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Book Review:
Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology

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Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology. Todd D. Whitmore. London: T. & T. Clark, 2019. Paperback, 386 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 9780567684172

Todd Whitmore's monograph *Imitating Christ in Magwi* is a difficult book to categorize. On which shelf does it belong: Theology? Anthropology? African Studies? Peace and Conflict Studies? Development Studies? Intellectual autobiography? There is a good case for each category.

The author calls the study "an anthropological theology." That is a field I have never seen listed in a university directory, but its legitimacy can be inferred, perhaps, from Whitmore's joint appointment in the Theology and Anthropology departments at the University of Notre Dame.

But what sort of hybrid can these two disciplines generate? Anthropology is a social science that seeks to identify and interpret the structures and relationships of authority, kinship, and social meaning in a culture and to study the means by which they are refined and communicated. Theology, on the other hand, is an interpretive study of the teachings, practices and meaning structures that undergird and identify a faith tradition.

A subdiscipline of theological anthropology is an easy concept to grasp: it would study the grounding of social and cultural structures in belief systems and the interactions between religion and culture. But what are the elements of anthropological theology? This is one of many interesting issues raised by Whitmore's study of the recent history of northern Uganda and southern Sudan. He has provided a many-faceted and multi-layered account of the experiences of the people of the region and of an American academic living in their midst for several extended periods. By doing so Whitmore seeks to persuade his reader both by argument and by example that an anthropological methodology can be deployed – indeed, it must be deployed – by theologians in the global community of Christians today.

The necessity of this hybrid perspective, Whitmore argues, arises from a chasm between belief and practice that has infected the Western church. How, he asks in his opening chapter, has "theology become so detached from the concrete practice of the imitation of Christ in the first place?" (p.35). In Whitmore's account the sources of this separation lie deep in the history of Western theology – deeper than the early modern and Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes and Kant who are often blamed for the divorce of reason from experience, mind from matter, transcendent from immanent. In a rather discursive appendix to the book Whitmore places the blame instead on Abelard, Athanasius, and, prefiguring these medieval thinkers, the apostle Paul.

The theological argument of the appendix is also supported – more directly, and for this reader more persuasively – by the historical account of East African missions to which Whitmore devotes several chapters in this study. His goal here is succinctly stated in an opening chapter on the importance of doing theology *in media res*. Some influential anthropologists, he notes, have

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advocated a mode of inquiry that embodies a deep ‘solidarity’ with research subjects. Such an approach, suggests Whitmore, has “close affinities with John Paul II’s understanding of the charity-infused solidarity that marks the life of the Christian”(p. 35).

In what way can our relationship today with the people of East Africa put this into practice, he asks? Can the spirit of solidarity bring together those who dwell in the global North and the global South, the affluent and the impoverished, the inheritors of millenia of doctrinal deliberation in monasteries and universities with the inhabitants of a world where ancestors and other spirits dwell among the living? If we are to overcome these divisions among people, we must also reject all bifurcation of the physical and spiritual realms, of belief and lived practice, of analytic reason and lived experience. When we do so, he urges, we make a beginning at living out the call to mimesis, the imitation of Christ in daily life.

To support and illustrate this synthesis of applied theology and engaged anthropology, Whitmore proceeds along several parallel tracks. One of them is an informative history of the Catholic mission to the region, highlighting the contributions of a pioneering nineteenth-century missionary priest, Daniel Comboni, and a twentieth-century bishop, Angelo Negri. The locally based orders that they founded, the Sons of the Sacred Heart (later renamed the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus) and the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, have worked faithfully to bring succor and hope to the people of the region, even when it was engulfed in civil war.

Launched by European missionaries, both of these communities are now overwhelmingly African. Yet their European roots have, inevitably, complicated their place in the political and economic environment. Under British rule, the Comboni missionaries initially aligned closely with the colonizers, for better and for worse. They tolerated and sometimes facilitated the corruption and co-opting of indigenous leaders, for example, and the exploitation of natural resources for export to Europe. But in the twentieth century, Whitmore recounts, both European and African members of the order became courageous advocates for the welfare and dignity of the people of the north, first against the British and later against a new Ugandan government dominated by southern ethnic groups.

