



Mission to the South, Words to the North: Reflections on Communication in the Church by a Northerner in the South

Jim Harries

After having worked as a missionary in Zambia, working in Kenya, since 1988.
A lot of indigenous churches primarily, in Bible teaching, and part time student on a Ph.D.
programme by extension, School of Theology, Birmingham University, UK
email: jimoharries@gmail.com

Abstract

Limitations in the possibility of clear communication, even when the language in use (English) is supposedly international, form the foundation for this post-Jenkinsian view of the relationship between Southern and Northern churches today. Presented by a Northerner living in the South this perspective suggests that Northern domination of Southern Christianity (as well as of the South in general) is a threat to the Southern church. Colonial, and particularly post-colonial North/South relations aggravate corruption in the South, and promote a shallow imitation of Northern ways which forms a thin veneer over lives that are deeply rooted in magical/witchcraft worldviews. The widespread negative evaluation of Northern Christianity is here identified with a linguistic idiosyncrasy arising from the preeminence of secularism in the North. 'Southern English' makes different sense of the term 'religion'. Christianity is a way of life. Secularism is also a way of life, and it was its being omitted from Jenkins' look at the world religious scene that has given it a misleading singular status. Christianity is alive in the north, but needs a jerk to arrest its current injurious southwards impact.

Keywords

African Christianity, relationship between Northern and Southern Christianity, intercultural theology, secularism, Jenkins

1. Introduction

This article considers Jenkins' well-known book *The Next Christendom*.¹ It asks whether a Northerner based in the North can sufficiently understand the

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2002.

Southern church to write as confidently as has Jenkins? Are indigenous Southerners, that are the stalwarts of the church, able to understand Jenkins? Would they agree with him? How can we tell? Does Jenkins describe a reality on the ground, or a peculiar perception of the North reflecting on itself? Does Jenkins having captured the imagination of many Northern theologians and missiologists, make him 'correct'?

The present author (b. 1964) has been a missionary in Zambia, and then Kenya since 1988. Sent by a Baptist church in England, seconded to Kima International School of Theology of the Church of God in East Africa, he also works with a lot of indigenous churches primarily in Bible teaching. He is fluent in *Kiswahili* and *Dholuo* (of Kenya) as well as English and German (and at one time *Kikaonde* of Zambia), and is currently a part time student on a Ph.D. programme by extension in the school of theology at Birmingham University in the UK.

Economic, social and cultural domination by the North of the South helps to proscribe the possibility of clear open communication between them. International debate is almost all in Northern languages. The process of translating the South's real issues into such familiar (to Northerners) linguistic contours results in a deceptive resemblance to Northern orientation, values and culture. What the Northerner receives can as a result be homely and familiar regardless of the nature of the original languages or issues being translated.² The South would perhaps not even have interest in communicating with the North, if it wasn't for its enormous dependence on it. How can one know that mandated communication is truly heartfelt? Kenyan children these days have *no choice* but to learn Northern communication systems — as primary school education modelled on the North and in English has been made mandatory by law. (Universal free primary education was recently introduced in Kenya.) Over the African Continent millions of people are spending long periods in the prime of their childhood (at least 8 years in Kenya) learning how to communicate in a Northern way.

Foreign domination and much use of foreign languages has made it difficult to find evidence for a deep intellectual attachment to Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Christian bookshops on the continent contain volumes and volumes of books written by Northerners in Northern languages from Northern Christian perspectives. (Secular bookshops are much the same being typically dominated in Anglophone Africa by English language text books

² Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, London: Routledge 1998, 5.

rooted in the North, written in a Northern way or as arising out of a Northern worldview. These very books are then used in African schools.) Should one chance upon an African author, he has probably had to spend many years in the North (typically doing a Ph.D. at a foreign university) in order to gain sufficient familiarity with Northern ways (and of course language) to be able to write in such a way as not to offend a Northern Christian publisher (or donor).

This practice has a negative impact on the growth of indigenous knowledge. It means in effect that the parts of African ways of life that are different from Northern ways of life are ignored by authors (/readers). Northern authors write from the perspectives of their own cultures. African readers cannot fully understand them because they are presupposing knowledge that most Africans do not have. They at the same time ignore profound complexities of life in Africa that happen to be unknown (or relatively unknown) in the North. This concern is worthy of expansion.

