

PREACHING FOOLS

The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly

Charles L. Campbell

Johan H. Cilliers

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CHARLES L. CAMPBELL AND JOHAN H. CILLIERS

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I dedicate this book to those who helped form this preaching fool:
Rudolf Bohren, who taught me to see;
Gerd Debus, who weighed words with me;
and Bethel Müller, who let me be.

Johan

For Stan Saunders
Friend in folly

Chuck

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PREFACE

The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools. These simple, loaded sentences wind as a refrain throughout this book. Here at the beginning, however, we need to add one more sentence: Homileticians are fools. For homileticians actually try to understand and explain and teach the foolish practice of preaching. What could be more ridiculous than that? Well, here are some possibilities: Have you heard the one about the two homileticians who wrote an academic book, packed with scholarly footnotes, about the *foolishness* of preaching? Or the one about the two white, male, Reformed university homileticians who wrote about the folly of preaching, even though in some ways they represent the wise and powerful cultural elites whom Paul *critiqued* by means of the foolish gospel in Corinth? Or the one about the two homileticians—one from South Africa, the other from the United States—who actually tried to write a book together over email? We confess: This book has been a rather foolish undertaking. Certainly an ironic one. Along the way, we have noticed jesters and tricksters and holy fools—not to mention Jesus and the Apostle Paul—pointing their fingers at us, at times laughing out loud. The first editor we approached with this proposal responded, “Why would you want to do *that*?” And after reading an initial draft, Carey Newman, our editor at Baylor University Press, suggested we might need to visit a psychiatrist. And there have been moments when we have joked about the book ourselves and asked, “What were we thinking when we started this project?”

In the midst of our folly, however, we have really had fun. And we are grateful for our conversations, for what we have learned as we have listened to each other and shared with each other. The seeds of the book were planted in Copenhagen at the 2008 meeting of *Societas Homiletica*, the international academy of homiletics, at which each of us presented an academic lecture on the foolishness of preaching—an appropriately ironic beginning. Following our lectures, though we had never met before, we engaged in nonstop conversations—at lunch, on the bus, between and after meetings. In those initial conversations we already imagined writing a book together. We knew it was time for more international collaboration in homiletics, but we wondered if such a book would be practical or even possible. Many emails and nine months later, we decided to try it.

Over the next two years, our conversations continued primarily over email, with two extended person-to-person meetings while Johan was in the United States. During that time we introduced each other to new cultures, new theologians, new authors, new artists, new perspectives—not to mention new wines and beers! In addition, we have both learned from the fools we have encountered, an odd and wonderful cloud of witnesses who come from different countries and cultures around the world. Engaging with these characters has been exciting. They have challenged us and changed us.

Mostly, we have learned that it is good to be unsettled. It is good to be drawn out of our theological certainties and clear identities into the fluidity and flux of a liminal gospel. Indeed, the book itself remains unsettled. At the deepest level, it is unsettled because the foolish gospel we have encountered is profoundly disruptive and unsettling. But the book is unsettled for another reason as well. Despite the similarities between us, we have realized we can never fully understand each other. There remains a gap between us, ever calling for further conversation and deeper understanding.

We have, to be sure, discovered contact points between our different contexts, which will be apparent in the book. In both South Africa and the United States, the indigenous people have been colonized. Many Native Americans live today in reservations, as Native Africans were placed in “homelands” in South Africa during apartheid. In both nations black people have been oppressed—through slavery and segregation in the United States, through colonization and apartheid in South Africa. And although serious racial injustice remains in both countries, each has wrestled, however inadequately, with the guilt of the past and has at least begun to move in some new directions, as a simple mention of the Civil Rights Movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Nelson Mandela, and Barack Obama suggests.

These contact points also extend to our personal lives. Chuck is a southerner from Little Rock, Arkansas.¹ He grew up in the shadow of racism, segregation,

¹ In 1957, when Chuck was three years old, Little Rock was the site of one of the most dramatic and significant events in the struggle against segregation. When Governor Orval

and the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Johan is an African, an Afrikaner, whose family has been in South Africa for ten generations.² He has lived through apartheid, witnessed its collapse, and seen the dawning of democracy in South Africa. In addition, both of us serve in once-prominent, now-declining ecclesial denominations, both of which have supported the oppression of black people. The former Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern Presbyterian Church) supported slavery, and the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa supported apartheid. Both of us know the dangers of a theology and church that exclude and oppress. Finally, both of us now experience the reality of liminal societies and churches, in which deep changes are taking place, identities are shifting, and the temptation exists, particularly among those traditionally privileged, to cling to or develop reactionary securities and exclusive identities that simply reinforce the old powers.

