

Liberating word: The power of the Bible in the global South

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

Gatherings of the worldwide Anglican Communion have been contentious events in recent years. On one occasion, two bishops were participating in a Bible study, one from Africa, the other from the U.S. As the hours went by, tempers frayed as the African expressed his confidence in the clear words of scripture, while the American stressed the need to interpret the Bible in the light of modern scholarship and contemporary mores. Eventually, the African bishop asked in exasperation, “If you don’t *believe* the scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?”

Fifty years ago, Americans might have dismissed the conservatism of Christians in the global South as arising from a lack of theological sophistication, and in any case regarded these views as strictly marginal to the concerns of the Christian heartlands of North America and Western Europe. Put crudely, why would the “Christian world” have cared what Africans thought? Yet today, as the center of gravity of the Christian world moves ever southward, the conservative traditions prevailing in the global South matter ever more. To adapt a phrase from missions scholar Lamin Sanneh: Whose reading—whose Christianity—is normal now? And whose will be in 50 years?

Of course, Christian doctrine has never been decided by majority vote, and neither has the prevailing interpretation of the Bible. Numbers are not everything. But overwhelming numerical majorities surely carry some weight. Let us imagine a (probable) near-future world in which Christian numbers are strongly concentrated in the global South, where the clergy and scholars of the world’s most populous churches accept interpretations of the Bible more conservative than those normally prevailing in American mainline denominations. In such a world, surely, southern traditions of Bible reading must be seen as the Christian norm. The culture-specific interpretations of North Americans and Europeans will no longer be regarded as “real theology” while the rest of the world produces its curious provincial variants—“African theology,” “Asian theology” and so on. We will know that the

transition is under way when publishers start offering studies of “North American theologies.”

The move of Christianity to the global South might suggest a decisive move toward literal and even fundamentalist readings of the Bible. Traditionalist themes are important for African and Asian Christians. These include a much greater respect for the authority of scripture, especially in matters of morality; a willingness to accept the Bible as an inspired text and a tendency to literalistic readings; a special interest in supernatural elements of scripture, such as miracles, visions and healings; a belief in the continuing power of prophecy; and a veneration for the Old Testament, which is often considered as authoritative as the New. Biblical traditionalism and literalism are even more marked in the independent churches and in denominations rooted in the Pentecostal tradition, and similar currents are also found among Roman Catholics.

Several factors contribute to a more literal interpretation of scripture in the global South. For one thing, the Bible has found a congenial home among communities that identify with the social and economic realities the Bible portrays. To quote Kenyan feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro, “Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction.” Conversely, societies that identify with the biblical world feel at home in the text.

The average Christian in the world today is a poor person, very poor indeed by the standards of the white worlds of North America and Western Europe. Also different is the social and political status of African and Asian Christians, who are often minorities in countries dominated by other religions or secular ideologies. This historic social change cannot fail to affect attitudes toward the Bible. For many Americans and Europeans, not only are the societies in the Bible—in both testaments—distant in terms of time and place, but their everyday assumptions are all but incomprehensible. Yet exactly the issues that make the Bible a distant historical record for many Americans and Europeans keep it a living text in the churches of the global South.

For many such readers, the Bible is congenial because the world it describes is marked by such familiar pressing problems as famine and plague, poverty and exile, clientelism and corruption. A largely poor readership can readily identify with the New Testament society of peasants and small craftspeople dominated by powerful landlords and imperial forces, by networks of debt and credit. In such a context, the

excruciating poverty of a Lazarus eating the crumbs beneath the rich man's table is not just an archaeological curiosity.

This sense of recognition is quite clear for modern dwellers in villages or small towns, but it also extends to urban populations, who are often close to their rural roots. And this identification extends to the Old Testament no less than the New. Madipoane Masenya, a shrewd feminist thinker from South Africa, comments, "If present day Africans still find it difficult to be at home with the Old Testament, they might need to watch out to see if they have not lost their Africanness in one way or the other." Could an equivalent remark conceivably be made of contemporary Europeans or North Americans?

While some resemblances between the biblical world and the world of African Christians might be superficial, their accumulated weight adds greatly to the credibility of the text. The Bible provides immediate and often material answers to life's problems. It teaches ways to cope and survive in a hostile environment, and at the same time holds out the hope of prosperity. For the growing churches of the South, the Bible speaks to everyday issues of poverty and debt, famine and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution. The omnipresence of poverty promotes awareness of the transience of life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and distrust of the secular order.

In consequence, the "southern" Bible carries a freshness and authenticity that adds vastly to its credibility as an authoritative source and a guide. In this context, it is difficult to make the familiar Euro-American argument that the Bible was clearly written for a totally alien society with which moderns could scarcely identify, and so its detailed moral laws cannot be applied in the contemporary world. Cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews find it easier to read the Bible (including the laws of Leviticus) not just as historical fact but as relevant instruction for daily conduct. This fact helps us understand the horror of quite moderate African Christians when Euro-American churches dismiss biblical strictures against homosexuality as rooted in the Old Testament, and therefore outmoded.

