

Hope or Dope

Christian Churches and Socio-Political Development in Africa

Africa Lecture
Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics St. Mary's College
University of St. Andrews
Thursday 26 April 2007

When I dey sick, my mother go cry, cry, cry,
she go say instead when I go die make she die.

O, she go beg God,
"God help me, God help, my pikin oh." ¹

Personal and historical perspectives

Let me introduce this with a little personal detail and a few brief historical notes. To paraphrase Isak Dikensen "I once had a house in Africa...", in fact I had several spread over the twenty five years I lived there, as a missionary, from 1977 until 2002, at which time I came back to University to research and write on aspects of that very interesting and most enjoyable period of my life. My fundamental research interest was the socio-political role of Christian Churches in Africa, focusing on the Republic of Benin as a case study.²

In the terms of Guy Arnold's *Africa a Modern History*, I arrived well after the African 1960s "decade of hope" had faded, in the middle of the 1970s "decade of realism" and lived through the "basket case" stage of the 1980s and into the 1990s, which Arnold describes as a decade of "new directions and new perceptions".³

Ghana, the beacon under Nkrumah, where I first arrived in 1977, spent a few weeks and have visited regularly since, was already being described as a failed state and certainly looked like one then, even to a newcomer. It is only fair to add that it has since recovered from that difficult period, but I still date Flight Lt.

¹ From song lyrics by Prince Nico Mbarga, 1976.

² See Patrick Claffey *Christian Churches in Dahoemy-Bénin : A Study of their socio-political role*, Leiden: Brill 2007

³ Guy Arnold, *Africa : A Modern History*, London: Atlantic Books 2005

Rawlings arrival in power in 1979/1981 as the beginning of a spiral of instability and violence that swept through a large part of West Africa over the following two decades culminating in the present crisis in Ivory Coast. The situation in much of the rest of Africa was no less grim. 1994 saw the Rwanda and Burundi genocides leading to catastrophe in the whole of the Great Lakes region. Less dramatically but no less definitely countries like Somalia and Sudan slid inexorably into the “basket case” category.

It was during that period that I began to look at Africa in a different way, something that ultimately led me back to research. What was happening? It appeared that Chinua Achebé’s phrase could well be applied to much of a continent, things were surely falling apart⁴ with states being variously described as collapsed, inverted, failed, criminalised, kleptocratic and even predatory.⁵ Why? I really didn’t know then and all I know now is that the reasons were a complex mix of the socio-economic, political and cultural. The evidence, in any case, was alarming. At that time twenty-six states of the more than fifty on the continent were in a state of war or extreme civil conflict.

The Congolese theologian, Kä Mana, like many others, was wondering if Africa was not “going to die”.⁶ He pleaded for a reconstruction of the continent, with the Christian myth as a starting point for the imagining of a new utopia.⁷ He was seeking “a coherent schema in which the ‘images of the world’ might constitute a force, a breath, a dynamic of pregnant symbols and vital representations capable of mobilising the energies of the peoples of Africa in order to invent the future”.⁸ In Christian theology several theologians were already looking at ideas of contestation and liberation and the need to conquer “[anthropological] pauperisation through a new cultural foundation of Africa as a

⁴ Chinua Achebé, *Things Fall Apart*, London : Penguin, 1958.

⁵ See Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, Béatrice Hibou *The criminalization of the state in Africa*, London: James Currey, 1999

⁶ See Stephen Smith, *Négrologie: Comment L’Afrique meurt*, Paris: Calman Levy, 2003.

⁷ Kä Mana, *L’Afrique va-t-elle mourir?: essai d’éthique politique*, Paris: Karthala, 1993.

