

# Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 31 • Number 2 • April 2007

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# African Christianity in Global Religious and Cultural Conflict

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**KEYWORDS:** *Cultural wars, religious wars, Islam, Jihad, globalization, freedom, missions, North African Christianity, indigenous religions, biblical authority, fundamentalism*

I WAS ASKED TO write and present a paper on the topic 'Theological Reflection on Religious Fundamentalism as a Global Issue' from an African perspective. Having researched and read materials available on 'Religious Fundamentalism', the following important major global issues emerged that are relevant and important to our theological reflection:

- The Western (North America and Europe) war on the resurgent militant Islam and its involvement in physical combat with militant Islamists in the Middle East;
- the great threat and challenge to African Christianity by resurgent militant Islam;
- the emerging revived neo-pagan-

ism, religious cults and syncretism in western nations that have great implications for Christianity worldwide;

- the revival of indigenous traditional religions and cultures in the world caused by contemporary powerful global religious and cultural conflict;
- the emerging rift and conflict between western Christianity and African Christianity.

This paper describes the global religious and cultural wars and conflicts that involve the West as a regional block comprising North America and Europe; Islam as a religious and cultural block in the Middle East; and Africa as a regional block with historical ties to Christianity, the West and Islam.

The primary objective of this paper is to raise global religious and cultural issues for theological reflection. Hopefully this will raise the need of defining

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the identity, role and status of African Christianity vis-à-vis western Christianity and Islam. It also raises some important issues for theological reflection on the current state of Christianity in the West and the influence of western global civilizing forces (democracy, advanced science and technology and capitalism) on the global scene.

The paper seeks to place African Christianity amid global religious and cultural wars between the West and Islam and its general impact upon Christianity; the threat and challenge of western modern philosophies (secularism, pluralism, relativism and modernism), global civilizing forces (democracy, advanced science and technology and capitalism) and neopaganism on Christianity and Islam; and the enduring and pervasive influence of traditional religions and cultures upon African Christianity and the revival of paganism in the West.

The West is not only waging a contemporary war against militant Islamists, but historically and ironically, it has been waging a religious war principally against Christianity and its own ethnocentrism. It is important that we examine this theological implication for world Christianity as a result of the decline of western Christianity; western rebellion against Christianity; and the revival of neopaganism in the West.

On the whole, the paper aims at raising theological questions and issues that are beyond the traditional discourse on religious fundamentalism. It is significant that we engage ourselves with major global issues of religious and cultural conflict that have grave implications not only for Christianity, but for the whole world.

## 1. The West, Christianity and Islam

Since 9/11 in 2001 the West (North America and Europe) has intensified its war against Islamic terrorism, or Islamic fascists, or Islamic fundamentalists or militant Islamists. This is a global religious and cultural war that is generating fierce socio-political and religious conflict and violence globally. Does Christian theology have something to contribute to the world about this on-going religious and cultural war?

From the western perspective, the on-going war between the West and Islam in general is not religious and neither is it cultural because in the West, both western culture and Christianity have been pushed to the periphery of society. Christian influence has been weakened and Christianity is generally being rejected. All those who adhere to orthodox Christianity are called various names such as fundamentalist, conservative or primitive. But the war between the West and Islam is indeed a war of civilization, a war to entrench western democracy, advanced science and technology and capitalism in the world. But Islam and other religions or cultures, on the other hand, are waging not a war of civilization as the West does, but a religious and cultural war of self-defence, survival and preservation of their religions and cultures. There is a strong fear that western global civilizing forces may take away the only thing which they have, their own religions and cultures. Islam has never shied away from emphasizing the fact that she is fighting a religious war against the West. It is a *Jihad*.

Besides waging a war against Islamists, there is another serious war which the West has been waging since the Renaissance, principally against Christianity. The West uses three powerful forces within its civilization to fight against Christianity, namely: modern philosophies (secularism, pluralism, relativism and modernism); global civilizing forces (democracy, advanced science and technology and capitalism); and the current revival of pagan religion (neo-paganism). These global civilizing forces from the West have devastating global consequences for Christianity and other religions and cultures.

