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Christianity in Africa: Roman Catholicism

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The position of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa on sexual minorities.

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is the largest single Christian denomination in Africa south of the Sahara, with over a fifth of the region's population as its members. Through missionaries and national churches, the RCC has wielded enormous influence over the religious, cultural, and legal norms that regulate sexuality; the heteronormative patriarchy inherent to Catholic tradition has both accommodated and reinforced similar tendencies in African societies (Alava 2017; van Klinken 2013b). Catholic teaching on sexuality is shaped both from above, through formal doctrine formulated and upheld by the church hierarchy, and from below, through interpretations and emphases deriving from responses to particular contexts. In their reflections on the process of engagement between Christian doctrine and African cultures, referred to in Catholicism as inculturation theology, African Catholic scholars have sought to counter the negative stereotypes created through colonial and missionary accounts of the continent. Often, however, this has been achieved through the creation of an idealized image of one homogenous "African culture," which is construed as being fundamentally averse to sexual diversity (van Klinken and Gunda 2012).

African Emphases in Catholic Sexual Ethics

African Catholic teaching on sexuality stands on three pillars: the sacramental status of marriage, specific understandings of so-called natural law, and an emphasis on community and procreation over individual rights or sexual pleasure. For the RCC, the sacramental union between a man and a woman symbolizes the union between Christ and the church. Marriage is perceived as the foundation of both church and society, for which reason protecting it from perceived threats is considered pivotal.

Natural law, which claims that certain moral principles are recognized universally, is an essential premise of Catholic moral theology. In African Catholic theology, natural law arguments are commonly coupled with particular interpretations of biblical creation stories and with essentializing claims about “African tradition.” Man and woman are seen as having been created fundamentally different and complementary, a view that is claimed to form the heart of African conceptualizations of personhood, in which “the bipolarity of man-woman is a most important dimension. . . . Neither as man nor as woman are human beings complete but rather both together constitute a whole human being” (Bujo 2009, 37). While many African priests have joined early missionaries in condemning certain African customary practices, others have explained polygyny, (asexual) female-female marriage, and the practice of levirate, whereby a widow can be inherited by the deceased husband’s brother, as having served the interests of the community (Magesa 1998).

In the view of the most influential of Catholic theologians in Africa, the community rather than the individual is at the heart of sexual ethics. The morality of sexual behavior is thus assessed in

light of its contribution to marital stability and the transmission of life from the ancestors to posterity (Bujo 2001). While some African theologians have criticized the negative tone adopted by the RCC in matters of sexuality (Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter 1998), they unite in teaching that sexual pleasure belongs strictly within marriage and that searching for it elsewhere is destructive.

Debates over LGBTQ Rights in Africa

Formal Catholic doctrine distinguishes between homosexuality as an intrinsic tendency and homosexual acts, only the latter of which are deemed sinful. African Catholic theologians cast minority sexual identities and practices not only as against church teaching but as foreign and abhorrent to their continent. For example, Joseph K. Njino claims that “homosexuals are dismissed as sub-human or abnormal people in traditional African cultures” (2004, 349), while Bénézet Bujo writes that the supposedly new sexual practices imported by foreigners “destroy the people of Africa, and bring on them a culture of death” (2009, 158). Even when it is acknowledged that some people may be “born gay,” African Catholic writers teach abstinence, in line with the RCC’s official stance.

Although some of the RCC’s national episcopal councils have called for respect for LGBTQ minorities, they have all supported legislative measures—excluding the death penalty, which the RCC universally opposes—against minority sexual practices. Individual priests have used their pulpits for hate speech, although perhaps the most important contribution of the church toward LGBTQ minorities has been the heteronormative silencing of their existence (Alava 2017).

The stances of Catholic churches in recent debates on homosexuality in Africa are not mere reflections of formal church doctrine or local theology but are profoundly influenced by broader societal dynamics. The growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has pushed the RCC to adopt increasingly fierce rhetoric, particularly in those countries where it has been accused of being unpatriotic, of harboring homosexual priests within its ranks, or of having originally imported homosexuality to Africa (Nyeck 2016; van Klinken 2013a). Conservative Catholic organizations such as Human Life International have invested financial and personnel resources to strengthen antigay stances in the region, whereas LGBTQ-friendly voices heard within the global RCC have been almost completely absent in Africa south of the Sahara.

Ongoing Debates and Future Trajectories

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), rather liberal views on sexual ethics were accommodated, only to be sidelined again under the papacies of John Paul II (1978–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005–2013). Pope Francis (2013–) has shown moderate support for sexual and gender minorities, but African bishops have vocally demanded that the RCC retain its conservative stances (Miller 2015). African Catholics, however, have historically shown remarkable flexibility in accommodating the contradictions between formal doctrine and customary practices. Even in regions where the RCC is highly influential, the norms that govern sexuality have not been dictated by the church but are negotiated “in the dynamic space between religious, ‘traditional,’ and ‘modern’ moral sensibilities” (Alava 2017, 45). Furthermore, failure to follow Catholic teaching does not lead individuals to be ostracized from local RCC communities. Thus, although this is far from full acceptance of LGBTQ minorities, Catholic churches in Africa could at least draw on their tradition of inclusive pastoral practice, as well as

on theological resources such as the notion of human beings as images of God (Phiri 2016), to counter the violent antigay activism witnessed in many religious communities in the region. In those contexts where prominent representatives of the RCC have joined actively hostile antigay lobbies, this may appear a wishful and unlikely scenario. Yet the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2004 in Cabo Verde, where over 90 percent of the population are Catholic, and the approval of anti-discrimination work law in Mozambique in 2007, where Catholics, at 28 percent of the population, are the largest religious group, point to the possibility of change toward greater acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ minorities within Catholicism in Africa south of the Sahara.

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