

The Church in the Mission Field, Edinburgh 1910

A Nigerian/African Response

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Clearing the Ground

In 1910, about one thousand delegates, from all over the world and from different denominations gathered in Edinburgh at an ecumenical conference to deliberate on key issues in the worldwide mission of the Church. John Amanze (citing Rouse and O'Neil) says the aim of the conference was to study ways of reuniting the divided Christian family. This gathering later gave birth to World Council of Churches in Holland Amsterdam in 1948 and many other important ecumenical organisations in Africa and elsewhere.¹ Today, almost a century later, we have returned to Edinburgh to reflect on one important report of this historic conference, the work of Commission II on the Church in the Mission Field. According to the Report of this Commission, its specific aim was "to consider missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world".² Perhaps the aim of ecumenism and that of the church's relation to the non-Christian world are not mutually exclusive. Before proceeding further, however, we pause to ask ourselves some questions: How many of us here present were alive in 1910 or took part in the mission and/or the conference? How many of us hope to be alive in 2110 (a century from now) or in 3010 (a millennium from now) when Edinburgh 2010 will be reviewed? What is the point of these questions? We will see shortly.

Edinburgh 1910 is almost a century old. The report on the Church in the Mission Field under review is firmly, if not exclusively, located in the early days of missionary endeavour in Asia and Africa, continents at the time colonised by the British.³ Latin America, then under Spanish rule, does not feature in the report. If my reading is correct, the authors of the report appear not to have been actively engaged in the mission field (as missionaries) themselves.⁴ The report is the outcome of a survey of trends, issues and problems in mission, as lived by the Protestant churches of the time. The Catholic Church is discernibly missing in the report.⁵ Now a century later this report is submitting itself to be reviewed by

¹John Amanze, "Some Large Ecumenical Organisations on the African Continent", in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism* Christo Lombard, ed. (Pietmaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999) 137-150, here, 1; R. Rouse & SC O'Neil, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 356.

²*World Missionary Conference, 1910 (To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World). Report of Commission II: The Church in the Mission Field. With Supplement: Presentation and Discussion of the Report and Discussion of the Report in the Conference on 16th June 1910* (New York, Chicago, Toronto: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier Edinburgh and London and the Fleming Revel Company).

³For practical purposes, the 1910 document, *The Church in the Mission Field* will be referred to in this work as the report, and members of the Commission, simply as the Commission.

⁴See the list of members of the commission on pp. vii-viii of the report.

⁵The Catholic Church is understood as the Roman Catholic Church, different from what the report calls "the

an African, specifically a Nigerian Roman Catholic woman religious and biblical scholar of post-colonial, post-independent Africa. In 1910 the leadership of the church in the mission field (both home and foreign) was mainly, if not exclusively in the hands of the missionaries. Today this leadership in the mission field (the daughter churches of the report) is largely, if not completely in some countries, in the hands of African and Asian Christians. Thirdly, this review session takes place in Edinburgh where the meeting took place and whence the document originated. Edinburgh is one of the “mother churches” that were active in the mission field.

The equation here outlined raises certain questions, if not tensions about the current exercise, namely the review of the report in the twenty-first by a Nigerian Roman Catholic woman religious in Edinburgh, from an African and biblical perspective. First the report is about mission in Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. African scholars (theologians and biblical scholars) have not spared pains in noting almost unanimously that while the missionaries did well in bringing a form of Christianity and education to Africa, their missionary work was by and large the handmaid or at the service of colonialism, one of the greatest evils that Africa has experienced, because of the destruction of the selfhood of the nation.¹ These scholars note that in many respects, the missionaries operated under the aegis and protection of the colonial masters whose sole objective was to loot, deplete, destabilise and destroy Africa by breaking down its political and social infrastructures, cultural socialising institutions and the integration of religion and life which made them view life as one integrated whole. A rare exception is Lamin Sanneh's praise of the missionaries for translating the message into local languages.² Yet this position has met with understandable criticism from African scholars who hold that its contribution to evolving written alphabets for many African languages notwithstanding, the translation itself (of English hymns and especially the Bible) was a powerful means of demonising Africa and African cultural practices. The written word sticks and inculcates values in all its readers that cannot easily be changed.³ Secondly, though the report is about the Protestant missions, the reviewer is a Roman Catholic whose church affiliation does not appear in the report.

Awareness of these and other issues can generate understandable tension between the report, the reviewer and this respected audience in Edinburgh. Yet in the typical African spirit of hospitality, one does not accept invitation with the intention of "quarreling with" or embarrassing one's host. Neither does the host invite a guest unless such a guest is a friend. Does this mean that in reviewing the report we will not have the courage to speak the truth in love, so as to maintain a false peace? By no means, for that itself would be to betray our common friendship in the Lord Jesus and our common accountability for his mission as his followers. How then do we proceed?

¹See on this T. Okure, "A New Testament Perspective on Inculturation and human Promotion", *Journal of Inculturation Theology* Vol. 1, no 2 (1994), 126-143, esp., 137-140, where she spells out the abiding and often unconscious effects of colonialism on the psyche of the African. Interestingly, though John Paul II (Luigi Accattoli, *When A Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa's of John Paul II*; tans. Jordan Aumann, OP [Boston: Pauline Books & Media Center, 1998]) apologises for the evil of slavery, he does not specifically do so for colonialism in Africa; but see the section on "Racism" (207-211) and on "The Indians" of America (157-164) which includes a section on "Faults of the Missionaries" (159-164).

²Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989). His basic thesis is that by translating the Bible into the vernacular languages, the missionaries effectively did themselves out of business. By these translations they gave the people the light to see and authority to claim the God of their religion as equal to the biblical God (since the same name for God was used in both), and therefore to assimilate Christianity into the traditional religions. Sanneh sees this as a fundamental religious revolution whereby the missionaries were reduced to a secondary place; see in particular pp. 159-160. The experience for most African Christians was not quite like that; though this may apply to the later African Independent Churches. See also Lamin Sanneh, "Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation". In *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years* (Philip C. Stine, ed., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

³See Dora R. Mbuwayesango, "How Local Divine Powers Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona" and Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani, "Translating the Divine: The Case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible", in *Other Ways of Reading* (under, Patriarchal and Colonising Translations) (n. 25 below), 63-77, and 78-97, respectively and the additional references in both studies.

This question brings us back to the initial questions raised. If none of us was alive in 1910 or hopes to be alive in 2110 or 3010, then we need to see ourselves as belonging together at the dawn of this twenty-first century. Accordingly instead of viewing one another as from opposite camps, the reviewer proposes that we take a common standpoint as friends (friendship, they say, is looking in the same direction, not at one another). From this standpoint and together, as friends, with eyes enlightened by Christological truth, we review together this past as objectively as possible, look at our present constructively critically in the hope effecting the necessary changes or growth that will result in leaving authentic fruit for future generations. Once we do this, we will not fear how this future generation (Edinburgh 2110 or 3010) will judge us. Thus liberated, we gain the freedom to both praise and critique our ancestors of Edinburgh 1910 with full awareness that they were faithful children of their time and did their best in the circumstances of the time, the outcome of that best notwithstanding. We take into the discussion the awareness that the real church in the mission field is not the report of Edinburgh 1910, 2110 or 3010, but the *ekklesia* which Jesus continually builds till he completes it, in accordance with the divinely willed mission of reconciling all things to the divine self through him, “things in heaven and things on earth” (Col 1:20). The church in the mission field is the divine project of drawing all peoples to the divine self, or gathering together of God’s children scattered by the sin of divisions, racism, sexism, classism, religion and all the other “isms” that are the injurious fruit of these anthropological sins of division.

We, therefore, begin this session as church on mission in the twenty-first century. We take a common stand in Christ and pray his promised Holy Spirit to liberate us from all that might hinder us from paying close attention as she leads us to the complete truth, within our own time and historical limitations. We pray that as we identify the graces and weaknesses of Edinburgh 1910, we will also not be blind to our own graces and weaknesses. Thus liberated in mind we will review the report together rather than from opposite camps, with fear and suspicion of what may emerge. In this way we will be joyful partners with the Holy Spirit in her one great act of giving birth to us individually, to us as church on mission and through us to a renewed humanity. Our openness to the truth of Christ in us, his disciples heightens our awareness of our common accountability to his mission, and empowers us to bear fruit that will last, the fruit that Jesus himself desires for us in ever greater abundance (John 15:1-17).

Task and Method

The organisers of this conference have requested that we do three things. First that we review the report of Commission II: The Church in the Mission Field in its own time and context. Second that we identify twentieth-century developments or trends that took place in the mission field, following from this report (either as a direct follow-up on its recommendations, or as a natural growth of the mission directed and guidance by God’s Spirit always operative in the church in and through Christ). Thirdly we are to identify the challenges which these trends and developments offer us as church on mission at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It seems almost impossible to treat the report in its own context without some reference to subsequent developments. We will therefore approach these three tasks interactively, especially in addressing the first two tasks, giving emphasis to each as the need arises. The challenges for the future, our future, will suggest themselves as we review the total past. As the report employs a narrative style, so does this review.

Given the area of specialisation/research of this reviewer, it will be impossible, also, to discuss the issues of mission raised in the report without reference to the practice of the

early church in the New Testament. African scholars mine the NT literature to discover in them the resources they need for offering a solidly grounded critique of the practice of mission that they received in the past and also for understanding their own role and contribution in mission and the challenges which this poses. African theologians made a public declaration that their theologising, whether they are biblical scholars or not, cannot be done independently of the Bible.⁴ The import of scripture is also very well emphasized in the report. This appears in the emphasis on the formation of the catechumen (who should be required to learn the Lord's prayer, memorise the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 5–7]); in the edification of the Christian [through Bible study sessions, reflection on the life of Christ, learning of Bible stories], in the articulation of the participation of women (summatively described as "Bible women") in the work of building the church, and above all in the exhortation, "We especially urge that in all the mission fields persistent effort be made to teach and encourage the Christian people to learn and read the Bible for themselves"(62).

⁴At the Post-SNTS meeting in Hammanskraal, South Africa, August 1999, the theologians invited for dialogue with the members of the Society for New Testament Studies took the stand that if an association was to be formed as a result of the encounter, it should be open to all African theologians, not only to biblical, still less New Testament scholars . The Proceedings of the meeting have been published as *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*; Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong eds (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001).

