

### 3

## THEOLOGY AND SCHOLARSHIP IN A GLOBAL CHURCH\*

*Andrew Walls*

Christian scholarship and Christian mission belong together. Christian mission without Christian scholarship can descend into confusion and frustration; the decline of Christian mission rings the death knell of Christian scholarship. Christianity which, in its origins, had seemed as Celsus argued, the sworn enemy of “Greekness,” became, in effect, the preserver of Greek culture by bringing its encyclopedia of learning into the service of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The process took generations, beginning with the missionary stage represented by Paul, the sympathetic outsider, who borrowed and stole Hellenistic symbols. It was followed by the convert stage, represented by Justin, who critiqued his inheritance by the principle of the divine logos. In turn there came the refigurative stage, represented by Origen, child of Christian parents: nurtured both in the Christian scriptures and in Greek learning, who could re-conceive the whole of that inheritance. Other early missionary movements developed and maintained their own distinct forms of scholarship that sustained their mission, often in harsh environments and under difficult circumstances. In later times, when the European academy was wholly unprepared for an encounter with the non-Western world, it was the missionary movement that provided new academic disciplines, new branches of learning, discoveries which the modern academy has

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since absorbed without remembering where they came from.

There is an immense relevance of this to the contemporary situation. The premise, made known more widely now since the work of Philip Jenkins, was that the center of gravity of the Christian faith lay no longer in the West but in Africa, Latin America, and some parts of the Asia Pacific region. That, as a result, the Christian faith was becoming increasingly a non-Western religion, rather than a Western one. And that Western Christianity will become progressively less significant within the total Christian consciousness. If mission and scholarship are inseparable; if the Christian center has moved decisively to the South; then the Southern continents, which will be the main theatres of mission, will be producing issues of profound theological moment.

Let us consider for a moment the historical context in which these developments have arisen. World history and the history of religions have often been redirected by movements of migration. And one of these was an event we do not normally think of as a migration. It began about 1500 A.D. and lasted for the next 450 years. It was the great migration from Europe, perhaps the largest movement of population to be ocean based. Over those four and a half centuries, millions of people left Europe by sea for the lands beyond, lands unknown or barely known in Europe in 1500. They were a diverse crowd: adventurers, destitute or unwanted people, religious and political refugees, younger sons frustrated by the European inheritance laws, discharged soldiers, convicted felons, and large numbers of ordinary people looking for a better life or a fairer society than Europe afforded. The Americas were the first and always the largest target area. But the temperate parts of Africa and the Pacific also received large numbers, with smaller numbers going to other parts of the world. Europeans even changed the habitation of non-Western peoples, populating previously uninhabited areas; taking people from India and China, and transplanting them as far away as Guyana, or Trinidad, or Fiji. In the biggest transplantation of all, they broke off a huge portion of Africa, and put it down in the Americas.

By the early 20th century, the migration process had produced a series of new nations: several of them vast in extent or population or both. In most of these, what was left of the indigenous population was driven to the margins of a society controlled by the descendents of European migrants.

The religious effects of the great migration are mixed. The most striking result is a huge accession to the Christian faith among peoples in the non-Western world. By the end of the twentieth century, Christians in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific were, as we have seen, signifi-

cantly outnumbering that of the old Christendom and North American combined. Christianity, which, in 1500 was apparently the European religion, was by 2000, becoming a progressively non-Western religion. The collapse of the imperial structures seems to be largely irrelevant to this movement. If anything, the process accelerated after the decline of the European empires.

The great migration was the indirect cause then, of substantial Christian growth outside the West. But it also produced renewal and expansion among the non-Christian religions. It was the British *raj* in India that established the climate which made Hinduism into a coherent, vigorous faith that could operate nationally in the modern scientific society. Equally, it was the British *raj* that established the climate that called Pakistan into being. And in Africa and Indonesia, colonial rule did more for the spread of Islam than all the jihads.

