EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 7

Volume 7 • Number 2 • October 1983

Evangelical Review of Theology

Articles and book reviews selected from publications worldwide for an international readership, interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary living.

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

92. For 200 years we have been talking in the poisonous intellectual smoke of German theology and science; and now we have realized that it is the cup of God's wrath (Isaiah 51:17–23) and a cup of God's judgement; because we thought ourselves wise, we have been choked by the German creations (I Corinthians 1:29). 'I testify for them that they are zealous for God, but without understanding'.

93. Only through a refreshing spiritual wind instead of these powerful dust and snow storms, can the 200 year strong intellectual 'ice-age' in Europe be overcome and the ice melted for the use of man (Psalm 147:8). He sends his word do that the snow melts. He sends his wind, so it works. The intellectual gifts which should have brought us to maturity have brought us to a fall, because they have stayed in the place of God, the only giver of all good things (James 3:17).

———————————

Rev. Scheunemann studied theology in Tübingen, Göttingen and Kid, and served as a missionary with WEC in Batu, Indonesia, as an evangelist and teacher at the Indonesian Bible Institute, Batu. p. 219

The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture

Andrew F. Walls

Reprinted from Faith and Thought 108 (1–2) 1981*, with permission*

Covering the broad span of Church history the author surveys the tension between the indigenising and pilgrim principles in the gospel's encounter with culture. He raises important questions about the future of Christian theology and African theologies in particular. This article is based on Prof. Walls' lecture at 1980 VI Symposium of the Victoria Institute of Great Britain.

IS THERE A 'HISTORIC CHRISTIAN FAITH'?

Let us imagine a long-living scholarly space visitor—a Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions perhaps—who is able to get periodic space-grants which enable him to visit Earth for field study every few centuries. Let us further assume that he wishes to pursue the study of the earth-religion Christianity on principles of Baconian induction, observing the practices, habits and concerns of a representative sample of Christians, and that he exploits the advantage he has over any earthbound scholar by taking his sample across the centuries.

Let us assume his first visit to be to a group of the original Jerusalem Christians, about 37 AD. He notes that they are all Jews; indeed, they are meeting in the Temple, where only Jews can enter. They offer animal sacrifices. They keep the seventh day punctiliously free from work. They circumcize their male children. They carefully follow a succession of rituals, and delight in the reading of old Law books. They appear, in fact, to be one of several 'denominations' of Judaism. What distinguishes them from the others is simply

that they identify the figures of Messiah, Son of Man and Suffering Servant (figures all described in those law books) with the recent prophet-teacher Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believe to have inaugurated the last days. They live normal family lives, with a penchant for large, close families; and they have a tightly-knit social organization, with many common meals taken in each other's houses. Law and joyful observance strike our spaceman observer as key notes of the religion of these early Christians.

His next visit to earth is made about 325 AD. He attends a great meeting of Church leaders—perhaps even the Council of Nicea. The company come from all over the Mediterranean world and beyond it, but hardly one of them is Jewish; indeed on the whole they are rather hostile to Jews. They are horrified at the thought of animal sacrifices; p. 220 when they talk about offering sacrifices they mean bread and wine used rather as it was in the house meals our observer noticed in Jerusalem. They do not have children themselves, since Church leaders are not expected to marry, and indeed most of them regard marriage as an inferior, morally compromised state; but they would regard a parent who circumcized his children as having betrayed his faith. They treat the Seventh Day as an ordinary working day: they have special religious observances on the first day, but do not necessarily abstain from work or other activities. They use the Law Books that the Jerusalem Christians used, in translation, and thus know the titles Messiah, Son of Man and Suffering Servant; but 'Messiah' has now become almost the surname of Jesus, and the other titles are hardly used at all. They give equal value to another set of writings, not even composed when the Jerusalem Christians met, and tend to used other titles, 'Son of God', 'Lord', to designate Jesus.

Their present preoccupation, however, is with the application of another set of words to Jesus—words not to be found in either set of writings. The debate, (and they believe it of absolutely fundamental importance) is over whether the Son is *homo-ousios* with the Father, or only *homoi-ousios* with Him.

The dominant factors which the outsider notices as characteristic of these Christians are the concern with metaphysics and theology, an intense intellectual scrutiny, an attempt to find precise signifiance for precise terms. He thinks of the Jewish Christians in the Temple nearly three centuries back, and wonders.