2. Models of Language and Culture

Because it is the impact and not the abstract meanings of words that are important, and because a word's particular impact will depend on its culture of use, we can say that every word in one language (culture) has a different meaning to every word in another language (culture). If I say 'I have a house' in the Luo (a people in Western Kenya) language (*an kod ot*), this means that I have a wife, as well as that I have built a structure for this wife, that may be made of mud. 'I have a house' in British English is taken as referring to a building made of bricks that I own. I can easily have a 'house' in British English, even as a single man. These examples illustrate the importance for clear scholarship of talking of the 'impact' of words on a context rather than their 'meanings'.³

Numerous examples illustrate this point. 'I ate at the table' may be an alternative to eating while sitting in front of the TV in some cultures, but a sharp contrast to the norm of eating while sitting on the kitchen floor in others. It is very acceptable to have a 'girlfriend' in some parts of the world, but the same term implies an illicit sexual relationship amongst another people. Going to work on a bicycle may suggest someone who is particularly courageous to face the cold weather in some places, but an improvement on the alternative which

³ Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edition 1995, 109.

is walking somewhere else. Love may be expressed through keeping a respectful distance in one place, but through sitting closely to someone in another.

Because imported words do not carry all the meanings that they have in their culture of origin, the adoption of a foreign language does not do away with local ways of using words, although it may conceal them. So while my use of a British English phrase such as 'he has been healed' implies a biomedical healing in England, that implicature is not carried over even if English is used in, for example, an African culture, where the same phrase could refer to having been healed from being bewitched (i.e. a spell).

Questions of witchcraft are especially pertinent. Southern Christians are engaged in assisting the Southern population in dealing with the spirits of ancestors and threats of witchcraft.⁴ Shoffeleers explains that Southern Christianity is an adaptation of the old *nganga* paradigm.⁵ (*Nganga* is often translated into English as 'witchdoctor.' 'Healer' would sometimes be a better translation.) Witchcraft is often considered as anathemas primitive syncretistic superstition by the North. Preferring not to be despised by their wealthy neighbours, the Southern Christian interpretation of what goes on is often oral and in vernacular languages. When it is written and in English, much of the reality of the vernacular portrayal is lost. How is the North to respond to this?

The unavoidable reality is that in interacting with a people who 'believe in' witchcraft, one is also interacting with witchcraft. (For an understanding of 'witchcraft' see Evans-Pritchard.⁶) Anyone perceiving that their problems are caused by witchcraft searches for someone who can solve these problems as they understand them. A pastor functioning in a 'witch bound' society⁷ must be able to assist people engaged in this search. Recognising a witch's capabilities is unfortunately empowering her (or him). Certainly the issue of finding an appropriate theology for dealing with witchcraft is unfamiliar to the North, thus there is a need for an understanding of African cultures in the thinking going into theological formulations.⁸

⁴ Jenkins, 123.

⁵ M. Schoffeleers, 'Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19/2 (1989), 163.

⁶ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. (Abridged.) Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976.

⁷ F.H. Melland, *In Witch Bound Africa: an account of the Primitive Kaonde Tribe and their Beliefs*. Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company 1923.

⁸ See also Mary Douglas, 'Sorcery Accusations Unleashed: the Lele Revisited, 1987', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69/2 (1999), 177-193, (www) pdf (accessed October 10, 2005).

3. Language Pragmatics

I suggest that the use of one language (English) internationally and cross culturally is a root cause of many communication blunders. This is for *many* reasons, which I draw on heavily but can in this paper only outline in barest detail.⁹

1. The critical eye of non-Northerners who can read the Northern language concerned prevents the Northerner from stating publicly that which is evidently true, because to do so would either:
 - (a) offend the non-Northerner or
 - (b) cause the Northerner to consider the non-Northerner to have been offended according to the former's (sometimes false) perception of the nature of the non-Northerner.
2. There is a limit to how foreign a thing can appear when the language used to describe it has to be familiar. The foreign, obscure and incredible easily appears domestic and familiar when the only metaphors available to picture it are thoroughly commonplace.¹⁰
3. The fact that people will interpret "in line with their experience of the way the world is"¹¹ cuts both ways. Wonderful truths, be they scientific, technological, social or theological, are frankly grasped in a different way by those in the South than is anticipated by those in the North. Explanations by Southerners to Northerners do not reveal 'what is', but an imagined middle world somewhere between reality on the ground in the South, reality in the North and Northern mythology and fiction.
4. Enormous context dependence of language unveiled in recent research in pragmatics and discourse analysis has shown that mutual understanding is possible only insofar as one has a mutual context.¹² The more distant the context of communicators, the lower the level of understanding. It is hard to imagine a more distant context than between some Northern and Southern societies.

