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# The Santa Clara Lectures

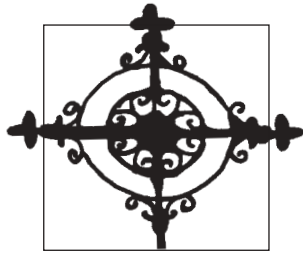
## Why is Christianity, the Religion of the Colonizer, Growing so Fast in Africa

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Thank you very much for the very kind words of welcome. I am delighted and honored to be invited here to Santa Clara as your lecturer. When I am reminded of the distinguished list of people who have come here to speak in this position, I recognize that your generosity really knows no bounds in making a special exception for me. My claim to distinction is that I follow in the footsteps of those more entitled to it.

I very much would like to share a few thoughts with you, but more importantly, also to engage with you in conversation about some of these issues. There are many young people in the audience, we may remind ourselves and that is important for the reason that the responsibility as to how the subject of world Christianity is shaped and implemented rests squarely on their shoulders. I would be very interested to learn about questions they have. There should be time afterwards for discussion and conversation among us.

It is more than for reasons of mere formality that such conversation is called for; it is a very important part of my own learning and understanding of the subject. I cannot tell you how many times I've gone back to my room in the hotel or wherever and spent a good part of the night before I go to bed thinking of the questions, of the issues I hope you will be raising here, and then saying to myself next time I must pay attention to these questions that one of you or several of you have asked. So I really mean that. When I return to my hotel, I should be thinking and meditating on the questions you will ask here, especially where those questions and comments diverge or disagree with my own views.

It is, by the way, a major reason for how as well as why I wrote the book *Whose Religion is Christianity?* I spent more than ten years teaching about world Christianity, taking notes from my students in class, asking them to submit written questions and objections to what I was teaching them. When I went around the country I did a similar thing and collected from people questions, objections, queries, and dissenting views. It was from such material that I was able to embark on the task of introducing interested readers to the subject of world Christianity. I edited the questions by sharpening and pointing them, and by elaborating on their implications. In some cases, I even retained the confrontational tone of the questions, only softening the tone by offering a respectful response. The goal was to remain engaged and focused on the subject and to resist getting distracted by provocative sidebars. I felt a dialogue format would best advance the conversation as well as reflect the environment of ideas in which the book has its origins. I did not set out to answer the questions fully or finally, as can be seen from the book, but hope that I have succeeded in drawing attention to the issues the questions raised, and made a case for further discussion and reflection.

So I pause here briefly to appeal to you to engage the issues involved in the current worldwide Christian expansion. That is what makes my task both challenging and worthwhile, that I can count on the critical interest of my audience.

Let me repeat my thanks for the invitation to come and speak to you. I recognize that many, many people were involved in getting me here and I want to thank them, even though they remain anonymous. Please accept my heartfelt thanks.

Right from the start the Christian movement promoted itself in the Gentile medium, which was very different from the Jewish culture of the founder of Christianity, and that cultural orientation was enshrined in the tradition of worship and scripture that the church adopted. The gospels we have were not written or dictated by Jesus, and the kind of Greek we have in the New Testament as a whole is not the Greek of the classical authors, and certainly not the same language as the Aramaic language of Jesus himself. Embedded in the Christian movement is what one may call the principle of one cultural deficit, that is to say, the idea of an original religion that lacks the claim of a fixed, founding culture, and of culture itself denied the status of a necessary universal prescription for believers everywhere. Freed of the weight of conformity to an original language, the early Christians were given the incentive to make Christianity feel at home in their own culture.

That situation is in striking contrast to Islam, where the message of Islam in the Koran is invested wholly, decisively, and finally in the accompanying and inseparable Arabic language. The New Testament, by contrast, has remained the founding scripture of Christianity through the religion's diverse cultural and historical manifestations. It is another way of saying that the New Testament became the warrant and the incentive for cultural variety and diversity within the broad Christian movement. Believers received the Scriptures, if they received them at all, in their own language.

It puzzles Christian missionaries when Buddhists and others say, "Well, we recognize something of our own philosophy in Christianity. Christians have four gospels to describe the life of Jesus. We Buddhists have a theory of incarnation which is multiple. So it makes eminent sense to us that there would be

four gospels as the four incarnations of Jesus,” which is not the way Christians think of the four gospels and of the New Testament canon as such. Those four gospels are four portraits of the life and teaching and the significance of Jesus, suggesting that variety and diversity are built into the very structure of the Christian gospel. When in turn it was translated into the languages of societies largely outside the Christian dispensation, the New Testament appealed as the seal and the narrative power of new cultural affirmation. There is an implicit, some would say an explicit anthropology lurking behind the translatable status of the New Testament. It is a theme that many anthropologists (including Edward Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, Victor Turner) have developed in their own work.

Just last week I was in London giving the Jordan lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, and in the audience was Mary Douglas. Some of you would know her work which has had an enormous impact on the field of anthropology. The Jordan lectures were given over the course of five days, and Mary Douglas came for all the lectures except on Friday when she was absent for personal reasons. She gave me two of her most recent papers (“A Feeling for Authority,” being the text of her lecture on the occasion of her 2001 Marianist Award in Dayton, Ohio, and “Other Beings, Being Post-Colonially Correct,” which was her 2001 Louis J. Luzbetak Lecture at the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. I have read these lectures with great profit). Douglas expressed the sentiment that she had not much considered the implications of translation in Christianity for the general field of anthropology, but that she felt translation might have something important to say about the subject that has occupied her in her professional work.