This need to include a focus on the life of the early church is particularly important for two reasons. First the young churches in the mission field described in the report belong at the same level as those of the New Testament. The report seeks to do for these churches what the NT literature and letters in particular did for the young churches of the NT. Secondly, many African Christians (especially Catholic, Pentecostal and African Initiated churches) have in turn undertaken what the report tags “foreign missions”, though they are, as a rule, not viewed as missionaries in the Western countries where they work. Cardinal Tomko’s final work as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples still speaks of the “young churches” some of which are more than 100 years old as “mission territories”, whose members are not to go on mission to the Western world, though they may do so in a South-South manner or within their countries and continents.¹ The Bible serves as the mainstay of these missions and of African Christians in general. Indeed according to the report, the Bible was from the beginning the only literature the people read.

For practical purposes the review selects and examines only those aspects of the report that still have acute relevance for the Church in Africa today and from the biblical perspective. This includes the image of Africa in the report, the understanding of mission, the question of inculturation (that of African cultural identity and unique contribution in the definition of what it means to be Church and Christian, the effect of all this on those whom the report calls “the Christian people” or the “home Church” and any other issues that God’s Holy Spirit may suggest as we proceed.

General Impressions from the Report

When I read the first pages of the report, I was pleasantly struck by how amazingly current the report is. A number of concerns raised by the commission remain very current today. This recalls Qoheleth’s view that nothing is new under the face of the earth. What is considered new had happened before, only the memory of it was not kept alive (cf. Qoh 1:10-11). I thank the organisers of this conference that they not only kept alive the memory of Edinburgh 1910, but graciously invited me to be part of that remembering. We mention at random some of these current issues in this report which are discussed almost at every theological conference in Africa, and perhaps elsewhere: the understanding of mission; the need for solid theological formation, education of church personnel; the issue of leadership, especially in the relation between the mother/daughter, older/younger churches; the sustained concern to promote the participation of women in the work of evangelisation; the need for original thinking by the evangelised and the conditioning effect of received hymns, textbooks and theologies (191); the use of native symbols in worship; the question of inculturation or the interface between Christianity and the African reality/culture; the issues of racism and ethnicity in the church; the economic factor which controls and conditions the training of local theologians and church personnel, including especially women, their adequate remuneration and publication of works produced locally; the establishment of sustainable theological institutions (other than seminaries); the problem of language in theological discourse (African languages vis-à-vis the colonial languages); and last but not least, the issue

¹See Josef Cardinal Tomko and Charles Schleck, “Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, Instructions on the sending Abroad and Sojourn of Diocesan Priests from Mission Territories”, April 25 2001 (www.vatican.va/roman-curia/index.htm. Click on Congregations and then Evangelisation of Peoples); the Deeper Life Church, Aladura, and The Redeemed Church of Christ for instance have missions abroad. The National Missionary Society of St Paul, Gwagwadala, Abuja, Nigeria, was specifically founded as a missionary society.

of ecumenism rooted in the awareness of the scandal caused by divisions within and among the churches. To this one may add the urgent but as yet unasked question of mission to the West or the sending/home churches.

In most of these concerns, the position of the commission is amazingly balanced, even when it differs significantly from those of the missionaries in the field. Yet in making its observations and recommendations, the commission shows great objectivity in presenting the situation on the ground, and great deference and respect for those in the mission field. In some instances they even appeared content to work with the imperfections they noticed on the ground so as to present as fully as possible what was actually operative in the mission field (e.g., in the definition of mission). One senses a strong spirit of ecumenism, a search for ways of collaborating among the different denominations and missionary societies while respecting the individuality of each, though as already mentioned, the Catholic Church is noticeably absent in the report. This may be a mark of that time. On the negative side, one is hit by the consistent and wholesale designation of “non-Christian” cultures as heathenism, though exceptions are made for those Asian countries that are said to possess “ancient civilisation”. In this respect, the report betrays a racial bias rooted in colonialism and white superiority complex, current at the time, and perhaps still very much alive today. The damaging fruits of this for both the cultures so designated and for the home people in particular remains to be assessed and remedied.

One is happily struck by efforts in the report to name the different agents in mission. The report speaks of pastors, catechists, teachers, bible women and so forth, drawn from the local people. This indicates that even at this level of the young church and primary evangelisation, the evangelised played indispensable roles in the work of spreading the gospel and transmitting the faith. Women count among those most forgotten in these histories. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for instance, shared during the meeting of the Anglophone Pan-African EATWOT Women’s Commission in CIWA, Port Harcourt, Nigeria in 1986, that her mother of the Methodist Church played very important roles in teaching the women and other works such as described in the report on as the ministry of women or Bible women. Yet when the history of the missions came to be written, she was remembered and mentioned only for having been an excellent cook. The report states that in Ghana three years of training was given to all church personnel. This training would no doubt have included women. The emphasis in the report on the ministry of bible women, and the ministry of women to women would require that they receive the training which would have equipped them for the work. Indeed the report maintains that the ministerial formation of women was more effective than that of the men because women were freer to undertake such training for a stretch of time in contrast to the men who were hampered by their regular professions—fishing, farming and so forth.

Today it is becoming increasingly clear that these peoples did not receive due recognition when the history of the missions were written. Different projects are undertaken to retrieve the memory of these “ordinary” people from oblivion. One such research project is initiated by Jonathan J. Bonk, director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC), Denville, NJ, USA, on African Christian biographies. It seeks to retrieve the memories of these important but nameless peoples. Similarly, an Interest Group of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), formerly named DAB (Database for Archives and Bibliography) now PODOH (Project for the Documentation of Oral History) aims at retrieving and documenting the memory of those countless peoples who made a difference in the history of mission. It held its first meeting under this new designation in Rome,

September 2002. Some African scholars while appreciating these initiatives still feel these projects are initiated by the West, and mainly for the interest of Western scholars. Long before these initiatives, the EATWOT history commission had undertaken a project on re-writing church history from the underside of history. Engelbert Mveng (a giant African scholar of happy memory) and Henrique Dussel of Mexico were flag bearers of the project. But the project did not get too far for a number of reasons, chief among them being finance and regionalism.² Because of the paucity of women missiologists among IAMS members, Interest Group of the Association on “Women in Mission” has failed to get off the ground. These same problems of personnel, regionalism and finance are noted here and there in the report as confronting the young churches. They remain alive even in our twenty-first century.

The role of nameless persons in the work of evangelisation cannot be overestimated. Indeed such persons were responsible in the early church for moving the mission from Jewish territory and race to the Gentiles, and who thus succeeded in making the Christian mission a worldwide mission. Acts 11:19-20 reports that some of the people who fled Jerusalem as a result of the persecution that arose over Stephen’s death started to preach to the Gentiles. From their initiative was born the church in Antioch where the community was first called Christian. Antioch launched Paul and Barnabas on the Gentile mission and so pioneered the worldwide mission of the church. Forgetting the memory of women did not begin in the twentieth century. In the gospels, Jesus specifically asks that the memory of the woman who anointed him for burial should be recalled wherever the gospel is preached in her memory. But as Elizabeth Fiorenza has shown *In Memory of Her*,³ the church over the centuries did not take this injunction of the Lord seriously. Mention has also to be made of the women who in all four gospels (with varying listings) were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Yet mention of them is completely omitted in the creed which Paul received as of foundational importance to be transmitted to all believers (1 Cor 15:3-11).

Today appreciable, though not perfect efforts are made to include and recognise the role of women in mission and in the life of the church as a whole. The WCC has taken a giant step here by appointing women to some key positions in its Programmes, for instance, Nyambura Njoroge, a prominent staff member of the Programme on Ecumenical Theological Education. Before her Mercy Amba Oduyoye also served as one of its administrative secretaries. Increasingly voices are raised on the indispensability of involving women in mission and in all aspects of the life of the church, of recognising the contribution of women, African women in particular. We cite here a few examples. The second EATWOT meeting in Accra, Ghana, emphasised the need to include women in the doing of theology and took the additional step of forbidding a region to present more members for admission in the Association unless at least a third of its regional members were women. If more members were women, that did not raise a problem. Maluleke maintains that “A striking feature of much current and allegedly innovative African male theology is its inability to dialogue and engage with the ideas and thoughts of African women. It is a cruel piece of irony that the fountain of creativity—African women’s theology—is the place into which tired and frivolous African male theology will not

²To my knowledge, no work was published by the project from the African or Asian perspective. The Latin American region fared better. See Henrique Dussel, *A History of the Christian Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)* (Grand Rapids, William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981).

³Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad,

look. There is therefore a sense in which there is little real innovation and change in mainstream African male theology”.⁴ Similarly, Sam Kobia, speaking of a positive way forward in sustainable ecumenism observes: “The visions of African women must be allowed to determine not only the structures but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the content of 21st-century ecumenism in African[sic]. In this vein, insights of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians are absolutely vital. Serious dialogue with the Circle and the ecumenical organisations of Africa has yet to take place”.⁵ John Pobee has shown his belief in the importance of women in the theological and missionary enterprise by actively encouraging them to publish and also promoting their theological training through scholarships.⁶ On the vital role of the Circle he observes:

Here is a source of *relevant* theology . . . The agenda of the Circle is not just reactive but creative and constructive. The Circle welcomes adherents of various religions in its membership, and attempts to live the ecumenical principles of inclusiveness, to make connections, to follow a participatory life-style of living in community and making a collective journey (in contrast the individualism marking the Enlightenment cultural heritage. When women are silent, the society, community, church are starved of the experience and memory of one half of its being [especially when this biological one half constitutes more than half its committed church members] . . .

If we seek to envision a new church in Africa in which women are more than half—and the vibrant and energetic part—then the mission-ecumenism agenda which defines church should seriously engage African women’s theology. The self-designation of the “circle” is already a hint at the model of church offered. “A church in the round” makes it easy for all to be visible and participate, which is not only typical of African ways of family gathering, but also is more faithful to the church as *kiononia*.⁷

For obvious reasons we have cited African men’s ratings of the work of the Circle and of African women theologians generally, than that of the women themselves.⁸ If the prominence and recognition given to the ministry of women in the report and emphasised in the last decades had been systematically followed by all the churches in Africa from 1910 onwards, the face of the church, of ecumenism and society as a whole would have been very different

⁴Tinyiko S. Maluleke, “African ‘Ruths,’ Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai”, in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Musa W. Dube, ed.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001) 237-251, here, 238.