⁸ Kä Mana, *La Nouvelle Evangélisation en Afrique*, Paris: Karthala, 2000, 21.

cultural entity”.⁹ With a certain sad irony in the year of the Rwanda and Burundi genocide a Special Synod of the Catholic Church for Africa spoke of itself as “an ecclesial event of fundamental importance for Africa, a *kairos*, a *moment of grace*, in which God manifests his salvation.”¹⁰ It cannot have seemed like that in either Rwanda or Burundi at this time, both countries with Christian majorities, Burundi is 62% Catholic, while Rwanda is 56.5%, Roman Catholic 26% Protestant and 11.1%, Adventist. While religious identities and sectarianism did not apparently contribute to the genocide, neither were the churches able to do very much to prevent it. Indeed the direct involvement of priests and religious both in developing the ideology behind the genocide and in carrying it made it all the more traumatic for the churches of all denominations.

Situating Christianity in postcolonial Africa

There may have been an assumption in some postcolonial thinking, particularly amongst Marxists, that the branch of Christianity would wither and die once the colonial tree had been felled. This, of course, has not been the case and in fact the growth across the denominational spectrum over the past forty years has been extraordinary by any standards. In the twentieth century, the Christian population in Africa exploded from an estimated eight or nine million in 1900 (8 to 9%) to some 335 million in 2000 (45%). As Phillip Jenkins has pointed out, the centre of gravity of Christianity has moved from the West to Latin America, parts of Asia and Africa.¹¹ Examined in historical terms this is hardly surprising given the strategies adopted. This is well illustrated by a statement by Pius XI in the 1926 encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*:

Both history and experience teach that when once the rulers of a people have been converted to Christianity, the common people follow closely in the footsteps of their leaders.¹²

⁹ Engelbert Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise. Paroles d’un croyant*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1986 in Kä Mana, *Théologie africaine pour temps de crise: Christianisme et reconstruction de l’Afrique*, Paris: Karthala, 1993, 41.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, # 9.

¹¹ Philip Jenkins, ‘The Next Christianity’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002

¹² Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, #31

Writing of religion and politics in Africa, Jean-François Bayart notes that it is “because the religious field is a locus of social change that it is simultaneously a field of political recomposition”. Whatever their relationship to the colonial enterprise, the Churches were agents for social change if only through their involvement in education and their role in the formation of what was to become a postcolonial African elite. Religion, Bayart asserts, “can contribute to the invention of modernity”, pointing to the role of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches “in the inculcation of new economic values and in the expansion of the capitalist world economy in the 19th and early 20th”.¹³

Ali Mazrui points to the role of the Christian Churches in education and the provision of a particular humanitarian and universalist political discourse that favoured the birth of nationalism.¹⁴ In any case by the end of the colonial period mainstream churches had insinuated themselves into a modernizing African society.

Adrian Hastings observed that “the coming of independence to most of black Africa brought a far slighter shift in Church-State relations than might have been anticipated”.¹⁵ In Dahomey for instance, the historian P. Mêtinhouë remarks that the period after independence was one of “almost perfect understanding” between the Catholic Church and the State,¹⁶ while M.A. Glélé concluded: “The Catholic Church represents an incontestable political force in Dahomey... [and] apart from the army, the clergy constitutes the only organised body, capable and very influential”.¹⁷ And this was not just the case in Dahomey. Governments with limited resources and often lacking capacity in the field of education and health were happy to be assisted by the contributions of the churches. In other cases the relationship was even closer, the bishop’s ‘brother’

¹³ Jean-François Bayart, *Religion et modernité politique en Afrique noire*, Paris: Karthala, 1993, 302-307.

¹⁴ Ali Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, London: Heinemann, 1978, 153-154.

¹⁵ Adrian Hastings *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975*, Cambridge: CUP, 1979: 147.

¹⁶ P.G. Mêtinhouë, ‘Monseigneur Christophe Adimou, un évêque au service de la vérité et du dialogue sous un régime marxiste-léniniste’ *Eglise de Cotonou*, Vol 33, 7, 1993, 66.

