

# Becoming good in Africa: A critical appraisal of Stanley Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic in the sub-Saharan context

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The present article examines the appropriateness of Stanley Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic for the sub-Saharan African churches. Thus, it consists in a Christian ethical assessment of the metaethical foundational categories of his ecclesial ethic. In brief, his proposal is eclectic and pluri-disciplinarily applicable to the churches of various denominations. It reflects the marks of the Aristotelian ethical tradition endorsed by Thomas Aquinas and recovered by several communitarian philosophers. It also includes some discernible ecclesio-centric and post-liberal theological accents. The promising insights of this proposal include: (1) the necessity to ordain the church's worship, polity and its entire way of life to the spiritual and moral formation of church members; (2) the stress on Christian virtuous life, identity formation, witness and non-conformism in social ethics. However, essentially designed against the background of a Western, liberal, autonomous and individualist self, Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic is not a definitive answer for the holistic, normative and communalist moral self, characteristic of the traditional African ethos and influencing a large majority in Africa. Moreover, it stresses the purity of the church in a way that restricts cooperation between Christians and non-Christians for socio-economic justice and the common good.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Therefore, Hauerwas' virtue, narrative, community and social ethics provide some valuable insights for moral formation in African churches as it explores the interplay between ecclesiology, Christian ethics, practical theology and philosophical ethics. For sure, other relevant resources should come from African spirituality, developmental psychology and sociology of religion.

## Introduction

Churches in sub-Saharan Africa serve within a context characterised by a moral decline which requires an efficient moral regeneration (Van der Walt 2003:52). For at least three main reasons, they should not evade, but rather take their responsibility of moral formation seriously. Sociologically, Christianity is the majority religion in the region (Barrett, Kurian & Johnson 2001:321–323), and thus Christians are more or less part and parcel of the very acute moral crisis prevailing in their societies. Historically, church denominations are traditionally known as institutions of moral formation *par excellence* through their Sunday services, schools, youth and women movements, etc. At the theological level, the church, according to the Scripture is 'intrinsically a community of moral formation' (Best & Robra 1997:24, 50). In this perspective, the critical need for a biblically sound, theologically and ethically coherent and contextually relevant paradigm for the church cannot be overlooked if the churches in Africa are willing to take seriously their inescapable commitment to moral formation.

With this in mind, the article turns to the pioneering work of the leading American theologian and ethicist Stanley Martin Hauerwas who has seriously dealt with the relation between ecclesiology and ethics. Since the 1980s, South African scholars have manifested a great interest in his recovery of virtue ethics (e.g. Koopman 2000; Richardson 1986; Strauss 1997; Vosloo 1994). However, it is a fair presumption that Hauerwas' proposal on ecclesial ethics constructed against the contemporary American background might not be fully appropriate for an African context. It is the aim of the article to substantiate this presumption. The present article first briefly indicates that Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic is an eclectic and pluri-disciplinary proposal. Secondly, it describes the metaethical foundational categories of his ecclesial ethic. Thirdly, it spells out the difference between the American and the African contexts to substantiate the claim that his proposal pre-eminently addresses the American socio-cultural context. The two last sections entail the critical appraisal of

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Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic by displaying promising and inadequate aspects for an African context.

## An eclectic and pluri-disciplinary proposal

Hauerwas has not drawn his ecclesial ethic on one theological tradition but rather on some ecclesial traditions, theological strands and philosophical theories and even on his own family background. He is the son and grandson of bricklayers and he grew up within an Evangelical Methodist family. There he first learned, outside of formal school settings, at least three important tenets of his ecclesial ethic: the significance of community, the Methodist emphasis on sanctification and perfection and moral formation as craft through apprenticeship to a master (Hauerwas 2010:27–37). This opened the doors for a future exploration of the Aristotelian and Thomist themes of character and virtue in dialogue with the Calvinist-Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification. Also, the Hauerwasian ecclesial ethic integrates with the Methodist sanctificationism, Roman Catholic sacramentalism and Anabaptist social critique.

At the theological level, Hauerwas' proposal bears the profound imprints of Karl Barth's essential relationship between ecclesiology and ethics, his stress on the church's witness and anti-liberalism as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's passion for church community life. Equally important is John Yoder's understanding of the confessing and non-Constantinian church and his Christological and eschatological radical pacifism. In addition, Hauerwas' proposal consists in the reaffirmation of scriptural narratives gained from post-liberal theology coupled with its non-foundationalist, intratextual, communitarian, historicist and ecumenical stances. In this perspective, it is influenced by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck's narrative theology and James McClendon's teachings on discipleship through local saints.