Despite these contact points, however, a gap remains in our writing—both literally and figuratively. On the one hand, at the literal level, we have different sensibilities and writing styles, and we draw on different theological and aesthetic resources. While we have worked hard to make the book a unified whole, rather than simply a collection of essays, these differences will undoubtedly be apparent to readers.

On the other hand, reflected in this literal gap in our writing, there is a deeper gap—the unsettled, unfinished quality of an ongoing conversation, a humble awareness that the words we write mean different things to each of us as well as to our different contexts. We simply cannot pretend to understand fully each other's worlds. How can someone from the United States comprehend the struggles, the suffering, the courage, the pride, the guilt of the Afrikaner people? And how can he grasp the suffering, laughter, struggles, or liminality of South

Faubus blocked black children from entering the all-white Central High School, President Eisenhower ordered federal troops to the city to enforce the integration of the school. The troops literally escorted the black students into the building. For an account of these events by one who participated in them, see Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* (New York: David McKay, 1962; repr., Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986). Originally published in 1962, the book was banned throughout the South.

² Johan is a liminal figure himself. He is a white, Afrikaans-speaking (South) African. He is part of Africa and all that is African. But his religious and theological tradition is also Dutch Reformed, a tradition still operating with many Western and specifically European presuppositions. His antecedents were French Huguenots (his surname, Cilliers, is a French word that literally means “keeper of the vineyard,” or “maker of wine”). He is the tenth generation after the first Cilliers couple arrived at the Cape in 1700 (Josué and Elizabeth—they were, obviously, winemakers). One of his forefathers, Sarel Cilliers (the fifth generation after Josué and Elizabeth) played a major role in the so-called Battle of Blood River, and was seen as an important spiritual leader of the Voortrekkers (mostly Dutch settlers) who journeyed inland toward the northern borders of what is now South Africa. Johan is an African, but also knows about liminality, about being in between worlds.

African society? Similarly, how can someone from South Africa fully understand the social and political nuances and intricacies of the United States? Or the fears of ordinary Americans who have become accustomed to being part of a superpower, but now face a somewhat uncertain future?

Neither one of us could have written this book alone; it emerged in conversations amidst the connections and distances between us. And that seems appropriate. Any single author might be tempted to think he or she could somehow master the foolishness of the gospel or the folly of preaching. But, as fools repeatedly remind us, one cannot master folly, either theologically or homiletically. The book itself, like the fools it engages, thus calls for humility—humility because of our own privileged social locations, humility in relation to each other's contexts, and especially humility before the untamable folly of the gospel. We can only offer this book while laughing a bit at ourselves.

Yes, homileticians are fools. We stumble and bumble around trying our best to understand and explain and teach the foolish practice of preaching. After writing this book, we have decided we wouldn't want it any other way. For we have discovered that fools can be good, unsettling company.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people to thank for a book like this one. Carey Newman, the director of Baylor University Press and our editor, saw the potential in this rather unwieldy project, and he guided us every step of the way, from the conception of the book to its final form. He read the manuscript several times, pushing and praising, challenging and encouraging at all the right moments. We cannot thank him enough for his commitment to this book and his efforts to make it better.

The 2008 meeting of *Societas Homiletica* in Copenhagen provided the occasion during which we began to imagine this project, and we are grateful for the comments, questions, and support of colleagues who responded to our lectures at that meeting. In particular, Mogens Lindhardt, the former president of *Societas*, brought us together at the Copenhagen meeting. He told us we needed to get to know each other, and, as usual, he was correct.

Susan Eastman, Daniël Louw, Joel Marcus, and Donyelle McCray read portions of the manuscript and made insightful and constructive suggestions. In addition, outside reviewers offered valuable comments and recommendations.

Donyelle McCray, Lois Henderson, Kimberly Mournighan, and Diane Decker did everything from checking footnotes and quotations to obtaining permissions to copying and mailing the final draft of the manuscript. Luxolo Titimani translated the Xhosa iimbongi poems in chapter 4.

