AFRICA AND CHRISTIANITY ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM:
THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

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In the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, it became widely expected that Africa would have a less strategic place in a world that would no longer be dominated by the ideological polarizations of East and West, of communism and capitalism. The near-intractable nature of the economic and political problems which many African nations had begun to experience following the 1960s, the decade of independence,1 contributed to the equally widespread perception that these problems were somehow endemic to the continent. It is doubtful whether even the thoughtful demonstration by Jean-François Bayart that the political life of Africa is not an exotic aberration, but that ‘in many respects Africa is a mirror’ reflecting ‘our own [Western] political image and has a lot to teach us about the springs of our western modernity’,2 did much to dispel a certain Afro-pessimism which suggested that not only was Africa a continent with problems, but that Africa itself had become a problem for the world. Indeed, according to at least one analysis made from the standpoint of the geopolitical interests of the West, Africa was marginal to the remaking of a coming ‘world order’.3 It was a mood that some African interpreters also shared.4

What much of the study of Africa appeared to miss, perhaps because of a persisting Eurocentrism, was that the very conditions of Africa, as well as developments within the continent, were steadily making it into a privileged arena in some important areas of scholarship. For our present purposes, what is most striking is the enhanced place of Africa in the modern transformation of Christianity in the world, as, indeed, in the renewed significance of religion as a social force in human affairs more generally.

Such an observation might be considered surprising, especially when set alongside the simultaneous rapid decline of the numbers of professing Christians in modern Western culture, a decline that ‘carries at its heart a moral relativism that discounts Christianity’s transcendent claims and

resists the religion, or any religion for that matter, as a valid source of truth and guidance.\textsuperscript{5} The varied effects of this modern intellectual revolution in the West, diagnosed with much persuasion by Lesslie Newbigin and which has its roots in the Enlightenment,\textsuperscript{6} need not detain us at this point. Rather, the sheer surprise that Africa should have emerged as a major heartland of Christianity at the close of the twentieth century makes it important that one should seek to understand what this might mean for Africa and for the world.\textsuperscript{7}

**Christianity’s shifting centre of gravity**

The Ghanaian scholar Christian Baëta, reviewing the work of the Seventh International African Seminar held in Ghana in 1965 under his chairmanship to evaluate Christianity in tropical Africa, wrote:

In numberless institutions of many different kinds as well as in the equally numerous and diverse voluntary organisations and free associations of men, women and children; in the pervasive influence and challenge of its message to men and demands upon their individual lives and their relationships with one another; in countless personal and group decisions made, and lives actually lived differently from what they would otherwise have been; in the new high hopes and aspirations for individual and social destiny which it has awakened; in sheer excellence of human performance in devotion and courageous self-sacrificing service to others, and yet in other ways, Christianity plays a role and exerts a force in tropical Africa which is none the less real or significant because it eludes full and conclusive analysis.\textsuperscript{8}

At the time Baëta wrote, in the first decade of African independence from Western colonial rule, it was commonly thought that Christianity would become less significant in Africa for having been associated so closely with the colonial presence and perceived to have been dependent on its structures. And yet, as the subsequent history of Christianity in Africa has shown, that presumption was completely false and it is Baëta’s insight that has proved more enduring.\textsuperscript{9} In fact, as Godwin Tasie and Richard Gray point out, ‘In many respects, political independence has proved a relatively


\textsuperscript{7} Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion* (Edinburgh University Press; Edinburgh and Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1995).


insignificant factor’. In 1987, in a survey of ‘The Christian Tradition in Today’s World’, Andrew Walls wrote:

In 1900 Europe (including Russia) and North America together accounted for 83% of the world’s Christians. The continent of Africa accounted for less than 2%. Today, over half the Christians in the world live in the southern continents of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania.

It is not necessary to accept these figures unquestioningly in order to recognize the trends they indicate. David Barrett, editor of the World Christian Encyclopaedia and widely acknowledged as the source of the most reliable statistical evidence on such matters, argued in 1970 that the enormous increase in Christianity in Africa ‘might well tip the balance and transform Christianity into a primarily non-Western religion’. Walls, for whom this fundamental change in the Christian world had much more than demographic significance, would later comment further on this global transformation of the Christian world:

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.

