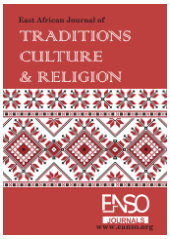

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Original Article

A Critical Comparison of African and Western Catholic Models of Moral Upbringing

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the modes of ethical upbringing in African and Western Catholic education in an effort to appreciate the fact that moral living is not universal, but contextual, given the different contexts in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The data collection tool employed is document analysis. It engages four Catholic moral theologians, three of whom are Africans, namely, John Samuel Mbiti of Kenya, Laurent Magesa of Tanzania and Benezet Bujo of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The fourth moral theologian, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), is an epitome of Western Catholic moral reflections.

African refers to what is related to the continent of Africa in terms of various cultures, traditions, customs, descent, ethnicity, nationality, languages, literature, art, music, spirituality, and history (Mbiti, 1969).

Western Catholic refers to the Roman Catholic Church, whose supreme head is the Pope, as opposed to the Eastern Catholic Churches (O'Collins and Farrugia, 2020, p. 2).

Froebel (1886) defines education as an activity,

"that raises man to a free, conscious living in accordance to the divine. It guides man to clearness about himself and in himself to peace with nature and to union with God" (p. 3)

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INTRODUCTION

This paper engages in a critical comparison of traditional African and Western Catholic conceptions of moral education. Before beginning this critical comparison, some initial comments regarding inter-cultural theological discourse are helpful. Dyrness (1992) argues that the growth of Christianity in the developing world was enabling Christians everywhere to "fill out John's vision in Revelation 7:9-11 in a very concrete way. He tells his reader to remember that John [of Patmos] sees a great multitude that no one can number from every tribe and nation, singing praises to God (pp. 16-17)." The 2013 research on global religious demography heightens Dyrness' point. To use the Catholic Church as an example, 40 percent of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics live in Latin America. Brazil is home to 134 million Catholics, more than Italy, France, and Spain combined. Sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, accounts for 16 percent of the world's Catholics and is steadily approaching Europe's declining 24 percent (Pew Research Forum, 2010). From these changing realities has grown a conviction among theologians of the need for a globally sensitive and collaborative dimension to theological reflection. Biblical, historical, systematic, moral and liturgical theology can no longer scrutinise only Western signs of the times in light of Western interpretations of the Gospel. It also reworks the oft-quoted line,

"Hence the focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will" (Paul VI, 1975, p. 1)

This study answers the following research questions: What shape will Christian discipleship take in our new global context? What kind of theological reflection is appropriate in light of this context? How can the enterprise of "doing theology" better engage interlocutors from the southern hemisphere? To begin answering these questions, this study considers an important theological reflection that is already taking place in the developing world and looks to ways it might challenge and illumine Western theologies more readily accessible to those in the West.

With this background, I now move into our critical comparison, which, as I stated, aims at the mutual illumination of traditional African and Western Catholic conceptions of moral formation—that is, how individuals receive, internalise and act upon ethics, and the role of the individual conscience in this process. To anticipate the structure of the paper, I begin by exploring three African Christian accounts of conscience. I then put these thinkers in conversation with the influential Western Catholic account of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, for the purpose of comparison. Finally, I consider how this mutual illumination might cast new light on contemporary theological reflection and pastoral practice.

The study chose relevant documents written by Mbiti (1986, 1991), Magesa (1997), Bujo (2007) and Ratzinger (2007) that directly and clearly answer the above research questions. These documents are credible, given the fact that they were written by renowned, experienced and expert Christian writers, scholars, philosophers and theologians from Kenya, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Germany, respectively. They, too, are not forged documents, have citations from other recognised scholars and contain truthful facts, meaning that they are integral, authentic and accurate.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

An African Account of Conscience and Moral Formation

Odozor (2003, p.35) defines conscience as

"The tribunal that teaches people to obey God's law inscribed in their hearts, the most secret core or sanctuary in a human being by which he or she does good and avoids evil."

With this definition, one may ask, how is this interior tribunal cultivated? Can a conscience be erroneous? If so, what are the norms for responding to an erring conscience? This examines three representative African theologians' work on these questions: John Samuel Mbiti, Laurenti Magesa, and Benezet Bujo. This study attempts to show how each author distinctively contributes to African ethics and casts new light on an influential strand in Catholic moral theology.