⁵Sam Kobia, “Denominationalism in Africa: The Pitfalls of Institutional Ecumenism” *The Ecumenical Review: Transforming Ecumenism in Africa in the 21st Century* 53/3 (2001), 295-305; See also Emmanuel Martey, “African Women and Theology in Africa and the Third World”, *Voices from the Third World*, “Mission Challenges and Theological Perspectives of the Nineties”, Vol XIII, No. 2 (December 1990), 54-88, esp. 60-68.

⁶Cf. John S. Pobee and B. von Wartenberg-Potter, eds., *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (Geneva: WCC, 1986); He was present at and sponsored and supported the Circle when he was a staff of the Programme for Theological Education of the WCC; he was also instrumental in Nyambura J. Njoroge succeeding him as staff of the PTE at the end of his term of office.

⁷John S. Pobee, “The Ecumenical Formation in the Service of a Renewed Church”, *The Ecumenical Review* 53/3 (2001) 319-332; here 329-330.

⁸For select and short bibliography of the publications of African women theologians, mainly Circle publications, see note 26 below; to which may be added Rosemary Edet and Margaret Umeagudosu, eds, *Life, Women and Culture: Theological Reflections. Proceedings of National Conference of a Circle of African Women Theologians*. Lagos: African Heritage Research Publications, 1990.

in the continent today. It is still to be lamented that the churches as a whole have not yet come to grips with the indispensable *relevance* and energising character of women's theology in the definition and conception of what it means to be church and in the efforts to reunite the churches. Women by nature have a way of accommodating differences, perhaps because they bear and rear children who, though the fruit of their womb, are yet very different one from the other, even including identical twins. The same applies on the management of resources. African mothers know how to make a small supply of food go around the entire family, even if it means their doing without. Working the miracle of the loaves is a daily experience for most of them. The Catholic Church at its Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994 came close to what Pobee calls the "church on the round" (recalling the African *pito*) when it adopted the concept of the church as the family of God as the best model or concept of church in Africa, one with which Africans can readily or naturally identify.⁹ This model, as Pobee rightly observes, "is not only typical of African ways of family gathering, but also is more faithful to the church as *kiononia*". We may also add that this model is equally faithful and characteristic of the church as *diakonia*.

The Image of Africa

The image of Africa projected in the report is consistently negative. Though perceptively described as "one of the widest and most varied of all the mission fields of the world" (8), the report consistently speaks of Africa as if it were just one country. Correspondents observed that Africans, especially those of "the Bantu races are no great readers" . . . "The people are not yet advanced enough to care to spend money on literature". "The people do not read much—Hymn Book, Prayer Book, and the Bible are in most cases their only literature" (239). Yet the report also laments the dearth of suitable literature for the mission lands, including Africa. This view that Africans are no great readers was bought and maintained by Africans themselves until very recently when education and the explosion of literature from the African Initiated Churches forced people to understand that Africans do read after all. One could see how consistently sown in all this were the seeds whose unsavoury fruits have nourished and continue to foster negative and pejorative attitudes of Westerners towards Africa over the years.

The report speaks often of China, Japan, Korea, India (all countries) and Africa, as if Africa was just a country among countries. This reduction of Africa to one country applies not only in the body of the report but even in the list of correspondents. They come from Japan and Korea (15), China (64), India (70) and Africa (35).¹⁰ Perhaps the priceless reference is in the General Conclusion of the report, which recommends that series of books be prepared "say, one for India, one for the Mohammedan world, one for Africa and one for China, Korea and Japan" (275; cf. 129, 179, 181). On the other extreme, it is intriguing to see Calabar or Old Calabar, a city in Nigeria (said to have been the first capital of Nigeria before the development of Lagos), listed among such African countries as Livingstonia, Congoland, Uganda, as if Calabar itself was a country (9, 52, 161, 180). This is not surprising. The Presbyterian Church had a memorable mission in Calabar, famed for Mary Slessor and her indefatigable zeal in "rescuing twin babies" and their mothers from

⁹The Outcome of the Synod is the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa on the Church in Africa and its Evangelising Mission Towards the Year 2000* (Vatican City: Editrice Vaticana, 1995), see esp. no 63, pp.64-65.

¹⁰Cf. pp ix-xx; other correspondents are from Mohammedan Lands (9) and Other Fields (14).

death. Today her monumental stature rises high at the Marian Hill Roundabout, Calabar, in recognition of her unique missionary work and that of her. Nevertheless, Calabar was a small city and today is the capital of one of the smallest states in Nigeria.

This mix-up is yet another evidence of the “inexact knowledge” of the actual extent of Africa which dies hard in the West till today. It is not uncommon that a European or an American sends verbal greeting through a Nigerian to a friend or relative working in Kenya. Nigeria is on the Atlantic coast and Kenya on the Indian coast of Africa. A few memorable stories help to illustrate this. In 1994, the year that Nigeria won the junior football Olympics Atlanta, the Society for New Testament Studies (SNTS) held its annual meeting in Strasbourg. Participants’ name tags carried their names and countries. A professor of theology at the University (not an SNTS member) noticed my name tag, “Teresa Okure, Nigeria” and tried to figure it out: “Nigeria, Nigeria. Is that the capital of Africa?” One could have asked him whether capital cities competed in the Olympics. Or whether either France, Germany, Spain, Italy, or any of the other European countries listed after participants’ names were “the capitals of Europe”. Friends in Europe get a shock when they hear that the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), is about eighteen times the size of Belgium, the home country of Leopold II who treated Congo almost as his private property. Sudan and Chad are each one third the size of Europe. Maps are very deceptive, and according to Peter’s projection, the map of Africa is yet to be properly drawn and its extent recognised in justice. Today Africa boasts of at least 53 countries, Member States listed in the Constitution of the African Union (AU), established in Lomé, Togo, 11 July 2000. What this view of Africa as one country does is reduce Africa to a size vastly incommensurate with its reality, and so deprive it of the energy it needs to address its exceptionally widely varied and diverse problems.

The report, strikingly, gives consistent attention to the Asian countries, especially praising their good initiatives, even cultural practices. But Africa and countries with black population, e.g., New Guinea, receive prominence when the report describes negative cultural practices, especially in the area of marriage, and what the report comprehensively calls heathenism and barbarism. The Fiji Islands, for instance, are said to be “typical of the darkest depths of heathenism” (6), while New Guinea is “a wild and savage race”, which, contrasted with Japan, a country with “an ancient civilisation”, counts “amongst barbarous tribes” (7). The report sincerely believes there are “those who are naturally intelligent, and those who are naturally dull”, namely, “members of civilised and advanced races, and those of communities only emerging from barbarism, men and women, especially as in most non-Christian countries”. The women form a special depressed class by themselves” and so “cannot all be taught under one uniform system” (58).

Africa is not explicitly mentioned here, but is included in the designation of non-Christian civilisations as witnessing to “the lowest depths of barbarism and social depravity”. What were these depths of barbarism? Did Europe of the time and of any other time ever qualify as a Christian civilisation (in the gospel sense of the word)? Was Europe devoid of its own barbarism even at the time? The question is asked, not pejoratively, but in all good faith. The issue is whether Europe was ever evangelised or whether what it received was a Christianity that had already been subsumed into the Empire under Constantine (AD 312-333) and subsequently made a state religion by Emperor Theodosius. Its fate as a state religion gave it in some respects the character that shrines like Shiloh, tagged the King’s temple by the priest Amaziah, received in the days of Amos (7:10-13). There is a big difference between the religion of Jesus and that of the empire. Christianity of the post-

Constantinian era has become a religion of the empire, the subtle and abiding effects of which are yet to be recognised and addressed with Christological truth.

This question is similar to that asked today by Africans about the importation of a divided Christianity from Europe to Africa. Of this sad division (or deviation from the gospel) the report says:

For, after all, while we lament our divisions, let us not be so untrue to Church History as to represent them as perverse and wanton breaches of Catholic unity. They have arisen in some cases rather from the external relations of the church than from any internal division. (34)

The report recognises that the divisions among Christians is deeply regrettable. It nevertheless believes that the cause is not intrinsic, except where in matters of faith, people hold diametrically opposed or even hostile views out of “loyalty to the truth”. Yet where Africa is concerned, the fruit that the division has born and continues to bear leaves little room for celebration or excuse, when viewed in the light of the gospel. Whatever the circumstances of the initial divisions, for which John Paul II has apologised from the perspective of the Catholic Church,¹¹ these divisions betray a solid lack of understanding of the gospel at the time they took place. The Pope’s much celebrated ecumenical encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (a follow-up on Vatican Council II’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*) and his personal efforts to reach out to churches, separated as far back as the Great Schism of 1054, all indicate his own unrelenting commitment to healing the divisions in Christianity.¹² If the Christians in those historical periods (including the Great Schism between the East and the West in 1054) had fully understood that the core of Jesus’ mission was to unite and reconcile all things to the divine self and that he had entrusted to his followers that ministry of reconciliation (as something intrinsic to their identity as Christians), perhaps they would have sought other ways of resolving their family disagreements other than resorting to radical separation. Once a rift begins, it has its own seed of division inside it and continues to bear fruit of its own kind. The same applies to war and violence, as we see in the recent war on Iraq.¹³ So the question whether or to what extent Europe was evangelised remains Christologically pertinent.

With great insight the report fears that these divisions may give rise to further divisions. This has proved true in the multiplication of mushroom churches in Africa and elsewhere, especially at the close of the last century. In Nigeria, for example, almost every

¹¹Luigi Accattoli, *When A Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa’s of John Paul II* (n. 5), 95-103. The Pope sees this request for pardon itself as “an ecumenical gesture” (100).

¹²John Paul II, “*Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism*” in *The Encyclicals of John Paul I* (n. 28), esp. Part I “The Catholic Church’s Commitment to Ecumenism”, nos 5-40. “A ministry of unity” has indeed been a distinguishing mark of his Pontificate.

