CONFERENCE REPORT

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: A CONTINENTAL COMPARISON

BY

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The final conference of the Study Programme of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT) on ‘Evangelicals and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America’, sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trust, took place from 28 to 30 June 2002. The conference was held in Washington, DC, under the title ‘The Bible and the Ballot Box’. On its first day, the findings of researchers on Africa, Asia and Latin America were presented. (The eighteen chapters, organized into three books, had been circulated before the conference.) On the second day there were comments by leading scholars of religion and politics. Comments were made on the African papers by Lamin Sanneh, David Maxwell and Paul Gifford.

For the last three and a half years, I have been the Director of the African part of the project. I advised six African post-doctoral researchers, who produced chapters on South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya and Northern Nigeria. These chapters, together with my introduction, will be published in an African volume, alongside volumes on Asia and Latin America.

What follows are my reflections, after the end of the Washington conference, on African Christianity in a comparative dimension. They first appeared in Transformation, 19, 4, October 2002, an issue that also contains an overview of the conference by Dr Vinay Samuels, and reports on the Latin American and Asian research by Dr Paul Preston and Dr David Lumsdaine.

Before the conference, my team had been very intently focussed on Africa itself. Now, in Washington, we found our material presented on
the same day as similar studies on Latin America and Asia. The next day there were commentaries by experts on the interactions of religion and politics in North America, Europe and the world as a whole. Our African cases were suddenly set in a vast comparative context.

On the first night of the conference I sat in my room trying to digest the papers from Asia and Latin America and to understand what they meant for Africa. I was struck, of course, by some comparisons. But what struck me most of all were the differences. At the opening conference dinner Lamin Sanneh drew a contrast between (in his words) ‘Global Christianity’ and ‘World Christianity’. ‘Global Christianity’ means a contemporary extension of Western Christendom—the religious idioms of Euro-America spreading triumphantly through other continents in a kind of spiritual neo-colonialism. It is stiflingly the same everywhere. ‘World Christianity’, on the other hand, means the total of all the appropriations of Christian ideas and forms that have been made in every part of the world. It is infinitely various. Evangelical Christianity has often been seen as an aspect of ‘Globalisation’ but what seemed to emerge from the conference was the variety of ‘World’ Evangelicalism.

The African papers certainly reveal very different interactions between evangelical Christianity and democracy than those shown in the papers on Asia and Latin America. But this is not due to ‘the Clash of Civilisations’, even though the conference was opened by Samuel Huntington. Huntington’s hypothesised ‘African Civilisation’ has always been one of the least convincing parts of his argument. Africa has never possessed a single religious civilisation—Judaism, Islam and Christianity itself are as ancient in Africa as anywhere in the world. The differences that arise from the African chapters are the result of more recent history.

I found the comparison with Asia and Latin America very useful for establishing quite what these historical particularities are. When I first went to Africa forty-five years ago, what I loved was its strangeness. I took, I suppose, an Orientalist perspective, rejoicing in the exotic. Over the decades I have worked hard on myself and Africa has worked hard on me and I now go there as returning home to a marvellous normality. Reading the Asian and Latin American papers is like my first visit to Africa. I am struck in them by what is strange, extraordinary, foreign—foreign, that is, to Africa. Reading these papers teaches me not so much about Asia and Latin America but about Africa by contrast. It reminds me of things about Africa which I have come to take as normal and which, indeed, are so obvious that they are easy to overlook.
At the conference, for instance, we heard a great deal from Michael Horowitz and others about the persecution of Christian minorities in Africa, particularly in the Sudan. But by contrast with Asia and Latin America the important fact about Africa is a very different one. By contrast with Asia, in none of our six sub-Saharan African case studies are Christians a minority within an overwhelming majority non-Christian religion. (The Northern Nigeria study, of course, deals with attempts by Muslim Governors to impose Sharia Law in their states, but this is in the context of the Nigerian nation in which Christians are as numerous as Muslims.) By contrast with Latin America, in only one of our six case studies—Mozambique—have Protestants been in a minority among a great majority of Catholics.