¹⁷ Glélé, *Naissance*, 45.

was a government minister leading to a cosy if less than health relationship for both sides. In some cases bishops provided theological legitimation for political developments.¹⁸ Separation of church and state was all very fine in France but this was not what was going on here. As Gambetta noted “*L’anticléricalisme n’est pas un article d’exportation*” and whatever else the French left in Africa, a secular state in the modern sense was not one of them. As a result, in many cases, there occurred between many of the mainline churches and the political powers in place what Bayart has described as a “reciprocal assimilation of elites”¹⁹, at least for as long as this was mutually convenient.

This, of course, refers specifically to the mainline historical Churches. Africans, however, had long since begun to experiment with their own forms of Christianity in the African Instituted Churches (AICs). This development was also intimately connected with social change and thus was not without political consequences. Terence Ranger speaking of early African religious movements notes: “even if they were not unequivocally anti-colonial they constituted a form of politics”.²⁰ Africa has been producing its own prophets and its own responses to African questions for a long time. Religious *bricolage* has always been part of this and to use Achille Mbembé’s expression an “indocile” Africa did not hesitate to improvise on the myths of the coloniser in creating new “arguments of image”²¹, however incomprehensible they might sometimes have seemed to the outsider. Catherine Coquery-Virdovitch speaks of the “[remarkable continuity] in the climate of resistance to oppression with a religious connotation which lasted well beyond the colonial period; from which in parallel, there is a permanent

¹⁸ See Comi Toulabor, ‘Monseigneur Dosseh, Archevêque de Lomé’, *Politique Africaine*, 35, 1989, 68-76.

¹⁹ Jean-François Bayart ‘Les Eglises chrétiennes et la politique du ventre: le partage du gâteau ecclésial’, *Politique Africaine*, 35, 68-76, 1989.

²⁰ Terence O. Ranger, ‘Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa’, *African Studies Review*, 29 (2), 1986, 4.

²¹ James Fernandez ‘African Religious Movements’ *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 7, 1978, 228-229.

defiance of political actors who continue with the surveillance and repression”²² of religious movements where these become inconvenient and, equally, instrumentalise them when this is convenient. It has long been obvious that Christian Churches of all hues have a definite socio-political significance.

More recent developments

From the 1980s, already described as “the basket case years”, the growth has been even more remarkable. Religious movements seem to have grown as states ran into increasing difficulty. Indeed it is difficult not to see the expansion of religion in some ways as a mirror image of the socio-political and economic stagnation with the churches rapidly rising in a period during which the continent was sliding in an extremely grim situation. Starting during this period of hopelessness, it seems there has been a definite recourse to the invisible and what Achille Mbembé has described as “*la prolifération du divin*”. He suggests that it is the “intellectual atrophy” of the movement for socio-political change in Africa in general that has led to the rise of various “nativist ideologies and new cosmologies articulated around religious symbolism and the rehabilitation of occult forces”.²³ In addition to these more “nativist ideologies” there has been a steady growth in the historical churches accompanied by a phenomenal growth in Evangelical Pentecostalism right across the continent.

The “intellectual atrophy” of the socio-political situation leads inevitably to a kind of alienation and anomie particularly amongst disaffected youth who can only glimpse modernity and its wares through internet cafés, TV programmes and the occasional brother or sister who has made the *breakthrough* to their *destiny*²⁴ – obtaining a visa to France or the USA. A Catholic secondary school student in the Republic of Benin (West Africa) illustrates the point, unwittingly

²² Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Afrique Noire : Permanences et Ruptures*, Paris : L’Harmattan, 1985, 243.

²³ Achille Mbembé, ‘Esquisses d’une démocratie à l’africaine,’ *Le Monde Diplomatique*, mars 2000, 20. See also Achille Mbembé ‘Prolifération du divin en Afrique subsaharienne’ in G. Kepel (Dir), *Les politiques de Dieu*, Paris: Seuil, 1993.