The prospect of Christianity, in one form or another, becoming a dominant religion in Africa, and of Africans contributing a visibly high proportion of the world’s Christians, may be assessed in a variety of ways. One way is to see the significance of Christianity in African life as a sign of Africa’s dependence, and to be puzzled that ‘Africa is not reacting to globalisation by revitalising African traditional religion’, but instead appears to be ‘opting into exotic (sic) religions’. According to such a view, Africa compounds its own marginalization by succumbing to Western hegemony

as one of its ‘best remaining ways of opting into the global order’.16
Another is to recognize, as Kevin Ward has recently suggested,
that, at some point in the twenty-first century, Christians in Africa will become
more numerous than Christians in any other single continent and more important than ever in articulating a global Christian identity in a pluralist world.17

Africa and its observers

It is perhaps too much to expect that the significance of modern African Christianity should readily find general acceptance,18 given the history of the interpretation of Africa in Western scholarship and the standpoint of Western missionary expectations. As late as the 1910 World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh, Scotland, the pre-Christian religious traditions of Africans, roundly described as ‘Animism’ (a term adopted from an interpreter who himself never observed African religious life), were held not to contain ‘any preparation for Christianity’.19 Temple Gairdner, in his official account, described Animism as the ‘religious beliefs of more or less backward and degraded peoples all over the world’.20

But it is important to recognize that the missionary ‘image of Africa’ was not, as has been shown by Philip Curtin, a missionary invention.21 There was a widely held intellectual consensus in Europe that Africa was a tabula rasa, and that Africans featured as a type of the ‘savage and barbarous heathen’ presumed to be at the bottom of a so-called ‘Great Chain of Being’.22 One of the most illustrious exponents of the Enlightenment, the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, expressed very clearly this kind of thinking:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences . . . Such a uniform and constant difference

could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.23

When related to religion and religions, the Great Chain of Being ensured that Christianity, associated with the civilized culture of Europe, was reckoned the most ‘civilized’ of all religions, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* stated:

When the different systems of religion that have prevailed in the world are comparatively viewed with respect to their influence on the welfare of society, we find reason to prefer the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans to the ruder, wilder, religious ideas and ceremonies that have prevailed among savages: Mahometanism, perhaps in some respects, to the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans: Judaism however to Mahometanism; and Christianity to all of them.24

At the close of the twentieth century, when all the indications are that not only has Christianity become the most global of all religions, but also that the radically changed character of Christianity’s manifestation in the world has turned it into a predominantly ‘non-Western religion’, to the extent that it has now ceased to be shaped primarily by the events and processes at work in Western culture, it is understandable that the intellectual adjustment that may be required could be quite considerable.

Africa and modern Christian theology in the West

The modern shift in Christianity’s centre of gravity, therefore, bears out Adrian Hastings’ observation that Christianity occupies a unique position in the world today, precisely because of ‘the unique importance of its study for any understanding of world history’.25 In relation to Africa, it—and religion generally—is of continuing social relevance. This is a vindication in the modern world of the viability of Christian religious discourse, as being ‘not outworn and to be discarded, but rather as fully coherent with human experience’.26 Given the specifically Christian predominance in Africa’s modern religious history, one would have expected that the field of scholarship that should have registered this African impact would be Christian theology in the West.

Nearly 25 years ago Harold Turner sought to show that in all the regular religious disciplines—Biblical studies, Christian history, Missiology and Ecumenics, Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, as well as in the general Phenomenology and History of Religion—the African field threw

new light on old issues, because it yielded data that were both vital and contemporary. His reasons for this are worth noting:

Theology as a science depends upon access to its appropriate data in their most authentic and vital forms. If we regard the data of theology as being the revelations and acts of the Divine, the post-biblical and contemporary manifestations of these data will occur less vividly in a dispirited Western Church with declining numbers and morale. On the other hand, the data will be more evident and accessible in unsophisticated churches where the living God is taken seriously as present in the healing and conquering power of the Spirit, with gospel-generated growth and a spiritual creativity and confidence. Here at the growing edges of Christianity in its most dynamic forms, the theologian is encouraged to do scientific theology again, because he has a whole living range of contemporary data on which to work. It is not that these dynamic areas of the Christian world are free from imperfection; but being full of old and new heresies, they need theology to offer it an important task.27

Turner was clearly not naive or uncritical regarding the modern African experience of the Christian religion and it is to be doubted whether there is any reason to modify his observations in any significant manner.

Yet it seems that just as ‘[Western] mission Christianity was not from the start prepared to face a serious encounter with the traditional religions and philosophy’ in Africa,28 so subsequent Western theology has been the least affected by the new global transformation of the Christian world.29 However, it would be too simple to attribute Western theology’s failure to register, to any significant degree, the effect of Christianity’s globalization to the persistence of a stubborn Western intellectual hegemony alone. Western theology’s failure here can be seen as a sign of something else. The ‘Christian interaction with the cultures of the South’ means that Christian thought is being taken ‘into new areas of life where Western theology has no answers because it has no questions’.30 This, in turn, means that our knowledge of Christianity, shaped exclusively by the modern intellectual experience of the West, may well not provide adequate preparation for our understanding of its interaction with the events and processes that take place in the South.

