

THE
NEW FACES
OF
CHRISTIANITY

Believing the Bible in the Global South



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SHALL THE FUNDAMENTALISTS WIN?

Our understanding of the Bible is different from them. We are two different churches.

Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi (Kenya)

In recent years, gatherings of the worldwide Anglican Communion have been contentious events. On one occasion, two bishops were participating in a Bible study, one an African Anglican, the other a U.S. Episcopalian. 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?”

Christian denominations worldwide have been deeply divided over issues of gender, sexual morality, and homosexuality. These debates illustrate a sharp global division, with many North American and European churches willing to accommodate liberalizing trends in the wider society, while their African and Asian counterparts prove much more conservative. These controversies are grounded in attitudes to authority and, above all, to the position of the Bible as an inspired text. Fifty years ago, Americans might have dismissed global South conservatism as arising from a lack of theological sophistication, and in any case, these views were strictly marginal to the concerns of the Christian heartlands of North America and Western Europe. Put crudely, why should the “Christian world” care what Africans think? Only as recently as 1960 did the Roman Catholic Church choose its first black African cardinal. 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.¹

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 at the same time, 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, then surely, Southern traditions of Bible reading must be seen as the Christian norm. We will no longer treat the culture-specific interpretations of North Americans and Europeans as "theology"—that is, as the real thing—while the rest of the world produces its curious provincial variants, of "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." As Joel Carpenter observes, "Christian theology eventually reflects the most compelling issues from the front lines of mission, so we can expect that Christian theology will be dominated by these issues rising from the global South."²

If in fact the numerical strength of Christianity is increasingly in the South, that might suggest a decisive move toward literal and even fundamentalist readings of the Bible, to the horror of American or European liberals, and the delight of conservatives. Having said that, intellectual traditions change and develop over time, and there is no assurance whatever that approaches popular today will still prevail in twenty or fifty years time. But current controversies do raise questions about the future of Christian thought, and they challenge popular assumptions about the seemingly inevitable directions it will take. In an earlier age of conflict in American Protestantism, in 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick asked, "Shall the fundamentalists win?"³ In North America, they clearly did not. On a global scale, though, matters might develop differently.

Anglicans

Over the past decade, the worldwide Anglican Communion has provided the most visible front in North-South struggles over biblical authority. Though current divisions have a long prehistory, the immediate detonator was the 2003 decision by the U.S. Episcopal Church to ordain Gene Robinson—a noncelibate homosexual—as bishop of New Hampshire. Meanwhile, the U.S. church was considering forms of blessing for gay unions or marriages, and similar gay-friendly moves were at least under discussion in other global North churches, including ones in Canada and the United Kingdom.

At first sight, such reforms seem to run contrary to repeated and explicit biblical condemnations of homosexual acts. Still, Northern liberals could

overcome biblically based objections by placing scriptural injunctions in a contemporary social and cultural context. Old Testament texts could be assigned to an older ritual and criminal code made obsolete by the Christian revelation. One satirical item widely circulated on the Internet noted that while the book of Leviticus indeed prohibited homosexuality, it did so in the context of other archaic and bizarre regulations. “Touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean. May I still play football if I wear gloves? . . . Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. . . . Can you clarify? Why can’t I own Canadians?”⁴

More difficult to challenge are the New Testament prohibitions on homosexuality. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul places homosexual behavior on a moral par with adultery, theft, and idolatry. Yet, as liberals argued, the New Testament too was written in a society that accepted slavery and condemned homosexuality, and since the regulations provided in the text about both matters are thoroughly culture specific, they need not bind modern believers. Few Christian denominations today enforce the detailed rules that Paul pronounced about how men and women should wear their hair during services, though the passage occupies a larger share of I Corinthians than do his remarks on homosexuality. While the basic spiritual and moral truths of the Bible remain, societies change over time, and so do detailed rules of conduct. Putting the argument in admittedly extreme terms, Bishop Robinson himself asserted that “Just simply to say that it goes against tradition and the teaching of the church and Scripture does not necessarily make it wrong.”⁵

Such a liberal interpretation appalled many church leaders in the global South, who reasserted a strict obedience to scriptural authority. According to Nigerian primate Peter Akinola, the most visible critic of Northern liberals, “I didn’t write the Bible. It’s part of our Christian heritage. It tells us what to do. If the word of God says homosexuality is an abomination, then so be it.” The Nigerian hierarchy explains further, “The primary presupposition is a high view of Scripture as inerrant and a sufficient guide in all matters of faith and conduct, such that its ethics and injunctions are of timeless relevance, notwithstanding man’s constant tendency to hop from one ethical paradigm to another.” Instead of relativism, his church would accept the “revealed position of Scripture, which we believe to be the mind of God.”⁶

Not all Southern Anglican leaders were so inflexible. The important South African church was prepared to allow individual provinces to make their own decisions in matters of sexual morality. Yet overwhelmingly, African and Asian leaders denounced the U.S. church for abandoning the clear principles of the Bible. Kenyan archbishop David Gitari called gay unions “immoral and contrary to the Bible.” Given the vast moral capital he had earned during

years of heroic struggle against that nation's dictatorship, his statement carried special weight.⁷

In the growing North-South confrontation, Southern conservatives find ample justification in the language of scripture, noting the hostility between the worldly-wise and the (godly) foolish, those who remain unseduced by secular learning. Using the Pauline epistles, Nigerian church leaders identify modern liberal Westerners with the pagan Greeks of old: "[In] spite of their pride in their wisdom (the Greek love of *sophia*) they had become utterly foolish. The last stage had been reached."⁸ To adapt the famous image offered by Tertullian, that great African thinker, Christians of the global South are citizens of Jerusalem, and they follow the Bible; Americans and Europeans, residents of Athens, obey secular texts. And what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or as that other African thinker, Augustine, framed the contrast, one must be a citizen either of Jerusalem or of Babylon.

Reading in the Global South

Though Anglicanism is an important tradition, claiming some eighty million adherents, that only represents around 4 percent of Christians worldwide. Still, the kind of split that we have seen in the Robinson affair has emerged across denominations, especially in matters of gender and sexuality. Other churches have watched Anglican conflicts with some alarm, fearing that perhaps they might be getting a foretaste of future debates among Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and perhaps, someday, even Roman Catholics. When Sweden's liberal Lutheran Church tried to enforce its views on traditionalist diehards, conservatives placed themselves under the authority of Kenyan bishop Walter Obare Omwanza, who denounced the official church for practicing "a secular, intolerant, bureaucratic fundamentalism inimical to the word of God and familiar from various church struggles against totalitarian ideologies during the 20th century." He attacked the Swedish ordination of women as "a Gnostic novelty," which "cannot tolerate even minimal coexistence with classical Christianity." Similar disputes surface not just in international meetings, but also within North American religious communities with large immigrant populations.⁹

We often encounter the same range of conservative themes in the religious thought of 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 literalism; 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 considered as authoritative as the New. Biblical

traditionalism and literalism are still more marked in the independent churches and in denominations rooted in the Pentecostal tradition, but similar currents are also found among Roman Catholics. Any acquaintance with African or Asian Christianity soon indicates the pervasive importance of the Bible and of biblical stories.¹⁰

Several factors contribute to a more literal interpretation of scripture. For one thing, the Bible has found a congenial home among communities who identify with the social and economic realities it portrays, no less than the political environments in which Christians find themselves. For the growing churches of the global South, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world 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 the distrust of the secular order.

Furthermore, Christianity—like any dynamic ideological or religious system—adapts to respond to its rivals or neighbors. In European history, Roman Catholics placed such heavy emphasis on “high” Eucharistic theology because they experienced such vigorous controversies with Protestants who challenged their ideas at every point. Lacking such competition, Orthodox Christians never felt the need to define their views on these matters as precisely. Today, similarly, Christians of the global North and South differ because of the main threats they perceive in their respective cultures. Joel Carpenter notes how, facing the challenges of secularism, postmodernity, and changing concepts of gender, Euro-American academic theology still focuses “on European thinkers and post-Enlightenment intellectual issues. Western theologians, liberal and conservative, have been addressing the faith to an age of doubt and secularity, and to the competing salvific claims of secular ideologies.” Global South Christians, in contrast, do not live in an age of doubt, but must instead deal with competing claims to faith. Their views are shaped by interaction with their different neighbors and the very different issues they raise: Muslims and traditional religionists in Africa and Asia, not to mention members of the great Asian religions. Accordingly, “the new Christianity will push theologians to address the faith to poverty and social injustice; to political violence, corruption, and the meltdown of law and order; and to Christianity’s witness amidst religious plurality. They will be dealing with the need of Christian communities to make sense of God’s self-revelation to their pre-Christian ancestors.” And in all these matters, they find abundant material in the scriptures, often in passages that resonate little with Northern theologians.¹¹

In consequence, the “Southern” Bible carries a freshness and authenticity that adds vastly to its credibility as an authoritative source and a guide for daily living. 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, so that 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 not just as historical fact, but as relevant instruction for daily conduct; and that even applies to such unfashionable books as Leviticus.

I am not, of course, proposing a simple kind of geographical determinism shaping religious belief. We can hardly speak of how “Africans” approach a given topic, any more than how Europeans do: Scots think one thing, Sicilians quite another. Nor are those societies in any sense uniform: Scots laborers presumably read one way, Scots professors another. Attitudes toward biblical interpretation and authority follow no neat North-South pattern, still less a rigid chasm between liberal North and conservative South. We find “Southern” expressions in the North, in the form of charismatic, fundamentalist, and deeply traditionalist belief; and those currents exist, however unhappily, in most liberal-dominated churches. If global South clergy express their faith that God will intervene to reward or punish contemporary states and societies, so do such high-profile American Christians as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Nor is it difficult to find North Americans who accept pristine New Testament views of exorcism and spiritual healing. For Pentecostal believers in North America and Europe, spiritual warfare is a strictly current reality, while the modern Vatican accepts a clear, if limited, role for exorcists—to the embarrassment of most Northern Catholic faithful, and many clergy. *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis continues to have a sizable readership among conservative Christians of all shades, at least some of whom take seriously its accounts of demonic temptations.¹²

At the same time, liberals and Northern-style feminists are by no means unknown even in the most fervently traditional-minded African and Asian churches. Despite all the financial difficulties faced particularly by African universities, global South scholars form a distinguished part of the global community of biblical learning, reading and publishing in the mainstream journals of Europe and North America; and international ties are reinforced by visiting appointments, by conferences and seminars. Naturally enough, given the colonial and postcolonial histories of their nations, many such scholars have been shaped by radical theological perspectives, by liberationist and feminist thought.¹³

As in the United States and Europe, global South churches produce a spectrum of theologies and interpretations. The North-South difference is rather one of emphasis. Conservative and literalist approaches are widely known in the global North, but in most mainstream churches, such views are regarded as controversial and reactionary, and they are treated with great hostility in

political discourse and the media. Even more suspect are explicitly supernatural or charismatic themes, such as exorcism and spiritual healing. In contrast, biblical and theological conservatism clearly represent the Christian mainstream across Africa and Asia, while ideas of supernatural warfare and healing need not the slightest explanation, and certainly no apology. They are rather at the heart of lived Christianity.

