

LINDA HOGAN AND JAMES F. KEENAN

# Continent in search of the ethical path

Africa's poverty, troubled past and need for peace were in the spotlight during a groundbreaking conference of theologians and ethicists. And with their focus on faith, they proved wary of the damaging compromises of political solutions

For those who lived through the Rwandan genocide, the mass murder of hundreds of thousands nearly 20 years ago continues to resonate. While people try to rebuild the nation, reminders of that dark period in recent Rwandan history are never far from the surface.

This was demonstrated powerfully by the Rwandan Jesuit moral theologian Elisee Rutagambwa, who began his reflections at a gathering of African theologians on the challenges of reconciliation in Africa with a simple narrative of the recent discovery of his uncle's and cousin's bodies, found in a freshly uncovered mass grave. They had been killed during the 1994 genocide but their remains had lain undiscovered with countless others, until now. And so, almost two decades after the 100 days of slaughter that left 800,000 Tutsi and Hutu sympathisers dead, Rutagambwa asks how the Church, which was itself complicit in the violence, can address the urgent challenge of lasting reconciliation.

Rutagambwa's question was addressed to the 50 delegates attending an expert seminar marking the first pan-African conference of Catholic theological ethicists, held at the Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations in Nairobi. The conference was sponsored by Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC, see [www.catholicethics.com](http://www.catholicethics.com)), the organisation that hosted the international conferences of Catholic ethicists in Padua (2006) and Trento (2010). Among those attending from nearly 20 African countries were several archbishops as well as the eight African women who



Championing the voices from the South: participants in the CTEWC conference

received full scholarships for their PhD studies from CTEWC.

For the first two days, participants grappled with the three key issues of the Second African Synod held in 2009: reconciliation, justice and peace. There is no doubt that these three challenges continue to loom large for the African Church. Indeed, as Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, one of the synod organisers, remarks: "on a continent infamous for its high levels of poverty, abuse of human rights and disregard for human dignity, reconciliation, justice and peace define clear imperatives of ecclesial renewal and social transformation."

Notwithstanding the depth and extent of these challenges, however, one of the most striking features of the conference was the way in which it made plain the commitment, tenacity and resilience of the Church in Africa.

An emerging theme in African theological reflection is the critical issue of whether the pursuit of justice can or ought to be sacrificed in the search for peace and reconciliation. Of course, this is a pressing political question in many countries around the world, continuing to dominate political life in the Balkans, South Africa and Northern Ireland. Its ethical dimensions are particularly challenging in the African context, and are felt even more acutely by Christians, who recognise that they are called to be reconcilers and peacemakers.

Throughout the conference, participants spoke about the need to resist political resolutions that are premised on this false dichotomy between justice and peace. Kenyan

Catholic ethicists Elias Omondi Opongo and Richard Rwiza both argued that justice was essential for true reconciliation. This point was reinforced by the witness of three extraordinary leaders in the African Church, each centrally involved in the practice of reconciliation in Africa: the Ugandan Archbishop John Baptist Odama, who recounted his mediator role with the Lord's Resistance Army's Joseph Kony in the lead-up to the Juba peace talks of 2006-09; the charismatic Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura Yambio in South Sudan, who is playing a critical role in witnessing to the power of reconciling justice in the world's newest country; and Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, whose peace-building work between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria will be recognised globally when he is awarded the 2012 Pax Christi International Peace Award on 31 October 2012.

If issues of justice reconciliation and peace dominated the first two days of the conference, among the main concerns of the third day was feminism, undoubtedly one of the most controversial and contested themes in African theological ethics. On this final day, the conversational platform was widened to include not only the 50 invited Catholic ethicists but also the faculty and students of the Catholic University of East Africa. Challenging, difficult debates highlighted just how deeply patriarchal the African Church and society continue to be. In his reflection on the challenges of feminism, the Zimbabwean ethicist David

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Kaulemu made a persuasive allusion to the theology of liberation, insisting that in the African context, taking up the feminist cause effectively means that one is making an option for the poor and the marginalised.

The reality of the lives of many African women who endure poverty and violence was in view throughout the discussion, an element that distinguished it from many of the academic discussions on these topics in the universities and theological colleges of the northern hemisphere. In particular, it was highlighted by Catherine Wanjohi, a young Catholic woman who runs Life Bloom, an educational project for women who have been trapped in prostitution. In her book *A Walk at Midnight*, Wanjohi charts her journey with these most marginalised of women as they try to protect themselves and their children from the deprivation that surrounds them, and as they find other ways of supporting their families.

The next critical step in African theological ethics, according to the pioneering feminist theologian Philomena Mwaura, must be the development of a more explicit and sustained engagement with the institutions of the Church and State, and in particular the articulation of an African women's public theology. What was clear was that gender justice remains high on the agendas of African theological ethicists. Although the scandal of global inequality frames the discussion, the focus now is more explicitly on the empowerment of the people of Africa themselves so that they can help change their continent.