John Samuel Mbiti

Mbiti (1986) argues that African people have a deep sense of right and wrong given to them at birth. God and the ancestors as the unchallenged authority do not physically write moral laws on African people's minds and hearts, but rather translate them orally and experientially into the community's rituals, riddles, myths, fables, proverbs, music, dance and drama, beliefs and practices, names of places and people, and dreams. Likewise, the community translates them to her through long training in the many customs, rules, traditions, and taboos and through social observation of what older people in the community do and do not do (Mbiti, 1986, p. 180).

Mbiti discusses at length the moral attributes of God understood in many African ethnic groups. God originates moral norms, since He himself is pure and without blemish (Mbiti, 1971, p. 38). God is intrinsically good and the source of all goodness, which he shows in being merciful to people who are beset by danger, difficulty and illness, averting calamity, supplying rain, providing fertility to people, animals, and plants, and bestowing wealth. For him, since God is the first and ultimate moral Being, He requires people to behave in a morally acceptable way. Importantly, Mbiti postulates that Africans experience the goodness of God through the moral actions and positive values expressed among themselves, such as friendship, politeness, reliability, the keeping of promises, love, hard work, justice, self-control, diligence in looking after the homestead, chastity, fidelity, and hospitality. In fact, many cultures understand moral actions as the force that maintains order and harmony between the living and the ancestral world and spirits, between the human community and God, and between the community and the natural world.

Yet, despite the goodness and holiness of God and its expression through the actions and values of the community, Mbiti observes that both physical and moral evils exist in the human community and nature. In most African accounts, moral evil is not attributed to God, who is "always right and cannot be charged with any offense (Mbiti, 1971, p. 204)." Yet some Africans believe that God is at times indirectly responsible for evil, having created the possibility of evil by bestowing freedom on the human person. Mbiti sees an intimate connection between moral and physical evil. Some African cultures believe that "unconfessed offenses are punished by God through certain diseases or accidents, for example, drought, flooding and devastating earthquakes, and that these are signs of falling moral standards (p. 181)."

In general, however, he attributes the existence of evil to spirits that were created good but fell away from God by misusing their freedom. These spirits now roam the world, actively tempting people to commit various evils, such as cheating, theft, selfishness, robbery, murder, rape, cruelty, profanity, practising sorcery or witchcraft, interfering with the rights of others, backbiting, laziness and breaking promises. Evil can also be caused by the recently deceased, "if they are not

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buried well or have a grudge, or are neglected…." (p. 205). Thus estranged from the living, they can cause harm to the living in the form of epilepsy or madness.

Mbiti, too, points out the intimate connection between an individual's offence and the community's well-being. Virtually every offence is understood as a corporate offence, since it wounds relationships among community members (p. 205). For example, if a person steals a goat, he/she does not steal his/her own goat, but that of another person, who is a sister, brother, father, mother, uncle, aunt, grandmother or grandfather, cousin, niece or nephew. A thief, as such, is seen as a thief of the whole community, who depends on that goat for their livelihood. As this paper explores later, among many groups, the whole community must be involved in punishing a particular evil and ensuring restitution for it. Thus, for Mbiti, traditional African ethics are fundamentally relational ethics.

Related to this argument is Mbiti's insistence that individual moral freedom always operates within, and, thus, is restricted by, the community. As mentioned already, the African community works together in the upbringing of youth, who from the moment of birth is inducted into the community's moral system, as conveyed by rituals, art forms, myths, proverbs, riddles, beliefs and practices, and taboos. A child's conscience is, thus, formed at every step to enable him/her to behave in a relational way. Implicit here is a moral sensibility wherein the individual is not an "autonomous" moral self. Rather, in the words of Katongole (2000, p. 247), individual choices are understood as a means of realising one's potential as a member of the family, clan, church, or tribe. One is responsible for behaving in ways that enhance the community's unity and stability, even against his/her personal volition.

As for Mbiti, communitarian considerations overwhelm the individual. Hence, his well-known dictum, "I am because we are, and since we are, then, I am (Mbiti, 1967, pp. 108-109)." Such an ethical vision is backed by the unique historical struggles of the community and a confidence that individual consciences participate in and restore a society's moral values (Mbiti, 1991, 181). Men and women of the community, attentive to their own consciences, keep an eye out against moral depravity and rely on the help of God, spirits and the living dead in their own moral endeavours. So, how does a community handle individuals behaving against their established moral norms? Mbiti describes an intricate system of immediate reward and punishment upon which many African communities rely. Divine reward and punishment are not postponed to the eschaton. Rather, the African conscience is patterned on a system of communal judgment and immediate consequences. Mbiti (1986) writes,

"God may punish the offender, but justice is executed by the community first" (p. 206).

