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# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

## Consulting Editors:

Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo, AEA General Secretary, Nairobi, Kenya.

Dr. Victor Cole, Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Nairobi.

Dr. Josephat Yego, Director of Accredited Development Studies Programme,  
World Vision International, Kenya.

**Editorial Committee:** Dr. Jacob Kibor (Managing Editor), Dr. Richard Gehman, Dr. Esther Kibor, Dr. Paul Bowers (Book Reviews), and Mr. Gregg Okesson.

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**Publisher:** Scott Theological College, the publisher of *AJET*, has been accredited by ACTEA since 1979 and has been chartered as a private university by the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) Kenya in November 1997. Scott offers university level theological education with concentrations in Pastoral Studies, Christian Education and Missiology.

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# AFRICA, AFRICA!

## *An AJET Editorial*

The African cultural values have greatly been influenced not only since the coming of Christianity but also by technology, secular powers, and social experiences which come alongside these events. While some of these changes, are not always positive, there is need for the African theologians to be alert and relevant as they focus on their own contextual needs with regard to the teaching of the gospel be it in the local church or the theological institution.

In the lead article, *The Legacy of Byang Kato*, Keith Ferdinando discusses Byang Kato's theology, polemic style, and vision. Though Kato died young, his writings continue to raise dust in the African continent. In the seeming controversy of rejecting African worldview, Kato believed that "there had to be a radical break with traditional belief, in favour, not of western theology but of the gospel itself." As a visionary person, Kato promoted theological education from an evangelical perspective without which, institutions of higher theological education like FATEB and NEGST would not exist today.

The second article by a renown African theologian, Joe M. Kapolyo, looks at *The Human Condition through Africa Eyes*, based on his book on the same title. From an anthropological perspective of his Bemba people of Zambia, the author explores what it means to be human, a statement, which "in the African approach does not have any reference to the image of God" (p.18). He rightly states that it is "impossible to reflect on human beings without consideration of their cultural context and identity. The whole of life and attitude for the African is based on the people's culture and community life. However, culture is dynamic and adaptive. Hence, the behaviour patterns, attitudes and values that people hold "reflect truths which reveal an adequate understanding of one's identity" (p.20). The question therefore is, what values are significant? And how will these values help in communicating the timeless truths of the gospel in an ever-changing social world of the African? He uses imagery and biblical metaphors, to present the complex reality of the African cultural values that make up the human being, saying further that these "inner, deeper cultural values determine and direct the outward life, though often the inner core of one's culture is difficult to identify and describe".

In the third article *Sacred and Secular Currents for Theological Education in Africa* the author, Gregg A. Okesson, argues that African theological institutions need to imaginatively integrate 'sacred' and 'secular' powers in order to construct curriculum that is relevant to the contemporary needs of society. This is premised upon the recognition that African cultures, unlike their Western counterparts, have greater integration between spiritual and material realities and an indirect experience with the Western enlightenment. This article develops these ideas through the writings of Harold W. Turner, Aylward Shorter, and Vinoth Ramachandra, and proceeds to relate them through a Pauline conception of Christology arising from within the Church of Colosse. Finally, the author explores various ways for the African educator to translate these concepts into his or her context, entreating theological institutions to not merely capitulate to Western educational forms, but think imaginatively, creatively, and foremost Christocentrically as they develop curriculum to address the contemporary needs within the African Church.

The final article by Benno van den Toren on *The political significance of Jesus* looks at the Christian involvement for the democratization of African. He discusses hermeneutical questions that surround the theme of Jesus and politics. In the three areas of difficulty touched, he concludes that the main problems will not be encountered on the level of exegesis but rather on the level of hermeneutics. Because the issue is not how to interpret difficult passages but rather how to interpret the person, work and message of Christ in relationship to the whole biblical revelation and as part of God's total plan. This author sees the message and work of Christ as encompassing the whole of reality, even political life.

# THE LEGACY OF BYANG KATO\*

Keith Ferdinando

More than 30 years since his premature death cut short an outstandingly promising ministry, Byang Kato's contribution to the growth of African evangelical Christianity remains unique. His book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, translated into French as *Pièges Théologiques en Afrique*, still provokes comment and controversy, as it has done since its publication in 1975. In recent years the *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* has published accounts of his life and work by Yusufu Turaki (2001) and Christien Bremen (1996). Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology named its chapel after him, and the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui its library, appropriate recognition of his role in the foundation of both institutions. The suggestion that he was 'the founding father of modern African evangelical theology'<sup>1</sup> is no exaggeration, readily justified by an appraisal of recent African church history.

Byang Henry Kato was born in June 1936 into the Hahm or Jaba people in the Nigerian town of Kwoi in Kaduna state. His parents were adherents of Jaba traditional religion, but he was converted to Christ at the age of twelve in a primary school of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). He subsequently went to Igbaja Bible College, gained British secondary school certificates by correspondence, and in 1966 was awarded a London University Bachelor of Divinity degree after three years study at London Bible College. He returned to Igbaja as professor from 1966-1967 and, aged 31, became General Secretary of the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) in 1967. He undertook postgraduate studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1970s, obtaining their Master of Sacred Theology and Doctor of Theology degrees. In

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Keith Ferdinando teaches at the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique in Kigali, Rwanda, and is AIM's Theological Education Consultant. He has an MA in history from Oxford University, and a BA and PhD in theology from the London School of Theology. He has served in Africa since 1985, largely in theological education, and for much of the time in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), as well as a brief period at Scott Theological College in Machakos, Kenya. He is author of *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999).

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1973 he was appointed General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now more simply the Association of Evangelicals of Africa—AEA), the second incumbent of that position and the first African to hold it. He drowned just two years later, aged 39, in a tragic and unexplained swimming accident while on vacation at the Kenyan coast.

## Theology

Kato was a pioneer of modern African evangelical scholarship, the first evangelical African Christian to gain a doctoral degree in theology. His literary remains are modest, comprising a number of articles, one or two pamphlets, and *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, which is the published version of his doctoral thesis. Whatever one's view of it, *Theological Pitfalls* was a pioneering work of African evangelical theology, which should 'be viewed within [the] wider context of Kato's vision for a positive evangelical theological initiative in Africa.'<sup>2</sup> Quite simply he showed that African theological scholarship need not be the unique preserve of theological liberals, as had seemed to be the case.

In this connection Kato's swift acceptance of the notion of *contextualisation* was particularly significant. The provenance of the word itself, first employed by Shoki Coe in the document, 'Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund' in 1972, made it suspect to many evangelicals.<sup>3</sup> Some prominent American missiologists reacted negatively to it because of the way in which the concept was understood in ecumenical circles. Kato, however, recognised its importance for the well-being of the African church, and believed that it did not imply compromising any of the theological principles which he considered fundamental. His approach ensured that mainstream African evangelicalism should not become entrenched in an obscurantist and contextually irrelevant 'fundamentalism'. *Theological Pitfalls* itself as well as many of his articles addressed some of the issues of the Africa of the 1970s, and are themselves, therefore, early moves towards a contextual approach.

It is of course true that his understanding of contextualisation reflected his time. His approach may not have had the theoretical basis and subtlety of those who followed, and *Theological Pitfalls* is, as Bowers points out, 'a "maiden effort" .. his first major publication .. [an] initial contribution' rather than the 'magnum opus'<sup>4</sup> which might have followed but for his early death. Nevertheless, his book and articles remain exemplary in at least two respects. First, his intention was truly to contextualise the gospel *for Africans*: he addressed African issues and most of what he wrote was published in Africa. In contrast, Parratt has noted 'the tendency of some African scholars to write and publish with a Western, rather than an African, audience in mind ... to publish

their work exclusively in the West ... and with an eye to the plaudits of Western academics rather than to the usefulness of their work to the African church.<sup>5</sup> Second, and related to this, Kato's theological activity aimed at a much broader African readership than just the theological *cognoscenti*. He avoided the trap which besets much Western theology, that of academic theologians producing inaccessible works of scholarship for one another. So he wrote, 'I am fully in favour of the ever-abiding gospel being expressed within the context of Africa, for Africans to understand.'<sup>6</sup> His concern was for the church and the fulfilment of its calling in the world, rather than the approbation of the academy. Despite his many criticisms of Kato's work, Bediako pays gracious tribute to the essentially practical and pastoral concerns that motivated it, describing him as 'practical, wise and pastorally concerned', and speaking of his 'essentially practical mind'. He is, says Bediako, 'most helpful on issues related to the impact of Christian commitment and discipleship on what is "considered good and beneficial in marriage in African society".'<sup>7</sup>

### **Polemic**

Nevertheless, to a considerable extent Kato's significance lies in the polemical nature of much of his writing. *Theological Pitfalls* is itself a polemic, responding to what he saw as a rising tide of universalism and syncretism within African theology and church. This he identified particularly in the works of John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, and in the ecumenical movement as embodied in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). His principal concern was to insist on the radical discontinuity between the gospel and African traditional religions – or indeed any non-Christian religion – in response to approaches which suggested an essential continuity between them. Briefly, he responded to the inclusivist tendency of some contemporary African theologians with exclusivist arguments adapted to the African context.

*Theological Pitfalls* is not without weaknesses. Bowers refers to its 'angularity' and 'limitations': 'the analysis is not always accurate, the polemic not always just, the demonstration not always persuasive, the organization not always clear.'<sup>8</sup> Such criticisms do not of themselves negate the essential validity of Kato's case. Nevertheless, Parratt claims that he stirred controversy unnecessarily: 'It would probably be true to say that although the dominant tradition in African Protestant Christianity remains broadly conservative, the lines are much less sharply drawn than in the West. In this respect Kato introduced into the debate in Africa a largely foreign controversy.'<sup>9</sup> The criticism begs some basic questions. If indeed the lines were not sharply drawn, perhaps some clarification was necessary, not in order to introduce a 'foreign controversy', but rather to focus issues that the church needed to face – rather

than evade – for the sake of its own well-being. From this perspective Kato's role was the prophetic one of confronting a theological trend that in his view threatened the future of vital Christianity in Africa. Paul similarly reprovved churches he had himself founded, introducing what might equally be termed 'largely foreign' controversies to confront serious declension. Nor was Christ a stranger to such polemic.

By his opposition to the AACC and theologians like Mbiti and Idowu, Kato was taking on the African ecclesiastical and theological establishment. He disagreed in print with those whose academic credentials were already established, risking opprobrium and ridicule. Bowers recalls that 'some reaction was vicious',<sup>10</sup> and continues: 'A prominent religious newspaper in Eastern Africa ran a review which called *Pitfalls* "alarmist in what it says and colonial in the perspective in which it is written."' Kato was accused of being a tool 'in the preservation and protection of neo-colonial interests', an accusation echoed in later critiques. He was probably aware of the likely reaction to his critique of fellow African theologians, but his refusal to remain silent encouraged the numerically large but theologically diffident African evangelical movement to find its voice and articulate its own distinctive vision. He became a model for those who would follow.

Moreover, his polemic received additional impetus from another quarter, for he saw the threat of syncretism not only in contemporary theology but also in the growth of politically inspired movements of opposition to the church within some post-colonial African states.<sup>11</sup> One of these was Chad, where there was outright persecution of Christians who refused to participate in traditional initiation ceremonies. The Zaïrian church was also under pressure from the government-inspired movement of *authenticité*, although it did not experience the physical persecution that took place in Chad. Kato supported the stand of Chadian Christians who endured suffering rather than participate in traditional initiation rites. And there is a clear correspondence between what they were facing and the controversy he was engaged in; for the Chadian government's attempt to force the church into a syncretistic accommodation with African tradition, paralleled what Kato believed to be taking place more subtly at the theological level. The theological trend he was resisting had indeed the potential to undermine the principled stand of Chadian believers, by implying that the rites of traditional religion might indeed be grafted onto Christian practice without theological loss. Thus, by resisting what he saw as theological syncretism, Kato was simultaneously providing the Chadian church with a reasoned theological basis for its resistance to a State-imposed syncretism. Juxtaposing the two issues helps to explain the insistence, even the passion,



with which he stated his position, and the urgent priority, in his view, of a polemical theological approach as opposed, perhaps, to a more creative one.

It has been suggested that Kato changed his position shortly before his death. In *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* Mbiti claims that Kato's attack on himself and Idowu 'arose partly out of insufficient understanding on his part',<sup>12</sup> and that he discussed the issues with Kato on 9 December 1975, a little over a week before Kato's death. 'At the end he apologized for having unjustifiably attacked me, and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of the book [*Pitfalls*] ... I assume, he would have made personal apologies to those others whom he had attacked.' The story that Kato had apologized for the charge of incipient syncretism was circulating long before *Bible and Theology* was published, and Bowers, one of those who knew him personally, refers to it: 'Kato's friends were deeply upset at this report, which they knew to be untrue and which they felt attempted to emasculate at a stroke the heart of Kato's critique, at a time when Kato, conveniently enough, could no longer respond and set the record straight.'<sup>13</sup> He claims rather that, 'in response to objections from Mbiti, Kato apologized for the wording of certain passages in *Pitfalls*, and undertook to make adjustments accordingly in two paragraphs in the book ... Kato made no deathbed recantations! He was still growing, but he was not changing directions.' It is indeed unlikely that Kato would so quickly have moderated his position on the basis of a single conversation with Mbiti, especially given the conviction that his writings demonstrate. Such changes as he made seem to have been few and minor, and had no impact on the thrust of his argument.

### Controversy

Kato's literary corpus, and especially *Theological Pitfalls*, continues to provoke controversy. Perhaps the most frequent criticism focuses on an alleged surrender to a Western theological agenda over against a distinctively African approach. Oduyoye's assessment is representative in both content and tone: 'The rejection [of the] African worldview by an African shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their "Africanness".'<sup>14</sup>

What is principally in view in these criticisms is his negative evaluation of African traditional religion, and consequent rejection of any substantive role for it in the formulation of an African Christian theology. This is seen by his critics as a rejection of African culture, which would *ipso facto* eliminate all possibility of an African theology at anything but a superficial level: he failed, says Parratt, 'to make allowance for the fact that throughout its history Christianity has had to come to terms with the cultures in which it has been implanted.'<sup>15</sup> Bediako offers the most developed critique, arguing that Kato's

insistence on the exclusive role of the Bible as a revelation of salvation coupled with his negative appraisal of African traditional religion, blinded him to the possibility that God may be working redemptively among those who have, or had, no access to the Bible. He critiques Kato's conception of the gospel as being ultimately – to use Bediako's term – *acultural*, 'a further dimension of his exclusivist Biblicism', and claims that for him 'no cultural factors had any part in the shaping of one's understanding of the Christian faith.'<sup>16</sup> Criticism has also extended to his rejection of 'the politicisation of African theological thought to deal with issues of social injustice and political oppression'.<sup>17</sup> Particularly in view here is his assessment of Black Theology.

Certainly Kato was committed to certain non-negotiable presuppositions which were fundamental to his thinking. Fundamental among them was the belief that the Bible was the unique Word of God, the ultimate source and authority for all legitimate theological expression, including African. Such a view will of course be problematic to those who do not hold it, but it has a venerable pedigree and not only in the West. Not the least aspect of that pedigree is the fact that both implicitly and explicitly the Scriptures themselves repeatedly insist on their own uniquely divine origin and consequent authority. He further believed that a biblical understanding of the gospel entailed an exclusivist approach towards other religions. Again, commitment to such a stance does not imply subservience to a Western agenda, any more than the adoption of an opposing inclusivist (or even pluralist) stance, which has equally strong roots within the Western theological tradition.

It is of course true that he studied in the West, and was undoubtedly influenced by Western thinking, but this is no less true of his critics. However that may be, dependence is all but inevitable in any academic field, for we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. That does not of itself invalidate any particular position, and to argue otherwise would be to fall into the genetic fallacy: an argument is neither established nor negated by reference to its source, but only on the basis of its own intrinsic merits or weaknesses. Kato's thinking was no less cogent than that of his opponents. The issue is not his alleged submission to 'Western value-setting',<sup>18</sup> but his theologically reasoned conviction that an 'African Christian self-identity' rooted to any extent in pre-Christian and non-Christian religious tradition was ultimately self-defeating, since it seriously compromised principles that lay at the heart of the gospel itself.

However, this did not mean that he was opposed to a specifically African expression of Christian faith – rather the contrary. If he distanced himself from the expression, 'African theology', it was because of the ambiguities which he

felt surrounded it at the time, but he emphatically approved the concern to formulate a Christian theology for Africa: 'that Africans have a unique contribution to make to theological debates is undeniable'.<sup>19</sup> He shared the concern of Mbiti and others that 'mission Christianity' had failed to engage seriously with African culture, quoting Mbiti to that effect: 'Mission Christianity was not from the start prepared to face a serious encounter with either traditional religions and philosophy or the modern changes taking place in Africa. The church here now finds itself in the situation of trying to exist without a theology'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently he looked for a culturally appropriate expression of Christian faith which addressed the questions raised by African society and tradition: 'such areas as principles of interpretation, polygamy, family life, the spirit world, and communal life should be given serious attention.'<sup>21</sup> Or, as he wrote elsewhere, 'the valuable concepts [of African culture] will of course be strengthened by his newly-found faith. The traditional belief in continuing existence after death is given a new and dynamic meaning. The respect for the elder falls in line with what the Bible teaches.'<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, at the most fundamental level of African culture, he believed that there existed a philosophy 'as to the real meaning and purpose of life',<sup>23</sup> which was fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith. It was here that there had to be a radical break with traditional belief in favour, not of Western theology, but of the gospel itself. This was true for any convert to Christianity of whatever culture, because the gospel ultimately transcends and challenges all cultures, while its domestication vitiates its essential integrity. This is the point Kato insists on: 'must one betray Scriptural principles of God and His dealing with man at the altar of any regional theology?'<sup>24</sup> In this sense, then, he certainly held the gospel to be *acultural*, which does not, however, negate the need for suitable cultural articulations of it. But, if words such as 'gospel' and 'Christianity' are to be used in anything approaching a univocal sense across cultures, there must necessarily be some unchanging core of meaning, whatever the culture in which they find expression. Of course, one can adopt a minimalist or a maximalist definition of that core. There is equally the danger that elements would be drawn into any such definition that belong more properly to particular cultural expressions of the gospel in a given context. However, if there is ultimately no *acultural* gospel at all – infinitely translatable no doubt, but an objective and unchanging reality which exists precisely to be translated – it makes little sense to speak of *the* gospel or *the* Christian faith in any universal and transcultural sense at all.

Nor was Kato silent about social and political issues. Interviewed by *Christianity Today*, a journal addressed to the American public, he spoke in a way that many readers would have found uncongenial: 'we must appreciate the

call for a kind of socialism because capitalism has become a real curse in Africa and the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to widen. In Africa today you will find many millionaires but also many people who go to bed hungry.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere he condemned the past oppression of African peoples, writing that 'enslavement of Africans by whites is probably the worst evil done by one class of people to another.'<sup>26</sup> In the same article he condemned the racial discrimination then being practised in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa and the United States, and continued, 'while I do not agree with the proponents of Black Theology ... I fully identify myself with their condemnation of injustice. The search for human dignity is a Scriptural principle.'<sup>27</sup> His quarrel with some contemporary theological approaches to socio-political issues was not their concern for justice, but his belief that they confused the fruit of salvation with its substance, which was the thrust of his critique of the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1976.<sup>28</sup>

### **Vision**

Kato was not just a reactive controversialist – he was also a visionary. As general secretary of the AEAM, a position he held for less than three years, he presided over a significant strengthening of the evangelical movement in Africa. One indication of this was an increase from 7 to 16 in the number of national evangelical bodies affiliated to the AEAM.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, although the primary focus of his ministry was on the provision of an authentically Christian theology for Africa, he had also a missionary passion for spreading the gospel in Africa and beyond – even in the West. At the beginning of the twenty-first century missionary endeavour is increasingly initiated by African churches. In the early 1970s that was not so much the case, but Kato saw its vital importance for the health of the church and its future growth. He was ahead of his time when he urged his readers to 'look beyond the borders of your country and further afield to the pagan strongholds on our continent, to the western world and its materialistic attractions. The world is the field. The church in Africa and elsewhere is the only agent for sowing the seed.'<sup>30</sup>

But, most significantly, he used his position to promote the cause of theological education within the evangelical constituency. He knew that evangelical churches lagged behind others in theological development, the result, to some extent at least, of a suspicion of higher theological education on the part of some of their missionary founders. Turaki refers to Kato's 'difficulties in persuading SIM and ECWA of the need for higher education and quality leadership training.'<sup>31</sup> What made the need increasingly urgent was the huge growth of the church coupled with rapid social change across Africa producing an increasingly urban population and a growing middle class.

Evangelicalism would not flourish unless its leadership was able to respond effectively to the issues confronting the church in the postcolonial era. So, he urged the need to expand, deepen and strengthen 'every possible means of teaching the church', 'particularly at the highest leadership levels',<sup>32</sup> and sought to move ahead in a number of areas.

