Is Europe the Exceptional Case?

"A Perspective from Africa (Zambia)"

Reverend Joe Kapolyo

"Then as now, the triumph of secular liberalism proved to be anything but inevitable" (Jenkins 2002:10). Jenkins' comment is set in the context of evangelical gains in the early nineteenth century temporarily reversing the relentless advance of the modernizing and secularizing juggernaut that had been, for several centuries, the staple diet of enlightened Europeans. Belief was strong in history as essentially progressive. This was the 'ultimate Enlightenment gospel' (Porter 2000: 445), and as Gibbon stated, "We contemplate the gradual progress of society from the lowest ebb of primitive barbarism, to the full tide of modern civilization" (quoted variously see especially Porter 2000:231). To be sure there had been dissenting voices including most notably William Wilberforce the youthful Member of Parliament for Hull who repudiated rationalism in the Christian religion as mere nominalism and heathenism. But such voices were in the minority. For the majority however, progress, the universalization of improvement was inevitable. It inspired optimism and pointed to a better future in which all remaining vestiges of wrongs in society would not only be exposed but also removed 'through criticism, reform, education, knowledge, science, industry and sheer energy' (Porter 2000:425). Economic growth, social modernization went hand in hand however with the decline of organized religion (Davie 2002:14).

My concern in this paper is not to rehearse the progress of secularism and the decline of the organized Church in Europe. But rather to ask the question whether the modernization of Africa will inevitably lead to the secularization of the continent?
Like the Middle Ages in Europe, the Church was largely instrumental in introducing modernization in Africa. David Livingstone's ambition for Central Africa was 'Commerce, Civilisation and Christianity'. These three 'Cs' were to be achieved primarily through the medium of education. This often happened on the Mission Stations. They proved to be the first point of contact between African people and Western civilization and its espousal of modernity. The majority of black Africans, who received primary education before 1945, did so in mission schools run by missionaries. They had very limited choice in the matter for until 1945 the secular colonial authorities in Zambia took very little interest in the provision of schools for the black population. By 1945 only 51 out of 2100 schools were run directly by the government although about half of the rest received some government funding (Snelson 1974:272). To show the spatial distribution of the mission stations here is a brief history of the educational development in Zambia.

The veteran CMML missionary Fredrick Arnot opened the first school in the whole country at Limulunga. In 1887 Francois Coillard, of the Paris Evangelical Mission opened a second school at Sefula. Other schools followed in 1889 at Kambole and Fwambo near the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika run by the London Missionary Society. So as mission activity took hold schools spread throughout the country. Each missionary society would begin by reducing the language in their area to writing then start schools to teach people to read and write with a view to teaching them to read the Bible. Some missionaries in spite of some encouragement from the British South Africa Company administrators initially frowned upon more technical education. Frederick Arnot is quoted as saying 'Missionaries I hold, have nothing to do with training boys in order to bring them into competion with white men, in white towns (Rotberg 1965:122). So dogmatic and theological education was to be the rule. The Church was to be founded on education. The emphasis was on primary education for various reasons including the following: better-educated Africans became cheeky, left mission employment for better and greener pastures. For financial reasons, secondary education was not given priority. For a start it was more costly, but it would also lead to educating an elite group where primary education would benefit more cheaply
a larger group. This policy was followed to the point where in 1939 there were nearly 78,000 primary school children compared to only 15 in secondary school (Snelson 1974:229). The first government secondary school, Munali, came into being in 1940 as the only secondary school for Africans. But in spite of some of these attitudes, it was the Church at the mission stations, which introduced technical education to the local African populations.

European missionaries formed economic entities when they first arrived but with time they began to interact both religiously and economically with the local populations. Mission stations were spread widely throughout each of the territories. Indeed in some parts of Zambia and Malawi it was the missionaries who introduced the first monetary currencies of any kind (Henkel 1989:158). Many mission stations engaged in fairly large scale economic activities. For instance the London Missionary Society missionaries at Kambole had accumulated in "1903...a stock of 1600 fezes, 4300 fancy scarves, 1850 pounds of soap, 5400 yards of red calico, 39,000 yards of sheeting and other calico, 2000 pounds of beads and large amounts of jewelry, watches, umbrellas, salt and chains (Rotberg quoted in Henkel 1989:159).

