Jan G. Platvoet
Leiden University

SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION: EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY ABROAD IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

During the recent conference on 'The History of Religions in Europe: Mankind-Nature-Technology', from 22 to 25 May 1998 at Hildesheim in Germany, I was asked to present 'two provocative theses' in the panel on 'European Christianity: an imported and exported religion'. The present article contains these two theses as well as the documentation on which I based them. The two theses may actually be applied to European Christianity both at home and abroad. Both suffer, albeit in different ways, from what I term 'the revenge of the "primitives"', and in both 'seeds of destruction' have been planted. The brief time of presentation – each of the three panellists was allowed only ten minutes – forced me to limit myself to developing these two theses for Christianity abroad only. This article, therefore, presents only that part of the picture. The structure of my article is a simple one: I begin with two cautions. Then I present data on how Christianity became a so-called 'world religion' on the wings of Western colonialism. Then follow my two theses. In my conclusion I stress that, despite appearances to the contrary, Africa is no more, and no less, religious than Europe.

Two Cautions

The two theses I develop in this article are not the outcome of a research project specifically devoted to European Christianity but rather the side-product of, on the one hand, my research into developments in the religious scene of Africa south of Sahara in this century during the last three decades,[1] and, on the other hand, my study of the wide field of Comparative Religion. In the latter, I am in particular fascinated by the long term developments in the general history of religions, from Neanderthal religion to New Age.[2] From Palaeolithic times till this age of globalisation and information, humankind's religions have exhibited a wide range of morphologies and contents under the shaping and constraining influence of the general history of human societies. I am very much aware that a full substantiation of my analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of late 20th century European Christianity abroad requires more reading and reflection than I have actually been able to devote to it. I wish to state emphatically that further research [4] may quite well force me to modify my present argument, or perhaps even to abandon it. This is my first caution.

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[1] Cf. *e.g.*, Platvoet 1996a, 1996b, 1999
[2] Cf. *e.g.*, Platvoet 1993, 1998

My second caution respects the lines in the preamble to the programme of the Hildesheim conference, which deal with its context and purpose. Its context was EXPO 2000 on Mankind-Nature-Technology. Its purpose was to redress EXPO's neglect of 'the religious dimension' by showing that 'religions have had, and still have, an impact on human behaviour with regard to nature and technology, sometimes encouraging, sometimes warning and prohibitive'. The perspective proposed is certainly a legitimate one. It is the traditional one of religions moulding societies, which has always been dear to students of catechising religions like European Christianity. My analysis inverts this perspective: I look at the processes by which societies mould religions and constrain developments in them. It may go some way, I think, to explain why EXPO-2000 actually neglects the religious dimension. So, technology, ecology, and modern humankind's globalising societies will all be important elements in my argument, but not as being shaped by religions, but as shapers, transformers, and at times destroyers, of religions, including possibly European Christianity.

Christianity and Colonisation

The two theses I was asked to put before the participants in the conference respect European Christianity abroad, as an exported religion. In this century, Christianity has undoubtedly become the most successful missionary religion ever, at least in terms of its numbers of adherents. In 1980, when the population of the world stood at the 4,300 million mark, Christianity was clearly the by far largest religion: it counted 1,433 million adherents as against 723 million Muslims, some 500 million Hindus, and some 300 million Buddhists. This is all the more significant in view of the fact Christianity did not make any significant inroads into the regions in which other major religions – Buddhism, Islam, 'Hinduism', Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto – were firmly established.[3] Christianity's resounding numerical success is due nearly exclusively to its becoming the majority religion in what Stephen Neill has called 'tribal societies with lower religions', *i.e.* in the formerly preliterate societies over which [**5**] European colonial rule was established in the late 19th century and in which that rule brought about major political, economic and cultural transformations.[4]

Historically, two types of European colonial rule must be distinguished: settler colonialism and territorial colonialism. They established European Christianity at different times and in ways, partly different, partly similar. Settler colonialism established Christianity in Latin America and the Philippines from the mid-16th century onwards,[5] in North America[6] and South Africa[7] from the mid-17th century onwards, and finally in Australia and New Zealand[8] from the

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[3] Cf. Kaplan 1995a: 1-2; cf. also Neill 1964: 256-257, 295 on the 'intense resistance' to Christian missions from the 'higher' religions. Kaplan (1995a: 2) says that 'the mechanisms whereby they […] resisted Christianity remain obscure'. I suggest that the comparative study of Christianity's success in preliterate societies and its very limited success in the societies with a major religion sheds much light on this problem. Cf. also Neill 1964: 295, 325-342, 346-347.

