AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE WESLEYAN SPIRIT: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION
IN A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH AND CULTURALLY PLURALISTIC WORLD

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Introduction

This paper will explore a possible relationship or affinity between African spirituality and the
Wesleyan tradition, by examining selected aspects of the African religious heritage and how
these aspects might be related to the Wesleyan tradition. The paper will suggest that the
dialogue between the African religious heritage and the Wesleyan tradition has the potential
for shaping relationships of respect, trust, and mutual enhancement across differences and,
hopefully, lead to the recognition of how cultural diversity within the global United Methodist
Church (UMC) provides an opportunity to strengthen our deepest Wesleyan ecclesiological
sensibilities. Included in this discussion will be a consideration of the role and place of African
membership in the UMC, given the UMC's self-declared effort to be a global church. Further, it
will be suggested that the exploration of the African religious heritage in relation to the
Wesleyan tradition not only fosters a catholic spirit but also strengthens our capacity to
mitigate the potential for re-inscribing colonialism in the global UMC's ecclesial practices.
Some implications for spiritual formation in a global, multicultural church and culturally
pluralistic world will also be explored.[1]

The Context

Valentin Dedji, a Beninese Methodist minister, has written that when asked to introduce
himself, he occasionally responds like Thabo Mbeki, former President of South Africa:

> I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the
> glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the sea and the ever-changing
> seasons that define the face of my native land.[2]

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[1] This paper is a slightly expanded version of a paper presented at the Practical Theology section of the Oxford
Institute of Methodist Theological Studies that met in Oxford, England in August 2013.
[2] Dedji, Valentin, "Methodist Theology-Where Is It Heading?"An African Perspective." In *Unmasking Methodist
Theology*, ed. Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, and Helen Wareing (New York; London: Continuum,
2004).

Dedji goes on to say that he also describes himself as a French-speaking Methodist minister from Benin, West Africa, who has deep within him "a creative tension between what it means to remain truly African as well as being Christian." Dedji confesses that "being Methodist does not solve but epitomizes this dilemma [of identity]."[3] The dilemma and creative tension he identifies points to what African theologian Laurenti Magesa has called "the phenomenon of a double religious consciousness"—a phenomenon prevalent among African Christians as they embrace both their Christian and African religious identities.[4] Dedji acknowledges that British Methodism has had "a great impact" on his upbringing and that of his extended family. Moreover, he points out how he went to Britain several years ago, as a doctoral student, with a primary motivation to study British Methodism because of the impact it had on him and on his family. Yet, even though he does not state this explicitly, Dedji implies that studying British Methodism does not, and should not, diminish his identity as an African—and by implication his African spirituality. Further, although he recognizes the danger of constructing rigid categories of identity that diminish or weaken connections between people of diverse cultural backgrounds, he also maintains that categories of identity such as "British Methodist" and "African Methodist" are helpful markers that help us identity two different worldviews and particular cultural realities that inform our discourses and understandings. Nevertheless, Dedji recognizes that, even though there is tension between his African and Methodist identities, in reality "we are [all] hybrids, all of us reflecting many divergent understandings and realities."[5]

As an African United Methodist, I find Dedji's struggle and reflection very instructive. In recent years, the United Methodist Church (UMC) has been increasingly claiming its global identity. In fact, some people have spoken of the UMC as a *global* church, because of its presence in Africa, Europe, the Philippines and in other parts of Southeast Asia.[6] The 2007 Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church of the Council of Bishops and the Connectional

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[3] Dedji, 211.

[4] Laurenti Magesa, "On Speaking Terms: African Religion and Christianity in Dialogue," in Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, ed. *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 33.

[5] Dedji, 212.

[6] The 2007 Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church of the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table uses the term "worldwide nature of the church." The report gives the rationale for this choice as follows: "We choose to use the word 'worldwide' to describe the nature of United Methodism. "Worldwide" differs from "global" as it has been used in the discussion of recent decades. Referring to the world is wider and more appropriate than to the globe. The Church's mission is to the world, not to the globe. "World", theologically, is more than a geographic term: it is God's blessed creation, God's adversary in its fallen state, the object of God's love and salvation through Christ and reconciliation." See, "Worldwide Ministry Through The United Methodist Church—An Interim Report of the Task Group on the Global Nature of the Church of the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, 2007." Hereafter, "Worldwide Ministry through the UMC." See also Patrick Streiff, "The Global Nature of the United Methodist Church: What Future for the Branch Outside the United States?" in *Quarterly Review*, Vol., 24/2 (2004).

Table calls the UMC to "live into its worldwide nature more fully."[7] However, others, such as Janice Love, have questioned the use of the label "global" in referring to the UMC. Love argues that the UMC is an "extended-national confessional" institution because the vast majority of UMC membership resides primarily in the United States, with UMC bodies in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines.[8] In essence, Love is suggesting that the UMC is an American church, with constituents in Africa, Asia, and Europe. She feels this is a "simple statement of fact, without negative or positive connotation."[9]

Whatever position one takes on this matter, the fact remains, though, that the UMC is an international body with members in various parts of the world who belong to various nations and culturally diverse groups, with particular cultural traditions, worldviews, and varying cultural expressions. United Methodism or Methodism in general is deeply rooted in these various cultural and national contexts and people from these different regions of the world claim a common Wesleyan and Methodist identity. Indeed, many Africans, for example, have embraced the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions as a means through which they express their spirituality; and United Methodism, like other Methodist and Protestant denominations, continues to grow considerably in various parts of Africa. However, these communities also bear the marks of colonial histories that have shaped their current political, social, economic and religious life; and this reality raises some important questions that need to be addressed, if the global UMC is to mitigate the potential for re-inscribing colonialism in its global mission: How can an expanding global denomination closely tied to Euro-American power and dominance foster an empowering and transformative engagement with differences and not replicate the cultural, economic, and political legacies of colonialism which are still being reenacted in our global race relations? Can United Methodism be a form of Christianity that does not alienate African United Methodists from their African identity and African spirituality *and* can it foster an attitude of respect, openness, mutuality, and dialogue with African Traditional Religion (ATR)—a phenomenon with moral power that continues to shape and direct the lives of millions of Africans in their relationship with other human beings, the created order, and the Divine?[10] What does it mean to be both African and United Methodist Christian? What does it mean for the UMC to "live into its worldwide nature more fully?" Equally important is the question about how to empower African United Methodists to begin to learn to value, own, and respect their multiple, diverse theological voices, using them all

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[7] "Worldwide Ministry through the UMC," 1.
[8] Janice Love, "Is United Methodism a World Church?" In Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, Dennis M. Campbell, ed. *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 260-65.
[9] Janice Love, "United Methodism in a World Context: Navigating the Local and the Global." *Occasional Papers*, No.100, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2006.
[10] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 19. I will be using the terms African Traditional Religion, African Religion, and African Religions (plural) interchangeably in this paper.

toward an emancipatory involvement and participation in the thinking and mission of the global UMC.

