

African Theology and Post-modern Britain

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Neil Evans was born in 1954. Following a career in health service management he attended the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield and was ordained in the Church of England in 1984. Neil has spent his entire ordained ministry in the Diocese of London, serving in Bethnal Green, Stoke Newington and Twickenham. He is currently Director of Ministry for London Diocese. Neil has a MA in Pastoral Theology from Heythrop College and a Doctorate of Ministry and Theology from King's College London; his doctoral thesis was concerned with the professional development of clergy. His current area of research and writing continues these themes in the field Ministry Studies.

Abstract

This paper explores the themes of African theology, making connections with the cultural situation of post-modern Britain today. The dominant theme throughout the paper, then, is the connection (and disconnection) between Christianity and culture. I examine a proposed four stages of evolution of African theology (introductory stirrings, adaptation, incarnation and reconstruction) and identify ways in which we might apply this evolution to contemporary Britain.

The paper gives some analysis of the background to the development of African theology and examines its context developing out of Western Missionary influence, presence and justification in Africa. It goes on to explore something of the legacy left behind by those missionary endeavours. One of the clearest legacies, I suggest, is a paralysing influence of denominationalism. I end the first part of this paper with a brief look at the vital theme of Gospel and liberation.

The second part of this paper explores the connections between the development of African theology and themes of contemporary Britain. I use the lessons of African theology to shed light on our situation in Britain and the endeavour to make connections with post-modern Christian culture. My analysis offers examples of how and why we fail and others of how we may succeed.

My clear conclusion is that by examining post-modern British culture through the lens of African theology we can gain new insights in our mission to preach the Gospel afresh to this generation.

“...And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.”¹

INTRODUCTION

In the conclusion to his essay on African Theology in David Ford's *The Modern Theologians*², Kwame Bediako says:

To the extent that the African endeavour has achieved a measure of success, it may hold promise for a modern Western theology which is now also asking seriously how the Christian faith may be related, in a *missionary* sense, to Western culture.³

I would like to take Bediako's conclusion as my starting point for this essay. I believe that the methodology applied by many African theologians over the past forty years in exploring how the Gospel relates, in particularity, to their own situation has much to offer us in the West – and particularly in Britain – as we encounter major changes in the nature of our society and culture.

In this essay, then, I shall be looking at some examples of the journey in the African theological enterprise and attempting to make connections with our situation in Britain as we begin 21st Century.

SETTING THE SCENE

In the introduction to Bediako's essay⁴, he identifies two distinct trends in African Christian thought from the late 1950s through to the late 1980s. One of these trends is what has generally become known as 'Black Theology', and is a theology of liberation exploring and highlighting the themes of struggle, oppression and inequality, and seeking the theological dimensions of these issues. The Struggle in South Africa and the theological imperatives explored exemplifies this trend, and Black Theology can be seen very much alongside the Central and South American experience of Liberation Theology.

The second trend, which has become known as 'African Theology', is a theology which has explored and examined the cultural issues and background of the African peoples. It looks at indigenous cultures and seeks to understand the links between pre-Christian and Christian religious traditions.

This trend became more closely associated with the rest of Tropical Africa, where political independence seemed to have taken away a direct regular experience of the kind of socio-political pressures which produced Black theology in South Africa. In this second trend, the broad aim was to achieve some integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.⁵

Bediako goes on to emphasise that these two trends are by no means mutually exclusive, but rather he sees Black Theology as being a part of the rather broader genus of African Theology, the two being entirely, therefore, interrelated.

¹ Acts 2:8-11 NRSV

² Kwame Bediako *African Theology* in David F Ford (ed.) *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford, 1997)

³ *Ibid.*, p.438

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.426

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.426

It is the second of these two strands that I shall be exploring in this essay, in relation to our experience in current Britain.