At the philosophical level, Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic endorses the Alasdair MacIntyre's concepts of virtue ethics, his critique of the Enlightenment project and its correlative rejection of modern and universalist ethical theories. This endorsement has been enriched with insights from Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and anti-foundationalism, Iris Murdoch's aesthetic ethics and Charles Taylor's communitarianism and critique of modern secularism. At the psychological level, Hauerwas' (1981a:129–152) ecclesial ethic rejects the theories of cognitive moral development elaborated by scholars such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson and especially Lawrence Kohlberg as well as James Fowler. This rejection is to secure the particularism of his ecclesial ethic drawn on the insights from Barth, Wittgenstein and post-liberal theology and seen as antithetical to universalist ethical theories underlying psychological developmentalism.

## Metaethical foundational categories

The Hauerwasian proposal encompasses the six interrelated concepts of the Aristotelian and MacIntyrean ethical

paradigm, namely tradition, *telos*, community, narrative, practices and virtues or character. Unlike MacIntyre who is working in moral philosophy, Hauerwas, as a theological ethicist, singles out the church as the community of virtue and discipleship where the Aristotelian and MacIntyrean themes endowed with their theological dimensions must be lived out (Hauerwas 2010:160–161). As a whole, his ecclesial ethic is made of some aspects of virtue or character ethics, narrative ethics and community ethics as well as social ethics.

### Virtue or character ethics

The ethics of character promoted by Hauerwas since the beginning of his theological project shifts the ethical reflection from the question, 'What should I do?' to 'What should I be?' or 'What kind of person should I be?' (Hauerwas 1981a:271). Thus, it is intended to take seriously the identity of moral agents and their moral growth rather than being only focused on decision-making as do most of modern ethical theories. According to Hauerwas (1985 [1975]:29), 'the idea of character provides the means to discuss with rigor and discipline the moral formation of the subjective'.

Moral formation is the process of acquiring character and virtues. Character (*ethos*) is not 'the simple sum' but 'a particular "mix" or connection between the various virtues characteristic of any one person's life pattern' (Hauerwas 1985 [1975]:75–76). As a matter of fact, a person can exhibit virtues or qualities such as humility, honesty, kindness and courage, but being a 'person of virtue or character' implies 'a self formed in a more fundamental and substantive manner than the individual virtues seem to denote' (Hauerwas 1981a:112).

Following Aristotle's contention in his Book One of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hauerwas and Pinches (1997:17–26) stress that virtues are to be learned and developed over time and through practices, including the one of deliberation, throughout the journey of moral life. They 'are rooted in the self through habits' or can be thought of as 'certain kinds of habits' (Hauerwas 1981a:261 n.5, 1985 [1975]:69).

Hauerwas and Pinches (1997:41–42, 44) advocate the concept of 'Christianly considered virtues' as they associate Christian virtues with a specific *telos* and particular practices, narratives and communities. Therefore, Christian virtues are different from Aristotelian accounts as well as other ancient and modern accounts of virtues. The *telos* of Aristotelian virtues is *eudaimonia*, happiness as the 'highest good attainable by action' (cf. Aristotle 1962:1095a20–30). But they follow Aquinas (1952:I–II, 65, 5) who speaks of '*caritas*, or a certain friendship with God' as the Christian ultimate end for human beings (Jn 15:14–15). Drawing on Milbank (1990:363–364), Hauerwas and Pinches (1997:6566) point out that the virtuous life in the ancient Greece was always ordered to heroism, conquering and war, that is, to a *telos* involving 'the practices and perfection of the virtues of conflict', whereas Christian charity consists in community and mutuality as 'the Christian church brings to the world the possibility of true peace'.

In the Hauerwasian perspective, a thorough account of character and virtue for moral formation cannot be divorced from vision and description underlying an essential and appropriate view of 'ethics as aesthetics' (Hauerwas 1983:30). Following Murdoch (1964:343–380), he states that '[t]he moral life is thus as much a matter of vision as it is matter of doing' (Hauerwas 1981b [1974]:66). Hence, his oft-repeated statement: 'we can only act within a world we can see and we can only see the world rightly by being trained to see' (Hauerwas 1981b [1974]:29).

### Narrative ethics

In the 1980s, Hauerwas revised his understanding of character. He (1998:95) moved from the concept of 'the self as agent' to that of 'the self as story' in order to stress the significance of habituation and the centrality of narratives and tradition that constitute people's lives. Thus, character and virtues are related to a concept of 'social self', which requires a narrative construal and includes a sense of tradition and history (Thompson 2003:5). He conceives of narrative as a valuable kind of rationality that takes into account the historical, social and practical nature of moral reason (Hauerwas 1977:9). Unlike theory and foundational explanations, narrative is not meant to merely help know the world, but it qualifies people's moral vision: it determines the mode of description by helping people deal with the world by changing it through changing themselves (Hauerwas 1977:73).