[4] Cf. Kaplan 1995a: 2; Neill takes it as self-evident that the success of Christian missions was 'naturally' greatest 'among the poor and underprivileged [in societies with major religions], or in tribal societies without strongly developed religious systems of their own' (Neill 1964: 257; also 167, 176).

[5] Cf. Neill 1964: 166-176, 202-204, 206, 345-346

[6] Cf. Neill 1964: 200-202, 224-227, 239

[7] Cf. Neill 1964: 310-316

[8] Cf. Neill 1964: 301-302

late 18th century onwards. It did so in some places by means of villages and schools ruled by white missionaries in a patriarchal manner. In others, it did so by oppressing, or even exterminating, the functionaries and adherents of the local religions, and by segregating the local Christianity after ethnic, 'racial', or high and low class divisions.

With the exception of the plantation colonies established in the Caribbean in the 17th century, European territorial colonialism took off in Asia and the Pacific Ocean mainly in the course of the 19th century only, and in Africa even only at the end of that century.[9] And it was only after 1920, in the heyday of territorial colonialism, that the conversion to Christianity began to take on massive proportions in these colonies.[10] As modern Christianity's numerical growth was mainly due to these conversions, European Christianity was set off on its road to become the first worldwide – or global – religion,[11] and the numerically [**6**] largest religion of mankind, only after 1920. And it is fair to say that it did so on the wings of European colonialism.[12]

I name some of the factors that played a role in that event. Firstly, by 1920, European territorial colonial rule had nearly everywhere been securely established. Secondly, European commercial firms had begun to dominate the colonial markets by then, as sellers, buyers and producers. Thirdly, the colonial administrations, these firms and the Christian missions were by then in dire need of locally trained personnel. Fourthly, better sanitation and medicines allowed the biggest ever influx of white missionary personnel from Christian Europe, and their often life-long stay for work in schools, hospitals, churches and other missionary institutions. Fifthly, the mainline mission churches had by then begun to team up with the colonial administrations for providing these colonial societies, at very little costs to the colonial governments, with the schools and hospitals, which the new colonial societies everywhere needed. The Christians missions were eager to do so because schools and hospitals had already proved a much more effective means for enlarging their flocks than preaching. The colonial governments were happy to virtually delegate education and health care to the mainline church missions because they

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[9] Exceptions were the Dutch formal colonisation of Java and other parts of Indonesia in 1798, the French occupation of Algeria from 1830 onwards, of several islands in the Pacific Ocean in the 1840s, and of Senegal from 1858, and Indo-China from 1859 onwards; British rule over the coastal parts of Ceylon in 1815, Singapore in 1819, Malakka in 1824, Natal in 1834, Hongkong in 1841, India in 1858, the coastal parts of Nigeria in 1861 and of the Gold Coast in 1874.

[10] Cf. Neill (1964: 321) on the very high costs and poor results of missionary work till 1858; that balance did improve a little between 1858 and 1920, but the Christian religion remained marginal everywhere, not only because of the small number of converts, but also socially, because the converts often lived in separate villages (*Salems*) or other institutions, or belonged to depressed groups.

[11] From the point of view of a secular, academic study of religions, it is wrong to term Christianity, as is usually done, a 'universal religion', or 'world religion', because these terms represent religious qualifications that can neither be verified nor falsified. All that one can say of Christianity on historical grounds is that it belongs to a tiny group of missionary religions, which became 'multinationals in religion' by transcending their nations, or societies, or culture areas, of origin. Like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and also Hinduism are now also in the process of becoming 'global' religions, as are several other much more recent religions, such as Baha'i. They have all become much more widely spread over the globe in the course of this century and especially in the last few decades, some by people shifting their exclusive religious allegiance to them by a religious or social 'conversion'; others by people using them selectively, or pragmatically, or synthetically in private inclusivist ways; and others again by becoming diaspora religions by the labour migration of their adherents within the several colonial and post-colonial 'commonwealths' (British, French, US, USSR, EEC, etc.).