If we take a historical view of the matter, we should realize that the shift from the idea of religion as confined to an immutable founding culture, as occurs in Islam, to one in Christianity where diverse and multiple languages and cultures provide the basis of encounter was not achieved except with great resistance and amid much uncertainty and misunderstanding. It complicated immensely the task of the church in teaching, interpretation, and formation. And yet the principle of Christianity as a translated religion, however modified or resisted, was never overthrown entirely. The Christian Bible is not the Muslim Koran, though many would wish it to be otherwise.

In the first three centuries of the Christian movement, the attempt to recover the Mosaic Code and its cultural underpinning was never abandoned. But in the end the Judaizers within the Ebionite movement were defeated. Their centuries-long resistance suggested, however, that the matter was not resolved without contention. So venerable is the tradition and the instinct of religion as lawful custom that people have felt committed to their faith community as a matter of national cultural orthodoxy.

The undeniable tendency in many parts of the Christian movement to revert to the terms of religion as customary law has justified the emergence of a nationalist stream of historiography within the general branch of studies of the empire. The impressive achievements of the Nationalist school of historiography have nevertheless thwarted an appreciation of Christianity's impact at the roots of cultural diversity and renewal, and especially on the agency role of local converts and their allies. It remains an irony of some puzzlement, however, as to how the Nationalist school failed to see a translated

Christianity as its foremost ally in the movement to appropriate and to indigenize.

In his classic study of the subject in the book called *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, Roland Oliver, for example, has demonstrated how the genuine interest of African Christianity came to assume primacy in the continent-wide missionary enterprise, challenging historians and others to engage not just the motives and the stylized cameo images of missions, but the ramifying unintended consequences on the ground. Oliver's thesis that historical research should be guided less by a priori assumptions than by 'actionable' evidence was as original as it was productive, but, inexplicably, it failed to deter or impress many scholars, at great and grave loss to them and to the field. To be specific, my own work in this area would have been inconceivably impoverished without Oliver's achievement. It is appropriate and not too late to acknowledge here at the place of his scholarly endeavor my indebtedness.

Fortunately, except for brief moments, the intellectual momentum of the subject has not faltered, thanks to the pioneering work of Richard Gray, Oliver's colleague and successor. Over a period of several years, the Lerhulme Fellowship at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) helped in a number of ways to keep the flame burning. Gray's many bold initiatives to move the intellectual center of the study of Christianity to the field by taking the full measure of developments there, such as in his *Black Christians, White Missionaries*, or in his collaborative *Christianity in Independent Africa*, and the catalytic influence of his ongoing work on the papacy and Africa, expanded the imagined and unimagined boundaries at least of the historian, and undoubtedly of other scholars, too. It is the shift, after all, from a metropolitan top-

down view of history to an *oecumenical*, bottom up view, and it resonates so well with the original intuitive spirit of Christianity in its Gentile translated potential, not to say anything of its genuine empowerment of local agency and priorities.

It is with the nature and characteristics of this shift in origin and expression in the worldwide Christian movement that my own academic work in the field has been occupied. In that work I have had necessarily to turn to the writings of better qualified people such as have helped define the identity of the academic mission of SOAS. Gray's work is exemplary of the timely availability of the new scholarly tools without which we would flounder in trying to make sense of the new Christian resurgence. Furthermore, Gray has helped to make historical scholarship itself a joint endeavor between the West and Africa – no mean legacy for a place like SOAS. All this important work allows us to overcome the inadequate view of history as a defensive, antiquarian pursuit, to escape stumbling like Clio into the realm of myth, as Gray put it, as we come to terms with the worldwide perspective of Christianity's cultural and geographical expressions, and with the accompanying tensions and opportunities. There are few subjects more opportune for seizing the academic initiative and setting the pace.

## Muslim Watershed

So thorough and so complete has been the Islamic capture of Arab culture as its necessary and inalienable medium that it has been difficult to conceive of a time in the pre-Islamic age when Christianity and Arab culture were congruent, as, indeed, they were. The name “‘Abdallāh,” ‘slave or servant of

God,' for example, had been intoned over the heads of numerous Arab children at the baptismal fount of the church long before it became the name of the father of the founder of Islam. Yet today, that name is properly and almost exclusively the property of Islam, suggesting a Muslim cultural revolution that effectively dissolved Christianity in its once Arab stronghold. Arab Christians survived as historical remnants, sometimes tolerated, sometimes repressed, but more often on notice.