It is important to note that the West does not use modern philosophies or neo-paganism in its wars against Islamists and other civilizations. Its warfare with them is not a religious one, but that of civilization as already noted. It uses its global civilizing forces (democracy, advanced science and technology and capitalism) to fight Islam and other civilizations. Westerners do not have to be Christians in order to fight these global wars of civilization. They may do so, but only privately as Christians or secularists or atheists or neo-pagans. The West is not out to defend Christianity or ethnocentrism. Rather, it is out to defend principally its global civilizing forces, especially the values of democracy and the free world. The war is to defend and promote individualism, human rights and freedoms of all peoples of the world. It is not a war to defend religion, but a civilization that is not religious. This is the point of difference between the West and Islam and other religions and cultures.

In Islam, you can fight this war only

when you are a Muslim. It is not a war to be fought by unbelievers or infidels. If one believes in the cause of Islam, one should be ready to die any kind of death for the sake of Islam.

Looking back, the World Council of Churches (WCC) sponsored conferences and research on the dialogue of religions and cultures between the late 1950s and 1970s. The United Nations Organization (UNO) did the same in the 1980s up to 2000s. Unfortunately, the world has moved beyond the state of dialogue and the search for peaceful co-existence of religions and cultures to belligerency, conflict, violence and warfare. In the wake of contemporary resurgent militant Islam since 1979, the language has changed from dialogue and peaceful co-existence to 'let's unite behind Islam to fight Satan and Evil America' or 'let's unite behind America (Freedom) to fight Islamic terrorists or Islamic Fascists'. The only language left is militaristic in order to crush the terrorists or the Islamist cry *Allahu Akbar*. Is there any Christian theological language that we can use today? The Muslims have rejected 'dialogue' and 'human rights' as western clichés. They have turned a deaf ear to the West. How is the West reading Islamist language of violence and terrorism? What does Christianity make of this?

In the contemporary world, there is a strong demand for Christian theologians to have a fresh look at western concepts of democracy, human rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the western conception of individualism tends to place autonomous man above God his Creator. The non-western conception of man and his rights is radically different from that of the West. In

Islam, human rights are rooted in both Shari'a and Allah. The custodian of both Shari'a and Allah is the Islamic Authority or the Theocratic State. In traditional Africa, human rights are rooted not in the individual but in the community. Western concepts of human rights are deeply humanistic and secular. The secular doctrines of human rights are rooted in absolute individualism or absolute human autonomy. Both Christianity and Islam reject such.

In Christianity, man can be free only in God and not apart from him. Man lives responsibly under God's moral and spiritual order. Human rights are a godly demand of a man under oppression by another man or any human institution. Rights and the moral social order (morality) are intertwined and go hand in hand and are inseparable. The bane of western claims of human rights is its lack of the authority of the moral and social order. It is simply rights without any moral order.

## 2. Historical Ties between Western Christianity and African Christianity

There is a strong historical tie and relationship between western Christianity and African Christianity. For centuries, western Christianity has exerted a very powerful influence over African Christianity. If western Christianity should reject its biblical and apostolic roots, it is most likely to affect African Christianity profoundly as a result of this historical tie and relationship.

Africa has two forms of historical Christianity: (1) the Hellenistic North African Christianity which had its

roots and origins directly from Palestine; and (2) Western Missionary Christianity of the 15th to the 21st centuries. This is the form of Christianity which came to Africa via Europe and North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Western Missionary Christianity forms the largest sector of Christianity in Africa. Islam invaded North Africa in the 7th century and destroyed the North African Christianity. However, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia have survived against all odds to the present. The Nubian Church in Sudan was finally crushed by the Muslims in the 16th century.

Looking at contemporary world affairs, we are not sure of the future of Christianity in the West, especially Europe. Christianity is fast declining both in numbers and influence amid (1) the pagan revival; and (2) the resurgent militant world-wide Islam. Pagan revival in the West has very serious religious consequences on African Christianity as these are being exported into Africa through the CNN, BBC World and other Mega Media organisations. The Muslims have theirs also—Al Jezeerah that propagates its own Islamic gospel to the world. Similarly, the resurgent militant Islam in its war against both western culture and Christianity has great consequences for the survival of Christianity in Africa. Furthermore, western modern philosophies and neo-paganism are forces of destruction for Christianity.

