

COMMUNITY IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND AFRICAN CULTURE

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Introduction

Geologists describe a river as 'old' when it has interacted with the surrounding landscape to the extent that a state of benign symbiosis has been achieved. The adjacent land is usually a flat plain across which the river wanders, often rather sluggishly. By contrast, a 'new river' has a far more dramatic relationship with its geological environment. The landscape is rugged and the river plunges in churning torrents through rocky ravines, and over roaring waterfalls. There is noise, there is spectacle. River and landscape wrestle with one another and much energy is spent over the millennia until, at some distant future time, a state of harmonious if somewhat dull coexistence is reached.

Christianity is a new river in sub-Saharan Africa, and theological reflection even more recent. There are those who suggest its early 'trickle down' through Africa, but there is scant evidence for such speculation.¹ The Christian stream that began to flow had its source in Europe - with the Portuguese Catholics in the late fifteenth century, the Dutch Calvinists in the seventeenth, the German Lutherans in the eighteenth, and the English Protestants in the nineteenth. The stream has swollen into a flood over the past one and a half centuries - a very short time in terms of Christian history as a whole. The interaction of Christianity and African culture has been and continues to be dramatic. New and sometimes unexpected forms of church life and liturgy have emerged, and new theological insights have been gained.

Two major historical factors are part of the motivational background of this paper. First, Christianity was propagated and established in South Africa by European missionaries who, by and large, did not sufficiently distinguish between the Christian message and their western culture. African converts routinely had foreign, western norms imposed on them in the name of Christianity. Secondly, apartheid as a political system has recently been discarded. Theology is now more free to consider its cultural as well as its political context in South Africa.

The main concern of this paper is the possibility of an account of ethics that is at once both distinctively Christian and unmistakably African. The key, it is suggested, is the centrality of Christian community.

1. Ethics in African theology

Works on African theology generally have an ethical section or at least an ethical dimension - as is to be expected in a holistic pattern of thought. Few have made ethics their main focus. Notable exceptions are the edited collection of Mugambi and Nasimiyyu-Wasike (1992), and the work of Bénézet Bujo. The former, as is usual in a collection of work from various authors, is of mixed quality. It must be said, however, that some of the articles are excellent and highly informative. It is Bujo however, among African theologians, who stands out for his attempt to put together an account of African Christian ethics. It should be noted that even this work,

¹ John Parratt acknowledges the importance of North Africa in the development of early Christianity. 'But these developments properly belonged to the Mediterranean world. 'African' though they were in a geographical sense, the vast expanse of 'black Africa' had to wait many centuries for the Christian message' (Parratt 1995:3-4). He places the origins of indigenous Christian thought at about the year 1700 CE.

African Christian Morality in the Age of Inculturation (1990) is a collection of previously published essays, but at least they are all from one author and on one general topic.² He points out in his Foreword that the book is 'not the result of a systematic elaboration of ideas'. Rather than attempting to offer the last word on the subject, he hopes more modestly that the effect of this book may be that of 'stimulating further research by African moral theologians' (p.11). His work nevertheless deserves careful consideration as well as a response in terms of the 'further research' he hopes to evoke. Such consideration and further research are the tasks of this paper.

2. Bujo's African Christian Morality

As noted above, this paper is concerned with the possibility of an account of ethics that is at once both distinctively Christian and unmistakably African. How far does the work of Bujo go to providing such an ethic?

- 2.1 There can be no doubt that Bujo's theology is unmistakably African - not only because he himself happens to be an African, but because of the substance and imagery of his thought. Of special note here are his frequent references to ancestors and to vitalism. He claims: 'It is above all in the ancestor cults of Africa that we see how people envisage life, for it is above all here that they seek an increase of that life-force which flows though the mystical body to which both they and the ancestors belong (Bujo 1992:23). In the light of this it is therefore not surprising that in developing his theological ethics Bujo finds his thinking resonating with that of John's Gospel and its central theme of 'fulness of life' (see 1990:104-105). On the topic of vitalism in ethics, he would certainly endorse Peter Kasenene's categorical statement: 'In ethical terms, any action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong' (1994:140).
- 2.2 In the most distinctively African and, in my view, the best of Bujo's chapters, he brings to the fore a strong sense of communality. Thinking in African ancestral terms, Bujo oscillates naturally between the ancestors and the community. It is the ancestors who have established each community and who continue to sustain the community. Communal wellbeing at all levels depends on the goodwill of the ancestors. Foremost in Bujo's thought here is not just the ancestor concept in general, but that of the proto-ancestor, the concept that he adopts as his chief christological image.³ It follows from a christology of this kind that Bujo's ecclesiology is strongly communal - he sees the church as the community of the proto-ancestor.