Before northern liberals despair at the future, some qualifications are in order. I have written here of religious and scriptural conservatism, but that term need not carry its customary political implications. Though most African and Asian churches have a high view of biblical origins and authority, this does not prevent a creative and even radical application of biblical texts to contemporary debates and dilemmas. Such

applications cause real difficulties for any attempt to apply northern concepts of *liberal* and *conservative*, *progressive* and *reactionary*, *fundamentalist* and *literalist*.

According to popular assumptions, liberal approaches to the Bible emphasize messages of social action and downplay supernatural intervention, while conservative or traditionalist views accept the miraculous and advocate quietist or reactionary politics. The two mind-sets thus place their main emphases in different realms, human or supernatural.

Even in the U.S. that distinction is by no means reliable. There are plenty of left-wing evangelicals, deeply committed to social and environmental justice. In churches of the global South, the division makes even less sense. For example, *deliverance* in the charismatic sense of deliverance from demons can easily be linked to political or social *liberation*, and the two words are of course close cognates in some languages. The biblical enthusiasm so often encountered in the global South is often embraced by exactly those groups ordinarily portrayed as the victims of reactionary religion, particularly women.

In his magnificent book *Transfigured Night*, a study of the Zimbabwean night-vigil movement, the *pungwe*, Titus Presler reports: "Charismatic renewal, conflict with demons, and the liberation of women are other fruits bearing directly on the churches' mission in Zimbabwe." How often do American Christians place women's social emancipation in the context of spiritual warfare and exorcism? But in African churches both are manifestations of "loosing," of liberation, of deliverance.

At one of these vigils, a woman preacher drew extraordinary lessons from an unpromising text, the story of Jesus ordering his disciples to untie a donkey for his entry into Jerusalem. She applied the passage directly to the experience of African women: "I have seen that we are that donkey spoken of by the Lord. . . . Let us give thanks for this time we were given, the time in which we were blessed. We were objects. . . . We were not human beings. . . . Some were even sold. To be married to a man—to be sold! . . . But with the coming of Jesus, we were set free. . . . We were made righteous by Jesus, mothers."

Women play a central role in southern churches, whether or not they are formally ordained. They commonly constitute the most important converts and the critical forces making for the conversion of family or of significant others. Women's organizations and fellowships, such as the Mothers' Unions, represent critical

structures for lay participation within the churches and allow women's voices to be heard in the wider society. So do prayer fellowships and cells, which can be so independent as to unnerve church hierarchies. Female believers look to the churches for an affirmation of their roles and their interests, and they naturally seek justification in the scriptures, which provide a vocabulary for public debate.

Some texts—like the story of the donkey—have to be tortured in order to yield the desired meaning, though given the pervasive interest in deliverance, any passage that can be linked, however tenuously, to “loosing” is too good to be ignored. With other texts, however, liberating interpretations are readily found. Throughout this process, literalist readings that may appear conservative in terms of their approach to scriptural authority have practical consequences that are socially progressive, if not revolutionary. Reading the Bible teaches individual worth and human rights, and it encourages mutual obligation within marriage, promoting the Christian “reformation of machismo” described by scholar Elizabeth Brusco. Leaving women to pursue domestic piety through Bible reading is like forbidding a restive population to carry weapons while giving them unrestricted access to gasoline and matches.

Think of the implications of Bible reading for widows, who in many traditional communities are excluded and despised, and who are tied to their husbands' clans even after the husbands die. The New Testament notion of “till death do us part” is burningly relevant. So is this claim by Paul in Romans: “If the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.” In the West, Romans 7:2 is scarcely a well-known scriptural text, certainly not a reference that enthusiastic evangelists wave on placards at sports stadiums. Yet in a global context, this verse may be a truly revolutionary warrant for change.

Reading as such also carries great weight. In a neoliterate community, access to the Bible betokens power and status, and there is no reason why this gift should be confined to traditional elites. Women—and young people of both sexes—have most to gain by achieving literacy. The more conspicuous one's knowledge of the scriptures, the greater one's claim to spiritual status.

But beyond any single text, the Bible as a whole offers ample ammunition for the cause of outsiders, to the dismay of the established and comfortable. People read of the excluded who become central to the story, of the trampled and oppressed who become divine vehicles—and of how God spurns traditional societies, hierarchies and ritual rules. As David Martin famously wrote in his account of global South

churches, Pentecostalism gives the right and duty to speak to those always previously deemed unworthy on grounds of class, race and gender. In the new dispensation, outsiders receive tongues of fire. The same observation can be applied across denominational frontiers.

Only when we see global South Christianity on its own terms—as opposed to asking how it can contribute to our own debates—can we see how the emerging churches are formulating their own responses to social and religious questions, and how these issues are often viewed through a biblical lens. And often these responses do not fit well into our conventional ideological packages.

