CHRISTIANITY:
To Save or Enslave?

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Introduction

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) spoke in its 1990 Human Development Report of a "concentration of poverty" in Africa.

Of all the developing regions, Africa has the lowest life expectancy figures, the highest infant mortality rates, and the lowest literacy rates.

- Life expectancy at birth in Sub-Saharan Africa is only 51 years, compared to 62 in all developing countries, and 74 in industrialized nations.
- Only 45% of Africans have access to health services, compared to 63% in all developing countries and 100% in industrialized nations.
- Only 37% of Africans have access to safe water, compared to 55% in all developing countries and 100% in industrialized nations.
- African daily calorie supply averages 91% of minimum requirements, compared to the developing countries' average of 107% and the industrialized nations' average of 132%.
- More than 50% of Africans live in absolute poverty. Nearly 400 million Africans will be living in extreme poverty by 1995.

The 16th Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Regional Conference for Africa held in Morocco, 1990, noted:

- by 1983—85, 142 million (more than one out of every three Africans, or 35.2%) were undernourished.
- land degradation is forcing out of production an estimated 50 000 to 70 000 square kilometres of land annually.
- 10% of African infants are born malnourished with birth weights below 2.5 kg.
- at least 60 million children under five are chronically undernourished, 10 million acutely so.
- vitamin A deficiency affects an estimated 30 million people, resulting in blindness or death for hundreds of thousands annually.
- 150 million Africans suffer from iodine deficiency, leading to cretinism in several million.

During the 1980s per capita income fell by about 20%; the proportion of Gross National Product spent on education fell dramatically (in countries like Zambia, it was almost halved). Skilled people left the continent; for example Ghana and Uganda now have fewer doctors per head than in the mid 1960s. And during the 1980s Africa became increasingly marginalized; by 1989 Africa's share of the world's export markets fell to less than 2%.

The 1980s have been truly called *"a lost decade"* for Africa.

Yet at the same time Christianity has spread widely on the continent — some estimates claim that as many as 16 000 Africans become Christians every day.

These pages are concerned with this second phenomenon (the spread of Christianity) but not in isolation from the first (the economic and social deterioration in Africa).

These pages argue that Christianity in Africa:

- should address these social, political and economic problems
- should not trivialize them

- above all, should not acquiesce in or contribute to this deterioration.

The aim here is to show that Christianity comes in different forms, with different social and political effects.

- Some forms lead to commitment to confront this social deterioration
- Other forms divert all attention from it, or say it is of no importance, thus leaving it unchallenged.

These pages also raise the question of ideological Christianity. When ideas, facts or feelings are used in such a way as to promote the interests of one social group over others, we speak of ideology. A form of Christianity that unconsciously promotes economic or political goals is ideological.

We will consider some forms of Christianity influential in Africa today.

1: The End Is Near

In the history of Christianity there have always been movements predicting the imminent end of the world. These movements seem to affect people on the fringe of society economically and politically, especially in times of social crisis.

These movements are often called millennial (from the Latin word "1 000") because members believe that Jesus will return to set up a 1 000 year kingdom on earth. The most popular form of this millennial thinking today is often called "dispensationalism", from its central idea that history is divided into 7 ages or dispensations, each marked by a different relationship to God. The "dispensations" are normally listed as those of:

1. Innocence (creation to the fall)
2. Conscience (fall to the flood)
3. Human Government (flood to Abraham)
4. Promise (Abraham to Moses)
5. Law (Moses to the cross)
6. Church or Grace (cross to apostasy of church)
7. Millennium

According to this scheme, we are now living at the end of the 6th age, the period of the church, just before the beginning of the millennium or kingdom age. This coming age will see the "rapture" of true Christians (their removal to heaven), then a 7-year time of tribulation or great suffering on earth, then the return of Jesus with his saints, then the 1000 year kingdom on

earth, then a final rebellion, after which Satan and his followers will be cast down to hell and the saints will live in eternal happiness.

Its proponents claim that this theory is the teaching of the Bible, and they quote countless texts in its support, particularly from Daniel, Revelation and Ezekiel. In fact the theory was devised by John Nelson Darby (1800—82), one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren. Though this name is almost unknown, he has had a tremendous influence on English-speaking Christianity — probably more influence than anyone else in the last 200 years. Although the Plymouth Brethren did not flourish in the USA, Darby's theories did — partly through his frequent preaching tours, but particularly through the Scofield Reference Bible (published 1909) which incorporates Darby's system in its notes and divisions.

Dispensationalism, which is not the teaching of the Bible, but Darby's ideas read back into the Bible, is taught at a vast number of Bible Colleges which have mushroomed in the USA and elsewhere in recent years. Many of the graduates of these Bible Colleges are unaware that the Bible can be read in any other way.

This kind of Christianity has definite social and political effects when it comes to Africa.

1. Passive acceptance

This Christianity places great stress on the end of the world. Its proponents are keen to see "biblical prophecies" being fulfilled everywhere. They cite bibilical texts which (only according to them!) predict the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948 (Ez 36, 24), the establishment of the European Common Market (Dan 7, 7—8), plastic bank cards and microchip technology (Rev 13, 16—18), Gorbachev's peace proposals (1 Thess 5, 3), the United Nations (Rev. 13, 7), the World Council of Churches (Rev. 13, 8) the Peace Movement (Mt 24, 6) the spread of AIDS (Job 36, 14). They claim that all this biblical fulfilment proves that the end of the world is almost here. Of course the Bible was not predicting any of these things. This just serves to show that there is no limit to what you can read out of the Bible if you are really determined.

This "end-time" picture is built up from the strange imagery of the apocalyptic (from the Greek word for "vision") parts of the Bible — the books of Daniel and Revelation, and passages from other books like Ezekiel, Joel and Zephaniah. In fact, the whole dispensationalist theory is based on a misunderstanding of how this apocalyptic material originally, functioned. Since these apocalyptic passages give great prominence to plagues, famines and disasters of every kind, these Christians tend to see all kinds of hardship and deprivation as foretold for what they think are these "end-times". Of course, if all these disasters are ordained by God, they are by definition unavoidable. So this way of thinking engenders passivity and resignation among those who have always borne the bulk of the suffering, namely the poor and marginalized. It can even lead to almost a cult of suffering, in which suffering is seen as a sign of blessedness, a proof of being one of God's chosen "remnant" (see box). It is obvious that this Christianity undermines any effort to confront society's ills.

> And just as their Lord was made perfect through suffering (Hebrews 5, 8) and became the Lamb of God, who was victorious over Satan's power, so His own will be able to become true lambs only upon this pathway where they are persecuted by Satan and his instruments. They become willing to suffer injustice, learn to love their enemies and bless them, learn to submit to mistreatment and to bear suffering like a lamb, which patiently endures every blow even to the point of being slaughtered. Only on this pathway will they, as Holy Scripture says (Matthew 5, 44f & 48), be made perfect as "sons of God" just as their Father in Heaven is perfect.
>
> *Basilea Schlink, Germany.*

Because the end is supposed to be near, nothing else matters but preaching the gospel, or fulfilling the Great Commission (Mt 28, 19). Evangelism is all that matters; to get involved in anything else is to distract oneself from the one important task of winning souls to Jesus. Not only does this divert attention from the social, economic and political realites of most Africans, by teaching that there is not time to do anything about them; it teaches that there is something almost unchristian about worrying too much about them.