Following MacIntyre (1984:218, 221), actions are 'enacted narratives' and the narrative of one's 'life is but part of an interlocking set of narratives embedded in the story of those communities from which [*people derive their*] identity' (Hauerwas 2004:140). In the particular case of Christian community, believers are called to learn, appropriate and absorb, practise and conform their lives to God's stories or the stories of Israel and Jesus. For the formation of truthful lives, Christians also need to test and continue to be tested by these stories (Hauerwas 1981a:96).

With Will Willimon, Hauerwas (1989:72) defines tradition as 'a complex, lively argument about what happened in Jesus that has been carried on, across the generations, by a concrete body of people called church'. They add that traditions shape the self and thoughts of Christians in that 'the individual virtues are specific skills required to live faithful to a tradition's understanding of the moral project in which its adherents participate' (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:100).

### Community ethics

'Having character' requires that the agent be put 'in the context of a community from which he draws his moral norms, values, and direction; for Christians [*this consists in*] being a people constituted in a church' (Hauerwas 1985 [1975]:17). Character formed in the church community gives to Christians their 'primary orientation' (Hauerwas 1977:9). As social beings, 'the kind of character' people have is the

one 'relative to the kind of community from which [*they inherit their*] primary symbols and practices' (Hauerwas 1985 [1975]:231).

In the church, Christians are morally formed through communal practices like preaching, baptism, Eucharist, liturgy and worship. Even 'seemingly insignificant practices' such as church-going, sexual abstinence, marital fidelity and truth-telling can be instrumental for moral formation (Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:18, 92). Practices include various demonstrations of faith through inter-personal deeds like caring for the sick, hospitality to strangers, generosity to the poor, suffering and faithfulness to the Gospel as well as social activities like peace-making, non-violence, non-resistance to suffering and death generated by evil powers (Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:124; Hauerwas & Pinches 1997:69). Practices 'name the on-going habits' forming a Christian community; they embody, extend, sustain and give proper content to virtues (Hauerwas 2004:156). They form the virtues and *vice versa* as they give rise to institutions sustaining the virtues (MacIntyre 1984:194–195).

In an Aristotelian way, it is inadequate to perceive moral formation as a democratic endeavour because morality is not autonomous but rather 'craft-like' by its nature (Hauerwas 1991:101–102). Like the arts, character formation requires training, initiation, imitation, emulation and habituation, and thus it supposes a community of masters and apprentices. In the church, the masters are pastors, leaders and the saints. The saints are 'palpable, personal examples of the Christian faith' who demonstrate the truthfulness of the Christian narratives and nearly represent Christian identity (Hauerwas 1977:80, 1983:70–71). They are not only ancient and universal but also contemporary and local virtuous Christians (Hauerwas 2011:257). Unlike the arts where the emphasis may be put only on the quality, the goodness and beauty of the product, a virtuous life takes into account both the sort of person and the acts performed in a way that the agent and the virtuous acts cannot be separated (Aristotle 1962:1105a22, 1105a26–35; cf. Hauerwas 2004:157).

Like Wittgenstein, MacIntyre and Lindbeck, Hauerwas emphasises the critical significance of language for moral formation. 'Language is a set of practices rather than a collection of words' which is necessary for being a person of virtue because this status 'involves linguistic skills' (Hauerwas 1981a:115; Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:59). Besides, 'learning to be moral is much like learning to speak a language' (Hauerwas 1997:2–3). Therefore, Christian discipleship entails the initiation into Christian narrative and learning a new language (Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:59). With the joint application of Murdochian and Wittgensteinian insights, Hauerwas insists that our vision must be trained through Christian stories and language in the community of the church. Through this training to 'see by learning to say', Christians acquire distinctive descriptions to name issues of moral controversy in their societies (Hauerwas 1994:7). For example, such trained Christians will adopt the language

of 'abortion', 'suicide' and 'promiscuity', which are determinative and congruent to the narratives of their community as opposed to the descriptions of 'termination of pregnancy', 'life termination' and 'sexuality' (Hauerwas 2000:48, 2001:611).

## Social ethics

In his *The Peaceable Kingdom*, while attempting to clarify his account of Christian social ethics, Hauerwas (1983) states:

I am in fact challenging the very idea that Christian social ethics is primarily an attempt to make the world more peaceable or just. Put starkly, *the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church—the servant community.* (p. 99, *author's own emphasis added*)

This often-repeated and very controversial statement contradicts the tradition of Christian social ethics developed in the USA emphasising the church's responsibility towards the larger society. To this widely held construal Hauerwas proposes the concept of the church as an *alter civitas* ('alternative political community') and a related account of character moral formation where to some extent moral formation in the church becomes a Christian social ethic.