In the introduction to his book *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Christian Theology*⁶, Valentin Dedji offers four stages in the evolution of African theology. These are:

...first, that of the *introductory stirrings*, involving the beginnings of discussion about the need for and possibility of an African theology... The next main stage is *adaptation*... (implying) the application of the general principles of theological renewal to concrete cases... (eg polygamy, ancestral cult)... or by attempting to adopt African elements into Christian theology. The third phase is the theology of *incarnation* with a cultural emphasis (*inculturation*) or a political one (*liberation*)... The fourth phase... is the theology of *reconstruction*.⁷

The parallels that I shall attempt to draw between the African theological experience and our current experience in Britain will suggest that we are currently moving, in our new cultural situation, from something approximating to a stage two, and on to a stage three in Dedji's analysis.

AFRICAN THEOLOGY

In 1910 the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, (which seems to be generally accepted by writers as a representative forum of its day in terms of the dominant and prevailing Christian world view) declared that African primal religions 'contained no preparation for Christianity'⁸. This notion underpinned the work of missionaries and their parent organisations and denominational bodies prior to this point and for the next more-than fifty years.

This simple statement (*African primal religions contained no preparation for Christianity*) effectively legitimised the presentation of Christianity as a package within Western cultural norms to be taken across Africa (and, for that matter, elsewhere outside of the West). For African primal religions and African tribal cultures were so closely interwoven as to be indivisible. If this was true of the African situation(s), it was most certainly true of the Western situation(s) too. As a number of writers have reflected, what had effectively become the 'cultic religion of the European tribes' was set to displace the primal religions and cultures of Africa, with the intent of the establishment of European cultic religion and associated cultural values (though undoubtedly, the missionaries would not have seen it in quite these terms!).

As Bediako, Mbiti, Ela and many other writers have shown⁹, then, the scene was set for a major discussion as to whether the African situation, with established primal religions, should be approached in terms of radical discontinuity – the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference's position – or preparation for the gospel.

Preparation for the Gospel

The balance of opinion moving in favour of primal religions being preparation for the gospel seems to have begun almost as soon as serious theology was being undertaken, in context, on the African continent. Once Africa raised up its own theologians the depth of the context of African cultural and primal religions could be appreciated. It was (perhaps understandably) far more difficult for those coming out of the 'Western tribal' context to see clearly the issues of culture and religion, and how these had become so closely intertwined in the West.

⁶ Valentin Dedji *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi, 2003)

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.2-3

⁸ Bediako p.427 quotes this reference from *The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions: The World Missionary Conference 1910, report of Commission IV* (Edinburgh and London, 1910), p.24

⁹ This issue is widely discussed in most of the books mentioned in my bibliography

Some earlier writers in the period clearly had reservations. For example Adrian Hastings¹⁰ was concerned and frustrated at the lack of Christology in primal religions, and this concern was reflected by other writers and teachers of theology. (Bediako gives the poignant example of meeting a Western missionary theological educator at a conference as late as the early 80s, who admitted his ‘bewilderment at having to teach *African theology* when virtually all the African theological literature he came upon seemed to be discussing and interpreting *African traditional religions*. “Where is the theology in that?” he apparently asked.’)¹¹

It soon became clear, then, that to dismiss the African primal religions and culture as being irrelevant to the Gospel was to effectively dismiss something of the nature of God Incarnate and to limit the action of the Holy Spirit. This was crystallised in Vatican II openness to other religions and cultures. This thesis was developed by Karl Rahner, amongst others, in his proposal for ‘Anonymous Christians’:

Christians must realize, however, that, besides the explicit faith which they profess as believing members of the visible Church, there is an implicit faith which is also salvific. Through this implicit faith, men (*sic*) who have never accepted or even encountered Christian Revelation become, not just anonymous theists, but anonymous Christians. In other words, they place an act of conscious, though implicit, faith in the Triune God of Christian Revelation.¹²

So, the agenda needed to move radically from one of changing African cultures and societies to fit Christianity as perceived from a Western perspective, to a renewed agenda of seeing Africa through the light of the Gospel. As Bediako puts it:

Consequently, the task of African theology came to consist, not in ‘indigenizing’ Christianity, or theology as such, but rather in letting the Christian Gospel encounter, as well as be shaped by, the African experience... Western traditions did not enshrine universal norms.¹³

