

# **God, the Christian Faith, and Social / Cultural Change in the Context of African 'Poverty'**

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## **Biographical Details**

Jim Harries (1964) is a Brit who has lived and worked in Zambia from 1988 to 1991 and then in Kenya from 1993 to date. His primary occupation is Bible teaching, especially to members of indigenous churches using the *Kiswahili* and *Dholuo* languages in which he is fluent, as well as English. He has a PhD in Theology that draws heavily on missiology, linguistics and anthropology. He is chairman of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, that encourages contemporary mission using the languages and resources of the people being reached.

## **Key words**

Africa, theology, development, vulnerability, knowledge, missions.

## **Abstract**

Challenging the certainty of contemporary knowledge leads to a reconsideration of the understanding of the role of the 'divine' in the history of society. Key questions about God are shown to pertain to his nature, and not his existence. 'Superior religion' debates are re-visited, leading to the suggestion that the key change agent in Sub-Saharan Africa is not Western technology, but knowledge of the true God. The struggle to acknowledge the unity of the Godhead itself brings positive change in human society, whereas development aid to Africa joins hands with the pragmatism of indigenous religion resulting in the enhancement of magical beliefs. Western mission to Africa is shown to rely excessively on foreign languages and finance, having taken the role of serving tables to the exclusion of ministry of the Word (Acts 6:2-4).

## **Introduction**

This theological analysis of the dilemmas facing Sub-Saharan African society challenges conventional presumptions on the way forward in social and economic development. Instead of economics and aid, the nature of people's beliefs in and understanding of God are shown to be critical and central to social progress.

This article presents a challenge to the Western mission force to reconsider its contribution to Christianity on the continent of Africa. The greatest need in Africa is shown to be for relevant theology expressed in the lives of Christians committed to vulnerable service, using local languages, freed from the constraints of misguided materialistic efforts at promoting 'African development'.

## **1. Divine Revelation in a Globalising Age**

I was startled when a visitor from the UK recalled some words of a Kenyan pastor, whose preaching I had just translated into English. ‘The Preacher said so and so ...’ recalled the visitor. ‘He didn’t say that’ I responded, ‘I said that!’ The preacher had actually said something very different but that couldn’t be translated (without long explanations) and that would anyway make little sense to a Brit. That is quite a problem. Explaining to people, that is, what they cannot understand. How do you explain what someone doesn’t understand, when they won’t understand what they won’t understand? They can rather suspect that ... are you making this up?

If someone acknowledges that there is something they don’t understand – that still leaves them not understanding it. If they are not understanding it, then whatever action they take will be ignoring it, or be on the basis of their understanding, which is a misunderstood understanding (or an understanding of a misunderstanding). Are there ways of life that are beyond the English language to grasp? If there are not, then I could ask what it is that has given me the notion that there are? If there are – then that may have important ramifications. It means that, missionaries who are constrained to English may be remaining ignorant. They may be missing things that are important.

What analogies from *within* English can illustrate this? In part our view of history. Why do people in the West generally assume previous generations to have been in important ways ignorant, when they presumably did not consider that for themselves? Might subsequent generations not turn around and say the same of people today as today’s have been saying of those who have gone before them? It now seems logical and even essential for women as well as men to vote in elections. Were prior generations who didn’t consider this necessary all sexist bigots? Looking back into British history we find a time when people were vastly more devotedly Christian than they are now (Larner 1984, 114). Could such devotion to Christianity re-occur? Were all those our ancestors misled? Is there not a risk that today’s generation are the ones who are wrong in rejecting that which was considered so valuable by their ancestors? Who is to say? Careful observers will note that the wisdom of one age can become the folly of another, and vice versa.

Such uncertainty ought to be high in people’s minds in this age of globalisation. One could compare globalisation to the meeting of distant historical epochs. Like traveling though time in a tardis rather like Dr. Who, but with a need for less confidence in one’s own innate superiority. How would it be to meet one’s great, great, great, great grandfather – not as an old man, but as one’s age-mate? Will it always be the prerogative of later generations to enlighten ignorant earlier ones? Do our ancestors have nothing to teach us? Can we say, that the ignorance of our ancestors is always reflected in the lifestyles of those in the world who are ‘not yet’ Westernised?

Such a ‘progressive’ view is dearly not universal even in today’s world. Many societies, and Bible believing Christians really must be counted amongst these, look back upon their ancestors as having had insights and revelations of a divine nature that current generations should prize.

