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The Southern Factor: Prospects and Challenges

Jonathan D James

In the last 100 years Christianity has become established as a non-Western faith in the South. The preceding chapters in the book have alluded to the fact that this demographic shift, which I term the ‘Southern factor’, can be understood as both a product and an agent of globalization. The processes of the global world have brought the Pentecostal and Charismatic strands of Christianity, described as a faith “made to travel” (Dempster, Klaus and Douglas, 1999) to the South. In the same vein, globalization is aiding the flow of Southern Christianity to the rest of the world.

In this concluding chapter, I give a brief summary of Southern Christianity and its mega churches; highlight a few salient features and prospects pertaining to the faith and identify the key challenges facing Christianity in the South.

Africa is poised to become the leading Christian continent in the South, with Latin America and Asia following close behind. The Pew research findings note that Christianity has “grown enormously” in sub-Saharan Africa as the Christian population has climbed from a mere nine percent in 1910 to a staggering 63 percent in 2010 (Inquirer website, 2011). The sheer sizes of churches there with large congregations, one with a seating capacity of 50,000 (see chapters 2 and 3), point us to a new center for Christianity.

The situation in Latin America is quite unprecedented because evangelical Christianity is gaining spiritual ground and swiftly moving into mainstream politics: more than 20 political parties have been founded by evangelical Protestant mega church pastors, thus imitating the actions of the dominant Catholic denomination in the continent (Freston, 2001).

Asia is a vast and diverse continent and although Christianity is gaining ground, it is still lagging behind compared to the other continents in the South. Our study does not deal with China, due to the lack of research personnel to do a thorough study of the Church scene there. Nevertheless, there are mega churches in China and, with a population of 67 million Christians, future studies will no doubt focus on this nation (Inquirer website, 2011). The crucial question pertaining to

China is: Which faith will fill the vacuum left by Marxism and be the majority faith? (See Guinness, 2008).

The situation in the Philippines is rather different because it is home to the largest Christian population in Asia, with a ranking as the fifth largest Christian nation in the world (Inquirer website, 2011). South Korea hosts the world's largest church and has redefined the concept of mega church: in that country, a mega church is one with 10,000 or more attendees, whereas 2,000 is the bench mark for the rest of the world (see Sebastian Kim's study in chapter 4).

The growth of Christianity in India is small compared to other nations in the South. With a Christian population of 31.9 million in India (Inquirer website, 2011), American missiologists underplay the impact of the faith here, stating that India is the "largest non-Christian country that is at all open to the gospel" (Winter and Fraser, 1992: 198-210). I will address this phenomenon of lower growth in India, but first I need to provide background information.

The Church scene in India needs to be understood in the light of some deep-seated historical and cultural issues. Early Christian missionaries in India (with the notable exception of Nobili, Ziegenbalg and Carey)¹ ignored the ingrained aspects of caste and community, thereby promoting 'extraction evangelism' (conversion, which involves extracting Hindus from their community into isolated camps of Christian churches). Therefore, to become a Christian in India virtually meant becoming an 'outcaste'.

In the 1930s, the *Rethinking group* of Madras proposed a new model for Christian mission in India. Chenchiah, one of the main members of this alternative group, argued that Christian conversion and Church membership should not be classed together (Chenchiah, 1938). He saw conversion as a change of life, without the church insisting on the convert's identification with the 'Western' church. In the 1960s, Indian theologians like M. M. Thomas introduced the notion of "Christ-centered secular fellowship" in contradistinction to the Western Church (Thomas, 1972). It is important to understand that Thomas' call for a 'secular fellowship' did not imply making the Gospel secular. 'Secular' for him meant "truly religious without being communal" (Thomas, 1972: 74). This call, if taken seriously would result in the formation of a Christian community within Hindu society; Christians would no longer be treated as outcastes and they would bridge the gap with Hindus. His call eventually led to the creation of what is known as *Christian Ashrams* or Indianized churches such as *Christu Bhakt* (disciple of Christ) movements. However, these groups are still few in number and never emerged as a viable movement in India because indigenization was not encouraged in any real sense. It seems likely that if this method of missions had been seriously explored and initiated, the shape and form of contemporary Christianity in India would be radically different today.