Christianity in African life: some ramifications

It is therefore heartening that, whereas Western Christian theology has seemed unable to embrace, in relation to Africa, the implications of

Christianity’s globalization, social science studies of Africa have more readily recognized the significance of Christianity in African life. Even a select bibliography of the recent literature would be vast. Terence Ranger’s comment that ‘because the Christian movement has been one of the great realities of twentieth century Africa, it has also been, by definition, an aspect of African identity’,\(^{31}\) shows how African Christianity has become a test case for social scientists, not only of the endurance of the Christian tradition in history but also of the persisting impact of religion as a social force in human affairs. No serious study of Africa can ignore Christianity and the role it has come to play in Africa. But this also includes the specifically ‘theological’ role of Christianity as religion in African life.

Even here, one needs to exercise caution, for, as has been observed:

> Religious activism intrudes upon the post-enlightenment secular world of sociological theorising as rudely, and with as little comprehension, as secularism once intruded upon a world united by belief. One of the paradoxes of the modern sciences that have made much of our world more accessible to human intellect is that it has made this part less so.\(^ {32}\)

Therefore it is probably not surprising, as Paul Gifford points out, that ‘many social science studies of African religion almost ignore this aspect’ of theology.\(^ {33}\) Gifford’s book is one of the few exceptions. And yet, Gifford’s own minimal definition of theology as ‘those ideas, symbols, images, motifs, myths and metaphors which we can glorify with the title “theology” or “belief”’,\(^ {34}\) means that he does not expect it to be particularly significant in the long run to African Christianity. Indeed, he expresses such a view quite candidly. Whereas theology, as connoting ‘reflective paradigmatic thought has been elevated to prominence by Western Christianity, we cannot presume that it is so central to African religion, even Africa’s mainline Christianity’.\(^ {35}\) One effect of presuming ‘reflective thought’ to be insignificant for African Christians is that Gifford skews considerably his discussion of the ‘public role’ of African Christianity and in fact fails to build sufficiently upon some of his own best insights and intuitions.

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\(^{35}\) Gifford, *African Christianity*. 
Surely one of the most perceptive comments that Gifford makes regarding Christianity in African life is the observation that the religious situation in Africa is one in which an appeal ‘to a primal imagination . . . does not involve a positive repudiation of Enlightenment rationality in the way that is required in the West’.36 This ought to mean that one should treat more seriously the argument that, given this changed situation of Christianity in the world, we may well have the opportunity for exploring new Christian theological discourse and idiom,37 by respecting the continuing primal world views of non-Western Christians,38 and in this particular case, of Africa. However, by holding the view that ‘whatever else it is, Christianity is a cultural product honed in the West over centuries’,39 Gifford is unable to follow through his own insight. The effect of what appears as an echo of the Eurocentrism of the past is that one is prevented from seeing that a new, possibly irreversible, trend has occurred, providing a new outlook on the relative positions of Christians from the West and Africa, and indicating, to an increasing degree, a new self-reflection on the part of African Christianity.

A hopeful sign pointing in this direction is documented in the recent studies on African Christianity and African Christians published by the Dutch scholar, Gerrie ter Haar. Writing on African Christians in Europe, with particular reference to the Netherlands, she has shown how

Dutch communities which so far have found it difficult to integrate African Christians in the Netherlands into the wider Christian community . . . put the emphasis on the African rather than the Christian identity of these believers.

and thus

use ‘culture’ as a mechanism to demarcate and separate, whereas the African diaspora Christians take the opposite view and aspire to use their Christian faith as a means of integration into Dutch society.40

38. What is meant by ‘continuing primal world views of non-Western Christians’ follows the position taken at the World Council of Churches Consultation on ‘Christian involvement in dialogue with traditional thought-forms’, held at Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1973. The Consultation stated: ‘A primal world view operates in varying degrees within the continuing primordial traditions, within neo-primal forms, within those who have abandoned the primal inheritance of their fathers and found no new faith, and within those who have adopted some form of Christian or any other religion without shedding their own culture.’ Cited in J. B. Taylor (ed.), *Primal World Views: Christian involvement in dialogue with traditional thought forms* (Daystar Press, Ibadan, 1976), p. 5.
Gerrie ter Haar’s insight, which she has subsequently refined in a larger publication, is important and points to some specifically Christian dimensions of the African participation in globalization that may escape secular-minded observers. She lays stress on the fact that the development of these ‘African-initiated’ churches outside the African continent, propagating a ‘self-confident Christianity’ and ‘claiming universal qualities for a religious world-view which, as it happens, has important roots in Africa’, is a significant departure that should lead to a renewed appreciation of Africa’s role in the modern world. Gerrie ter Haar, interestingly, comments:

To call them ‘African’ churches implies a limitation of their task in Europe. They look at themselves as ‘international’ churches, expressing their aspiration to be part of the international world in which they believe they have a missionary task.