Inasmuch as inculturation is gradually being taken more seriously...we could, for example, start with the importance of our forefathers, to the proposal to conceive Jesus Christ as Proto-Ancestor, founder of a new family and clan which is the Christian church. (Bujo 1990:109)

The bond between ancestor and community involves a two-way reciprocity. Just as the ancestor blesses the community, so it is the particular community that holds up certain worthy ones among its dead members as its ancestors. Without a community to succeed them, there would be no ancestors! In theological terms this is to say that the church looks back to Jesus Christ as its founder and depends on him for its ongoing life, but that Christ also needs the church to 'give him a presence' in the world. Who else is there to do that for

2 Page references in this paper to Bujo's work refer to this book, unless otherwise specified.

3 See p.104, and for a fuller exposition of the Proto-Ancestor christology see Bujo 1992:88ff.

him? Ecclesiology and christology are, thus, inextricably intertwined. In African theological terms, Bujo insists: 'An African ecclesiology can no longer dispense with a christology based on Jesus Christ as Proto-Ancestor and as the source of proto-ancestral vital force' (p.83).

2.3 African ethical thought recognises the close relationship between ritual and moral practice. Bujo's introduction of the eucharist into his ethical concerns is clearly influenced by the African practices of ritual meals in the community. In these meals the ancestors are believed to share with the whole community, and these meals are the most common means of simultaneously communicating with the ancestors, putting right that of which they disapprove, and strengthening communal bonds. Bujo uses the concept of the eucharist to challenge the church as a moral community, in its own structures as well as in its action in the world. He contrasts an uncaring, clericalist, hierarchically powerful, ostentatiously wealthy church in an Africa of suffering, poverty stricken people, with a church in which there is 'true community life among the People of God' (p.86), and which is 'ready to risk all our privileges and financial advantages for the benefit of the most miserable and exploited' (p.87). The eucharist in the former kind of church is well described as 'a drug which puts to sleep any serious Christian social concern, instead of serving as an antidote against lethargy and self-complacency....' (p.87). In the latter, serving church of the people of God, the eucharist is 'the life-blood or life-sap in the proto-ancestral mystical body' (p. 86). Significantly, however, for Bujo it is not the eucharist itself that is a moral action. Rather, the eucharist is seen as taking its character from the moral role of the church in society.

While Bujo is to be highly complimented for creatively bringing African concepts and imagery into the service of Christian theology in ways that are enriching and challenging, certain questions need to be asked of his work as an adequate African Christian ethic.

2.4 How African is Bujo's ethics? While employing African concepts and imagery, Bujo also emphasises the fading of the traditions of Africa (p.122), and thereby seems to reduce their potency for the development of an ethic that is African. That African traditions are indeed under threat, is a point that is widely attested. That is not what is at issue here, but rather that Bujo seems to come close to saying 'Let's forget about the past and about those traditions, and concern ourselves with the pressing problems of the present'. If this is indeed his point, then he is in effect undermining the rest of his work, the Africanness of his thought and surrendering to the invasion of western trade, technology and culture. He goes as far as to describe Africa as 'post-ancestral' (p.122), thereby raising serious questions as to his own African christology and ecclesiology and bringing him to a point of apparent self-contradiction.

This problem, however, could be ascribed largely to the admitted 'fragmentary nature' (p.12) of the work, commented on above. The articles were all first published in the 1980s, and there is a greater clarity and depth in the later articles. In the article in question, first published in 1983, he rescues himself, by speaking of a 'living tradition...still pulsating...in the hearts of the people' (p.122) and by asserting that African theology must be constructed in dialogue with precisely that tradition. In a chapter first published three years later, he urges priests and religious to 'promote typically African forms and styles of religious life' (p.88). He spells out their envisaged role forcefully and in detail:

But they would also take a personal interest in reviving the positive cultural elements

of the past, which are in danger of getting lost or are being despised by the young. Such cultural elements would include constructive and valuable aspects of traditional religion, character-building qualities of traditional education and custom, inherited skills, trades, music, handicraft, artifacts and arts of any kind. This seems to us to be the only way to save Africa, and to give her hope and dynamism for building her own better future, a future which will be an object of self-confidence and legitimate pride. (p.90)

What we have detected in this section is a tension in Bujo's thinking. He is African (Zairean) and desperately wants his theology to be thoroughly African. He says: 'I have tried to lay down what I might call some basic guidelines for a morality that is essentially African' (p.11). As we have seen, however, he despairs of the future of his African culture and, as will become evident, he is also pulled in the direction of western concepts and methods, perhaps due to his theological training and professional location in western Europe.