The church's primary social strategy consists in being a community of peace and servanthood committed to the politics of the Gospel in contrast to the subtle violence and coercion found in the wider society (e.g. the American liberal and capitalist democracy) (Hauerwas 1983:99, 102). To illustrate, moral formation as social ethic requires the development of a servant and spiritual leadership in the church committed to humility, truth-telling and encouraging kindness, trust, friendship, mutual dependence and the formation of families (Hauerwas 1981a:11). Another example is about the church government. 'How the church governs herself', says Hauerwas, 'is crucial to what kind of social ethics she is' (Hauerwas 1977:143). Equally important for the church's social ethic is the economic life of the church involving moral formation in the community concerning the use of possessions, and the choice of economic professions because 'not all professions and roles of a society [should] be open to the Christian's participation' (Hauerwas 1977:143). A further example is moral formation about the care of 'the stranger and the neighbour' (Hauerwas 1977:143).

## A proposal essentially designed for an American context

Central to Hauerwas' proposal is his intimate and bold conviction that ethics, whether Christian or secular, is traditioned, storied and community-based and contextual (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:101–102). In other words, there is no universal ethic, but only a qualified one because 'the very nature and structure of ethics is determined by the particularities of a community's history and convictions' (Hauerwas 1983:1). Moreover, endorsing the MacIntyrean tenet of 'ethics as sociology', he holds that '[n]o ethics is formulated in isolation from the social conditions of its time' (Hauerwas 1981b [1974]:48; cf. MacIntyre 1984:23).

Accordingly, the Hauerwasian proposal is first and foremost a response to American socio-political and religious ethical challenges. Hauerwas' virtue, character or visional ethic is meant to curb his perceived lack of formation of virtuous people in capitalist, liberal and democratic America where people are being lured into the pursuit of hedonist happiness. His narrative ethic stands as a corrective to the primacy of Christian doctrines and divine command ethics related to fundamentalist literal, grammatico-historical conservative or critico-literary Mainline Protestant interpretations of the Bible as source of moral knowledge (Hauerwas 1981a:57, 1993:15–18). Both his narrative and community ethics target natural law and creation ethics, priced respectively in Roman Catholic tradition and Protestant theology. In Hauerwas' (1983:61, 63) assessment, they dilute Christian ethics into human ethics or a minimalist ethic. Hauerwas' (1983:26) ecclesial ethic is also meant to curb an understanding of Christian faith limited to assent, intellectual adherence to beliefs or doctrines without a corresponding performance or Christian life.

At the same time, the Hauerwasian ecclesial ethic alludes to individualism, secularism and moral relativism as well as materialism and consumerism fostered by a liberalist and Enlightenment cultural background with corresponding views on the church membership and modern ethical theories. Seen as a voluntary association, the church cannot expect a faithful membership and committed loyalty. Universal ethical theories, like the deontological and utilitarian ones, based on the individualist choice and decision-making of an unnumbered autonomous subject, are widely praised (Hauerwas 1981a:117–121). Of note, the Hauerwasian ecclesial ethic is also an intended response to cognitive moral development theories like the one of Kohlberg based on universal ethical theories (Hauerwas 1981a:129–152).

In brief, Hauerwas' proposal addresses the American ethical culture, which predominantly underwrites an understanding of the moral self in terms of Western liberal, rational, autonomous, solipsistic, atomistic and individualist views. In contrast, the traditional communalism is acknowledged as a more deep-rooted and influential mindset in African rural and urban areas. Even in the lives of many Western-educated Africans lies a holistic, normative, communal and fully integrated understanding of the self. Hence, the predominant mode of African ethics built on holism, vitalism, spiritualism is communalistic, tribalistic, humanistic and pragmatic (Ikuenobe 2006:57; Richardson 2009:44).

Hauerwas' understanding of 'the church as a social ethic' paradigm is levelled at American churches' and Christian social strategies characterised by an exceptionally vibrant socio-political mobilisation labelled under the Yoderian designation of 'Constantinianism', the subservience of the churches to America, an idolatrous nationalism and the reduction of Christianity to a civil religion (Hauerwas 2001:473–479).

In Africa, dictatorship, pseudo-democracy and neo-patrimonialism are widespread phenomena, if not the sole modes of political life. A capitalist and neo-liberal economic system is urged by international financial organisations, but locally, the popular pressure reflects a particular interest in welfare economy mixed with market economy (Uwizeyimana 2012:148–149).

Churches in Africa are broadly characterised by poor political participation. It is useful to view the vigorous anti-colonialist and anti-apartheid political mobilisation of the 1970s to 1990s in Southern Africa as a relatively localised and non-permanent phenomenon. Usually, churches only speak up sporadically and prophetically at critical times like civil wars, national elections, natural ecological disasters and epidemics (e.g. through pastoral letters of Roman Catholic bishops; joint ecumenical messages to the nation, denominational declarations, etc.). The prevalent dualistic sacred-profane view strongly maintains African churches in escapism, pietism, ecclesiasticism and secularism, hence political demobilisation (Van der Walt 1999:3–22).

