EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 3

Volume 3 • Number 1 • April 1979

Evangelical Review of Theology

There remains much of significance in *Fundamentalism* which has received no mention. This is partly because of the nature of the book.

> I found the book's exposition of its care diffuse; it offers not so much an unfolding argument as a series of essays on various aspects of the topic (Ch 296, cf. TvT).

This diffuseness does not make for a good book but it means that there is a considerable wealth of material scattered throughout its pages. The discussion within the reviews and this survey has not exhausted the interesting and stimulating material to be found in *Fundamentalism*. p. 27

Questions Concerning the Future of African Christianity

by DICK FRANCE

A FEW years ago I found myself the only white man in a crowd of several hundred marching along a road in a new suburb of the ancient city of Ife, Nigeria, lustily singing 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' in Yoruba. We were marching to lay the foundation stone of a new church, the 13th congregation in Ife of that one denomination, founded only 40 years before; they had already outgrown their 400-seater church building. Usually such a procession in a Nigerian city draws a huge crowd. That day it did not, for the very good reason that practically all the population of the area was already in the procession. Christianity is on the march in Africa.

That was the Christ Apostolic Church, one of the larger of the hundreds of independent churches which have sprung up in the last half-century across Africa, particularly in South Africa and Nigeria. Usually beginning as breakway movements from the mission-founded churches, they have developed their own leadership, their own forms of worship, and often their own theology, recognisably Christian but sometimes disturbingly unfamiliar to a western visitor. Dreams, visions, fasts and prophecy are prominent; physical healing, exorcism and protection against witchcraft are major concerns, and western medicine is suspect if not positively forbidden.

The remarkable success of these independent churches is largely due to their ability, too seldom shared by the missionary, to scratch where it itches. It is they who are in the forefront of the spectacular statistical growth of Christianity in most of Africa south of the Sahara, causing statisticians to predict a predominantly Christian continent by the end of the century.

But the missionary-founded churches are also growing, governed in most areas now by national leaders. Missionaries must increasingly, even if sometimes reluctantly, stand back and watch p. 28 the juggernaut which they have launched gather speed. It is certainly out of their control—but is it out of control altogether? Some of them think so, and so they try to keep a hand on the wheel. Particularly among the evangelical missions there is a reluctance to let go, and so powerful African voices have been raised calling for a complete 'moratorium' on missionary involvement in Africa. 'Moratorium' implies a limited period,

but among its main proponents there seems little enthusiasm for the eventual return of the missionaries.

When you have visited a mission guest house where the only thing African was the servants; when you have sung Hymns A & M at half speed to harmonium accompaniment; when you have listened to an African cleric in full medieval European regalia reading in Elizabethan English to a black-suited congregation, and then you step outside to the colour and rhythm and sheer exuberance of the real Africa—you cannot help sympathising with the frustration which has led to the call for moratorium. But it is too simple a solution to a very deep-seated problem, for the staunchest upholders of the foreign traditions are usually the national leaders themselves. I remember a prominent Nigerian Methodist layman rejecting a potential lesson-reader as 'not properly dressed'—he was wearing impeccable national dress, not a western suit!

And even when you have banished all the missionaries and burned all the organs, will the churches necessarily be any more effective in interpreting the biblical revelation to the African context? If not, what is the future for Christianity in Africa?

Colonial protection is a thing of the past, and the post-colonial hangover is passing. Many African Christians can see persecution ahead. In Chad the church has already had to face up to the compulsory reintroduction of traditional initiation rites, and it was caught unprepared: many complied, and many died. The compulsory unification of the churches in Zaire in the interests of 'authenticity' may well indicate a growing tendency for governments to try to take over the churches for political ends. In Uganda—well, who knows what is happening in Uganda, or why? But there seems no doubt that Christians as such rank high on the lists for elimination. And the worldwide re-assertion of the political goals of Islam is already being felt by Christians in several areas along the southern edge of the Sahara, while the Ethiopian p. 29 situation suggests that Marxist governments in Africa cannot be expected to humour Christians any more than their European and Asian counterparts.

