The expansion of Christianity: An interview with Andrew Walls: Gospel, culture and the missionary movement

Cover Story in the August 2, 2000 issue

A former missionary to Sierra Leone and Nigeria, Andrew Walls taught for many years at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He is founder-director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at the University of Edinburgh, and founding editor of the Journal of Religion in Africa*. He recently wrote* The Missionary Movement in Christian History *(1996). He is currently guest professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, and also teaches regularly in Ghana. We spoke to him about African Christianity and about the history of missionary expansion.*

In writing about the expansion of Christianity, you have drawn attention to the way Christianity has over the centuries established new centers of the faith in different cultures and in different parts of the globe. What is so significant about this pattern?

If you consider the expansion of Islam or Buddhism, the pattern is one of steady expansion. And in general, the lands that have been Islamic have stayed Islamic, and the lands that have been Buddhist have stayed Buddhist. Christian history is quite different. The original center, Jerusalem, is no longer a center of Christianity—not the the kind of center that Mecca is, for example. And if you consider other places that at different times have been centers of Christianity—such as North Africa, Egypt, Serbia, Asia Minor, Great Britain—it's evident that these are no longer centers of the faith. My own country, Scotland, is full of churches that have been turned into garages or nightclubs.

What happened in each case was decay in the heartland that appeared to be at the center of the faith. At the same time, through the missionary effort, Christianity

moved to or beyond the periphery, and established a new center. When the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, Hellenistic Christianity arose as a result of the mission to the gentiles. And when Hellenistic society collapsed, the faith was seized by the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By the time Christianity was receding in Europe, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America were coming into their own. The movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion.

Is this process more than an historical curiosity—does it have theological significance?

Well, this pattern does make one ask why Christianity does not seem to maintain its hold on people the way Islam has. One must conclude, I think, that there is a certain vulnerability, a fragility, at the heart of Christianity. You might say that this is the vulnerability of the cross.

Perhaps the chief theological point is that nobody owns the Christian faith. That is, there is no “Christian civilization” or “Christian culture” in the way that there is an “Islamic culture,” which you can recognize from Pakistan to Tunisia to Morocco.

It seems that Christianity is able to localize itself or indigenize itself in a variety of cultures. Do you see this as in some way consistent with the Christian belief in the incarnation?

Yes. Christians’ central affirmation is that God became human. He didn’t become a generalized humanity—he became human under particular conditions of time and space. Furthermore, we affirm that Christ is formed in people. Paul says in his Letter to the Galatians that he is in travail “until Christ be formed in you.” If all that is the case, then when people come to Christ, Christ is in some sense taking shape in new social forms.

I think cultural diversity was built into the Christian faith with that first great decision by the Council in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, which declared that the new gentile Christians didn’t have to enter Jewish religious culture. They didn’t have to receive circumcision and keep the law. I’m not sure we’ve grasped all the implications of that decision. After all, up to that moment there was only one Christian lifestyle and everybody knew what it was. The Lord himself had led the life of an observant Jew, and he had said that not a jot or tittle of the law should pass away. The apostles continued that tradition. The obvious thing, surely, for the new church to do was to

insist that the gentile converts do what gentile converts had always done—take on the mark of the covenant.

The early church made the extraordinary decision not to continue the tribal model of the faith. Once it decided that there was no requirement of circumcision and no requirement to keep every part of the law, then things were wide open. People no longer knew what a Christian lifestyle looked like. The converts had to work out, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a Hellenistic way of being Christian.

Think how much of the material in the Epistles needn't have been written if the church had made the opposite decision. Paul wouldn't have needed to discuss with the Corinthians what to do if a pagan friend invites you to dinner and you're not sure whether the meat had been offered in sacrifice the day before. That was not a problem for any of the apostles or any of the Christians in Jerusalem. They were not going to be eating with pagans in the first place, since observant Jews don't sit down at the table with pagans. But in Hellenistic Christianity this was an issue. These Christians were faced with the task of changing the Hellenistic lifestyle from the inside.

Early in your own career you were a teacher in West Africa. You have said that while teaching African Christians about the early church, you suddenly came to the realization that the African Christians were living in their own version of the early church. In a way, you were living amid the early church that you were teaching about. Tell us about this moment.

This was a very important realization. At the time I was still thinking of African Christian history as a sort of hobby, not part of the study of mainstream Christian history. I was wrong about that.

It became clear to me that we can better understand the early church in light of the recent experience of the churches in Africa and Asia. Our knowledge of the early church prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 is fragmentary, but the fragments reveal many of the concerns African churches have today, from distinguishing between true and false prophets to deciding what should happen to church members who behave badly. Even the literary forms are often similar.

I think the experience of the African churches also brings into focus the period when Western Europe was converted to Christianity. We have a tendency to forget about this period, to jump from Augustine to Luther and forget about Bede and Gregory of

Tours. During this period Christian missionaries had to explain Christianity to the inhabitants of Europe in light of the indigenous religions—the religions of the Goths, for example, or the Celts. And they had to answer practical moral questions, because the people who were abandoning their old gods needed to know what the new God demanded. Reading the pre-Nicene literature and the literature of the European conversion period in the light of modern African experience cast floods of light. African and Asian Christians can vastly illuminate “our” church history.

What are the theological questions that are urgent in Africa today?

Well, theology in southern Africa has had a political edge, because people have had to maintain their faith within a system of oppression which itself often had a Christian theological justification, as in South Africa. And throughout Africa, Christians have to ask questions about the nation state which Western Christians have never asked, because Western Christianity more or less grew up with the nation state.