⁹ See Jim Harries, *Pragmatic Theory Applied To Christian Mission In Africa: with special reference to Luo Responses to 'Bad' in Gem, Kenya*, incomplete Ph.D thesis, University of Birmingham UK, n.d. and Jim Harries, *Missions, International Relations, and Inter-sport Language in the African Context*, <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/missions.htm> (accessed June 14, 2005), n.d.

¹⁰ Venuti, 67.

¹¹ George Yule, *The Study of Language*, Cambridge Low Price Editions Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 1996, 141.

¹² Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Incorporated 1991, 97.

5. While misunderstandings occur in very simple day to day activities, these linguistic difficulties apply the most profoundly and intricately to the complexities of spiritual life, meaning, value and purpose, that are the bread and butter of the work of the theologian and missionary.

The attention already given in missiological circles to the issues briefly previewed above is, in my view, still inadequate. Hence my emphasis on it in this article. I hope that I am making my readers aware of the importance of language and cultural learning as prerequisite for understanding and engaging in cross-cultural mission, and thus by implication some weaknesses of scholarly work engaged in by those who have not passed through such learning.

4. The Church in the South

Jenkins has, I suggest, given insufficient attention to the interdependence of Northern and Southern churches. The South, and for the Northern Christian community particularly Southern Christians, have become the focus of charitable giving. (It has been my frequent observation that materials aimed at the popular Christian market in the UK usually portray Africa, and Southern communities more widely, as places to which to donate funds.) The intellectual dependence of the Southern on the Northern church extends also into material and cultural spheres.

The character of the church in the South is in many ways that of an anti-witchcraft movement. I do not say this disparagingly, and do not claim to have objective evidence to support it, but do suggest (as have many others) that this is how the North could easily find the church in the South to be if it were to take sufficient time to examine her closely. (For example see Murray.¹³) Once deprived of a view of Northern culture and ways of life to imitate, the Southern church would lose the alternative model that it has been copying since its inception. Sanneh tells us that 'the Biblicism of extreme Protestantism (...) acted to shield indigenous cultures from Western religious and intellectual dominance [thus conferring] on the vernacular an autonomous, consecrated status (...) more in tune with indigenous attitudes towards language than the

¹³ Jocelyn Murray, 'Inter-relationships Between Witchcraft Eradication Movements and Christianity in Central Africa', Dar es Salaam, UCLA Conference on the History of African Religious Systems 1970.

attitudes of missionaries'.¹⁴ We could restate that as implying that a church that develops in Africa on the basis of a text written in its own language (a translated Scripture) will be much more inclined to operate on the basis of indigenous principles (for example as pertaining to witchcraft) than a church (such as the Roman Catholic church) that imports its live traditions along with the Scriptures.¹⁵ Hence African Indigenous Churches (AICs) that much more frequently arise from Protestantism than Catholicism, are usually overtly active in countering witchcraft.

I have little doubt as to the good *intentions* of the vast majority of mission efforts from the North to the South today. *I do doubt whether many practitioners in the North understand what is happening in the South.* It would be helpful to consider the church in the South as a mystery, to be approached with humility and wonder, and not a knowing confident assumption of superior knowledge that results in an over-quick assuming of the role of 'teacher.' Inappropriate cross-cultural mission policies all too often arise and are perpetuated if people do not realise that all kinds of Northern mission efforts can be valued for their side benefits, (salaries, gifts, sponsors, access to the formal or international sector etc.) and not for their content.

Vulnerable, insightful, humble mission is all too frequently forestalled by the failure to consider the linguistic issues mentioned above. Approaches such as that of "ask the people what they want first" are looking for trouble. For example, not wanting to offend the Northerner, whom the local knows is best at and feels happiest at sharing Northern culture and wealth, the latter are said to be wanted. You do not share your deep heart-felt problems with a foreigner who has not made major efforts to understand you. The nature of the solution on offer dictates the nature of the 'problem' referred to. A medical doctor asking me if I have a problem will cause me to remember the strange ache I had last week, whereas the local architect asking the same question will have me ask if he can improve the design of my kitchen. So then what is my 'real' need?

In a day when the North dominates the world church, the Northerner who is determined to share the Gospel from a position of vulnerability and familiarity with culture will face very real difficulties. Southern Church authorities

¹⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture*, New York: Orbis Books 1989, 208.