In its beginnings the new religion made significant inroads in Middle Eastern society. One of the most important long-lasting initiatives developed from the personal conversion of Antony (251-356). Antony sparked a movement that took Christianity outside the study and debating halls of Alexandrine society, and beyond the ambit of imperial urban culture and its philosophical Greek, into the idiom of indigenous Egypt and beyond. His story was written up and publicized in Greek by Athanasius (c.296-373), bishop of Alexandria, and an unlikely biographer of a simple Coptic hermit. At any rate, Athanasius' account of Antony, which in its Latin translation had a role in the conversion of Augustine, introduced the West to the institution of monasticism. (While living and teaching in Milan, Augustine met a friend by the name of Ponticianus, an African, who introduced him to Antony's life, "the Egyptian monk, whose name was in high repute among [God's] servants, though up to that time not familiar to us. When Ponticianus came to know this, he lingered on that topic, imparting to us a knowledge of this man so eminent, and marveling at our ignorance...What is wrong with us...The unlearned start up and 'take' heaven, and we, with our learning, but wanting heart, see where we wallow in flesh and blood!" *Confessions*, book viii, chapters 6, 8.)

The monastic orders of Antony's inspiration were among the most effective and most fully developed carriers of Christian ideas in a world of rapid social change. The monastic orders became the motor of the Christian movement by engaging local materials and ideas to produce distinctive patterns of religious life. In a fashion evocative of the American Shaker communities and their quasi-religious customs, monasticism moved away from, and sometimes against, mainstream culture to hammer out distinctive styles of religious living, and the spare habits it cultivated in intense devotions and spiritual exercises helped define the ethos and character of the wider society.

Christianity was mediated to the Arabs through the establishment of monasteries that struck root among the pre-Islamic Arabs. Ancient Arab Christianity is memorialized in an apocryphal New Testament document called *The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Saviour*, based on an original Syriac source and compiled from different sources, chiefly from Luke and Matthew, and from the acts of James. The document resounds with the sentiments of its Arabic milieu, with the miracles of Jesus recounted in the rolling, caravan-like steps of the steady, surefooted mastery of an Arab story-teller. The Gospel ends in stylized form with supplication and with celebration of the largesse appropriate for an oriental host whose guests receive handsomely from the open-handed hospitality and bounty of their patron. The open arms of the crucified Jesus are blessed tokens (sifât) of divine munificence now configured in the accessible idiom of the open arms of Arab hospitality, with its sense of giving unstintingly for the security and wellbeing of the client and guest (dhayf).

In his thought-provoking examination of the issue, Sir Richard Southern argued that the reality of Islam was the most far-reaching problem facing medieval Christendom, affecting every level of experience. At the practical level it called for action, including the Crusades. Islam was a gathering geo-political challenge that had to be resisted. As a theological problem it called for an answer to the mystery of its existence and apparent resilience. Was Islam a Christian heresy? Was it a schism? Or was it a new religion? What was God's role in it, or was it a religion devised by the devil? Does its system of thought deserve to be treated with respect? The feeling all this engendered was that Islam was close enough intellectually to make differences with Christianity familiar, if no less objectionable for that. Islam upholds belief in one God, but that sublime teaching ends up with a repudiation of the Holy Trinity. An old theological principle produced the incomprehensible novelty that was Islam.

The medieval situation mirrors our own. The greatest practical problem of our time, particularly since 9/11, is the problem of reconciliation between seemingly incompatible and potentially hostile systems of thought, morals, and belief embodied in political power of global scale. Islam is not only a distant challenge, something that helps to define them over there against us over here; it is now also something that defines our own neighborhoods and is intertwined with issues of Western global interests and security. But the fact that that Western self-understanding has been stripped of its religious content results in distorting our understanding of Islam by reducing Islam to one more option among the choices we allow ourselves.

It is on the basis of religion as having only relative merit that many writers have argued for the West's core values to be detached from their religious roots in order to promote a culture

of choice, free speech, inclusivism, and tolerance. It is no longer the case that secularization means the dissolution of religion, as the new religious resurgence in an age of globalization demonstrates. But a version of the secularization theory has survived to the effect that globalization has required the plural expression of religion, and pluralism means in that context the availability of choice in religious affiliation. One may be born into a religion, but that is not enough in an age of globalization. One has to choose, to become consciously religious, with the stress on consciousness as an independent variable. The question is whether the secularization thesis is any more productive in inter-cultural encounter with Islam whose Arabic canon in Scripture and worship protects it from the fate of a dependent variable, of a context-bound tradition. As Max Weber conceded in his *Economy and Society*, Islam was really never a religion of salvation. Even if Islam fits into the arithmetic of secularization it is distinct from it.

It is fair to add that the culture of relativism that has been the driving force of pluralism has nevertheless failed to cope with issues of religious and ideological radicalism. Radicals do not wish to play by the rules of a tolerant pluralism, and tolerant pluralism in turn cannot be intolerant of the radicals without being inconsistent with itself. Tolerance is thus exposed as either inadequate or evasive, or both. That situation creates the urgent need to match the rhetoric of an inclusive pluralism with commitment to some standard or idea of what is true and worthwhile. The West may be woolly about definitions of its core values, but they exist and the West defends them with military and economic means, including going to war if necessary. Just because the West is a secular culture does not mean the West has ceased to believe. Many speak today of



cultural Christians, where the cultural link disarms Christian claims. Contemporary Europeans, in any case, are apt to praise and emulate the ancient philosophers for their candid discussion and tolerance of cultural differences, an attitude to which Dr. Johnson offered a riposte in the following way:

Sir, they disputed with good humour, because they were not earnest as to religion...when a man has nothing to lose, he may be in good humour with his opponent...Being angry with one who controverts an opinion which you value is a necessary consequence of the uneasiness which you feel. Every man who attacks my belief diminishes in some degree my confidence in it, and therefore makes me uneasy; and I am angry with him who makes me uneasy. (Boswel's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1934-1940, III, 10-11.)