God is understood to have done His part in providing moral values to people. Thus, he entrusts the community with designing its own moral system and does not interfere with its specific articulation and enforcement, because the immediate custodians of human morality are the ancestors, or the living dead, and the spirits. Such an ethical system reflects a certain moral fluidity. Rather than underscoring an essential unity to African or global ethics, each African culture is seen as developing its own moral norms.

Mbiti goes on to argue that restitution for wrongdoing has an essential communitarian focus. Since an erroneous conscience harms the whole community, repair of this conscience and the damage it has wrought must involve the whole community. Furthermore, since wrongdoing damages the individual's relationship with God, the community of the living, the spirits, ancestors, and the natural world, restoration must be established among all these forces. This is, perhaps, one of the starkest contrasts between African and most

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Western Christian ethics, especially at the practical level. The latter tends to view reconciliation primarily as restoring the individual soul's relation to God, whether in the private "working out of one's salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil.2:12) or through the sacrament of reconciliation. However, for the former, the communal effects of harm done are not sufficiently addressed in these Western models of restoration of conscience. Instead, he favours the public, ritualised forms of restoration practised among many African ethnic groups, in which an individual makes a verbal confession and tangible, physical restitution for wrongs done before the whole community.

Having viewed Mbiti's ethics, we can now summarise his distinct contribution to Christian ethics. For Mbiti, an act is viewed as wrong primarily because God and the community punish the act, for it has disturbed the balance of the interrelationship between living and non-living forces. He writes,

"If relationships are not hurt or damaged or if there is no discovery of a breach of customs, then, the act is not evil or wrong" (Mbiti, 1986, p. 213).

Such a view differs starkly from many Western moral theologies, particularly because it seems to deny the existence of intrinsically immoral acts or private wrongdoing. Positively, however, in this framework, the God-given, socially cultivated moral sense in each human person receives tremendous grounding within and sustenance by the life and practices of a given community.

Laurenti Magesa

Laurenti Magesa presents perhaps a more mystical account of the African moral sensibility. He posits that Africans believe that the world is a sacred abode of life forces, namely, God, spirits, ancestors, living persons, and the natural world. Thus, he observes an intimate connection between spirituality and ethics. Africans' deep sense of the sacred permeates all aspects of their daily living, especially moral decision-making. An African "grows into an ethical consciousness wherever he/she is" (Magesa, 1997, p. 58). While Mbiti sees a vital distance between God and His people, leaving the articulation of moral laws to their discretion, Magesa situates God, spirits and ancestors in the centre of the drama of morality.

Like Mbiti, Magesa stresses the role of the community in shaping an individual's conscience. The latter, however, observes that a human being endeavours to do good and avoid evil primarily because he/she lives in continual awareness of the spiritual world, not primarily because he/she is answerable to a particular human community. For Magesa, community includes all the vital forces of the cosmos. The very being of the human person, situated in this cosmic web, equals his/her doing. That is to say, every act of living is potentially a moral action.

He writes,

"Not only is the view of the universe at the service, so to speak, of the formation and execution of good relationships, but relationships make possible the continuing existence of the universe (p. 64)."

While Mbiti emphasises the living person as the moral agent, Magesa names all animate and inanimate forces as caught up in a universal moral synthesis.

For Mbiti, the enforcement of ethics is not God's responsibility, but rather that of "the living dead and spirits who act as the police of the community of the living." By contrast, for Magesa, since the individual is enveloped within the sacred world, and human action is a form of reverence to it, punished or not, evil is evil (p. 59). Even private wrongdoing is an offence against God, spirits, ancestors, the community, and other vital forces. Conscience, which Magesa identifies with personhood and refers to as "Ubuntu," serves the universe, and the universe serves conscience (p. 66). This cosmic interconnectedness prompts the conscience to

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promote peace among the created order rather than jeopardise its stability. This explains his insistence that witchcraft and sorcery are serious evils, because they disintegrate the African community's cohesion and tamper with the harmony between the universe's vital forces (p. 179). Overall, he argues that one's moral choices must be made and judged, insofar as they promote or diminish the universe (p. 64).