2. Anti-socialism

This Christianity is very political: it is very anti-communist. Among all the prophecies its proponents claim to see fulfilled in our day there are many involving Russia. They interpret Magog of Ezekiel 38—39 as the modern Soviet Union. The note in the Scofield Bible on Ezekiel 38, 2 reads simply: "That the primary reference is to the northern (European) powers, headed up by Russia, all agree". However, Ezekiel was referring in the strange apocalyptic imagery of his day of a typical oppressor of Israel.

> Russia must play a tremendous role in events occurring between now and Armageddon. This is fully portrayed in Ezekiel 38, where she appears under the title of "Rosh", and with her confederation of nations, moves down to the Holy Land. "Rosh" is the army of the North that Joel speaks about.
>
> Notice that the Beast, rising out of the sea in Revelation 13, has the feet of a bear! The one country in the world today symbolized by the bear, is Russia. Moreover, Persia, which in Bible prophecy in ancient times was represented by a bear (Dan 7, 5), is also included in this Russian confederacy (Ezek 38, 5). The fact that the Beast of Revelation 13 has the feet of the bear, infers the Beast Power in its rise is associated with Russia and Communism.
>
> *Gordon Lindsay, USA.*

The identification of Gog with Russia seems to have originated with an Englishman called John Cumming during the Crimean War (1853-56). When Britain was fighting Russia it was in Britain's interests to portray Russia as an enemy of God. It has suited American interests this century, too. It fitted in with the great "red scare" in the 1920s; with the cold war period after the Second World War; and with the aggressive anti-communism of the Reagan years (1981—88). Many of these Christians imagine a coming end-time confrontation ("Armageddon") as a nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union, in which God will punish the Soviet Union by means of US arms.

Thus this kind of Christianity has been used as a religious justification for the enormous arms expenditure of the Reagan

years (by the end, US$300 000 000 000 or US$300 billion annually). Outside the USA, it has provided religious justification for US opposition to "Marxist" or "socialist" regimes; it has swung "Christian" support behind movements like the Contras in Nicaragua and behind Renamo and Unita in Africa. In South Africa, this kind of Christianity has tried to present South Africa's problems as a conflict between "Christian civilization" and "the communist threat".

3. Christian Zionism

This Christianity opposes the Soviet Union, and since its proponents seem to think in terms of opposites, this normally means that it supports the USA. But it has another particular political element. According to dispensationalists, God never completely forsook Israel. Soon true Christians will be "raptured" and God will return to dealing with Israel. These Christians see the establishment of the modern state of Israel (1948) and its capture of Jerusalem (1967) as signs that God is about to begin his end-time activity. This leads these Christians to support Israel in everything. According to them, since God has never forgotten his promise to Abraham (Gen 15, 18—21), modern Israel has a right to all the disputed territories — the West Bank and Gaza. They give the Israeli state every political and diplomatic and financial support, and teach that this is demanded by "True Christianity". They have opened a "Christian Embassy" in Jerusalem to provide such support. They organize tours to Israel, not so much to see the places Jesus knew as to learn about present Israeli politics (which for them is part of the divine plan). They teach that America's future well-being depends on continued unquestioning support for Israel (see box).

> Whoever stands against Israel, stands against God.
>
> *Jerry Falwell, USA.*

This blind Israeli support has, of course, as its other side, a marked

> God will bless those who bless Israel, but He will bring low those who would harm the Jews.
>
> In the past, America's support of Israel had been strong and sure. Beginning in 1956, however, that changed. In the Sinai War of that year France and England had an agreement with Israel. They would take the Suez Canal from Egypt and Israel would fight across the Sinai desert to meet them.
>
> President Eisenhower of the United States, however was determined that would not happen. He forced France and England to withdraw from the conflict, threatening to fight on the side of Egypt: and he also cut off all American supplies to Israel — food, medicine, oil and everything else.....
>
> What has become of the United States since 1956? Note carefully. We have lost the last two wars we have fought in Korea and Vietnam. Our society has begun to fall apart rapidly. Violent rebellion broke out on our college campuses. The drug problem, sexual sin and divorce have exploded. Our economy has become far less stable and far more vulnerable to foreign competition.
>
> All these things may seem unrelated on the surface, but that is not the case. It is not a coincidence that these problems erupted after our desertion of Israel in 1956.
>
> *Lester Sumrall, USA.*

opposition to the Arab cause. When this Christianity comes to Africa, this pro-Israeli attitude (called "Christian Zionism" because it provides Christian support for Zionism, the movement for the creation and support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine) is translated into an anti-Islam attitude. Again, this suits American preoccupations of the last ten years, when Gaddafi and the Ayatollah Khomeini and then Saddam Hussein came to be almost demonized as America's enemies. These Christians have little respect for Islam as a religion. For them, Muslims are not to be dialogued with, but simply converted. Muslims are seen as "spiritually oppressed"; Muslim areas are seen as "under Satan's control" or in "Satan's bondage" or areas of "Satanic darkness". There are signs that much of the hostility that these Christians have traditionally directed towards communism is now, after the collapse of communism, being redirected towards Islam. Religious

conflict between Christians and Muslims is one of the real threats to Africa's future. This Christianity, far from helping resolve growing tension, is fomenting it.

2: The Gospel of Prosperity

In the 1980s a kind of Christianity called the Faith Movement or Word Movement has spread widely in Africa. According to this, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. A believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith.

Several figures, all Americans, have been influential constructing this doctrine.

> (God) wants his children to eat the best, he wants them to wear the best clothing, he wants them to drive the best cars, and he wants them to have the best of everything.
>
> *Kenneth Hagin, USA, Founder of Rhema Bible Church.*

E.W. Kenyon. Kenyon, who died in 1948, is almost unknown now, but his books contained the ideas that the faith preachers built on.

A.A. Allen. From the beginning the prosperity gospel was closely related to fund raising efforts. Allen, one of the US "healing evangelists" of the 1940s and 1950s, was the first to make this explicit: that God is a rich God, and that those who want to share in his prosperity must obey and support God's servant (that is, the preacher himself). Allen's successor **Don Stewart** has ministries in Africa.

Oral Roberts. Roberts began his ministry as one of the original "healing evangelists". In the 1950s he was promising prosperity to his followers. At first he promised a sevenfold return on all money given to his ministry. He developed this with his idea of *seed faith,* that you prosper by planting a seed in faith; the return will meet all your needs. His insistence that in every area of life, and always, one must "expect a miracle" also became crucial to prosperity teaching.

T.L. Osborn. Osborn was originally another "healing evangelist." His contribution was that he was the first prosperity preacher to live in a luxurious style himself, something which later prosperity preachers have continued, to prove that the teaching works.

Kenneth Hagin. Hagin is undoubtedly the one who made this teaching central. He founded Rhema Bible College in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1974, and his pupils have spread the teaching around the world. There are Rhema Churches, and Rhema-related churches in many African countries, and Hagin's numerous books and pamphlets are readily available on the continent.

