



Global Christianity and the Healing of the Nations

by David Smith

Almost one hundred years ago a book appeared which dealt with the prospects for the Christian mission in the new century which had then just begun. Looking back at the long reign of Queen Victoria, the author noted that the entire world had been opened up by European explorers, engineers and traders. China, Asia and Africa had all been brought within the sphere of European political and economic power, and the writer concluded that the nations 'which are best fitted to send Missionaries abroad are the strongest and most influential in the world, and their united empires comprise the greater part of the habitable world.'¹

The author was certainly correct in his estimate of the extent of the spread of Western power across the world. It has been calculated that by this time the European nations and their former colonies in the Americas had established political and economic control over an astonishing 84 per cent of the land surface of the globe. After the First World War, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and its division between Britain, France and Italy actually increased this percentage. The British alone claimed possession of an empire 'on which the sun never set', extending their control over 11 million square miles and 390 million people.²

Underlying this extraordinary expansion was the conviction of the superiority of Western civilisation to all other cultures and worldviews. Indeed, the terminology used at the time divided the world between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' regions, implying that the West alone possessed the gift of civilisation which was to be shared with other peoples. Many Christians assumed that the scientific and technological advances made in Europe were in some sense the fruit of the Gospel, and they thus treated evangelisation and civilisation as two inter-related aspects of the mission of the church. Thus, an advocate of missions writing in 1910 could argue that 'steam and electricity' had brought the world together and created a situation in which the church 'has well within her control the power, the wealth, and the learning of the world.'³

Within the space of a very few years the terrible carnage of the First World War brought about a radical change of mood and perception, a change reflected in the title of Oswald Spengler's multi-volume work, *Decline of the West*. The confidence of many Western thinkers was now seeping away as Communist revolutions and the spread of the Marxist critique of capitalism were beginning to split the world into two armed, ideological camps. As the twentieth century unfolded the dominance of the West was challenged and a bi-polar structure emerged in global politics in which rival ideologies faced each other from East to West and endeavoured to align the rest of the world behind their particular version of modernity. Remarkably, as we now look back on the twentieth century, that bi-polar structure of world politics has also slipped away into history, leaving us to come to terms with a new world in which we struggle to make sense of a confused global picture.

Of course, for those cultural commentators who have interpreted the apparent triumph of Western liberal democracy as marking the 'end of history' there is no uncertainty or confusion. Such commentators hail the globalisation of the market economy and the spread of liberal concepts of democratic government in language that sounds rather like a secular form of the Gospel. Those who argue in this way see no alternative future for the peoples of the world apart from the penetration of Western market values into every corner of the globe. This kind of talk contains an uncanny echo of the language of our author from 1910, as though after an unfortunate hiatus resulting from the Soviet and Chinese resistance to 'progress' in the twentieth century, the whole world again lies open to the civilising influence of the Western powers. There is, however, one very significant contrast between those who speak in this way today and the situation which existed a century ago: in Europe the linkage between the Christian mission and this project has been broken, revealing the essentially secular and materialist nature of the movement toward globalisation.

Clash of Civilisations?

According to the American political scientist Samuel Huntington the situation we face in the post-cold war era is very different from that described by the people who assume the 'triumph of the West'. It is, Huntington says, 'sheer hubris to think that because Soviet communism has collapsed, the West has won the world for all time and that Muslims, Chinese and others are going to embrace Western liberalism as the only alternative.' The Cold War division of humanity is over, but according to Huntington, it is being replaced, not by a homogeneous, monochrome culture with its roots in Europe and America, but rather by the re-emergence of the fundamental ethnic, religious and civilisational divisions of humanity.⁴ Samuel Huntington argues, in my view convincingly, that we are living through a phase in human history in which the long period of Western dominance is ending, and is being replaced by a new world in which there are 'intense, sustained and multidirectional interactions among all civilizations.' Or, to put it another way, 'the expansion of the West' has ended and the 'revolt against the West' has begun.⁵

In this lecture I want to explore this new and confusing world and to ask, in particular, what the prospects for Christianity and its mission are in this context? If from the time of the conquistadores onwards mission was linked to the civilising task of powerful Western nations, where does it stand today in a fragmenting world in which other religions and ancient civilisations are resurgent and are increasingly mounting resistance to the spread of the secular values of the West?