The people at Baylor University Press professionally and graciously transformed our manuscript into a book and sent it forth to readers. Jordan Fannin,

Jenny Hunt, Caroline Gear, and Diane Smith guided us through each stage of the publication process; the copyeditors did more than their fair share of work; and Dean Bornstein designed a cover beyond our wildest hopes.

We also want to thank colleagues, friends, and students at our respective institutions.

The staff at the library of the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, often walked the extra mile to find all the (sometimes unusual) books Johan needed for his research. His friend and colleague Ian Nell acted as go-between while Johan was on sabbatical.

The dean, the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, and colleagues at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, allowed Johan the privilege of a year's sabbatical, during which a major part of the book was completed.

Many people at Columbia Theological Seminary put up with and actually encouraged Chuck's explorations into foolishness both inside and outside the classroom. In particular, Haruko Ward offered helpful materials and support in the early stages of this book, and Anna Carter Florence uniquely understood and celebrated this project. Most important, Stan Saunders explored with Chuck the foolish gospel's implications for discipleship, preaching, and pedagogy, as well as the unmanageable realities of jesters and carnivals. Conversations and experiments with Stan were the seeds that have come to fruition in this book.

New colleagues, friends, and students at Duke Divinity School have not only encouraged the completion of this book, but also enriched Chuck's teaching and scholarship.

Our professional guilds have also made significant contributions both to our scholarship generally and to our work on this book in particular.

Johan's colleagues and friends from *Societas Homiletica* and the International Academy of Practical Theology have, in many direct and indirect ways, through the course of many years and numerous discussions, formed his theology and enriched his being—in particular Wilhelm Gräb from the Humboldt University in Berlin; Marcel Barnard from the Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands; Albrecht Grözinger from the University of Basel in Switzerland; Thomas Girmalm from the University of Umea in Sweden; Joris Geldhof from the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven, Belgium; and Daniël Louw from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. In addition, members of both *Societas Homiletica* and the Practical Theological Society of South Africa have responded helpfully to several of Johan's papers dealing with material in this book.

Similarly, Chuck's friends and colleagues in *Societas Homiletica* and the Academy of Homiletics—especially John McClure and Alexander Deeg—have been invaluable conversation partners. In addition, participants in the Academy's Rhetoric Working Group offered helpful feedback on an early essay dealing with holy fools and homiletics.

This book was also enriched by comments and questions at several conferences where Chuck presented lectures on this material as it was being developed: the Rochester College Lectures on Preaching; the Mennonite Church Eastern Canada School for Ministers; the Reclaiming the Text Conference at Montreat, North Carolina; the Lenten Workshop for United Methodist Clergy and Laity in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; and the Zentrum für evangelische Predigtkultur in Wittenberg, Germany.

We also express our gratitude to several publications that have allowed us to use portions of articles previously published in them: *Practical Theology in South Africa*: “Religious and Cultural Transformations and the Challenges for the Churches: A South African Perspective” and “From the Ridiculous to the Sublime: Practical Theological Perspectives on the Healing Power of Humor”; *Preaching: Does It Make a Difference?*, ed. Mogens Lindhardt and Henning Thomsen (Frederiksberg: Aros Forlag, 2010): “Clowning for Change: Comments on Charles Campbell’s Comic Vision on Preaching” and “In Search of Meaning between Ubuntu and Into: Perspectives on Preaching in Post-apartheid South Africa”; *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips*, ed. Robert Stephen Reid (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2010; used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers. www.wipfandstock.com): “Preacher as Ridiculous Person: Naked Street Preaching and Homiletical Foolishness”; and *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines*, ed. David Fleer and David Bland (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007): “The Folly of the Sermon on the Mount” and “Imagine.” All poems from *Imbongi Ijong’ Exhantini* were used by kind permission of Oxford University Press.

Finally, we are both endlessly grateful to and for our spouses, Elna Cilliers and Dana Campbell, and our families, who have been extremely patient and supportive during the writing of this book. They have put up with a lot of foolishness, and we cannot thank them enough.