First, and most crucial, was the establishment of institutions of advanced theological education by the AEAM itself. He argued that francophone Africa should be given the priority as the English-speaking countries already had far more seminaries and Bible schools.<sup>33</sup> Plans were therefore laid for the foundation of a theological school in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, a vision which materialised in 1977 with the *Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui* (FATEB). Subsequently a parallel Anglophone institution was founded in Nairobi, the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), which received its first students in 1983. These have become training institutions of critical importance for the evangelical African church. Second, he proposed raising standards in existing evangelical institutions through a theological accrediting agency. He was working on this shortly before his death, and it became a reality in 1976 when the AEAM formally constituted the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). He also hoped to see the establishment of an evangelical theological journal for the whole of Africa and an association of evangelical theologians. None of this was the vision of a man wedded to a Western agenda and indifferent or opposed to a distinctively African theology. Finally, less visible perhaps than the establishment of such institutions but no less significant – and still remembered by many – was the warm personal encouragement and help he gave to younger aspiring African theologians, passing on his vision for the growth to theological maturity of the African church. 'Through his vision and wide personal contacts [he] formatively impacted the following generation of African evangelical leadership.'<sup>34</sup>

Byang Kato was only 39 when he died. His relatively brief life's work was seminal in the development of evangelical theology in Africa, through the example of his own scholarship, the visionary initiatives that led to the foundation of enduring institutions, and the encouragement of the rising generation. He set the agenda for African evangelicalism and, according to Tiéno, it is still largely his vision that 'provides the basic framework for such strategy as a whole in our continent.'<sup>35</sup> Since his death he has been harshly and unjustly criticised, but he was no pawn of missionaries or of Western parachurch bodies, nor the neo-colonial spokesman of Western theology. He was a 'twentieth century prophet, somewhat in the school of an earlier African, Tertullian, for while he identified with black Africa in its cry for liberation

against unjust oppression, he was fearless in his denunciation of all liberal theology and philosophy that deviated from the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.<sup>36</sup> The goal of his work was to advance the ambition vibrantly expressed in his famed rallying cry, 'Let African Christians be Christian Africans'. It is not only a fitting epitaph, but also a continuing challenge to the evangelical African church today.<sup>37</sup>

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shaw, M., *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Bowers, P., 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy', *TrinJ* 1 NS (1980), p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> WCC, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, 1970-77* (Bromley: T.E.F. Fund, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Parratt, J., *Reinventing Christianity: African Christian Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Kato, B., *African Cultural Revolution* (Jos, Nigeria: Challenge Publications, 1976), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Bediako, K., *Theology and Identity: the Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 412.

<sup>8</sup> Bowers, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 63, note 29.

<sup>10</sup> Bowers, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., for example, Kato, *African Cultural Revolution*, pp. 22-24.

<sup>12</sup> Mbiti, J. S., *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Bowers, P., 'Review of Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*', *Themelios* 5.3, May 1980, p. 34.

- <sup>14</sup> Oduyoye, M. A., *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), p. 62. Cf. Bediako, p. 387; Mugambi, J. N. K., *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1989), p. 133; Parratt, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>15</sup> Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 63.
- <sup>16</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 413.
- <sup>17</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 394; cf. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, p. 61.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 391.
- <sup>19</sup> Kato, B., 'Theological Anemia in Africa', *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985), p. 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Mbiti, J. S., quoted by Kato, B., 'Theological Anemia', p. 11.
- <sup>21</sup> Kato, B., 'Black Theology and African Theology', *ERT* 1 (1977), p. 45.
- <sup>22</sup> Kato, B., *African Cultural Revolution*, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Kato, B., *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House), p. 16.
- <sup>25</sup> Kato, B., 'Africa's Christian Future', *Christianity Today* XX.1 (1975), p. 14.
- <sup>26</sup> Kato, B., 'Black Theology and African Theology', p. 36.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.
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<sup>36</sup> Nicholls, B. J., 'Byang H. Kato - A Personal Tribute', *Theological News* (WEF), Vol. 8 No. 1 (January-March 1976), p. 2. I am grateful to Dr Nicholls for sending me a photocopy of this issue of *Theological News*.

<sup>37</sup> I wish to thank Dr Paul Bowers, Miss Ailish Eves and Dr Gordon Molyneux for reading this paper and making many helpful suggestions.

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# THE HUMAN CONDITION THROUGH AFRICAN EYES: TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS

Joe M. Kapolyo<sup>1</sup>

One could usefully reflect in *macroview* on the African understanding of human nature, as I myself have done elsewhere with respect to the African concept of *ubuntu*.<sup>1</sup> But here instead I want to offer one African's view of human nature, a personal *microview* of human nature within the context of traditional African perceptions.

The task of writing about human nature is of course near impossible. A writer can only authoritatively make specific and subjective statements limited to his or her experience. Beyond that one is almost totally reliant on what others have said about human beings. So I am very aware of my personal limitations in this attempt. But in the end I suppose I am simply exploring a subject that fascinates me. In doing so, I am using my personal 'lived in' experience and my understanding of God's Word to put forward some thoughts about the nature of human beings and their cultural environments.

There was a period of my life when I was submerged in an almost purely traditional African cultural context, namely that of the Bemba people who inhabit a part of northeast Zambia. The only light in the village came from the sun by day and from the fires dotted around the village at night. The only running water was in the

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Kapolyo has served as Principal both of the Theological College of Central Africa in Zambia, and of All Nations Christian College in England. He has also served as pastor of Baptist churches in both Zambia and England. This paper represents, with slight modifications, a chapter from his recent book *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005). The book is part of a new series *The Global Christian Library*, for which John Stott serves as Consulting Editor. The book may be ordered from IVP UK or through Langham Literature. The material presented here is reproduced by permission of IVP.

river half a mile away. Engagement with the world outside was minimal. But that did not last. Christianity and the wider world soon permeated my world, and from the late 1950s until relatively recently I have viewed both of these realities largely through the eyes of a 'borrowed' cultural milieu. Although I grew up in Zambia, my initial experiences of both Christianity and the wider world were mediated through personal and corporate Zambian experiences of British colonialism and its educational and other social legacies enshrined in present Zambia life and its social structures.

Here I want to make some first faltering steps in exploring my own traditional African world, and use perspectives from that exploration as lenses through which to view both Christianity and the wider world. I believe strongly that this is imperative not just for my own development, but in a small way, for the church as a whole. Such a process will in the end call for a certain rethinking of theological categories. Not a reinvention of historic Christian belief, but a recasting in more culturally friendly categories. As Christianity increasingly makes a home in the cultures of the majority world, the task is to make Christ the Lord in every part of every culture. I can myself only contribute a few lines of thought along which further explorations can follow, but by sharing in such a task we can together work to enact and affirm the global nature of Christianity, by ensuring that it is deeply rooted at the heart of each host culture, including those in Africa, to the honour and glory of Christ our Lord.

I take as my focus for this paper the question what it means to be human, the question addressed by that part of Christian theological discourse traditionally referred to as 'Anthropology'. Within any traditional Zambian or African approach to that question I have been unable to find any references to the image of God in human beings.<sup>2</sup> This may be indicative of the limitations of my research, but the language of imagery in the African languages I am familiar with is limited to physical and immaterial likeness between human generations. A son may be said to be the image of his father or a daughter the image of her mother or grandmother. But this language is never applied to the relationship between people and God, except of course in the appropriate translations of the Word of God into the many African languages.

In Africa it is impossible to reflect on human beings apart from their cultural surroundings and identity. The society-based existence is evident everywhere. Not for us any 'I doubt, think or buy, therefore I am'. Rather for us it is: 'We are, therefore I am.' A Bemba proverb makes this point in its statement that *umuntu ekala na bantu: uwikala ne nama, akaliwa* (a human being lives with people or in the company of other people: he who lives with animals will be eaten). Note the seeming choices are between living with people and living with animals. Africans find it difficult to conceive of a solitary or highly individualistic or isolationist existence. 'I am

because we are' is a very African attitude to life. Culture therefore is the best milieu for understanding human beings in most sub-Saharan African contexts. Culture is dynamic. It constantly changes and adapts to new influences and challenges. In recognition of this fact, anthropologists no longer regard human beings from purely essentialist or ontological perspectives but relationally and dynamically. That is why I begin with three stories to highlight the link between behaviour patterns and the values they reflect.

In an interview on prime-time Zambian television a bright Zambian female legal practitioner made the startling statement that all Zambian men were essentially adulterers! Adultery is a common indiscretion or sin in the world today as indeed it has been from time immemorial. Zambians are probably no more or less adulterous than other peoples in this day and age, but the statement was based on both her legal experience in litigation in marriage cases and more importantly on her own personal, perhaps bitter, experience in marriage. The topic under discussion was *polygamy*. Zambian law recognizes two basic forms of marriage: those entered into under customary law and those contracted under 'the Ordinance'.

Those married under the Ordinance incur the wrath of the law if they commit bigamy; that is, marry someone else while still married to the first spouse. But those who marry under customary provisions are entitled to polygamy if that is allowed in the culture of the families involved. These two separate systems have their own appropriate enforcement agencies. The magistrates' courts settle grievances arising from marriage under the Ordinance. The others are settled in local (customary) courts superintended by local court judges, men and women chosen for their proven wisdom and knowledge of local customs. The two systems are incompatible and trained lawyers are barred by their profession from participating in the proceedings of local courts.

The interviewee's own marriage had been solemnized under the Ordinance. Her husband was also a lawyer, and in fact one of the country's leading legal practitioners who had at one time held the cabinet post of Minister of Legal Affairs in Government. They had been married for almost twenty years. During most of that time he had maintained another marriage, entered into on the basis of tradition. Children had been born to that union. This had been a source of problems for the first wife. It was an apparently insoluble dilemma, for there was nothing she could do to change the situation. Legally he had not broken the law. The second 'wife' was not recognized as such by the system under which he had married his first wife. She might have some rights as a common-law wife, but no more. Why had the first wife not divorced him? She could certainly prove a case of adultery, which is accepted as grounds for divorce. She retorted

that the exercise would be futile because all Zambian men were the same. In sexual matters they are not satisfied with one partner. In any case, the next man she would meet and marry would behave in exactly the same manner that characterized her present husband (notice the underlying assumption of the necessity for remarriage). We will come back to this 'fact' (Zambian men in relation to sexual matters) when we deal with relationships in marriage.

Jamie, a development worker from the West, sought to befriend ordinary Zambian men in his social life. He assumed that this would be useful for his own work as well as his social life. So he joined a social club. He mixed well, sitting, chatting and drinking with them. After several years of these encounters he concluded that 'All Zambian men are adulterers and thieves.' He drew his conclusions from the basis of what dominated the men's conversations: infidelity in marriage and how to avoid paying back loans.

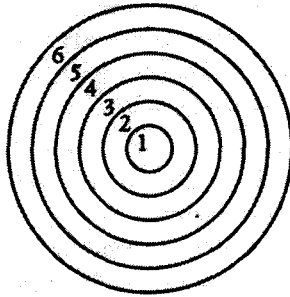
At a college in the West the bursar was heard to say that 'when it comes to money we do not trust black African students'. He made the statement partly to justify himself and partly to explain why he had not bothered to check the facts before wrongly accusing a black African student of soliciting for donations under false pretences. This is reminiscent of a comment by B. J. van der Walt, who said that the 'Westerner tends to place too high a premium on such qualities as honesty, openness, integrity, perseverance, and so on. (For that reason the Westerner will often consider the African dishonest, and the African will consider the Westerner impolite)' (van der Walt 1988:30).

One could easily dismiss these stories as either sexist or racist. But perhaps the right attitude is to ask what truth the generalizations may contain. What does that truth reveal about an adequate understanding of who I am as an African? And what values are important to me and how will these values, rightly understood, help us in communicating the timeless truths of the gospel into the ever-changing social world of the African?

### **Deep and surface cultures**

I will employ the imagery of an onion, with its layers of skin, to help us visualize the complex cultural make-up of any human being. The concentric circles are numbered 1-6, starting with the core or the heart of the matter. At the centre, in the first circle (1), we can expect to find one's religious convictions and the essential elements of one's vision of life, the way one views oneself, the world and one's place in it, as well as values and norms that characterize one's world view. Moving outwards, the next circles, numbers 2-6, encompass material and spiritual creations such as marriage, initiation rites, work, family, healing, indeed the church and the state with its laws, customs, behaviour, habits and others. What

is in the first circle, what we might call the inner person, is not visible but completely permeates and regulates what is said and done in all the other circles. The 'inner, deeper cultural layers determine and direct the outward layers'. Whereas the latter are easier to describe, for they are clearly discernible (van der Walt 1988:20-21), the inner core, the vision of life, is more difficult to identify and describe.



There are other ways of presenting this same reality. We may borrow biblical metaphors of the tree (roots below ground supporting and feeding the stem, branches, leaves and fruit above ground), or a building (a foundation below the ground supporting a visible superstructure). Turner has developed another helpful metaphor, that of surface and deep levels of cultures (Turner 2001.74ff.). The surface, expressive or visible cultures relate to personal and public forms within our social existence. Some of these forms will be highly localized while others will be more widespread and national. This is particularly so for a country like Zambia and no doubt many others created by decree on a drawing board by imperial colonists. The boundaries drawn often cut through whole ethnic groups, consigning them to different countries. For example in the northwest of Zambia the Chokwe people now live in Zambia, Congo and Angola! Other similarly divided groups include the Ndebele of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the Ndaou of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the Tumbuka of Zambia and Malawi and so on. The national cultures in these countries hardly exist. Those that do are inventions that bear the hallmarks of the cultural forms of the colonial masters.

Some of these personal forms will relate to the way people live, including their dress codes and personal appearance, the kind of architecture and furnishings that characterize the majority dwellings, the manner in which food is prepared and eaten and indeed what kind of food is eaten. This will also include

what people do to entertain themselves and their guests, the music they create and listen to or dance to and the manner in which they dance or sing, what kinds of guests they entertain and how these are chosen. Other forms of expressive culture will include the nature of greetings, whether people prostrate themselves, kneel, shake hands, clap their hands, bow and hug or kiss each other. Funerals are of particular interest. In my culture when a person dies we, the members of the extended family, invariably drop all but the most essential of duties and gather at the funeral home for several days and nights until we bury the deceased. During the time before the burial we meet many relatives. A lot of them would have had to travel long distances to get to the funeral. We cry and mourn the dead and comfort the bereaved, we catch up on family news and increase the extended family networks and consolidate the family solidarity we so treasure. I did not really understand how significant these rituals are to me until I had to cope with the death of a close relative while living in self-imposed exile with no way of attending the funeral. I have been left with a sense of incomplete closure and some very raw feelings!

We also include under this category of surface culture the way people mark the rites of passage, including who has the right to know when a pregnancy has occurred, who names the child, what is the source of the name and how the child relates to the grown-ups. Relations between one generation and the next are always formal but relations between alternate generations are free and easy. A young child can address a grandparent as if they were equals! The functions and responsibilities of the biological father in relation to the child will be defined by culture. In my culture traditionally it is the child's 'male mother' or mother's brother who is more significant than the biological father. He is the person responsible for discipline and often the material support of the child. The expressive culture will be even more evident in the way marriages are conducted. A young Zambian man may decide to marry a young woman but the process includes the appointment of a go-between to break the news to the girl's family and to negotiate terms for payment of dowry or *lobola*.

### **When two cultures meet**

We observe a complication in surface cultures when a major transition takes place, as has happened at the interface between the gospel and local cultures or indeed between Western culture and local cultures. Some of the results are bewildering, while others are humorous.

I had been brought up to respect my superiors and betters. One of the ways to do this was to avoid eye contact at all times, especially when receiving instructions or when one was being rebuked for misconduct. This worked well at home and all through primary education, where all the principal players were



Zambian. In my first year at secondary school, at the age of fourteen, half the class was black Zambian and the other half consisted mainly of white boys, most of whose parents were expatriates from all over the world. The teachers were all white. One day I misbehaved and Mr O'Hagan was not at all pleased and began to give me a dressing down. As a good African boy I looked down to show my respect for him and hopefully to convey my sense of remorse and contrition. Mr O'Hagan was furious and demanded that I look into his face, a thing I could not physically do!

The deaths of 'my father' were also a source of constant confusion. My father's brothers and cousins are all fathers to me. I would never address them by any other title or name but 'father'. The first time one asked for time off to go to one's father's funeral, there was a lot of sympathy all around. But when it happened again and again, all sorts of conclusions were drawn by our teachers, who thought we were inveterate liars who assumed they were all dim!

More serious is the matter of names. We do not traditionally have surnames. In this respect Bemba-speaking people of north-eastern Zambia are somewhat peculiar. Other ethnic groups in the country do indeed have clan names or surnames, which all the males bear (Mbiti 1969:119). We always receive the 'belly-button' name at birth or perhaps when the remnant of the umbilical cord drops. That is usually the name by which a person is distinguished. But if the same name is common in the village, then the distinction will be made with reference to one's parents or grandparents. The first major name change will occur when one's firstborn arrives. The 'belly-button' name falls out of use and may only be used by one's very close friends or relatives. In its place a person is called the 'father of ...' A similar name change will occur when grandchildren are born. My father's name was Mutale, his 'belly-button' name. When he went to a mission school, he needed to have a Christian name and surname. Since he already had an African name it was only necessary to choose a name from the Bible or some other English name. So at his baptism he became Joseph Mutale. All his brothers went through the same process and the result was that all four of them had different surnames to their dying day.

By the late 1950s when I started school the concept of surnames was understood to be necessary but not in the Western manner of understanding. I was always referred to as Kapolyo, son of Joseph, or more simply Kapolyo Joseph. When I went to secondary school my English headmaster decided to correct the 'mistake' that my African name should come before my 'Christian' name! So from then on I have been called Joseph Kapolyo. My older brother has a different surname from me and so do all my other brothers. What happened to names also happened in relation to houses, marriage ceremonies,

music and so on. Indeed expressive or surface cultures change quite easily. I started life in a little house of mud, poles, a thatch roof and no electricity or running water. Now I live in a medium-sized red brick house with most modern amenities. Similarly I look after my own children and play only a supporting role to the offspring of my sisters, and only if asked. However, changes are harder in the core or foundational culture.

Like the foundation of a house or the roots of a tree, this basic aspect of culture is not readily visible.

It is a complex for which we use many different descriptive terms—a complex of axiomatic, unconsciously assumed convictions, belief systems, values, mind-sets, stances, reference points, frameworks, paradigms, and so on. These form the ultimate creative and motivating forces and controlling factors operating at the expressive or surface levels, whether in parent or sub-cultures (Turner 2001:75; see also van der Walt 1988:20).

This is the illusive, inner, deeper, foundational culture that forms the core in which resides a people's vision of life, the home of their world views. Most ethnographic descriptions of culture deal at the surface level, although studies of myth and ritual have led the way into a deeper understanding of what lies below the surface.

At coffee time this morning a veteran missionary and indefatigable world traveller was giving advice to a colleague about visiting Korea for the first time. One piece of advice was never to drink water in public while facing the audience or congregation. This it seems to me illustrates the superficial nature of most of our attempts to teach intercultural studies to those about to cross cultural boundaries with the gospel. We all too often tell them to avoid making mistakes at the surface level. It is indeed important not to drink water in public while facing the crowd or to blow one's nose in public even if one has a handkerchief, or hand over items with one's left hand and so on. But these are hardly the issue if we are going to affect people deeply with the gospel of Christ. It may well be that the 'conversion' of deep culture is something that only the natives can bring about with the help of the Spirit of God as he leads them in discovering God's will through his Word.

### **Some core or foundational cultural values of the Bemba**

Here are some of the values that belong to the core, the foundational culture that constitute a vision of life for the African Bemba.

#### ***Religion and spirituality***

The first is what we may call *religion*. This term is probably misapplied to

sub-Saharan Africans. The Bemba people do not have a word for religion in their vocabulary. There are words for 'praising God' (*ukulumbanya Lesa*), 'serving God' (*ukubombela Lesa*) and 'thanking God' (*ukutotela Lesa*), but there is no word for 'religion'. Mbiti is perhaps the first African to attempt a thorough systematization of what in my view is erroneously called 'African religions'. Mbiti himself admits this much in saying that this is not an easy task. For 'Africans are notoriously religious ... religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it' (Mbiti 1969:1). But then he proceeds to treat 'religion' as if it were a separate category from other entities in life, a category that can be systematized. This was his first mistake. For there is no body of orthodoxy preserved either orally or in literary form in the so-called African religions. The one thousand or so African ethnic groups (tribes) do not share a monolithic system of religion. Instead they have different beliefs expressed variously depending on need. This is not to say that some beliefs and practices are not more widespread, or that they do not bear any resemblance to expressions of spirituality found elsewhere in the world. Migrations, similarity in kinship systems, wars, famines, witchcraft eradication movements, intertribal trade all combined to ensure cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. In this regard Taylor is right in suggesting that 'we may reasonably claim that we are dealing with the universal, basic elements of man's understanding of God and of the world' (Taylor 1963:26). But this recognition does not amount to a promulgation of a religious system, which can be systematized around the theme, for example, of the African concept of time.

But Mbiti, along with many other Africanists, is also wrong in calling the collection of 'traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices' of African peoples a religion. The isolation of beliefs in deities and the whole spiritual side of human existence is a Cartesian creation imposed on a description of African experiences. The Enlightenment demands classification. But life for the African must be embraced in its totality. Rationalism demands that life be broken up and classified in order to be labelled and thereby presumably be understood better. Classification in itself is not a bad thing - it depends on what one does with what is so classified. In modernity, classification almost invariably leads to the process of the privileging of human minds over everything else, including the spiritual realm. Spiritual practices are therefore classified in the category of religion, which is then deemed a private pursuit that belongs to the area of personal subjective opinion. It is divorced from ordinary life in the public domain. African practice until the onset of Christianity knew no such classification.