To the extent that the ‘international’ ethos of the diaspora African Christians reflects the attitude of their churches in Africa which send their pastors out as missionaries to the West, this development contributes a useful perspective on the nature of the external relations that link African churches and the outside world, particularly in the West.

There is another dimension of the Christian scene in Africa that also calls for nuanced treatment: the increasing presence since the 1980s of a whole range of pentecostal, or perhaps more accurately, ‘charismatic’ forms of Christianity, since these transcend the traditional classical denominational pentecostalism. In the 1980s, particularly before the political transformation in South Africa, what was most visible about this development was the connection with the American Religious Right, as it sought to maintain the status quo in Southern Africa. Since then, the analysis has shifted to focus on the indigenous African character of these movements as authentic developments within African Christianity. Some of these new charismatic ministries and churches, such as the International Central Gospel Church, founded by Pastor Mensa Otabil in Ghana, demonstrate Christian self-confidence as African movements, which recalls Gerrie ter Haar’s observations quoted above.

But here too, much academic analysis tends to press the evidence into something of a dualistic dialectic that sets African pentecostalism and its

42. Ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise*, p. 192.
44. Ter Haar, ‘Strangers’, p. 29.
46. See Gifford, *African Christianity*. 
socio-political effects against ‘mainline’ churches which then appear to be ineffectual. This is unfortunate because the parallel ‘pentecostalizing’ process occurring within some of the mainline churches should alert us to the fact that any hard divisions of that sort are unhelpful. One may belabour the point because it recalls the earlier similar hard distinctions that were made in the 1960s between ‘older’, ‘mission-founded’ and ‘African Independent Churches’, the latter being presented as the authentic African responses to the Christian faith in Africa. As it turned out, those distinctions also became rapidly less meaningful, since the Independents were in fact indicating the direction in which African Christianity as a whole was moving.47

It is also less than helpful to continue to polarize the so-called ‘political theology’ of South Africa and the so-called ‘cultural theology’ of the rest of the continent. One of the remarkable developments of the 1990s has been the emergence of a theological dialogue in which the two trends are mutually engaged in a ‘theology of reconstruction’ to address the complex realities of African existence.48 In the mid-1980s Desmond Tutu was already describing ‘Black Theology’ and ‘African Theology’ as not ‘antagonists’ but rather as ‘soul mates’, as ‘two concentric circles of which Black Theology is the inner and smaller circle’.49 In the new, post-apartheid and post-Mandela South Africa, Thabo Mbeki’s quest for an ‘African Renaissance’ derives its inspiration not from a narrowly conceived ideology of social engineering, but from James Kwegyir Aggrey’s (of the then Gold Coast) earlier vision of the African personality and its intrinsic worth and dignity.50 It is one of the strange twists in Gifford’s analysis that he should consider the theology of South Africa’s Afrikaners as ‘a genuinely (albeit now discredited) African theology’.51

These ramifications of Christianity in African life give some indication that we may be unduly sanguine if we presume that approaches provided by

47. See A. F. Walls, ‘The challenge of the African Independent Churches—the Anabaptists of Africa?’, Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, 3 (April, 1979), pp. 48–57, reprinted in Andrew F. Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the transmission of faith (Orbis Books, New York, and T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 111–18. A brief comment on the AICs in this study provides an insight into the ‘dualistic dialectic’ in the analysis of African Christianity: ‘One of the remarkable features of the Independent Churches for a Westerner is their combination of the ritual and hierarchical with the charismatic and spontaneous. The West knows both types of religion, but—at least until recently—identifies them with different traditions. The Independents combine them in the same tradition. But both features are part of African life. African life is ordered, has a sense of the appropriate time, place and person; but it is also spontaneous, improvisatory, responsive.’ (p. 118).
the social sciences are by themselves any more successful in achieving fully nuanced interpretations of Christianity than other traditional theological approaches. But this also means that we may not presume to answer the questions arising from Christianity’s interactions with the events and processes taking place in the Southern continents before those questions have been adequately formulated from those interactions themselves. If Christians in Africa are likely to become ‘more important than ever before in articulating a global Christian identity in a pluralist world’, as Kevin Ward has suggested, we are not yet in a position to claim as self-evident what this might entail.

