negative individualism has contributed profoundly the current moral malaise that Africa has found itself today. Negative individualism basically holds that I can do anything I want without holding myself accountable or responsible to anyone. Negative

individualism basically disregards what others think of him or her in matters of life and morality.

Shame and honour were key concepts which influenced behaviour and morality. Unfortunately, shame and honour have been replaced with shameless morality which has no regard for responsibility and respect to the total community. People restrained themselves from certain actions because of their community – uncle, brothers, and sisters, clan and cities. Today, everybody is a law unto himself and herself. Thus the moral collapse in our societies.

The narrative aspect of Scripture replaced by systematization of Scripture not relevant to context. Though Scriptures come to us in narrative form, the Church has reduced the Scriptures to isolated truths that have no immediate bearing to life situations.

The gradual decline of Scriptural authority in shaping morality. Though many parts of the Church in Africa still hold that the Scriptures are authoritative, there is a gradual disregard of the authoritative role of Scriptures in life. Unchristian moral beliefs and practices, secularism, postmodernism, negative individualism, and so on are slowly diminishing the authoritative role of the Scriptures in moral choices. Let me bold in providing ways in which we can overcome these problems.

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#### **4. Towards a solution**

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The challenge of African morality lies in locating our true elements, so that we live our Christian life truly. A fruitful way forward is for the church to recover and reaffirm what was good in her traditional culture. The belief that all African traditional beliefs and practices were pagan and evil must be rejected. Mugambi (1999:14) has stated it so well:

The modern Christian missionary enterprise has assumed, in general, that the culture and ethics of the missionary is “Christian” and “good”, whereas that of the prospective converts is “non-Christian” and “evil”. Missionary expansion has thus been rationalized in terms of going out to convert

those of different cultures and religions so that they might become like the missionary.

All that happened was that these so-called evil practices of African beliefs were simply replaced with alien Western beliefs, which did not find a dwelling in our African souls. What is being called for is cooking Christianity in an African pot. The African pot “represents the African worldview, traditions, anthropology, and indeed African epistemology which ... form the substratum of the faith and life of the Christians in Africa” (Fiedler, Gundani, and Mijoga 1998:2). The following ideas do not follow any particular order of importance.

#### **4.1. Holistic approach to life**

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Life is one big whole. Both the parts and the whole are intimately related.

For Africans the whole brings about the unification of the parts. The whole is not a reality which ignores the parts: it would be contradictory and equally impossible to think of a “whole” without its parts. It would be equally difficult to think of the parts without having an idea of the “whole” to which they belong ... African thought has a unified vision of reality in which there is no room for irreducible dichotomies between matter and spirit, religions tension and daily life, between soul and body (Nkemkia 1999:65).

The physical and the spiritual, training and ministry, academic and life situations, theory and practice, religion and economics, politics and religion, sex and faith, go together. Speculative reflection without practice has never been the thrust of African pursuit. Practice, reflection, and praxis always go together. This interconnectedness, relatedness, and cohesion are what Nkemkia refers to as “vital force”, by which he means “the parts are really indispensable for the whole, and enable the whole to include in itself all the parts, though different from them” (p. 166). Right belief without action is a paralysis. A right belief in a holy God results in righteous living. The right ethical life of Romans 12-15 is built upon a righteous standing with God. Formal moral ethics taught in class must go along with informal moral

education of the students. This must be taught in our classes and churches. It is one package.

Theologians must bridge the compartmentalization of academic theology and moral transformation. Perhaps it is up to theological teachers at tertiary educational institutions to bridge the chasm between academic theologies and practical ethics, overcoming the compartmentalization of the intellectual, affective and volitional aspects of Christian practice (Kretzeschman 2004:104).

