
THE CHRISTIAN CENTRE OF GRAVITY

“Over the past century, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably Southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America. If we want to visualize a "typical" contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.”¹

“...the period [since 1792]...has seen the Christian centre of gravity steadily move away from the West and towards the Southern continents.”²

The two quotations above illustrate what seems to be a clear consensus amongst observers of the Christian Church that the centre of gravity of world Christianity has indeed shifted to the non-Western world. However, we will briefly examine the evidence for this shift under two broad headings; the numbers of Christians in the respective areas of the world, and the influence of the Church in the South versus the West³.

NUMBERS

In 1920 Hillare Belloc wrote that ‘The Church is Europe and Europe is the Church’. It is undeniable that for four or five hundred years the fortunes of the Christian Church and the people of Europe were intimately entwined. However, today Belloc would not be able to make the same statement with any degree of accuracy (it is questionable whether it was accurate even at the time of writing). Over the last two hundred years two trends have given the lie to Belloc’s words; the decline in the number of Christians in the West and the growth of the Southern Church. The Church is now thriving in the South while the “Church in the West is in deep trouble”.⁴

¹ Jenkins p.2

² Walls 2002 p.31

³ For convenience sake and to avoid repetition, we will refer to the European and North American church as being from the West, and the Africa, Latin American and Asian Church as ‘Southern’ although these geographical distinctions are hardly exact.

⁴ Dowsett p.448

A number of authors have commented at great length (for example, Jenkins, Walls, Johnstone⁵), on the numerical shift from the West to the South and we will not examine all of the evidence here but we will select some representative statistics which illustrate the trend.

Comparing trends in Uganda and the United Kingdom gives an indication of the process which is underway. Christianity only took root in Uganda around 150 years ago yet today 75% of the population would describe themselves as Christian.⁶ By contrast, in 2005 a Manchester University study showed that only 50% of British Christian parents succeeded in passing on their faith to their children,⁷ while a report by Peter Brierly suggests that the membership of Christian denominations in the UK will fall to under 5% by 2040, compared to just under 10% today.⁸ According to Richter and Francis “For every adult in Church, four other adults used to attend regularly but have given up”.⁹

Sanneh sums up the cumulative effect of these two trends:

By 1985 there were over 16,500 conversions a day (in Africa), yielding an annual rate of over 6 million. In the same period some 4,300 people were leaving the Church on a daily basis in Europe and North America.¹⁰

The different experiences of the Church in the West and elsewhere have led to a change in the profile of Christians around the world. In 1800, well over 90% of Christians lived in Europe and North America, whereas in 1990 over 60% lived in Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific, with that proportion increasing each year.¹¹

⁵ See the full texts of the works cited in the bibliography

⁶ Jenkins p.91

⁷ Daily Telegraph: 17 August 2005

⁸ Daily Telegraph: 3 September 2005

⁹ <http://www.facingthechallenge.org/forgotten.htm>

¹⁰ Sanneh p.15

¹¹ Walls 2002 p.31

There is, then, a change in the overall profile of the Christian Church worldwide, what is less clear is why this has occurred. One possible explanation is that the rapid growth in population in the South compared to relative stagnation in the West has led to the change in the number of Christians in each hemisphere. However, the statistics do not support this contention.¹² Equally, the growth of the Church in the South cannot simply be written off as being due to the influence of European colonialism.¹³ Ultimately, the decline of the Church in the West and its success in the South must be related to the different reactions to the Gospel message of the respective peoples. Africans and Asians have accepted the Gospel in great numbers because they “came to believe the message offered, and found this the best means of explaining the world around them”¹⁴ while the West has increasingly rejected the Gospel message in favour of other explanations. There is, as Andrew Walls points out, a divine aspect to this change. God is not bound to preserve individual Christian Churches or traditions for all time¹⁵ rather He “goes where he is wanted.”¹⁶

We should note in passing that this shift in the centre of gravity is not an isolated phenomenon. Similar shifts have occurred in earlier periods of the Church’s history.¹⁷

INFLUENCE

Most of the Churches in the South owe their foundation to Western missionary activity and as a result, many Southern Church groups owe a great deal of allegiance to authority structures based in the West. This is true of strongly hierarchical groups such as the Roman Catholic Church as well as of more loosely organised groups such as the Anglican Communion or the numerous Baptist denominations. However, Southern Churches are exercising an increasing degree of influence over their mother Churches. This is perhaps most graphically illustrated in the case of the Anglican Communion

¹² Jenkins p.90

¹³ Jenkins p.56

¹⁴ Jenkins p.44

¹⁵ Walls 2002 p.13

¹⁶ Quoted in Jenkins p.15

¹⁷ Walls 2000, 2002 p.3 ff

where opposition to the ordination of openly homosexual clergy has pitted the more conservative Churches of the South against their liberal colleagues in the West (particularly in North America)¹⁸ and may lead to the exclusion of the North American Episcopal Church from the communion.