¹⁵ Sanneh, 203.

are unlikely to place a Northerner into a position where he/she is vulnerable, preferring rather to take advantage of their powerful skills and contacts, especially as Northerners are usually much more effective in raising money from their 'own people' than are Africans. (There are clearly exceptions to this, and some African people are very effective at winning the hearts of Northern donors.) The ideal place for them from the African point of view may well be in the finance office. Many Northerners anyway quickly tire of close interactions with grass-roots African culture. Having financial and other clout they can easily do damage arising from misunderstanding or jumping over-quickly to conclusions if they get too close to sensitive local issues. Meanwhile Northerners fear that African lifestyles will bring them early demise or (biomedical) debilitation. Overall we can say that it takes considerable fortitude, including standing up to the pressure of both sending and receiving leaders, for a Northerner to succeed in being put into a vulnerable position on the mission field. It then takes even more fortitude to survive in such a position without all relationships being as of a 'patron'. (For more information on how to avoid being a 'patron' see Harries¹⁶ and for an explanation as to just how widespread the patron/client system is in Africa see Maranz.¹⁷)

Ironically, the more that Northern mission strategies are influenced by English speaking 'Southerners', the lower can be the prospect by Northerners of understanding the South as it is, and working with the people from *within*. Relying on inputs from Southerners, who are themselves trying to understand something that is foreign and often perceive the Gospel as closely linked with 'prosperity', is unfortunately often adding misunderstanding to poor understanding. Not because the Southerner is unintelligent, but because he/she is being asked to communicate about something in a way that is foreign to his/her people and worldview. In addition, most highly educated church leaders from Africa have in the course of their education drunk deeply from and become dependent on the perpetuation of springs of Northern wealth. They are of necessity careful to protect those springs.

Theoretically, the exceptions to the above rule, would include those 'Southerners' who have major exposure to Northern cultures, and are able to communicate clearly and accurately with the North by operating as 'coordinate bilinguals':

¹⁶ Jim Harries, *Power and Ignorance on the Mission Field or "The Hazards of Feeding Crowds"* [www] at <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/harries.htm> (accessed January 15, 2003), n.d.

¹⁷ David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, Dallas: SIL International 2001.

Psycholinguists have drawn a distinction between a coordinate bilingual and a compound bilingual. A coordinate bilingual is said to operate in two (or more) languages somewhat independently of each other. In essence a coordinate bilingual ‘controls’ two cultures and two ‘worldviews’ corresponding to the two languages in his/her repertoire. Switching from one language to another means crossing cultural and cognitive boundaries to a different mental universe.¹⁸

5. Northern Church ‘Helps’ Southern Church

The supposed re-orientation of mission from paternalism to partnership, has been much critiqued. Rheenan concludes that partnership has “... frequently become a disguised form of paternalism.”¹⁹ Yet it continues to be the stated aim across the board. Asking “am I/we being paternalistic” is no panacea to this issue. The intermingling of paternalism with dependency, sometimes known as patronage, makes for a powerful force. Patronage is a widely accepted system of social relations in SSA. We must ask; who will prefer partnership with hunger to patronage with a full stomach?

Maranz does an excellent job of bringing the patronage system in Africa to the attention of scholars in his 2001 text *African Friends and Money Matters*. This text, which rings strongly true both to Europeans who have lived in SSA and African people themselves (personal observation), explains clearly in a non-condemnatory way how friendship in Africa is inherently integrated into dependency relationships. Maranz suggests, and I concur, that it is almost impossible to develop a friendship within African circles in the absence of a relationship of material dependency.²⁰ The best intentions of a Northern church aiming for ‘partnership’ are not even understood in the South, where having patrons and then pleasing patrons is presupposed as a normal part of relationship.

Yet doing mission with money is a recipe that in the long term spells disaster. This has many aspects: paternalism is perpetuated; racism (in which whites become god-like) is constantly reconfirmed; the ignorance of the Northern missionary (‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’) is boundless; Northern superiority

¹⁸ Alamin M. Mazrui, ‘Language and the Quest for Liberation in Africa: the Legacy of Frantz Fanon’, *Third World Quarterly* 14/2 (1993), <http://weblinks2.epnet.com/citation.asp?> (accessed November 10, 2005).

¹⁹ Gailyn van Rheen, *Money and Missions*, (revisited) MMR#13 <http://www.vlib.anthotech.com/bin/jump.cgi?ID=1077> (accessed March 20, 2002), 2001.