Reading the Readers

This conservative emphasis might sound counterintuitive in light of the sheer volume of radical or liberationist work stemming from Africa, Asia, and particularly Latin America. Since the 1970s, many scholars have been fascinated not just by the distinctive interpretations emanating from the global South, but by their enormous potential for reshaping Christianity worldwide. In 1995, R. S. Sugirtharajah—one of the most impressive and wide-ranging of these scholars—wrote that “there is at present an explosion of interest in Third World biblical interpretation” and that surge of interest has continued unchecked. Often, though, it can be difficult to tell which of these voices accurately represent the thought of the wider Christian community in those societies. Generally, attention focuses on academic or educated opinions, on the voices of professors, bishops, and church leaders, the sort of people who write books that get published in Europe or North America; but this emphasis can give a distorted view of global South traditions.¹⁴

Sugirtharajah, himself a distinguished postcolonial scholar, writes scathingly of the appropriation of “third world theologies” by Western academics, who overemphasize those currents they find attractive, while ignoring others they find less palatable or sensational. Liberation theology in particular has been thoroughly “colonized.” Citing some of the celebrity writers in this genre, he comments, “While espousing and retaining grass roots interest, the theologies of [Gustavo] Gutiérrez, [Leonardo] Boff and [Jon] Sobrino largely fall within the Western academic syntax, which makes them easy to incorporate.” He quotes a dismissive comment that the Kairos document, a legendary product of South African liberation theology, “is better known in Germany than to Zulus.”¹⁵

In terms of the amount of work readily available in the West, one might easily assume that African or Asian churches are obsessed with liberation theologies, with black theology, feminism, and womanism, when in fact, we could easily assemble a substantial volume of texts devoted to highly conservative social and political stances. Among all the hundreds of titles by global South Christian writers and theologians published in the United States, only a handful give any inkling of the vast popular interest in themes of healing,

spiritual warfare, and exorcism, of mission and evangelism, topics that occupy much of the daily attention of African and Asian believers. This liberal or radical tilt does not represent any kind of ecclesiastical conspiracy to silence authentic popular voices. Rather, publishers produce books that interest them and reflect their particular outlook, books that will moreover find a North American audience, and the most active firms in this area of religious publishing overwhelmingly favor progressive and feminist theologies. They do not pretend that their offerings represent any kind of sample of Christian opinion in global South nations, nor should they be taken as such.¹⁶

Issues of unconscious bias even surface in what seems to be the most populist method of finding what ordinary Christians think, namely the exercises in which scholars “read with,” that is, engage in directed Bible studies with groups of uneducated and often illiterate believers. These encounters can be very fruitful, and the readings that emerge are often creative and illuminating. Even so, it is the academics who determine the texts to be read and who formulate the questions, often with the goal of leading their groups to address issues of gender or progressive politics that interest the researchers.¹⁷

These comments are not meant to understate the significance of radical approaches in the rising churches, especially in some countries—South Africa comes to mind. But the texts and interpretations favored by scholars and, often, prelates differ substantially from those that emerge from studies of ordinary believers: the woman in the Sunday congregation or the man at the revival meeting. For this demotic thought world, we must look to more commonplace sources, such as sermon texts, writings by local clergy and seminary educators, testimonies, best-selling memoirs and devotional works, or the kind of popular Christian writing that appears so often in popular media. Often, the attitudes we find might indeed be socially progressive in some ways, but they are deeply supernatural and (seemingly) superstitious in others.¹⁸

Moving South

In many ways, then, Christian communities in global South nations share certain approaches to the Bible and to biblical authority, and these are sufficient to mark real differences with the outlook common in Europe and North America. Divisions over the nature of biblical authority matter because the weight of numbers within Christianity is shifting so decisively to the churches of the global South. Partly, this is a matter of demographic change and the rapid growth of the relative share of the world’s population living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Since the 1960s, populations have fallen or stagnated in Europe and North America, while global South birth rates have remained

far higher—spectacularly so in Africa. Today, there are about two billion Christians, of whom 530 million live in Europe, 510 million in Latin America, 390 million in Africa, and perhaps 300 million in Asia, but those numbers will change substantially in coming decades. By 2025, Africa and Latin America will vie for the title of the most Christian continent. A map of the “statistical center of gravity of global Christianity” shows that center moving steadily southward, from a point in northern Italy in 1800, to central Spain in 1900, to Morocco by 1970, and to a point near Timbuktu today. And the southward trajectory will continue unchecked through the coming century. As Todd Johnson points out, Spanish has since 1980 been the leading language of church membership in the world, and Chinese, Hindi, and Swahili will soon play a much greater role. In our lifetimes, the centuries-long North Atlantic captivity of the church is drawing to an end.¹⁹

The figures are startling. Between 1900 and 2000, the number of Christians in Africa grew from 10 million to over 360 million, from 10 percent of the population to 46 percent. If that is not, quantitatively, the largest religious change in human history in such a short period, I am at a loss to think of a rival. Today, the most vibrant centers of Christian growth are still in Africa itself, but also around the Pacific Rim, the Christian Arc. Already today, Africans and Asians represent some 30 percent of all Christians, and the proportion will rise steadily. Conceivably, the richest Christian harvest of all might yet be found in China, a nation of inestimable importance to the politics of the coming decades. Some projections suggest that by 2050, China might contain the second-largest population of Christians on the planet, exceeded only by the United States. More confidently, we can predict that by that date, there should be around three billion Christians in the world, of whom only around one-fifth or fewer will be non-Hispanic whites.²⁰

The effects of these changes can be witnessed across denominations. The Roman Catholic Church, the world’s largest, was the first to feel the impact. Today, two-thirds of its adherents live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that total does not include people of the global South residing in the North. By 2025, that proportion should rise to 75 percent, a fact that will undoubtedly be reflected in future papal elections. The Anglican Communion—historically, the “English” church—is becoming ever more African dominated, so that the Nigerian branch will soon be its largest representative. The Seventh Day Adventist Church also epitomizes these trends. In the 1950s, the church had around a million members, mainly concentrated in the United States. Today, the church claims some fourteen million members, of whom only one million are located in the United States; and among even that American million, a sizable share are of immigrant stock. Of the churches with Euro-American roots, those that are expanding do so by becoming

rapidly more Southern in composition. Those that fail to expand retain their Euro-American identity, but they are shrinking perilously in terms of market share. The Orthodox Communion, still firmly rooted in Eastern Europe, offers a worrying model of apparently irreversible demographic decline. Christianity worldwide is booming, but at least in relative terms, “Western” Christianity is stagnating, while the old Eastern Christianity may be facing terminal crisis.²¹

Seeing Christianity “going South” in our lifetimes, we think of John Updike’s wry comment “I don’t think God plays well in Sweden. . . . God sticks pretty close to the Equator.” That remark seems true today, and it will be ever more so in years to come.

The End of Fundamentalism

At least in the short term, the growth of Southern churches portends a conservative shift in theology and in attitudes toward biblical authority. By North American standards at least, the ideas expressed by African churches in the sexuality debates certainly seem fundamentalist. Liberals might indeed discern all the elements of that unholy trinity identified by Peter Gomes—bibliolatry, culturism, and literalism—a religion of the letter rather than the Spirit, one that worships the text rather than God.²²

Yet in discussing the use of the Bible by contemporary theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, we see the limitations of the whole concept of fundamentalism. In the United States and Europe, the term usually suggests a bull-headed obstinacy in the face of scientific facts, a tendency toward repression, especially directed against women or the sexually unorthodox. If that is in fact the future of Christianity, then it is not just theological liberals who have cause for concern, since the new face of Christianity would look disturbingly like the worst stereotypes of radical Islam. But as in the case of Islam, sincere or passionate religious involvement need have no negative connotations, and might easily be reconciled with social and political progress.²³

Definitions are critical. Media coverage of any topic, religious or secular, is shaped by the need to summarize complex movements and ideologies in selected code words, labels that acquire significance far beyond their precise meaning. Though designed as guideposts for the perplexed, such words all too often tend to stop intellectual processes. One such demon word is fundamentalism, which was originally a description of a particular approach to reading Christian scriptures, but has now become a catch-all description for ultraconservative intolerance. Used thus, the term becomes purely pejorative and, often, subjective. The term “fundamentalism” expands to cover anyone who treats a religion as something that should shape one’s daily life, provided

that leads to conclusions that the speaker does not like. If your reading of the Bible inspires you to help the poor, that is passionate religious commitment. If it leads you to denounce homosexuality, you are a fundamentalist. In the modern U.S. context, the term “evangelical” is well on the way to acquiring such connotations, as a label for intolerant (white) social conservatives.