2.5 How Christian is Bujo's ethic? Remembering the concern of this paper, the development of an ethic which is at once both African and Christian, it needs to be asked whether Bujo offers an ethic that is distinctively Christian. Certainly, it is Christian in the weak sense that it does not engage any of the other imported religions and ideologies that are influential in Africa, such as Islam and, to a much lesser extent, Marxism. It seems, however, to fall short of being Christian in any strong, positive, constitutive sense. Indeed, in his opening chapter, Bujo dilutes the Christian aspect to the point where it loses all distinctiveness and is nothing more than a new spirit with which already existing ethics may be infused. 'But then, it will be asked, What is new in Jesus' ethics? It may be said that the newness of Jesus' ethics consists not in the number of the norms but rather in their quality' (p.29). Referring to the early church he adds: 'Neither would the primitive community add anything specific to the ethics of the world around it in material content' (p.30). He concludes: 'The fact that the Bible in both Testaments does not constitute materially distinctive norms is of capital importance for the future of ethics' (p.31).

One cannot escape the impression that Bujo calls into question some of the main strands of the moral tradition of the Roman Catholic church to which he belongs. He is at pains to stress the autonomy both of the moral agent and of ethics itself as a discipline. Yet in his sliding out from under the weight of the hierarchically imposed moral law, he can only assert the similarity of Christian ethics to all other ethics and the freedom of the Christian individual to choose. What, then, is the choice Bujo would recommend as a Christian ethicist? Merely, it seems, the pursuit of as vague and general a notion as 'the human'. He says: 'The question which must be uppermost in one's mind is: how can I make my society, my nation, yes even the whole of humanity more human?' (p.42)

The main link of this universal, human ethic to Christian theology seems to be the notion of fundamental human dignity based in creation and the image of God. Rightly recommending an attitude of openness on the part of the church and its theology to other disciplines, Bujo states:

If Christian morality is to be open to the enquiries of the other sciences, it is in the name of human dignity. This does not distinguish Christian morality from general human morality which concerns itself equally with the goodness of human life so that life becomes ever more fully human. (p.43)

Commendably he seeks to free himself and individual Christians from the weight of moral law as traditionally prescribed by his church for the sake of the full responsible

participation of all in facing the great social problems of Africa. The only escape route he seems to know, however, leads him back into the grip of natural law methodology that underlies very moral law he is trying to shake off. He ends up with an ethic for all that cannot be an adequate ethic for Christians. He lacks a theoretical framework that will allow him to fulfil the Christian aspirations of his ethic. He describes the morally admirable practices of traditional Africa such as respect for the newly born, communal care for the aged, mutual benefit derived from the use of material property, and hospitality to strangers (pp.51-57). These may well be akin to biblical guidelines for social life, but Bujo cannot claim them as being distinctively Christian.

2.6 How central is the church in Bujo's African Christian ethic? While struggling with the moral tradition of his own church, Bujo nevertheless recognises the importance of the church for Christian ethics, and especially for Christian ethics that would claim to be African. He insists that the 'ecclesial dimension has to be rediscovered in present-day ethics' (p.98). I have discussed elsewhere the centrality of community for African moral thought and practice (Richardson 1996) and, indeed, it is commonplace for this point to be stressed in works of African theology. A difficulty arises, however, as to precisely how the African understanding of 'I belong therefore I am' should be translated into Christian ecclesiology. Much depends here on whether African communality is understood as being particularistic or universalistic. Motlhabi argues against an unquestioning acceptance of the particularity of African communality. He is surely correct in claiming that such African principles as 'a person is a person through other people' have a certain universalism about them, and carry a moral obligation beyond one's immediate family or clan (Motlhabi 1986:94). Motlhabi's argument for universality, however, is far from conclusive and at most establishes that there is only an element of universalism. What may be claimed with confidence is that particularity is fundamentally necessary to African communality, and that African social thought is clearly particularistic when compared with the universalism of modern western social thought.