The momentum of Islam made medieval Europeans extremely uneasy, and so people became angry, and frustrated when their anger seemed futile. This sense of futility was nowhere felt more acutely than when theologians sought to probe the motives of Islam in order to gain access to the minds of Muslims. Islam's obstinacy led to incomprehension, and that in turn seemed to exacerbate a sense of powerlessness and of unyielding resentment, or, as with current policies in the Muslim world, the moral imperative stubbornness. It is with the nature and implications of the Christian engagement with Islam that my own work has been concerned in the past several decades.

Thankfully, there is today a general awareness and recognition that Christianity is a world religion that in many places shares common borders with Islam. What that means for

us is that Christianity is the most pluralist and diverse of the religions of the world. More people pray and worship and read the scriptures in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion in the world. It is a fact that normally escapes attention.

Another feature of the worldwide Christian resurgence is that most Catholics have become so since Vatican II, and the vast majority of them are under 35. There are 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide.

In 1900, 82 percent of people professing to be Christian were European and North American. In 2005, only 35 percent are European and North American. And the only reason it is 35 percent is because we have in the United States some 40 million Hispanic immigrants, a majority of whom are Catholic.

To take a global view, by 1900 colonialism had been established in much of Africa, and in that year the number of Christians in Africa were 8.75 million, most of whom were Coptic and Ethiopian orthodox.

In 1960, colonialism in Africa had ended or was ending. (Nigeria was independent in 1960; Ghana in 1957; Kenya in 1961, making 1960 a pretty important historical watershed.) At the time, Christians numbered between 50 and 60 million. Between 1960 and 2005 the number of Christians increased from 60 million to 380 million, just below 50 percent of the population of the continent of Africa.

In the lifetime of many of us sitting in this room there has been a continental shift, the first of its kind in the recent history of the religion, comparable in some ways to the conversion of Northern Europe. We are witnesses to a seismic shift in religious history.

John Paul II responded to these momentous changes by affirming Catholicism as the church on the frontier, not just as the church in its European heartland. A spell was broken, and the peoples of the world arose to claim the heritage as their own. Few people in Europe or North America were prepared for this, so common was the assumption that Europe is the faith, in the famous words of Hilaire Belloc (*Europe and the Faith*, New York: Paulist Press, 1920, 191). But Pope John Paul stepped into that new role with the natural flair of a brilliant pioneer, affirming the changes and giving them fresh impetus and new direction. It is to be hoped that in any assessment of his legacy, his role as transmitter and agent of Christianity as a world religion will be recognized. Little of that has been reflected so far in accounts of his accomplishments and yet it is unquestionably the case that, with remarkable stamina and with unwavering vision John Paul II presided over Catholicism as a world religion, as a world church – and that way of describing the Catholic church is not an oxymoron. The way to understand the changes is to think of a heartland Catholicism with its great cathedrals, its great heritage and legacy in art and literature, philosophy, theology, great music, buildings and architecture, and a frontier Catholicism where the greatest monuments of the church are living men and women, often children, and where the greatest buildings of the church remain lie in the distant future. They have not been built yet because the church is too busy receiving new members and establishing them in the faith.

In these new circumstances, papal statesmanship requires mediating between frontier Catholicism and heartland Catholicism, that is to say, between the Catholicism of the top down variety where the concern is with regulations and conformity and rules and definitions and boundaries, and

*frontier Catholicism* with its teeming masses, lively liturgy, poignant prayers, and dynamic spirituality.

We are all familiar with the culture of heartland Catholicism – it was what Hilaire Belloc and others meant when they spoke about how people could not be Christian unless they were European, or Europeanized. That was how claims for extending Western civilization became intertwined with efforts at Christianization. As a German scholar once put it, thanks to the empire, the narrow world had become a unity; the barbarian world had become Greek and Roman: one empire, one universal language, one civilization, a common development towards monotheism, and a common yearning for saviors. Since then scholars have felt that they were correct in assuming that a certain level of political centralization in terms, for instance, of organized societies and markets, consolidated military power, the founding of libraries, and legal institutions was a necessary accompaniment of the spread of the religion, and that pitched Christianity as part and parcel of a distinctly metropolitan civilization.

Christianization meant the process by which a motley patchwork of tribes and clans banded together to create social institutions, national communities, organized states, regional power blocs and long-range trading contacts, culminating in sweeping triumphant kingdoms and empires. Christianization demanded, or was seen as demanding, repudiation of the local and the particular.

It was a powerful vision even of modern Protestant missions who preached the trilateral creed of civilization, commerce, and Christianity, in that order. The great objects of civilization, exulted John Philip, the Protestant Scottish

missionary, are to the mind what the sunbeams are to the flowers: they paint the colors and ripen the fruit. As Solomon says of pride, idleness is not made for man, for it shrinks the impulse of civilization. That is why, Philip insisted, religion is necessary to conduct the process of civilization, from planting the germ of civilization on the icy hills of heathen Greenland to sowing the seed of social virtue on the sultry plains of primitive Africa. Accounts portrayed missionary heroism as consisting in pushing the frontiers of civilization among hinterland populations abroad, uprooting ancient customs and sanitizing primitive cults.