African Christians and globalization ‘from below’

It is important to realize that Christianity, which ‘has always been universal in principle’, can be said ‘to have become universal in practice’ only in recent history, a fact which ‘is not only unique among the world’s religions; it is a new feature for the Christian faith itself’. It is important, therefore, not to underestimate what the outworking of a ‘global Christian identity’ might involve. It is sometimes, but probably not adequately, recognized that, with the exception of the very earliest phase of the rise of Christianity, the modern shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian heartlands has produced a situation in which the Christian faith has emerged as, by and large, the religion of ‘the relatively and absolutely poor, centred in the poorest parts of the world’. That the levers of global economic and hence political power are likely to be ‘located in the post-Christian West’ could mean that Africa will be perceived as not significant when viewed from the standpoint of the geopolitical interest of the West.

However, it will be to misconceive the nature of Christianity as a universal faith to presume that Christians in the West will equally consider Africa as of scant interest. On the contrary, it is precisely the ‘Christian factor’, and its massive importance in contemporary Africa, which will mean that Africa cannot be marginalized in any serious sense. It is perhaps significant that the Jubilee 2000 movement associated with relief of the debt burden of the poorest nations in the South has drawn on the considerable support of groups of Christians and councils of churches in the West.

Developments within the world-wide Anglican Communion give an indication of what the significance of the African ‘Christian factor’ can

57. Bediako, Christianity in Africa, pp. 252 ff.
be. At the 1978 Lambeth Conference there were 80 bishops from Africa; in 1988 there were 175. As the trend of growth of Anglican churches in Africa seemed set to continue, so it was expected that the number of African bishops would increase in relation to Anglican bishops elsewhere within the Communion. As the 1988 conference was ending, an African bishop is reported to have observed that ‘Anyone who wants a resolution passed in 1998 will have to come to terms with the African bishops’.58

By the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the total number of African Anglican bishops had indeed risen: there were 226 African bishops,59 and it is a fact that they did have a considerable influence on resolutions that were passed, bringing to issues of faith and conduct a perspective that was quite often distinctive and that set them apart from the outlook of many Western bishops. If the Anglican Communion is to continue as a world-wide fellowship of independent churches and provinces, it is evident that it will be shaped in a decreasing manner by the processes at work and the choices made within the circles of Western Christianity.

In the coming decades, therefore, the cumulative effect of the impact of the new African ‘international’ Christianity in the diaspora and the significance of the African ‘Christian factor’ in world Christianity, now for the first time in history a universal faith, could well be a reverse process to the prevailing Western-driven globalization. A process of globalization ‘from below’, in which the social and cultural significance of religious belief and religious communities—associated with the less affluent parts of the world—could become appreciated afresh, could lead to a considerable modification of the now generalized expectation that the Two-Thirds of the world has little choice but to follow in the trail of the One-Third. The West has hitherto been regarded as historically ‘Christian territory’. Where Africa is concerned, it is the new African ‘Christian factor’ that could prove decisive.

African Christianity in the twenty-first century: pointers to a new role

If we are, therefore, to regard African Christianity as ‘potentially the representative Christianity of the twenty-first century’ (Walls), culturally and intellectually as well as demographically, what are the indicators that this expectation is likely to be justified? Elsewhere I have suggested that part of the significance of modern African Christianity lies in two areas: namely, how the African accession to Christianity helps towards an understanding of the recession from Christian faith in the modern West, and how the lived experience of African Christians, in their total religious, cultural,

as well as socio-political contexts, points the way for how Christians may exist in a post-Christendom pluralist world.\(^{60}\) One may profitably revisit these two ideas and explore them further.

In view of what has been said above, it becomes important that studies of modern African Christianity should not be such as will isolate it and make its features so unique that they seem to bear no relation to what happens to Christianity elsewhere. It is evident that the considerable accession to Christianity in the predominantly religious world of Africa has coincided with an equally marked recession from Christianity in the modern West, a situation which cannot be separated from the rapid erosion of religious outlook, particularly in Western Europe. Paul Gifford, who notes this fact, responds to it by postulating ‘different Christianities’, the one, ‘supernaturalistic’, the ‘realm of demons, spirits, witches’, being the African variant; the other, ‘supernatural’, the realm of ‘God, heaven, prayer, the resurrection of Christ, sacraments’, being the Western variant\(^{61}\) One does not need to pledge unqualified endorsement of all that happens within African Christianity to see that this distinction is dubious. A more helpful approach is to recognize that ‘the internal transformation within Western Christianity’ (that is, in the direction of secularization), which Gifford regards as ‘a major cultural shift’,\(^{62}\) has a bearing on the recession from Christian faith in the modern West.

This is not a matter of making competitive claims, but rather of appreciating that the modern shift in Christianity’s centre of gravity may thus have secured for it a future which would otherwise be precarious in a secularized cultural environment. It might be illuminating to examine how earlier shifts also secured it in the transition from the Jewish world to the Hellenistic world of the early Christian centuries, and then, in subsequent centuries, from the ‘civilized’ world of the Mediterranean basin to the ‘barbarian’ world of northern and western Europe. But all this lies outside the scope of our present discussion.

