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## THE EMERGENCE OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY AND THE REMAKING OF THEOLOGY

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### ***Introduction – A changed Christian world: A fully world religion***

In 1974, John Mbiti of Kenya, probably the most influential theologian of Africa in the twentieth century, observed that 'the centres of the Church's universality are no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila'<sup>1</sup>. I do not think he was attaching any particular significance to the specific cities he cited; what was important were the terms in which he stated his observation. It was 'the Church's universality' that has found new centres elsewhere, beyond the West. Christianity, a religious faith that has been universal in principle from its origins, has become universal in history for the first time, a fact which makes Christianity 'unique among the world's religions and is a new feature of the Christian faith itself'.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, a situation that had subsisted for a millennium of history and gave rise to the perception that the Christian faith was the religion of the West has now been succeeded by a new realisation that the faith is to be more accurately understood as a 'non-Western religion', in that we are now able to describe Christianity as a truly world faith, present on all continents and in virtually all

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<sup>1</sup> Mbiti, John, 'Theological impotence and the universality of the Church', *Lutheran World*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1974; republished in Gerald Anderson & Thomas Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends 3: Third World Theologies* (New York/Grand Rapids: Paulist Press/Eerdmans, 1976): 6–18. For a discussion of Mbiti's idea, see Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa – The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995): 154ff.

<sup>2</sup> 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), p. 76.

countries. In what was probably the last published work under his name, *A World History of Christianity*, which he edited, the late Adrian Hastings commented: 'One could reasonably claim that it [Christianity] is in historical reality, the one and only fully world religion'.<sup>3</sup> What Dr Mbiti discerned thirty years ago has now entered general consciousness and is no longer controversial.

### ***Understanding our new Christian reality***

All this means it is important that as Christian scholars and committed Christians engaged in the witness to the Christian faith and in the affirmation of Christian action in the world, we understand the phenomenon of this new Christian reality and what lessons it may hold for our vocation. In particular, as those who affirm divine providence in human history, it is important that we understand our new Christian world in a way that is consistent with Christian history and which, by illuminating that history, helps point us into our future. This is because it is also possible to misread and misunderstand.

It is undeniable that what has occurred is a reconfiguration of the cultural manifestation of the Christian faith in the world, a phenomenon that one may also describe as a shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity. The notion of shifts in the centre of gravity of Christianity in the course of Christian history, as I use it, I owe to Dr Andrew F. Walls, who in our time, is widely regarded as the most perceptive interpreter of Christian history. A recent article in *Christianity Today* described him as 'a historian ahead of his time' and 'probably the most important person you don't know'<sup>4</sup>. Derived from the evidence of Christian history itself, the notion of shifts refers to a series of dominant cultural shifts.

The very first disciples who gathered around our Lord Jesus and were constituted into the faith community on the Day of Pentecost were all, with only a few exceptions, Jews. They did not even call themselves Christians. Yet by the time that the last apostle was dying in the late first century, the majority of the followers of Christ were from a Hellenistic background. Whatever one thought of the immoral Corinthians, or the fickle Galatians, or the unstable Colossians, in the pages of the New Testament, they were the future. From the second century onwards, for nearly three centuries, Christianity, now the name of their peculiar movement, became associated with the Graeco-Roman world of the Mediterranean, outside of Palestine, though it also expanded eastwards into Iran and southwards into Upper Egypt and Ethiopia, where Christianity has remained unbroken till our time.

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian Hastings, (ed.), *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 1.

<sup>4</sup> Stafford, Tim, 'A historian ahead of his time', *Christianity Today* (February 2007): 86-9 (87).

Then, following the sack of Rome and the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the centre of gravity would shift to the tribal peoples of northern and western Europe, whom the Greeks and Romans called 'Barbarians'. The subsequent phases of Christian history to our time, marked by the migration of European peoples, various missionary enterprises and their interweaving with the histories of economic, political and imperial interests, are familiar to us.

In our own time, it is a shift from North to South, from the northern continents of [Western] Europe and North America, or the North Atlantic, to the southern continents of Latin America, parts of Asia and the Pacific, and Africa. It is generally accepted that over 60% of all professing Christians now are found in the South, and that percentage continues to grow.