But “fundamentalist” need not have such dreadful connotations, especially when applied across religious boundaries. In its origins, the word implies a strict belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the entire Bible text. Growing as it does out of debates within Christianity, the term can only with difficulty be applied to other faiths. It represents an American-Christian response to an American modernism. Muslims have their own form of reactionary fundamentalism—*usuliya*—though its implications are rather different from the Christian sense of the word. In a sense, all Muslims are fundamentalists by virtue of their approach to scripture, in that they view the Quran as a text inspired or dictated by the divine. No vaguely orthodox Muslim would accept that Muhammad had anything to do with the composition of the Quran, as his role would rather be seen as receiving dictation. In Christian terms, such a view of scripture would by definition be fundamentalist, but that kind of interpretation has no necessary implications for social or political stances. A Muslim who believes faithfully in the inspired Quran can, in theory, be a feminist, a daring scientific pioneer, or a progressive social reformer.²⁴

Among Christians likewise, attitudes to Bible interpretation can be a poor guide to belief or conduct. It can in fact be difficult to determine who is a Christian fundamentalist, since the whole debate simply matters less outside North America. One African independent church, for instance, scorns the term: “We read the Bible as a book that comes from God and we take every word in the Bible seriously. Some people will say that we are therefore fundamentalists. We do not know whether this word applies to us or not but we are not interested in any interpretation of the Bible that softens or waters down the message. We do not have the same problems about the Bible as white people have with their scientific mentality.”²⁵

Other global South evangelicals distinguish their beliefs from fundamentalism in the American sense. In the Philippines, an evangelical umbrella organization asserts, “If fundamentalist is understood to mean a person who believes that the Bible is the only authority, then we are not fundamentalist, for we have a place for traditions, creeds and councils, but they are all subject to the supreme and final authority of Scripture. If fundamentalist means one who always interprets the Scripture literally without regard to the context, we are not fundamentalists for we believe in grammatical and historical exegesis.”²⁶ Even Creationism, which in North America represents an acid

test for religious loyalties, has different implications for global South churches, since evolution plays little role in debates over education. While Creationist beliefs are widely held, members of many large and influential churches, including Catholics and Anglicans, are quite at liberty to believe in the principle of evolution, however literalist they might be on other biblical matters.

Even harder to fit into fundamentalist ranks are Pentecostals, who constitute a large proportion of the world's newer Christian population. Since its origins in the early twentieth century, the Pentecostal movement now claims at least 350 million adherents worldwide. Though Pentecostals vociferously proclaim the power of the Bible and biblical authority, they reject the fundamentalist tenet that God's revelation ended with the scriptures. Instead, they give high regard to prophetic, inspired, and mystical teachings, and apply a prophetic exegesis to the scriptural text. In terms of Friedrich Schleiermacher's classic distinction of styles of Bible reading, their approach is feminine, based on "creative intuition and immediacy with the text. . . . Pentecostal hermeneutic is feminine, eschatological, organic, and helps the audience to recognize the signs of the times and to discern what God is doing in today's world."²⁷ To adapt Harry Fosdick's question, Bible-believing Pentecostals and charismatics stand a much better chance of winning than do fundamentalists, if we define the latter with any degree of precision.

Conservatives and Liberals

If the word "fundamentalist" needs to be used cautiously, so do those familiar ecclesiastical labels "liberal" and "conservative." Though most African and Asian churches have a high view of biblical origins and authority, this does not prevent a creative and even radical exegesis, as texts are applied to contemporary debates and dilemmas.

I have written here of religious and scriptural conservatism, but that term need not carry its customary political implications. Euro-American believers are used to drawing a sharp distinction between the political consequences of different styles of Bible reading. 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 mindsets thus place their main emphases in different realms, human or supernatural.

Now, even in the United States, that distinction is by no means reliable. There are plenty of left-wing evangelicals, deeply committed to social and environmental justice. But in churches of the global South, the division makes even less sense. Many churches take very seriously the supernatural

worldview that pervades the Christian scriptures, with the recurrent themes of demons, possession, exorcism, and spiritual healing. Yet readings that appear intellectually reactionary do not prevent the same believers from engaging in social activism. In many instances, biblical texts provide not only a justification for such activism, but a command. *Deliverance* in the charismatic sense can easily be linked to political or social *liberation*, and the two words are of course close cognates. The biblical enthusiasm we so often encounter in the global South is often embraced by exactly those groups ordinarily portrayed as the victims of reactionary religion, particularly women. Instead of fundamentalism denying or defying modernity, the Bible supplies a tool to cope with modernity, to allow the move from traditional societies, and to assist the most marginalized members of society.²⁸

When Northern-world observers discuss the churches of the Two-Thirds World, labels such as fundamentalist and literalist, liberal and conservative can distract from the real issues that Christians face in their own very different societies. 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 or 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. Writers such as James Baldwin suggest how utterly saturated black American culture was, and remains, in the thought and language of the Bible, and of biblically derived hymns and prayers. Black American politics are 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. Yet having said this, 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, now 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, one is reminded of a familiar text: the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone.²⁹

Rich and Poor

Looking at some recent North-South clashes, some might despair at the cultural gulf that seems to yawn between the older and newer churches, which are divided by their common scripture. In a worst-case scenario, the dominant forms of Christianity in North and South might become mutually incomprehensible. To adapt slightly the words of Benjamin Disraeli, old and new worlds would constitute in fact “Two Christianities between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor.”³⁰ The prospect of such a religious division is intriguing for Northern-world ecclesiastical politics, as both liberals and conservatives have seen the growing numbers of global South Christians as confirming the validity of their own particular views. During the 1970s and 1980s, liberals and radicals rejoiced to hear liberationist and feminist voices emerging from the churches of the Two-Thirds World. More recently, U.S. and European conservatives have come to see, in the moral and sexual traditionalism advocated by the growing churches of the global South, an enticing vision of the theological future. In their different ways, both sides assume that the global South represents the future of Christianity, and that that future is ideologically congenial.

Though particular denominations might split along North-South lines, for many reasons, we are not likely to see a clear break of the epochal kind that separated Western Catholics from Eastern Orthodox, a repeat performance of the great Schism of 1054. Straightforward North-South clashes are not likely. Most obviously, as we have seen, neither Northern nor Southern Christianities represent any kind of solid front. “Northern” approaches and beliefs are found in the South, and vice versa.³¹

Also, of course, views will change over time. North-South crossovers will only increase with globalization, with the influence of Northern media and academe across the world, while swelling populations of global South migrants in the North will give a more Southern quality to many North American and European congregations. Furthermore, African and Asian Christianity will develop and diversify as these faiths develop deeper roots, build more elaborate institutional structures, and engage in new theological debates. Only recently has Christianity become a mass faith in many of the nations that today constitute such obvious bastions—such as Nigeria, Uganda, Korea, and China. As the religion develops, churches will develop a greater range of theological and biblical attitudes, and probably spawn a new liberalism. In some churches, that liberalism will in turn drive new generations of conservative and fundamentalist protesters against what they see as a betrayal of

the authentic faith. The consequence will be an ever-widening diversity of churches and sects, making any concept of unified “Southern” Christianity ever more problematic.

Hypothetically, we might even imagine more extreme moves away from orthodoxy in coming decades. Cultures or societies that are literalist or even fundamentalist in one generation can in later years become liberal, if not highly skeptical of all forms of faith; and that pattern occurs frequently—though not inevitably—across faith traditions. In European history, seventeenth-century Calvinism was a rigorous and often intolerant faith, with a tradition of militant political activism that we can legitimately compare to today’s puritanical varieties of Islamic revivalism. By 1680, the most visible Calvinist territories were the Netherlands, Scotland, Switzerland, and New England; which were also the heartlands of Enlightenment thought and religious liberalism a century later. We can argue about why such a transition should have occurred: perhaps Biblicism and fundamentalism build determined self-reliance. If you believe your understanding of the scripture gives you direct access to the divine, you are unlikely to accept the authority of flawed human authorities in this or any other matter. In the 1770s, the British government thought it was dealing not with an American War of Independence, but a “Presbyterian Revolt.” But for whatever reason, historical experience suggests that fundamentalists often have good grounds to worry about their liberal grandchildren. We can speak with fair confidence about the ethnic composition of the world’s Christians in fifty or a hundred years, but we must be on shakier grounds when it comes to predicting attitudes to authority or orthodoxy.

Whose Readings?

For the foreseeable future, though, the fastest-growing segments of Christianity worldwide will share certain approaches to biblical authority and interpretation, and understanding these approaches is essential for anyone interested in secular affairs. In fact, seeing how the Bible is often used today to create a vocabulary and intellectual framework for contemporary debates and problems, we recall similar developments in other societies undergoing revolutionary religious change. Throughout, current events recall the impact of the Bible on the making of Europe during its age of Christendom, the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, when biblical texts and themes influenced social thought, art, cultural perceptions, narrative traditions, and the very concepts of history and nationhood. Europeans came to see the tales of the Bible as their own stories, as biblical passages and stories shaped the perceptions of all different sorts of people, tyrants and rebels, reformers and conservatives. In modern Africa and Asia too, whether we are interested in politics

strictly defined or in wider social concerns—attitudes to gender and family, wealth and poverty, debt and development—the Bible provides a critical guide to worldly matters, much as it did in Europe in 1600 and the United States in 1850.³²

We can also appreciate how far social and cultural circumstances help determine religious outlook. However much believers might cite the obvious meaning of the “plain text of scripture,” that Christian scripture is a very large and complex set of documents, and different portions and emphases seem relevant in some settings but not others. It is fascinating, and sometimes shocking, to see how Christians in very different parts of the world emphasize such radically different portions of the scripture, to the point that it sometimes seems that they are not just offering differing interpretations, but actually reading different books.

In trying to understand such variations, we must begin by asking what we regard as normal, and that can in itself be a surprising exercise. From a North American point of view, we might seek to know how and why African or Asian Christians came to have such strikingly conservative beliefs, and we can certainly find explanations for that. Sometimes the explanations are not too complimentary. In the Anglican sexuality debates, some liberal activists have blamed the conservative opposition on the personal ambitions of Archbishop Akinola, who is portrayed as seeking almost papal powers to interpret doctrine and scripture. Other liberals accuse African leaders of ignorance, of bigotry, even of becoming the paid tools of ultraright American tycoons. At an Episcopalian gathering in 2002, one gay activist condemned African conservatives for “monkeying around” in the church: “All I have to say to these bishops is: Go back to the jungle where you came from!”³³ Sober academics seek other reasons for the charismatic nature of much global South religion. Why, for instance, do these churches so emphasize healing, visions, and prophecy? Perhaps, one might suggest, they are rather too much in contact with their pre-Christian roots, with traditional worlds of healing or magic or shamanism. For Northern liberals, contemplating a belief in demons and exorcisms based on a fundamentalist reading of scripture, this seems to be the realm of cults, not Christianity.

Yet many Africans and Asians respond that their views are grounded in the abundant evidence of scripture; they ask how any reasonable reader could exclude healings and miracles from the Christian message. Have liberal Americans and Germans never read the gospels or the book of Acts, in which miracles and exorcisms so proliferate? If Southern Christians have compromised with animism, have not Northerners sold out to scientism, materialism, and determinism?