While Mbiti stresses that the community is served by the individual conscience, or that conscience justifies the community's demands on the individual, Magesa stresses the symbiotic relationship between the community and the individual. For him, individual moral discernment represents the capacity to go beyond oneself. Conscience uplifts the individual, making him or her potentially "abundant and superabundant" in community life (p. 65). As for Mbiti, the individual conscience is absorbed into the community's collective moral sense. Magesa, by contrast, does not regard individual moral agency as a potential threat to be controlled, but an abundance that can contribute to the common treasure of communal life. For example, a son or daughter who has a wide circle of friends and companions brings pride and prestige to his family, clan and tribe. In sum, the individual acts in ways that maintain and promote the life of the family, clan, tribe and universe, yet without loss of his/her moral autonomy.

Interestingly, Magesa includes in his list of vital forces the consciousness of the yet-to-be-born. He argues that although the yet-to-be born are not directly involved in morality, they are consciences in potency and are not to be harmed. The community of the living awaits their contribution to the decision-making process that bonds its shared life (p. 66). In addition, he focuses, in particular, on the consciences of leaders such as herbalists, rainmakers, diviners, mediums, prayer leaders, family heads, and chiefs and kings, who are "the teachers, moral guides and counselors" of their communities. He outlines the behaviours and virtues expected of good leaders, such as the ability to protect the life of the community, maturity, thoughtfulness, patience, wisdom, the ability to settle differences, non-violence, and direction in questions of worship. Such leaders are the guiding conscience of the people under their care, a similar point made in some Western moral theologies, as we will see. Additionally, Magesa, unlike Mbiti, casts the moral life against the horizon of the eschaton. He explains that by "their good example, [leaders] pass on all the moral codes of the clan and ethnic group from one generation to the next" and that "their good consciences guarantee life… in the hereafter" (p. 67-9).

Finally, Magesa's ethics are also distinct in their ecological focus. He writes;

"The earth is given to humanity as a gratuitous gift which humans own equally. This is the reason why land, air and the like are not alienated from the clan and tribe" (p. 61).

A resource like land is never owned as private property, according to Magesa, but is held in trust by an individual or family on behalf of the clan or tribe. Ultimately, natural resources do not belong to the community at all, but to God, who lends them to humankind. While for Mbiti, ethics are ethnocentric, centring on the community's stability and hopes, Magesa's ethics are cosmo-centric and theocentric. Thus, questions of property and resource sharing are central to morality. For him, insofar as the African conscience is naturally groomed to be hospitable and freely share the earth's resources, greed and inhospitality are fundamentally opposed to moral living (p. 62).

Benezet Bujo

The final interlocutor in this survey of African perspectives on conscience is Benezet Bujo. Mbiti, Magesa and Bujo all agree that conscience has its immediate origin in God. However, more than these other two theologians, Bujo underscores key differences between a Western and African

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Christian conception of human moral freedom. For him, while Western perspectives make central the individual moral responsibility, an African perspective has the community as the primary moral agent, which employs individuals to inculcate moral values through various cultural norms, family upbringing and taboos (Bujo, 2007, p. 107). In fact, he suggests that it is never permissible for the individual to follow his/her conscience against the discernment and opinion of the whole community.

As already observed above, Magesa and Mbiti, to a lesser degree, advocate for some measure of individual freedom in moral decision-making. Yet Bujo argues that an individual is compelled either by the community or by God to act in conformity with the community's will. In comparison to a traditional natural law perspective, Bujo argues that the dictates of conscience are culturally determined. For him, the community designs moral norms and values to reflect its own lived experiences and those of the ancestors. While the faculty of moral discernment originates from God, its shaping and specific determinations rest solely with the community. Rather than a process whereby the individual first discerns privately and then seeks additional counsel from the community, Bujo reverses the process. He sees the African conscience beginning its discernment by consulting the community (p. 112). Here, individual conscience does not prevail over the community as the ultimate subjective norm of morality, as is held in the Western Catholic moral tradition. Rather, Bujo denies any possibility of individual freedom, internalisation of moral norms and exercise of conscience apart from the community (p. 110). The individual conscience is not a faculty of *freedom*, but of participation. The community, he suggests, grants even personal identity. Bujo's ethics are nicely summarised in his statement: "Only the community is the ultimate basis of value" (p. 124).

Not surprisingly, then, Bujo strongly critiques a Western Christian concept of conscience that makes morality primarily a private affair. He notes that the "I-We" relationship is far more robust in the African moral system than in many Western systems. In the end, he does maintain the existence of objective moral truth, originating with God, but that its translation is concrete, subjective, situational and always communal. In sum, Bujo proposes a situational ethics that is appropriate to the unique communal focus of the African society, and one that emphasises the primacy of the community as a moral agent.

