



Christology in the War-Torn Context of South Sudan: Reconciliation, Hope, and the Suffering Savior

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Abstract

This paper intends a Christological perspective and approach to effective spiritual healing and social reconciliation in South Sudan. That is, in the midst of the severe conflict, religious intolerance, Islamic aggression (*Jihad*), and tribal retaliation in the region, Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, satisfies as the restorative, sanctifying balm for Sudanese believers, their families, and local churches (Is. 55:3; Acts 16:31; Eph. 5:23). This olive branch of healing can also be extended to the broader population via subsequent overflow of societal Christian benevolence (Matt. 22:37-39; Col. 1:19-20). Towards this endeavor, a focused dialogue between the Christian and Muslim worldviews will be traversed, but done so in the spirit of amicable dialogue, rather than that of polemics. What is more, the war related traumas that are unfortunately so prevalent in the Saharan regions will be carefully analyzed as well. The hope is to foster deeper insight and understanding of what the South Sudanese experience on a regular basis in the plight of their daily lives. The research modalities used to support this thesis include sociological analysis, interfaith relations, redemptive analogies, comparative religious perspectives, and a proposed practical theology of suffering and reconciliation. In this stride, an overview of the civil conflicts in the region will be presented, and the tribal peace-ritual sacrifice of *Mabior* (cir. 1999) will be analyzed regarding its potential for (and/or hindrance to) peacemaking attempts and contextualized outreach.

Keywords: Christology, peace, reconciliation, South Sudan, war related trauma

Introduction

Basically, the Islamist military of the north has relentlessly asserted itself upon the predominantly non-Muslim south. This has therefore caused severe war related trauma for the Sudanese peoples; an adverse emotional condition that will be examined in the purview of hopeful suffering and the cross. Characteristics of Jesus Christ and Muhammad are also compared and contrasted (regarding Muslim outreach potentials). And, the life-promoting African philosophy of Ubuntu (i.e., traditional, communal, neighborly love) is applied to reconciliation in the region-theoretically serving as a golden rule of thumb-directed toward the often volatile Sub-Saharan peace process. Also exhorted is fervent prayer for The Sudan; that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” would guard the hearts and minds of the afflicted Sudanese peoples “through Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:7) [1]

South Sudan: Rife with Civil Conflict

Tragically, The Sudan has continually experienced violent civil conflicts, displacements, famines, social turmoil, and grueling political corruption since gaining its independence from both the United Kingdom and Egypt in 1956 [2]. According to the 2010 entry in *Operation World*, “Sudan has only known war for its entire modern history. Violence is rife

throughout Sudan, which is regarded as one of the world’s least stable nations.” [3] Although there has been tangible aversion to the aggression of the Muslim Brotherhood of the northern region, their “belligerent government/military [has] waged war against resistive populations in the south, west and east at massive human and economic cost to its own citizens.” [4] Ultimately, in an effort to detach from the north and finally relieve themselves from the Islamist attacks, the nation of South Sudan was officially formed in 2011 with great optimism.

Nevertheless, matters of civil conflict have only gotten worse since their strategic secession and the resultant forming of the newest nation of the global community. The most recent *Operation World* entry for South Sudan unfortunately reads thusly:

After a hopeful start to its existence, South Sudan seems determined to undermine itself. Within two years of independence, civil strife erupted. Political rivalry between the President and his Deputy, as well as ethnic conflict between their tribes (Dinka and Nuer, respectively), escalated into a civil war that has contributed as many as 400,000 excess deaths. More than 4 million people were displaced and South Sudan’s desperately-needed development regressed [5]. Regarding additional bleakness, the *Associated Press* reports that a peace deal sought after in 2018 experienced hapless

delays, and a “government of national unity” had only finally been formed as of 2020. And, what is more, a lack of funding and diminished political will has hampered the development of a unified security force for the nation, leaving millions of impoverished South Sudanese to remain in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

Upon personally visiting this troubled Sub-Saharan region in 2015, I had the honor of speaking about such matters with Thomas Nokrach, a valiant chaplain in the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) [6]. With somberness, he shared that the violent conflicts had only worsened since the south’s 2011 secession, as the battle lines had previously been well established geographically (south vs. north) and fought against clearly distinct enemies. But, since the newer civil battles had erupted locally there in South Sudan, Thomas explained they were then fighting against their neighbors and people they personally knew [7]. He therefore considered it to be an increasingly difficult conflict—more confusing and emotionally stressful than before—amplifying the already extreme levels of war-exacerbated trauma for the Dinka, Nuer, and multitudes of other South Sudanese tribes-peoples that are affected by the fighting.