[12] Cf. *e.g.*, Neill 1964: 450-451 on Christianity having been 'carried forward on the wave of western prestige and power'.

and European commercial firms were provided, at virtually no costs to themselves, with schools that served their needs well.

But the largest benefits of this pact accrued to the native populations of the colonies. They were eagerly seeking education and health care in order to obtain the training, which would enable them to participate in the new colonial economy. In return, they were usually quite happy, and often quite proud, to become the lifelong members of whichever church provided them with the education they needed for a better position in these colonial and post-colonial societies.

Lastly, the populations of the colonial societies that had been preliterate till then, were also quite receptive to Christianity – and in parts of Africa and elsewhere also to Islam –, because Christianity (and Islam) much better matched their dramatically enlarged horizons than did the traditional, preliterate religions. [**7**] Robin Horton has correctly argued that the colonial era propelled the colonial societies into a micro-macro shift of horizons by their worlds being integrated, politically, economically and culturally, into the European colonial commonwealths. The colonial predicament having vastly expanded the horizons of the colonised peoples, from the relatively 'micro' ones of their pre-colonial societies (and matching types of ecology, economy, demographic densities, complex social structures, emerging political structures, internal and external communication, cosmologies, and religions) to the much more 'macro' ones of the colonial and postcolonial societies and the increase in scale in all aspects of life, Christianity (and Islam) were obvious choices for 'conversion'.[13]

The Revenge of the 'Primitives'

It is precisely at this point in time that success began to defeat itself. Or phrased differently, it is precisely after 1920 that the so-called 'pagan', or 'primitive', or 'preliterate, or 'traditional', or 'pre-Christian/pre-Islamic', religions began to take revenge on Christianity (and Islam) in several subtle ways. The early generations of orthodox, pious, self-sacrificing, but often lowly educated and narrow-minded, if not bigoted, missionaries had come to eradicate the pre-colonial religions as the pernicious delusions of the devil.[14] Their small success and paranoid fear of paganism as the 'religions of fear' had enabled the early generations of missionaries to pursue an effective policy of mental, and often also spatial, segregation of their tiny flocks from 'pagan' society, and to instil group identities of sharp opposition to anything 'idolatrous' into them.[15]

When government assisted schools became the major missionary means, three elements changed. First, the missionary clergy – who were becoming better educated and began a slow but constant shift towards liberal theologies of religions – fairly quickly changed from preach-

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[13] Horton 1971, 1975. On this micro-macro shift in relation to the rapid and massive 'conversion' of Africans to Christianity and Islam after 1920, cf. Platvoet 1979: 582-583; 1996a: 56-57 and the literature cited there on the debate over 'African conversion' between Robin Horton (1971, 1975) and Humphrey Fisher (1973, 1985) and others who rejected or contested Horton's analysis.

[14] Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1979: 585-561; Meyer 1992b: 103-106.

[15] Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1979: 559-563; Meyer 1992b: 107, 114-120. Which caused, much to the distress of the later liberal missionaries and African theologians, the devil and the gods, spirits, ancestors, etc. of the traditional religions to remain very much a living reality to many members of the members of mainline churches, and to look for protection against them elsewhere (cf. Meyer 1992b: 107sq.).

ers against paganism into managers of schools, who routinely incorporated thousands of school children into their churches after they had been taught the basic tenets of Christianity in the particular version of their own denomination. Secondly, the segregated Christian congregations became not only an integral, but soon a prominent, and even a dominant, part of the colonial societies, and provided them with a new class of social and political leaders, [8] because formal education enabled many of their members to obtain salaried posts, or to engage in profitable trade, especially when the churches, under the supervision and with the assistance of the colonial administrations began also to develop secondary education in the interbellum. In addition, the colonial governments began to lay the foundations of tertiary education after World War II.[16] Thirdly, a marked religious (and moral) pluralism began to prevail, of two sorts.

One was an intra-Christian pluralism. The pre-colonial unitary situation of one society practising one traditional religion – albeit an open and adoptive one – was replaced in the colonial era only exceptionally, or for a brief period, by one particular Christian mission obtaining a monopoly in a society or region and establishing there a unified religious situation of a more closed type for a brief time. It was much more usual that in a particular society or region, several mainline mission churches established schools in an open competition for pupils as automatic 'converts'. The extended families which had been 'converted' more recently, became the melting-pots of the several local mainline churches, with each member developing his or her often life-long loyalty to the church of his or her school, yet all living together comfortably within a 'Christian' extended family in a pan-mainline church ecumenicity.

