

BOOK REVIEWS**Gordon Molyneux*****African Christian Theology: The Quest for Selfhood.***San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993,
422 pp., \$59.90.

In this fascinating study Molyneux focuses on the process of theologising as seen in three church communities in Africa. What distinguishes this contribution is that Molyneux's primary concern is not so much with evaluating finished theological products as it is with exploring and explaining the practice of theological reflection in contemporary African Christianity. Additionally (and fitting for a continent with a collective rather than individualistic cultural orientation), Molyneux focuses on theological reflection in communal settings rather than as the project of individuals. The material is based on PhD research done at the University of London. The specific objects of research were three different church communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC-formerly Zaire): Roman Catholic, Kimbanguists, and Evangelical; and three different modes of theological expression: the publishing programme of an academic institution, a denomination's procedure for hymnic certification, and a series of pastoral seminars.

Molyneux's initial chapter offers a historical survey of the political, ecclesiastical, and theological background to the development of African identity theology. The 'winds of change' that swept across Africa after World War II provide the orientation for the political analysis. The rise of the African indigenous church movement (often referred to as African Independent Churches or African Initiated Churches) gives the second focus. And the rise of African identity theology in light of the political and ecclesiastical developments furnishes the third. This chapter is a valuable survey in its own right, and also sets the stage for the rest of the discussion.

The second chapter (which has also appeared in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 11:2 [1992], p. 58-89) considers the theological reflection that has taken place at the Faculty de

Theologie Catholique de Kinshasa (FTCK), a Louvain-modeled Roman Catholic university founded in Kinshasa in 1954. Molyneux's special interest is the agenda of this institution's remarkable publications programme, which for many years formed the cornerstone of the university's emphasis on scholarship. In particular, for those who do not read French and are not familiar with theological reflection in francophone Africa, and especially in Catholic francophone Africa, Molyneux opens a welcome window on the rich heritage that is available from that milieu. As the FTCK has arguably been among the most prominent sources of African academic and literary theological reflection, this chapter is in itself a valuable contribution to the literature on African theologies.

The third chapter (which has also appeared in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 20 [Je 1990], p. 153-187) assesses the theological process evident in some 560 Kimbanguist hymns. (The exact number of hymns is difficult to determine, since it is given as 560 on p. 170; 565 on p. 174, and 569 on p. 175). The history of the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK; officially founded in 1959) is chronicled, with fresh insights given through interviews of key church members. This forms the context for the analysis of the hymns as examples of oral theology. Molyneux recognises that for a comprehensive assessment of the oral streams of theology in the EJCSK far more work would have to be done (e.g., incorporating sermons, talks during retreats and at the firesides in the homes of members, etc.). Since his research intended a comparative treatment of the theological process within three traditions, the fact that the hymns were accessible in written form, that they were in wide use, and that they were therefore highly influential in the church, suggested particular analysis of the hymns.

Molyneux's access to the hymns came through several weeks of study at the Department of Hymns for the EJCSK, including extensive interviews of key individuals. Perhaps even more fascinating than the hymns themselves is the process through which they are composed (through revelation given to the hymn-writer) and then authenticated by the church. The latter is a standardised procedure in which the recipient performs the hymn several times to give opportunity for its transcription. In addition to transcribing, the officials note the quality of the tune and even the demeanour of the

recipient during the performance. Once the hymn is transcribed, the recipient is thanked and excused so that analysis can take place. At the time of Molyneux's research, there were 46 people in the country who were registered by the church as having the gift of receiving hymns through inspiration. In the year 1986, 277 hymns were processed by the Department.

The fourth chapter explores the practice of theology as undertaken in the *Communauté Évangélique au Centre de l'Afrique* (CECA), founded by the Africa Inland Mission after its entry into DRC in 1912, and representative of the evangelical wing of African Christianity. The first half of the analysis explores various means of theological growth in CECA, notably the Bible schools and seminaries that have been established, the Theological Education by Extension programme, and the women's movement known as "Women of the Good News." Molyneux then turns his attention to several experimental "Gospel and Culture" seminars initiated by John Gration, former missionary in DRC and Kenya, and at that time professor of missions at Wheaton College Graduate School. The seminars themselves, held in 1983, were interactive ones in which pastoral leaders of the CECA community focused on the actual theological needs they encountered in their role as church leaders but which had not been addressed in their theological training. The focus of the seminar discussions was intentionally on issues relating to traditional African culture rather than those relating to contemporary (urban) Africa. Gration's intention in the seminars was to facilitate African-focused theological reflection on issues that the African leaders perceived to be of significance. Molyneux evaluates these pioneering seminars, one held in Swahili and the other in French.