In fact one of the major weaknesses of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, as I will seek to demonstrate in this paper, is precisely because it is a religion, 'a classroom religion' for that matter (Taylor 1963:22). It therefore fits not into the

inner person, the deep culture that is the locus of the vision of life, and where it naturally belongs, but rather, and unfortunately so, into the second set of concentric circles in our proverbial onion or the expressive culture, in the area of material and spiritual creations. It is not thus an integrating element in life. For this reason it is more accurate to speak not of African religions but African spirituality, a living faith.

Spirituality, unlike popular types of religion, does have those qualities of control and of powerful influence over life in its totality. It is an integrating principle of life. If this understanding and practice of spirituality in Africa had been transferred to the practice of Christianity, the church would be healthier, authentically African and exerting greater impact upon life in its totality, not just personal, but public as well. As it is, African spirituality controls, certainly permeates, the practice of Christianity. 'Christianity thus seemed like an ideal which people wanted to aspire to, but practically they continued living according to the normative system of their ethnic groups' (WLSA 1997:53). Van der Walt states that 'Westernisation has not touched their essential being' (van der Walt 1988:21).

Traditional Africans do not maintain a dichotomy between spiritual and secular values. 'No distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for Nature and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community' (Taylor 1963:72). For many Africans we understand that the material world is firmly connected to the spiritual world, and spirituality is the tie that binds human beings to the world of the ancestral spirits and gods. The practices of many African peoples show that they strongly believe in God and in the spiritual world (Mbiti 1969:16). An illness for instance is never considered, let alone treated, in isolation. Contrary to normal biomedical practice, an illness is treated as part of the person suffering within the context of the community, which includes both the people alive, and the spirits of the ancestors.

I experienced this as a child when I received treatment for the many abdominal ailments that plagued me. My maternal grandfather would always take me to a bush he knew to have medicinal qualities for dealing with abdominal disorders. He would instruct me to put my hands behind my back, to close my eyes and to walk towards the bush. Upon reaching the low-lying leaves I was to bite off a leaf at a time and chew it, swallowing the sap and spitting out the rest. While I was walking, he would walk alongside all the time saying prayers to God through the spirits of the ancestors. That is why the Bemba say, *ukwimba akati: kusanshyako na Lesa* (to dig a small stick [or perhaps more accurately a small medicinal plant], you add God). This means that to be successful at finding the right roots for medicinal application one needs more than just knowledge of the relevant

bushes. One needs the efficacious presence of God and the good will of the spirits of the ancestors in digging up the roots, or presenting sacrifices, as well as in applying the medicine (Taylor 1963:103-104). What was true of treating bodily disorders was also true of endeavours like hunting, preparing gardens for planting, going on long journeys, and deprivations like lack of food in times of drought (Taylor 1963:105).

### ***Spiritual activities***

The second core value, which derives from the first, is the growth of varieties of spiritual activities, such as rainmaking, healing, witch finding and sorcery (more widely referred to as 'witchcraft', a term Mbiti disparages and desires not to be used at all; Mbiti 1969:166). Africans are very spiritual. Unlike their Western counterparts, they have no need to be convinced of the existence of God. Many are even monotheistic. Both humanist rationalism that characterizes the West and the atheistic materialism that sums up communism are foreign to the African mind, except for a tiny group of diehard men and women who swallowed the Marxist doctrines in the Cold War era. Even they must have a tough time at funerals. I suspect that at those times they conveniently ignore their philosophies.

I recall standing at a graveside conducting a committal for an elder in a church who had died tragically in a road traffic accident. At the appointed time I invited the family and friends to follow me in throwing into the grave a token amount of soil. Many responded, including the younger brother of the deceased. In his remarks he promised the dead brother (or perhaps the spirit of the deceased) that within twelve months the person responsible for his death would similarly die. The promise was a commitment, first, to seek a diviner to discern the person responsible for the death (it is widely believed that death when it occurs is always the result of the malicious use of magic or witchcraft; death is always both natural and unnatural; Mbiti 1969:155), and, second, to use magic or witchcraft to cause the death of the person deemed to be responsible for his brother's death. Such counter-measures are common both for protection and for offensive use of magic. Many if not most African peoples believe that lots of human beings have power to tap into the supernatural realm and use such power mysteriously for harm or good. Many Christians of good standing are intimidated by threats of witchcraft. It is a fact that a number of people on death row at the Zambian maximum security prison are men who caused the death of another at a funeral. In northwestern Zambia it is believed that on the way to the grave, a spirit will take hold of the bier, bind the pall bearers and the coffin and lead them to the person who has caused the death. The power of the spirit, which at that point cannot be resisted, not only seeks out the 'culprit' who caused the death of the deceased but causes him or her to be battered to death by using the coffin as a battering ram!

In spite of these horror stories arising from African openness to the spirit world, it

is precisely this openness to spiritual things that has made it easier to account for, and is in part responsible for, the phenomenal growth of the church in the developing world. The important question is, which spirit is one in tune with?

### ***Commitment to the group***

The third value is commitment to the group. One of the hallmarks of Western Christianity from the time of the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution is the concept of 'faith as a matter of individual decision and individual application' (Walls 1996:21). This is what John Taylor calls the 'isolated man with his intensely private world' (Taylor 1963:93). On the contrary, for the African person such isolationism is unimaginable. Taylor is so captivated by the all-embracing presence of the group that his chapter on an African anthropology, entitled 'What is Man?', is simply a description of an African person's incorporation into and existence within the extended family. He says:

The sense of the personal totality of all being, and of a humanity which embraces the living, the dead and the divinities, fills the background of the primal world-view. But the foreground in which this solidarity becomes sharply defined and directly experienced is the life of the extended family, the clan, and the tribe. This is the context in which an African learns to say I am because I participate. To him the individual is an abstraction; Man is a family. (Taylor 1963:93)

My nuclear family, that is the immediate family to which I belong as a son, at the moment comprises sixty-eight people (three have died: my father, one niece and a nephew). There are four generations included: my mother (parent), twelve of us (children) plus all our spouses, all our children (grandchildren), and three great-grandchildren. My extended family comprises the nuclear families of my parents' siblings. That number is in excess of two hundred people. But that is not all, for all my father's and mother's collateral relations and their families are also members of my extended family. If we were to count them all, there would be no fewer than five hundred. This is what is called in Bemba *ulupwa* - one's paternal and maternal relatives (WLSA 1997:9).

Legally defined, a family is 'a socially recognised union of two people and any offspring from that union' (WLSA 1997:30). This is what the Bemba would call 'those of one house'; that is to say, they have one mother and one father. Culturally and practically this is the least significant of the definitions of 'family'. It corresponds to a household, although even a household would normally be greater in that it includes all the people who live together and share the same dwellings, food and other basic essentials. *Ulupwa*, among the Bemba, corresponds more to the kinship group and that really only to the maternal relatives. This is espe-

cially so because the Bemba are matrilineal. But in practice bilateralism is common. Two proverbs illustrate this: (1) *abana ba mjubu: bangala amatenga yonse* (children of a hippo play in all the pools of water in the river or lake, which means that children belong to both their paternal and maternal kin); (2) *umutembo: ufinina konse* (a heavy burden weighs heavily on both sides, which means the duty and cost of bringing up children must be shared equally between the two sides of the family. Both sides of the family should recognize their obligations to the child as a member of the two families).

The extended family combines all the benefits of a fully-fledged social security system without any bewildering red tape. 'The family is a refuge in both the urban and rural areas, and the only institution providing some form of social security' (WLSA 1997:190). Children needing school fees appeal to the family members who will invariably oblige. Children needing to be housed for any number of reasons will find a home in the house of a member of the family. Elderly people, parents or uncles and aunts, who need to be looked after will not normally be shunted off to an old people's home but will be cared for by their own children at home. The system is flexible, efficient and user friendly.

The sense of solidarity of the family is a felt thing. Nowhere is this more real than at a family funeral when hordes of relatives gather for several days to mourn and bury the departed. The physical presence of all relatives is imperative. Sometimes the necessity arises from fear that absence could be interpreted as evidence of guilt for having been the source of witchcraft that led to the death of the departed. But in general it is the duty of relatives to attend all funerals. At the funeral house itself, the sheer numbers of relatives makes the burden of grief light. Physical duties like baby care, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry are all done by the many gathered willing helpers. Babies become the focus of particular attention as they are introduced and passed around to the relatives they have never seen. The prosperous members of the family will make contributions to pay for the gathering and the funeral expenses related to the actual burial. The camaraderie is also very significant. Lots of family stories are told and family histories may be recited for the benefit of the young. Identity crisis is not really a problem on the African continent, although it may be so among the African Diaspora in the impersonal cities of Europe, America and elsewhere.

There are difficulties with the extended family system, however. Some unscrupulous people can easily abuse it. Lazy people can opt out of their obligations and instead move from one relative's house to another in search of a more comfortable life. But abuses do not outweigh the benefits of the system. There are, however, some important issues in relation to the church. These include the matter of fellowship, support for the church, hospitality, individuality (personal and in

relation to any given marriage) and priority of relatives. Let me deal with just two of these: fellowship and priority of relatives.

### ***Christian fellowship and the African extended family system***

Fellowship is an essential part of what it means to be a Christian. The apostle John considers it to be the grounds for the incarnation (1 John 1:3-7): Jesus came into the world that he might create the basis for fellowship. The word 'fellowship', from the Greek *koinonia*, is used in the New Testament to describe the church in terms of community, participation and, of course, fellowship. At the basis of the use of this word group is the idea of a common and shared background. In the Christian sense this stems from our 'being united in Christ. . . participation in the Spirit' (Philippians 2:1). The Christian heritage includes primarily a participation in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These things cannot be changed because they are bestowed on us by God.

I have a brother who has lived for the past quarter of a century in North America. He now speaks with an accent reflecting his chosen country of domicile and his complexion is quite different from mine. We rarely correspond as brothers should. But there is nothing that either my brother or I could do to take away the fact that we will remain, in name anyway, brothers to our dying day. The sooner we start behaving as brothers in reality the better for both of us. Similarly, Christian fellowship is not just what we share in common; it must issue in community of goods (Acts 2:43-47) and the giving and receiving of hospitality (Acts 9:43). These attributes find much common ground with the African extended family.

All who belong to any extended family share a common biological ancestry. Their blood, their names and to a large extent their culture can all be traced back to a common ancestor or set of ancestors. The extended family gives us identity and a strong sense of family or clan solidarity. The relationships between members result not only in words of affirmation but especially in deeds of solidarity that include many of the attributes of a fully functioning social security system in the West. But more than that there is a strong personal social support structure to meet the needs of the members at all times.

One would have assumed that the similarities in attributes between the African extended family and the Body of Christ, the church, would make it easier for the African church to live out the concept of fellowship more fully. But sadly the reality in many places is that the experience of 'fellowship' in the natural family is so real and exclusive that it hinders and discourages fellowship in the church. The sense of solidarity stemming from common ancestry is so strong that it acts as a big barrier to the idea of extending the same sense of community to total strangers. Tribal churches thrive on this weakness.



Priority of relatives is the term I choose to use to describe the fact that in life, personal, social, public, relatives always assume a place of priority over all others. In public life nepotism is a blight on the political and social landscape of the African continent. Priority of relatives distorts a proper sense of justice and fair play. But it is also and maybe especially so in marriage where priority of relatives can have a devastating effect on personal relations and on the ability of culture to negate the teaching of Scripture. The Bemba always say, *umwanakashi: mwinafyalo*, 'a woman [wife] is always a foreigner'. That means she must never be allowed to assume a place of importance in relation to her husband prior to his relatives. The woman on the other hand will never allow her sisters in law to assume a place of prominence prior to her in relation to her brothers. The unfortunate result in many cases is that marriages can be little more than convenient arrangements for increasing the number of people in the extended family and may thus lack the rich mix of love, care and sharing the Bible envisages. One of the more unfortunate demonstrations of this fact is the prevalence in both Zambia and Zimbabwe of what is called the dispossession of widows. In the event of the husband dying before the wife, his relatives move in and strip the house of all assets and distribute them among themselves, leaving the widow and her children destitute. 'There are many people who take the cattle or the money paid for the daughters of their deceased brothers, but do not provide the sons of their brothers with wives' (Van Rooy 1978:19). In an atmosphere like this, biblical teaching on subjects like marriage often falls on stone-deaf ears. One Christian with whom I discussed these issues said to me that one needs to live in exile, away from one's relatives and cultural milieu, in order to have any chance of being true to the teaching of the Bible in these matters. He at least recognized the challenge but indicated that attempts to be successful were doomed to fail!

### *Ukulilapo*

The fourth core value is what I call *ukulilapo*. This is a Bemba word derived from the word *ukulya* (to eat). The word implies that in every situation it is my duty to exploit the circumstances to my personal (and by extension my extended family's) advantage. The attitude may well have arisen at a time when eating was the preoccupation of most people and feasting was to be desired, for it was so rare. However it came about, it is a fact that this attitude, and nepotism as an expression of it, makes public and social accountability very difficult indeed. New orphanages are a case in point. Many of these institutions have sprung up in response to the great numbers of orphans from the scourge of the AIDS pandemic. The suffering of children attracts a lot of sympathy from donors all over the world. And yet it is common to see the children for whom such aid is sought and procured still languishing on scraps while the person running the orphanage grows wealthier and so do his or her relatives. Such abuse of public trust would not be understood for what it really is, stealing,

but as a duty that one has to himself and his or her relatives. Dare I suggest it that some of the resources of many local churches and denominations are misused in this way?

### ***Life after death***

The fifth core value is belief in the *afterlife*. Ecclesiastes says that God has put eternity in the heart of people (3:11). Whatever else this verse means, it certainly suggests that it is part of the human condition not only to long for but to seek for life after life.

In Africa there are two clear lines of thought in considering what happens to a person after death. The first is the translation of the dead into the *living dead*. These are the spirits of the departed who are nevertheless very much alive and well and resident in the neighbourhood either in a physical reality like a tree or simply as a disembodied spirit. As pointed out earlier, the living dead are still part of the family. Care must be taken not to ignore or be negligent to them. Libations and foods must be left for them. In times of crises they can be consulted and appealed to for protection. Although they are invisible, they are very much alive and part of the family. Eventually they will pass on when their memory is completely erased from human consciousness after the demise of the last remaining relative who remembers them in physical form. From then on they become part of the corporate identity of the spirits of our fathers.

The second line of thought in dealing with the afterlife has to do with *inheritance*. After the death of a man or woman, the relatives gather to appoint the person who will inherit the deceased. It is important to establish that inheritance in this case has little to do with receiving bequests, and everything to do with 'becoming' in a mysterious way the person who has died. Symbolically the family through the ceremony invites back the departed and renews contact with him or her (Mbiti 1969:152). At the appointed time a younger relative will be nominated. Sometimes the deceased might have nominated the person he desired. In matrilineal ethnic groups the line of inheritance goes through a man's sisters and their children, his uterine nephews and nieces (Richards 1950:222). This is perhaps what makes the sisters of a man so special and important. They bear him the boys who will take his name after his death.

The ritual is chaired by a leading member of the family and all involved are asked to sit in the circle and the nominee is asked to sit in the middle of the circle. The subject is then given water to drink and token chattels from the wardrobe of the deceased. He or she may also be given some implements that defined the major activity of the deceased. For example, he may be given a gun if the deceased had been a hunter, a hoe for a farmer and so on. Then words are uttered inviting back the

deceased to take up residence in the body of the nominee. Notice that people inherit people, not wealth.

From that moment on the candidate in effect becomes the departed. All who had relationships with the departed transfer those to the candidate so that they relate to him or her in the same way they would have related to the departed. A man whose daughter has inherited his grandmother will always treat her with the same love and respect as he would his departed forebear. This person will henceforth be the representative of the departed among the living. The living/dead are immanent and involved among their people in this way. As the ritual of inheritance unfolds, comments are invited from everyone who wishes to speak. The speakers address the nominee in words that make it clear that they are addressing the departed. The nominee has effectively *become* the dead person. The children of the departed will regard the nominee in effect, and defer to him, as if he were their real father. Boys inherit their maternal uncles and girls their maternal aunts.

A friend once introduced me to his nine-year-old daughter with the words 'This is my older sister.' As long as the young woman is alive, and there are people who remember that she has taken the name of the departed, to all intents and purposes she is the reality of the afterlife of the person whose name she now bears. This is why it is so important to have children. A childless person is an oddity and in the case of death peculiar rituals will be done to ensure that his spirit is not inherited. A childless marriage is no use to anyone and the relatives will exert pressure to dissolve the marriage. All these expectations make for difficult teaching in areas of fidelity and faithfulness in marriage.

We can also speak of a third way of conceiving of the afterlife, which involves the naming of children. Names of the newborn are sometimes discerned through dreams and visions or divination. Such names will invariably belong to some ancestor whose spirit is seen to want to continue its existence in the material world through a newborn child.

These then are the three ways of conceiving of the afterlife, primarily in terms of the living dead or through inheritance but also by the giving of ancestral names to newborn children. Such an afterlife is bound firmly to this present earth, and existence in the afterlife is conceived of in terms of an earthly body. We might call this 'existence by proxy'. In more general terms we see the afterlife in a corporate disembodied spiritual existence as the living dead, a hope very different from the Christian hope.

The glory of the Christian message is seen not only in the resurrection of the new incorruptible body, but also in existence in the very presence of God eternally, without

any fear of death (1 Corinthians 15:51-57). The preachers in the churches must take these values and look at them in the light of Scripture in order to be relevant to the African constituencies they serve. The repeating of evangelical platitudes originally conceived in other cultures will thus not serve the African church.

### ***African concept of time***

The sixth core value is the African *concept of time*. According to Mbiti (1969:17), African time has two basic dimensions, the present and the past. The future is really only important in that it will become the present and later on the past. Time moves 'backwards rather than forward'. Time does not exist in a vacuum as something with independent value. Human beings create time to be used as and when it is needed. We are masters of time, not slaves to it (except in the limited sense of having to act quickly in the case of an emergency). African calendars, if they do exist, are phenomenological, filled with events and people, not a linear succession of measures of time leading to the future. It is the events and the people who define time.

The names of the months are instructive in this regard. In Bemba the names of the months correspond either to the dominant distinguishing human activity during that period or to the most prominent natural phenomenon during that lunar cycle. So November (*Mupundu milimo*) is not only the month when the mupundu fruit ripens but is also the busiest month in terms of preparing the fields for planting. June, one of the coldest months, is called *Cikangulu pepo* (the greater cold).

The Bible views time as something God created (Genesis 1:3 -2:2). It belongs to him and through time he expresses his purposes and will. Time is not just the Greek idea *chronos* (a linear succession of events); it is also *kairos* (the appointed time), especially God's appointed time. God controls, interprets and terminates time (Nyirongo 1997:94). The African view emphasizes our mastery and control of time, while Westerners view time as an independent commodity by which we are controlled. Both need to understand that without God our understanding of time lacks an important dimension. We are accountable to God in our use of time.

### ***The good image syndrome***

The seventh core value is *social definitions of truth*, what I called above the *good image syndrome*.<sup>3</sup> Western philosophy since the Enlightenment has generally conceptualized truth in absolute terms but divorced from any metaphysical ideas or notions. This conception of truth has drawn a sharp distinction between facts and values. Facts are objectively true, while values are a matter for personal opinion. Bosch summarizes the debate in the following words:

Over against facts there are values, based not on knowledge but on opinion, on belief. Facts cannot be disputed; values on the other hand are a matter of preference and choice. Religion was assigned to this realm of values since it rested on subjective notions and could not be proved correct. It was relegated to the private world of opinion and divorced from the public world of facts (Bosch 1993:266).

Science assumes enormous prestige in this privileging of its form of knowledge over biblical revelation. Scientific truth has its basis in observation but observation has its limitations. A chicken observing the farmer putting down food in its feeding trough assumes, on the basis of observation, that the farmer puts down the food in order to feed it. This is true but it is not the whole truth. The chicken has no way of knowing the financial and economic strategies behind the farmer's actions! But in general it is observation that gives the Western concept of truth the quality of timelessness or contextual autonomy. As a consequence Western culture has basically rejected the metaphysical world as true because such notions and concepts are not verifiable. Their 'truth' must be virtual rather than absolute. In line with this, a statement is deemed to be true if there is a verifiable corresponding fact or reality behind it. It is fake if no such corresponding fact or reality exists. This conceptualization of truth puts Western attitudes in sharp contrast to those of other cultures like that of the Bemba.

For most if not all African cultures, 'Criteria of truth and value are socially, not internally, generated and applied; responsibility is communal, not conscientious, and public shame, not guilty self, is the penalty for moral contravention' (Maxwell 1983:24). When the need to tell the 'truth' conflicts with a greater value (i.e. the demand to protect one's 'good image' or defend a close relative) it is appropriate to tell lies. However, although everyone acknowledges the lies as lies, the person who told them to protect his kin or his 'good image' will generally be upheld in the community as truthful. This often brings much biblical teaching into conflict with culture.