Kenneth Copeland. Copeland studied under Hagin, and was once a pilot for Oral Roberts. He and his wife **Gloria Copeland** are now probably the most famous of all prosperity preachers. Copeland taught the prosperity gospel at Bonnke's "Fire Conference" in Harare, 1986, which was a channel of this teaching to Africa.

John Avanzini. Avanzini has added a refinement that all the wealth of the world belongs to God, and it is his desire "in these last days" to take it from the unrighteous and to give it to his children. Avanzini has made several trips to Africa.

Other names associated with this teaching are **Jerry Savelle,** a long-time associate of Copeland; **John Osteen** of Florida; and **Fred Price,** of Los Angeles, whose Faith Dome is now the biggest church in the USA.

All these authors claim to be preaching a "biblical" doctrine. Among the key texts they quote are:

Mk 11,23—24: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will". Hagin claims that an insight into this text was responsible for a miraculous cure in 1934 that enabled him to begin his ministry.

Dt 28—30: "All these blessings shall come upon you... if you obey the voice of the Lord your God".
The blessings and curses God promised to Israelites for keeping or rejecting his law. This is sometimes linked with **Gal 3, 13—14** to show that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (poverty) so that we can have wealth if we want it.
3 Jn 2: "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health" (King James translation is necessary here).
Mal 3, 8—11: "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse... and thereby put me to the test if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing".

Prosperity comes from a prior giving.
Mk 10, 29—30: "There is no one... who will not receive a hundredfold here in this life".
Used to show that we can receive not sevenfold (as Oral Roberts originally said) but a hundredfold of everything we give to (men of) God.
Phil 4, 19: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus".
The return can be even greater — incalculable.

The frequent use of biblical texts gives the impression that the doctrine is "biblical". However, again, the doctrine is imposed on the Bible from outside. The doctrine is a product of social concerns and developments in the USA.

There was a form of this prosperity gospel in the USA at the turn of this century. This was a time ("the Gilded Age") when a certain class was amassing unprecedented wealth, and were living in a style never before seen. (The term "conspicuous consumption" was coined for it.) This gospel was used to justify

their wealth, legitimize their methods of acquiring it, and (not least) to forestall any government attempt to touch it.

A good example of this early prosperity message is offered by a sermon entitled "Acres of Diamonds", delivered over 5 000 times by Russell H. Conwell, from 1879 pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia.

"Never in the history of the world did a poor man without capital have such an opportunity to get rich quickly and honestly as he does now in our city... I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich... To make money honestly is to preach the gospel... The number of poor who are to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins, thus to help him when God would still continue a just punishment, is to do wrong, no doubt about it, and we do that more than we help those who are deserving. While we should sympathize with God's poor — that is, those who cannot help themselves — let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings, or by the shortcomings of someone else. It is all wrong to be poor anyhow".

This sermon and others of the day like it display some important differences from the modern prosperity gospel. Conwell makes it clear that one gets rich by enterprise or initiative, by finding a need and meeting it — in other words, one gets rich by becoming the entrepreneur of the American dream. The modern prosperity gospel, however, teaches, first, that we do not have to do anything; prosperity has been won for us by Christ, and is our right. All we have to do is claim it by faith. And, second, it teaches that a key aspect is giving to God first; if we give, and to the extent that we give, God will reimburse us abundantly (see box). In practice, giving to God means giving to "the man of God" preaching the message. It was mentioned above that this new form of the prosperity gospel grew up among the US

healing evangelists of the 1940s as a way of raising funds. One can see why this doctrine really become fashionable in the mid 1970s; it was necessary to meet the needs of the media evangelists. Copeland has admitted that it was only after committing himself to a TV series with no apparent capital did he come to understand "Biblical prosperity" properly. The expenses of the media evangelists are enormous. At his peak, Jimmy Swaggart needed US$300 000 a day just to stay in operation. This doctrine of prosperity-through-giving has proved very effective in persuading people to meet the expenses of very costly ministries.

> You give $1 for the Gospel's sake and $100 belongs to you. You give $10 and receive $1 000. Give $1 000 and receive $100 000. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10, 30 is a very good deal.
>
> *Gloria Copeland, USA.*

This prosperity gospel has obvious socio-political effects.

It makes prosperity a simple matter of faith, or of faith and generous giving to a preacher. It simply ignores the political and economic reasons for so much poverty in Africa, reasons like dependent economies, fluctuating prices, overpopulation, overgrazing, corruption, mismanagement, destabilization, mistaken priorities and so on. One kind of Christianity tries to include these things within the area of Christian responsibility, tries to educate Christians about them and empower christians in some concerted action to confront them. The prosperity gospel is the exact opposite: it diverts attention from political and economic issues, and leads to no social activity whatsoever.

(Miraculous faith in Zimbabwe) The plots were seeded, and in time a variety of vegetables began to sprout from the ground. As the growing season waned, however, and the dry winter months approached, something odd began to happen. The plots belonging to the unbelievers completed their production cycle, flowered, went to seed, and died off as normal. But the plots of those Christians who had believed in God's Word continued to produce — not just through the autumn months but through the dry African winter as well.

There was simply no natural explanation. It was impossible. Yet it had happened. And it was not the result of the work of a dead ancestor or the consequence of a ritual dance. This winter harvest was the direct result of a people hearing and applying God's Word.

Kenneth Copeland's Voice of Victory, 1989.

Note the lack of social responsibility in this prosperity gospel. According to this, only Christians matter. Christians will have jobs, food, education, and be successful. Non-Christians will not have these, but neither should they. They will naturally lack all these goods, because the fruits of Jesus' sacrifice belong only to believers. So the plight of the nation, or the state of society, or the situation of the general population, are of no importance to the Christian. The Christian's duty to deprived unbelievers is merely to convert them so that they can prosper as well.

The gospel of prosperity tells the peoples of the world's poorest continent that material prosperity will be provided by a "miracle-working God", or (alternatively) that material prosperity will come as the inexorable result of the functioning of spirtual laws (in this case, the "law of sowing"). Thus the gospel of prosperity functions by diverting all attention from the economic and social situation.

It is worth asking: Is the gospel of prosperity taught by people who are doing well out of the system as it is?

3: The Health Gospel

The basic principle of the health gospel is the same as that underlying the prosperity gospel. According to its proponents, Jesus redeemed us from sin, poverty, and sickness: Jesus bore our sicknesses (Is 53, 4—5). All a Christian has to do is believe, and claim his or her health by expressing that belief. Most of these preachers claim that all sickness comes from Satan, and that no Christian should be sick — to be sick is to lack faith or to have sinned.

I believe that it is the plan of God our Father that no believer should ever be sick.

Kenneth Hagin, USA, Founder of Rhema Bible Church.

This teaching has its roots in the first Pentecostal preachers of the early years of this century. Many of them held a similar doctrine, that in Christ's death on the cross our healing was accomplished, that no Christian should ever be sick, and that a Christian has no need of doctors. But most of them were forced to rethink their early position as they experienced sickness themselves. They modified their position; they came to the view that God could heal sickness and often would, but he could not be forced to.