As we have seen above, Bujo provides an image of the church as the community of the Proto-Ancestor. In his development of the image of Christ as Proto-Ancestor, Bujo believes he has shown 'how Jesus Christ establishes a new community and a new clan which go far beyond the traditional biological clan' (p.105). This is indeed a powerful and fertile image linking christology and ecclesiology, but Bujo's tendency to widen, even to universalize, its reference is problematic. The problem arises even more sharply in his later discussion of the same point but it still goes undetected by Bujo. He stresses that in Christian ethics 'the moral perspective is no longer limited to my clan, my elders, my friends, but extends to the whole human race, in loving service of the Father'. But he then adds: 'The morality of the disciple who accepts Jesus as Model and Proto-Ancestor is a personal enactment of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus' (Bujo 1992:88). He does not see that this can only be an ethic for disciples (who else would want such an ethic?), although its significance certainly reaches beyond the community of disciples.

An African ancestor is by definition specific to a particular family or clan (see, for instance, Wilson 1971:90). Eager to link the ancestor metaphor to theological notions of the universal relevance of Christ, Bujo stretches the ancestor concept beyond its normal African meaning. He is perfectly at liberty to do that, and in one sense is theologically correct in doing so. The New Testament, and especially the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline writings claim that Christ not only transcends, but breaks down barriers that divide people and brings those people together in a new community (e.g. Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians

2:10-20). Certainly it may be claimed that Christ is of relevance and appeal across cultures and other differences, that those of diverse cultures and social positions are indeed drawn together into his community, but is the community thus formed distinguishable from the rest of humanity? If it is not, then the church evaporates into human society at large and ecclesiology can be nothing but an abstraction.

Bujo rightly sees the clan of the Proto-Ancestor as extending 'far beyond the traditional biological clan', but how far? Where are its boundaries? Exactly who or what is described in this image? For at least two reasons it seems that Bujo should stay closer to the literal sense of community implied in the African notion of ancestor when he refers to Christ as 'our Proto-Ancestor'. First, such an understanding has more resonance with African traditions, and will therefore be a more powerful christological-ecclesiological image for Africa. Secondly, the community which formed and continues to form as a result of the relevance and appeal of the Proto-Ancestor, will be rightly expected to have its own distinctive identity in the wider society. It will go about the business that Christ its Proto-Ancestor requires of it, and in so doing it will be communicating that Proto-Ancestor to others who may be unresponsive or even hostile to the Proto-ancestor and his community. Certainly that community will be wider than any single family or clan, but there will also be a particular group specified by the pronoun 'our' in the term 'our Proto-Ancestor'. This is a community with its own boundaries, fixed by the criterion of faithfulness to Christ as Proto-Ancestor, and which cuts across and thereby relativizes all other boundaries - cultural, racial, class and gender. Everyone is welcome and anyone may belong equally in that community but, by their choice, not everyone does!

In summary, then, we may say that Bujo's work seeks to stimulate the development of an ethic that is both Christian and African and that, in his drawing on African concepts and images, he makes an important contribution to this development. What he has achieved is admirable and encouraging in terms of the growth of African Christian theology. Unfortunately, he seems unable to frame an ethic that is distinctively Christian, or to show how the potent communalism of African morality might translate into Christian ethics. The natural law and individualistic liberalism of the western world seem to offer limited help. These highways of western thought soon become dusty tracks and dead ends in Africa. By taking these routes, Bujo is hampered in his efforts. He lacks a theoretical framework that will better facilitate the development of African Christian ethics. Such a theoretical framework is now available, I would suggest, in the work of Stanley Hauerwas.

3. Christian community in the ethics of Stanley Hauerwas

One is immediately struck on reading Hauerwas's work that it is different from the mainstream of Christian ethics. On almost every point, Hauerwas runs counter to what has become virtually axiomatic. The first impression may be that he is what in boxing parlance is called a 'counter puncher', merely concerned with arguing against whatever the 'common wisdom' of his moral environment throws at him. Certainly the polemical element is strong throughout Hauerwas's work, especially in respect of the liberal-democratic society of his native United States, but that is not its fundamental purpose. His overall positive project is rather to construct a Christian ethic free from the 'Constantinian captivity' within which he sees most Christian theology to be trapped. It should be no surprise, then, that the theology emerging from this perspective is going to be 'different'. A similarity may be drawn here between Hauerwas's theological task and that of African theology in general, whereby both may be seen to be striving to offer a 'post colonial' account of theology. Both are seeking to develop a theology free from the all-pervasive influence of a dominating culture.