Missions in India developed since the colonizers left with what I term 'post-colonial churches' (James, 2010). These are basically Western denominational entities that were introduced during

colonization, with all the trappings of Western structure, clergy, liturgy etc. Denominations such as Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist grew when large sums of money were invested from abroad to build elaborate churches each according to their own tradition. Most Christians today are part of these ‘mainline’ Churches. It is apparent that some of these churches may have lost their reason for being because in many mainline churches, there are numerous litigation cases being heard in courts of law over the issue of property (in Indian law all land and property belonging to a church is deemed to belong to the Bishop of the denomination). Today, many well-meaning Christian groups from abroad are still investing funds, personnel and Western strategies into India without understanding the nation’s real missiological and cultural issues.²

To sum up, there are four types of churches in India:

1. Post-colonial (mainline) churches that are organized in a Western manner in accordance with traditional and ritualistic denominational styles of worship and liturgy.
2. Indigenous groups and churches in various shapes and forms.
3. Pentecostal and Charismatic entities that are generally upbeat, using aggressive methods and American strategies of evangelism and *Hillsong*-style worship. These churches tend to attract people of all castes and classes. Most of the mega churches in India would fall under this category, although there are also some non-Charismatic mega churches in India, such as the *Dimapur Ao Baptist Church* with more than 6,000 attendees in the mother church and another 9000 attending their 12 'satellite churches' in Dimapur, North East India.³
4. Single-ethnic group churches such as the *Syrian Mar Thoma* (followers of St. Thomas) churches. This church is only attended by *Malayalam*- speaking people from the state of Kerala and has branches all over India and the world where this ethnic group is found. The various ethnic community churches of the *Ao*, *Lotha* and *Garo* tribes in North East India also come under this category.

Winter and Fraser (1997) believe there is potential for explosive Christian growth in India especially if a truly indigenous Indian Church is developed among the Brahmanical Hindu community:

Some estimates indicate that about 100 million Hindus would become Christians tomorrow if someone would take the necessary pains to establish a believing fellowship within their own social grouping. (Winter and Fraser, 1997:198)

This is a reference to approximately 400-600 million traditional Hindu Indians who are averse to Western approaches and strategies. These Hindus will not drink the Gospel from a “Western cup”.⁴ Christian scholars are in agreement that vital indigenous movements “bubble up from below...they do not come as foreign imports” (Dyrness, 2011: para. 28). Judging by the

increased awareness and recent calls for indigenization in India by scholars such as Bharati (2004), there is every possibility that there will be a revival of the Brahmanical form of Christianity in the coming years.⁵

Understanding Southern Christianity

Before I consider the features of Southern Christianity, I will give an overview of what underpins contemporary Northern theology. Often the Northern Church is incapable of hearing its Southern counterpart because of the different values that stem from each other's worldview.

The Northern Church's theology is shaped in part by the high priority given to individualism and the 'liberal self', where "the individual exists prior to and apart from society so that the primary locus of religion is the individual" (Dyrness, 2011: para.11). In the South community and relationships are "pre-existent, involuntary and constitutive" (Dyrness, 2011; Goizueta, 2008). Kwesu Dickson describes this reality in the African context:

It is commonplace that the sense of community is strong in Africa. A society is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained and the spirit powers given regular and adequate recognition. Members of society are expected to live and act in such a way as to promote society's well-being; to do otherwise is to court disaster, not only for the actor but also for society as a whole. (Kwesi Dickson, 1984:62)

Furthermore, the post-Enlightenment lens from which the Christians in the North view the world, precludes or downplays the world of spirits, demons and the whole exercise of exorcism. However, the Southern worldview does not separate the material, physical world from the supernatural world of God, angels and spirits. In the name of orthodoxy, many traditional mainline churches of the North tend to marginalize the non-rational aspects of religious experience:

So far from keeping the non-rational element in religion alive in the heart of religious experience, orthodox Christianity manifestly failed to recognise its value and by this failure gave to the idea of God a one-sidedly, intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation. (Otto, 1923:3)

Kalu (2008) concurs with this view, saying that Church leaders in the North are in "bondage to the tyranny of [the] modern world view and secular social science models...ignoring the miraculous and experiential dimensions [of Christianity]" and placing their faith on science, technology and rational thought instead (Kalu, 2008:16).

