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Let us make God our banker:

Ethics, temporality, and agency in a Ugandan charity home

ABSTRACT

Faith in divine intervention affects the ethical and temporal orientations of a community of East African nuns managing a charity home in Central Uganda and leads them to make programmatic decisions that put them at odds with mainstream approaches in development and humanitarianism. By demonstrating that their resistance to long-term planning and audit practices is not the product of material privation or ignorance but, rather, a consciously developed orientation toward time and agency, I bring together concerns from the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of development. Further, by seeking to explain how the sisters come to hold their particular beliefs, I move beyond the elucidation of doctrine to show how mundane forms of practice are central to the formation of ethical subjectivity. [*Africa, agency, Christianity, charity, ethics, temporality*]

Teresa and a ducat can do nothing; God, Teresa and a ducat can do everything. Let us do everything we can, but let us make God our banker.

—Saint Teresa of Avila, 16th-century Spanish mystic

It is six in the morning and raining when I walk from the cement-floored guesthouse toward the chapel. There is no light in the sky—there never is at this hour in Uganda. At seven, the sun will rise quickly and bathe the country in the full light of noon until it makes its startlingly quick descent at seven in the evening. I walk across the wet grass and along the gravel-lined paths to the chapel. Long florescent bulbs light the outsides of the buildings.

The chapel is a stately brick structure, and its floor of uneven red, black, and cream clay tiles has been lovingly polished by the feet of those who have come to pray here over the years. Tucked into the quiet of a narrow wooden pew, I like to watch those same worshipers casually slipping off their sandals, at home with God in a house they seem to share with him. The shelves built into the backs of the pews hold their prayer books, most wrapped in worn silver foil dotted with tiny pink roses.

According to the Franciscan Sisters of Africa, Mother Mary Patrick¹—the Irish Franciscan nun who founded their order—was given the money to build the chapel by a stranger she unexpectedly encountered as she walked before sunrise one morning. As she thought and prayed for a solution to the problem of finding the money needed to construct a permanent church building, the stranger appeared before her, handed her an envelope filled with money, and vanished. The sisters have built a grotto to the Virgin Mary to mark the site where this is said to have occurred.

One sister or another told me this story nearly every time I came to stay with them, and it was also included in a formal display commemorating the life and works of Mother Patrick that the sisters had assembled to commemorate the 50th anniversary of her death. Over time, I came to see the story not only as one they told themselves to reinforce their belief in the small miracles they thought might prove Mother Patrick's sainthood but also as a reassurance that their own financial woes would be solved and, more importantly, that they would be solved not through their own planning but through the workings of divine providence.

Marking time

In this article, I consider how this faith in providence encourages the sisters to focus on the eternal and intrinsic goods of action accomplished in the present moment. I argue that this ethico-temporal orientation is at odds with the forms of rational planning and demands for lasting change that advocates of sustainable development call for. In so doing, I bring arguments on the anthropology of religion into dialogue with questions concerning the politics of aid in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, asking the reader to consider resistance to such forms of planning not as an obvious lack to be remedied through capacity-building exercises but, rather, as an alternative orientation toward time and agency chosen for its own sake.

Scholars have reflected on how different conceptions of time shape the fields of development and humanitarianism. In these writings, humanitarianism is distinguished not only by its concern with survival and bare life (Agamben 1998; Fassin 2007; Redfield 2005) but also by its operation within the space of emergency or crisis (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Calhoun 2010; Redfield 2005, 2010; Rieff 2002). Emergencies are not only immediate but also set apart from the problems of “normal life,” no matter how long they may last. Development, by contrast, can be characterized not only by its focus on economic well-being but also by its teleological orientation toward a singular modernity yet to come (Ferguson 1999, 2006; Rist 1997). While contemporary NGOs may be fixated on the production of short-term deliverables, such as workshops and trainings, these deliverables are all oriented toward a long-range productive future in which development interventions will no longer be necessary (Ferguson 2012; Green 2000; Kremer and Miguel 2007; Scherz 2010a, in press; Swidler and Watkins 2008).

In contrast to both of these approaches, Catholic charity is ideally focused on the intrinsic and eternal good of each action carried out within the present moment.² In contrast to the punctuated inputs aimed at securing sustainable future progress characteristic of current development practice, the Franciscan Sisters of Africa are remarkably uninterested in long-range planning and tend to focus on the intrinsic good of individual actions, or what the 20th-century Trappist monk Thomas Merton referred to as working with “simple intention” (1955:62). Considering this vision of sacred time brings together concerns from the anthropology of ethics and religion and the anthropology of development and social welfare, two fields that, with a few notable exceptions (Bornstein 2003, 2012; Elisha 2011; Muehlebach 2012; Pandian 2009), are too often kept apart.

In addition, despite their differing attitudes toward time, humanitarianism and development share a faith in the possibility that change can and will be accomplished through rational human action. This is especially true of the

more expansive contemporary rationalized humanitarianism that has aligned itself with military intervention and the promotion of human rights (Calhoun 2010; Rieff 2002). The sisters’ vision of the limits of their own ability to affect the future through long-range planning provides a vivid contrast to the ideals of development and humanitarianism that envision poverty and suffering as problems with feasible human solutions.

Since the 1970s, social theorists have become increasingly interested in the relationship between human agency and social structure (Ahearn 2001b; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Ortner 1984; Sahlin 1981; Sewell 2005). More recently, anthropologists have begun to explore a multiplicity of culturally variable conceptions of agency (Ahearn 2001a, 2001b; Desjarlais 1997; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Keane 2007; Mahmood 2005). Like these scholars, in this article I show how the sisters’ limited faith in their own ability to bring about change helps us to think about how historically and culturally variable notions of agency affect the ways people experience and approach the world around them.³ Further, I argue that the sisters’ experience of time and agency is not the result of a forced retreat made necessary by their economic predicament. Instead, I leave open the possibility that their lack of interest in the midrange future is the result of their religious commitments, making it independent, and at least partly generative, of their material situation. Considering this possibility requires us to think about the relationship between religion and political economy without granting dominance to either.