¹³The bombing of the land till it shook and cried for mercy, but to no avail, the burning of houses and children, the killing of allies and even some US soldiers by US troops, has born the further violent fruit of the looting of the age-old heritage of the Iraqi people in Bagdad, the destruction of an invaluable Library, comparable, perhaps, to the destruction of the ancient Library in Alexandria by the Vandals in the 6th century. The lodging of soldiers (the Marines) in “posh hotels in Bagdad” instead of in camps, where soldiers rightly belong, to name but a few, is part of the unsavory fruit of an immoral war. This does not include the violence which this war has caused to the world at large, the violence of lies, the violence of moral bankruptcy, and so forth. Perhaps we need to include this entire new situation among the Pope’s apologies for “Dictatorships”, *Mea Culpa’s*, 87-93.

other house in a given town street may be a church in its own right. Jesus must have a very busy and sad time on Sundays as he listens to the cacophony of members of his body shouting down one another, all in praise of him, each claiming his undivided attention. The report also recommended the policies of those churches who discouraged catechumens of other churches from crossing over to their church, by refusing to admit them. Today many mushroom churches undertake a “soul harvesting” mission in the established churches or make it a policy to proclaim (not the gospel to the poor, the down trodden and those unjustly treated), but the evils of the established churches, especially the Catholic church, which they see as a sinking boat, to be abandoned before one gets drowned and lost. This is the very reverse of the church’s position before Vatican Council II, also present in the report right from the Introduction, namely, *extra ecclesiam, nulla salus* (outside the Church no salvation).

Now instead of people scrambling into Peter’s barque to escape drowning and perishing in the world of heathenism, outside the Catholic Church, they are encouraged by the new evangelists to hasten out of this boat before the worst befalls them. What would Jonah have said to this? These preachers themselves were, more often than not, originally members of these established churches. Soul harvesting in the established churches may be due to practical reasons. The preachers seek new converts for their churches from people they already knew in their previous churches. Or the aim may be to weaken these older churches so that from sheer numerical strength, they themselves may emerge as the largest and strongest in the country and continent. Thirdly, the multiplication of divisions within the church may be the continuation of the legacy of the partitioning of Africa at the Berlin Conference, a measure calculated to decimate, subjugate and exploit at will the continent. Whatever the case, Africa wins the price when it comes to the proliferation of Christian churches and suffers consequently in its witness.¹

Another evidence of the inexact knowledge of Africa, “one of the widest and most varied of all the mission fields of the world” (8) is the generalisation of cultural practices within the continent. This applies particularly in the area of marriage, especially that of polygamy, and issues of sexual morality. Thus as late as 2001, the National Catholic Reporter report raised a furore because of its report on “sexual abuse of African nuns by African priests”. It merged that while the report was initially intended for many countries, including Western countries, it ended up by focussing on Africa and only mentioned at the tail end that the said abuses also occurred in other countries (note, not continents!). In an interview by the NCR report, the superior general of a major male religious congregation of Western origin with mission and members all over Africa, remarked that part of the problem was that “Africans” have the custom of “wife sharing” (something I never even heard of before). It also emerged that the report took a case or cases that occurred mostly in one or two countries in Southern Africa (where the Blacks are not given the scope to grow as mature human beings and relate with the opposite sex in a healthy manner) and generalised it for the whole of Africa.

¹ See, for instance, David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (London/Nairobi, OUP, 1968); Inud Daneel, *Quest for Belonging* (Gweru: Zimbabwe: Mambu, 1982); Paulus Makubu, *Who are the Independent Churches?* (Johannesburg: Skotville, 1988); E. Welbourne and B. M. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home* (London/Nairobi, OUP, 1962); John Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of African Churches. A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* Geneva: WCC, 1998.

Letters from friends in Europe commiserated with me, that African nuns are so helpless, submissive and afraid of men because of their patriarchal culture that they dare not oppose these priests when they are petitioned by them for sexual favours. Some well meaning congregations who had “African members” wanted to write to Rome and protest on the unjust treatment of their African nuns. They believed these nuns were voiceless and needed somebody to speak for them! I asked some of my correspondents whether they regarded me as an African nun, so too other outstanding nuns they knew. Secondly did they think that I or those other nuns needed somebody to speak for us? This example of sexual abuse which was posted on the Internet is a good evidence of how the generalisation about Africa, mainly in the negative, and mainly in sexual matters has sunken deep into the psyche of most Westerners and dies hard. Ironically, it was not long after the generalisation about Africa that the media blew off the lid in the West and revealed how very rampant for almost a century (if not more) sexual abuse by the clergy and pastors, especially that of paedophilia, was in the Western churches.

The report’s generalisation on the sexual, moral laxity of “Africans” appears under the section on “Bigamy and Polygamy” (64-74). The report introduces this section thus:

In connection with those vices and faults of the heathen world which are forbidden in all parts of the Christian society, we have now to deal with the complicated and difficult problems presented by bigamy and polygamy which, under a variety of conditions, are still so widespread in most non-Christian lands.

This is the one section where the report gives its greatest prominence to Africa (64-74). The report regrets that in this matter “the Church is placed at a disadvantage in her warfare, owing to the fact that the Mohammedan with his easier views on the subject is more in accord with the ‘average man’ of Africa” (70, emphasis added). It views “the Christian law upon this subject” as possibly “the greatest obstacle to the acceptance of our faith” adding that “in the face of this it is surprising to note, that it is in regard to the evidence from Africa alone that there is an almost complete unanimity of opinion. Every Mission within our review refuses admission to the Church in Africa to any man who is actually living with more than one wife”. Then it gives specific examples.

In Africa we read of a chief having “three hundred wives and both in Africa and Polynesia the wives are often numbered by tens or scores. . . . It is not surprising, therefore, to find that our correspondents in Africa view with unanimous intolerance conditions of life which are not only unchristian, but which are at variance with the instinctive feelings of natural morality. With them there can be no question of polygamy. It is the gross evils of heathen society which, like habitual murder or slavery [slavery was conducted by peoples from Christian societies and countries!], must at all costs be ended . . . and it is felt that the applicant for Christian baptism must clear himself at once from this corrupt and barbarous environment. (65-66).

To rub in the point of Africa being the most corrupt and barbarous environment, practising a form of marriage which is “not only unchristian, but which are at variance with the instinctive feelings of natural morality”, the report goes on to contrast how polygamy in China, with its ancient civilisation is “of a different matter”. The civilised difference here is that no matter how many wives a man may have, there is only “one legal wife” since the second or third wife (best designated as “concubine”) has no legal standing in the society and their children are legally those of the first wife. The fault of Africa, therefore, appears to be that the wives are given legal status as wives, however many they may be and however badly they may be

treated, whereas in China and elsewhere, though married to one man, they are “wives non grata” and the children they conceive and bear belong to another woman, the first wife. In other words, these women are effectively not regarded as persons in their own right in this marital context.

The report makes no discernible effort to identify possible values which “Africans” may have attached to this practice, before condemning it out right. In traditional African societies, polygamy was not evidence of a man’s sexual immorality or lewdness. The anthropologist Archbishop of Kumasi, Ghana, P. K. Sarpong, has identified some of the values that the Ghanaian (and other African) societies attached to polygamy.² Polygamy gave the polygamist a status symbol in the community. It also had an economic aspect in that the marriage provided more labour force for the man’s farms. The society did not view polygamy as wrong or sinful. What was wrong was to marry only one wife, because that was evidence of poverty and of poor standing in the community. It even had an eschatological character. If one did not contribute richly to the furtherance of the race or the clan by having many, especially male children, one would not merit admission to the abode of the ancestors. What the report calls “the Christian principle” of one man one wife, one wife one husband is a scriptural injunction which God intended for all humanity (Gen 2:24) not just for Christians. The principle renders “sinful” all other types of irregularity in marriage such as the keeping of mistresses and divorce. The Christian principle comes to the fore in this issue of divorce, for Jesus plainly stipulates against it (cf. Mark 10:1-12 and //s). This notwithstanding, some Christian churches of Western origin allow divorce.

The slant given in the report on polygamy and marriage in general is also influenced by the Western conception of marriage. An evidence of this is that the report finds the matrilineal system strange, to say the least: “In Congo, it must be remembered that to a considerable extent the woman keeps the man, and that the children of the marriage belong to the mother’s family, and that the father has very few rights over them” (71). It is interesting that the report seems to warm up to the idea of concubinage, perhaps because this and that of keeping a mistress were operative in the West (e.g., the mistresses of Henry VIII of England and Louis XIV of France). Given its great emphasis on and respect for the Bible, would the report equally have considered Abraham’s concubines (cf. Gen 25:6) and that of the patriarchs, as evincing a corrupt and barbarous or heathen way of life, “at variance with the instinctive feelings of natural morality”? As for wife sharing, Abraham did this in Egypt to escape death and consequently became a great Sheik (Gen 12:10-13:2). African scholars view and ask that their traditional practices be rated the same as those in the Old Testament, which, after all had their roots in Africa.

African scholars have taken up this issue of Africa’s cultural identity from the socio-cultural dimension. The earliest theological literature from Africa north of the Limpopo grappled with these issues.³ African women’s contribution offers both an appreciation of

²P. K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Cooperation; 2nd ed., Ostfildern 1, Germany: Schwabenverlag, 1974).