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CHAPTER ONE

DON QUIXOTE AND THE CROSS

The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools.¹ And preachers of the gospel are not alone in their folly; they are in lively and colorful company. For fools are everywhere.² From tricksters to jesters, from holy fools to clowns, fools are found around the globe and throughout history in widely diverse times and places. Fools and folly are thus valuable, though neglected, pointers for preaching.³

Our interest, however, runs deeper than stereotypical notions of fools or simplistic forms of laughter. This book is not primarily about the “humor of the gospel” or the “laughter of God” or the “comic vision of Scripture.”⁴ These are

¹ See 1 Cor 1:17-25 and 4:9-10, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

² Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³ For an earlier book focused on the foolishness of preaching, see Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel against the Wisdom of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). A couple of other books treat the foolishness of preaching, though much less than their titles would suggest: Ian Pitt-Watson, *Preaching: A Kind of Folly* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); and Michael P. Knowles, ed., *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). For a rich rhetorical exploration of folly and metaphor in preaching, see Rodney Kennedy, *The Creative Power of Metaphor: A Rhetorical Homiletics* (New York: University Press of America, 1993). All of these books differ significantly from this one in both focus and scope.

⁴ There are already numerous books on this topic. See, for instance, J. William Whedbee,

minor notes, but a larger theme informs and shapes them. We contend that the foolishness of preaching is inseparable from the folly of the cross (1 Cor 1:17-25).

Viewed through the lens of the cross, gospel foolishness is not simply comical, but also deeply disruptive and unsettling. The folly of the cross interrupts and challenges the powers of death in the world; it includes tears and lament as well as humor and laughter. Gospel foolishness so disrupts our systems and securities that it calls both preacher and church to in-between, liminal places where fools make their home and where theology is unsettled and identity is in flux. This foolishness cannot be captured or controlled, either in sermon or book or life, for it challenges our rigid “iron theologies” and our desire for clear, stable identities. This foolishness challenges us especially at times when societies are unsettled, and we are tempted to guard ourselves against the flux by developing just such iron theologies and stable identities. In this book we engage this deep, uncontrolled, uncontrollable gospel foolishness.

To introduce this folly, we offer three initial images—aesthetic fragments of foolishness, we call them: one from third-century Rome, one from seventeenth-century Africa (Kongo peoples), and one from twentieth-century Spain.

Rome and the Parody of the Donkey

Although almost two thousand years old, a remarkable parody from early Christianity called the *Alexamenos graffito*, or *graffito blasfemo* (ca. 238–244), still captures our imagination today (see fig. 1.1). It was carved in the plaster of a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome and can be seen now in the Palatine Antiquarium Museum. It seems to have been created in the quarters of the imperial pageboys, a boarding school called *Paedagogium*. In the depiction, one of the boys, obviously a Christian, is being mocked by another boy, or by a group of his schoolfellows, by means of parody. The provocative parody shows a man with a donkey’s head being crucified on a tau cross.⁵ In front of the cross stands a young man—presumably Alexamenos—raising his hand as if in prayer. Across the picture, written in broad, childlike strokes are the words *Alexamenos worships his God*.⁶

The Bible and the Comic Vision (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); Marion Daniel Shutter, *Wit and Humor of the Bible—A Literary Study* (Boston: Arena, 1893); Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds., *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990); Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981); Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2008).

⁵ The tau cross resembles the Greek letter *tau* (T). The hands of the crucified person were tied to the cross beam, and there was a bar to support the feet—as in the *Alexamenos graffito*. This is also one of the earliest known depictions of the crucifixion. Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 596–97.

⁶ There has been some debate about the correct translation of the Greek inscription: *Alexamenos sebete theon*. In Greek *sebete* actually indicates an imperative, i.e., *Alexamenos, worship God!* Several scholars have suggested, however, that *sebete* could be understood as a variant



FIGURE 1.1
*Alexamenos Graffito (detail), Palatine Hill, Rome
 public domain*

of *sebetai*, which simply means “worships,” or perhaps that *sebeta* is a phonetic misspelling of *sebetai*, and that the idea in fact was to say: *Alexamenos worships his God*. Others prefer to interpret it as a declarative statement: *Alexamenos worshipping God*. Cf. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 596–97.

In the upper right-hand corner of the picture one sees the Greek letter Y. It is not quite clear what this indicates—perhaps a representation of a cry of anguish, or another indication of the tau cross (although the Y rather looks like the Greek letter upsilon), or, as some have argued, some form of reference to the Egyptian god Seth (who is also depicted as a figure with a donkey head). The latter does not seem to be an accepted notion today; see Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 596–97. If there were in fact hints of this allusion in the parody, it would in any case strengthen the idea that a powerful figure (god) is here depicted as crucified and therefore powerless. *In this powerless power lies the parody*. Cf. Andreas Mertin, “Karikaturen: Das Christentum aufs Korn genommen,” *Katechetische Blätter* 4, no. 6 (2008): 277.