In addition, some family members might take part for a time, or permanently, in the several revivalist prayer-groups, and in the several 'indigenous' churches led by local Christians, which grew from them, and in their distinct, ecstatic, faith-healing spirituality. Thus from the local Christian pluralism, an intra-Christian plural religious allegiance emerged in many places which consisted in the practice of many Christians, especially women, combining regularly the loyal membership of a particular mainline church with the occasional or even regular participation in the ecstatic singing, dancing and healing services of the indigenous churches.

The other, and even more pervasive pluralism was the extra-Christian one of the general religious scene. It consisted of two main elements. One was the continued powerful, albeit often unobtrusive, presence of the pre-colonial traditional religions in specific domains of life at the time when Christianity had become the dominant religion of colonial or post-colonial societies. It had been typical of preliterate religions in pre-colonial societies to have a very limited visibility, because preliterate societies lacked institutional differentiation which had caused their religions, so to say, to be 'dispersed' over the other domains of their economic, social, political, etc. life. In addition to this lack of institutional differentiation and visibility, they also lacked doctrinal integration: precisely because of that dispersal over the many domains of life, they were complex, [9] inarticulate, non-unified religions. In the colonial societies, the very limited visible presence of traditional religions was reduced further by some of their elements merging with the parallel elements of Christianity such as the belief in the creator god, while others receded because Christianity offered more attractive alternatives – e.g., the burial rites, or the Christian notion of the devil – replacing certain traditional beliefs.

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[16] Cf. Platvoet 1989: 109-110.

But especially where European Christianity had no, or only poorer, alternatives to offer, – as in respect of the dead as ancestors; or of witchcraft and sorcery as the (postulated) causes of dissent, disease, death, and other misfortune;[17] or of the protective qualities ascribed to certain humans, animals or plants –, traditional beliefs and practices would unobtrusively continue to be important co-determiners of religious practice. They did so because they were very diffuse, greatly malleable and highly functional beliefs. In addition, preliterate religions had always been dynamic and receptive religions by their lack of doctrine. Being always in need of a continuous stream of revelation from the unseen in dreams, divination and spirit possession, they had a long history of eager adoption, and effective adaptation, of any fresh internal inspiration and of whatever seemed worthwhile to import from other religions. New gods, charms, medicines, and cults had been, and were being, imported to replace the gods, charms, medicines, or cults that had fallen into disuse. They were religions with a high turn-over.

The virtually automatic intake of new members into the mainline churches through classes in Christian doctrine in the government-assisted mission schools hardly affected the traditional religious culture of pragmatic and selective combination, and the use of the wide range of options in the religious scene by the numerous individual Christians of the school type.[18] The most important hidden influence of the preliterate religions on these Christians was, therefore, their outspoken penchant for 'plural religious allegiance',[19] *i.e.,* for the simultaneous, or consecutive, use of anything religious that appeared to be powerful, or useful, or needful, or necessary, or traditionally proper, irrespective whether it was of [**10**] traditional, Christian, Muslim, or esoteric origin, or from some other religion, and irrespective whether it was home-grown or imported.

This extra-Christian as well as intra-Christian ecumenicity constitutes what I term 'the revenge of the "primitives"'[20] on orthodox and mainline church Christianity in post-colonial societies, for this pervasive plural religious allegiance effectively subverts and denies the exclusive claims of early orthodox missionary Christianity, as well as those of their modern Pentecostal and other revivalist varieties. That which that Christianity came to uproot and destroy rules virtually the whole religious scene, including much of orthodox and evangelical Christianity.[21]

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[17] Cf. e.g. Gifford 1994: 252-253

[18] As a result, 'conversion' needs to be understood in most of modern religious history of Africa in the very weak sense of the adoption of additional religious orientations (Hackett 1989: 348). 'Conversion' does not then conflict with religious 'multi-membership' and/or 'religious mobility', nor with fluid, variable, dynamic and highly personal configurations in matters of religion (Platvoet 1996: 56, note 42); on the variability and flexibility of African religions, cf. Van Beek & Blakeley 1994: 15-19.