John Mbiti, according to Bediako¹⁴, develops this theme, drawing a very helpful distinction between ‘The Gospel’ and ‘Christianity’, the latter being the encounter of the Gospel and Culture. In other words he would say that European missionaries brought Christianity (ready packaged) to African, rather than the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

To speak of “indigenising Christianity” is to give the impression that Christianity is a ready-made commodity which has to be transplanted to a local area. Of course, this has been the assumption followed by many missionaries and local theologians. I do not accept it anymore.¹⁵

To put it another way, as Mbiti succinctly does, God was not a stranger in Africa prior to the coming of the missionaries; they did not bring God, rather God brought them. It was not a meeting between Western missionaries and Africa, but rather a meeting between Africa and Jesus (which came about through the action of Western missionary endeavour).

Mbiti identifies the translation of the Bible into native tongues as the most significant and long-lasting achievement of the missionaries, for, he says (unlike Islam¹⁶) Scripture in African Languages means that God speaks our language.

¹⁰ Adrian Hastings *African Christianity: An essay in interpretation* (London, 1976)

¹¹ Bediako p.439

¹² Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations, vol VI, p.390f* (DLT London, 1974)

¹³ Bediako p.432

¹⁴ Bediako quotes extensively Mbiti’s own words pp.432-4

¹⁵ John Mbiti, response to the article of John Kinney, *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 3/2 (1979), p.68, quoted by Bediako p.433

¹⁶ The Koran is, of course, to be read in Arabic

The Denominational Tragedy and Gospel Travesty

Jean Marc-Ela¹⁷ brings remarkable insight into this debate. One of his primary pleas is for the transcending of denominational boundaries. He clearly sees the denominational baggage as being imported by the missionaries and leaving a most unhelpful legacy.

A movement of inter-communion must begin on a pan-African scale. But this will be possible only by transcending ecclesiastical boundaries. We must enlarge the horizons of our consciousness and situate ourselves in a gospel project in an African society in gestation. The dynamism of the apostolate calls the priests and nuns of Africa to emerge from the narrow limits of a Church too much structured in terms of geographical and ethnic frameworks.¹⁸

Referring back to Mbiti's distinction between Christianity and Gospel, it would certainly seem that beside the Western cultural baggage brought by the missionaries the denominational baggage comes a close second. Over and over again the various denominations are seen to be competing one with another, often over issues which are not especially relevant to the African situation. In my own experience in Namibia the tensions between Finish Lutheran, Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches seemed completely irrelevant to the issues of the Gospel in Namibia. Indeed, the main purpose of these denominational divides seemed to be to perpetuate divisions which would otherwise have disappeared long before.

One obvious example of this was following independence Namibia and majority rule in neighbouring South Africa, there was a call for the Namibian government to set in motion a process similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In South Africa the united front of the Churches had been a major factor in bringing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into being and of its success. In Namibia the Churches were unable to exert the same pressure for the simple reason that they found it impossible to present a united front. Quite simply their denominational baggage and history meant that any real dialogue between church leaders was all but impossible. Yet, the issue was crystal clear. The result was no Commission and a sadder and more divided country as a result.

One of Ela's particularly trenchant observations is how seductive denominational boundaries and institutional debates can become. For example:

Ela suggests that theologians must not waste their time in commenting on the recent Catechism of the Catholic Church or allow themselves to be dazzled by the papal encyclical *Splendor Veritatis*... For him, the colonised Africa has to go and have a wash in the pond of Siloam, for he has been tainted with imported rationalism.¹⁹

Ela rails against an expression of the Church in Africa which encourages pious prayer groups and avoids the study of Amos and the prophets: a 'safe' theology. He sees this as hiding behind the denominational structures so that faith becomes a travesty of the Gospel; promoting a religion which avoids encounter with the issues that face the people and culture of Africa. He accuses the Church (most pointedly!) of reinventing the (European) Middle Ages.