³John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); idem., *Concepts of God in Africa* (London SPCK, 1970); Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, eds., *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1969); Kofi Appia Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en Route* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). See further, T. Okure, “The Bible in Africa: A select Literary survey” in *Yearbook of Contextual Theologies* MWI Missio, Aachen; Frankfurt and London: IKO-Verlag für kontextuelle Theologen, 2002), 174-209, esp. 179-186 and to date the most comprehensive resource of Grant Lemarquand, “A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa”, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*; Gerald West & Musa. W. Dube,

culture and a sustained critique of patriarchy within the culture. This includes a critique of colonial translations and interpretations of the Bible, rooted also in patriarchy. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians initiated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, introduced at the Anglophone Pan-African Conference of EATWOT African Women Commission at CIWA, Port Harcourt in 1986 and launched in Accra in 1989, is the celebrated flag bearer of this through its publications.⁴

Other cultural practices decried in generalistic terms are “ancestor worship” and “animism”. The report underscores the difficulty in addressing this for the pastor or evangelist: “He is dealing with a people who *have lived for centuries in animism and unchastity*, and one of his hardest tasks, calling for infinite patience and tact is to teach them by grace of God to overcome ignoble passions, and realise a pure family life” (68, emphasis added). In the minds of the “average Westerner”, this generalisation extends even to individuals who, to use an Akan saying, “are all twins”. If a European or American invites “an African” for a meal and discovers that he or she likes a special dish, the “logical” conclusion is that “all Africans” like that particular dish or behave the same way. This happens whether or not the persons thus rated come from different cultures or countries or whether or not they even know the dish in question. What all this does, is to deprive “the African” of his or her personality and personhood.

In fairness to the report, we note its great sensitivity and common sense in addressing this issue of polygamy, despite the undisguised horror with which the commission views the practice, which it plainly regards as sinful. This sensitivity is evidence of a true Christian spirit in the report. The fundamental question is whether a practice can be regarded as sinful which those who practised them did not view as sinful. In this and similar “non-Christian practices”, it is the law that makes them sinful, for as Paul says, “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covert, if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covert.’ . . . Apart from the law sin lies dead” (Rom7:7-8). Similarly, Jesus himself says of his Jewish leaders, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22). The commission’s stand in this matter is praiseworthy: “There is no question about the sin of polygamy. The only question is, whether the solution of putting away, where there has been no unfaithfulness, may not be adding sin to sin”. Or, to put it in another form, the question is

eds (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), 633-800.

⁴Notable publications of the Circle include Mercy A. Oduyoye and Musimbi R A Kanyoro, eds., *Talitha Qumi: The Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* (Ibadan: Daystar, 1990) 1-7; her Inaugural Address in this work gives details of the Circle and its goals); eadem, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001); Mercy A. Oduyoye and, eds, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *Talitha Qum!: Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001); Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, Geneva: WCC, 2001); Musa W. Dube, *Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible* (St. Louis MO: Chalice, 2000); Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Nyoroge, eds, *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi, 1996); Isabel Apawo Phiri, et alii eds, *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002); see further the bibliography in Teresa Okure, “Invitation to African Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns”, in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke and Justin Ukpong eds.; Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 42-67; Emmanuel Martey, “African Women and Theology in Africa and the Third World”, *Voices from the Third World Mission Challenges and Theological Perspectives in the Nineties*. Vol XIII/2 (1990) 54-88; Leny Lagerwerf, “African Women Doing Theology: A Survey”, *Exchange* 19/1 (1990), 1-69.

whether the “heinous sin” of polygamy does not consist in the very fact that “it is impossible to undo its results, without fresh violations of Christian righteousness” (68). These violations of “Christian righteousness” consist in the awareness that the wives put away will be badly and unjustly affected, so too the children of those marriages whose mothers are put away:

Once again, when polygamy has been thus entered upon by both parties in the times of *ignorance*, and where there are children recognising the two parties as their parents, for the Church to insist on the breaking up of the relationship is to deprive the children either, on the one hand, of the protection of their father or, on the other, of the care of their mother; while the women this put away finds herself, according to many letters before us, in the gravest moral danger – ‘relegated,’ as one correspondent bluntly puts it, ‘to the position of a prostitute’. On the other hand, a custom is so manifestly inimical to the pure ideals of the Christian family cannot easily be looked upon with any tolerance when determining the principles on which the Christian Church is to be founded. (65, emphasis added)

The dilemma remains till today. Most African Christians urge that the practice be revisited perhaps as it has never been done before. They do not advocate polygamy for people who are already Christians (though few scholars argue that polygamy should be permitted because of the short ratio of men to women). The question applies to the many who did not think they were committing a sin (but quite the opposite), when they entered into polygamous marriages. They argue that these people could be admitted to church membership while allowing them, as the report notes, to be the ones to discover that polygamy is wrong and to find personal ways of resolving it themselves, not just by the man who decides which wife to keep. Paul did this with his Jewish heritage in which he took so much pride before he met Jesus (Phil 3: 4-16), though before then, he was a first class saint in the system. The Catholic Church gave the man the freedom to choose one wife. Quite often it was the youngest, for obvious reasons! Yet in the traditional setting, the first wife has inalienable rights over subsequent wives. African scholars observe that though the Catholic Church requires celibacy for its priests, it nevertheless admits married priests from the Anglican Church who want to transfer to the Catholic Church (with their wives and daughters; if they have them) because they oppose their church’s admission of women to priestly ordination. The policy on priestly celibacy notwithstanding, these married priests continue as priests in the Catholic church without conditions being placed on them (at least not to my knowledge), concerning conjugal conduct with their wives. What would have been at stake if similar considerations had been given to Africans of traditional polygamous marriage?

Understanding of mission

Remarkably, in defining “the church in the mission field”, the report recalls that “The whole world is mission field, and there is no Church that is not a Church in the mission field. Some Christians are younger and some are older, but that is all the difference”. It adds that “All alike are redeemed souls who have passed from death to life, and who amid the perils and temptations of a world not yet ‘brought under’, are seeking to cherish the new life and to perfect its fruit”. The first part of this citation could have come from *Ad Gentes divinitus* (the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity) of the Second Vatican Council, which declares that “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit”.⁵ From this it

⁵AG no. 2; see also *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) 1; the citations of the documents of Vatican Council II are from *Vatican Council II: Vol 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*; Austin

has become a household phrase to say “where there is church, there is mission”. So the report is on target when it views as “popular but inexact” the “usage of calling only those regions ‘mission field’ where the Church has been more recently planted, and where its history falls, roughly speaking, within the last two centuries” (4; i.e., the 18th and 19th centuries).

While regrettably accepting this inexact definition, the report nevertheless goes on to wish that a time may come when “the younger Church being no longer dependent for the maintenance of its activities on the older . . . may be regarded as passing out of the domain of ‘Missions’ and its future course lies in the region of general Church history” (5). According to *Ad Gentes*, such graduation is not possible, since it is impossible for the church to graduate from its own identity as missionary. Nevertheless, the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples (formerly the Propagation of the Faith Propaganda Fide) still exists to promote and monitor the work of the younger churches in what was once the mission field of the report (but now including the Latin America, and perhaps more recently Eastern Europe, since the collapse of Communism, followed by the falling of the Berlin Wall).

The report speaks of mission as a “conquest”, a “propaganda”, or of people needing to be “brought under”, and of the converts as those who have been taken, gathered or rescued out of heathenism, from masses of darkness and superstition. The people’s natural environment tagged “of heathenism” is said to be injurious to their Christian faith. So efforts are made to keep them away from this environment. This view of mission is rooted in the conception of the non-Christian world, especially Africa, as heathen, savage, barbaric, sunk in vice and having little or nothing to offer by way of virtue. The oriental countries said to possess ancient civilisation are viewed with more sympathy.⁶ This view of non-Christian world, specifically Africa (from which the Whites in South Africa are *not included*), as the home of heathenism which the Christian mission has to conquer is a mark of its time. Such was the attitude of the church as a whole towards non-Christian civilisations. It would hardly stand its ground today, except, perhaps, among the fundamentalist group of Christians (some charismatics and Pentecostals). Mission is not about conquest but reconciliation, proclamation of the good news of liberation to all nations. So no nation is to be conquered by another, even for Christ. The conquering attitude is located in the colonial mentality and justifies the protest of African scholars that the missionary enterprise in the colonial era served as the handmaid of colonialism. In recompense to serving the interests of the colonial masters missionaries enjoyed the protection offered by their national colonial governments. Ironically this protection by the state happened to the universal Church in the fourth century when the Christianity came under the protection of Constantine and later, under Theodosius, became the state religion. The Church has not yet recovered from this union, which I regard as “the illegal marriage with the empire”. Equally the Church both in the sending and missionary countries has not yet recovered from the illegal marriage of mission with colonialism. As already mentioned (in connection with translating the message), this does not mean that Christian missionaries had nothing to offer to the countries in “the mission field”.

Flannery, gen. ed., (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988 rev. ed.)

⁶The report seems unaware that if the truth were told, Africa is the home of world civilisation. Cf. Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth of Reality* (edited and translated from the French by Mercer Cook; Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1974).

The Apostolic Letter of John Paul II at the close of the Great Jubilee 2000 is very relevant here. Using the fishing episode (Luke 5:6), the Pope holds that for the past two thousand years the church has been toiling on the surface all night, catching nothing or very little. Now at the dawn of this third millennium, the church needs to listen to its master and leader as he directs his mission and asks the church to launch out into the deep for a great catch. This catch is not intended simply for primary evangelisation. Perhaps those to benefit most from it are the “Christian people” who did not even recognise that what they caught was a pittance, compared to the great abundance, the harvest of the earth, which God has in store for us. The harvest imagery designating the church as mission speaks to this issue of catching and gathering in. Some key questions that guide this renewed understanding of mission would be: What happened to the Christian message along the line? What casualties did it endure in the past two thousand years, not simply since Edinburgh 1910? What can we today do to redeem the redeeming Church and Christian religion from all the aberrations or foreign elements that kept creeping in the past two centuries? Though it is beyond the scope of this work, we ask these questions in all honesty, aware that, as the report observes, we need to respect Church history, knowing that if we were alive at the times in question, we would not have done otherwise. Still we have a responsibility in our times to live according to our own light or “better” enlightened faith and knowledge, as the Holy Spirit leads the church progressively into the complete truth (Jon 16:12-15).

That these deviations from the gospel existed does not make them evangelistically valid for all time. They cannot therefore remain binding on Christians at the expense of Christ, “God’s Gospel” (Rom 1: 1-6, 16) . We are perhaps familiar with the common saying, that Christianity has not failed; it has never been tried (except perhaps in the early Church in Jerusalem, Antioch and Thessalonika when believers learned to cross their racial barriers and tried to forge a community where none of their members was ever in want; Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34). This effort was not perfect as the stories of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), the neglect of the Hellenistic widows (Acts 6) and the insistence of the circumcision party (Acts 10 - 15) indicate. Yet their focus was not blurred. They did not shy away from facing the problems that challenged their being in Christ and his witnesses to the world to persuade it to believe in him.