African Christianity is going to need, indeed it already needs, more than numbers. If it is to survive, it must be seen to be more than a relic of the colonial period. It must be truly African, speaking to actual African concerns with an authentically African voice. But, if it is to have any *raison d'etre*, it must also be truly Christian, and that means that what it applies to the questions of Africa must be the biblical revelation. It is on its ability to be both truly African and truly Christian that the future of African Christianity hinges.

GROWTH OF 'AFRICAN THEOLOGY'

In recent years the question of 'African Theology' has been increasingly aired. The recognition of the predominantly western concerns of the traditional theological syllabus has led in Africa, as in other parts of the third world, to an attempt to break away into a new form of articulating Christian truth. So far so good. It is a quest which is both necessary for Africa and also salutary for the West, in that it may make us aware of areas of the biblical revelation (such as spirits and demons, or group solidarity) which we have tended to ignore.

The lead has been taken by scholars in the Religious Studies departments of African universities, such as Professors John Mbiti of Makerere and Bolaji Idowu of Ibadan. They have directed their attention particularly to the beliefs and practices of the traditional religions of Africa, and this is surely an essential starting-point in order to establish what are the basic religious concerns to which African Christianity must address itself. The problem is to know where to stop. While these scholars would not want, with one Ghanaian professor, to produce an 'African theology' which is distinct from 'Christian

theology as it may be expressed by African theologians', there are many who fear that their attitude to the traditional religions goes beyond the search for points of contact to the affirmation of truths which are indeed African, but which are hardly compatible with biblical theology. p. 30

Thus Dr. Byang Kato, the late General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, persistently warned against a trend towards universalism in such 'African theologies', which he regarded as essentially syncretistic. While his strictures have been felt by some evangelicals to be too shrill, there is a widespread distrust of 'African theology' among those who want to affirm that Christ has brought a way of salvation which African traditional religions could not offer.

Thus there is beginning to develop in Africa the scenario which we already know too well in the West, where avant-garde theologians shock and delight the reading public, and thus come to be regarded as the authentic voice of scholarship, while evangelicals snipe from the sidelines, and thus project an out-of-date, reactionary, and even unscholarly image. Evangelical scholarship in Africa desperately needs to get in where the action is, and not to allow 'African theology' to slide by default into an unbiblical syncretism.

It does not lack opportunity: practically every university Religious Studies department in Africa is desperately short-staffed (how unlike the West), and the shortage is most severe in the area of biblical studies. There are few more strategic areas for Christian prayer and action than the filling of these posts with African scholars who are as concerned to be biblical as they are to be African in their theology. There are such men, but they are mostly confined within the walls of evangelical seminaries, which are, as far as the great debate on African theology is concerned, the sidelines.

But it is not only the scholars but the church as a whole which has got to learn to think biblically for the African context. Evangelicals, who make so much of biblical authority, are too often ruled in practice, in Africa as in the West, by theological and behavioural conventions which they would be hard put to it to defend biblically. We are used to following, not to thinking issues through for ourselves; so no wonder we do not make the running.

With all this in mind, it was with a sense of great expectation that I sat recently in a small group late one night in the Ivory Coast laying the foundations for an Evangelical Theological Society for Africa. A name and an organisation mean nothing, but if the evident enthusiasm for this development is maintained, it suggests p. 31 that African evangelicalism is beginning to stir itself to think seriously about the application of biblical truth to the African scene. And if that is so, it augurs well for the church in Africa as a whole. It is not too late to influence the growth of the infant African theology in the direction of a more healthy balance of the two crucial factors of being at the same time African and biblical.

THE ISSUES AT STAKE

But what sort of issues are involved? Where is this 'serious thinking' needed for Christianity in Africa? Three main areas seem crucial, within each of which are many more specific issues than can be mentioned here.

1. Theology

The traditional religions of Africa, which have long been dismissed by the educated, at least in the missionary-dominated areas, as primitive and incompatible with 20th century life, are increasingly the object not only of academic study but of experimental interest; some intellectuals are no longer ashamed to be known as 'traditional religionists', and

some 'African Christian theologians' are becoming prominent apologists for, even promoters of, the old faiths. So the African Christian is being forced to reconsider the total repudiation of his ancestral religion which the missionaries had taught him. Was it, as he was often taught to believe, all a work of the devil? Is there not the possibility of truth apart from the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Or, to put it more theologically, just how far does general revelation extend? In this connection passages like Acts 14.15ff, 17.22ff, and specially Romans 1.18ff come vividly to life. Would Paul have preached in the same way in pre-Christian Africa? Is this how the missionaries approached African religions?

