Book Reviews

Stan Chu Ilo


As a non-Catholic reader with years of development experience with churches in Africa, I approached this with hopes for a substantive and creative theological contribution to an important interdisciplinary area by an African scholar. Unlike another African Catholic contribution (Swart, 2006) which unpacks one particular development approach, Ilo’s book is theologically focused. He seeks a “creative appropriation” of Pope Benedict’s 2009 encyclical Charity in Truth, framed as a “transformative theological praxis” on development in Africa. (p214). However its “Christian manifesto for social reconstruction” seems to collapse back into a “conversion of human hearts”.

The book unpacks the encyclical and its theological grounding in Chapters 1 and 2. It introduces Benedict’s “principle of gratuitousness” (pp. 38–43) as at its heart, “civilising the market through charity and truth” (p. 42), a theme also picked up in the last chapter as “building a civilisation of love”. Given the problematics of the “civilising” term in Africa, this is an early red flag. According to Ilo, the encyclical seeks to establish the “correct scale” of ethical value about what it means to be human. Chapter 3 offers a broad overview of development themes in Sub-Saharan Africa where a clear link is made between poverty and human rights. Chapters 4–5 apply the encyclical’s principles to Africa emphasizing the need to respect the agency of the poor, a prophetic critique of the state and the internal transformation of citizens. It is only in Chapter 5 that Ilo highlights the wider inculturation/ liberation theological debate in Africa (p. 214). His approach is never clearly situated here and wider tensions between Catholic social teaching and theologies of liberation receive little attention.

Ilo calls for a “missional cultural hermeneutic” (p. 219) to inform how Christian NGOs operate in Africa, suggesting, but not fully unpacking, an ethic of communion, mutuality and friendship. His four roles for the African church
are termed as: embodying a credible and prophetic lifestyle, holding a critical function through practical acts of love, playing an instrumental role and supporting cultural and human development. He concludes with an appendix of “Ten Commandments for Christian charities in Africa” (pp. 291–2). This reveals an ambiguity through the book where despite a rhetorical insistence on bottom-up participatory agentic approaches and rejection of ‘Westernization’, it tends to retain a top-down approach to moral truth through an unquestioned Catholic tradition. While the need to tackle structures is noted (p. 410), Ilo’s emphasis is on reconnecting development to morality, and is in danger of reproducing essentialised binaries between self and other-centred, modernity and tradition, secular and religious, West and Africa in ways that have been widely deconstructed.

Ilo addresses the book to three groups; Christians, Christian charities and Catholic charities, offering guidance to those from the West as to how to operate in Africa. His emphasis on the “practice of charity” as core for Christians (xiii), seeks to rethink charity as sharing in the lot of the poor. He points to the need for the church to be prophetic and critical but applies these not to interrogate either African or Christian traditions, but to reinforce them in the face of “secular Western modernity”, a scapegoat alongside capitalism, globalisation and social immorality. A focus only on the poor, whilst important, can avoid other more contested social marginalisations. For Ilo, existing Catholic theology operates as a truth trump giving little room for alternatives or critique on a continent facing huge practical challenges on gender, sexual violence/stigma and HIV.

The encyclical connects charity to the ‘truth’ as the lens by which it is to be understood. Is this helpful in a pluralistic, multi-faith space when traditional Catholic understandings of “truth” are often at odds with emerging legal and policy frameworks? For example, Ilo ties a pro-life position to development despite a recent African Commission decision to campaign for abortion decriminalisation in the light of the deaths of 27,000 women a year. His claims of “development imperialism” (p. 137), globalisation as a “monstrous behemoth” (p. 178) and “cultural cloning” (p. 183), and conservative links between rights, dignity and natural law require a hermeneutic of suspicion.

On a positive note, Ilo emphasises the church’s need for a credible public existence in Africa. He critiques its culture of acquisitiveness and greed over a shared solidarity with the poor which informs his valuable, though theologically underdeveloped, concept of “vulnerable mission” (p. 225). He also insists that this “incarnational kenotic disposition” must be concretely embodied e.g. simpler church structures and vocalised with a “critical prophetic voice” on the abuse of money. However his ‘agency’ discourse can homogenise Africans,