In her reflections on the UMC in the world context, Jane Love suggests that "issues of power, control, and justice inevitably arise when people and institutions with more money attempt to form partnerships and/or Christian community with those who have less money."[11] And these dynamics may lead to the dominance of the affluent partners and subordination of partners with less money. Love asserts that the UMC, as a United States-based church, continues to bear the cultural, political, economic, and other marks of American identity.[12] She argues that the UMC is a rich, powerful church based in a rich, powerful country, with a clear American identity.[13] In a similar spirit but a bit more forcefully, Robert Cummings Neville has recently affirmed that there is a colonialism involved in American Methodism becoming a global church.[14] Neville writes:

> The whole idea of a global United Methodist denomination is a colonialist project. Why in the world would anyone think that there should be a unified global organization of United Methodists? When the organization reports to Nashville or to the United States-based General Conference, this obviously mirrors an American hegemony of enterprise, embodied in American missionary enterprises.[15]

Acknowledging some of the reasons given for some United Methodist conferences outside the United States to be a part of a global United Methodist Church, Neville writes: "For the time being it might be in the interest of the leaders in the [central] conferences to look to the relatively rich United States church for financial and educational aid;" however, Neville suggests that if the gospel is in fact indigenized in many different cultural settings, then each central conference can have "its own organizations, ecclesial philosophy, and theological ways of re-incarnating the great historical expressions of the gospel." But Neville asks: "What need is there at all for a global United Methodist Church beyond simple recognition of a complex global set of historical developments?"[16] Continuing his reflection on this theme, he goes on to raise another important question which reflects his position more clearly, although I am not sure it mirrors a connectional sensibility that is so central to United Methodism or to Methodism in general. Neville asks: "Are not the American Methodist missionary movements rightly fulfilled

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[11] Love, "United Methodism in a World Context," 9.
[12] Love, "United Methodism in a World Context," 4.
[13] Love, "United Methodism in a World Context," 8.
[14] Robert Cummings Neville, "Uniformity versus Independence: Reflections on Theology for a Global United Methodist Church." *Perspectives on Theology and Church*. (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, No.1, November 2012), 9.
[15] Neville, "Uniformity versus Independence," 9-10.
[16] Neville, 9-10.

by developing their missions to maturity and then pushing them out of the house so that they can build their own, reconnecting with their past?"[17] I agree with the idea of United Methodist churches outside of the United States reconnecting with their past and exploring their contextual needs in order to incarnate the gospel in ways that are relevant to their particular cultural and political settings. In many ways, many churches are already doing this. However, the phrase "pushing them out of the house so that they can build their own" may be just as imperial and colonialist as the idea of a unified global organization that "reports to Nashville or to the United States-based General Conference," to use Neville's phrase. However, having had the opportunity to dialogue with Neville in person at the "Consultation on Global United Methodist Theological Imagination"[18] where he presented this paper, I am aware that his vision is liberative and more inclusive—although the phrase itself may indicate otherwise to the reader without that context.

Indeed, an examination of the agenda of the General Conference, the global body that meets every four years to decide legislation and vote on the budget to support its global mission, clearly shows that there is a strong American influence in global United Methodism. In fact, the content and processes of General Conference—how meetings are being conducted and, generally, the issues being discussed—clearly demonstrate that the UMC is a United States-based and United States-dominated church. Further, the way global mission work is structured and carried out, including through some of the agencies of the UMC, seems to reinforce the idea of an "American" church with mission outposts outside the United States.[19] And this raises more questions for consideration: Given American affluence and structural dominance of the UMC, What is the role and place of African membership in the global UMC? How can Africans affirm and nurture not only their African identity and spirituality but also use them to contribute substantively and meaningfully to the thinking and mission of the global UMC, truly as partners and not only as recipients of "financial and educational aid"?[20]

Some have suggested that there is enough African representation in different global church committees and meetings, including membership at General Conference. However, taking into account the issues of language differences and lack of well-planned translation services for these meetings, one wonders if physical presence alone is enough to indicate adequate and substantive *participation* and *contribution* to the thinking, governance and mission of the global

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[17] Neville, 10.

[18] This consultation was organized by Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, April 15-16, 2012. The full title is "Toward a Global United Methodist Theological Imagination: Challenges, Prospects, Possibilities."

[19] A close look at the story of The United Methodist Church found in the historical narrative in the *Book of Discipline* clearly still holds the idea of an American church with mission outposts in other parts of the world; thus, by implication, still has a colonial and imperial tone to it.

[20] Neville, 9.

church.[21] I would like to suggest that one way to ensure emancipatory participation of Africans in the global church is to claim the resources and wisdom of African Religion, in dialogue with the Wesleyan tradition, for the construction of a liberative vision of African presence and participation in, as well as for theological reflection on the mission and ministry of the global UMC. I now turn to the discussion of some selected aspects of the African religious heritage.

The African Religious Heritage

Vincent Mulago, a preeminent African scholar of African Traditional Religions, suggests that African Religion in its essence is a set of cultic ideas, sentiments, rituals and practices based on the following essential elements: belief in a Supreme Being, creator of all there is, who is dynamically involved in the world; belief in two worlds, the visible and the invisible worlds, with the invisible world being viewed as both transcendent and immanent; belief in the interconnectedness of all of life; and belief that the whole of creation and the entire universe are sacred and that they are divinely connected.[22] At the heart of African Religion is the quest for harmony: harmony between the human being and nature; between the human being and the community; between the human being and the living spirits of ancestors; between the living and the dead; between the visible and invisible worlds; and most importantly, harmony between human beings with God.[23]

In a similar manner, Peter Paris, an African Canadian scholar, has observed that African peoples relate all dimensions of human life, including their spiritual strivings for freedom and empowerment to "a transhistorical source" of power and meaning, namely to God.[24] Paris

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[21] Jane Love, for example, has decried how non-English speaking United Methodists are treated in the formal conduct of United Methodist meetings. She states: "Those of us from the United States do not routinely and conscientiously organize our meetings as though we genuinely expect careful scrutiny of the denomination's work by members or delegates from outside the United States, especially those who are not fluent in English." She contrasts this situation with what she calls "genuinely global institutions," and argues that these, in contrast, tend to seek more carefully to capture the participation of all delegates or members. These organizations determine the number of working languages they will need translation for, and then pay for all the services necessary in those languages to ensure effective participation of all members. They provide translations of all major documents, plenary presentations, drafts of reports, and other basic materials. She cites the World Council of Churches as an example of such organizations (p.9). She argues that if United States members really want to know how United Methodists from outside the United States deliberate on important matters of faith in church meetings, "we should treat them as partners, not decorative guests who receive badly organized, half-hearted consideration in deliberations about the serious business at hand" (p.9).

