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## Into Africa

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Christopher M. Duncan was named Dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts at Duquesne University in July of 2009. He received his PhD in Political Science from Wayne State University in 1992. He has published two books on American political thought: *The Anti-Federalists in Early American Political Thought* (1995) and *Fugitive Theory: Political Theory, The Southern Agrarians and America* (2000). His current research agenda includes work on the relationship between religious belief and political activism in American politics and thought in a tentatively titled book: *Radical Conversion: Catholic Social Thought and the American Liberal State*. His published work has also appeared in *American Political Science Review*, *Polity*, *The Review of Politics*, *Public Administration Review* and numerous other journals, as well as the magazine *Commonweal*.

## INTO AFRICA

*The Continent of Africa will receive special focus, as well as the global African diaspora.*

– Duquesne University Strategic Plan 2010-2015

### Introduction

As I sat waiting for my name to be called to receive my dose of Yellow Fever vaccination, I wondered what in the world I had gotten myself into. Prior to my turning thirty I had only flown on a plane twice: once to Florida with my family when I was eleven and once to my first professional job interview in Mississippi at the age of twenty-nine. Since my academic career began, I have travelled much more widely, but still I remain a relative neophyte compared to so many of my peers when it comes to international experiences. As a middle-class kid growing up in Detroit, exotic for us was venturing thirty minutes south over the bridge into Canada, or taking our yearly family jaunt “up north” in Michigan. Even in college, as my worldview expanded dramatically and my sense of adventure grew, there were no significant foreign excursions or immersion experiences beyond my national borders. My thirteen year-old-son already has almost as many stamps in his passport as I do at the age of forty-seven. European travel was daunting and anxiety filled for me the first two times I went and so you can only imagine what the prospect of journeying to Tanzania might have meant. However, once that needle pierced my skin and the vaccine flowed into my veins, reality set in.

Although I have sent a number of my students to various parts of the African continent over the years, all of whom who have all returned both safely and dramatically changed by the experience for the better, it is simply the case that twenty-year-olds are braver and bolder than forty-year-olds. Everything about this trip made me nervous, from the sheer amount of time spent getting there (about thirty hours total including over twenty in the air), to the developing and unpredictable nature of the country itself, to my own ignorance and irrational prejudices about the culture, the people and, for lack of a better term, the *politics* of the place. To say that I was leaving my comfort zone would be a vast understatement. However, to say that none of my concerns turned out to be legitimate is also not true.

*...generous and friendly  
place that simmered with  
the possibility of violence  
and danger around its  
edges.*

### Seeking the Lived Mission

As I set out to write this essay about three weeks after returning safely to Pittsburgh, the terms that have stuck with me more than any others are “contrasts” and “scale.” Everything in this part of Africa seemed vast and big, from the beauty and geography to the problems and pathologies. It is at once a place of breathtaking landscapes and picturesque vistas and a place of chaotic and pollution marred public spaces. It is a place of great cultural and spiritual depth and a place of the crassest and most mercurial modes of petty capitalism. It is a place of strong and robust communal traditions and practices and a place of social disintegration and cultural fragmentation. It is a generous and friendly place that simmered with the possibility of violence and danger around its edges. It is a place of vast wealth and crushing poverty. And so on the list could go. I am well aware that this all could be applied to places across the developmental continuum, not the least of which might be my own city or nation. But that was not my charge in this piece.

While familiarity may indeed breed contempt, it most certainly fosters complacency. Training your various senses on a place and focusing intently on how it looks, sounds, tastes, smells, and feels makes what is always present more vivid and stark than it may otherwise appear. Seldom do most human beings look at what surrounds them all the time with the same level of scrutiny, intensity or sense of inquisitiveness as they do in a place that is foreign and fresh. Everything in this new place was both fascinating and disconcerting at the same time. While I have seen plenty of big-city traffic and dangerous driving in my life, none of it compared to what I can only characterize as a Hobbesian state of nature of the streets of Arusha—a place where, to steal a phrase, I was routinely convinced that life would be nasty, brutish and short. Though I have attended Mass in a number of different settings and seen it conducted in very different liturgical styles, I have never heard or felt a Mass like the one I attended with the Maasai people on Pentecost Sunday in rural Tanzania. Although I have tried to understand the Spiritan charism and mission since my arrival at Duquesne, it was not till I spent time with the priests and their various partners that I had a real sense of how those things were enacted and lived out beyond a university campus. To be some place so new and different is to be more fully conscious of every hour of every day, to be, in some sense, more alive and open to life’s gifts—and challenges.

