

## Article

# Decolonizing the Gospel of Love in Africa

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**Abstract:** The violence of missionary agents on Africans contradicted the gospel of Christ's redemptive love, which they preached. In response to the contemporary manifestations of the violence and dehumanization of "colonial love", this article proposes the decolonization of the gospel of love, both as theological hermeneutic and a moral imperative in the African Church. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus commands us to recognize every human being as a neighbor. Within a colonial context, this means rejecting the dualistic logic of colonial love, its segregation, dehumanization, and violence.

**Keywords:** colonial love; Christ's love; violence; colonialism; Christian ethics; Africa

## 1. Introduction

This article studies how the violence of missionary agents against Africans effectively contradicted their gospel of Christ's redeeming love, perverting, in the process, the power and beauty of love, which Christop Schwobel aptly describes as "a constitutive characteristic of Christianity".<sup>1</sup> As Weaner G. Jeanrond laments, "within the Christian movement, love has had a tainted history. Love has been invoked in order to punish children, to persecute non-believers, heretics, and revolutionaries, to exclude and even burn women who dared to challenge the patriarchal order in church and society" (Jeanrond 2010, p. 26). In much of the African continent, which was evangelized at the same time it was being colonized, what was proclaimed by the actions of the missionaries who shared the same "civilizing intent" with the colonial administrators can be best described as "colonial love", which according to Carolyn Urena is founded on an imperialist dualistic logic and as such "dangerously fetishizes the beloved object and participate in the oppression and subjugation of difference".<sup>2</sup> Unlike Christ's sacrificial and tender love, colonial love is pretentious, racist, dehumanizing, and violent. Located within and nourished by the logic of coloniality, it, in turn, embodies and perpetuates coloniality's logic, which is essentially violent. Whereas Christ came so that we may have abundant life, colonial love segregates human societies, stifles human life, violates human bodies, and exerts domination on human groups.

In response to what I will describe as contemporary manifestations of colonial love, I propose decolonizing the gospel of love as both a theological hermeneutic and a moral imperative in the African Church. Freeing the gospel of colonial entrapments energizes it to inspire a violence-free African continent, that is, among other things, a continent where the human dignity of the most vulnerable population is always respected. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan as a paradigm, I argue that Jesus' "love your neighbor as yourself" commandment calls us to widen our horizons, which in practice, within a colonial context, means rejecting the dualistic logic of colonial love, its segregation and dehumanization, its violence, and its natural tendency to oppress.

The background to this theological reflection on the essence and demands of Christian love is a historical account of missionary activities in colonial Africa via recourse to fictional and non-fictional resources.<sup>3</sup> In addition to fictional accounts containing intricate details usually glossed over in non-fictional sources, as Chinua Achebe explains, fiction gives us "a heightened sense of our personal, social and human reality" in a way no non-fiction can (Achebe 1988). Using both history and fiction thus aids me in emphasizing the many



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ways colonial logic and politics manifested in the actions of the missionaries shaped and hampered the Christian message they proclaimed. I am also interested in some of the concrete ways the colonial logic and hegemony continue to dominate African religious (Christian) ethics, manifested in the ongoing weaponization of Christian ethics to silence women, gender minorities, and other minorities.

Finally, while I argue that healing the wounds inflicted on African Christianity and society during colonial evangelization will require interrupting the colonial logic that has set in motion the vicious cycle of violence with the logic of Christ's love, my dream is modest rather than utopic. This article is a modest appeal to the Church in Africa to embrace its prophetic role. Christianity in Africa must continue to play a crucial part in the ongoing healing and reconciliation of a much-battered continent. I am, however, convinced that this journey of healing requires an awareness of the complicity of Christian missionary endeavors in colonial Africa in many of the continent's enduring challenges.

## 2. White Missionaries and Their Black Neighbors: Colonial Violence

In Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, a South African novel written during apartheid, Absalom, son of Reverend Stephen Kumalo, a black Anglican priest, "unintentionally" murders Arthur Jarvis, a white man.<sup>4</sup> What makes the murder particularly tragic is that the white man in question was among the few white settlers sympathetic to the plight of the black natives and committed to tearing down the walls of segregation. More fundamentally, he believed in the God-given human dignity of blacks and white-black equality. His love for the natives was never in doubt; his tragic death inspired a revolution of white-black love. What makes Arthur Jarvis an unforgettable character in African fiction is that he was what many missionaries to Africa during the colonial era, unfortunately, were not. While the missionaries proclaimed the essence of the Christian message with their lips, their hearts and actions often contradicted this holy message.