The nation state doesn’t seem to operate well in parts of Africa. Sometimes the churches are the only form of civil society still operating in Africa. In that respect, too, Africa today resembles the pre-Carolingian stage of Europe, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, when the only institution that worked was the church.

The other important theological questions are cultural, and have to do with coping theologically with the African past.

What do you mean by “coping theologically with the past”?

Africans have a need to understand how God was at work among their own traditions. This question is alive for Africans just as it was for Greek converts in the ancient Hellenistic world. Do we have to reject our entire history and culture when we become Christians?

I think one can distinguish three stages in dealing with the non-Christian past: the missionary stage, the convert stage and the reconfiguration stage. African Christians are now in the reconfiguration stage.

We should remember that Paul was functioning in the missionary stage. He was himself a foreign missionary. He could use a Hellenistic idea like the *pleroma*, but he was still an outsider. Dealing with the Greek past became a much more pressing

issue for converts of a later generation, such as Justin Martyr of the second century. Justin wanted to know how God had been at work among the pagan philosophers before the time of Christ. Were they totally without value? Did God have nothing to do with Socrates? Justin worked out the theory that the pagan philosophers who had been speaking according to reason, the logos, were in fact speaking also in accordance with the Logos. He found a way to reject part of his cultural tradition, affirm part of it and modify part of it.

The next stage of reconfiguring the past is represented by Origen, in the third century. He was not a convert; he grew up in a Christian home. But he also had a thorough Greek education. Origen was able to reconfigure the whole of the Greek tradition from a Christian perspective. He could do this because he was perfectly at home with the Christian tradition, whereas Justin was still uneasy within it. Justin was always afraid of demons, for example, whereas Origen wasn't afraid of the demons because he knew Christ had dealt with them.

What aspects of the African experience are being reconfigured in Christian terms?

The role of ancestors and witchcraft are two important issues. Academic theologians in the West may not put witchcraft high on the agenda, but it's the issue that hits ordinary African Christians full in the face.

Of course, Western theology has made its peace with the Enlightenment, the fundamental assumption of which is that there is a firm line between the empirical world and the transcendent world or spirit world. If you're a rationalistic person of the Enlightenment, you'll say either that there's nothing on the other side of the line or that we can't know anything about it. Western Christians have particular points on which they cross the line—incarnation, resurrection, prayer, miracles and so on—but on the whole they still assume the existence of that firm division.

The world of most African Christians doesn't have this firm line between the world of experience and the transcendent world. It's an open frontier which is being crossed all the time. They are very aware, for example, of the active forms that evil takes.

So what does a Christian theologian do when somebody says he's a witch? Our instinct in the West is to say, Oh no, of course you are not a witch. But what do you do when a person tells you she has killed somebody, that she hated some woman so much she wanted her baby to die—and then the baby dies. This can be a pressing

pastoral issue in Africa.

When African Christians read the New Testament, they naturally see things that Western Christians miss. They can see, for example, that the New Testament plainly deals with demons, and that it also deals with healing—issues that Western Christians tend to think are part of an outdated world.

It seems that African Christians have two challenges: they are reinterpreting their traditional religious culture in the light of Christian teachings, and at the same time they are responding to the pressure of the Enlightenment worldview and Enlightenment-sponsored technology.

Traditional and Enlightenment worldviews can live together very well. You can drive a car and watch television and still be very much aware of the objective force of evil and may want to call it witchcraft. And the reconfiguration process has a variety of solutions. African traditional universes have several components. Many recognize not only God, but also lesser divinities who are rulers of territories and of departments of life, as well as ancestors who are mediators. In African Christian thought, the God-component is enlarged—but what happens to the divinities? They are sometimes interpreted in terms of angels and ministers of God, sometimes in terms of demons and enemies of God. African Christianity has a lively sense of the demonic. Ancestor mediation produces still more complex theological questions. All three kinds of answers emerge within African Christianity. But Western theology is not very helpful in providing answers to such questions, because it doesn't even understand the questions.

John Mbiti has a wonderful story about the African student who goes home to his village with a PhD in theology. This son of the village is greeted with a service of welcome and afterward a big party. During the party there's a shrieking and a howling and a banging in the tent—his sister has become possessed. Of course, the villagers immediately turn to the new PhD—he's the expert, the one who has received the best theological training. But he's completely incapacitated for dealing with this African event.

The notion that the center of Christianity has moved to the southern world, to Africa and Asia, is familiar to U.S. Christians, but it doesn't seem to make much of a dent in how we operate or how we do theological education. How do you think this fact should influence us?

The center has changed, and though I wouldn’t say there’s no future for Western Christianity or no important task for Western theologians, it and they will be less and less significant for the future of Christianity. Already what they’re doing is pretty parochial. The events that are shaping 21st century Christianity are happening in Africa and Asia.

Part of what this change means is that the big ecumenical questions are no longer how Lutherans will get on with Baptists or Reformation churches with Rome. The urgent ecumenical question is how African, Asian, Latin American, North American and European Christians can live together in the same church, authentically expressing the same faith of Christ and love of Christ.

It seems to me that now, more than at any time in history, the church looks like the great multitude described in the Book of Revelation—a multitude from every tribe and nation.

Paul speaks of Jews and gentiles growing together, and he says that only when the two strands are one will they have grown into the full stature of Christ. At the time, no one had any idea how important the missions to the gentiles would prove to be. After the fall of Jerusalem, the church became as monocultural in a Hellenistic way as it had been in its earliest days in a Jewish way.

We live now at a time when the church is multicultural. I think that the fullness of the stature of Christ will emerge only when Christians from all these cultures come together. If I understand what Paul says in Ephesians correctly, it is as though Christ himself is growing as the different cultures are brought together in him.