

the political maneuvering of the first section. After dealing with Spanish government in conquered America, Benjamin also brings in the missionary efforts, not only in Mexico and Peru, but also in Paraguay and in Canada. This is then followed by two back to back chapters dealing with the slave trade and the African experience in slavery, again showing a good regional balance between North and South America. An interesting and engaging chapter, "Partners" explores the wide ranging sexual and gender relations between Europeans and various non-Europeans ranging from the casual "wives of the coast" in Africa, through the elite marriages of Spanish conquistadors with Aztec and Inca nobility, to the temporary marriages of French backwoodsmen and their Huron consorts.

"Rivals" moves back to inter-European rivalries of the eighteenth century occasionally involving indigenous people as participants, followed by chapters that cover the Age of Revolution, including the American, Dutch and French Revolutions; then the Haitian Revolution, the liberation of Spanish America, and the independence of Brazil. The final chapter tells the story of the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.

*The Atlantic World* is a good representation of the themes of the New Atlantic History, which focuses on exactly the sort of questions and interactions that Benjamin chooses. It is particularly commendable for the ease with which both Americas and Africa are included in the Atlantic World. He has been attentive to recent literature and themes, though as this is not a work of primary scholarship, the book adds little in any specific area to that fund. Furthermore, in some areas, notably the African sections, it presents some distressing errors. Benjamin, for example, presents the Portuguese presence in the Gold Coast in far too "colonial" a light, as if there had been a conquest. He also seriously misstates the story of Kongo's engagement with Portugal, relegating its Golden Age from about 1580 to 1665 as a period of isolation and decay. His step is generally surer on the American regions. On the whole, then, the book is likely to be a worthwhile textbook for classes devoted to the New Atlantic History at the undergraduate level.

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**Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.**

Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator writes that his book "offers neither sophisticated arguments nor complicated analysis of the different themes of content of Christian faith. It is not even a technical recipe for doing theology." Rather, it "offers an invitation to

drink, savor, and celebrate theology in an African context (p. 10). For him, theology is the practice of “talking sensible about God,” and “faith seeking understanding and hope” (pp. 3,5). This last quote is telling. Saying that faith in God is required to do theology leaves little room for doubters and non-believers. Orobator does not “intend to make the vexing question of God’s existence or nonexistence the starting point of our reflection on God.” He continues by saying: “If you think this assumption does not adequately express your situation in life, read no further. This book is not for you” (p. 15).

It is clear that Orobator writes for only the believer and views theology as a discipline that does not question God’s existence. For him the philosophical arguments for and against God’s existence fall outside of the domain of theology. Whether these questions are properly called theological is an interesting question, but not one I shall dwell on. I bring it up to highlight Orobator’s view of the relationship between theology and philosophy and the limitations of such a view. He thinks that secular reasoning has no place in theology. One limitation of such a view is that it makes it difficult to enter into dialogue with potential converts who approach questions about what they should believe from a view point based on critical reasoning. Is not understanding the nature of God open to those who are not born believing in him?

In an African context, Orobator thinks that there are no such beings. He provides a quote from John Mbiti: “All African people believe in God. They take this belief for granted.” He completely agrees with Mbiti (p. 19). It is hard to know how Orobator and Mbiti want us to understand this claim. It’s surely false if they mean it literally. I get the feeling, though, that this is how Orobator intends us to understand this claim, which is a problem because there are no doubt Africans who have questioned and doubted the existence of God.

I bring some of these things up to point out some ways in which I think this book could have been better. Had it appealed to philosophy at certain points it could have made difficult theological questions less unsettling. Before providing examples, I will note Orobator’s general method and the structure of the book. The book is divided into 11 chapters. The first two chapters serve as an introduction, and the rest discuss issues such as the triune nature of god, creation, grace, the meaning of “church,” the role of Mary in African Christianity, the place of ancestors in African religion, the relationship between faith and culture and inculturation, and African spirituality in general. A short set of questions for reflection and inspirational prayers follow each chapter. The book also takes inspiration from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and takes examples from that book as starting points for discussion. Each chapter begins with a quick account of what the Bible and church teachings have to say of the particular matter at hand, then Orobator puts the subject of the chapter in an African context. In the rest of this review, I shall focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