Finally, and most surprisingly of all, the period of the great migration and its aftermath saw the decline of Christianity in the West. The great exception was the United States, where the Christian faith took firmer root in the course of the nineteenth century. But the empires struck back: First, Britain and France each found that they had acquired a substantial new population from their former or residual colonies, an inescapable legacy of the colonial past. Then other European nations found a steady flow of people from Turkish-Kurdistan and other troubled areas drawn into the labor market of their expanding economies. Germany coined the expression, "Gastarbeiter," to describe the status of such people, but it was soon clear that these guests would not readily return home. Then, North America, and the United States in particular, which had been the main target of the European migration, began to receive numbers of migrants of another kind – some came from new international obligations, some from new specialist labor needs, and above all they came from the rest of the Americas. The great new fact of our time (and it has momentous consequences for Christian mission) is that the great migration has now gone into reverse. There has been a massive movement, which all indications suggest will continue, from the non-Western, to the Western world as global population in the non-Western world expands.

The great European migration has left us with a post-Christian West, and a post-Western Christianity. Christianity, once the religion of confident technological advance and rising affluence now will increasingly be associated with rather poor and very poor people, and with some of the poorest countries of earth. And people from the non-Western world will be the principal agents of Christian mission right across the world. Even in the Western world they will have a significant place. For it may be that in some

areas of the West at least, Christianity will increasingly be associated with immigrants.

The religious aspect of the reverse migration that first attracted attention was the new visibility of non-Christian religions: the Hindu temples appearing in or beside redundant churches. It's striking that a William Carey Memorial Church in England is now a Hindu temple. English Muslims outnumber all English non-Anglican Protestants put together; arguments long used to justify Catholic or Anglican schools within the British state education system can now be used to justify Islamic schools there. African and Afro-Caribbean churches in Europe are among the few expanding sectors of European Christianity. It is also clear that they are beginning to have an impact on the indigenous Western population, for some of whom they provide the first contact with Christianity as a living faith.

Such factors tie together the issues of mission in the Western and non-Western world. However, our concern here lies in one sector of this relationship, that of theology and scholarship. I would like to consider this under three heads: first, a few of the theological concerns for theological education; second, some thoughts about the materials that feed and sustain and propagate scholarship; and, third, something about the structures that might sustain such scholarship.

The present juncture offers parallels to the period of the second, third, and fourth centuries when the Christian faith, having crossed the cultural frontier from the Judaic into the Greek world, began to interact seriously with indigenous Greek thinking and the questions that it raised. The crossing of cultural frontiers can extend and enlarge theology. It does this because Christian entry into a new culture in any depth poses issues previously unconsidered. It may also provide intellectual and imaginative materials for use in dealing with those issues. Crossing the first frontier, entering the Greek world at a deeper level than before, opened a more profound understanding of who Christ is than gentile believers ever could ever have attained from the use of traditional Jewish categories such as Messiah. When we recite, "Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God from God, light from light, very God from very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father," we can be drawn out in worship, recognizing that this is indeed who Christ is. But the discovery came through a long and painful process of thinking in Greek; asking Greek questions of a sort another culture might consider irreverent; using indigenous categories and conventions from philosophical debate; using the intellectual materials of middle-period Platonism; and making indigenous mistakes. When the process was complete, it was evident that this was all implied in the scriptures anyway; but it was only the use of indigenous mental processes that re-

### *Theology and Scholarship*

vealed this to be the case. Nor was there any loss: the word Messiah still meant everything it had always meant. Translating it, and transposing it into a new cultural setting revealed a new dimension of its meaning.

The cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity has in the past produced some of the most creative movements of theology. How much more could follow from a century of serious interaction between the biblical tradition and the ancient cultures of Africa and Asia. Latin America raises other issues. For centuries it was the sleeping Christian continent, perhaps because it was given the Council of Trent without having to work for it. Consequently, the theological ferments of the sixteenth century caught up with Latin America only in the twentieth, when the theologians exercised the option for the poor and the poor (or many of them) exercised the option for Pentecostalism. The combined result has been a heady brew of theological and religious ferment.