Our age clearly prides itself on its profiting from a vast increase in the availability of knowledge. Levels of education are rising for an ever increasing number of people. More and more information is available ever more widely, and with the spread of the internet this increase is explosive. Surely that vouches for the superiority of the current age over and above all that have ever gone before? This author finds himself to be a product of this age.

Brought up the son of a farm labourer but now with a PhD under his belt after having spent many years in the British educational system. Am I not glad for my education? Has it not raised me from the pits of dark ignorance into the enlightened Twenty First Century?

A question rarely asked regards the suitability of educational systems to the foundations of a particular society where they are applied. The dominant Western education that spreads around the world is secular. Religious components of it are from a Western perspective. People assume education to be up-building of society. But what if there is something missing, and that 'something' was given to our ancestors through divine revelation? The effect or impact of that 'something' may still be there in Western society but it may no longer be known or recognised? Let's say '... the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs' (Weber 1930, 182). That something may have such a key role to play that its absence renders the rest of the education ineffective without it; like an engine without a starter motor, or a beautiful well built house without any doors.

If access to a vast ever-growing body of existing knowledge is the key to progress today, then what has happened to divine revelation? More specifically, how important was people's understanding of God in forming Western society as it is today? History books today depict the past in Europe as one of technological advance (assuming the philosophical position of materialism and determinism (Cline 2007)), but to what extent was that society's self-understanding at the time? Is this accurate? Is theology irrelevant to human social and cultural advance? That seems unlikely, despite Marx's protestations.<sup>1</sup> If it is not irrelevant, then the question arises as to which kind of theology is important, and in which ways is it important or even essential to human development? These days, even many Christians in the West seem to have taken historical materialism on board.<sup>2</sup> Are they right to have done so?

What is the key to a good education? Is it the right content (as seems to be nowadays assumed) or is it the right *relation*? That is, for an education to be appropriate for a particular community is it of primary importance that it speaks to the life and needs of the community to which it is to be applied, or is there an appropriate provision of a universal set of knowledge that any child must have? In more detail: is appropriate education a universally transferable superstructure, or is it learning how to live in one's community, such that it ought to grow from one's own people or those closely related to them? Should there be a match between education and life as experienced by those being educated? I suggest that these days in the Third World we have far too little of this match, including in theological education. I suggest that it is more appropriate for one society to learn from another by adapting and changing what it has, than by the wholesale adoption through relocation of a complete system from one community to another as is being attempted in Africa today as it adopts 'education' from the West.

I believe that there is a real danger in today's globalising world that the current forcing (economically through all sorts of subsidy) of secular English-based education and life onto

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<sup>1</sup> Marx tells us that: 'The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness' (Marx 1843).

<sup>2</sup> Historical materialism is the belief that: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1859). My suggestion that this has become a very wide-spread presuppositional belief in Western countries arises from the widely observed decline of religion and hence recognition of religious causation in the same. What remains in the absence of the spiritual, is the material.

non-Western societies is denying them, especially the poor amongst them, their opportunity to advance themselves. Particularly because some of the components of self-advance, being 'religious', are left out. Also because of the difficulties non-native English speakers have in acquiring sufficient language acumen to critically interact with what they are taught. Subsidizing educational models based on the current secular state of the West may be directing people into incompetence. A secular education that may (or may not) be fine for an industrialized society, may be the death of a primal community. Let's consider God's role in education and in life.

## **2. Who / What is God?**

Has the West become so accustomed to asking 'do you believe in God?', as to neglect the question of who (or what) God *is*? Many do not realize how simplified a view of reality the question 'do you believe in God' can represent. Who or what is that, belief in which is so easily explained using a 'yes or no' answer? What does it mean to say 'no' to belief in God? What happens if we substitute something for God? Do you believe in wives, do you believe in love, do you believe in managing directors, do you believe in your father ... None of these questions have a very simple answer, like 'yes or no' – so why do some people say 'no I do not believe in God', and what do they mean by this?

It would appear in the West that God has long been in retreat. He is taken as gap-filler. The logic now is something like this; God was at one time thought to be the one who pulled the sun across the sky, but now that we know in reality the earth revolves around the sun and not the other way round, there is no God. Sickesses like measles or malaria that were once thought to be caused by God's displeasure are found to be due to virus and plasmodium, hence there is no God. God was thought to live above the clouds, but when aircraft and space-ships went above the clouds he was not to be seen, so there is no God. From history, to psychology, to anthropology the story is the same. Rather like the proverbial straw man – the West has invented a god, and subsequently disproved him. But what of that other God – the one the West seems to choose to ignore?