Some scholars, such as Stephan Wyss, have argued that the crucified donkey could be linked to prevailing donkey cults, which celebrated the sensory and erotic. This would give the parody a further dimension: not only is Christ mocked as being a “lower” god, guilty of sensory and bodily pleasures, but the parody backfires on those doing the mocking—because Christ indeed *did* celebrate and re-dignify the sensory and corporeal dimensions of being human. His whole life, and his death, signify an embodiment of the dignity of humanity—inclusive of the sensory and the erotic. Then the parody becomes a type of *double parody*, a parody on a parody! See Stephan Wyss, *Der gekreuzigte Esel: Aufsätze zu einer christlichen Archäologie der Sinnlichkeit* (Freiburg: Schweiz, 1986), 29–30.

Apparently the Christian boy, Alexamenos, held onto his beliefs, for another inscription close by reads: *Alexamenos is faithful* (*Alexamenos fidelis*). It is not clear whether Alexamenos wrote these words himself as a response to the mocking graffito, or whether another boy took sides with him.⁷

One could ask: Why specifically a *donkey*? The donkey played a significant role in antiquity, especially as a metaphor used by classical authors. The depictions of the donkey are paradoxical. On the one hand, it is applauded for its endurance in doing hard work economically,⁸ but on the other, it is slandered for its sloth and stupidity. In the course of time, however, it was the *foolishness* of the donkey that became its most prominent trait. The donkey became the standard metaphor for stupidity and foolishness in classical antiquity.⁹ Cicero, for instance, calls Calpurnius Piso a donkey, someone not capable of being taught letters, and not in need of words, but rather fists or sticks.¹⁰ Juvenal even talks about a stupid person as a two-legged donkey.¹¹ This metaphor of the stupid, two-legged donkey (just like the one in the *Alexamenos graffito*) carried with it unmistakable overtones of mockery and became a sign of foolishness.

The donkey also played an interesting—and paradoxical—role in Christianity. From the earliest centuries of Christianity there was a tradition claiming that Joseph and Mary fled with the Child to Egypt on a donkey, although this detail is never indicated in the Bible. The donkey was venerated for many generations as a vehicle of salvation. During the Middle Ages worshippers actually celebrated the Feast of the Donkey, which originated in France to commemorate the flight to Egypt, and which was closely related to the more widely known Feast of Fools.¹²

In addition, in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus rode on the back of a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Here the donkey also carries overtones of foolishness. It contributes to Jesus' carnivalesque parody of worldly power and authority.¹³ In Christianity the donkey was, and still is,

⁷ Cf. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), 174–75.

⁸ Pliny the Elder, for instance, says: *Quidquid per asellum fieri potest, vilissime constat*, meaning: Whatever is done through a donkey works out cheapest (*N.H.*18.8.44), in LacusCurtius, accessed July 30, 2011, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/18*.html.

⁹ Ilona Opelt, “Esel,” in *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 6, ed. Ernst Dassmann (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1967), 577. Opelt also refers to the *vanity and false self-understanding* often ascribed to donkeys in the classic fables (575).

¹⁰ “Quid nunc te asine litteras doceam? Non opus est verbis, sed fustibus.” Cicero, *in Pisonem* 73.377, in the Perseus Digital Library, accessed July 30, 2011, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=PerseusLatinTexts&getid=1&query=Cic.%20Pis.%2073>.

¹¹ Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, *Satura* 9.92, in the Latin Library, accessed September 19, 2010, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/juvenal.html>.

¹² Cf. Opelt, “Esel,” 588. The Feast of Fools will be discussed in chapter 4.