I want to take you back to the finals of the football World Cup in Japan and Korea in June 2002. At one level this event seemed to illustrate the process by which the entire world is being unified around values and symbols originating in the West. Asians, Africans and Latin Americans are, so it appears, football crazy, with megastars like David Beckham achieving the status of international icons. However, look more closely and you discover evidence of the reality of ethnic and cultural differences. The Korean crowds were enthusiastic yet orderly to the point of regimentation. Apparently the Dutch coach of the South Korean team was astounded to discover that his players refused to display joy in the dressing room after their remarkable victories for fear of offending the substitutes who had failed to make the team. Quite clearly, deeply embedded cultural values were at work here, so that football was being embraced while also being changed within this Asian context.

There is one other memory from the World Cup Finals worth recalling. After their predictable victory the entire Brazilian squad, many of whom removed their national strips to reveal T-shirts bearing the slogan 'Jesus loves you', linked hands and knelt together in a very public act of thanksgiving and worship. The British TV commentator was nonplussed by this extraordinary sight, mumbling: 'There seems to be some kind of religious ceremony going on here'. Secular media people in the West are not used to seeing God brought into the sphere of professional sport in this way and are likely to interpret such acts as bizarre, or even unacceptable. However, in that moment in Japan, the Brazilians revealed an aspect of the emerging world picture which is invariably overlooked by Western commentators (including, I am bound to say, Samuel Huntington), namely the emergence and significance of non-Western Christianity.

Modernity and Secularisation

I will return to the subject of world Christianity shortly, but I want first to notice the significance of the growing realisation among Western scholars that certain crucial assumptions regarding the culture of modernity may be false and misleading. It has long been assumed that modernisation is a process which brings such massive benefits that peoples everywhere in the world will wish to embrace it. What is more, it has seemed inevitable that nations taking the path of modernisation will have to pay a price for this in terms of increasing secularisation. Since this has clearly been the experience of the West, especially of Europe, it has been assumed that modernity will always result in the replacement of traditional, communal values with the anonymous and impersonal relationships that are part and parcel of a developed, rationalised society. What is more, the advance of science and technology will inevitably mean the retreat of religion and the removal of God from the public sphere of life. Modernity and secularisation belong together and you simply cannot have one without the other.

However, such assumptions seem to be challenged, if not actually falsified, by recent history. The Islamic resurgence reveals a religious response to the secular and materialist values of the West in which there is a selective use of modern science and technology. Islam seems to be perfectly capable of producing competent scientists, technicians and doctors who remain passionate in their devotion to Allah and show no signs of capitulating to Western social values. Indeed, the Muslim terrorists who flew passenger aircraft into the Twin Towers in New York were well trained in the technical and scientific aspects of navigation and flying, but this had not in the least eroded their religious convictions, nor had it diminished their hatred of Western, secular values. Consequently, as Huntington says, it seems increasingly clear that modernisation can be separated from Westernisation and, rather than weakening ancient cultures and civilisations, it is being used to strengthen them. 'In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western.'⁶

The Significance of Global Christianity

The Islamic resurgence has been the subject of a great deal of research and comment and the impression is

sometimes given that a new form of bi-polarism is emerging in which the West may end up defining itself against Islam. Clearly the challenge of Islam is enormous and must be taken seriously, but what is often overlooked is the fact that Christianity has experienced explosive growth in the Southern hemisphere and is likely to play a significant role in the emerging world order. Despite the fact that the Gospel often arrived in Africa, Asia and Latin America in a cultural wrapper that was far from attractive, millions of people on those continents have proved able to separate the treasure from its container and the person and message of Jesus Christ have repeatedly demonstrated an appeal quite distinct 'from the imperial power by which it was originally carried.'⁷

The figures are simply mind-blowing: in the early decades of the twenty-first century the Archbishop of Canterbury will preside over a block of 150 million Anglicans worldwide, of whom the vast majority are in the Southern hemisphere, including 20 million in Nigeria alone. The State Department in Washington has estimated (and probably over-estimated) the number of Christians in China at 100 million, while the massive surge of Pentecostal religion in Africa and South America has been seen by some commentators as a movement that is reshaping religion in the twenty first century.⁸ We may argue over the meaning of the statistics, but the fact is that the exponential growth of Southern Christianity is increasingly recognised as a phenomenon of world historical significance which will have huge political as well as religious consequences.

I want to consider the implications of this situation for the churches in the Northern hemisphere, but first we need to take note of another factor of crucial significance in the emerging world picture. When the author quoted at the start of this chapter wrote confidently about the spread of civilisation in 1910, the peoples of Europe, Russia and North America accounted for 32 per cent of the world population. In the year 2000, this figure had almost halved to 18 per cent and demographers now predict that by the middle of this century the populations of the Northern regions will make up as little as 10 per cent of the peoples of the world. One commentator recently observed that the clearest indication of the erosion of traditional social ties within the West is to be seen in contemporary attitudes

toward children and child-bearing and he noted that the birth rate in Europe was now below 1.7, 'far short of the level at which a society naturally replenishes itself.'⁹ By contrast, exactly the reverse is happening across the Southern hemisphere. By 2050 India and China will be by far the most populous nations on earth and countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Congo will have massive populations.

