



# Whitefield BRIEFING

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## ***Between Jos and Oxford: Personal Reflections on Theology Between Two Continents***

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There is an African proverb that says, 'He who never visits thinks his mother is the only cook.' So far as Christian theology is concerned, he who never gets beyond Oxford and Cambridge (or Geneva, Edinburgh or Princeton) may imagine that Western theology, with its centuries of development, has said the final word about the meaning of the gospel and can be used as the normative standard for Christian thought and belief anywhere in the world. Let me frankly confess that I arrived in Africa in 1977 to teach at the Samuel Bill Theological College in Nigeria with just such assumptions. Within weeks I encountered massive problems. My pre-packaged theology failed to provide answers to the urgent pastoral problems of students who came from traditional village settings in the rainforests of Eastern Nigeria. Worse still, I was not even sure that I understood the questions being raised. There was nothing in my previous experience that enabled me to relate to the deep existential anxieties of people concerning the spirit world, nor could I easily grasp the ethical dilemmas regarding marriage, fertility (or its absence), and the complex web of societal obligations that existed in a culture in which 'family' extended far beyond the narrow limits I had associated with that term. In this situation, classical western theological texts were of little help. Neither Charles Hodge nor Karl Barth showed much interest in witchcraft or polygamy and the indexes of the systematic theologies which had provided my resource base were ransacked in vain on such subjects. Slowly, at times very painfully, I discovered the imperative need for a contextualisation of Christian theology. Harvie Conn neatly describes this as the skill of transplanting the seed of the gospel in cultures' diverse soils *apart from the pot in which it is transported*. The distinction is crucial. To transfer an entire theological package, or an ecclesiastical system, without a critical appreciation of the extent to which it has been shaped by human culture is to prevent the seed of the word of God from sending down deep roots into the soil of new host cultures. Although this fundamental principle has been widely recognised, examples of the retention of alien cultural packaging remain distressingly frequent. It makes little difference whether the plant-pot is stamped 'Made in America' or 'Made in Korea'- to confuse what is culturally relative with what is absolute and biblical is to hinder the genuine growth of the kingdom of Christ.

When I returned to the UK from Nigeria in 1983, the lessons learned in a cross-cultural setting began to affect the way I viewed the theological task in the West. Earlier assumptions concerning the gospel and cultures now had to be abandoned. I became far more critical of my own culture and found myself asking the question, 'Where exactly *is* the mission field?' I had left Cambridge in 1977 believing that I was going *to* a culture in need of missionary input from the British churches. Exposure to African Christianity and the realisation that the situation here was characterised by religious decline and the advance of what the sociologists call 'secularisation' demanded a radical rethink. The revolution in my understanding of the way in which theology should be done was now followed by a revolu-

tion in my perception of mission and when Lesslie Newbigin suggested that the most urgent missiological question at the close of the twentieth century is, 'Can the West be converted?', I felt grateful that the conclusions towards which I had been moving were now expressed publicly with such clarity and conviction.

### Theology in a Cold Climate

In October 1998 I returned to Nigeria for eight weeks to teach in Jos at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria. Whilst there I gave a public lecture which was a personal reflection on the parallels and contrasts between the theological enterprises in Europe and Africa under the title which appears at the head of this paper. Speaking to my Nigerian audience, I stressed two aspects of the context in which theology must be done in Oxford today. First, since (to use a phrase coined by Andrew Walls) the history of the *whole* church belongs to the *whole* church, it seemed important to outline the rich spiritual and theological traditions of this ancient city. Neither concern for valid contextualisation nor the necessary recognition of the recession of Christianity in Europe diminishes the significance of this historical dimension. On the contrary, the struggle to establish the Reformation in England, the socio-political debates in the turbulent times which witnessed the emergence of democratic government, the beginnings of Methodism, the lessons from the Great Awakening, and the impact of Christian preachers and thinkers here in more recent times, all have relevance to the churches in Africa at the close of the twentieth century. The similarities are often as surprising as they are striking: Africa has its 'Anabaptists' in the shape of a seething mass of new religious movements; it too faces urgent socio-political questions which spark debates concerning the nature of the state and forms of government as animated as those witnessed in Cromwellian England; and the spiritual ferment in eighteenth-century Oxford, while a now distant memory here, has exact parallels in the revivalist movements which bring both massive numerical growth and huge pastoral and theological challenges to Christian leaders across the continent. Thus, the story of Western, evangelical Christianity is far from being of merely academic interest since it offers models, precedents, and principles which can be vital tools in

the ongoing task of African theology today.