*...I have never heard or  
felt a Mass like the one I  
attended with the Maasai  
people on Pentecost  
Sunday...*

Christopher M. Duncan

*...a small group of  
Duquesne deans and  
faculty... travelled to  
Tanzania...*

In mid-May of 2010, a small group of Duquesne deans and faculty set out from Pittsburgh and travelled to Tanzania in order to build relationships and explore the various missions and work of the Spiritans in that region of Africa. Among those making the trek were Deans Duncan, Frazer, Miciak, Seybert, Welch and Zungolo along with Father McCloskey, Jim Swindal, Sister Rosemary Donley, and our faithful guide, Anne Marie Hansen. Organized through the Office of Mission and Identity, the trip lasted roughly ten days, with seven nights spent in country. For everyone except Dean Frazer, Vice-President McCloskey and Professor Hansen, this was their first time in Tanzania. For half of us, it was the first time on the continent itself. Although we did spend a little time with Dean Frazer, his primary task was taking care of the thirteen Duquesne students he had brought on an extended study abroad trip to explore healthcare. The students, Dean Frazer and Sister Donley stayed at the Spiritan House in Arusha. The rest of us stayed in a hotel just down the street, except for Dr. Swindal, who spent most of his time at the Njiro Hill Seminary and College a few miles away. While there, all our travel was made possible by the Spiritan run Spirit Missionary Travel headed up by Father Honest Munishi. Most of the time our driver was a wonderful and patient young man named Nicholas.

*The hotel... was fairly  
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air conditioning.*

Landing at the Kilimanjaro Airport in the evening of May 19<sup>th</sup>, we were met by Anne Marie and carried by car to our respective accommodations about an hour down the road. Among the first things I noticed on that initial trip was how little light there was due to the modest amount of rural electricity and, correspondingly, how many stars you could actually see. It was warm, but not as warm as I expected. We all peered out the windows trying to see through the dark night whatever there was to be seen in this new land. As we approached Arusha, the traffic picked up and the lights got brighter. The hotel, called Naura Springs, was fairly modern and quite comfortable even without air conditioning. The exhaustion of the trip caught me quickly once I was in the room and settled, and I slept hard and fast through the night.

### **Unpacking Tanzania**

After breakfast the next morning our real work began. The group's first stop was Njiro Hill Seminary and College where we met with a number of Spiritans from the province for an introductory session on the Spiritans in Tanzania and to the work of the school itself. The Tanzanian Spiritans present included the Provincial, Fr. Joseph Shio, the Rector, Fr. Justi Tarimo, Fr. Paul

*...socialism waned  
and private schools  
reemerged...*

Chuwa, Fr. Paul Flamm, Fr. Joseph Mshaka, and Fr. Amandeus. We learned that the first Spiritans arrived in the country in 1863 and were tasked primarily with an educational mission. Viewing education as a form of evangelization, the Spiritan teachers emphasized practical skills for self-reliance as a principal focus for a holistic education. In 1967, when African socialism came to the nation, this mission was interrupted as the government assumed control over all education. In the 1990's socialism waned and private schools reemerged, and once again the Spiritans could vigorously pursue their mission. In keeping with this focus, the Spiritans present at this session were in significant agreement that the next iteration or moment of "creative fidelity" with regard to their work should be in the direction of teacher training and education itself. Noting that there were no unemployed teachers in the country, our hosts saw great need and potential for this next logical step. A later visit to Mwenge University would help confirm their reading of the times.

It was at Njiro Hill where what at first seemed unusual now seemed emblematic. At the hotel, the Spiritan House, and now at the seminary itself, I had noticed that each place was situated in a gated compound. Indeed, almost everywhere we would travel within the city limits—from schools and hospitals, to commercial sites and even restaurants— would be encircled by large walls with limited access through large hinged and guarded gates. It was never made explicit what or whom the walls were meant to keep at bay, but their presence was both reassuring and disconcerting at the same time. Their very existence implied an ongoing struggle between the calm and predictability needed for sustained growth and development and the human propensity to destabilize and undermine our own accomplishments. Whether well-founded or not, there is a noticeable psychological shift that takes place upon entrance and departure from such places. Once through the gates there is a sense of having "made it" and a certain psychic sense of exhaling that takes place, at least for me. Upon departure, however subtle and unpronounced, one's sense of danger is heightened. It is certainly the case that subsequent trips will diminish this reaction, but the juxtaposition and latent subtext will remain. Furthermore, I cannot help but wonder in an existential sense which is the *real* Tanzania?