Ela expresses his bitterness against Africa's political leaders' blind policies and the (Roman Catholic)²⁰ Church's paralysing structures. However, he offers an important four-point agenda to

¹⁷ Jean-Marc Ela *My Faith as an African* (London, 1989) and as discussed by Dedji *Reconstruction and Renewal*

¹⁸ Jean-Marc Ela *African Cry* (New York, 1986) p. 26, and quoted by Dedji *Reconstruction and Renewal* P.220

¹⁹ Dedji pp.221-2

²⁰ My brackets, for although he is writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, all denominations may well have the finger pointed at them in this respect. My experience – and other recent experience – of the Anglican Church in Africa

address the issues. In so doing he addresses, I believe, the heart of the issues of the Gospel and culture:

1. A theological reconstruction of a Western theology which has failed to take African tradition into account, and alongside this a transcending of the boundaries of ecclesiastical traditions
2. A genuine hermeneutical reading of the Exodus and its application to past, present and future of the continent of Africa
3. An addressing of the social conditions of the people of Africa and a reconstruction of local communities. A rediscovery of the of wholeness and integrity of life inherent across African cultures
4. A developing of a theology 'Under the Tree'; one developed far from libraries, by the people (a bottom-up theology).

He comments on this last point that so often the various state authorities (often with the tacit support of the denominational structures) have cut down the palaver trees, and the people are only allowed to applaud.

Deji comments on Ela work:

Now the rulers can continue robbing Africa of its resources, can continue impoverishing farmers and workers, while the clergy, meanwhile, lose themselves in striving after an authentic African Christianity. A liturgy with native music makes African people forget they are oppressed. They accompany their Calvary rhythmically with songs that make them hope for a heavenly salvation, just as at the time of the Negro Spirituals. Drumming on the tom-tom and the rhythm of the balafone in church cannot protect the rural population, which has already been crushed by the dictatorship of peanuts cotton and cocoa, against food weapon with which they are threatened.²¹

Gospel and Liberation

In the introduction to this essay I said that I would be seeking to follow one of two strands in the development of theology in Africa: that of African Theology. Bediako was clear, as I expressed above, though, that the two strands are totally interwoven. This becomes particularly clear in Ela's work. In seeking to explore a culturally integrated theology the theme of liberation will naturally break through on a continent that has seen so much oppression, persecution, injustice and inequality.

John Parratt²² explores the interrelationship of these themes at length, and I would like to draw on his examination of Benézét Bujo, a Roman Catholic theologian from Zaire (the Congo). One of Bujo's major themes is that of integration:

Bujo is particularly critical of a theology of inculturation that fails to address solid issues and seeks to appeal to an academic public outside the continent rather than to the African in his or her own need and context. For him the liberative and cultural aspects of theology must be wedded. For this happen there is a pressing need for the African to rediscover roots, and it is hoped that this will enable him or her to relate ancestral religion to modern society. In so doing the African must not idealize the past as a lost paradise nor denigrate it as idolatry. African

can certainly be considered. Interesting, too, I have also received anecdotal news of similar problems in the much newer 'Vineyard' Church in Southern Africa.

²¹ Deji p.235

²² John Parratt *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Cambridge 1995)

tradition, according to Bujo, saw life as unity – religious, political, social – and was infused with the concept of the wholeness of life, which is ‘liberation’ in the true sense.²³

Bujo argues that it was the Western influence which caused the disintegration of African society and culture, and that it is now the ministry and mission of the Gospel to (re)integrate:

In Bujo’s view, therefore, when the colonizing powers and the Christian missions came to African they found a well-ordered and functional society which, while not perfect, did enable its members to enjoy wholeness of life. The missions, by and large, Bujo argues, worked hand in hand with the Colonial powers, and took part in the radical disruption of traditional African societies.²⁴

Bujo cites the employment of cheap labour, the creation of artificial borders, the imposition of ‘Christian’ names (ignoring the significance of traditional African names), the rape of *objets d’art* (which Africans regarded as having life-giving power), and the institution of racism built on concepts African inferiority.

Bujo, then, in identifying disintegration and highlighting the need and for and return journey towards integration, offers a very appropriate bringing together of this section of my essay, fusing the various elements of the African theological enterprise that I have been discussing under the theme of integration.