Many African novels written during colonialism and in the decades after colonialism officially ended highlight this contradiction that often existed between the Christian message of love and the attitude of missionaries towards the natives they purported to be evangelizing. Ferdinand Oyono's first novel, *Houseboy*, is an example. Saint Peter Catholic Church at Dangan is segregated. While the whites sit in more comfortable velvet-covered armchairs near the altar, the natives sit on tree trunks instead of benches in the nave, supervised and controlled by stick-wielding catechists (Oyono [1956] 2012, pp. 33–34). This segregation reflects the European-native separation of the society. Violence against black bodies is a constant feature in the novel. Fanon insists that violence in colonial settings serves a crucial systematic purpose, and this is the proper starting point of any discussion of how most missionaries regarded and acted toward African natives.

As the psychiatrist and foremost theorist of colonialism explains, "The colonial world is a compartmentalized world" (Fanon [1961] 2004, p. 3). This division into the native or colonized sector, characterized by hunger and every other kind of want, and the European or colonist sector, flowing with ostentatious luxury, is enforced by regular resort to violence or at least vivid threats of violence. According to him, this division serves colonialism's foremost agenda, which is the exploitation of colonized land and people, while forestalling the retaliation of the colonized as much as possible, containing it whenever it erupts. "We have seen how government agents use a language of pure violence. The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcer, and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject" (Fanon [1961] 2004, p. 4). For Fanon, therefore, violence is the chief instrument used to maintain colonial order by keeping the colonized subject in place and in check.

Fanon's argument is what Oyono brings into perspective in *Houseboy*. Set in colonial Cameroon, Ondoua, the novel's main character and narrative voice, lives and works with the European colonists in Dangan as a houseboy. At first, he is a houseboy to Father Gilbert and lives at Saint Peter's Catholic Mission. Shortly after the sudden demise of Father Gilbert,

he moves to the Commandant's residence to become houseboy to the new Commandant. From the time he learned to read and write, he has maintained a diary, which is mostly full of his recounting of the incessant acts of violence he witnesses, beginning with the incidence of Father Gilbert kicking him when he found him mimicking him in the sacristy. He informs us that Father Vandermayer, Father Gilbert's assistant and eventual successor, is not just verbally abusive; he is physically violent and takes great delight in humiliating black bodies. The white priest "loves to beat the Christians who have committed adultery—native Christians of course. . . . He makes them undress in his office while he repeats in bad Ndjem, When you were kissing, weren't you ashamed before God?" (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 15). Fortunately for Ondoua, he manages to evade Father Vandermayer's disciplinary brutality until he leaves the mission after Father Gilbert's death.

Leaving the mission did not mean escaping colonial violence. At the Commandant's residence, following the Father Gilbert's death, Ondoua continues to experience and witness European-on-black brutalities. After receiving a kick to the shin that sent him sprawling under the table, he reflects: "The Commandant's kick was even more painful than the kick of the late father, Gilbert" (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 23). Ondoua also narrates how a certain M. Janopoulos, the wealthiest member of the European community and manager of the whites-only European club, despises natives and "likes to set his huge Alsatian on them. This causes a great stampede and amuses the ladies" (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 27). On one occasion, Ondoua was almost a victim of M. Janopoulos' strange sport. "I could feel the Greek's dog at my heels. I shall never know how I managed to get to my feet and to climb up to the top of the huge mango tree. There I took refuge. The Europeans were laughing and pointing up to the top of the tree where I was hiding. The Commandant was laughing as well. He had not recognized me. How could he recognize me? All Africans look the same to them" (Oyono [1956] 2012, pp. 27–28).

Despite the continuous physical and verbal abuse he suffers or witnesses, Ondoua's narrative voice manages to remain cheerful throughout the novel; however, his constant experience of colonial violence has a drastic effect on his nascent Christian faith. He could never reconcile the sermons on love your neighbor as yourself that Father Gilbert and Father Vandermayer often preached at Mass and the acts of brutality incessantly meted out by white hands on the African natives, including by these priests. This sad point, which Oyono emphasizes and which many other novels with similar historical settings make and which is often glossed over by non-fiction accounts of church history in colonial Africa, is how much the colonial church and its agents reflected many features of the larger colonial society in which it existed, especially pertaining to violence against black bodies, cultures, and histories. This multidimensional violence took place everywhere, including church rectories, private colonial quarters, public offices, and prisons.

By far, the most brutal spate of colonial violence Ondoua witnesses is by M. Moreau, the prison director, on two Africans suspected of stealing from M. Janopoulos, and it was an instance of the colonial state and church cooperating to brutalize these Africans. M. Moreau flogged the suspects, stripped them to the waist, handcuffed them, and then tied them to a pole. As he whipped them severely with his hippopotamus-hide whip, which tore up their flesh, they groaned. While M. Moreau flogged them, M. Janopoulos released his dog, which tore at their trousers, and Ndjangoula shattered their skull with the butt of a rifle. Ondoua narrates what a shivering effect witnessing the torture had on him.

Ndjangoula brought down his rifle butt the first time, I thought their skulls would scatter. I could not hold myself from shaking as I watched. It was terrible. I thought of all the priests, all the pastors, all the white men, who come to save our souls and preach love of our neighbors. Is the white man's neighbor only other white men? Who can go on believing the stuff we are served up in churches when things happen like I saw today. . . (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 76).