The best cure for his wonderment is the still greater wonder of a journey to Ireland some three centuries later still.

A number of monks are gathered on a rocky coastline. Several are standing in ice-cold water up to their necks, reciting the psalms. Some are standing immobile, praying—with their arms outstretched in the form of a cross. One is receiving six strokes of the lash because he did not answer 'Amen' when the grace was said at the last meal of brown bread and pulse. Others are going off in a small boat in doubtful weather with a box of beautiful manuscripts and not much else to distribute themselves on islands in the Firth of Clyde, calling the astonished inhabitants to give up their worship of nature divinities and seek for joy in a future heavenly kingdom: others are sitting quite alone in dark caves by the seashore, seeking no intercourse with men.

He ascertains from these curious beings that their beautiful manuscripts include versions of the same holy writings that the Greek fathers used. He notices that the Irish use the same formula that he heard being hammered out in Nicea in 325 AD; somewhat to his surprise, p. 221 because they do not in general seem very interested in theology or very good at metaphysics. They attach great importance to the date on which they celebrate their main festival, Easter; an outsider is most likely to notice their desire for holiness and their heroic austerity in quest of it.

Our spaceman delays his next visit until the 1840s, when he comes to London and finds in Exeter Hall a large and visibly excited assembly hearing speeches about the

desirability of promoting Christianity, commerce and civilization in Africa. They are proposing that missionaries armed with Bibles and cotton seeds be sent a distance of four thousand miles to effect the process. They are also proposing a deputation to the British Government about the necessity of putting down the slave trade, raising a subscription to promote the education of black mechanics, agreeing that letters be written, pamphlets and articles published. The meeting has begun with a reading from the same book (in English translation) that the other Christians used, and there have been many other quotations from the book; indeed, a large number of people in the meeting seem to be carrying it. On enquiry, the observer finds that most also accept without question the creed of Nicea. Like the Irish, they also use the word 'holy' quite a lot; but they are aghast at the suggestion that holiness could be connected with standing in cold water, and utterly opposed to the idea of spending life praying in an isolated cave. Whereas the Irish monks were seeking to live on as little as possible, most of this group look remarkably well fed. What impresses the outsider is their activism and the involvement of their religion in all the processes of life and society.

In 1980 he comes to earth again, this time to Lagos, Nigeria. A white-robed group is dancing and chanting through the streets on their way to their church. They are informing the world at large that they are Cherubim and Seraphim; they are inviting people to come and experience the power of God in their services. They claim that God has messages for particular individuals and that His power can be demonstrated in healing. They carry and quote from the same book as the Exeter Hall gentlemen. They say (on being shown the document in a prayer book) that they accept the creed of Nicea, but they display little interest in it: they appear somewhat vague about the relationship of the Divine Son and the Holy Spirit. They are not politically active and the way of life pursued by the Exeter Hall gentlemen is quite foreign to them; they fast like the Irish, but only on fixed occasions and for fixed purposes. The characteristic which springs most readily to the spaceman's mind is their concern with power, as revealed in preaching, healing, and personal vision. p. 222

Back in his planetary home, how does our scholar correlate the phenomena he has observed? It is not simply that these five groups of humans, all claiming to be Christians, appear to be concerned about different things; the concerns of one group appear suspect or even repellent to another.

Now in no case has he chosen freakish examples of Christians. He has gone to groups which may, as far as such statements can be permissible at all, be said to reflect representative concerns of Christians of those times and places, and in each case the place is in the Christian heartlands of that period. In AD 37 most Christians were Jews. Not only was Jerusalem the main Christian centre; Jerusalem Christians laid down the norms and standards for other people. By AD 325 few Christians were Jews, the main Christian centres lay in the Eastern Mediterranean and the key language for Christians was Greek. By AD 600, the balance had shifted westward, and the growing edge of Christianity was among the northern and western tribal and semi-tribal peoples—and Ireland was a power centre. In the 1840s Great Britain would certainly be among the outstanding Christian nations, and certainly the one most notably associated with the expansion of the Christian faith. By 1980, the balance had shifted again, southwards; Africa is now the continent most notable for those that profess and call themselves Christians.[1]

---

[1] cf. D. B. Barrett, 'A.D. 2000:350 million Christians in Africa', *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 39–54; A. F. Wails, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history', in J. S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a pluralistic society: essays presented to Professor C. G. Baëta*, Leiden 1976, p.180–189.

