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"Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

An excerpt from Philip Jenkins' new book, The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South.

Philip Jenkins | posted 12/05/2006 09:23AM

Our understanding of the Bible is different from them. We are two different churches.
—Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi (Kenya)

In recent years, gatherings of the worldwide Anglican Communion have been contentious events. On one occasion, two bishops were participating in a Bible study, one an African Anglican, the other a U.S. Episcopalian. As the hours went by, tempers frayed as the African expressed his confidence in the clear words of scripture, while the American stressed the need to interpret the Bible in the light of modern scholarship and contemporary mores.

Eventually, the African bishop asked in exasperation, "If you don't believe the scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?" Christian denominations worldwide have been deeply divided over issues of gender, sexual morality, and homosexuality. These debates illustrate a sharp global division, with many North American and European churches willing to accommodate liberalizing trends in the wider society, while their African and Asian counterparts prove much more conservative. These controversies are grounded in attitudes to authority and, above all, to the position of the Bible as an inspired text. Fifty years ago, Americans might have dismissed global South conservatism as arising from a lack of theological sophistication, and in any case, these views were strictly marginal to the concerns of the Christian heartlands of North America and Western Europe. Put crudely, why should the "Christian world" care what Africans think? Only as recently as 1960 did the Roman Catholic Church choose its first black African cardinal. Yet today, as the center of gravity of the Christian world moves ever southward, the conservative traditions prevailing in the global South matter ever more.

Of course, Christian doctrine has never been decided by majority vote, and neither has the prevailing interpretation of the Bible. Numbers are not everything; but at the same time, overwhelming numerical majorities surely carry some weight. Let us imagine a (probable) near-future world in which Christian numbers are strongly concentrated in the global South, where the clergy and scholars of the world's most populous churches accept interpretations of the Bible more conservative than those normally prevailing in American mainline denominations. In such a world, then surely, Southern traditions of Bible reading must be seen as the Christian norm. We will no longer treat the culture-specific interpretations of North Americans and Europeans as "theology"—that is, as the real thing—while the rest of the world produces its curious provincial variants, of "African theology," "Asian theology," and so on. We will know that the transition is under way when publishers start offering studies of "North American theologies." As Joel Carpenter observes, "Christian theology eventually reflects the most compelling issues from the front lines of mission, so we can expect that

Christian theology will be dominated by these issues rising from the global South." If in fact the numerical strength of Christianity is increasingly in the South, that might suggest a decisive move toward literal and even fundamentalist readings of the Bible, to the horror of American or European liberals, and the delight of conservatives. Having said that, intellectual traditions change and develop over time, and there is no assurance whatever that approaches popular today will still prevail in twenty or fifty years time. But current controversies do raise questions about the future of Christian thought, and they challenge popular assumptions about the seemingly inevitable directions it will take. In an earlier age of conflict in American Protestantism, in 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick asked, "Shall the fundamentalists win?" In North America, they clearly did not. On a global scale, though, matters might develop differently.

Anglicans

Over the past decade, the worldwide Anglican Communion has provided the most visible front in North-South struggles over biblical authority. Though current divisions have a long prehistory, the immediate detonator was the 2003 decision by the U.S. Episcopal Church to ordain Gene Robinson—a noncelibate homosexual—as bishop of New Hampshire. Meanwhile, the U.S. church was considering forms of blessing for gay unions or marriages, and similar gay-friendly moves were at least under discussion in other global North churches, including ones in Canada and the United Kingdom.

At first sight, such reforms seem to run contrary to repeated and explicit biblical condemnations of homosexual acts. Still, Northern liberals could overcome biblically based objections by placing scriptural injunctions in a contemporary social and cultural context. Old Testament texts could be assigned to an older ritual and criminal code made obsolete by the Christian revelation. One satirical item widely circulated on the Internet noted that while the book of Leviticus indeed prohibited homosexuality, it did so in the context of other archaic and bizarre regulations. "Touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean. May I still play football if I wear gloves? ... Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. ... Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?"

