

# IS THERE HOPE FOR AFRICA?

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*Interior* by the South African painter Wolf Kibel, circa 1930 – 1935. South African National Gallery. Source: Google Cultural Institute, via Wikimedia Commons.

## AFROPATERNALISM IS EASY

It is easy to be pessimistic—even despairing—about the future of Africa. Most of us who live in North America have our views of Africa filtered through stories told in the mainstream media we consume, and these are most often stories of disease, famine, and war. For non-Africans seeing Africa through these filters, the most positive response seems to be paternalistic concern.

As I write the opening paragraphs to this essay, I scroll through the first four websites that pop up when I google “top news Africa,” to see what their headlines on Africa show us on this day. At [cnn.com/Africa](http://cnn.com/Africa), “38 dead in beach massacre: Tourists flee Tunisia” takes the main spot, followed by “Child bomber kills 10 in Nigeria market,” “Al Shabaab claims suicide attack,” and “SA mine massacre: Report blames many.” At [bbc.com/news/world/Africa](http://bbc.com/news/world/Africa), “Tunisia launches security clampdown” is the top news item, and at [independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/](http://independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/)—the most astoundingly myopic of the sources in this day’s top Google hits—the lead headline is “Tunisia hotel shooting: 15 Britons confirmed dead as Government warns death toll ‘may well rise.’” The content exception with regard to leading coverage of Africa in my search is [itnewsafrica.com](http://itnewsafrica.com), which leads with “Nigerian-born scientist wins award for cancer-seeing glasses.”

The satirical publication *The Onion* captures the tone of much of the reporting that informs our understanding of Africa with its headline “Tens Of Thousands Dead In Ongoing Africa.”<sup>1</sup> One consequence of this kind of reporting on Africa

is that non-African attitudes towards Africa are bent towards an afropaternalistic bias that prompts support for international disaster relief and development aid as the primary response to the African situation.

In a study of attitudes towards Africa in the US,<sup>2</sup> Andy Baker of the University of Colorado at Boulder found that “white Americans view the foreign poor of darker skin through a paternalistic lens that underestimates their capacities to be active agents in bringing about improvements to their own lives.” He concluded that “[given] the standard American media portrayals of Africa as well as the sheer physical and symbolic distance between Western and African lives, white Americans are more likely to treat foreigners of African descent as enigmatic others with less than full capacities to plan and act.”

Carla De Ycaza of the Center for Global Affairs in New York, in an examination of “the existing competing methods for teaching and researching Africa,”<sup>3</sup> suggests that also in the academic world the study of Africa by non-African scholars is marked by “the prevalence of a neocolonial Afro-pessimist form of cultural imperialism.” She laments that “the involvement of African studies and African scholars in setting the conceptual and methodological architecture of globalization or international studies remains minimal.”

These glimpses confirm my sense that the global conversation about Africa continues to be characterized by pessimism and paternalism. As a result, Africans are primarily understood and approached as objects of pity.

Not that such pessimism, paternalism, and pity are without probable cause.

According to the June 2015 *Bulletin* of the World Health Organization (a themed issue on the health of the 738 million people currently living in Africa):

- More than 90% of the malaria cases worldwide every year are in Africa;
- Africa has 11% of the world’s population but 60% of the world’s people with HIV/AIDS (and this disease is the continent’s leading cause of adult deaths);
- 19 of the 20 countries with the highest maternal mortality rates worldwide are in Africa; and,
- Africa has the highest neonatal death rate in the world.

According to the 2015 *Regional Overview of Food Insecurity: Africa* of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the total number of undernourished people in Africa has increased from nearly 176 million in 1990-1992 to about 220 million in 2014-2016. And the World Health Organization’s Regional Office for Africa claims on its website that as of 2015, “[undernutrition in Africa] is directly or indirectly responsible for 3.5 million child deaths every year.”<sup>4</sup>

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), “Africa in 2014 experienced the highest risk of violence against civilians since ACLED records began in 1997.”<sup>5</sup> The organization reports that, “the rate of conflict occurrence in Africa has risen over the past 18 years. ACLED recorded a

total of 10,174 organized, armed conflict events in Africa for 2014, an increase from [the previous year's] 8,379 organized, armed conflict events."<sup>6</sup>

It is these kinds of dismal realities that provoke the pessimism, paternalism, and pity with which the rest of the world views Africa.

## **BUT AFRICA DOES NOT NEED AFROPATERNALISM**

Nonetheless, I believe that pessimism, paternalism, and pity are inappropriate responses to the present predicament of the people of Africa.

I have seldom been so thoroughly surprised as I was at the beginning of 1990 when the then racist government of South Africa, under its president, F.W. De Klerk, announced that it was releasing Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, unbanning the African National Congress and other anti-apartheid organizations, and initiating a public process of negotiation towards a new democratic constitutional arrangement in the country of my birth.