Nonetheless, a historical perspective on Western theology requires honesty concerning *the realities of contemporary secularisation*. Believing that African Christians need to be aware of the present spiritual condition of Europe, I indicated that in many parts of the United Kingdom the institutional church is disappearing and hundreds of thousands of young people grow up with no knowledge of the gospel story. Theology in Oxford is challenged by the fact that at the intellectual level there is a widespread feeling that Christianity is an *old* religion which, although once alive and powerful in shaping Western culture, is simply unable to help us. Inevitably this aspect of the analysis offered in Nigeria last year provoked the question, 'Has Oxford anything of importance to say to Jos (Nigeria) at the present time?'

There are two important lessons which the African churches can and must learn from the experience of their sisters and brothers in the West today. First, at the risk of gross oversimplification, it can be claimed that one of the major factors leading to the secularisation of our culture was the constant failure of the church to take the gospel seriously at the level of its own life and conduct. The religious wars fought on European soil as rival versions of the Christian faith battled to secure monopolistic control of territory, led to a growing alienation from dogmatic faith on the part of many intellectuals. The conviction grew that if religious faith resulted in such bitterness and led to bloodshed on a continent-wide scale, then a new way, based on human reason, must be found to establish human peace and happiness. Voltaire expressed this sense of revulsion at the ethical failures of institutional religion when he said, 'Which of us would not belong to Christ were it not for the church?' Acknowledging the justice of this complaint, the Dutch missiologist Johann Bavinck wrote: 'While wishing to serve God, the church has repeatedly been an obstacle to his love for the world.'

Thus, from the cold climate in Oxford the warning to the church in Africa is clear: the unity, love and ethical integrity of the church is of fundamental importance to its mission and long-term well-being. There has been much talk recently of a massive shift in the centre of gravity

in world Christianity, with the centres of dynamic growth and spiritual power now to be found in South America, parts of Asia, and above all, in Africa. However, if the growth of the Christian movement in the southern hemisphere is to be other than ephemeral, then the issue to which attention is being drawn here must be given urgent consideration. My deepest worry is that Oxford's present experience may represent Jos's future. Evidence is not hard to find of both the shallow nature of much of the church growth occurring around the world (one missionary thinker recently described the church as '260,000 miles wide and one inch deep') and of the gathering forces of secularisation which seem to accompany the process of development and modernisation. Unless the African churches take seriously the call of Christ to be salt and light, a microcosm of the redeemed humanity that is promised as the ultimate fruit of the gospel, their current prosperity may vanish rapidly in the twenty-first century.

There is a second lesson that Jos may learn from Oxford at the present time. There is no doubt that the present cold spiritual climate in Europe is hard to endure, yet it compels Christians to engage in a process of deep and honest critical reflection which can be of huge benefit. In this process certain questions surface: Where did we go wrong? How did we manage to allow the gospel to become entangled with the ideologies of thrones and empires? How did we ever come to treat the mission of the people of God as something additional to the church's life when it now seems patently obvious that it belongs to the very essence of her being? In the process of wrestling with issues like these new thinking is emerging, new ways of being the church are being pioneered, and the hope grows that our present winter will give place to a new spring and summer.

It would be both ironic and tragic if, at the very point at which Western Christianity is coming to recognise the inadequacy of an academic theology unrelated to the mission of the church, evangelical theologians in Africa were enticed down this barren path. Tite Tienou observes, 'Evangelicals in Africa are best positioned to overcome the debilitating polarisation between academic theology and popular theology in a way that would encourage more missionary

proclamation, more discipleship, more faithfulness to our Lord.' Perhaps the European churches, reduced in numbers and stripped of the power and prestige they have taken for granted for centuries, can offer an example as they renounce the luxury of an academic theology unrelated to the urgent pastoral and missiological issues demanding attention, and seek not merely a theology of mission, but a missionary theology.