Yet, as Ondoua informs us, this is not where the story of the two African suspects ends. After this torture, they will be sent to "Blackman's Grave", where they will spend the remainder of their days in pain. They will be buried naked and during the following Sunday

Mass, the European priest will pontificate over their inglorious memory, announcing their damnation while still receiving money to pray for their souls. “How wretched we are”, Ondoua heaves, as throughout the rest of the story, he is visibly traumatized by this experience. One immediately notices a significant decibel reduction in his previously cheerful voice (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 76).

Oyono, through Ondoua’s playful voice, does not leave us without many clues with regards to the motive of the Europeans in the novel, that is, the reason for their brutal treatment of black natives. In addition to Fanon’s apt diagnosis, the desperation to preserve the colonial arrangement unchallenged, there is yet another reason for the anti-black violence of Europeans throughout the novel. It is the natural consequence of the very low opinion the white colonial actors had about their black subjects. In one telling instance, M. Salvain, the schoolmaster, incurs the wrath of every other European at the European Club. His crime was desperately trying to defend the natives from the demeaning stereotypes and unfounded accusations, including savagery and moral depravity. He tried his best to explain African behavior while insisting that Paris was not in any way morally superior to Dangan. In an earlier instance in the novel, we hear M. Salvain bragging about the African students in his school. “Young African children are just as intelligent as ours”, he said on that occasion, bemusing rather than amusing his white interlocutors (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 32). Ignoring his authority in the matters he spoke about, “Everyone told his own little African story to refute him and demonstrate that the African is a child or a fool. . .” (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 52). They also accused M. Salvain of being a traitor: “Ever since you came into this country, you have behaved in a way unworthy of a Frenchman. You’re stirring the natives up against us. You keep telling them that they are as good as we are—as if they hadn’t got a high enough opinion of themselves already. . .” (Oyono [1956] 2012, p. 53).

It is, of course, not difficult to see the connection between the low opinion the majority of the Europeans have of the African natives’ mental capacity and morality and their ready recourse to violence in dealing with them. The two Africans who were literally beaten to death before Ondoua’s very eyes were merely suspected of stealing. Ondoua himself is arrested towards the end of the novel, put in jail, and tortured severely for a crime committed by Sophie, an acquaintance who was a secret lover of one of the Europeans. Although he claims not to know Sophie’s whereabouts, as an African native he is simply unbelievable. While the novel ends with Ondoua about to flee into Spanish Guinea with a much-brutalized body, the violence and brutalization that he and many colonial subjects endured, sadly, did not end with them.

### 3. Colonial Violence in the Postcolony

For Fanon, in addition to a pervasive feeling of self-alienation, another major effect of colonialism is the internalization of violence by colonial subjects. According to him, it is through violence that the colonist fabricates the colonized subject (Fanon [1961] 2004, p. 2). Violence, thus internalized and employed as the only natural and adequate response to colonialism, proving to be the “absolute praxis” against that which is nothing but “naked violence”, did not magically vanish after official political independence (Fanon [1961] 2004, pp. 23, 35, 44). While Fanon, who died in 1961, just at the start of the great decade of African independence, could only guess that “official” independence would not likely put an end to internalized colonial violence, Mahmood Mamdani has found that in the postcolony, “colonial victims” almost always inevitably become “postcolonial” killers or at least perpetrators of colonial violence. This, according to him, is the most apt way to understand the Rwanda genocide. He traces the violence of 1994 to the political changes in 1959 occasioned by the systematic changes wrought by colonialism and certainly not to the precolonial legacy.<sup>5</sup> For him, this is also the best way to understand the Darfur conflict in Sudan, whose root he traces to colonialism’s marginalization and retribalizing of Darfur.<sup>6</sup>

While colonial violence has often led to genocidal levels of horror, which Mamdani studies in his works above, it more often manifests in diverse and much smaller scales in the postcolony. A fictional example is what we encounter in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s

*Purple Hibiscus*, a novel on how internalized colonial violence manifests in a postcolonial era. Told through the teenage eyes of Kambili, we can rightly describe it as her recount of the violence she, her brother Jaja, and Beatrice, their mother, endured from Eugene, her dad. Violence is his preferred way of enforcing patriarchal dominance over his loved ones. Thanks to this, his wife has had two miscarriages, his son lives with a deformed finger, and his daughter, on one occasion, is admitted to the hospital where she spends nearly a week. Apart from his proneness to violence, Eugene is also a typical example of a thoroughly colonized African. His sister, Ifeoma, nicknames him a “colonial product” (Adichie 2003, p. 13). Not only is he a proud product of missionary education and a direct fruit of colonial evangelization, he tenaciously embraces and promotes his colonial heritage, making regular recourse to violence to do this.