More difficult to challenge are the New Testament prohibitions on homosexuality. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul places homosexual behavior on a moral par with adultery, theft, and idolatry. Yet, as liberals argued, the New Testament too was written in a society that accepted slavery and condemned homosexuality, and since the regulations provided in the text about both matters are thoroughly culture specific, they need not bind modern believers. Few Christian denominations today enforce the detailed rules that Paul pronounced about how men and women should wear their hair during services, though the passage occupies a larger share of I Corinthians than do his remarks on homosexuality. While the basic spiritual and moral truths of the Bible remain, societies change over time, and so do detailed rules of conduct. Putting the argument in admittedly extreme terms, Bishop Robinson himself asserted that "Just simply to say that it goes against tradition and the teaching of the church and Scripture does not necessarily make it wrong."

Such a liberal interpretation appalled many church leaders in the global South, who reasserted a strict obedience to scriptural authority. According to Nigerian primate Peter Akinola, the most visible critic of Northern liberals, "I didn't write the Bible. It's part of our Christian heritage. It tells us what to do. If the word of God says homosexuality is an abomination, then so be it." The Nigerian hierarchy explains further, "The primary presupposition is a high view of Scripture as inerrant and a sufficient guide in all matters of faith and conduct, such that its ethics and injunctions are of timeless

relevance, notwithstanding man's constant tendency to hop from one ethical paradigm to another." Instead of relativism, his church would accept the "revealed position of Scripture, which we believe to be the mind of God."

Not all Southern Anglican leaders were so inflexible. The important South African church was prepared to allow individual provinces to make their own decisions in matters of sexual morality. Yet overwhelmingly, African and Asian leaders denounced the U.S. church for abandoning the clear principles of the Bible. Kenyan archbishop David Gitari called gay unions "immoral and contrary to the Bible." Given the vast moral capital he had earned during years of heroic struggle against that nation's dictatorship, his statement carried special weight.

In the growing North-South confrontation, Southern conservatives find ample justification in the language of scripture, noting the hostility between the worldly-wise and the (godly) foolish, those who remain unseduced by secular learning. Using the Pauline epistles, Nigerian church leaders identify modern liberal Westerners with the pagan Greeks of old: "[In] spite of their pride in their wisdom (the Greek love of sophia) they had become utterly foolish. The last stage had been reached." To adapt the famous image offered by Tertullian, that great African thinker, Christians of the global South are citizens of Jerusalem, and they follow the Bible; Americans and Europeans, residents of Athens, obey secular texts. And what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or as that other African thinker, Augustine, framed the contrast, one must be a citizen either of Jerusalem or of Babylon.

Reading in the Global South

Though Anglicanism is an important tradition, claiming some eighty million adherents, that only represents around 4 percent of Christians worldwide. Still, the kind of split that we have seen in the Robinson affair has emerged across denominations, especially in matters of gender and sexuality. Other churches have watched Anglican conflicts with some alarm, fearing that perhaps they might be getting a foretaste of future debates among Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and perhaps, someday, even Roman Catholics. When Sweden's liberal Lutheran Church tried to enforce its views on traditionalist diehards, conservatives placed themselves under the authority of Kenyan bishop Walter Obare Omwanza, who denounced the official church for practicing "a secular, intolerant, bureaucratic fundamentalism inimical to the word of God and familiar from various church struggles against totalitarian ideologies during the 20th century." He attacked the Swedish ordination of women as "a Gnostic novelty," which "cannot tolerate even minimal coexistence with classical Christianity." Similar disputes surface not just in international meetings, but also within North American religious communities with large immigrant populations.

We often encounter the same range of conservative themes in the religious thought of African and Asian Christians. These include a much greater respect for the authority of scripture, especially in matters of morality; a willingness to accept the Bible as an inspired text and a tendency to literalism; a special interest in supernatural elements of scripture, such as miracles, visions, and healings; a belief in the continuing power of prophecy; and a veneration for the Old Testament, which is considered as authoritative as the New. Biblical traditionalism and literalism are still more marked in the independent churches and in denominations rooted in the Pentecostal tradition, but similar currents are also found among Roman Catholics. Any acquaintance with African or Asian Christianity soon indicates the pervasive importance of the Bible and of biblical stories.

Several factors contribute to a more literal interpretation of scripture. For one thing, the Bible has found a congenial home among communities who identify with the social and economic realities it

portrays, no less than the political environments in which Christians find themselves. For the growing churches of the global South, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world issues of poverty and debt, famine and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution. The omnipresence of poverty promotes awareness of the transience of life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and the distrust of the secular order.

