

A new Christian world: signs of the Kingdom of God amid global geopolitics

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Courtesies

Prof. Olav Guttorm Myklebust, I did not get to meet and to know personally. However, the occasion of my delivering this first Myklebust Memorial Lecture gives me the opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to him.

In July 1987, I was appointed Alexander Duff Visiting Lecturer in the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, for a number of years. It was then that, thanks to Prof. Andrew Walls, I became aware of the important place Prof. Myklebust assigned to Alexander Duff, returning from missionary service in India to Edinburgh to be the first holder of a Chair anywhere in Mission Studies. Subsequently, here in Oslo, through the kindness of Egede Institute, I obtained the two volumes by Prof. Myklebust on the significance of Mission Studies in theological education and I read his assessment for myself. So, at this centenary of Prof. Myklebust's birth, I wish to express, from Africa, gratitude to God, the Lord of mission, for the life and heritage of Prof. Myklebust. For me too, he is an ancestor!

Introduction: Understanding Christianity in the 21st century: Which scenario?

We live in a new Christian world, and all who have any interest in Christian mission and in Christianity in the world need to be aware of its significance. Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, is, perhaps, the latest to concentrate our minds on this fact of our time through his book, *The Next Christendom – the Coming of Global Christianity*.¹ Christianity has become a largely non-Western religion. It has become more visibly identified with the Southern continents – Latin America, parts of Asia and especially Africa – and the vitality of the faith is more frequently found among people from these continents.² For Jenkins, this new configuration of the Christian world carries far-reaching consequences for geopolitical balance:

We are at a moment as epochal as the Reformation...Christianity as a whole is both growing and mutating in ways that observers in the West tend not to see. For obvious reasons, news reports today are filled with material about the influence of a resurgent and sometimes angry Islam. But in its variety and vitality, in its global reach, in its association with the world's fastest growing societies, in its shifting centers of gravity, in the way its values and practices vary from place to place – in these and other ways it is Christianity that will leave the deepest mark on the twenty-first century.³

It is important to understand that Prof. Jenkins' concern with the subject is to inform and enlighten a largely Western, or perhaps better, North Atlantic, audience about what an ascendant Southern Christianity might mean for them. And we would be mistaken if we thought that, for Prof. Jenkins, this prospect of Christianity leaving 'the deepest mark on the twenty-first century' is a necessarily favourable one.

Although Northern governments are still struggling to come to terms with the notion that Islam might provide a powerful and threatening supranational ideology, few seem to realize the potential political role of ascendant Southern Christianity.⁴

By placing ‘the potential political role of ascendant Southern Christianity’ in the same discussion as the notion that ‘Islam might provide a powerful and threatening supranational ideology’, threatening, that is, to the North, Prof. Jenkins’ analysis has the effect of suggesting that the southward shift of contemporary vital Christianity also constitutes a potential threat to the North! Prof. Jenkins, in fact, describes this ascendant Southern Christianity with the words: ‘exotic, intriguing, exciting, but a little frightening’⁵ and comes close to suggesting that imposing controls on the northward migration of Southern Christians, on the basis of their religious [Christian] beliefs and practices, might not be a bad thing:

Even as this migration continues, established white communities in Europe are declining demographically, and their religious beliefs and practices are moving further away from traditional Christian roots. The result is that skins of other hues are increasingly evident in European churches, half of all London churchgoers are now black. African and West Indian churches in Britain are reaching out to whites, though members complain that their religion is often seen as ‘a black thing’ rather than ‘a God thing’.⁶

It is, therefore, not difficult to understand why Prof. Jenkins may not like the evidence he finds:

The demographic changes within Christianity have many implications for theology and religious practice, and for global society and politics. The most significant point is that, in terms of both theology and moral teaching, Southern Christianity is more conservative than the Northern – especially the American – version. Northern reformers, even if otherwise sympathetic to the indigenous cultures of non-Northern peoples, obviously do not like this fact...⁷