The period of modernization goes back to the last decades of the nineteenth century when Cecil John Rhodes' British South Africa Company took over as caretaker administrators of the territory of Northern Rhodesia. At that point the population was largely agricultural and almost entirely rural. Seventy years later Zambia had vibrant urban population of up to one million people (out of a possible four million) and an industrial base, which was the envy of many. Indeed it was predicated that Zambia would soon make it into the ranks of the truly modern nations. The Copperbelt Industrial Revolution was claimed by J C Mitchell a prominent anthropologist of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute to have been unequalled in thousands of years (Ferguson 1999:2). This linear development seemed to have had a teleological goal, namely Western industrial modernity. And so the question arises naturally, would such a state lead to the decline of the Church in Zambia?

Before attempting to answer this question it is important to state that industrialization in Zambia has gone into sharp decline in the past twenty years and most of the industries that supported the copper mining activities
have shut down. The reasons for this decline are at the same time simple but also complex. The Zambian economy was based on one product, copper. The end of the Vietnam War in the late sixties led to an abundance of copper on the world market followed by a slump in its price. This was followed by the OPEC oil prices in the mid seventies. These two factors and economic mismanagement have led to a severe reversal in the modernizing project in Zambia. Men and women who enjoyed a good life in the sixties and seventies are now struggling to make ends meet. The official wage earning base has dropped from around three quarters of million when the population was only four million to around a third of million in a population of about ten million. The country had fallen from a middle-income country to a basket case within a short twenty years (Ferguson 1999:6). The various world bank remedies seem only to have helped the country to continue servicing its external debt while sinking all the time into deeper economic crises. So perhaps the incompleteness of the modernization project means that it would be wrong to view the African situation through the same theoretical apparatus that served the European scenario.

But there are other differences too, namely the nature of African religiosity. I will employ the imagery of an onion, with its layers of peels, to help us to mentally visualize the complex cultural make up of any human being. The concentric circles are numbered 1 - 8 starting with the core or the heart of the matter. At the centre, in the first circle (1), we can expect to find a person’s religious convictions and the essential elements of one’s vision of life, the way a person views himself or herself, the world and one’s place in it, as well as values and norms that characterize one’s world view. Moving outwards, the next circles, numbers two - eight (2 - 8), encompass material and spiritual creations such as marriage, initiation rites, indeed the Church and the state with its laws, customs, behaviour, habits, and others. What is in the first circle, what we might call the inner person, is not visible but completely permeates and regulates what is said and done in all the other circles. The ‘inner, deeper cultural layers determine and direct the outward layers’. Whereas the latter is easier to describe for it is clearly discernible (Van der Walt 1988:20 - 21) the inner core, the vision of life, is more difficult to identify and describe.
Here are some of the values that belong to the core, that constitute a vision of life for the Bemba (African). The first is what we may call 'religion'. This term is probably misapplied to sub Saharan Africans. The Bemba people do not have a word for religion in their vocabulary. There are words for praising God, (Ukulumbanya Lesa), serving God (Ukubombela Lesa), thanking God (Ukutotela Lesa), but there is no word for religion.

Mbiti is perhaps the first African to attempt a thorough systematisation of what in my view is erroneously called African religions. Mbiti himself admits this much in saying that this not an easy task. For 'Africans are notoriously religious . . . religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it' (Mbiti 1969:1). But then he proceeds to treat 'religion' as if it were a separate category from other entities in life, a category that can be systematised. This was his first mistake. For there is no body of orthodoxy preserved either orally or literally in the so-called African religions. The one thousand or so African ethnic groups (tribes) do not share a monolithic system of religion. Instead, they have different beliefs expressed variously depending on need. This is not to say that some beliefs and practices are not more widespread, nor that they do not bear any resemblance to expressions of spirituality found elsewhere in the world. Migrations, similarity in kinship systems, wars, famines, witchcraft eradication movements, inter tribal trade all combined to ensure cross fertilisation of ideas and practices (Ranger 1993:72 - 74). In this regard Taylor is right in suggesting that 'we may reasonably claim that we are dealing with the universal, basic elements of man's understanding of God and of the world' (Taylor 1963:26). But this recognition does not amount to a promulgation of a religious system, which can be systematised around the theme, for example, of the African concept of time.