So will our visitor conclude that there *is* no coherence? That the use of the name Christian by such diverse groups is fortuitous, or at least misleading? Or does he catch among the spheres some trace of Gilbert Murray's remark that representative Christians of the third, thirteenth and twentieth centuries would have less in common that would a Catholic, Methodist and Freethinker, or even (glancing round the College Common Room and noting the presence of Sir Savapelli Radhakrishnan) 'a well-educated Buddhist or Brahmin at the present day'.[2] Is shared religion in the end simply a function of shared culture?

Our spaceman may, however, note that between the five groups he has visited there is a historical connection. It was Christians scattered from Jerusalem who first preached to Greeks and founded that vast Greek edifice he observed in 325; it is in Eastern Christianity that we must seek some of the important features and some of the power of Celtic Christian religion. That Celtic religion played a vital part in the p. 223 gradual emergence of the religion of Exeter Hall. And the Cherubim and Seraphim now in Lagos are ultimately a result of the very sort of operations which were under discussion at the Exeter Hall meeting.

But besides this historical connection, closer examination reveals that there are other definite signs of continuity. There is, in all the wild profusion of the varying statements of these differing groups, one theme which is unvarying as the language which expresses it is various: that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance. In the institutional sphere, too, all use the same sacred writings; and all use bread and wine and water in a special way. Still more remarkable is the continuity of consciousness. Each group thinks of itself as having some community with the others, so different in time and place, and despite being so obviously out of sympathy with many of their principal concerns. Still more remarkable, each thinks of itself as in some respect continuous with ancient Israel, even though only the first have any conceivable ethnic reason to do so, and though some of the groups must have found it extremely hard to form any concept of ancient Israel, or any clear idea of what a Jew might be or look like.

Our observer is therefore led to recognize an essential continuity of Christianity: continuity of thought about the final significance of Jesus, continuity of a certain consciousness about history, continuity in the use of the Scriptures, of bread and wine, of water. But he recognizes that these continuities are cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to their environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or indeed even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon.

THE 'INDIGENIZING' PRINCIPLE

Church history has always been a battleground for two opposing tendencies; and the reason is that each of the tendencies has its origin in the Gospel itself. On the one hand it is of the essence of the Gospel that God accepts us as we are, on the ground of Christ's work alone, not on the ground of what we have become or are trying to become. But, if He accepts us 'as we are' that implies He does not take us as isolated, self-governing u nits, because we are not. We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by 'culture' in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another. But if He takes us with our group relations, then surely it follows that He takes us with P. 224 our 'dis-relations' also; those predispositions,

[2] Gilbert Murray, *Five stages of Greek religion*, 1935, p.174.

prejudices, suspicions and hostilities, whether justified or not, which mark the group to which we belong. He does not wait to tidy up our ideas any more than He waits to tidy up our behaviour before He accepts us sinners into His family.

The impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history: the desire to 'indigenize', to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one's own society, to make the church (to use the memorable title of a book about Independent churches in Africa) 'A place to feel at home'.[3] The desire to do this is tied up with the very nature of the Gospel; it is patterned in the Incarnation itself. When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, members of a particular nation, with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil He sanctified. Wherever He is taken by men in any time and place He takes that nationality, that society, that 'culture', and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by his presence.

This fact has led to more than one crisis in Christian history, including the first and most important of all. When the eiders at Jerusalem in the council of Acts 15 came to their decision that Gentiles could enter Israel without becoming Jews, had they any idea how close the time would be when *most* Christians would be Gentiles? And would they have been so happy with their decision had they realized it? Throughout the early years the Jerusalem Church was in a position to set the standards and to make the decisions, because of its direct connection with the Saviour, and its incomparably greater knowledge of the Scriptures. And when its historic decision opened the door wide for Gentile believers in the Jewish Messiah, there must have been many who assumed that nevertheless Gentile Christians, as they matured, would come to look as much like Jerusalem Christians as was possible for such benighted heathen. At least Acts 21:20 suggests that, while being decently glad of the 'mission field' conversions recounted by Paul, they continued to think of Jerusalem as the regulative centre of God's saving work. What were the thoughts of those who fled from Jerusalem as the Roman armies moved in to cast down the Temple? Did they realize that the future of Messiah's proclamation now lay with people who were uncircumcized, defective in their knowledge of Law and Prophets, still confused by hangovers from paganism, and able to p. 225 eat pork without turning a hair? Yet this—and the fact that there were still many left to speak of Jesus as Messiah—was the direct result of the decision of the Jerusalem Council to allow Gentile converts 'a place to feel at home'. So also was the acceptance of Paul's emphatic teaching that since God accepts the heathen as they are, circumcision, food avoidances and ritual washings, are not for them. Christ has so made Himself at home in Corinthian society that a pagan is consecrated through his or her Christian marriage partner (1 Cor. 7:14) No group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place.