The Christians concerned did not lose sight of the gospel. Rather they saw their cultural and racial differences as concrete, life challenges and areas where they needed to address their inherited anti-gospel values and all kinds of cultural and racial prejudices in the light of their faith in the Lord Jesus, as his disciples, followers of his way and of him who was their Way. Moreover these early Christians preached, not the Christian faith or the doctrines of their different churches, but “the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20), or “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 2:23). The resurrection featured in this preaching as of primordial importance (1 Cor 15:1-11). They were baptised not into the different denominations (or the different churches of the different evangelisers: Peter, Paul Cephas, Apollos, the Jewish Church and the Hellenistic Church, the Johannine, Matthean, Marcan and Lucan Churches) to which they had to pledge allegiance. Where they preached themselves (if one may put it that way), they did so to underscore that they were servants of their converts for Christ’s sake (1 Cor 3:5-4:6).

As noted earlier, the young churches addressed in the report belong on the same level of evangelisation as those addressed in the New Testament. According to the report, its

emphasis is not so much upon the evangelistic work by which new members are added to the Church, a subject which falls rather within the scope of other Commissions, but rather on the questions of organisation, Church membership, the discipline, and edification, the training and employment of workers, the development of new life within the Church in character and spiritual fruitfulness, and its deepening and strengthening by means of an adequate Christian literature in all its departments. These are the principal part covered in our enquiries, and the Report which we now submit to the Conference will follow, in the main, similar lines (3).

In line with this, the report confines itself to “the product, the first fruits of the spiritual life, as it takes place in the young Church that is growing and maturing on so many mission fields” (4). Thus the report may be said to do for the churches in the mission field what the literature of the New Testament did for the early Christian Churches. Though this is not the place, it might be very rewarding to undertake a research on the similarities and dissimilarities of approach between the report, its view of the mission field and that of the NT authors. For one thing, the report is addressed to members of the conference, the sending churches and missionary societies, not to the converts or young churches themselves. Very few, if any of the “natives”, were present at the conference, though missionary representatives from these lands, similar to the delegation from Antioch, attended the conference. In other words, the conference (of the home churches) discussed the young churches in their absentia. In the New Testament approach, the young churches are the subjects of address. The Council in Acts 15 was itself initiated by questions brought to the Jerusalem church by the church of the new converts. The Council concluded with a letter and their delegation to these converts on what was required of them (Acts 15:22-29). They were directly challenged to assume responsibility for their faith in the Lord Jesus.

The Edinburgh report, on the other hand, for the most part, focuses on the evangelisers and their responsibility for the young churches: how they should train them, allow them to assume leadership responsibilities, develop independent or native theological thought, compose prayers and hymns, produce and publish locally suitable literature, sustain their own theological institutions, and so forth. Though the report laments the stagnating effect of too much control of the young churches by the missionaries and their home churches, it seems unable to do anything about it, except make its recommendations to the conference. Members of the commission also had to defend the church in the mission field before the conference and assure the conference that their fears of too much independence of the young churches may lead to doctrinal laxity was ill founded, given the number of converts who were prepared to die for their faith (e.g., the Martyrs of Uganda, 1886)

The closing remarks of the Rev. J. Campbell Gibson, Chairman of the Commission, to the representative missionaries at the end of the discussions of the report, deserves notice in this connection.

I wish to address myself from my dear brethren from Eastern lands, from Japan, from China, from Korea, from India and from Africa. You have seen within these few days with what sincere cordiality and sympathy yourselves and your views as expressed to us have been received by this conference. You have seen how heartily encouraging was the recognition given to the great principle that the Church represented in your countries is one which has its rights and its future as well as the older Churches of the West, and that we who are connected with these Churches of the West do not grudge full recognition of the liberties of the Churches you represent. Having seen that encouraging recognition, I venture to make this appeal to you in turn, that you

will carry to your own Churches, not only the expression of this cordial sympathy with your national and racial aspirations, and your Christian aspirations, but that you will also, in view of the cordiality of this recognition, assure your brethren that they need not be overanxious upon that point, and above all things that they should not by rash haste make it more difficult for the representatives of the older communions to accord absolute liberty which is your right. (374)

Though one hears the echoes of the address of the Council of Jerusalem to the Gentile churches in this report, a significant difference is that the remarks are not those of the more than 1000 member Conference, but that of the Chairman of the Commission. The impression is also given that the older churches will continue to monitor the developments in the younger churches and that this older church has the power to accord or refuse to the younger churches the absolute liberty which is their right, should they ever felt unsatisfied by the moves made by the younger churches.

This shift in methodology, in viewing the converts as objects rather than as subjects is a major issue which African and Third World theologians and historians, and indeed all marginalised sectors in the Church have made and are making concerted efforts to address and change. Chief among them is the issue of women. John XXIII, the Pope who summoned the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, saw the women issue as a major sign of our times, and declared that “those who know they have rights have the responsibility to claim their rights while others have the corresponding duty to respect them as they claim those rights” (*Pacem in Terris* nos 39-41). Perhaps the teething problems of the church in the mission field mentioned in the report continue till today because of this failure to treat the new converts, or young churches as subjects of their own life and church and make the contribution of women a more substantial part of that project. In all fairness, it needs to be observed that the report itself urges the sending churches and missionary societies to make efforts to encourage local leadership, thought, and reflection on the Christian faith. How and whether this was actually done and to what success remains a question.

John Paul II in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, offers a review of mission which seeks to correct fundamental errors in the approach to mission in the past by emphasising that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of Mission.⁷

On the principal agency of the Holy Spirit in mission, *Redemptoris Missio* has this to say:

The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church’s mission. His action is preeminent in the mission *ad gentes*, as can clearly be seen in the early Church: in the conversion of Cornelius (cf. Acts 10), in the decisions made about emerging problems (cf. Acts 15) and in the choice of regions and peoples to be evangelised (cf. Acts 16:6ff). The Spirit worked through the Apostles, but at the same time he was also at work in those who heard them: “Through his action the Good News takes shape in human minds and hearts and extends through history. In all of this it is the Holy Spirit who gives life.”⁸

⁷See John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Missio*” in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, Edited with Introductions by J. Michael Miller, C.S.B Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc, 1996, 494-570, esp. part III, nos 21-30).

⁸*Redemptoris Missio* no. 21.2; the citation in the citation is from the Encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vifivicantem*, no. 42 of John Paul II, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (1986), 857; see also *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (n. 28), 305.

Strikingly the Holy Spirit is not very prominent in the 1910 report. This, too, is a mark of the times. Perhaps if the churches had focussed less on themselves and more on the Holy Spirit as the principal agent and irreplaceable managing directress of mission, many mistakes in mission and quarrels between and within the churches might have been avoided. It is not surprising, then that it has taken the Pentecostal movements of the twentieth century for Christians to recognise anew the role of the Holy Spirit, not only in primary evangelisation as stated in *Redemptoris Missio*, but also indispensably in the on-going formation and transformation of every Christian of every age and location. The NT Christians never lost sight of the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives, not even in the lives of the preachers of the gospel who were not just the apostles. Indeed left to the apostles (understood traditionally as the Twelve) the mission to the Gentiles would hardly have advanced, at least at the time and at the pace it did. It took nameless Christians to break the barriers of racism and begin for the first time to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. It was from these nameless and apparently insignificant people (women would have been among them), that the first so named Christian community came into existence. It was from that community too, who by sending Paul and Barnabas, decidedly the best endowed in their community, that the worldwide mission of the Church was launched and stayed poised. This means then, that in the NT, the new converts were not seen as insignificant to the mission of the Church. Quite the contrary, they defined the questions and the methods of evangelisation that the whole church had to recognise and come to terms with. It is unfortunate, that given the colonial mentality, the missionaries in the mission field and the Christian churches at home did not see mission in this same light.

The report laments the negative view of mission by the home churches but is hopeful that time has effected some changes in this attitude, as witnesses the following entry:

The subject on which we report is THE CHURCH IN THE MISSION FIELD. It is perhaps one of the most encouraging signs, both of the progress of mission work itself, and of the *advance which has been made in the thought of the Church at home* with regard to it, that 'The Church in the mission field now occupies so prominent a position in the discussion of mission questions and methods. It is easy to recall the time when the work of foreign missions was commonly regarded by Christian people as the sending of a small forlorn hope into the midst of great masses of darkness and superstition, from which very little could be looked for in return. *The missionaries' work was conceived to be a continual struggle with heathenism* [emphasis added], and at the best the converts *gained* were thought of as little groups of unimportant people, whose conversion was gratifying for the sake of the individuals gained, but who had no important share in the missionary enterprise as a whole

Now, happily, the Church at home sees further into the true state of the matter, and the most important general conclusion which we draw from the replies made to our enquiries is that henceforth this view must be entirely abandoned. We have now to think of the Church on the mission field not as a by-product of mission work, but as itself by far the most efficient element in the Christian propaganda. (2, Preface).

One may ask how seriously this pejorative view of the mission and of the new converts was actually abandoned by the Church at home, given that till today, African Christians, at least, are still struggling for the right to be included in the definition of what it means to be church. They are still struggling to peel off the stigma of being viewed largely as heathens and as having little or no important part to play in the mission, though this varies from Church to

Church and from one denomination to another. In this we see yet another difference between the members of the commission and “the Church at home”, even as elsewhere in the report there exists a difference between the commission and the missionaries in the mission field. Another sad aspect of the above submission is the implication that “the Christian people” at home had not much interest, let alone faith in the missionary work itself. It was seen as a fad of a few crazy missionaries who perhaps needed distraction from the quarrels at home or a safari to the newly discovered worlds. This lack of interest contrasts sharply with the commission of the risen Lord to his followers, to go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:20). Here again satisfaction with one’s own salvation and a loss of sense of Christian identity and the affluence which the despoiling of Africa and the rest of the Third World brought to the Christians at home may have been some of the determining factors. Whatever the causes, this negative or indifferent attitude to the work of mission by some Christians was a living contradiction of the Church as mission.