*...I cannot help but  
wonder...which is the  
real Tanzania?*

The superficial answer to that question is, of course, both are real but partial attributes of the country. However, my true question is concerned with aspiration. The songwriter Tom Waits sings of a woman who is a "diamond but wants to remain coal." Like any developing country, Tanzania is situated in the midst

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in fact reside.*

of great and competing historical valances and narratives vying for dominance. A visit to the Tanzanian Cultural Center and Art Gallery provided a small window through which to view this phenomenon. Though it was billed as a museum and art gallery, the architecturally intriguing “Cultural Center” turned out to be a large and somewhat garish gift shop owned and operated by an entrepreneurial gentleman from Pakistan. Each picture, painting, and sculpture on display—though beautiful and well rendered—had its price prominently affixed and displayed for easy sale. There was little in the way of organization or thematic insight, let alone an attempt to place the works in any sort of historical or aesthetic context. It was my own impression that there was a supply of pieces somewhere in storage waiting for any space opened up by a purchase. Indeed, the most important business of the Center’s operator appeared to be the sale of tanzanite stones.

The above is not meant to be disparaging—I spent my money there along with my colleagues. Rather, I note it to raise the question of ownership and appropriation. Expecting to learn something at the Center and finding out that this was not its true purpose, I was left to wonder where the master story of the nation or the area *did* in fact reside. Admittedly, it is a large country and we saw such a small sliver of it such that the question itself is unfair. Coming from the city of Andy Warhol, it is probably a little hypocritical to complain about mass produced authenticity. And yet, I can’t help myself. The sight of traditionally dressed Maasai men walking down the streets in high-top basketball shoes, smoking cigarettes, while talking on their cell phones as rap music blasted from one of the ubiquitous street-side bars decorated by Coke or Pepsi produced what might be called signifier overload for this traveler. Sleep that night became more elusive as the physical exhaustion of the previous day’s travel was replaced by the swirl of images and questions of our first full day on the ground.

*...the morning brought  
no resolution to the mix  
of competing thoughts  
and images...*

### **A Prayer for the Sick and Soft Landings**

While the morning brought no resolution to the mix of competing thoughts and images that I had wrestled with during the night, the day itself would bring me back to some fundamental truths about the nature of the human experience. The most rudimentary of those truths is that any collective story is at best a composite or melding of so many personal narratives. To find any general sense of the place, we would have to explore the particular.

*...the facility is equipped  
to transmit results and  
data via satellite to the  
doctors in Rome...*

Our second full day took us first to two Spiritan affiliated healthcare missions, the Usa River Health Center and the Dream Project. The Dream Project is a wonderful example of collaboration and Christian praxis. The Project's primary purpose is to provide treatment and counseling for H.I.V. patients. It also serves as a food distribution center. The Spiritans, who were doing AIDs ministry, supplied the land for the building and worked in conjunction with the Episcopal Conference and the Belgium Corporation, Accentus, along with the World Food Program, to deliver practical information, anti-retroviral drug treatment, blood testing, nutritional education, food and counseling for patients and families free of charge. To understand the critical role the Project plays, it is important to understand that transmission from mother to child is the second leading cause of HIV infection in the country. In the United States, the rate of such transmission has been reduced to almost zero. Led by Italian volunteer Dr. Michele Bartolo, who resides predominately in Rome, the facility is well equipped by local standards and makes extensive use of technology. A functioning lab in its own right, the facility is equipped to transmit results and data via satellite to the doctors in Rome who can then make diagnosis and treatment decisions remotely. We were told that this is the best equipped lab in the entire region. The evidence suggests that the work is bearing fruit and that the rate of HIV transmission is being slowed radically.

*...each day...lives were  
changed and saved.*

The Usa River Health Center is connected to the Dream Project in terms of physical proximity, but functions as a general health clinic for the local community. All services are provided free of charge, and our principal guide to the work of the clinic was a nurse, Sister Honorata. Depending on the season, the clinic serves approximately thirty patients a day. For the Spiritans, this ministry is viewed through the lens of the charism and the call to be of service to society's least well off. Like so many similar ministries all over the world, one cannot help but be struck by a certain perceptual tension between the often ominous scale of the problems and the relatively small capacity of such entities to make a real difference. It often seems that many of the dedicated professionals we met were trying to empty out a swimming pool with a thimble in a rain storm. And yet, each day people were served, and lives were changed and saved. Throughout our visit the words of Oscar Romero played in my head:

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*...my...sense of order  
was tested as things that  
seemed not to fit together  
naturally were put  
together as a matter of  
course.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of  
liberation in realizing that.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very  
well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step  
along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace  
to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the  
difference between the master builder and the  
worker.*

That prayer is a lived reality for so many people we met on this visit—men and women who saw a need and began to work, not out of a misguided optimism that what are often intractable issues will be resolved, but out of the hope that their work will matter and that grace will abound more fully. As we ended our long drive to our next stop for the day at the Olkokola Mission, this thought stayed with me. Again at the Mission my own quasi-Germanic sense of order was tested as things that seemed not to fit together naturally were put together as a matter of course. It was also here that my own understanding of the notion of a “vow” would begin to deepen.