There are some striking points of resemblance between prominent practical aspects in traditional African moral practice and the Christian moral life described by Hauerwas. Obvious examples are those of nonviolence, hospitality to strangers, being present with the sick, and care for the mentally handicapped. What is to be made of these resemblances? From an African perspective, there would certainly be acknowledgement, affirmation and appreciation of these features of Hauerwas's ethics. There would probably also be some curiosity as to where a non-African discovered such characteristically African ideals of behaviour! Hauerwas, for his part, would probably be interested to know that social virtues so similar to his are to be found in such a 'foreign culture', but in his writing he generally gives little indication of being informed by social anthropology.⁴

In terms of his method, however, Hauerwas would be uncomfortable with an emphasis on the resemblances between African moral tradition and Christian moral practice as he sees it. Certainly he would resist the suggestion that his ethics is similar to African or any other ethics of a general kind. Such a suggestion moves too much in the direction of ethical universalism and is conducive to a method of searching for ethics as held in common by all people merely by virtue of their humanity. Bujo, as we have seen, operates with precisely such an ethical method. By contrast, Hauerwas would insist that the resemblances are superficial, that they arise from different sources and that they have a very different moral significance. An understanding of such a response, must trace Hauerwas's method of moral reasoning - from narrative, through community, character and virtue, to the kind of observable behaviour noted above as being similar to African moral practice. Because of their suggested importance for an African Christian ethic, focus in this paper will be on two main features of Hauerwas's thought - the distinctively Christian nature of his ethics, and the ethical significance of Christian community.

3.1 Claiming that all ethics is qualified ethics, Hauerwas qualifies his own ethics as unequivocally Christian. He employs the narrative method to develop his ethics. 'The nature of Christian ethics is determined by the fact that Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community' (1983:24). Ethics describes the particular way of life of a particular people, formed by a particular story. They are 'a story-formed community' (1981:9). Hauerwas explains:

Christians and Jews are a traditioned people who believe that they have been invited to share a particular history that reflects the God who has brought us into being. To know our Creator, therefore, we are required to learn through God's particular dealings with Israel and Jesus, and through God's continuing faithfulness to the Jews and ingathering of a people to the church. (1983:27-28)

That ingathering, of late, includes Africa, and it is that part of the ongoing story that this paper is attempting to articulate. What is clear from Hauerwas's perspective is that, in Africa as elsewhere, it makes as little sense for 'Christian ethics' to be partly Christian, as it makes for a woman to claim to be partly pregnant!

A method which starts with a narrative which forms a community and then develops a morality which is in fact a description of the life of that community, is bound to be

⁴ Notable exceptions are one or two illustrations in *The Peaceable Kingdom* such as that concerning the Nuer practice of discarding 'undesirable' babies (Hauerwas 1983:116), and the Tanzanian use of grass as a sign of peace, as related by Vincent Donovan (Hauerwas 1983:110-111).

particularistic in an emphatic way, and Hauerwas's particularity is emphatically Christian. Therefore, he claims, 'Christians cannot pretend to do ethics for anyone' (1983:34).

3.2 In dealing with Hauerwas's ethic as Christian, it is clear that community is central to his thinking. Important as the constituting narrative is, there can be no narrative without a specific community: '...the narrative requires a corresponding community who are capable of remembering and for whom active reinterpreting remains the key to continuing a distinctive way of life' (1981:54). Narrative therefore requires community just as community requires narrative. The kind of ethics that emerges from an approach of this kind lies in the communal life that faithfully embodies the narrative. In Hauerwas's terms, 'the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic' (1983:99 my emphasis). To use the terms 'communal' and 'communitarian' as adjectives is inadequate to describe ethics of this kind. For Hauerwas, the bond between community and ethics is stronger, even to the point of identification - the community is its own ethic. If an enquirer asks what Christian ethics is, Hauerwas, according to his own logic, should not try to explain or to recommend a list of reading material. He should direct them to a church. Which church is this, and where may it be found? Elsewhere I have discussed the 'double-edged normativity' of this ethic in that it places a forceful obligation on the church to embody the Christian narrative in an obvious way (Richardson 1991:469). The task of the theological ethicist is then to articulate that embodiment and, of course, to challenge the community where it seems to be less than vigilant and faithful in that embodiment. Herein lies the constantly required prophetic function of the Christian ethicist.