²⁰ Maranz, 25.

continues with no end in sight;²¹ local initiative is sidelined, belittled and even ridiculed and demonized.

The widespread interest in Northern theological education in SSA should not deceive us as to its 'real' value to the African people. How can Northern theological education as we know it link in with a holistic 'magical' worldview and Christological paradigms based on the *nganga*? In short, often it doesn't, for many reasons.²² In the indigenous view, words are valued for their power and not primarily for their *meaning*. In other words — the popularity of Northern theological education in SSA is less an indication of its meaningfulness for Africa, and more of the wealth and power of the church that stands behind it.

Being easy to understand (as it's *a Northern* thing) and easy for it to do (its in *a Northern* language and rooted in *a Northern* worldview) the North is quick to jump to using its economic might in pushing its theological terminology into the far flung corners of the South. All too often their pre-packaged solutions are considered to be applicable to any context around the world regardless of local conditions, cultures, languages, politics, beliefs or patron-client traditions. (Global University uses its curriculum for "training the found [disciples] — everywhere!"²³) It does not seem to be realised that this contradicts some of the very foundations of Protestantism. A major point of the 16th Century reformers, that was to result in the birth of Protestantism, was that people should read and interpret the Bible in their own language and in respect to their own cultures. Then why are missionaries these days forcing foreign theology in foreign languages onto African people? Such theology can be like a wet squib damping local theological initiative. Relevant local language programmes that are able to reach the people are seen to be the 'lowest of the low' by those searching for career ladders and prosperity. The foreign, wealthy and irrelevant thus oppresses the apt and indigenous.

'How can this be' my readers may protest? Two mechanisms, I suggest, make this not only likely but actual. One could be termed 'dependency syndrome'. It is amazing how reluctant African people can be to say 'no' to the white man given his financial bounty. Very often the answer is yes, yes, and

²¹ Harries, *Power*.

²² See also Jim Harries, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in Relation to Conventions of Language Use in Africa: pragmatics applied to interpretation in cross-cultural context', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 30/1 (2006), 49-59.

²³ Global, *Global University: undergraduate studies catalog 2006*, Springfield, Missouri: Global University 2006, 9.

yes, until crisis point. Many have learned the profound reality that — if you follow the Northern way you can continue to get bountiful funding. But any suggestion by you that the Northerners have not understood or are misleading people and you can soon be back on the ‘poverty heap’ with the rest.

To this can be added the deeply ingrained faith by Africans in what we can term magic. Sub-Saharan African versions of rationality do not search for cause and effect in the same way that Northern ones do. They are more likely to be convinced by that which has power, even if its internal logic is inconsistent. (See also Tanner.²⁴) Northern theology is evidently powerful for reasons already mentioned above — its links with powerful Northern churches. That in itself makes it formally acceptable in many African circles.

Those who would argue that ‘better do something than nothing’ need to consider the counterfactual. A course of action achieving a given objective is far from proving that course of action to be the best. There may well be better options to having a foreign-subsidised network of English-language theological institutions that teach Northern theology scattered around the South. What appears to be ‘help’ may in the long run be denying the African church its chance to put deep roots into local soil. How much more effective would education be if presented in a language that people understand and in a way that enables the theologian to benefit from life-exposure to local cultures and dialogue with people on a par, rather than being a stand-alooft purveyor of superior mysteries? (In fact, once he or she relinquishes the use of European languages the possibilities for learning on the part of a Northern theologian increase greatly, especially if he/she comes to work in someone’s true mother tongue that touches deep heart issues.)

Various factors, including particularly the failure to comprehend the contextual dependence of language and understanding, cast a question mark on the real value of much of the ‘help’ provided by the Northern to the Southern church.

6. South Seeks Own Solutions

Is the South seeking its own solutions? How do we understand this as happening? Language meaning being contextually dependent presumably means that Jenkins’ understanding of this is from a Northern perspective (as Jenkins is a

²⁴ R.E.S. Tanner, ‘The Inequality Of Unwritten Languages: Some Reflections On The Christian Use Of The Vernacular In Eastern Africa’, *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 13/1 (2004), 68.

Northerner and writing to Northerners).²⁵ That is, Jenkins will by default be assuming Southerners to 'think as he thinks' and therefore to be seeking solutions in much the same way that he would. (Or in more detail as mentioned above, that Jenkins will be operating from an 'invented in-between world.')