Evaluation of the African Concept of Conscience

Despite the variations, the three theologians agree on the sources of moral norms, namely, that God is the origin and source of the faculty of conscience, and the living community and the ancestors are the secondary sources. Yet, particularly in Mbiti and Bujo, the community operates as a designer and gadfly of moral norms, to the extent that personal identity and moral autonomy are in large measure subsumed in the collective identity and conscience. An individual is brought up, and even policed, to ensure that he/she does what is regarded as good and avoids what the community, even against his/her will, regards as evil.

As it is yet to be seen below, Western Catholic conceptions of conscience pose important questions to such a model of moral formation: Does the individual ever interiorize the community's norms? Furthermore, in the ethics of Mbiti and Bujo, it is unclear whether in any realm, public or private, the individual is able to exercise personal freedom. If the term "conscience," is understood as Odozor does, to denote "the tribunal or secret core in a human being by which one does good and avoids evil," this term may be a misnomer when applied to such fundamentally communal visions of morality discernment. If the judgments of this interior tribunal may never contradict the community, is there a genuine conscience here at all? Magesa's ethics seem to offer an alternative vision that retains individual moral autonomy and where the community is not infallible, even with respect to its

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own relation to cosmic harmony. Yet he underscores that the African individual receives invaluable grounding within and sustenance from the life and practices of a given community.

In sum, then, African moral theology generally posits that conscience is inherently relational. By stressing the inseparability of individual acts and community stability, and by depicting the conscience's interaction with a host of visible and invisible forces, African moral anthropology is far from being anthropocentric, let alone individualistic. Rather, such a vision stretches the significance of moral discernment and action to include the whole web of vital forces that comprise the universe (Orobator, 2008, p. 63). Likewise, in these moral frameworks, sin and evil are also seen as fundamentally relational. An evil act is that which destroys one's relationship with God, the community of the living, spirits, the ancestors, animals and the inanimate world. This is evidenced strongly in the fact that many African religions place a strong emphasis on determining the precise causes and effects of evil, in contrast to Western theologies' preoccupation with the origin and definition of evil (Muzorewa, 1985). A critical correlate, as already seen, is the unique African perspective on forgiveness and restitution for wrongs done. This understanding relies on the sense that the wrongdoer must be tangibly and visibly restored to those he or she has wronged. Reconciliation must also facilitate his/her restoration with all the vital forces of the universe, especially the imbalance that the wrongdoer has created in the community's relationship with these forces. Thus, the "I-Thou" relationship designates a reality far more expansive than merely the wrongdoer and the person wronged (Bujo, p. 119).

Western Catholic Moral Thought on Conscience: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

A fruitful comparison to these African accounts of moral formation is found in the thought of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the late Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. While Ratzinger's theological reflection on conscience began in the 1970s, it was after assuming his responsibilities as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1981 that conscience emerged as a key concept in his writings (Twomey, 2007, p. 21). His responsibilities as Prefect of the CDF prompted continuous reflection on questions of authority, tradition, and ecclesiology, as well as the more fundamental question of the nature of theology in modern Western culture. These reflections, perhaps not surprisingly, frequently surfaced [tensions about the relationship between the theologian and the teaching authority of the Church, between the individual conscience and the magisterium's pronouncements, and on the role of conscience in the exercise of ecclesial and political authority (p. 89)]. During this time, Ratzinger delivered two essays at workshops to United States bishops organised by the National Catholics Bioethics Center, in 1984 and 1991. Since both essays nicely highlight Ratzinger's account of conscience, and since this account continues to exercise significant influence in Catholic moral thought, these two essays form the primary material for the comparison with the surveyed African perspectives (Ratzinger, 2007, p. 17).

In reflecting on conscience, Ratzinger responds to a general problem he perceives in contemporary public discourse, namely, the exaltation of individual moral judgment as the supreme norm of morality. He describes a personal encounter that profoundly shaped his thinking about conscience, which occurred during his tenure as a university professor in Germany. One of Ratzinger's colleagues argued that an individual must follow their conscience above all else, so that one can, in fact, speak of "the justifying power of an erroneous conscience (Ratzinger, p.17)." This colleague insisted that the Church "should seek Nazi officials in heaven, since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience."

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Ratzinger writes:

"Since that conversation, I knew with complete certainty that … a concept of conscience that leads to such results must be false. Firm, subjective conviction and the lack of doubts and scruples that follow from it do not justify man" (p. 17).