Furthermore, Christianity—like any dynamic ideological or religious system—adapts to respond to its rivals or neighbors. In European history, Roman Catholics placed such heavy emphasis on "high" Eucharistic theology because they experienced such vigorous controversies with Protestants who challenged their ideas at every point. Lacking such competition, Orthodox Christians never felt the need to define their views on these matters as precisely. Today, similarly, Christians of the global North and South differ because of the main threats they perceive in their respective cultures. Joel Carpenter notes how, facing the challenges of secularism, postmodernity, and changing concepts of gender, Euro-American academic theology still focuses "on European thinkers and post-Enlightenment intellectual issues. Western theologians, liberal and conservative, have been addressing the faith to an age of doubt and secularity, and to the competing salvific claims of secular ideologies." Global South Christians, in contrast, do not live in an age of doubt, but must instead deal with competing claims to faith. Their views are shaped by interaction with their different neighbors and the very different issues they raise: Muslims and traditional religionists in Africa and Asia, not to mention members of the great Asian religions. Accordingly, "the new Christianity will push theologians to address the faith to poverty and social injustice; to political violence, corruption, and the meltdown of law and order; and to Christianity's witness amidst religious plurality. They will be dealing with the need of Christian communities to make sense of God's self-revelation to their pre-Christian ancestors." And in all these matters, they find abundant material in the scriptures, often in passages that resonate little with Northern theologians.

In consequence, the "Southern" Bible carries a freshness and authenticity that adds vastly to its credibility as an authoritative source and a guide for daily living. In this context, it is difficult to make the familiar Euro-American argument that the Bible was clearly written for a totally alien society with which moderns could scarcely identify, so that its detailed moral laws cannot be applied in the contemporary world. Cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews find it easier to read the Bible not just as historical fact, but as relevant instruction for daily conduct; and that even applies to such unfashionable books as Leviticus.

I am not, of course, proposing a simple kind of geographical determinism shaping religious belief. We can hardly speak of how "Africans" approach a given topic, any more than how Europeans do: Scots think one thing, Sicilians quite another. Nor are those societies in any sense uniform: Scots laborers presumably read one way, Scots professors another. Attitudes toward biblical interpretation and authority follow no neat North-South pattern, still less a rigid chasm between liberal North and conservative South. We find "Southern" expressions in the North, in the form of charismatic, fundamentalist, and deeply traditionalist belief; and those currents exist, however unhappily, in most liberal-dominated churches. If global South clergy express their faith that God will intervene to reward or punish contemporary states and societies, so do such high-profile American Christians as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Nor is it difficult to find North Americans who accept pristine New Testament views of exorcism and spiritual healing. For Pentecostal believers in North America and Europe, spiritual warfare is a strictly current reality, while the modern Vatican accepts a clear, if limited, role for exorcists—to the embarrassment of most Northern Catholic faithful, and many clergy. *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis continues to have a sizable readership among

conservative Christians of all shades, at least some of whom take seriously its accounts of demonic temptations.

At the same time, liberals and Northern-style feminists are by no means unknown even in the most fervently traditional-minded African and Asian churches. Despite all the financial difficulties faced particularly by African universities, global South scholars form a distinguished part of the global community of biblical learning, reading and publishing in the mainstream journals of Europe and North America; and international ties are reinforced by visiting appointments, by conferences and seminars. Naturally enough, given the colonial and postcolonial histories of their nations, many such scholars have been shaped by radical theological perspectives, by liberationist and feminist thought.

As in the United States and Europe, global South churches produce a spectrum of theologies and interpretations. The North-South difference is rather one of emphasis. Conservative and literalist approaches are widely known in the global North, but in most mainstream churches, such views are regarded as controversial and reactionary, and they are treated with great hostility in political discourse and the media. Even more suspect are explicitly supernatural or charismatic themes, such as exorcism and spiritual healing. In contrast, biblical and theological conservatism clearly represent the Christian mainstream across Africa and Asia, while ideas of supernatural warfare and healing need not the slightest explanation, and certainly no apology. They are rather at the heart of lived Christianity.