"Neither the liberal nor the conservative dreams will be fulfilled" we are told.²⁶ But could there be another dream being fulfilled that is not recognised by the North? What could this be?

Is it possible that the truth about the church in the South may defy the North's wildest dreams? In reality, I suggest (along with Steiner²⁷) that the North is in some respects very narrow in its thinking. A consideration of the extravagant inventions emerging from Hollywood well illustrate this point. While not a connoisseur of film production by any means, I can nevertheless quickly recognise the style of American movies. In other words, the American ideology and identity underlying Hollywood heroes (perhaps seen the most clearly by non-Americans) graphically illustrate the limitations of human imagination and acknowledgement of what is 'possible', in social/human terms. The solutions that the African church is likely to 'seek for itself' may easily, speaking from a Euro/American worldview perspective, be 'out of this world'!

Over-simplistic language comprehension can be responsible for the failure of Northern people to realise this. (See above.) English, into which communications from Africa have to be translated, does not have the means to cover the width and breadth of African beliefs and practices. Much that is common experience in Sub-Saharan Africa falls *outside* of the range of life-experiences shared by Northerners. This, and especially the overt Northern devaluing of 'superstition', renders much of African ways of life invisible to the North. Intent (i.e. ignoring African ways because they are full of superstition) is not even needed for a Northerner to be grossly deceived as to what is happening on the ground in this continent.

In reality, and speaking to the North and not to Africans (for linguistic reasons mentioned above, I cannot pretend to address both at once accurately) life in much of SSA is dominated by witchcraft beliefs, mystical forces and the rule of the dead. These beliefs and such powers do not disappear in an instance

²⁵ Jenkins, 2002.

²⁶ Frans Wijzen, 'Nijmegen Missiology Conference Oct. 2005/Jenkins', email sent by Wijzen on February 3, 2005.

²⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition 1998, 486.

on the encroachment of either the modern (whatever that is) or Christianity. "Confrontation with the spirit world is a central element in African thinking. Western theology, on the other hand, regards demons as superstitious trash, said Kapolyo, although Jesus Christ himself drove out demons."²⁸ As the decision making of Northern Christians is (from an African perspective) dominated by scientific rationality, so the reasoning of African Christians is and will continue to be dominated by what could loosely in the North be termed 'superstition'.

The Southern church as the Southern community as a whole, in seeking its 'own solutions' will apply spells, blessings, incantations, exorcisms, anti-witchcraft strategies, divination and so on in seeking for the solution of its problems. Blunt illustrates this in showing how strongly Kenyan society is oriented to deliverance from satanic powers.²⁹ The history of the church indicates to me that these are not 'a nonsense'. It is often recognised that the Bible speaks more clearly to worldviews rooted in magic than it does to the modern, rational and so-called sophisticated. If this is the avenue that God chooses to use in maturing the Southern church, then Northerners need urgently to improve their own learning strategies. (That is to be vulnerable to and ready to listen to local people by operating from within their own languages and cultures so as to acquire the ability to comprehend what God is trying to do amongst them.)

I refer those horrified by these suggestions back to section 4.0. Yes, help *is* needed where what itches is currently hardly scratched. But use of a foreign 'rational' language bypasses the key issues. Theological education *is* needed, and the North *could* help to provide it-but then this help *must* be presented in local languages, and in response to 'local' worldviews. Reasons for this include that the use of foreign languages will always leave the foreigner in a dominant position. It will not (given the vast cultural gap between North and South) be able to accurately express Southern truths or address Southern contexts. It will severely hinder the opportunities for Northerners to learn from Southern contexts — so that as well as dominant they will be ignorant. It will leave all Southerners' attempts at devising theology wide open to critique by Northerners who will understand the Southerners' writing (or speaking) better than its

²⁸ Joe Kapolyo, 'Africans Need African Theology: Western Theology Fails to Address African Needs', in: David Parker, *WEA Theological News On-Line: Promoting Biblical Truth by Networking Theologians* 45 (May 2006), received by email in May 2006.

²⁹ Robert, Blunt, 'Satan is an imitator: Kenya's recent cosmology of corruption', in: Brad Weiss, (ed.) *Producing African Futures: ritual and reproduction in a new liberal age*. Leyden/ Boston: Brill 2004, 294-328.

authors! (See also Harries for further reasons for the need of the use of African vernacular languages in theological education in Africa.³⁰)

This is not to say that every single African dialect must have its own theological college and library. Rather — that the above problems are much reduced between one African language and another as they arise from comparable cultures. The difference in lifestyles between neighbouring African people groups is generally minute by comparison with the gap between Northern and African peoples. Regional African languages, while not perfectly suited, are eligible for use.