²⁴ These are common terms in Pentecostal Christianity.

echoing Fanon²⁵, when he tells me “*Nous sommes une génération maudite*”, citing AIDS, chronic unemployment, a future without hope or promise if he does not manage to flee to Europe or the USA. The distance between where he is and the world he aspires to, and increasingly peeps at for 400 f cfa an hour in Internet cafés, seems to grow daily. The tension between the global and the local, tradition and modernity, the attainable and the unattainable is almost unbearable.²⁶ He is, he says, “blocked” in his progress at school and in his other “*projets de vie*”.

In the absence of a ministry of protection and deliverance in the Catholic Church in his local area, he has started attending prayers with a charismatic pastor who had recently set up a Church in the area and promised him deliverance:

I kept going to him for the prayer sessions.... This was for some time before the examinations.... So now that I have succeeded at the BEPC (Intermediate level examinations). I have understood that perhaps I was somewhat delivered and that the road is open to me.²⁷

This could be dismissed as the fear and frustration of an adolescent but a senior bank official appears to confirm his view when I ask him what he is seeking in the Pentecostal Christian Action Faith Ministries International:

First of all spiritual protection for ourselves and our children and then the possibility of developing ourselves as a man and an individual in the society in which we live. You will not be unaware of the fact that we live in a country where there is a development of malefic power...You know that Benin is the cradle of Vodún, that witchcraft still exists in Benin. The advantage of this Church is that it knows how to give spiritual protection and to show that in Jesus Christ we have been saved for the future.²⁸

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Paris, 1961.

²⁶ Online shopping sites are amongst the most frequently visited.

²⁷ Interview 09 September 2002.

²⁸ Interview 26 May 2002.

Albert de Surgy reports an almost identical response but the conclusion is more radical:

Africans start their life with a malediction since when we are born in our families we find customs and traditions. These customs and traditions are maledictions that Satan has introduced into our families. We must cut the ties with our ancestors. Alleluia... The fetishes and idols we possess are maledictions that are blocking our path, that block all progress.... You who are Christian ...if you continue to conform to the customs and the traditions, to eat the meat of the Devil, cease doing it this very evening. Some among you are not true Christians. You are still Béninois. Me, I may have been born Zairois, but I crush my culture, my traditions, to save my brothers and sisters. This is what we must do. Amen.²⁹

This evidence is very significant, with several common themes which, in my view, reveal a society in considerable difficulty and it can be replicated across much of the continent. In the most negative sense, they represent a rejection of family and culture that can only result in extreme alienation and certainly poses problems for the construction of a modern state and society.

In an essay entitled *The religious effects of culture: nationalism*, Hart cites Quentin Skinner's *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought* to suggest that political modernity in Europe, the state and the nation-state, were born in the political ferment of the Renaissance and Reformation age and the religious wars that followed. "On Skinner's view, the state is what 'happened' when Europeans found themselves drowning in their own blood for religious reasons. The absolutist claims of the state usurped and displaced the absolutism of Christian convictions, the *imperium* of the state displacing the *imperium* of the Church."³⁰ In effect, the state had to be strong to contain the warring forces within it and impose order and, ironically, religious enthusiasm led to the secularisation. What I am suggesting here is a similar process but somehow in reverse. The

²⁹ De Surgy, *Le choix*, 48. One of the books on sale at family seminars was Ofoegbu Timothy Godwin, (1999), *Skeleton of the Ancestors: Heal Your Family Tree*, Lagos: Flame Books, 1999.

³⁰ In William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the religious effects of culture*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000, 48. See also Quentin Skinner. *The foundations of modern political thought*, Cambridge: CUP, 1978.

weakness of many African states creates a situation allowing Churches to emerge providing, however tentatively, the space for some semblance of an ordered life, and some *hope*, however ephemeral.