¹³ Jesus' triumphal entry will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

appreciated and applauded as being part of the foolish history that God makes with humanity.¹⁴

Before the advent of Christianity, the Jews were slandered as worshippers of an ass, and perhaps this slander forms part of the background of the figure on the wall in Rome.¹⁵ Classical authors such as Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and others refer to the charge that Christians are guilty of practicing *onolatry* (donkey worship).¹⁶ Minucius Felix, for instance, made the following accusation: “I hear that they adore the head of an ass, that basest of creatures, consecrated by I know not what silly persuasion—a worthy and appropriate religion for such manners.”¹⁷ And Tertullian defended the Christian belief against the charge of a critic who carried around a picture directed against Christians with the heading *Onocoetes*, which means “donkey priest.” The picture featured a man wearing a toga and the ears of a donkey with a book in hand and one leg ending in a hoof.¹⁸

The message of a crucified God, coupled with the image of a donkey, was thus seen by many, actually by the majority, as stupid and inappropriate, as utter foolishness. To pagan ways of thinking the whole notion of a crucified donkey-God seemed to be completely contemptible, totally scandalous and nonsensical, and utterly laughable and absurd. In short, the connection between a crucified God and a donkey expressed in a striking way the folly of the cross.

In the Hellenistic world, with its adoration of the good, the true, and the beautiful, such a view of the divine would have been vehemently rejected as a distorted form of aesthetics, an *aesthetics of the repulsive*.¹⁹ The forms of Greek beauty simply cannot portray the agony and torments of the crucifixion.²⁰ Conventional aesthetics of beauty cannot fathom or endure the aesthetics of the crucified donkey.

¹⁴ See, e.g., G. K. Chesterton's poem, “The Donkey,” in *As I Was Saying: A Chesterton Reader*, ed. Robert Knille (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 22.

¹⁵ Cf. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 596–97.

¹⁶ Cited in Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 596–97.

¹⁷ Minucius Felix, *Octavius IX*, *Catholic Encyclopedia, Fathers of the Church*, accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0410.htm>.

¹⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, XVI in Logos Virtual Library, accessed July 30, 2011, <http://www.logoslibrary.org/tertullian/apology/16.html>. Tertullian refuted the accusation that “our god is actually the head of an ass” in quite an interesting way—one could call it a technique of *ironic literalism*. He took the claim literally and ironically to the point of absurdity, and, in the process, turned the argument on its head: “You will not, however, deny that all beasts of burden, and not parts of them, but the animals entire, are with their goddess Epona objects of worship with you.” In effect he says something like the following: You in fact worship the ass in its entirety, not just the head. And then you throw in Epona, the patron saint of donkeys and all the beasts of burden, cattle, and wild animals. You even worship their stables. Perhaps this is your charge against us that in the midst of all these indiscriminate animal lovers, we save our devotion for asses alone! Tertullian, *Apology*, XVI. Ironic literalism, a classic rhetorical move of the jester, will be discussed more fully in chapters 4 and 8.

¹⁹ “Ästhetik des Hässlichen”; Mertin, “Karikaturen,” 276.

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *On Beauty* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 135.

The aesthetics of the cross is a different form of aesthetics. One might call it the aesthetics of ugliness, or repulsion. But it is simultaneously a different form of beauty. It is the terrible beauty of the cross. The beauty of God is often revealed under circumstances that we would find offensive: the ugliness of the cross is the strange “beauty” of God par excellence.²¹ The paradox of this ugly beauty of the cross is that it evokes hope: in ugliness and suffering, beauty shines through and new possibilities are born.

Not everybody discerns this beauty. The aesthetics of the cross often remains hidden from us. But there are people who recognize (God’s) beauty in (God’s) ugliness. We call them *fools*. Fools embrace the strange aesthetics of repulsion; they prize the ethos of the donkey. They have a wisdom that discerns beauty in ugliness. Fools disturb us by pointing out the chaos and the suffering of life; but more than that, fools believe that out of this ugliness, beauty can be created. They gesture toward alternatives. Most people think they are totally ridiculous, that they are, well, fools, as dumb as donkeys. Some people might even find these dumb donkeys so irritating that they would insist that fools be ignored or ridiculed or silenced—or crucified.

One who does not see as a fool could in fact ask: God, a donkey? On a cross? How could one worship such a God? Let alone preach this God? Such a strange gospel, in which the weakness of the cross and not a conventional, powerful God takes central place, can be described as absurd and ludicrous. This gospel can become a stumbling block, a scandal, to many, as Paul indicated in his first letter to the Corinthians.²²

Imagine for a moment a God (omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent) who orchestrates the pulsating powers of the universe beyond the farthest galaxy, who is the foundation and center, the beginning and the end of creation and time, who is the living energy in the smallest blade of grass and the dynamic adhesive holding together the most minuscule concentration of atoms somewhere in a grain of dust—but *at the same time*, is powerless, mocked, a donkey, on a cross. Just imagine such a powerless, powerful God—if you can. Foolishness. Complete and utter nonsense. *Holy* nonsense, for sure, but still nonsense—to many.