There is a materialistic and economic aspect to the North -- South Church discussions, as pointed out by Jesudas Athyal in chapter one of this book. The growing economic disparity between the

North and the South means that the North sets the standard of what is deemed successful and often progress is measured largely in economic terms according to the standard of living of the Northern countries. These economic and material indicators have also inadvertently filtered into the thinking and practice of the Southern Churches (as seen in the examples given in the preceding chapters on mega churches), and so it seems that the Southern Church has fallen prey to the same economic and power pitfalls of the North.

Christianity is well and truly a multicultural world religion; it has found a home in a multiplicity of cultures, idioms and languages. Our study of Southern Christianity is restricted to a study of representative mega churches in the South. These churches have combined the global aspects of the Charismatic and Pentecostal strands of Christianity with their own local cultural values. In the main, the chapters in the book reveal that Christians in the South, at least in the mega churches, are renegotiating their faith in the following ways:

1. Re-reading the text

The world portrayed in the Bible, an agricultural world, resembles many of the countries of the South which have agrarian economies. When Christians in the South read the Old Testament text, which contains narratives of prophetic pronouncements of plagues and famine, they can identify with these experiences because the South is no stranger to natural disasters such as floods, famine and plagues. And so the biblical text comes alive with richness and relevance unknown to believers living in the industrialized, technologically-savvy nations of the North. This re-reading of the Bible with fresh eyes (without the hermeneutical principles of the Northern Church) brings with it a multiplicity of new and intriguing interpretations. For example, Lamin Sanneh cites the example of an African convert who experienced this perspective: "...We thought it [the Bible] was a thing to be spoken to, but now we know it has a tongue. It speaks and will speak to the whole world" (Sanneh, 2011:101-102).

2. Recapturing Christianity's spirituality

Belief in spirits and witchcraft are commonplace in many countries in the South (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2009). However many of the traditional mission churches marginalized and underemphasized the supernatural. In Africa, these strong beliefs have resulted in the formulation of a theology called 'witchdemonology' which is a synthesis of both African traditional religion and Christianity. Even though, as I point out later, that this rather simplistic understanding of how people can succeed in life is fraught with problems, it represents an opportunity for African Christians to practice Christianity within the framework of African primal religiosity. It also takes the culture of the people seriously, by

dealing with Africans' beliefs and fears in their new faith, through a synthesis of both old and new systems. Meyer describes this example of African Christianity:

in contrast to the mission-church, Christianity...[it]...offers the possibility of approaching in the safe context of deliverance what people seek to leave behind but still disturbs them. (Meyer, 1994: 216)

The spirituality of the South is really unique and invites more scholarship. An extraordinary phenomenon known to be practiced by Christian mystics in Latin America and the Philippines is *stigmata*, an intense concentration on Jesus' passion to such a degree that these mystics (known as *Stigmatics*) receive visions and revelations. Almost always, these Stigmatics are known to break out in bleeding in various parts of the body just as the New Testament account describes the intense suffering of Jesus Christ at the crucifixion (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.). Even though there is some skepticism about this practice of spirituality, it illustrates the depths of the mystical nature of Southern Christianity and the fact that the Christianity experienced in the South is more than just abstract creeds and dogma.

3. Re-evangelizing the North and reaching the world

A new phenomenon has occurred in Christian missions with increasing transnational linkages originating from the South to reach the *diaspora* cultures as well as the citizens of the North. Missionaries from Brazil and South Korea are now in many regions of the world, in fact Brazil is the second largest missionary-sending nation in the world (USA is first) with 34,000 missionaries (Johnson, 2012). It is estimated that there are 21,500 South Korean missionaries in 175 countries worldwide (Mandryk, 2010).

The chapters on Africa by Asamoah Gyadu, Walter Ihejirika and Godwin Okon (chapters 2 and 3), reveal the fascinating trend of Christian missions to the North from the South, which represents a new pattern of missionary outreach. This phenomenon needs to be seen from two standpoints. First, as *diaspora* communities from the South fuel the fire of Christian missions in the North, they perpetuate the Northern Church as a vibrant center of Christianity. Wuthnow and Offutt (2009) report that 74 percent of Americans attend churches with immigrant populations and that immigrants make up 8 percent of the total religious workforce in the USA.