The socially liberating effects of evangelical religion should come as no surprise to anyone who has traced the enormous influence of biblically based religion throughout African-American history. Black American politics is still largely inspired by religion and often led by clergy, usually of charismatic and evangelical bent; black political rhetoric cannot be understood except in the context of biblical thought and imagery. African-American religious leaders are generally well to the left on economic issues, as are many evangelicals in Latin America, and also independent and Protestant denominations across Africa. All find scriptural warrant for progressive views, most commonly in prophetic and apocalyptic texts.

When viewed on a global scale, African-American religious styles, long regarded as marginal to mainstream American Christianity, seem absolutely standard. Conversely, the worship of mainline white American denominations looks increasingly exceptional, as do these groups' customary approaches to biblical authority. Looking at this reversal, we are reminded of a familiar text: the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone.

For a North American Christian, it can be a surprising and humbling experience to try to understand how parts of the Bible might be read elsewhere in the world. To do so, we need to think communally rather than individually. We must also abandon familiar distinctions between secular and supernatural dimensions. And often we must adjust our attitudes to the relationship between Old and New Testaments.

Any number of texts offer surprises. Read Ruth, for instance, and imagine what it has to say in a hungry society threatened by war and social disruption. Understand the exultant release that awaits a reader in a society weighed down by ideas of ancestral curses or hereditary taint, a reader who discovers the liberating texts

about individual responsibility in Ezekiel 18. Or read Psalm 23 as a political tract, a rejection of unjust secular authority. For Africans and Asians, the psalm offers a stark rebuttal to claims by unjust states that they care lovingly for their subjects—while they exalt themselves to the heavens. Christians reply simply, “The Lord is my shepherd—you aren’t!” Adding to the power of the psalm, the evils that it condemns are at once political and spiritual, forces of tyranny and of the devil. Besides its political role, Psalm 23 is much used in services of healing, exorcism and deliverance.

Imagine a society terrorized by a dictatorial regime dedicated to suppressing the church, and read Revelation—and understand the core message that whatever evils the world may produce, God will triumph. Or read Revelation with the eyes of rural believers in a rapidly modernizing society, trying to comprehend the inchoate brutality of the megalopolis. Read Hebrews and think of its doctrines of priesthood and atonement as they might be understood in a country with a living tradition of animal sacrifice. On these grounds, a Ghanaian theologian has described Hebrews as *our* epistle—that is, Africa’s. Apply the Bible’s many passages about the suffering of children to the real-world horrors facing the youth of the Congo, Uganda, Brazil or other countries that before too long will be among the world’s largest Christian countries.

Read in this way, the letter of James is particularly eye-opening. James is one of the most popular sermon texts in Africa. Imagine reading this letter in a world in which your life is so short and perilous that it truly seems like a passing mist. What implications does that transience hold for everyday behavior? The letter is a manual for a society in which Christianity is new and people are seeking practical rules for Christian living. The references to widows appear not as the history of an ancient social welfare system but as a radical response to present-day problems affecting millions of women.

As a particularly difficult test for northern-world Christians, try reading two almost adjacent passages in chapter five of James—one condemning the rich, the other prescribing anointing and prayer for healing. Both texts, “radical” and “charismatic,” are integral portions of a common liberating message.

Think of the numerous forms of captivity entrapping a poor inhabitant of a Third World nation—economic, social, environmental, spiritual—and appreciate the promise of liberation and loosing presented in Jesus’ inaugural sermon in the

Nazareth synagogue. Understand the appeal of this message in a society in which—to quote a recent journalistic study of poverty in Lagos—“the frustration of being alive . . . is excruciating.”

When reading almost any part of the Gospels, think how Jesus’ actions might strike a community that cares deeply about caste and ritual purity, and where violating such laws might cost you your life—as in India. Read the accounts of Jesus interacting so warmly with the multiply rejected. In many societies worldwide, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well can still startle. He *talked* to her? And debated?

Or use the eighth chapter of Luke as a template for Christian healing and a reaffirmation of the power of good over evil. Or take one verse, John 10:10, in which Jesus promises abundant life, and think of its bewildering implications in a desperately poor society obviously lacking in any prospect of abundance, or indeed, of any certainty of life. This one verse may be the most quoted text in African Christianity, the “life verse” of an entire continent.

Now recognize that these kinds of readings, adapted to local circumstances, are quite characteristic for millions of Christians around the world. Arguably, in terms of raw numbers, such readings represent the normal way for Christians to read the Bible in the early 21st century.

After I wrote *The Next Christendom* in 2002, I had a bizarre encounter with an elderly and rather aristocratic Episcopal woman, who praised me for how effectively I had delineated the growth of new kinds of Christianity in the global South, with its passion and enthusiasm, its primitive or apostolic quality, its openness to the supernatural. She then asked my opinion: As Americans, as Christians, as Episcopalians—what can we do to stop this?

I understand her fear, and see why some northern-world Christians might have concerns about the emerging patterns of global South Christianity, with its charismatic and traditional quality. But the prognosis is nowhere near as bad as she imagined. As so often in the past, Christianity must be seen as a force for radical change rather than obscurantism, for unsettling hierarchies rather than preserving them. On second thought, perhaps she was exactly right to be alarmed.