### **Conclusion**

We could add to this list still more significant core values such as concepts of seniority and authority, guilt and shame, and so on. All these values are to be found in the spiritual core of one's life, the deep or foundational culture, and they form the integrating principle of life. They fundamentally affect how we view the world and how we understand ourselves, our human nature, the human condition. They also affect how we perceive and practise Christianity for better or for worse.

Around such a core of values any culture builds its essential expressive or surface institutions such as marriage and family, work, play, relationships, methods of healing, even the church; these are the human creations that appear as

the culture of any given people. The question is, how does the core affect the institutions any cultural group sets up? For the African situation, because the core of values, which are spiritual in orientation, are in effect an integrating principle of life, and because there is no secular-sacred divide in public and private conception of life, the core values affect every one of the essential cultural institutions.

So, with respect to understanding human realities, as seen above, treatment of any illness is both a physical and a spiritual exercise. Unlike medical science, African systems of healing treat illnesses in a social context in which the spiritual element plays an integral part. Similarly priority of relatives encourages nepotism in public office and at the same time makes it difficult for marriages to attain the ideal spelt out in Genesis 2:24-25, where a man and woman must leave their respective parents, physically mentally, emotionally and spiritually in order to be united in an indissoluble union. The desire for children often means a person's worth is judged by his or her ability to bear children, so childless men and women are the object of great community derision. Childless couples come under intolerable pressure to break up.

What then is the effect of these core values on the institutions of the church? Ideally at conversion one would hope that it is the core values that are 'converted' and replaced by biblical values, derived from the Bible and enshrined in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Because the core values are already both spiritual in orientation and an integrating principle in life, it is often stated that therefore when an African gets converted the core values are somehow transformed to reflect new allegiances and immediately, following established patterns, become the new integrating principle of life in its totality. The unavoidable inference is that the African church should therefore reflect biblical values through and through.

This is obviously too simplistic a formula. Processes of conversion are truly complex and when they occur they do so for a variety of reasons quite apart from the straightforward desire to follow another religion. Aguilar says, 'African processes of conversion are fluid, and they also include processes of reconversion to religious practices socially present in the eras preceding the world religions' (Aguilar 1995:526). Fear, opportunities for commercial and political advancement, desire to create cohesion around a tribal identity, economic survival, all can play significant parts in the decision made especially by groups of people to convert from traditional beliefs to a world religion. Since core values change very slowly at the presuppositional philosophical level (Jacobs 1979:181), it takes a long time before 'true' religion of the heart corresponds with what takes place at the expressive or surface level culture. In the intervening period we can expect to see a kind of localization of the new religion as expressive cultural forms superficially change to correspond to the new-found faith.

This is the case in much of Africa, where Christianity appears as a veneer

thoroughly affected by the original African core values. 'The Christian spiritual import, with its aim at bringing men to their ultimate goal in heaven may be a mere overcoat over traditional deep seated beliefs and customs leaving them undisturbed' (Oger 1991:231). This I believe is the reason why so often the church in Africa has been compared to a river two miles wide but a mere two inches deep! This is an admission of the failure of African Christianity to root into the foundational or deep cultural level of the host cultures on the African continent. Instead it has adopted surface cultural changes, such as singing Christian hymns (for a long time these could only be Christian if they were in the traditional Western linguistic forms and idiom), meeting on Sundays, reading the Bible, adopting 'Christian' names, forms of dress, taking communion, undergoing baptism and so on.

I am suggesting that it is only by such attempts to take more fully into account African traditional perspectives on the human condition that Christianity in Africa will be able to live out a truly effective and enriching demonstration of biblical values within our African setting.

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### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Joe M Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 2005) 34-45.
- <sup>2</sup> A book entitled *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, written by G. M. Setiloane (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1976), is an ethnological study of the Sotho/Tswana-speaking people of Botswana with a view to encouraging the judicial acceptance of the cultures so described as fit vessels for the communication of the gospel.
- <sup>3</sup> This material is based on a discussion in an MA dissertation I submitted to the University of London for the degree of MA in Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1996. A fuller discussion exists there but here I summarize the essentials.

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# SACRED AND SECULAR CURRENTS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Gregg A. Okesson

In 1965 Harvey Cox wrote *Secular City*, which chronicled the increasing secularisation of society and the need for talking about God in distinctly non-spiritual ways. Over the years, Cox slowly began to change his views on this subject, culminating in one of his most recent books, *Fire from Heaven*, where he explores the rise of global forms of Pentecostalism. In the Introduction to this book he says, 'We are definitely in a period of renewed religious vitality, another "great awakening" if you will, with all the promise and peril religious revivals always bring with them, but this time on a world scale'.<sup>1</sup> This 'turn about' in Cox's writings is representative of many contemporary religious thinkers, especially in light of the rise of new religious movements (often linked formally or informally with Pentecostalism). Hence, the secularisation thesis, vigorously argued and defended over the past thirty years, is being contested and reshaped by resurgent forms of global religiosity.

The situation in contemporary Africa provides colourful illustration of this reality. In 2006 I attended a conference at Cambridge University where historians from around the world met to discuss 'Ethnohistory and the shaping of Identity in Africa'. Almost all presenters delivered papers that chronicled the impact of Christianity in the formation of modern, African societies, until one young American scholar spoke on some topic related to Zimbabwe. At the end of his presentation, there was a time for questions. One older historian stood, cleared his throat, and asked this young man how he could expound this topic

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Gregg A. Okesson is currently the Deputy Principal for Academic Affairs at Scott Theological College, having lived in Africa with his family since 1998. Gregg has two MA's from Wheaton Graduate School and is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Leeds, UK. His academic interests focus on power and modernity as they relate to theological anthropology.

<sup>1</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1997), p. xvi.

without once mentioning Christianity and its subsequent impact on the development of Zimbabwean society. The man was clearly embarrassed and apologised for this oversight, admitting that no study would be plausible if it did not acknowledge these factors.

The 'sacred' or spiritual presents one of the predominant ways many Africans think about and/or shape their world. Traditional religion(s) were often oriented around the divine, or sacred, and permeated all facets of life. They focused on how the spiritual affects such 'mundane' realities as agricultural cycles, birth, death, and developments within the community. With the coming of Christianity, the sacred developed new expressions, sometimes mirroring the enlightenment influences from European and Western culture, and other times blending with traditional religion(s) to cultivate new autochthonous representations. Usually, however, there was an intermingling of the two, where Africans critically adopted, re-interpreted, and created new formations of the sacred in modern societies. One noteworthy example would be the impressive rise of African Pentecostalism on the continent, articulated by Ogbu Kalu as the 'Third Response' of Africans to Christianity, after Ethiopianism and Zionism.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars are estimating by the year 2025 there will be over 600 million Christians in Africa,<sup>3</sup> significantly contributing to the shift in the statistical and cultural shape of world Christianity from the North to the South.

Yet, we should be careful about not reading a Western, sacred-secular dichotomy into the religious landscape of Africa, by limiting this influence only to overtly spiritual forms within Christianity. Africa's encounter with the enlightenment was often indirect, mediated by the trader, colonist or missionary,<sup>4</sup> and therefore subject to critical appraisal and/or re-expression. One of the greatest heritages that many African cultures possess (I believe) is the creative and imaginative way(s) that they deal with the sacred and secular. Some scholars, such as Ellis and Ter Haar, argue that no study of modern African politics is tenable without understanding the religious dimension. The general thesis of their book, *Worlds of Power*, explains, 'We contend that it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960-1996*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 104ff.

<sup>3</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), p. 16.

that religious ideas provide them with the means of becoming social and political actors'.<sup>5</sup> If this is true, and certainly it is compatible with earlier traditional religious beliefs, then African theologians must take very seriously the confluence of the spiritual and secular. More specifically, the general premise of this study argues that the curriculum of African theological institutions should reflect a creative and flexible relationship between these elements in the formation of ministerial leadership for today's Africa.

### Understanding the Terms

Before I proceed to develop this thesis, I must outline some general parameters for understanding these terms. As stated above, I am hesitant to provide Western, post-enlightenment definitions to the sacred and secular, yet acknowledging that these concepts have relevance for the discussion in a global and 'modernised' world. The word 'secular' comes from the Latin, *saeculum*, indicating 'race' or 'generation' but also relates to the French word, *siecle*, which means 'age' or 'century'.<sup>6</sup> It came to its contemporary usage through the identification of 'secular' land as distinguished from 'regular' monastic properties. This concept was especially prominent from the confessional wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and resulted in growing scepticism with ecclesiastic authority.<sup>7</sup> This mistrust of the Church corresponded to a narrowing of the 'sacred' (and/or spiritual) sphere of influence; while, at the same time, the enlightenment brought great confidence in the possibilities of the 'secular': most evident with the rise of positivism and empiricism. The scientific method provided achievements that further widened the (perceived) gulf between sacred and the secular, often placing people's trust in the latter. In the words of David Bosch, 'With the "supernatural" sanctions (God, church and royalty) gone, people now began to look to the subhuman level of existence, to animals, plants, and objects, to find authentication and validation for life. Humanity derived its existence and validity from "below" and no longer from "above"'.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Fox, 'Secularization', In John R. Hinnels (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 291-305: p. 292; Charles Chikezie Agu, *Secularization in Igboland*, Studies in the Intercultural Study of Christianity, No. 50 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> See Wolfhart Panneneberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World*, (London: SCM Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 263.

confidence in science, corresponding to a narrowing of the religious domain, has led to what is commonly called Western 'secularism', which is an ideology where God, religion, or the sacred is removed or trivialised within the public arena. Yet this is not the only manifestation of the 'secular'. For the purposes here, secular will refer to material or physical realities: whether nature, humanity, or related disciplines (purposely avoiding Western, value-laden concepts such as 'secularism' or 'secularisation' which may or may not be of relevance for African modernity). Therefore, this article suggests a variety of forms of secularism that may exist in different contexts.

The sacred likewise often derives its contemporary, Western colourings as the antithesis of the 'secular'. However, some such as Mircea Eliade have found it a subject of intense scholarly interest. Eliade investigated religions from around the world through the lenses of what he calls *hierophany*, the manifestation of the sacred. His largely phenomenological approach to the sacred has focused on the *numen*, or, feelings of religious awe that can be located in particular areas in the world.<sup>9</sup> John Oman similarly defines it from its supreme value or absolute worth as compared with the 'common'.<sup>10</sup> In either case, religion, most people believe, is the domain of the sacred and where the *numen*, or supreme value, orients the rest of life. However, ecclesiastical abuses have often contributed to a value-negative perception of the sacred, as something very powerful but susceptible to distortion. Evangelicals have often reacted against the elevation of the secular (arising out of the enlightenment) and sought to represent the sacred (or, more commonly, the 'supernatural') as the substance of 'real' life. For them, the secular reveals only the temporal, while the sacred points towards the eternal. Hence, the dichotomy between these concepts continues (Ironically, Western evangelicalism has often, unknowingly, become agents of secularisation through perpetuating a supernatural-natural dichotomy).

These concepts are further complicated by the ways scholars of religion have dealt with them. At times, Western 'secularism' becomes an ideology that is opposed to the sacred; at other times it represents personal and human morality. Likewise, secularisation may indicate the gradual withdrawal of religion from influencing society; or, it may even reveal a stream of influence evident from within Christianity. There is no consensus regarding these terms,

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<sup>9</sup> Veikko Anttonen, 'Sacred', In Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 271-282: p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> John Oman, *The Natural and the Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 59, 65.

except that they are to be differentiated from one another, and often, I might add, to the detriment of each.

Therefore, in order to avoid this confusion, I will be speaking about 'currents' in the sacred and secular, and consciously avoiding such value-laden terms as Western 'secularisation' or 'secularism'. My use of 'sacred' will be sufficiently general in order to designate an association with the divine – often represented through theology or religion – but not autonomous as if with its separate sphere of influence. Likewise, as stated above, 'secular' will refer to physical or material realities. African culture(s) usually refuse to accept any dichotomy between the sacred and secular, and this article acknowledges the same, yet seeking to be cautious not to blur them together. Therefore, as I will argue, there is still legitimacy in talking about them, but in imagery that refuses any dichotomy. Hence, for the purposes of this paper I will talk about 'currents' of the sacred and secular.

In any given stream there may be multiple currents, some pushing, others pulling; at moments they may act together, and at other times they are to be distinguished and contrasted, seemingly moving against each other. Yet the stream always moves in one direction. The currents are integral to the water, and contribute to its particular identity. This imagery attempts to overcome the impasse created by post-enlightenment perceptions of the sacred and secular. It allows for healthy distinctions between the terms but without the historic antagonism they often elicit.

### **Theological Education: the Modern Predicament**

The context for this study is the contemporary predicament of theological education in Africa, and in particular, within Kenya. Among the private universities currently chartered by the Kenyan government, 6 of 7 arose from the work of mission churches or Christian organisations and incorporate some aspect of theology in their curriculum. Of the seven, only one is a predominantly theological institution – Scott Theological College – and many people question whether the Kenyan Commission for Higher Education (CHE) will ever grant a charter to another predominantly theological institution. Because of this, and/or for other reasons, several other theological institutions are significantly diversifying their curriculum and following the Christian 'Liberal Arts' model, common within American higher education. This movement towards non-theological disciplines, in fact, has been building for a long time, and a brief historical excursus may demonstrate this.

One of the oldest missions organisations in Kenya is the Africa Inland Mission (AIM), which founded the Africa Inland Church (AIC). When AIM first came into Kenya, it viewed education as one of the primary means for evangelisation. Most western missionaries served as teachers, and by 1920, AIM had over 1500 students enrolled in its various schools throughout the region.<sup>11</sup> Yet, what had initially been the strength of the mission would soon become problematic as Kenyans' appetite for education grew disproportionate to the commitment of the AIM to develop and sustain quality programmes of learning. A 'thirst for education' had been unleashed.<sup>12</sup>

In subsequent years, the AIM saw itself at odds with many of the educational developments within the region. Initially, the colonial government came alongside the mission societies in order to assist them in the educational work. Yet, the AIM received this with suspicion. Would government assistance affect the AIM's commitment to 'faith giving' and therefore not soliciting funds for its operations? Furthermore, would the focus on education detract from the 'real deep work of God'<sup>13</sup> (evangelism); especially as the government increased its standards for all educational institutions?<sup>14</sup> Finally, over time, as learning continued in many other mission organisations and new programmes were developed that expanded beyond the theological curriculum, the AIM was fearful of the secularisation of such learning.<sup>15</sup> The root of this fear arose from within the Church as well as from the 'secular' authorities. In 1948, the elders of the Mbooni Station (in *Ukambani*) penned a letter to the President of the AIM expressing concern for their relationship, asking for financial support of educational programmes, and entreating the AIM for higher education. They wrote: 'They [the AIM] also should aim in giving our people higher education, without mixing Education with preaching business, simply because if there is no Education nothing of importance can be done, as blind man cannot lead another blind man'.<sup>16</sup> The plea for learning 'without mixing education with preaching business' should not be interpreted as a call for Western secularism

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<sup>11</sup> John A. Gration, *The Relationship of the Africa Inland Mission and its National Church in Kenya Between 1895 and 1971*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1974, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Ward, 'Africa', In Adrian Hastings (ed.) *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), pp. 192-237: p. 219.

<sup>16</sup> Gration, *The Relationship*, Appendix C, pp. 387-389: p. 388.

(although the AIM might have interpreted it as such), but instead as a commitment for quality education inclusive of the various disciplines: where 'sacred' and 'secular' are fully integrated.

Almost sixty years later, it should come as no surprise that quality and multi-disciplinary education remains a predominant feature within Kenyan society. This is particularly the case for technology and the 'hard' sciences, as the government attempts to face food, health, security, and communication challenges within its region of the world. Furthermore, many foundations and NGO's privilege monies to the sciences and technology. What does this mean for theological institutions? For one, physical realities are of great importance and need active engagement by theology. Yet this can take many forms, and such institutions must choose a model for the integration of theology with the 'secular' disciplines. They may follow the trend toward Christian liberal arts education; retreat into a 'spiritual' and protectionistic posture, separating theology from the other disciplines; or, create new paradigms for the relationship of the sacred with the secular. Furthermore, if they are to embrace this third alternative (which is clearly in the interest of the author) then such institutions need to look for resources not often found within corresponding Western institutions, which often linger with a post-enlightenment hangover. This is not to argue that we should abandon the Western liberal arts model, but to argue that African theological universities should draw upon resources found within their cultures to create alternative models.

### **African and Non-Western Currents of the Sacred and Secular**

The next section of this paper will draw upon thoughts of African and non-Western scholars in order to construct some general parameters for the relationship between the sacred and secular. These are not to be taken as exhaustive on the subject, but as an entrance into creative integration of the sacred with the secular – as complementary currents flowing in the same direction.

#### ***Harold Turner and 'Mediated Immediacy'***

Harold Turner, one of the foremost experts in 'primal' or new religious movements in Africa, has undertaken some imaginative steps toward defining the relationship between the sacred and secular. His article, 'A Model for the

Structure of Religion in Relation to the Secular'<sup>17</sup> seeks to explore some of these by using his research into 'primal' religions. He begins by 'tipping his hand' and sharing some presuppositions that he brings to the discussion, foremost among them that a human exists (ontologically) 'through the totality of his relations with the universe around him, in its sacred and secular aspects'.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, that the divine 'is mediated to man by and through his "world" or situation and in no other way'.<sup>19</sup> These two points illustrate Turner's highly dynamic relationship between the 'sacred' and secular', where the latter serves as the direct means for knowing and experiencing the former.

Turner proceeds to explain several different models for the relationship between these elements, discounting both 'secularism', where the sacred and secular are divided into separate spheres; while also opposing pantheism, where the supernatural absorbs the world, blurring all distinctions. He speaks in terms of a 'spatial model', where the various elements are envisaged as spheres and illustrated through circles, accompanied by arrows to show interrelationships. However, this may also be one of Turner's weaknesses, as the dynamic elements between the sacred and secular may resist such spatial conceptualisations. This might be where the illustration of 'currents' may be more effective than structural diagrams, as they can actively move into each other, through the other, and yet remain relatively distinct in their force.

His model, as explained earlier, wants to include the entirety of the world (human relationships, the physical world, interactions with self, and the divine) and he proceeds to explain various kinds of interrelationships between these, demonstrating the deficiencies of each. This brings Turner to his model of 'mediated immediacy'. He says, 'Each of the three basic relationships (nature, others and self) is in fact always interconnected with the other two kinds and mediated through them, so that the growth of knowledge and experience in any one sector always depends on a concomitant development in the other two'.<sup>20</sup> Hence, religion involves a multi-faceted array of interrelationships. These 'secular' subjects provide the immediate means for humans to interact with the divine: to know and serve Him.

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<sup>17</sup> Harold W. Turner, 'A Model for the Structure of Religion in Relation to the Secular', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 27 (1979), pp: 42-64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 50.



True religion does not issue from the rejection of the secular for the sacred, nor by the substitution of an alternative and higher more spiritual way, the direct route of the model. Nor does it emerge from the unbeliever's absorption of the sacred into the secular, but rather from the continuing distinction between the two so that there may be mutual interaction in everchanging ways and with certain tension that is resolved from moment by moment by the act of faith.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, for Turner, the distinctions are necessary as they serve the means for explaining the other – especially as the secular reveals the sacred. This elevates the secular to a noble and spiritual purpose and prevents humans from interacting directly with the divine, by passing the world, and so sacralising themselves. It likewise provides the means for critiquing all other religions, which he does with all the biases of his own presuppositions. Working through the secular, in this manner, provides the locus for the enacting faith in the world.

Turner's model helps to understand many of the African traditions, where the physical world and ritualistic devices provided the conduit to the world of spirits.

The concept of 'mediated immediacy' plays with words in such a way to illustrate 'togetherness', yet without blurring distinctions between the sacred and secular. He does the same with transcendence and immanence, trying to achieve a balance between them, but only eliciting further questions by the reader. Furthermore, by utilising the secular as the means to the sacred, the former is elevated in status without being idolatrised or confused with the divine. This 'de-sacralisation' provides a needed balance to tendencies within African religions to divinise the spiritual leader as the one in greatest proximity with God and who has *direct* contact with the divine. However, Turner's model contains elements that may lead to greater confusion. For example, while he adamantly defends the thesis that the secular acts as the direct mediator for the divine, he is less sure of the opposite hypothesis, where the sacred mediates the secular. To his defence, he does hint in this direction,<sup>22</sup> but his reluctance to admit this correlation may reveal certain biases, questioning the holistic nature of the model. Furthermore, he fails to provide adequate safeguards to protect the secular from certain abuses with its association with the divine. If his model protects humans from sacralisation, does it do the same to other physical

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 57-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

realities? In other words, if the world mediates the divine, can the world become divinised (even if in a secular manner) through this process? Such examples might be the 'Prosperity Gospel', materialism, or even the scientific method. If the physical world acts as the predominant conduit for the expression of the divine, what safeguards the secular from such distortions of proximity and purpose? This demonstrates the need for carefully expounding the dynamics between the two, being careful to provide ethical parameters for the interrelationship. Notwithstanding these concerns, Turner's model provides a very interesting articulation of the dynamic relationship(s) between the secular and sacred, and one founded upon African traditions.