Indeed, in many sub-Saharan countries Protestants have formed a majority, particularly of the public class. The political culture of several African countries can be described as Protestant. John Lonsdale has hailed the Bible as Kenya’s only common political manual, and John Karanja describes Kenya’s Protestant politics in his chapter.

The Evangelical President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia to be a Christian State—and in her chapter Isabel Phiri shows that the ideal persists even after Chiluba’s fall. People are persecuted in Kenya and Zambia but not because they are Christians. And even in the most disorderly of sub-Saharan countries—Rwanda, Congo—people are killed and their bodies are piled up in churches, but not because they are Christians.

A second, connected, contrast can be drawn. In most of Asia Evangelical (and other) Christians are seeking to defend the democratic rights of minorities. In most of Africa, however, Evangelicals and other Protestants are seeking to draw upon the resources of a majority religion in order to democratise the whole political system. This makes for a very different politics and for a very different theology.

Where Evangelical Protestants are in a small minority they have no alternative but to follow the Pauline injunctions to respect political power. In most of Africa there is an alternative. Evangelicals can still decide not to resist the authorities and to seek instead to moralise politics and society through love. But they can and do reach new theological conclusions.

Achieving democracy in Africa is largely a matter of ensuring the widest possible participation and of restoring morality to politics. In her chapter on Zimbabwe, Bella Mukonyora shows that many Evangelical theologians there have come to argue that these tasks require personal transformation; that personal transformation is peculiarly their business;
and that the personal is the political. ‘The life of the city is the responsibility of the community’, says the leading Evangelical, Reverend Ngwiza Mkandla:

Jesus reorganized society by showing a respect for women and putting no boundaries between Jews and Greeks, showing a social concern by taking action against the evil enshrined in his society. The rule of God must prevail; one must be grounded in the community and be politically active, even if it means becoming a victim of injustice as Jesus did.

In his case study of Northern Nigeria, Cyril Imo writes that, while retaining ‘their views of the secularity of the state’, Evangelicals have re-interpreted the text ‘Give unto Caesar what is his and to God what is his’:

The new interpretation saw Caesar as not meaning ‘worldliness’... The evangelicals now begin to see Caesar in the right light, as a political leader, thereby deducing that a ‘believer’ should identify with politics and political leadership and at the same time remain faithful to God... Now every Christian in the northern states that have witnessed the operation of sharia... is politically conscious... No evangelical sees a fellow evangelical engaged in politics as doing what is ‘satanic’.

More than this, some Evangelicals have come to distinguish between legitimated authority and illegitimate ‘principalities and powers’. It is the Christian duty to resist these, if necessary by force. Imo describes how Nigerian bishops have approved of taking up arms in self-defence and how Christians in Kano, ‘including evangelicals’, have used guns to repel attacks, killing many Muslims.

There is a third significant difference. Three of the Asian papers and one of the Latin American deal with despised ‘tribal’ groups which make use of Evangelical Christianity to construct and assert a new ethnic identity. This did not happen in Africa. There, as Lamin Sanneh told us, it was the ‘strong’ peoples who took up Christianity. ‘Tribal’ peoples in India, Susan Harper argued at the conference, had been subject to so many centuries of Hindu and Muslim contempt that they had lost faith in their own past and culture. By contrast Sanneh’s ‘strong’ African peoples retained their own names for God and their pride in their own cultures. African scholars could never write simply, as some of the Asian papers do, about Evangelical Christianity purifying and modernising tribal societies and freeing them from fear. Even the most committed Evangelical African scholar is much too well aware of the complex dialectics between Christianity and culture.

In Africa, moreover, it has not really been possible for despised minority groups to assert themselves by becoming Christians. In Botswana, for example, the oppressed San find themselves facing a Tswana/
Protestant political culture, which condemns their way of life on both ethnic and theological grounds. There is a ‘minority’ problem for Evangelical African democrats, but almost everywhere it is not the problem of achieving rights for themselves as a minority. Instead it is the problem of their being prepared to allow rights to non-Christian minority groups. (In my introduction I argue that Evangelical demonisation of African traditional religion and its practitioners has profoundly undemocratic effects).