On both sides, the same kinds of question might be asked about other points of obvious North-South difference. To adapt a phrase from Lamin Sanneh: whose reading, whose Christianity is normal now? And whose will be in fifty years time?³⁴

In short, the growing significance of Christianity in global South nations demands to be understood by anyone interested in the future development of those regions. But considering such different forms of the faith raises questions about the “Western” forms of Christianity that have so long been regarded as normative. Looking at the impact of the Bible in the Two-Thirds World—the choice of texts and the manner in which they are read—should remind Northern churches of aspects of the scriptural tradition that might have seemed lost or—as in the case of apocalyptic or healing—tainted beyond recovery. Fresh Southern readings help restore these traditions to their ancient centrality within Christian thought, but without the ultraconservative implications that “fundamentalism” has acquired in our own culture. The more exposure we North Americans and Europeans have to such readings, the harder it might be for us to approach that scripture in the same way again.

POWER IN THE BOOK

The Bible is alive—it has hands and grabs hold of me, it has feet and runs after me.

Martin Luther

Why are global South churches so conservative in their approach to biblical authority? African and Asian leaders dismiss any charge that they remain ignorant of American or European textual scholarship, or critical approaches to the Bible. Archbishop Akinola himself stresses that “Our position is not simply representative of the opinion of an insignificant minority who are blinded by cultural biases and uninformed sentiments in a world of well-read and ‘broad-minded’ scholars.”¹ The statements of conservative Southern clergy, such as the Nigerian Anglicans, make clear that they know the rival arguments and interpretations arising from historical criticism, but they choose to reject them.

Certainly, readers are often struck by the direct relevance of the Bible to the lived realities of contemporary society; but we must also take account of the means by which the Bible has arrived in these Christian cultures. The Bible is still a relatively new book in most of Africa and Asia, where Christian communities are still in the initial phases of a love affair with the scripture, before the texts and stories become familiar or hackneyed.

In speaking of novelty, I am not ignoring the far older Christian origins in such nations, especially China, but thinking rather of the modern phase of growth. In this sense, Christianity in its present forms represents a new force even in Latin American lands such as Brazil, a land with Christian roots dating back five centuries. Yet the more biblically centered versions of the faith, whether Catholic or evangelical, represent a much newer arrival, as does the whole attendant culture of Bible study and popular Bible reading. The Bible did not occupy anything like its central role in the belief or worship of the vast

majority of Christians until the second half of the twentieth century. Only in the 1960s did Bible reading acquire its exalted status among Latin America's lay Catholics, while the massive growth of Protestant and Pentecostal communities begins in the same era. Today, though, Latin American nations—above all, Brazil—are among the world's greatest producers and consumers of Bibles.²

Also, in most settings, the Bible did not arrive as one book among many, but came together with certain revolutionary assumptions about the nature of reading and the means of communicating information. Understanding the means by which the Bible is understood and communicated allows us to appreciate the special weight of authority that the text bears in global South churches.

Missionary Memories

In most of Africa and Asia, Christianity traces its origins to Euro-American missionaries, and that inheritance might have contributed to the particular emphases that the religion acquired in those cultures. The very negative image of missionaries in contemporary Euro-American popular culture allows critics of global South churches a powerful rhetorical weapon. Of course (it is claimed), African clergy are so conservative, they are just parroting what the missionaries told them. In this view, conservatism arises not from any characteristics peculiar to Africa or “the South,” but rather from the nature of the mission process. During the Anglican debates over homosexuality in the 1990s, U.S. Episcopal leader Barbara Harris complained that “the vitriolic, fundamentalist rhetoric of some African, Asian and other bishops of color, who were in the majority, was in my opinion reflective of the European and North American missionary influence propounded in the Southern Hemisphere nations during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Feminist scholar Hyun Kyung Chung complains that Korean Protestantism is “literally frozen from the nineteenth-century American missionary theology, based on biblical fundamentalism.”³

We would expect the missionary legacy to be conservative in tone. Indeed, we can see a kind of Darwinian process of cultural selection, by which conservative ideas were more likely to reproduce and sustain themselves. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western Christians who ventured into the mission fields were more commonly drawn from conservative churches, or from conservative and traditional-minded branches of mixed denominations. Less fervent believers, or the more broad-minded, tended to stay at home. Missionaries were also likely to pay attention to prophetic and apocalyptic beliefs: one incentive for the missionary movement was the

apocalyptic belief that the gospel must be preached to all the world before the second coming of Christ could occur. Evangelicals took seriously notions of spiritual warfare, and they saw the pagan realms through which they traveled as being in thrall to forces of darkness. And after the factional feuds over biblical authority at the end of the nineteenth century, evangelical missionaries became ever more explicit about the claims and the reliability of the Bible.

It is hardly surprising, then, that churches built on these foundations should lean toward evangelical, literalist, and apocalyptic ideas. In recent years, the Anglican churches most fervently opposed to gay ordination and gay unions—Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda—were founded by the evangelical Church Mission Society, while the more liberal South African province reflects the influence of its Anglo-Catholic founders, who were more open to critical biblical scholarship. Also, though Christianity has long since gained deep roots in most of Africa, a constant influx of American and European preachers and revivalists brings regular new calls to biblical orthodoxy. Across the continent, ideas of spiritual warfare owe much to the work of British Pentecostal evangelist Derek Prince, while Germany's Reinhard Bonnke has led some of the largest and most spectacular revivals in the history of Christianity.⁴

Of course, this foreign influence is only part of the story. We must be cautious of perpetuating stereotypical notions of the white missionary drilling his ideas into the heads of his obsequious native listeners, almost literally at gunpoint. While missionaries began the process of Christianization, they had little control over how or where that path might lead. As we trace the spread of Christianity across Africa and Asia from the nineteenth century onward, we see the role of grassroots means of diffusing beliefs, through migrants and travelers, across social and family networks. As it passed from community to community, the message was subtly transformed. Missionaries might introduce ideas, but these would only succeed and gain adherents if they appealed to a local audience, if they made sense in local terms. Sometimes missionaries themselves were appalled at the radically different and radical forms that the Christian message took as it was absorbed into local societies. African and Asian believers created their own apocalyptic, messianic, or healing movements, which restated Christian teachings in forms appropriate to local traditions.⁵ At the same time, ideas that clashed with local sensibilities failed to develop local roots, most obviously the injunctions to be faithful subjects of the respective colonial empires. Missionaries could successfully introduce the Christian framework and the texts that supported it, but once they had done so, these beliefs acquired lives of their own.

The same observations apply when scholars discuss newer waves of evangelism, which spread what appears to be a close facsimile of U.S.-style

fundamentalism. To use the title of one important study, the growth of such churches around the world seems at first sight to constitute *Exporting the American Gospel*. Undoubtedly, U.S. money and influence help to shape worship styles, and in religious matters as in secular, Western media exercise a potent influence worldwide. But as in earlier eras, the ideas presented by the would-be “exporters” of American-style evangelicalism must compete with many other strands of Christian belief and practice, often with deep roots in a particular culture; and we cannot automatically assume that the ideas backed by the richest resources will triumph. Similar points, incidentally, apply to the forms of radical Islam exported from the Arab Gulf and backed so enthusiastically by oil money. The communities to whom such ideas are targeted might be poor, but they do not constitute a cultural blank slate on which foreign notions can be inscribed at will.⁶

The question is not so much how particular ideas are presented, but why these rather than others should dominate the marketplace, why they should achieve so large and enthusiastic a following. No Nigerian is dragooned into going to hear Reinhard Bonnke, though millions attend his revivals voluntarily. In discussing the impact of Derek Prince on West African ideas of exorcism and deliverance, Paul Gifford suggests that Euro-Americans were not introducing these themes, but rather offering them attractively in a modern-looking Western package. The content was accepted because it meshed so perfectly with deeply rooted African themes. As Gerald West observes, “Africans have not negotiated with the Bible empty-handed, nor have they been passive receptors.”⁷

Reading the Word

To understand the very high respect accorded to biblical authority in the global South, we must look beyond the missionary inheritance and take account of the means by which the Bible arrived in particular societies. In some cases, the Christian scripture arrived in nations in which the idea of sacred writing was already familiar, and so was an exalted view of the power of text, so that the Bible effectively took the place of older holy writ. Not every alleged case of continuity must be accepted uncritically, since writers sometimes make such accusations for polemical purposes, but some of the carryovers are suggestive. David Kwang-sun Suh remarks that “Christianity in Korea has been and is thoroughly indigenized into the Korean religious cultures. The hierarchical structure of the Korean churches is more Confucian than Christian. . . . The literary Biblical fundamentalism of many Korean Christians is in fact deeply rooted in the old ethos of neo-Confucian literalism rather than in influences from outside sources.”⁸

More commonly, though, Christianity grew in societies in which literacy was restricted to only a tiny elite. In modern India, Christianity has enjoyed its greatest success among people of the lowest and most despised castes, the Dalits or Oppressed; these people were specifically forbidden to learn the Sanskrit that would give them access to the Hindu scriptures, and typically they were illiterate in any language. In much of Africa, the Word arrived in the same package as the revolutionary idea of the written word, and it takes a real act of imagination to recall the power and the authority of the written text. In some areas, the word “reader” might be synonymous with Christian.⁹

In the beginning was the book, and a strange idea it was. Yvonne Vera’s novel *Nehanda* presents a fictionalized but credible account of an African’s first encounter with a white Christian cleric, in the opening years of the twentieth century, in what is today Zimbabwe. Seeing the missionary reading, the African, Kaguvi, asks him, “What will happen when these leaves turn to dust?” The European explains, “There are many copies of this book, and more can be produced. This book can never die.” Kaguvi is puzzled, all the more so when the clergyman asserts that he only worships one God: but is not the immortal book a god? “Kaguvi is fascinated. The priest’s god can break into many pieces. But he also feels pity for a god who has to manifest himself in this humble manner. He does not understand why a god would hide behind the marks on a page. ‘He is inside your book, but he is also in many books. . . . Your god is strange indeed.’” In some mysterious way, the book is associated with the power of divinity.¹⁰

The new Christianity advanced alongside literacy, in societies in which orality had been the traditional form of communication and knowledge transmission. As in the first Christendom of medieval Europe, the shift from orality to literacy gives an enormous symbolic power to the written text, to the Book, which in many cases might be the only actual book in a given household. In much of modern Africa, even many pastors might not own any books except a Bible, and even that not an elaborate study edition.¹¹