**T**his was the first continental conference of CTEWC. In 2015, the Asian Regional Committee will host its own conference in Bangalore, India, and in 2016 the Latin American Regional Committee will follow suit. As in Padua and Trento, the organisation is mindful of inviting well-known theological ethicists as well as newly minted ones. Emphasising its mission to champion the voices from the South, it turns there to the wise and the young, women and men, hierarchy, Religious, laity and clerics. In its pursuit of networked discourse, it hopes to develop uncommon relationships based on the common search to respond concretely to the needs of the Church and the world in its suffering.

What we two authors learned at Nairobi was that each person had to be critically in touch with her or his own local needs if there was to be any hope of working together. And we learned from our Kenyan hosts that hospitality indeed provides the foundation for such engagement. But we also heard in the voices of the insightful presenters, the scholarly women and the dedicated bishops a hope that acknowledged the Cross and the cost of redemption.

■ Linda Hogan is vice provost of Trinity College, Dublin and James F. Keenan SJ is Founders Professor in Theology at Boston College, Massachusetts. They co-chair Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church.

**SARA MAITLAND**

## 'It made me aware of how seldom religion in Britain is allowed to be fun'



This time last year, I wrote about the local pilgrimage to St Ninian's Cave and invited *Tablet* readers to come and walk the last stretch of the traditional route with me this time.

And so, on the Saturday of the August bank holiday weekend, I found myself sitting in the car park of Glenluce Abbey slightly nervously awaiting the arrival of my companions. There were two of them; one was a friend and fellow parishioner who was going to walk the first couple of hours with us (she was in training for the Camino and right now, as you read, she is walking towards Santiago de Compostela).

It was not she who was making me nervous; it was the stranger who had contacted me almost a year ago, had said then that she wanted to come, and stuck with it, while other interested parties had pulled out for various reasons. This showed true commitment on her part, as over the year I had changed the scheme: it turned out I had seriously underestimated the distance and decided that it could not reasonably be done in a single day, if we were going to get to the cave in time for the afternoon pilgrims' Mass on the Sunday. So she was signing up for two days.

She was unfazed, still apparently content and keen. Nonetheless, I was nervous: two long days walking with someone I had never met, who had emailed that she was "not much of a walker" and had no intention of spending a night in a tent. (Luckily she had made other wonderfully competent arrangements and her careful planning let me off the hook. Given the weather this summer, I was very happy to be able to abandon my own high-minded camping schemes.) It was raining.

Using the back roads across the Machars, it is over 30 miles (it is less than 20 by a more direct route, but not agreeable walking along a busy A road without a footpath). In the event, we cut off the three-and-a-half mile loop above Glenluce village – this gives

wonderful views of the journey ahead, but in the rain felt pointless.

It was a very happy two days. By lunchtime, it had stopped raining. We walked through a remarkably various and lovely landscape: the first day mainly rough moorland scattered with tiny lochs and woodland (and past one of the most Romantic houses in the country – Old Place of Mochrum) and the second day the wide green pastures of the southern Machars where dairy cows stood in fields and glimpses of the sea revealed themselves from three different directions.

In his kindness, Ninian not only kept the midges at bay, he also kept the weather fine for us: it did not rain again all weekend, and by Sunday afternoon it was bright and sunny on the beach. (Ironically, we had more rain on the following Monday than I have ever recorded before; a patron saint for procrastinators, perhaps.)

One thing about a pilgrimage, as opposed to a "long walk", is that you actually want to be a little tired – it is part of the deal, and gave me a real sense of satisfaction. This was enhanced by my fellow pilgrim knowing lots about Ninian – the awareness of walking a route that has been in use since the eighth century (at least) was grounded in new knowledge and consciousness. (This was not a silent walk; pilgrimage should not be about silence, but about meeting and companionship; Chaucer knew a thing or two.)

We were welcomed at the Mass admiringly, if a little teasingly, which was gratifying. I'm not sure why we got such warmth because the diocesan youth group, using a different route, converged on the beach much when we did: perhaps our "batty old lady" status gave us bonus points.

As always, the Mass on the stony shore was lovely even though the gannets and the seals, which were so magnificent last year, failed to turn up. ("Hope they haven't lapsed," someone said.)

It felt like a very good thing to have done. It was, simply and gloriously, fun. It made me aware of how seldom religion in Britain is allowed to be fun.

Perhaps as well as telling us to be more pious, more reverent, more committed and more obedient, our church leaders could try urging us to be merrier-hearted in the pilgrimage tradition and to have more fun.

I'll be going again next year, if you want to try it.