Peace Efforts and the Mabor ‘White Bull’ Sacrifice

Westerners mainly think of the term “sacrifice” figuratively; oft referencing things such as volunteer service (i.e., the sacrificing of time), strict dieting, abstaining from electronic devices and media, or intentionally hitting a long fly-out in baseball to score a run home from third base. On the converse, Africans apply the term more literally, especially with regard to folk religion and cultural practices. Hence, the much publicized sacrificial offering of the white bull, Mabor, that was the centerpiece of a truce-initiating ritual between warring tribal factions in The Sudan (many years before the south’s 2011 secession). According to Ross Kane, during the most violent days of Sudan’s civil war in the 1990s, something known as the People-to-People Peacemaking initiative addressed “ongoing conflict perpetuated by rival Dinka and Nuer rebel movements.” The ritual of Mabor was a central (yet controversial) feature of the peace-seeking process, and it seemed to successfully (at the time, anyway) form “public alliances between church leaders and kinship authorities represented by elders and chiefs.” [8]

V. N. Redekop states that the severe violence “involved abducting and killing children, burning homes, demolishing villages, and outright armed conflict.” [9] It is understandable, then, how extreme inter-tribal hate, bitterness, and vengefulness could fester, as “By insolence comes nothing but strife” (Prov. 13:10a ESV). Toward a truce, Kane avers, “the bull sacrifice ritual opened a path to peace by allowing a space before God in which Dinka and Nuer could speak of the wrongs committed against one another and find social and spiritual cleansing. The sacrifice ritual thus enabled activities like dialogue, confession, and restitution.” [10] One of the attending chiefs even staunchly warned the crowd; “Mabor will take revenge on anyone who revives these conflicts. Mabor died for our reconciliation” [11] While Old Testament practices are plainly mirrored by the ritual—“And you shall offer a bull every day as a sin offering for atonement... and you shall anoint it to sanctify it” (Ex. 29:36)—important issues still remain regarding any acceptable (and/or rejectable) aspects of religious syncretism.

For example, the ritual was viewed by some as properly contextualized, “utilizing indigenous Dinka and Nuer practices as well as Christian practices;” a synthesized event

that “formed peaceful publics that practiced politics of inclusion and coexistence over and against politics of ethnic exclusion[.]” Conversely, some Nuer and Dinka Christians rejected the ritual outright, arguing that it “detracted from Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as the final sacrifice for human sin.” [12] The Sudanese seemed to align with one of the two extremes; either to entirely castigate Mabor or to unabashedly coalesce. My etic Christian assessment is that the event was overly ecumenical (and pagan) rather than tangibly evangelical [13]. Ultimately, God does not desire animal sacrifice (Ps. 51:16), and it is the gospel of Christ that reconciles (2 Cor. 5:18-21). No matter how one viewed Mabor back then, Sudan is still suffering from extremely violent civil conflicts. Therefore, while the cultic white bull sacrifice may have promised peace and atonement, over time, it has drastically failed to deliver the goods (cf. Isaiah 66:3; Heb. 9:6-10).

Nevertheless, there exists a moderate ‘third way’ contextualized approach that views the ritual as a modus to share about the Lamb that was slain once-and-for-all in order to reconcile humans to God and to each other. (cf. 1 John 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:18-19) While Mabor plainly deviates from true biblical practice (1 Cor. 10:20), for outreach purposes, one need not initially castigate the ritual practitioners in a judgemental manner. That is, since Africans often understand sacrifice better than persons do here in the west, Sudanese can be encouraged to view Mabor as a connective bridge that can lead them to Christ (cf. Heb. 10:1-18). To borrow an insight from Don Richardson: Why view religious Christ-like parallels as barriers to the gospel, rather than as thresholds with the words ‘welcome to an understating of Christ’ written across them? [14] As D. A. Carson aligns, “it is important for the evangelist, church planter, and witnessing Christian to flex [i.e., contextualize] as far as possible so that the gospel will not be made to appear unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level.”

Wan and Fancher state that for the successful missionary, “Rites and rituals must be understood, both of celebrations and of mourning.” [15] Discernment is essential, though, as it is important to recognize evil elements in culture when they appear and to understand how biblical norms assess them. And, there will be situations requiring respectful critiques and/or assertive confrontations of culture on mission [16]. According to Carson, “demanding accommodation to all social norms while expecting unlimited theological flexibility from the Christian is simply a way of saying that the gospel does not have the right to stand in judgment over culture—and that will not do.” [17] Darrow L. Miller adds, “Biblical thinking means knowing that truth is universal, applicable to, and binding on all cultures.” [18] And, Issiaka Coulibaly warns, “It is impossible to combine *righteousness* and *wickedness*, *light* and *darkness*, *Christ* and *Belial*, *believer* and *unbeliever*, the *temple of God* and *idols*.” In short, when such diametric worldview conflicts eventually arise on mission, “A [definitive] choice must be made between these things.” [19]