## A promising ecclesial ethics for an African context

In many ways, Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic is a viable and challenging framework for moral formation in an African context. It is useful to unfold some of its valuable insights structured in the lines of its metaethical categories.

### Virtue or character ethics

Hauerwas' (1981a:83, 86) recovery of virtue is very appealing for African churches as he has relentlessly taken seriously the church as a community of and 'school for virtue' *par excellence*. The stress on virtue ethics is a necessary corrective in moral formation in African churches for several reasons. Firstly, his proposal could relevantly contribute to curb the legacy of divisiveness of colonialism and apartheid in African churches. Unlike Aristotle who, with his emphasis on the *polis*, maintains a vision of a community of equal individuals sharing the same race, gender and social class, Hauerwas (1983:100) strongly recommends a church 'as the moral-forming community for the people of God that cuts across the barriers that divide us' (Reuschling 2008:62). The persistent, insidious, latent or open conflicts engendered by all kinds of divisions in African churches require the cultivation of relevant virtues like acceptance, self-esteem, humility and sacrifice as well as unconditional and fraternal love.

Secondly, a sound character formation is critically needed to overturn the overemphasis on divine command as the legacy of missionary moral teaching based on a list or catalogue of 'dos' and 'don'ts' that insists on the negative dimension of morality (sins) and seldom mentions its positive dimension (virtues). For this reason, traditional Africans who embrace Christianity encounter a morality seen as more legalistic than traditional African morality that is grounded in their community's narratives and envisioning abundant life

(Bujo 1990:40–41; Van der Walt 2003:64). Equally, attending to character formation is necessary because of the deontological prominence related to the observance of customs and taboos in African ethics focusing more 'on doing one's duty by being obedient to the demands posed by gods and the spirits of the ancestors' (Kunhiyop 2008:17).

### Narrative ethics

In Africa, the relevance of Hauerwas' methodology of story-telling cannot be overstated. It 'is a critically important aspect of a community's process of moral formation. Our narratives—the stories we live by—help us understand both our identity and our allegiances' (Cunningham 2008:65–66). In Africa, story-telling has always been the usual mode of moral education because the traditional African culture requires memory and remembrance. Experienced preachers know that their audiences are more captivated by stories than the mere systematic exposition in their sermons and teachings (Kunhiyop 2009:20, 68). Thus, stressing the significance of Biblical stories, the history of the church, the stories within people's own lives and their acquaintances within their socio-cultural environment that Hauerwas advocates could not be perceived as a foreign mode of moral formation in Africa. Through narrative ethics, the biographies of the church's martyrs and local saints, the lives of women and men of virtue like the famous Fathers of independence and other heroes of social and political movements as well as the glorious face of African history can vividly enlarge people's moral imagination and contribute to virtuous life.

### Community ethics

Hauerwas' community ethic is rooted in a profound and undeniable truth concerning the shaping of human beings through communities: 'Communities are the forms of our social relatedness and the material reality of the moral life' (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:19). His proposal is, to a large extent, a recovery of ancient Greek ethics. Central to classical Greek philosophical schools was being communities for 'the guidance of souls' or 'soulcraft' (*psygogogia*) with a correlative understanding of good philosophy as embodying a life of discipline and virtue (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:23). Similarly, his proposal is a recovery of early Judeo-Christian ethics. Hauerwas draws his understanding of conversion in terms of doctrinal, moral and identity formation through re-socialisation which is common to classical philosophical schools and New Testament communities. Early Christians – recognised as 'People of the Way' or a variant of Jewish community – endorsed the communal and Biblical images underlining Jewish ethics: 'Israel, family, kingdom, covenant, a banquet, one vine with many branches, a body with many parts, a chosen race and royal priesthood, etc.' (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:23–24, 26–27). In brief, the Hauerwasian view of community life is largely consistent with the practice of moral formation performed in early Christianity, which integrates moral formation and spiritual formation (Kretzschmar 2004:98).

Being under the influence of globalisation and Western individualism that invades the African church and fuels autonomous life and moral pluralism, a special attention is to be given to the Hauerwasian link between community, discipleship and discipline through morality as a craft. Firstly, Christians in African churches need the authority of pastors and elders and the critical presence of the saints who combine goodness to boldness and reject sentimentality as advocated by Hauerwas (1991:102–103). Secondly, they need not to adopt voluntarism and ostensibly proclaim their refusal of mutual accountability. Rather, they have to learn to be vulnerable to each other and should not apprehend all efforts of community discipline as bearing the odour of judgementalism, moralism or legalism (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:79). Third, the combined influence of the Western individualism that fosters the autonomous life and the traditional African background of Ubuntu, which praises social harmony, caring for others, sharing and mutual aid (Gyekye 1996:35), could tempt some people to seek togetherness and care in the church. However, their needs could be divorced from their real commitment and openness to discipline. Thus, embracing Hauerwas' (1991:93–111) vision of the church as 'a disciplined and disciplining community' is a promising way of enhancing a virtuous life in African churches. Equally relevant for the African church community is the use of the grammar of faith or adequate moral semantics – for example, abortion, suicide, promiscuity, prostitution, et cetera – to describe immoral conduct and discourage a lifestyle of irresponsible toleration and fostering virtuous life.