In the Preface to the collection of essays, *The Changing Face of Christianity – Africa, the West and the World*, which he edited with Lamin Sanneh, Joel Carpenter notes:

Today, Christianity is a global faith but one that is more vigorous and vibrant in the global South than among the world's richer and more powerful regions. It presents a remarkable case of 'globalization from below', rather than imposition from the world's great powers.<sup>5</sup>

Joel Carpenter's insight points to a significance in the present shift beyond the obvious demographic evidence. It has to do with the recognition that Christianity now lives through other cultures, in other historical, social, economic and political realities than those that appear to prevail in the West. This means that we may not too easily assume that the present universalising of Christianity partakes in all respects in the Western-driven project of globalisation, which would reduce the acceptance of Christianity to little more than the consumption of a 'cultural product honed in the West over centuries',<sup>6</sup> as some analysts argue.

### ***Our changed Christian world as the logic of Christian history***

In a lecture here at Calvin a few years ago, I suggested that the evidence of Christian history indicates a correlation between each shift in Christianity's centre of gravity and some critical and decisive religious, cultural, social and other developments within the matrix of Christianity's dominance at the time that threaten the survival of the faith.<sup>7</sup> I wish to recall this argument and take the discussion a little further. On

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Carpenter, 'Preface', in Lamin Sanneh & Joel C. Carpenter (eds.), *The Changing Face of Christianity – Africa, the West and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gifford, *African Christianity – its Public Role*, London: Hurst & Co., 1998, p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> See, for a published version, Kwame Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the threshold of the third millenium: The religious dimension', *African Affairs* (Centenary Edition), Vol. 99, No. 395 (April 2000), pp. 303-323.

this understanding, the first cultural shift enabled the faith to escape being extinguished as a sect within Judaism when the Jewish state and its religious structures were demolished with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The next major shift made it possible for the faith to outlast the fall of the Western Roman Empire, so that it would not be identified as simply the religion of the 'civilised' Mediterranean basin, as against the 'barbarian' world of the ancient northern and western Europeans. Similarly, the present '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, Latin America, the Pacific and parts of Asia.

It is important to note that in these regions of the world, shared world-views have retained affinities with the living world of the Bible and the experience of the reality and actuality of the Living God, as Jesus and the apostles experienced them as recorded in the Bible. These affinities should not be understood to mean that these societies are 'pre-modern', or 'unsophisticated', as some observers conclude.<sup>8</sup> Rather, modern conceptual maps used to interpret and understand existence, community and our place in the universe, which are based on a severely pared-down Enlightenment, secular view of life, may need to be revised.

As far back as 1974, German theologian, Karl Rahner, in *The Shape of the Church to Come*, wrote that the modern Western world, as 'a milieu that has become unchristian', was in need of re-evangelisation. Thus, when we consider the successive shifts in the centre of gravity of Christianity, it becomes evident that both *accession* and *recession* belong within Christian religious history and that there is accordingly no permanent centre of Christianity. Every centre is a potential periphery and every periphery is a potential centre.

But another way to describe recession and accession within Christian history is to speak of Christian *decay* and Christian *vitality*. Decay does not necessarily mean an absence of Christian manifestations, but an attrition of robust discipleship. Alongside Christian vitality, there is always the phenomenon of counterfeit, to which Jesus refers in the Parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). Thus the history of Christian mission and of Christian churches in all places and periods gives ample evidence to show that the name, Christian, covers a considerable diversity of phenomena. The content and meanings derived from the application of the name have not always been uniform, or even mutually recognisable among various groups of Christians. We may not presume that the Christian world of our time is

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity – Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: OUP, 2006).

any different. We may not be worse than earlier generations, but it helps to be attentive to the distortions and discrepancies of our time too.