In many ways the 1980s were horrible years in South Africa. As the apartheid regime became more and more beleaguered (internationally by increased sanctions and other acts of censure from foreign governments and international businesses and domestically from an intensifying resistance by South Africans opposed to that racist constitutional order), suppression of dissent became both more thorough and more

violent. An atmosphere of anger and fear pervaded public life, somewhat mitigated by voices and actions of bright courage (frequently emerging from Christian communities of faith, as in the case of efforts mobilized by the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, and by the leader of

vote, regardless of race. By 1995 South Africa had its first black president, the erstwhile political prisoner Nelson Mandela. By 1996 South Africa had a new constitution that in its preamble states the purposes of the new constitutional order are to:

Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law; Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

The process of change in South Africa in the first half of the 1990s persuaded me once and for all that pessimism with regard to the prospects of Africa is an inadequate preparation for the kinds of surprising turns that history takes. As I considered the end of apartheid, it appeared to me that a philosophy of history informed by the clues towards a theological anthropology that I glimpsed in my reading of the Bible (the sacred scripture that tells the story that has decisively shaped my view of the world), rather than succumbing to historical pessimism (with regard to Africa, or anywhere), more properly would start out from a stance of



the pan-African evangelistic organization Africa Enterprise, Michael Cassidy). During that decade I came to believe that God's call on my life was to a relentless struggle against the political injustice and economic exploitation entrenched in apartheid, but given the obvious stubbornness and apparent efficiency of the apartheid state's apparatus, I also came to believe that I would not see the end of that struggle in my lifetime.

Thus the enormity of the surprise in early 1990, when suddenly, precipitously, a tectonic political shift took place that, in very short order, thoroughly rearranged South Africa's political landscape. By 1994 South Africa had its first elections in which all adult citizens were eligible to

openness to surprise, recognizing the capacity of people to act with both amazing grandeur and horrifying pettiness. History, in such a view, results from the turbulent flow of myriad human persons' actions—imbued with an innate agency explained in the poetry of the first few chapters of Genesis as the result of human beings' creation in God's image and of a promise from God that humans would tend the rest of creation in ways that would unfold possibilities God enfolded into creation—across a landscape of divine creation-sanction and providential constraint.

The surprises of South African history in the late twentieth century for me resonate with the poetry of the biblical scriptures, and in addition to persuading me away from afropessimism persuaded me away from afropaternalism. The primary actions that brought about the end of apartheid were the actions of Africans (of manifold races), even as the conditions that increased the likelihood of success for those actions (the end of the Cold War, economic sanctions, the diplomatic efforts of many nations and international agencies) were the result of efforts by people from all around the world. But the key actors in that surprising drama—people like Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk, Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, Joe Slovo and Niel Barnard—were Africans, and they were not objects of pity but real leaders (as Dean Williams<sup>7</sup> defines real leadership) who focused on “getting people to face reality and think and act responsibly, thereby enabling their organizations and communities to address their toughest challenges and make meaningful progress.”

Afropaternalism fails Africans by ascribing less agency to those of us who make (all or part of) our lives in Africa than we have exercised historically, and it fails to measure up to the high view of human persons in general portrayed in the poetry of the Bible. The surprises served up by South Africans in the early 1990s, considered in the light of biblical poetry, suggest that we should be open to further historical surprises both from South Africans and from others elsewhere on that vast and unpredictable continent.

To say that one has hope for Africa, as I do, is not only a confession of belief but also a recognition of a calling. Hope is not only the virtue of anticipating the blessing of a loving God; it is also the theological virtue that serves as the precondition for the exercise of courageous action. Classical Christian virtue teaching recognizes hope as an infused virtue, primarily a divine gift, not primarily (as some other virtues are) the result of sustained habit. To accept the gift of hope is to accept the calling to courageous action.

To say that one has hope for Africa is to recognize that a key element in the future of Africa will be the life of communities of faith that recognize and proclaim that hope is ultimately anchored in Christ, whose present and future reign is the ultimate context within which courageous action finds its meaning and direction. The hope for Africa is a Christian hope, nurtured in the celebration of the sacraments, the study of the biblical scriptures, the practice of prayer, and finding courageous expression in every human vocation and in our vocational contributions to the common good.

To say that one has hope for the future of Africa is not to deny or underestimate the very considerable challenges Africa faces, many of which are made in Africa and many of which are the consequence of a global context marred by idolatries ancient and modern, the predatory hubris of European colonialism, and the ideological distortion of global market dynamics and international politics. Practicing hope for the future of Africa demands honesty and attentiveness in the study of the challenges the continent faces, seriousness in the cultivation of the skills necessary for courageous action in addressing these challenges, but above all, guileless trust that our efforts in history are both meaningful because of who we are as human creatures and ultimately sustained and guided by divine providence. P

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#### Endnotes

1 <http://www.theonion.com/article/tens-of-thousands-dead-in-ongoing-africa-28201>

2 “Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid: Evidence from U.S. Public Opinion.” *American Political Science Review* (February 2015).

3 “Competing Methods for Teaching and Researching Africa: Interdisciplinarity and the Field of African Studies.” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 38(3), 2015.

4 <http://www.afro.who.int/en/clusters-a-programmes/frh/child-and-adolescent-health/programme-components/child-health.html>. Accessed June 27, 2015.

5 <http://www.acleddata.com/violence-against-civilians-in-2014/>. Accessed June 27, 2015.

6 <http://www.acleddata.com/rates-of-violence-in-2014/>. Accessed June 27, 2015.

7 *Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005, p. x.