This is the terrain upon which religions of all kinds operate in much of Africa. Cities wake before dawn to the cries of muezzin imploring Allah “the great and the merciful” and go to sleep (or don’t) to the sound of Christian Churches praying and singing late into the night.³¹ There is an enormous religious market offering what is craved for: *salvation, refuge, healing, deliverance, protection, solutions, breakthroughs, success release, prosperity, miracles, victory, and even glory*. What Kä Mana describes as “the exuberance of the religious” is very striking and here one encounters what he colourfully describes as “the respectable”, “the delirious”, “the venerable”, “illusion merchants”, “true seekers of God”, “counterfeiters of the sacred”, “the deep breath of the spirit” as well as the occasional “terrorist of the invisible”³² all seeking their share of a booming religious market.

The salvation sought is not just personal it is also collective, since there is a constant emphasis across the denominational spectrum on the need “prayers for the nations”³³ in order to save Africa from the plight it finds itself in. The German pastor Reinhard Bonnke runs the well know move Christ for All Nations, which concentrates much of it’s crusade activity on Africa under the title *Africa is Being Saved!*³⁴ Ironically, however, one of the most repeated common prayers in many churches is the supplication for success in obtaining a visa, precisely it

³¹ In March 2002 a presidential decree dealing with “sound pollution” placed restrictions on the nocturnal activities of the churches. One of the churches I was visiting was stoned by people of the neighbourhood upset at the noise.

³² Kä Mana, *La Nouvelle*, 23-24.

³³ See <http://www.bethanyinternational.org/home/articles/mani-prayer-report.asp> (accessed 02 March 2007)

³⁴ [http://cfan.org/{English-Intl}/\[SouthAfrica_Site\]/index-crusade_report.asp?page=2](http://cfan.org/{English-Intl}/[SouthAfrica_Site]/index-crusade_report.asp?page=2) accessed 02 March 2007. See also Gifford, Paul. 1992. Reinhard Bonnke's Mission to Africa, and his 1991 Nairobi Crusade. In *New Dimensions in African Christianity*. P. Gifford, (ed.) 157-187. Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).

would seem to escape the fate of being condemned to stay in a nation that is in difficulty and to escape to what many Pentecostals refer to as a new *destiny*.

The following extract from a sermon is a useful illustration of this:

You are *Destined for Glory*...BUT...BUT...BUT... You are tied...You are tied... You are tied. You are destined for glory but you are tied.... You have a car, a little car. You have a job, a little job. You have money, a little money. *But that is not your destiny*. You have come to the city. Now you are at the junction of two roads. [...] Your business was going well but now it has slowed down. It is not like it was, because *you have been tied*....

It is not enough to be born-again. You must go on further to your destiny. You need to be *relocated* to where *you ought to be* [...] *to where your abundance is waiting for you*....

This inevitably raises questions as to what the churches are offering in any real sense, is it in fact dope in the Marxist sense of an opiate in a situation of *misère-désolation*, to use Corten's term, or is it as Kā Mana hopes "a coherent schema in which the 'images of the world' might constitute a force, a breath, a dynamic of pregnant symbols and vital representations capable of mobilising the energies of the peoples of Africa in order to invent the future" – in other words *hope*?³⁵ The answer must surely be mixed and it certainly requires an examination of the different discourses.

The development of the social doctrine with the mainline churches

Within Catholicism and indeed in ecumenical Christianity generally there is a certain emphasis on the social doctrine of the Churches and certainly heavy involvement in social projects of all kinds, education, health, agriculture, women's projects and social development of all kinds. Often they are the main providers either through local church services or through the intervention of international faith-based NGOs.

³⁵ Kā Mana, *La Nouvelle Évangélisation en Afrique*, Paris: Karthala, 2000, 21.

In the past thirty years there has been a particular emphasis within Catholicism on the importance of the social doctrine of the Church. This was developed particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II, most particularly in the 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. This along with John Paul's many visits to the continent became the basis for Catholic social commentary on Africa, ultimately leading to the post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*³⁶.

