

Africa: A Troubled Continent (Concluding Article)

A Case for Higher Christian Education.

The phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa is a wonderful reality. But if Christianity is experiencing such rapid numerical gain why, then, has Africa, potentially the richest continent in the world, become a bleeding continent? In my series of articles I have pointed to such issues as colonialism, the resurgence of traditional religions, communism, the rise of militant Islam, kleptomaniac regimes and AIDS. Furthermore, many political leaders are still more interested in the welfare of close relatives and people of their own tribe than in the welfare of their nation as a whole. This tribalism has often led to a high rate of corruption, unfair wealth distribution, and the hiring of civil servants not on the basis of merit but on family and tribal connections. In other words, all around them Christians witness injustice and misery. In these adverse circumstances, winning "one more soul" for Christ from this sinful world, and preserving Christian integrity in face of temptation, depravities, innocent sufferers, disease, rampant poverty, and persecution seems to be the sole urgent task according to many believers. And indeed, winning the lost for Christ is an urgent task. There are still the hidden, primitive tribes in Africa where the Gospel has not penetrated. Millions are still in spiritual darkness. But who is going to disciple the new converts? The growth of Christianity in Africa poses its own unique challenge - how to move from quantity to quality? How can African Christianity, which is "a mile wide and an inch deep," become a faith that can impact every area of life? I believe that this is not the time to put all our money down on winning converts. Education holds the key to the future! I am convinced if no measures are taken, Christianity in Africa will dissolve into ashes of Western type of disbelief on the grounds of its failure to come to grips with the pertinent questions raised by today's political, religious and intellectual environment.

History of Education

Historically, almost all formal education in Africa was Christian in origin, the educators were Christian, the literature was Christian. The indigenous teachers were taught by Christians. Mission schools educated a greater ratio of Africa's population than anywhere else in the world. In other words, Africa owes a great debt to Christian missions. For many years Christian higher education was not a top priority. The primary concern was the establishment of elementary schools. For example, as late as 1875, there existed in Malawi, "no schools, no teachers, no pupils and nobody who could read." In thirty years things changed. Various mission societies established successful educational systems. Throughout the 19th century, missionaries were in a pioneer situation. (And in many African countries, mission work is still in the pioneering stage.) They were men and women of great dedication and unquestioned commitment, willing to leave everything behind for the sake of spreading the Gospel. Their secret of missionary effectiveness was their willingness to suffer and die for their Lord. To put it in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." In general, the early missionaries to Africa did not possess a high degree of formal education. They had less education than their counterparts in the home ministry. Their

aim was to gain converts for the Lord. Many converts were gained through mission schools. These schools became forerunners of the present-day national school systems, and they were maintained from the start by mission societies, supported by the voluntary giving of Christians in the West. The colonial governments, with minuscule budgets for educational purposes, were content for the most part to supervise the education which the missionaries provided, although the expanding responsibilities of mission schools and colleges could not have been met without the government grants-in-aid made available from 1920 onward. But the colonial government did not offer their minuscule support for the sole benefit of the Africans. They depended on the mission schools for the education of the white man's kind. From these schools came the clerks and interpreters in government offices and others of what might be called the emerging intellectuals.

The introduction of a Western style education had some negative side effects. It produced a younger generation which soon felt itself superior to its elders, reversing an age-old and natural relationship. The African student became an inhabitant of two worlds, one world of Western thought and technology, the other world of his ancestors, his parents and elders, and most of his age group. Another product of the mission school was the yearning for freedom from the yoke of colonialism. As Ndabaningi, a leader in Zimbabwe, put it, "The missionary ...laid explosives under colonialism." Another African said it differently, "Africans found that the Bible begins with Genesis and ends with revolution." Unfortunately, not all African leaders educated in mission schools became stalwart Christians. Through outside influences, some were also indoctrinated in secularism, Communism, and strange cults. And where African nationalism had been captured by Leninist-Marxist propaganda, anti-missionary sentiment was fostered strongly among the people who owed so much to missions. Wholesale rejection of Christianity occurred within revolutionary movements led by non-Christians. Teaching African students was in the pioneer days and still is a challenge for the Western educator. Immense stress on parental authority and the consequent fear of asking independent questions is an important reason for the closed character of African society. The authoritarian family structure tends to produce passive and dependent children. Priority number one is the continuation of the tribal cultural heritage. Consequently, a critical original creative approach is not welcomed or appreciated but in fact strongly discouraged. There is a strong tendency to accept without question statements on authority, be they written textbooks or a teacher's word. Rote memory is an important factor in education. Africans have an outstanding ability to memorize. In the past tales and proverbs were transmitted orally to the next generation. But what they learn by rote becomes more a repetition of empty formulas and verbalisms than the ability to understand the subject. They may have a great facility for memorization of a passage from a book or the Bible, but they do not know how it should be applied. In later years the primary task of Christian higher education was the training of pastors and workers for local churches. The establishment of Bible colleges and seminaries was to provide a minimal level for Christian workers in a society which then started acquiring Western higher education. Africa today has well more than 200 seminaries and university departments of theology. Nigeria alone has more than 50 seminaries and 20 university departments of religious studies. Most of these institutions were established

in the last four decades. Until recently none of the major seminaries was a research centre providing graduate programmes in the area of Christian studies. Thus, for graduate studies, the field is left almost entirely to the Department of Religion in Universities. Nigerian educator Dr. Nlenanya Onwu comments:

"Conservatism is still a basic problem in most of these theological schools in Africa, and their graduates usually fail to take into account the various contexts of the African condition. They have often not helped the cause of Christianity in changing Africa today. Their theology is quite unrelated to present African and ecclesiastical situations."