Reading the Readers

This conservative emphasis might sound counterintuitive in light of the sheer volume of radical or liberationist work stemming from Africa, Asia, and particularly Latin America. Since the 1970s, many scholars have been fascinated not just by the distinctive interpretations emanating from the global South, but by their enormous potential for reshaping Christianity worldwide. In 1995, R. S. Sugirtharajah—one of the most impressive and wide-ranging of these scholars—wrote that "there is at present an explosion of interest in Third World biblical interpretation" and that surge of interest has continued unchecked. Often, though, it can be difficult to tell which of these voices accurately represent the thought of the wider Christian community in those societies. Generally, attention focuses on academic or educated opinions, on the voices of professors, bishops, and church leaders, the sort of people who write books that get published in Europe or North America; but this emphasis can give a distorted view of global South traditions.

Sugirtharajah, himself a distinguished postcolonial scholar, writes scathingly of the appropriation of "third world theologies" by Western academics, who overemphasize those currents they find attractive, while ignoring others they find less palatable or sensational. Liberation theology in particular has been thoroughly "colonized." Citing some of the celebrity writers in this genre, he comments, "While espousing and retaining grass roots interest, the theologies of [Gustavo] Gutiérrez, [Leonardo] Boff and [Jon] Sobrino largely fall within the Western academic syntax, which makes them easy to incorporate." He quotes a dismissive comment that the Kairos document, a legendary product of South African liberation theology, "is better known in Germany than to Zulus."

In terms of the amount of work readily available in the West, one might easily assume that African or Asian churches are obsessed with liberation theologies, with black theology, feminism, and womanism, when in fact, we could easily assemble a substantial volume of texts devoted to highly conservative social and political stances. Among all the hundreds of titles by global South Christian writers and theologians published in the United States, only a handful give any inkling of the vast

popular interest in themes of healing, spiritual warfare, and exorcism, of mission and evangelism, topics that occupy much of the daily attention of African and Asian believers. This liberal or radical tilt does not represent any kind of ecclesiastical conspiracy to silence authentic popular voices. Rather, publishers produce books that interest them and reflect their particular outlook, books that will moreover find a North American audience, and the most active firms in this area of religious publishing overwhelmingly favor progressive and feminist theologies. They do not pretend that their offerings represent any kind of sample of Christian opinion in global South nations, nor should they be taken as such.

Issues of unconscious bias even surface in what seems to be the most populist method of finding what ordinary Christians think, namely the exercises in which scholars "read with," that is, engage in directed Bible studies with groups of uneducated and often illiterate believers. These encounters can be very fruitful, and the readings that emerge are often creative and illuminating. Even so, it is the academics who determine the texts to be read and who formulate the questions, often with the goal of leading their groups to address issues of gender or progressive politics that interest the researchers.

These comments are not meant to understate the significance of radical approaches in the rising churches, especially in some countries—South Africa comes to mind. But the texts and interpretations favored by scholars and, often, prelates differ substantially from those that emerge from studies of ordinary believers: the woman in the Sunday congregation or the man at the revival meeting. For this demotic thought world, we must look to more commonplace sources, such as sermon texts, writings by local clergy and seminary educators, testimonies, best-selling memoirs and devotional works, or the kind of popular Christian writing that appears so often in popular media. Often, the attitudes we find might indeed be socially progressive in some ways, but they are deeply supernatural and (seemingly) superstitious in others.

Moving South

In many ways, then, Christian communities in global South nations share certain approaches to the Bible and to biblical authority, and these are sufficient to mark real differences with the outlook common in Europe and North America. Divisions over the nature of biblical authority matter because the weight of numbers within Christianity is shifting so decisively to the churches of the global South. Partly, this is a matter of demographic change and the rapid growth of the relative share of the world's population living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Since the 1960s, populations have fallen or stagnated in Europe and North America, while global South birth rates have remained far higher—spectacularly so in Africa. Today, there are about two billion Christians, of whom 530 million live in Europe, 510 million in Latin America, 390 million in Africa, and perhaps 300 million in Asia, but those numbers will change substantially in coming decades. By 2025, Africa and Latin America will vie for the title of the most Christian continent. A map of the "statistical center of gravity of global Christianity" shows that center moving steadily southward, from a point in northern Italy in 1800, to central Spain in 1900, to Morocco by 1970, and to a point near Timbuktu today. And the southward trajectory will continue unchecked through the coming century. As Todd Johnson points out, Spanish has since 1980 been the leading language of church membership in the world, and Chinese, Hindi, and Swahili will soon play a much greater role. In our lifetimes, the centuries-long North Atlantic captivity of the church is drawing to an end.