The fifth and final chapter summarises the findings, provides issues for further reflection, and indicates lessons that can be learned from the differing methods of theological reflection.

Why is this study so important? One reason is that method in African theological reflection has tended to be taken for granted. If nothing else, Molyneux reminds us of the importance of theological processes that do not fit our standard academic mode. He also clearly demonstrates that more than one method is not only

appropriate for the church, but is vitally needed if the church is to provide relevant theological structuring for its adherents.

Molyneux's unique contribution to the discussion is in providing a descriptive evaluation of the actual practice of theology in three different communities (Roman Catholic, Kimbanguist, and Evangelical) through three quite different "media" (a publications programme, a hymnic programme, and reflective pastoral seminars) all within one African nation. While literature on oral African theology is slowly starting to appear (e.g., Healey and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Orbis, 1996), there is almost no work on the process of theological reflection in Africa, and nothing else comes close to Molyneux's contribution in presenting such disparate efforts within a single country.

It is for these reasons that Molyneux's book would seem to be among the most important studies on African theology in the 1990s, since it illustrates and suggests a whole new genre for research on theology in Africa, one that turns attention to the processes of theological expression in African Christian communities. Perhaps the most unfortunate reality concerning Molyneux's thesis is the relative lack of awareness of it. Published in 1993, this pioneering text on the theological process in Africa has been largely ignored in book reviews and publication notices. In addition, the publisher's pricing will have given pause to many potential purchasers. In light of the fact that theological process can be just as significant as theological product (whether book, journal article, hymn, or seminar), and the fact that theological processing remains largely ignored in discussions of African theology, this text should be considered essential reading for everyone concerned with contemporary theological reflection in Africa.

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[Editor's note: this book may be obtained direct from the author at a special price of 15 Sterling pounds or \$25.00, postage and handling included. Inquiries may be addressed to: Dr. Gordon Molyneux, Paddock View, Netherfield Lane, Standstead Abbots, Herts. SG12 8HD, UK.]

Peter Hicks

***Evangelicals and Truth: A Creative Proposal for
a Post-Modern Age***

Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998

Evangelicals and Truth: A Creative Proposal for a Post-Modern Age is one of several recent publications that grapple with the rise of postmodernism and its impact on the proclamation of the gospel. The author, Peter Hicks, who lectures in philosophy at London Bible College, deals with the question from a philosophical perspective.

His argument is developed in three sections, each of which begins with a brief paragraph outlining its content. In the first section Hicks explains what he means by truth and evangelicalism, and then gives a swift survey of changing notions of truth in western thinking from Plato through to the present day. He emphasises the significance of the Enlightenment attempt to make human reason the ultimate epistemological authority, and its ultimately disastrous consequences for any notion of objective and certain truth. The result is the relativism of postmodernism, which cannot, however, be lived out in practice: 'our postmodern age has continued to function as if truth, meaning and even authority continue to exist.

In the second section Hicks discusses what he identifies as significant evangelical conceptions of truth from the time of the Reformation down to the present day. His survey in this section is fascinating and for the most part very instructive. Nevertheless, the attempt to include so much leads occasionally to superficiality or a lack of clarity. The chapter on fundamentalism is particularly problematic, as the author does not sufficiently clarify the relationship between the approach known by that name today, and the theological position held and advanced by the authors of 'The Fundamentals' in the early twentieth century. In the final chapter of this section Hicks identifies three positive (in his view) features of modern evangelicalism: the charismatic movement, representing, he suggests, a swing from a largely cerebral form of Christianity to a

largely experiential one; a greater openness among evangelicals to the possibility that they may at certain points be wrong, and a willingness to be corrected; and holism, the desire to engage the beliefs of evangelicalism with the whole of life. He then indicates the significance of these trends for the question of truth.

In the last section, 'Evangelicals and Truth Tomorrow' Hicks seeks to rebut the relativist position. He argues that it is untenable, firstly, in that it cannot even state its case without being inconsistent with it and, secondly, because it destroys meaning and makes communication impossible. He then gives his own proposal, in which he seeks to go back to what he terms the pre-Enlightenment conception of truth, while also drawing on more recent evangelical thinking. Fundamental to his proposal is the belief that knowledge of truth must begin with God and not with man. God is the source of all truth, which means, firstly, that it can once again be regarded as objective and, secondly, that it is fundamentally unified rather than fragmented (although it is certainly multidimensional). Furthermore, it can be received, but not created, by human knowers, because they have been created in the image of God, one implication of which is that they have a capacity to receive what he communicates. However, he insists on the necessity of conversion, without which 'knowing and living the truth will be seriously inadequate'. This does not mean that there are two types of truth, one for the Christian and the other for the non-Christian: a non-Christian may know Christian doctrine, and even, Hick claims, have certain experiences of God (although his argument at this point is shaky and questionable). What distinguishes the Christian's knowledge is that God has become the centre and key to everything, while the knowledge of the non-Christian will 'lack the full integration and application to every area of life'.

