HISTORIC CONNECTIONS

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A few days ago I compared the mediaeval Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, with a church in Ouagadougou and asked which was authentically Christian. In truth, the idea was not my own, I took it from a wonderful paper by Andrew Walls: The Gospel a Prisoner and Liberator of Culture (you can find it in his book The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith). Walls imagines an extraterrestrial student of religion who makes periodic visits to earth and examines Christian faith at different times. He suggests that the visitor might come to the early Church in Jerusalem, the Council of Nicea, an Irish monastery around 700AD, an English missionary meeting in the mid 1800s and a contemporary Nigerian church. All of these groups would claim to be Christian, but there would be very little in common between them, though each would be more or less typical expressions of Christianity for their era.

Walls suggests that there are a number of things that these groups have in common, the first is that they all owe ultimate allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, bread and wine play a key role in their meetings. But most remarkably, there is a continuity of conscience, through history the groups see themselves as being related to each other (despite the great differences in time and space) and also to the ancient people of Israel.

Starting from this point, Walls goes on to derive two important principles about the Gospel. Firstly, he says that the Gospel has an 'indigenizing principle'. The Christian message does not belong to any particular culture and is able to make itself at home in each and every culture. But equally, there is also a 'pilgrim principle': as Walls says:

> *'Not only does God in Christ take people as the are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which maks his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that h has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. '*

So to return to my question ofÂ a couple of days ago: modern Burkinabe and mediaeval Yorkshire cultures can both authentically express the Gospel, but both would be changed by the encounter.