We must understand the nature of this warfare. Modern western philosophies and neo-paganism do not attack religions or cultures of other peoples outside of the West. Their attacks are

only directed at western culture and Christianity. If Christianity in the West does not escape the onslaughts of western modern philosophies and neo-paganism, certainly, Christianity cannot survive anywhere in the world. Christianity in Africa is equally vulnerable to attacks from these major global fronts from the West: (1) modern western philosophies; (2) the emerging western neo-paganism; and (3) the resurgent militant Islam. African Christianity now faces these formidable global forces.

The numerical size of Christians in Africa (over 350 million) is increasingly becoming a factor that is bound to shape and affect world Christianity. But we cannot ignore the great threats and challenges which African Christianity is currently facing as already mentioned. Professor Andrew Walls has called the attention of world Christianity to the fact that the majority of Christians in the world live in the non-western world which means that the centre of Christianity is shifting from the North (western nations) to the South (non-western nations). Professor Kwame Bediako asserts that the vibrant life and size of the African Church demand that a serious study of African Christianity be made so as to ascertain its place and role in global Christianity. The recognition and acceptance of this fact will go a long way in shaping and strengthening Christianity in Africa.

Recently, Professor Philip Jenkins in his latest book, *New Faces of Christianity* (2006), has made a similar call to the western Church to listen to and learn from African and Asian Christianity by virtue of its numerical size and vibrant forms of Christianity.

Given these facts, I strongly feel that we should pay great attention to this emerging force of Christianity. We should also be fully aware of its global religious and cultural threats from both the West and Islam.

The historical ties and relationships between African Christianity and western Christianity are crucial in shaping and influencing the emerging identity, role and status of African Christianity. This historical factor is essential to our understanding of the emerging conflict that is beginning to rear its head between western Christianity and African Christianity. This emerging crisis will pose a great threat and challenge to the voice and influence of African Christianity in the world.

### Does African Christianity have a voice or influence within world Christianity?

Just a few years ago, we noticed this new emerging trend creating a potential for crisis between western Christianity and African Christianity. Jenkins observed that there is an emerging conflict between western forms of Christianity and African and Asian forms of Christianity as already alluded to. His observation and conclusion were drawn from the research he undertook on the use and interpretation of the Bible. He identified one key social fact as the cause of this rift and conflict, that is, *culture*. He identified African and Asian approaches to the use and interpretation of the Bible as *conservative, traditional, Biblicist, literalist, fundamentalist*, while that of western Christianity is *liberal, modernist, secularist*.

Jenkins seems to agree with Profes-

sor Samuel P. Huntington and Dr. Geert Hofstede that *culture* exerts a powerful and pervasive influence upon human civilizations and organizations. Jenkins' conclusion seems to endorse the concept of *cultural determinism*. The new emerging forms of Christianity whether in the West or in Africa or Asia are simply cultural expressions and are bound to be different. This view has been echoed in the West as regards the question of the ordination of homosexual priests. African and Asian priests of the Anglican Communion strongly opposed western theology and the practice of homosexuality in church leadership. This attitude of the African and Asian priests angered some of the western Anglican priests.

This matter of homosexual priests was brought into the open by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a reason for the division between western priests and African and Asian priests of the Anglican Communion. The BBC interviewed one African Archbishop in 2005 and charged African Christians with holding to African cultural views about homosexuality and using these against western Christians in the name of Christianity and the Bible. The BBC also stated that the views on homosexuality of western Christians reflected deeply their own culture. The real issue at hand according to the BBC was not the Bible but culture.

In this western thinking, Christianity could be dismissed on cultural or civilization grounds, but not so in the theological thinking of most African or Asian Christians. In African theological thinking, the apostolic faith and the authority of the Bible are superior to anything in contemporary thought by

virtue of their divine origins and source. To some westerners, African reverence and adherence to the teachings of the Bible and Apostolic faith are fundamentalist, literalist, conservative or traditional. African interpretations of the Bible, apostolic Christianity and Church traditions may be labelled conservative or primitive, but history, or reason, or science does not change what has been divinely given or handed down from an authoritative divine source or origin, and which cannot be changed or altered. Christianity in its divine essence is not answerable to human historicism, or rationalism, or scienticism. For most Africans, there is no conflict between faith and science or between faith and reason. Both are well accommodated under God in their own African worldview as well as in the biblical worldview.