The book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians living just like the rest?*<sup>9</sup>, published a couple of years ago, does not give a flattering account of Christian faith and conduct in North America. But the phenomenon described is not limited to North American Christianity. With regard to my own home country, Ghana, one analyst who describes the country as having 'a recognisably Christian' ethos,<sup>10</sup> has identified preachers in whose sermons "'Take up your cross daily and follow me'" does not exist and is unthinkable'; and he calls them 'Ghana's new Christianity'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is important to understand these apparently similar phenomena in their specific contexts. The first describes a situation of Christian decay. The second describes the counterfeit backlash to Christian vitality. The point, then, is not that the new centres of Christian vitality are without imperfections; rather, their imperfections are diverse. And yet they disclose recognisable features of Christian history.

In this connection, what the present reality of the Christian world discloses above all, and on a scale not seen before, is that no Christian history anywhere ever ceases to be a *missionary* history, in which Christians never cease to be called upon to apply the mind of Christ to the realities, questions and dilemmas of that time. Accordingly, in the present situation, it becomes less helpful to speak of a 'global Christianity' whereby, presuming a contest for 'global' hegemony, the new centres of Christian vitality are represented as 'the next Christendom' – a relocation of power from Western churches, and therefore a global threat to the West.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is more helpful and indeed more accurate, to recognise the emergence of a 'world Christianity', the result of diverse indigenous responses to the Christian faith in various regions of the world, the emergence of a positive polycentrism, in which the many centres have an opportunity to learn from each other.<sup>13</sup> It is possible, therefore, to see in the emergence of the 'world Christianity' of our time the logic of

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<sup>9</sup> Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians living just like the rest?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Gifford, *African Christianity*, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Gifford, 'A view of Ghana's new Christianity' in Sanneh & Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity*, p.85. See also Gifford's book, *Ghana's new Christianity – Pentcostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst & Co, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom – The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: OUP, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Stafford, 'A historian ahead of his time', p.86; Kwame Bediako, "'Whose religion is Christianity?'" Reflections on opportunities and challenges for Christian theological scholarship as public discourse – The African dimension', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (December 2006), pp. 43–8.

Christian history itself. This leads us to recognise a connection between Christian history and Christian theology.

### ***Christian history as mission and the birth of theology***

If the world Christianity of our time discloses the logic of Christian history, it is the logic of Christian history as mission. In other words, it is mission as the effort to establish the credentials and validity of the Christian faith, not only in terms of the religious and spiritual universe in which Christians habitually operate, but also and especially in terms of the religious and spiritual worlds which persons of other faiths inhabit,<sup>14</sup> which produces theology. This means that it is mission that engenders theology, which, in turn, should sustain mission. There is, then, a symbiotic relationship between mission as 'cultural crossing' and theology as the process whereby the faith appropriated is lived, embodied and communicated. In as much as the several historical shifts of the heartlands of the Christian faith, as noted earlier, have been cultural crossings, they are privileged moments for understanding the meanings inherent in the faith, that is, for the development of theology.

It would not take extensive argument to demonstrate that this is the consistent picture in the New Testament. Certainly, what we regularly understand as the theology of the New Testament is inconceivable apart from the cultural crossing from the Jewish world into Hellenistic culture. In fact, it is possible to describe the books of the New Testament as the authoritative documents illustrative of the major mission activity of the apostolic era; without that mission activity, the books and the theological teachings they have imparted to succeeding Christian generations would not exist.

### ***The Reformation in world Christian history***

It would be possible to study and understand, for example, the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as also involving in some important respects, a 'cultural crossing', even if it was largely confined within the European arena. It involved a cultural crossing of the Christian faith from the 'civilised' and hallowed meanings framed, learned and transmitted only in Latin, to the universe of vernacular mother-tongue meanings inhabited by the northern 'barbarians'.

Everyone familiar with the history of the church in Europe knows of the long dominance of Latin in the Christian history of the ancient peoples of northern and western Europe. Since Latin was not for them a vernacular language, but rather a 'special' language for Christians – the 'language for Scripture, liturgy and learning' –

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<sup>14</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'How is Jesus Christ Lord? Aspects of an evangelical Christian apologetics in the context of African areligious pluralism', *Exchange, Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, Vol.25, No.1, 1996, pp.27-42.

this meant that as people were brought into Christianity, Latin functioned not so much as the 'motor for the penetration of their cultures; rather it was a vehicle for learning to appropriate and express a new identity',<sup>15</sup> which originally had not belonged to them. In effect, as people accepted Christianity, they were stepping outside their indigenous cultures, and it would take several centuries for this situation to change.