Prof. Jenkins acknowledges that Christianity may well be the ‘rising faith of Africa and Asia, the authentic or default religion of the world’s huddled masses’, that ‘Christianity is not only surviving in the global South’, but ‘is enjoying a radical revival, a return

to scriptural roots'. Yet he does not consider all this to be an unmixed blessing, because 'we [that is Northerners or Westerners] aren't participating in them'.⁸ It is as though the emergence of a post-Western Christianity that seems to be independent of Western cultural and social norms is, somehow, a nuisance that has to be resisted, or else managed. It becomes clear, then, what Jenkins' analysis is seeking to convey:

All this means that our political leaders and diplomats should pay at least as much attention to religions and sectarian frontiers as they ever have to the location of oil fields.⁹

And so, our religious convictions and the 'location of oilfields' come to belong in the same discussion!

Whose religion is Christianity?

One might well ask then: 'Whose religion is Christianity?'¹⁰ as Lamin Sanneh has recently done in a book with that title. For Jenkins' analysis leaves us none the wiser as to why Christianity has *endured* through its history, and why it now seems likely to endure in spite of the post-Christian West. But even more glaringly, by not allowing Christianity to have an integrity of its own as a religious faith, Jenkins' analysis comes close to those views of early Christianity that considered the little-known Christians as a nuisance and a threat to the security interests of the Empire. Jenkins chooses to designate the emergence in our time of a post-Western Christianity as the emergence of a new Christendom, 'the next Christendom'. This is a term that in English relates to the European medieval alliance of throne and altar in a territorial notion of Christianity, and it is the mental habits of Christendom that are revived in Jenkins' term, 'global Christianity'. In so doing, he shows an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to reckon with a non-Constantinian version of the Christian presence in the world.

In the process, it is Christianity itself that suffers, because Cold War habits of thought and responses take over and project onto centre-stage issues of global geopolitics that rather obscure realities of another order that are equally luminous in the course of Christian history. An important question, then, is: What does the present shift in Christianity's centre of gravity indicate for our

understanding of Christian mission, beyond the evident fact of the waning of Western dominance within the Christian faith in our time?

Why do I consider this question important? I have devoted some attention to the analysis of Philip Jenkins because I believe it deserves our attention. But it does so because it suggests that the emergence of a Southern, Non-Western Christianity that is independent of the West is an unwanted child of Christian mission. And yet it is possible to demonstrate that the vision and motivation of the fathers and mothers of the modern missionary movement had little to do with the hegemony of Western empires in the world. Therefore, to honour the memory of Prof. Myklebust, to advance the study of Christian mission, and to understand the nature of world Christianity in our time, we need to develop other intellectual criteria that will illuminate mission and its outcomes as the very logic and dynamic of Christian history. If we fail to do this, then we become subject to other categories of analysis that can misread the character of the Christian presence in the world.

The emergence of Southern Christianity – the logic of Christian history

It is essential, therefore, that we seek to understand our new Christian world in a way that is consistent with Christian history and, which, by illuminating that history, helps to point us into our future. Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* is the most recent analysis to draw our attention to the present configuration of the Christian world. Yet it comes nearly half a century after the event, following earlier discussions by interpreters of Christian expansion, such as David Barrett,¹¹ Walbert Buhmann¹² and Andrew Walls.¹³ In 1970, David Barrett wrote that the scale of Christian expansion in Africa could mean that 'African Christians might well tip the balance and transform Christianity permanently into a primarily non-Western religion'.¹⁴ When Walbert Buhmann wrote about the 'coming of the Third Church' in 1974, his essential conclusions were that 'the migration of the church towards the Southern Hemisphere' meant that the church was turning

1. 'Towards the peoples of antiquity' and realising that 'world history did not begin in Europe, that Latin America, Africa and

Asia are more ancient and more interesting ... from the point of view of the history of culture and the origins of man, than the West'.

2. To 'dynamic' peoples in newly independent nations.
3. To 'the youth, that is to nations with relatively higher proportions of youth in their populations ...'