Africa and the Foolish Power of the Cross

Another depiction of the foolishness of the cross takes us to the continent of Africa, where the cross comes into contact with African notions of power.²³ The idea of a vulnerable God, at least in the conventional sense of the word, seems

²¹ Cf. Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (New York: Oakwood, 1996), 309–10.

²² 1 Cor 1:18–31.

²³ Actually, one cannot speak of African culture or spirituality in the singular. Africa is a vast continent, incorporating a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups. The term “Africa” does not denote one homogenous group.

to stand in stark contrast to certain African concepts of God linked to *Amandla*, which literally means “power” or “energy” or “life force.” These concepts are difficult to describe. In Africa this power or *force vitale* is directly linked to the Divinity that rules over humanity and determines our fate.²⁴ The Divine Force penetrates all of reality as a cosmogenic presence, but is not necessarily understood in terms of personhood. It is rather the all-penetrating force that enables individuals and communities to receive and experience life. This ever-active, penetrating force initiates existential experiences of *force vitale*, to the point where humans in turn strive to exercise power over any force that is perceived to endanger society or the individual’s well-being. The (divine) Power empowers.

Many Africans thus seek power-charged objects because the quest for power is a driving force in African religion.²⁵ *Ubunye* (the unity of all reality) is kept intact through *Amandla* (power), which in turn operates within *Ubuntu* (community). African spirituality is concerned with the maintenance of equilibrium and therefore with guarding against the loss of power. The specific understanding of the Divine, or God-image, that forms the background for this quest is itself paradoxical: on the one hand, this God penetrates all of life and is therefore near; on the other hand, the Power stands aloof, not touched by the events of humanity. God is powerful and provides all that is needed for life, but at the same time is distant and remote.²⁶

The African notion of God’s *immanence*, we could say, finds it difficult to incorporate a Christian understanding of God’s vulnerability. Such an understanding of God’s power, as embodied in the crucifixion of Christ, is difficult for many Africans to grasp, possibly more so than for non-Africans. Concepts like *kenosis*—God’s self-emptying—and the *cross* may be stumbling blocks for an African understanding of power and empowerment.²⁷

African spirituality is not only about power and empowerment, but also often about the disempowerment of one’s enemies. These dynamics can also clearly be seen in African art. Traditional African art, which often seeks to encapsulate power, can be used as a powertool or magic charm against one’s enemies and for one’s own well-being. An example of this kind of art can be seen in the crucifix dating from the early seventeenth century, found in what is today Angola (fig. 1.2).

²⁴ Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1989), 34. Of course, there is no common understanding of “Divinity” in Africa. It is impossible to go into detail concerning all the nuances on the continent in this regard. For a good overview, cf. Edwin William Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh House, 1966).

²⁵ Cf. Abraham Kriel, *Roots of African Thought: Sources of Power—A Pilot Study* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989), 198; Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 283.

²⁶ Smith expresses this paradoxical God-image as follows: “At times the impression is gained that God appears to the African as the complete Other, the absolute sovereign, external to his own creation, so far remote in his solitary glory as to be unapproachable save through intermediaries; but at other times he is thought to be immanent in man” (*African Ideas of God*, 27).

²⁷ Daniël J. Louw, *Cura Vitae: Illness and the Healing of Life in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Wellington, South Africa: Lux Verbi.BM, 2008), 108–9.