[19] On 'plural religious allegiance', cf. Dickson 1975: 92; Hackett 1989: 348-355; Platvoet 1979: 566-575, 580-581; Platvoet 1996: 56, 62, 88.

[20]. I developed this concept originally in an essay (Platvoet 1993) on the long term developments in the general history of religions as they have become morphologically visible in the distinctive traits of the new religions which have been, and are, emerging in modern times in the West, and more recently in the rest of the world, as the products of 'the Second Axial Age'. I apply this concept here in a slightly different, though equally legitimate, manner.

[21] Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1979; Gifford 1994: 255-256; Meyer 1992a, 1992b, 1995a. I should add that plural religious allegiance is but one of the ways in which the traditional, precolonial religions take revenge. Another which is disturbing to liberal Christians in Africa, is the fact that members of prayer fellowships in the mainline churches and the charismatic, Pentecostal, and evangelical churches continue to equate the gods and ancestors of traditional religions with the Devil and the witches. Thereby they continue not only to wage war on 'paganism' as fiercely as did

The Seeds of Destruction

The other element, the seeds of destruction,[22] is constituted, in the short term perspective of the last two centuries,[23] by the conglomerate of technological, [**11**] economical, scientific and other cultural factors, such as we find them now in full-blown form in modern Western societies. Their combined effects have completely transformed the religious landscape in the West in the past two centuries. More recently, they have begun to turn major parts of it into religious wastelands. Despite appearances to the contrary, we find these wastelands also in the postcolonial societies in which Christianity is now prominent or even dominant.

A crucial element in that transforming complex is formal education. It is through schools that by now virtually everyone in the post-colonial societies has become literate; and it is through schools that many have obtained the intellectual means for earning a share in the general increase of prosperity in their modernising and globalising nations. The Christian mainline churches developed such a school system in the former colonies of Europe in order to 'convert' the masses to Christianity.

Now, by itself alone, literacy and education, and especially a limited degree of education, have, generally speaking, proved highly beneficial to the missionary cause of the scriptural religions. That is especially so in the countries that are poorly [**12**] integrated into the global

the early missionaries, but they also introduce the traditional beliefs on witchcraft and on the gods and the ancestors as possible sources of evil into their Christianity, thereby confirming what missionaries, orthodox as well as liberal, and modern African theologians try to abolish; on this see especially Meyer 1992b.

[22] On this concept, cf. Platvoet 1998. This concept was also developed for the sake of the analysis of the recent development in the general history of religions. I use it here for more restricted purposes.

[23] In the long term perspective of roughly the last three millennia, they consist of the same conglomerate of factors but each scaled down to very moderate proportions compared to those they have grown to now. An important one among them was systematic reflective thought as it emerged gradually between 1500 and 500 BCE (= 'before the common era') in ethical, religious-mystical and philosophical matters. It began to be applied also to the articulation and organisation of religious beliefs from the middle of the first millennium BCE onwards, producing competitive doctrinal religions and their theologies. Some of these, such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, claimed to have received the complete and unadulterated revelation, and therefore to possess the full metaphysical truth, and to be the exclusive road to salvation for all humankind. Liberal Christianity has abandoned these exclusivist claims in the past two centuries, but has produced systems of beliefs that are even more 'rational' than those of orthodox Christianity. As a result, both orthodox religions and their liberal varieties have not only systematised religious beliefs by articulating them, but have also progressively eliminated numerous beliefs that were felt to be incompatible, or inconsistent with the core beliefs, or to be too crude, or too 'superstitious', to fit in with a 'civilised', *i.e.*, 'rational', religion. Such articulation, systematisation and rationalisation of the belief-content, therefore, considerably attenuated and atrophied the traditional body of beliefs of a religion. I tend to agree with Don Wiebe that theology, in as far as it is scientific and produces a rationalisation of the religious beliefs of a society, is basically at odds with, and potentially destructive of, religion as (postulated) communication by believers with the (postulated) meta-, or infra-, empirical realms, beings, powers, or qualities that are central to a particular religion (cf. Wiebe 1991: 7-16, 213-216). Whether, and to what degree, such a rationalisation actually affects a religion positively, or negatively, or even destroys it, seems to be co-determined, however, in complex ways, by the wider constellation of the other extra-religious factors, and their increase in scale (or degree of development), such as technology, economic development, demographic growth, complexity of institutional organisation and differentiation, and level of communication. Wiebe's thesis that religion is incompatible with (academic) theology, because the mythopoeic thinking of the former is fundamentally at odds with the scientific thought of the latter, seems to me, on the one hand, logically consistent but, as too stark a dichotomy, on the other hand, at odds with history in which the relationships between religion and reason seem much more complex and variable. Wiebe's 'irony of theology', though basically correct, may be inverted: though rational thought did, and does, plant seeds of destruction in a religion, it is also ironical that theology has also immensely assisted particular religions in establishing their superiority in particular times and places and/or for particular persons, or in accommodating themselves to changed circumstances, or in polemically defending themselves.