In the 1940s and the 1950s, the American "healing evangelists" revived much of the early Pentecostal view. The faith movement has revived the whole position. It has not gone unchallenged, however, in the USA. Widespread publicity accompanied scores of

eaths which occurred to adherents who preferred to rely on faith ather than to consult a doctor or take medicine. One church alone ad an estimated 90 preventable deaths, and in 1984 the pastor imself died, amid great publicity — a victim of his own reaching.

Again, this doctrine is always said to be "biblical". The texts nost frequently cited are:

Dt 28—30: "If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God... then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you".
Sickness is a curse.

Mk 11, 23—24: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will".
Faith can achieve anything.

Ps 103, 1—3: "He cures all your diseases".

Is 53, 4—5 (1 Pet 2, 24): "He bore our sufferings... by his stripes we are healed".

Ps 91: "No disaster can overtake you, no plague come near your tent".

Ps 107, 19—22: "He sent out his word and cured them".

1 Jn 3, 8: Jesus came 'to undo the work of the devil".

3 Jn, 2: "I wish... that thou mayest prosper and be in health" (only in King James translation).

Acts 3, 16: "Faith which is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health".

Acts 5, 12—16: "All of them were cured".

Acts 9, 32—35: "Aeneas, Jesus Christ cures you: arise, and take up your bed".

Acts 10, 38: "Jesus cured all who had fallen under the power of the devil".

Mt 4, 23—24: "Jesus cured all kinds of disease and illness among the people".

Mt 8, 1—3: "Jesus said, I am willing — be cured".

Mt 9, 27—31: "According to your faith be it done to you".

Also stories of Jesus' miracles (e.g. **Mt 8, 14—17; 9, 1—8; 9, 18—26)** and of course, **Heb 13, 8** — "Jesus Christ, yesterday, today, the same forever".

Today there are frequent healing crusades all across the continent. Some draw crowds of 200 000 and are conducted with great publicity and involve hundreds of local churches. It is not argued here that no one is cured at these crusades. The Christian God is a sovereign God who can act as he wills. (Although it is worth noting that after Bonnke's 1986 Harare crusade, held in conjunction with his "Fire Conference", the umbrella organization which represents organizations for the disabled in Zimbabwe reported (ZBC, 20 May 1986) that no cures had taken place). Some traditions within Christianity place more stress on healing than others; in Africa the Independent Churches have always set great store on this aspect.

It is not the point here to deny that cures take place at healing crusades. The point here is that the exclusive insistence that health is a consequence of belief, or that healing is to be obtained through God's miraculous intervention, has a pronounced socio-political effect. At the end of the 1980s, 45% of Africans had access to health services; 37% had access to safe water; the daily calorie intake averaged 91% of the minimum requirement; over 55% lived in absolute poverty. Many countries, like Ghana and Uganda, had fewer doctors per head than in the mid-1960s. With the collapse of many economies, the availability of drugs had decreased alarmingly. And in so many African countries, AIDS has ravaged the population. Life expectancy in Africa is lower than that in any other region. Infant mortality is actually rising in many parts of Africa.

This is the current situation in Africa. It is undeniably a situation of crisis. The crisis demands a commitment from all Africans. But this Christianity undermines any such commitment — it calls merely for faith. It is claimed that it is faith that will raise life expectancy and abolish infant mortality (see box).

Your minimum days should be 70 years, that's just the bare minimum. You ought to live to be at least 120 years of age. That's the Bible. God out of his own mouth — in the Old Testament — said the number of your days shall be 120 years. I didn't write it! God said it. The minimum ought to be 70 years, and you shouldn't go out with sickness and disease then.

The only reason people die before their time is because they do not understand how to exercise their faith according to the word to prevent death, or they choose to die before their time.... Children that are born dead had no control over their life, but their parents had that control. However, if the parents do not know the Word of God and to claim their rights in Christ, the child suffers the loss.

Fred Price, USA.

This Christianity leaves everything up to God. And it focuses only on the health of an individual, ignoring the needs of the nation. This Christianity leads to no analysis of the socio-political causes of deteriorating health services (e.g. economic mismanagement, destabilization, corruption, diverting available resources to military spending or to prestige projects). It leads to no community mobilization for child inoculation, for sewers, or for provision of clean water. This Christianity leaves oppressive structures completely unchallenged.

4: The World

The Bible uses "the world" in three different senses.

- First, the earth God created (e.g. Acts 17, 24).
- Second, human beings in general (e.g. Jn 3, 16).
- The third use is negative, e.g. 1 Jn 2, 15: "Do not love the world or anything that belongs to the world. If you love the world you do not love the Father".

In the same way, there have been different attitudes to "the world" in the history of Christianity. There have been times when Christians have "fled the world", turned their back on it, and some of these (like Christianity's first few centuries) have been times of great creativity. However, in recent years, influenced particularly by the social sciences, Christians have come to understand how "the world" or "human society" operates. They have come to realize as never before that most of human suffering is caused by political, cultural, and economic systems. These systems are not created by God, nor are they part of the nature of things, even though they may appear that way. Political and economic systems are created by human beings, or rather by particular groups of human beings, largely for their own benefit. As a result of this sociological insight, Christians realize that their duty to help the suffering extends beyond offering relief to suffering individuals; it extends to improving the systems which inflict so much hurt.

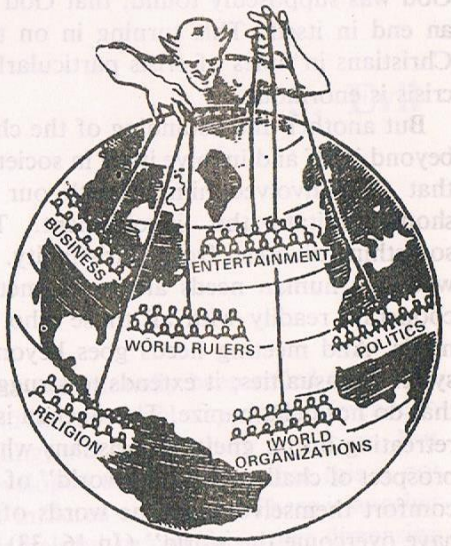
Suffering comes about not only because one individual hurts another individual. There are systems that cause untold misery. A good example is the modern banking system. The World Bank

reports that merely to service their debts the developing countries paid the developed countries US$43 billion (US$43 000 000 000) in 1988 — this brought the total paid during the period 1983—1988 to US$143 billion. Forget all that talk about aid — this sum is several times the amount the developing countries received in aid. This net outflow of resources to the West is one of the main reasons why, for instance, in the 37 poorest countries of the world, spending per head on schools declined by 25% in the 1980s. Africa's foreign debt soared to US$225.6 billion at the end of 1989, increasing by 40% in the previous five years. At the end of 1989, 31.5% of Africa's exports were needed merely to pay the interest on this debt. This is a major cause of Africa's deteriorating health services, increasing malnutrition, and unemployment. Many suffer hardship not because they are victimized by a particular individual, but because they are victims of such a system.

Many Christians now realize that love of one's neighbour means more than providing relief to suffering individuals; it means confronting dehumanizing systems and attempting to change them so that they do not brutalize people. Obviously this involves entering "the world" and using one's influence in society generally.