A medical doctor made a discovery (Snyder 2007). When people are diagnosed as having serious illness their thoughts do not go to options for their treatment. What comes to the mind of someone who considers their life to be threatened, is usually the future destiny of their soul. 'Where am I going?' 'What does it mean to "die"?' 'Is this a good thing, or is it as terrible as it appears?' Now – where do these thoughts come from?

This person may be dying of lung cancer. They may have been galled by a bull. They might inadvertently have taken poison. They may be 100 years old. They may be facing the electric chair. The nature of the causative agent is immaterial. However someone comes to face death – the cause of death is in this sense totally inconsequential. The point is that – they will die. No modern or scientific discovery has yet come to alleviate this. When faced with its prospect, people think, usually fearfully, of eternity and of God. So then God has, I suggest, something to do with the eternity of the human soul (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And God is integral to human existence – even if pushed to the margins.

Why was I born in Britain and not France? Why is my skin white and not black? Why is it that while I have flown in planes, and plane crashes have occurred, I have never been in one? Why was I born to bilingual parents, and therefore was brought up bilingual, and have I since acquired a fascination with languages? Why have some people suffered from cancer in

their early 20s and I have not? The answer the West has on offer is essentially ‘statistical chance’ and circumstance. Where does this answer arise from? Is it in our human nature? I suggest not. People ‘by nature’ seek for more meaningful reasons. That is – for God, for meaningfulness. The ‘chance’ explanation is a recent introduction arising from an artificial construct called science.

The English language contains terms such as: ‘amazing’, ‘incredible’, ‘awesome’, ‘fantastic’, ‘incredible’ and ‘vast’. Those are God. That is not to say the thing itself that is described in these ways is God. Or that the words themselves are God. Someone being amazed at the size of a chicken does not mean that the chicken is God. God is rather behind the amazement – that is, he underlies the capacity to be amazed. This is the essence of the New Testament term *miracle*. A miracle could not in the New Testament have been a contravention of a scientific or natural law, because such laws were not then known as they are now (Kee 1986, 27-66). A miracle rather was – ‘wow’!<sup>3</sup> This term – ‘wow’ – I suggest, is of God.<sup>4</sup>

The important question I suggest is not ‘do you believe in God’, but ‘who (or what) is God?’ That is – what is he like!<sup>5</sup> I take God as having made himself known specifically through the lives and testimonies of Old Testament characters, and latterly through Jesus Christ and his disciples. Having moved the question from being *whether* God is to *who/what* God is I believe we are in a position to begin to consider in more detail – the importance of God in social and cultural change.

### 3. God in Social and Cultural Change

If God is indeed an essential part of human society (shown above), it should be clear that he has a role in social and cultural change. This is not at this stage claiming a pivotal or key role, but merely a role. In the same way as one could say, for example, that women have a role to play in social and cultural change. Or house design has a role to play. Or language, even soil type and rainfall, plus divorce rates and staple food – all these have a role to play in social and cultural change. In each case we can say that there must be women, there must be houses of some sort, there must be a language, and there must be a type of soil, so there must be God of some kind in a human community. Then we can go on to ask something of the role played by each of the above, and to what degree they are essential. Is it possible for social and cultural change (improvement) to occur for example if women do not go to school, or houses are made of mud, or soil is dark and fertile, or divorce rates are especially high or low? In each case there are clearly boundaries that must not be crossed. Women can be tall or short, but must be fertile. Rainfall may be absent in one location, but present in another, the staple food must contain carbohydrates, and so on.

We could ask whether for human and social development to occur God needs to be intelligent, or whether a ‘stupid’ machine-like God with fixed roles who leaves people to

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<sup>3</sup> I emphasise this ‘wow’ aspect of miracle to counter more recent English understanding that a miracle is due to a ‘supernatural agency’ (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1982). This latter assumes that there is a ‘nature’ that is distinct from a ‘super-nature’. In New Testament times such distinction was, according to Kee, at best vague. (1986) Hence something amazing, whether or not it was contrary to science, was taken as ‘miraculous’, and pointed to the action of ‘God’.

<sup>4</sup> In other words, the human tendency to be amazed is linked to an in-built orientation to worship / adoration of a higher being.

<sup>5</sup> To go into much greater depth in proving the existence of God would seem to belong to the real of apologetics, and to go beyond the bounds of this essay.

think for themselves is adequate? Does God have to be powerful? Or are the powers needed to direct cultural change to be found in nature and God's role can be merely to sit and observe? Does God need to be a listening God? Can social / cultural change occur even if God has no interest in listening to human beings? Does he have to be present, or can he be like the person who winds up the watch or charges a battery and then goes away? What are the necessary or desirable parameters required of God that will allow or enable healthy social and cultural change?