When the growth of Christianity and Islam is placed in this context, we end up with a situation in which a largely secular First World seems likely to find itself confronting rapidly increasing Southern populations among whom religion continues to thrive and expand.¹⁰ What is more, the majority of the churches in the South will be churches of the poor and as the century unfolds they are likely to be increasingly restive about the manifest injustice of a global system that results in an imbalance 'between where the people are and where the wealth is.' Small wonder then that the United States' intelligence community has begun to recognise the potential danger to America's strategic interests posed by people it describes as 'activists' within both Islam and Southern Christianity, people who, according to an official website, 'will emerge to contest such issues as genetic manipulation, women's rights, and the income gap between rich and poor.'

Christianity in the Third World: The View from the South

It is obviously dangerous and misleading to generalise about a phenomenon as complex and diverse as Southern Christianity, not least because there are conflicting interpretations of the data available to us. Yet, while recognising the risks involved here, I want to suggest that there are some features of non-Western churches that can, with reasonable confidence, be identified as characteristic of Southern Christianity overall.

For example, whatever particular ecclesiastical traditions may be involved, Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America invariably promote the strange idea that God intervenes directly in everyday life. Kefa Sempangi has described how, amid the terror of Idi Amin's brutal reign in Uganda, he came to realize the importance of reading the Gospel within the African context. A desperately poor woman came to him with the request that he and his

elders might pray that God would provide her with a Vono bed (a brand well known in parts of Africa, identified with a simple metal bed frame and a basic mattress). 'I could hardly believe my ears,' he said. 'It seemed especially strange now, when our whole country was in serious trouble... Surely we had more pressing things to think about!' But the following Sunday the woman showed up in church dancing with excitement. Sempangi sent an usher to find out what the commotion was about, at which the woman shouted out: 'The kingdom of God has come! The kingdom of God has come! Jesus has given me a Vono bed!' After hearing many testimonies of this kind from poor Christians, Sempangi concluded:

These testimonies caused me to read again the story of Jesus' earthly ministry. The more I read and reflected on his life, the more I saw the naked inadequacy of my own approach to the gospel. I met people at the point of my expertise, my knowledge of the Bible. Christ met people at the point of their need.¹¹

The phenomenal growth of indigenous forms of Pentecostalism throughout the Southern hemisphere, and especially in Latin America, must be understood in relation to beliefs like these. People facing a daily struggle to survive will find little to help them in a Christianity that is carefully confined to the intellectual sphere and sealed off from the concrete realities of everyday existence. As Philip Jenkins says, churches in the Southern continents 'can read the Bible in a way that makes Christianity look like a wholly different religion from the faith of prosperous advanced societies of Europe or North America.'¹²

Theology from the South

Perhaps the crucial difference between Christianity in Western Europe and the form the faith is now taking in the Southern continents concerns the impact of the movement known as the Enlightenment on the spirituality, worship and theology of the older churches. For the past few centuries the churches of Europe have found themselves responding to the impact of new ideas in philosophy and science, with the inevitable result that theology in the West became highly contextual. As they endeavoured to translate Christian beliefs into

Enlightenment categories, Western theologians accepted the existence of a clear distinction between the realms of the sacred and the secular, and they granted a privileged place to rational thought and investigation as the path to knowledge. Theology involved the systematic articulation of belief; biblical interpretation and preaching were to be logical, and truth itself came to be understood in terms of propositions requiring mental assent.

As we have seen, it was long assumed that this form of Christianity was capable of meeting the spiritual needs of peoples everywhere, so that mission became the means by which a more or less secularised form of faith was transmitted to the rest of the world. What is now clear is that a theology that exalted the cerebral above the instinctual, gave priority to the individual over the communal, and accepted that matters of faith and ethics were private concerns, has contributed to the loss of faith in what was once known as 'Christendom', even as it was being rejected as inadequate to meet the real needs of growing churches in the new heartlands of Christianity.