What is particularly important to us is the direct connection between Eugene’s colonized mind and violent hands. According to Asempasah, having internalized colonial violence, Eugene transformed his domestic space into “an arena of despotism, violence, terror, colonial mimicry and civility” (Asempasah 2020, p. 277). Like Ondoua, Eugene was a houseboy to missionaries. Kambili informs us that his routine acts of brutality on his family are inspired by the violence he experienced at the hands of the colonial missionaries he lived with as a houseboy and gardener. Kambili learns about this after her father burns her feet with boiling water as punishment for the “sin” of not informing him that she and her brother shared living space with their heathen grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, while they were on vacation in their aunt’s house. After punishing his daughter, Kambili, for, as he describes it, seeing sin clearly and yet walking into it, he goes on to provide her with a justification for his barbaric act. He recounted to her how a white priest made him put his hands in boiling water because “I committed a sin against my body once”. He added, “The good father did that for my own good” (Adichie 2003, pp. 196–97). Kambili, in this instance, also believed that her father was acting in her best interest.

Another critical theme in *Purple Hibiscus* is the curious connection between violence and love. Despite his consistent acts of violence, she believed that her father loved her. And throughout her childhood, her one desire was to feel deserving of her father’s love. She is not entirely wrong. Although he is violent and brutal, we can rightly presume that Eugene, the patriarch and bigot, loved his family. He only employed violence to enforce what he thought was in their very best interest. This echoes historical instances of violence in the name of Christianity throughout Christian history. In Christian love’s very long and tainted history, as Jeanrond describes it,

love has been used or invoked in order to commit what we today would consider to be more or less atrocious crimes: in the name of love corporal punishment was inflicted on children until not so long ago. Proverbs 13:24 was cited as biblical foundation for this practice. ‘Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.’ Infidels have been persecuted and killed for the love of truth. ‘Witches’ have been burned out of love for their souls. (Jeanrond 2010, pp. 9–10)

Jeanrond adds almost immediately that within this history, a person’s soul could be loved while the same person’s body was being tortured or destroyed.

This is the lens from which we might best understand the motive behind Eugene’s violence. He is not violent despite being a Christian. On the contrary, his violence is inspired by the version of Christianity he inherited from the colonial missionaries he lived with and served as a houseboy. We can guess from a careful consideration of Eugene’s actions and preferences throughout the novel that, among other things, the missionaries he lived with despised African culture, tradition, and even bodies but clearly loved and cared for African souls. For example, he burned his daughter’s feet to protect her soul from going to the same hell he was certain Papa-Nnukwu, who blatantly refused to abandon the religion of his ancestors and convert to Christianity, was heading to. While he hated his father and refused to care for the old man, Eugene cared for the eternal salvation of his father’s “soul” till the end of the latter’s life. When he received news of his father’s demise,



his only lamentation was that “Ifeoma did not have the sense to call a priest before he died. He might have converted before he died” (Adichie 2003, pp. 190–91).

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai’s theory of virtuous violence, in their 2015 book of the same name can also help us understand the connection between Eugene’s Christianity and his propensity to violence (Fiske and Rai 2015). According to their theory, most violence is morally motivated. Violence is one of the moral ways human beings regulate social relationships. Most of the time, people are violent because they feel morally entitled, required, or even obligated to hurt or kill others (Fiske and Rai 2015, p. 1). Their point is that the perpetrators of most violence in any given society are not social misfits, immoral individuals, or evil geniuses, as we often love to imagine. Instead, much of the violence in any given society is performed by individuals who feel a certain obligation to “make relationships right—to make a relationship what it ought to be according to his or her cultural implementations of universal relational morality” (Fiske and Rai 2015, p. xxii). Eugene’s violence is an apt example of what Fiske and Rai study in this research.

Eugene is not only perpetuating the violence he received and internalized, he feels obligated to do so and has the backing of the leadership of his local church that consistently failed to call him out. And just like in *Purple Hibiscus*, in many sad instances, the African Church as an institution and African Christians have been complicit in violent and other dehumanizing acts against people, especially minority groups, on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. The point is that these acts of violence are often considered morally justifiable and expedient and connected to a skewed understanding of Christian ethics or the demands of Christian love. In other words, Eugene is not the last of his kind and the silence of his parish in the face of his violence is not an isolated case in the history of Christianity in Africa.

On the contrary, in contemporary Africa, many people are prepared to employ violent means to achieve ends they presume to be pious. For example, the anti-LGBTQ laws in many countries in Africa have the overwhelming support of the African Church and many individual Christians. A coalition of Christian, Muslim, and Ghanaian traditional leaders sponsored the stringent anti-homosexuality bill recently passed by Ghana’s parliament.<sup>7</sup> Ghana’s president, Nana Akufo-Addo, recently described Ghana as a Christian country while insisting that gay marriage will never be allowed while he is in power (Aljazeera News 2024). Of course, violence against homosexuals is not uncommon throughout the continent; Christians and the African Church are often complicit in this spate of violence, which many Christians think of as not only “virtuous” but expedient to banish sexual acts that they insist are “unnatural” and incompatible with Christian morality.