The fact, then, that 'if any man is in Christ he is a new creation' does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is as true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches—including our own.

But throughout Church history there has been another force in tension with this indigenizing principle, and this also is equally of the Gospel. Not only does God in Christ take people as they are; He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no

[3] By F. B. Welbourn and B. A. Ogot, 1967.

abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. Jesus within Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions—not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.

Just as the indigenizing principle, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the *particulars* of their culture and group, the pilgrim principle, in tension with the indigenizing and equally of the Gospel, by associating them with things and people outside the culture and group, is in some respects a *universalizing* factor. The Christian has all the relationships in which he was brought up, and has them sancified by Christ who is living in them. But he has also an entirely new set of relationships, with other members of the family of faith into which he has come, and whom he must accept, with all their group relations (and 'disrelations') on them, just as God has accepted him with his. Every Christian has dual nationality, and has a loyalty to p. 226 the faith family which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that to which he belongs by nature.

In addition—as we observed to be the case in all the spaceman's varied groups of representative Christians—the Christian is given an adoptive past. He is linked to the people of God in all generations (like him, members of the faith family), and most strangely of all, to the whole history of Israel, the curious continuity of the race of the faithful from Abraham. By this means, the history of Israel is part of Church history,[4] and all Christians of whatever nationality, are landed by adoption with several millennia of someone else's history, with a whole set of ideas, concepts and assumptions which do not necessarily square with the rest of their cultural inheritance; and the Church in every land, of whatever race and type of society, has this same adoptive past by which it needs to interpret the fundamentals of the faith. The adoption into Israel becomes a 'universalizing' factor, bringing Christians of all cultures and ages together through a common inheritance, lest any of us make the Christian faith such a place to feel at home that no one else can live there; and bringing into everyone's society some sort of outside reference.

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND ITS CULTURAL CONDITIONING

In the remainder of this paper I would like to suggest something of the relevance of the tension between the indigenizing and the pilgrim principles for the future of Christian theology.

First, let us recall that within the last century there has been a massive southward shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian world, so that the representative Christian lands now appear to be in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other parts of the southern continents. This means that Third World theology is now likely to be the representative Christian theology. On present trends (and I recognize that these may not be permanent) the theology of European Christians, while important for them and their continued existence, may become a matter of specialist interest to historians (rather as the theology of the Syriac Edessence Church is a specialist matter for early church historians of today, not a topic for the ordinary student and general reader, whose eyes are turned to the

[4] '.. the first fact of the Church (is) that we are Gentiles who worship the God of the Jews'—with *their* psalms, in Gentile languages but their concepts. P. van Buren, 'The mystery and salvation and prayer', *Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies Yearbook*, Jerusalem 1977–78, 37–52.

Greco-Roman world when he studies the history of doctrine). The future general reader of Church p. 227 history is more likely to be concerned with Latin American and African, and perhaps some Asian, theology. It is perhaps significant that in the last few years we have seen for the first time works of theology composed in the Third World (the works of Latin American theologians of liberation, such as Guttierez, Segundo and Miguez Bonino) becoming regular reading in the west—not just for missiologists, but for the general theological reader. The fact that particular Third World works of theology appear on the Western market is not, however, a necessary measure of their intrinsic importance. It simply means that publishers think them sufficiently relevant to the West to sell there. Theology is addressed to the setting in which it is produced.

This is perhaps the first important point to remember about theology: that since it springs out of practical situations, it is therefore *occasional* and *local* in character. Since we have mentioned Guttierez, some words of his may be quoted here. Theology, he says, arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all who have accepted the gift of the word of God. There is therefore in every believer, and every community of believers, at least a rough outline of a theology. This conviction leads to another: whatever else theology is, it is what Guttierez calls 'critical reflexion on Christian practice in the light of the word'.[5] That is, theology is about testing your actions by Scripture.