3.3 In describing the life of the Christian community as its social ethics, Hauerwas points to the sacramental rituals as examples of what he has in mind.

These rites, baptism and eucharist, are not just 'religious things' that Christian people do. They are the essential rituals of our politics. Through them we learn who we are. Instead of being motives or causes for effective social work on the part of Christian people, these liturgies are our effective social work. For if the church is rather than has a social ethic, these actions are our most important social witness. It is in baptism and eucharist that we see most clearly the marks of God's kingdom in the world. They set our standard as we try to bring every aspect of our lives under their sway. (1983: 108)

While Bujo takes the sacraments seriously, particularly the eucharist which he sees both in terms of his proto-ancestor imagery and as closely linked to the moral life of the church (see 2.3 above), Hauerwas's understanding is clearly even more fundamental to Christian ethics. In his view, it is by means of the sacraments that Christians know themselves and their place in the Christian community and in the world. Without such knowledge there can be no Christian ethics.

3.4 The development of the character of Christian people through their belonging in the Christian community is a vital part of Hauerwas's ethics. As with the citizens of Aristotle's polis, the members of the Christian community are seen as receiving their moral understanding, their training in moral skills and habits within the community. It is my community that shapes my character and, reciprocally, my character contributes to the nature of the community of which I am a member. Together with character goes self-understanding. This too is dependent upon the community. 'Not only is knowledge of the self tied to knowledge of God, but we know ourselves truthfully only when we know

ourselves in relation to God. We know who we are only when we can place our selves - locate our stories - within God's story' (Hauerwas 1983:27). As we have seen, the narrative and its community, the community and its narrative, are inextricably intertwined. In expressing his understanding of personal identity, Hauerwas could do no better than to borrow the words of John Mbiti: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti 1969: 108-109) - 'we' in Hauerwas's case referring to the church.

Having considered aspects of the ethics of Bujo and Hauerwas, we now need to ask how their combined contributions can assist in the development of an African Christian ethic.

4. Some guidelines for African Christian ethics

Introducing his book, Bujo specifies three closely related purposes which he intends to address. Only one of these holds the possibility of the kind of ethic this paper is pursuing - not 'the relevance of the Christian ethic for a black African ethic', much less 'some basic guidelines for a morality that is essentially African', but rather 'a black African ethic in the context of Christianity' (p.11). Even that formulation, however, is inadequate for an ethic which is distinctively Christian. Perhaps the most appropriate formulation of the quest of this paper would be to adapt the second of those statements of purpose to read: 'the development of some African guidelines for an ethic that is essentially Christian'. The proposal is that the questions asked by Bujo and the suggestions made by him for an ethic that is African give rise to a more adequate Christian ethic for Africa when the method of Hauerwas is introduced.

4.1 An ethic that is narratively based is familiar in Africa. Setiloane recalls folk tales 'of the clever rabbit who always escaped the wily jackal' and 'about the pompous lion and the massive elephant who were in unceasing competition for the royalty of the animal kingdom'. He explains the vital moral significance of these apparently frivolous stories.

Oral tradition is not something that was there only for entertainment and driving away the boredom of long evenings. It was a medium of education. For, African educational methods, the way people were prepared for life and survival with the consequent preservation of the species, and its values and norms, were so matter-of-fact and unassuming by Western sophisticated ways that they have often been passed by either as non-existent or as inconsequential. These...(folk tales) invariably contained moral teaching purposed at character-building aimed at creating harmonious community life. (Setiloane 1986:2 my emphasis)

The links between narrative, community and ethics are clear here, and seem at face value to have much in common with the method of Hauerwas. There is, however, a decisive difference. The narrative of Hauerwas is both biblical and historical, while the morally educative stories of Setiloane's African community are neither.