However, my point in this article is not just the numerous examples all across the continent of the church remaining silent or even, in many instances, actively sanctioning state laws and actions that violate and deny individuals their full human dignity. Instead, my argument is that the complicity of Christians and the African Church in dehumanizing violence against minority groups echoes the way agents of the colonial church regarded and mistreated colonized bodies. While preaching the gospel of Christ’s love with their tongues, they operated on an imperialist logic that subjugates and violates bodies, stifles human life, and exerts domination on human groups. What Eugene, the colonized product, witnessed in the lives of the missionaries he lived with and served was not Christ’s redeeming love but what I have described as colonial love. It was this love he piously embodied for his wife and children.

Following the observation above, I insist that African theology cannot continue to ignore the sad fact that the gospel of Christ’s redemptive love was first proclaimed in sub-Saharan Africa within the context of colonial hate, racism, and violence. In many instances, it was weaponized as a colonial tool. I do not by any means imply that all missionaries were hateful, racist, or violent against Africans, nor do I ignore the heroism and many laudable contributions of the missionaries to African society. Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau, whose influential work on African church history was first published in 1996, attempt a very commendable balanced account of missionary activities in pre-colonial

and colonial Africa and insist that while the missionaries were not always “heroic angels”, neither were they “imperialistic devils”.<sup>8</sup>

It must, nevertheless, be emphasized that the missionary, in more cases than not, embodied and actively collaborated with the civilizing agenda of the colonial administrators and the wider European society they belonged to. This means that their ideological position was pro-empire and their bias was Eurocentric. This also means that as sad as it may sound, many of the heralds of the message in Africa did not often acknowledge the full humanity of Africans (savages).<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, they presumed the superiority of their European culture and history. This significantly impacted the gospel they preached and how they treated even their black converts. Chinua Achebe provides a historical example of how colonialists’ anthropological assumptions were reflected in their missionary strategies.

In his famous essay, “*An Image of Africa*”, in which he vehemently exposes and criticizes the racism in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe briefly narrates the story of Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed his brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe and relocated to Africa, where he set up a medical mission. Achebe quotes Schweitzer as saying, “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother”. According to Achebe, this statement, which was reflected in the kind of medical service Schweitzer considered appropriate to his “junior brothers”, exposed that the ultimate question of the equality of white people and black people was not just relevant throughout during colonialism but for many years after (Achebe 1989). Thus, the missionaries were as guilty as the average liberal in the systematic dehumanization of Africans during colonialism.

Most importantly, I argue that the dehumanization of Africans by colonialists, including missionaries, has perhaps had an even more significant impact on how Africans received the gospel and the perennial impact of the gospel on African society. Decolonizing missionary evangelization, specifically the gospel of love in Africa, is an urgent task of African theology. However, by decolonizing the gospel of love, I do not just mean denouncing the colonial logic and ethos that obscured the gospel’s message when preached by Christian missionaries in colonial Africa, which I have done thus far in this article. By decolonizing love, I mean revisiting the gospel of Christ’s redemptive love and emphasizing that Christ’s commandment calls us to reject the dualistic logic of colonial love, its segregation, and dehumanization. I will now argue that properly understood and contextualized within African society, the message of Christ’s redemptive love, expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan, can interrupt the vicious cycle of colonial violence and heal the continent of the wounds inflicted on it by colonial love.

#### 4. The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Horizon of Christian Love

As Thomas Jay Oord rightly observes, “Jesus not only lived a life of love, he also told stories to illustrate love” (Oord 2010, p. 15). Oord’s example is Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37). It was not a question directly about love that the lawyer trying to test Jesus had asked. Instead, his inquiry pertained to the requirements for inheriting eternal life. Jesus threw the question back at him, asking him to consult the law, his area of expertise as a lawyer. Jesus affirms his interlocutor’s response. Love of God and neighbor are the twofold requirements for inheriting eternal life. Jesus’ affirmation ended with a counsel: “Do this, and you will live”, which provokes the unrelenting lawyer to raise one of the contentious points in Jewish law and what has also become a central consideration in Christian ethics: “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>10</sup>

The parable of the Good Samaritan was Jesus’ elaborate response to the lawyer’s second question. The very brief story can be divided into two scenes. In the first scene, a man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho falls into the hands of robbers. They rob him of his possessions while also beating him up, leaving him half dead. While a priest and, afterward, a Levite, who were both passing by, saw him but refused to come any closer to him, a Samaritan who also happened to pass by approached the wounded man. Filled with compassion, he bandaged the man’s wounds and took him immediately to an inn.

The second scene takes place in the inn. The Samaritan hands the wounded man to the innkeeper, offering to pay whatever is needed to nurse him back to health.