Like the African theologians surveyed, Ratzinger is concerned with a modern notion of the subject as "a self-sufficient criterion over against the demands of authority (Twomey, 2007, p. 125)." In his 1991 essay, he argues for the recovery of what some have called an "ontological level of conscience" found in the thought of Basil, Augustine, Aquinas, and Newman (p. 122). Distinct from conscientia*,* which denotes practical moral judgment, but similar to the Stoic and later Scholastic concept of *synderesis*, Ratzinger uses the Platonic term *anamnesis* to describe this level of conscience, which denotes "recollection" or "primal memory (p. 122)." Linked to natural law theory, and closely connected to Paul's description in Romans 2:14 that the divine law is inscribed into the hearts of Gentiles, an *anamnetic* conscience actively recalls what constitutes a person's very being, the sense of "the good and… the true (both are identical) implanted in us." He goes on:

"This anamnesis of origin, which results from that constitution of our being which is in conformity with God, is not a conceptual, articulated knowledge, a treasury of recallable contents. It is, as it were, an interior sense, a capacity of recognition, so that the person, who is thereby addressed, if he is not interiorly opaque, recognizes the echo of it in himself (p. 127)."

According to Ratzinger, attention to this ontological level and *anamnetic* function of conscience is precisely what is needed in both theology and civil discourse today, namely, the overcoming of "two apparently contradictory, but, in fact, closely related" misconceptions about conscience. On the one hand, the confused meaning of the term "erroneous conscience," such that it does not matter what one does so long as one is sincerely convinced of its rightness, and the notion of the "infallible conscience," that the determinations of one's conscience are always right (p. 123). Both notions Ratzinger traces to the Enlightenment project, with its emphasis on the autonomy of the subject, and sees leading to the moral relativism displayed in his university colleague's argument that those who committed unspeakable crimes under German National Socialism are free from guilt (Ratzinger, pp. 5, 23).

While he calls for the retrieval of conscience's ontological contours, Ratzinger does address the closely related second level of conscience commonly understood by the term: particular moral judgments in concrete situations. At this level, he suggests, one must act according to one's conviction, even if to do so is objectively wrong.

He writes,

"It is never wrong to follow the convictions one has arrived at—in fact, one must do so. However, it can very well be wrong to have come to such askew convictions in the first place, by having stifled the protest of the anamnesis of being. The guilt lies then in a different place, much deeper—not in the present act, not in the present judgment of conscience but in the neglect of my being, which made me deaf to the internal promptings of truth. For this reason, criminals of conviction like Hitler and Stalin are guilty. These crass examples should not serve to put us at ease but should rouse us to take seriously the earnestness of the plea" (Ratzinger, p. 38). This assertion agrees with 'Free me from my unknown guilt' (Ps 19:13).

For Ratzinger, while a person is obliged to obey his/her conscience, he/she may be guilty of making the wrong decision. The guilt lies not in the judgment that something objectively wrong is right, but rather in the past choices by which he/she is now "insensible to the voice of truth and its appeal to his/her inner self" (Twomey, p. 127). Importantly, he suggests that no one can completely silence the

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voice of conscience: **"**[A person] can see the truth of God as a result of being created… It is not seen if and because it is not willed. This "no" of the will that prevents knowledge is guilt. Then, the fact that the signal-lamp does not light up is a consequence of an intentional looking away from that which we do not want to see (Ratzinger, p. 125)." While the scope of this paper does not permit its consideration, Ratzinger does discuss the centrality of grace and forgiveness once an "erroneous conscience" recognizes its guilt; without these, he suggests, the heart of the Christian message is fundamentally obscured.

Precisely because a conscience can err, Ratzinger insists that conscience needs outside input in order to remain itself, insofar as "what is outside the self performs a maieutic function to bring its openness for truth to fulfillment (Twomey, p. 126)." There must, then, be genuine moral authorities in conversation with the subjective reflections of each individual for genuine morality to be achieved, including the shared experience of one's community, the Church, and reality itself (Ratzinger, pp. 2-3). Ultimately, he told bishops in 1984, "Everything depends on… a God who is Creator and on a God who has revealed Himself" (p. 74). This is why, Ratzinger argues, the Church's teaching authority, guided by grace, is uniquely equipped to form consciences. Through its "sacramental incorporation into Christ," the Church engages in a kind of corporate anamnesis (p. 126). In other words, as the authentic interpreter of the natural moral law, the Church can competently interpret to the faithful God's will (Haas, p. 4).