[22] Vincent Mulago, "Les Elements Fondamentaux de la Religion Africaine," In *Religions Africaines et Christianisme: Colloque International de Kinshasa, 9-14 Janvier 1978*, 43-63.

[23] Mulago, "Les Elements Fondamentaux de la Religion Africaine," 43-50 ; see also Louis-Vincent Thomas, "La Religion Negro-Africaine dans Son Essence et Ses Manifestations." *Religions Africaines et Christianisme: Colloque International de Kinshasa, 9-14 Janvier 1978*, 6.

[24] Peter Paris, "The Spirituality of African Peoples." *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*. 7:2 (November 1993): 114-124.

contends that there is a widespread belief in African Religion that God is creator and preserver of all reality.[25] Therefore, because all reality originates from God, it is also ultimately destined to return to God. Paris affirms that this belief in God's creative and protective providence has been the primary source of meaning and strength for African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora who have long been threatened and oppressed by ever-present forces of destruction.[26] Believing that the whole of life is sacred, Africans cannot conceive of human life apart from its relationship to God. In this sense, they believe that neither humanity nor nature is alone in the universe but they exist in the presence and company of God and the living spirits of ancestors.[27]

John Mbiti, a pioneer African scholar of African Traditional Religion, observes that "acceptance of Christianity or Islam in Africa means that Africans 'come out of African religion but they don't take off their traditional religiosity. They come as they are. They come as people whose world view is shaped according to African religion.'"[28] Mbiti goes on to say that if there are any changes during this process "they are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life, and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking pattern, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs, and response in situations of need. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many Africans…"[29]

Reflecting against the backdrop of colonial Christianity and colonial experience, Magesa also observes that the African religious heritage has continued to persist "despite the odds against [it]." Magesa argues that African religious perspectives have served a positive purpose in the lives of Africans throughout the years. For example, having preserved the identity of Africans through such enormous crises as slavery and colonialism, they "continue to exert a more important and fundamental influence on African spirituality [today] than many Christian leaders and Western or Westernized academics care or dare to admit."[30] Magesa notes that one of the common complaints of Christian leaders in Africa concerns what he calls the "duality" of African Christians' way of life, by which he means that "African Christians do not always adhere to religious and ritual demands that are formulated and expressed by the leaders of their

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[25] See also Vincent Mulago, *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et leur Vision du Monde* (Centre d'Etudes des Religions Africaines: Kinshasa, 1965); E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975); O. Bimwenyi Kweshi, *Discours Theologique Negro-Africain: Probleme des Fondements* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1980), etc.

[26] Paris, "The Spirituality of African Peoples," 114-15.

[27] See also Vincent Mulago, "Les Elements Fondamentaux de la Religion Africaine." *Religion Africaine et Chrisitanisme: Colloque International de Kinshasa, 9-14 Janvier 1978*.

[28] Quoted by Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 6.

[29] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), ix.

[30] Magesa, *African Religion*, 6.

churches. Many times they seek comfort in their own religious symbol systems, even though these may not correspond exactly to those inculcated by and expected by their Christian leaders. Indeed, these are often symbols and rituals that church leaders have explicitly condemned."[31] Certainly, missionary Christianity had denigrated African Religion as superstitious, backward, and therefore inferior. It was characterized this way in order to justify the colonial enterprise and to ensure efficient and effective control and exploitation. However, the irony of all this has been the fact that the African conceptions of God, the world, and morality have continued to make their way into Christianity in Africa.[32] And this has led some African scholars such as J.N.K. Mugambi to suggest that "African Christianity has a long way to go in rehabilitating the African religious heritage so that African churches can become 'a place to feel at home.'"[33] Mugambi also adds that if African Christianity becomes fully rooted in the African cultural and religious heritage, it will no longer be a replica of the missionary ecclesial institutions that introduced the gospel to Africa.[34]

Some scholars have demonstrated persuasively that African Religion and spirituality have persisted in the mission or mainline churches (i.e., Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.); they are present in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, as well as in African Independent Churches.[35] This reality points to the phenomenon of a "double religious consciousness" noted above. Instead of denying this reality, there is a need to embrace it in order to undo the oppressive binary oppositions erected by colonial Christianity—the binaries that cause considerable psychological suffering in the life of many African Christians and diminish their spiritual vitality. Indeed, the experience of African Christians who are deeply shaped by both their African religious heritage and Christianity creates a hybridity of perspective, understanding, and practice.[36] Given the postcolonial context of African Christianity, hybridity cannot be denied. It is everywhere—in politics, culture, economics, education, and certainly in religious life. Rather than being viewed as a problem, as most Christian churches do thanks to the colonial denigration of African Traditional Religion, hybridity should be regarded as "the triumph of the postcolonial subject over the hegemonic," to quote postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha.[37]

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[31] Magesa, *African Religion*, 7.

[32] Magesa, *African Religion*, 8.

[33] J.N.K. Mugambi, "Introduction," in *Christian Presence Amid African Religion*, John V. Taylor (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), xxxii.

[34] Mugambi, "Introduction," xxxii-xxiii.

[35] See S.G. Kibicho, "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Case-study," in E. Fashole-Luke et al., eds. *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 370-88; and John Mary Waliggo, "Ganda Traditional Religion and Catholicism in Buganda, 1948-75," in Fashole-Luke et al., 413-25.

[36] This is what Dedji, early in this paper, is referring to.

[37] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York; London: 1994; 2004).

The African religious tradition—its beliefs, worldview, creeds, codes of behavior, rituals, and values—continues to inform how African Christians live, relate and worship; it shapes their identity and informs their spirituality in profound ways. As such, African Religion is an expression of the *being* of the African. Indeed, some African scholars of African Traditional Religion have suggested that Christianity and African Religion are not diametrically opposed; they are rather "on speaking terms" because the values found in both religious traditions evidence "the common inherent desire in all human beings for the divine."[38] Magesa underlines the need for a just and peaceful relationship between Christianity and African Religion. He writes that this can only happen when both traditions respect each other enough and engage in a genuine and mature encounter. And for him this "implies conversation based on the principle of give-and-take in terms of each one's lived values and their common search and goal for God, the universal God who is beyond any single tradition's absolute comprehension."[39] Magesa goes on to make an elaborate statement about the need for interreligious dialogue between Christianity and African Religion which in essence, for those who regard Christianity as a Western religion, might be viewed as a case for an honest dialogue between Western Christianity and *Africans*. Because African Religion can be considered as embodying the very being of the African person, the dialogue between Western Christianity and African Religion would result, in his estimation, in the affirmation of the cultural identity and humanity of Africans. He writes:

> … instead of the previous campaign by the churches to annihilate African Religion as the purpose and goal of Christian mission, the future lies in genuine conversation between Christianity and African Religion, to discover and uncover as much as possible God's presence in each. Unqualified antagonism against African Religion not only breeds in some Africans deep-seated resentment against Christianity for demonizing their cultural identity (and, by implication, their humanity), but also does not help Christianity to pay attention to, learn from, and so enrich itself from divine values found in African Religion.[40]

The connection Magesa makes between African Religion and the dignity and integrity of the humanity of Africans is quite remarkable. I am not sure all African scholars of African Religion would espouse his position. However, if one considers African Religion *as* culture, perhaps his argument would make more sense. Anthropologist Geertz has been quoted as saying that there "is no such a thing as human nature independent of culture." Geertz adds that "we," as human beings, "are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves

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[38] Magesa, "On Speaking Terms," 25-26.
[39] Magesa, "On Speaking Terms," 32.
[40] Magesa, "On Speaking Terms," 32-33.

through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it."[41] Religion can be perceived as a highly particular form of culture. And if this is the case, then understanding the formative power of African Religion as a highly particular form of culture provides us with a framework for understanding the importance of recognizing the link between African humanity and this particular expression of culture—and the idea that human nature shapes culture and vice versa. Let me now discuss some selected values reflected in African Religion.