Further, by exploring how the sisters make use of a range of techniques to foster these beliefs, I engage with an emerging literature on the anthropology of ethics that has been deeply influenced by Michel Foucault’s writings on Hellenistic practices of self-formation. In seeking to explain how the sisters come to hold their particular beliefs about their accountability to others, about which temporal frames matter most, and about how their own actions might or might not affect the future, I argue that they make use of a complex set of practices based around a form of narrative mimesis to acquire their faith in the workings of divine providence. While the theology underlying the sisters’ beliefs has been extensively discussed (Brown 1967; Lloyd 2008; Mahoney 1987; McBrien 1994; Weber 2002), I focus here on how these beliefs are instilled through practices ranging from frequent reassignments to accounting procedure and laughter, thus making use of ethnography to show how mundane forms of practice are central to the formation of particular kinds of ethical subjects.

Finally, I explore how these orientations toward time and agency have shaped the programmatic decisions of the Franciscan Sisters of Africa working at Mercy House, an NGO that serves as a home for orphans, children with disabilities, and the elderly. By contrasting the sisters’ actions with more conventional approaches to development and

humanitarianism, I demonstrate that their ethico-temporal frame has had a profound impact on their long-term commitment to the provision of material charity—and that this choice has ultimately made them marginal members of the international aid community.

Mercy House

The arguments I present in this article emerged through the fieldwork I conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2010 at Mercy House. Mercy House is a mission of the Franciscan Sisters of Africa, a Franciscan Third Order Regular congregation made up of more than 600 women from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. It was founded by Mother Mary Patrick, a Franciscan Mill Hill Missionary, in 1923.

When I began my fieldwork in Uganda in May 2007, I was interested in studying orphan-support programs but was not particularly interested in orphanages or children's homes, as they seemed to be falling out of favor with the majority of local and international NGOs. Nevertheless, out of deference to my host father, a Catholic retired civil servant who was anxious to introduce me to the people he knew who were working with orphans, I agreed to visit several of these homes, all of which were run by small communities of African nuns. After a series of preliminary visits, I decided that these homes were, indeed, marginal to the larger story of sustainable participatory development I wanted to tell and decided not to pursue Mercy House as a field site. Yet, after months of fieldwork with Hope Child, a more mainstream Ugandan orphan-support NGO (Scherz 2010a, in press), I began to see Mercy House as an important counterpoint to sustainable development, for it was against exactly this sort of unsustainable charity that NGOs like Hope Child framed their work. From November 2007 to April 2008, I split my time between the two, generally staying for a week at a time in a guesthouse at Mercy House while continuing my research with Hope Child. While at Mercy House, I spent my days observing the activities of the home and talking with the sisters, the residents, and the steady stream of volunteers who came to donate their time through a varied array of projects. This fieldwork was supplemented by visits with Mercy House's primary donors in May of 2008 and 2010 and by a two-week return visit to Mercy House in 2010.

Mercy House was founded in 1928 in a rural village two hours southeast of Kampala within the kingdom of Buganda. Rather than focusing their efforts on a single population, the six sisters running Mercy House work with a broad range of people whom they see as in need of care and support. The group of approximately one hundred residents includes orphans, children who have been abused, children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities, and elderly migrants who can no longer support themselves. Most of the children attend local schools, the

majority of which are also run by the Franciscan Sisters of Africa.

Mercy House's one-acre compound is made up of a series of low-slung cement buildings that house dormitories, vocational training and occupational therapy classrooms, a commercial bakery, a kitchen, and the sisters' residence. Some buildings originally designed for other uses have been repurposed for rearing chickens, pigs, and cows. While there is at present enough space for all of the residents, the order has been unable to secure funding to hire additional staff to support the six sisters whose time is primarily taken up by the administration of the home, its gardens, and the commercial bakery. This situation has left the resident children and adults, many of whom have serious medical and psychological problems, largely in each other's care.

Mercy House runs on an annual operating budget of approximately \$20,000. The nuns constantly struggle to raise the needed amount. They have been supported in their efforts by two foundations in the Netherlands, one of which provides sponsorships for approximately 25 percent of the children. The other contributed start-up support for the commercial bakery, which is primarily intended to provide jobs for people with disabilities and to cover some of the home's operating expenses. Most of the money used to cover the expenses of the unsponsored children and other residents, including food, medical bills, school fees, clothing, and other supplies comes as small donations from a wide range of local and international "friends," most of whom have some personal connection to Mercy House, and through the sisters' income-generating activities, including raising chickens and pigs for sale. Neither the nuns nor the home receives any regular support from the Franciscan Sisters of Africa (and, indeed, the nuns are expected to contribute to the running of the order), from the Catholic Church, or from other religious orders.

The sisters' precarious financial situation reflects their refusal to seriously engage with processes of audit, which has largely disqualified them from taking a share of the aid that has flowed into Uganda since the late 1980s. While the sisters make use of a complex set of ethical techniques, described below, they generally eschew visible reports, files on residents, budgets, work plans, formal meetings, and long-term plans. This avoidance is often shocking for Ugandans and foreign volunteers accustomed to working within formally managed bureaucracies and businesses, all of whom embraced the regime of audit and found the sisters' lack of organization to be a constant source of frustration.