There has been no shortage in past centuries of scholars who have attributed Western Europe's global transcendence to the peculiar wonders of the Christian God. Weber (1930, 51), Durkheim (1977),<sup>6</sup> Hegel (Latourette 1953, 1125) and Stahl (Latourette 1953, 1131) are just some of these. Christianity was long seen to be superior to other religions, as it formed the foundation for what has proved to be the most materially prosperous civilization the world has ever known (Western Europe and those people who have migrated from it).

This kind of thinking has gone out of vogue, for various reasons. One important one has been the enormous economic success of people that are clearly not traditionally Christian, such as the Japanese. (Bellah would have us believe that the amazing economic success of Japan is connected to Japanese religion (1957).) Then there has been the decline of Christianity in Europe (Jenkins 2002, 191-192). Related to this has been the predominance of materialist-causative thinking which attempts to ground social changes in class and economic factors and more recently especially in 'things' themselves.<sup>7</sup> It has become politically incorrect to consider people's poverty to arise from their religion, especially in the African context. Black people being renowned for being superstitious, occultic and so on, this would seem to be racist. Were a necessary role for 'religion' in human society and human development be discovered then superstructures built on the assumption of God's absence, such as much of secularist philosophy, would surely be threatened.

Arguments about 'superior religions' no longer take pride of place in academic debate. Presumably because it has come to be seen as inappropriate to consider someone 'inferior' because of their religion, in a world in which racial equality comes more and more into vogue? It is interesting to trace the changes in policies of colonising nations over the centuries. Coloniser's of the Americas had little problem with killing off large percentages of the original inhabitants (Wheatson 1992, 40) leaving Argentina with an 85% immigrant population (Ludwig and Wilkie 1985, 614). Native Americans (Red Indians) were hoarded into reserves in America (Sandefur 1989:37). Aborigines were marginalized in Australia, and black Africans treated inhumanly as slaves. Yet the 20<sup>th</sup> Century story in Sub-Saharan Africa was to turn out very differently. Notions of human equality far overtook 'superior religion' thinking, in the end even in such of its stalwarts as the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the coin seems to have flipped almost totally. At least in Europe (less so in America) there is a sense in which the 'religious' missionary, especially of

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<sup>6</sup> See especially Chapters 2 and 3 that talk of the role of the church in promoting education in Europe.

<sup>7</sup> I have already considered historical materialism in footnote 3 above. The tendency to go beyond this, and see the physical and material as foundationally causative is reflected in the theory of natural evolution in its tracing of the origin of all of life to random physical combinations of matter. See also Plantinga (1983).

<sup>8</sup> As indicated by the fall of apartheid in South Africa between 1990 and 1994 (Schwartzman and Taylor 1999). The Dutch Reformed Church provided theological underpinnings for the apartheid policy (Verkuyl n.d.).

Christianity, is seen to be thoroughly out of date.<sup>9</sup> Church/mission efforts have been monopolised in many circles by a finance / project approach on the part of the Western church relating to the rest of the globe.<sup>10</sup> This has led to the prominence of organisations such as Tear Fund (The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund), World Vision, Compassion International and so on which, while overtly Christian, have a stand focused on resource-transfer and rooted in the financial and technological rather than religious ‘superiority’ of the West. Evangelism, for these organisations, while important, occurs on the back of ‘giving’ (Micah Network 2008). While a revival of points of view onto which the coffin lid has been firmly nailed down would seem to be retrogressive, a question remains: what relevance does God have to social and cultural change?

Looking at the African scene – the coffin-lid may not be nailed down as hard as sometimes appears. Jenkins has reported the booming of the church in the ‘Global south’, while it declines in the north (Jenkins 2002). My own experience in East Africa confirms – that many African people give more credit to Christianity as a belief system (the truth about God) for social and cultural change than do Westerners. (African people’s widespread understanding that evil spirits or demons are responsible for their problems, would clearly have them attribute a decline in demonic activities to a force of the same spiritual order, i.e. God.) There is a high level of concealment of local African reality from Western eyes and ears occurring for many reasons.<sup>11</sup> Not least has been the adoption of English and other European languages as the media for official communication in numerous African countries (Harries 2011c). As discussed above, (see also Harries 2007) this has contributed significantly to the insulation of Western academia from on-the-ground reality in places like Africa. It has made it harder and harder for Western academia to connect with African languages, in which the truly African debates are invariably engaged at all less than formal levels. Hence the African religious reality is concealed from the gaze of Western scholarship.