The most important category in African Religion is **life**. It is believed that life in its fullest manifestation and expression is found only in God, who is the source and author of all life. In this sense, ensuring a bountiful life for humanity and, indeed, enhancing and increasing that life is an important value. Indeed, life is considered a primary category for self-understanding which provides the basic framework for any interpretation of the world, persons, nature, and divinity.[42] There is no distinction or separation between religion and other areas of life; no distinction between the sacred and the secular. God's presence and activity is seen as being dynamically involved in every aspect of life. Yet, God is also believed to be beyond the cosmos. African theologian Engelbert Mveng writes that in African religious thought, the universe, the cosmos, are constituted by the struggle between life and death. That is why by definition and by essence, God is beyond the cosmos and, therefore, beyond all the confrontation between life and death.[43]

The human being, however, as a microcosm of the cosmos, is part of the confrontation and struggle between life and death. But it has the mission which makes it a religious being and a historical being. That mission is the calling to ensure the victory of life over death. For Mveng, the human being is, by definition, a threatened being. It searches its salvation in the victory of life over death. In the immense battleground of the world where life and death confront each other constantly, the mission of the human being is to identify the "allies of life," to enlist and align them to its cause, and to ensure its survival, which ultimately is the victory of life itself. Mveng suggests that this is the major concern of African Religion.[44] To support this argument, Mveng discusses the role and meaning of rituals in African Religion. He suggests that African religious rituals are always rituals of liberation and salvation of the human being. He goes on to contend that if we analyze the prayers of African Traditional Religion, we will see that most of

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[41] Quoted in John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 44.

[42] Magesa, *African Religion*, 71.

[43] Engelbert Mveng, "Spiritualite Africaine et Spiritualite Chretienne," in *L'Afrique et Ses Formes de Vie Spirituelle* (Centre d'Etude des Religions Africaines, Facultes Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1990), 270; see also Vincent Mulago, *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et leur Vision du Monde* (Centre d'Etudes des Religions Africaines: Kinshasa, 1978).

[44] Mveng, "Spiritualite Africaine et Spiritualite Chretienne," 270

them articulate a quest for salvation from the forces of death or forces of evil. Further, all the rites of initiation find their significance and, indeed, their *raison d'etre* in this quest and its achievement—which is an ultimate victory of life over death and triumph of life. Thus, Mveng concludes:

> African spirituality can therefore be construed as being essentially a spirituality of liberation. This liberation is actualized by a mediator who is at the same time a model and a rescuer. This liberation is a result of the *passage* from the old life to a new life, sustained by the allies of life [and by God, who is the champion of life].[45]

And there is more. African spirituality is also cosmic. Because the human being is a microcosm of the cosmos, the salvation of the human being is also the salvation of the cosmos. This is the case because the same struggle that is within the human being is also in the cosmos. The elements of the world are divided between messengers of life and messengers of death. The cosmic allies of life are by definition the allies of the human being, and vice versa. In this sense, nature is not filled with the silence of God. It is rather a *place of encounter* between the human being with God. Hence, the sacramental role of nature in African religious rituals.[46]

Another important value in African Religion is **the primacy of human relationships**, and the value immediately related to it—**the community**. The religious bent of the African person is such that human activity is thoroughly shaped by relational moral concerns or what Magesa has called the "the relationship imperative."[47] Here Magesa contends that the realization of relationships in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African Religion. The formation and implementation of good relationships is highly valued because good relationships are believed to "make possible the continuing existence of the universe." The following statement is worth quoting at some length:

> What the African worldview emphasizes, therefore, are relationships. Through the act of creation, God is related in an unbreakable way to the entire universe. At the center of the universe is humanity, but it too is intrinsically and inseparably connected to all living and non-living creation by means of each creature's life-force. Although God, spiritual beings, ancestors, humanity, living things and non-living things enjoy life-forces with greater and lesser powers, all the forces are intertwined. Their purpose is ultimately [abundant life for] humanity; they can act either to increase or suppress the vital force of an individual person or of a community. The relationships of the vital

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[45] Mveng, "Spiritualite Africaine et Spiritualite Chretienne," 271 (My translation).
[46] Mveng, "Spiritualite Africaine et Spiritualite Chretienne," 271.
[47] Magesa, *African Religion*, 64.

forces in the universe constitute the complex of African Religion. The management of these forces so that they promote the abundance of human life and not diminish it constitutes the sum of Africa's religious activity.[48]

Clearly, the emphasis on relationships points to the importance placed on the interconnectedness of all elements in the universe. In terms of the human community, relationships receive the most attention in judging what is good and bad, what is desirable and undesirable. And, here again, what is clearly desirable is connection, interdependence, relationships.

Writing about the importance of relationality and communality in African thought and life, John Mbiti states: "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual." Human personality is viewed in communal terms, with individuals perceived as having a corporate personality.[49] And the context of all this is the community. Participating in community gives a person a place of belonging, an identity, human dignity and personhood. Interdependence is highly valued above individualism. Personal identity is intricately tied to the identity of others within the community. This is where the African sees herself as a communal being, a "being-there-with-others," to quote African theologian Penoukou.[50] In terms of self-definition and self-understanding, if a Westerner like Rene Descartes would say, "I think, therefore I am," an African would say instead "I belong to the community and participate in community life, therefore I am." Others have suggested the following variations to communicate this idea: "I am related, therefore we are;"[51] "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[52] There is in these statements not only an assertion of a communitarian self-definition, but also a guiding principle of ethical behavior in the community.

Then, there is **hospitality**. The value of African hospitality, as Joseph Healy and Donald Sybertz suggest, is closely linked to the person-centered values and personal and community relationship values.[53] Hospitality makes community possible in that to be hospitable is to be ready and available to form community.[54] Strangers are to be welcomed and made to feel a part of the local community. Many relationship proverbs highlight the importance of hospitality for strengthening the character of a community. The following proverbs indicate the

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[48] Magesa, *African Religion*, 285-86.