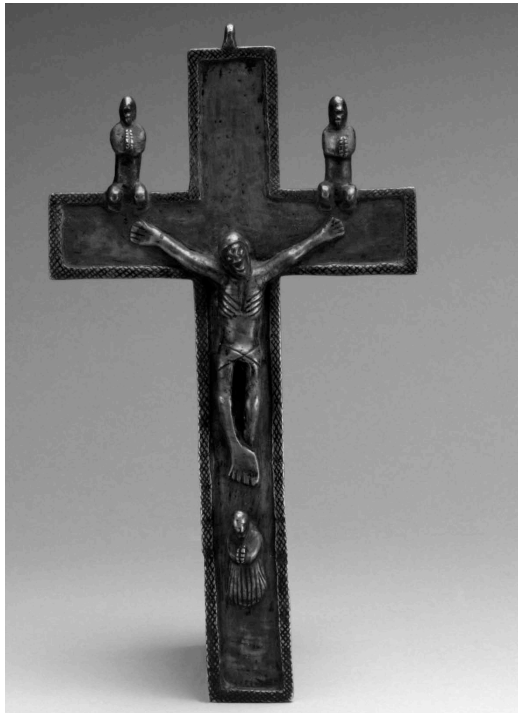


FIGURE 1.2

Crucifix, Angola, Northwestern Region

Kongo peoples, early 17th CE. Brass, H x W x D: 10 x 5 1/2 x 3/4 in. (25.4 x 14 x 1.9 cm). Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999 (1999.295.4). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

This work of art is aesthetically and symbolically rich in detail.²⁸ The manner in which the crucifix has been assimilated into local idioms is extraordinary. Christ's features, particularly his hair, suggest those of a Kongoles person.²⁹ His flattened

²⁸ For this image and the following description, including information about the large Kongo Kingdom, see "Crucifix," Works of Art, Collection Database, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed August 10, 2011, http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/collection_database/arts_of_africa%2C_oceania%2C_and_the_americas/crucifix//objectview.aspx?OID=50011006&collID=5&dd1=5.

²⁹ Later in this region of Africa, black, African depictions of Jesus served as figures of resistance to white colonialism. See Musa W. Dube's account of the radical, boundary-crossing woman, Kimpa Vita/Dona Beatrice, who, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as Dube puts it, repainted Jesus, his disciples, and his mother with black paint in the white colonial church. No longer was Jesus the "white, blue-eyed, blonde" figure of the colonialists,

hands and feet, with the feet joined into a single five-toed limb, represent Kongo gestures associated with heightened spiritual power. The large, protruding oval eyes, another common Kongo art motif, represent the supernatural vision of one possessed by an ancestor or god. Below Christ and above his shoulders are small, praying figures, which possibly depict ancestors, angels, mourners, or saints. Believed to have spiritual authority and power, including magical protective properties, the cross was acculturated into Kongo ancestral cults and burial rituals and was used to intervene in matters such as illness, fertility, and drought. The cross is thus intertwined with the search for magical power; it becomes a tool for, and of, power, a kind of amulet that can ward off evil. Such an understanding of the cross seems at first glance to be far removed from a God who sides in solidarity with suffering humanity, who is a vulnerable, broken, and mocked donkey-God.

But perhaps this fascinating, magic-like amulet actually takes us to a deep and profound reality of the cross. On the one hand, the crucifix stresses in a non-Western fashion the power of the cross, which is often lost in Western emphases on suffering, sacrifice, and weakness. In this depiction the cross is truly an object of power. The power to ward off evil is here precisely the power of the Crucified One. And such an affirmation lies at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel: on the cross Jesus overcomes the “evil one.” While the connection with magical power may trouble many Western Christians, the affirmation of the power of the cross over evil remains a central Christian affirmation, however it is conceptualized.

On the other hand, this crucifix may also capture in a distinctive way the deep folly of the cross. One of the early attractions of fools was apparently the fact that they were mysterious, often physically odd or grotesque figures who were believed to be immune to evil, and who were thought to possess powers to ward off the “Evil Eye.”³⁰ Fools were therefore valued as lucky possessions. They were believed to protect their benefactor in much the same way as the Kongo crucifix provides protection from evil.

In addition, the fool often became the scapegoat, who was believed to take the ill fate of “normal” people upon himself or herself. Not only did fools transfer good luck from themselves to their masters, but they also enticed bad luck away

but a figure of African christological resistance. Kimpa Vita/Dona Beatrice also wanted all crosses and crucifixes and images of Jesus destroyed because “they were just as good as the old fetishes.” For her radical resistance, she was martyred in 1706. See Musa W. Dube, “*Talitha Cum* Hermeneutics of Liberation: Some African Women’s Ways of Reading the Bible,” in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, eds. Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andinach (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 134–35.

³⁰ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), 61. Welsford’s claims at this point are, by her own admission, somewhat speculative; the ancient origins of the fool are difficult to discern.