This emerging conflict between western Anglicans and African and Asian Anglicans has been identified wrongly by some western apologists as deeply cultural and not theological or biblical. Such arguments of cultural determinism lack any theological reflection and depth. However, African and Asian priests of the Anglican Communion stood their grounds and dismissed western cultural determinism and a neo-paganistic theology of homosexuality. They asserted their theological grounds and appealed to biblical and apostolic Christianity as authoritative and of divine source and origin. Some western Christians labelled this position as conservative or biblicist.

No doubt, such Christian apologists from the West are not free from the powerful and pervasive influence of secularism, religious pluralism, cultural relativism and postmodernism.

For most Africans, their deep Christian faith is not enlightened by these western modern philosophies. They are guided by the Holy Spirit, the Bible, apostolic Christianity and their African worldview which is very similar to the biblical worldview.

In modern western thinking, both the Bible and historical Christianity should be subjected to the old historical criticism or the contemporary fad of extra-biblical and Gnostic literature which are held in high esteem and are also said to contain the hidden truths about the Bible, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Church history, etc. In some western circles, there is a strong demand for the rewriting of the Bible, the history of Jesus, the Apostles and Church history. This view has already produced en masse the new pagan-feminist-Christian literature, such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, or Kathleen McGowan's *The Expected One* (the descended one from Jesus and Mary Magdalene). This emerging neo-pagan literature is meant to shake the foundations of and discredit the Christian faith. The rising literary and communicable powers of neo-paganism in the contemporary world are something which must concern Christian theologians today.

It is certain that the size and influence of African Anglicans could force a rift within the Anglican Communion. Some Anglican priests were quoted as saying, 'Western money cannot buy our conscience.' The stage is already set for possible future conflict between western Christianity and African Christianity. There are deeper historical and theological roots that will throw more light on this emerging conflict between western Christianity and African Chris-

tianity, that is beyond the simplistic explanation of cultural determinism or to say that one is a fundamentalist and the other a liberal.

The labels of liberal, modern, traditional, conservative, fundamentalist, literalist, or biblicist as religious name tags, or the familiar theological discourse on liberal-fundamentalist, conservative-modernist, or secular-religious are inadequate in addressing the deep rooted cultural and theological issues of various expressions of Christianity all over the world. We are dealing with religious and cultural megatrends in the world today. The real issues at hand are not about splinter religious cults, or peoples' theological opinions or traditions. The pressing issues can be put in this way: just imagine an Islamist piloting a plane consisting of Christians, Muslims, atheists, fundamentalists, liberals, terrorists, democrats, fascists, etc. into flames—or a sovereign State invading another sovereign State and wrecking society and citizens. These are the pressing issues that demand our theological reflection and solutions.

A lot has been offered as regards the psychology and reasons behind Christian or Muslim fundamentalism. The results of such analysis only reinforce our unique differences from each other and the burning quest for dialogue, understanding and tolerance among religions and cultures. But the unfolding drama of contemporary world affairs have shown only how the world by itself has pitched religion against religion, culture against culture, ideology against ideology, civilization against civilization, etc. In the words of Huntington, everything has turned to a 'clash of civilizations'.



We are reminded of the good hard work of both the World Council of Churches (WCC) from the late 1950s to the 1970s and the United Nations Organization (UNO) from the 1980s to the present. They have devoted their efforts and resources towards forging an understanding of other faiths, religions and cultures for the purposes of creating dialogue, tolerance, peace and mutual respect among world religions and cultures. Professor Hans Kung has produced a master piece on *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* that deals with issues of dialogue, understanding, tolerance, mutual respect, world ethic, etc.

However, from the late 1970s to the present, the world has increasingly become more belligerent than being understanding, peaceful and tolerant of other religions and cultures. We have witnessed a prevalent and increasing rise of violent Christian fundamentalism, the resurgent militant Islamic fundamentalism and vicious ethnic and cultural wars of genocide and ethnic cleansing in many parts of the world. The list of such places is endless. The dogmas of peace, human rights, freedoms, democracy, free market economy and free speech have been rendered impotent in the face of violent forces and powers of resurgent religions, cultures and civilizations. Religious, cultural, economic and political crisis and conflict are not only *intra* and *micro*, but also *inter* and *macro* in nature. They are increasingly becoming global conflagrations.