This situation could change if European languages were allowed to become African. Should communication with European originators of the foreign languages used in Africa suddenly cease, then the very languages will become Africanised. This is not currently happening because (at least in East Africa) Northern languages are valued exactly because of the links that they enable with the North, and assessed using foreign standards.

7. Explosion of Northern Christianity

That which explodes can be being destroyed, or multiplied. Jenkins living in the North sees the weakness of Northern Christianity,³¹ whereas myself, living in the South, see the weakness of the Southern church! Perhaps this difference in perspective is important. Do any one of these perspectives have a greater claim to ultimate truth?

The linguistic contours in common use in the North are deluding us.³² For 'secularism' not to be included in the list of 'world religions' is one such. Much can be said of the term 'religion', which through translation into African languages and back into English would most often become 'life'. 'Religions' are in the North referred to as 'faiths', implying that (unlike ideologies such as secularism and modernism) they are held 'by faith alone', i.e. without evidence. What can scholars of religion and missions, do about this circumstance? Perhaps they can start by correcting their writings to debunk those misleading fallacies, and cease to give secular religion privileged status in discussion.

³⁰ Jim Harries, *The Name of God in Africa' and Related Contemporary Theological, Development and Linguistic Concerns*, unpublished paper 2006, www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles (accessed October 23, 2006).

³¹ Jenkins, 162.

³² Steiner, 22.

Secularism's privileged status as 'not a religion' undoubtedly aids and has aided its spread — as it thereby bypasses 'different religions' means for protecting their boundaries. (The God of the Bible is jealous of sharing his rule with other gods,³³ but secularism has no 'gods'!) Claims by secularists to being non-religious in nature are not true historically — as secularism has arisen in historically Christian places. It arises through the choice of a particular philosophy in preference to another. In Africa it creeps in under the cover of Christianity, all too often leaving African people bewildered as to just where it has come from; it is spread by the very people who claim to believe in nothing but the Bible, which does not seem to even mention many of its tenets! (This puzzle leads some people in Africa to believe that a supplement to the Bible or a secret religion is being kept hidden from them.³⁴)

The syncretism of Northern Christianity is grossly evident from the South. Many mission activities, from Northern medicine to numerous projects, are hybrids with secular culture. (They are not found in the Scriptures.) A particular syncretism has given Northerners an aversion to 'religiosity'. Why are British people embarrassed to pray before a meal in a public restaurant? Why do so many families (apparently) not sing together? Why do our people have so little respect for 'men of God'? How can an intelligent people pay so little attention to ultimate questions of the meaning of life and what happens after death? Why are people so easily deceived into believing that having wealth is so much more important than being at peace with their Creator?

This has resulted in a strange paradox in mission to Africa. Secularists deny that their faith has anything to do with Christianity, while Northern Christians largely ignore the fact that many of their actions arise from secular beliefs. Many of the pieces of the puzzle needed to recreate Northern life in Africa thus being hidden from view, leaves thinking African peoples all too often floundering. (And then reverting to so-called prosperity theology.) To resolve this situation I suggest that secularists should cease to conceal their innate Christian nature, and Northern Christians should either 'deseccularize' themselves, or acknowledge the secular beliefs that influence them. While it may be extremely difficult or impossible for Northern Christians to live and work as if they were not influenced by secularism, the tenets of secularism being foreign to African (Southern) languages and cultures make this an urgent requirement for the sake of clear communication. (Perhaps teaching of Greek classics and

³³ Deuteronomy 5:7-10.

³⁴ H.W. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements*. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co. 1979, 271.

philosophers would be an aid towards Northern honesty in self-presentation to Africans? The writings of the ancient Greeks addressing cultures that resemble some African ones makes them into a potential 'bridge'.)

Secularist religion clearly has important weaknesses (such as that it offers no hope for eternity). Its grandiose claims being a deception, I presume that it will pass, and return people to its living roots — vital Christianity. An increasing proportion of the population becoming aware of the deception of secularism may result in a boom in Christianity in the North. Those who see Islam as a greater threat than secularism to Christianity in the North are probably correct. By comparison with the long history of strained relations between Christianity and Islam, the threat of communism has been merely a small blip, and so probably will be the fate of secularism.