Monica, a Peace Corps volunteer who was finishing her two-year term at Mercy House while I was conducting my fieldwork, said that when she first arrived at Mercy House, it was a mess, "just a jumble of people and needs." She began asking what were, for her, basic and necessary questions: "How involved is the board of directors?" and "What is the five-year plan for the home?" She was stunned by

the lack of answers: “These were questions that could have been pulled from a Business 101 course, and they couldn’t answer them! I was ready to pack my bags and go home. I just went to my room and cried.” Monica did not leave, but she continued to be frustrated with the sisters at Mercy House throughout her stay. Despite her best efforts to “build capacity” by introducing systems, budgets, and plans, there was still no complete list of residents or written management plan by the time she left. As I tried to gather basic facts about Mercy House’s operations, I too was amazed that it took me several weeks to compile a list of current residents, a task that I ultimately completed by consulting several competing filing systems, all of which had been begun by well-meaning volunteers and none of which were in active use, and then checking these files against the sisters’ memories.

Mercy House’s specific interventions also set it apart from other NGOs in Uganda. Instead of holding community trainings and working toward the creation of sustainable projects and community institutions, the sisters focus on the direct provision of care and material support. They argued that moving away from providing care directly to the needy would require them to abandon their Franciscan charism.⁴ The sisters’ primary responsibility is seeing to the upkeep of the children and adults attached to Mercy House. Concretely, this means raising money to pay for school fees and other expenses, taking people to medical appointments locally and in Kampala, visiting children living away at boarding schools, managing and teaching at the small vocational training school located within the Mercy House compound, and managing the home’s poultry, piggery, bakery, and garden enterprises.

The sisters recognize that their work is fundamentally different from the workshop- and advocacy-based approaches of the more mainstream NGOs and feel that these NGOs are wasting money that might otherwise be spent on more practical material needs. One afternoon, Sr. Valentine complained about a visit that representatives of the African Center for the Rights of the Child had made to the home.

They came around collecting lots of nice stories to take back with them about all of the suffering these children had seen, but they did nothing for them! They talked so much about the importance of schooling, but did nothing to help us pay for the children’s fees. Their speeches were nice, but they didn’t give us so much as a little money for one blanket, yet they had 80,000 UGX [\$47] to spend on fuel. What good did that 80,000 do for us?

Sr. Valentine’s frustrations with the advocacy- and training-based approaches of these other NGOs speak to the sisters’ broader skepticism regarding nonmaterial forms of assistance targeted at creating long-term social transformation, which have become an increasingly important part of NGO interventions since the 1990s. In line with efforts to

promote sustainable change, many NGOs have moved away from the distribution of material goods or “handouts” and toward efforts to form community-based institutions and advocacy and sensitization efforts (Green 2000; Kremer and Miguel 2007; Scherz 2010a, in press; Swidler and Watkins 2008). These NGOs explicitly define themselves in opposition to “charity.” Meanwhile, Sr. Valentine defined Mercy House’s charitable efforts in opposition to these mainstream approaches. For organizations interested in advocacy and sustainability, like the African Center for the Rights of the Child, handing out blankets or money for school fees constitutes a meaningless gesture that is unlikely to create long-term change. By contrast, Sr. Valentine saw the failure to give concrete assistance as an unethical withholding. In addition, the sisters had little hope that advocacy efforts would have much of an effect in Uganda and little faith in the capacity of the government to make changes that would actually benefit the country’s people. They, like many Ugandans, felt that most of the legislation passed through advocacy efforts, such as the 1996 Children’s Statute, was nothing more than pretty words designed to please the international community, creating little real change in people’s lives.

School of charity

The sisters saw their daily work of caring for the residents of Mercy House not only as a better way of caring for the poor but also as a way to care for themselves, in the sense of advancing their spiritual life. In addition to being a form of prayer and a way of expressing gratitude for what they saw as God’s unmatched gifts of love and grace, care was a means for self-crafting, allowing them to perfect the virtue of charity and to foster their capacity to trust in divine providence.

Foucault (1984, 2005) described the process of intentionally crafting a particular kind of self in his later works on ethics, and several anthropologists have recently taken up his approach (see Faubion 2011; Mahmood 2005; Marshall 2009; Rabinow 2003; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2011). In analyzing the ways in which the Franciscan Sisters of Africa use techniques of narrative and mimesis to similar ends, I have also chosen to follow this model, not because it works as a general theory of ethics applicable in all cases but because the sisters’ mode of ethical formation is a direct extension of the monastic practices that developed out of Hellenistic forms of caring for the self (Foucault 2005).

Within this model of ethical formation, people perform exercises of self-care under supervision to shape themselves and to align their desires with specific virtues, allowing for the development of good judgment in practical matters. This process of preparation is a reflexive engagement of the self with the self as well as with teachers and institutions. Through a process of elaboration or ethical work, including such activities as reading, memorization,

prayer, confession, examination of one's behaviors, or even manual labor, the self becomes equipped to face future ethical challenges (Foucault 1984). This ethical equipment is used to transform a logos, a discourse, that one believes states the truth and describes what one must do, into an ethos, an action-oriented matrix deeply embedded into the subject that enables the logos to be deployed in the difficult moments of daily life (Foucault 2005; Rabinow 2003).

The Franciscan Sisters of Africa make use of this ethical mode, in which discourses, specifically their charism and various strands of Catholic theology, are instilled through specific forms of equipment, including narrative, mimesis, manual labor, daily prayer, accounting practices, voluntary poverty, laughter, art, and frequent reassignments. Through the use of these kinds of ethico-moral equipment, the sisters form themselves in line with the virtues, or the qualities, that are necessary to achieve their aim or telos. In this case, these virtues include faith, humility, solidarity, and detachment from worldly concerns. A sister who has successfully undergone the formation process is thought to be able to make decisions about specific situations in alignment with the ultimate end, aim, or telos of her practice. For the sisters, that end is the love of God, and all other ends are subordinate to that aim.

In line with this ethical mode, a prospective Franciscan Sister of Africa undergoes a nine-year training process. Prior to beginning this training process, while the young woman is still living at home, a sister guides her through a process of discernment to determine whether she truly has a calling to the religious life. If she decides that she does have a calling, she may begin the process of formally joining the order after completing secondary school. She first spends a year living as a postulant at a remote center in eastern Uganda, where she engages in manual labor and prayer and learns about the order and about communal life. The eastern part of the country is very hot and dry, and most sisters describe this step of the formation process as difficult and physically demanding.