The traditional Western approach of emphasizing only the future must be discarded. Churches that are witnessing significant growth and impact in Africa are the ones who get their hands dirty trying to meet the current needs of people. If the church in Tanzania is going to be relevant and Christian, it must not just speculate about the problem of killings of the albinos, but it must get its hands dirty by getting involved in poverty and other social ills that are driving these evil practices. The killings are not isolated events. They involve important practical issues of life, hunger, poverty, and other social ills.

If evangelical Christianity is going to make sense and cut into the very fibre of the African, it must deal with life as one whole. Salvation must be seen to affect every aspect of life. Salvation is not just about cleansing and forgiving our sins, but also deals with our present needs and challenges. Keta Sempangi states correctly that “a religion that speaks only to man’s soul and not his body is not true. Africans make no distinction between the spiritual and the physical” (quoted in Jenkins 2006:97). Christianity is not an abstract, theoretical matter. It is very concrete and practical, involving the present and the future, the now and the then, the spiritual and the material, the head and the body, politics and religion, and so on. A religion that seeks to answer only questions of the head will fail miserably. Christianity must touch every aspect of life. Any attempt to disjoint, dichotomize, compartmentalize, and over-specialize life is foreign and alien and irrelevant to an authentic African Christianity.

#### 4.2. Community life

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Closely related to the holistic thinking is the idea of community, which is paramount in many African societies. Whether you see it in terms of the clan, tribe, or nation, the idea of community is still the *sine qua non* in Africa. “If the community exists, then the individual exists” (Nkemkia 1999:172). The individual is always aware of the fact that “I am because we are, and we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti 1982:214). This means that existence was basically interpreted in terms of relationships and the society. John Mbiti correctly notes that “within African communities where kinship makes a person intensely ‘naked’, these moral demands are uncomfortably scrutinized by everybody so that a person who fails to live up to them cannot escape notice” (p. 214). Because of this very communal and relational dimension of ethics, the family, the clan, and the community serve as a public control on the moral lives of the individuals. The concepts of shame and honour are critical here. In community-based morality, how the individual conducts himself becomes critical—a person’s actions either bring shame or honour to the family.

It must be noted that though individualism has contributed to many modern developments, it also has impacted negatively on Western morality. Individualism, as a major force in modern American-European ethics, is a demon that cannot be exorcised easily. Individual rights and freedoms are given as legitimate reasons for children to rebel against parents, girls aborting their babies, men and women cohabiting, and so on. Although Western individualism has threatened Africa, its community approach to life is one of God’s gifts to Africa. Not only is this African, it is also a biblical idea. Christianity must link up to the community life. It rejects individualism that emphasizes self—personal achievement without other people.

It is a shame that negative individualism is beginning to be imbibed by Africans. The breakdown of law and order and the emergence of many moral crises can be attributed mainly to overemphasis on individual rights and freedom. The main reason for this is the rejection of community. The “I” is celebrated more than that “we”. Individuals commit shameful acts without a feeling of shame or accountability to the group or community.

Throughout the Scriptures, the context of all individuals is the community or the group. There are families, clans, tribes, communities, and nations. The biggest and fullest is the “Christian tribe”, to which Jesus gave birth. The blood of Jesus Christ runs through this organic body, called the church. The tribe is international and local. This international tribe has ancestors, great ancestors whose stories need to be told and retold in proverbs, songs, and riddles. These include the biblical ancestors such as Abraham, David, Daniel, Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Others include Augustine, John Calvin, Luther, Jonathan Edwards, continental ancestors such as Byang Kato, Bediako, John Mbiti, and so on. Personalities in the Bible are typically mentioned within the context of their family, tribe, and lineage. David Wells correctly notes that in the biblical world “people thought of themselves, not as free-floating, isolated individuals, but as belongers” (Wells 1997:165). In that world, “one stood by and within one’s group, and it was from this group that one derived prestige.” Jesus’ genealogies illustrate this well (see Matt. 1; Luke 3). The ideas of connectedness, belonging, and togetherness are critical in the existence of persons. No one belongs to himself. Everyone belongs to a group. His morality is seen and judged in terms of his connectedness to the larger whole. No person stands alone or exists for himself. Paul, for example, took pride in belonging to the tribe of Benjamin and being a true blooded Jew (Phil. 3:5).