Even to raise such questions is to cause horror in many Christian circles in Africa. It is uncomfortable to feel a rocking of the boat which the missionaries launched and which has been forging ahead so smoothly; it is irresponsible thus to unsettle the unquestioning faithful. But the questions are being asked, and the younger generation of African intellectuals are taking them up eagerly. This is not a time for clinging blindly to traditions, but p. 32 for a careful re-examination of the evidence; in other words, for theological discussion, which in this connection will mean a responsible exegetical study of passages like Romans 1 and 2, leading to a restatement of the doctrine of general revelation in relation to the African context.

The point, at which this question becomes most acute is often that notoriously 'grey area' in Christian theology, the fate of the unevangelised. Granted that salvation is only through the atoning work of Christ (and even that is *not* granted by all concerned!) what does this imply about the devout traditional religionist who never heard the gospel? It is one thing to debate this issue in a cosy British common-room with centuries of Christian tradition shielding us from any personal implications; it is quite another matter when your grandfather died in undisturbed 'paganism', and everything in your culture insists that your ancestors are still very much involved in the life of your community. In that situation you may well find it more congenial to study the Old Testament saints and to discuss their status before God than to keep on trotting out the 'hard-line' texts like John 14.6 and Acts 4.12 with a smug *QED*. Then you may hear some theologians suggesting that the traditional religions were a sort of *praeparatio evongelica*, a schoolmaster to lead to Christ just like the Old Testament law, and even proposing that African Christians dispense with the Old Testament and put in its place the corpus of African religious tradition.

When you are up against this sort of question, there will be little help to be found in the western theological texts which line the shelves of African seminary libraries. The African church has got to do its own theological homework, and unless it finds theologians who take the biblical revelation as their non-negotiable starting-point but who are prepared to ask radical questions about its interpretation and its application to their own intellectual scene, its future is murky.

2. Culture

The need for an increasingly African image in such areas as church music, buildings, dress, forms of worship, etc., is now widely recognised, at least in theory, although there is often strong resistance at the grass-roots level to such 'unchurchly' innovations p. 33 as drums and dancing. The Catholics have taken the lead here, acting while the protestants talk, and some of their developments in African Christian art, music and architecture are quite exciting.

But these are not the most difficult issues in cultural adaptation, important though they are for the appeal of Christianity to the newly self-conscious Africa. Culture goes deeper than forms of expression. It involves the whole life of a people, and religion is an inseparable part of it. Here arise the more serious problems, when the traditions received

from the missionaries conflict with those of the society. To decide what is fundamentally unchristian, as opposed to what is unfamiliar or unacceptable to western Christianity, is a task which demands careful study and an almost impossible degree of objectivity, as the African theologian is torn between the pull of African authenticity and a long-grained suspicion of 'pagan' customs.

Should a Nigerian Christian, for instance, seek or accept chieftaincy titles? They have lost nothing of their importance in the life of the community, and are an undoubted source of prestige and authority which could be valuable to the Christian cause. To refuse such a title is to cock a snook at society. But these titles have religious associations, not now taken very seriously *as religion* by most of those involved, but traditionally an essential part of the ceremonial. So the missionaries denounced them as intrinsically pagan. Now the churches find themselves divided, with the Catholic church permitting and even encouraging its members to take titles, while most protestant bodies are officially opposed to them, but far from agreed in practice.

More fundamental still is the issue of polygamy, which is a central feature of many African societies, and is far from dying out after a century of colonial rule. Most African Christians agree that monogamy is God's ideal, and would disapprove of a Christian taking a second wife (though this is not true in many of the independent churches). But the question of the Christian who was a polygamist before his conversion is a sure recipe for a lively debate in African evangelical circles. The missionaries generally refused to baptise a polygamist until he had divorced all but his first wife.