After completing a year as a postulant, a young woman may choose to become a novice. Following a formal ceremony during which she ritually asks to be admitted to the novitiate, she dons a modified version of the Franciscan Sisters of Africa habit and enters a yearlong prayerful period during which she is cloistered in the three-story compound of dormitories and classrooms that make up the novice house. Much of this time is spent in silent prayer and in classes. This instruction focuses on the lessons that can be learned from the lives of Saints Francis and Clare as well as those that can be gleaned from stories of the life of Mother Mary Patrick.⁵ In addition to the formal education a novice receives, she is also encouraged to read what she likes from the library in the novitiate. After this first year, the novice begins to reenter the world and is sent to spend three months working at one of the missions, of which Mercy House is

one. At the end of the second year, she decides whether to make the first of a series of professions in which she dedicates her life to the order. After six years, most go on to make their final profession, during which a sister dedicates her life to the service of God.

The sisters do not conceive of themselves or each other as blank slates during this process. They emphasize that each sister has different gifts and talents that make particular parts of religious life easier. At times, they speak of these as inborn virtues. At other times, they focus on the lessons they learned as children from their parents and from other family members. While all of the sisters make an effort to adopt a common set of virtues, allowances are made for their differences, in terms of both their assignments and their own ways of managing the daily challenges of living and working together.

In the commemorative magazine produced by the sisters for Mercy House's platinum jubilee celebration in 2003, many sisters wrote remembrances of Mercy House that focused on its role as a "school of charity" through which they were better able to understand and live out their charism. It was in this spirit that Sister Pauline wrote, "For the [Franciscan Sisters of Africa], [Mercy House] is a window through which their charism: to love and serve the poor and the needy of our world today, is lived and practiced daily. [Mercy House] is the school where such lessons are learnt and shared."

Sr. Jean Namudosi similarly noted that until the mid-1970s every sister who entered the formation period took her turn at Mercy House. "Having a turn at serving the poor" was seen as critical to the formation process. The mundane details of teaching vocational training classes, plucking chicken feathers, taking children to the hospital, and looking for ways to pay the children's school fees serve as techniques for developing the virtues of charity, humility, and faith in God's divine plan.

Much of this process of formation can be characterized as a form of ethical mimesis in which the sisters attempt to model their actions on a series of moral exemplars, a method of ethical formation common in many traditions (Humphrey 1997). For many Catholics, the imitation of Christ is at the foundation of what it means to lead a virtuous life (Spohn 2000; Whitmore 2011). The Franciscan Sisters of Africa pursue such a life both through the direct imitation of Christ and through a mimetic chain of virtue in which they attempt to model their actions on those of Mother Mary Patrick, who in turn modeled herself after St. Francis, who in turn modeled himself on Christ.

Stories of the works of Mother Patrick, like the one of the founding of the church, were endlessly repeated as the sisters spoke to each other, and to me, about who they were and what their work ought to be. For a long time, although I found them amusing, their stories about their Irish foundress struck me as tangential to my aims of

understanding the training processes they had gone through and how the order kept tabs on their activities. Yet, over time, I came to realize that these stories were not tangential at all but were, in fact, chapters in the narrative to which the sisters attempted to shape themselves and, through this process, participate in a chain of mimetic virtue. In other words, the sisters attempted to transform themselves into virtuous subjects by modeling their actions on those of the saints and other holy men and women they saw as exemplars. During their lives, these exemplars had also attempted to model themselves after other holy men and women. We thus find a chain of mimetic virtue extending back through the saints toward Christ.

In a booklet on Franciscan spirituality, Sr. Reginald Amogin instructs the novices to use Saints Francis and Clare as models for shaping their own behavior. She writes,

The nature of Francis and Clare's religious experiences can be said to be embodied. Whatever belongs to our human condition (joys, sorrows, weaknesses/failures, limitations, sickness and rejection) can lead us into an experience of the divine because of Jesus... Francis's compassion for the marginalized (the lepers and the poor) led him to have compassion for the crucified Christ... Thus the human experience with the lepers led him to experience the Divine.

Sr. Reginald, then, likens the sisters' intimate work of dressing wounds and otherwise tending to bodies marginalized by society to St. Francis's experience of forcing himself to embrace the leper on the roadside and speaks to the ways in which a sister's embodied experience of the human condition can lead to an experience of the divine. In this sense, the sisters' daily work becomes a form of prayer and a form of mimetic equipment.

In addition to Saints Francis and Clare, the sisters look to Mother Patrick as a moral exemplar, and they frequently justify actions and decisions through appeals to her actions, wishes, or intentions. They learned about the life of Mother Patrick often by talking with the elderly nuns who had known her personally, thus participating in an intimate form of didactic hagiography. Sr. Sylvia Birungi often spoke with great feeling about the way, she was told, Mother Patrick had taught the first sisters to pray simply: "Jesus I love you" and "Jesus give us food." Sr. Jane Nabaggala repeated a story about Mother Patrick joining other sisters when they went out to dig in the gardens, a story that she felt emphasized Mother Patrick's humility and the importance of everyone participating in manual tasks. These stories, and not their more formal catechetical training in the novitiate, were what the sisters drew on as they worked to mold their lives to her example.⁶ The tenderness with which the sisters learned and retold stories of the life of Mother Patrick was further evidenced by the poetry they wrote about her and her work in Uganda and by the brightly

painted homemade papier-mâché bust of Mother Patrick that smiled down on the sisters from a shelf in their living room.