An Inter-cultural Conversation on a Christian Understanding of Conscience

Ratzinger can serve as an important interlocutor with the African theologians surveyed above, especially so that the moral and pastoral theologies developed in both regions can mutually illuminate each other. In general, for Ratzinger, conscience is the subjective norm of morality, or, as Augustine formulated, the sense of the good imprinted in us (Svensson, 2013). While we must honour this personal, subjective conviction, it is not infallible, and to point out so is imperative for overcoming the pitting of a "morality of conscience" against a "morality of authority," especially ecclesial authority (Haas, p. 2). By contrast, for both Bujo and Mbiti, consciences serve primarily to ensure community harmony and stability. For Mbiti, individual freedom is not only best expressed by obedience to one's community, but, in fact, it must operate within the restrictions of the community: "I am because we are, and since we are, then, I am," he insists. However, the Nazi era, Ratzinger suggests, illustrates how even a community can become disordered and, thus, cannot alone guarantee moral rectitude. If either an individual or a particular community can declare for itself what is right in every circumstance, there could be no objective moral norms. Thus, only an account of conscience as a subjective, fallible capacity for moral judgment, he suggests, can overcome the tendency, evidenced in Bujo's ethics, of making one community's judgment a self-sufficient criterion of morality, pitted against the judgment of the individual or global society. At worst, without counterbalances to such subjectivism, society faces the constant threat of a tyranny of the strong over the weak, a totalitarianism of the powerful arising from their own arbitrary decisions(Haas, p. 3).

An account that calls into question moral subjectivism as the basis for understanding conscience, as observed in Magesa and Ratzinger, seems more likely to serve cross-cultural collaboration in ensuring human rights and dignity. Both theologians insist that individuals, in fact, require ongoing moral formation by their communities, which are essential for calling the human person out of itself and that can be a locus of encounter with God. Magesa envisions an African individual being formed to promote the natural order between all the universe's vital forces, including but beyond its local community.

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Ratzinger writes that individuals "need the community that can guarantee God, whom no one on his own could dare bring into his life (Haas, pp. 8-9)." Nonetheless, both insist that moral autonomy enables an individual to participate in the wisdom and goodness of God (Miller, 1996, p. 656). Conscience is not only a tool for discerning good from evil and preserving the right relation with God, but also an exceptional sign that human beings are created in the image of God: *imago Dei* (John Paul II, 1994). In modern society, Ratzinger suggests, the well-formed individual conscience can safeguard and defend the weak and vulnerable, and speak truth against misguided popular opinion, as in his example of St. Thomas More (Ratzinger, p. 32).

Therefore, insofar as the ethics of Bujo and Mbiti heavily circumscribe personal identity and moral freedom, Magesa's account of conscience is to be preferred, since it offers a compelling account of communal moral formation without loss of individual autonomy and personal identity. He, like Ratzinger, suggests that personal identity is not granted to individuals by the community, but by God, and this point could be further explored in the thought of Bujo and Mbiti. This problem notwithstanding, the communitarian grounding of all three African accounts of conscience challenges Ratzinger's account, which is wary of describing the local community as an authoritative tribunal of morality on a par with the Church. Ratzinger suggests the primacy of the moral guidance of ecclesial authority, which must "remain credible in her moral traditions" even while engaging other genuine, albeit lesser, sources of moral guidance (Ratzinger, p. 73). Yet African theology's preference for the role played by local, non-ecclesial communities in conscience formation offers an important challenge to Ratzinger's vision, especially in light of ongoing critiques of the Eurocentrism prevalent in theological discourse (Murphy, 2012). Such discourses' vision of a universalising ethic and of the Church as conscience formator *par excellence* runs the risk of being realised at the expense of tribal identity and familial belonging in African contexts. African ethics suggest "the value of focusing on the particular rather than the universal, on the interests of communities rather than humankind as a whole" (Young and Brunk, 2018, p. 66). The watchword of their ethics is 'harmony' rather than 'truth,' a point that can hardly be undervalued today in what some have called "the era of global violence" (Balibar, 2001, p. 15-29).