### Social ethics

The positive aspect of Hauerwas' social ethic for an African context is his particularly strong emphasis on the character formation of church members and on their role as faithful witnesses in the larger society. The church in Africa ought not to follow the trend discerned by Hauerwas in America where the church has 'despaired of being the church', and it has become 'unable' to provide a viable moral formation to its membership through 'preaching, baptism, and witness to form a visible community of faith' (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:80).

Hauerwas is urging the church to give priority to moral formation within its community rather than being concentrated on socio-political activism. The church envisioning social change should not overlook the fact that moral renewal should begin in its midst; in deed and words, in its polity and the whole way of life, the church should demonstrate the truthfulness of its narratives and doctrines. Hauerwas also convincingly directs attention to the fact that moral formation for social transformation is 'a long and exacting task' rather than 'a quick fix' because transforming the socio-political landscape requires moral formation in the church, school and family and other spheres and not just good laws and policies (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:121–122).

Accurately, Hauerwas, along with other Anabaptist theologians, has perceived the danger of the church's accommodation to the state. The Constantinian assumption can only at best turn the church into a follower of state agenda and at worse to a subservient servant obeying the dictates of the state. Rather, by serving the state on its own terms and according to its own identity and traditions the church can contribute to the welfare of the wider society and at the same time remain faithful to its core beliefs (Hunter 2010:283). Constructively, Hauerwas' approach directs attention to the fact that the church can serve the wider society by not necessarily using the state's political and juridical apparatus (Cunningham 2008: 257–258). His approach seems also relevant to curb the widespread tendency of statism found in Africa. Through statism, far too much has been and is still expected from the government, which is considered as an omnipresent direct controller and a providential provider in every situation and need (Van der Walt 1994:272).

### A partially adequate proposal for the African context

Despite the above-mentioned promising aspects, some limitations can be detected in each aspect of the Hauerwasian ecclesial ethic, namely virtue ethics, narrative ethics, community ethics and social ethics.

#### Virtue or character ethics

Not only Hauerwas asserts the priority of 'being' over 'doing' (or character over acts) in ethics, but also seems to overemphasise the significance of character. The place of actions in Christian morality should, however, not be downplayed. Christian faith requires that virtues be translated into actions. Moral actions significantly matter because they 'express and form our developing character and impact upon the world around us' (Connors & McCormick 1998:35–36). Accordingly, the Johannic parenthesis urges the community 'to not love with word or tongue but with actions and in truth' (1 Jn 3:18). Rightly, Oliver O'Donovan posits the epistemological priority of 'act' over 'character'. Virtue ethicists, like Hauerwas, following the Thomist view of dispositions generating character through habituation rightly assert, in contrast to behaviourist tendencies, that character is more irreducible and is not to be atomised. However, in Biblical categories, the heart which reflects one's character and where virtues reside is 'hidden from man's eyes until deeds and words declare it' (O'Donovan 1994:207). According to Jesus' teaching, trees are recognised by their fruits; likewise character is recognised through actions and deeds (Mt 7:17–20).

Also, Hauerwas overemphasises the significance of virtues to the detriment of rules, principles and norms. He (1983) attacks deontological and consequentialist theories because their:

concentration on obligations and rules as morally primary ignores the fact that action descriptions gain their intelligibility from the role they play in a community's history and therefore for individuals in that community. (p. 21)

For him, 'what we *are* is then ultimately what we *do*' all seems to be about virtue and character (Higginson 1988:124; emphasis original). However, people of virtue still need rules, principles and norms; their community's traditions would not be enough in some situations to determine which actions should be either prescribed or prohibited, either absolutely forbidden or allowed with some exceptions. Christians might confront situations which necessitate even a choice between virtues (Higginson 1988:126–127).

Hauerwas' concern for restoring the role of the agent seems to undermine the significance of decision-making and acts in ethical analysis. He is right in stressing that conviction, narrative and vision as well as character including virtue, motivation and intention should be included in moral analysis rather than being overlooked as it is the case in standard accounts (e.g. in deontological and consequential theories). However, as Dennis Hollinger (2002:58) points out, Hauerwas (1977:20) seems to go too far when he contends that 'it is character [...] that provides the context necessary to pose the terms of a decision, or to determine whether a decision should be made at all'.