However, increasingly the growing Churches in the South belong to independent or Pentecostal denominations which do not owe any direct allegiance to Western hierarchies and which are becoming increasingly influential in their own spheres¹⁹.

In non-denominational settings the voice of the Southern Church is being heard more often. According to Lee²⁰ international mission conferences were predominantly Western until the Lausanne meeting in 1974, but since Lausanne the mixture of participants has been much more equitable. However, while there may be a good representation of Southerners in International gatherings, it is still Westerners who dominate the discussions.²¹ It is my experience that many international gatherings have a good representation of Southerners (though their numbers often do not reflect the reality of the World Church). However, Southerners are often placed at a linguistic and cultural disadvantage. The dominance of English as an international medium makes it more difficult for non-English speakers to participate in discussion and debate. Also, open discussion and argument on a conference floor is a very Western way of achieving group consensus, but is not very comfortable to many Asians and Africans who prefer more indirect methods of achieving the same aim.

Southern Churches are slowly but surely increasing their influence in World Christianity. However, it is still true that the most influential Churches and individuals tend to be based in the West. This is partly due to historic reasons but also due to the fact that though the Western Churches may be declining, they are still rooted in the richest and generally the most powerful societies in the world. This gives the Western Churches a

¹⁸ Jenkins p.202

¹⁹ Jenkins pp. 59, 63

²⁰ Lee p.137

²¹ Dowsett p. 454

degree of economic power and influence within the Christian communion which is out of all proportion to their true size.

From this discussion we can confidently assert that in demographic terms there has been a massive Southward movement of the Christian Church in recent history. The majority of the World's Christians now live in the Southern continents. That being said, the Western Church still retains many of the trappings of leadership and influence which historically belonged to it. So, while it is true that there has been a shift in the centre of gravity of the Church to the South, this shift is not yet fully complete. However, it does seem clear that the future of the Church lies in the South, rather than in the West. The Southern Church is the 'Church of the future as well as the future of the Church.'²²

*When we look at the Pentecostal enthusiasm of present-day Brazil, or the indigenous Churches of Africa, then quite possibly, we are getting a foretaste of the Christianity of the next generation.*²³

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

*In moving towards the South the Church is turning ... towards the 'poorer peoples' of the earth.*²⁴

Increasingly, the Church is rooted in the poorer countries and communities of the world, while the Christian communities in the richer and more powerful West are in decline. This means that there is a distinct difference in the experience of the Church across the World. The Southern Church is vibrant and growing but economically marginalised, while the Western Church is rich, but struggling spiritually. There is, however, a significant point of contact between the West and the South - between the powerless and the powerful - in the work of cross-cultural missionaries from the West. The rest of this essay will explore some of the issues raised by this interaction. We will not be examining

²² Buhlmann, quoted in Bediako p.128

²³ Jenkins p.108

²⁴ Bediako p.27 quoting Buhlmann

the role of the missionary in combating poverty, rather we will discuss some of the issues raised when individuals from relatively rich and powerful backgrounds are called to work alongside and under the leadership of those from more modest environments.

FINANCE

In many (though not all) situations, Western missionaries are financially much better off than their Southern colleagues. One unfortunate consequence of this is that very often the wealth of the Westerner speaks more loudly than his Christian profession. This was clearly illustrated to me when the head of the local Church in the rural part of Africa where we worked wrote to the head of his denominational mission and asked for a missionary to be sent to his town. The reason was not because the Church needed a teacher or preacher, but to provide someone to drive the pastor and his colleagues on visits to Churches out in the bush. To this Church leader, the message that missionaries have cars was much more in focus than the idea that missionaries have a role in teaching and evangelising. So, when missionaries work with a large amount of equipment, the local Church (understandably) will often feel that it needs the same material if it is to carry out its duty and so Churches expend a great deal of effort in obtaining projectors, sound systems and the like, which may not always be very useful in their context.

Electronic equipment and technology have a role in spreading the Gospel even in the remotest areas. However the missionary must be sensitive in their use and must avoid an over-reliance on them or giving the impression that they are central (or even essential) to the work of the Gospel. What Turaki refers to as “Capital intensive missions”²⁵ has a distorting effect on Southern Churches because they place a very high reliance on funds coming from the missions’ home base and do not develop the economic and personnel potential of the local Churches. Adeney suggests that tapping into local resources and art forms rather than relying on imported technologies and methods may well be one way to deal with this issue:

²⁵ Turaki p.277

Yet all of us are created in God's image, died for by Christ, capable of rightly dividing the Word of truth. If we are to strengthen pastors, lay leaders and thinkers in the whole Body of Christ, to help leaders in the whole Body to grow to theological maturity, we must learn how to make resources accessible at multiple levels. We must learn how to nurture the creativity of local believers so that they can create their own contextualized resources. Indigenous oral art genres – story, song, drama, dance – as media for teaching Scripture...²⁶

Unfortunately, the power and finance imbalance between missionaries and the Churches which they serve can stifle this sort of local initiative and promote the export of Western culture and values over and above the Gospel.