Peter N. Rule rightly observes the centrality of parables to the pedagogy of Jesus, the rabbi, arguing that while Jesus was not the first to use parables, his use of parables as a pedagogical strategy was in many ways unique. He also explains that the parable of the Good Samaritan, like virtually all of Jesus' other parables, is embedded in a communicative event, a fact which their distillation from oral to written and from the original Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, into the Greek in which the gospels were written many decades later, seems to blur (Rule 2017, p. 2).

Rule fails to emphasize in his very instructive analysis of its structure the immediate success Jesus had with this parable compared to Jesus' other parables in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus does not conclude with an explanation of the parable as we find in, for example, the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13). He did not privately explain the meaning of the parable to his close circle of followers as we see in the parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15). Instead, by the time Jesus finished telling the story of the Good Samaritan, his point was clear to his immediate audience. "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" he asked. The lawyer answered correctly, saying: "The one who showed mercy on him". Again, impressed by his interlocutor's correct answer, Jesus had nothing to say but to leave him with a counsel: "Go and do likewise".

However, that the lawyer was able to, even without any further explanation, decipher the meaning of the parable has not prevented multiple interpretations throughout Christian history, including those that Maurice Ryan argues have had dire consequences on the Christian attitude to Jews and Judaism (Ryan 2021, pp. 2–4). A central element in what he decries as the "traditional" Christian misinterpretation of this parable is the contrast between what has been captured as the legalistic tendency of Jewish laws versus Christian compassion. As he puts it, "The compassionate Samaritan has been read as a proxy character to justify the replacement of Jews and Jewish religion by Christians and Christianity in God's plan of salvation" (Ryan 2021, p. 4). According to him, the parable is neither about Jewish obsession with "purity laws" nor is it accurate to presume that the priest and Levites were journeying from Jericho to the Temple in Jerusalem. "If the author, for example, wanted the victim to be deceased, then he would have indicated that in the story. If the priest was traveling to the Temple preparing to lead religious rituals, then that would have been indicated by the author. If purity was a consideration in the process of deciding whether to render assistance, then some indication would have been offered by Luke" (Ryan 2021, p. 15). Also, while there indeed existed strains in the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, Ryan insists that antagonism between these groups was neither deep nor general. Jews and Samaritans were not sworn enemies but neighbors whose differences did not stop them from coexisting, albeit in what Martina Bohm calls a "community of convenience".<sup>11</sup> He argues that this, combined with the fact that the wounded man's identity is not specified in the parable, makes it probably inaccurate to interpret this parable as about loving one's enemies (Ryan 2021, p. 8).

Yet, although weary of traditional interpretations of the motive of the priest and Levite that advance a false opposition between "legalistic" Jewish Law and Christian compassion, he nevertheless insists that accurately discerning their motive is vital to understanding the meaning of the parable, even though the story provides very little indication of this. In other words, if their reason for not helping the wounded man was not because of Jewish–Samaritan enmity or concern with purity laws, whether reasonable or obsessive, or even a lack of the demand to be compassionate in Jewish law, then what could it have been? Was fear the motivating characteristic in their decision making, as Martin Luther King Jr. argues in a homily, which Ryan cites? Were both the priest and Levite "afraid that if they stopped they too would have been beaten; for couldn't the robbers still be around? Or maybe the man on the ground was just a faker, using a pretended wounded condition to draw passing travelers to his side for quick and easy seizure" (Ryan 2021, p. 12). Taking a clue from Ryan's critical evaluation of the traditional interpretations, I will immediately



point out that if fear underlined why the priest and Levite passed by on the other side of the road, it would have been indicated in the story.

Even Ryan's preferred interpretation, which he includes toward the end of the article, must likewise be subjected to this scrutiny. According to him, the behavior of the priest and the Levite reflects the human tendency to see and yet to not see. Citing Ruben Zimmermann, he explains, "the priest and Levite are not blind. They see—and they do not see. In our culture of looking the other way, we have precisely this paradoxical correlation. We see and we do not see. Seeing is more than just an objective sensory process". Again, we can argue that if this was the point of the story, some indication would have been offered by the author. On the contrary, the story emphasized that the priest and Levite did indeed see the wounded man and only consciously decided to avoid having anything to do with him—they passed by on the other side. The man was not at any point invisible to them. They did not see and then unsee him. The point of the story is what they did after they saw the man. They refused to help him. The question thus remains: why did they not help?

Perhaps our best chance at discerning their motive, that is, why they refused to help the wounded man they clearly had seen, is to revisit the dialogue that precedes the parable. While it was Jesus' response to a lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" the foundation of the lawyer's inquiry about the identity of his neighbor is the Jewish law's love requirement, which, as Jeanrond rightly explains, is based on the Sinai covenant and captured in the very famous verse from Deuteronomy known as the *Shema Israel* (Jeanrond 2010, p. 30). She further notes that in both Christian and Jewish praxis, love of God, love of neighbor, love of self, and love of God's creation are intimately related. While these different attentions in love must be distinguished, they should never be separated (Jeanrond 2010, p. 29). This second argument is based on her reading of Deuteronomy 10:12–20, where following the command to fear, love, and serve the Lord, God's sovereignty over all of creation, awesomeness, as well as special care for the orphan, widow, and stranger is affirmed (Jeanrond 2010, p. 32).