Foreshadows of Things to Come

Taking Mabor at face value, Kane explains that the bovine’s blood purportedly carried a healing quality that counteracted the polluting quality of human blood [20]. The Dinka and Nuer believed that the human bloodshed had contaminated tribal relationships, and the sacrifice would heal such contamination, serving also as “an oath” to God and fellow human beings. Those who participated in the ritual promised

to end the atrocities committed against one another. And, if they did not, they risked their own death^[21]. Samuel Ngewa would categorize anything tacitly biblical in this sacrifice as, at best, a mere “foreshadowing of the reality that is Christ,” as Jesus “is the God-given way to have fellowship with God.”^[22] Even Old Testament offerings fell short, as “the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, *which can never take away sins*. But our High Priest offered himself to God as *a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time*.” (Heb. 10:11-12a NLT, italics mine)

Erwin Lutzer stresses the non-redemptive nature of such religious rituals, rites, and works; “Human merit, all those deeds that make us feel better about ourselves, had to be permanently set aside as a basis for reconciliation with God. From God’s viewpoint, we are not filled with latent good but with latent evil.” (cf. Rom. 3:9-31) Lutzer continues; “Our hearts, Christ taught, are deceitful, and our moral blemishes can neither be covered nor changed by us or through religious rituals.”^[23] (Matt. 12:34; Jer. 17:9-10; Ps. 40:6-8) Regarding true conciliatory appeasement, Coulibaly furthers, “The importance of the [gospel] message is found in the fact that to make reconciliation possible, God condemned a just person in the place of sinners[.]”^[24] That is, “God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:21 NLT) As Tesfaye Kassa reminds, the Old Testament law itself that even required the sacrifices was “only a *shadow of good things* to come... it was simply a picture of the superior sacrifice that would be offered by Jesus on the cross.”^[25]

Muslims, Jihad, and Jesus (*Isa*) the Christ

Conversely, in Islam, while Abraham is believed to have intended to offer his son, Ishmael, as a momentous sacrifice unto Allah (cf. Surah 37:101-107),^[26] Muslims *do not* see this as a picture of atonement fore-relating to a son of God. Moreover, while in the Qur’an, Jesus (*Isa* in Arabic) is mentioned as a prophet of God (Surah 19:30), and is believed to have performed miracles, healings, and also born of the virgin Mary—they refrain from believing that he died on the cross and/or that he was God incarnate (in fact, that latter notion is blasphemous to them)^[27]. And, such stark theological disagreement lends to the tremendous contention between the Islamist Sudanese of the north and the predominantly non-Muslim south. While Muslims and Christians have found ways to live in relative harmony in other African nations (Uganda and Ethiopia are examples), the exact opposite is tragically the case in The Sudan.

According to D. B. Cook, Islamism “has a global and totalizing message that does not permit its followers to compromise the absolute monotheism it preaches.”^[28] Furthermore, Bona Malwal, in his book *People & Power in Sudan: The Struggle for National Stability*, documents that as far back as 1966, the Muslims had declared that any tangible “failure of Islam in southern Sudan would be the failure of Sudanese Muslims to the international Islamic cause. Islam has a holy mission in Africa and southern Sudan is the beginning of that mission”^[29] This aggressive Islamism has amounted to much pain and suffering for the South Sudanese, many of whom are Christians, continually subjected to the relentless jihadist attacks.

While some of the warring conflict can otherwise be attributed to general disputes, beefs, violence, retaliation, and revenge, the underlying theological differences between Muslims and Christians are entrenched. According to Alistair

McGrath, doctrinally, “Islam speaks of a revelation *from* God, where Christianity speaks of a revelation *of* God.” That is, again, what sets Jesus apart from Muhammad (and thus a severe point of contention between the warring Sudanese factions) is that Christ claimed to be God in human form (cf. John 8:58; 10:30). Moreover, as Kenneth R. Samples advances, Muhammad (AD 570-632) and Jesus Christ (c. 4 BC-AD 30) are certainly two of the most influential people in history; nevertheless, “the identities, missions, and messages of the two leaders are fundamentally different.”^[30] Samples further breaks down the theological comparison and contrast thusly:

Muhammad’s mission was to persuade the people of Arabia to submit their wills completely to the one god, Allah, because they would soon encounter divine judgment. Muhammad served in the roles of profit, soldier, and politician to accomplish his divinely motivated goal.

Jesus Christ’s mission, on the other hand, was to rescue sinners by providing a permanent sacrifice for human sin on the cross. As the Son of God in human flesh, Jesus Christ came to earth to reconcile God and human beings.

So while Islam is a religion of good works, Christianity is a religion of divine rescue (though good works are expected to flow from God’s redemptive grace)^[31].