Second, new geo-political groupings are being formed in the South because Southern agencies and churches are involved in intra-Southern partnerships and linkages, which are changing the previously dominant North -- South flow of missions. Robbie Goh (2004) argues this point with reference to the Asian scene:

Evangelical Christianity has been making significant advances in the latter part of the twentieth century...in a number of ‘hubs’ such as South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines. These hubs mark the rise of a highly organized, globally networked, and socially transformative vision of Asian Christian identities that, unlike the missionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are largely driven by Asian organizations and agencies. (Goh, 2004: para.1)

4. Repositioning the church in the public sphere

The chapters in the book reveal that there are three basic ways that the Southern Church is repositioning itself in the public and private spheres: by using the business model for doing church, by espousing the latest in media technologies, and by entering into the political and civil spheres through political and social activism. Jeaney Yip, in chapter five uses *Hillsong* in Australia as a prime example of a branded mega church that perpetuates its own products and services in the marketplace of Christianity. Walter Ihejirika and Godwin Okon in chapter three describe the high visibility of Nigerian mega churches through multi modal media expressions. Freston (2001:308), in his analysis of the church in Latin America suggests that the attitude to the State will determine the future of evangelical political activism in the South. His startling claim about the concept of “the church...at the centre of society” though presently unrealistic, because of the perceived disunity amongst the evangelical community, is not beyond the realms of possibility (Freston, 2001: 308). In Southern mega churches, some of the ‘prophets’ have become ‘king makers’ because many senior pastors have the power to influence votes and legislation. This is in keeping with Kim’s findings that the distinctive feature of Asian Christian mission is its approach to sociopolitical and religious problems (Kim, n.d.). Southern Christianity is seen to be making forays into the realms of politics, economics, nation building and also, along the way, contributing to sociological and ideological changes in the region (Kim, n.d.).

Critics of the mega church worldwide bemoan the fact that the Church was intended to be a fellowship yet both institutionalism and size have come in the way of the Church’s true purpose (Brunner, 1952).⁶ Others argue that the focus on church size is a reflection of the American obsession with wealth and power (Olson, 2012). Contemporary Christian scholars point out that the mega church model may not be the most effective means for the practice and promotion of the faith, highlighting that the ‘missional’ church is more effective than the ‘attractional’ church:

Those with a missional perspective no longer see the church service as the primary connecting point for those outside the church. While there is nothing wrong with attracting people to participate in various meetings of the church, the missional church is more concerned about sending the people in the church out among the people of the world, rather than getting the people of the world in among the people of the church. Some have described this missional-attractional

distinction as a challenge to ‘go and be’ as opposed to ‘come and see’. (Wright, 2011)

In the balance, however, scholars like Elisha (2011) have concluded that mega churches are here to stay and that they are meeting real needs by offering a wide array of ministries and services ranging from spiritual growth and religious education to youth programs, volunteer opportunities, social networking and even career development. Furthermore, by virtue of their size, mega churches have ample resources, staff and space to provide more meaningful participation for people of all walks of life than the average-sized church. Elisha’s study concludes that the mega church is part and parcel of contemporary Christianity and culture:

The megachurches...have a considerable influence on the religious culture of the region, not only because they are high-profile institutions that tend to attract powerful and influential members, but also because they are often regarded as standard-bearers for new and emerging styles of Christian spirituality in their region. (Elisha, 2011: 222)

Even in India, where deep-rooted problems of caste and religion have been experienced over the years, Sudhakar Reddy (chapter 7) reveals that postmodern, mega churches are attempting to create a niche for both rural and urban dwellers by adopting the ethos of folk religion.

Challenges of Southern Christianity

The Southern factor—the shift of Christianity to the South -- while being a novel phenomenon is not without challenges. In this concluding section I outline what I consider some of the key challenges facing Southern Christianity.