I mentioned earlier that the book could benefit from philosophy. Let me give an example. Orobator wants his readers to get a better understanding of the Trinity, which he says is mysterious. He does not think that abstract reflection can yield much insight into this matter. He is in general skeptical of purely abstract theologizing and says at many points that his method of doing theology depends on lived experiences. That is all well and good. But let us look at some of things he says about the triune nature of God, which he could have been made clearer with more reasoning. He says that the concept of the Trinity is the idea that there are three persons in one God. Of course, we all know that there is God, his son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. But what sense is there to calling all three of these people as Orobator does? Is God a person? Is the Holy Spirit? I would certainly think that they are not. Jesus was a person (at least in part), that's for sure. However, it is a category mistake to think of the Trinity as being a relationship of three persons in one God.

Of course the Trinity is difficult to understand when we articulate it in terms of three people. Orobator turns to African thought to help us solve this puzzle. This is a good method: it looks at previously untapped ways of thinking to solve problems, and it gives those preaching to Africans a way to articulate the Trinity. He uses the idea *Obirin meta*, which conveys the notion of "a woman who combines the strength, character, personality, and beauty of three women" (p. 31). This metaphor is supposed to help because we can understand how one woman could have this sort of strength. So, we should not let the mysteriousness of the Trinity get in the way of our closeness to God. Orobator then goes on to say that "*Obirin meta* symbolizes the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God's self and in our encounters of God. The veil of mystery is lifted, and we are able to recognize the God who enters into our experiences and meets us where we are" (pp. 32-33).

What, then, is *Obirin meta* intended to symbolize: the triune nature of God or the idea that God is in our experiences? It is hard to see a clear answer here. This is one of the weakness of the book. Orobator wants to use this symbol to do too much. It does not really help us understand the triune nature of God. It may distract us from the mystery by diverting our attention, but it does nothing to remove the mystery. Had he engaged in a bit of philosophy, we could have made the situation a bit less mysterious. First, we should think of the Trinity not as three persons in one person, but as three roles of one entity.<sup>1</sup> This is how Orobator could have used his metaphor: to show us how we can understand one person playing different roles. Just as a man can be father, lawyer and husband, so can an entity be God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We need to think of the Trinity in this way and not as three persons in one God. This is the sort of philosophical reasoning--the avoidance of category mistakes--that would have helped Orobator.<sup>2</sup>

There are many strengths in Orobator's method, though, and we do get many insights into the nature of Christianity in an African context. Let me focus on an example. His writing on the nature of sin in and out of an African context is interesting.

Orobator notes that in Africa one does not, as they say, sin against God. One's sin is felt by the entire community. Repenting for one's sins also involves the entire community, an idea very much in conflict with the Western view of confession.

There are more insights into the nature of African religion, especially in the last chapter. We learn that religion in an African context is not only a Sunday affair: it permeates every aspect of culture. Experience is more important to African religion than abstract theory. The Protestant idea that we have a one-on-one relationship with God is very different from the African idea that a community has a relationship with God, and each individual has a role to play in that relationship. Despite these interesting observations, however, we do not quite get much theology. Orobator states a few times that in an African context religion is about experience and one's everyday relationships and not about abstract matters. That theology in an African context is concrete and not abstract would be one way to sum up the view. No doubt that concrete, everyday religious experiences are important, and perhaps it is true that God permeates every aspect of life in Africa. But if theology is just that, and not a reflection on these experiences, reflection which is abstract, it is hard to see what sense there is to calling that theology. It sounds more like living to me. I bring this up in order to suggest again that this book could have benefitted from more reasoning of the theological and philosophical sort. Many of the claims are in need of justification that is not found in the book. For example, Orobator says, "Africans know God from birth" (p. 154). This is a fascinating thesis, and one that is far from obviously true, and, therefore, in need of justification. Are Africans the only people who know God from birth? If so, what explains it? All in all, though, the book does achieve its goal of wetting our appetite for a fuller treatment of this interesting topic.

## Notes

1. "Entity" is a term which has a broader extension than "person." Every person is an entity, but not every entity is a person. Molecules, tables, clouds, the number 3 and I are all entities, but just I am a person. Surely it makes more sense to say that God is an entity than a person.
2. This term 'category mistake' comes from Gilbert Ryle. A category mistake is a conceptual mistake. For example, if I say that the number 2 is heavy, I make a conceptual mistake. Numbers can't be heavy, nor can they be light; they are abstract and have no weight.