*Pilots... come from many  
different parts of the  
world...*

Our host at the Mission was Fr. Pat Patten. A fascinating priest who had an air of politics about him from an earlier age, Fr. Patten augmented his rural parish work with a real passion for the Flying Medical Service he oversaw and flew for. Using small aircraft to bring health services, medicine, education and emergency transportation to over 22 thousand people living in remote villages each year, Fr. Patten and his dedicated group of volunteer pilot-paramedics fill a crucial role in a nation of 42 million souls where there are only 50 practicing surgeons and 1 doctor for every 45 thousand people. Pilots in the service come from many different parts of the world and make a three-year commitment. They must be highly skilled insofar as they often must fly where there are no maps, and landing strips are often makeshift, to say the least. Aside from being able to fly and perform emergency medical procedures, the pilots must know how to service and repair their own aircraft. If the stories about Fr. Patten are true, they must also be able to crash well and walk away every once in a while too.

Contextually speaking, it is estimated that fifty-percent of all healthcare in Tanzania is provided by people and groups



*...there is often an ingrained social stigma attached to physical deformity...*

affiliated with the Catholic and Lutheran churches. At the crossroads between healthcare and education sits the other piece of the mission at Olkokola: the Vocational School. Directed by a Lutheran partner named Zablon, the vocational school is a residential program that provides practical training for handicapped students in carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, and animal care. Students finishing the program return to their villages with the necessary skills *and* the tools for their particular trade in hand. Aside from the material component of this education, there is also a highly significant social aspect to it. While the intensity varies from tribe to tribe, there is often an ingrained social stigma attached to physical deformity in the country's villages where such handicaps are often viewed as a form of divine punishment for previous familial sins or transgressions. Returning to their respective villages with useful and often marketable skills as well as valuable tools in their possession, these students deconstruct archaic prejudices and dangerous social practices by their very presence and work in the community. Our day ended with an extended conversation with an associate of Fr. Patten's, Dr. Dilantha Ellegala, Director of the Center for Global Health, which is run out of the University of South Carolina Medical School. The conversation was intense and involved, but must wait for another time to relay.

*...Mass featured...a Gospel enactment of the story of Babel by the children...*

### **Creative Fidelity**

Our next day was spent in Ngorongoro Parish, which is situated in and around a giant crater filled with all manner of African wildlife. We were hosted for lunch by Fr. Joe Herstein, a Spiritan priest who has served in Tanzania since 1966! The next day we would be in Endulen Parish with Fr. Ned Marchessault, who had also been in the country for decades. Both men exemplified for me the depth and discipline of a committed religious life, as they carried out their missions in relative isolation among the rural Tanzanians and the Maasai year in and year out. While our time with Fr. Joe was both entertaining and enjoyable, the Pentecost Mass we would celebrate the next afternoon with Fr. Ned was for me the spiritual high point of the trip.

Set in the midst of breathtaking mountains and hills, the small, sparse cinderblock church was filled to capacity and then some with colorfully dressed Maasai and other local parishioners. Conducted in both Swahili and Maasai, the Mass featured dance, a Gospel enactment of the story of Babel by the children, and some of the most joyful and effusive music and singing I have ever heard in a Catholic church. As the obvious strangers in the room, we were received with a warmth and fellowship that was

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*Although Spartan by American standards...the university...has doubled in size in the last few years.*

*...there is not a single psychiatrist in the entire city of Arusha.*

both moving and endearing, especially by the numerous children. While it is one thing to know that you are part of a world-wide church, this experience with all its liturgical distinctiveness made that reality more fully present than any other I could imagine. It was to be both “away” and “at home” at the same time. After a lunch of roasted goat with Fr. Ned, we set out on the long drive back to the city.

The next day took us to the city of Moshi where some of us visited Mwenge University, a Catholic teacher preparation school. Others explored healthcare education at KCMC Tumaini University. Those of us in the former group met with Fr. Donge, the Deputy Principal, who showed us the university’s grounds and facilities. Although Spartan by American standards and severely underfunded, the university is experiencing tremendous growth and has doubled in size in the last few years. Students at Mwenge earn a B.A. in Education Studies and specialize in two subjects, predominantly from the areas of math and science. Given the severe teacher shortage in Tanzania, the school plays a vital role and will no doubt continue expanding as rapidly as space and resources will allow. Despite the significant challenges at the school, the deputy’s pride and passion were clearly evident as he showed us new buildings and facilities.