The Little Sisters were founded by Bishop Negri, a Comboni priest, in 1942 with the goal of providing better education, especially for girls, and their work has focused on schooling. During the Lord’s Resistance Army’s (LRA) conflict the schools were the targets of repeated kidnapping raids – and yet the sisters were suspected by government troops of being rebel sympathizers. As the conflict drew to an end, northern Uganda saw a massive influx of NGO’s, and many members of the order left their convents to collect generous salaries as local consultants and translators. All these made life more difficult for the religious order.

Few regions of the world have suffered from as brutal or as protracted a conflict as did northern Uganda and southern Sudan during the quarter-century rebellion led by Joseph Kony. Whitmore’s extended stays in southern Sudan and northern Uganda took place in the last years when the conflict still raged, isolating the region from the rest of the world, and in the first years after the LRA withdrew from Uganda at last in 2006. Releasing LRA soldiers and other camp residents to return to their home villages, Kony and a small band of his followers took refuge in remote locations in neighboring countries, where they remain in hiding today, eluding all efforts by regional armies to flush them out.

The story of the LRA rebellion is known around the globe, along these lines: a rapacious warlord claiming to speak for the spirits launched a brutal war for control of northern Uganda, killing and kidnapping and raping at will, while Ugandan government forces, with aid and advice from Western allies, made valiant efforts to defeat the rebels and restore peace. That widely accepted account, Whitmore shows, is far from the truth. Residents of the region told him a very different story. Government neglect of the region had long fueled resentment, and Kony was initially respected by many as an advocate for the Acholi people. As his movement evolved into a rebel army, the government's response escalated to equal levels of cruelty. Both sides kidnapped young people, killed suspected sympathizers with their enemy, and raped village women. Army troops and rebel soldiers alike, pursuing each other in a region far too dangerous for journalists to travel, terrorized and brutalized Acholi towns and villages.

In the late 1990s, having failed to defeat or even weaken the LRA, the government of Uganda forced nearly all the residents of the region into displaced persons camps, where overcrowding, disease, and lack of access to farms caused unimaginable suffering. Whitmore provides a first-hand account of one of the largest camps, at Pabbo, where he interviewed a number of residents. All of this took place out of sight of the rest of the world. Western governments and NGOs were assured that defeat of the LRA was imminent, but this was no more than wishful thinking.

Thanks in large part to the courageous witness of religious leaders, domestic and international, a path opened at last to resolution of the conflict, and the camps were emptied when the LRA withdrew from Uganda in the mid-2000s. Whitmore gives credit, in a few brief mentions, to the amazing interfaith group the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, created in 1997 by bishops and pastors and imams, whose steadfast efforts to alleviate suffering and facilitate dialogue laid the groundwork for peace.¹

Whitmore's interpretation of what he heard, and his efforts to counter prevalent misconceptions of the conflict, themselves became a source of conflict, ironically, both in Uganda and at home. What his local informants described to him, he decided, was nothing less than a campaign of genocide against the Acholi people. He laid this charge against the Museveni government in an article submitted to a scholarly journal in the United States. When the Ugandan authorities learned of his allegations they blocked him from visiting Uganda for three years, overturning his research plans. Whitmore's colleagues and graduate supervisors back in the United States, to his shock and disappointment, also registered their dissent from his conclusions and their opposition to their publication, which they feared might jeopardize continuing mission and development work in East Africa.

Whitmore's rehearsal of this controversy seems at times intended as much to strike back at his critics as to advance his argument. Was the military campaign against Kony indeed a heinous war crime directed at destruction of the Acholi people, or was it simply an undisciplined and uncoordinated reign of destruction by poorly disciplined soldiers shielded from accountability for their actions? Whitmore has reasons for the first characterization; but my own informants in Uganda who lived through the civil war, many of whom suffered grievous losses from both

¹ The story of the ARLPI is set out in more detail, against the background of Uganda's recent history and the rise of Kony's movement, in my most recent book, "*We are the voice of the grass;*" *Interfaith peace activism in Northern Uganda* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

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government and LRA violence, never invoked the term he employs. If charges of genocide were lodged in an international tribunal, they might not be sustained.