The figures are startling. Between 1900 and 2000, the number of Christians in Africa grew from 10 million to over 360 million, from 10 percent of the population to 46 percent. If that is not, quantitatively, the largest religious change in human history in such a short period, I am at a loss to

think of a rival. Today, the most vibrant centers of Christian growth are still in Africa itself, but also around the Pacific Rim, the Christian Arc. Already today, Africans and Asians represent some 30 percent of all Christians, and the proportion will rise steadily. Conceivably, the richest Christian harvest of all might yet be found in China, a nation of inestimable importance to the politics of the coming decades. Some projections suggest that by 2050, China might contain the second-largest population of Christians on the planet, exceeded only by the United States. More confidently, we can predict that by that date, there should be around three billion Christians in the world, of whom only around one-fifth or fewer will be non-Hispanic whites.

The effects of these changes can be witnessed across denominations. The Roman Catholic Church, the world's largest, was the first to feel the impact. Today, two-thirds of its adherents live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that total does not include people of the global South residing in the North. By 2025, that proportion should rise to 75 percent, a fact that will undoubtedly be reflected in future papal elections. The Anglican Communion—historically, the "English" church—is becoming ever more African dominated, so that the Nigerian branch will soon be its largest representative. The Seventh Day Adventist Church also epitomizes these trends. In the 1950s, the church had around a million members, mainly concentrated in the United States. Today, the church claims some fourteen million members, of whom only one million are located in the United States; and among even that American million, a sizable share are of immigrant stock. Of the churches with Euro-American roots, those that are expanding do so by becoming rapidly more Southern in composition. Those that fail to expand retain their Euro-American identity, but they are shrinking perilously in terms of market share. The Orthodox Communion, still firmly rooted in Eastern Europe, offers a worrying model of apparently irreversible demographic decline. Christianity worldwide is booming, but at least in relative terms, "Western" Christianity is stagnating, while the old Eastern Christianity may be facing terminal crisis.

Seeing Christianity "going South" in our lifetimes, we think of John Updike's wry comment "I don't think God plays well in Sweden. &133; God sticks pretty close to the Equator." That remark seems true today, and it will be ever more so in years to come.

The End of Fundamentalism

At least in the short term, the growth of Southern churches portends a conservative shift in theology and in attitudes toward biblical authority. By North American standards at least, the ideas expressed by African churches in the sexuality debates certainly seem fundamentalist. Liberals might indeed discern all the elements of that unholy trinity identified by Peter Gomes—bibliolatry, culturism, and literalism—a religion of the letter rather than the Spirit, one that worships the text rather than God.

Yet in discussing the use of the Bible by contemporary theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, we see the limitations of the whole concept of fundamentalism. In the United States and Europe, the term usually suggests a bull-headed obstinacy in the face of scientific facts, a tendency toward repression, especially directed against women or the sexually unorthodox. If that is in fact the future of Christianity, then it is not just theological liberals who have cause for concern, since the new face of Christianity would look disturbingly like the worst stereotypes of radical Islam. But as in the case of Islam, sincere or passionate religious involvement need have no negative connotations, and might easily be reconciled with social and political progress.

Definitions are critical. Media coverage of any topic, religious or secular, is shaped by the need to summarize complex movements and ideologies in selected code words, labels that acquire

significance far beyond their precise meaning. Though designed as guideposts for the perplexed, such words all too often tend to stop intellectual processes. One such demon word is fundamentalism, which was originally a description of a particular approach to reading Christian scriptures, but has now become a catch-all description for ultraconservative intolerance. Used thus, the term becomes purely pejorative and, often, subjective. The term "fundamentalism" expands to cover anyone who treats a religion as something that should shape one's daily life, provided that leads to conclusions that the speaker does not like. If your reading of the Bible inspires you to help the poor, that is passionate religious commitment. If it leads you to denounce homosexuality, you are a fundamentalist. In the modern U.S. context, the term "evangelical" is well on the way to acquiring such connotations, as a label for intolerant (white) social conservatives.