Such an elaborate argument about Christianity as cosmopolitan hypothesis was overthrown by the post-Western resurgence of the religion, and it is to the credit of John Paul II that he remained unwavering in his commitment to the worldwide implications of that new fact of our time. As Pius XII predicted, in its post-Western phase, the church would come to know resurgence and renewal such as it has never before known.

Today a typical symbol of the world church is normally to be encountered in a village off the beaten track. One encounters there not a single white face and where the liturgy is in the vernacular. Even when the lectionary reading is in English or in French, it is for a small part of the mass before the local idiom takes over decisively. The church building normally is somewhat nondescript, scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding architecture. On the generous side, its modest proportions may allow room for, perhaps, up to 250 worshippers. Out of concern to fit into the rhythms of local life, there might be two masses in the morning, at 8 and 10, let us say. The mass at the earlier time has the place already buzzing with eager worshippers who begin gathering some twenty

minutes or so before the mass. A jostle for the available seats typically starts that soon. By the appointed time the church is filled to standing room only. Still the crowds press in from all sides; they hang out of the windows and cram the doorways. Several people post themselves on the roofs of taxis. The spectacle is of ordinary people of all ages – mothers carrying children on their backs, toddlers hanging by the fingers of their grandmothers, small boys and girls forming a crocodile line as they file in, young men and women sporting batik shirts and dresses emblazoned with Christian phrases (“Jesus is my savior,” “Give praise to God,” “Trust in the Word of God”), and people clutching dog-eared copies of the Bible and the Missal. Perhaps four hundred worshippers have assembled in the end, each one there because seated neighbors have given up just a few inches next to them to make room.

You do not feel overlooked at worship among such people, and, at the later Mass, you positively feel hemmed in as a greater number of worshippers cascade into the church and the open grounds. The rural background of the people, their modest lifestyle, and the fact that most of them are barely literate, sets them off strikingly from the cosmopolitan advantages of heartland Catholicism. That is the new vibrant face of frontier Catholicism, and because of its sheer numerical weight and its cumulative global momentum, it promises to overtake heartland priorities.

That extraordinary scene is repeated all over the world outside the West, sometimes even, or especially, in situations of political repression. It is increasingly a feature of 21st century Christianity, with waves of conversion rising from the ranks of the least of world’s classes.

The service handout on this occasion would be full of practical instructions, guidance, and advice on such subjects as the obligations of parents and godparents, the plight of the homeless, the hungry, immigrants and refugees, the elderly, orphans and the need for adoption, the call for action on behalf of the persecuted, those in prison, street prostitutes, the handicapped and the sick, single parents and widows, street girls contemplating abortion, dress, food, the company one keeps, conduct in church (“the Church is a PRAY ground, not a PLAY ground”) and in public and private life, personal ethics, care for the elderly, concern for the poor, and developing regular habits of Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. The church is busy with elemental issues of nurturing new faith communities, not with the scandals and culture wars that have rocked the church in the West.

The service handout continues pointedly: “What we do for them, we do for the Lord Jesus. By reaching out to those in need, we reach out to Jesus. By refusing to extend our friendship to those in need, we are withholding our friendship from Jesus.” It reads like a page taken out of the apostolic epistles, proof that 21st century post-Western Christian resurgence has deep affinities with first century Christianity, including persecution and suffering. These people are young, eager, attentive, full of hope in the midst of the privations of a life of poverty and need, and still deeply devoted to the Holy Mother, which baffles the European missionary Catholic sister there. And it turns out that the word for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” is *yerem*. In an adjacent language forgiveness is also translated as *balafa*, which means literally “God’s skin shivers with numbness from

shared pain with us.” It is exactly the word used for the pain of childbirth. It stands for a mother’s compassion – and God is like that.

The connection from there to the idea of the Mother of Jesus bearing compassion for the people seems a natural one, missionary incomprehension notwithstanding.

The numerous subtle cultural connections by which Christianity is embedded in society reflect something of the great momentum that is stirring among the peoples of the world and directing them to the church. Signs of that were evident when the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, went to Manila in the ‘80s for the World Youth Rally, and some seven million young people turned up for the mass, as if responding to a sense of vocation for their generation.

The point to be made here is that there has been a seismic shift. The greatest monuments of the Catholic Church are living men and women, flesh and blood, who gather in very undistinguished places to pray and worship, and yet that takes nothing away from the vibrancy of their spiritual life. To show the simple conditions of the church, there may be no recording of the liturgy because there is no money to purchase and maintain technical equipment for the purpose. The church simply does not have the resources even to make a record of its developing liturgical life.

One of the legacies of John Paul II is to challenge Catholics to recognize that Catholicism is a world church of tremendous vibrancy and diversity, with numerous cultural streams running through it, and that the most dynamic, the most vibrant parts of the Catholic church are not in the old medieval

cathedrals and the great heritage that Europe once was, but in the new emerging frontiers around the world. There are profound implications in this for all sorts of things, one of the most striking being the extent to which Catholic ritual and liturgical work is able to conserve much in the old dispensation. This is the case with sacred vernacular hymns, songs, prayers, art, and music, for example, as the work of the late Cameroonian Jesuit, Fr. Mveng, demonstrated. We catch glimpses of the enormous potential of what is possible from the well-known Missa Luba where sacred music is fused with sacred dance and choral art to make a vivid, lively impact.