Even when people began to read, they were not immediately at ease with books or texts. Not for generations would books and magazines be something that one picks up casually in an idle moment. To understand the attitudes of the newly literate, we can look at the global impact of John Bunyan’s seventeenth-century text *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which enjoyed phenomenal success in Christian Africa. According to South African scholar Isabel Hofmeyr, part of Bunyan’s appeal was that he himself grew out of a plebeian culture that, in terms of the status of literacy, resembled much of twentieth-century Africa: in this sense, like was speaking to like. Bunyan himself was literate, but he came from a society still rooted in oral culture, with an ambiguous attitude toward the written text. Though documents carry immense weight,

they are mysterious things, glimpsed in visions or bestowed by angelic visitors. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, documents appear as flying scrolls or cryptic engravings on a throne. Texts "are held in awe, but not entirely trusted," so that their authenticity must be confirmed by a mystical visitation, by a dream or vision. The status of texts and writing is further complicated by the oppressive ways in which documents are used by the elite forces of government and law. "Documents are paradoxes. On the one hand, they are props in the theater of ruling, policing and dragooning. On the other, they betoken spiritual authority." Documents can be passes—papers that the police demand to see before they allow one to travel—or they can be passports to heaven.¹²

In such a semi- or neoliterate world, the power to read can itself be seen as a miraculous phenomenon. Some modern African prophets report receiving the gift of literacy through heavenly intervention, or transmit their revelations through special scripts revealed to them through divine inspiration. The Xhosa prophet Ntsikana "discovered hymns fully formed on the hem of his cloak." Reading such stories, Americans might recall the career of prophet Joseph Smith, with his secret writings, angelic interventions, and mystical decoding stones, and his scorn for accredited religious experts. Another South African prophet, Isaiah Shembe, reported, "No, I have not been taught to read and write, but I am able to read the Bible a little, and that came to me by revelation and not by learning. It came to me by miracle. . . . God sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and educated." Supporting his revelation, Shembe quoted Matthew 11:25, in which Jesus praised God for revealing his wisdom to infants while concealing them from the wise. This verse has a special appeal for radicals and prophetic figures challenging the religious establishment, particularly when the conflict is framed in North-South terms, as nonwhite "infants" confront complacent white scholars.¹³

The special value attached to the written text does not mean that new Christians were credulous or believed every word of the new story to which they were exposed—often, they asked acute questions—but the emerging churches were generally built on a profound veneration for the written text. In a traditional society, the ability to read the Bible becomes an act of self-assertion, confidence, and potentially resistance.

Speak in Our Tongues

Also recalling the older European experience, the Word arrives in familiar speech. While Hebrew or Greek has its own arcane power, the translated text presents the inspired word of God in vernacular speech, at once domesticating the divine and elevating the language that becomes its vessel. This point is

difficult to convey to an American or British audience that has always known an English Bible, which knows that St. Paul—like Shakespeare—had the irritating habit of writing in obscure Elizabethan speech, with all its *thous* and *thees*. Yet some accounts of the European Reformation help us to reconstruct the original impact of the vernacular. Martin Luther himself knew the seductive power of the Bible, and countless readers of his German translations reported similarly unnerving encounters with the text. After the early English protestant John Rogers was captured by church authorities, a bishop lectured him about the foolishness of putting vernacular texts into unlearned hands. After all, he said, this Bible is just dead words, unless and until it is interpreted by qualified experts. *No!*, cried Rogers, *the Scripture is alive! It burns.*¹⁴

For over four centuries, European and North American Christians have recognized the paramount need to translate the scriptures into local vernaculars, as the foundation for Christian growth in those societies. As Kwame Bediako observes, the history of African missionary Christianity is the history of Bible translation. Today, at least one book of the Bible is available for approximately 650 of Africa's 2,000 languages, and 150 languages have complete Bibles. And a translated Bible defies conventional images of missionary imperialism. Once the Bible is in a vernacular, it becomes the property of that people. It becomes a Yoruba Bible, a Chinese Bible, a Zulu Bible; and the people in question have as much claim to it as does the nation that first brought it. It is no longer English or French.¹⁵

The sheer scale on which these translations are circulated is mind-boggling. In 2004 alone, the United Bible Societies distributed 25 million Bibles. If we consider only the largest nations involved, the figure included 3.8 million in Brazil, 3.3 million in China, 2 million each in Malaysia and South Korea, 1.2 million in India, almost a million in Nigeria, and 900,000 in Indonesia and Japan. And those figures refer only to complete Bibles, not counting New Testaments, portions of scripture, or selected readings. In India, some 30 million selections and "portions" were circulated, over and above the complete scriptures. All told, in just one year, the Societies distributed 390 million versions of the scriptures, complete or partial. Once the Bible is made available in cheap editions and circulated widely, it has the potential to initiate social revolution. Reportedly, Mao Zedong was so impressed by the collections of pocket-sized scriptures circulating in the China of his youth that he imitated the device in his legendary Little Red Book, which in the 1960s was one of the best-selling books on the planet.

To understand the impact of vernacular scriptures, we might draw parallels with the spread of Christianity through Dark Age Europe, during the creation of the first Christendom. Though people accepted religious ideas and objects

from the “civilized world” of that time, this did not mean that they were joining the Roman Empire, any more than modern Southern-world Christians become American or French, or that receiving an exported gospel means they are joining the West. As Peter Brown writes, “The arrival of objects or persons charged with the charisma of distant places did not carry with it the modern sense of dependence on a distant and ‘superior’ center. Rather such objects and persons could be seen as coming in a sense from heaven. They were welcomed because they were thought of as helping the local society to establish a ‘vertical’ link with an overarching cosmos, which was shared by center and periphery alike.”¹⁶ For modern believers too, the Bible—especially in the vernacular—offers a direct link between the community and the kingdom of heaven. Cardinal Newman once remarked that all ages are equidistant from eternity; but so are all places, Rome and the distant cliffs of Ireland in the Middle Ages; Los Angeles and Lagos today. The use of vernacular scriptures means that all Christendoms are equidistant from Jerusalem.

We can contrast Muslim and Christian attitudes to the question of translation. Reading the Arabic Quran, Muslim converts worldwide are offered the opportunity to share equal participation in the glorious history and culture of Islam, which becomes just such a “superior center.” Christians, meanwhile, with the Bible in their own tongue, can claim not just the biblical story, but their own culture and lore in addition. In different times and places, each missionary message can have a stirring appeal. But for Christians in contemporary Africa and Asia, it is this newly discovered Bible that fascinates, and that burns within. Reading this book opens the door to real inner power.

Reading Together

For modern Northerners, reading the Bible is usually a personal, individual experience, and even for the most pious, the experience of reading scripture does not differ utterly from the act of reading nonsacred texts. However holy the book, reading is reading. Yet private, silent reading on an individual basis is not the only means of taking in the scripture, and perhaps not the most effective. The way in which the Bible is publicly read in modern church services commemorates a time when this was the customary way that the faithful would hear the word. Throughout the New Testament, we find references to hearing and listening. People hear the word, hear the call; they respond to the voice of Jesus, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The Gospel of John, particularly, is strongly auditory, while references to voice and voices pervade Revelation, a work directed to “him that heareth.” In the North African church of Augustine’s time, Bible study was a matter of collective listening to reading and explication. Augustine himself stressed the physical

stamina required of those who wished, for instance, to understand the psalms. He asked, “If [those in the theater] had to stand so long, would they still be at their show?”¹⁷

The ancient custom of hearing the Word is very much a living tradition in contemporary churches of the global South, giving a quite different quality to the reception and the impact of the text. Passages are shared, aurally and communally, with an audience with old-established expectations about the nature of oral tradition and communication. Also, communal reading occurs in a sacred setting, whether in reading and study groups or in the context of worship. The words might be flanked by familiar prayers or hymns that evoke the traditions of the community. This pattern is suggested by an account of an all-night vigil service held by a Zimbabwean independent church: “Preachers punctuated their sermons with frequent repetitions of the phrases ‘Peace be with you apostles!’ or ‘Peace be with you, children of God!’ . . . to which the people responded ‘Alleluia! Amen!’ Also in AIC style, preachers expounded the designated passage (Colossians 3) verse by verse, the scripture being read by an evangelist who stood with each preacher at all times. The reader’s visual prominence emphasizes the authority of the written word and the preacher’s accountability to it.” Drawing on such practices, Jean-Marc Éla describes what he believes would be the best mode of presenting the Bible to Africans. Instead of merely reading, churches should present “a festival of language shared by the whole community, which includes grasping the Word, searching for its meaning, questions and answers, prayers and chants.” Readings should have an incantatory quality, with presenters making full use of body language and vocal tones.¹⁸

The results can be impressive. Itumeleng Mosala comments that Africans—especially members of the AICs—“have an oral knowledge of the Bible. . . . [M]ost of their information about the Bible comes from socialization in the churches themselves as they listen to prayers and sermons.” Studies of such sermons note how much attention they devote to expounding the biblical text, and this is as true of mainline churches as independents. Roman Catholic churches, meanwhile, have wholeheartedly adopted the lessons of the second Vatican Council in placing scriptural reading and interpretation at the forefront of liturgical life.¹⁹

Experiencing scripture communally promotes exalted concepts of the nature of the group that hears the sacred words, a sense that the religious community becomes the vehicle for the divine message. Interpreted by ordinary believers, validated by the common experience of the Christian congregation, the Bible becomes the word of Christ’s church, which cannot be gainsaid. A story told by Musimbi Kanyoro suggests just what a text can mean in a communal setting. She reports reading a Pauline text in a northern Kenyan

community, concluding with the good wishes that Paul sent two thousand years ago to the Corinthian church, “My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.” “The community, which had been listening silently, responded in unison, ‘Thank you, Paul.’ They were thanking Paul for sending them greetings, not the reader for reading the text to them.”²⁰ Paul might not have been physically present, but he had been kind enough to send his best wishes. In such a setting, we can easily imagine the willingness to accept the explicit moral or doctrinal rules presented in such a text.