To conclude this section, though, I would like to quote from John Parratt’s introduction to the second edition of *A Reader in African Christian Theology*.²⁵ In commenting on what has changed from the first edition in 1987 to this new edition he says:

In earlier stages of African Christian theology ‘conservative evangelicals’ (perhaps under some duress from their Western counterparts) had been reluctant to become involved with their African brothers (and more recently sisters) in dialogue about the need for and shape of an African theology. This is now changing. The publication of Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology is very welcome, and it is clear that many evangelicals have adopted onto their agenda political, social and cultural issues which did not feature strongly in earlier African conservative theological writing. This may well indicate that to label African Christians as ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ is to import western categories which are not at all helpful to the church in Africa.²⁶

So it seems, the Church in Africa continues along a path towards integration and away from the western moulds of division and compartmentalisation. So, I believe, that the journey on which the Church in Africa is set on offers much for us in Britain to learn from.

21st CENTURY BRITAIN

Graham Kings, in an essay from Kenya back to his home in Britain wrote in 1987:

John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, has described how when a traditional African enters the world of biblical revelation he does not have ‘far to go before he begins to walk on familiar ground.’ To me from another culture, goats, lizards, seeds growing secretly, footwashing after journeys, oil lamps, the importance of land, burials, circumcision, genealogies and greeting –

²³ Ibid. pp.122-3

²⁴ Ibid. p.125

²⁵ John Parratt *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London, 1997)

²⁶ Ibid. pp.ix-x

all of which I knew in my mind from the bible – have become real, since coming here only two years ago.²⁷

As has been explored above, it seems clear that one of the key issues is rediscovering the Gospel from out of the baggage of religion; using Mbiti's distinction between 'The Gospel' and 'Christianity' (the Gospel applied to culture). Kings' transition to a new situation – using Mbiti as 'translator' – enables him to see through a new pair of spectacles, and see the Gospel outside of the cultural packaging.

Dedji, similarly, gives an extraordinary cultural connection with the Eucharist which would simply never have been made or understood by Western missionaries – or by most Western Christians today:

Communion through food takes place between those who are, or wish to be, on peaceful, friendly or brotherly terms. As Mulago points out, eating from the same dish or drinking from the same straw, means entering into interaction with someone else, letting his or her vital influences be exchanged with one's own. Among African communities, almost all ceremonies, e.g., marriages, naming ceremonies, etc., are concluded by a 'communion meal'. For instance, at the investiture of the *Oba* (King of Ketu in Benin), and at the annual renewal ceremony, the *Oba* has a 'communion meal' sent to all the chiefs, sub-chiefs and notables under his jurisdiction; to be deprived of this would be a sign that one was about to fall from power.²⁸

To set this alongside the Last Supper gives a whole new rich tapestry of Gospel interpretation.

In the same way we are *called to proclaim the Gospel afresh in each generation*.²⁹ Over and again in surveys, books and studies we are told that something in the region of 72% of the people of this country claim to be Christians, yet a tiny proportion of that number ever go to Church, and an even smaller proportion attend regularly. Clear anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of children have little more than a sketchy knowledge of the Christian story. (On Easter Sunday morning, standing around the Easter Garden, I asked a group of children who the first person was to discover the empty tomb. As quick as a flash the young daughter of committed Christian parents answered, The Easter Bunny...).

We are clear then, in our post-modern world, that there seems to be a real thirst for spirituality, but we seem as a church unable to offer any refreshment to this thirst from our enormous reservoirs of experience in Christianity spirituality.

The question raised for me from my encounter with African theology is how can we rediscover the Gospel aside from the baggage of a Christianity seeped in the culture of a fading past. The experience of Church that we offer fails to connect with huge swathes of the population. Recently at (what I – and others – thought to be) a rather good baptism service in a Parish Eucharist, with a relevant sermon and good choice of hymns, I found scrawled across a service sheet left at the back of church afterwards the words 'I'd forgotten how boring church is'. This comment could be argued away in many different ways, but what I perceived and took to be the underlying message went home to me like an arrow; Church worship, however well done, fails to connect with vast numbers of our population.