What all this implies is that the new centres of living and dynamic theology in the twenty first century will emerge in those new heartlands of the faith in Africa, Latin America and Asia. As Andrew Walls points out, most African Christians operate within a worldview that is vastly different from that which shapes Western culture. He concludes that the real strength of African Christianity is to be found in its independence from the tradition of the Enlightenment, 'its openness to the accommodation of other visions of reality, visions in which the frontier with the spiritual world is crowded with traffic in both directions, visions which involve communal solidarity and do not take the autonomy of the individual as the defining category.'¹³

Peering into the Future

Consider then a possible scenario of the world in 2025. I stress that this is uninspired speculation, not prophecy. Nonetheless, in the light of the facts we have considered, it is not an impossible fantasy. If present trends continue, the Northern hemisphere will be populated by people who are incredibly wealthy, yet find it ever more difficult to articulate the meaning of life in any coherent manner.

While the material prosperity of these people continues to grow, protected by massive government spending on increasingly sophisticated weapons, their numbers will be in sharp decline as birth rates fall. Immigration from South to North will accelerate because, as a Hispanic theologian has pointed out, 'When the rivers of wealth, flow in one direction, it is only natural for the population to flow in the same direction.'¹⁴ By this time though, the shrinking and greying of the indigenous populations in Europe and North America will mean that increased immigration will provide the only way to recruit the labour force required to maintain businesses and services in this privileged part of the world. The French government recently issued a highly sensitive report which argued that in the coming half-century, Europe will have no alternative but to admit 75 million immigrants and face the consequences of becoming an ethnically mixed society in which growing cultural cross-fertilisation is bound to occur.

Across the Atlantic, by mid-century no less than 100 million Americans will be people of Hispanic origin and 60 million will claim Mexican descent. Meantime, in the Southern hemisphere, vast masses of poor people will wave flags, not of Communist revolution, but of ascendant Islam and Christianity. There will be huge Christian communities in Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Korea, the Philippines and China. However, if the two worlds, North and South, continue to drift apart economically, the danger is that a huge gap will open up at the level of perception and understanding. On the one side, as Philip Jenkins observes, it is easy to anticipate that the Western media will depict the faith of Christians in the South as fanatical, superstitious and sexually repressive. A supernaturalist form of religion that insists on bringing God into politics, economics, and even football, will be parodied as 'jungle religion' and the nations of the old Christendom will be in danger of defining themselves against both Islam and Christianity. Meantime, as the Southern churches become more radical, they will be tempted to view the global situation in apocalyptic terms, and may come to view the rich and selfish North as the last terrible manifestation of Babylon.

Hearing the Voice of the Spirit

I propose that in a context like this the most urgent

challenge confronting the church world-wide, is that Christians in both North and South should listen to each other and, in fellowship together, hear what the Spirit is saying to them. I am here deliberately alluding to a text that occurs at the end of each of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

The challenge facing those churches seems to be remarkably similar to that which we face in the twenty-first century. It seems clear that by the close of the New Testament most of the 'older' churches addressed in these chapters were deeply compromised by their association with the imperial power of the Roman empire. They were extremely rich and, as one of them boasted, 'did not need a thing.' They were located at the heart of an empire which became prosperous at the expense of the rest of the world, and maintained its privileged position by means of the most efficient and ruthless military machine the world had ever seen. Many Christians living in Roman cities or ports operated within this system and so were inclined to believe Roman propaganda and to seek a synthesis between Christ and Caesar. The Laodiceans, the false prophetess Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, all have in common the attempt to adapt and modify Christianity in a way that would make possible their continued involvement in Roman social and economic life, evading the sacrifice and suffering that, according to John of Patmos, are the cost of following the Lamb of God.

In this situation the risen Christ summons people to 'hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' Notice that the Holy Spirit is alive and contemporary; the call is not to remember what the Spirit has said in the past (important as that undoubtedly is), but to be open to the voice of God now, today. At the same time Christians are reminded that this process of listening, of discerning the will of God, involves the fullest possible ecumenical fellowship since they are to receive both the revelation given to them and the content of the letters delivered to the other churches. No one church has a monopoly on the truth and the wider our fellowship in the Gospel the more likely it is that we shall be able to 'discern the mind of Christ.'

The issue of the unity of Christians is vital in the context we have attempted to describe. In the nineteenth century the unity that had been promised by the Great Awakening

disappeared as the class divisions in industrial society split the church into denominations which merely reflected and sanctified wider social distinctions. In a classic study entitled *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Richard Niebuhr observed that denominations are sociological groups 'whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes.' They represent the secularisation and moral failure of Christianity and 'unless the ethics of brotherhood can gain the victory over this divisiveness within the body of Christ it is useless to expect it to be victorious in the world.'¹⁵

The great danger today is that as the world fractures along cultural and civilisational lines Christians will again find themselves forced into opposing camps so that, instead of resisting wider social and political trends, they mimic these and even claim that Christ supports their particular civilisational inheritance. The greatest danger of all is that the North-South divide will split the Christian movement turning Christianity in Europe and America into an ideology in support of privilege, power and wealth, while leaving the Southern churches alienated, bitter and perhaps tempted by the appearance of some latter-day Karl Marx.