The idea first struck me some twenty years ago when the Catholic Cathedral Choir of Dakar, Senegal, traveled to stage a performance at an hotel in Banjul, The Gambia, where I happened to be staying. The performance showcased the famous African instrument called the Kora, an elegant, ancient twenty-one string harp/lute piece quite familiar to many American audiences. The Kora is performed by an eminent caste of musical families who trace their roots to the time in the sixteenth century when they were affiliated to the Sanneh secular royalty. After the Sanneh clan converted to Islam, the Kora retained its reputation as the musical medium of the pre-Islamic sagas. For that reason, the Kora still remains excluded from the mosque. It has no status in the religion's canonical devotions. (With effect, the musicians have proceeded to adopt Koranic Arabic phrases as rhetorical ornaments in their repertoire to deflect highly incriminating charges of paganism. For added legitimacy, many have performed the Mecca pilgrimage, entitling them to the nominal designation, al-hajj. Here is a case where the music remains non-Islamic while the musicians themselves have converted to Islam, suggesting a subtle, complex distinction that is lost even on scholars of the

subject. Clues of that distinction lie to hand in Djibril Tamsir Niane's Sunjata ('Sundiata') Epic and the composite Penguin Classics version (1999) of Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute's Sunjata. In all cases, the central figure Sunjata epitomizes pre-Islamic heroism even while Niane, Suso and Kanute are Muslim.)

In the setting of the Cathedral Choir, however, the Kora player, himself a Muslim, gave powerful, eloquent expression to the genius of the music, as if the stimulus of the Catholic liturgy had allowed it to realize its suppressed centuries-long religious potential. The musician introduced his art by declaring that he was delighted to be given a role in the choir in spite of the fact that he was a Muslim. It was a half-hearted protest, for his art blended so well with the great doxological strains of the Sanctus. The music tapped the rich veins of gratitude that a response to God's fathomless grace could inspire.

There is something else that is striking when people gather for worship in what might be a predominantly Muslim society. The role assumed by women as leaders in the choir, in ushering, and in standing side by side with men at the altar is in sharp contrast to the inferior role they occupy in society. Such an example of the freedom and dignity of women affirmed at the altar comes across as a scandal – as a flouting of hallowed cultural norms. It explains why, among their Muslim neighbors, Catholics and other Christians carry a whiff of stigma. Ritual impurity that disqualifies Christians from entering the mosque would acquire the force of taboo in social relations, making it difficult in some places even for friends to eat at a common table as Christians and Muslims.

What mitigates the stigma is the local Wolof notion of *taranga*. *Taranga* means hospitality. The ancient Arabs had much

the same idea which they expressed as *husnu dhayf*. The African notion of hospitality, of openness undermines this stigma that people would have felt by men and women coming together.

All of that suggests that we abandon the civilization hypothesis that has been used to explain the rise and expansion of Christianity in the Roman Empire and in the Hellenistic transformation of Christianity and shift to an alternative model, what I call the vernacular. We should remember, for example, that it was from the encounter of the Roman legions with the ancient Gauls that a pidgin Latin emerged that would have scandalized Cicero. And that pidgin Latin became French.

A similar process was at work in Italy. When Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) began his work he confronted immediately the dialectal confusion that existed in the Italy of his day. He wrote: “If we would calculate the primary, secondary, and subordinate variations of the vulgar tongue of Italy, we should find that in this tiny corner of the world the varieties of speech not only come up to a thousand but even exceed that figure.” (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*.) In the face of this linguistic confusion Dante persisted, saying there was a common Italian “whose fragrance is in every town, but whose lair is in none,” that the illustrious, cardinal, courtly and curial vernacular language was that which belonged to all the towns of Italy, but did not appear to belong to any one of them. Amid all the welter of speech there were common elements; and it was the function of writers like him to sift them out, gather them together, and so bring to perfection that form of the language which belonged to the whole of Italy without being the exclusive possession of any one part. The result was the *Divine Comedy*, perhaps the greatest of all poems.

What Dante did for Italian, missionary translators did for peoples in various parts of the world. That was precisely how Union Igbo developed in Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century, as I once reminded Chinua Achebe. After initial hesitations and criticisms, Archdeacon Dennis’ translation of the Scriptures into Union Igbo was eventually applauded as a work of genius. “The beautiful and liquid phrasing of the Archdeacon’s Bible, as majestic and chaste in its euphony and its haunting sweetness as our own English Authorized Bible, spoke the grand truths of God and Christ to countless waiting hearts.” Union Igbo became a living speech. Pupils took it home with them from school. People coming from distant parts found that they could understand each other through this new tongue, new yet somehow their very own. It was not unlike what Dante had achieved with the unification of the various Italian dialects. Dante had assumed the dialect of Tuscany, which he professed to despise, and made it the basis of his magnificent achievement.