Basically, Islam is a religion of self-reliance and self-effort, and adherents trying to be saved by their own works and observing religious rites can only hope that Allah might have mercy on them on the Last Day. Whereas followers of the Crucified Servant, Jesus Christ, are people whose confidence is not in themselves (Phil. 3:1-7), but in the God of grace and mercy who sent His Son to reconcile them to Himself (Eph. 2:8-10). A culture-specific evangelistic point to consider here is that the shame (and ‘loss of face’) the jihadists experience when their global advancement mission falls short can be turned to honor by their repentance (Acts 3:19), via the Cross at Calvary (Heb. 12:2). Therefore, Sudanese believers have incredibly liberating, restorative news to share with Muslims who are willing to listen (Rom. 1:16)^[32]. Nevertheless, ultimately, the argument concerning the significance of the Cross must be a personal one regarding what Jesus’ death means to an individual Muslim and his/her family^[33].

Cross-religiously considering for a moment the benevolence that drew former Hindu, Dr. Mahendra Singhal, ultimately to Christianity; “The image of Jesus Christ that made the strongest appeal to me was the limit to which he was willing to go to show his love toward me, and I didn’t even know him at the time. I have discovered in my witnessing to Hindus that they are generally moved by the depiction of Jesus on the cross to validate his love toward us.”^[34] While such amazing sacrificial love could even touch a hardened jihadist’s heart, as previously mentioned, the Cross is often an irreconcilable point of contention for devout Muslims. Unless, per providence, you are Nabeel Qureshi, who (in his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*) details his dangerous conversion from Islam to Christianity after weighing the apologetic evidence of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

I was [then] sure that Islam and Christianity are not just two paths that lead to the same God but two very different paths that teach very different things about God. I was sure that I had excellent historical reasons to believe the gospel. I was sure that though I loved Islam, I couldn’t ignore the problems that plague its foundations. But most of all, I was sure that following the one true God would be worth all trials and all suffering. I had to follow the evidence and the truth, no matter

the cost. I [then] left my religion of 22 years and became a follower of Jesus^[35].

While Qureshi, having immigrated to the west from Pakistan, therefore had abundant access to religious research materials, such opportunities are often very limited in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, alternatively, visions and dreams are playing a key role in Muslim conversions to Christ in Sudan. The accounts of the apparitions are quite similar; a Muslim is searching for answers to life, then Jesus appears to them in a dream announcing that He is *Isa* who they are looking for. It does come as a surprise to them when *Isa* appears to them in a dream, but they take it seriously. They wake up and then begin their search for truth until they come across a website, church, or a Christian. Jesus revealing himself to Muslims in this manner, along with the attending feelings of peace and love in his presence, opens the door to the gospel. And, many missionaries find that explaining who *Isa* really is provides the best way to evangelize^[36].

Nevertheless, an issue of severe limitation (regarding socio-religious peace) still remains. That is, such accounts of Muslim converts to Christianity notwithstanding, the jihadist northerners consider holy war to require the killing of any resistant “infidels” out of obedience and devotion to Allah (Surah 9:5), thus exalting jihad to the level of a pillar of their faith^[37]. (Surah 2:216) The limit question being that since the warring has gone on in Sudan for several generations-can or will it ever stop? For South Sudan, then, the receiving-end of jihad seems like an endless (and hopeless) cycle of brutality; one that entails “the experience of (and fear of) bombings, attacks, rapes, capture and other acts of violence.”^[38] And, such dire circumstances often entail “emotional shock that is experienced as a result of war,” resulting in what Wan and Fancher refer to as “war related trauma;” a negative psychological phenomenon experienced by residents of Sudan and other volatile regions of the world.

War Related Trauma

Back in 2017, having just watched the World War II based movie *Dunkirk*, my Ugandan-born wife, Amina, expressed having anxiety as we exited the theater. After some debriefing on the way home, she revealed that the loud cinematic artillery sounds reminded her of times when Congolese rebels would instigate armed conflict with military defenders of her village in western Uganda. Moreover, she does not care for loud fireworks on the Fourth of July holiday either, as they also stir up negative emotions. In my estimation, these audibles trigger *war related traumas* from her previous life experiences. While this is rather manageable for her here in the United States, for those residing in war zones such as South Sudan, the continued “bringing of strife and violence” via loud and deadly armaments results in severe trauma that “can be multifaceted and sustained over a long period of time.”^[39]

Furthermore, such war situated circumstances can facilitate “a sustained sense of uncertainty or helplessness due to economic disruption, displacement, hunger, death of loved ones or uncertainty as to their location or well-being, or disruption of social structures such as jobs and schools.”^[40] And, unfortunately, things are not getting any better for those in South Sudan, as Nyagoah Tut Pur reports, “violence between communities has increased, due in part to spillover grievances from the war and competition over land, cattle, and grazing.”^[41] And, “Political and military leaders have added to the violence by supplying weapons to communities.”^[42] Wan and Fancher also express some tragically specific

details of Sudanese civil conflict; “Villages have been ravaged and looted, cattle stolen or killed, crops burned, women raped and mutilated, men massacred, and women and children have been taken into slavery.”^[43]

