

The Imperative of Self-Reliance for the Churches in Africa:  
A Study in Christian Social Ethics

**Uchechukwu Obodoechina**

Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2006

Contextual Application of Christian Social Teaching on  
Political Ethics: In the Light of Pronouncements  
of the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar in the  
Era of Globalization

**Polycarp Chuks Obikwelu**

Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2006

Examining the Foundations of Solidarity in the  
Social Encyclicals of John Paul II

**Uzochukwu Jude Njoku**

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In his acclaimed 2001 book, *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins speculated about the future of Christianity based on demographic trends and their seeming theological and sociological implications. In general, the prescience of Jenkins' theses has been markedly confirmed in the years since the book's publication. One prediction concerned the growing importance of Africa in worldwide Christianity.

If Jenkins' book was the grand thesis, then these three monographs represent case studies. That is not to say that they are more focused and specialized examinations of whether or not Jenkins' thesis holds true; instead, the books themselves are indicators of the change that Jenkins identified. There is now a pipeline—or, rather, several pipelines—connecting African clergymen to institutions of higher theological education in developed countries such as Germany and the United States. Each of these three books, all of which were published in Peter Lang's European University Studies series, was written by an African Catholic priest as a dissertation for a European university—Bochum, Bonn, and Leuven, respectively.

Obodoechina takes up a critically important problem—the culture of dependence rampant in African churches—and applies the principles of Catholic social teaching in quest of a solution. Obodoechina's focus is on the Catholic Church, but most of his analysis is surely germane to other ecclesial bodies as well.

Obodoechina's effort is itself a sign of progress toward the goal that he outlines. It should not be too controversial to observe that an African writing about Africa enjoys a certain freedom of expression in bluntly describing the continent's problems. The same points are usually more discreetly made by an outsider. Thus, "the habit of corruption and dictatorship among [postindependence African states] cannot reasonably be explained away with the hazards of colonialism" (97).

That a Nigerian writes so forcefully about the need for Africans to assume responsibility for the economic messes in which they find themselves is a hopeful sign. That is not to say that the solution is a fait accompli—there have been scattered such voices saying the same thing for a long time, and yet Africa's problems remain.

More disconcerting is Obodoechina's particular way of arguing for self-reliance in the Church's theology, liturgy, and structure. His point is not wholly off target. It is true that the unseemly dependence of African churches on their western sponsors has a theological dimension. In this book—a few throwaway lines notwithstanding—the emphasis is entirely on the danger of dependence to the neglect of any cautionary words about the dangers of independence. Obodoechina is rightly concerned that African churches not ignore their indigenous spiritual resources in a rush to emulate their western “betters,” but he seems utterly unconcerned about the possibility that, in their zeal to generate “authentic” African expressions of Christianity, African Christians may separate themselves from the universal Church. Obodoechina repeatedly invokes the slogan that unity does not mean uniformity, but, like all slogans, its meaning is too imprecise to be of any value. His use of them is generally in service of unexceptionable points, but it does not inspire confidence that Obodoechina's theology is solid when his authorities include Tissa Balasuriya, Richard McBrien, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Like Obodoechina's book, Obikwelu's offers an immense amount of information on the history and present situation of Africa. As with Obodoechina's book, too, the effect is ambivalent. On the one hand, Obikwelu's outlook is hopeful. His unique project is to document the statements of the African Catholic bishops and demonstrate that the principles contained therein offer the solution to the continent's problems. Of the validity of that claim there can be little doubt.

On the other hand, the very history that Obikwelu recounts and his very effort to demonstrate the potency of Catholic social teaching both undermine confidence in the prospects for success. In their letter *Peace Depends on You*, the bishops of Ghana condemned “bribery and corruption, favoritism and nepotism, extortion and intimidation, lying and intrigues.” That was 1974. The fight has been a long one, the victories few and far between.

Obikwelu tries to persuade the reader that the endless protestations and exhortations of Catholic bishops and other religious figures have made a difference. For the most part, however, his analyses fall into one of two categories: (1) there was a bad outcome (e.g., violence in Sudan), in which case the bishops' warnings were not heeded; or (2) there was a good outcome (e.g., the development of a multiparty system in Kenya), but Obikwelu fails to demonstrate that the bishops' efforts caused the result. In cases falling into either category, Obikwelu makes manifest the sound principles offered by the bishops but fails to convince that those principles exerted any significant influence.

All three books bear the marks of dissertations, with large doses of awkward writing and derivative scholarship. The most skillfully written, most original—and most troubling—of them is Uzochukwu Njoku's. It is a long treatise with many parts, which cannot adequately be summarized here, so I will focus on the first and last sections. Njoku's

summary of the intellectual and historical development of the concept of solidarity is a genuine contribution to the literature on Catholic social teaching. He not only traces the use of the term through the modern social encyclicals; he also identifies the theological and circumstantial influences on each particular pope, culminating in a lengthy treatment of John Paul II and personalist philosophy.

The final section is Njoku's application of solidarity to the African situation. Like the previous two authors, he locates Africa's problems in both the abuses of colonialism and the mendacity of African postindependence leadership. Unlike the other authors, however, Njoku emphasizes the former at the expense of the latter. This creates the less helpful effect of shifting blame for Africa's condition—and responsibility for improving it—off of contemporary Africans.

There is a theological dimension to this account. Njoku is much taken with the work of Latin American liberation theologians and, in the end, wishes to supplement papal Catholic social teaching's "inadequate" analysis of social problems with the emphasis on "structures of sin" offered by Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino. Njoku states but fails to demonstrate the John Paul did not sufficiently recognize the "constraints" on human activity that might result from sinful structures. The claim is hard to fathom in light of the late pontiff's extensive remarks on the evils of communism, especially its suppression of persons' innate desire for freedom.

It is true that John Paul's (i.e., orthodox Christianity's) concept of sin differs from that of liberation theology, but Njoku's attempt to prove the superiority of the latter does not convince. What we are left with are political, social, and psychological channels of thought and action created by colonial abuses, which constrain the future options of Africans. If sinful structures are built by sinful human actions, then are they not soluble by virtuous human actions? Njoku seems to think not, but his theoretical commitments permit no other practical route. It is a recipe for despair.

When I first read Jenkins' book, my only qualm about his prescience concerned what I took to be his underestimation of the way in which "southern Christianity" itself might change by its interaction with "northern Christianity." Jenkins observed that southern Christians tended to be theologically traditional in many ways but also theologically unsophisticated. The evidence of these books suggests that African clerics are gaining sophistication by engaging northern academic theologians. That is to be applauded. In the process, however, their customary orientation to orthodox Christianity is being compromised. These priests will take back to Nigeria broader and deeper knowledge of Catholic theology, as well as a not-critical-enough appreciation of the views of heterodox theologians. It is a development about which I am, to finish with the adjective that also reflects my judgment of the value of these books, ambivalent.

—Kevin Schmiesing

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