### **What has Jos to say to Oxford?**

It is clearly not my position to articulate the lessons which African theology can teach the world church today, but I can affirm the conviction that the cutting edge of Christian theology is now to be found in the southern hemisphere and that Western Christianity needs to sit at the feet of African teachers. Twenty years ago Andrew Walls made a remarkable claim: 'What happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of Church History for centuries to come.' With the keen eye of the historian Walls had spotted the fact that the growth of Christianity beyond the Western world in this century represents a truly epochal turning point in Christian history. Recently other scholars have come to agree with this, seeing in the successful transmission of the faith to Latin America, Asia, and Africa a fundamental shift as momentous as earlier great transitional phases in church history. Mark Noll notes that whereas earlier expansions of Christianity involved single originating and receiving cultures, the twentieth century has uniquely witnessed the church growing in multiple settings: 'Such multiple translations of the Christian faith at the same time in different parts of the globe can only appear chaotic, especially to those Christians whose experience is deeply rooted in the long Western appropriation of Christianity.' Noll concludes: 'What will come of the simultaneous translations of the Christian faith into so many of the world's cultures, God alone knows. But a long historical perspective can inspire considerable confidence.' Over two hundred years ago, before the modern missionary movement had even begun, the American theologian Jonathan Edwards made an extraordinary prediction. Writing at a time when the African continent remained largely unknown to the West, he anticipated a future in

which 'all countries and nations...shall be full of light and knowledge' and 'many Indians and Negroes' will be theologians of the front rank. Looking at the global scene today it can confidently be claimed that Edwards' amazing prophecy is being fulfilled before our eyes. It is enough to cite the names of René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, Vinoth Ramachandra and Kwame Bediako to prove the point and an extended visit to Jos leaves no doubt that, despite the formidable problems it must face, African theology is *alive*, dealing with life-and-death issues as it serves a church which, both in its dynamic growth and its chaotic pastoral problems, bears an uncanny likeness to the Christian community to which Paul addressed his Corinthian correspondence.

It is precisely the conjunction of the spiritual crisis of the West and the explosion of Christianity almost everywhere else that suggests that, provided African Christianity recognises the task to which God is calling it in a wider, global setting, the experience and knowledge of non-western churches may yet help to heal our great sickness. When apartheid came to an end in South Africa and that remarkable man Nelson Mandela was installed as president, I watched a TV news programme in which a well-known commentator listened to the singing of 'God bless Africa' from Johannesburg with a number of guests in a London studio. Visibly moved, this secular journalist turned to the African lady beside him and said, 'What a beautiful national anthem that is.' I have not forgotten her reply: 'That is not just a national anthem,' she said, 'It is a prayer we pray in Africa that the Holy Ghost might come down and help us with our problems.' TV commentators in Britain are not used to hearing such language in political discussions because it is taken for granted that God has no place in this area of life. This is where Jos, facing desperate social and economic problems, speaks to an Oxford which is materially rich but spiritually bereft. Perhaps at the dawn of the third millennium God is saying to African theologians: 'Who knows whether you are not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.'

### Books for further reading:

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|--------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Kenneth Cragg,     | <i>The Secular Experience of God</i>                                       | Leominster: Gracewing, 1998       |
| Douglas John Hall, | <i>The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity</i>               | Leominster: Gracewing, 1997       |
| J. Andrew Kirk,    | <i>The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission</i>                     | Leominster: Gracewing, 1997       |
| Mark Noll,         | <i>Turning Points</i>  | Leicester: IVP, 1998              |
| Alan Roxburgh,     | <i>The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality</i>              | Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press      |
| Int., 1997         |  |                                   |
| David Smith,       | <i>Transforming the World? The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism</i> | Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998 |
| Tite Tienou,       | 'The Theological Task of the Church in Africa' in                          |                                   |
|                    | <i>Issues in African Christian Theology</i> , ed. Samuel Ngewa et al       | Nairobi: E.African Ed. Publish-   |
| ers, 1998          |  |                                   |
| Andrew F. Walls,   | <i>The Missionary Movement in Christian History</i>                        | Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996        |

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