### *Secularism in Africa*

Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha's book provides a sociological/theological critique of the modern urban predicament, and therefore, another way of looking at these issues. While Turner appeals to the primal religions for direction, Shorter and Onyancha attempt to guide urban Christians through the crisis that they believe is modern, Western secularism. As such, they begin with Western-laden definitions, opting to focus upon secularism according to its associations with secularisation: 'the situation in which the secular is observed to dominate or even replace the sacred'.<sup>23</sup> Their book moves quickly from definitions to phenomenology, where they focus on urbanisation, unbelief, consumer materialism, and its effect upon various aspects of culture.

Yet, before they move toward the general purpose of their study – to critique Western forms of secularism and their impact on urban culture and religiosity -- they posit another kind of secularism which may bear more similarities with African traditional religions. Utilising the work of Mary Douglas, they briefly discuss secularism as a 'cosmic religion' where nature functions as the mediation with the sacred. This is important, they argue, because it may provide the Church a means towards evangelising those who become disheartened by Western secularism, and who lapse back into various forms of 'cosmic religion'. Unfortunately, this was casually mentioned, but never fully developed.

The remainder of their book is an interesting treatment of Western secularism as it arises within African, urban culture. It is filled with many

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<sup>23</sup> Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: a case study: Nairobi city* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), p. 14.

captivating stories and images of contemporary relevance. One of its strengths comes as a general sociological study of the various elements of urban culture, and anyone familiar with Nairobi will recognise the portrayal of youth and/or *matatu* culture. Furthermore, the last chapter presents their strategy for the 're-evangelisation' of people in a mostly secularised climate, where they denounce militant forms of evangelisation and promote human participation and social transformation of urban culture. Their ideas are constructive and provide a needed balance to many contemporary conceptualisations of evangelism where spiritual power functions as force, rather than authority.

While the book provides a helpful contribution to the discussion of secularism in modern Africa, it also has notable shortcomings. Foremost among them is the reductionism of secularism to consumer materialism. While this certainly is a form of modern, Western societies, and a distorted one at that, nevertheless it remains just one feature of Western secularism. Furthermore, the authors failed to connect traditional African emphases upon the material (communicated earlier as 'cosmic religion') to the corresponding rise of consumer materialism in modern Africa. This would have enabled them to identify *unique forms* of secularism within the African context – a missing element in their discussion. This is to argue that African communities are not idle or passive in their receptivity to global, cultural flows, but 'answer back'<sup>24</sup> and interpret such things with their own meanings. In other words, we cannot provide a direct correlation between Western secularism (as identified in the West) with the same in the modern African context. The similarities are, in fact, great, but a direct correlation discounts any unique African contribution and may appear as a subtle form of imperialism.

Finally, and central to this paper, the authors attempt to articulate the dynamic relationship between the sacred and secular. They say,

Sacred and secular represent two different ways of seeing and experiencing the same reality. They are, as it were, two different levels or planes, which, in themselves, are not in competition or conflict. At the sacred level, reality is experienced as being under the governance of God.... The secular, on the other hand, is the same reality construed as being accessible to humanity and under its control.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bodil Folke Frederiksen, 'Popular Culture, Gender Relations and the Democratization of Everyday Life in Kenya', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26:2 (June 2000), pp. 209-222: p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> Shorter and Onyancha, *Secularism*, p. 13.

Yet, the above definition struggles to communicate interdependency. If, as they say, the two elements are the same, yet on *two different levels or planes*, they do not touch each other, and their agreement is based upon avoidance rather than active integration. This is clearly not the intent of the authors, but they devote most of their time to discounting insidious forms of Western materialism, rather than actively promoting the kind of integration implied by holding these elements together. In their last chapter, they do hint in this direction, by relating the 'new evangelism' with social action and the need for 'more human and participatory',<sup>26</sup> emphasis as the Church engages with the modern context. This, I believe, provides us a step toward reconciling the sacred and secular, and the most important contribution of this book.

***Vinoth Ramachandra:***

Finally, I will borrow some insights from outside Africa, but with a kindred perspective of looking at such issues from the non-Western world. Ramachandra is a Western-educated Sri Lankan who has been very influential in engaging various forms of Western modernity from an evangelical perspective. His article 'Learning from Modern European Secularism' provides a balanced treatment of Western secularism, with particular application to the Church in the majority world.

In this article, Ramachandra begins by identifying many of the Western elements of modern, secular societies (de-sacralisation, scientific rationalism, differentiation of state, economy, and civil society) and notes that they are rapidly becoming contemporary features of non-Western societies.<sup>27</sup> He takes the reader back to the historic conception of these modern elements, which, he proposes, arose from within Christianity. Although Ramachandra is not the first to demonstrate how such values as equality, freedom and human rights came out of Christendom (re-shaped later by the enlightenment and modernity), he brings a unique contribution by articulating their importance for non-Western societies. He proceeds with numerous examples of positive influences coming from Western missions to Indian and African contexts: ranging from translation work to medical developments. These and their European values brought such 'secularising' tendencies to such societies, enabling them to place high commitments upon education, build appreciation for local cultures, emphasise

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, 'Learning from Modern European Secularism: A View from the Third World Church', *European Journal of Theology* 12:1 (2003), pp. 35-49: p. 36.

the scientific method, and give greater accountability to political leaders. Hence, while 'secularism' is often associated with the enlightenment, the author wants to demonstrate that it had earlier origins within Christianity.

These examples lead Ramachandra to oppose any false dichotomies; instead, he argues that the antithesis of secular is the eternal, demonstrating that in the present age the sacred and secular belong together. Christianity is committed to the 'secular' because of creation and the incarnation, and 'called to anticipate God's reign in the ordering of human life'.<sup>28</sup> With these thoughts, he proceeds to provide a balanced assessment of modernity, arising from its Christian heritage, and explore how the lessons might assist majority world peoples with their encounter with modernity. He asks, 'If, indeed, modernity is the prodigal son of the Christian narrative, then what would the return of the prodigal – the 'recapitulation' (apokata-lessein, Eph 1:10) of modern society in Christ – involve?'.<sup>29</sup> The remainder of the essay is a theological treatment of 'secularism', calling Christians in the non-Western world to learn from these historical lessons as they encounter unique associations between the sacred and secular in modern societies.

Bonhoeffer provides the primary avenue for exploring these concepts as he articulates a 'worldly' Gospel in a distinctly secular world. God has been pushed to the edges of the universe, writes Bonhoeffer, and Christians too often accept that they must only speak about him in these margins. Instead, He must exist within the 'centre' of the world and humans should speak about Him in distinctly 'secular' and worldly ways. Instead of relativising God, Bonhoeffer's treatment opens the entire universe to Him, and places humanity in the midst of it all. In his 'Letters and Papers from Prison', he says,

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.<sup>30</sup>

These thoughts stand in contrast to frequent attempts to posit a 'sacred' domain where one is free to worship and believe without the pressures of secularity.

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<sup>28</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letter of 18 July 1944* (London: SCM Press, 1953) as cited in Ramachandra, 'Learning', pp. 40-41.

Instead, Bonhoeffer argues, it is precisely amidst the secular where true belief occurs.

This brings Ramachandra to the subject of the Image of God, where the 'secular' receives its ontological basis for dignity and human equality. Rather than sitting back and accepting these modern notions as something exclusively for 'secular' governments, Christianity must claim them for itself, as its rightful possession. Hence the author says, 'Injustice is a violation of God's own being'.<sup>31</sup> These thoughts re-orient theology in relationship with the other disciplines. Instead of being a separate academic specialty removed from the other academic subjects, theology needs to actively engage within the world, for the world. Ramachandra is less lucid regarding how this might appear. He does suggest that theologians need to 'help artists, economists, entrepreneurs, doctors and other professionals to think through in Christian perspective their "secular" callings'.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, he opposes treating non-Western societies as 'exotic', where African studies (for example) might involve dealing with separate and distinct issues from the global and 'modern' world. This has been the tendency of many contextual studies and often promoted by Western scholars fascinated by romantic images of the 'traditional'. Yet, if God exists in the 'centre' of the modern world, then theological engagement must deal with distinctly modern issues, such as the exploitation of the environment, consumer materialism, political corruption, technology, science, and other interactions with the 'secular'. He pictures a wide range of 'contextual secularisms',<sup>33</sup> each connected but distinct from what we see in the Western world.

The next step in Ramachandra's thinking -- though not developed in this article -- would be to suggest some imaginative ways where non-Western theology may assist the Western world in its engagement with the secular. Let me take this as my point of departure and proceed in that direction, yet with the intention of specifically applying the insights to theological education in Africa.

### **A New Model: Christ, Humanity and 'Mediated Immediacy' with the world**

The previous authors are dealing with what it means to 'be Christian' within the secular world. For Turner, primal religions teach us that there is no immediate encounter with God, but only through the world around us. Hence,

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<sup>31</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

the 'secular' becomes the sacrament of our worship. Shorter and Onyancha allude to the secularity of 'cosmic religion' in ways echoing Turner, but turn their attention against Western materialism and the ways that it distorts African cultures. They suggest that a return to traditional African spirituality with its emphasis on humanity and participation may provide a 'new evangelism' for people disheartened by Western secularism. Finally, Ramachandra suggests that the antecedents of Christianity's contribution to Western modernity may provide resources for Africans (and other non-Western theologians) to interact with various modernities. He sees the theological method as actively involved in these various 'securities' and essential to the 'recapitulation' of the modern world for Christ.

Before returning to the context of theological education in Africa, let me briefly suggest a different theological paradigm for the relationship between the sacred and secular. I will borrow from the various authors in articulating or framing this model, yet expounded through the incarnational theology of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

***Christ, 'reconciling all things to himself':***

In his letter to Colosse, Paul addresses a church beset by philosophical and ideological forces in their world that often privileged the spiritual. There was great confusion, one might say, between the sacred and secular, where a mixture of Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs distorted their understanding of Christ in the world. Ralph Martin summarises the situation as he hypothetically asks two questions which might have been in the minds of these first-century Christians: Firstly, 'Where is God's true presence to be found and how may mortal man gain access to that presence?'<sup>34</sup> This led some to worship of angels (2:18), and perhaps proto-gnostic ideas regarding 'elemental spirits of the universe' (2:8,20) as a means toward obtaining mediation with God. Secondly, Martin poses a related question: 'How may a person prepare himself for a vision of heavenly realities as part of his rite into the divine presence?'<sup>35</sup> This brought various Jewish philosophies regarding food and drink (2:16,21), as well as other regulations toward the ascetic treatment of the human body (2:23). These beliefs treated the secular with relative contempt in relation to heightened emphasis on the sacred. The material, in other words, often inhibited true

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<sup>34</sup> Ralph Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

spirituality; by treating the human body with disdain, one might gain greater audience with God, through the spirits.

Later in the same passage, Paul turns his attention against misconceptions of the secular and the reductionistic views that often correspond to the denigration of the physical body. These include, 'sexual immortality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry' (3:5). In other words, when Gnostic or ascetic views misrepresent the body, it often leads to the loss of values and morals which under gird the secular and give it meaning in the world; this results in greater licentiousness and a focus upon raw desires. Hence, as the church in Colosse elevated the sacred, they succumbed to sensuality and unfettered emotions that compromised their Christian integrity.

Paul's answer to the confusion was to present Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' (1:15) over the entire cosmos. He is the source and *telos* of creation (1:16-17), as well as the 'firstborn from the dead' (1:18). This places Christ before, after, and through all of creation, so that 'in everything He might have the supremacy' (1:18). Hence, the currents flow together in and through Christ as He unites the world to Himself, and Himself to the world, accomplishing the reconciliation of 'all things to Himself' (1:20).

As Paul continues the epistle, he expounds on this concept of 'reconciliation' by stressing the full humanity of Christ (1:22 and 2:9) and how His life (including, among others, the death, burial, resurrection and on-going supremacy) relate directly to the world. This was especially important in light of the philosophies that privileged the sacred over the secular. This 'fullness of the Deity' does not exist as some esoteric notion of spirituality where humans need to escape the physical in order to experience or relate with the divine. Instead, it is precisely in the secular that the sacred lives and whereby the world is reconciled to Christ. Furthermore, the concept of 'secular' is further clarified to the substance of humanity, implying an anthropocentrism within the world. However, unlike secular humanism, this is a Christocentric anthropocentrism, whereby Christ is connected to humans, and humans with the rest of the world.

### ***Humans, 'the fullness in Christ'***

This concept that I am calling 'Christological anthropocentrism' arises from 2:9-10, where Paul connects two statements: firstly, where he says 'For in Christ all the fullness of the divinity lives in bodily form', and secondly, where he declares, 'and you have been given fullness in Christ, the head over every power and authority'. The humanity of Christ relates the sacred to the secular by transforming humanity and repositioning it within the world. In Christ (ejn



Cristwv), humans represent the visible and instrumental Body of Christ on earth. Yet, Christ is the head of this anthropocentrism. The word 'head' (kefalh/) can indicate 'authority' or 'source'; or, in this case, there may be an intermingling of both meanings. By repeating the concept of authority through two words (kefalh and ejxousi/aB) Paul may be emphasising the supremacy that Christ has over all things. Alternatively, if he has in mind kefalh as 'source', this would make Jesus the genesis and *telos* of all authority and power, bringing the reader back to the earlier Christological passage in 1:15-20. Lightfoot takes this direction and speaks of Christ as the 'centre of vital force, the source of all energy and life'.<sup>36</sup> Later, Paul alludes to this meaning when he speaks of one who has 'lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow' (2:19). In either direction, or a combination of the two, the passage makes clear that Christ is the centre of the cosmos, and that believers enjoy this privileged identity from (and in) Him.

Christians 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4) by being the fullness of Christ in the world. Through circumcision (2:11), burial and resurrection with Christ (2:12) believers experience the entirety of Jesus' humanity in order to participate fully within the world. This is no supra-human or metaphysical orientation, but instead involves the renewal of humanity for the recapitulation of the world.

We participate in the full humanity of Jesus Christ as the source and growth of our own humanity, bringing together the sacred and secular in human communities (the body) as we interact with the world. This authenticates the secular as the locus of Christian faith, without privileging it, or distancing it, from the sacred. Furthermore, as humans grow in Christ and 'put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator' (3:10), the intimacy between the sacred and secular grows with greater congruence. Yet, concomitantly, humanity transcends the present world. Paul says, 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God' (3:1). This reminds us that the 'secular' enjoys a future that supersedes this present world and any attempts to

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<sup>36</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and Philemon: A Revised Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 183. This has interesting correlations with Tempels' concept of 'vital force' as foundational to humanity and the African cosmos; see Placides Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959).

crystallise the divine into a particular moment or human representation amounts to idolatry.

### ***Christ and 'mediated immediacy' with the world***

Finally, these thoughts suggest that believers interact with the world only through Christ. Paul very carefully outlines his teachings to counter the philosophies apparent within the church of Colosse. He likens them to a shadow, which give an indirect and distorted appearance of something, in contrast to 'the reality' that is 'found in Christ' (2:17).

The ensuing images of dying with Christ (2:20) and being 'raised with Christ' (3:1-2) communicate on-going participation with Him as the means for engaging within the world. This is no escapism, but provides significant powers (see 2:10 and vs. 15) for confidently living amidst the world.

I would suggest that we take Turner's concept of 'mediated immediacy' and reapply it to this Christological anthropocentrism. For Christians, the world is not experienced directly (or, unmediated), but only through the entire humanity of Jesus Christ. This is similar to the direction suggested by Shorter and Onyancha, where their 're-evangelism' would take Africans back to a human and participatory Christianity, in reaction to the de-humanising influences apparent within consumer materialism. Likewise, it reminds us of Ramachandra's call for the 'recapitulation' of the modern world for Christ. Irenaeus' work, *Against Heresies*, lies behind Ramachandra's assessment as the early church father sought a Christological foundation for encountering Gnosticism with its distortion of humanity and the world.

Since Christ is the creator, the *telos*, and the reconciler of the world who lives in bodily form, the Christian life has a very 'worldly' orientation. The secular, in this regard, becomes the locus of our faith and enjoys a privileged status by means of the humanity of Jesus Christ. This stands in marked contrast with the ideology of secularism where it is separated from the sacred. On the other hand, since our lives 'are hidden with Christ in God' (3:2) our humanities transcend this temporal world. This prevents the idolatrous notions associated with locating the sacred as a permanent feature within the secular. Hence, the sacred and secular are co-joined in Christ and therefore in us, but only as humans live the fullness of God in the world. Wolfhart Pannenburg says,

The difference between the spiritual and the secular is the expression of the eschatological awareness of the transitoriness of the world, in the face of which the church with its liturgical life conveys participation in the

ultimate reality of the kingdom of God, albeit in a merely symbolic, sacramental form.<sup>37</sup>

This enables believers to fully engage within the world as the creation of God, and to simultaneously await their final redemption in Christ. Everything passes through Jesus Christ (as evidenced in the Body of Christ) to authenticate human existence as we 'put to death' those aspects that distort humanity, and 'put on' those which lead to fuller expressions of real humanity. The source of human existence comes through connection with the 'Head' (2:19), and any other configuration leads to gross distortions of the world and/or humanity within the world. Or, as Ramachandra says elsewhere, 'Our humanity is not something that comes between us and God. On the contrary, it is precisely in our humanity that we are called to be bearers of the divine glory, the means by which God is made known'.<sup>38</sup> This Christological anthropocentrism posits a responsibility for humans within the world, to instil it with values and meaning that derive from 'fullness in Christ'.

To neglect this role, is to essentially marginalise Christ within the world; in effect, to say that Christ only relates to some separate (and contrived) 'sacred' sphere of influence, and to relegate the world to licentiousness that arises when the secular loses its moorings from the sacred. However, to interact directly with the world without the immediacy of Christ is to transfer sacred powers to the secular and hence idolatrise certain aspects of the physical world: whether science, materialism, or the human body. I would argue that the dichotomies arising from the enlightenment have led Christians in both directions: either to abdicate their responsibility within the world or to sacralise the temporal by the sacred powers of humanity. Furthermore, I would argue that Africans should greatly contribute to this discussion through their rich heritage of creatively and imaginatively holding together sacred and secular currents.

### **Currents in the Sacred and Secular for Theological Education in Africa: Way(s) Forward**

As we return to the context of theological education in modern Africa, we should note the formative currents of the sacred and secular that have shaped this continent. No history of democracy or the formation of African societies is plausible without discussing spiritual (and primarily, Christian) influences.

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<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg, *Christianity*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 252.p. 252.

Similarly, no study into African religiosity is tenable without exploring the 'secular' or material aspects of it. These currents have contributed to the rise of a formidable and multi-faceted African Church that is significantly reshaping global forms of Christianity.

A stream may move in one central direction, but possess multiple currents, shaping the way that it cuts through the land; furthermore, a larger body of water such as an ocean may contain innumerable currents, affecting the way the ocean moves, and providing transport for ships and animals. In either case, a body of water has intrinsic unity to itself despite the presence of these multiple flows: sometimes as they move into each other, as at the confluence of a stream; and other times as they act against each other, such as when the waves are breaking on the seashore. Nevertheless, the currents are integral to the shape and character of the water.

I would propose we view the sacred and secular in a similar way. Jesus Christ is neither exclusively sacred nor secular, but is both, and in unique ways. The Chalcedonian affirmation reminds us to hold in tension the distinct, but co-joined aspects of his Person, and the same ought to be true for the representation of Christ in the modern world. 'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (Col 2:9). He is the perfect confluence of the two currents and the place where they flow together with seamless fluidity. To receive Christ is to receive the world of Christ with a mandate to reconcile all things to him.

The rise of Christian 'Liberal Arts' education in Africa clearly represents secular currents upon the sacred, as if responding to something that has been neglected and needs a more viable representation. This constitutes one expression of their relationship and may be healthy so long as the pendulum does not swing too far to privilege the secular against the sacred; or, where the confluence of the sacred and secular amounts to 'baptising' Christian terms as a veneer over secular disciplines. This latter danger is especially prevalent when theology has been relegated to some distant corner of academia, and/or when Christian lecturers are ill-equipped by the Church to deal with the various currents in society. The effectiveness of Christian Liberal Arts Universities in African will be tested by their ability to integrate the sacred and secular together; and, in this regard, we should be cautious about following Western forms of it, where the integration may be less pronounced.

Another option would be for theological institutions to imaginatively construct new relationships between the sacred and secular. This would enable

them to maintain their 'mission' of existing specifically for training ministerial leadership, while exploring alternative ways for theology to impact society. Robin Gill presents three possible relationships for theology and the social sciences, whereby: (1) The sciences assists theology in understanding the context in which theology is being practiced; (2) the social context influences the shape of theological exploration; and finally (3) theology acts as an independent variable influencing social context.<sup>39</sup> Most theological institutions grudgingly, in one way or another, acquiesce to the first by including a smattering of non-theological disciplines into their curriculum. The historical context of missions in Africa provides some painful lessons of the second relationship, where missionary transmission carried Western culture along with the Gospel. Finally, Africa provides one of the strongest case studies for the importance of theology as an independent variable. As stated earlier, Christianity (including its theological affirmations) has dramatically impacted the development of politics, education, and other aspects of society in Africa.