Moral judgments are made not only for the individual person, but for the good of the larger community. Adam’s sin did not only affect him, but all of his descendents (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12-21). The blessings of Abraham were blessings for the whole believing community (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:14). The sins of Achan brought judgement on the whole clan (Josh. 7). The sin of the adulterer in 1 Corinthians 5 reflected greatly on the perception of morality in the church, because the moral failure of one person was a reflection on the entire assembly.

A very important reason for the community is that it is the best way to fight moral decay. Problems and challenges are better fought and won by the community than by the individual. If the church is to fight the moral problems in our society, it must fight collectively. Together is always better.

### 4.3. Shame and honour

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In order to recapture our sense of morality, there is need to recapture quickly the key concepts of honour and shame. Shame and honour served as means of public control on morality. Honour—which included respect, dignity, pride, and sense of accomplishment for the community for exemplary conduct or actions by one of its members—served as a major motivation for morally praiseworthy acts. Shame, on the other hand, involves a feeling of letting the community down, and includes a sense of personal failure, or betrayal against oneself and the community (Magesa 1997:169). Shameful acts not only let the offending person down, but also disgraces his relations and community. There were two kinds of shame in most African communities, namely, as the people of New Guinea called them:

the “shame of the skin” for minor transgressions, and deep shame” for major ones. To come into physical contact with an in-law may be shame of the skin or of the face, but to commit incest is deep shame or shame of the heart that calls for confession and retribution. If the person is to become whole again, the shame needs to be removed by special rites (Magesa 1997:173).

Shame and honour served as a major restraint against moral wrongdoing. Honour brings respect and pride to one’s larger society. Shame is failing one’s people by doing something disgraceful. He does not fail exclusively in his private capacity; he fails on behalf of his society. Thus the Kuria say, “Often the whole community suffered retribution collectively for the ills of individuals” (Kinoti 1999:79). People acted for the honour of their families and clans, and not for money and personal material gains. To be ashamed or to lose face means that the whole family or community suffers. The Saramis version of “to lose face” is “your face has fallen” or “our faces have fallen”, and the remedy is “clean your face” or “clean our faces”. Failure was not personal, but communal. “To lose face is to suffer embarrassment because others see the offender as having let them down, or having dishonoured their family, or town, or business. Shame and dishonour become intertwined, the one hardly ever happening without the other, because of the sense of

responsibility towards others” (Wells 1997:166). Restoring the concepts of honour and shame will put some checks in moral behaviour.

#### **4.4. Hermeneutics and theology**

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African Christian morality, in order to be established, must reinterpret and find proper models that fit its situation. The quest for appropriate models and concepts is as old as Christendom. Jesus’ disciples had to interpret the second person of the Trinity in models and concepts that made sense to the hearers. John the apostle, for example, had no qualms in using the Greek philosophical concept of *logos* to explain the pre-existent and incarnate son of God. The church fathers, through many lively debates and councils, articulated the Christian message in meaningful models and concepts best understood by their contemporaries. Justin Martyr, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, and many others used philosophical categories to explain Scripture. The West used categories and models best suited to make Christianity meaningful for their contexts.

In the same way, African Christianity must aim to make “the Christian message really to enter the hearts of Africans, so that it may bear abundant fruit in a way of life which is at the same time both truly African and truly Christian” (Bujo 1992:76). As has been clearly demonstrated by Jenkins, Africans are a fertile ground for reading and applying Scripture as the Word of God. Africans in their own context are familiar with questions of evil spirits (demons), poverty, agriculture, divine healing, rituals, evil, and so on. Therefore, they are naturally familiar with many biblical themes. The political, economic, social, and religious concerns of Africa make the reading and application of the Scripture more palpable and relevant.