But "fundamentalist" need not have such dreadful connotations, especially when applied across religious boundaries. In its origins, the word implies a strict belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the entire Bible text. Growing as it does out of debates within Christianity, the term can only with difficulty be applied to other faiths. It represents an American-Christian response to an American modernism. Muslims have their own form of reactionary fundamentalism—*usuliya*—though its implications are rather different from the Christian sense of the word. In a sense, all Muslims are fundamentalists by virtue of their approach to scripture, in that they view the Quran as a text inspired or dictated by the divine. No vaguely orthodox Muslim would accept that Muhammad had anything to do with the composition of the Quran, as his role would rather be seen as receiving dictation. In Christian terms, such a view of scripture would by definition be fundamentalist, but that kind of interpretation has no necessary implications for social or political stances. A Muslim who believes faithfully in the inspired Quran can, in theory, be a feminist, a daring scientific pioneer, or a progressive social reformer.

Among Christians likewise, attitudes to Bible interpretation can be a poor guide to belief or conduct. It can in fact be difficult to determine who is a Christian fundamentalist, since the whole debate simply matters less outside North America. One African independent church, for instance, scorns the term: "We read the Bible as a book that comes from God and we take every word in the Bible seriously. Some people will say that we are therefore fundamentalists. We do not know whether this word applies to us or not but we are not interested in any interpretation of the Bible that softens or waters down the message. We do not have the same problems about the Bible as white people have with their scientific mentality."

Other global South evangelicals distinguish their beliefs from fundamentalism in the American sense. In the Philippines, an evangelical umbrella organization asserts, "If fundamentalist is understood to mean a person who believes that the Bible is the only authority, then we are not fundamentalist, for we have a place for traditions, creeds and councils, but they are all subject to the supreme and final authority of Scripture. If fundamentalist means one who always interprets the Scripture literally without regard to the context, we are not fundamentalists for we believe in grammatical and historical exegesis." Even Creationism, which in North America represents an acid test for religious loyalties, has different implications for global South churches, since evolution plays little role in debates over education. While Creationist beliefs are widely held, members of many large and influential churches, including Catholics and Anglicans, are quite at liberty to believe in the principle of evolution, however literalist they might be on other biblical matters.

Even harder to fit into fundamentalist ranks are Pentecostals, who constitute a large proportion of the world's newer Christian population. Since its origins in the early twentieth century, the

Pentecostal movement now claims at least 350 million adherents worldwide. Though Pentecostals vociferously proclaim the power of the Bible and biblical authority, they reject the fundamentalist tenet that God's revelation ended with the scriptures. Instead, they give high regard to prophetic, inspired, and mystical teachings, and apply a prophetic exegesis to the scriptural text. In terms of Friedrich Schleiermacher's classic distinction of styles of Bible reading, their approach is feminine, based on "creative intuition and immediacy with the text. ... Pentecostal hermeneutic is feminine, eschatological, organic, and helps the audience to recognize the signs of the times and to discern what God is doing in today's world." To adapt Harry Fosdick's question, Bible-believing Pentecostals and charismatics stand a much better chance of winning than do fundamentalists, if we define the latter with any degree of precision.

Conservatives and Liberals

If the word "fundamentalist" needs to be used cautiously, so do those familiar ecclesiastical labels "liberal" and "conservative." Though most African and Asian churches have a high view of biblical origins and authority, this does not prevent a creative and even radical exegesis, as texts are applied to contemporary debates and dilemmas.

I have written here of religious and scriptural conservatism, but that term need not carry its customary political implications. Euro-American believers are used to drawing a sharp distinction between the political consequences of different styles of Bible reading. According to popular assumptions, liberal approaches to the Bible emphasize messages of social action and downplay supernatural intervention, while conservative or traditionalist views accept the miraculous and advocate quietist or reactionary politics. The two mindsets thus place their main emphases in different realms, human or supernatural.

Now, even in the United States, that distinction is by no means reliable. There are plenty of left-wing evangelicals, deeply committed to social and environmental justice. But in churches of the global South, the division makes even less sense. Many churches take very seriously the supernatural worldview that pervades the Christian scriptures, with the recurrent themes of demons, possession, exorcism, and spiritual healing. Yet readings that appear intellectually reactionary do not prevent the same believers from engaging in social activism. In many instances, biblical texts provide not only a justification for such activism, but a command. Deliverance in the charismatic sense can easily be linked to political or social liberation, and the two words are of course close cognates. The biblical enthusiasm we so often encounter in the global South is often embraced by exactly those groups ordinarily portrayed as the victims of reactionary religion, particularly women. Instead of fundamentalism denying or defying modernity, the Bible supplies a tool to cope with modernity, to allow the move from traditional societies, and to assist the most marginalized members of society.