[49] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

[50] E.J. Penoukou, "Christology in the Village," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Marknoll: Orbis, 1991).

[51] John Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 49.

[52] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-9.

[53] Joseph Healy and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 179.

[54] Magesa, *African Religion*, 62.

significance of hospitality in African thought: *A guest is never an interruption*; *It's not good to greet some people and pass by others as if they were dogs*; *The bed that a guest uses will eventually be empty*; *If you are loved by the king, love others*; *Sharing is living*; *The person who eats alone dies alone*.[55] Moreover, there is a deeper religious meaning to the practice of hospitality. Being hospitable means that we remember and honor God and the ancestors and our attitude and act of hospitality express our readiness to share them through communicating the gift and power of life with other members of the family and the larger community.

The purpose of hospitality is "to enhance life in all its dimensions."[56] The opposite of hospitality then is the refusal to be open, welcoming, considerate, and accepting. Such an attitude weakens relationships, destroys community, and, as such, is immoral. The refusal to be hospitable is a refusal to share with God, the ancestors, just as it is a refusal to share with the community itself. Such a refusal destroys not only community, but also the relationship with God and the ancestors, as well as the communitarian purpose of the universe—i.e., being hospitable to all life. The virtue of African hospitality is captured in the term **ubuntu**[57]—a term popularized by Archbishop Tutu through his leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. *Ubuntu* is an African concept that Tutu uses to describe the human qualities of hospitality, generosity, friendliness, kindness, caring, and compassion. The term *ubuntu* is variously called *bumuntu*, *umutu*, *obuntu*, etc. in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. These terms are related to the word *muntu* or *mutu*, which means person or human being. In addition, the term *muntu* also has special meaning in that it describes human maturity. Thus, to say that someone is really a *muntu* means that they are a mature human being—someone who exemplifies wisdom, in addition to the aforementioned qualities of hospitality, generosity, friendliness, kindness, caring, and compassion.

Further, the terms *ubuntu* and *bumuntu* also include the word *buntu* which, in some African languages, points not only to the full manifestation of the human qualities noted above, but also has religious meaning in that it refers to the theological concept of grace. Thus to be a mature person or to be fully human is to be shaped by *buntu* (i.e., grace) and to embody it in interactions with others. To be fully human is to be grace-full, generous, wise, caring, loving, compassionate, and merciful. Furthermore, there is another intangible element involved in the terms *muntu*, *ubuntu*, and *buntu*, and that is the concept of *ntu*. This concept refers to a living

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[55] Healy and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 177-190.
[56] Magesa, *African Religion*, 62.
[57] For more on the concept of *muntu*, see Placid Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. English Translation (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959/1969); (Reprinted by HBC Publishing: Orlando, Florida, 2010), 96-98; see also Mutombo Nkulu N'Sengha, "*Bumuntu* Paradigm and Gender Justice: Sexist and Antisexist Trends in African Traditional Religions." In *What Men Owe to Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*, John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire, eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

force or vital force which characterizes, energizes, and animates persons and orients them towards life-giving choices, actions, and behaviors.[58] However, in true African spirit, Tutu makes it clear that *ubuntu* should not be perceived as an individual attribute, but rather as a communal characteristic deeply rooted in community. He explains:

> My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share." A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated. Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good.[59]

All the values, virtues, and relational dynamics discussed above express the quality of a person and community's character, all of them reflecting the characteristics of life desired by African Traditional Religion. However, it is also important to note that they do not only express the human qualities of *ubuntu*, but also convey the nature, content, and character of African spirituality. [60] To be truly a *muntu*, and to have *buntu* is to embody the qualities of a mature spiritual life. Peter Paris, in his seminal book *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, describes the spirituality of a people as referring to "the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences." For him, the spirituality of a people is "synonymous with the soul of a people," metaphorically speaking; with soul understood as "the integrating center of their power and meaning."[61] I think in keeping with the above discussion we can say that *ubuntu* constitutes not only the soul of African peoples' understanding of human maturity, but it also embodies the spiritual quest for human dignity, integrity, social harmony and interconnectedness. *Ubuntu* is a major goal toward which

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[58] This vital force is something that transcends human agency and is part of the cosmos, and thus is found in things (*bintu*), places or locations (*hantu*), or direction (*kuntu*), etc. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on these dimensions here. But suffice it to say that human beings' participation in *ntu* increases life and strengthens one's vitality. The *muntu*, as a being energized by *ntu*, is "an active causal agent who exercises vital influence" in his or relationships, the community, and in the larger world (Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 97-103). Therefore, the concept of *ntu* accounts for the character, disposition, ability, and intelligence of a person.

[59] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31. See also Michael Jesse Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Revised and updated edition (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009).

[60] For more discussion of the African religious, spiritual, and cultural values, see Joseph Ntedika Konde, *Les Communautes Ecclesiales de Base et les Valeurs Africaines Traditionnelles* (Kinshasa: Facultes Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1995).

[61] Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 22.

communities orient their members. A person who is truly *muntu* and manifests *ubuntu* is therefore someone who is profoundly related to his or her primary source of meaning and power (i.e., God), is deeply grounded in the community, and lives in harmony with other human beings. It is this belief in *ubuntu* that led Tutu and others to orient the work of the TRC in South Africa toward restorative justice, instead of pursuing retributive justice.

Further, Paris recognizes that African spirituality involves "the struggle for survival" *and* "the union of those forces of life that have the power to threaten and destroy life, on the one hand, or to preserve and enhance it, on the other hand."[62] As I have pointed out above, this spirituality has not only been a guiding force for Africans, but also has been a sustaining and grounding power for us. Indeed, African peoples' quest for authentic freedom, dignity, meaning, and power is a spiritual quest for *ubuntu*. To alienate Africans, and indeed other people of African descent from this spirituality, is to strip them of their dignity and humanity, *and* certainly of their sustaining power and significant source of moral inspiration. African United Methodists, if they are to contribute substantively and meaningfully to the witness and mission of global United Methodism, need to reclaim their African religious heritage, drink deeply from it, and engage it in dialogue with their Wesleyan tradition in order to develop a distinct theological contribution that would attend to their particular context(s) as well as to current global issues. But I need to make it clear that I am not advocating an uncritical embrace of African Religion but rather for a critical reappraisal and re-appropriation of values that advance community, promote human flourishing and well-being, and strengthen African identity in a globalizing world.[63] I will now discuss selectively some key Wesleyan theological themes and briefly relate them to some aspects of the African religious tradition discussed above.

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[62] Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 22.