In other ways too, the demographic makeup of Southern Christian churches promotes ideas of religious authority and reliance on inspired texts. Today, half the inhabitants of this planet are under twenty-four, and of those, almost 90 percent live in the global South. What else marks the landscape and soundscape of a Third World society so definitively as the abundance of its children? Young adults predominate in Southern churches—and mosques—and that profile shapes attitudes to faith. We think of the kind of idealism we will find in such a congregation of the young: the fire, the openness to changing the world and overthrowing natural hierarchies, the openness to ecstasy. We think also of the desire for certainty, for absolute standards; the denial of subtleties and compromises, of shades of gray; the rejection of hierarchy and experience, the quest for immediate experience and direct access to the divine; and the need for absolute conviction. In the Euro-American tradition, this demographic profile sounds like the Methodist revival of eighteenth-century England, the American revivals of 1740 or 1798; and that age structure will continue to be the central fact in global religion for at least the next half-century. Such congregations respond avidly to messages grounded in the assured certainty of revealed scripture.

The word “community” may mark the single most striking difference between older and newer churches, with all that implies for the understanding of authority. Much as it might discomfort members of both faiths, the Christianity of Africa and much of Asia has a great deal in common with the Islam of those regions, not the violent extremist Islam of popular nightmare, but the ordinary lived religion of hundreds of millions of people. In Muslim cultures, the Quran, too, is less a book for private study or devotion than a work of art to be recited, preferably communally. As the Hadith declares, “He who does not recite the Quran melodiously is not one of us.” In both cases, Muslim and Christian, one commonly hears the scripture, as well as reading it, and looks to the text not just for theology, but for detailed instructions about the organization of everyday life. Though their attitudes to translating the text differ, many Christians treat the Bible with the same sense of perfect inspiration with which a Muslim views the Quran. Ernest Ezeogu draws an apt analogy: “The popular view of the Bible in Africa approaches

the Islamic view of the Koran—‘composed by God in eternity for all eternity, then revealed to mortals in time, through divine inspiration understood as dictation.’”²¹ The presence of neighboring Muslim communities, with their reverential attitude toward scripture, may have influenced Christian attitudes toward the Bible. For practical reasons of recruiting and retaining church members, Christians do not wish to be seen paying any less regard to their own scriptures than Muslims devote to the Quran.

Other resemblances between the faiths include the sense of the collective or communal, and a radical notion of social justice rooted in the prophetic tradition. Both Christians and Muslims share a powerful apocalyptic sense of a final confrontation in which nations and peoples will be judged. Both understand that states and kingdoms exist at the pleasure of God, and that God’s laws take precedence over human. In Africa particularly, the Christian-Islamic or Abrahamic parallels and linkages make much more sense than the familiar North American notion of the merely Judaeo-Christian.

Telling Stories

Reading the Christian scriptures is thus an awe-inspiring experience, but even for those who cannot read, the Bible acquires immense potency. To speak of scripture and Bible—writing and book—is to imply literacy, yet often biblical ideas and texts spread by the methods appropriate to oral cultures. In such a setting, memory is a critical skill, the kind of memory that usually deteriorates with literacy. One account of a Trinidadian Baptist community reports, “Several older informants, including one with over fifty Bibles in his collection, are unable to read. Illiterate Baptists attempt to disguise their inability to read by committing long passages of the Bible to memory.” In East African AICs, illiterate believers learn key verses by heart. They also make a habit of carrying their Bibles with them so that, when needed, they can ask a literate friend to read the text for them.²²

Attracted to the faith, new believers avidly seek access to the Bible, by whatever means are open to them. Bible societies try to cater to all levels of readers, offering illustrated versions and cartoons where possible, but any kind of text proves beyond the skills of many. As in the European Middle Ages, those who find reading difficult receive instruction through storytelling or through drama. When a modern American congregation witnesses its children performing a Christmas play or Epiphany pageant, the event’s appeal is largely based on the cuteness factor, on seeing the children mastering their lines and relishing their improbable costumes: it is difficult to recall a time when such performances represented a powerful form of Christian education for young and old. The medieval tradition of ritual drama and the public

reenactment of biblical scenes still flourishes in the Philippines, especially, and in Catholic Latin America—the Mexican *posada* recreates the events surrounding the Nativity. And while Protestants disdain such performances as prone to superstitious excesses, they too use alternative means of learning. Writing of peasant communities in northeastern Brazil, Carlos Mesters reported how “They are using song and story, pictures and little plays. They are thus making up their own version of the ‘Bible of the Poor’. Thanks to songs . . . many people who have never read the Bible know almost every story in it.” (I respectfully doubt this last statement.)²³ Such alternative means of teaching fit wonderfully well into some Asian cultures: Chinese Confucian scholars had for centuries encouraged popular music, drama, and ritual, in order to instill correct values into an illiterate populace.

Similar methods have resurfaced in the modern Christian context. As Kwok Pui-Lan writes, “Asian women do not write commentaries on the Bible; instead they talk about it and devise skits for discussion, dramatizing and performing the Bible.” In Indonesia, one missionary reports the use of the Bible in a poor migrant community that maintained a subsistence life in a refugee camp. In the mid-1990s, the text chosen was the book of Ruth, read at the rate of a chapter a week. “The widows formed their own group. ‘I am Naomi’ said one relating her personal Naomi biography. ‘You are Orpah.’ ‘I am Ruth.’ The biblical novelette of failure in economic migration brought out stories of the dead-end life that the women were leading in the Patisomba transit station. The strategy which the resilient Naomi and Ruth drew up and carried out successfully fired their imaginations. On the final Sunday, they presented their findings to the whole congregation in a series of dramatic declamations. Meanwhile, youth had studied the same texts on the beach. They presented a dramatized version of the story from the point of view of the young women.”²⁴

When presenting the Bible to what was until recently a nonliterate public, one finds that certain parts of the text work better than others. Throughout the history of Christianity, Bible translators have had to make judgment calls about the order in which particular books will be presented in a new language, and in a few cases, whether certain books should be attempted at all. The ancient translator of the Bible into the Gothic tongues passed over the books of Kings, because his potential readers already knew far too much about battles and assassinations. More modern Indian translators have confronted the issue of translating books concerning the sacrifice of oxen and cattle, texts with the potential to appall a Hindu public. Must the church really admit that the prodigal son was treated to a fatted calf? But even avoiding such pitfalls, the decision to present books in a certain order must have consequences for the kind of Christianity that will be built on those

foundations. As Gerald West asks, what kind of faith could emerge in the coastal East Africa of the mid-nineteenth century, when for a while the only two available biblical books were Genesis and Luke? Most challenging are closely argued literary tracts such as the Epistles of Paul, which force translators to find local words for the very technical concepts familiar to Hellenistic Judaism. Philippine scholar Daniel Arichea remarks, “Having worked with the United Bible Society for 16 years, I know that translators don’t want to touch Romans until and unless they have to, and often that means never!” At the other extreme of accessibility are the parables and straightforward historical narratives.²⁵

On the positive side, the stories that do succeed in such communities work very well indeed, largely because they are received by an audience well accustomed to oral tradition. Such listeners can appreciate story twists that can be lost on readers in long-established Christian societies to whom the general outline of the story is too familiar, for whom the punch line is not a surprise. Hearing a passage well told, an audience accustomed to storytelling can be really affected by narrative features that emerge less strongly in reading, such as the devious irony at which the author of the Fourth Gospel was so adept. To take one example from many, Matthew and Luke state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; John only mentions the fact obliquely, by having it denied by a hostile mob.

This sense of affinity with the Bible’s ways of presenting its message is not surprising, given the oral form in which those sayings and stories originally circulated before being canonized in writing. Appropriately, the passages that work best today are those that most closely recall their origins in oral transmission, the stories and parables, hymns and wisdom literature, psalms and proverbs. The Kenyan audience that cordially thanked Paul was responding to the most conversational portion of his epistle. One reason for the popularity of Revelation in the global South is that the book so often betrays its oral or neoliterate sources, and represents an anthology of hymns, oracles, and visions. The work’s attitude to written texts—those awesome but cryptic things—is very much that of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Nor, of course, are oral cultures troubled by what seem to be the laborious and repetitive style of storytelling that sometimes characterizes biblical accounts—see, for instance, the double account of Peter’s vision in Acts 10 and 11. That is just what storytellers do.

John Lonsdale remarks on the seductive impact of the Bible’s stories to ordinary converts in orally based cultures: listeners may find them much more attractive than the stark moral exhortations that Muslim preachers drew from the Quran. “Christian scholars among Kenya’s up-country peoples found a book in which national and personal destinies were often gloriously

intertwined and in their own language, . . . and whose images and proverbial formulae found their way into Testaments old and new, making the Bible very much their own tribal story.” And within a few decades, those biblical stories permeate oral culture, as the narratives through which people interpret their own lives, their own societies. At this stage the Bible becomes “a national store house of folktales.” When we approach the Bible in this way, learning to read the text is a later, and not inevitable, phase of Christian development, a new way of learning the stories of faith that give the book its appeal—but the stories come first. In the words of one Malawian pastor, “Listen to me my brother. You must have time to ponder upon this book. You must read it when you wake up in the morning, when you go to bed in the evening. You must read this book. There are good stories in this book. There are stories of salvation.”²⁶

Sacred Music

Music also becomes a critical weapon of mass instruction. Again, this recalls the circumstances of Europe’s Reformation era, when literacy rates were low and some languages possessed little in the way of written or printed vernacular literature. Creative reformers solved this problem by teaching scripture and Protestant doctrine through easily memorized verses or songs. This was a successful technique, for instance, in Gaelic Scotland. Protestantism came slowly to Wales because my ancestors were unable to read the splendid Bible translated into their own language in the 1580s. The turning point came half a century afterward, when a country parson took Protestant doctrines and biblical lessons, and transformed them into verses, songs, and jingles that soon echoed round every country fair and market. Not till the end of the seventeenth century did a network of schools teach the mass literacy that the general public needed actually to read the text. In England, the metrical settings of the psalms were a powerful evangelistic weapon in the Puritan arsenal.

Later evangelical revivals made enormous use of hymns, which often based themselves on biblical passages or closely paraphrased them. One favorite source was the book of Psalms, itself an ancient collection of hymns and prayers, and psalms provide the basis for such popular English hymns as “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” and “All Creatures That on Earth Do Dwell.” Through frequent singing of hymns, through the association of texts with emotionally powerful music, Christians internalize biblical passages, stories, and doctrines. However much Protestantism may claim to be a religion of the Bible, it would be truer to describe it as a faith of the Bible and hymnbook.²⁷

This history finds many parallels outside the realms of Western Christianity. A Chinese tradition of Christian poetry and hymn writing dates back

at least to the seventeenth century, when Jesuit Wu Li presented Christian teachings in the canonical forms of Chinese literature.²⁸ One song includes the lines

Late in Han
 God's Son came down from heaven
 To save us people
 And turn us towards the good.
 His Grace goes wide!
 Taking flesh through the virginity
 Of a Holy Mother
 In a stable he was born.