But there is another kind of Christianity that understands "the world" and "human society outside God" to be evil, and teaches that a Christian must remain untainted by the world. For instance, a Christian correspondence course commonly used in Africa, actually writes that "Satan's world-system includes commerce, politics, religion, education, entertainment, world kingdoms, world organizations, and many other things". The course goes on to teach that Christians must have no part in Satan's world system. This means that Christians should turn their back on, say, commerce and politics. But Africans cannot opt out of the world's commercial and political system; they are already caught up in it whether they like it or not. These world systems are all set up and operating, and controlled by Western interests, largely for their own benefit. This correspondence course is effectively telling Africans to leave these systems alone. This Christianity has one

effect for those who preach it, and a completely different effect for those to whom it is preached. The writers of this course in the USA are effectively telling the people of the third world, "Let us continue to direct your existence, while you continue to be directed by us. Let us continue to control your economy, while you continue to support ours. We, the beneficiaries of the present international system, want to remain just that".



"The whole world lieth in the evil one"
Source of Light Ministries, Madison, Georgia, USA.

If to involve oneself in the fields of business and politics is to enter the realm of Satan, it becomes a grossly unchristian act, say, to protest about the destruction of Africa's forests or the depletion of Africa's mineral reserves. This is truly good news for those who have bought the logging and mining concessions, but the complete opposite for those whose resources are being plundered.

When those preaching this message can also be seen as closely linked to those who benefit from the present system, the question of the ideological use of Christianity cannot be avoided.

This issue is closely related to one's understanding of the church. In history there have always been Christians who retreated from the world, turned in on themselves, formed a ghetto. They saw that their only duty to the world was to convert others, or to bring others from the world into the church. The church thus became an alternative society. It was within this special society that

God was supposedly found, that God acted. The church became an end in itself. This turning in on themselves seems to affect Christians in times of crisis particularly, and in Africa today the crisis is enormous.

But another understanding of the church is that it should look beyond itself and involve itself in society. The incarnation means that God involved himself with our world; a Christian today should imitate this involvement. This involvement is not something divorced from Christianity. A Christian's task is to be wherever human needs are to be met (Mt 25, 31—46), and to cooperate readily with all those who are already meeting these needs. And meeting needs goes beyond providing relief for the system's casualties; it extends to struggling to introduce systems that do not dehumanize. This agenda is far more demanding than retreating into a ghetto. Christians who feel overwhelmed at the prospect of challenging "the world" of these powerful systems can comfort themselves with the words of Christ: "Take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16, 33).

5: Evil

1. Sin

In Christianity, an evil act has traditionally been called a sin. Sin has normally been understood in a personal way, with reference to personal acts like lying, stealing, murder, adultery and so on. But in recent years there has developed an awareness that this is not adequate to explain the hurt inflicted on people. There is another dimension, and some find it helpful to call this other dimension "social sin". This is evil committed not by an individual, but by a group, a country, a people. Dehumanizing forces are built into institutions, whether social, economic, cultural, political or religious. As people go about their activities, the destructive forces built into these institutions will damage many people. This evil may be inflicted without people being conscious of their responsibility for it — people grow up into systems and accept them as "the way things are".

> The greatest sufferings that afflict mankind come from political, economic and cultural causes. Not to want to do something about them would be to deny one's Christianity.
>
> *Archbishop Denis Hurley, South Africa.*

An obvious example is apartheid. This is a system which both blacks and whites are born into. A white can live a personally blameless life; he can truthfully say he does not lie, cheat, steal, and is faithful to his wife. He may not be personally guilty of oppressing his workers, indeed may pay them

well above the accepted wage. However, he is still part of an oppressive system. He benefits from an evil system. He must confront that fact. (It is of course at this point that ideologies can be constructed to justify involvement in such a system; Christianity can be used in the ideological way.) Needless to say, other African countries operate with systems every bit as oppressive, even if the reality is disguised under labels like "socialism". "humanism" and "people's republic".

There is obviously a connection between personal sin and social sin. Oppressive institutions were originally created by sinful people; but institutions then mould the consciousness of the people born into or involved in them. African Christianity today has to take into account both the personal and the social elements. There has to be a double analysis. Systems require change over and above the change in the hearts of those who make them up. This awareness affects the notion of conversion. Conversion can no longer be seen in reference to one's personal sin only. There must also be a recognition of and a turning away from the social dimension of sin, present in the collectivities to which one belongs. Christians of those traditions which stress conversion to Jesus as one's personal saviour sometimes fail to see that evil in society has a twofold origin: in the sinful hearts of men and women, and in unjust systems which have a life of their own over and above that of the individuals who make them up. This evil can be overcome only by a movement that includes social change. Again, an understanding of sin that leaves unjust structures unchallenged can sometimes be preached by those who benefit from those structures. That Christianity is ideological.

> How can the African human being attain to a condition that will enable him and her to escape misery and inequality, silence and oppression? If Christianity seeks to be anything more than a vast effort to swindle a mass of mystified blacks, the churches of Africa must all join to come to terms with this question.
>
> *Jean Marc Ela, Cameroon.*

So much Christianity is weak in this social awareness. It concentrates on the personal side. It blames the sinner, and the criminal, though it may make some allowance for the social pressures that reduce freedom and responsibility. But it does not subject the social environment to the same analysis that it applies to the individual wrongdoer.

2. Evil Spirits

Satan and evil spirits have traditionally been seen as responsible for much evil in the world. It is not the intention here to deny that, merely to show that this explanation can sometimes be used in such a way as to divert attention from ordinary causes of a political or economic nature. Moving the explanation on to a "higher" or "spiritual" level can be a way of leaving injustice unexposed. For example, there is no need to resort to a "demon of malnutrition" when a country is so mismanaged that there is famine. In one African country people starve because corrupt politicians take the rice supplies and sell them over the border for hard currency. A missionary, in preaching about the people's hardships, referred to Ephesians 6, 12 and spoke of an "evil spirit of shortages". This conceals the immediate reason for the shortages, and also suggests a spiritual remedy like prayer in the place of a more mundane strategy like confronting the political structures.

Evil spirits can be used to distort the nature of politics. Politics has to do with the clash of interests of different groups within society. Such clashes are normal and inevitable. Institutions have to be developed to resolve these differences, and a just society is one in which these differences can be equitably resolved as they arise. However, it makes normal political negotiating impossible if an inevitable clash of groups with different perceptions and interests is presented as part of a transcendent power-struggle between forces of good and forces of evil. For example, many African countries will soon have to face serious differences between Muslim and Christian sectors of their populations. All political discussion comes to a shuddering halt if this clash of interests between two different cultural groupings is presented in terms of a

struggle between good and evil or between God and Satan.

If one understands social activity in the way advocated here, one can easily see the difference between relief and structural change, Many Christians can be very generous in gathering money and goods for the displaced or for refugees. But sometimes this relief work can obscure the deeper question of why there are refugees in the first place. The 1980s have seen several instances in which Christians have generously provided aid, ignoring the fact that it is their own governments (and their own taxes) that have caused the suffering in the first place. This is not intended as an argrument against aid or relief; but relief is no substitute for a rigorous structural analysis of the basic causes of the suffering.