[63] There are those who are denouncing the African traditional religious cosmology as a "spiritualistic worldview" which undermines the cultivation of scientific rationality and imagination in Africa and thus contributes to the marginalization of Africa in the global political economy. I share this concern for an over-emphasis on the belief that the world is charged with supernatural forces, leading to the attribution of supernatural causality to most events and therefore to the search for supernatural remedies in most situations and problems. But I think that the African traditional religious cosmology is broader and more complex than this, and as such, it should not be reduced to this "spiritualistic worldview." In that spirit, I would like to suggest that the neglect to multiply efforts to cultivate a growing scientific imagination in Africa and to holistically integrate religious practices and scientific knowledge would continue to reinforce the marginalization of Africa in the global political economy. Perhaps this is a topic for another paper. But for our purposes here, I am arguing that there are life-giving and empowering values in African Religion that must be harnessed to nurture and strengthen African identity and contribution in an increasingly globalizing world, and especially in the global UMC. For a discussion of the issues noted above, see David Tonghou Ngong, *The Holy Spirit and Salvation in African Christian Theology: Imagining a More Hopeful Future for Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). The following book also provides an interesting contrast between African spirituality and Western secular thought by critiquing an indiscriminate application of the latter without taking into account African symbolism and realities: see Gerrie ter Haar's book *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

The Wesleyan Tradition

There are several distinctive themes and practices that characterize Methodism in general and United Methodism in particular.[64] I will discuss some selected themes and practices in order to relate them to some selected dimensions of the African religious tradition discussed above. My discussion is only illustrative and, as such, is in no way exhaustive.

Holiness of heart and life. John Wesley taught that the doctrine of holiness was "the goal and crown of the Christian life."[65] His emphasis on holiness and the expectation to be made perfect in love in this life are some of the distinctive marks of Methodist belief and practice. Wesley was very clear in stating the nature of the mission of his Methodist societies as "to spread scriptural holiness over the land."[66] In this sense, Methodists have always understood themselves as people called out and sent forth in mission to live out a life of love, concretized in service to the world. Holiness, as the goal of spiritual growth, is a result of continued "training of all our affections on the will of God" and "having the mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus."[67] This training of our affections involves the development of the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-26) as deep-seated dispositions of the mind and deeply embedded emotional constitutions of the heart and soul that result from our response to and participation in the life of the Spirit. These affections, as manifestations of holiness, are qualities and virtues that reveal the meaning and orientation of Christian existence toward God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace. Cracknell and White, interpreting the Wesley brothers, suggest that holiness, as a quality of the heart and life, is the freedom from all that diminishes human life; it is the fullness of love, and growth toward "the full stature of Christ."[68]

According to Albert Outler, John Wesley had three irreducible minimum Christian fundamentals: 1) sin and repentance, 2) justification and pardon, and 3) holiness of heart and life. These fundamentals point to a process of self-knowledge and awareness of our sin, assurance and acceptance of our dependence upon God's freely offered gifts of love and joy,

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[64] For a list of practices of Methodism, see Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), ix. Richey et al list hymns, love feasts, conferences, class meetings, journal-keeping, testimony, discipline, itinerancy, etc., as some of the major practices of Methodism. While they recognize that these and other practices have been important to Methodists, they focus on a subset of four of them: connectionalism, itinerancy, discipline, and catholicity—which, they suggest, "serve well to characterize" Methodist practices of church (7, 15).

[65] Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 69.

[66] Albert C. Outler, "Foreword." In Ted Campbell, *The Apostolate of United Methodism*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1979, v.

[67] Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White. *An Introduction to World Methodism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.110.

[68] Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 110.

and movement toward holiness, which Wesley variously called holy living, Christian perfection, sanctification, or perfect love.[69] Wesley considered holiness or perfection as "the grand *depositum* which God had lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."[70] However, Wesley did not understand perfection as an end state of completed growth, or something achieved once and for all; he did not understand perfection as *perfected*. Rather, he viewed perfection as *perfecting*; that is an ongoing gradual process of growth in which "further horizons of love and of participation in God always opening up beyond any given level of spiritual progress."[71] God's grace prompts an inner transformation, a new disposition toward God and neighbor, a new self-understanding, and a new outlook and hope which facilitate further development and growth toward the ongoing work of sanctification.[72] John B. Cobb, Jr. describes this process as follows: "The new birth is the beginning of the process of sanctification in which [the love of God and neighbor] grows stronger and more dominant over other motives. This culminates in entire sanctification, in which human beings attain to perfect love. All other springs of action have disappeared, and love alone remains. Holiness is thus nothing other than love."[73]

Methodists were therefore called to a way of life that sets them on a path toward this growth in grace, Christian perfection or perfect love—which Wesley understood as "the fullness of faith."[74] And faith in the Methodist tradition is viewed as a *means* to a higher aim—i.e., faith mediates the fullness of love for God and neighbor. As a covenantal relationship with God, faith is the fruition of perfect love, just as it is productive of all Christian holiness. As Outler, interpreting Wesley, puts it: "faith is a means in order to *love* just as love is in order to *goodness*, just as goodness is in order to *happiness*—which is what God made us for, in this world—and the next."[75] Indeed, while faith in the Wesleyan tradition is viewed as an intensely personal experience, it is not self-focused or self-interested—faith shapes us toward the experience of being made perfect in love in this life whereby works of piety that draw us close to God (i.e., personal holiness) lead to works of mercy which draw us closer to our neighbor (i.e., social holiness). Rather than narrowing one's horizons, faith broadens one's outlook and opens us to the larger world, involving us in "[thinking] and [acting] toward holiness, social and

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[69] Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 69.

[70] Quoted in Lovett H. Weems, Jr. *John Wesley's Message Today* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources; Abingdon Press edition, 1991), 59.

[71] Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 73; see also Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 151. Maddox describes sanctification as a gradual process of salvation.

[72] Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 73.

[73] John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 57.

[74] Albert Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 28.

[75] Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, pp. 85-86, emphasis in the original. Another version of this statement reads as follows, "faith is in order to love, so love is in order to goodness—and so also goodness is in order to blessedness [or happiness]. (Outler, ed. *John Wesley*, 31).

personal."[76] Indeed, calling us to increase in love and good works, faith compels us to become agents of moral and ethical change in the wider society whereby we live out Wesley's assertion that there is no holiness but social holiness. In this sense, spiritual formation and moral formation are intricately intertwined in the Wesleyan tradition; meaning that personal piety and social holiness are inextricably connected in Wesleyan thinking and practice, so much so that the spiritual life involves the call and commitment to social reform. Christian perfection is therefore not only manifested in personal piety, but it is also demonstrated in concrete acts of love towards others, especially for those in need, and it is expressed in struggles for justice in contexts of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. Works of piety and works of mercy, as dimensions God's sanctifying grace, therefore, orient the church toward public engagement and social action, to address social ills and facilitate social transformation.