Communication difficulties between the West and Africa go far and wide. The West sometimes seems to consider itself guilty for African poverty – a position which fundraisers for the African cause generally milk diligently.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, the West in considering Christianity now as an imperial colonial imposition is almost embarrassed by the vast success of the missionary project. This especially as traditional Christian countries are attempting to build a prosperous Europe of the future on so-called ‘secular’ foundations (Anon 2007).

On the basis of personal experience as well as of the above discussion, I can respond with a resounding ‘yes’ to the question of whether the coming of Christianity ‘itself’ (as against the finance and Western culture that often accompanies it) has had a major significant positive (in terms of impairing people’s general ‘well-being’) impact on Africa. The question I suggest now is – will God be allowed to work, or will Westerners continue to confuse God with themselves (Harries 2011b)?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This of course follows naturally from the secularisation of European society, and implicit belief in historical materialism (see above).

<sup>10</sup> As shown in many ways in Western Christian media. Hence it is my clear personal impression that the *idea* magazine of the Evangelical Alliance (UK) while concerned with spiritual issues for the UK church, often focuses on material issues for the rest of the globe, as illustrated by an article by Southam (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Maranz tells us that ‘Africans are possessive of knowledge’ (Maranz 2001, 30). Reality on the ground may be concealed if it is feared knowledge of it could interfere with donor flows.

<sup>12</sup> This can go back to guilt for the slave trade.

<sup>13</sup> This article suggests that Western missionary practice tends to result in the missionary being confused with god, rather than being merely the means of introducing people to God.

#### 4. The Impact of Christianity on African Communities

What is received is not identical to what is communicated. That is, because people being reached have to understand any communication in *their* context and not in the context of origin of the missionary concerned, words used by missionaries with the intent that they have certain impacts may be received differently.<sup>14</sup> Words used by foreigners, say in English, will typically be understood as equivalents to words in a native tongue.<sup>15</sup> Concepts that were foreign to a people being reached cannot be introduced by mere words.<sup>16</sup> Enculturation, a term often used to describe what ‘ought’ to happen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it moves cross-culturally, actually occurs in practice, I suggest, largely by default in churches, but less so in seminaries (Harries 2011a, 226-228). To consider the impact of Christianity on African culture we must consider African Christianity and *not* European Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

What then is ‘African Christianity’? Clearly there are many variations on the theme. What also ought to be as clear – is that African Christianity can only truly be understood within the African context. As Western concepts such as secularism do not communicate to Africa intact (Harries 2010), so the shape of African concepts is radically altered through communication to the West. My aim here is not to give an apologetic for African ways to Western academia, as is so much of African theological writing in English.<sup>18</sup> Rather to attempt to draw on what understanding I have of African lifestyles from 20 years of working closely with indigenous churches in Zambia then Kenya, so as to consider the impact of Christianity in terms of social and cultural change.

Christianity is said to differ from many primal religions, and indeed other world religions, in its having a progressive or linear view of life and the world.<sup>19</sup> Prior to the coming of Christianity African people had a circular view of life: generations came and went with little effort at counting, and were expected to continue to come and go indefinitely with little change in ways of life.<sup>20</sup> The bible however has a clear beginning and end, with man on a progressive route from nomadic shepherding in a dispersed sacrificial system (Abraham) to a theocracy based on a central temple cult (Moses) to Kings who remain variously faithful to the almighty God (David) to the forward thinking prophecies of the latter Old Testament (Isaiah). In the New Testament we have the universalisation of the message of salvation through Jesus to be followed by the final judgment. The fact that this message has been communicated by very linear / progressive people from the West has helped to emphasize its linearity. Linking it with descriptions of ways of life that make much more sense to Africans

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<sup>14</sup> And word meanings arise largely from the context of their use. (See also Hesselgrave 1978, 29.)

<sup>15</sup> Someone learning a new language will associate new terms with existing ones in their own language.

<sup>16</sup> As neither could they be in ‘little dark marks’ on a piece of paper (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 1).

Wavelengths of sound, i.e. spoken words, as written words, can impact on what is already understood by a listener, but are not of themselves ‘knowledge’.

<sup>17</sup> That is, to acknowledge that these two differ, and base our research on the characteristics of African Christianity. This is difficult for Western scholars to do, as they will instinctively draw on Western Christian notions.

<sup>18</sup> African culture is such that its expression in English tends to grate with native-English speakers’ language uses. African theological writing that seeks an international audience concentrates on justifying African culture (and African Christianity) to Westerners. (See also Harries 2007.)