This raises a point of great difficulty for the relationship between Christianity and African culture. African religions do not look to historical founders, and their narratives are consequently not historical as Judaeo-Christian narratives are. Even the ancestors are not regarded historically, but rather in terms of their living presence and their ongoing influence in the life of the community.⁵ Parratt's conclusion to his discussion on this topic is: 'It seems clear that the lack of a historical founder in African religions represents a serious element of discontinuity between African religion and Christianity' (Parratt 1995:80).

This discontinuity brings our discussion to a crisis point. Are the narratives which shape

5 That is not to say that Christianity has no place for such thinking. It is very similar to accounts of the presence of the risen Christ, and also of 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'.

the ethics we are developing Christian or African? It is clear from what has already been said that they must be Christian and therefore historical. That decision, however, must immediately be qualified with the acknowledgement that the term 'Christian' is not the possession of western culture. Therefore the moral significance of the Christian narratives must be worked out in relation to contemporary context which, for this paper, is African. The narrative of Christian ethics in Africa must, then, be the biblical story of Jesus and his people, but it is a narrative that is now unfolding in Africa - and that makes a difference. Bujo is clear that a narrative approach to theology is at home in Africa. He says: 'To some extent, the religious perspective of Africa can be compared to what is nowadays called 'narrative theology' which is in fact rooted in the Bible' (1992:29).

4.2 Likewise, an ethic that is community-centred is familiar in Africa. This is emphatically attested to by Mulago:

The key to understanding of Bantu customs and institutions would thus appear to be the fact of community, unity of life. The handing on of this life, the sharing in this one life is the first link which unites members of the community. (Quoted by Setiloane 1986:10)

Non-Africans need reminding that this community includes not only those presently living, but also the ancestors. The main purpose of the community's rituals, particularly the rites of passage marking birth, marriage and death, is to tend to the communal bonds and social harmony among the presently living members, the departed and those about to be born. Human life is inconceivable outside of community. One's personal identity, one's name, and one's morality are all determined in relation to one's community. This community-centredness is the reason for missionaries often finding, like Vincent Donovan, that when Africans are considering converting to the Christian faith, they are reluctant to do so until their community as a whole converts with them (Donovan 1978:92).

Surely in such a context of thought and practice, ecclesiology must be the most obvious and easily developed aspect of theology. Is there not in Africa an ecclesiology just waiting to be written? As John Mbiti has observed:

African traditional life is largely built on the community. Since the church is also a community of those who have faith in Jesus Christ, this overlapping concept should be exploited much more on the African scene, particularly in terms of the family, the neighbours and the departed. (Mbiti:1977:26)

Bujo agrees: 'This ecclesial dimension has to be rediscovered for present-day ethics' (p.98). Furthermore, given the African understanding of the communal shaping of personal identity, character and morality, the ethical method of Stanley Hauerwas should be understandable, familiar and easily acceptable. The obvious affinity at this point lies at the heart of this paper. The ethical method developed by Hauerwas, I would suggest, provides the theoretical framework for an ethic that is profoundly African. Certainly, Africans would appreciate Hauerwas's point in the story of the Mennonite who was asked: 'Brother are you saved?' His response after a long bewildered pause was to write a list of names of those who knew him with the comment that they would know whether he was saved or not (Hauerwas 1994:24). In African tradition likewise, it is one's community that confers status, judges character and determines social roles.

Yet there is a difference between African and Hauerwasian thinking on community and, precisely because it is on community, it is a fundamental difference. The following comment by John Parratt helps us understand both the similarity and the difference. 'In

African religions the place of the community is of central importance, and the religious community is identified with the civil community' (Parratt 1995:92). Traditionally, that civil community is comprised of those closest to hand, such as the biological family and clan. It is precisely this community that Bujo sees expanded and extended by the 'new clan' of Christ as Proto-Ancestor. Up to this point Bujo and Hauerwas are in agreement. But this is precisely the point at which Bujo's methodological resources fail him. Having strongly affirmed both the communality of the Christian life, and the fact that Christ's community is more inclusive than those we belong with 'by nature', Bujo leaves us with a concept as undefined and nebulous as 'humanity'. Hauerwas is far more specific. He says:

To be sure, as Christians we do believe that the unity of all peoples has been established in principle, but this unity is not an accomplished fact nor can it be presumed to be the basis of a universal ethic. Rather, it can only be manifested in the kind of community made possible by a people who have learned to remember and thus tell rightly the story of God's choosing and caring for his people - both Jews and Christians. (Hauerwas 1985:77)