The principle of 'Christological anthropocentrism' presents the case for the Body of Christ to intentionally live its theology within the centre (ala Bonhoeffer) of society. This means, among other things, that theological institutions must relate primarily with humanity, as they prepare men and women for guiding the Church into this kind of active engagement: the reconciliation of all things into Christ. Evangelicals must not fear the 'secular' forces within the world, since being united with Christ comes with its own authentic secular powers. Furthermore, the principle set forth in this essay of 'mediated immediacy' reminds believers that before they engage with the world, they first relate with Christ; and, thereafter, they only relate with the world through the body of Jesus Christ. This is no retreatism, but conveys a posture of the Church existing in the world for the world. Furthermore, if churches took this kind of active engagement seriously, they would better prepare Christian professionals for 'thinking [and living] Christianly' about their particular discipline or area of expertise. This guards against the tendency of 'baptising' secular concepts with a thin Christian coating as if uncritically stamping them with some kind of Christian legitimacy. This may do more harm than good; for, to 'Christianise' in this regard is rarely to affect the underlying values that give the secular any real meaning in the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Robin Gill, 'Sociology Assessing Theology' In Robin Gill (ed.) *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Chapman Publishers, 1987), pp. 145-160: pp. 147-8.

This essay argues for the creative and purposeful confluence of the sacred and secular within theological education in Africa. The integration should not be indicative of some grudging appeasement of a 'secular' accreditation body, but an active and intentional integration of Christ for the world. As those with 'fullness in Christ', we see Christ as the beginning, the *telos*, and the reconciliation of the world. What is more, we need to resist building little earthly kingdoms through our institutions, as if idolatrising the temporal. 'For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:3). These words remind us that all attempts to localise and reify the divine within earthly representations will ultimately fail.

Finally, and foundational to the thesis of this paper, what form(s) might theological institutions adopt for the confluence of the sacred and secular? Firstly, we should avoid separating general education courses from theological content. General courses such as history, social sciences, and languages need the moorings of theology and the values inculcated from the divine in order to situate them within the world. This is not to uncritically stamp them with some external validity, but to look for ways in which God's truth has already authenticated them within His world. Furthermore, theological studies should never be divorced from worldly realities, as if some isolated sacred sphere existed somewhere in human existence. *Each course being offered by the institution needs such integration*, rather than trying (awkwardly, at best) to pull together separate disciplines into a cohesive whole. The presence of various disciplines does not mean that integration ever occurs. An Institution may have an impressive array of various courses, covering a wide range of disciplines, but present them as isolated or compartmentalised units. If theological institutions are going to maintain any viability in modern Kenya, they must strive for active and intentional integration of sacred and secular (or, commonly stated: theology with other disciplines). This must be their contribution to higher education, and ultimately to society as a whole.

Furthermore, the curriculum must deal with issues of relevance within the modern world, not of some 'exotic' variety. As such, the question of relevance is often best answered by alumni and stakeholders within the institution and rarely by academicians. Such topics might include: a theology of money; Christ and reconciliation; Ethnicity; or, the Holy Spirit and human power. Furthermore, ecclesiology provides many opportunities for exploring the confluence of the sacred and secular, such as Church and politics, the Church and social transformation and/or a responsibility for the environment. These topics have often been overlooked by evangelicals, often suspicious of the 'secular' or liberal agenda. Similarly, while it is likely that Christian 'Liberal

Arts' may contribute to these discussions, their focus may be different than those of theological institution, which seeks to inculcate such visions for ministerial leaders.

Related to this, one should not underestimate the significance of sacred or pastoral powers in today's Africa. While other parts of the world have experienced a de-sacralisation of spiritual authority, Africa continues to demonstrate re-expressions of the sacralisation of power, especially evident within many Pentecostals and African Initiated Churches (AICs). In other words, spiritual authority has enormous influence on Church and society: this may arise from within the Church itself, or as political leaders strive for 'sacred' powers to elevate their own status and legitimacy. The dangers of sacralisation are well-documented, resulting in uncontested powers for the self-promotion of leaders at the expense of the followers.<sup>40</sup> But, we might ask, if there are other forms of sacralisation than this? Are there some 'sacralities' that might actually lead to the growth of the Body of Christ as it relates to the world? This, I have argued, may be apparent through the concept of Christocentric anthropocentrism. Irregardless, the purpose of this discussion is to highlight the prevalence of spiritual power in Africa and the subsequent need for active and intentional integration of the sacred and secular currents within theological education. In other words, this is to say that theological education will continue to play a prominent role in the development of modern African society, and institutions should not re-write their mission statements, or re-orient their curricula, as if responding to an apparition that looks like Western secularism. Spirituality or the sacred continues to exert significant influence in modern Africa and theology must responsively communicate this within broader 'secular' realities.

This brings us back to a suggestion by Ramachandra, where he proposes that we envisage a wide variety of 'contextual secularities'.<sup>41</sup> Related to this, we might broaden his statement by likewise asking if the same could be true for 'contextual sacralities' (albeit ones without privileging some humans at the expense of others in greater proximity to the divine)? We need the freedom to imaginatively explore such inter-relationships and what they might mean for education in modern Africa, without the default mechanism of copying other

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<sup>40</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Unmasking the Powers: Christianity, Authority, and Desacralization in Modern African Politics', In J. Wiffe (ed.) *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 207-229.

<sup>41</sup> Ramachandra, 'Learning', p. 46.

structures or 'cutting and pasting' from Western curriculum. Unfortunately, the financial pressure within African institutions often prevents this contemplative and imaginative endeavour, resulting in a rush to launch new programmes and make oneself more viable and marketable. Such pressures may not be avoided, and so institutions may need to commit themselves to a never-ending process of redefinition and self-critique, where the curricula remain 'open' and continually reformulated and re-expressed. In other words, integration must be a continual process where tension is embraced and maintained for the value of what each of the elements may contribute to the whole.

This essay does not posit one particular model, but a wide range of contextual secularities (sacralarities?) as the sacred and secular currents flow together for the constitution of the Body of Christ in the world. This is to argue that the relationship is highly dynamic and intensely theological. The Body of Christ should not be marginalised to some peripheral or exotic role within society, for we are the 'fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Eph 1:23). Therefore, when an institution declares within its mission statement that it exists for the Church, it says something impressive and with world-affirming implications. The currents rush together as a torrent of water cascades over the landscape. In Christ, and through the Church, they receive their mission: to irrigate a dry and arid land, desperately needing sustenance.

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# THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS: CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT FOR THE DEMOCRATISATION OF AFRICA

Benno van den Toren\*

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s we have witnessed in Africa a new interest in democratisation and new openings for its implementation. These openings are one of the most significant consequences for Africa of the ending of the Cold War. During the Cold War the main interest of the great powers was not in democratisation but about which ideological block the African countries supported. The superpowers would support their allies in governments or in the opposition, be they democratic or not. Now the international community tends to use its influence more to support movements of democratisation, even if this support remains very partial and still depends on political and economic interests.

This new interest in democratisation has provoked fresh reflection in the churches. It concurs with the central evangelical interest in liberty, and it is a natural consequence of the participation of Christians as responsible citizens in the developments in their nations. At the same time, it has many characteristics of a new fad, partly provoked by forces outside Africa. On the one hand, there is the economic pressure of the "Structural Adjustment Programs" of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and, on the other hand, the support

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\* Dr. Benno van den Toren studied theology in Utrecht, Oxford and Kampen. From 1996 until 2005 he taught systematic theology at the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST) in the Central African Republic. He is currently a lecturer in Christian Doctrine at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, UK, while continuing to teach as a visiting professor at BEST.

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by the worldwide ecumenical movement for the process of democratisation and the strengthening of civil society in Africa.

Among the African theologians related to the All Africa Conference of Churches, there has been significant theological reflection on this process of democratisation (e.g. Mugambi, 1997; Magesa & Nthamburi, 1999; Njoya, 2003), but the theological reflection in African evangelical circles on this issue has been very limited. What is most lacking is reflection on this question: how can we arrive at a serious theological evaluation of the relationship between democratisation and our Christian calling? This question may be asked, but not always with sufficient rigour. Too often we have already determined our sympathy or antipathy to this new fad on other grounds, and our theological reflection limits itself to a search for the biblical passages that support the position that we have already taken up in advance. Serious theological reflection does not demand that we try to forget the contemporary world and our interests in it, but it does require that we make a conscious effort to read the Bible on its own terms and try to understand the inner logic of revelation. It is this revelation that should determine our approach to political reality, rather than letting our political interests determine our reading of Scripture.

In our search for the will of God for our political involvement, we here concentrate particularly on the theme of "Jesus and politics". We ask ourselves what are the implications of the work and message of Jesus Christ—the cornerstone of God's revelation—for our political involvement. "Political involvement" itself is still a very large concept, for the political responsibility of God's people has varied a lot from one situation to another. In biblical times this political responsibility was very different when God's people were a nomadic clan, as under the patriarchs, from when they were an independent kingdom. It was different again when the people of Israel lived as a minority under great empires, be it Babylonian, Persian, or Roman (Wright, 1995). In the same way the political responsibility of Christians is different when they constitute a minority under a dictatorial anti-Christian state, compared to a situation where they can be represented in the government. Of course, we cannot here address all of those possible situations, and resulting answers would not always even make sense for our present circumstances. In this article we will limit ourselves to the situation in which the majority of the churches in sub-Saharan Africa find themselves nowadays. The question we need to ask is the following: *What do the message and work of Jesus Christ imply for the involvement of Christians in the young democracies of our continent?*

In this article, we will first of all deal with the hermeneutical questions that surround the theme of Jesus and politics. This will help avoid hasty answers that

sidestep the real questions we need to address. The next section treats the central question: What is, in fact, the political significance of Jesus? These considerations form the basis of the last section, in which we ask what this implies for Christian involvement in Africa's emerging democracies.

### **1. Hermeneutical Problems**

According to the Christian faith, it is Jesus Christ who most clearly reveals to us the goal and the will of God for our human existence. This revelation should therefore be our starting point for all of our reflection on the Christian life. Yet, if we try to derive the political implications for our life from the example and meaning of the life of Jesus, we will soon encounter a number of difficulties that make a right interpretation of its political meaning difficult. There are at least three hermeneutical difficulties related to these questions that we need to consider.

The first difficulty is that the different declarations of Jesus concerning the involvement of his disciples in civil governance and in politics seem to contradict each other. The consequence has been that Christians historically have been able to appeal to words of Jesus in order to defend political attitudes that are in outright contradiction to each other.

On the one hand, we find declarations that seem to propose a complete separation between the affairs of the state and those of the Kingdom of God, declarations like "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36)<sup>1</sup> and "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mk 12:17). Those who defend this separation often also appeal to those texts that seem to entirely oppose the desire for this world and the desire for the Kingdom of Heaven: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:19f). Such texts form the basis of much of the resignation of evangelicals towards politics. For me, these texts are one of the reasons to be interested in the theme "Jesus and politics": how should we understand this message, when the rest of the Bible proclaims the lordship of God over all of life, spiritual as well as social?

This interest in the socio-political side of our existence is, however, not foreign to Jesus himself. The same person who said that we should not collect treasures on earth had a radical message concerning the socio-political realities of his time. In his coming to earth, God revealed Himself as the One of whom it is said: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless otherwise indicated.

humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” (Lk 1:52f). Jesus said that the prophet Isaiah was talking about him, when he said in strongly political terms: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” (Lk 4:18f; cf. Isa 61:1f). We should moreover not forget that a good deal of the language Jesus used to describe his mission had its background in the socio-political domain. We perceive this in expressions like “Kingdom of God”, “Lord” and “Messiah”. The spiritualization of those terms in the history of the church and the history of theology makes us forget too easily that this terminology has its primary meaning in the socio-political realm.

The second hermeneutical difficulty has to do with the relationship between the work and message of Jesus Christ and the remainder of biblical revelation. We perceive this problem when we compare the ideas of John Howard Yoder with those of Richard Mouw. Yoder (1994) takes his starting point in the message of Jesus Christ, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Jesus' example of accepting the cross rather than resisting it. On this basis Yoder opts for pacifism and non-violence. His book raises the question about the relationship between these options and the rest of the Bible, with all the wars fought in the name of the God of Israel, and the language concerning the legitimate use of force by a government which is called the servant of God (Ro 13:4). Mouw (1976) rather takes his starting point in the rest of Scripture and asks about the place of civil government according to the will of God for His creation and about the function of such government in the world after the fall. In doing so he gives little attention to Christ. Here the question should be asked what Christ has in fact to teach us as the supreme revelation of God's plan with us. The question to ask here has to do with the role of Christ. Is his role entirely unique and special, because of his coming to reconcile us with God (Mouw, 1976, 112ff) or is Christ rather the model for all Christian involvement after him (Yoder, 1994, 105ff).

The third hermeneutical difficulty originates from the socio-political context of the life of Jesus Christ. Political life in the time of Jesus was radically different from the current situation, in which many Christians live in democratic states where their contribution to politics is not only permitted, but even solicited. How can the example of Jesus help us when he lived in a dictatorial empire and under a religious aristocracy?

These hermeneutical problems, together with the different political interests of those who wish to have Jesus on their side, form the basis for the fact that we

encounter extremely varying and even contradictory interpretations of his political significance. There are those who proclaim Jesus the revolutionary.<sup>2</sup> There is Yoder's Jesus the prophet of non-violence. There is the Jesus who is the teacher of a personal morality that goes well with the interests of a capitalist society. And there is the spiritualised Christ who proclaims the Kingdom of Heaven and a withdrawal from the world.

From the consideration of these hermeneutical problems we can draw a preliminary conclusion concerning the method to approach our question. We can conclude that the main problems will not be encountered on the level of exegesis, but rather on the level of hermeneutics. And the hermeneutical question is not in the first place how to interpret certain difficult passages, but is rather how to interpret the person, work and message of Christ in relationship to the whole of biblical revelation and as part of God's total plan for us. Our main questions are therefore not exegetical, and not even of the competence of biblical theology. Rather we will need to enter here into the field of systematic theology. In order to bridge the distance between the Scriptures and the contemporary world, the exegetes cannot do without the systematic theologians, and this article will concentrate on these questions of systematic theology.

## 2. Jesus and Politics

### *Jesus as socio-political fact*

Before we look more closely into the message of Jesus, we need to start by drawing attention to the simple fact that his activity was perceived as a factor in the socio-political field. The political and religious authorities of his time perceived him as a challenge to the *status quo*. The religious authorities, who considered themselves specialists in the interpretation of the law, the scribes and particularly those of the party of the Pharisees, saw him as a menace to their authority, for he criticised their interpretation of the law. The life of Jesus was a social reality that was ill viewed, for he invited people into his company whom the Pharisees wanted to exclude or to minimise, like women, pagans, Samaritans, prostitutes, and tax collectors (cf. France, 1989, 95ff).

The religious authorities who were in charge of the Temple, mostly of the party of the Sadducees, considered him a threat to their authority, because he minimised the importance of the Temple and criticised their management of Temple worship.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Bammel, 1984, and for a negative answer to the question whether Jesus was a revolutionary Richardson, 1973, 44-48.

Herod the Great felt threatened by Jesus when Jesus was still a baby, for he could not accept that anyone else should be called “king of the Jews”. A second Herod, his son, wondered if Jesus might be a resurrected John the Baptist whom he feared because of John’s criticism of his marriage. Pilate in turn feared the words of the Jewish leaders about Jesus, for he did not want people to reproach him that he had let go of a man who did not recognise the Roman emperor. The political challenge that Jesus represented was even clearer in his official charge, fixed to the cross, that said that he called himself “the king of the Jews”.

Even if we could try to interpret the message of Jesus Christ as an entirely a-political one, we need to recognise that the reality of his life placed him in the middle of the social and political tensions of his time, and that he played a role in those tensions, willingly or unwillingly.

Even setting aside his message, the socio-political impact of Jesus is also apparent in the fact that he formed a group of disciples. This group had the explicit purpose of being an alternative community that could replace an older community that did not function as it should. In the choice of twelve apostles, Jesus formed the kernel of a renewed Israel that should replace the old Israel of the twelve tribes. In the same line, the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the second Moses, who again on a mountain (Mt 5:1) gives a new law which should guide a new people that are called to influence an old society as “salt and light” among them (Mt 5:13-16).

Human existence is always socio-political. Every life and every message in a society influences that society. By our lives and our words we criticise the society of which we are a part, and if our lives are not a criticism, they implicitly support it. Let us consider in this respect the fact that many denominations and Christian institutions have in their constitution an article that they will refrain from political activities. Sometimes governments of states ask for the inclusion of such articles before they will officially recognise a denomination or international Christian organisation that wants to work within their borders. However, the idea of non-political institutions is a contradiction in terms. The existence of a denomination, para-church organisation or of an educational institution is by itself a socio-political fact; if they never criticise the government, they support it by their very existence under its governance. They may opt not to be explicitly involved in politics for the sake of politics itself, or for the sake of other interests that they may consider more important than to follow critically the activities of the government, but in every case their existence is by itself a socio-political factor. We would do better if we would consciously ask ourselves as Christians what form we should give to this political influence.



If even a religious institution is a political factor, even independently of its message, so much more was the life of Jesus that rocked the world. Let us now turn to the political character of his message.

### *Jesus' socio-political message*

In our considerations of the socio-political message of Jesus, it is revealing to start with the two great commandments, which ask us to love God more than anything else and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In order to understand the social implications of the ethics of Jesus, it is not even necessary to turn to the explicitly socio-political passages. These social implications are already implicit in the two great commandments.

Let us consider the love for the neighbour. To explain the extent this love should have, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The story shows that for Jesus the question is not: who is my neighbour and to whom am I obliged to show neighbourly love? The question should rather be: for whom should I become a neighbour? The question should be: who needs my help, even if this person does not belong to my extended family, not even to my ethnic group or to the people of God. If I ask how I can exercise love to those who need my help, social questions can no longer be excluded. If the Samaritan was a trader who travelled that road every week and he would regularly find people who were mugged, would the same love that made him help the first one not imply that he would go see the mayor of Jericho to ask if it would be possible to improve the security of those that travel on that route? (Williams, 1989, 268ff).

To love God also implies that we love that which He loves and that we share his interests. The Old Testament shows even more than the New Testament that social and political structures are not marginal in God's plan and interests. He gave his laws in order to facilitate a good organisation of society. He sent his prophets like Amos and Hosea to criticise the leaders of Israel who abused their authority for their own interest, to criticise judges who did not consider the interests of widows and orphans, but were easily corrupted, and to criticise the rich who enriched themselves even more at the expense of the weak and the poor.

This interest of the Mosaic Law and the prophets brings us to those parts of Jesus' message which deal explicitly with socio-political questions. Some sections of Jesus' preaching follow this line of the indignation of the Old Testament prophets over social injustice. Jesus said to his disciples that they should be different from the heads of the nations who rule as masters and who

seek to make their power felt. Jesus' disciples should rather seek to serve, even when they are called to lead others. They should follow the great example of their Master who came himself in order to serve (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:12-16). Luke is the evangelist who was most sensitive to this side of Jesus' message. His gospel gives the beatitudes for the poor along with the curses concerning the rich (Lk 6:24-26). It is Luke who passes on the parable of the rich man who is condemned for not taking care of poor Lazarus who lived on his doorstep (Lk 16:19-31).

We need to recognise, however, that socio-political themes receive less attention in the New Testament in comparison with the Old. What could be the reason? Is it that in relation to the preparatory stage of the Old Testament, the message of Jesus is spiritualised and thereby perfected? This is very unlikely. The New Testament recognises, just as the Old, the Lordship of the God of Israel over every aspect of reality. Therefore "[t]here is not an inch in the whole area of human existence of which Christ, the sovereign of all, does not cry, 'It is Mine'", as the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper said (quoted in Van Til, 2001, 117). The central confession of the New Testament that "Jesus is Lord" (Ro 10:9; Php 2:11) implies also the contestation of all other lordships that claim to be absolute, such as the absolutist and divinised authority of the Roman emperor (Blocher, 2002, 76). The New Testament is moreover interested in the renewal of the entire creation and of the human being in his entirety, body and soul, individually and as a social being.

If the New Testament placed less stress on socio-political themes than the Old, this is rather because of the particular vocation of Jesus and because of the particular theological context in which his ministry and the ministry of his apostles unfolded. The New Testament confirms the socio-political content of the Old Testament, but without the elaboration of the Old Testament. In this sense we can speak of a "surplus of the Old Testament" (with an expression of K.H. Miskotte, 1967, 271ff). The Old Testament is richer when we consider concrete social-political teaching, but we need to understand its full meaning in the light of its confirmation in the message and the work of Christ. We turn now to the special contribution of the revelation in Christ to socio-political theology.

### *Jesus' particular vocation*

In a very practical way, the focus of the New Testament on the ministry of Jesus Christ has as one of its consequences that the New Testament covers only a period of two or three generations. During this entire period the community of his disciples had very little political influence. Through the many centuries covered by the Old Testament the political influence of the community

belonging to Yahweh varied widely: from the age of the patriarchs, through slavery in Egypt, the judges, the monarchy, the exile, until the period under the different great empires after the exile. Each period required a different relationship between the religious community and the political powers (Wright, 1995). We still need different attitudes to the state in different situations, and we cannot treat the situation of Christians in a democratic country that is in majority Christian in the same way as the life of the small first Christian community without political influence in the pagan Roman Empire. The fact that the New Testament gives moral guidelines for different authorities, such as masters of slaves, heads of families and church leaders, but not for governors is probably occasioned by the simple fact that those authorities were not (yet) present in the Christian community. It is not necessarily an indication that Christians could not take up such positions (against Yoder, 1994, 183).<sup>3</sup>

The relative silence on socio-political issues surrounding the person of Jesus is not only related to this particular political context, but even more to his unique vocation. Jesus is greater than Moses, who gave the law for the personal, religious, and social life of his people. He is greater than David, the exemplary king and warrior who freed Israel of its oppressors. Jesus is greater than Solomon, the wise king who left his model and proverbs for individual and political life. He is greater than the prophets who condemned the sins and the sinful social structures and who announced the eschatological reign of God who would come in order to re-establish Israel.