Deeply inherent in the bellicose posture of religions, cultures and peoples towards each other in the global scene, are their deep seated differences, founded and rooted in their cultures,

religions, and identities. The way of seeing, understanding, interpreting and applying life in general differs from culture to culture or from religion to religion. These deep seated cultural and religious roots are what baffle, frustrate, twist and limit human desire to communicate across cultures or religions, and make us unable to forge peaceful alliances. We must have a fresh theological look at the role of culture and religion in our understanding and interpretation of religious fundamentalism and political activism. We must also try to understand the nature and mission of religions, cultures, or civilizations.

These are powerful social forces that entangle human beings and hold them captive. What is in the nature of religion that holds people captive and sometimes turns them into fundamentalist? We need to understand the power of a religious cause and its mission. Islam has not shied away from telling us where her militant adherents are coming from. When people are hooked on to certain teachings, or beliefs, or associations, all else is secondary or non-existent. Sometimes we question whether such people are free to think for themselves or whether they might have been religiously programmed into zombies. We call such people religious fundamentalists, fanatics, fascists, conservatives, liberals, modernists, etc. All these religious variants are found in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and in others.

But true Christianity parts company with extreme Judaism or extreme Islam, or any other extremes on grounds of creedal statements or beliefs. In Judaism, the creedal state-

ment is: '*Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One....*' (Deut. 6:4). In Islam, it is: '*There is no god but Allah; and Mohammed his Apostle.*' In Christianity, it is: '*Jesus is both Lord and Christ (Messiah), the Son of God.*' In his teachings Jesus revealed something hidden about all creedal beliefs. Throughout his interactions with Jewish religious leaders, he clearly charged them with not knowing their God. But these creedal statements are said to have issued from God. 'You know neither me nor my Father, if you knew me, you would know my Father' (John 8:19). In other words, 'If they had known God (the Father), they would have believed in him.'

What was the problem with Jewish religious leaders or any creedalist? Something was missing in their creedal religion. They had a religion that lacked *personal active faith in God*. They were not seeking after God, but the ends of religion. They were not open to God, but had shut their eyes, ears and hearts against God. They had hardened their hearts against God. Jesus identified both their *god* and *father* as Satan.

Creedalism in religion shuts out God. It dries up faith in God. It blinds the eyes from seeing God and his works in the world. It shuts the ears. It hardens the hearts. The worshippers are not open to God, but only creedalism that blinds. For this reason, God shuts the secrets of the Kingdom from them (Matt. 13:13-15). Jesus did not cure the Jewish religious leaders of their creedalism because they had an incurable religious disease.

The western doctrine of the freedom of speech or freedom of expression is currently under Islamic cross fire. The

Danish magazine published derogatory cartoons about Prophet Mohammed late in 2005. The West discovered that in global reality, freedom of expression means a sense of Muslim insult, anger and world-wide demonstrations. Islam settled its scores by drawing blood and embarrassing the West regarding its foolish example of freedom of expression. National morality may not be global morality. During 2006, Pope Benedict XVI discovered that quoting a derogatory historical statement made about Prophet Mohammed to an exclusively Christian/Western audience could spark off Muslim world-wide anger and condemnation. Islam has made its voice and reactions very clear to the West. Defamation or lampooning of its religious figures can incur Islamic *fatwah* (death sentence) or wrath. It is ironic that only in the Christian West can Jesus be defamed and lampooned in a way that passes for freedom of speech or expression (*Da Vinci Code*).

### 3. Historical Ties between Islam and African Christianity

The historical ties between Islam and African Christianity are an important issue that needs to be examined as the threat of Islam in Africa is real. In view of the on-going war between the West and Islam, African Christianity needs to establish its unique identity, role and status before the Muslim world. African Christians need to develop a theology that will address Islamic militancy and violence against Christians in Africa. The militancy of Islam against Christianity in Africa cannot be taken lightly. As far as militant

Islamists are concerned, African Christianity is western culture and religion. But historically, Islam destroyed almost all of Christianity in North Africa. We cannot rule out the fact that contemporary resurgent militant Islam could still wreak the same havoc as older Islam did in North Africa.