economy, in which only a few have become both well-educated and well-to-do, and in which the majority has received both a very limited education only and has remained poor in relative or absolute terms. It may even be held that the combination of limited education and pervasive poverty has caused the role, and the visibility, of religion to increase beyond measure in the post-colonial societies in the past few decades. Whereas the visibility of the traditional religions was distinctly low, mainline Christianity achieved already great prominence in colonial societies through churches, mission compounds, primary schools and colleges of secondary education, hospitals, printing presses, bookshops and other enterprises. It is outstripped, in the modern post-colonial societies, by the even much higher visibility, audibility, and accessibility of the mass media conscious, autonomous Pentecostal and charismatic churches[24] and their enthusiast/revivalist electronic and crusading varieties.

For example, in present-day sub-Saharan Africa, religions seem not to show any signs of decrease at all, whether in the numbers of its adherents or in functionality for them; let alone that they have already begun to shrink and disappear as in secularizing Europ. On the contrary, Africa is commonly seen, by Africans and non-Africans alike, as 'notoriously religious',[25] and by many African Christians as in the process of becoming *the* stronghold of the Christian religion from which many missionaries will soon depart, and are already departing,[26] for the 'reverse mission' of reconverting secularised Europe to the Christian faith and for executing 'God's Pentecostal revenge' upon it[27] (and on Europe's mainline churches). In sub-Saharan Africa itself, the upsurge of religious enthusiasm has been such in the past three decades that even the staid, status-conscious and influential mainline churches have been invaded by waves of Pentecostal fire, charismatic gifts, faith healing, speaking in tongues, inspired prophecy, demonic possession, and the exorcism of demons.[28] In addition, they see their members flock in numbers to [**13**] anti-intellectual,[29] high-power, evangelisation crusades, such as those of Bonnke,[30] in order to become born-again Christians, or tune in to the electronic churches to obtain miraculous health and wealth from God, or attend other Pentecostal and 'charismatic' churches, or Pentecostal-type prayer groups in the mainline churches,[31] for deliverance from the attacks of witches and the temptations of their master, the devil.[32] They and he are believed not only to cause dissent, disease and death among people, to drain off their money, to make them fail in love, a career, or exam, or cause them to be barren or impotent, but also to entice some people to enter into an immoral pact with Satan by which they obtain quick, 'Satanic'

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[24] Gifford (1994: 241) uses 'charismatic churches' as a label for the 'new [post-1980, JP] autonomous Pentecostal churches' now proliferating in Ghana in order to distinguish them from 'the churches of [the older, JP] established Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God'.

[25] Mbiti 1969, 1; Shorter & Onyancha 1997: 11

[26] Cf. e.g. Gifford 1994: 257. Actually, this 'missionary drive' is a function in part of the wish to establish international links with the rich Pentecostal churches in the West, in part through the (mainly illegal) labour migration to the West and the founding of branches in the African diaspora there.

[27] Cheryl Bridges Johns quoted in Anonymous 1998.

[28] Cf. e.g. Ter Haar 1992, Meyer 1992b

[29] Cf. Gifford 1987: 82, 86 on Bonnke's crusades; cf. also however Gifford (1994: 246-248, 258-259, 260-262) for the preoccupation with education in the charismatic churches in Ghana.