> When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.
>
> *Dom Helder Camara, Brazil.*

6: Obedience to Authority

Obedience to authority has always been an important value in Christianity — and in traditional African societies, too. It is not difficult to understand why. Nothing can be achieved without order. No society can function in disorder. Nobody benefits from chaos.

But there are different kinds of authority. Consider, first, the authority characteristic of an army. In an army there is no room for debate. Subordinates do not have to know the reasons for a command; they must simply obey. An army with no discipline is useless as an army.

Consider, second, authority in a family. Parents have authority, and children must obey. But the authority of parents is very different from that of an army commander. A parent's authority is to lead children to self-determination, to maturity, to responsibility and autonomy. The relationship changes as children grow older, and it is always one of respect. A parent's authority is for service.

Political authority resembles authority in a family. Certainly government has authority, and good citizens must obey, and a police force exists to ensure that they do. But leaders have a duty to pass just laws and to maintain a just society. Leaders do not possess authority to enrich themselves or oppress their subjects. They must continually justify their authority by their competence. They are accountable to their people. Rulers who ignore this and rule for their own benefit may succeed for some time, but (as Eastern Europe proved in 1989) they live on borrowed time, and their countries become sick, brutal and impoverished. There are lessons here for the "Big Men" of Africa.

Christian churches, like all human societies, require authority and obedience, too. However, authority within the church must be like authority in a family. It is an authority for service. It exists to make people mature and responsible adults in the Christian life not childishly subservient. But like all good things, this can be corrupted, too. "Big Men" can reach positions of authority in churches as well as governments. But whereas governments use armies as their obvious instrument of control, church leaders can use Christianity, which is a far more subtle instrument. Demands can be made in the name of God, policies can be promoted as the will of God, when the real aim is pursuit of particular human interests.

1. Discipling

In the 1970s a new structure of obedience appeared in a whole section of Christianity. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA, five men (Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Don Basham, Charles Simpson and Ern Baxter) created an entire system in which "disciples" placed themselves under the authority of "shepherds", in a structure like a pyramid with these five at the top. These five themselves entered a "covenant relationship" in which each was responsible to the others. Subordinates were accountable to their shepherds in all things, even purely personal matters. In this network key concepts were "taking authority over", "biblical submission", "shepherding", "accountability", "covenant relationship" and "cell groups". These ideas spread widely, particularly through the magazine *New Wine*.

The movement had a wide following in the 1970s, but was always the cause of great controversy. Prince left the group in 1980. In 1986 the rest of the group dissolved. Most of the leaders released those in "covenant relationships" under them. In November, 1989 Bob Munford publicly apologized for all the harm he had done through the abuse of authority in this system.

This thinking is still very strong in some churches, particularly those with cell groups. (This is not to say that all churches with house groups are part of this movement.) Discipling literature is commonly found in Africa — other important authors were the

Argentinian Juan Carlos Ortiz and the Korean Paul Yonggi Cho. Of course it is good to have a friend to consult and discuss with, or an experienced individual who can advise, encourage and suggest. But the goal is that each individual stand on his or her own feet and take responsibility for his or her own decisions. A system that keeps people subservient or in childish subordination is unhealthy and inhuman.

2. Prophets

Many leaders, especially of prophetic churches, claim that they have been given a vision. It is not denied here that privileged individuals do receive visions; and these prophetic churches remind all Christians that God still speaks in today's circumstances. However, it is obvious that "the vision" is wide open to abuse as an instrument of control. Bishops misusing authority can do incalculable harm, but a bishop who orders some course of action can be asked to give his reasons, which can then be evaluated rationally; a vision, though, can hardly be challenged, because by definition it comes from God himself. Moreover, it is often stated that those who have not received a vision should submit themselves to those who have. In this way, the claim to a "vision" becomes an instrument of control over others.

Some churches with a tradition of prophecy (in the sense of speech publicly delivered in the name of God) seem to be shifting their emphasis. Prophecy is assuming greater importance, replacing the Bible as the chief means of legitimating a leader and his ministry. Increasingly leaders prophesy over other leaders. There seems to be an international group of "men of God" who move around the world legitimating one another. Sometimes the prophecy can state explicitly that to resist the leader is to resist God (see box). There are even instances of leaders prophesying in this way about themselves. These are indications of a trend towards unaccountability and authoritarianism.

Any prophet has to be prepared to submit his vision to the biblical test: "By their fruit you shall know them" (Mt 12, 33). Any prophet must continually justify his authority by manifesting his competence, integrity and insight, by showing that he does indeed possess special understanding of the ways of God. Those who accept his authority must do so freely, knowing that their lives have been enriched by the prophet's vision; they can never be asked to renounce their responsibility, intelligence and common sense.

> I shall increase your responsibility in a great way and upon your shoulders shall rest great responsibility...I've sought for a man through whom I can move, affecting the very leadership of this nation.... Whoever stands against you as you take this responsibility that I have given you, stands against me. Whoever points a finger against you points it against me. Yea, saith the Lord, this greater responsibility shall bring upon you greater anointing. With greater anointing shall come greater judgement on those who will fight you. For when they fight you, they will be fighting me, saith the Lord of Hosts.
>
> *Benny Hinn, USA, prophesying (in the name of God) over Ray McCauley, South Africa.*

3. Bible

The Bible has always been a prime authority for Christians. As we shall see, however, the Bible is a complex authority. It needs interpretation, and — unfortunately — all too often the key to interpretation has been provided by political and economic interests. The temptation has been to take out a few texts that support a particular view (the view, for example, that God has planned the misery of the poor — see box), and then to pass this view off as "biblical". (If anyone doubts this, look at the numerous meanings that have been found for the Bible that are mutually contradictory.) Thus the Bible becomes a means of legitimating purely human ideas. And, like the prophet's vision, this is a much more insidious form of control than a bishop's decree; that can be challenged, but no Christian wants to challenge "the Bible". There is much "biblical Christianity" in Africa which is only remotely biblical; the claim of submission to scripture is merely used to maintain the human authority of leaders.

> We ask ourselves: How is it that sin and wickedness, riots and violence, destruction and murder are constantly spreading, gaining control of the world, bringing misery upon misery — and that love, justice and peace have almost disappeared from the earth?
>
> The Word of God gives us an answer. In Holy Scripture we come across phrases like the following, "It must be so."
>
> *Basilea Schlink, Germany.*

The command to subject one's intellect to the Bible should be resisted; only by using one's intellect can one judge whether this particular preacher's understanding of the Bible is tenable. We were given intelligence to use it. There may have been a time when "intellectualism" was the greatest threat to Christianity, but, if so, the wheel has turned full circle. Today the greatest threat to Christianity is the refusal to use one's intellect to examine critically the many messages presented as "biblical"

4. Obedience to State

Christianity can be used to enforce political obedience. Many preachers persistently quote Romans 13,1: "All authority is from God... and existing authorities have been put there by God" (see also 1 Tim 2, 1—2; Tt 3, 1). Again we are confronted with the complexity of biblical teaching. The Bible does not unequivocally teach submission. One could also build on Elijah's challenge to the rulers (e.g. 1 Kings 21, 18—29) or Amos' attacks on corrupt authorities (Amos 3, 9—11; 7, 10—17) to reach a very dif-

> The Church is committed to the sole purpose of preaching and publishing the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and does not involve itself in politics or with political parties of any kind. Its members are admonished to be law-abiding, honest citizens of their respective countries and are taught to

ferent conclusion. The original context of these books is all-important.