Historically, Islam confronted Christianity in Africa at these levels: (1) the level of religion where Islam replaced African religions or Christianity in North Africa and elsewhere; (2) the level of culture where Islamic and Arabic culture replaced African cultures or Hellenistic Christian culture of North Africa and elsewhere; (3) the level of politics and economics where Islamic states and economies replaced the African indigenous kingdoms and economies; and (4) the human level where the African people as different from the Muslims/Arabs were subjected to humiliation and slavery. It is important to note that Islam has dealt with African Christianity and African peoples directly for over 14 centuries. Africans have had direct contacts with Islam since the 7th century up to this date where Muslims are still holding black Muslims, African Christians or animists as slaves in Sudan, Mauritania and Niger. Africans have written their own stories about their contacts and experiences of Islam over these centuries which are kept in colonial and Islamic archives.

Muslims need to be reminded of the sources and origins of Christianity in Africa: (1) the Hellenistic North African Christianity which had its roots and origins directly in Palestine and was almost destroyed by Islam; (2) Western Missionary Christianity of the 15th to 20th centuries which had its

roots and origins in western Christian missions. When Islam invaded North Africa in the 7th century, the Christianity which it destroyed was not western in origin because it predated western Christianity, and originated from the Middle East (Mediterranean and Palestinian). Nevertheless, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia have survived against all odds to the present date. Later Muslims destroyed the Nubian Church in Sudan in the 16th century.

The historical conflict between Islam and Christianity in Africa was inherent within the nature of the two religions and cultures as regards their Abrahamic origins in Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Both Islam and North African Christianity have had centuries of relationships. Africans for centuries have interacted with Muslims and Arabs.

The historical conflict between Islam and Christianity in Africa was not originally an Islamic reaction against western colonialism and imperialism as the current justification for Islamic attacks on the West and Christianity seem to suggest. Rather, it originated from the Islamic spirit of exploitation, expansion, colonialism and imperialism. Islamic colonialism and imperialism in Africa, Middle East and Asia predated that of western powers which came into being as from the 16th to the 20th centuries. During the height of Islamic colonialism and imperialism in the world, nation-states were just being formed in Europe and in fact, Europe had no political power or influence over the world. It was still struggling with its barbaric and pagan past with increasing Christianization. This was evidenced by the historical domi-

nant presence of Islam in North Africa, the Mediterranean, Middle East and Asia. The contemporary reason for Islamic conflict with Christianity in Africa seems to contradict this historical reality and the historical experience of non-western Christianity in North Africa, the Mediterranean, Middle East and Asia.

Contemporary militant Islamists are seriously engaging the West, its culture and Christianity in an extensive global war. But unfortunately, these Islamic zealots see African Christianity as western culture and religion. For example, the militant conflict between the West and Islam has always expressed itself violently in clashes between Christians and Muslims across Africa. Militant Islamists have used the Gulf War of the early 1990s, the recent invasion of Iraq in 2003 by western powers and the current western war on Islamic terrorists as an excuse for turning their anger and violence upon innocent African Christians. From Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran to the present, African Christians have experienced their fair share of militant and violent Islam. Their lives and property have been destroyed on account of Islamic anger and outbursts against the West. Certainly, contemporary Islamists identify African Christianity as an offshoot of western culture. This identification is then used to justify violent Islamic attacks on African Christians.

Contemporary militant Islamists do not have an historical understanding of the roots and origins of Christianity in Palestine and the Middle East. The historical nature and origin of Christianity has been overlooked in their zeal to

confront and arrest western global civilizing forces from overrunning and dominating Islam. It was Christianity with its roots and origins in Palestine that later helped transform western society and culture by Christianizing it. African Christianity must engage contemporary militant Islamists from this historical perspective.

There are abundant historical primary sources of Islam which define the role and status of the African as against that of the Muslim/Arab within the context of Islam prior to any western influence on Africa or on the Islamic world. One major area that brought Islam face to face with Africa was the notorious, degrading and the inhuman treatment of Africans by Muslim slave-raiders and slave-traders for over 14 centuries. The inhuman Islamic trade of African slaves has left an indelible derogatory mark on Africans generally, whether African Muslims, or Christians, or animists (pagans). Contemporary African Christianity has the task of addressing this historical Islamic treatment of Africans from the 7th century to the 21st century. African Christianity has a duty of defining historically the experiences of Africans under Islamic colonialism, imperialism and slavery which went on for centuries without any influence of western colonialism, imperialism or slavery.