All this leads to a fifth, and very important, contrast. African Evangelical Protestantism is clearly part of ‘World’ rather than ‘Global’ Christianity. It seemed to me, considering all the papers in Washington, that it was more clearly so than Latin American or Asian Protestantism. As I have argued, in many parts of Asia Protestantism has been seen unequivocally as part of ‘modernisation’ rather than of ‘inculturation’. In Latin America, so it seemed from most of the chapters, there has never yet been a cultural or religious decolonisation. Even the famous Liberation Theology is an extension of European radical Christianity. In Africa, though, all Christianities—including the new Evangelical and Pentecostal movements—have engaged with the cultures, and with the politics, of the strong African peoples.

What this means can be illustrated by a debate which arose on the second day of the conference. One of the speakers, talking about Christian family structures in the two-thirds world, suggested that the choice was between ‘modern’, i.e. Anglo-American, kinship patterns and ‘traditional’ kinship patterns. But this underestimates the creativity of Evangelical Christianity in Africa. The part of the evangelical movement which seems most ‘African’—the ‘Zionist’ and Apostolic churches which are described in the case studies of Teresa Cruz e Silva and Bella Mukonyora—are revolutionising ideas of kin and family. The result is something which is clearly not ‘traditional’; ancestral spirits are exorcised in these churches. But it is not ‘modern’ either. Zionist and Apostolic families are certainly not nuclear. In many ways the church itself, the congregation, is the core of the new family.

The same creativity is beginning to be shown in African politics. It does not do to romanticise African Evangelical churches. Some show an undemocratic intolerance; others still cling too closely to corrupt and brutal regimes; in yet others the church leadership amasses wealth and arbitrary authority. Yet one can see how Evangelicalism may contribute to a new African democratic politics that is neither ‘modern’ nor ‘traditional’.

I was able to clear my mind about Africa on the first day of the
conference by contrasting it with Asia and Latin America. I found the
generalist comments on the second day equally clarifying, once again
by contrast. Thus Peter Berger, looking up to the roof of the extraor-
dinary chapel in which we were meeting, saw the spirit of Max Weber
hovering there. What we were all discussing, he thought, was the
Protestant Ethic and by extension the rise of Capitalism. Evangelical
Protestantism had an extraordinary affinity to individuation; it under-
doured collective solidarities; it moved people from fate to choice; it
encouraged bourgeois culture and family structures; it ‘enters modernity
as a fish enters water’. Protestants, he proclaimed, had no cousins.
Philip Jenkins called upon us to take a historical approach and to learn
lessons from the earlier history of Evangelicals in Europe and North
America. We should study the ways in which people stopped living
loosely and became thrifty; how they became ‘a civilised people’ out
of which a modern Protestant civilisation could be constructed.

Once again I found these comments very helpful but more by con-
trast than by comparison. No one can any longer get to the ‘modern’
world by the same routes taken by Weber’s Protestants or by Jenkins’s
Evangelicals. The ‘modern’ world itself is now so differently constructed
and so globally hegemonic that it has shut off all the old routes to eco-
nomic development. Thrift in Africa leads to survival rather than to
entrepreneurial triumph. As I have suggested, new African Evangelical
family structures succeed precisely because they are not identical with
bourgeois family patterns.

Much has been written about the Gospel of Prosperity in Africa. But it is very different from Victorian ideals of Self Help. At one
extreme the Gospel of Prosperity substitutes ‘magic’ for thrift, promis-
ing reward for totally non-economic reasons. At the other—and by far
the more important—extreme it becomes a belief that God will not
allow his faithful to perish. What is important in African Evangelical
churches is what David Maxwell calls ‘penny capitalism’—the encour-
gagement of informal economic activities by youth and by women. This
prevents them from starving. It gives them self respect. It has a demo-
cratic effect by encouraging participant self-reliance. But it goes no fur-
ther than any other political, economic or spiritual theory has done
towards linking African democracy to the emergence of a prosperous
capitalism.

NOTE

1. These chapters were written by Drs Tony Balcomb, Teresa Cruz e Silva, Isabel
Mukonyora, Isobel Phiri, John Karanja and Cyril Imo.