

## The Vatican Anti-Gender Theory and Sexual Politics: An African Response

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'If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge him?' Pope Francis asked in July 2013. On his September 2015 official visit to the United States, Pope Francis did not only speak at the Pontifical Council for the Family's World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, but also met with a gay couple (one of them was his former student) in Washington DC (Yardley and Goodstein 2015). But as the New York Times reported, the Pontiff also privately met with Kim Davis (a US county clerk in Kentucky, who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples despite the court order). In November 2015, Pope Francis toured Africa. Despite the growing demonization of, and violence directed on sexual minorities, the Pontiff did not utter a word on sexuality during his tour of the continent. Yet his visit followed the 2014 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights resolution to protect sexual minorities against 'acts of violence, discrimination and other human rights violations; corrective' rape, physical assaults, torture, murder, arbitrary arrests, detentions, extra-judicial killings and executions, forced disappearances, extortion and blackmail.' (2014: Resolution 275). In June 2016, however, Pope Francis called on Christians and the Roman Catholic Church to ask for forgiveness from gays 'for the way they had treated them' (Pullella 2016).

The contradictory nature of Pope Francis's attitude to sexual minorities is arguably informed by the Vatican's opposition to *gender theory*, which he once compared to nuclear weapons (McElwee 2015). As Cardinal Bergoglio in Argentina, Pecheny, Jones and Ariza attest, Pope Francis described same-sex marriages as 'destructive pretension of God's plan' aimed at destroying God's image: man and woman. As Pope, he reiterated this position in his address to the colloquium *Humanum* in Rome. Organized around the paradigm of *complementarity*, diverse religious traditions and faiths affirmed complementarity as foundational to the future of the human family.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, 'Full Text: Pope Francis's Opening Address to Humanum Conference,' <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/11/17/full-text-pope-franciss-opening-address-to-humanum-conference/>. Accessed October 12, 2016.

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To understand Pope Francis's opposition to gender theory, I employ two of his recent documents, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* (2015) and *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family* (2016). These documents, I argue, illustrate how gender theory *vis-à-vis* 'complementarity' is foundational to the Vatican's socio-political and secular agenda.

## Pope Francis on Complementarity and Gender Theory

Pope Francis is opposed to gender theory, same-sex marriages, and women's sexual health and reproductive rights. While Pope Francis's first Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is widely celebrated for highlighting the realities of ecological challenges, its opposition to gender theory is apparent:

valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it (LS Para. 155).

The retention of complementarity in *Laudato Si'* seems to address eco-feminist arguments that link environmental degradation to gender exploitation. It is from this perspective that he addresses sexual health and reproductive rights: 'Since everything is interrelated, [complementary], concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion' (LS Par. 120).

Unlike in *Laudato Si'* where complementarity is not highly highlighted, *Amoris Laetitia* dedicates various paragraph to the 'ideology of gender':

[Men] play an equally decisive role in family life, particularly with regard to the protection and support of their wives and children... Many men are conscious of the importance of their role in the family and live their masculinity accordingly. The absence of a father gravely affects family life and the upbringing of children and their integration into society. This absence, which may be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, deprives children of a suitable father figure (AL Par. 55).

To Pope Francis, the family is not a social construct. Rather it is heteronormatively defined – father, mother and children. Since feminist and gender theory challenges this patriarchal definition of the family, the Vatican views it as a threat to the future of the human race. Pope Francis argues:

The weakening of this maternal presence with its feminine qualities poses a grave risk to our world. I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities – motherhood in particular – also grant duties, because womanhood also entails a specific mission in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all (AL Par. 173).

Although *Amoris Laetitia* is about 'the joy of love,' Pope Francis limits love in the family to heterosexual contracts. Same-sex unions, he argues, threaten marriage since:

only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life. *We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions, may not simply be equated with marriage.* No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society (AL Par 52).

The acknowledgement of 'great variety of family situations' has been positively interpreted as endorsing same-sex marriages. But such claims ignore the Vatican's views on homosexuality as discussed below.