Here again is the method of a particular narrative, a distinctive people and a qualified ethic. Bujo's ethics needs such a method if it is to be both African and Christian. His African context, however, may justifiably lead him to be more optimistic as to the size of the Christian community in Africa, than Hauerwas is of the Christian community in 'Christian America' when he says: '...Christians cannot help but be a minority if they are being faithful to their basic convictions' (Hauerwas 1988:189, n.33)

4.3 As well as being distinctive and communal, an African Christian ethic needs to be engaged in addressing the particular problems of Africa. Bujo is clear and emphatic on this point. As we have seen, he regards the community of Christ the Proto-Ancestor as eucharistic, and the eucharist as entailing social concern and action. So pressing are Africa's social needs, so gross are its atrocities, and so deep its suffering, that the eucharist which does not take account of this is: '...a mere ritual hypnotizing its participants; making them forget hunger, disease, dictatorship for one hour per week, ignoring the bitter realities of the here below by focusing solely on the ecstasy offered by a heavenly world' (Bujo:93). The way to a proper, socially concerned eucharist is expressed in the term 'solidarity'. 'Concretely, this Christian solidarity must no longer be confined to one's fellow tribe or nation, but must widen itself to include, especially, all fellow Africans, of whom so many are suffering torture from misery, starvation, warfare or some kind of dictatorship' (Bujo:92). Again we see Bujo stepping out from family into nebulous space. He needs Hauerwas's sharply defined ecclesiology to help him retain the church. But Hauerwas equally needs to hear Bujo's plea, and to give place in his ethics for similar intense social concern. In his argument for the distinctiveness of the church he seems at times to overstate his case. For example, he says: 'I am in fact challenging the very idea that Christian social ethics is primarily an attempt to make the world more peaceable or just' (Hauerwas 1983:99 my emphasis). His point is not that Christians should neglect working for a better human society, but that for them the work that must take priority is that which will ensure that the church is the right kind of church. To make this point in his liberal democratic society is one thing. In the African context which so moves Bujo, however, it sounds different. The key term 'primarily' can easily be lost, and the argument for the distinctiveness of the church can seem callous, uncaring and deaf to the cries of the people.

A strong plea for Christian ethics in the Hauerwas mode to listen more sensitively and

for his community to be more open and vulnerable to the stories of those who suffer gross social injustice has been made recently by Gloria Albrecht (1995). Her case centres on the place of women in church and society. This point needs to be made loud and clear in any ethic that claims to be both Christian and African. The pitiful plight of women in Africa's traditionally patriarchal society has been noted by many theological writers (Jacobsen 1994:151, and Kasenene 1994:143). Bujo himself raises the question of 'the existential situation of the black woman in the rapidly progressing Africa of today' (p.113) and sees his Proto-Ancessor, Jesus, as challenging the male-centredness of the past.

Both Hauerwas and Bujo (p.71) focus on the local, empirical church. As Hauerwas sees it, the church's main business is understanding, reinterpreting and embodying 'the continuing story of Jesus Christ in the world'. He continues: 'the church is the extended argument over time about the significance of that story and how best to understand it' (1983:107). Why should that argument be extended, but for the challenges of the changing contexts which confront the Christian narrative? One of the prime sources of those challenges is surely the social injustice both within and without the church. African voices like Bujo's can make westerners more aware of the demonic force of those injustices and the urgency for the church to confront them. Such confrontation, of course, must be in the name of Christ our Proto-Ancessor, but in precisely such social engagement, the church may well find itself more faithful to its narrative and more truly the Christian community.

5. Postscript

At the end of his book, Bujo raises some sharp questions that strike at the motives of those who join in the quest for a truly African theology. Are overseas conferences and academic publications the appropriate places for the presentation of such a theological ethics? Is this not the theological equivalent of an African curio shop - of interest to tourists, but artificial and hollow where the indigenous people are concerned (p.122ff)? Is this a theology for export only, well received in the developed West because of the need of tired western theology for novelty and revitalization?

Time will tell whether or not efforts such as this paper, or even Bujo's own admirable attempt at developing an African Christian ethic prove useful to the living Christian communities of Africa. As for the potential of Africa to revitalize the theology of the western world from which the river of Christianity first flowed to sub-Saharan Africa, I have no hesitation in saying (with apologies to Charles Wesley): 'Let the healing streams abound'!

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