> hold government agencies and officials in high esteem according to the Biblical principle of Romans 13.
>
> *General Policy Statement, Church of God of Prophecy, Cleveland, USA.*

Those who will not take account of the context have no way of controlling what they find in the Bible, and their own political and economic concerns can easily determine what they find there. This has historically been very evident in this matter of obedience. These texts about submission have been used to support all kinds of power structures. In the USA they were an important element in the Christianity taught to the slaves. Originally slave owners did not want Christianity taught to their slaves because they were afraid that Christian ideas like justice, brotherhood and love might lead the slaves to question the whole institution of slavery. But the owners came to see that Christianity could be used to their own benefit, if preachers put their stress on obedience, faithfulness, duty, patience, endurance under suffering, the hardships to be expected in this life, and the glorious rewards in the next. Christianity thus became a means of controlling the slaves — one far more effective than the whip, because far more subtle.

> The three combined bodies, Missionaries, Government, and Companies, or gainers of money, do form the same rule to look upon the native with mockery eyes. It sometimes startles us to see that the three combined bodies are from Europe, and along with them there is a title, "Christendom"... If we had power enough to communicate ourselves to Europe we would advise them not to call themselves " Christendom" but "Europeandom".:. the life of the three combined bodies is altogether too thefty, too mockery.
>
> *Charles Domingo, Independent Church leader in Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1910.*

Under colonialism of all kinds — British, French, German, Belgian, Portuguese and Spanish — a good deal of Christianity was of this kind. A good insight into the churches' role is provided by this sentence from a letter written by Cecil Rhodes himself to the parents of a Dutch Reformed missionary, Rev A A Louw of Morgenster, Rhodesia: "Your son among the natives is worth as much to me as a hundred of my policemen"

Those colonial structures have, of course, all gone now. But there are in Africa today structures of control every bit as real, if less obvious. Is Christianity today being used to support these new structures? Are some preachers today, consciously or unconsciously, promoting the interests of foreign business and the local ruling elites?

Another factor complicates this issue of obedience to governments. The notion of "freedom" is quite a complex one. For one thing, there are all kinds of freedoms — of association, of assembly, of speech, of religion, of the press, and so on. Another complexity can perhaps be illustrated by the following example. In South Africa's "homelands", it is quite true that every individual is perfectly free to own a private jet. However, it is equally true that, given the social, educational, political and economic disadvantages that these people experience, very few will ever be able to exercise that freedom. Here, in essence, lies the difference between capitalist and socialist views of freedom: capitalism has emphasized *freedom* to, socialism has emphasized *freedom from* the handicaps that hinder exercise of positive freedoms. Now there is a widespread tendency to reduce this complex notion of freedom to just two elements, namely religious freedom (the freedom to evangelize without hindrance) and free enterprise (the freedom to do business with minimum controls). This tendency is particularly evident in the USA, for historical reasons: the country was founded on the notion of religious freedom, at that time a great novelty, and the free market has always been part of its business ethos. In line with this tendency, some Western missionaries adopt the view that any

President Daniel Arap T Moi paid a state visit to the Federal Republic of Germany during the second week of February, 1989. There President Moi met with Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke at "Schloss Gymnich", a state guest house. The president and the evangelist had a wonderful time of fellowship and prayer. It truly is a great privilege for a country to be ruled by a born-again head of state.

Reinhard Bonnke's Revival Report, 1989.

country that is characterized by religious freedom and free enterprise is a "free" country, and that any government that allows these two freedoms is (regardless of its performance in other areas) a "good' government which should be obeyed. Since "free enterprise" sometimes effectively means the freedom of Western companies to repatriate profits, this again raises the issue of ideological Christianity.

7: True Christians

In the history of Christianity it has been common for some Christians to denounce others as "heretics" and deny them the name of Christian. But whereas the mainline churches have stopped doing this, now other churches, calling themselves "biblical", denounce the mainline churches as unchristian. The accusation takes many forms: the mainline churches are "merely political", they teach "traditions of men", they deny basic Christian beliefs, they are merely "Christianism", another "ism" along with all the others.

It is undeniably true that all the mainline churches have been formed by Western history. It is impossible to understand the Catholic Church without some idea of Europe's Middle Ages. It is impossible to understand the Lutheran or Reformed Churches without some awareness of 16th century Europe. It is a great help in appreciating the Anglican Church to know some recent English history. To understand Methodism properly it helps to know John Wesley's background and preoccupations. All these churches have undoubtedly been influenced by the cultures in which they arose, and it is probably true that African members of these churches have been too reluctant to Africanize the European characteristics of these mission churches. But all these churches have considerable strengths and have led countless people to good holy lives.

Because these churches are so obviously conditioned by their history, however, it does not follow that the modern Christianity claiming to be "biblical" is biblical in any privileged sense, or in a way that the mainline churches are not. In fact, it is not so. This

"biblical" Christianity is every bit as culturally conditioned. Most use the revival, which is America's single greatest contribution to the history of Christianity. Their fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, with its emphasis on inerrancy, is not the traditional Christian attitude to the Bible at all, but arose in the USA, for largely cultural reasons, within the last century. Particular biblical interpretations, like discovering Russia and modern Israel in the scriptures, are unthinkable without the recent foreign policy preoccupations of the USA. Their notion of freedom (understood as religious freedom and free enterprise) and their understanding of the relation between church and state are thoroughly American. Their spiritual fund-raising ideas are inconceivable without the financial preoccupations of the American televangelists. Their preoccupation with media betrays America's technological culture. To make these points is not to criticize, much less "discredit", these churches; it is merely to show that this "biblical" Christianity is every bit as American as Lutheranism, say, is German.

It must be acknowledged that all branches of Christianity are made up of (at least) five strands: beliefs, worship, morality, spirituality and organization. Each denomination has these elements in its own unique balance. For example, the organizational structure of the Anglican Church, with its bishops and synods is very different from that of the Quakers; the formalized worship of the Greek Orthodox Church is markedly different from a Pentecost tent meeting. Different people are attracted to different denominations, often for reasons that seem no more substantial than temperament or upbringing. There has been a tendency in Christianity to consider those who have these elements in a different balance not Christians. But there are surely many ways of seeking God, and it is arrogant to stand in God's place and decide in his name who is not acceptable to him.

There are two particular criticisms that "biblical" Christians make of the mainline churches.

1. Political Christians

The first says that these churches — usually the churches belonging to the World Council of Churches, or to national councils of churches — are "political". The criticism is often expressed as a condemnation of "liberation theology" which is associated with these bodies. But "liberation theology", far from being some wild aberration, is merely Christianity with some awareness of the structures within which Christians live and operate. It is Christianity which refuses to be privatized, because it is aware that privatizing Christianity can be a way of preserving unjust structures and promoting the present system.