But Mbiti, along with many other Africanists, is also wrong in calling the collection of 'traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices' of African peoples a religion. The isolation of beliefs in deities and the whole spiritual side of human existence is a Cartesian creation imposed on a description of African experiences. The Enlightenment demands classification. Life must not be embraced in its totality. It needs to be broken up and classified in order to be
labelled and thereby presumably understood better. Classification in itself is not a bad thing. It depends on what one does with what is so classified. In modernity classification almost always invariably leads to the process of the privileging of human minds over everything else including the spiritual realm. Spiritual practices are therefore classified in the category of religion, which is then deemed a private pursuit, which belongs to the area of personal subjective opinion. It is divorced from ordinary life in the public domain.

African practice until the onset of Christianity knew no such classification. In fact one of the major weaknesses of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, as we will seek to demonstrate in this chapter, is precisely because it is a religion, 'a classroom religion' for that matter (Taylor 1963:22). It therefore fits not into the inner person, the locus of the vision of life, and where it naturally belongs, but rather, and unfortunately so, into the second set of concentric circles in the area of material and spiritual creations. It is not an integrating element in life. For this reason it is more accurate to speak not of African religions but African spirituality, a living faith. Spirituality, unlike popular types of religion, does have those qualities of control and of powerful influence over life in its totality. It is an integrating principle of life. If this understanding and practice of spirituality in Africa had been transferred to the practice of Christianity, the Church would be healthier, authentically African and exerting greater impact upon life in its totality, not just personal but public as well. As it is African spirituality controls, certainly permeates the practice of Christianity. 'Christianity thus seemed like an ideal which people wanted to aspire to, but practically they continued living according to the normative system of their ethnic groups' (WLSA 1997:53).

Traditional Africans do not maintain a dichotomy between spiritual and secular values. 'No distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for Nature and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community' (Taylor 1963:72). The spiritual element is always a part of life, indeed the larger part. It emanates from the understanding that the material world is firmly connected to the spiritual world and spirituality is the tie that binds human beings to the world of the ancestral spirits and gods. The practices of many African peoples show that they
strongly believe in God and in the spiritual world (Mbiti 1969:16). An illness for instance is never considered, let alone treated, in isolation. Contrary to normal bio-medical practice, an illness is treated as part of the person suffering within the context of the community, which includes both the people alive, and the spirits of the ancestors.

I experienced this as a child when I received treatment for the many abdominal ailments that plagued me. My maternal grandfather would always take me to a bush, which he knew to have the medicinal qualities for dealing with abdominal disorders. He would instruct me to put my hands behind my back, to close my eyes and to walk towards the bush. Upon reaching the low-lying leaves I was to bite off a leaf at a time and chew it swallowing the sap and spitting out the rest. While I was walking, he would walk alongside all the time saying prayers to God through the spirits of the ancestors. That is why the Bemba say, *Ukwimba akati: kusanshyako na Lesa* (to dig a small stick (or perhaps more accurately a small medicinal plant), you add God). This means that to be successful at finding the right roots for medicine one needs more that just knowledge of the relevant bushes. One needs the efficacious presence of God and the good will of the spirits of the ancestors in the digging of the roots, or presentation of sacrifices, as well as in the application of the medicine (Taylor 1963:103-4). What was true of treating bodily disorders was also true of endeavours like hunting, preparing gardens for planting, going on long journeys, and deprivations like lack of food in times of drought (Taylor 1963:105).

The second core value, which derives from the first, is the growth of varieties of spiritual activities, such as rainmaking, healing, witch finding and sorcery (more widely referred to as witch craft - a term Mbiti disparages and desires not to be used ever at all - Mbiti 1969:166). Africans are very spiritual. Unlike their western counterparts, they have no need to be convinced of the existence of God. Many are even monotheistic. Both humanist rationalism that characterises the West and the atheistic materialism that sums up communism are foreign to the African mind, except for a tiny group of die hard men and women who swallowed the Marxist doctrines in the cold war era.
Even they must have a very tough time at funerals. I suspect that at those times they conveniently ignore their philosophies.