Therefore we can understand why the former Professor of Theology in the Free University of Amsterdam, Anton Wessels, should pose the question in the title of his book, *Europe – Was it ever really Christian? The Interaction between Gospel and Culture*,<sup>16</sup> thinking of pre-Reformation Europe. We are generally accustomed to thinking of the Reformation as a contest of theological positions. We may be considerably less aware of it as a religious and cultural renewal movement, in which the translation of the Scriptures into indigenous European languages came to play a major role. This is what engendered a much more profound interaction between gospel and culture having far-reaching effects in many areas of life, including the inauguration of the Christian academy in a new form. It is perhaps not always realised that the impact of the major work of John Calvin, *The Institutes*, came about not through the Latin version, but through the French, his mother tongue!

There is also a general view that the fuller missionary implications of this internal cultural crossing appear to have escaped the first generation of Reformers. But whatever the merits of that view, it overlooks the tremendous effort that was required to overcome the prolonged Latin captivity of the northern European Christian mind. Some may even wonder whether that Latin captivity has been effectively overcome in all Protestant theological discourse!

Be that as it may, it is also possible to recognise that in the Evangelical Revival and Great Awakening of two centuries later, as well as in the world-wide missionary movement that they inspired, it was the delayed learning from that earlier cultural crossing which was then catching up with European Christians.

I say this because, by and large, the Christian histories of the South, in so far as they are connected with the modern West, have not followed the earlier European model. What one finds instead is the link between the vernacular principle and religious and cultural renewal through the gospel. Allowing for unevenness in the details of specific histories, it is this early predominance of the Scriptures in many mother

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "The translation principle in Christian history", in Philip Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church - The last 200 years*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990: 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.

<sup>16</sup> Anton Wessels, *Europe - Was it ever really Christian? The Interaction between Gospel and Culture*, London: SCM Press, 1994.

tongues, enabling deep connections to be made with indigenous world-views that goes to explain, in large measure, the expansion of Christianity in the South. It has been the Bible in the hands of indigenous preachers, not Western missionaries as such, that has won the South for Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Looked at in this way, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation and its lessons, come to look strangely familiar to Christians elsewhere. Since it illustrates a cultural crossing in Christian history, albeit in a particular sense, all Christians can share in it, as, indeed, in all the other cultural crossings. For if we maintain an organic view of Christian history, then the whole tradition of the whole church belongs to the church in every time and place. By the same token, when some of the Reformation's fruit turns sour, as it did in the apartheid theology in South Africa, we are able to formulate a Christian critique of the distortion, or as in this case, the heresy,<sup>18</sup> without being dismissive or destructive of Christian tradition as a whole.

The emergence of a world Christianity in our time, therefore, has brought us into a larger heritage of shared space than ever before, as the church looks now more like what it will look like at the end, the 'multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' (Rev. 7:9).

### ***The remaking of theology: Embracing the task afresh***

What, then, might the 'remaking' of theology involve in an era of post-Western world Christianity? Remaking here is not to be understood as an attempt to provide a once-for-all revision or reformation of what has so far been achieved in Christian articulation. It would be a mistake to imagine 'that we are about to usher in the eschatological age in theology'.<sup>19</sup> The remaking that is meant is simply the recognition that our changed Christian world presents opportunities and challenges for Christian theology that are not generally available in the Western context, for the task of Christian articulation has now been taken 'into areas of life where Western

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<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> See John de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid is a Heresy*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine – A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967), p. 174. For this paper I have re-read Dr Wiles' two books, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* and *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press 1974). Though Dr Wiles intended to apply the 'principles' from 'early doctrinal development' to 'the present task of doctrine', his treatment took no account of the emergence of a world Christianity beyond the West, and he stayed within the boundaries of a Western discussion, apart from one reference to the Indian theologian, Raymond Panikkar. See *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, p. 58-9.

theology has no answers because it has no questions'.<sup>20</sup> This is another way of saying that since the significant cultural crossings of the Christian gospel are taking place in the churches of the South, it is to these theatres of Christian interaction that we must turn for the reorientation that is needed for embracing the task of theology afresh in our time. Among several observations that might be made, I shall confine myself to three: first, a recovery of the religious dimension to theology which can provide a confident basis for courageous Christian witness amid religious pluralism; second, the recognition of the critical importance of the living church for doing theology; and third, a recovery of spirituality in theology.