> The church has one aim to concern itself with — the War with Satan and the campaign for souls....
>
> Many churches are very active but active doing what? To fiddle about with secular issues is one way to look impressively busy and "relevant"... But to bring the Gospel to a dying world is the true relevance... The command to evangelize is all that matters, snatching men from the flames.
>
> *Reinhard Bonnke, Germany.*

It is not true that whereas challenging structures is a political act, refusing to challenge them is an unpolitical stance. In South Africa, many Christians have opposed apartheid because of the evil it inflicts, and certainly that is a political Christianity. But those Christians who refuse to confront the apartheid system are equally political; it is just that their vote is for the apartheid system, whereas the vote of the first group is against it. In other African countries, some churches oppose the corruption and mismanagement that inflicts such harm on people. Certainly that is a political Christianity. But those Christians who refuse to get involved in publicly challenging such injustice cannot claim to be "non-political"; they are supporting, at least by their silence, the unjust system. Politics and religion cannot be kept separate. They are inextricably mixed.

Liberation theology is not a new set of particular doctrines, it is Christianity marked by an awareness of structures. It does not have clear answers, but it is marked by a determination to seek solutions in the sphere. To call Christians who have this awareness "Marxists" is not correct, although to analyse social structures requires borrowing techniques from the social sciences, to which

Marx contributed. Admittedly, liberation theology does introduce a new element into Christianity, the understanding of how societies function. But throughout its history Christianity has always been ready to confront new problems with new resources. It would be a betrayal of one's Christian duty to refuse to do so.

2. Deny the Bible

The second criticism often made against mainline Christians is that they "deny the Bible". They do not "deny the Bible"; they are merely aware that biblical studies have revealed the complexity within the Bible.

The Bible is not a single book, but an entire library, written over a period of more than 1 000 years, by different inspired authors with different assumptions and perceptions. Over that 1 000 years, the problems, questions and issues changed greatly. Individual books have to be seen in the contexts in which they were written. If that context is ignored, texts taken in isolation can lead anywhere. One can construct a very narrow and exclusivist Christianity, building on Ezra and Nehemiah; but one can equally construct a universalist and encompassing Christianity from Isaiah and Jonah (perhaps Jonah was written precisely to counter the smug narrowness of Ezra). One can preach a vindictive, unforgiving God from Ex 34, 6—7; one can preach the opposite view of a loving, forgiving God based on Hosea. One can, as the advocates of the gospel of prosperity do, hold a simplistic correlation between virtue and wealth, building on Dt 28—30. One can just as easily appeal to the dialogues of Job to show that such a correlation simply does not work in practice. In the New Testament, highly structured churches can claim the authority of the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) for their organization. On the other hand, groups like the Quakers with almost no structure at all can find their justification in the Johannine literature. Those who want to give great importance to worldly authorities can appeal to Romans 13 and Titus 3; those who want to hold the opposite view can build on Revelation, where worldly powers are identified with the forces of Satan. And so it goes on. all these views can be described as "biblical", but biblical in the sense of selective readings of certain

texts, based on ignoring other texts, de-emphasizing some at the expense of others, and reading some through a lens provided by others.

Mainline Christians who admit this diversity in the Bible should not accept the criticism that they somehow downplay the Bible and its authority. (They are often accused of this — see box.) Quite the contrary. It is the mainline Christians who let the biblical books say what they want to say. It is so-called "biblical" Christians who for the most part have elaborated human theories, fathered them on the Bible, and then pass them off with a spurious biblical authority. Advocates of dispensationalism, for instance, have subscribed to a theory devised in Britain last century. If the Bible can mean *that,* it can mean anything. And a Bible that can mean anything, means nothing.

> With increasing frequency the leadership of the denominations will be captured by those who completely reject the historic truths of the Bible and deny doctrines which according to Christ Himself are crucial to believe in order to be a Christian. In some of the largest Protestant denominations this has already taken place. The few remaining institutions which are not yet dominated by the disbelievers will go downhill in the same manner.
>
> *Hal Lindsey, USA.*

The Bible must be given a key. It has always been given a key, whether this has been recognized or not. It is a theological task to ensure that this key is provided by the central Christian insight of God's becoming one with the poor and rejected.

And the theological task is more than a simplistic "prooftexting" from the Bible. It is a complex activity involving the Bible certainly, but involving also culture, tradition, experience and reason. The same point has been made by saying that a truly Christian reading of the Bible has as its aim not just to know the Bible but to listen to God today. To hear God today we must attend to the Bible, our own particular situation, and the community where the Holy Spirit is present. Through that complex activity Christians will discover the truth of the Bible today.

Conclusion

These pages have raised issues in an attempt to make African Christians think. It was not the aim here to discredit any particular mission or denomination. But African Christians must realize that Christianity comes in many different forms. They have a duty to examine critically the varieties proposed for their acceptance. In this booklet we have printed in boxes various statements by influential Christians. Some we accept, others we reject. Do you agree or disagree with the viewpoints expressed in these boxes? Give reasons. Do you think this booklet has judged some of these positions too negatively? Do you know of other forms of Christianity that have questionable effects?

African Christians must be responsible. Even a sketchy knowledge of the history of Christianity reveals how frequently Christianity has been used to promote political, cultural and economic goals. Last century many colonial missionaries, with the purest of motives, used Christianity to promote their national interests. Those colonial empires have gone, but they have been replaced by an international system largely run in Western interests. A particularly Western form of Christianity is sweeping Africa today. It is at least worth asking: what is the relation between this Western Christianity and Western political and commercial interests in the area?

Judge for yourself

In Africa today, whose interests are served by a Christianity

- **that diverts attention from social conditions and says you can prosper under the present system if only you believe?**
- **that sickness has nothing to do with deteriorating health services but with one's own faith?**
- **that God has decreed the miseries of the poor?**
- **that one must expect things to get worse, because God has foretold this?**
- **that one should not expect any rights or contentment here, and that only in heaven will one find peace and justice?**
- **that a government's sole task is to allow unrestricted evangelizing, and to such a government obedience is a Christian's duty?**
- **that this world is not our concern, so something like deforestation is of no importance?**
- **that any changes God wishes to bring about he will accomplish miraculously?**
- **that morality concerns only personal and private issues?**
- **that politics and Christianity are completely different things, and to the extend that you concern yourself with the former, you have renounced the latter?**
- **that a Christian's sole task is to go out and encourage others to adopt these ideas?**

In what sense is this Christianity "non-political"? Surely this Christianity is a solid support for the present system? It is worth asking: is this Christianity being promoted by the foreign interests and the local elites who benefit from the present system?

The human condition in today's Africa is characterized, on the one hand, by the imperialism of the developed countries and the cultural and technological domination of the West, and on the other hand, by injustice and oppression, in all of its various forms, such as racism and apartheid, the condition of women in thrall to dowry and polygamy, and ultimately, the denial to millions, individually and collectively, of their basic human freedoms, at the hands of bureaucracies that are rotten to the core....

The cry of the African — of the African human being — ought to move the churches to question themselves as to what they are, what they are saying, and what they are doing in Africa.

Jean Marc Ela, Cameroon.