<sup>19</sup> The Bible presents a linear view of history of God’s increasing self-revelation, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Hence the tendency to look backwards rather than forwards in life, and the African view of time described by Mbiti (1969, 15ff).

than Western ones (i.e. biblical, especially Old Testament, characters often seem to be more African than Western in their behaviour) and to the African concept of vital force (God) has helped bring this message home in Africa.

To date, Africa is widely considered to be a place of much superstition and occultic practices. The power of African gods<sup>21</sup> is expressed through the activities of the departed, or 'living-dead' as Mbiti describes them (Mbiti 1969, 25). These dead, who tend to rule in Africa, are diverse in character, disposition, ethnicity and so on. This essence of the complexity of African lifestyles brought and brings an essential diversity in life orientation, as different people variously orient themselves to pleasing different ancestors / gods.<sup>22</sup> While it is a struggle for African people (as others) to fully engage with the proposed reality of 'one god,' this struggle is in itself effectual. That is, life is influenced and its orientation altered by African people's attempts to come to terms with the unity of the Godhead.<sup>23</sup> Acceptance of the unity of the God-head, in implying a common fatherhood for all, of course sufficiently emphasises the unity of mankind as a whole, as to constantly whittle away at inter-tribal or inter-ethnic conflict.

Continuing with the monotheistic theme, the unity of the godhead suggests that there is a planned orderliness in events. Like two women in one kitchen, so more than one God ruling the world, implies conflict. People can then choose to side with one or the other, perhaps at different times and places, perhaps concealing from the first their engagement with the second and so on. Thus the chaos of earthly life is understood as being merely a reflection of the diversity of divine reality – something to which no human solution is available. True monotheism does away with this 'excuse', forcing people to take self-responsibility for that for which they had been blaming the 'gods' (ancestors etc.).

What of the question of the nature and origin of evil? Do we have true monotheism when Satan holds as much sway as he does in Africa (Blunt 2004)? Many scholars have found that the term 'Satan' encompasses much of the content of the indigenous terms for 'witchcraft' and 'spirit.'<sup>24</sup> Is it a sanitised way of speaking of the same old beliefs? I will not attempt to draw a conclusion to this vexed and much discussed issue. What I think *is* clear – is that Christianity has brought an orientation to (or strengthening of) monotheistic belief to the people of Africa.

What limits the development of Christianity in Africa, I suggest, is the absence of an indigenous literate African theological scholarship.<sup>25</sup> This absence continues as a result of the failure to sufficiently develop African languages. For example, African religion in many places has a pre-occupation with the dead. Theological studies these days have little to say

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<sup>21</sup> The use of capitals in writing forces an author to write either 'God' or 'god'. Note that there is no such distinction in oral societies, such as traditionally African ones. I therefore ask the reader to ignore the capitalization of g/God in this essay.

<sup>22</sup> As different ethnicities in Africa have different 'gods' of different characters, so they justify their various ethnic differences.

<sup>23</sup> The Trinity is no threat to this unity, as the three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are clearly given in Christian teaching as of one-mind. That is, there cannot be contradictions, disputes or disagreements between them.

<sup>24</sup> 'The god of the Lele had become the Satan of Christian traditions' (Douglas 1987, 178). See also Murray (1970).

<sup>25</sup> Much theological scholarship in Africa is done in European languages, which cannot truly represent African meanings (Steiner 1998, 491-492) and which falling under the critical eye of European scholarship fails to advance on its own terms.

on this, because it is not a Western theme. Formal theology being dominated by the West because it is in Western languages means that it is ignored. Was scholarship to attend to it then I believe the Scriptures would challenge this orientation.<sup>26</sup> For theological debate to effectively address African issues it needs to be written in African languages (or an African language).

The Bible is replete with examples of people who against many odds were rewarded for their perseverance in Godly service: Abraham believed God for a child even when his wife was past childbearing age (Romans 4:3 and Genesis 18:10-11). Joseph maintained his righteous stand even after being callously sold as a slave to a foreign land by his brothers (Genesis 37 and 39). The prophets, such as Jeremiah, Amos and others continued to speak what they considered to be God's truths in the face of persecution. Christ himself taught us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), and so on. Surely such accounts are not inconsequential in their impact on readers?

The above are only side-issues to true believers. Over and beyond all these, the impact of Christianity arises from its taking us into a relationship with the living God, creator of all the universe. Is that inconsequential? What could possibly have a greater impact on ones social and cultural context than to discover the almighty God, to be able to follow his example and to realize a relationship with him?