The essential point, then, is that religious accession and religious recession both belong within Christian religious history, and the character of Christian impact in the world is not linear and cumulative, but rather serial and dialectic. Therefore one can understand how Karl Rahner’s observation about the modern West as ‘a milieu that has become unchristian’, represents in fact one illustration of the way that the correlation to accession and recession within all Christian religious history helps towards a more nuanced interpretation of the ‘Christian West’.\(^{63}\) Writing recently

on Christianity in Western Europe from the Enlightenment, Mary Heimann concludes:

It seems absurd to presume that there could ever have been a time when the entire population of Europe would spontaneously and wholeheartedly have chosen to commit itself to Christianity had it been presented with a series of distinct and mutually contradictory ethical and philosophical systems and been free of any legal pressure or social incentive to choose only one. Despite the prevalence of romantic fictions about the European past, there never was an age of perfect Christian faith.  

Understanding the significance of the correlation of African Christian accession and Western Christian recession in the way I have suggested, perhaps also helps towards understanding how the experience of African Christianity provides pointers as to how Christianity itself may function in a post-Christendom pluralist world.

There is no doubt that in the present global transformation of Christianity, which has made the designation ‘universal religion’ more accurate than ever before, Christians are also more dispersed than ever before. The notion of territorial Christianity, or Christendom, in the West, supremely the achievement of Charlemagne and which endured until relatively modern times, has effectively collapsed. Indeed, it can be argued that the modern missionary movement from the West, along with other developments within Western Europe, played a significant role in bringing about the crumbling of Western Christendom, though this outcome may not have been intended. Be that as it may, the fact now is that virtually all Christians the world over live in plural societies, comprising persons of other religious faiths or of none. How persons of diverse religious persuasions may live together in harmony has become one of the most crucial questions in any discussion of the social significance of religion.

So far as religious engagement in a pluralist setting is concerned, in contrast to Africa, the modern West has less to offer than may be readily recognized, unless it be the lessons from the disaster that was Christendom. 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, while the secularized environment that followed the Enlightenment has tended to suggest that specifically religious claims are no longer decisive. As a result of this Western handicap, the encounter with religious pluralism may lead to religious fundamentalism, or else to the diminishing of religious conviction. It is

what Lamin Sanneh describes as ‘a situation that tolerates people to be religiously informed so long as they are not religious themselves’.65

In contrast, modern African Christian thought has had, by and large, to establish its categories in the interface of Christian profession and the perennial spiritualities of the primal religious traditions of Africa.66 The experience of African Christianity may well have some unique contributions to make to the present subject. This is why it must be reckoned as a loss that most studies of inter-religious encounter continue to ignore the primal religions, possibly because they were for so long regarded as ‘primitive’ by Western scholars, with little or nothing to contribute. Yet the long tradition of hospitality and tolerance which the African primal religions have maintained in their meeting with the missionary religions of Christianity and Islam must qualify them to contribute substantially to the quest for inter-religious dialogue and harmony. But over and above these practical considerations, they are eminently qualified for having a unique historical connection with Christianity especially, since they constitute the religious background of the majority of Christians of all nations so far in Christian history, including Western Christians.67

If religious affirmations are what they purport to be, claiming to transcend the human measure by pointing beyond to the divine, it cannot be reasonably expected of religious persons to compromise their religious convictions. Gilbert Murray’s observation on the religious outlook comes to mind here: ‘Religion . . . is all-encompassing and demanding of total allegiance—infinite in its application to life. The man who makes terms with his conscience is essentially non-religious.’68 And yet it is possible to show that a religious militancy which seeks the enforced elimination of all alternatives need not be intrinsic to the nature of religion itself.

It is self-evident that the demands of inter-religious peace and harmony in Africa now focus primarily on Christian-Muslim relations. But it can be argued that the nature of the conflicts between Christians and Muslims appears to be extending the bitter consequences of religious territoriality, Christian as well as Muslim, that has marked the history of their relationship in the West.

With regard to the unfolding test-case of Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation, and where Christianity and Islam meet each other on something approaching an equal footing, Lamin Sanneh relates how the Christian response to the rise and stiffening of Islamic militancy resorts, in effect, to the prescriptions of Christendom as handed on from Western mission Christianity.69 Following the unpublicized decision by the military government of President Ibrahim Babangida to enrol Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), and the federal government’s backing for Shari’ah courts in northern Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), an ecumenical grouping formed specifically to respond to Islamic militancy, issued a statement asking for an identical public status and recognition for Christianity. However, as Sanneh observes:

... CAN’s strategy of demanding privileges for Christians comparable to those offered to Muslims set it on the Muslim side of the fault line, with Christians wheeling and dealing on a stage Muslims have constructed for their own purpose. For example, the Kaduna branch of CAN published a statement asking the government to offset any concessions to the Shariah with similar concessions to Christians by establishing a Christian constitution based on ecclesiastical courts (Nigeria Tribune, 21 October 1998). No wonder Muslims welcomed CAN’s platform, forcing a Catch-22 upon Christians by challenging them to say which they prefer, English Common Law, ecclesiastical canon law, or secular law.70

But as Sanneh further comments, as if to temper Muslim confidence in the stand-off:

If . . . the example of Christendom and its disastrous consequences for genuine pluralism and multiculturalism were available to Muslims, it might calm passions and provide instructive lessons about the liabilities of religious territoriality in Africa or anywhere else.71

The point of the argument, then, is that there is a ‘body of material in both Christian and Muslim traditions to support a public role for religion without requiring theocratic rule’.72 The Jakhanké Muslim clerics, pacific and peripatetic, whose roots reach as far back as medieval Africa, provide an outstanding example of an African Muslim tradition that rejects political coercion and military means for maintaining religious allegiance.73 If one is puzzled that, on the Christian side, the Christians in Nigeria appear to be in a Western Christendom bind, Sanneh offers a historical insight:

69. Sanneh, Piety and Power.
71. Sanneh, Piety and Power, p. 129.
Historians struck by the survival in Christian Africa of vestiges of European influence will do well to remember that it was a scholasticised faith that came to Africa, and that in its European form the church demanded little engagement with local priorities and attitudes. Jesus of Nazareth was swallowed up in abstract dogma, his earthly life refined as fuel for enlightened minds.74

The public role of African Christianity

We noted earlier Christian Baëta’s prefatory remark, in Christianity in Tropical Africa, on the influence that Christianity had exerted in determining individual and social identity in Africa. Baëta was the first African to head the University of Ghana Department for the Study of Religions, established in the early 1960s to take the place of what was previously a Department of Divinity. In his valedictory lecture delivered before the University in 1971, Baëta made observations which give some indication of what African Christian conviction amid religious pluralism might require:

On the horizontal line, in our search for true humanity, obviously it is highly desirable that all men should achieve the greatest possible consensus. Our claim is that the Lord Christ, being the paradigm of God’s own activity in the world, is the paradigm of the true man, and that he is recognisable as such by all men of good will. In fact I am not aware that this claim, if it stops here, has ever anywhere been seriously challenged. The interesting observation has been made that in the evolution of the various world religions there is clearly discernible a certain inclination, a ‘pondus’ in the direction of Christian patterns, for example in the development from strict Hinayana Buddhism to the trusting devotion of Amidism. We could cite ourselves the advance from traditional religions to post-Christian cults such as Tigare. Doubtless this is also the point of the title of the recent book by M. M. Thomas, the Indian layman who at present is chairman of the World Council of Churches: The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance.75

That Baëta was prepared to be so wide-ranging in his observations and to include [African] traditional religions, Buddhism and Hinduism in his discernment of ‘Christian patterns’, shows how far he was willing to extend the argument for the validity of Christian claims amid religious pluralism. Baëta’s remarks about ‘our search for true humanity’, achieving ‘the greatest possible consensus’, that ‘the Lord Christ ... the paradigm of God’s own activity, ... the paradigm of the true man, ... is recognisable as such by all men of goodwill’,76 bring us to the important matter of the

public role’ of African Christianity, to use Paul Gifford’s term. By this is meant the capacity of Christianity to function as a positive social and political force in society for the enhancement and consolidation of those values and attitudes that make for wholesome social cohesion and so promote harmonious and integral human development.

One may not belittle, therefore, as Gifford appears to do, efforts aimed at linking the mainsprings of responsible Christian political action with the political vision of the Kingdom of God and the political option of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Elsewhere, I have sought to show that part of the Christian contribution to the struggle for democratic culture in Africa will involve making room for ‘the mind of Jesus’, as a non-dominating, non-self-asserting, but rather a redemptive mind, as this relates to the issues of power and authority.

This is not the place to develop fully the notion of the political options of Jesus, and to expound the concept of ‘the politics of Jesus’. It is sufficient to recall that the capacity of Christianity to operate as a de-sacralizing force in history has been well noted and documented. The essential thrust of the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament, and the teaching and attitude of Jesus in the New Testament, is to de-sacralize, and therefore also de-mystify, persons and situations where there seemed to have occurred an integration of altar and throne—one of ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’—in what Arend van Leeuwen called ‘ontocracy’.