To date, most of the standard works on theology and ethics being used in Africa are by Westerners or Europeans. The worldview underlying them is often irrelevant to African Christianity. Both the books used and the issues discussed in seminary classes across Africa tend to be Western in nature, rather than indigenous problems and theologies. We must reject doing or mimicking or parroting foreign theologies. Just as the West found a relevant theology in its own context, we must do theology in the way that best fits our context.



Roman Catholic theologians have been courageous in trail blazing this route. Imagine referring to Jesus Christ as the Proto-Ancestor or Master of Initiation (Benezet Bujo) or the Healer of Healers (A.T. Sanon). We can easily criticize this concept as reducing Jesus to no more than a great human being. Admittedly, these concepts are not without their shortcoming, but which concept is not. Surely this African knows what the concept of “Ancestor” invokes in an African. The ever-present nature, the undying ancestor, the ever-seeing ancestor, and the ever-protecting ancestor are paramount in this concept. The concept of Proto-Ancestor, though limited and potentially misleading, still captures the essential qualities of Jesus as pre-existent, omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal God. He is not only God, but also Man in the fullest sense of the Word. He is God of very God and Man of very Man. All that is being argued is that there is a need to find and locate within the African worldview metaphors and symbols that bring out the truth of the gospel more forcefully. Philip Jenkins reminds us that “the task of the modern theologian is to strip away the Western accretions, to recover a gospel that in the modern world is to return to its natural social setting” (Jenkins 2006:48). Africans must seek to contextualize the Bible to fit their framework.

So far, the predominant reading, understanding, and interpretation of Scripture have been foreign. The reading of Scripture over the years has been intellectualized and secularized. Unbelieving and atheistic questioning colours our interpretation of the text, replacing the ordinary, author-intended meaning. One only needs to read some exegetical studies that are made on passages that deal with topics such as homosexuality, abortion, and marriage to see how liberal, secular, and postmodern biases influence the understanding of these texts. African theologies and Christianity must learn to read Scripture through their own lenses rather than through Western lenses, which are influenced by the kinds of damaging philosophies mentioned above. Africans are well positioned for a better reading of Scripture. Jenkins (2006:5) notes:

A much greater respect for the authority, especially in matters of morality; a willingness to accept the Bible as an inspired text and a tendency to literalism; a special interest in supernatural elements of scripture, such as miracles, visions, and healings; a belief in the continuing power of prophecy; and a veneration for the Old Testament, which is considered as authoritative as

the New. For the growing churches of the global south, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world issues of poverty and debt, famine, and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution. The omnipresence of poverty promotes awareness of the transience of life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and the distrust of the secular order.

Why are the Pentecostal churches growing more than the conservative, traditional, mainline denominations? I believe that they take the Scriptures at face value, that is, literally. They avoid theological liberalism. For example, a line in the Lord's Prayer reads, "Give us our daily bread". Africans can relate to this. Many of them lack bread on a daily basis. They do not need a scholar in New Testament Greek to tell them what bread meant in the original languages. Where there are many poisonous reptiles, such as snakes and scorpions, the ending of Mark's gospel makes a lot of sense; critical arguments about the authenticity of the text are irrelevant. Where many people cannot afford modern medicine, divine healing is a practical need, not a theoretical debate.

#### **4.5. Ministerial training**

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If an authentic African Christianity is going to be realized, it must challenge the old mode of ministerial training. Residential ministerial training grounds which remove student pastors from their local context and place them in strange environments with foreign curricula have been unsuccessful in producing productive ministers in the church. What residential seminaries have succeeded in doing is the reproduction of their mentors with foreign ideas who do not fit their ministry context. The Western mode of residential training has also resulted in a strict class distinction between teacher and student, learned and learner, master and disciple, clergy and laity. This class distinction has also been introduced into African Christianity.