Providential practices

The sisters' faith in providence was among the most important ways in which they modeled themselves after Mother Patrick's ethical example. In addition to the story of the mysterious stranger who provided the money for the construction of the chapel, many other stories compiled in the commemorative exhibit made a similar point. Most of these stories were gathered together on a board entitled "little miracles." All of them highlighted the miraculous work of providence in Mother Mary Patrick's life and in the history of the order. In one, a duchess gave Mother Patrick a building for a convent for missionary sisters in Europe. In another, a midwife interested in traveling to Africa appeared just as Mother Patrick was praying for someone to come and help the sisters provide better obstetric care in Uganda. These stories resonate with the sisters' own stories of providential fundraising, as they often narrate their funding successes as arising from chance encounters of divine origin.

Laughter, an important means of demonstrating and cultivating a faith in divine providence, was also modeled in the stories of Mother Patrick's life. One of the elderly nuns gave me a copy of a biography written by Sr. Mary Louis, herself a member of an order of European missionary nuns that Mother Patrick founded. In it, Sr. Mary Louis relates,

Bishop Hanlon had been given a donation for the purpose of bringing a Community of Sisters to Uganda. When fares had been paid, outfits provided, and a convent built, there was not much money left. At the end of six months the Bishop had, most reluctantly, to tell Mother Paul that he could no longer give any financial help towards the Sisters' maintenance; the Community must support itself... Mother Paul was stunned when she received the news... She called Sister [Patrick] and told her about this unexpected difficulty... Mother Paul was almost in tears as she sat down on a tree stump and cried: "Sister [Patrick], dear, what *are* we going to do?" Sister [Patrick] tried to find a few consoling words when, suddenly, the ant-ridden stump collapsed and her poor Superior was left sitting flat on the ground! The situation proved too much for her bubbling mirth. She gave vent to peals of laughter. "The Bishop can't support you, Mother, and neither can the stump! We shall just trust in Providence!" The episode ended in hearty laughter, the Franciscan method of meeting a crisis, especially a financial one! They returned to the convent and, at evening recreation, Mother Paul laughingly told the Community that they were faced with utter ruin. [1964:58-59]

Recalling such moments of laughter, the sisters attempted to face crises with humor. This is not to say that

they did not worry when, for example, the World Food Program suddenly cut off its shipments of nutritional soy porridge without warning, leaving sick children with limited access to protein. Of course, they worried. But their faith that other funding would be forthcoming tempered their fear. Laughing in the face of adversity, a lesson learned through their attempts to mimic Mother Patrick's own laughter, was, for the sisters, a providential practice through which they both demonstrated and nurtured their faith in God's ability to care and provide for them.⁷

The sisters' faith that God would ultimately solve their financial difficulties was fostered in a different way through such mundane activities as drawing up an annual budget. In 2010, Sr. Jane's budget for Mercy House for the coming year included a line for "expected donations." As Sr. Jane walked me through the budget, I asked her how she had determined the precise figure, which was approximately four million UGX (about \$2,000) higher than total donations received the year before. She replied, "That number is the difference between what we have and what we need, that's the part we expect that God will provide for us through our friends."

These anticipated gifts were related to the sisters' projected expenditures on "contributions to other causes," which Sr. Jane listed under "administrative expenses." Surprised by this categorization, I asked her why she thought making such donations was an important administrative expense. She replied, "We trust [that] in giving . . . we are able to receive. For example, the other day I put 10,000 UGX in the collection plate, but received more." Sr. Jane was referring to an incident that had occurred several days earlier, when she had taken my husband and me to visit a Marian shrine just outside Kampala.

The previous year, when I was searching for an academic job, she had, unbeknownst to me, stayed awake all night in the chapel praying for my success and promising that we would visit the shrine when I returned, if her prayer was answered. Upon learning that I had, indeed, found a job, she insisted that we take a day to visit the shrine. While on the way there, she spent a 1,000 UGX note on a few bottles of water without realizing that it was her last small note. At the shrine, when the collection basket was passed during mass, she found only a 10,000 UGX note in her pocket, and I saw her hesitate for a moment before placing it in the basket. After mass, I asked her if we could stop at one of the wholesalers in Kampala on the way back to Mercy House so I could purchase some school supplies for the children to thank them for participating in my research. Sr. Jane immediately told me about the 10,000 UGX note she had placed in the collection plate, interpreting my request to stop for school supplies as a divinely sent reciprocation for her offering.

While this story also speaks to a sacred economy of reciprocal giving, here I think about it as one of many provi-

dential practices, or forms of ethico-moral equipment, that help one to build one's faith in divine providence. Interpreting donations as reciprocal gifts from God, telling and retelling the stories of the "little miracles," laughing aloud in the face of adversity, and formally including in the annual budget gifts from sources yet unknown and contributions to be divinely reciprocated are all providential practices that helped the sisters to foster their faith in divine guidance and care and prepared them to face future struggles with a steadfast commitment to their charism and the belief that God would provide solutions to their problems. Just as the Stoics prepared themselves for misfortune through *praemeditatio malorum* (Foucault 2005:468–473), so too the sisters were preparing themselves to respond to misfortune in a way that would confirm, rather than deny, their love of God.⁸

Proud beggars

The results of these providential practices can be seen in the sisters' commitment not to a plan but to a charism and in how this commitment concretely altered their relationship to their donors. In place of the fear of losing donors, which grips so much of the Ugandan NGO community, the sisters trusted that they and the children in their charge would be provided for, despite all evidence to the contrary. This trust affected the sorts of projects the sisters chose to undertake and made them less inclined to change their programs to align with trends in the international aid community.

Over the course of my fieldwork, the sisters of Mercy House told and retold a story involving the Edmund Mercer Foundation. From my first trip to Mercy House, it was clear that the story of their relationship with the foundation and its subsequent termination, which I relate below, was at the center of the sisters' understanding of what their work was about and of their place in the larger philanthropic universe.