These are similar to Bible times when “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.” (Gen. 6:11 NIV) When human blood was shed for human blood, and exchanging an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was the norm (cf. Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:24; also see Ammon and Tamar, 2 Sam. 13; and the fate of the Levite’s concubine, Judges 19)^[44]. By “swearing and lying, killing and stealing” tribal society had broken all restraint, with “bloodshed upon bloodshed.” (Hos. 4:2) Sudan’s resource depletion also parallels a time when “famine had become so severe” in the region of Judah, “that there was no food for the people of the land.” (Jer. 52:6; cf. Ez. 4:1) Sadly, there are no easy solutions. Perhaps the Prophet Isaiah should be heeded; that the Sudanese would fervently “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.” (Is. 55:6-7a). As Jason Mandryk assesses Sudan, “Only true repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation can overcome the spirit of bitterness and revenge,” thus calling for global Christians to “Pray for God to work miracles in the hearts of the leaders and of the people.”^[45]

Hope and The Suffering Savior

The pivotal matter is that reconciliation amidst such divisive suffering has to be deeply Christological and spiritual (Matt. 5:10-12; 6:4). For those ravaged by the wars in Sudan, the suffering is defined as “pain and discomfort as a result of violence, unjust treatment, extreme economic hardship, physical maladies including illness and injuries, loss of and separation from loved ones, and lack of basic resources necessary to sustain life.”^[46] Sudanese Pentecostal leader, Isaiah Majok Dau, has reflected on such hardship in relation to God within the context of his homeland by what he calls “suffering as a direct result of being followers of Christ.” While living and ministering in this war-stricken land, Pastor Isaiah says that he rejoices, as the Pentecostal church has progressively become “a community capable of absorbing suffering” having learned to embody the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of others. He shares that this was not always the case, as in the past “suffering people not only did not look at the church as the community for suffering people but rather as something different and foreign.”^[47]

The problem was that a prioritization of Pneumatology had led to an overemphasis on empowerment, blessings, and gifts. Since, according to Allen Yeh, “circumstances and occasions dictate what aspects of theology certain people tend to emphasize at any given time,”^[48] driven by constant suffering, the church leaders then began emphasizing the cross of Christ. While in Yeh’s estimation, “Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing form of Christianity around the world” and is linked “with the rapid growth of Two-Thirds World Christianity,” unfortunately, there is also an “ever-increasing threat of the prosperity, or health-and-wealth, gospel.”^[49] Again, theological balance between the Spirit and the cross is crucial, as “Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.” As Yeh surmises, “Jesus Christ is the message, and worship and witness are done by the power of the Holy Spirit.”^[50] And, Dau is greatly encouraged by this poise, as in his estimation, the Pentecostal church in Sudan has thus

“become the center for social solidarity, ritual and healing.”^[51]

In his *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Dale P. Andrews explains, “God’s activity transforms suffering and uses it redemptively. The conversion experience reconciles the valued person and God in an experience of personal and spiritual liberation. Salvation envisions spiritual and historical liberation in reconciliation, but empowers humanity in living redemptively here and now.”^[52] In the Sudanese context, Dau refers to this as, “the biblical promise of God acting on behalf of and empowering those who suffer under oppression, injustice, neglect, and other similar situations.”^[53] With the excessive emphasis on Pneumatology now in balance, a robust Christology of suffering is significant toward spiritual stabilization. In what Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen refers to as “liberation through suffering,” what is outlined here could be further applied to a redemptive, integrative, and healing future for South Sudan:

- **Redemptive Suffering:** Clinging to the “theology of the cross” that facilitates not only forgiveness of sins but also concrete hope based on Christ^[54].
- **Integrative Suffering:** Accepting suffering and pain as part of a victorious Spirit-filled life and ministry.
- **Healing Suffering:** Engaging in mature faith and hope [in] the ministry of healing and compassion to help those who suffer^[55].

Basically, hopeful social healing stands to be administered by way of those who would agonize for the cause of Christ in such an upward, inward, and outward manner. Wan and Fancher thus explain, “As we remain faithful, humble and demonstrating the love of Christ in our suffering, we become more like Christ and demonstrate His truth to the world. (Luke 24:46)”^[56]

What is more, for Christian believers (Sudanese and global), the incarnate Christ sympathizes with our suffering (Heb. 2:17-18),^[57] offers spiritual hope as well as physical healing (Is. 53:5; Col. 1:27; 1 Pet. 2:24), provides true psychological peace (Jn. 16:33; Phil. 4:6-7), and tremendous emotional relief (cf. Matt. 11:28; Jn. 14:27). The Book of Hebrews assures us that “we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb. 4:15) And, in application to the Sub-Saharan context of adversity, Kassa commentates, “All of us in Africa who believe in Christ can run to this great high priest at any time, in any circumstances and find the help we need. We will find mercy and grace to help us to face the challenges of our traditions and of the world.” This Hebrews principle, Kassa affirms, properly encourages Africans who have been severely tested “to confidently approach the throne of grace in heaven” so that they may “receive mercy and find grace” to help them in their times of suffering and need (cf. Heb. 4:16)^[58].