## **5. The Occlusion of Godly Power, and its Rectification**

True faith in God is believed by Christians to be uplifting and beneficial to a human community. Any compromises to God's revelation and diversion from his plans is therefore detrimental to his superior intent. Hence Christians around the world pay careful attention to God's word, to obeying the Scriptures, to correct doctrine, to maintaining holiness in their Christian walk. Any diversion from such an ideal should become the subject of discussion and target of correction. That is what I want to consider here.

St. Anthony in the fourth Century and others in that era were so abhorred by the worldliness they saw creeping into the church, as to cause them to prefer to live lives of self-sacrifice and poverty in the desert (Latourette 1953, 223-226). The monastic movement resulting was to play many crucial roles in the progress of the church, not least contributing to the church being a beacon of light through the 'Dark Ages' (Latourette 1953, 331-352), and preserving the canon of Scripture for us today. The problem that the early monks identified in the Roman Empire at the time of Anthony, was the impossibility of distinguishing in the church between true believers, and those who were 'Christian' for the sake of social and material advance (Latourette 1953, 224-225).

ATR (African Traditional Religion) is said to be very pragmatic in nature. That is – it is designed to help people with problems, and to provide for their wellbeing.<sup>27</sup> Christianity came to Africa through the hands of people<sup>28</sup> who consider themselves much more 'expert' in well being than the Africans. They decided to introduce the two (Christianity and 'wellbeing') together.<sup>29</sup> Hence Christianity in Africa strongly reflects the character of ATR in its seeking of earthly prosperity. Even more than ATR – Christianity in Africa has become

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<sup>26</sup> (Referring to the book of Numbers): 'This is the Lord's first taboo. His worshippers must have nothing to do with death, nor dead bodies' (Douglas 1993, 158).

<sup>27</sup> Hence the well-known orientation of African churches to spiritual healing.

<sup>28</sup> Western missionaries.

a source of wealth and a means for self-betterment and enrichment. Endless examples point to this. Western Christians, rather than seeing this as a problem, are aggravating this situation by stacking up more and more funds to 'help poor Christians in Africa'.<sup>30</sup> The African church, it seems, is not strong enough to resist this concerted effort. This 'attack' is of course not only on the church. Almost the whole of sub-Saharan African society is constantly being enticed into materialistic lifestyles, with massive grants, loans and subsidies to boot!

If indeed a true Christian is one who is prepared to forego material pleasures for the sake of his faith, then much of the African church may be in deep trouble. Yet their dependence on foreign wealth is so great, their experience of a Christianity that isn't materially on the receiving end from the West so minimal, that some church leaders may be numb to alternatives.<sup>31</sup> Add to this the monopoly of Western languages (and hence theology) in all vaguely formal contexts, meaning that the African church has no forum in which to discuss its own issues (see above), and the African church finds itself in the iron grip of a foreign power that it simply cannot evade.

One consequence of the above situation could be expected to be a negation of benefits that may otherwise have accrued to African people through their Christian faith. That is, because they are not given a clear view of God, neither will they learn to clearly know him. If they do get to clearly know him, and if God is not permitted to work amongst them, then neither will they benefit from that which God has to offer. Instead of Godly living being a way of sacrifice for the sake of truth, it will become (and has become in the prosperity Gospel) a means of self-aggrandizement (Cotterell 1993). Biblical examples of perseverance in Godly service can be taken as teaching the need for perseverance in order to acquire earthly reward. The non-fulfillment of 'Christian' ideals of wealth and happiness can be blamed on Satan. Instead of being challenged by the church, Africa's 'superstition's practices' can take refuge in the church.

But has the church not always had to struggle against captivity to human and political powers? Persecution and martyrdom of Christians was commonplace in the early centuries of its history. The church has been used, and continues to be used by political players. (At the time of my writing (2007) Kenyan politicians are taking advantage of Christian gatherings to promote their interests in the forthcoming general elections.) This cannot easily be denied. But then the very strength of the church has lain in its capacity to resist, not to be swamped by, such domination. Regardless of the worldly powers that have sought to manipulate her, the church has remained the place where people seek to meet with God.

This writing represents an appeal for such a movement for renewal in the church and of the church. It needs renewal and release especially from that which threatens to make the African church into a society for the promotion of prosperity. That which threatens can have the best of intentions. Suggesting the need for church renewal is not to say that God has failed. But that he intends to use his servants to fulfill new purposes.

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<sup>29</sup> This link has long been made. Livingstone himself talked about 'Christianity civilisation and commerce' (Euro-Afric 2008).

<sup>30</sup> So there is a 'global campaign to mobilise Christians against poverty' (Micah Network 2008a).

<sup>31</sup> Drawing on personal experience, especially in Western Kenya between 1993 and 2008.