In this, of course, we are hearing the typical modern Latin American theologian, who is stung by the fact that it has taken Marxists to point out things that Amos and Isaiah said long ago, while Christians have found good theological reasons to justify the position of Jeroboam, Manasseh and Dives; and is nagged by the remark of Bernanos that 'God does not choose the same men to keep his word as to fulfill it'. But it is likely to be the way of things also in Africa. The domestic tasks of Third World theology are going to be so basic, so vital, that there will be little time for the barren, sterile time-wasting by-paths into which so much Western theology and theological research has gone in recent years. Theology in the Third World will be, as theology at all creative times has always been, about *doing* things, about things that deeply affect the lives of numbers of people. We see something of this already in South African Black Theology, which is literally about life and death matters (As one South African Black Theologian put it to me 'Black Theology is about how to stay Christian when you're a Black in South Africa, and you're hanging on by the skin of your teeth.') There is no need to go back to wars of religion when men shed blood for their theologies: but at least there is something to be said for having a p. 228 theology about things which are worth shedding blood for. And that, Third World Theology is likely to be.

Because of this relation of theology to action, theology arises out of situations that actually happen, not from broad general principles. Even the Greek Church, with centuries of intellectual and rhetorical tradition took almost 200 years to produce a book of theology written for its own sake, Origen's *De Principiis*. In those two centuries innumerable theological books were written, but not for the sake of producing theologies. The theology was for a purpose: to *explain* the faith to outsiders, or to point out where the writer thought someone else has misrepresented what Christians meant.

It is therefore important, when thinking of African theology, to remember that it will act on an African agenda. It is useless for us to determine what we think an African theology ought to be doing: it will concern itself with questions that worry Africans, and will leave blandly alone all sorts of questions which we think absolutely vital. We all do the same. How many Christians belonging to churches which accept the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith could explain with any conviction to an intelligent non-Christian

---

[5] G. Guttierez, *A theology of liberation*, Eng. trs. Maryknoll and London 1973, 6–15

why it is important not to be a Nestorian or a Monophysite? Yet once men not only excommunicated each other, they shed their own and other's blood to get the right answer on that question. The things which we think are vital points of principle will seem as far away and negligible to African theologians as those theological prize fights among the Egyptian monks now seem to us. Conversely the things that concern African theologians may seem to us at best peripheral. Remembering the emergence of theology at a popular level, it is noteworthy how African Independent churches sometimes seem to pick on a point which strikes us by its oddity or irrelevance, like rules about worship during the menstrual period. But this is usually because the topic, or the sort of topic, is a major one for certain African Christians, just as it apparently was for the old Hebrews and it needs an answer, and an answer related to Christ. There often turns out to be a sort of coherence in the way in which these churches deal with it, linking Scripture, old traditions and the Church as the new Levitical community—and giving an answer to something that had been worrying people. In short, it is safe for a European to make only one prediction about the valid, authentic African Biblical theology we all talk about: that it is likely either to puzzle us or to disturb us.

But is not the sourcebook of all valid theology the canonical Scriptures? Yes, and in that, as the spaceman found, lies the continuity of the Christian faith. But, as he also found, the Scriptures are read with p. 229 different eyes by people in different times and places; and in practice, each age and community makes its own selection of the Scriptures, giving prominence to those which seem to speak most clearly to the community's time and place and leaving aside others which do not appear to yield up their gold so readily. How many of us, while firm as a rock as to its canonicity, seriously look to the book of Leviticus for sustenance? Yet many an African Independent church has found it abundantly relevant. (Interestingly, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the great 19th century Yoruba missionary bishop, thought it should be among the first books of the Bible to be translated).

The indigenizing principle ensures that each community recognizes in Scripture that God is speaking to its own situation. But it also means that we all appproach Scripture wearing cultural blinkers, with assumptions determined by our time and place. It astonishes us when we read second century Christian writers who all venerated Paul, and to whom we owe the preservation of his writings, that they never seem to understand what we are sure he means by justification by faith. It is perhaps only in our own day, when we do not read Plato so much, that Western Christians have begun to believe that the resurrection of the body is not the immortality of the soul, or to recognize the solidly material content of Biblical salvation. Africans will have their cultural blinkers, too, which will prevent, or at least render it difficult for them to see some things. But they will doubtless be different things from those hidden in our own blind spots, so they should be able to see some things much better than we do.

That wise old owl, Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society, reflecting on the Great Commission in 1868, argued that the fulness of the Church would only come with the fulness of the national manifestations of different national churches.