She nevertheless notes that while the two commandments referenced in the parable indeed belong together, they are based on citations from two separate passages, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. However, according to her, theologically speaking, more important than ascertaining whether or not Jesus was the first to have introduced the combination of both love commandments is appreciating the significance of this double commandment for the proclamation of God's reign in the synoptic gospels. In other words, that the parable of the Good Samaritan is told immediately after the citation of the double love commandment is far from incidental. Instead, this is crucial for interpreting the parable.

This background furnishes us with an effective interpretative hint. While, as Ryan convincingly argues, it is not about loving one's enemies, the parable of the Good Shepherd is nonetheless a parable about love, or more accurately, a parable about the practice of love. The lawyer's question to Jesus can thus be rephrased thus: "Who is my neighbor that I may show love?" When it is rephrased this way, this question is a possible window into the interior reflection of the priest and the Levite upon seeing the wounded man. While they indeed saw the man and even recognized that he needed help, they failed to regard him as their neighbor and thus hurried away rather than help him.

Similarly, Jesus' response, that is, the parable, can be rephrased thus: "Everyone is your neighbor. Therefore, show God's love to everyone!" Jeanrond corroborates this reading. "The point of the parable is not to *have* neighbors but to *become* a neighbor to others. The praxis of love that Jesus proclaimed and lived through his actions reaches out to all sorts of people: the friends, the needy, women, children, the poor, the suffering, the sick, the sinners, the foreigners, and the enemies. The praxis reflects God's goodness to all and gathers all people around God's creative and reconciling presence" (Jeanrond 2010, p. 34). In essence, the parable of the Good Samaritan exhorts us to understand the meaning of God's love and its inclusive nature.

For Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2005 encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, through the parable, Jesus abolished all the limits of the term neighbor while universalizing its meaning.

Until that time, the concept of “neighbor” was understood as referring essentially to one’s countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of “neighbor” is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract, and undemanding expression of love but calls for my own practical commitment here and now (Pope Benedict XVI 2005, no. 15).

This is perhaps why, as Ryan rightly points out, the identity of the wounded man is neither indicated nor necessary. It does not matter whether he is a Jew, Samaritan, or neither of the above. What matters is that he is human, like the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, and in need.

Thus, we can say that Jesus invites us to widen the horizon of love on this occasion and in many other places in the gospel. As Jeanrond emphasizes, this would entail the willingness to become and prove ourselves neighbors to everyone we encounter (Jeanrond 2010, p. 35). His final words to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise”, is a divine command to his disciples to both proclaim love as well as widen the horizon of this love. In other words, proclaiming God’s love is widening our horizons and becoming neighbors to “anybody requiring so” (Jeanrond 2010, p. 126). As *Gaudium et Spes* urges,

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, “As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me”. (Matt. 25:40) (Vatican II 1965, no. 27)

What this means is that Christian love must be founded on the basic principles of Christian anthropology, which include the equal human dignity of every human being, irrespective of race, gender, orientation, or social status. Another basic principle of Christian anthropology is universal human kinship (Vatican II 1965, no. 24).

## 5. Decolonizing the Gospel of Love in Africa: Conclusions

It is necessary to emphasize that to proclaim God’s love while refusing to widen our horizon is to preach an incomplete message or, better still, to contradict the message we proclaim. As I have already mentioned, this is what occasioned the crisis of faith experienced by Ondoua in Oyono’s *Houseboy*. The white missionaries, just like the other European colonial agents in the novel, did not treat the African natives in the compassionate manner the Good Samaritan treated the wounded man because they did not recognize the full human dignity of African natives or realize their common humanity. They regarded as neighbors only their European counterparts, hence had no qualms about accepting to be members of the European-only club of Dangan.<sup>12</sup> And failing to become (or see themselves as) neighbors to the African natives, they were often as violent to them, as the robbers who stole from and beat up the man, or not genuinely concerned about their plight, as were the priest and Levite who did not come to the aid of the wounded man.

The unfortunate man beaten and robbed in the parable of the Good Samaritan can be an apt metaphor for the experience of Africans in the hands of colonial actors, just as in the same way, the attitude of European missionaries is very similar to that of the priest and Levite in the story. We can even add that the missionaries often proved to be worse than the priests and Levites in the parable, who had nothing to do with the plight of the wounded man and only refused to come to his aid. Unlike the priest and Levite in the parable, who sinned by omission only, the missionaries were active agents of colonial brutality. In other words, they often came in the same boat as the colonists and shared a common Eurocentric worldview and civilizing intent, thus actively cooperating. This entanglement between missionaries and colonial administrators was often very intentional and even

mandatory.<sup>13</sup> And as Jean-Marc Ela equally notes, even when colonial administrators “no longer patronized the missions”, they continued to “smooth the missionaries’ way”.<sup>14</sup> This, as I have emphasized, ultimately hampered the Christian message of the colonizers.