When I joined the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom forty years or so ago, the Association listed only three others who gave their principal interest as religion. Religion could only mean the study of the traditional religions of Africa. The situation is quite different today. The scholars who first caused the change were not the theologians or the students of religion, but the historians. It was the leading British historian of Africa, Roland Oliver, who seems to be the first to point out what was happening to Christianity in Africa. In a pamphlet published in 1956, *How Christian is Africa?* he pointed to the remarkable growth of the Christian community - to the fact that Christians in the continent had multiplied by geometrical progression, doubling their numbers approximately every twelve years since the middle of the nineteenth century. Before long, the late Kenneth Dike and his students began to produce their ground breaking studies that showed the importance and the revelatory capacity of mission archives. They revealed how significant for African history the Christian story was: that it had often been determinative, with Africans central agents in Christian missions, as far back as the 1840s. They showed how the history of a major African nation such as Nigeria, could not be understood without understanding Christian history.

Anthropologists, social and political scientists see the importance of the churches as areas of research and as viable forms - sometimes the only viable forms - of civil society in Africa. Even the specialists in comparative literature have noticed a strange phenomenon. A few years ago I heard a paper which described the fruits of an extended study of popular literature in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ghana. After discoursing at length on detective stories in Swahili and things of that nature, the author turned briefly to Ghana, where she declared that the entire popular literature of that coun-

try appeared to consist of “religious fundamentalism”. Indeed, in the cabin of a Ghanaian truck driver one may indeed find a little paperback book called *Jesus of the Deep Forest*. It is hardly what is normally described as fundamentalism; it consists of the poems of a Pentecostal woman singer who took the form and the exalted language of the praise songs for Akan kings and addressed them to the King of kings.

There is growing recognition that in places where Africa is the focus of academic life that in order to study Africa nowadays, it is necessary to know something about Christianity. But the converse is that in order to study Christianity nowadays, it is necessary to know something about Africa. For now, ministers are trained, scholars identified and taken to PhD level and beyond without any conception of what the church is like in which they are called to serve. The way in which Christian thinking has been presented to them assumes that Christianity is a Western religion, or at any rate, if it began as something else, its now a Western religion. There are well-informed, well-read scholarly Western theologians who are not readily aware that what is presented in many seminaries as “Church history” constitutes only a local fragment of church history. They are sometimes surprised by the statement that Africa has nearly 2000 years of continuous Christian history, and still more by the statement that there were nearly 1500 years of Christian history in Asia before the first European missionaries came there. And they may be astonished to find that the first preaching of the gospel to the leaders of the kingdoms of Northern England took place at the same time as the first preaching of the gospel before the emperor of China.

Enlightenment theology has shaped biblical studies in particular. And in no area has the experience of African graduate students been more testing than in the biblical field. Their desire has often been to establish the relation between matters treated in the biblical text and some custom or institution in their own tradition: sacrifice, prayer, libation. But the demands of the literary historical method established by the Enlightenment greatly restrict their freedom of movement and at worst can produce despair. Old Testament studies should be one area where Africa comes into its own. Western Christianity has always had difficulties with the Old Testament. The Enlightenment decided that it needed careful, explanatory, special introductions. But in Africa the Old Testament is not a strange book; needs no complicated explanations. Customs, institutions, relationships which need footnotes in the West are immediately recognized by quite simple readers.