8. Further Comments on Jenkins

Jenkins' has scratched where missiologists have itched. His research may have been thorough, but his being heavily grounded in northern worldview perceptions has given his writing significant weaknesses.

Jenkins' own acknowledgements as to the weaknesses of the quantitative approach that he uses, appears to be an attempt to pre-empt his critics. (For example, see Jenkins' intentional critique of 'clever men' as if to set himself up as straw man, but then to remain standing!³⁵) His frequent distant extrapolations of current trends and his heavy reliance on numbers, indicates methodological weakness and a lack of theoretical depth and profundity.

Jenkins considers that it is they're being 'ordinary' that results in there being less interest in mission churches than in AICs by researchers in the South.³⁶ I suggest that the difference between these groups is not fundamentally in nature ('ordinariness'), but in degree of openness. That is AICs do openly what mission churches hide in their attempt to imitate and please the North. Jenkins considers that people in the South are adapting Christianity to their cultures.³⁷ I find this to be a common but erroneous understanding amongst missiologists. Southern Christians perceive themselves as adapting their culture to the Gospel, but the latter being as understood in their own language.³⁸

³⁵ Jenkins, 211.

³⁶ Jenkins, 58.

³⁷ Jenkins, 51 and 133.

³⁸ Marko Kuhn, 'From African Consciousness to Subconscious Inculturation: a study into African independent churches (AICs) in Nyanza/Kenya.' Diplomarbeit, University of Frieberg,

While Jenkins does not reveal his own stand, his considering Christianity's appeal as 'surprising',³⁹ suggests that he writes as a secularist. While Jenkins' heralding of missionary work as a great success story⁴⁰ is long overdue, he makes insufficient effort to consider the strengths and weaknesses of different mission policies. He reveals his own secular foundations by promoting mission by money⁴¹ even though later contradicting this position in sharing that Christianity fares the best in a situation of relative poverty.⁴²

Jenkins' lack of awareness of the importance of linguistic considerations in his research, while perhaps not uncommon, takes him off course. His having accepted Northern (English) language categorisations (classically in the use of the term 'religion') while claiming to write on many non-Northern cultures is perpetuating some of the very paternalism he seems to want to dispense with.

9. Conclusion

I find myself in disagreement with Jenkins' pessimism on the North, and optimism on the South. Recognizing secularism for what it is, a New Religious Movement that has broken away from mainstream Christianity, will help us to avoid its deceptions. Recognising that the North does not 'know' what it thinks it knows about the church in the South once having perceived the deceptiveness of language use, will help us to realize where the church in the South is in its need for relationship with the North. An open recognition of Northern Christianity's syncretism with secularism could easily be followed by a renewal of Christianity. Mission to the South can then benefit from renewed spirituality and be a seeking to share the Gospel of Jesus with people as they are, instead of the recent pre-occupation with short term efforts at secularisation in the name of Christianization, and presupposing that 'Southern' Christians (and non-Christians) are really much the same as 'Northerners'.

Pragmatics, specifically the consideration of language in terms of its impact rather than its meaning, are used to question the legitimacy of Jenkins' knowledge of the Southern church. Northern domination of Southern Christianity

2001, (PDF) http://WWW.comboni.de/angebote/buecherstube/aics_in_nyanza.pdf (accessed 27.08.05), 2001, 89.

³⁹ Jenkins, 39.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, 39.

⁴¹ Jenkins, 213.

⁴² Jenkins, 218.

(and the South in general) is seen as a threat to the Southern church. Colonial, and particularly post-colonial North/South relations aggravate corruption in the South and promote a shallow imitation of Northern ways which forms a thin veneer over lives that are deeply rooted in magical/witchcraft world-views. The widespread negative evaluation of Northern Christianity is here identified with a linguistic idiosyncrasy arising from the preeminence of secularism in the North. 'Southern English' makes different sense of the term 'religion'. Christianity is a way of life. Secularism is also a way of life, and it was its being omitted from Jenkins' look at the world religious scene that has given it a misleading singular status.

Jim Harries (b. 1964) has been a missionary in Zambia, and then Kenya since 1988. Sent by a Baptist church in England, seconded to Kima International School of Theology of the Church of God in East Africa, he also works with a lot of indigenous churches primarily in Bible teaching. He is fluent in *Kiswabili* and *Dholuo* (of Kenya) as well as English and German (and at one time *Kikaonde* of Zambia), and is currently a part time student on a Ph.D. programme by extension in the school of theology at Birmingham University in the UK.