On the question of sin, Mbiti's point is that since wrongdoing is always relational, there can be no private or personal sin. This point could also be reconsidered in light of Ratzinger's and Magesa's accounts, yet without loss of his strong emphasis on the inherent relational dimension in all human action. In contrast to what some have critiqued as the anthropocentrism of Western ethics, the surveyed African theologians depict humanity surrounded by realms of nature and spirits over which the Supreme God presides, but which all factor into moral discernment. Thus, it is unthinkable for Africans to think of humanity [and hence ethics] apart from its connectedness with the larger ecological and cosmological whole (Paris, 1993, p. 114-5). Admirable though Ratzinger's pursuit of a universal ethic may be, these surveyed African accounts, especially Mbiti's, raise the question of whether the universalising appeal to natural law is peculiarly redolent of Eurocentric values, and questionable insofar as it views human beings in distinction to the rest of nature. From this perspective, it would perhaps be more modest to see human beings as merely a part of the cosmological whole, with rules they are obliged to learn and respect demanded for all aspects that have life and spirit (Young and Brunk, p. 66).

As this study continues its comparison, the most notable distinction, perhaps, between an African and Western Catholic vision of moral formation is the former's emphasis on immediate punishment and communal reconciliation. African ethics pose an important challenge to Ratzinger's vision of

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moral formation. To use the example mentioned already, in many African communities, a thief who has stolen a goat makes public restitution not only to the family from whom he has stolen, but also to that person's extended family, whose livelihood he has jeopardised, and to the whole community, whose stability he has compromised. Restoration is undertaken both physically, through the replacement of the animal, and symbolically and publicly, through an open confession and celebratory ceremony involving the whole community. If African Christian theologies are taken seriously in the global Church, sacramental theologians should further consider whether the sacrament of reconciliation could include physical and symbolic extensions of restorative justice, a concept well-developed in Catholic social teaching but less concretised in practice. The Catholic catechism prescribes that **"**every offense committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation," and that only "when it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly" (CCC, No. 2487). Yet despite this formal insistence on public reparation, which "obliges in conscience," it is unclear whether, in pastoral practice, meaningful public and material reparation is encouraged and/or facilitated by pastors and communities.

On the other hand, Mbiti and Bujo's vision of immediate judgment and communal restoration as part of the moral formation process lacks a robust eschatological component and concept of grace. Since a foundational component of most Christian ethics is, in some sense, that God is the ultimate judge of human moral action (cf. Rom 2:6; 14:12), an eschatological horizon could be further integrated into these ethics (Mbiti, 1986, p. 206).

In sum, then, a cross-cultural comparison finds an African conception of conscience rich in its vision of community as a formator of the individual conscience. Insofar as it gives less consideration to the preservation of individual moral freedom, it could be enriched by Ratzinger's and Magesa's accounts. These accounts offer the possibility of defining a consistent ethic across time and culture, a check to what Ratzinger calls the "canonization of subjectivity" (Ratzinger, p. 22), while linking personal identity and freedom primarily to creation by God, not primarily in membership in a particular ethnic or even religious community. Nonetheless, the intensely communal African ethics of all three theologians pose an important challenge to Western accounts of conscience construed broadly, insofar as they tend to privatise and individualise morality. Ratzinger attributes this problem to modern, secular culture and identifies an ecclesial-based solution. Yet the surveyed African theologians, particularly Bujo and Mbiti, have called into question whether this privatisation of conscience underlies some Catholic practices, especially the sacrament of reconciliation, and challenged it to take into greater account the inherent communal, ecological and cosmological dimensions of sin.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study's principal aim has been to take up Dyrness' call for an increasingly global outlook in theological reflection. It has allowed African moral theologians to speak for themselves, highlighting their distinctive contribution to global ethics by casting them in relief of a prominent Western Christian thinker (Dyrness, 16-17). African models of moral formation merit a greater role as a conversation partner in both magisterial and public theology, especially because sub-Saharan Africa's Catholic population surpasses that of Europe. However, more importantly, there is a great need for a discourse of Christian ethics that "can speak to and hear multiple moral traditions in its own culture and in other cultures" in our increasingly interconnected global society and Church (Sowle, 1996, p. 11). The mutual reshaping of both African and Western ethics could begin with the simple step of the Church's teaching authority and Western academics engaging theologians who have already begun thinking in these ways. For example, Laurenti

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Magesa's nuanced ethics are sensitive to the shortcomings and insights of both African and Western Catholic traditions, and theologians like Emmanuel Katongole and Paulinus Odozor doing this kind of work in our own backyard. But the call to anamnesis of conscience, to remembrance, must not only recall the moral law written in our hearts, but the pressing need to reach beyond our region's traditions to discover the truth and deep humanity present beyond our borders (Haas, p. 10).

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