The nationalization of mission schools has greatly diminished their missionary role and significance today. Sad to say, it has hastened the secularization of African education. In general, the current climate of opinion in Africa on Christian education is no less different from elsewhere in the world. An African Christian educator complained that the young and inexperienced with a half-baked knowledge of Christian education have filled the hives of the educational services. As Dr. Cephas T. Nziramassanga of the University of Zimbabwe described the plight confronting young Christian students, "Murder for fun has become a sport; the value and preciousness of human life are a laughing stock. In the field of belief, faith and worship, the atheistic climate has redoubled its influence while some pseudo-Christian educators are regrettable vanguards of syncretism introducing education often called "Multifaith' education."

Secular Education.

Secularism is no stranger to Africa. Its origin can be traced to the late 19th century with the rise of cultural nationalism. It soon took a "life of its own" when African nationalists decided to take their destiny in their own hands. They were convinced that its fulfilment was within the horizon of their own world. They thought they could build free nations on the basis of their own values, aspirations and abilities. But secularism has not been Africa's friend. Instead it has worsened the spiritual, moral, and economic crises in African nations.

Secularism has also impacted higher education. It divides faith and learning, learning and life. It results in privatizing the Christian faith and produces a crisis of values in society in general and education in particular. In many African nations Christians are marginalised in public life. And with respect to social transformation, few African societies are congenial to the church or Christian values. Today, most universities in Africa are secularized state institutions. Secularism, therefore, has become a fierce enemy of Christianity. I am convinced, therefore, that a secular type of Western education will not solve the tremendous problems Africans face. And neither does the revival of traditional African culture and religions offer an answer. As the South African educator B.J. van der Walt observed in his essay *Secularism: The Most Dangerous Enemy of Christianity*:

" Some people from the Western world like to argue that secularism is an outdated topic not worthwhile to be discussed anymore. This may be true of

Europe, but not of Africa. On this continent we daily see and experience the devastating effects of secularisation and a secular way of life. Both traditional and Christian values are destructed when people live and die 'as if God does not exist or matter.'"

Christian Higher Education.

Fundamental religious and cultural changes are necessary for the development of Africa's potential wealth. Hence, Christians have an unprecedented opportunity to teach the Christian worldview. And the best place to expose students to a Christian worldview is in institutions of higher education. Therefore, Christian higher education is not a luxury for the training of Africa's future leaders. From this perspective, the motto of a university in Nigeria is most appropriate: "If you plan for one year, you plant corn - which matures in one year. If you plan for a decade, you plant trees - which require one decade to mature. If you plan for a generation, you train and educate people - this creates a permanent change and its impact is passed on from generation to generation."

Christian scholars must develop their own agendas, founded in the Gospel, as an alternative framework from which the issues in Africa can be addressed. If they believe that each thought is taken captive and made to serve God (2 Cor.10: 5) than they will see that "all truth is God's truth." They will know that right from the beginning every subject matter has to be taught "In Thy Light" (Psalm 39:9b). Christian education zeroes in on the educative purpose of God Himself and the meaning and purpose of life for humankind. In other words, Christian education is education for life in all its fulness. Although seminaries and theological colleges are necessary for the training of pastors and church workers, they are inadequate on their own to insure the exposure of all modern higher education from a Christian perspective relevant for today's African students. Dr. Nziramasanga observed: "There is a need to establish departments and faculties of Christian education in African universities and colleges and not 'Religious Studies' departments."

Africans see the need for higher education all right! Dr. Ralph Winters, founder of the U.S. Center for World Missions, remarks in his remarkable article *What's Wrong with 4,000 Pastoral Training Schools Worldwide?* (March-April 2002 *Mission Frontiers*) that if missionaries are not going to establish university institutions, national believers will. And he warns that if these schools "rush to unmodified secular curricula, if these schools are not regarded as the right foundations for both lay people and ministers of the Gospel, we will simply see the perpetuation of a secular versus religious polarization."

Thankfully, the Lord has raised up Christian educators with a vision for higher education in Africa. At the University of Jos in Nigeria, where the faculty and the student body are either Muslim or Christian, Dr. Adrian and Dr. Wendy Helleman are both professors in the advanced degree program under the auspices of the Canadian ministry, *Christian Studies International*. Previously all prospective seminary professors had to get their advanced degree in a Western country where the cost is substantial and the culture foreign to the African culture.

In 2001 the Centre for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (CPCHEA) was established in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Its mandate is not only to work for an effective presence in higher education in Africa, but also to link Christian educators already involved in teaching programs for fellowship and mutual assistance. I believe this is an exciting development. When African evangelical leaders call for an African public philosophy from a Christian perspective and CPCHEA can make a positive contribution in this area, the old phrases and concepts of Kuyperian Calvinism takes on a new meaning.

Africa also has some Christian universities. One of them is Daystar University College in Nairobi, Kenya, which was established in 1964. The Kenyan capital is a key centre for a Christian university with an enormous potential for a positive influence among evangelicals. It is Africa's ecumenical, missionary and para church ministries "capital," and home to African Christian leaders, both from the area and from across the continent. Daystar approaches its total educational program from a Christian worldview. It sees itself as an alternative to secular higher education in an African context. Its stated goal is to train Christians who will become leaders whether in church, government or industry.

Conclusion

Will Africa ever get the chance to make a break with its painful past and troubled presence? As Christians we may never give in to despair. All things are possible with the Lord! We should never underestimate the liberating power of the Gospel. In the power of the Spirit, a total, integral Christian world view and an applied Christian life will be able to break the powers of Islam, secularism, African traditional religions in family life, in education, in the arts, in politics, and in the world of commerce.

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