An Ubuntu Theology of Life

Reconciliation for the Sudanese peoples might reside at a much deeper and historically cultural level for them. Bridging black theology and African folk religion, Andrews thus avers that “African worldviews are deeply concerned with the ongoing harmony among all realms of creation or life. When this harmony is disturbed, spiritual values place great expectations in resolving human conflicts or reharmonizing with the created order.”^[59] James Khomba also advances a cultural-unity perspective helpful towards communal survival in a desolate region such as The Sudan, “An African is not an

individual in isolation but a person living within a community. In a hostile environment, it is only through such community solidarity that hunger, isolation, deprivation, poverty and any emerging challenges can be survived, because of the community’s brotherly and sisterly concern, cooperation, care and sharing.”

What Khomba is speaking of is a traditional African philosophy of life called *Ubuntu*. Ubuntu is a biblically correlative worldview (cf. Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 13:8; Phil. 2:3) that Africans can (and all nations should) apply toward respecting all people as authentic human beings—a communal recognition that individual humans “are part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.”^[60] Mashau and Kgate would place the responsibility of propagating this worldview on the shoulders of the Sudanese churches, as in their estimation, African Christianity must develop an alternative spirituality of liberation which taps into the African philosophy of Ubuntu—one that strongly prioritizes this communal theology of life^[61]. In short, Ubuntu is an *others-centered* philosophy that rightly cares for the wellbeing of others, and could theoretically inspire christologically redeeming social qualities in war-torn Sudan.

Moreover, perhaps Stassen’s *Just Peacemaking* principles should be considered regarding Ubuntu motivated resolutions^[62]. For example, “the new paradigm for the ethics of peace and war” promotes the support of nonviolent direct action and independent initiatives dedicated to reducing violent inter-tribal threats; the use of cooperative conflict resolution between Sudanese tribes and religious factions; the encouragement of grassroots (local) peacemaking groups and voluntary associations. And, the (non-violent) political advancement of Sub-Saharan democracy, human rights, and religious liberty—with African leaders also seeking to foster just and sustainable economic development in the region—globally working with emerging cooperative forces in the international system toward strengthening international efforts for cooperation and human rights. And, perhaps most importantly, Sudanese Christians and Churches should acknowledge any (individual and/or corporate) responsibility for conflict and injustice, thus seeking (personal and societal) repentance and forgiveness^[63].

This might all be much easier said than done, as similar initiatives have taken (and will continue to take) substantial time to organize and implement in Sudan, and there is often much push back and resistance. Nevertheless, in order for reconciliation to take place in Africa, and even here in the United (often divided) States, Dreyer stresses a Christ-like healing principle: that we must treat others as we would like them to treat us. (cf. Mark 12:30-31) Thus, Nyengele aligns that Ubuntu philosophy prioritizes a profound sense of group solidarity, underscoring that our true human potentials can only be realized in partnership with others. In this stride, an imperative regarding Sudanese social healing would be an Ubuntu theology of hope and accompaniment—a process of walking alongside others and joining with them in solidarity. A robust practical theology that encourages individuals and communities to enter into relationships with one another, and to do so “for the sake of fulfilling Christ’s message of reconciliation.”^[64]

Conclusion: Seeking G.R.A.C.E. Relations

Again, as an outsider, I propose that an Ubuntu theology would be crucial for Sudan’s development, rather than remaining deadlocked in sectarian tribalism. Also beneficial,

in accordance with “liberation through suffering,” would be for the Sudanese church to fervently pursue Grace (G.R.A.C.E.) relations with each other, rather than seeking inter-tribal peace and harmony by participating in white bull sacrifices (recalling Mabior) or the like. From the informed perspective of Ken Ham and A. Charles Ware, “Grace (God’s Reconciliation at Christ’s Expense) offers a healthy foundation for dealing with the sins of the past and the alienation of the present as well. Grace relations are built upon forgiveness and the intentional pursuit of peace, trust, unity, and loving relationships because of Christ.”^[65] This would admittedly be very hard to accomplish in The Sudan. Nevertheless, a G.R.A.C.E. formation is what heaven will look like in the eschatological future, where a great multitude from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues,” will worship together; “standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (cf. Rev. 7:9).