Jesus Christ is the inaugurator of the eschatological Kingdom of God in the fullness of time announced by the prophets. He is the inaugurator of the Kingdom, but shows as such also the bankruptcy of all human religion and of all human socio-political efforts to create a better world. This becomes clear from the reception he received. This representative of the reign of God was not well received by those whom he met; even more, He was condemned and crucified by the representatives of the purest religion of his time, the Jewish religion, and by the representatives of the best judicial system of his time, the representatives of Roman law. If the best representatives of humanity murder the One sent by the Creator, the bankruptcy of all human religious and social projects becomes evident (Niebuhr, 1949, 143f). This failure of humanity and even of the people of God to save themselves and to arrive at a personal and social life that agrees with the will of the Creator was already noted by the

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<sup>3</sup> This does not exclude that in certain circumstances all involvement of Christians in public offices becomes impossible, for example if this involvement demands participation in idolatrous worship. Because of this practice, many Christians in the Roman Empire were of the opinion that a Christian could not serve in the Roman army.

prophets. It was because of this failure that they concluded that there would be no individual, religious or political salvation if God himself would not intervene decisively for the redemption of humanity.

Jesus not only shows this failure of all human effort, but also opens a new phase in the relationship between God and humanity. He inaugurated the eschatological presence and reign of God because of a double representation: on the one hand, he represents God among men, while on the other hand, he represents humanity before God (O'Donovan, 1996, 120ff). He is the final representation of the reign of God among men: He shows the authority of God over illnesses, over nature, over demonic powers, over Satan, over sin, and over death. He battles with those forces which oppose the reign of God in a way that no one before him could do; he meets them and triumphs decisively over them. Jesus is at the same time the final representative of Israel and in this way also of humanity. He represents Israel in the perfection of his life and of his obedience in which he substitutes himself for humanity.

Precisely as representative of God and of humanity, Jesus is rejected by the world as exemplified by the political and religious authorities of his time. It is in this way that he brings divine judgement on the world. By his death and resurrection he is victorious over Satan, sin, and death. In this way, he decisively inaugurates the Kingdom of God.

There is therefore no opposition between the Jesus who proclaims love and the Kingdom of God, and the Christ who died for us. Many theologians oppose these two sides of Jesus' work and consequently feel that they need to choose one of these two options: either a political Jesus or a spiritual Christ. The two images are impoverished versions of what the Bible teaches. Either of the images is by itself too poor to answer the needs of our lives. On the one hand, a political Jesus—political in a narrow sense—cannot save us from sin, nor from demonic powers, nor from death. Without a salvation that touches those realms, every political project remains a marginal correction of our lives which cannot change human beings as they are. Moreover, such a project will never reach the real evil and the real hopelessness of our lives and our communities. On the other hand, a spiritual Christ—spiritual in a narrow sense—can only guide our souls to heaven, but cannot change our communities, our countries and the world in which we live and which remains his creation.

The Christ who died for us is the same as the Jesus of Nazareth, the one who proclaims the Kingdom of God with all its political connotations, who broke through social barriers, who called for a love without distinction, and who denounced social injustice. He inaugurated this Kingdom in destroying the main barriers that hinder us from living as the people of God, including in our socio-

political existence. He decisively inaugurated this reign of God, even if we wait for its accomplishment when he returns, and even if we can only see its traces in the world of politics. Though we still wait for the final coming of the Kingdom, he inaugurated it by defeating its enemies. We can therefore invest ourselves more confidently in the socio-political sphere that was at the centre of Israel's law, its judges and kings, its prophets and its sages.

### *Two confrontations with political authorities*

In the light of this particular role of the person and vocation of Jesus Christ, we can now understand two passages in the teaching of Jesus which played an important role in the discussion concerning the political significance of Jesus and to which some Christians appeal in order to defend an apolitical Christ. We start with the passage in Mark about the trick question concerning the payment of taxes to Caesar. As we know Jesus answers enigmatically: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mk 12:17) This text is probably a good candidate for a contest for the most abused Scripture verse. This text is often used to justify an obedience to the state and service of the state that are contrary to our belonging to the Kingdom of God. One can find Christian government officials and employees who use this verse to justify the need to obey their government even when this means disobeying the law of God.

Is it really possible that Jesus said that these two areas—God and Caesar, the spiritual and the material, the church and the state—have their own independent jurisdiction? This sounds improbable when we consider the Old Testament background of his message, which declares that God is King over all creation and over all of life. Such a separation of the two spheres is also not in agreement with Jesus' own behaviour over against political authorities. When questioned at his trial, he did not submit himself to the authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Neither did He submit himself to Pilate, who asked that Jesus defend himself so that Pilate could find a good reason to liberate him. Jesus obeyed his Father in spite of the pressure of human authorities. This principle is later formulated explicitly by his disciples (Ac 4:19) and seems a good reflection of the attitude of their Master, and in fact of all great biblical examples.

If we should give to Caesar what is his and to God what belongs to God, the biblical message in its entirety helps us to understand that the authority of the creature—Caesar—can never be at the same level as the authority of the Creator himself. Only the Creator has absolute authority, and the authority of all human governments is derived from Him and therefore submitted to Him (cf. Rm 13:4; Jn 20:11). Caesar's authority is therefore limited. This authority includes for example the right to collect taxes and to punish wrongdoers (Rm

13:1-7). This authority of the government, however, can never go beyond God's authority and has therefore never the right to go against the will of God, which is supreme. This is even clearer if Jesus' calling attention to the image of Caesar on the denarius is an implicit reference to the image of God, that the human being bears (Trocmé, 2000, 302). If we owe to God which belongs to Him, we owe Him our entire lives, for we are created in his image. The authority of God can therefore easily conflict with political authority, and if we know who we are, it is clear what our supreme allegiance should be in such a situation.

This relationship between divine and civil authority is also upheld by the second text that is often used to interpret Jesus' message apolitically. We refer here to his statement before Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). Pilate is here confronted with the accusation of the Jewish leaders that Jesus made himself King of the Jews. He therefore asks Him: "Are you the king of the Jews?" This question resembles the question of this article, which is to know if Jesus really has something to do with the political powers. As when asked before the High Priest if he were the Messiah and the Son of God, so before Pilate he answered indirectly "You say that I am a king"<sup>4</sup> and for the same reason. He could not deny that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, but neither could he accept these titles without clarification of their meaning when applied to him. Otherwise his interrogators could understand his being the Messiah and his kingship in the terms to which they were used: as a Messiah principally for the Jews with his main mandate to destroy Israel's enemies. That is why Jesus explains with regards to his political project: "My kingdom is not of this world" (v. 36). With this he does not say that his Kingdom is the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore does not concern the earth. "This world" should in this context be understood in line with its more common use in the Gospel of John: it is the world as fallen into sin, in darkness, the world existing in enmity with God (cf. Jn 1:10; Barrett, 1978, 536). This opposition is clarified in the explanation which follows directly: in this world, the authorities maintain themselves by force and if Jesus' authority would be the same, his disciples "would fight to prevent [his] arrest by the Jews." (v. 36)

The authority and kingship of Jesus are thus different from those of Pilate, for Pilate's authority rests on power, but Jesus' authority rests on truth: "for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (v. 37). We can recognise both types of authority in our world, but often those who live according to the measure of their power can only recognise one sort of

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<sup>4</sup> This translation of the New Revised Standard Version (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1989) follows the Greek more closely here than the New International Version.

authority. The authority of truth means nothing to them, even if they encounter it, as exemplified by Pilate who asks sceptically: "What is truth?" (v. 38; cf. O'Donovan, 1996, 140). He doesn't consider it a reason to condemn Jesus, for it is a challenge to his authority that he does not discern.

The Kingdom of Jesus is therefore a real challenge to the political and other powers of this world. Yet, at this moment in his unfolding plan of salvation, God restrains his power in order that his authority can show itself by its truth. To testify to this authority and to this truth, Jesus went to the cross. At the cross He unmasked the powers of this world to show their true nature and to inaugurate a Kingdom which does not follow the power principles of this world

### **3. Christians and the Young African Democracies**

We have concluded that the message and work of Jesus Christ do have important socio-political implications. We cannot limit his message to the spiritual domain or to individual life as if it would not touch on society and politics. At this point, we need to take one further step and ask what are its more practical implications for our Christian involvement in the development of the young African democracies, which represent a context to which Jesus of course never made allusion.

Democracy as we know it was unknown in the time of Jesus. In the Greek city-states before the rise of Alexander the Great, there existed some form of democratic government, but it was still significantly different from democracy as we use the expression. Only free males, a small portion of the total population, could participate in the democratic process, thus not the slaves, not the women, nor the foreigners. The city was a limited political entity with a limited number of participants. They could therefore all directly take part in the political process without the intermediation of chosen representatives and political parties. In Jesus' day this form of democracy was already only a phenomenon of history. The great empires were governed by emperors with only a very few people having any influence on the choice of the emperor.

The fact that modern democracy did not exist in the days of Jesus, and that He did not explicitly address the subject, does not of course imply that democracy does not have any specific value for Christians or that they cannot develop a Christian opinion on the question. Different forms of government have been developing since the existence of human societies. The political structures of Jesus' days were not ideal and should be evaluated in relation to their own social context. We need to ask if the forms of government which we

encounter today are adequate for our context, and more importantly, if they agree with the Christian view of the world, the human condition, and society.

In what follows, we trace what light the message and work of Jesus Christ throws of the Christian view of the world, humanity and society. We will, first of all, see how Christian involvement in the democratisation and in democratic structures is legitimate and in our times part of our vocation as disciples of Christ. We will, secondly, see that there are important reasons to consider this involvement as a relatively important task, yet not as an absolute obligation. We should not expect too much of democracy, contrary to the tendency to present democracy as the panacea of all problems or as the new Gospel for Africa. Finally, we will ask ourselves, what forms of involvement are right for Christians and more particularly for the church.

### ***Legitimacy and importance of involvement in democratisation and democracy***

In the contemporary Christian ethical debate, we encounter two basic approaches to defend democracy that seem at first sight diametrically opposed.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, we encounter a defence of democracy based on the value of each human individual created in the image of God. This is why, it is said, each human being should have the liberty to take responsibility for his own destiny and this is why he has the moral resources to do so. We should not force anyone to accept a government if he has not had any voice in its formation.<sup>6</sup>

We can also find defenders of democracy who argue on the basis of the corruption of the human being rather than on the basis of his goodness and moral capacities. We should recognise that power corrupts. Democratically elected governments have the same tendency to be subject to the corrupting force of power. However, democracy is the lesser evil compared to other forms of government, for it shares power among a community as large as possible, and it installs procedures that provide that governments cannot be too corrupted by power without losing it soon afterwards.

For certainly one perennial justification for democracy is that it arms the individual with political and constitutional power to resist the inordinate

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<sup>5</sup> Concerning the variety of theological argumentations in favour of democracy, I am greatly helped by the overview in an as yet unpublished paper of Jonathan Chaplin, 'Christian Theories of Democracy: The Contemporary Relevance of a Neglected Legacy' (2006). Chaplin distinguishes three main theories of which I only refer to the last two which are more used in contemporary debates.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, §75.1 of the Second Vatican Council (Flannery, 1975, 982).



ambition of rulers, and to check the tendency of the community to achieve order at the price of liberty. (Niebuhr, 1945, 38)

If, moreover, the democratic process in a nation receives a certain prestige and moral dignity, conflicts of interest in a society can be solved in less bloody battles than those that are solved by military power (cf. Niebuhr, 1960, 5f).

The best defence of democracy takes the two sides of the coin into account (cf. Stott, 1984: 40). In the teaching of Jesus, we encounter both lines: he saw a creature of God in every person he encountered, whatever that person's state; and He received detested groups like prostitutes and Samaritans in his company. At the same time, He was deeply conscious of the corruption of the human heart and of the corrupting nature of power.

The Christian considers each human being as created in the image of God, but does not conclude from this an optimistic view. In Scripture the dignity of the human being in the image of God is not based on a confidence in his moral and other capacities, but only on his divine calling, setting aside his corruption. If God gives such a high place to the human being by creating him in His image, we should also treat him with respect and place him in a situation in which he can give direction to his own life and participate in the government of his own society. As an image bearer of God, the human person is called to such governance while recognising God as his supreme authority and as the Creator of whom he is only the image and representative (cf. Blocher, 1984, 79ff). The value of democracy lies in the fact that at the same time it limits the abuse of power. The best democracies are those in which the democratic processes are conceived in order to detect, reveal, and limit such abuse.

Defending democracy does not necessarily imply that the current forms of democracy are divinely legitimated (cf. Turaki, 1901). Democracy as a political system needs to deal with a number of possible deformations of the system. Among these we should consider the possibility that democracy can become a tool for collective egoism at the cost of minorities within the community, of foreigners, and of the non-human creation. This also shows the limits of what we can expect of democracy and should show the relativity of the value of our democratic involvement.

### *The relative value of this involvement*

In some evangelical circles, political involvement is still highly suspect or even condemned outright. We therefore need to defend the legitimacy of political involvement. At the same time, however, where democracy is sometimes presented as a solution for all political problems and even as the

most important battle in which the Christian can be engaged, we have reason to show that the value of this involvement is only relative. Democratisation can even become an idol if we expect too much of it and sacrifice too much for it!

The limits of democracy become apparent when we consider the realities of democratic decision-making. Just as there are benevolent dictators, great democracies can be profoundly corrupted. Democratic societies, which offer democratic liberties to their own population, can use the support from their own people to keep other populations in a situation of oppression and economic and political deprivation. We see this in the external politics of a number of large North-Atlantic democracies. Showing the relative value of democracy is also important considering the fact that the efforts of Western churches to engage African churches in the movement for democratisation gives the impression of being the new political fad. Democratisation is not necessarily more biblical for being more fashionable. Caution is needed considering certain indicators that the interest of western states in the democratisation of Africa is at least partly ideologically motivated. Why was there so little interest in democracy before the end of the Cold War in the 1990s? Why is it that this interest in democratisation is so strong in our time of globalisation, where democratisation supports globalisation and therefore the economic interests of the rich countries? It would show discernment were western churches to show a more critical attitude towards the programmes of democratisation of their governments, and ask: "Which democratisation, with what goal?" (cf. Mugambi, 1997, 4).

In the African context moreover, multiparty democracy can easily become a tool in the hands of those who look for power for their own interest or for the interests of certain ethnic groups. The possibility of abusing democratic structures for the hegemonic interests of the contestants in the political arena is, in Africa, also related to the reality that a democracy needs certain supporting structures in order for it to function properly. Democracy can only function properly when there is freedom of press and a population which is sufficiently educated and informed to be able to evaluate who among the candidates looks out for the interest of the population and whose vision for the future of the society they can share. Democracy also needs a civil society that is sufficiently developed to be able to function as a counterweight to the structures and interests of the state. Without these conditions, it is virtually impossible to develop a quality democracy.

As Christians, we have even more profound reasons to show the relativity of the value of democratisation, reasons that originate from a biblical understanding of human nature and the human condition. Biblical anthropology

considers the human being as a unified entity, even if we can distinguish different aspects of his being. The human being exists as physical and spiritual reality, in relationship with the non-human creation, with his fellow human beings, and in relationship with God. A definition of a good and blessed life—that is, of living in “shalom”—should encompass life in all these aspects and in all these relationships. At the same time biblical anthropology also sees a certain order of importance among these different aspects. Our relationship with God is more important than our relationship with fellow human beings: we need to be ready to leave even our closest relatives for the sake of our relationship with God, as Abraham and Jesus’ disciples needed to do. Similarly, relationships between human beings are more important than our relationship with the rest of creation, and our spiritual health is more important than our physical health.

According to the biblical view, the root of all our problems does not lie in economic and socio-political structures, as Marxists and certain forms of liberation theology make us believe. Our deepest problem is our separation from God and our enmity towards Him. This is one of the reasons that placed the question of sin at the centre of Jesus’ message rather than the political questions of his time. He knew that the corruption of humanity was more profound, than man’s political condition. And he knew that it was his particular calling to touch the deepest problems of the human condition. It was his calling to reconcile us with God and to obtain the Holy Spirit for us, who can radically change our attitude to our fellowmen and our attitude towards God. We therefore need to be conscious that democratisation can contribute to the flourishing of human life—to our “shalom” in the biblical sense, but that it cannot be the solution for the most profound and critical problem of the human condition. Democratisation without a repentance of the citizens will always remain superficial in its effects. Such a democratisation is a gift to the community to which Christians can contribute, but it is not the greatest treasure which we have received from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Showing that democratisation only has relative value also has a positive corollary: if Christ came to reconcile us with God, and if this relationship is more important than all other relationships for which we were originally created, attaining the goal of our life does not depend on our political environment. We can live with our God and attain what gives us supreme fulfilment in our lives as slave or as free citizen and under whatever government: Roman, colonial, or democratic. We can already celebrate the decisive victory of Christ over the powers, even while his victory is not yet complete. We can invest ourselves so that people may be changed by the Gospel and by the power of the Spirit, so that oppressed people can be free in

the Lord, even while they remain in socially unjust situations (1Co 7:22f). This will contribute to a change of socio-political structures, but even if that may still take generations, people may already experience a real freedom and the most important freedom in Christ (de Coninck, 1992: 182ff).

### *The form of our involvement*

So far we have seen that the message and the work of Christ encompass the whole of reality and therefore also political life. We have also concluded that this message touches at a much more profound reality than politics and democratisation can hope to reach, and that therefore the Kingdom of God can never be identified with a political programme, whatever it may be. The form of Christian political involvement should correspond with this double reality: the Gospel touches upon our political existence, but democratisation should not be welcomed as a new Gospel. In this section we want to show, in four points, what this implies for the form that responsible Christian political involvement should take.

In the first place, the church can influence the wider society by living an *exemplary life* as a community. As we saw, Jesus called his disciples to be the new Israel, which as salt and light could influence the surrounding world (Mt 5:13-16; cf. Stott, 1992, 57-68). The Christian community is able in the power of the Holy Spirit to live the life of the Kingdom, as the world cannot do. When the community of disciples lives its renewed life, they are a living invitation and at the same time a judgement on the world. It is invitation and judgement in its internal social relationships, in its relationship with the wider world, even with its enemies, in its attitude to possessions and with the non-human creation. The church should also specifically model the values on which sound democracy is based: the sharing of responsibility, the open and serious consideration of differences of opinion, accountable leadership, and a caring attitude to every member of the community (cf. Magesa 126ff).

In the second place, the church can take up its political responsibility by its *prophetic message* in which it denounces socio-political injustice and calls the state to its responsibility to use state power for the general good, respecting all human beings, and obeying the God whose servant the government is called to be (Stott, 1984, 71ff; Tinder, 2001, 7ff). We call this a prophetic message, for by it the Christian community accepts the heritage of the Old Testament prophets who denounced the abuse of government authority and who called governors to respect God's supreme authority. In Africa, the Catholic and Anglican Churches have been most explicit in raising this prophetic voice. On the Anglican side, one can think of the examples of the bishops Festo Kivengere

(Uganda), Desmond Tutu (South Africa), and David Gitari (Kenya; Gitari, 1996).

To call on political forces with such a prophetic language is a relatively new phenomenon among evangelical denominations.<sup>7</sup> The use of this form of political expression has, additional to its biblical antecedents, two advantages, which make it an important tool for the exercise of political responsibility by the church.

On the one hand, the church in this way can keep its distance and avoid being identified with one or another government or political movement. For the church it is a great risk to become too close to the state. We see this for example in the *Eglise du Christ au Zaïre*, which profited largely from government support under the Mobutu regime and found it therefore difficult to denounce its totalitarianism. If the churches go too far in courting the government, they may easily be associated with some of its actions for which it would rather not be held responsible. In those conditions, the Church can easily loose credit or even be abandoned by those who align themselves with the opposition.

On the other hand, this distance between the church and the government is required because, although the church has her own competence, she is not equally competent in everything. It is true that the church is competent in the most crucial aspect of the human life: the relationship between God and humanity, the church, and history. This aspect touches on all other aspects of life. However, as an institution, the church is not necessarily the most competent body concerning all aspects of life. There is need for appropriate bodies, such as the government, the legislature, and the judiciary. All these bodies need to submit to the sovereignty of God, just as the church should do, but they are called to live out the will of God in other spheres of the human life.<sup>8</sup> Such a distinction may be hidden behind Jesus' refusal to answer the

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<sup>7</sup> A recent example is the "Lettre pastorale à son excellence Monsieur le Président de la République, Chef de l'Etat", written on March 31 2003 by the Alliance of Evangelicals in the Central African Republic to François Bozize, who took power two weeks before by a coup d'état.