I recall standing at the graveside conducting a committal for an Elder in a Church who had died tragically in a road traffic accident. At the appointed time I invited the family and friends to follow me in throwing into the grave a token amount of soil. Many responded including the younger brother of the deceased. In his remarks he promised the dead brother that within twelve months the person responsible for his death would similarly die. The promise was a commitment firstly to seek a diviner to discern the person responsible for the death (it is widely believed that death when it occurs is always the result of the malicious use of magic or witchcraft. Death is always both natural and unnatural (Mbiti 1969:155), and secondly to use magic or witchcraft to cause the death of the person deemed to be responsible for his brother’s death. Such counter measures are common both for protection and offensive use of magic. Many if not most African peoples believe that lots of human beings have power to tap into the supernatural realm and use such power mysteriously for harm or good. Many Christians of good standing are intimidated by threats of witchcraft. It is a fact that a number of people on death row at the Zambian Maximum Security prison are men who caused the death of another at a funeral. In northwestern Zambia it is believed that on the way to the grave, a spirit will take hold of the bier, bind the pallbearers and the coffin and lead them to the person who has caused the death. The power of the spirit which at the point cannot be resisted not only seeks out the ‘culprit’, who caused the death, but causes him or her to be battered to death using coffin as a battering ram!

In spite of these horror stories arising from African openness to the spirit world, it is precisely this openness to spiritual things that has made it easier to account for and is in part is responsible for the phenomenal growth of the Church in the Third World. The important question is which spirit is one in tune with?

What is the effect of these core values on the establishment and long-term survival of the Church? Ideally, at conversion one would hope that it is the core values that are 'converted' and replaced by biblical values, derived from
the Bible and enshrined in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Because the core values are already both spiritual in orientation and an integrating principle in life, it is often stated that therefore when an African gets converted, the core values are somehow transformed to reflect new allegiances and immediately, following established patterns, become the new integrating principle of life in its totality. The unavoidable inference is that the African Church should therefore reflect biblical values through and through.

This is obviously too simplistic a formula. Processes of conversion are truly complex and when they occur they do so for a variety of reasons quite apart from the straightforward desire to follow another religion. As Aguilar says "African processes of conversion are fluid, and they also include processes of reconversion to religious practices socially present in the eras preceding the world religions" (Aguilar 1995:526). Fear, opportunities for commercial and political advancement, desire to create cohesion around a tribal identity, economic survival, all can play significant parts in the decision made especially by groups of people to convert from traditional beliefs to a world religion. Since core values change very slowly at the presuppositional philosophical level (Jacobs 1979:181), it takes a long time before 'true' religion takes a very public face. In the intervening period we can expect to see a kind of localisation of the new religion. Certainly this is the case in so much of Africa where Christianity appears as a veneer which is itself thoroughly affected by the core values. "The Christian spiritual import, with its aim at bringing men to their ultimate goal in heaven may be a mere overcoat over traditional deep seated beliefs and customs leaving them undisturbed" (Oger 1991:231).

This I believe is the reason why so often the Church in Africa has been compared to a river two miles wide but only two inches deep! These and not modernization and secularization are the real threats to African Christianity.

Bibliography:

Davie G 2002
Europe: The Exceptional Case D L T London
Ferguson J 1999
Expectations of Modernity California UP, Los Angeles> 
Henkel R 1989
   Christian Missions in Africa Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin 
Jenkins P 2002
   The Next Christendom OUP London 
Mbiti J S 1969,
   African Religions and Philosophy, Heinemann, London 
Porter R 2000
   Enlightenment Penguin Books 
Rotberg T I 1965
   Christian Missionaries and the Creation of Northern Rhodesia Princeton 
Snelson P 1974
   Educational Development in Northern Rhodesia 1883 - 1945 Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, Lusaka 
Taylor J V 1963,
Van der Valt B J 1988
Van Rooy J A 1978
   The Traditional World View of Black People in Southern Africa, Instituut Vir Die Bevordering Van Calvinisme, PU vir CHO, Potchefstroom 

Joe M Kapolyo 
May 2003