This emphasis on the social teaching is often followed up in institutes throughout the continent dedicated to issues of justice and peace. The Institute of Justice and Peace in Cotonou, Benin, is an interesting example of this. The Institute's largely Christian-democratic orientation would seem to be confirmed by the support it receives from the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*,³⁷ which has been actively involved in democratic political development in Benin since 1990, as well as its contacts with the German Catholic business world. Dr Tardy Ostry, director of the *KAS*, says: "Our aim is to strengthen the social doctrine of the Church". And in this contribute to the consolidation of democratic institutions within the state.³⁸ The *IJPs* discourse is essentially that of the social doctrine. It is somewhat abstract, conservative and appears to me to be little adapted to the political realities of the country, although it does touch on questions such as ethnic identity.³⁹ Essentially, however, it repeats with little variation what it sees as classical Thomist positions and the social doctrine as enunciated by John Paul II. It is difficult to know to what extent it contributes to the imagining of the state in contemporary Benin. I posed the problem to Fr. Goudjo, director of the Institute, in the course of an interview. He acknowledges my observations but says that the problem is one of finding an appropriate discourse that will express

³⁶ See particularly ch VI of this document.

³⁷ Founded in 1956. " The Foundation offers political education, conducts scientific fact-finding research for political projects, grants scholarships to gifted individuals, researches the history of Christian Democracy, and supports and encourages European unification, international understanding, and development-policy co-operation." See <http://www1.kas.de/stiftung/englisch/intro.html>

³⁸ Interview, 11/06/2002.

³⁹ Raymond B. (Ed.) Goudjo, *Identités ethniques et intégrité nationale*, Cotonou: Flamboyant, 1998.

a political philosophy for Africa today. He has chosen that of classical Thomism because, he says, when African intellectuals meet they need a schema of debate “because [they] don’t have a philosophical springboard...that is thought out and co-ordinated”. In fact, he points out, all of them are using exogenous discourses, whether developmentalist, Marxist/dependency or neo-liberal, and in this his institute is no different.

We can take a few of our local sayings but this is not a discourse, and in order to establish a discourse one must find another logic. We haven’t been formed in an African logic – even those who pass for Africanists.... There is not an African thinker who has the logical coherence upon which we could found our philosophical springboard. My springboard is founded upon the Catholic faith, that is all I have done. Catholicism and Thomism for the very simple reason that I admire Thomas Aquinas...his capacity and the strength of his synthesis...because of these titanic ideas he has succeeded in establishing.

I’m doing what I can...If I write a lot, it is because of that, it is because we find ourselves in a *no man’s land*... So we have to accept the entry into our politics of external elements which are completely strange to us but which at the same time impose upon us a conversion in the way we look at things...⁴⁰

The ethical values expressed in the social doctrine are those that he considers to have contributed to the construction of other successful polities in the Christian Democratic tradition.⁴¹ These states are based on the dignity of the human person, the primacy of truth, the common good, and justice for all, in a state that is respectful of the subsidiary entities that compose it, allowing them room to develop in a spirit of solidarity with others and the wider world. This certainly contests more totalitarian models of power which seem to have been dominant since independence.⁴² It is difficult, however, to see how this is making any real inroads in the cut and thrust of everyday politics in Benin.

⁴⁰ Interview, 14/07/02.

⁴¹ See Amato Giuliano, Dehaene Jean-Luc et Giscard d’Estaing, Valéry, ‘L’Europe demain: la fausse querelle des “petits” et des “grands”’, *Le Monde* 13/11/03 18-19. A part of this long piece in *Le Monde* attempts to show how these values have been fundamental to the construction of European polities and how they have been incorporated into the proposed European constitution.

⁴² Bediako emphasises the importance of Christianity in “desacralisation of authority and power” in the African context. See, *Christianity*, 243-251.

Pentecostalism and the search for a new destiny

Pentecostal churches speak of Africa making a breakthrough as they advance on widespread campaigns seeking “soul harvests”, the rejection of the tradition and new destiny for the nations of the continent.

Amongst academics David Martin is perhaps the most enthusiastic particularly with regard to Evangelical Pentecostalism as a source of new energy and life for the continent. He claims:

To be born again is to have the power to “construct a space” for freedom and dignity, and to exercise authority by prayer, by exorcism and by averting misfortune.