My basic argument is this: One of the great paradoxes of Christianity began with this idea of the cultural deficit, of an original religion claiming an original revelation but without an accompanying original culture or language. One of the great paradoxes of Christianity is that where it was most successful, people began to claim that their culture — Italian in Dante’s case, English in the case of the Authorized version of the Bible, Union Igbo in the case of Nigeria. Translation is the original language of religion in Christianity, and, all else being equal, the mother tongue is how God chooses to address us and each other.

It is generally assumed in many religious circles in America, for example, that the King James Bible is scripture in the original tongue of Jesus. As someone once declared, if the King James Bible is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for

us. And yet when the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Colony not one of them brought a copy of the King James Bible even though it had been in circulation for a decade. The King James Bible was still regarded with suspicion.

We should recognize that the sentiment of the King James Bible as the scripture of Jesus is part of the cultural assumption that English, or any other European language, is the only legitimate medium of Christianity – that is how modern Christianity was largely propagated at home and abroad in mission. When I pointed out to a Divinity School student about to assume her position as priest-in-training in a New England parish that Jesus did not speak English, she was flabbergasted, saying she had not thought of that before. She is not alone. The fact that for centuries it was a criminal offense to use English in worship and Bible translation has been virtually erased from the collective cultural memory. Yet it would make it easier for us to be open to the reality of a post-Western Christianity if we remember how English got to where it is today.

This is not to ignore challenges presented by post-Western Christianity. The political and cultural cohesion that the creation of sovereign nation states was intended to achieve has largely failed. The two world wars of the twentieth century, the global nuclear threat, and widespread political collapse and instability made sure of that. Third World states, meanwhile, have remained as exaggerated anachronistic survivals of nineteenth century nationalism, with disastrous consequences for the peoples of Africa and Asia. The new post-Western Christian resurgence has merely dramatized that dilemma to which Catholic social teaching should have something to say. But the modern claims of complete secular ascendancy against the feared

recrudescence of theocratic power has prevented serious engagement with Catholic teaching on building a new society of freedom, tolerance, justice, and ethical advancement.

## A Period of Questions and Answers Followed:

**MR. SANNEH:** The question is whether the present pope is thinking in terms of downsizing or at least of controlling the concentration on heartland Catholicism's focus on top down, institutional, doctrinal and boundary issues. It is probably too early to say. After all, the pope has only been in the job for a short time. We should remember that the office can and does transform the man.

As I see it, in the present situation of the church there are at least two realities facing the leadership. There is the momentum of tremendous growth, with the explosion of Catholicism outside the Western world. And then there is a rear guard process going on in Europe and elsewhere where people are retreating and falling away from the Catholic Church. And even if you win the intellectual battle in Europe, Europeans are not going to take much notice.

One prominent historian has predicted that by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe will become largely Islamized. The people who are setting the agenda in Europe, whose voices you hear more loudly than anyone else, are basically secular in outlook. There are some Catholic thinkers but they have been marginalized. And that for me is a clue as to the direction in which Europe is headed.

**MR. SANNEH:** I am about to set out for a trip to Jordan to attend the World Economic Forum. I am part of a group called the Council of 100 leaders (C-100) which is charged with responsibility for dialogue between the West and the Islamic world. The West accounts for itself in secular terms whereas the Muslims insist on a religious view of the world. Accordingly, the Muslims wonder whether secularism has acquired a religious status in the West, and if so whether the dialogue should be between Muslims and secularists. Not surprisingly, Christians are typically split in response to that challenge. Meanwhile, Muslims have pressed ahead on the religious front, leaving Christians to make up their minds about what most matters to them. No one can serve two masters, Muslims might remind Christians.

**MR. SANNEH:** The question is about AIDS and how the Muslim frontier in Africa and elsewhere seems to have the lowest incidence of AIDS, whereas the opposite seems to be the case with Christianity, Christian areas have very high rate of incidence of AIDS and whether that has to do with the conservative teachings of the mosque. The implicit charge in that question is whether a liberal Christianity has fostered, or at least has tolerated, a culture of promiscuity, with Islam offering a moral prophylaxis against vice.

Statistics are hard to come by in the Muslim world as far as AIDS is concerned. The U.S. national population center that looks at such issues announced recently that China, Russia, India, and Ethiopia are among the countries most at risk from the AIDS epidemics. No Muslim country is listed in the report. But it is very hard to say that Christianity is responsible for the spread of AIDS in Africa in the sense of its loose moral teachings

encouraging promiscuity. If that were the case, the Bible belt would be the AIDS epicenter. It doesn't make sense empirically to say that, as if repression is the answer to AIDS.

The evidence is that there are some 7,000 cases of AIDS-related deaths annually in Africa. Through the work of Catholic sisters in many parts of Africa the church is very heavily involved in trying to deal with the AIDS crisis. But you can't really deal with it effectively as a church without the help and the cooperation of governments. The church doesn't have the resources or the mandate to cope, although it has the motivation to try to do something about it.