## The Vatican on Homosexuality

In the wake of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009, the Holy See at the UN released its short historic statement on homosexuality on December 10, 2009:

The Holy See continues to oppose all grave violations of human rights against homosexual persons, such as the use of death penalty, torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. The Holy See also opposes all forms of violence and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons, including discriminatory penal legislation which undermines the inherent dignity of the human person. ...The murder and abuse of homosexual persons are to be confronted on all levels, especially when such violence is perpetuated by the state. We continue to call on all states and individuals to respect the rights of all persons and to work to promote their inherent dignity and worth (Bené 2009).

In contrast, however, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved (Catechism, 2357).

What sets the Vatican apart from African Roman Catholic opposition to homosexuality is the acknowledgement of the biological, historical, anthropological and cultural existence of same-sex loving people 'through the centuries' (Catechism, 2357). Yet these realities are ignored in favor of the Bible, complementarity, and natural law. Involuntary chastity is the answer to such individuals, whether Christian or not (Catechism, 2359).

Moreover, while the Vatican does not explain how sexual minorities can carry out God's will amidst criminalization, it nonetheless contends that same-sex unions are not marriages or families. As Pope Francis wrote in *Amoris Laetitia*, echoing numerous documents produced by his predecessors:

[T]here are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family. It is unacceptable 'that local Churches should be subjected to pressure in this matter and that international bodies should make financial aid to poor countries dependent on the introduction of laws to establish 'marriage' between persons of the same sex' (AL Par. 251).

Here Pope Francis highlights the global South Bishops' neo-colonial claim to the imposition of homosexuality on non-Western countries by donor nations. According to *The New York Post*, this paragraph is from global South Catholic bishops, who 'were irate at foreign governments and aid organizations that insist on equal treatment of gay people as a condition for financial aid' (Goodstein 2016).

In Africa, this neocolonial claim is often accompanied with the externalization of homosexuality – it is alien to African culture and values (Kaoma 2009, 2012, 2013). After the passage of Nigeria's anti-gay law in 2014, for example, Roman Catholic Bishops commended President Goodluck Jonathan 'for fighting the conspiracy of the developed world to make our country and continent the dumping ground for the promotion of all immoral practices that have continued to debase the purpose of God for man in the area of creation and morality, in their own countries.' Similarly Ugandan Roman Catholic bishops thanked President Yoweri Museveni for signing the anti-gay bill in 2014, which sought to expand the criminalization of homosexuality. In Cameroon, Victor Tonyé Mbakot, the archbishop of Yaoundé, and Cardinal Christian Wiyghan Tumi mobilized the anti-homosexual and anti-abortion crusade, which catalysed the public's externalization of homosexuality and abortion (Awondo 2016). In 2014, Roman Catholic bishops from Malawi, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, Eritrea, Zambia, Uganda and Ethiopia jointly advocated for the criminalization of same sex unions that are unnatural and alien to African cultures.<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to treat such statements as oppositional to the Vatican's stance on homosexuality. Yet they reflect the Vatican's contradictory views on the same.

Finally, for the Vatican to call on politicians and anti-sexual rights activists to stop any advancement in same-gender rights while opposing all forms of violence and unjust discrimination is an oxymoron. Despite such ambiguity, the Vatican's position fits into Meredith Weiss's (2013) argument on 'anticipatory' or 'pre-emptive' legislations: passing laws that bar same-sex couples from marriage and the adoption of children without decriminalization of sexual orientation and gender identity. But it also justifies perpetual criminalization of sexual orientation and gender identity as an act of family and child protection as the Kenyan case shows.

## **The Vatican and Secular Policy in Africa – the Case of Kenya**

The drafting of Kenya's *National Family Promotion and Protection Policy* (NFPPP) illustrates Mary Anne Case's argument about the Vatican's goal of influencing secular law and policy. Aside from ensuring that the Vatican's claim that 'life begins at conception' is enshrined in African national constitutions (Kaoma 2012), in Kenya, the Vatican's teachings found their way into the NFPPP spearheaded by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. Intended to block advancements in sexual and gender rights, the draft document presented at the African Regional Conference on Families in Nairobi, on September 23, 2016, the

<sup>2</sup> Lusaka Times, 'Catholic Church Condemns Homosexuality,' July 29, 2014. <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2014/07/29/catholic-church-condemns-homosexuality/>. Accessed October 12, 2016.

policy repeatedly cites the Vatican's statements without saying so. On gender, it reads:

The challenge is posed by the various forms of the ideology of gender that denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. (Slide 20)

*Amoris Laetitia* reads,

Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. (AL Par. 50).