### **Grace in Translation**

The following day was a very full one that took us first to the Arusha Mental Health Trust to meet with Sr. Shelia Devane of the Medical Missionaries of Mary, a clinical psychiatric nurse who came to Tanzania in 1973. To underscore the difficulty of her work, it is important to note that there is no good translation in the Swahili language for *psychotherapy*. The closest term is something like “advice.” Indeed, there is not a single psychiatrist in the entire city of Arusha. In turn, there are very few mental health programs or providers. Simply put, the idea of mental health treatment is a taboo subject, and those seeking it are often severely stigmatized. There is very little in the way of government support, and what work is done in the area is provided mostly by the churches. Unfortunately, there are serious problems, including significant instances of abuse and domestic violence. Sr. Devane thought that a very high number of those in prison should in fact be in hospitals. Beyond all this, there is still a strong presence of witchcraft among a number of Tanzanian tribes and its attendant belief in “pills, potions, and lotions” that competes with contemporary psychiatric practices in often ineffective and sometimes horrific ways. It is unclear who will carry on her work when she leaves, thus creating an even larger shortage of an already far too scarce resource.

*...answering questions  
and talking with them  
about their future plans.*

The next stop for the day for half of us was a very important and impressive Spiritan mission at the Tengeru Boys School, where our host was Fr. John Assey. A residential school for what would be middle-school age boys in the U.S., the school was a well-kept and creatively designed environment, providing serious education for what seemed like highly motivated young men. Here we met with some faculty and a group of deans, spending time with one class answering questions and talking with them about their future plans. The hit of this visit was Dean Welch, who used sign language in her discussion with the boys, much to their amazement (and mine, too). In total the school serves about 350 students at a time, with 13 faculty members and two Sisters. The goal of the school is to train the non-wealthy students of the area so that they will be successful in a college preparatory program when they are done. The school's motto seemed to be lived out among the members of the institution: "Knowledge, Integrity, and Discipline." Attached to the school was a vocational training school for older boys who were not college bound. Here the motto was "Knowledge, Skills, and Discipline."

Close to the schools was our final stop for the day at the home of the Spiritan Provincial. This beautifully appointed residence contained offices and an almost completed 20-plus room retreat center sitting high in the hills with marvelous views and in a serene ambiance. Here with numerous priests and some sisters we shared a wonderful meal and began some of the conversations that would conclude our visit the following day back at the Seminary.

*...a shared sense of the  
possible was not fully  
present, yet.*

On our final day, we met with a number of Spiritans with whom we had spent time during our visit, including the Provincial, as well as some of the Spiritan faculty members of the seminary to debrief a little and talk about future prospects. Though pleasant and civil, this conclusion was not without some tension. Like most familial partnerships at the early stages, expectations varied widely and a shared sense of the possible was not fully present, yet. Nascent friendships had formed and a few older ones were renewed, but it will no doubt be a while before, pace Aristotle, we have all things in common. However, a start was made, the imagination was fed, and grace entered in its own way as it is wont to do.

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*...this visit...represents a  
critical first step.*

## **Conclusion**

One day, near the middle of our stay as we drove through the Maasai lands, we stopped to take some pictures of one of the larger villages. Two Maasai men in traditional garb approached Dean Seybert and me curiously and then smiled and held out their hands in welcome. They agreed to have their picture taken with us. After saying our goodbyes, we got back in the Land Rover and immediately checked our BlackBerrys and iPhones for messages and email. From what I observed during our stay, there is a very strong possibility that the Maasai men with whom we had posed were doing the very same thing as they walked off together. Although Africa in general, and Tanzania in particular, had both seemed so distant and far away to me before last May, it is the case that the world has simply gotten smaller, and with it my own world has gotten much larger.

I do not want to speculate here on what the future holds for the relationship between Duquesne and the Spiritans in Africa except to say that this visit by six deans, three faculty members and our stalwart Vice-President for Mission and Identity represents a critical first step. While Duquesne has had an important presence in parts of the continent before this trip, it is clear that this is a beginning of its own kind. In the coming months I believe a robust conversation will ensue and the promise of the new strategic plan will take on a more concrete form—form, with real substance to be born out of a new partnership and set of friendships that asks for everyone to bring their talents and gifts to the common table and embrace the work our mission and the Spirit calls for.