On a final note, when ministering to (and/or praying for) the politically ravaged, economically devastated, violently war-torn nations such as South Sudan and elsewhere globally, in the words of the professor of this course (e.g., Allen Yeh), we should wholeheartedly “commit ourselves to the well-being of those that suffer most from the consequences of these expressions of death.”^[66] Thus, continuing to boldly go forth onto (and/or remain actively supporting) the mission field, while seeking to act justly, showing suffering peoples great mercy, and doing so in solidarity with others while walking humbly together with our God. (cf. Micah 6:8)

References

1. Unless otherwise noted, scriptural references are from the *New King James Version* of the Holy Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1982).
2. Throughout this paper, mention of *The Sudan* notes the entire land mass and societies of both the northern and southern nations. The term *South Sudan* specifically refers to the nation that succeeded in 2011, and the general usage of *Sudan* broadly means the Sudanese land and peoples (south, north, and/or both, depending on context).
3. Jason Mandryk, ed. *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010) *Sudan*, pgs. 783-790.
4. Ibid.
5. *Operation World Online*, “South Sudan: Monthly Prayer Calendar-Nov. 10” <https://operationworld.org/locations/south-sudan/> (last accessed December 6, 2023).
6. According to *Operation World*, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army is “the southern (and formerly rebel) army [that] bravely resisted the predations of the north.” While the SPLA are unfortunately also “guilty of atrocities themselves,” thankfully, groups such as Frontline Fellowship and Far Reaching Ministries efficiently “train chaplains for this army.” Praise report in that subsequently, “Many thousands of soldiers... have become Christians through the work of these chaplains.” (2010 print edition), p. 788.
7. Sadly and tragically, SPLA Chaplain Thomas Nokrach was killed on May 12, 2017 when answering an urgent request to settle a dispute over a marriage dowry. According to Far Reaching Ministries, “Things were going extremely well with the family, but the husband was drunk and he thought someone was sleeping with his wife. He had mistaken Thomas for that man, even though his wife never committed adultery. He shot Thomas in the chest with an AK-47 and he died from his wounds that very night.” (cf. Hos. 4:2)
8. Ross Kane, “Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics: Sacrifice and Syncretism in South Sudan (1991-2005),” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44 (2014), p. 386.
9. V. N. Redekop, “Reconciling Nuers with Dinkas: A Girardian approach to conflict resolution,” *Religion* 37 (2007) 64e84 (p. 75).
10. Ross Kane, “Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics,” 387.
11. Ibid., 386. cf. *New Sudan Council of Churches* (2002), 62.
12. Ibid., 392.
13. Allen Yeh also emphasized that the Mabior ritual is fully idolatrous and thus entirely unbiblical in its own right.
14. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures throughout the World* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 53.
15. Enoch Wan and Karen Fancher, “Ministry in the Context of Suffering and Trauma in Southern Sudan,” Lecture Outline/Notes from the EMS-NW Regional Meeting, April 8, 2006 IICC-Portland, Oregon, p. 7.
16. Cf. Col. 4:6; 1 Pet. 3:15; Acts 17:16-34.
17. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 139 (paraphrased and directly cited).
18. Darrow L. Miller, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 2018), 80.
19. Issiaka Coulibaly, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, gen. ed. (Nairobi, Kenya: Zondervan with Word Alive Publishers, 2006)-2 *Corinthians*, 1405. The text emphases are his.
20. Ross Kane, “Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics,” p. 391. (cf. Ouko 2004; Leonardi 2011).
21. Ross Kane, 391.
22. Samuel Ngewa, *Africa Bible Commentary-The Place of Traditional Sacrifices*, p. 1503. Mabior’s tacit biblical similarities would be the purported cleansing/healing quality of sacrificial blood, and the taking of oaths with recompense for their violation does mirror Old Testament principles. Here, Samuel Ngewa also cautions Africans against full syncretism, “We should not fall for the argument that since our traditional sacrifices are so close to the Bible, they are our way of salvation.”
23. Erwin W. Lutzer, *Christ among Other gods: A Defense of Christ in an Age of Tolerance* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 142.
24. Issiaka Coulibaly, *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 1405.
25. Tesfaye Kassa, *Africa Bible Commentary-Hebrews*, p. 1501. cf. Heb. 10:1-25; Isa. 52:13-53:12.
26. Dean C. Halverson, *the Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 118.
27. Cf. Mark Legg, “How dreams and visions of ‘Isa’ are awakening the Islamic world,” *Current events*, September 8, 2021 <https://www.denisonforum.org/current-events/global/how-dreams-and-visions-of-isa-are-awakening-the-islamic-world/>.
28. D. B. Cook, “Islam, Basic Beliefs Of,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of World Religions*, H. Wayne House, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 245.