[30] Cf. e.g. Gifford 1987 and Lease 1996 on those of Reinhard Bonnke

[31] Cf. e.g. Meyer 1992b

[32] Cf. e.g. Gifford 1994: 252-253. Cf. also Meyer (1992b: 119): 'Through the equation of *Abosam* ['Devil'] and *adzeto* ['witches'] witchcraft belief becomes part of Christian ideas'.

riches, but at a price deadly for their kin and themselves, for they are believed to have consented to sacrifice the life of someone dear or near to them to the devil and the witches in return for this newly acquired wealth, and often to have offered up their own fertility too,[33] unless they confess their sin and become fervent born-again Christians.[34]

This representation of Africa as incurably religious and one of the bastions of Southern Christianity in the next century is, I am sorry to say, mainly mythical. It is the product of the myopic perspective of those whose business it is to foster, or to study, religion. They focus on the religion, Christian and other, that can be seen, and interpret that visible religion in European-Christian terms. They neglect to study the effects of African traditional religion and of secularising modernity on the religion they see, and the massive a-religiosity in Africa that results from them. The myth of religious Africa needs severe qualification and correction. The full churches and enthusiastic singing and dancing mask the fact that the number of people in Africa who are religiously indifferent, or are inactive, or dormant, or nominal believers, by far exceeds that of those who are religiously committed, and also that of those who regularly practise their religion by, *e.g.*, attending church every week. The full churches and enthusiastic dancing also, more often than not, express, and foster, religious practices that are fully in line with the modern – and, I would add, perennial – quest of virtually all humans for health, [**14**] wealth, education, status, and prosperity and so foster the modern economic rationalism that is at the heart of modern secularisation.

The study of the secularisation of Africa is a virgin field. To my knowledge, so far just one booklet has recently appeared that deals with it, and it does so, unfortunately, from the normative perspective how one may counteract it.[35] It is a case study of Nairobi City and the adjacent rural (peri-urban) area of Kiambu in Kenya by the social anthropologists Shorter and Onyanchaa. They define 'secularism' as 'the situation in which religious faith, for one reason or another, is felt to be superfluous' with 'religion losing its hold both at the level of social institutions and at the level of human consciousness'.[36] They distinguish several forms of secularism: one at the universities, among staff and students;[37] an urban one which is especially strong among the poor;[38] another urban one, in the affluent Christian congregations in the centre of Nairobi;[39] and one which is intrinsically linked with the pragmatism of traditional religion, among the nominal Christians of the countryside.[40] Except for the more explicit atheism at the universities, where it was present much more prominently in the middle decades of this century than at present,[41] secularist unbelief, they say, is 'rarely the product of formal, atheistic philos-

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[33] This is especially so in the Mami Water varieties of these beliefs in quick, 'Satanic' riches. Oon the Mami Water cults in West Africa, cf. Fabian 1978, Drewal 1988a, 1988b, Wendl 1991, Meyer 1995a, 1995b; Bastian 1997; O'Brien Wicker in the press.

[34] . Cf. Meyer 1992a, 1992b: 114-119; Gifford 1994: 255

[35] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997

[36] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 14-15

[37] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 19-22

[38] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 28-29, 31-34, 57-67

[39] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 38-47

[40] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 26-27, 123-128

[41] . Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 19-22. Academic unbelief, they say, suffered a certain erosion in the last quarter of this century because university chaplains and Departments of Religious Studies have strengthened the position of the Christian religion in the universities.

ophy',[42] but mainly of three other dominant elements of modern life, especially urban life: urbanisation, which causes most migrants from the countryside to abandon religion 'because they no longer formed part of a coherent community in which church-going was an accepted practice';[43] the 'consumer materialism' of both the poor and the well-to-do;[44] and the pragmatism inherent in what Shorter and Onyanchaa term the 'cosmobiological' orientation of both the precolonial traditional religions of Africa and the new religions, in Europe and elsewhere, of the New Age type.[45]

[**15**] 80% of the 3,5 million inhabitants of Nairobi at present claim to be Christian. Of that 80%, only 4% are actively involved in their churches; only another 12% go to church every Sunday; and only again another 20% attend church occasionally. The other 64% are the nominal, or at most 'dormant', Christians who never, or hardly ever, go to church. Shorter and Onyanchaa estimate that 'in absolute numbers, the 'unchurched' are growing to more than half of the total population' of Nairobi, *i.e.*, to 'around 1,5 million'.[46] Unchurching is especially common among the young male migrants from the countryside, who, being jobless and/or looking desperately for one, or being self-employed in the desperately difficult informal sector, do not feel at home at all in the affluent congregations of their church in Nairobi.[47]