The head of the home during the first half of my fieldwork was a nun named Sr. Caroline. She had been raised in a village in eastern Uganda and had been at Mercy House since 1998. In addition to her duties at Mercy House, she was involved with similar homes run by the Franciscan Sisters of Africa in eastern and northern Uganda and with the Junior Franciscans Program, a youth club. In the evenings, Sr. Caroline would often lean her heavy body back in her chair, exhausted after returning from visiting these distant projects, and speak with enthusiasm about planting wheat for the bakery in eastern Uganda or extending the Junior Franciscans Program to northern Uganda. She seemed secure in her belief that God would provide for these projects as he saw fit. Other sisters and volunteers, meanwhile, privately expressed their worries that Sr. Caroline's plans seemed more expansive than even providence would allow.

One evening, Sister Caroline retold the Mercer story.

In 1983, the late Cardinal Nsubuga, of the Archdiocese of Kampala, got a letter from England concerning that Edmund Mercer man . . . We had five homes with charity services like this one . . . The Cardinal gave the letter to one of our sisters to go and attend the conference in London concerning this program of Edmund Mercer. It was a good program; they were interested . . . in disability. They said, "You add in the name 'Mercer' and we will do the fundraising." That building [over there] was contributed by Edmund Mercer, that small workshop in the middle, the underground water tank, then the Land Rover, the red car, all of that was contributed through Edmund Mercer and their fundraising.

During this period, the Edmund Mercer Foundation was largely interested in supporting direct care and rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities. Even though working with people with disabilities was only one of the tasks then being carried out at Mercy House, the staff of the Mercer Foundation felt that providing direct support for both operational and capital expenses was an effective way of carrying forward its mission, as evidenced by the goods and funding the sisters received during this period.

Sister Caroline continued,

Edmund Mercer died in 1994. The people who took over after he died, some were carrying on with his vision, others were not. They wanted this home to send away all of the old people and the children. But caring for those people is part of our charism. When Mother Patrick started her ministry she built the first small thatch hut to look after a boy who wasn't orphaned or disabled, but was simply needy. We could agree to take in more disabled, but we could not get rid of the others.

The sisters were very angry about what they interpreted to be a demand that they change their charism, but after some time, they agreed. While they were not willing to send anyone away, they would avoid taking in any more people who fell into the ambiguous "needy" category and would try to limit future intakes to people with disabilities.

Yet this decision was not without consequences. Sr. Caroline continued,

One day an old man came to our gate requesting our help. Given the new agreement we turned him away saying there was nothing we could do given the new policy. The man, dejected, went to the parish priest and told him of the situation. The priest encouraged him to come back and ask again. But, he was so dejected that he refused to come back. Instead we found him hanging from the tree just outside our compound having committed suicide. You see this is the reason we cannot limit our population in the way that another group might.

In mourning, the sisters reflected and prayed and eventually decided, "It is the charism of the Franciscans to cater for the poor and needy. We ultimately decided to say let the money go, let the donors go, we will find a way out. We may be beggars, but we are proud beggars."

The sisters felt that narrowing the mission of Mercy House would require them to change the fundamental mission of their order. Their ultimate refusal to do this is striking in a climate in which NGOs regularly change their missions, target populations, and approach to match trends in international funding. Their decision to "let the donors go" placed Mercy House in a situation of grave financial instability. Their statement "we will find a way out" reveals their faith in providence as the force that would ultimately support them, just as the name of their dog, Disaster, a puppy at the time of the Mercer crisis, reflects their ability to laugh at their own predicament.

The sisters' faith that God will ultimately provide the means to sustain their work reveals a logic of sustainability, time, and agency that differs from developmentalist logic. The sisters of Mercy House believe that their work will be sustained not through their own efforts but, rather, through the work of God and their place in his plan.⁹

Hope and the simple intention

In considering their faith in the power of providence and their focus on the present moment, we begin to understand that the sisters think about hope, time, and their own agency in the world in a way that is quite different from the linear, humanly reachable, midrange future of developmental time (Ferguson 2006). While thinking about this, I stumbled across a copy of Merton's *No Man Is an Island* in the sisters' collection of devotional books. In this volume, Merton describes the good of working with what he calls "simple intention":

A simple intention rests in God while accomplishing all things . . . Since a simple intention does not need to rest in any particular end, it has already reached the end as soon as the work is begun. For the end of a simple intention is to work in God and with Him—to sink deep roots into the soil of His will and to grow there in whatever weather He may bring. [1955:62–63]

And so, while the sisters' way of working often struck outsiders who were attached to outcomes as aimless and unpredictable, in looking toward Merton's notion that work has "reached the end as soon as the work is begun," we begin to see a pattern in this "jumble of people and needs" that is about more than having too little time and too little money. We also move toward a point of understanding how overcommitted orphanages like Mercy House come to be, with new residents viewed as having been sent through divine providence and accepted for the good accomplished

in the initial moment of action, the ultimate results of the action being left to God.¹⁰

In looking toward Merton's notion of the simple intention, we find an ethico-temporal mode at odds with the sort of long-range planning and monitoring that is becoming increasingly essential for organizations called to demonstrate sustainable returns. This focus on returns can be seen in what Geneva Global, a U.S.-based philanthropic advising firm, has termed "performance philanthropy." Under the logic of performance philanthropy, potential donors are advised to think of their gifts as investments that can be evaluated according to their returns. These returns can be measured in any number of ways, including cost-effectiveness modeling based on QALYs, DALYs, and Geneva Global's own cost-per-life-changed ratio, which it likens to the price-to-earnings ratio commonly used among investors (Smith and Thurman 2007). All of these measures look toward some sort of midrange future, punctuated or otherwise, and seem incompatible with Merton's advocacy of work performed in the present of the simple intention. In the ethico-temporal frame of the simple intention, detachment from the future results of one's work is not viewed as a shortcoming but is actively promoted.