**MR. SANNEH:** The question is about pre-Vatican II Catholicism in Africa and the extent of its appeal. Pre-Vatican II Catholicism in Africa was conservative and concerned about drawing boundaries, putting up fences, defining heretics, carrying out expulsions, and upholding orthodoxy. The church remained very defensive. But there were also many ecumenical projects with Protestant churches in Bible translation, social work, and in issues of peace and justice. Vatican II changed the tone of the church. When, for example, the Third World bishops arrived in Rome for Vatican II they adopted a positive attitude from the start. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church they moved away from thinking of their work as consisting in describing who does not belong to the church and what Christianity is not. Instead they thought of the church as a growing, expanding family with new life pouring in and the membership increasing in all sorts of directions. That sense of the church is reflected in the language we use today when we speak, not about essential Catholicism but about dynamic Catholicism. And so the Dogmatic Constitution reflected that



positive spirit and outlook, to the benefit of all concerned. Vatican II also opened the Bible to Catholic scholarship, although it is important to remember that in September, 1943, Pius XII issued a strong encyclical called *DIVINO AFFLANTE SPIRITU: ON PROMOTING BIBLICAL STUDIES*, which laid the basis for collaborative projects with other churches.

A colleague of mine suggested that Vatican II was a two-prong movement, one being a response to modernity in order to bring the Catholic church into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the other, equally important, being a response to the missionary consequences of the Catholic missionary movement. Pius XII made a prediction about how one day the Catholic Church would be saved by believers in Asia and Africa.

I think it is important for ordinary Catholics to think of Catholic faith and practice as a dynamic thing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most Catholics, 1.3 billion of them, as I say, are under 35, and the numbers are slated to grow exponentially. My reckoning is that the next frontier of Christian resurgence is going to be China. In the West we are not ready for that, perhaps because we are not looking for it. The Bible societies in association with Catholic groups have printed some 30 million copies of the Bible for China, indicating a gathering momentum in China. There may yet well develop a Sino-Korean Christian axis that could have a lot to say about the prospects and character of Catholicism in East Asia.

**MR. SANNEH:** The question is: What are the concerns of the Catholic Church in Africa. Many of us have been looking forward to the work of Professor Richard Gray on the papacy and Africa to help us understand and engage what is happening in Africa. That work has sadly been interrupted because of Gray's

recent illness, though I have every confidence that it will continue in some form. The surge in conversions has posed a particularly acute challenge to the church. There simply is not enough room to hold converts, and so ad hoc measures have had to be adopted to try to respond.

It is important to remember that growth requires making room for new members as well as allowing for the expansion of mental and psychological horizons. The West has pioneered so many breakthroughs on so many different fronts that people find it hard to think or imagine how any new or worthwhile could emerge from anywhere else. But it may well be that the toll that the West's material ascendancy has taken on individual loneliness and a sense of personal insecurity can be reversed by the new hope and spiritual cohesion that the post-Western Christian resurgence has initiated. The evidence lies all over the field and in front of us, though we are slow to understand. Perhaps a new statesmanship at the level of the papacy can mediate between a Europe bewitched by wealth and power and a post-Western Christianity undeterred by poverty, persecution, and suffering.

Perhaps hearts can be strangely warmed again to dispel the chill in global injustice, mistrust, and estrangement. Catholics caught in the post-Western Christian resurgence are not burdened by the inherited baggage of Western Christians. Such Catholics are not oppressed by a sense of distrust of Rome, in part because they became Catholic since Vatican II, and in part because their societies were never dominated by priestly power, at least of the Christian type. They are accordingly less conflicted about their Catholic loyalties. That is the new challenging as well as hopeful context for a renewed papal statesmanship.

There is deep mistrust in the West about the improbability of a new resurgent Christian frontier outside the West, and that is not chiefly because of new scandals, though they are bad enough. The main reason lies in the fact that the enlightenment secularization of the West has advanced to such a stage that the West defines itself now against Christianity as an orthodox commitment. The feeling is that the post-Western world cannot be trusted with the immense liberal gains wrested from Christianity, and so the prospect of Christianity surging without Enlightenment constraints provokes deep antagonism in the West, suggesting a gathering culture clash. How can people who do not know Plato and Aristotle, and who view the rainbow as God's smile because they cannot imagine such a thing as Newton's prism, teach the West anything new about faith and ideas? The incredulity is unshakable.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong of Newark, NJ, announced the impending culture clash by charging that what we are witnessing in the upsurge of Third World Christian conversion is the sunset of Christianity as a force in Western civilization. Third World Christians, he asserts, come from cultures that are still steeped in superstition and witch-hunting, making Third World Christians incapable of appreciating the immense Western liberal gains of a progressive culture, its inclusive social tolerance and other sound, subtle influences.

Bishop Spong's remarks suggest that the finality of a progressive Western civilization competes with the finality of the Gospel, although whether the move from a literal interpretation of the Gospel to a prescriptive commitment to liberalism represents an improvement in tolerance and inclusiveness is

another matter altogether. (John Shelby Spong, "Anglicans Get Literal," *New York Times* Op-Ed essay, 13 August, 1998.)

In response, Third World church leaders instead urge rejection of name calling and a renewed commitment to the Gospel. Many of these leaders speak with real appreciation of how God used the West to proclaim the Gospel, and how that example inspires their own commitment. It is an example of how new Christians testify to the love and mercy of God and to the accompanying ethical and social challenges they should not shirk. They deserve partnership and friendship from the West, not rejection and aspersion.

All this righteous indignation in the West raises a real question about whether the cultural gap that's opening between the West and the non-Western world will in any way command the loyalty and the commitment of people in the West. It bears pondering, especially in light of the challenge of a radical global Islamic movement.