The reorganisation of a chaotic moral field enables Pentecostals to participate in popular discontent with government. Most born-again Christians do not bribe officials or even tolerate such behaviour, and they also articulate an indirect critique of state-sponsored violence and the operations of the fraternities. They wrestle against the principalities and powers, and that means spiritual and satanic wickedness in high places, i.e. big and evil men. They are armed with countervailing power and their struggle on the spiritual level is all of a piece with their refusal to “play the game”. There are signs that this spiritual contest with corruption and with violence and lack of accountability of the powerful may grow into a more institutional participation in politics... Clearly this cannot be a homogeneous movement precisely because Evangelicals express different sets of interests in their opposition to corrupt elements in the social order. Nevertheless, they are part of self-conscious regulation “in an ongoing process of social transformation.”⁴³

Martin’s thesis is that Pentecostalism has “replicated Methodism” and that its socio-economic and political effects in Latin America and in Africa will be similar to those it is claimed it led to in Great Britain and in the USA. He is enthusiastic about its transforming effect on the situation of oppressed groups and particularly women, even calling it “a women’s movement”.⁴⁴ The Pentecostal

⁴³ Martin, *Pentecostalism*, 140-141. See also Ruth Marshall, ‘“Power in the Name of Jesus”: Social Transformation and Pentecostalism in Western Nigeria Revisited’, in T. Ranger and O. Vaughan (Eds) *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa*, London: Macmillan, 1993; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh: EUP, 1999.

⁴⁴ Martin, *Pentecostalism*, 169.

emphasis on “betterment, self-discipline, aspirations and hard work” which are “the first harsh phase of modernisation” will, he claims, eventually propel other parts of the world into modernity.

Paul Gifford casts a colder eye on things. While acknowledging that Evangelical Pentecostal may contribute to the maintenance of a certain social cohesion and “peaceability”, as Martin suggests, he has little time for the idea that they contribute in any meaningful way to the “reform of culture”. Even in their understanding of “peaceability”, he argues, they play the game of those in power, and thus in dulling the public debate that is essential to a working democracy and a renewal of Africa. He is equally dismissive of their role in gender issues, the understanding of success, and the inculcation of democratic values, the building of social capital or trust, and the work ethic, all at the core of Martin’s argument.⁴⁵

I would find it difficult to share Martin’s optimism and my fieldwork revealed little that corresponds to his thesis. Much of the discourse I heard in Pentecostal churches, and indeed in many of the mainline churches, seemed centred increasingly on *deliverance*, *healing*, *wonders* and *miracles* rather than anything that could be even loosely described as a new Protestant ethic. Far from being the centres of a new motivating discourse, they often appeared to me more as places of refuge in the face of a difficult daily life and an often a dysfunctional state. Writing of Haïti Laënnec Hurbon states:

One can ask oneself if the Pentecostal public space is not conceived essentially on the basis of the imaginary of witchcraft. In other words, only the Church herself, that is the assembly, can offer a haven of protection against a world understood as totally hostile, and in some sense an intermediate space which serves both as a private and as a public sphere, in the sense that the individual can allow himself to freely express the sufferings of his daily life and at the same time find a certain fusion with the pentecostal community, his new family. Can we say that we are witnessing here a *marronnage* (that is to say a flight) from the political?⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993; *Ghana's New Christianity*, London: Hurst, 2004.

⁴⁶ Hurbon, *Sociologie*, 241.

I certainly found it significant to note within the churches a constant emphasis on fellowship, fraternity, community etc all over and against society, these churches seemed to me at times to be *alternative societies*, and in that sense *sectarian* and somewhat closed in on themselves rather than positively engaged with and contributing to the edification of a better civil and political society.