> Inasmuch as all native churches grow up into the fulness of the Stature of Christ, distinctions and defects will vanish … But it may be doubted whether, to the last, the Church of Christ will not exhibit marked national characteristics which, in the overruling grace of God, will tend to its perfection and glory.[6]

[6] Instructions of the Committee of the Church Missionary Society to departing missionaries 30 June 1868. (Reproduced in W. Knight, *The missionary secretariat of Henry Venn*, 1880, 284).

Perhaps it is not only that different ages and nations see different things in Scripture—it is that they *need to see different things*. p. 230

THE PRESENT AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

The major theological debate in independent Africa[7] just now—Item 1 on the African theological agenda—would appear to be the nature of the African past. Almost every major work by an African scholar in the field of religions—Harry Sawyerr,[8] Bolaji Idowu,[9] J. S. Mbiti,[10] Vincent Mulago[11]—in some way dealing with it. Now each of the authors named was trained in theology on a western model; but each has moved into an area for which no Western syllabus prepared him, for each has been forced to study and lecture on African traditional religion—and each has found himself writing on it. It seems to me, however, that they all approach this topic, not as historians of religion do, nor as anthropologists do. They are still, in fact, Christian theologians. All are wrestling with a theological question, the prime one on the African Christian's intellectual agenda: who am I? What is my relation as an African Christian to Africa's past?

Thus, when Idowu concludes with such passion that the orisas are only manifestations of Olódùmare, and that it is a Western misrepresentation to call Yoruba religion polytheistic, the urgency in his voice arises from the fact that he is not making a clinical observation of the sort one might make about Babylonian religion: he is handling dynamite, his own past, his people's present. One can see why a non-Christian African writer like Obot p'Bitek, who glories in pre-Christian Africa, accuses John Mbiti and others so bitterly of continuing the Western missionary misrepresentation of the past.[12] It is as though he were saying 'They are taking from us our own decent paganism, and plastering it over with interpretations from alien sources'. Here speaks the authentic voice of Celsus.

The mention of Celsus reminds us perhaps that African Christians are not the first people to have a religious identity crisis. Gentile Christians had precisely the same issue to face—an issue that never faced the Jewish missionaries, Paul, Peter, Barnabas. They knew who they were ('circumcized the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin …'), just as Western missionaries for more than 150 confident years knew who p. 231 *they* were. It is our past which tells us who we are; without our past we are lost. The man with amnesia is lost, unsure of relationships, incapable of crucial decisions, precisely because all the time he has amnesia he is without his past. Only when his memory returns, when he is sure of his past, is he able to relate confidently to his wife, his parents, or know his place in a society.

Early Gentile Christianity went through a period of amnesia. It was not so critical for first generation converts: they responded to a clear choice, turned from idols to serve the living God, accepted the assurance that they had been grafted into Israel. It was the second

---

[7] 'Independent Africa' is here distinguished from South Africa, where different conditions have produced different priorities and a different debate.

[8] e.g. *God—Ancestor or Creator*? 1970.

[9] Cf. *Olódùmare. God in Yoruba belief*, 1962; *African traditional religion: a definition*, 1973.

[10] *New Testament eschatology in an African background*, Oxford 1971; *African religious and philosophy*, 1969; *Concepts of God in Africa*, 1970.

[11] Cf. his 'Christianisme et culture africaine', in C. G. Baëta (ed.)., *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, 1968, pp.308–328.

[12] Okot p'Bitek, *African religions in Western scholarship*, Kampala 1971.

and third generation of Christians who felt the strain more. What was their relation to the Greek past? Some of them (some indeed in the first generation, as the New Testament indicates) solved the problem by pretending their Greek past did not exist, by pretending they were Jews, adopting Jewish customs, even to circumcision. Paul saw this coming and roundly condemned it. You are *not* Jews, he argues in Romans 9–11; you *are* Israel, but grafted into it. And, defying all the realities of horticulture, he talks about a wild plant being grafted into a cultivated one. But one thing he is saying is that Gentile Christianity is part of the *wild* olive. It is different in character from the plant into which it is grafted. Such is the necessity of the indigenizing principle.