Without disregarding the zeal and heroic work of many Christian missionaries in Africa, the gospel of Christ’s love must be preached anew on the continent. Healing the wounds of colonial love requires resisting the violence of colonial love founded on the dualistic framework with the excess of Christ’s love and a conscious widening of our horizon to include every human being. As Saint Peter (1 Peter 2:21) says, Christ’s sacrificial death is our ultimate exemplar of the true nature of love. Our Christian mission consists of following in Christ’s footsteps, and the radical nature of Christ’s love is to be seen in Jesus’s life, which includes the indiscriminate way he related to everyone around him and even the universal dimension of his death. Sadly, while practicing love is imperative for the church as a community and individual Christians, as Vincent Lloyd laments, Christian tradition, while rich in the language of love, is regrettably less rich in the practice of love (Lloyd 2020, p. 120). African Christians must become more intentional in their practice of love. This means giving to others the love we have received not from the violent hands of colonial evangelists but from Christ.<sup>15</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Schwobel (1998–2001, p. 307). According to him, “The notion of love in its manifold variations is indeed so significant that it seems to appear in all dimensions of Christianity: in its doctrinal dimension, in its worship-dimension, in its social-dimension, its ethical dimension and in its experiential dimension”. He, however, clarifies that “asserting the significance of love for the understanding of Christianity does not mean that in other religions love does not play an important role”. He subsequently compares the concept of love in Christianity to *bhakti* in Hindu traditions and *metta* in Buddhism. pp. 307–8.
- <sup>2</sup> Urena (2017, p. 86). While I am indebted to Urena for the concept and basic definition of “colonial love”, my theological adaptation and contextualization of the concept can best be seen in contrast to Joseph Drexler-Dreis’ “Decolonial Love”, which he develops as a theological response to colonial modernity and defines as “a way love is made concrete in history within the struggle to reveal and shatter the structures of colonial modernity”. He adds that decolonial love is theologically pedagogic and “offers one basis of theological reflection and one way of shaping the content of a decolonized image of love” (Drexler-Dreis 2019, pp. 4–5).
- <sup>3</sup> There are at least two other important reasons a decolonial critique of African history benefits tremendously from complementing non-fictional history with fictional accounts. On the one hand, M. Keith Booker highlights African literature’s rootedness in African history. See Booker (2009, p. 141). On the other hand, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza observes what he describes as a crossfertilization between African history and literature. This interchange between African history and literature justifies the utilization of both sources interchangeably within academic research endeavors. See Zeleza (2007, p. 12).
- <sup>4</sup> Paton ([1948] 2003). In his note to the first (1948) edition, Paton insists that while the story narrated is not true and the characters and places are fictional, “considered as a social record it is the plain and simple truth”. See p. 14. It is also important to note that this novel is not without critics among decolonial scholars. See Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981, pp. 91–92). For Ngugi, Reverend Stephen Kumalo, the colonial tool and hero who eschews violence despite the racist violence around him, is an example of an African who helps European colonisers in the occupation and subjugation of his own people and country, as is thus proclaimed the “good African” by the European colonisers.
- <sup>5</sup> Mamdani (2001, p. 105). At first, colonialism created Tutsi “privilege” in contrast to Hutu’s subservience, and eventually, a Hutu elite that was full of grievance against the Tutsi’s colonial imposed privilege.
- <sup>6</sup> See Mamdani (2009, pp. 145–70).
- <sup>7</sup> See VOA (2024).
- <sup>8</sup> Shaw and Gitau (2020, p. 275). It was earlier published in 1996 under the title *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*.
- <sup>9</sup> Wijzen (2015, p. 190). According to him, “Nineteenth-century European missionaries”, says Franz Wijzen, “saw Europe as the cradle of Christianity and civilization as opposed to the non-Western World, which was perceived as unsaved and uncivilized”.

- <sup>10</sup> See Ryan (2021, p. 2).
- <sup>11</sup> Ryan (2021, p. 7), cites Böhm (2020, p. 11). She emphasizes not just the differences between Jews and Samaritans but also their many commonalities.
- <sup>12</sup> While at Dangan in Oyono's novel, membership of the club was open to all Europeans, irrespective of socioeconomic status, in many historical contexts, segregation was not only race based, it was also class based.
- <sup>13</sup> See Orobator (2018, p. 37).
- <sup>14</sup> Ela (1986, p. 17). His example is French Cameroon.
- <sup>15</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI puts it in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (Pope Benedict XVI 2005, no. 14), "Love can be "commanded" because it has first been given".

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