Clearly there is a difficult question of balance which needs to be achieved here. There is a need for Westerners to identify more closely with the lifestyle of the people they work with. Frequently, Catholic missionaries²⁷ have more successfully adopted a lifestyle of poverty than their protestant colleagues. However, there are limits to which expatriates can ever fully adapt to a new situation. We did not have the resistance to African diseases which our neighbours had acquired through childhood and had we tried to emulate their living conditions exactly, we would probably have died within a few years. Equally, the village chief was proud of the white people living in his village and insisted that we build a cement block house, rather than the more modest (and cooler!) mud brick one which we would rather have lived in.

Perhaps more perniciously, the financial gap between missionaries and local Christians can place a very real strain on relationships between individuals in the Church. For example, Church leaders often buy, or are given, second hand computers or cars when missionaries trade their obsolete models for something newer and better. This can be a great help to the Church leaders who might otherwise have no access to such equipment, but there is undoubtedly a degree of shame and discomfort associated with having to use

²⁶ Adeney p. 192

²⁷ Escobar 2001a p.34

other people's cast offs. Likewise, I am aware of urban Church leaders who were embarrassed to invite me to their homes because they did not want a Westerner to see how they lived. Social unease of this sort can create a very real divide between the Western missionary and the Southern Church. In parts of the world, particularly Africa, the economic gap with the West is growing over time and these sorts of issues are going to increase therefore missionaries must be involved in helping Southern Christians in their struggle for economic and technological development.²⁸

IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONARY WORK

Each year, many Church groups from the United States make short term trips to Mexico to work with local Churches in evangelism, children's work or building projects. Palmatier suggests that such trips have the potential of being of great mutual benefit. However, he goes on to suggest that, in reality, many short term mission trips end up giving an exciting cultural experience to the Christians from the US but end up discouraging and de-motivating the Mexican Church members. Palmatier goes on to suggest that the most important factor in making such short term trips a success is that the American Christians are there to serve the Mexican Church, not to dictate to it:

Guests do not go to a neighbour's house and demand that things are done their way – not if they expect to be invited back. The visiting US team should not expect the local Mexican Church to “get with their program.” Rather the US team should get with the local Church's program²⁹.

This is an important remark. In a situation where the Western missionaries have more power and influence than the people amongst whom they are working, it is very easy for the needs of the Westerner to dominate and there is a suspicion amongst some Third World Christians that they are merely objects of a strategy which is primarily aimed at the home constituency of the missionaries³⁰.

²⁸ Escobar 2001a p. 33, Adeney, p. 193

²⁹ Palmatier p.231

³⁰ Escobar 2001b p.112

If the missionary is to be a true servant of the Church, they must adapt to the realities of the situation in which they find themselves. However, this sort of cooperation has not always come easily to missionaries and the Church as the 1999 mission conference at Iguassou highlighted:

“Inadequate theology, especially in respect to the doctrine of the Church, and the imbalance of resources have made working together difficult. We pledge to find ways to address this imbalance and to demonstrate to the world that believers in Christ are truly one in their service of Christ³¹.”

There are cultural and economic reasons which underlie the imbalance in influence between Westerners and their Southern brothers and sisters, but the impact of the Biblical message should challenge these and bring about a situation which is more equitable. If we are to break down these barriers, then first responsibility of the missionary must be to listen to the voice of the local Church. The role of a listener is not one which comes naturally to many missionaries (who are generally selected on their ability to teach and train others rather than on an ability to listen and reflect). But it is only by listening that the missionary can be certain that they are doing something which the host Church considers to be of value. Palmatier gives the example of teams from the US building Church buildings in Mexico which the Mexican Churches did not really want and which they had no ability to maintain in the long term.

This need for listening extends beyond specific short-term projects to the whole picture of the missionary enterprise. Western missionaries often have a fairly simple view of mission which boils down simply to evangelism: to “get them saved”³². Southern Churches, on the other hand often see mission in more complex terms involving a range of social and economic activities. This is illustrated by what Escobar calls ‘managerial missiology’³³. This influential school of thought originated with the Church-growth movement in California and is heavily influenced by Western social sciences and

³¹ Taylor p.21

³² Palmatier p.232

³³ Escobar 2001b p.109-112

business models. In its more extreme forms, managerial missiology makes predictions of what amount of contact, or how many radio broadcasts are needed in order to see a given number of people become Christians. However, according to Escobar these neat calculations cannot survive contact with the realities of life among the World's poor³⁴. Missionaries need a practical theology which takes into account the experience and context of their Southern colleagues.