The reported encounter between Pontius Pilate, representing the Roman Empire, and Jesus, the innocent yet non-assertive victim of evil, represents the high point of the de-sacralizing emphasis in the tradition of the Bible. Pilate’s claim to have the ‘power either to free or to crucify’ Jesus shows that he held a conception of power which sacralized the political authority of the Empire. On the other hand, Jesus’s response: ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above’, shows how Jesus de-sacralized the Empire itself. In theological perspective, Pilate’s authority, ‘like all human authority, is delegated; its source is Divine and therefore it is not arbitrary power, which can be exercised capriciously without moral blame.

Therefore Jesus’s willingness to suffer, though guiltless and innocent, becomes the ultimate clue to his mind on issues of power and authority. By his willing acceptance of death on a cross—the ultimate refinement in imperial methods of death by torture—Jesus desacralized all worldly power, relativizing its inherent tendency towards absolutization and its pretensions to ultimacy.

Of course, mainstream Christian theology reads the career of Jesus in religious terms as sacrifice and atonement. However, the ‘concrete social meaning of the Cross’84 is no less important, since it is such a social meaning which illuminates the rather unfamiliar terminology of ‘principalities and powers’ and their related expressions in the New Testament. For behind this terminology lie all the institutions and structures that are held to affect and shape history and human social relations—family, blood, kinship, nation, social class, race, law, politics, economy, custom, tradition, religion. In a century which has witnessed some of the worst excesses of race-consciousness and ethnic exclusiveness, to the point of practising ‘ethnic cleansing’, hopefully it is possible to see how the social meaning of the religious terminology of the New Testament can have relevance to the problems of the modern world.85

In many countries of Africa, pre-colonial political systems tended towards onocracy, as traditional religious and cultural norms were inclined to sacralize power and authority.86 In that sense, it is possible to trace the traditional religious roots of some of the problems of post-independence political authoritarianism in Africa. At the same time, the role of Christianity in desacralizing the political environment in Africa has also been noted.87 It is possible therefore to recognize the achievement of African churches in the democratization of Africa in the 1980s and 1990s as a genuinely religious achievement, linked with ‘the mind of Jesus’ in the African churches.88 By the same token, it may be said that, without such a conception of power as Jesus held, taught and demonstrated by the Cross,

84. Yoder, Politics of Jesus, p. 134.
the hope for a sustained democratic culture in modern African politics could prove elusive. 89

If the ‘Christ paradigm’ has any significance in the public sphere, therefore, however essential it may be that transformation should find expression in socio-political institutions and structures, it needs also to find incarnation in personal lives. In this regard, Africa’s most important resource for its needed transformation may well reside in its current Christian spiritual vitality, whilst the churches’ greatest challenge lies with their ability to ‘conscientize’ their Christian communities in the direction of the ‘social’ meaning of their religion. Whereas the situation overall is uneven, it is an overstatement and inaccurate to suggest that ‘in large parts of black Africa there is a mood of Afro-pessimism . . . in the sense that Africans themselves have lost self-confidence’. 90 A more discerning view would be, rather, that there is emerging an increasing awareness that ‘Africa’s ills will not be cured without calling out its own resources’, 91 and that Africa’s resources include its specifically religious ones. 92

Conclusion—a cautionary word

The burden of this essay has been that the changed situation of Christianity in the world, with its centre of gravity in the ‘marginalized’ and vulnerable Southern continents, gives opportunity for a considerable breakthrough in the potential role that religious persons and religious communities can play in the coming new world order. But to fulfil this potential requires the embracing of the twin challenges of abjuring religious territoriality and internalizing and demonstrating new and redemptive concepts of power.

Early in this paper we noted Jean-François Bayart’s comment that ‘in many respects, Africa is a mirror’ reflecting lessons ‘about the springs of our western modernity’. As Africa is likely to continue to hold the interest of its observers and interpreters, a further observation from Bayart, still dealing with the interpretation of African politics, may close this discussion:

If the majority of phenomena which it [Africa] has allowed us to see and which taken together serve to typify it, are also found under other skies without none the less being seen as distinctive characteristics of systems of power in Asia, America

92. It is, perhaps, instructive that it is an eminent Kenyan scientist and Christian layman, George Kinoti, the founding Director of the African Institute for Scientific Research and Development, who has written the book Hope for Africa and What the Christian Can Do (AISRED, Nairobi, 1994).
or Europe, it is perhaps more a matter of degree or proportion . . . The condescending perplexity of the observer faced with the political practices south of the Sahara derives less from the fact that these are in themselves astonishing, than that such an observer is unable (or unwilling) to reconstruct the subjectivity of the African actors and remains instead a complacent hostage to the paradigm of the yoke.93

Bayart’s observations about the interpretation of African politics, in a curious way, reflect the burden of this essay regarding Africa’s significance for understanding Christianity as a world religion on the threshold of the third millennium. When seen in this light, Africa can hardly be called a marginal continent.