A close examination of central values in the African religious heritage and key emphases in the Wesleyan tradition reveals interesting parallels between the two belief systems and practices. To be sure, there certainly are some significant differences between African Religion and Christianity, and certainly between some African cultural values and Wesleyan ethos; however, there are also glaring similarities, in terms of their emphasis on spiritual formation and moral development, and ethical commitment or engagement; and these cannot be underplayed if we are to find common ground and ways to deeply incarnate Christianity, and specifically the Wesleyan tradition, in African soil and also, in the process, rehabilitate the contribution of the African religious heritage and its wisdom. More specifically, there is an interesting similarity between the virtue or quality of *ubuntu* and the Wesleyan notion of Christian perfection or perfect love, precisely in terms of the characteristics used to describe the constitutive elements of both *ubuntu* and perfect love. As indicated earlier in this paper, a person with *ubuntu* is hospitable, generous, kind, caring, loving, compassionate, merciful, and grace-full. And to have *ubuntu* is to embody and attain these qualities of a mature African spiritual life. Similarly, these categories, and others with similar meaning, are also used to describe a mature Christian life which is moving toward holiness or perfect love, in the Wesleyan tradition. Sanctification is a process that moves us towards a life of love, peace, joy, kindness, patience, generosity, faithfulness, self-control, and grace (Galatians 5:22-26; Ephesians 4:24-5:2).

In this sense, the concept of *ubuntu*, as a goal of human development in African culture and religion, can be likened to the process of sanctification in Wesleyan spirituality. Just as sanctification or holiness is the goal of spiritual growth in the Wesleyan tradition, *ubuntu* is the goal of human development in the African heritage. Just as holiness is the quality of heart and life in Wesleyan spirituality, *ubuntu* is a major characteristic of a mature human being, which reflects significant development in African spirituality. Just as sanctification or holiness is the

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[76] Richey et al, *Marks of Methodism*, 15.

actual formation of Christian character in Wesleyan thought, *ubuntu* is the manifestation of deep moral character and a sign of deep transformation of character. Just as sanctification is a process of ongoing growth toward perfect love, *ubuntu* is a quality of life towards which persons are constantly being directed for continued development, nurturing, and growth, and the maintenance of community. Based on these observations, we can suggest that sanctification can be construed as formation towards fuller *ubuntu* or *bumuntu*, and perfect love as *ubuntu* itself. *Ubuntu* is therefore one of the categories that can help us deepen our theological understanding of the Wesleyan concept of sanctification and growth in grace in the African context. This interpretation of sanctification as the cultivation or pursuit of *ubuntu* can help to incarnate the gospel in ways that are relevant to the African situation, and in so doing provide an invaluable contribution to the revitalization of the concept of sanctification or perfect love in global United Methodism.

Furthermore, the emphasis on love in the Wesleyan tradition can be related to the focus on ensuring a bountiful life for all in the African religious heritage. As a religion of love and joy and peace, the Wesleyan tradition seeks to "spread virtue and happiness" [77] in the world, while the African heritage seeks to enhance and increase life for all. The language may be somewhat different, but they both are trying to shape people who have an enduring moral commitment to the well-being of others. The language of love in the Wesleyan tradition conveys God's relationality and by implication the call to also be relational—themes of significance in both traditions.

The concept of grace is another important emphasis in Methodist and Wesleyan theology. Wesley's notion of grace has three aspects: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient or preventing grace is the grace that is already present and active in us before we are even aware of it; it is "free in all and free for all"—hence the affirmation of the *catholicity of grace*. Justifying or saving grace is the dimension that prompts the new birth and initiates the Christian life, through faith. Sanctifying grace involves a deeper transformation toward holiness of heart and life, and into the full moral character of Christ.[78] Randy Maddox makes it clear that both God's initiative and human participation are crucial in the process of salvation. He suggests that "without grace, we cannot be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace will not save." This is why he uses the term "responsible

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[77] John Wesley, *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, cited in Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciple of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church," 1, at http://www.pulpitandpew.duke/maddox%20paper9-23-02.pdf; hereafter, "Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples."

[78] While Outler affirms the three dimensions of grace in Wesleyan theology, he has also noted, in some of his writings, four aspects of grace in Wesleyan theology: prevenient, saving (i.e., justifying), sanctifying, *and* sacramental; see Outler, *John Wesley*, 33.

grace" to describe "the grace that empowers rather than overrides human responsibility."[79] At any rate, the notion of prevenient grace conveys a sense of optimism about God's presence and influence in the world; it refuses to limit God's presence and power to certain spheres of life or exclude God's activity in other contexts. Indeed, the notion of prevenient grace refuses to colonize God and limit God's work in God's world. Cracknell and White put it very well when they write, "[in] Wesleyan understanding, prevenient grace is replete with divine intentionality. God is at work among all people at all times to save and deliver humankind."[80] This statement affirms the pervasiveness or catholicity of grace and the ever-present divine initiative in prevenient grace.

Based on the above discussion, I would like to suggest that prevenient grace and the idea of the catholicity of grace can be related to the virtue of African hospitality and, again, to the quality of *ubuntu* in the African tradition. The attitude of generosity, acceptance, welcoming, embracing and receiving the other, the stranger, for the sake of the stranger and the building of community, is similar to the notion of prevenient grace in that it is extended to all and is available and "free for all." In fact, there is a special cultural grace reserved for the stranger or the other in African culture, since it is believed that the stranger or the other brings blessings to their host. Certainly this belief has its strengths and weaknesses. Since my focus in this paper is to harness the resources and wisdom of the African religious heritage, the discussion of weaknesses should be reserved for another paper. What needs to be emphasized here is the idea that, just as God's initiative in prevenient grace reaches out to all, even outside of human awareness and embrace, African hospitality, based on the idea that we are inextricably linked together in our common humanity, is extended to all with the goal of extending care, offering fellowship, and creating community for all. Because we all "belong in a bundle of life," to use Tutu's phrase, we preventively and practically create space for all to be included in our care and fellowship by our attitude of openness and generosity to all, *even* and *especially* to the stranger or the other. In this sense, African hospitality, based on the idea of *ubuntu* and the related optimism about people found in African culture, can be described as "prevenient care," in keeping with the Wesleyan notion of prevenient grace.

Furthermore, the Wesleyan notion of prevenient grace provides a wonderful lens through which to see African Religion as an arena of God's presence and activity—an affirmation that God has been at work in that religious tradition and, indeed, in African history long before the arrival of European missionaries. Moreover, the idea of the catholicity of grace is also related to the notion of *catholic spirit*—another important emphasis in Methodist theology and ecclesiology. Outler, interpreting Wesley, suggests that a **catholic spirit** is "an openness of

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[79] Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 19.
[80] Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism,* 260-61.

heart and mind that cherishes diversity within the larger unity of essential faith and commitment."[81] Participation in and commitment to ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and relationships is nurtured and sustained by the notion of catholic spirit. Indeed, this ecumenical spirit and openness to other religious traditions needs to be extended to African Traditional Religion in the spirit of mutual learning, enrichment and enhancement—thus rectifying colonial prejudice, denigration and rejection of this religious tradition.