Young adult males in general are severely underrepresented in the Christian congregations of Nairobi. Shorter and Onyanchaa suggest this may be due to one or more of the following reasons: the struggle for survival and jobs; being too poor to be able to afford the luxury of religion; the need to work also in the weekends; the need to use the Sunday for a rest; the many ways of spending the weekend, other than attending church, which life in town offers, such as bars, discos, cinemas, sports; the need to travel home; loss of all interest in religion; having become disillusioned with religion after having attended churches preaching the gospel of prosperity, having 'sown' in them by liberally giving to the church, yet failing to become rich; etc.[48] People who are regularly employed, often also do not have the time or the means to attend church regularly. For their pay is usually so low that they must make ends meet by having a second job, or other sources of additional income, and work on Sundays. Or again, they have become indifferent to religion and spend the Sundays in bed, bars, or discos, etc.[49]

Shorter and Onyanchaa find the highest church attendance in the most affluent congregations of most prestigious mainline churches in the centre of the town, but note correctly that it is inspired as much by tradition, and by social and economic considerations, as by religion: 'church-going offers affluent Christians scope for [**16**] achieving their own particular social, as well as their religious, goals. It reinforces their social networks. It offers them further opportu-

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[42]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 15.
[43]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 31; as was the case in 19th century England (Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 29-31).
[44]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 22-25.
[45]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 26-27, 126-128.
[46]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 36. In low income areas, church attendance is as low as 2,5% of the population (Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 58, 63). The Nairobi situation in neither unique nor new: in Latin America, 93% of the population registered as Roman Catholic in the mid-fifties, of which 'not more than ten percent were regular in the practice of their Christian duties' (Neill 1964: 506). Especially its middle class has been almost wholly secularised for many decades. As early as 1912, Lord Bryce wrote: 'Men of the upper educated class appear wholly indifferent to theology and Christian worship. It has no interest for them' (quoted in Neill 1964: 508).
[47]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 28-34, 39.
[48]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 38-42, 57-69.
[49]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 64-66.

nities for exercising leadership, deploying managerial and other professional skills, even perhaps finding clients. Furthermore, it confirms them in their chosen lifestyles. Above all, it provides a conscious or unconscious justification, at the highest possible level, for continuing to enjoy and acquire wealth.'[50] By far not all the affluent, however, are regular church-goers: 'some […] prefer to spend Sunday at home, and some even find religious practice superfluous'.[51]

The perhaps most misleading part of the myth of Africa being incurably religious is the romantic misunderstanding of the 'spirituality' of Africa. That respects the 'spirituality' of traditional religion, as 'discovered' by modern African Christian theologians as well as, more recently, that of the Spirit-filled, ecstatic, healing and crusading, dualist orthodox-evangelical churches, native as well as imported, which are so prominent now on the African scene. Despite the latter's virulent opposition to the former, ecstatic Christianity is as explicitly a capitalist religion as are the traditional religions: the major goal and purpose of both is the acquisition of health and wealth now. They are capitalist in a pure sense of the word, and fit in very well with modern individualism and rationalism. Precisely because their common capitalism is inspired in both by religious dualism – which explains the lack of health and wealth as the work of the witches and/or the devil –, ecstatic dualist Christianity has a great appeal to the economically oppressed, especially to women who struggle with the health and financial problems of themselves and their children. Moreover, like the mainline churches, the Pentecostal/charismatic ones often offer not only ritual help, but often provide also social support and the means for improving one's skills in literacy and organisation and moral standards, thereby serving for themselves and their believers as bridges into modern capitalist society.[52]

In Conclusion

Shorter and Onyanchaa should be criticised for the biased criteria by which they measure religion and religious indifference in modern urban Africa. Their criteria are clearly those of mainline church Christianity, and their analyses clearly serve the development of a mainline church Pastoral Sociology and Theology that is capable of devising an 'adequate response' to, and remedy for, Africa's secularisation. The picture they present is also unduly alarmist, because they wish to provoke the development of a mainline church counterstrategy. This purpose [**17**] and their criteria put the academic study of the secularisation of Africa on a wrong footing. But their study has the merit of showing that Africa is, basically, no more, and no less, a religious continent than Europe was and is.

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[50]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 46
[51]. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 46
[52]. Cf. *e.g.*, Gifford (1994: 244-249) on Mensa Otabil and his International Central Gospel Church at Accra.

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