Adrian Hastings' observation that Christianity is 'the one and only fully world religion', while accurate, also conceals the fact that Christians are now more dispersed than ever before. Territorial Christianity, Christendom, the supreme achievement of Charlemagne (742-814), which endured in Europe and in the extensions of Europe until relatively modern times, has come to an end. Now virtually all Christians the world over live in plural societies, comprising persons of diverse religious faiths or of none. How persons in such situations may live in harmony and contribute to a common human intellectual space has become a crucial testing of the public theology of every religious faith.

In this connection, the modern West has less to offer than may be readily recognised. There are two main reasons for this. The prolonged experience of Christendom in the West meant that Western Christian thought lacked the regular challenge to establish its conceptual categories in relation to alternative religious claims. Then the secularised environment that followed the Enlightenment has tended to suggest that specifically religious claims are no longer decisive. As a result of this two-fold Western handicap, the encounter with religious pluralism may lead to either religious polarisation, or else the diminishing of religious conviction. This latter is what Lamin Sanneh has described as 'a situation that tolerates people to be religiously informed so long as they are not religious themselves'.<sup>21</sup>

The lived experience of the new heartlands of the Christian faith, by contrast, constitutes a remarkable achievement. In general, Christian expansion has taken place in the midst of other religious faiths, compelling Christian thought to establish its categories in the interface of Christian convictions on the one hand, and the local

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'Structural problems in Mission Studies', in his, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: T & T Clark/Orbis Books, 1996, pp. 143-59 (146).

<sup>21</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power - Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996): x.

alternatives, on the other.<sup>22</sup> In the midst of other faiths, Jesus remains Lord, and gospel distinctives do not have to be imposed or surrendered, as one is so often tempted to do in a Western setting. If Christian theologians of the South and indeed ordinary Christians too became more aware of what their Christian interaction with their religious and cultural environment has done for them, they would realise what a significant gain this is for Christian theology. It is this character of the theologies of the South that Dutch theologian and missiologist, the late Dr Johannes Verkuyl, saw when he described them as 'communicative, evangelistic and missionary' and focused on the question: 'How can we best do our theology so that the Gospel will touch people most deeply?'<sup>23</sup>

Second, Christian theology as public discourse relates primarily to the fortunes of Christianity as a living faith. This means that the emergence of vigorous and vibrant Christian communities in the new world Christianity of our time provides the opportunity to do 'scientific theology again', as in the midst of 'Christianity in its most dynamic forms, the theologian has a whole living range of contemporary data on which to work'.<sup>24</sup> It is not helpful, therefore, for Western scholars who show interest in understanding the Christian manifestations in the South to stress how 'different', or how uncongenial they may appear, fixating on what seems aberrant, as some do. Diversity need not mean difference, and to be stuck on that is to be wrong-footed. We all know that the complex intellectual processes that we call the Enlightenment in Europe have something to do with our present situation. By its exaltation of reason over against revelation, of the autonomous individual self over against community and collective consciousness, of the present and so-called modernity over against the past and tradition, the Enlightenment turned much of European traditional thought, informed by Christian teaching and practice, upside down. The Western Christian theology that emerged from that bruising struggle was Enlightenment theology, a Christian theology shaved down to fit the Enlightenment world-view.

But it is with the southward shift in Christianity's centre of gravity that the profound undermining of the Christian faith by the Enlightenment can now be seen, and perhaps one should agree with Andrew Walls that 'part of the strength of Christianity in the South today is the fact that it is independent of the

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<sup>22</sup> On this subject, see in my *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Chapter 6 on 'The primal imagination and the opportunity for a new theological idiom': 91-108.