Society meetings, classes, and bands constitute other important marks of Methodist life and practice. Historically and today (in places where class meetings are still being used, like in most United Methodist congregations in the Congo), classes, bands, and society meetings provided structures through which people who were newly converted could be united, nurtured, and helped to growth in their faith, increase in love and good works. These structures and practices contributed then and now (in places where they are still being practiced) to the creation of networks of relationships of mutual care, support, accountability, and interdependence that have shaped the character and common life of Methodist Christians.[82] But, religious instruction also had a significant place in these gatherings. Thus, one of the purposes of the societies, classes, and bands was to give a set of instructions to the newly converted and other members about the shape of their new life and the discipline that would regulate it, so that they would grow toward perfect love.[83] Furthermore, classes and bands met to provide opportunities for confessing sins to one another, praying for one another, and for the ongoing building of community.[84] These gatherings were then fellowships in which people supported one another as they worked together toward fuller love.

Societies, classes, and bands' focus on the communal life resonates with the African emphasis on the importance of the community in the development of identity and character. The quality of *ubuntu* discussed above is thought to be a virtue that is deeply embedded in community, and one cannot develop it outside of interactions with other members of the community. In this sense, because identity and character are shaped in and by community, *ubuntu* cannot be cultivated or achieved in isolation or outside of a sphere of interactions with others.

This convergence between Wesleyan ethos of the common life and the African worldview, has led some to suggest that the African communal worldview is one of the reasons why "the Wesleyan concepts of 'classes,' 'bands,' and 'societies' have been so appealing to African

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[81] Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 36.
[82] For a discussion about the nature of each of these categories, including the place of classes and bands as subgroups within societies, see Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 121-33.
[83] Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 122.
[84] Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 123.

Methodists." This is the case because in the structure of the classes, the African communal vision and the Christian vision of life together cohere.[85]

Connectionalism is another important Wesleyan emphasis. It is one of the distinctive marks of Methodism for which "local authority or freedom does not mean total independence but interdependence."[86] Richey et al suggest that connectionalism orients Methodists in general and United Methodists in particular, not only toward one another, but also toward a reality of a "unity more broadly shared within the Christian family, indeed within the whole family of God."[87] Connectionalism orients the church, the people of God, toward other Christian communities and toward the world, establishing empowering collaborative relationships. Richey suggests that connectionalism, as a dynamic and evolving reality, takes various forms in various periods. In the 20th and 21st centuries, connectionalism has taken the forms of general boards and agencies, in addition to annual conferences, jurisdictional and central conferences, etc.[88]

I see the notion of connectionnalism as relatable to the notions of the primacy of relationships, the importance of belonging and participating, and interdependence in the African heritage. The African belief that good relationships are believed to "make possible the continuing existence of the universe" echoes the connectional concern for mutual affirmation, enhancement, and transformation. The interconnectedness of the African universe and its replication in human community epitomizes the need to belong, to participate, and contribute to the life of the larger community for the sake of enhancing life. Desmond Tutu has stated that the notion of *ubuntu* teaches that we are made for a "delicate network of interdependence"[89] and that this interconnectedness and the related quest for harmony nurture the organic relationships that exist between all people. We all belong to a greater whole and are part of "a bundle of life." In a world prone to domination and subjugation, connectionalism, understood from the perspective of *ubuntu*, has the potential to foster equality in power sharing, promote equitable representation in the governance of the global church, as well as mitigate structural U.S. dominance in the current structures of the UMC. When practiced faithfully, connectionalism has the potential for countering colonial and imperial bents that may sneak into United Methodist efforts toward becoming a global church.

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[85] Dedji, "Methodist Theology."
[86] "Core Principles Team Report of the Connectional Table of the UMC," 2010.
[87] Richey et al, *Marks of Methodism*, 40.
[88] Russell Ritchie, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2010).
[89] Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 35.

Implications for Spiritual Formation

Several implications arise from the above discussion of the relationship between African spirituality and the Wesleyan tradition. Perhaps a pertinent first implication is to acknowledge that key distinctive Wesleyan and Methodist themes of social holiness, perfect love, catholic spirit, mutual accountability, connectionalism, etc. are congruent with African spiritual values of *ubuntu*, the primacy of life, hospitality, the centrality of relationships, interdependence, interconnectedness, and community. Additionally, integrating the two spiritual traditions in the spiritual formation of African United Methodists would affirm their *being* and their dignity and humanity, since the African religious tradition is an integral part of African identity and culture—even when this is not explicitly or consciously claimed or recognized by some.

A second implication is an affirmation that spiritual formation in a global United Methodist Church ought to be done from a pluralistic perspective, drawing from various contextual, historical and spiritual resources; in response to God's prevenient grace present in those traditions and faithfulness to the Wesleyan catholic spirit that invites us to learn to respect other religious traditions and to be open to learn from the divine presence found in those traditions. This involves the prioritizing of loving relationships and fellowship over rigid adherence to doctrine, and it is informed by the catholicity of grace found in the very notion of prevenient grace.

A third implication is the recommendation that spiritual formation in a global church should nourish a robust multicultural spirituality that empowers individuals and communities to realize, in true Wesleyan spirit, that "anything in the world can be taken as a means of grace and put to sacramental use in thinking and living the faith."[90]

A fourth implication is an acknowledgement that both African spirituality and Wesleyan spirituality are each defined as *a way of life*. The African tradition stresses the abundant life motif and orients its adherents toward ethical commitment and action that ensures bountiful life for all. As a way of life, it has to be *embodied* in those who practice the faith. The Wesleyan tradition, on its part, focuses on shaping a Spirit-filled life whose essence is love. Indeed, a Spirit-filled *person* is an *embodiment* of "holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed on a created, 'a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.'"[91] Elsewhere Wesley speaks of Christianity as "a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the

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[90] "Toward a Global United Methodist Theological Imagination: Challenges, Prospects, Possibilities: Recommendations," (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, April 15-16, 2012), 3.
[91] "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 11, 527.

heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth…."[92] This statement describes "holy living" and faithfulness in response to the God of life whose mission is to renew and reconcile everything; the God of infinite love and mercy who is "pure unbounded love."[93]

Finally, a spirituality that develops out of a dialogue between the African religious heritage and the Wesleyan tradition is non-colonial and non-imperial in that it recognizes that the two traditions are not diametrically opposed but rather are "on speaking terms," to quote again African Catholic theologian Laurenti Magesa.[94] Recognizing that African Religion is just as resourceful as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and other Native Religions is to restore its dignity and to recognize its contribution not only to the well-being of Africans, but also to the life of the world.[95]

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[92] *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*.

[93] A line from the first stanza of the well-liked Charles Wesley hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 384; see also a very helpful commentary on this hymn by John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*, 58-61.

[94] Magesa, "On Speaking Terms," 25.

[95] See Mark Juergensmeyer, ed. *Global Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). This is one of the books that exemplify a growing recognition of African Religion as a world religion, among other world religions.