When Northern-world observers discuss the churches of the Two-Thirds World, labels such as fundamentalist and literalist, liberal and conservative can distract from the real issues that Christians face in their own very different societies. Only when we see global South Christianity on its own terms— as opposed to asking how it can contribute to our own debates—can we see how the emerging churches are formulating their own responses to social or religious questions, and how these issues are often viewed through a biblical lens. And often, these responses do not fit well into our conventional ideological packages.

The socially liberating effects of evangelical religion should come as no surprise to anyone who has traced the enormous influence of biblically based religion throughout African-American history.

Writers such as James Baldwin suggest how utterly saturated black American culture was, and remains, in the thought and language of the Bible, and of biblically derived hymns and prayers. Black American politics are still largely inspired by religion and often led by clergy, usually of charismatic and evangelical bent; black political rhetoric cannot be understood except in the context of biblical thought and imagery. Yet having said this, African-American religious leaders are generally well to the left on economic issues, as are many evangelicals in Latin America, and also independent and Protestant denominations across Africa. All find scriptural warrant for progressive views, most commonly in prophetic and apocalyptic texts. When viewed on a global scale, African-American religious styles, long regarded as marginal to mainstream American Christianity, now seem absolutely standard. Conversely, the worship of mainline white American denominations looks increasingly exceptional, as do these groups' customary approaches to biblical authority. Looking at this reversal, one is reminded of a familiar text: the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone.

Rich and Poor

Looking at some recent North-South clashes, some might despair at the cultural gulf that seems to yawn between the older and newer churches, which are divided by their common scripture. In a worst-case scenario, the dominant forms of Christianity in North and South might become mutually incomprehensible. To adapt slightly the words of Benjamin Disraeli, old and new worlds would constitute in fact "Two Christianities between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor." The prospect of such a religious division is intriguing for Northern-world ecclesiastical politics, as both liberals and conservatives have seen the growing numbers of global South Christians as confirming the validity of their own particular views. During the 1970s and 1980s, liberals and radicals rejoiced to hear liberationist and feminist voices emerging from the churches of the Two- Thirds World. More recently, U.S. and European conservatives have come to see, in the moral and sexual traditionalism advocated by the growing churches of the global South, an enticing vision of the theological future. In their different ways, both sides assume that the global South represents the future of Christianity, and that that future is ideologically congenial.

Though particular denominations might split along North-South lines, for many reasons, we are not likely to see a clear break of the epochal kind that separated Western Catholics from Eastern Orthodox, a repeat performance of the great Schism of 1054. Straightforward North-South clashes are not likely. Most obviously, as we have seen, neither Northern nor Southern Christianities represent any kind of solid front. "Northern" approaches and beliefs are found in the South, and vice versa.

Also, of course, views will change over time. North-South crossovers will only increase with globalization, with the influence of Northern media and academe across the world, while swelling populations of global South migrants in the North will give a more Southern quality to many North American and European congregations. Furthermore, African and Asian Christianity will develop and diversify as these faiths develop deeper roots, build more elaborate institutional structures, and engage in new theological debates. Only recently has Christianity become a mass faith in many of the nations that today constitute such obvious bastions—such as Nigeria, Uganda, Korea, and China. As the religion develops, churches will develop a greater range of theological and biblical attitudes, and probably spawn a new liberalism. In some churches, that liberalism will in turn drive new generations of conservative and fundamentalist protesters against what they see as a betrayal of the

authentic faith. The consequence will be an ever-widening diversity of churches and sects, making any concept of unified "Southern" Christianity ever more problematic.

Hypothetically, we might even imagine more extreme moves away from orthodoxy in coming decades. Cultures or societies that are literalist or even fundamentalist in one generation can in later years become liberal, if not highly skeptical of all forms of faith; and that pattern occurs frequently—though not inevitably—across faith traditions. In European history, seventeenth-century Calvinism was a rigorous and often intolerant faith, with a tradition of militant political activism that we can legitimately compare to today's puritanical varieties of Islamic revivalism. By 1680, the most visible Calvinist territories were the Netherlands, Scotland, Switzerland, and New England; which were also the heartlands of Enlightenment thought and religious liberalism a century later. We can argue about why such a transition should have occurred: perhaps Biblicism and fundamentalism build determined self-reliance. If you believe your understanding of the scripture gives you direct access to the divine, you are unlikely to accept the authority of flawed human authorities in this or any other matter. In the 1770s, the British government thought it was dealing not with an American War of Independence, but a "Presbyterian Revolt." But for whatever reason, historical experience suggests that fundamentalists often have good grounds to worry about their liberal grandchildren. We can speak with fair confidence about the ethnic composition of the world's Christians in fifty or a hundred years, but we must be on shakier grounds when it comes to predicting attitudes to authority or orthodoxy.