This sort of detachment can be seen in the ways the sisters are regularly moved from one post to another, moves that they must accept as part of their vow of obedience. While such moves proved maddening for some of their donors, the superiors defend them as essential for discouraging the sisters from becoming too attached to their projects. Whereas development professionals talk regularly of the need for project "ownership," the sisters were actively discouraged from taking "ownership" of their work. This sense of detachment is further reflected in the sisters' own attitude toward their work, for, while they are very interested in doing what they do well, they seem markedly less convinced that their actions will be the primary cause of whatever results they achieve. Merton's encouragement to work in such a way that one envisions oneself "sink[ing] deep roots into the soil of His will . . . to grow there in whatever weather he may bring" provides a possible explanation for the sisters' resistance to planning and about their relationship to questions of hope and agency.¹¹

In his essay on hope as a category of social analysis, Vincent Crapanzano distinguishes hope from the related category of desire, describing it as desire's "passive counterpart." Hope, he writes, "ultimately . . . depend[s] on the fates—on someone else" (Crapanzano 2003:6). Crapanzano's focus on collaborative agency (between God and humans, between the lover and the beloved) on which hope ultimately rests seems an accurate description of its role at Mercy House and is reflected in Mother Patrick's reliance on Teresa of Avila's exhortation, quoted in this article's opening epigraph. In line with this motto, the sisters live in the hope that what they accomplish in the present

moment will be perfected and completed by God. Shaped by an Augustinian anthropology (Brown 1967; Lloyd 2008), they understand themselves as essentially broken and incapable of truly molding themselves to religious life or of accomplishing anything without God's grace. This same theme is repeated in Catholic theologies of salvation, in which God's grace perfects human works. The sisters, like other Catholics, live in the hope that God will make up for their shortcomings, and this faith helps them to avoid becoming preoccupied with their own salvation.¹²

Conclusion

Living within this ethico-temporal frame is difficult, leaving the practitioner struggling through both practical and theoretical problems. In addition to the demands of donor organizations to modify their planning and accounting practices, the sisters continue to struggle with long-standing controversies concerning how to balance the poverty prescribed by St. Francis with the need for institutional stability within the Franciscan orders (Moorman 1968). At present, these debates have been manifested in efforts to enroll more sisters in business administration courses and to assign more sisters to positions in schools and hospitals where they can earn the salaries needed to support the order. Nevertheless, the sisters assigned to work at Mercy House remain rooted in the present moment, not conceiving of themselves as "fixing the world" or "solving" anything. This is not "the end of poverty" that Jeffery Sachs (2005) promises. Instead, the sisters see themselves working to better love their neighbor, and through these actions, loving God in a way that is simultaneously focused on the immediate present and eternity. Where aid workers see possibilities for better futures brought about through their own actions, the sisters at Mercy House have a far more limited view of their own potency. While they see themselves as working within God's plan, they do not see themselves as being able to bring about social change without divine intervention. In their embrace of the simple intention, they believe that only God can complete and perfect their imperfect works, which are always broken, always partial, as they believe themselves to be. The giver of charity is thus not the complete human who strategically distributes her surplus to the broken poor. In this vision, the giver herself is also broken and her actions can only be completed through divine grace.

Considering the effects of the sisters' faith in providence and their own sense of the limits of their agency can allow us to see otherworldly hopes not as necessarily paralyzing but as enabling certain kinds of action and movement. While this form of action is quite different from the stepwise planning associated with political advocacy and development work, it has allowed these sisters to remain committed to forms of care and redistribution that are

becoming increasingly marginal in international development. Much like the case of the women engaged in the piety movement in Egypt, who have voluntarily embraced a form of life many would describe as highly restrictive (Mahmood 2005), and that of young women in postcrisis Cameroon who practice forms of judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks 2005), this case allows us to see a wider range of actions as agentic or intentional.

There are also striking resonances between the sisters' approach to temporality and the present-oriented strategies of those living in contexts where the future is decidedly unpredictable. Across much of Africa, the dissolution of firm links between intention and its fulfillment that has accompanied political and economic crises (Johnson-Hanks 2005) has made placing one's hopes on a predictable midrange future an increasingly risky proposition. Mbembe writes of a future horizon "colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations" in which life becomes "a game of chance, a lottery" (2002:271), and Ferguson has spent the better part of his career reflecting on the decomposition of the promise of modernity in a sub-Saharan Africa where "developmentalist patience has little to recommend it" (2006:186, see also Ferguson 1999). Multiple modes of temporal imagining have come to fill this space, including those presented by Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (Cole 2010; Guyer 2007; Piot 2010; but see Vokes 2005),¹³ judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks 2005), new forms of debt and social investment (Livingstone 2009), seizure (Mbembe 2002), informal economies (Jones 2010), visa lotteries (Piot 2010), and various paths to emigration (Cole 2010; Ferguson 2006).

In many ways, the sisters' orientation toward time coincides with secular forms of "enforced presentism" (Guyer 2007:410). While the work of the sisters at Mercy House is indeed quite distant from the demands of the rifle-toting young man standing at a roadblock during the Liberian civil war, whose T-shirt reads "Patience, My Ass" (Ferguson 2006:186), they share with him a common distrust of the promises made by African governments and NGOs of a brighter future secured through development and legislation.

And yet, like Joel Robbins (2007) and Ruth Marshall (2009), I want to avoid a strictly materialist explanation for the sisters' lack of interest in midrange planning, such as that posited by Bourdieu (1979), which would view these alternative temporalities as simply the result of economic circumstance. Rather, by considering the decidedly noneconomic reasons for taking up this particular ethico-temporal mode, we not only begin to understand why the sisters of Mercy House approach their work in the way they do and how this approach affects their relationship to the wider aid community but we are also reminded of the importance of avoiding reductionist analytics that would force us to see their choices as resulting solely from their material circum-

stances or their Catholic theology. This is not to say that we should ignore the ways in which other material and ideological forces might influence people's commitments and actions but only that, as Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1993) remind us, we lose the invaluable insight that careful ethnographic research can provide when we assume that we are already in possession of the answers.