The phrase “Late in Han” performs the same function as the well-known credal statement that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” By giving a specific historical date to the event, it ensures that the incarnation is located in an actual time and place, rather than becoming (for instance) a recurring moment in the human consciousness.

In Africa, the hymnody of the Coptic Church preserves traditions dating back to ancient Christian times. Appropriately, given the long history of persecution suffered by that church, themes of suffering and martyrdom are much in evidence. One hymn telling of the suffering of Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace remains “the most beloved hymn in their hymn book (that all are supposed to know by heart).”²⁹

Modern African churches have made great use of music, both imported and autonomous; and at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, believers across the continent have deployed local musical traditions to the service of praise and worship. So central, in fact, is music to African cultures that institutions of all kinds are commonly riven between the official head and the music leader, whether the musician is a church worship leader or a school choirmaster: music matters. Of Isaiah Shembe, it has been said that his “greatest traits as a churchman and leader of people were his faith-healing powers, coupled with his musical gifts”—two closely related manifestations of charisma. Shembe, like many founders of independent churches, was a prolific composer of hymns, and like them, he drew heavily on vernacular styles. Commonly, African hymns adapt popular musical genres such as wedding songs and praise songs.³⁰

In modern East Africa, the hymns of the historic revival movements have a power at least comparable to what “Amazing Grace” conveys to Americans. The East African equivalent would be the astonishing “Tukutendereza Yesu,” the anthem of the great revivals of the 1930s and a song that can still reduce a secular-seeming crowd to tears.³¹

Tukutendereza Yesu
 Yesu Omwana gw'endiga
 Omusaigwo gunaziza
 Nkwebaza, Omulokozi.

We praise you Jesus
 Jesus Lamb of God
 Your blood cleanses me
 I praise you, Savior.

Over time, such hymns acquire ever-richer narrative associations, stories of how martyrs went to their deaths singing it, of how hearing the hymn softened the hearts of persecutors; and these stories add still more to the impact of the work.

Many hymns stick close to the biblical text. One popular Nigerian hymn is a paraphrase of the famous Christological text in Philipians, which is itself believed to be an ancient hymn or liturgical chant:

He is Lord, He is Lord, amen
 He has risen from the dead, he is Lord
 Every knee shall bow
 Every tongue confess that
 Jesus Christ is Lord.³²

Ghanaian composer Ephraim Amu adapted biblical texts in his songs in the Akan language, with great effect. One work is a meditation on Paul's declaration of Christ's victory over death, in 1 Corinthians 15:55–57:³³

What joyful news is this?
 The Lord's Power has defeated death
 And the place of the dead for us
 . . .
 A day is coming when tears shall turn
 Into songs of jubilation
 The Lord's power will give abundant hope
 Shout the battle cry of victory
 Oseyee! Oseyee! Ose aye!

The Dinka people of the Sudan—long victims of that nation's bloody wars and persecutions—have a rich tradition of such hymns, unsurprisingly focused on the cross. One calls on God to accept his people,

For we are your children
 And let us carry your cross and follow after you
 Let us be like Simon, the man of Cyrene, who went with you to
 The place of the skull.³⁴

Simon of Cyrene is one of the few New Testament figures of indisputably African origin.

In Tanzania, contemporary Anglican hymns use vernacular settings of Bible texts, using a dialogue between soloist and choir. One hymn, “Kisha Nikaona” (Then I Saw), freely quotes the verses from Revelation 20:1–2, about the angel descending from heaven to lock up the ancient dragon.³⁵ The chorus then sings,

It was the time when they locked him up for a thousand years
That real devil and Satan who so tricks people on earth today
Now, my brother/sister, frustrate his tricks today
Truly that snake has no power over us again

The Bible makes its impact on a community through hymns and prayers as well as through the text itself, and a hymnbook can be an object almost as cherished as the Bible itself.

Zimbabwean scholar Ezra Chitando also points out that the practice of giving highly charged biblical names “constitutes oral theology of the first order.” Just as Muslims express their faith from day to day by their personal names—“servant of the merciful,” “servant of the mighty”—so do African Christians. Zimbabweans bear Shona names such as Tinashe, “We have a savior,” or Anesu, “God with us,” while a family that has patiently borne many burdens may name a son Kudakwashe, “His Will.” Such names have no more theological content than the familiar American John or Michael, but the fact that they are given in contemporary language means that their implications are more likely to strike the listener.³⁶

More recently, newer technologies bring the Bible to a mass public, regardless of people’s reading ability. Radio has long served such a purpose, while evangelism has been transformed by television broadcasting, cable, and particularly video. One effective tool has been the *Jesus* video, the 1979 film version of the gospel story that has been circulated in tens of millions of copies worldwide, and that is often used to introduce potential converts to the faith: controversially, it is said to be particularly effective among Muslims. The video has been translated into nine hundred languages to date, and all these versions can be accessed via the Internet, as well as through videocassettes and filmstrips. Its sponsors claim that the film has been responsible for two hundred million “decisions for Christ.” But other organizations and churches have also ventured into contemporary technologies. One writer claims that “indigenously produced video films in Nigeria constitute a cultural and social revolution,” by making biblical and particularly charismatic messages available to all. Films such as *Living in Bondage* and *Captives* teach doctrines of deliverance and sanctification while constantly reminding believers of the

dangers of the occult. Seventy such films were produced annually in the mid-1990s, over a thousand by 2001, and the growth continues to accelerate.³⁷

My Bible and I

Whether in global North or South, belief in the absolute authority of scripture shapes the ways in which biblical texts are used. Ghanaian Catholic bishop Peter Sarpong has said, “To talk to the African of the centrality of the Word of God is to carry coals to Newcastle. Africans believe the power of the word.” If every word is true, then the whole is contained in each part, and indeed in each verse. This encourages the use of popular proof texts, which are cited very much as aphorisms and proverbs were used in traditional African and Asian societies. To quote a recent study of the AICs, “For the African Christians, the Bible has come to take the place of the traditional ancestor whose authority cannot be disputed.”³⁸

At its worst—whether in Africa or North America—this literalist approach can lead to a selective reading of the scripture, a stress on passages that confirm familiar ideas or prejudices, and a neglect of context. Texts thus become little more than bumper sticker slogans. This vice does exist, though in practice, believers draw on themes and passages that appear especially relevant to their life circumstances, and that can be used to challenge the status quo. Kenya’s Victor Zinkuratire notes how the AICs try to “read the Bible contextually so that it might address their daily needs, problems and concerns, the way their traditional religion did before the arrival of Christianity and the Bible.” Grant LeMarquand cites an analogy taken from one of the most discussed miracles of Jesus: “African exegesis does not seek to understand the text merely for its own sake or out of an intellectual curiosity. African exegesis is need-driven and faith-oriented. . . . The faith of the woman with the issue of blood is often seen as a model for the exegete. Her faith was not detached and merely cerebral but engaged and committed to life.”³⁹ Also modifying the strict reliance on scriptural verses is the strong tradition of prophecy and charismatic experience prevailing in many churches, in which texts are adapted to the needs of the church’s situation.

Yet the sense of inherent authority—and authority framed in terms thoroughly familiar to the culture in question—helps explain the deeply proprietorial attitude to the Bible, and the reluctance to challenge an explicit command or prohibition. In one African chorus, the believer sings,

My Bible and I
 My Bible and I
 Oh what a wonderful treasure
 The gift of God without measure

We will travel together
My Bible and I

As a Zulu song teaches, *Aka na mandla uSathane / S'omshaya nge vhesi*: “Satan has no power / we will clobber him with a [biblical] verse.”⁴⁰

So great is the power of the text that for some Christians, the physical object of the Bible itself becomes a locus of spiritual power, which in some circumstances can become superstitious or near-magical. In medieval Europe, the word “grammar” was the source of grimoire, that is, a magical text for evoking demons. Some Western countries still require witnesses in court to swear on the book.

Sathianathan Clarke tells a story that indicates the aura surrounding the book in the Indian context. He reports teaching sessions in southern India for Dalit activists. To make a point, he writes, “I delicately tossed the Bible on the ground in front of me saying that there was nothing intrinsic to the materiality of the Christian Scripture that made it holy and venerable. Two reactions ensued. First, the activist closest to me picked it up and moved it away from me. He later confessed that he was afraid that I might kick the Bible with my foot by mistake which would have been a big insult to the whole Christian religion. [Many] also shared their fear that I was going to do something dreadful with the Bible. They asserted that for them the principles for universal human rights came from the Bible.”⁴¹

The Bible is also assumed to be effective in combating evil and sickness. A century ago, the great West African evangelist William Wadé Harris explicitly used the Bible as the mighty symbol that overwhelmed all fetishes and pagan amulets, almost a superfetish in its own right. More recently too, in one Kenyan congregation, “Some prophets and prophetesses will not only pray for the patient but will also place the Bible on the patient.” In India, Clarke tells how, while visiting a Christian Dalit community, he was asked to help a poor Hindu woman who was sick, and to grant her the healing powers of the Bible. He prepares to read an appropriate text, but those assembled tell him not to bother, because the woman is illiterate, and anyway knows nothing of the Christian scriptures. Instead, he should place the Bible on her head as he prays for her. “I could not resist slightly opening my eyes at some point of the prayer to catch a glimpse of the intense and expectant posture of trust that was expressed by all those in the room, Christian and Hindu Dalit alike. Truly, it was a picture of reverence, awe, and mystery. . . . In this instance, the Bible was not read but there was a distinct view of what it was and what it could perform.” For a modern Christian in West Papua, “The Bible is very authoritative. From my first to my fifth child, I have always put the Bible next to their heads when they sleep so that God will protect them.”⁴²