On Religion and Culture, the Kenyan Policy states:

Throughout the centuries, different religions maintain their constant teaching on marriage and family by promoting the dignity of marriage and family and defining marriage as a community of life and love. (Slide 14).

The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops reads,

Throughout the centuries, the Church has maintained her constant teaching on marriage and family. ...promoting the dignity of marriage and the family (Par 16).

On the media, it reads,

The media have the capacity to do grave harm to families by presenting an inadequate or even deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality. If this power by the media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully. (Slide 14).

Pope John Paul II's Message for 2004 World Communications Day reads,

Yet these same media also have the capacity to do grave harm to families by presenting an inadequate or even deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality. This power either to reinforce or override traditional values like religion, culture, and family was clearly seen by the Second Vatican Council, which taught that if the media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully.

Whereas the meeting was sponsored by US-based anti-gay and anti-abortion group World Congress of Families, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the archdiocese of Nairobi and the Evangelical Alliance, the employment of the Vatican's teachings in what is meant to be a secular policy is an excellent example of how the Roman Catholic Church is purposefully driving its agenda in Africa. On the continent where religion is a given, African bishops are jointly

working with Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Protestants and other faiths to ensure the perpetual criminalization of sexual orientation and abortion.

## Sexual politics Across Continental Boundaries

Case, Garbagnoli, Fassin, and Pecheny, Jones and Ariza independently speak to the resurgence of religion in sexual politics. African Christianity continues to grow at an intense rate – from 10 million in 1910 to over 633 million adherents by 2025 – shifting the center of global Christianity to Africa (Johnson and Ross 2010). With 42% of Evangelical leaders self-identifying as Pentecostalism (Pew Forum 2011), US-influenced Christianity is growing in political influence on the continent (Kalu 2008: 190; Kaoma 2015). This surge in Evangelical Christianity, however, is clashing with the global post-modern appeal to human rights and secularism. Gender theory may threaten the assumed sanctity of sexuality, but it is also foundational to the realization of human rights.

The contestation of sexuality and gender is informed by specific socio-cultural and historical realities. In this regard, a nuanced approach is critical to the examination of sexual politics across continental boundaries.

First, although opposition to gender theory features in Roman Catholic public discourse on sexual rights, it is not at the forefront of African sexual politics. Unlike in France and Italy where ‘gender’ is said to be foreign, in Africa, it is positively acclaimed – with many countries having ‘The Ministry of Gender’ as a cabinet position. Africa’s opposition to the 1995 Beijing conference, for example, is blamed on unqualified ‘human rights’ which are perceived to blur the gender roles of men and women. In this case, human and gender rights disrupt traditional relationship between genders. Like the Vatican, in Africa gender liberation implies upholding socially defined gender roles. From President Museveni of Uganda to Yahya Jammeh (the former president) of the Gambia to Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, homosexuality and gender theory are mocked on the premise of reversing or compromising gender roles.

Second, the wider suspicion of human rights in Africa unites diverse political and religious actors in sexual politics. Since ‘human rights’ are generally assumed to imply sexual permissiveness and secularism, Africans employ culture and religion in attempts to externalize homosexuality. In Zambia, for example, religious leaders opposed the Bill of Rights and the ‘anti-discrimination clause’ in the national constitution on the premise that they would open the nation to ‘special’ human rights for LGBTQ individuals. Since culture controls the perception of right and wrong, gender theory like postcolonial theory destabilizes assumed unchallengeable powers of culture and religion. In this regard, homosexuality is said to be unnatural, unAfrican, unchristian, unIslamic and ultimately foreign.