<sup>8</sup> The attentive reader can discern here an understanding of the separation between church and state which does not imply that the state should be non-religious, atheistic, or at least not considering God. It seems to me that, in the light of Scripture, there is a place for the secularity of the state in the particular sense that the structures of the state and the church should be independent from each other. Both have their specific competence and sphere of authority. Yet biblically both spheres are submitted to the supreme authority of God, and in the state as well as in the church Christians are called to search for the will of God for these particular spheres of life. (Cf. van den Toren, 2004, 175ff.)

question on how two brothers should divide their inheritance (Lc 12:13). This question concerns the judiciary, and Jesus says to the one brother that this is not his vocation (v. 14). This answer does not, however, imply that Jesus, or the church after Him, has nothing to say about the issue. Jesus draws attention to the root of the problem, when he says: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (v. 15). This reality of human greed is why many debates within the functions of the judiciary cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all participants. In the same way, in the political arena the church can and should remind the political actors to do their work with a good attitude, respecting the right priorities. Beyond that, the church can leave the details of governance to the specialists.<sup>9</sup>

We come now to our third consideration concerning the form of Christian political involvement. Even if the church as an institution should maintain a certain distance in its relation to the state, individual Christians or Christian groups can and should invest themselves directly in the government and in wider socio-political activities. In order to guard a healthy distance, it is better when pastors who more directly represent the church as an institution would not accept political posts, unless they resign from the pastorate. Lay Christians can, however, participate, for these are legitimate structures given by the Creator for the organisation of our communities and in order to judge between right and wrong (Mouw, 1976).

Even individual Christians and Christian groups who want to contribute in this area need to keep a certain distance. Politicians have the tendency to find their personal identity in their political activities. It is for this that they live and it is in this that they find their fulfilment. A Christian, however, receives his identity from Jesus Christ, in whom and for whom he lives. His political vocation is only a secondary vocation, as are all other vocations—including the vocation of some of us to be pastors; all such vocations are secondary compared to our calling as children of God. This distance helps Christians to retain their integrity. If they find their identity in Christ rather than in their political existence, they can be ready to leave a political function, if this function asks them to compromise their primary allegiance to Christ. I am always impressed with the attitude of biblical figures that God called to very influential positions in different pagan governments, such as Joseph and Daniel and his friends. They were thankful for the fact that God gave them this place. Yet, because

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<sup>9</sup> I came across this application of this passage in a sermon by Stephen N. Williams, now professor at Union Theological College in Belfast.

they knew it was God who gave them this place in order to serve Him, they were ready to leave their position if it was no longer possible to serve God there with integrity. One main problem with certain Christian politicians is that they want to remain at all cost in the position they have obtained. Only the freedom to leave a position allows the liberty to work there with integrity and in the spirit of Christ, an integrity that will certainly encounter resistance, but that will also demand respect. This political activity should therefore, following the example of Jesus, be done in truth (Jn 18:37), in a spirit of service (Mc 10:43-45; Jn 13:14), and in a spirit of willingness to follow Him even on the way of the cross (Mt 16:24-26).

Such a Christian spirit, which is the spirit of Christ, goes radically against mainstream political life, which is a life of pragmatism, compromises, of short-lived alliances for one's own interest, of a hypocritical use of moral language and of ideals. In order to help Christian politicians to survive in a context that is unfavourable to such behaviour, the church needs to accompany them pastorally. Such pastoral care is not easily given and accepted, and asks often for a conversion of the church itself. If a Christian rises to a position of political importance, his church will often be quick to show a renewed interest in him or her. Too often, however, this interest is not motivated by the desire to help this person in his new ministry and his personal calling, but more by the hope to profit from his influence and from the resources to which he now has access. With such an attitude, the church risks adding to the pressures towards corruption and towards the loss of integrity that this position already brings with it. A true pastoral accompaniment envisages rather the salvation, the sanctification, and the spiritual health of the person in the particular context where God has placed him or her.

We want to conclude this article, and our reflection on the forms of Christian political involvement, by underlining, in the fourth place, that the Church already plays a crucial and irreplaceable political role when she invests herself in the task, which is uniquely hers: the proclamation of the Good News of the victory of Jesus Christ. This proclamation has a political impact, for if a significant segment of a population changes, the society will also change. Moreover, this proclamation of Christ's victory reminds the state, democratic or not, that it should not go beyond its mandate in claiming an absolute authority. Too many presidents and governments behave as if they have an absolute authority, and as if they themselves are above and outside the legislation which they establish. Such problems may have their roots in misconceived worldviews, such as the traditional African idea that the authority of the chief is absolute and sacred (Bediako, 1995), in the lack of separation between governmental and religious authority in Islam, or in the elevation of the

individual in the modern Western world (van den Toren, 2004). If the church functions, therefore, simply as a community with her own goal, which is to proclaim the victory and lordship of Christ, she therefore already contributes decisively to the democratisation process on four different levels that are currently particularly crucial for democratisation in Africa.<sup>10</sup> She forms critical and responsible citizens; she provides channels of information which are not controlled by the state; she is part of the civil society that provides a counterweight to the state; and she shows the relativity of political authority when the latter has a tendency to make itself absolute.

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<sup>10</sup> See for an analysis of some of those problems Ongong'a, 1999.



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## BOOK REVIEWS

Donald L. Donham

***Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic  
History of the Ethiopian Revolution***

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999  
Oxford: James Currey, 1999. 236 pp, pb, \$19.95

Donham, Professor of Anthropology at Emory University, here attempts to analyze the effects of the Marxist revolution and the impact of modernity upon a small people group in southwestern Ethiopia, the Maale, between 1974 and 1991. This carefully researched and well-documented ethnographic study comprises seven chapters and applies theories and insights from the dialectic of modernist Marxism, local Maale traditional culture, and what the author terms 'anti-modernist evangelical Christianity'—namely that of SIM missionaries. The book enables all those involved in the missiological enterprise to better understand the growing literature produced by secular scholars about modernity impacting non-western church culture.

A recent example of this genre of writing is that of two distinguished secular ethnologists, John and Jean Comaroff, who attempt to read old missionary documents in new ways. Their two-volume *Of Revelation and Revolution* is a study of the evangelizing efforts of two 19<sup>th</sup> century British non-conformist missions to the Tswana of southern Africa. This scholarly work, published by University of Chicago Press in 1991 and 1997, attempts to interpret the motives of the Tswana who forsook their traditional religious practices for Christianity. The Comaroffs conclude that the Tswana changed their belief system merely for practical benefit; therefore their faith commitment was merely a humanist faith. From detailed archival research the Comaroffs also deduced that the 19<sup>th</sup> century members of the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society were the initial agents of colonialism among the Tswana.

Let me comment in particular on two chapters from *Marxist Modern* because of their missiological significance for AJET readers. It is evident that Donham spent considerable time researching within the SIM Charlotte archives. In his introductory 'Acknowledgments' he kindly pays tribute to SIM Archive staff, Gary Corwin, Jo-Ann Brant and Sarah Ely who "provided me with indispensable help" (p. xxv). Chapter 4, "The Dialectic of Modernity in a North American Christian Mission" describes the founding of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Canada by Rowland Bingham, whom Donham describes as an "entrepreneur for Christ" (p.85). Donham quotes letters by SIM Ethiopia missionaries to justify his contention that "medical technology became almost a modernist fetish in the hands of anti-modernist missionaries" (p.89). In the conclusion of this chapter, Donham affirms the significant expansive growth and the positive self-identity of the Wolaitta evangelical church in southern Ethiopia from 1938 to 1944. He acknowledges that it was committed evangelists from Wolaitta who established the majority of churches in southern Ethiopia from 1938 to the present. Donham is to be commended for his scholarly ability in handling a myriad of historical data from the SIM archives.

Chapter 5, "The Cultural Construction of Conversion in Maale" focuses on the SIM missionary activity deployed from the Bako SIM station to nearby Maaleland. Donham, a close observer of the small but growing Maale congregations, relates the dynamic relationship that SIM missionary Alex Fellows, based in Bako, developed with the evangelists sent from Wolaitta to the Maale. Fellows is described as "encouraging and linking up groups, creating modern organizations with representative practices, monthly meetings, and bureaucratic procedures" (p. 109). The section on 'An indigenous theory of conversion' highlights Donham's understanding of Maale cosmology. From personal narratives that were collected from many Maale Christians, Donham could conclude that the impetus for conversion was promise of health and wealth. But further research from the Maale past indicated that when unusual calamity struck an individual or a family, the teachings of indigenous prophets were to be heeded and a new belief system was to be accepted. This new belief system for the Maale, who were suffering from drought, was evangelical Christianity, which initiated modernity in Maaleland around 1960. Donham concludes this chapter with what he describes as ironic. "Rowland Bingham: that dour Canadian believer in angels and demons, lakes of fire that burned forever, and a Jesus Christ who would be returning any day now – to rule the world" (p. 121) was the architect who produced such unusual results for modernity within much of southern Ethiopia.

What makes Donham's ethnographic study significant for missiologists within Africa is his use of personal narratives of ordinary Maale Ethiopians. Their stories, recorded at intervals from 1974 to 1996, are the "resulting sedimentation" that provided the scaffolding for *Marxist Modern*. A conundrum for Donham was to observe that what he termed, in the religious sense, "anti-modernist" SIM missionaries from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, who preached the gospel and inspired the formation of communities of Maale evangelicals, resulted in what in turn became "an intensely modernist group of converts" (p. 178), involved in the vanguard of education, modern health practices and constructive social interaction. It would appear that Donham's overarching categories of 'modernist' versus 'anti-modernist' break down when applied to SIM missionaries. Rather, they operated within an integrated model of preaching the gospel which liberated the spirit and made use of modern technology which enhanced the quality of daily living. In his "Afterword/Afterward" Donham acknowledges that by 1991 modernist Marxism within Greater Ethiopia had eventually ran its course, with no genuine followers remaining. But on the other hand, he observed this phenomenon among the Maale evangelicals during the heyday of the Ethiopian Revolution. "Strengthened by persecution, Kale Heywet Churches [in Maale] began to attract the young in increasing numbers ..." (p. 182). He concedes that the Maale evangelicals are the new modernists.

Donham is to be commended for his willingness to sympathetically explore a faith community in such depth by means of his particular social anthropological theory. His conclusion, however, suggests that his categories are insufficient to encompass all the dynamics of either church or mission.

Dr. E. Paul Balisky  
Former Lecturer, Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology  
Addis Ababa

## CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR *AJET*

The Editorial Committee for *AJET* (a journal that facilitates theological reflection and research by evangelicals on theological issues throughout the continent of Africa) welcomes articles by evangelical scholars for publication. Such articles will be screened based on the following criteria:

**Theology:** Since *AJET* publishes theological reflection based on the authority of Scripture articles submitted for publication should reflect an evangelical perspective.

**Relevance:** Articles should be relevant to the African Christian church today. Topics may deal with a range of issues, including theology, African church history, practical theology, theological reflection on problems in the church due to traditional African culture or contemporary society, theological and Christian education in the African context and other similar topics.

**Scholarship:** Articles should reflect serious scholarship based on library or field research. Bibliographic references should preferably be no less than ten. The English composition should be accurate and readable, without the need for extensive editing.

**Format:** Articles should be typewritten, double-spaced with bibliographic information of every book used at the end of the article. Footnotes or End Notes should be properly given, following guidelines of scholarly publications.

**Biographic Information Requested:** Authors should include a brief biographic sketch of their present vocational work, together with the last degree obtained and name of the institution from which the degree was obtained.

**J Daniel Hays**

***From Every People and Nation,  
A Biblical Theology of Race***

Leicester: Apollos/Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003  
240 pp, p/b, £12.99

According to Hays, the western world has tended to impose its own characteristics on its depiction of biblical characters, both in art down through the centuries and, more recently, in the cinema, overlooking or misinterpreting important biblical data in the process, to the detriment of a sound theology of race.

Hays examines pertinent biblical texts. For example, in the Genesis creation narrative, the racially generic Adam represents the whole of humankind who, irrespective of racial distinctions, share equally in the dignity of bearing the image of God.

The so-called 'curse of Ham' (Genesis 9) has often been used to sanction discriminatory views towards Black African races. Hays robustly rejects this misrepresentation of the text: the 'curse' is directed specifically against *Canaan*, and is rather to be interpreted in the light of the Israelites' eventual conquest of Canaan and its inhabitants.

The 'Table of Nations' in Genesis 10 provides theological grounding, Hays argues, for the common origin of all races; all fall equally under the judgment of God and, therefore, are equally eligible for the promise of divine blessing that is made to Abraham, and that informs many other texts in both the Old and New Testaments.

Even the chosen people of God were not ethnically 'pure'. The 'mixed crowd' (Exodus 12:38, NRSV) that shared in the Exodus event along with the 'sons of Israel' almost certainly included Cushites (Black Africans). If these accepted worship of Yahweh and were circumcised, they were eligible to share in the covenantal Passover meal. Significantly, in Hays' opinion, it is not God who criticises Moses' marriage to a Cushite (Numbers 12) but Aaron and Miriam. Indeed, in the dispute God stands with him against them. Hays concludes from this episode and from other evidence that racial intermarriage is sanctioned by Scripture *for believers*.

Hays then sets out his case that Black Africa played a large part in the biblical story, noting the 54 references to Cush/Cushites in the Hebrew OT. Phinehas the priest, and Ebed-melech who helped Jeremiah out of the slimy cistern, are other notable Black Africans in the biblical narrative. The point is pressed so vigorously that some readers could gain the impression of a certain excess and imbalance. Hays served in mission in Ethiopia (broadly associated with ancient Cush) over a number of years, so his emphases are perhaps understandable. But his interest in Black Africa is also due to his perception that some of the ugliest expressions of racism have been, and still are, directed towards Black African races.

Hays is also seeking to redress the widespread opinion in Africa that the biblical world only impinged upon Africa with the relatively recent arrival of Western missionaries, and that Christianity is to be dismissed as a 'White man's religion'. Hays notes the frequent scholarly portrayal of Cushites in the Bible as belonging to the menial, slave classes and rejects it as a 'reading back' into Scripture of historical prejudices. In fact, Cushites often exercised important leadership roles in Egypt and elsewhere, and indeed Egypt was actually ruled by Cush in the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (from 715BC to 663BC).

The prophets (especially Isaiah) and the prophetic voices in the Psalms present an eschatological vision of Yahweh bringing all peoples together in worship in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. It is a vision whose fulfilment in Christ is emphasised by such New Testament authors as Luke and Paul. And the book of Revelation looks forward to the eschatological realisation of the people of God as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, drawn from every nation upon earth, united in their worship of God and of the Lamb.

Hays writes in a clear and accessible style, with frequent summary sections. A bibliography of some 450 entries indicates the degree of his interaction with scholarly debate. There is an index of authors, and another of Scripture references. A map of the Ancient Near East and of north-eastern Africa would have been helpful. If some of his arguments are speculative, they are nevertheless based on careful scholarship. Finally, despite the academic rigour, pastoral and contemporary concerns of the author are not far beneath the surface. His theology is one of engagement; he argues passionately not for the obliteration of ethnic differences, but for their theological and spiritual irrelevance within the transforming unity of the family of God in Christ.

Gordon Molyneux  
All Nations Christian College  
Ware, England



Helen Miller

*The Hardest Place:  
The Biography of Warren and Dorothy  
Modricker*

Bellville, Ontario: Guardian Books, 2006. ISBN: 1-55306-994-3  
[order from: Guardian Books, Belleville, Ontario K8P 1S3, Canada. \$22]

This is the extraordinary life story of Warren and Dorothy Modricker, pioneer missionaries to the Somali people. The author of this missionary biography, Helen Miller, is uniquely qualified for the task. She, like the Modrickers, was an SIM missionary to the Somali people. Helen went to Somalia in 1962, where she met her future husband, John Miller. Warren Modricker united John and Helen in marriage, and together they served with the Modrickers until 1972. Thus, she has written of this intrepid couple with the advantage of having personally known them.

Warren Modricker was born in 1907, and grew to young adulthood near Boston, USA. Like many other SIM missionaries of his generation, he grew up poor and during hard times. At age 15, before graduating from secondary school, Warren quit school at his family's urging in order to earn money and help with family expenses. Warren found work as a door-to-door salesman selling Christmas cards. He also renewed his interest in church and became active in the youth group. Another very active member of that youth group was a certain Dorothy Dixon, just three years younger than him.

Warren was invited by an older gentleman to accompany him to a service at a rescue mission in central Boston. Warren said later, "I will never forget that night, seeing many drunkards and others in bad shape." He was troubled by the message he heard, unlike anything that was preached or taught at his church, and announced "I'm never going back to that place." However, God was moving within his heart and he decided to revisit the rescue mission. That night he accepted Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. As president of his church's youth group, he shared his salvation experience with the others and invited them to accompany him to the Rescue Mission in Boston. Dorothy Dixon was among those who went, and that night she also accepted Christ.

Warren and Dorothy became good friends. They quit their jobs and enrolled as students at the Boston Bible Training Institute. As they grew in the things of

the Lord, Dorothy felt that God was calling her to Somalia. Warren thought that the Horn of Africa had been in contact with civilization for centuries, and wanted to go to a harder place, in fact, *the* hardest place. Little did he realize at the time that of hard places, Somalia would be among the very hardest (hence the title of the book). Dorothy eventually transferred to Wheaton College in Illinois, while Warren completed his studies at the C&MA's Missionary Training Institute in Nyack, New York.

In due course Warren asked Dorothy to marry him and she consented. Without the aid of a mission board, the newly married couple trusted God to supply everything they would need to get to Somalia and to serve there. They went out as independent missionaries because, as they would later explain, no mission society was working in Somalia. Arriving off the coast of what was then British Somaliland in late 1933, the Modrickers were surprised and disappointed when the British administration denied them entrance, even though they had been issued a visa before leaving the United States. The British feared that allowing missionary work among the totally Muslim population would risk political unrest. The young couple had to be content with settling, temporarily at least, in the nearby British colony of Aden.

In Aden the Modrickers found a language helper and began to learn the language and make contacts in the Somali community. Although there was no mission board to hold them accountable, both were as diligent in studying and learning the language and in making friends and witnessing to Somali men and women, as though they had had to make out monthly written reports. When war erupted in Europe, because Aden was in the war zone Warren and Dorothy decided it was best to return to America, which they did in 1941. While back in the States Warren met Rowland Bingham, one of the founders of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), and learned that SIM was contemplating opening a field in Somalia. Warren was invited to join SIM and head up their Somalia work. So Warren and Dorothy joined SIM in 1943, and spent the rest of their lives associated with that mission.

In 1943 Warren was able to return to Aden, leaving Dorothy behind with the children in the States for the next two years. Eventually in 1945 Dorothy and two younger children were able to rejoin Warren in Aden. Three years later the mission asked Warren to try to get permission from the British administration to establish an SIM presence in Somalia itself. Warren made valuable contacts in Mogadishu, but no official permission was forthcoming at that time. Meanwhile Dorothy had sensed a calling from the Lord to undertake the translation of the

Bible into the Somali language, so during their next furlough Dorothy returned to Wheaton College to study Hebrew.

Finally in 1954, after twenty years of praying for and working with the Somali people outside of Somalia, Warren and Dorothy were able to move into Mogadishu, Somalia. They knew that this door of opportunity might not remain open indefinitely, since the country was largely Muslim and was moving towards self-rule. Warren was a man of vision and passion who thought expansively, prayed fervently, and worked tirelessly. He was a capable and no-nonsense administrator, able to negotiate effectively with government officials, and an effective fundraiser. He and Dorothy lived for the evangelization of the Somali people, and during their relatively short tenure at this time within Somalia itself they made extraordinary advances.

Despite Warren's several abilities, one that was not so in evidence was relating well to his younger co-workers who came to work in Somalia. The mark of a good biographer is to give as balanced a picture as possible and not to gloss over imperfections. Helen Miller is a good biographer. She writes that Warren, "being made of sterner stuff himself, was not too tolerant of what he felt might be lack of determination or courage when difficulties arose. What he didn't realize was that some of those early missionaries found him hard to work under, and several did not return after their first furlough."

In 1962 Warren turned his administrative duties over to someone else, which allowed him to devote more time to helping Dorothy with her translation work. From 1963 onward the work of missions in Somalia became more and more restricted by the newly independent Somali government, and in 1973 SIM was expelled. Warren and Dorothy continued working with Somali people and doing translation work in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and later in Nairobi, Kenya. Then in 1977 the translation of the entire Bible in the Somali language was completed and published. This alone was an accomplishment of monumental proportions. Also during their years in Ethiopia and Kenya the Modrickers helped pioneer a missionary radio ministry in the Somali language, and a Somali correspondence school outreach.

In 1983 the Modrickers moved to the SIM retirement center in Florida. When asked about their retirement plans, Warren and Dorothy would say, "We shall devote more time to reaching the Somalis in America, hold meetings as calls come in, and channel gifts to the field." This they did and more. In failing health, Dorothy entered into the presence of her Lord in 1995 at age 85. When a

daughter came to visit Warren in 1998, she found him at 91 still as energetic and optimistic as ever. And then one day during that visit she found him sitting where he had been having his morning devotions, resting peacefully with his open Bible, “quietly gone to heaven.”

During his retirement years Warren planned to write a book about their experiences as missionaries. He never did. He was busy, as always, seeking the salvation of the Somali people for whom he and Dorothy had devoted their lives.

Thankfully, Helen Miller has chronicled the lives of this remarkable couple, and has thus enriched the annals of missionary biography.

Donald Hall,  
SIM, Sebring FL, USA