Contestation

The global spread of Christianity has increased the contestation of the faith both within Christendom and without. The Catholic denomination is facing a serious challenge because evangelical Protestantism, especially the brand of Charismatic Christianity, is spreading rapidly in several nations in Latin America and in the Philippines in Asia. In other countries in the South, the proliferation and visible presence of Christianity poses a challenge to Islam and Hinduism. There is a tendency in some of the mega churches in the South to demonize all other faiths except those of the evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal persuasion. In our increasingly pluralistic world, this can often cause unnecessary tension between Christianity and other faiths. In light of this, Guinness (2008:128-193) cautions the worldwide church to take the approach of civility pointing out that all faiths and no faiths should be free to engage issues from their own perspective and “what is a right for one is a right for another and a responsibility for all.” He argues that even though he believes that Christianity can hold its own in the marketplace

of ideas, “we are taught [from the Bible] to respect and to listen and debate each other persuasively and civilly” (Guinness, 2008: 128-193).

Varieties of new teachings and ‘Christianities’

As mentioned above, the theology of ‘witchdemonology’ in Africa helps Christians come to terms with primal beliefs that are part and parcel of their belief system; thus we see traditional religion and Christianity coexisting as a “coherent theology” (Onyinah, n.d.). However, there is a downside. If all problems are purported by some Southern Church leaders to stem from witchcraft and spirits, people are relieved from acknowledging and taking responsibility for their wrongdoing; conveniently shifting the blame on someone else, who often becomes the enemy of the whole community (Onyinah, n.d.):

For example, although during my fieldwork, males who claimed that they were practicing witchcraft outnumbered females (eight against two); victims of exorcism are often women, children (especially girls) and maids. (Onyinah, n.d.)

Furthermore, the primitive animistic belief system keeps people in a constant state of fear, thereby preventing growth and progress and also inviting false teachers who take advantage of people’s fears:

During my fieldwork there were many instances where people had stopped building houses in their hometowns for fear of witches...The socio-economic factor in Africa causes many people to begin prayer centers just as a means of financial support. Since it does not need any training, certificate, or formal recognition from a body of Christians to begin a prayer centre, charlatans and the unemployed who have strong personalities can easily claim spiritual encounters and begin centers with a profit motive in mind. (Onyinah, n.d.)

Christianity has grown in South Korea but with that there has come a plethora of sects and cults originating from the Church there. One such extreme group is the *World Mission Society Church of God* (WMSCG) ⁷with headquarters located in Sunnam City, Kyunggi Province, near Seoul. The followers of this group believe that Jesus has already come back and they are exclusive possessors of his second coming. They also use biblical texts, such as Galatians 4:26, ⁸ to teach that there is a Mother God in the divine trinity, a teaching alien to historic evangelical Christianity (WMSCG website). Founded by Ahn Sang-hong in 1964, who once was a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist group, the WMSCG claims to have 1.7 million members and “established 2,200 local churches in 150 countries in just half a century” (WMSCG website). The church further claims: “Our church is the only true church which God has established on this earth” (WMSCG website).

The Christian Council of Korea, which represents Protestant churches in the country, has declared the Church of God heretical; however this group is located in 150 countries worldwide and has brought confusion to many leaders in several nations in the South. Most leaders in the South do not have the courage or the theological discernment to make assessments about such groups⁹ (UNHCR website). Southern leaders feel it is up to Church associations in their respective countries to take a theological stand on such groups.¹⁰

This poses the question: Is Southern Christianity in danger of losing its coordinates? There are evidences of incomplete theologies and at times an ‘increased toxicity’ as new ‘Christianities’ uncritically absorb aspects of the culture of the North and novel interpretations of the Bible.