There are many supersonic pastors who live an affluent lifestyle while their members live in abject poverty. Many of us who trained in the West or in traditional schools in Africa struggled to adjust to Africa in a relevant way. The catalogues, books, resources, and approach to ministry we had imbibed

were completely Western. We uncritically imported Western resources to schools and churches in Africa. Though we did not have problems about the existence of God, Western theologies forced us to memorise theistic proofs for His existence. Even when we had no problem about the Bible as the Word of God, our curricula treated the inerrancy of Scripture in depth. Why did we need to belabour such point when we already believed in God and the Scriptures?

The Scriptures give us some clues about how to train ministers. Joshua learned from Moses; Elisha travelled with Elijah; Jesus and his disciples walked together, ate together, struggled together, and celebrated together. Joshua, Elisha, Paul, Timothy, and Titus became great spiritual leaders because they lived and worked alongside their mentors. The idea of a professor sitting and passing on learned ideas to a student “down there” does not make disciples; it produces academics. The most effective method of teaching has always been the intimate relationship between mentor and mentored. That is the biblical way. It is also the African method. Farmers took their children to the farm and the sons became farmers. Hunters took their children to the bush and the sons became hunters. Mothers cooked with their daughters in the kitchen, while they taught them housekeeping, love, romance, and motherhood. We need to recapture those modes of learning in our ministerial training of pastors and leaders.

#### **4.6. Double listening**

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John Stott (1992) recommends that the Christian should practice the art of double listening, by which he means that we need to listen carefully to what the Word of God is saying and, at the same time, listen to what the world is saying. Pastors may be careful in reading and interpreting the Word of God, but illiterate when it comes to understanding and reading the times. Our reading of culture, politics, economics, and ethics is so poor that we hardly know what is going on in the world. The Word of God cannot be preached and lived in a vacuum. People who hear and live the Word do not do so in a vacuum. To be relevant in preaching, we must know their circumstances.

African Christianity must balance historic faith and modern relevance. At the centre of this faith is the unchanging Word of God, which provides a basis for

life and conduct. The West is losing this respect for biblical authority, which results in the distortion and confusion in Western theology. Sometimes, the theologies in the West do not have a semblance of biblical Christian.

However, our Christianity also cannot be frozen in the past, without a modern relevance. An authentic African Christianity is really an incarnational Christianity. Christianity must willing to become vulnerable, even to the point of death, getting its hands dirty in order to make the gospel real to the people. The challenge of African Christianity is to descend into the worldview of Africa, and capture it for Christ.

#### **4.7. Back to basics**

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A sure way to recover our moral balance is to go back to the Bible as the Word of God. Most Africans have probably not heard of Vince Lombardi, the famous football coach of the Green Bay Packers. In one training session, feeling frustrated because he was getting nowhere with the plans, he blew his whistle and the all the players stopped and gathered around. He knelt down, picked up the pigskin, and said, “Let’s start at the beginning. *This is a football. These are the yard markers.*” It was not that they did not know a football when they saw one, or the yard markers, but they needed to be reminded of the basics of playing football.

Perhaps many Christians have not forgotten what the Bible is. They need to be reminded that the Bible is the Word of God, the authoritative source of morality, the ultimate guide in matters of life and conduct. In going back to the Bible as the basic source of judging our morality, the church needs to restore its *prophetic role* in being able to call sin “sin”. Accommodating, tolerating, and justifying sin is unacceptable in the Word of God. Condemning sin in all its shades has never been a popular thing to do, but it is a compelling duty.

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### **5. Conclusion**

The challenge of African Christian morality is not to be satisfied with the status quo. The fantastic story of the gravitational shift of Christianity to Africa should not close our eyes to the stark realities and challenges of the many moral problems facing the African Christian continent. This is a time for

some serious soul searching for African Christianity. Nobody, even the sophisticated North, can do it for us. We must do it ourselves. We must raise the questions and provide permanent and lasting solutions to the concrete problems that face us. Those solutions must be found a root in Scripture and a dwelling our souls.

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