AFRICA NEEDS GOD. WHO SAYS SO?

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Categories: Africa, Mission

A while ago I posted a link to a Times article by Matthew Parris which said that Africans need God and that Christian missionary work accomplishes far more than secular NGOs (read my initial post here). Since then, I've been emailed more copies of the article than I can count (which shows how few of my colleagues read my blog!)Â and it has been plastered all over Facebook and different websites.

As a missionary who has worked extensively in Africa, I found the affirmation of our work very heartwarming. However, I have to admit that I always had a little niggling uncertainty about what Parris said, though I could not put my finger on it.Â A post by Ben Byerly, which pointed me to something that Rombo had written helped me to identify why I was unhappy about what Matthew Parris wrote.

To put it simply, Matthew Parris, an atheist, said that Africans need God and that an encounter with Christianity improved their lives (and this is what so many missionaries got excited about). But hang on, if an encounter with God is so good, how come Parris is still an atheist? God is needed by Africans, but not by him. In other words, there is something about African individuals and societies which needs God, but Western materialists are all very fine, thank you very much.Â The whiff of cultural imperialism is rather strong here. Yes, I believe that Africa needs and encounter with God, I also believe that the West, the East and everyone else needs that same encounter. If God is only needed by Africans and not by rich, artistic Londoners, then he isn't God.

Ben and Rombo have said it far better than me, so I'll quote them:

Ben says:

> *...missionaries (including White North American and European missionaries) have played an important role in the spread of faith in Jesus and should be appreciated - a couple of present-day, white missionary heroes are here. Just keep in mind that the vast, vast majority of African believers in Jesus were led to Christ by other black, African believers. (Donâ€™t forget too that parts of Africa were â€œChristianâ€ centuries ago - Ethiopia for one.)...*

> *THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:*
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> - *This is an article written BY a white man ABOUT Africans TO a primarily white (British) audience. (Specifically, if I read him correctly, a Brit who grew up in Africa under a colonial government and has only briefly â€œtouredâ€ Africa since. The fact that he still speaks of Malawi in his mind as Nyasaland says something to me.)*
> - *How much in-depth knowledge of African cultures (and their varieties) does the author actually exhibit?*
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> *I would have felt a lot better, if he had had made even one passing reference to the impact of*

> *God on his own beliefs or his own culture. Itâ€™s one thing to say Africans need God. Itâ€™s another thing to say, the faith of Christian Africans has made me re-examine my own beliefs and implications for my own culture (Do you see the difference?) Is Parris conflicted about the difference God makes - overall ? Or is his thinking about God limited to his manifestations in Africa? My suspicion is that it is the latter. Itâ€™s the exclusive, repeated emphasis to â€œin Africaâ€ that bugs me most about the above quote.*

And Rombo comments:

> *Matthew Parris doesnâ€™t believe in God but that doesnâ€™t stop him from arguing that Africa needs God to get it past â€œthe crashing passivity of its peopleâ€™s mindset.â€*
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> *Africans need Christianity because belief in and communion with a personal God supplants an outdated belief system, enhances our engagement with the world, and encourages a positive individuality in stark contrast to a suppressive collective superstitious belief system.*
>
> *As it happens, I do believe that active engagement with a personal God can and does have a transforming effect on the individual life. He could have made an argument about fatalism and ideas having consequences that would have left me a tad uncomfortable but more resigned and less apt to argue with him.*
>
> *But he didnâ€™t. He went and cast his nets overboard and fished out collectivism and went on to ascribe to it failings not necessarily its own.*

There are some positives in Parris' article, but I do think we need to consider the implications of what he is saying and to whom he is saying it, and not just trumpet that he is giving backing to our work.