The questions come at me fast and furiously, and seem to cut across all church traditions and styles of worship. What does our stylised form of the Eucharistic meal mean to those who only ever eat

²⁷ Graham Kings *Facing Mount Kenya: Reflections on the Bible and African Traditional Religion* (Anvil 04 February 1987) p.127

²⁸ Dedji p.245

²⁹ from the introductory words by the Bishop in the Church of England's service of Induction of a new Incumbent

watching television? What does hymn / worship song singing mean in a society where the only communal singing encountered will be at a football match or drunkenly on the street at closing time? What do our vast buildings, usually empty and unused six days a week, say where the only other encounter with such buildings is as museums and heritage sites? How about our word-based Christian culture, when society is locked into tele-visual images, emails, the web, and texting?

Further, what does the experience of church have to say to a society which is shot through with a disposable, no-commitment attitude? One which watches *Wife Swap*, *Big Brother* and *Changing Rooms* in its millions? One which seems hooked onto the cult of the celebrity, individualistic video games and designer labels?

The issues are clearly on the horizons of the Church's radar. Mission-shaped Church³⁰ recognises the issue. Mission-shaped Church asks serious questions about the nature of the Church and explores a wide variety of fresh expressions of church and renewed and revitalised concepts of church. It is an excellent book, but my fear is that it is asking the wrong question. The basic premise of the book is, how do we make church fit (post-) modern society; a top-down approach. I wonder whether the African theology question is more relevant; how do we take the Gospel into British culture(s) today; how do we meet with God in post-modern Britain; a bottom-up approach.

I could, of course, be accused of semantics here, but I do feel that Mission-shaped Church is a very 'churchy' book, and although many of the examples and recommendations that the report offers are very exciting, it is still taking the church, in some currently recognisable form, as a given.

The problem, of course, is how to present the unrecognised, when it is unrecognised and perhaps unrecognisable! The answer is, I believe, to take some huge risks and expect to get it wrong, probably much of the time. I would like to offer some possible examples.

The Whisky Priest³¹

Chris Neal, who works for CMS, at a recent talk described how an Anglican Vicar friend of his had approached him for advice. His son had been home from university and had met up with some friends, and he had been around. After the son had gone back to university one of the friends had contacted Neal's friend asking whether they could meet with him, as they had some questions to ask. Slowly this developed into a regular meeting at the Vicarage, over whisky. What developed was a meeting to discuss faith issues. The friend contacted Neal to ask his advice as to whether and how it should develop further. This group was highly unlikely to attend any church service; they were in many ways becoming 'church' themselves. Neal's advice was to bill the PCC for the whisky, and carry on!

Estate Ministry

Luke Taylor (an Anglican Priest) has been employed by a local church to 'go and do something' on a large local housing estate, which includes three high rise towers and around 4,000 people. It is perceived locally as the 'dumping ground' for a London borough. Following a successful start under the umbrella of *Soul in the City* – a major Christian youth initiative across London last summer – Taylor made several false starts. He had no building, so did carol singing in the centre of the estate. No-one turned up. Then a chance encounter in the community centre led to an invitation to hold Midnight Mass in a local pub – with a congregation of more than fifty. As a result the community centre's management committee are in the process of changing the 'no religious groups' rule, so that Taylor can start a church (of sorts) in the community centre. In the mean time a wholly un-churched group is meeting on Sunday evenings in a near-by hall, whilst they – and Taylor – try to discover together what shape church might be for them.

³⁰ GS1523 *Mission-shaped Church* (CHP London, 2004)

³¹ With apologies to Graham Greene!

Fountain Point

In a Church where I was vicar we had major building problems which led to us thinking about how best to use our Church building. We recognised that in a deprived inner city area it would be impossible to raise the level of funding needed simply to repair our church. We knew that it might be more possible to raise money if the building were to be used more for general community use. However, there was general reluctance to open our 'holy space' to be used for anything other than worship.

One evening I introduced a bible study with the development group, looking at the various ways Jesus was touched and handled in the gospels. The effect was staggering. A group with little formal education or theological literacy rapidly made connections with Jesus being touched, handled, open and generally available to all and sundry with the body of their church building. A project and an opening up of our church building was born.