The Holy Spirit, as already said, is very rarely mentioned in the report. This oversight may explain why it took the Church some fifty years after the report, to openly recognise that the Church is missionary by its very nature. Vatican Council II began in 1965. John Paul II, following this Council has indefatigably maintained that the mission *ad gentes* remains an abiding commission of the risen Lord for the Church. This must never be abandoned even while we recognise and celebrate the right of individuals to freedom of worship. Again, in our view, the problem of mission *ad gentes* is not with the mission itself but with how we approach it. It is one thing to lead people to Jesus whose Spirit alone can give them the grace of conversion, and quite another to set up ourselves as the privileged saved ones in relation to whom the rest of humanity is a *masa damnata*. People resent this kind of stigma and religious arrogance. Yet it is also very evident, as in the case of Ghandi and others, that people naturally warm up to Jesus once they discover him personally for themselves, not through our denominational propaganda. The idea of gaining converts [perhaps for self, and one congregation] dies hard even till today. It constitutes one of the greatest stumbling blocks to ecumenism, then and now.

African Cultural Identity

The issue of African cultural identity has already been touched upon in the previous sections. The greatest casualty that Africa suffered in the report lies here. As said earlier, this view itself is located in the general colonial attitude towards Africa with its view of all things African as barbaric, savage, lacking in culture, and so forth.⁹ Given this situation, it is not surprising that the greatest focus of African theologians South of the Sahara and North of the Limpopo River has been on what may comprehensively be described as inculturation theology. From the earliest days of their entry into the theological discourse, African theological scholars have sought to make their distinctive contribution to the Christian thought (something the report encourages) by revisiting their cultural heritage, what is left of it anyway, and identifying the values, even gospel values, that were and still are present in them.

⁹I have conducted upon request a number of personally enlightening studies on Africa for *Concilium* on this issue; cf. T. Okure, “Africa: A Refugee Camp Experience”, in *Migrants and Refugees Concilium* 1993/4, edited by Dietmar Miet and Lisa Sowle Cahill (London: SCM, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1993), 12-21; “Africa: Globalisation and the Loss of Cultural Identity” in *Globalisation and Its Victims, Concilium* 2001/5, edited by Jon Sobrino and Felix Wilfred (London: SCM, 2001) 67-74; and “Martyred Africa: Seed for a New Humanity” in *Martyrdom Reconsidered, Concilium* 2003/1, edited by T. Okure, Jon Sobrino and Felix Wilfred (London SCM, 2003).

The issues covered include, ancestor veneration (not worship as the report says), rites, rituals, naming ceremonies, marriage rites, socialisation processes and initiation rites for inculcating moral values, marriage and widowhood practices. The comprehensive rejection of African life as evidence of the lowest type of barbarism is belied by the fact that African cultures themselves had criteria for discerning between the good and the bad in their own cultural practices. On the issue of idol worship, taking Ibibio for instance, the worship of God (Abasi) was clearly distinct from such practices as the worship of a wicked spirits (ndem). Spiritual diviners were comparable to early OT prophetic practices, that pre-dated the writing prophets. People who practised sorcery and witchcraft, were regarded in bad standing in the community. To then condemn all African practices as fetish is to do great injustice to Africa and the African people. The question Africans are asking is this: if what Africans worshiped was animism, how come then that in translating the Bible and in the liturgy, the Christian missionaries were able to use African divine names to designate the Christian God? We have already mentioned Abasi. Others include Chukwu, Nkulunkulu, Olodumare. The use of these names and similar concepts would indicate that the comprehensive condemnation of the African culture and environment as barbarism or heathenism is ill-founded.

Inculturation theology does not only seek to identify what was good and gospel in its own cultures. It also draws attention to the fact that much of what the West transmitted as the Christian religion was indeed the result of western culture that had so become part and parcel of the Christian message that those who proclaimed this inculturated message to Africa failed to see that theirs was already an inculturated gospel. Thus African and other third world scholars, especially in Asia, ask that a distinction be made between the gospel message and Christianity. This distinction is deemed necessary if the African contribution to world Christian thought is to be “allowed” in practice and treated on equal terms as integral part of our Christian heritage. African scholars compare the situation to that of Jewish and Gentile Christians in the first century. As some Jewish Christians felt that the Gentiles had first to become Jews before becoming Christians, so in many respects, the older churches have felt that Africans must first become Europeans before they can be authentically accepted as Christians. This applies in the areas of liturgy, theology of the family, rites and rituals and not least, in the total worldview and conception of life. The literature on this is vast and extensive. Perhaps the most recent compendium” or quick reference resource on this is Laurenti Magesa’s *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*.¹⁰

African scholars have in particular pointed out that family and community based view of life (this is summed up in Mbiti’s celebrated phrase, “I am because we are and because we are I am”,¹¹) the spirit of hospitality, the extended family which can accommodate members belonging to different religious affiliations and a democratic approach to conflict resolutions count among the gospel values inherent in the different African cultures. Interestingly, Fiona Bowie faults this claim that much in African culture was already gospel. In her view, “Christianity has failed to take root, often after centuries of evangelism, if one is to judge from phenomena such as the absence or scarcity of candidates for the priesthood, or the rejection of monogamy. A perceived threat to mission churches from African Independent and Western fundamentalist churches, as well as from Islam, also contribute to the sense of

¹⁰Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997; which in 1998 already underwent a second printing.

¹¹John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1970), 141.

urgency in the search for new solutions”.¹²

Ironically the common saying today is that Christianity has failed in the north and moved to the South, especially to Africa. In Nigeria alone, the Catholic Church cannot cope up with the number of candidates to the priesthood and the religious life. It seems impossible to open enough seminaries, for as soon as one is split into up to de-congest it, or a new one is created, that soon fills up and necessitates the creation of a new one. Currently there are about eight major seminaries (excluding those of religious congregations of men) as opposed to four in 1994, each with an average student population of 300 seminarians. The older ones (such as Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu, SS Peter and Paul Ibadan, St Joseph Ikot Ekpene, Seat of Wisdom Owerri) have an average of 400-500 candidates each. These statistics do not include those seminarians studying at the Urbaniana, Rome and elsewhere in Europe and America. The congestion is so great that some dioceses are even contemplating opening diocesan as opposed to regional seminaries (e.g., the Blessed Cyprian E. Tansi Seminary in Onitsha). Or is the dearth of candidates for the priesthood lamented by Bowie applicable to the Protestant Churches or other countries of Africa? If so, why continue to generalise on Africa? Many African Christians would see the remark that Africans cannot “reject polygamy” as insulting, if not racist.

Developments in the area of theological education

A problem confronting Africa, also hinted at in the report, is that of communication. As a result one hardly knows of theological literature published in one’s own country not to speak of other countries, especially those that belonged to different colonial masters – Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone. From continental meetings, one gains a general view of what obtains in the continent. Theological associations (like the Conference of African Theological Institutions with its regional chapters), individual theological institutions, departments of theological or religious studies in universities all provide avenue for the study of theology within the African socio-cultural context in a way which was not possible or even imaginable in 1910. Unfortunately, the issue of textbooks continue to be a problem. Because the texts used are for the most part written by western scholars, the problem of memorising and reproducing what is read in these works or worse still of modelling one’s theological thinking by those of western scholars or reacting to questions set by these scholars remains a problem. Yet many African scholars have branched out and continue chart their own theological methods and “other ways” of reading the Bible.

Some African scholars are of the view that we are more reactive or proactive, more theoretical than empirical in our doing of theology (saying what should be, rather than getting on with it). Yet this phase just described is understandable given the effect of colonialism on the African thought and self conception. South African liberation theologies had their own specific issue of apartheid to reckon with while those not affected by apartheid struggled with cultural liberation. The attitude of outsiders was to pitch one against the other and look down on the cultural approach to theology as not being liberative. But it is becoming increasingly clear that cultural liberation is the most fundamental liberation of all. Culture embodies values, systemic and structural sin and so forth. Even the issue of apartheid was deeply rooted in culture. In my view there is no human activity or thought, no matter how scientific it claims to be, which is not influenced by culture. Culture is the inescapable,

¹²Fiona Bowie, “The Inculturation Debate in Africa” *Studies in World Christianity, The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion* 5/1 (1999), 67-92, here, 67

inalienable prism from which human beings view life. It is as intrinsic to our human reality as is our being male and female.¹³

Culture lies behind even the current war on Iraq. For any group of people to think they have no culture or that culture is only about primitive peoples and their customs and rituals is greatly misleading. I have heard some western colleagues lament in good faith that by comparison to Africa and maybe Asia, those countries that have not yet become technologically developed, they have no culture left to which they can resort. In such discussions I have asked them whether they ever thought of theologising from the culture of individualism, capitalism (some would want to distinguish between capitalism and exploitative capitalism). This matter can only be settled, for the Christian society, by holding the principles, goals and objectives of capitalism against the light of the gospel of Jesus. If any aspect of capitalism holds out in this light, then one can regard it as good. If not, the result should speak for itself. We in the south who have borne the burden of capitalism, the most recent manifestation of which is the war on Iraq, see little good in the system. Capitalism need not and should not be confused with the right to own property. Its fundamental problem is in the root of the word, capital which implies profit. Jesus' parable of the rich fool may offer a good starting point for the West to do its own theology of inculturation and liberation from capitalism and individualism, both of which are radically opposed to the gospel of Jesus and should not be or continue to be regarded as "Christian practice and of society". Even this was the cultural heritage of the 18th century Enlightenment.