Third, the growth of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity *vis-à-vis* the opposition to homosexuality is visible on the continent. Since the 1970s, American founded Churches have experienced rapid growth. With this growth, however, comes political power – making the Evangelicals/Pentecostals critical political actors in national politics (Kaoma 2015). Opposition to homosexuality and abortion, however, is shared by mainline Protestant Churches (Anglican, Methodists, etc.) as well. Hence Roman Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals/Pentecostals and Muslims are unified in their opposition to homosexuality and abortion. The

situation is different in Argentina, where religion seems to play a minimal role in sexual politics. This difference is reflected in the Pew Forum global study of Evangelical leaders who attended the 2010 Lausanne Congress in Cape Town.<sup>3</sup> It found that the majority of global Evangelicals are opposed to homosexuality and abortion (Pew Forum 2011: 20). Nonetheless, 51% of Evangelical leaders from Latin America approved of homosexuality. In contrast, 87 % of the North American leaders and over 95 % of Africans are opposed to homosexuality (Pew Forum 2011: 30). This observation, however, does not explain why Evangelical/Pentecostals in Latin America are accommodating to homosexuality while remaining unmoved on abortion.

Fourth, *protective homophobia* – the claim to protect culture, national identity, and children from the foreign homosexual agenda is another shared element in sexual politics. Aside from confirming Fassin's argument on how opposition to homosexuality is framed as defending marriage, and children, recent anti-gay laws in Africa are said to protect children and cultural identity.

Besides, opposition to comprehensive sexuality education is not limited to France but extends to Africa. The belief that the United Nations, Euro-American nations and Western civil society organizations are imposing a radical agenda alien to African cultural values is widely held. Yet historical study shows that abortion and birth control were practiced in pre-colonial Africa. In their 1915–1920 research on the Ila people of Zambia, Edwin W. Smith and Andrew M. Dale attest to traditional methods of abortion and birth control: 'There are several apparently efficient abortifacient in use among these people' (Smith and Dale 1920a: 250). After describing the methods employed to delay pregnancy or to abort, they assert,

These are used by girls; by women who do not want to lose their husbands' attentions through being pregnant; by women who through anger or dislike of their husbands do not want to bear children; and by a woman who becomes pregnant when suckling a baby (*Ibid*).

Against claims that women bodily autonomy is foreign to Africa, Ila women controlled their own bodies.

Moreover, many African nations subscribe to the Maputo Protocol – the African Union agreement that accords sexual health and reproductive rights to women. The Protocol's demand for abortion rights, however, is overshadowed by constitutional ambiguities that define life as 'beginning at conception,' while allowing abortion under medical recommendation. Yet 11 African countries outlaw abortion without exception, while 36 nations allow the termination of pregnancy on certain conditions (only Zambia allows abortion for socioeconomic reasons), and Cape Verde, South Africa, Mozambique and

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<sup>3</sup> A brain child of U.S. Evangelist Billy Graham, the Congress on World Evangelization is a global movement of evangelicals which seeks to evangelize the entire world. The first Congress is identified with the host city of Lausanne, Switzerland, where the first meeting was held in July 1974. Among the famous speakers were U.S. evangelical leaders Francis Schaeffer, Ralph Winter, Carl Henry, and Church of England evangelical John Stott. Lausanne II was held in July 1989 in Manila, Philippines. Lausanne III was held in Cape Town, South Africa in October 2010. For details see <https://www.lausanne.org/about-the-movement>.

Tunisia permit abortion without restrictions. According to the Guttmacher Institute, from 2010–2014, about 8.3 million abortions were induced in Africa,<sup>4</sup> and 97% of them were unsafe abortion. In addition to costing Africa US\$380 million annually on treatment for unsafe abortion-related complications, non-medical termination of pregnancy contribute up to 14% of maternal deaths on the continent (Spooner 2014). Because abortion is very common, however, it is not as volatile as homosexuality in Africa's sexual politics. In most cases, abortion is cited in the context of homosexuality – the global North homosexual agenda promotes abortion (Kaoma 2014).

Fifth, the concept of 'complementarity' seems to direct religious and cultural opposition to homosexuality in Africa. Whereas Mary Anne Case explores its history in Vatican documents, in Africa, complementarity seems to find support in various African ontologies which view procreation as the goal of human sexuality (McQuillan 2004; Zahan 1970: 10). In this worldview, to be a man or a woman is to procreate. Does this suggest that same-gender relations are foreign to pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa? Smith and Dale (1920a) suggest otherwise. In precolonial Zambia, they argue, heterosexual sexual intercourse was prohibited during certain community rituals. Among the Ila of colonial Zambia, a male doctor chose another man as *mwinangu* (wife), who cooked for him during the ritual period. Smith and Dale, however, note that such husband/wife relation had nothing to do with sex – thus 'it meant no more than that' (1920a: 207). In their second volume, however, they confront the issue of transgender identity: 'Instances of sexual inversion are known, but whether congenital or acquired it is impossible to say. We have known of only one man who dressed always as a woman, did woman's work such as plaiting baskets, and lived and slept among, but not with, the women. This man was a *mwaami* ('a prophet')' (1920b: 74).

