Africa: religion and innovation

Ben Knighton

‘Africans are notoriously religious’ was the favourite scholarly epithet quoted (from John Mbiti) by my students in Kenya. They had an interest in doing so, being theological students, and they also liked to highlight the difference between the popularity of the Christian religion in their part of Africa compared with the apathy of the West. It is not that Africa has any monopoly on religion, for the preoccupation with it may be even more marked in other parts of the Two-Thirds World. Its significance is that we live in a world where there is unprecedented growth in numbers of those who are classified as agnostics. This is the strange, or notorious, quality of human life in today’s world, and we should note with trepidation, that this growth follows hard on the heels of the growth of the worldwide church to encompass a third of our multiplying species. Is there a causal relationship here? Is the Christian faith as the religion of the West undermining and eroding the religious background and ethos of cultures which have a closer historical connection to the premise of a spiritual universe? Is a gospel which desacralizes the world, and its human and spiritual actors, as a continual expression of the immanence of God, not a message which fundamentally secularizes traditional cultures? Does the theology of the late twentieth century have the effect of stimulating a sectarian chaos which is diminishing the name of Jesus even at the same time that all the religious achievements of the past, even the great, not vital, givenness of their situation which gave them an influence and a part in the historical development of the church in South Africa. They certainly were instrumental in religious innovation, but it is salutary that the missionary who had her service curtailed by the mission, was trying, and succeeding, to understand the customs of rural Africa.

On the other hand, Africa has not changed so homogeneously, that urbanization is everything and tradition nothing. For the vast majority south of the Sahara, the assumed approach to life still takes its colours from the traditional, even if not vital, world-view. For many millions, especially livestock herders, the African traditional religion is still at the heart of the culture, informing every aspect of it. In either context, there even now remains a task of theological integration between the pre-existing understandings of God, and the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. This is a task which is so vital for the pastoral health of the church, which still needs a genuinely consistent African identity, for no-one can lead a life as a Christian transcending all culture. Mission should be to redeem the cultures and the identity of a people.

Africa is a fast-changing continent and there is no going back into the primal womb. Population growth is relatively high, and a desert that held a livelihood for tens of thousands will not hold hundreds of thousands. As Professor Deryke Belshaw demonstrates, the changes are not generally for the best, when economic indicators show Africa to be growing poorer in the 1990s. The crises met by state provision and welfarism lend an opportunity to the churches as Civil Society Organizations to provide a lead to a more peaceful and prosperous future for those not in political power. Religion must be a part of the future, or else there will be a greatly diminished basis for social ethics.

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Dr Deborah Gaitskell gives fascinating insights into how five individual missionaries coped with the changing contexts of South Africa. Being women in a past era, they were not given the power either to lead the shifting times, nor to determine mission policy, but they found different ways of coping with the givenness of their situation which gave them an influence and a part in the historical development of the church in South Africa. They certainly were instrumental in religious innovation, but it is salutary that the missionary who had her service curtailed by the mission, was trying, and succeeding, to understand the customs of rural Africa.

Two articles focus on Asia. Joshua Hong deals with an Asian context of apparent economic and ecclesiastical success. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is the site of several of the world’s largest mega-churches. Joshua Hong has performed a sophisticated statistical analysis of their astonishingly effective leadership. Here he shows that even in triumphs of the Christian mission, there lie the seeds of decline. In order not always to be living off the religious achievements of the past, even the immediate past, the task of theology for local contexts and its application always remains.

Finally, C.B. Samuel offers a critical reading of India’s journey in building a nation-state, and the challenge this presents to evangelicals to present a public face for the Christian faith. This raises fundamental theological issues of the nature of a nation and the identity of a people.

The articles by Deryke Belshaw, Ben Knightton and Deborah Gaitskell came out of a series of monthly seminars held at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies between January and June of this year.