The Bible can be a tool for divination, replacing the arsenal of traditional oracles.⁴³ This idea is familiar to Westerners from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, who famously heard the instruction to “take and read,” and whose life was changed by the passage that first struck his eyes. In vernacular African usage today, a Bible is commonly used as a sacred object with inherent power to defeat evil forces and spirits. A study of ordinary Nigerian Christians found that “[t]he Bible is used to ward off evil spirits, witchcraft and sorcery, it is placed under the pillow at night to ensure God’s protection against the devil, it is put in handbags and cars when traveling to ensure a safe journey, it is used in swearing to bring God’s wrath upon culprits. . . . [The Bible] is regarded entirely as a book of devotion, a rule of life and a norm for morality.” Ezeogu recalls that for a first-generation Igbo Christian, “[w]henver you saw my father open the cabinet and bring out the Bible, you know that there is big palaver in the village. There must certainly be a dispute which has defied the ingenuity of the village elders and the only way to settle it would be for one of the contending parties to swear an oath. And for this my father’s Bible was the most reliable means. . . . [M]y father’s Bible had replaced the sacred staff (*ofò*) of the traditional religion as an object of oath taking, thanks to the example of the colonial court-room formality.” Also in West Africa, some AICs teach what is almost a cabalistic approach to the text, with an interest in angelic names and secret interpretations of the Bible text, taught only to initiates. At the other extreme of sophistication (or of sophistry) is the Wordless Bible, a teaching device that Euro-American evangelicals have employed since the nineteenth century. The teacher holds up a book containing only colored pages and uses the colors as visual aids from which to preach on basic Christian truths—black for sin, red for blood, white for redemption, gold for heaven. In illiterate communities in modern Asia and Africa, the message gains its power because the audience has such awe for the notion of the Book and the lessons that it potentially contains.⁴⁴

The mystical awe inspired by the Bible text sometimes encourages suspicions about the existence of other lost or secret portions of scripture. After all, the whole history of colonized peoples teaches them that the winners write and rewrite history, often excluding the narratives of the defeated. Some West African peoples claim that secret and more extensive Bible texts that once existed provided not just additional spiritual insights, but also practical information about how Jesus carried out his miracles, and possibly how the West achieved its technological superiority. Giving credence to the idea of a Western conspiracy to suppress biblical texts, Africans note that some books are found in Catholic but not Protestant Bibles, and they pay attention to the rediscovery of lost gospels such as Thomas. Asian Christians know that Thomas was reputedly the Apostle of Asia, and some scholars speculate

whether that rediscovered text has any special relevance for them.⁴⁵ Now, Africans or Asians have nothing like the Western fascination with lost or hidden gospels that has become such a popular fad in recent decades, but their deep immersion in the canonical text inevitably arouses a thirst to find more of the same.

Reading Outside

Whether or not they can read, then, Christians around the world show their enthusiasm for the scriptures, in whatever form they can find them. At the same time, the Bible and the attendant Christian culture can exercise a real attraction for non-Christians, who are fascinated by its ideas and its literary qualities, even if they might ultimately be repelled by the claims of the religion as a whole. This appeal might seem surprising to a Euro-American audience for whom biblical stories and images are part of the air they breathe, almost the ambient noise of Western culture. Many English speakers, for instance, readily use phrases from the great Bible translations (a thorn in the flesh, sour grapes, through a glass darkly, skin of my teeth, pour out my heart) without any sense of their religious origins.

Yet many contemporary stories suggest the amazing impact of these familiar themes outside the old Christendom. Christianity exercises an intellectual and emotional fascination, often partly due to the means by which it has been absorbed into a particular culture—how, for instance, biblical stories are transformed into vernacular hymns or poems, sutras, or sagas. People immersed in a given tradition, with its well-established philosophies and narrative forms, suddenly find those adapted to express this strange and radical new doctrine, which appears at once deeply alien and strangely familiar. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe describes the impact of the missionary presence on one young Igbo man, in what would become Nigeria: “It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. . . . He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye’s callow mind was greatly puzzled.”⁴⁶

The fictional Nwoye became a convert, but that was not the inevitable outcome of such an encounter. In modern Chinese literature, Christianity remains a divisive topic because of its historical association with Western imperialism, and one of the most vigorous critics of the faith is essayist and journalist Xiao Qian. Yet in the 1980s even he professed himself “a devout lover of church music, Xmas carols, the Messiah, and the hymns. . . . I’m fond of religious architecture too. I love to sit in an empty cathedral, smell the incense and

gaze at the painted glass. I love many passages from the Bible, especially 1 Corinthians, chapter 13.” (This is the passage in which Paul declares, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”)⁴⁷

Other intellectuals find in Christianity more than merely an aesthetic appeal. One of China’s leading avant-garde writers is novelist and screenwriter Bei Cun, who startled his admirers by suddenly converting to Christianity in 1992. In his Kafkaesque story “The Marriage of Zhang Sheng,” he suggests the impact that even a casual encounter with the Christian scripture might have on a receptive mind. Glancing at a Chinese-language Bible, the troubled scholar hero finds the passage from Romans 1, beginning “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” Now, this is a critical passage in the Christian encounter with the non-Christian world, long a foundational text for Western missionaries. It asserts that those deluded human beings who forget God fall into paganism or false philosophy, and thence into systematic immorality.⁴⁸ Without acknowledging God, what standard can the world offer to judge truth or virtue? In a modern context, the Pauline chapter suggests the failure of relying upon mere human ideologies that neglect God—an explosive statement in modern China, with its Communist values sinking into ever-deeper crisis. With his intellectual assumptions in ruins, all from this single reading, Zhang Sheng is soon driven to accept Christianity, much like what had occurred to his real-life creator, Bei Cun.

Social scientists warn against too-ready use of the word “conversion,” with its implications of sudden road-to-Damascus enlightenment. They prefer to speak of recruitment, the act of joining a faith, while one’s degree of active commitment to the group can be measured in various objective ways. While such caution about terms is praiseworthy, we also need to remember that rapid and emotional conversions to Christianity do occur, and that biblical texts and stories can play a critical role in this process, whether they are read or heard. As F. F. Bruce remarked, “There is no telling what may happen when people begin to read the Epistle to the Romans.” Arguably, the less familiar Christian ideas are in a given society, the more novel and unexpected, the more likely such texts are to have this kind of revolutionary effect. In such settings, the Bible’s hands and feet can indeed grab the unsuspecting reader or listener.⁴⁹

Confirming the Word

For many reasons, then, we can expect religious and particularly biblical texts to carry great weight in Southern churches. And before seeing this “Biblicism”

as a sign of youth and immaturity, we might well ask whether liberal Northern or conservative Southern readings are more dated in their own ways, or cling too specifically to particular cultures. Each in its ways is rooted in particular assumptions about modes of interpretation, and historical or literary criticism.

By what standards, for instance, do churches decide whether particular biblical verses or passages carry special weight, or might be less authoritative than others? Except for the hardest of hardcore fundamentalists, American Christians rarely believe that each and every verse of scripture carries the same degree of inspiration, and hence the same value. Instead, many assume an implicit hierarchy of texts, based on what is commonly viewed as the best scholarly opinion. So, for example, the assumption that St. Paul did not really write the Pastoral Epistles attributed to him—the letters to Timothy and Titus—means that these can be treated as less serious, less authoritative, than the apostle’s undoubted words in Romans or the Corinthian correspondence. To claim that “Paul didn’t really write this” consigns the Pastorals to a semi-apocryphal status. At one synod of the Church of England, a clerical presenter made the remarkable argument that since no scriptural texts prohibited the ordination of women, modern conservatives should not “set up artificial and inept lines that no one can defend.” Apparently, in such a view, the explicit prohibition on women’s leadership or teaching authority found in 1 Timothy 2:11–12 no longer even counts as part of the New Testament. Opinions can differ about the authority that such a passage should command, but for many believers, it literally has been read out of scripture.⁵⁰

This selective approach is based on a great many rarely examined assumptions about the nature of reading and authorship, and about how texts are read and received. To take an example, one very popular passage in African Christianity is the closing section of the Gospel of Mark, 16:14–20, which concludes, “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.” This is the charter or foundation text of African missionary practice. (The equivalent passage in Matthew 28:18–20 is also much cited.) Since it occurs at the end of Mark’s Gospel, the reader might assume that the passage represents the real point of the book, and that impression emerges even more strongly for those who hear the gospel read or told: these are the parting words that remain with you. The passage is widely quoted. Jean-Marc Ela, one of the continent’s leading Christian writers, asks, “In the African environment, shouldn’t the church take Jesus at his word in the gospels in making use of the power granted to it to lay hands on and heal the sick? (Mark 16.18).” The scripture gives the authority to heal and exorcize, to triumph over the powers of evil, and the visible signs of that triumph, especially in healing, prove the truth of the word. As a Korean Pentecostal theologian remarks, “Even the promise of

the Lord for supernatural power as recorded in Mark 16:15–18 is understood in the context of mission.”⁵¹ Texts and deeds go forward together, in a way that recalls the earliest Christian ages.

For such readers, then, the conclusion to Mark thus carries a weighty theological agenda, which it lacks for mainline churches in the global North. For most liberal churches, not only does this section have negligible authority, it literally is not found in many Bibles, since a solid historical consensus has concluded that it was not part of the original text of Mark, but was rather the work of a second-century editor. Further discrediting the passage, the text is popular with extremist Holiness believers in some rural sections of the United States, who prove their faith by handling serpents and drinking poisons. Far from confirming the word, such disreputable “signs following” actively favor the scholarly consensus that the Marcan passage has no place in the Bible.

The liberal view thus claims the right to assess the value of particular texts based on historical criticism. The African view effectively follows more contemporary theories of reading and interpretation, stressing the role of the communities that receive and use the texts in question. From this perspective, it makes little difference to argue that a given text is clearly not from the hand of its supposed author, if it is received as authoritative by the churches that read it. Nor, unsurprisingly, do Northern churches make headway when they try to place the Pauline condemnations of homosexuality in a social or historical setting. If the text says it and the church believes it, that authority is decisive enough. The nature of the reading community is critical. In this sense, literalism has much in common with postmodern theories of reading.

Looking at this history, we can understand the shocked disbelief of global South Christians, Anglicans and others, over recent liberal reforms in North America and Europe. As everyone knows in practice, many biblical passages can be sidestepped or politely ignored. It would take a stubborn pastor to enforce the rules that St. Paul laid down about hair care for the women in his congregations. Yet there is a difference between flexibility and openly flouting a lengthy series of explicit biblical injunctions. Given the history of global South Christianity, especially in Africa, it would have been foolish to expect any other response. Whatever their disagreements over particular issues, the newer churches see the Bible as a dependable and comprehensive source of authority; and this respect extends to the whole biblical text, to both Testaments.