#### 4. Historical Ties between Traditional Religions and Cultures and African Christianity

We have already mentioned the pagan revival in the West as having serious

implications for Christianity world-wide. Besides western neo-paganism, there are new forms of Christianity coming out of the West that have serious theological implications for Christianity world-wide. There are Christian cults and syncretism that are coming out from the West into Africa. Let me mention one such, not in any way to demean this new Christian group, but used only as an example. The American Prosperity Pentecostalism is rapidly eclipsing the older and established Pentecostals. Because of the global power of television and money this religious sect has influenced not only Christian theology, but Christian forms of worship, ritual and practices. Its theology is easily adaptable to the traditional African religious beliefs and worldview. The older Pentecostals in Africa have always sought to differentiate and distance themselves from this new arrival from the West. The weakening power and influence of western Christianity in general and the poverty level of Africans generally leave African Christians vulnerable to the menacing local and global religious forces from the West.

Nevertheless, Africa also has its own home-grown revived neo-paganism, religious cults and syncretism. These contemporary religious movements are being boosted by (1) pagan revival in the West; and (2) the religious vibrancy and fervour of American Prosperity Pentecostalism. Western neo-paganism and American Prosperity Pentecostalism are external challenges to African Christianity, especially in the area of theology, music, worship, rituals, religious garments and practices. Furthermore, the emerging American churches have

also exported their ecclesiology, theology, worship, music and life-style to African cities. It is very difficult for the older denominations to maintain their traditional forms of worship, music, rituals and life-styles against these new religious forces from the West. African Christianity has a task of redefining these new entrants and the impact of their teachings on Africans and African Christian theology.

Let us turn to consider the challenge from within. In fact, Christianity is rooted in an African traditional and religious background. The power and influence of the traditional religions and worldview are enduring, pervasive and invariant. It was through an African religious worldview and spirituality that Christianity was understood and accepted. Generally, Christianity in Africa reflects the way Africans see, understand, interpret and apply it. This however, gives room for the possibility for Africans to create new forms and expressions of Christianity. Christianization of Africa has the possibility of error, heresy, or syncretism. The revival and resurgence of African cultures after independence in the 1960s have led to the emergence of various new religious cults, neo-paganism and syncretism.

How Africans express their Christianity is bound to differ from that of other cultures and regions of the world. This can be observed in its forms of worship, liturgy, theological teachings, reading and understanding of the Bible and Christian life-style. However, not every form of Christian expression is authentic, biblical and culturally relevant in an African setting. Not every theological experiment, teaching and model is acceptable and

relevant. The believing Christian community has the duty of ascertaining what is acceptable or not. Not every cultural understanding, interpretation and expression is valid as this has to be authenticated by the believing Christian community. In its own self and spiritual understanding of the Scriptures and apostolic Christianity, the believing Christian community can set guidelines as to what forms of Christian expressions are valid or not. Only sound biblical hermeneutics or exegesis and theological methods can help guard against possible errors, heresies and syncretism which may tend towards the emergence of new cults and neo-paganism.

### 5. Summary

African Christianity holds a strategic position in the emerging world Chris-

tianity. But it faces the challenges of global religious and cultural conflict, especially between the West and Islam in their religious and civilization conflict. African Christianity faces the challenges of the socio-political, cultural and religious implications of the conflict between the West and Islam, on the one hand and, on the other, of the conflict between Islam and Africa with deep historical roots into the origins of both Christianity and Islam in the Middle East. In addition to these, Christianity in Africa faces the challenges of pagan revival in both the West and Africa and the devastating influences of both western civilizing global forces and modern philosophies of spirituality and religion. These challenges call for a new Christian theological reflection that will address this global religious and cultural conflict.

## **The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises 1900–1994**

Tharcisse Gatwa

Since the early years of the twentieth century Christianity has become a new factor in Rwandan society. This book investigates the role Christian churches played in the formulation and development of the racial ideology that culminated in the 1994 genocide.

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978-1-870345-24-8 / 229x152mm / 306pp / £19.99

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