How does the message of the book of Revelation relate to this situation? In a remarkable study the Hispanic historian and theologian Justo Gonzalez has argued that John of Patmos faced exactly the kind of issues we have described. John is summoned to speak to churches that are wealthy, privileged and deeply compromised concerning 'many peoples, nations, languages and kings.' This is a God-given vision of an alternative community to the one centred on Rome. Joining this multi-ethnic community brings no guarantee of wealth and security, rather, it is likely to lead to suffering and death. Those who follow the Lamb will be involved in witness that is joyful, yet profoundly counter-cultural in the context of an empire that declares itself to be the final goal of human history. Yet it is precisely as Christians catch this vision and see through the blasphemous pretensions of the empire that they are able to bear faithful witness to the Crucified One who alone holds 'the keys of death and of Hades.' This message of a new, multinational community, united in the worship of the slain and risen Christ had to be preached to the deeply compromised Christians in Asia Minor. This

was not an easy task since the vision of a multi-ethnic church, which stood in total contrast to the dominant power and values of Rome, would be resisted and resented by Christians who were prospering by operating within the system.

I want to conclude by quoting again from Justo Gonzalez who demonstrates the significance of the message of the book of Revelation in a age of growing cultural conflict. The future of Christianity in the Northern hemisphere will, it seems to me, be determined by the extent to which rich and privileged Christians can truly hear words like these, and recognise in them what the Spirit is saying to the churches today. This is not to say that Christianity in the South is beyond criticism, or that we have nothing to offer to our sisters and brothers there, but I suggest that our spiritual health depends crucially on how far we can respond to Southern voices like this one. Failure

at this point may mean the removal of the candlestick by the head of the Church. Here then, is Justo Gonzalez' challenge:

The fact is that the gospel is making headway among the many tribes, peoples and languages – that it is indeed making more headway among them than it is among the dominant cultures of the North Atlantic. The question is not whether there will be a multicultural church. Rather, the question is whether those who have become accustomed to seeing the gospel expressed only or primarily in terms of those dominant cultures will be able to participate in the life of the multicultural church that is already a reality.¹⁶

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.'

NOTES

1 J.I. Macdonald, *The Redeemer's Reign: Foreign Missions and the Second Advent* (London: Marshall & Scott, 1910) pp 218-219.

2 See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London/New York: Touchstone Books, 1998) p 51.

3 Macdonald, op cit (note 1 above) p 231

4 Samuel Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London/New York: Touchstone Books,1998), p.51.

5 Ibid p.53

6 Ibid p.78. On the challenge which non-Western religious vitality poses for the received paradigm of secularisation, see Grace Davie, *Europe: the Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd).

7 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), p.58.

8 The positive assessment of Pentecostalism is found in various works of David Martin, including *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002), and in Harvey Cox's important work, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing,1995). See also Bernice Martin, 'From Pre- to Postmodernity in Latin America: the case of Pentecostalism' in Paul Heelas (ed), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell,1998), pp102-146. On the other hand, Paul Freston's *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) suggests that detailed empirical, regional studies leave open the question of the social impact of the new churches. Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford and Susan Rose reach more clearly negative conclusions as the title of their book suggests: *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996)

9 Martin Jacques, 'The Age of Slefishness', *The Guardian*, October 5, 2002, p.24

- 10 See Philip Jenkins, Op Cit (Note 7 above), p 80ff
- 11 Kefa Sempagni, Reign of Terror, Reign of Love (Tring:Lion Publishing, 1979), pp.76-78
- 12 Jenkins, Op Cit (Note 7 above), p.217
- 13 Andrew F. Walls, 'Of Ivory Towers and Ashrams: Some reflections on theological scholarship in Africa', Journal of African Christian Thought, 3/1, June, 2000: p.1
- 14 Justo L. Gonzalez, For The Healing of the Nations (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p.83
- 15 H.Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Meridian Books, 1929), p.25
- 16 Gonzalez, Op Cit (Note 14 above), p.91

This is an edited version of the sixth Catherwood Lecture in Public Theology delivered by David Smith on 24 October 2002 in Belfast. David W. Smith is Lecturer in Urban Mission and World Christianity at the International Christian College, Glasgow. He was formerly Co-director of the Whitefield Institute, Oxford, and Principal of Northumbria Bible College. He is the author of Mission After Christendom, Crying in the Wilderness: Evangelicalism and Mission in Today's Culture, Transforming the World? The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism, and Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization.



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