But, most important of all for Buhmann, the Church was gravitating

4. 'towards the poorer peoples' of the earth and there to find 'the opportunity not only to be in a real sense the Church of the poor', but also to have 'some experience of the goodness, humanity, simplicity and integrity of poor peoples'.

It was this complex reality of the 'Third Church', that is, alongside the Western and Oriental Churches, therefore, 'a new reality ... a fresh peak reached', that constituted for Buhmann 'the Church of the future as well as the future of the Church'.¹⁵

But it was Prof. Andrew Walls who, in an article published in 1976 entitled, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history', drew attention to the connection between theatres of Christian expansion and significance in Christian theological development. In his view, 'theology that matters will be theology where the Christians are'. As Africa seemed to have a particularly important place in this southward shift of Christianity's centre of gravity, Prof. Walls concluded:

...whether and in what way, world evangelisation is carried on may well be determined by what goes on in Africa; what sort of theology is most characteristic of the Christianity of the 21st century may well depend on what has happened in the minds of African Christians in the interim.¹⁶

Commenting on the subject more than twenty years later, Prof. Walls noted:

This means that we have to regard African Christianity as potentially the representative Christianity of the twenty-first

century. The representative Christianity of the second and third and fourth centuries was shaped by events and processes at work in the Mediterranean world. In later times it was events and processes among the barbarian peoples of Northern and Western Europe, or in Russia, or modern Western Europe, or the North Atlantic world that produced the representative Christianity of those times. The Christianity typical of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the events and processes that take place in the Southern continents, and above all by those that take place in Africa.¹⁷

In an article in the centenary edition of *African Affairs*, I too have argued that we can see a correlation between each shift in Christianity's centre of gravity and cultural and other developments within the matrix of its dominance at the time that threaten the survival of the faith. Thus, the current 'shift in the centre of gravity may have secured for Christianity a future that would otherwise be precarious' in the secularised cultural environment of the modern West. It has given the faith a new lease of life in the predominantly religious worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Earlier shifts also secured it for differing reasons, in the transition from the Jewish world to the Hellenistic world of the early Christian centuries, and in subsequent centuries, from the 'civilised' world of the Mediterranean basin to the 'barbarian' world of northern and western Europe.

If we take such factors into account, it becomes more evident that both *accession* and *recession* belong within Christian religious history, that the character of Christian impact in the world is not linear and cumulative but serial and dialectic, and that there is accordingly no permanent home of Christianity. This is where, by assessing the new configuration of the Christian world primarily in relation to its perceived impact on global geopolitics as it impinges on the West, Philip Jenkins misreads the significance for the church of this new turn in Christian history.

Modern Christian expansion – the history of Bible translation

I wish now, therefore, to return to the African significance in the present shape of the Christian world. It does not require extensi-

ve research to demonstrate that many of the Christian churches as they are found in Africa today are historically continuous with the modern missionary movement from the West, for Roman Catholics, since the 15th century, and for Protestants, as from the late 18th century. This is, of course, to leave out Egypt and Ethiopia, as uniquely Ancient African Christianity. Accordingly, there is a great deal in African Christianity that is explainable in terms of the cultural impact of the West. And yet there is also much that goes on that is not directly traceable to the Western impact.

Only recently has it become more generally recognised that the history of the modern expansion of Christianity in the last two centuries, in which the African story features prominently, can be written as the history of Bible translation. It is now better appreciated that, without denying the role of foreign (i.e. Western) missionaries, it was the Bible, not Western missionaries that won Africa for Christianity. This cannot be said of the missionary history of the West itself.¹⁹

Every student of European Church History knows the prolonged dominance of Latin in the Christian history of northern and western Europe. The long dominance of Latin as the scriptural medium meant that evangelisation took the form of an acculturative process which "had the effect of taking the consciousness of the peoples of the north and west beyond the locality and the kinship group which had traditionally bounded their societies". This preservation of Latin, not as a vernacular language but as a "special" language for Christians—"a common language for Scripture, liturgy and learning"—meant that as the ancient peoples of the north and west became Christian, the language of Scripture functioned less as "the motor for the penetration" of their cultures than as "the vehicle for the appropriation and expression of a new identity",²⁰ that had not belonged to them originally.