29. Bona Malwal cited from *The Changing World Religion Map: Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, Stanley D. Brunn, ed. (Manhattan: Springer, 2015), pgs. 3517-18. cf. Rainer Rothfuss and Yakubu Joseph (2015) and Cole and De Blij (2007).
30. Ibid., 159-160.
31. Ibid., 168.
32. Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference? A Look at 20 Worldviews, Faiths and Religions and How They Compare to Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 86.
33. Halverson, *The Compact Guide to World Religions*, 118.
34. Dr. Mahendra Singha cited in Halverson, *The Compact Guide*, 100.
35. Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 352.
36. Mark Legg, "How dreams and visions of 'Isa' are awakening the Islamic world," (accessed June 5, 2023).
37. Norman L. Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999)-*Islam*, p. 369.
38. Wan and Fancher, "Ministry in the Context of Suffering and Trauma in Southern Sudan," p. 1.
39. Ibid.
40. Wan and Fancher, p. 1.
41. *Human Rights Watch Online* "South Sudan at a Crossroads: Challenges and Hopes 10 Years After Independence," by Nyagoah Tut Pur (July 9, 2021) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/09/south-sudan-crossroads> (accessed January 25, 2023).
42. While the chaplains of the SPLA are trained to fight and stand against any evil corruption in order to defend and protect the South Sudanese Christian cause, professor Yeh hopes to never hear of such a ministry approach reversely informing his three year old son in American Sunday school. The point being that what works in Sudan may not work at all in the US, and/or *vice versa*.
43. Wan and Fancher, p. 3.
44. My wife, Amina Woodstock, having ministered in South Sudan and worked for Far Reaching Ministries for several years shares that even mild-to-moderate social discrepancies that could otherwise be talked through are settled by violence in Sudan, as that is unfortunately how they have habitually handled things for decades.
45. *Operation World Online*, "South Sudan: Monthly Prayer Calendar-Nov. 10" <https://operationworld.org/locations/south-sudan/> (accessed January 18, 2023).
46. Wan and Fancher, p. 1.
47. Cf. Amos Yong and Clifton Clarke, eds. *Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism, and The Great Commission: Towards a Renewal Theology of Mission and Interreligious Encounter* (Asbury Theological Seminary: Emeth Press, 2011), from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's commentary and citations of Isaiah Majok Dau, pgs. 102-106.
48. Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: 21st-Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016) Kindle Edition, location 918.
49. Cf. Yeh. Also, note that even though the prosperity heresy is not as prevalent in Sudan as it is in many other African nations, Anthea Butler stresses that South Sudan is "ripe for exploitation by unscrupulous preachers" of give-to-get theologies. This serves as a contrasting exhortation for Pentecostals to stay on track with a solid/balanced pedagogy of the cross. Cf. <https://religiondispatches.org/american-prosperity-gospel-makes-south-sudan-ripe-for-exploitation/> (accessed June 7, 2023).
50. Ibid., kindle locations 347, 3689, 1942.
51. In Yong and Clarke, eds. *Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism, and The Great Commission*, p. 115 n. 66 cf. Dau, *Suffering and God*, pgs. 59-61.
52. Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) Kindle Edition, location 564.
53. Dau in Yong and Clarke, 103.
54. Jonathan Best posits that there is a level of suffering that goes beyond human limits of toleration. I concur, and add that there are no existent theodicies that can adequately explain such circumstances this side of heaven. Therefore, Christians should avoid offering mere/trite "thoughts and prayers" to those suffering as such.
55. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen in Yong and Clarke, eds. *Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism, and The Great Commission*, 104-5.
56. Wan and Fancher, p. 8.
57. Kärkkäinen holds to a neo-evangelical view of "divine suffering" where God purportedly shares in "the *passio* and *pathos* of the world and makes it his own." My assessment is that such is contrary to the classical doctrine of divine impassibility which is supported by God's immutability (cf. Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17; Heb. 17-19). Nevertheless, Kärkkäinen's notions can simply be moderately adjusted and applied to the full human nature of Christ instead.
58. Kassa, *Africa Bible Commentary-Hebrews*, p. 1496.
59. Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American Folk Religion*: Kindle location 163.
60. Here in this section I indebtedly cite, quote, paraphrase, and reference Wilson Zvomuya's "Ubuntuism as an international turning point for social work profession: New lenses from the African pot of knowledge," *African Journal of Social Work*, Volume 10 Number 1 2020 Special issue on Ubuntu Social Work (p. 24).
61. And, also here indebtedly thoroughly cite/reference, and paraphrase Thinandavha D. Mashau and Mookgo S. Kgatle's "Prosperity gospel and the culture of greed in post-colonial Africa: Constructing an alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu," *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Online cf. pgs. 1-7).
62. Cf. Glen H. Stassen (ed.), *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), paraphrased from the *Description*.
63. Ibid
64. Ibid., cited, quoted, paraphrased, etc.
65. Ken Ham and A. Charles Ware, *One Race, One Blood: the biblical answer to racism* (Green Forest: Master Books, 2019), 121.
66. Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology*, Location 3824.
67. Adeyemo, Tokunboh, gen. ed *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*. Nairobi, Kenya: Zondervan with Word Alive Publishers, 2006.
68. Andrews, Dale P. *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American*

- Folk Religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
69. AP News. "South Sudan, nearing 10 years old, struggles for stability. <https://apnews.com/article/africa-south-sudan-81779937ea228a61e1407fa5ecd02a54>.
 70. Britannica Online. "Sudan." <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sudan>.
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 90. Zvomuya, Wilson. "Ubuntuism as an international turning point for social work profession: New lenses from the African pot of knowledge." *African Journal of Social Work*. 2020.