Mission to the Sending Churches

The need to undertake a mission to the home missions was partly raised above in the section under the understanding of mission. Both the report and the Second Vatican Council believe, though stated in different ways, that the mission field is the world, the entire world. An unfortunate mentality which is discernible in the report, the fruit of which is now evident in what is termed "a post-Christian West", is that while the sending churches were concentrating on educating the savage, they neglected themselves. The false assumption was that all was OK with the West. It was already a Christian country. But we in Africa in particular ask how the West that in 1910 regarded itself as Christian could ever have committed itself to practising the evil of slave trade, with all the horrible and horrendous experiences which the Black slaves were subjected to, the destabilisation and displacement of harmonious communities (e.g. in East Africa, whole communities had to relocate from the coast to the mountains to escape the sporadic incursion by the slave traders). The story of St Josephine Bakhita of Soudan is a good illustration of the breakdown of family and social life that the slave trade inflicted on African peoples.¹⁴

We also ask how the West could possibly have prided itself as being Christian and yet practice colonialism, an abiding evil which Africa, despite all its efforts since the wave of independence in the sixties, has not yet been able to overcome. Yet colonialism is not only

¹³Cf. T. Okure, "'I will open my mouth in parables': Matt 13:35: A Case for a Gospel Based Biblical Hermeneutics" *NTS* 46 (2000) 444-463; eadem, "Inculturation: Biblical/Theological Bases" in, T. Okure, Paul van Thiel et alii. *32 Articles Evaluating the Inculturation of Christianity in Africa* (Spearhead 112-114; Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1990) 55-88; S. C. Bate: *Human Life is Cultural: Introducing Anthropology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

¹⁴*Bakhita: From Slavery to Sanctity* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1993, 1998, 2000).

of the past. The current state of neo-colonialism is perhaps worse than colonialism itself. In colonialism, as in apartheid, one knew and could identify the oppressor. One knew the foreign master that one was under; one knew that one's territory was occupied, so one knew what to struggle against. In neo-colonialism, the enemy is not only hidden but often emerges as a friend. So much "aid" given to Africa have indeed become AIDS to its economic and political development. One of the critiques levelled against NEPAD (the newly formed New Partnership for Africa's Development, adopted as a measure to buttress the African Union) is that the African leaders are still expecting and counting on the very West that has exploited and impoverished the continent over the years (and continues to impoverish and deplete their economic resources for self gain) to come to their rescue and help them to stand economically on their feet.

It is recently noted that the UK/England alone sells four hundred million pounds sterling worth of arms to Africa yearly? Yet UK is one of those countries that have pledged themselves to help Africa. We will not speak of how France, for instance, ensured that its former Francophone countries trade only with them, while they in return offer aids. The slogan now is we want trade (freedom of trade) instead of aid. The exploitation of Africa is not only in economic and political sphere. It is worse in some ways in the theological sphere. African scholars are not read by the West or if they are, it is because the West needs their input for its own theological development. Many African scholars are now teaching in Western universities where they become almost redundant because there they are out of touch with the vital force, the African vital force, the problems of development, economic problems, poverty, incredibly hard working conditions, the nitty gritty of underdeveloped peoples, that become the vital force and energising daily experience for doing a life-centred theology. I would dare to suggest that this closeness to life at the grassroots is what gave the teaching of Jesus the authority recognised by the people which his leaders lacked. Affluence has the tendency if not character to benumb the senses and deprive them of growth. The challenges that an undeveloped economic world poses to one's doing of theology is the song and soul behind the Ecumenical Association of Third World theologians.

Challenges and Future Trends

In view of the above section, a major challenge which emerges for us in the twenty-first century and in view of Edinburgh 2110 (3010) is to examine **together** what we have received in our different contexts as the Christian heritage since the past two millennia, not only since 1910. John Paul II has taken the initiative in reflecting on this past.¹⁵ He calls on all members of the Catholic Church in the first instance to do the same, that is, to reflect on their experiences of the Jubilee and heed the essential jubilee call to return to one's roots and one's land. As Christians whether we are located in Africa, Asia, America, Europe, developed or developing world, we share a common origin and heritage in Jesus of Nazareth. We therefore need seriously to find ways of coming to grips with what it means to be his followers and witnesses today. We need to revisit in the light of our common heritage all the issues mentioned in the report: conditions for membership in the different churches, the need for ongoing edification of members, the need for theological education of all, for learning bible stories, stories of the life of Christ, and so fort.¹⁶ In addition we need to face

¹⁵In his Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Dawn of the Third Millennium), (Vatican City: Editrice Vaticana, 2001) addressed to all his "Brothers and Sisters" (repeated many times in the letter), not simply to his Brother Bishops and Priests (cf. Nos 3, 26, 29, 42, etc).

¹⁶See further on this cf. Okure, "Drawing from our Treasures the New and the Old: Challenges of Mission in the

our particular challenge of taking our different contexts seriously as the place to be evangelised. Incidentally, the report shied away from evangelising the people's contexts. Instead of evangelising those contexts, the missionaries rather sought to rescue their converts from those "heathen" contexts. Could that have been possible?

The context needs to be addressed not only by those whom the report describes as the mission field, (they are already doing it) but in the current awareness that the church by its very nature is missionary, that all are called to remain disciples, followers of the Way who is Jesus at every given moment and location of one's life. Otherwise one ceases to be a disciple, a follower. In this regard we need to discern all the other gods we followed in the guise that they are Christian, or that we have struck a compromise with to the betrayal of the gospel: nationalism, racism, capitalism, with its face and apostles: globalism, free trade and competitive economy.

I would end perhaps by recalling here what I identified elsewhere last year as challenges for the church on mission in the foreseeable twenty-first century. These are the challenge of a new understanding of Mission and the Church, the challenge of the relationship between the missionaries and the evangelised, the challenge of the power and structure of governance/of the keys; the challenge of developing a Gospel-based spirituality (where the gospel is intended to set all free and declare God's general amnesty to the entire creation), and the challenge of inculturation. Understood among these challenges but perhaps one that needs to be clearly stated in this context is the challenge of ecumenism. In the African context, these challenges would need to be integrated with the challenge of faithfully ministering the blessings, spiritual and material, which God has given in super-abundance to this continent. Ironically these blessings have served as the major cause of the despoiling of Africa.¹⁷

Despite the criticisms of the report in this review, one is left with the final impression that the body concerned was deeply committed to mission and ecumenism. They manifested that commitment in the first fact of the conference itself. From this conference came the WCC in 1948 (the same year as the UN Charter for Universal Human Right was issued) whose primary aim is to work for the unity of the churches. On the African scene, John Amanze has shown how this Edinburgh initiative has given birth to the many ecumenical initiatives in Africa.¹⁸ Among those he lists are the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Ecumenical Documentation Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa (EDICESA); Churches Drought Action in Africa (CDAA), the International Refugee and Documentation Network (IRDN), Africa Network on Churches Participation in Development (ANCPD), Conference of African Theological Institutions (CATI) with its regional branches (West African Association of Theological Institutions (WAATI), Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA), Association des institutions d'Enseignement Théologique en Afrique Centrale (ASTHEOL), Association of Theological

Twenty-First Century" *The Church in Mission: Universal Mandate and Local Concerns*, Thomas Maliprathu, SVD and L. Stanislaus, SVD, eds; Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: Anand Press, 2002, 181-210, esp. 188-205).

¹⁷Cf. T. Okure "The Beatitudes in African Context: A Bible Study of Matt 3:3-22", given in absentia at the Joint Africa Theological Conference. Nairobi, 14-18 August 2000, 16 pages. The Proceedings of the Conference are yet to be published, due mainly to financial reasons.

¹⁸John Amanze, "Some Large Ecumenical Organisations on the African Continent", (note. 1), 144-164.

Teachers in Madagascar (ATTIM), Association of Christian Lay Centres in Africa (ACLCA), Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC); Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT, African Regional Chapter). Unfortunately most of these bodies or organisations are not functioning to maximum capacity because of finance and above all, because of the intrinsic fragmentation and weakening of its resources that Africa suffered from the slave trade, colonialism, its being carved out at the Berlin Conference, and on-going neo colonialism of all kinds. Interestingly, Amanze's listing leaves out the Circle of Concerned African Theologians (The Circle) which by all reckoning is the most dynamic and active ecumenical theological body in Africa. Its ecumenism embraces not only Christians but is also open to Moslems who are willing to reflect on their faith and engage in cultural analysis that leads to true liberation for all in Christ.¹⁹

Despite the rather gloomy picture, hope is not lost. One of the incredible qualities of the African continent is its resilience. This is an inbuilt gift from God which enables it to survive against all odds. Above all, Africa's hope for survival lies in the deep awareness that it is God's creation, therefore no forces can take it away from God's hands and destroy it for God. The challenge of mission in the twenty-first century from the perspective of Edinburgh 2010 might be to work towards restitution of the denied dignity and selfhood to Africans. This will necessarily include working to change the mentality of the "home Christians" (for it is no longer acceptable to call Europe "the Christian people" to the exclusion of those in the mission field) to a truly Christian conversion, based on the principles and values of the gospel. The liberation of the home Christians from the bondage of selfish and self-serving cultures will be part and parcel of the restoration of Africa. Then the gospel will be preached impartially to all, north and south, perhaps for the first time since the early days of the early Church.

A Concluding Thought

A final note on the need for the Christians in the West to become aware of and undertake a self-liberating mission. It cannot be denied that how we understand our faith depends on the questions we ask about that faith. The questions themselves are determined and conditioned by the total contexts in which we live. If then any group of persons (church) fails to ask questions raised from its contexts or lives only on answers asked by past generations in its context, or ignoring its context entirely focuses on the contexts of others and exercises a supervisory role over the questions they are asking, critiquing the answers they offer for those questions, such a group of persons can be said to have lost the real sense of Christian, gospel life.

One may venture to posit that the current crises of Christianity in the West, what is called post-Christian or what some would want to identify as Christian at all costs, is caused for the most part by the failure of the church in the West to ask life-questions to its context. For long it concentrated most, if not all of its energy on the questions and answers offered by the young churches, neglecting itself. Meanwhile the young churches have come of age and are claiming the right to ask their own questions, seek their own answers and even offer those answers to the West as part of our common Christian heritage. The response is either to ignore the evidence, to reject it or to fight it outright as being inconsonant with the deposit of faith. A deposit which does not yield interest is dead. But the word of God, the

¹⁹In praise of the work of the Circle, see, for instance, the works cited in notes 7 and 8 above.

gospel, is something alive and active. Jesus whose name we bear as Christians is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. He assured us that he would be with us till the end of time. He also assured us that we would do even greater things than he did because he has gone to God. This awareness of our fundamental Christian heritage as Gospel would serve as an incentive for all in their diverse contexts to ask sustained questions about these contexts with a view to living ever more deeply, truly and intently our Christian faith. When we do this, we will leave behind an authentic fruit or heritage for the Christian generation of 2110 that will review our faith commitment in Edinburgh 2010.

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