### Narrative ethics

Because they ground morality on the distinctive virtues, narratives, beliefs, practices and polity of a given community, post-liberal theologians and communitarian ethicists, like Hauerwas, face the criticism of moral relativism (Fergusson 1998:6–7). Yet, one has to take note of Hauerwas' (2001:170) contention that he is not promoting 'a vicious relativism' because he recognises, to some extent, the virtue of principle ethics. He also posits some useful criteria by which one can appreciate a good story: unity, wholeness, consistence and integrity (Hauerwas 1977:15–39). Nonetheless, his proposal presents, as aptly termed by David Fergusson, an 'epistemological relativism'. He seems to fail to notice that truth is 'not relative to a particular framework, although knowledge thereof is available only to those who inhabit the framework' (Fergusson 1998:7). This epistemological position renders problematic the assessment of moral perception outside the Christian community. And it also denies the positive influence the expression of public theological views and moral persuasion could play in the larger society. In Africa, these two activities are necessary ingredients of a relevant moral formation in the church for the quest of common good.

This understanding of moral formation cannot adequately help the church community in Africa to be a place for moral deliberation and action regarding many critical social issues and requiring cooperation between Christians and non-Christians. These issues include 'poverty, inequality, land reform, affirmative action, racial conflict, xenophobia, violence and corruption, [...] to mention but a few' (De Villiers 2012:764). Hauerwas' proposal supposes that Christians ought to learn about social issues and formulate normative perspectives drawn from Christian narratives. However,

these perspectives could not be directed to the wider society at the same time; they could not be subjects for public theology, external prophetic pronouncements or cooperation between Christians and non-Christians. In this perspective, Hauerwas' community and narrative ethic reduces the scope of the formative role of the church based on moral action in the wider society (cf. Birch and Rasmussen 1989:120–40). His proposal fosters the Christian embodiment but does not stress a Christian vibrant involvement for the transformation of the wider society. For example, he urges believers to be in politics as Christians but without providing a thorough framework for this mission (Hauerwas 2001:525–526; Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:111, 115).

Because of the community-based and narrative-based ethics, Hauerwas accepts moral principles while he rejects universal codes or moral theories. He asserts that the narrative ethic that he puts in tandem with virtue or character ethics should not be perceived as an 'alternative to an ethic of obligation' (Hauerwas 2001:76). However, his particularist Christian ethic through the concept of 'Christianly considered virtue' demonstrates a serious limitation in the light of many problematic aspects of social traditions found in Africa. They include the status of women, the tradition of slave holding, racial and economic inequality, religious intolerance, domestic violence, social injustice, et cetera. For a thorough analysis and critique to be performed regarding these issues 'in the name of practical reason, this criticizing [...] will have to be done from a Kantian or Utilitarian viewpoint, not through an Aristotelian approach' (Nussbaum 1988:33).

### Community ethics

As a corrective to Western liberal individualism, Hauerwas' proposal by giving priority to the community over the individual may underscore certain negative side-effects of traditional African communalism in the church. In Africa, individualism is regarded as an imported predicament under the invasive influence of Western culture, whereas communalism is seen as the pervasive and deep-rooted value of the traditional African outlook (Gyekye 1996:36). Communalism in African cultures can, however, lead to 'an *over*appreciation of the community and the consequent *under*appreciation of the individual' (Van der Walt 1994:182; emphasis original). A sound Christian anthropology includes both communality and individuality as fundamental and complementary qualities of humanness. 'Neither can develop normally without the other', as Stuart Fowler, quoted by Van der Walt (1994:251), rightly stresses. Fowler pursues: 'A healthy community life will nurture the individuality of its members and a healthy individuality looks for fulfilment in communal life'. Hauerwas' proposal, strongly turning the attention to the community, does not sufficiently affirm the significance of the individual dimension in the Christian life. Biblical narratives, however, do not stress community at the expense of individuality (e.g. Lk 10:13–14. Jn 21:20, 21; 1 Cor 12:12–27; Rv 2, 3) (Van der Walt 1994:251).

In an African context, moral formation should also strongly nurture individuality to curb the negative side of African communalism that distorts people's lives. This includes social parasitism, evasion from personal responsibility and the lack of a spirit of openness, initiative and dynamism. Tolerance of views differing from one's own, group egoism and loyalty restricted to the church community, other religious groups, tribes, races or secular associations lengthen this list (Van der Walt 1994:182–183).

Hauerwas is not unaware that his communal ethic, upholding the authority of the church's tradition through pastors, other leaders and local saints, is formulated 'in America [where] all claims to authority cannot help appearing authoritarian' (Hauerwas 1998:199; Hauerwas & Willimon 1996:62). Although Hauerwas has nuanced his proposal through the accountability of leaders and a non-univocal discipline in the church, Jeffrey Stout (2003:66) still finds that this communitarian ethic 'tends, by default, to reinforce unjust arrangement'. The critique of the feminist theologian Gloria Albrecht (1995:225) is more incisive. She sees Hauerwas' communitarian ethic as patriarchal, oppressive and authoritarian.