The situation in Africa today has parallels with that of Acts 6:1-6 in New Testament times. Provision for widows brought dissension, which threatened to so overwhelm the apostles as to deprive them of sufficient opportunity to preach the Word (Acts 6:2). The solution enacted was the appointment of seven men (deacons) who were to be responsible for the distribution of food to the widows, thus freeing up the apostles for spiritual ministry. The solution that I am proposing to resolve the current predicament in mission to Africa is essentially the same. We already have many ‘deacons’ from the West who, in the name of the church of Christ, concern themselves with matters of material, health, food and so forth of African people. Now we need others to remain free from such ties, thus enabling them to concentrate on ministry of the Word. Such spiritual ministry, *must* be in local languages and on a foundation of the understanding of local contexts, this requiring vulnerability to the local context on the part of the minister concerned especially should s/he be a foreign missionary.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of missions to Africa today, I suggest that the role of deacon has over preoccupied the missions force. Extremes of human need (as perceived by the West) have exaggerated this – as even those who in their countries of origin were ministers of the word easily end up running development projects and feeding programmes on the African continent.<sup>33</sup> Such activity on the part of Western missionaries means that such is implicitly the model of churchmanship being taught to Africans – one of engaging in the world, oriented to pleasure, to comfort and the acquisition of wealth.

This situation in mission to Africa is these days aggravated in various ways. One is the enormous differences in material lifestyles between indigenous Westerners and African communities. This means that even those servants of the church in the West who have an entirely ‘spiritual’ ministry often do so through consuming relatively large amounts of resources. (Typically through heavy use of a personal motor vehicle.) Unlike in the USA or UK, motor vehicles in Africa are in relatively short supply. What is in the West a means of getting a pastor from A to B becomes a valuable and potentially very helpful aid to all sorts of life-saving or progressive activities in much of Africa. A pastor in the West will rarely be called upon to ferry the sick because an effective ambulance service is in place. This will very likely not be the case in Africa. To avoid such pressure and contradiction or apparent ignoring of urgent need, those missionaries who seek to have a spiritual ministry in Africa must avoid using expensive personal transport. I suggest that they should not subsidise their ministries using outside resources. I believe that sufficient attention being paid to the concerns mentioned in this section will result in a release of Godly power in the African church. Leaving the church captive to Western financial whim is not in its long term best interests.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The widespread use of European languages in African governance and academia contributes to the ignorance of the West about African reality. This is for various reasons related to difficulties of translation and assumptions made by Western scholars about meaning when they hear their own language used. The innate assumption by the West as to its own superiority is here questioned on the basis that changes even within one Western society over the course of time results in the rejection of the wisdom of one age by that of a subsequent

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<sup>32</sup> See articles at <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/index.html> (accessed November 31, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Drawing on personal experience of having found that church ministers from the West tend to consider initiating projects to alleviate poverty more important than church ministry as such, when they reach Africa.

age. The theological dependence of human development is then considered. The fact that theology has been demoted from its prior central position in life by modern secular forces does not mean that a knowledge of God was not necessary for the West in the past. So it could be necessary for Africa today.

The Western tendency to consider belief in God to be 'either/or' is here questioned. The appropriate question is not 'do you believe in God' but rather 'who (or what) is God to you'? The existence of God is shown to be presupposed in all human societies, especially in people's view of death, in understanding of chance or fortune, and in human awe with regard to the 'amazing'.

The nature of people's beliefs in the divine has long been considered by academics as well as laymen to be key to society's changing and advancing. This has changed only in recent years. The impact of the understood nature of God on human development is here examined, including the thesis that Christianity is the true religion because it has given birth to the most powerful civilisation ever known – the 'West' as it is today.

The impact of Christian belief on African communities has been and is shown to continue to be considerable to date. It would be further advanced if African Christian scholarship were enabled using African languages. A linear view of history, the challenges of monotheistic belief, an orientation to perseverance in the face of calamity or difficulties and a challenge to the rule of the dead are all found in Christianity. The question of the role of belief in Satan in Africa is raised. Most powerful of all in Christianity's impact on human society – is it's enabling of a relationship with the living God.

The captivity of the African church to Western theologies and materialist ideologies needs to end. The pragmatism of ATR (African Traditional Religion) has combined with the Western orientation to promoting development in Africa through financial and material aid, to give birth to the prosperity Gospel. This occludes the progress and development of 'true' Christianity. Christian mission from the West to Africa needs to include personnel who refuse to use foreign finance to acquire power, and are committed to serving God using local languages. Only thus will it speak meaningfully of the true God into the African scene. Only thus can bottom-up development in Africa occur.

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