Later Gentile Christians, by then the majority in the Church, and in no danger of confusing themselves with Jews, had a major problem. Yes, they were grafted into Israel. The sacred history of Israel was part of their history. Yes, the idolatry and immorality of their own society, past and present, must have nothing to do with them. But what was God doing in the Greek world all those centuries while He was revealing himself in judgment and mercy to Israel? Not all the Greek past was graven images and temple prostitution. What of those who testified for righteousness—and even died for it? Had God nothing to do with their righteousness? What of those who taught things that are true—that are according to reason, *logos* opposed to the Great Lies taught and practised by others? Had their *logos* nothing to do with The Logos, the light that lighteth every man coming into the world? Is there any truth which is not God's truth? Was God not active in the Greek past, not just the Jewish? So Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria came up with their own solutions, that there were Christians before Christ, that philosophy was—and is—the schoolmaster to bring the Greeks to Christ, just as was the Law for Jews.

This is no place to renew the old debate about continuity or discontinuity of Christianity with pre-Christian religion, nor to discuss the theology of Justin and Clement, nor to consider the correctness of p. 232 Idowu and Mbiti. My point is simply that the two latter are wrestling with essentially the same problem as the two former, and that it seems to be the most urgent problem facing African Christians today, on their agenda. Until it is thought through, amnesia could make African Christianity tentative and unsure of its relationships, and unable to recognise important tasks. More than one answer may emerge; the early centuries, after all, saw the answer of Tertullian as well as of Clement. And there may be little that outsiders can do to assist. Once again Paul saw what was coming. 'Is He not', he asks his Jewish interlocutor, and on the most thoroughly Jewish grounds, 'the God of the Gentiles also?' (Rom. 3:29f).

The debate will certainly reflect the continuing tension between the indigenizing and the pilgrim principles of the Gospel. Paul, Justin and Clement all knew people who followed one without the other. Just as there were 'pilgrims' who sought to follow, or to impose upon others the modes of thought and life, concerns and preconceptions which belonged to someone else, so there were Greek educated 'indigenizers' who sought to eliminate what they considered 'barbarian' elements from Christianity such as the Resurrection and the Last Judgment. But these things were part of a framework which ultimately derived from the Christian faith, and thus they played down, or ignored, or explicitly rejected, the Old Testament, the Christian adoptive past. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the opponents of these Gnostics is that they were just as Greek as the Gnostics themselves, with many of the same instincts and difficulties; but they knew instinctively that they must hold to their adoptive past, and in doing so saved the Scriptures for the Church. Perhaps the real test of theological authenticity is the capacity to incorporate the history of Israel and God's people and to treat it as one's own.

When the Scriptures are read in some enclosed Zulu Zion, the hearers may catch the voice of God speaking out of a different Zion, and speaking to the whole world. When a

comfortable bourgeois congregation meets in some Western suburbia, they almost alone of all the comfortable bourgeois of the suburbs are regularly exposed to the reading of a non-bourgeois book questioning fundamental assumptions of their society. But since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitment which our own era of Church history has over all others is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue. Never before, therefore, has there been so much potentiality p. 233 for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.[13]

———————————

Professor Andrew Walls is Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. p. 234

Identity Crisis in the African Church

By Ngoni Sengwe

Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, April 1981*, with permission*

This article penetrates some of the causes for the rise of the independent Church movement in Africa which is seeking to relate supernatural Christianity to African world views.

Statistics show that Africa will become a Christian continent by A.D.2000.[1] To some people this may sound unbelievable, but it is true. The church is booming. But while the Christian world is shouting hallelujah for such growth, there is a hidden weakness in this growth.

For instance, David Barrett, a Nairobi researcher, states that this stronge surge of growth is tied to the independent church movement in Africa. Barrett estimates that there are 6,000 or more independent churches in Africa, with South Africa alone accounting for more than 3,000 of them. The Kimbanguist Church of Zaire is probably the largest with about three million members. These churches are growing at the rate of 100 every year in Africa. Probably, one out of every twelve African Christians is affiliated with an African Independent Church.[2] These churches are independent from mission domination and control; they are nonliturgical congregations, adopting and adapting Christianity where they will with real cultural impact.

---

[13] I am grateful for permission to quote here some sentences from my paper 'African and Christian identity' which appeared in the Mennonite Journal *Mission Focus* and was reprinted in W. R. Shenk (ed.) *Mission focus; current issues*, Scottdale, Penna. 1980.

[1] Tokunboh Adeyemo. 'An African Leader Looks at the Churches' Crises', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1978, p. 151.

[2] Independent church may include one congregation. The words *mission church, older church, historical church* are used interchangeably.