It is also important that Western missionaries work in ways which are acceptable to their Southern partners. The highly organised and programmatic approach to mission which typifies much Western activity can be confusing at best, and offensive at worst to Southern Christians³⁵. There are many who feel that the "assembly line paradigm" of mission training, which aims primarily at efficiency, overlooks the question of Spiritual formation and produces missionaries who have a limited ability to serve the Southern Churches³⁶. It is also relatively easy for missionaries to hide behind their technology rather than strike up serious relationships with the local Church³⁷.

It is all too easy for Westerners to bring huge material and organisational resources to bear on projects which are ostensibly aimed at serving the needs of Southern Churches. However, this means that Southern Christians can easily feel squeezed out of the things which are being done for their benefit. Without Southern *ownership*, which is engendered by open two-way communication and involvement of all parties in all parts of the enterprise, building projects fall into disrepair, Bible translations go unread and evangelistic campaigns are not followed up.

CONCLUSION: RECOGNISING WHERE TRUE POWER LIES

The preceding discussion illustrates some of the issues which can face Western missionaries working in many Southern contexts. Both the missionary and the receiving Church have to deal with the fall out from the economic and power imbalance between

³⁴ Escobar 2001b p.110

³⁵ Escobar 2003 p.87

³⁶ Escobar 2003 p.77

³⁷ Escobar 2001a p.30

the West and the South. Good communication and a humble spirit can help to overcome these issues, but as long as the West is so much richer than the South, these problems will endure and will need to be faced.

On the other hand, it is important that, as Christians we recognise where true power and influence lies within the Christian community. The Kingdom of God is not of this world (John 18:36) and God does not necessarily bestow his favour upon the rich, rather he has chosen the poor to inherit His Kingdom (James 2:5). In other words, the political and economic power which gives authority and influence to Western missionaries, is of less importance than the fact that God is clearly blessing the Southern Church – as evidenced by its exponential growth. And, while the Southern Church is growing rapidly, it is doing so in the face of a number of real hardships; poverty and suffering are very much the stuff of daily life for many Southern Christians (Revelation 2:9 *I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich*). The Westerner has much to learn about the nature of the Gospel and triumph in adversity from his Southern brother. As the Gospel advances in the South, Christians are making new discoveries about the message of Scripture and there is a unique opportunity for people from a wide variety of backgrounds to learn together and to encourage and critique one another as they each bring their cultural understandings to bear³⁸. The Southerner has a great deal to bring to these debates. David Smith suggests that the West has a great deal to learn from the Southern Church which sees God as being intimately involved in our daily lives and which has a theology more or less free from the secularism and individualism of the Western enlightenment³⁹. However, a deeper understanding of God's mission to the world will be best gained through dialogue between the South and the West, not simply by moving away from the West⁴⁰. But, the Southerner can only make a serious contribution to the life of the global Church if Westerners are willing to listen to them and as we have noted the relationships between the South and West are such that Southern voices sometimes struggle to be heard.

³⁸ Walls 1996 p.15, Escobar 2003 p.19

³⁹ Smith p.15 ff

⁴⁰ Lee p.142

Given that the West does not always listen to the South, missionaries are in an ideal position to bring the learning from the Southern Church to the West, in what would be a reversal of the usual perception of their role. It is hard to give an accurate assessment of the extent to which Western missionaries do mediate the message of the Southern Church to their home constituencies. The Iguassou declaration rejoices that the twentieth century saw an increase in “reflection from many parts of the Church”⁴¹ which is clearly a hopeful sign. On the other hand, a major mission text book published in 2004 pays scant attention to the experience or theology of the Church in the South⁴². On an anecdotal level, it is my experience that it is very difficult for Western missionaries to communicate about the Southern Church in the way that, perhaps, they should. The volunteer system upon which mission organisations are based means that there is a pressure on missionaries and mission executives to emphasise the role of the mission in order to maintain the mission’s profile and funding from the Western Church.

There is undoubtedly still a role for Western missionaries working cross culturally in the South (there is perhaps even a greater role for Southerners working in the West), but these Missionaries must work from a position of humility and learning. Equally, it needs to become understood that part of the missionaries’ role is to mediate the blessing and learning of the growing Southern Church back to her poorer and weaker brother in the West.

⁴¹ Taylor p.17

⁴² Ross

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