My point is that African Christianity today is inconceivable apart from the existence of the Bible in African indigenous languages. By its deep vernacular achievement, therefore, relative to Europe's own missionary past, the modern missionary movement from the West in Africa ensured that Africans had the means to make their own responses to the Christian message, in relation to their own needs and in consonance with their own categories of thought and meaning.

Elsewhere I have suggested that

This, in turn, ensured that a deep and authentic dialogue would ensue between the Gospel and African tradition, authentic in so far as it would take place, not in the terms of a foreign language or of a foreign culture, but in the categories of local idioms and world-views. Africa in modern times was experiencing the reception of the Word of God in ways and at levels which the crucial formative generations of Christians of northern and western Europe, ... may never have known.²¹

Christian faith as vernacular religion

To this subject, Lamin Sanneh has, as is well known, made an important contribution.²² By identifying vernacularisation rather than westernisation as the essential outcome of the translation process, Sanneh's analysis helps to focus our attention on the potentialities of receptor languages and cultures, an outcome that sets the Christian example in sharp counterpoint to the Muslim standard of the non-translatable Qur'an.²³

Because 'God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incomunicable in their languages',²⁴ the translation process endowed African languages with a transcendent range that far outstripped the slow and often begrudging Western respect for African peoples, their social institutions and their religious and cultural traditions. Thus, the stage was set for the African discovery of the relevance and significance of the religion of the Bible, through indigenous languages.

In addition, the Supreme God, whose names had been hallowed in indigenous languages in African pre-Christian religious traditions, was found to be 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', in a way that none of the major European gods had been, whether Zeus, Jupiter or Odin. This situation was bound to present a challenge that only African Christian thought itself could address. For it means that the Christian Scriptures are, in fact, the revelation of Olorum, Chineke, Mwari, Muungu, Nkosi, Nyame, Mawu – all African divine names known for generations in African pre-Christian traditions – in a way that they are not the revelation of an ancient European god. Thus the African Christian's God was not a European loan word, as was assumed by some,

but was deeply at home in African tradition. Among European peoples, the Bible found no name for God; among African peoples it found many.

The sheer diversity of this African manifestation of the Christian faith demonstrates, therefore, that the Christian religion in Africa, is in fact vernacular religion, which finds its fullest and deepest expression in African indigenous languages and their cultural categories. While we cannot claim that this character of Christian faith in Africa has registered fully within African Christianity as a whole, what we can reasonably say is that the needed ingredients are present in many places for its impact to be felt.

Conclusion: Christian mission - biblical vision of world community or globalisation?

Some may ask, what about the phenomenon of 'globalisation' and the prospect of the passing of vernaculars and their replacement by so-called world languages, with the English language emerging as the new Latin? This prospect may prove to be a false dawn. We see in our time, in many parts of the world, a revival of distinctive linguistic, cultural and national identities, often associated with the impact of Christian mission, a revival that co-exists with the capacity to embrace new unifying knowledge in communication and information technology. This fact could be the sign that the globalisation that eliminates all cultural particularities may not happen.

But, more important, if the modern resurgence of Christianity outside the West demonstrates principally the 'recovery of scriptural roots', then the Bible as the revelation of the mind and design of God, with its own vision of world community, also acquires a renewed significance. For, in biblical perspective, the ultimate vision of world community is a plurality of redeemed cultures of equal standing, with an enhanced capacity for communication among them, being the direct outcome of the redemptive presence of the living God.

This is how the last book of the Bible, Revelation (7:9) describes it:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...