Thankfully, ‘self-theologizing’, that is, Southern churches critically examining their theologies in accordance with the Bible, is on the increase; and this activity may bring about more tested and sustained varieties of ‘Christianities’ in the South. And so the challenges associated with culture and Christianity continue in the Southern churches:

Balance is advisable...Collectively, humans in social interaction do not eliminate the taint of sin. Cultures bear the marks of fallen humanity. Cultures are not amoral or neutral in the contextualization dance. People and cultures are given to flux and flow of every wind or thought. Yet it is the Bible that tethers believers during the gales of life. Contextualization or self theologizing without the Bible can be akin to taking a walk outside a space shuttle without the life preserving tether. (Theological Matters, 2010: para.13)

However, rather than seeing these variations in purely negative terms, I believe it is timely to recall that each Christian generation grappled with its own challenges as the faith has coalesced with contemporary values and taken on the culture of the day. For example, the early Christian Church wrestled with purity of the faith in the midst of differing views and permutations, and in AD 312 the Council of Nicaea was convened to resolve such theological issues. Therefore, there is the likelihood that the Southern Church will congregate to wrestle with some of the new Christianities and announce new creeds in the process. Furthermore, it seems likely that Southern evangelicalism will become more introspective of its weaknesses and eventually play a leading role in “opposing market-driven globalization” and smoothening out existing ethnic differences (Freston, 2001:315).

Conclusion

The noted historian Panikkar (1953) predicted that as Europe’s supremacy fades away so would Christianity’s influence in Asia. However, this book refutes that prediction as Christianity has

grown in Asia and throughout the Southern hemisphere. We are intrigued by this phenomenon -- what has indeed become the norm-setting faith of the future and we welcome the opportunity to explore its new vistas of inquiry. Yet there is a sobering side to our study. In this early foray, we have detected that Southern Christianity has perhaps been hasty in its adoption of the cultural and commercial aspects of the North and its churches there. It has unashamedly borrowed the terms and references of popular culture. It has become institutionalized and embraced the 'here and now'. In doing so, arguably, it has overlooked the words of Christ: "My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). As Southern Christianity adopts the values and aspirations of the North such as capitalism, and its economic indicators of success and prosperity, this begs the question: Where is the fragility and the vulnerability of the faith (see the introduction) which Walls (2005) so eloquently describes as being characteristic of Christianity?

Furthermore, and in keeping with Walls' (2005) description of Christianity as iterative, with its ebb and flow over time and nations, another set of important questions emerge: Where will the new centers of Christianity be located when Southern Christianity reaches its ebb? Who then will be the new recipients of the life-giving germ of the gospel?

Hopefully these questions will be taken up by future scholars as they research the next phase of this global, moving faith.

End notes

¹ Robert de Nobili, was an Italian Jesuit priest who worked in South India from 1605 onwards. Bartholomew Ziegenbalg a German Lutheran missionary, who came to India in 1706, was responsible for the translation of the first Tamil Bible. William Carey was an English Baptist missionary who arrived in Kolkata in 1793.

² Susan Billington Harper's bold book, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma* (2000), draws attention to how the Western Church has not been sensitive to India's cultural thought patterns and norms resulting in dialectic tensions and even counter-productive ministries.

³ I visited the Dimapur Ao Baptist Church on 20 April 2013. Nagaland is a Christianized State (close to 90 percent) in North East India with the first missionary arriving there in 1894. The Baptists brought the Gospel to the tribal, animistic people and as a result, there are many strong and large churches (predominantly Baptist) there today.

⁴ This phrase is attributed to Sadhu Sundar Singh, a well-known Sikh who became an avid follower of Christ in India.

⁵ Indian leaders are increasing their calls for greater indigenization. Also books such as: *Living Water and Indian Bowl* by S. Bharati (2004); and *Communicating Christ among Indian Peoples* by G. David (2008) are slowly changing the thinking and practice of Indian Christianity.

⁶ Brunner's thesis is that the current church and the concept of *ecclesia* are not the same thing. He argues that the current church has become an institution rather than *ecclesia*, a communion of persons.

⁷ It must be pointed out that there are countless Korean groups which represent historic Biblical Christianity as well. I have deliberately chosen an extreme group as my example of the new 'Christianities' in the South.

⁸ Galatians 4:26 is the text used by this group: "But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother."

⁹ This was the consensus of five key Church and Christian organizational leaders I spoke to in Nepal, India and the Philippines in various visits from November 2012 to April 2013.

¹⁰ The five Church leaders I spoke to when I visited Nepal, India and the Philippines felt that the Evangelical Alliance of each nation, which is affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, should be given the task of taking a theological stand on all cultic and sectarian groups.

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