<sup>23</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology - An Introduction* (trans. & ed. Dale Cooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> H.W. Turner, 'The contribution of studies on religion in Africa to Western Religious Studies', in Mark Glasswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke (eds.), *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World, Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyerr* (London: SPCK, 1974): 169-78 (177-78).

Enlightenment'.<sup>25</sup> There is so much that happens in Christian life and thought, particularly where the Transcendent impinges upon everyday human existence, that the Enlightenment marginalised, discounted or simply ignored in earlier Western Christian experience. We can understand how Andrew Walls, writing about Africa, comes to suggest that, as a consequence, 'Western theology is not big enough for Africa'. It may not be big enough for the church in the North either.

To take, for instance, the field of Biblical Studies, which we would consider to be vital in the curriculum of theological formation, the historical-critical method of exegesis, a legacy of Enlightenment methodology, which belongs to just a segment of Western intellectual history, continues to hold sway, however modified it may seem to be. And yet it will not take exhaustive research to demonstrate that neither the Old Testament prophets, nor our Lord Jesus, nor his apostles, are models of that method of Scriptural exegesis. Other cultural traditions in the treatment of sacred lore and heritage, indigenous to the southern continents where the majority of the Christians now are, could prove immensely helpful in freeing our Scriptures from this persisting Western hegemony and liberate the living Word of God for our time, so that our theology can communicate God's authoritative truth to our societies. We are now able to recognise, in a way that we were not able to before, that there are, in the ancient cultures of the southern continents, persisting indigenous cultural traditions of wisdom, knowledge and spiritual insight, which make the world of the Christian Scriptures and the depths of Christian apprehension of reality so evidently luminous with meaning

This brings me to my third and final observation. Does theology have a place and a role in public discourse, bringing its unique contribution to the shaping of a shared human intellectual space? Emmanuel Katongole (from Uganda, now teaching in Duke Divinity School), in an article two years ago, spoke of theology being tempted to succumb to what he called 'Christian theology's false humility', the 'tendency to allow its social contribution to be shaped and defined by the secular disciplines of political science, economics and sociology',<sup>26</sup> and therefore disabling theology from speaking in its own terms as the discernment of the manifestations and acts of God. Almost twenty years ago, Leslie Newbigin indicated what he thought would be needed to overcome the destructive dichotomies injected by the Enlightenment that weaken the impact of Christian affirmations, making them into private opinion rather than public truth in a 'unified view of things'.

This calls for a more radical kind of conversion than has often been thought, a conversion not only of the will, but of the mind, a transformation by the renewing of

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<sup>25</sup> Walls,, 'Christian scholarship in Africa in the twenty-first century', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 2001), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Katongole, 'Hauerwasian hooks and the Christian social imagination': 137.

the mind so as not to be conformed to this world, not to see things as our culture sees them, but – with new lenses – to see things in a radically different way.<sup>27</sup>

By ‘our culture’, he meant modern Western culture. In my *Christianity in Africa – The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, I suggest that in the cultural worlds of the Christian communities of the Southern continents, there is opportunity to recover the ancient Christian unity of theology and spirituality and so restore to theology the vital dimension of living religiously for which the theologian needs make no apology.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion: A reverse pilgrimage**

I drew attention earlier on to the observation by Joel Carpenter that our changed Christian world ‘represents a remarkable case of “globalization from below”, rather than imposition from the world’s great powers’. There is a further insight in that comment: Christian history is the theatre not of the imposition of human will upon the world, but the disclosure of the initiative and sovereignty of the living God. And now the trend towards the South is well nigh irreversible.

So I end as I began, with John Mbiti, writing over thirty years ago. Two sentences further on from the statement I cited, he makes the further observation and raises a question:

Theologians from the new (or younger) churches [of the South] have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches [of the North]. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you ... We know you theologically. The question is: do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p.38.

<sup>28</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa – The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995), p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> Mbiti, ‘Theological impotence and the universality of the Church’, pp. 16–17.