It was a workable rule of thumb, but was it the biblical position? Does the New Testament attitude to divorce count for so little? p. 34 And what of Paul's advice that a convert should remain in the condition in which he was called (I Corinthians 7.17ff)? If this does not apply to polygamy, why not? Without in the least weakening the insistence on monogamy as the biblical ideal, many Christians are questioning seriously which is the lesser evil in this situation. It is not an academic issue; you cannot conclude smugly that the biblical evidence is not clear when you have a polygamist sitting in front of you asking for baptism!

Such issues are easily decided on the basis of prejudice and convention, and that is too often the level at which the debate is conducted. But there has been too little open discussion of the biblical position, not at the level of proof-texts but of principles.

3. Social and political issues

Christianity is stigmatised throughout Africa as the white man's religion. To point out that this is not true in terms of its ultimate origin cuts little ice when in most of Africa it *was* the white man, the political and economic exploiter of Africa, who brought it. And it is undeniable that the values and practices, not to mention the theology, of African Christianity have been until very recently overwhelmingly those of the white man. Christianity is thus an obvious target for the militant nationalism which is the over-riding reality in modern Africa, whether it finds its ideological base in traditional religion and culture, or in Marxist theory, or even in the political aspirations of Islam. (It is interesting how much more successful Islam: has been in projecting itself as an authentically African religion than Christianity; undoubtedly Christianity's link with the colonial regimes has a lot to do with this.) While nothing is further from the intention of most present-day missionaries than cultural imperialism, Christianity is saddled with the image of the colonial era.

Last December Christians from all over Africa met in Nairobi for the Pan-African Christian Leadership Assembly, and one of the dominant impressions of those present was the breaking down of barriers between black and white in a common commitment to

the cause of Christ in Africa. Yet when I visited Nairobi a few days later, and talked to more radical churchmen outside the PACLA constituency, I found the whole exercise branded as an imperialist propaganda device, designed to buttress white control p. 35 of the future of African evangelicalism and to rehabilitate the white regime in South Africa. African Christianity, and especially evangelical Christianity, has a lot to live down.

Such an image may be unfair and outdated. But that does not stop it being believed. African Christianity has got to show that it knows and cares about the concerns of Africa today, that it is not tied to the vested interests of western 'Christian' capitalism. African evangelicalism has got to realise that an exclusive concern for personal piety and doctrinal orthodoxy is not the sum total of biblical religion, and that a concern for political and economic issues is not a sign of worldliness and deviation from the truth. (Try telling that to the Old Testament prophets!). If the discussion of exploitation and liberation is left to the radicals, you cannot complain at radical results.

When the All-Africa Conference of Churches calls for a missionary moratorium, it is not enough to 'tut, tut'; there must be thorough study of mission-church relationships in the past and in the present, and a new look at the biblical pattern for cross-cultural co-operation in the mission of the church. When South African theologians produce a 'Black theology' (not to be confused with 'African theology') which virtually equates 'black' with 'good' and 'white' with 'evil', it is not enough to shrug one's shoulders and return to the production of Sunday School manuals. The Bible has a great deal to say about justice and nationhood, and it is up to African evangelicals to study it and apply it to the crying needs of their continent. Until they do, the whole of African evangelicalism is in danger of being dismissed as one great Uncle Tom.

THE GREATEST NEED

I have written all this as an outsider. Really I have no right to do it, and I stand open to correction by my African brethren, particularly for some of my more cavalier statements. But I wonder if the very fact that it was a Westerner who was asked to write this article is not perhaps an indication that there is some truth in the assessment I have given.

I have talked a lot about theology, about the need to develop a theology for Africa which is both uncompromisingly biblical and p. 36 authentically African. I believe this (if 'theology' is taken in a sufficiently broad sense) is the single greatest need of the church in Africa today.

Meanwhile the church marches on. It grows by leaps and bounds. It is overwhelmingly an evangelical church, at least in the broad sense that most grass-roots believers, whether in the independent churches or in the denominations of western origin, turn instinctively to the Bible as their religious authority and believe in a God who is real and a salvation which really makes a difference. But it is also a credulous church, wide open to any appealing new teaching which can quote a biblical verse or a miraculous cure in its support. It needs teaching and direction, from within, not from outside. It needs theology, its own African, Christian theology. Until it has it, while it may continue to grow in numbers, it will not grow in influence on the new Africa, and it will be increasingly dismissed as a hangover from the colonial past. p. 37