In this connection, it is important to realise that though Christianity, in the words of Prof. Walls, 'has always been universal in principle', it can be seen 'to have become universal in practice' only in recent history. This is a fact that 'is not only unique among the world's religions, it is a new feature of the Christian faith itself'.²⁵

In the book of Genesis, we read that when God called Abraham out from his home and sent him on a mission, it was so that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12:3). If the biblical trajectory from Genesis to Revelation is indicative of the mind and purpose of the Living God, then Christian mission that has produced, for the first time in history, a truly universal presence of the people of the God of the Bible, is worth studying in its own terms. For Christian mission that leads to the unfolding of the mind and purpose of God, and not the schemes and projects of world empires and superpowers, is shown to be the clue to human history.

Perhaps a final observation may be in order. It is important to recognise that the present shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world has produced a situation in which the Christian faith has emerged as the religion of the poor of the earth, centred in the poorest parts of the world, while the levers of global economic and political power are 'located in the post-Christian West'.²⁶

Here the analogy with Christian origins in the New Testament is revealing and constitutes a challenge to all who will engage in the activity of mission, as well as to those who will engage in the study of mission with a view to understanding the outcome of mission. It is a challenge to recover the mind and purpose of the Crucified and Resurrected Saviour, who is the Lord of history according to Christian theology, and who taught that 'Blessed are you poor, (not because you are poor, but) because yours is the Kingdom of God' (Luke 6.20). The long term impact of the emergence of a non-Western world Christianity in our time, therefore, could be the blessing of 'all peoples on earth' through the faith of Christians associated with the less affluent parts of the world. If this expectation is realised, it will be the fulfilment of Christian mission and an outcome that, I trust, Prof. Myklebust, would approve.

Noter

- ¹ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; also his, 'The Next Christianity' in *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002: 53-68.
- ² See the widely acclaimed *World Christian Encyclopedia, A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world, AD 1900-2000*, (edited by David B. Barrett), Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- ³ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', p.54.
- ⁴ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', p.55.
- ⁵ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, p. 220.
- ⁶ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', pp.58-59.
- ⁷ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', p.59.
- ⁸ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', p.68.
- ⁹ Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', p.68.
- ¹⁰ See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003
- ¹¹ David B. Barrett, 'AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa', in *International Review of Mission*, vol. 59, no.233 January 1970: 39-54.
- ¹² Walbert Buhlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church – An Analysis of the Present and the Future of the Church*, Slough: St. Paul's Publications, 1976; first published in German as *Es kommt die dritte Kirche – Eine Analyse der kirchlichen Gegenwart und Zukunft* (1974).
- ¹³ See Andrew F. Walls, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history', in J.S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden: EJ Brill, 1976: 180-89.
- ¹⁴ Barrett, 'AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa', p.40.
- ¹⁵ Buhlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church: 23*.
- ¹⁶ Andrew F. Walls, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history': 183.
- ¹⁷ Andrew F. Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect", in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1998:2.
- ¹⁸ Kwame Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the threshold of the third millennium: The religious dimension', *African Affairs* (Centenary Edition), March 2000
- ¹⁹ See Philip Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church - The last 200 years*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990.
- ²⁰ Andrew F. Walls, "The translation principle in Christian history", in Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: 24-39*; quotation on p.38. The article is reprinted in A. F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the transmission of faith*, New York: Orbis/Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996:26-42.
- ²¹ Kwame Bediako, "The impact of the Bible in Africa" Epilogue in Ype Schaaf *On their way rejoicing—The history and role of the Bible in Africa* (translated by Paul Ellingworth with an epilogue by Kwame Bediako), Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994, pp. 243-254; quotation on pp..246-47.

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- ²² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message - The Missionary Impact on Culture*, New York: Orbis, 1989.
- ²³ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*: 211-38.
- ²⁴ Lamin Sanneh, 'The horizontal and the vertical in mission: An African perspective', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 7, no. 2, October 1983: 165-171; quotation on p. 170,
- ²⁵ Andrew F. Walls, 'The Christian tradition in today's world', in F.B. Whaling (ed.), *Religion in Today's World*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987: 76.
- ²⁶ Walls, 'Africa in Christian history': 14. See also Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa - The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books/Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995, especially ch.8, 'Christianity as the Religion of the Poor of the Earth': 126-151.