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**Ronald Nicolson (ed.). *Persons in Community: African Ethics in a Global Culture*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008.**

*Persons in Community* is a collection of essays commissioned by the Unilever Ethics Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal that gets ambitious billing in its introduction. Sadly, it fails to live up to its billing. The book sets out to answer four important ethical questions: “Is there such a thing as a set of African ethics? What constitutes African ethics? Are African Ethics consistent with, or different from, the prevailing set of Western ethics (however confusing and disarrayed Western ethics may seem to be)? Do African ethics have anything valuable to say, not only to an African context, but also in a wider world?” (p. 1).

There are other interesting, related questions which arise in the book: To what extent can the concepts and moral imperatives that constitute African and western ethical systems fit into the same dialogue? Is western ethics at odds with the basic African worldview? These are all very interesting questions in need of answers. The book’s seven essays do not answer them in a completely satisfactory way, however. Some stray too far from the above questions by discussing solutions to the HIV and AIDS epidemic, aspects of the assimilation of capitalism in Africa, the importance of traditional African healing, and whether or not the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did justice to all South Africans. These are all important issues, but the discussions of them take focus away from the above questions. Only one essay (Shutte’s “African Ethics in a Globalising World”) discusses in-depth the parallels between the views of certain contemporary Thomist (hence western) thinkers and African ethics. Furthermore, only one essay (Mkhize’s “*Ubuntu* and Harmony: An African Approach to Ethics”) directly and properly discusses what constitutes African ethics. Perhaps it is best to view this collection as a first attempt to answer the four key questions and not a comprehensive answer.

There, nevertheless, is a picture of African ethics that emerges from this book, one centered on the concept of *ubuntu*, a familiar word to South Africans. It is of Bantu origin, and has translations in other African languages (e.g., ‘maat’ in Egyptian); yet there is no one-word translation in English. Even so, we can talk about this concept in English. More than one author says that *ubuntu* is the idea that a person is a person through other people. This concept captures the communalism in which we typically think African societies are rooted. Perhaps the clearest articulation in the book comes from a quotation of Desmond Tutu:

A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished, when others are tortured and oppressed, or treated as if there were less than who they are (p. 68).

Nhlanhla Mkhize writes: "*Ubuntu*, the process of becoming an ethical human being, is the process by which balance or the 'orderedness of being' (Karenga 2004, 191) is affirmed. This is realized through relationships characterized by interdependence, justice, solidarity of humankind, respect, empathy and caring. From this perspective, then, ethics is not a matter of individual legislation by abstract, solitary thinkers; rather, it is grounded in practical life and human action" (36). This last part of this quotation supposedly shows how a *ubuntu*-centered moral theory is different from traditionally western ethical thinking.

*Ubuntu* seems to be, in part, a realization of the shared fate of humanity. First, one must understand that others are as valuable as oneself and that one's own fate depends on others. Second, one must act in light of this realization. *Ubuntu*, then, is an ethical attitude and motivation that one acts in light of and because of. It is a concept grounded in empathy. This is surely a concept that is important, perhaps of utmost importance to ethics. The notion of *ubuntu* could use a fuller articulation in this book. It is, after all, difficult to translate in Western languages, according to more than one author in this book.

Understanding *ubuntu* helps us to understand the answers to the four questions. African ethics have the concept of *ubuntu* to contribute to western ethics, which many of the authors see as flawed for its focus on man as a solitary individual. The essays are united by rejecting the flawed perspective of Western ethics: a lack of focus on the interdependence of community and individual, and the necessity of community for the growth of the individual. The answer to what constitutes African ethics and whether there is such a thing as African ethics could be more developed, but what we see is that there is an African ethics, and it is constituted by the notion of *ubuntu*. As I said, a comprehensive articulation of the concept of *ubuntu* would be needed if one is to fully answer our above questions.

In closing, I should note that the essays' general criticism of western ethics is an attack against a straw man. One weakness of many of these essays is that they fall into the trap of thinking that the entirety of western ethics sees man as an isolated individual in search of pursuing his own self-interest. This—certainly at odds with *ubuntu*—has also been criticized by many within the Western tradition. If we truly want to understand how the key concepts of African and western ethics can contribute to our moral lives, to our lives as global citizens, then the many perspectives of western ethics—and not the too simple articulation in this book—will be given their due alongside African ethics.

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