Nevertheless Whitmore does readers a service by correcting the wildly inaccurate picture, put forward by the Museveni government and naively accepted by most of the world, that the rebels alone were responsible for indiscriminate violence. By no means does the truth exonerate the LRA: “I find Kony and his actions to be not merely wrong, but deeply evil, even demonic,” Whitmore writes. But what must also be recognized is that “the life- and culture-destroying tactics of Museveni’s NRA [the national army] created a social context in which spirit-medium-led resistance seemed to the Acholi to be the only possible defense” (p. 242).

Whitmore recounts a rich assortment of personal stories from the heart of the conflict, gathered during the many months when he lived, observed, listened, and reflected in the region. One of the book’s many strengths is its vivid and disarmingly honest account of the life of an outsider who stays long enough to become a participant in village life. On one occasion, for example, he approaches a village funeral cautiously, standing at a distance and observing the joyous dancing and drumming that traditionally mark the passing of someone whose life has been long and happy. Villagers draw him in and – although he professes to be a dreadful dancer – smear his head with ashes to identify him as a leader of the dances. But when he begins taking photos, he reports, the atmosphere changes. The dancers are more self-conscious, and two young men want to know all about his camera. Elders draw him aside and advise: “You better leave. We think those young men are planning to beat you” (pp, 181-182).

Among the most remarkable stories Whitmore relates – puzzling, perhaps alienating, for the reader – is the occasion when he feels a two-year-old girl pressing against his leg. He recognizes the girl, and knows her name – only because he has been shown her photograph, as the victim of a ritual killing years earlier. Yet the sensation of her against his leg is as real and vivid, he says, as anything else in his environment. Whitmore finds himself compelled to ponder the gulf between the “critical rationality” of academic discourse and “a construal that populates the world with intervening spirits.” The experience causes him “to reassess – that is, to re-discern – what I think on a wide array of other things.” Perhaps the child’s “unbidden (so far as I could tell) visitation” was “a kind of loving vengeance on the scholar” (pp. 202-204).

A strength of the book is the window it offers into the daily life of East Africans. One of its weaknesses is Whitmore’s tendency to digress into lengthy side discourses, making the whole less persuasive and less unified than it might have been. The book’s closing chapter, for instance, includes a fascinating dialogue, in side-by-side columns, between Whitmore’s call to bring theology and anthropology together in the practice of “mimesis” and the personal reflections of a former LRA captive, a novice in the Little Sisters community. But the first half of this chapter is devoted to another topic entirely: the foibles and blind spots of Notre Dame, including its reluctance to boycott Chinese garment sweatshops and the lavish rituals of devotion to the football team. And then, in an appendix of nearly 40 pages that makes no mention of Uganda or Sudan, the author decries the tendency of Christian theology to exalt the abstract over the concrete, the received text over lived experience, and traces this error from the apostle Paul to the early Fathers to the contemporary academy, an argument that perhaps belongs in a different book.

A conversation with a group of men in the Pabbo Internally Displaced Person’s (IDP) camp – Whitmore’s name for the group in his notes is the “Teachers’ Drinking Club” – confronts him with

a question that becomes a leitmotif in the book, invoked several times in different contexts. “We know you have your research,” one of the men remarks. “But what are you going to do for us?” (p. 19).

Whitmore’s response includes some practical measures -- he has founded a nonprofit that offers training in agriculture and peacebuilding – while he continues to search for a more adequate answer. Perhaps the question posed is a variant of the question that I posed at the outset of this review: what would it mean to practice anthropological theology? It would mean opening oneself to unexpected challenges and unexplainable experiences in seeking to find new ways of imitating Christ.

The rich treasury of personal stories that Whitmore distills from his search deepen our understanding of the LRA conflict and its aftermath and of the encounter between North and South. The dialogue between social science and lived experience that Whitmore models can enrich our understanding of both theology and culture.