Notes

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1. Names of all people, places, organizations, and religious orders have been changed to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the study.

2. I specify Catholic charity, as there are subtle distinctions that set it apart from a range of other forms of Christian almsgiving. For a more extensive discussion of these differences, see Scherz 2010a. By attending to Catholic institutions, theology, and experience, this article makes a contribution to the emerging literature on the anthropology of Christianity that, with a few exceptions (Behrend 2011; Green 2003; Lester 2005; Mayblin 2010, 2012; Scherz 2010a, 2010b, in press; Taylor 1995), has largely neglected Catholicism. While Catholic institutions are not rapidly expanding, unlike the Protestant Pentecostal and Apostolic churches that serve as field sites for the majority of anthropologists studying Christianity (see, e.g., Cole 2010; Elisha 2011; Engelke 2007; Harding 2001; Marshall 2009; Meyer 1999; Piot 2010; Robbins 2004; Werbner 2011), they continue to be a very real presence in the lives of people across Africa, particularly in countries like Uganda, where 42 percent of the population is Catholic (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2002).

3. Laura Ahearn (2001b) and Robert Dejarlais (1997) also note the relationship between capitalism and the understanding of agency Ahearn and I attribute to development interventions. For a discussion of how a focus on planning and on the causal efficacy of long chains of human action links both capitalism and humanitarianism, see Haskell 1985a, 1995b.

4. The term *charism* in this context refers to the beliefs, commitments, and mission of a particular order.

5. Francis of Assisi (1181–26) founded the first Franciscan order—the Friars Minor—in the early 13th century after giving up the lifestyle he had enjoyed as the son of a wealthy Umbrian cloth merchant. St. Clare's request to follow a similar life in 1211 prompted him to found the Order of Poor Ladies, a contemplative order now known as the Poor Clares. Francis was also involved in founding a third order of lay confraternities and religious

institutes, which follow similar rules based on poverty, obedience, and chastity while taking up a more active role in the world.

6. This engagement with narrative differs in emphasis from Anthony Simpson's description of the use of narrative in the religious formation of Catholic Missionary Brothers in Zambia. In his ethnography, Simpson (2003) focuses on the ways that the Zambian candidates were taught to construct "narratives of vocation" according to Western narrative conventions. Rebecca J. Lester (2003) similarly describes how a class of postulants in a convent in Mexico came to fashion narratives about their vocational calling that focused on continuity rather than rupture. While such narratives of continuity were also common among the Franciscan Sisters of Africa and were the product of similar structuring processes, here I emphasize the role that narratives about others played in their process of religious formation.

7. While also in some ways an act of resistance against the demands of international donors, the sisters' laughter is different from that described by Achille Mbembe (2001), for whom humorous distortions of signs of power, which are themselves already part of a shared aesthetics of vulgarity, allow the postcolonized subject to simultaneously reaffirm and subvert commandment. The sisters' laughter is less an act of subversion than it is a technique for diminishing the importance of a crisis and for performing for themselves and for others, and thereby achieving, a sense of confidence that the present crisis is somehow part of a divinely ordered plan.

8. Clearly, tension exists between intensive efforts to shape the self and faith in divine providence. Stoic (Lloyd 2008; Long 1974) and Christian (Brown 1967; Lloyd 2008; Mahoney 1987; McBrien 1994; Weber 2002) scholars have spent millennia attempting to resolve the apparent contradictions between their belief in a divinely ordered world and their belief that humans must work hard to avoid evil and to align themselves with this divine order. Given that this is one of the most important and philosophically complex tensions within these traditions, it is beyond the scope of this article to summarize or resolve it.

9. The fact that they could not lose their jobs, which they had committed to for life, reinforced this feeling of stability and gave them the space of freedom necessary to say no to the Mercer Foundation. Unlike NGO workers' positions, which depend on the fate of their grants, the sisters' positions were not directly tied to the fate of their funding.

10. Similar perspectives on the present moment can be found in the writings of Simone Weil (1909–43) (Weil 1973) and Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751) (Caussade 1975).

11. Henrietta Moore, writing on hope, attempts to bridge the gap between "proximate, realizable" hopes and the idea that hope is concerned with what "cannot be realized," with the otherworldly. In so doing, she is attempting to think about a form of hope that might provide a model for a form of the subject capable of achieving social transformation. While Moore (2011) is not interested only in proximate, near-term hopes, she remains more committed to the political and to the power of human action than the sisters at Mercy House.

12. This particular, historically contingent form of hope (Bloch 1986) can in some ways be conceived of as a method, but not quite in the sense in which Ernst Bloch and Hirokazu Miyazaki conceive of it. Bloch (1986) sees hope as a philosophical method that focuses not on what is but on what is "not yet" (see also Miyazaki 2004, 2006). While the sisters' prayers are also at times oriented toward the "not yet," their attitude toward their own role in bringing this "not yet" into being and the subsequent focus on the importance of living within the eternity of the present moment make Bloch's and Miyazaki's formulations awkward matches. In addition, hope

here is not only a method but, along with faith and love, also an end in itself (1 Cor 13:13, NRSV).

13. Jane Guyer's (2007) discussion of the evacuation of the midrange future focuses on the growing importance of long-run economics of monetarism, apocalyptic eschatological horizons, and the punctuated temporalities of dates. While the sisters' engagements with temporality similarly reflect an evacuation of the midrange future in favor of a simultaneous concern with the present moment and the eternal, their notion of providence, their belief in the protective care of God and his involvement in their daily lives, reveals a different sense of eschatology than that discussed by Guyer, one that not only highlights God's judgment but also reflects on the ways in which God breaks into the present moment.

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