Six, social movement theory can aid the examination of sexual politics in Africa and elsewhere. Social movements mobilize political responses from social actors with the goal of defending or changing the existent social order. Understanding the Vatican's anti-gender theory activism from this perspective can shed light on Roman Catholic-influenced secular sexual politics. Aside from uniting various groups with diverse interests such as politicians, pro-life, and anti-gay activists, the Vatican seeks to transform the secular landscape in which sexual politics is contested – in this case legal instruments both locally and globally. The Vatican scholars are movement intellectuals who craft intellectual strategies for social and ideological mobilization against gender theory. Garbagnoli speaks to this role when she argues that Pontifical Councils' consultants and experts were behind the 'two syntagmas – 'gender ideology' and 'gender theory'– in which the terms 'theory' and 'ideology' are programmatically used as synonyms' (191). Regardless, the Vatican has successfully provided the sociopolitical narrative through which gender theory or gender ideology is contested and appropriated in secular sexual politics as the Kenyan case reveals.

Seventh, Garbagnoli's discourse of 'ideological colonization' speaks to sexual politics in Africa. The Vatican perception of gender as grounded in the biological sexual identity, male or female is not just appropriated in African sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Guttmacher, 'Fact Sheet, Abortion in Africa, Incidence and Trends,' May 2016 <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/facts-abortion-africa>. October 16, 2016.

politics, but also employed to denounce same-gender relations. Nonetheless, ideological colonization should move beyond gender – it extends to Christianity as a colonial project. As Kaoma and Chalwe (2016: 178–179) argue, Africans rejected colonialism, but not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is now Africanized and nationalized – with many African countries self-identifying as Christian nations.

Finally, Pope Paul VI 1968 Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*'s characterization of contraception, sterilization, and abortion as intrinsically evil still influences Roman Catholic sexual politics in Africa. Despite the HIV crisis, the Vatican demeans condoms but promotes 'natural family planning' and abstinence only programs. Behind this opposition is the distrust of gender theory. That said, the Vatican's failure to acknowledge the public health context in which *Humanae Vitae* was born ignores the fact that a generation of young people who were born HIV positive and are now sexually active exists on the continent. To ignore this public health reality in the name of opposing gender ideology is immoral!

## Conclusion

The Vatican anti-gender theory activism aids the externalization of sexual orientation, abortion, and gender identity. Regardless of Pope Francis's progressive views on many fronts, he operates within the Vatican's contestation of gender theory or the ideology of gender. Whereas the Vatican's Christianity is foreign to Africa, it is pro-abortion, and LGBTQ advocacy which is projected as a threat to national identity, culture, and child welfare. It is important, nonetheless, to note that the Vatican's anti-gender theory global reach operates within the religious landscape of global Christianity. Since the Roman Catholic Church understands itself as a global institution, anti-gay and pro-gay activists share tactics and resources beyond national and continental boundaries. Here the claim to the exportation of US culture wars to Africa and elsewhere must be tempered with the theological worldview that informs the Vatican and other Christian communities.

More studies, however, are needed to determine why religious leaders in Africa employ religion to oppose homosexuality, while their Argentinian counterparts do not. Moreover, the claim that LGBTQ persons, comprehensive sexuality education and gender theory are threats to children seems to have little traction in Argentina as opposed to Italy, France, and Africa. Although Pecheny, Jones and Ariza point to secularization, the distrust of religion and human rights, in Africa secularization and unqualified human rights are professed as part of the international gay agenda – they seek to destroy children, culture and religion. This is because the majority of Africans tend to be very religious. To conclude, human rights, the politics of colonial suspicion, the defense of children, religion, and romanticized African traditional culture drive African sexual politics.

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