Liquid Church³²

In his book Ward challenges his readers to look for new and previously unimagined ways of being church. He recognises that the nature of our society has changed and that the previously accepted natural groupings and networks are fast disappearing. The challenge is to find new 'liquid' ways of being church.

Liquid church... starts from the positive elements in the new, fluid environment and tried to work with these and make them part of the way forward for the church... To be liquid church means that we are able to combine with water to become fluid, changeable, flexible...³³

The analogy he uses is in contrast to the idea of the church as a ship ploughing through the water of society. Rather, he says we should become more one with society. Rather than setting out to be church set apart (over and above?) society, he calls on Christians to seek out groups that are already there – parents at the school gate, work colleagues, sports clubs – and to be a Christian presence within them, developing 'church' organically.

Ward's thesis in many ways parallels that of the African theologians, calling for an un-bagged Gospel approach with culture:

In Paul's vision of the body of Christ, unity does not arise from living in the same place; rather, it comes from common allegiance or connection to Christ.³⁴

LICC³⁵

The work of LICC, although based in a (converted) church, is by no means church-shaped. Amongst the many things that they do is a real attempt to make the gospel relevant to people's everyday work situations. Mark Greene, the director of LICC has written an excellent practical and simple handbook³⁶ to help churches and Christians address the issues of faith, work and the gospel.

Another important initiative of LICC is their weekly email (free subscription) *Connecting with Culture*³⁷. The most recent one dealt with tattoos³⁸ in a very positive and real way and making real Gospel connections:

³² Pete Ward *Liquid Church* (Carlisle, 2002)

³³ Ibid p.15

³⁴ Ibid p.35

³⁵ The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity

³⁶ Mark Greene *Supporting Christians at Work* (London, 2001)

³⁷ Available from mail@licc.org.uk More information at www.licc.org.uk

³⁸ Brian Draper *Tattoos LICC – Connecting with Culture* (London, 01 April 2005)

Paul speaks of bearing the ‘marks of Christ’ in his letter to the Galatians, and while he probably received them not from a tattooist but an angry mob who disliked his hermeneutics, he infers that he is ‘branded’ for Christ on the outside and the in.³⁹

The examples could be greatly multiplied, but the reality is that examples such as these are a tiny proportion of the expressions of Gospel and Christianity we find in our country and culture. Yet, we needs must take such initiatives seriously as we seek to find expression of the Gospel in a new culture.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have examined the nature of African theology and drawn from the example of African theologians to highlight what I perceive to be the issues facing Britain at the beginning of the 21st Century in terms of the Gospel and (post-) modern culture. To paraphrase Mbiti, the Gospel is not intrinsically foreign to the culture(s) found in Britain today, but has deep roots in the histories of its people⁴⁰.

Perhaps one of the issues for current British cultures is that we have lost our memory; that we need to rediscover our inheritance. For the issues that we face today are little different to those that we faced in our past. It was from the meeting together of the gospel and ancient British culture that we found the term ‘Lent’ from the old English words for Spring; that we claimed the name Easter from the goddess Eoster; that we transformed the midwinter festival of Yuletide into the Feast of the Nativity.

It would be easy to accuse our forebears – and then ourselves – of blurring or blending, and thereby diluting the Gospel. But the Gospel has survived and grown from such encounters with culture before, and in seeking and using such encounter as African theologians have done, we return to our core values of identity, of a God who wholly identifies himself with his creation, in the Incarnation, in space, time and culture.

The issue is not just of finding ‘ethnically’ relevant worship, with rock bands and video clips, nor of retreating into pious prayer group and heritage liturgy. The challenge for theologians in Britain today is to discover the Palaver trees and find our equivalent of ‘Theology under the Tree’. And in doing this we will uncover the issues of liberation – which may be in the politics of food, of global warming, or of multinationals – the issues where Gospel and Culture meet.

In the words of my opening quotation, how do we ensure that people in our time and culture *in our own languages ...hear them speaking about God's deeds of power*⁴¹. It is a huge challenge, but an exciting one to begin the century with.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ See Bediako p.432

⁴¹ Acts 2:11

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