Across the churches it appeared to me that that was a serious lack of social analysis of the kind that might allow for the development of appropriate theologies “capable of mobilising the energies of the peoples of Africa in order to invent the future”.⁴⁷ In fact one is often struck by the paucity of original theology in Africa. Liberation theology had a brief life in the writings of one or two authors such as Englebert Mveng and Jean Marc Ela, Kä Mana worked briefly on a theology of reconstruction but it is not clear that this resulted in very much.

Writing recently of Kenya, Paul Gifford is quite pessimistic in his analysis of the theologies coming out of a part of Africa that has become a kind of intellectual centre for the continent. Far from being political theologies with a view to social and political change, he sees them as dominated by the idea of African culture and the theme of inculturation but they are also marked by a “relentless externalism or blaming the West” for all of Africa’s problems.⁴⁸ This in turn takes the focus away from where it should be in analysis. It is a kind of inculturation, in my view, that looks to a golden past rather than towards building a new future. Naipaul remarks that “Africa lives its past like a dream of purity, the past as a religion.”⁴⁹ The question one must ask, however, is what of the future?

Conclusion

And so the time comes to put my own cards on the table in answering the question set in my title: *Christian Churches dope or hope?* I should state that I

⁴⁷ Kä Mana, *La Nouvelle Évangélisation en Afrique*, Paris: Karthala, 2000, 21.

⁴⁸ Paul Gifford pers comm.

⁴⁹ V.S. Naipaul cit. in Smith *Négrologie*, 82

came to this study as a practising Christian and having lived and worked as a missionary for 25 years, it can fairly be said that I have every interest in viewing this positively. Of course, I have also met Christians who I think are making a difference based on their faith and their commitment. Kă Mana's "true seekers of God", the poor of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5.1-10), righteous people in the best sense seeking to live honest lives and build a better and more hopeful future for themselves and their families. No doubt this is spread across the denominational spectrum.

The churches themselves speak of an African *kairos* in which faith must play a role. But how effective is all this? Where does it lead? Is there a coherent project "capable of mobilising the energies [needed in Africa] to invent a new future?" To what extent "can the Christian utopia as a horizon of existence be credible in the debates of society and in what way could the new evangelisation be presented as another way of being and of living for human societies"?⁵⁰ One must certainly wonder and worry about the apparent recourse to the invisible, to a world of "miracles and wonders" that often seems devoid of any kind of social analysis, as indeed one wonders and worries about a discourse which while it may have a certain intellectual or philosophical coherence also fails to engage with more concrete realities on the ground.

As a Christian one lives in hope but at the same time one must have an awareness of the dead ends religion has also led us into. Here, of course, one comes back to the importance of the theologies and where they take us. In his study of the Reformation, Geoffrey Elton notes: "It will not do to treat the radical reformers as though only their theology mattered; neither the spread of their ideas nor the reaction of others can possibly be understood unless the secular discontent to which they give tongue is kept in mind".⁵¹ It is a fundamental theoretical tenet of this paper that neither religion or theology exist outside social circumstances and they respond to these in different ways. Thus it can take on forms that one may find difficult to recognise as 'religious' in the more

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵¹ G.R. Elton, *Europe from Renaissance to Reformation*, London: Folio Society, 2001, 68.

conventional sense. The course of religious history has often been one of decay and reformation. It seems to go down blind alleys and into dead ends to the point where it becomes a caricature of itself, making Faustian deals of all kinds with the powers of *the world*. In these circumstances, it is certainly difficult to see it making a contribution to the edification of a more just society.

As a Christian, however, one is also aware of its positive power and its contribution to the construction of a more just society. What we need, I suggest, is a theology with its ear to the ground, or perhaps more appropriately on the heart of humanity, a theology of engagement rather than a theology of retreat, a theology of liberation as well as a theology of solidarity, ultimately in Jürgen Moltmann's terms, *a theology of hope*.⁵²

Dr. Patrick Claffey
Department of Mission Theology and Cultures,
Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy,
Dublin

⁵² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, SCM Press, London, 1967.