Contemporary African pastoral practice recognizes a larger, more populated universe than the Enlightenment knows, now influenced deeply

by the Charismatic movement. Particular issues to be faced include Africa's experience with systemic evil in broken states with endemic warfare, or the endless cycle of weekly funerals of AIDS victims. Western theology is still trying to come to terms with the Holocaust: how did the attempt at extirpation of the Jewish race come about in the heart of Christian civilization? African theology has to cope with the equally frightful genocide in Rwanda and to consider how this happened in what by any standards was one of the most Christian countries in Africa. We must expect to see an African theology catching up with pastoral practice: explaining it, correcting, and balancing it - setting it in context. An African theology may increasingly be concerned with the principalities and powers, their place as world rulers and their subjection through Christ's cross and resurrection. A burgeoning of African theological activity could bring immense benefits to the rest of us. Western theology has found it difficult in practice to annunciate the relation between personal sin and guilt and systemic evil. Perhaps in the great creative ferment of African theological thinking that we must expect and pray for, something may emerge to help us to understand the full cosmic scope of redemption- reaching to the height of the universe and to the depths of human personality.

The second theme, that of resources, is itself deserving of a whole paper. There is a dual need: On the one hand, Western scholarship needs to mine materials available only in the non-Western world. On the other hand, the non-Western world needs access to resources stored in the West. Nigerian books cannot be found in Kenya, nor Kenyan books in Nigeria; and Western books are priced at such a rate that a monograph could eat up an African professor's salary for three months. In earlier times, this seemed an impasse. But now the technology allows us access to a huge range of resources without the need to replicate the Bodleian Library or even the need to go there. Can we not get to serious thinking and planning about using the new technology to reduce these problems? It is doubtful if there can be any realization of the body of Christ without attention to the implications of the economic imbalance and technological imbalance within that body.

Can librarians devise a way which will challenge the Western church to make available in the non-Western world resources which are at present available only in the West? The new colonialism is the colonialism of information. Having said that, Africa is packed with resources for study that are not being used: there are research materials in every town and village. There is a vast amount of published literature that is not collected by libraries or learned institutions, either in Africa or the West. And there are richer resources for understanding the life of the early church: first, second, or

third century in the life and experience of the church in Africa than can be found in even the finest Western library. African scholarship can abundantly benefit from the stockpiled resources in the West- but needs also to exploit the resources that it has already to hand.

In the early 1960s, I was involved in a program that sought to collect church records in Eastern Nigeria. Many people said little would result- that these churches did not keep records; or time and termite had destroyed them. In the event, there were hundreds of records. baptismal registers, marriage registers, records of services with the preacher and the text for each one, minute books of committees, books recording disciplinary decisions. Some of these went back to the 1890s: seventy years of an African church emerging, developing, worshipping, witnessing, sinning and repenting - with hardly a foreign missionary in sight. We had a good building to store the materials. We had an excellent young graduate who has recently retired as Nigeria's first professor of church history who recorded and cataloged them. We thought of photocopying; but photocopying in those days was expensive, and it could always wait till next year .... There was no next year. The Nigerian civil war came. The archive building took a direct hit and was burned to ashes. I know I walked in the ashes.

We can never escape the possibility of catastrophe. It is the human condition. It is in the nature of civilizations, from the Assyrian to the American; from the Tower of Babel to the institutions we know best, to aim for permanence. It is in the nature of Christianity that we have no permanence; no abiding city until the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven on the last day. In the meantime, perhaps no aspect of Christian scholarship is more urgent or more demanding than that of sharing the resources of generations: cultural and chronological, within the body of Christ.

Finally, in Christian scholarship, as in the Christian church as a whole, the significance of the new Christian heartlands must increase and that of the old ones decrease. Western intellectual leadership of a non-Western church is incongruous. And the process may prove inspiring, bringing fresh visions, fresh verve, fresh excitement to academic study. Over the centuries in which Christians explored their faith in engagement with the Hellenistic culture, they strengthened and established their faith and in the process saved the Greek academy. The Western academy that I have known and loved and worked in now seems to me to be sick, tired, crippled by careerism and compromise with Mammon - whose altars are as sanguinary as of Moloch. Is it inconceivable that Christian interaction with the cultures of Africa and Asia will cause us to see something more of the fullness of Christ, and in the process see vocation restored and the salvation of scholarship itself.