Whose Readings?

For the foreseeable future, though, the fastest-growing segments of Christianity worldwide will share certain approaches to biblical authority and interpretation, and understanding these approaches is essential for anyone interested in secular affairs. In fact, seeing how the Bible is often used today to create a vocabulary and intellectual framework for contemporary debates and problems, we recall similar developments in other societies undergoing revolutionary religious change. Throughout, current events recall the impact of the Bible on the making of Europe during its age of Christendom, the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, when biblical texts and themes influenced social thought, art, cultural perceptions, narrative traditions, and the very concepts of history and nationhood. Europeans came to see the tales of the Bible as their own stories, as biblical passages and stories shaped the perceptions of all different sorts of people, tyrants and rebels, reformers and conservatives. In modern Africa and Asia too, whether we are interested in politics strictly defined or in wider social concerns—attitudes to gender and family, wealth and poverty, debt and development—the Bible provides a critical guide to worldly matters, much as it did in Europe in 1600 and the United States in 1850.

We can also appreciate how far social and cultural circumstances help determine religious outlook. However much believers might cite the obvious meaning of the "plain text of scripture," that Christian scripture is a very large and complex set of documents, and different portions and emphases seem relevant in some settings but not others. It is fascinating, and sometimes shocking, to see how Christians in very different parts of the world emphasize such radically different portions of the scripture, to the point that it sometimes seems that they are not just offering differing interpretations, but actually reading different books.

In trying to understand such variations, we must begin by asking what we regard as normal, and that can in itself be a surprising exercise. From a North American point of view, we might seek to know how and why African or Asian Christians came to have such strikingly conservative beliefs, and we

can certainly find explanations for that. Sometimes the explanations are not too complimentary. In the Anglican sexuality debates, some liberal activists have blamed the conservative opposition on the personal ambitions of Archbishop Akinola, who is portrayed as seeking almost papal powers to interpret doctrine and scripture. Other liberals accuse African leaders of ignorance, of bigotry, even of becoming the paid tools of ultraright American tycoons. At an Episcopalian gathering in 2002, one gay activist condemned African conservatives for "monkeying around" in the church: "All I have to say to these bishops is: Go back to the jungle where you came from!" Sober academics seek other reasons for the charismatic nature of much global South religion. Why, for instance, do these churches so emphasize healing, visions, and prophecy? Perhaps, one might suggest, they are rather too much in contact with their pre-Christian roots, with traditional worlds of healing or magic or shamanism. For Northern liberals, contemplating a belief in demons and exorcisms based on a fundamentalist reading of scripture, this seems to be the realm of cults, not Christianity.

Yet many Africans and Asians respond that their views are grounded in the abundant evidence of scripture; they ask how any reasonable reader could exclude healings and miracles from the Christian message. Have liberal Americans and Germans never read the gospels or the book of Acts, in which miracles and exorcisms so proliferate? If Southern Christians have compromised with animism, have not Northerners sold out to scientism, materialism, and determinism?

On both sides, the same kinds of question might be asked about other points of obvious North-South difference. To adapt a phrase from Lamin Sanneh: whose reading, whose Christianity is normal now? And whose will be in fifty years time?

In short, the growing significance of Christianity in global South nations demands to be understood by anyone interested in the future development of those regions. But considering such different forms of the faith raises questions about the "Western" forms of Christianity that have so long been regarded as normative. Looking at the impact of the Bible in the Two-Thirds World—the choice of texts and the manner in which they are read—should remind Northern churches of aspects of the scriptural tradition that might have seemed lost or—as in the case of apocalyptic or healing—tainted beyond recovery. Fresh Southern readings help restore these traditions to their ancient centrality within Christian thought, but without the ultraconservative implications that "fundamentalism" has acquired in our own culture. The more exposure we North Americans and Europeans have to such readings, the harder it might be for us to approach that scripture in the same way again.

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