In Africa, women seem to be only half-citizens and often suffer the distortions of patriarchy and discrimination in society. Actual authoritarian practices are not uncommon in the churches because of the missionary tradition and, over and above that, the background of the traditional religion (Nürnberg 2007:127–128). Scholars like Kwasi Wiredu, Didier Kaphagawani and Kwame Appiah assert that 'an essential and negative aspect of African communalism' is its 'epistemic, political and moral authoritarianism' (Ikuenobe 2006:176–177, 215). At root, for them, are the 'authoritarian dictates of tradition' and 'the gerontocratic tyranny' of elders viewed 'as the repositories of knowledge' (Ikuenobe 2006:175). In this context, the church does not need indoctrination but a cautious and humble exercise of authority open to the virtue of respectful and responsible freedom of expression.

### Social ethics

All things considered, Hauerwas' social ethic is first of all context specific, directed to an American church viewed as accommodationist or Constantinian towards its surrounding capitalist, liberal and democratic culture. For an African pluralist context and environment of pseudo-democracy, however, this particular understanding of social ethics presents several salient inadequacies. In Hauerwas' view, the church should provide political services to the wider society, 'the most important of which is the development of people of virtue' (Kotva 1996:36; cf. Hauerwas 1981a:3). In fairness, Hauerwas speaks of it as the primary social task of the church, meaning that this is not 'the church's only task. The church's participation in struggles for justice and freedom and dignity and respect and peace are taken for granted, rather than excluded' (Wells 2013:10).

However, seeking to alleviate the gross social plights in the name of Christian love to the neighbour by using the state political apparatus should not be considered as a secondary social ethical task of the church in Africa (Richardson 1997:383). Direct Christian political involvement (e.g. through lobbying and policy formation) that is neglected in Hauerwas' (1983:101) social ethic is of a crucial necessity in Africa in order to uproot and transform the social structures of injustice. This is a corrective to the traditional or missionary teaching of political apathy, which urges Christians to stay away from politics considered as an essentially dirty and sinful work. African churches and Christian living in almost totalitarian political regimes cannot leave the management of all the state resources and even their fate in the hands of unbelievers, nominal Christians and corrupted leaders (Kinoti 1994:83).

Hauerwas' (1983:104–105) social strategy of living 'out of control', being 'patient in the face of injustice' and accepting to 'be poor and powerless' by following the example of Christ on the cross is far from being appropriate in Africa. And stressing charity to the poor and the oppressed rather than adequate action towards social justice overlooks its serious side-effects such as the loss of self-esteem, dependence, disempowerment and paternalism.

In fairness, Hauerwas is not completely opposed to cooperation with non-Christians for the pursuit of common good. However, his overly strong emphasis in social ethics on the purity of the church and the integrity of Christian convictions implies radical church-world separation (Shen Ma 2014; cf. Hauerwas 1983:101, 1987:92–93). Over against Hauerwas the Biblical message that Christians 'are salt and light of the earth' (Mt 5:13) should be upheld. Their moral and doctrinal integrity is not antithetical to their faithful presence in the world (Hunter 2010:231–235). Christian love should be directed to the oppressed and the oppressor within and outside the church. In Africa's failed and pseudo-democratic states, one powerful way of helping them is the establishment of a juridical, social, economic and political order of social justice. This could help at the same time the oppressed, destitute and voiceless to not resort to violence and the oppressor to renounce any kind of violence.

### Conclusion

In sum, Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic undergirding his proposal for a particularist character formation, though generated in the American context, presents several outstanding insights for African churches. It amounts to a call for the African churches of various denominations to emphasise discipleship and discipline and ordain their worship, liturgy, polity and entire way of life to the spiritual and moral formation of their members. Its stress on virtuous life and Christian identity formation and non-conformism is a necessary component of church moral formation in Africa for Christians to make a difference in all the domains of their lives and for the churches to maintain a critical solidarity with the government.

Hauerwas' proposal is directed to the individualist and autonomous morality of the modern and post-modern world. As such, it is a valuable resource for African churches in their efforts to equip believers to depart from the insidious influences of the Western mindset. Its community and narrative orientation is congruent with African culture; hence it offers valuable points of contact for the cultivation of virtues in African churches.

However, Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic seems to overemphasise the significance of character and virtues to the detriment of actions and deeds on the one hand, and significance of decision-making through universal ethical theories on the other hand. Also, it runs the risk of reinforcing the authoritarian leanings of African traditional culture. Moreover, it seems to compromise the collective moral deliberation and action of the church and its valuable activities in the domains of public theology and moral persuasion towards the wider society. The strong particularism of Hauerwas' ecclesial ethic distorts the universal dimension of Christian ethics and stresses the purity of the church in a way that restricts cooperation between Christians and non-Christians for socio-economic justice and the common good.

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