The book is an ambitious undertaking, covering as it does the history of western epistemology over two and a half millennia, and the development of evangelical epistemological approaches in the five hundred years since the Reformation, as well as putting forward an evangelical response to late twentieth century postmodernism. It is quite a *tour de force* and certainly repays careful study: it has much to offer the reader. It would benefit from more in the way of

introductory and summary chapters. The brief paragraphs which preface each section are not adequate as signposts to guide the reader through the author's argument. It is surprising too that there is no introductory chapter: it would be helpful to have the aims of the book made explicit at the outset.

The book is written primarily for a western readership, dealing as it does with movements in western philosophy and evangelical responses to them. However, the issues discussed by Hicks have also a universal significance: the source of truth, the possibility of a certain and objective knowledge of truth, and the nature of the Scriptures and their role in the quest for truth. Accordingly *Evangelicals and Truth* will be a useful tool for African students of theology and their teachers.

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***Turning Points: Decisive Moments in
the History of Christianity***

Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Books, 1997

Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997

As the information on the cover informs potential readers in *Turning Points*, Noll takes readers on a tour of twelve decisive moments in Christian history. He also reflects on some twentieth-century events that may someday be considered 'turning points'. The result is an absorbing book which gives a fairly swift survey of church history, and avoids getting lost in the details. Each chapter starts with a hymn from the period under consideration, and concludes similarly with a prayer. There are also quotations from significant Christian

writings through the ages, interspersed within the text, black and white illustrations, and helpful, brief bibliographies at the end of each chapter. The introduction gives the author's reasons for studying the history of Christianity: it shows the historical character of the Christian faith; it gives perspective on the interpretation of Scripture; it is a laboratory in which to examine Christian interactions with surrounding culture; and it can help shape proper Christian attitudes - of humility faced with human failure and sin, and gratitude to God who remains faithful to his people.

In fact, however, not all the events identified are really turning points. Noll himself recognises this, as when he discusses the coronation of the emperor Charlemagne by Pope Leo III in 800: 'when Pope Leo crowned Charlemagne the "new" emperor, it only solidified a connection that had been developing for more than half a century'. The importance of the coronation, and of many (but not all) of the other events which Noll discusses, lies in their symbolic significance, what they symbolised, rather than in the event itself. So, what he is often looking at is not so much a turning point, but rather a trend of great importance which can be epitomised in some particular moment or event. This is what gives the book its great value, as a survey of some of the most fundamental developments in the history of Christianity, 'written for laypeople and introductory students rather than scholars'. It also means that, regardless of whether the reader accepts or disputes the central significance of the particular events that Noll has chosen to underline, it would be difficult to question the importance of the trends which they represent.

Throughout his analysis Noll seems to be striving to maintain a certain detachment from the history he records, and specifically from the doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues they sometimes raise. Thus, while on several occasions he makes clear his own evangelical commitment, he tries not to allow this to colour his presentation. From the academic historian's viewpoint such apparent impartiality may be considered a virtue, although Noll admits in the introduction to his book that absolute historical objectivity is impossible ('Identifying such critical turning points is a subjective exercise ..'). The problem is that his approach seems to suggest equal value, in

Christian terms, for fundamentally opposed movements. Thus the chapter on the reformation is followed by one on the counter reformation, or 'Catholic Reform' as Noll prefers to call it. In terms of the purely historical impact of the two movements, it could indeed be argued that they were both equally significant, but in the context of a history written from a Christian point of view, the reader might perhaps expect the historian to offer some analysis at a deeper, more theological level too. Indeed, the neutral, 'value-free' approach, does itself imply a certain commitment. Objectivity in historical scholarship is not possible for mortal men.

Further, some of his judgements are very questionable, which may at times be due to a lack of familiarity with the subject under discussion. Thus his unqualified reference to the Zionist churches of South Africa as 'a dynamic Christian movement' and 'a biblical, Christ-centred, Pentecostal form of Christianity', a 'distinctly African variety of Christianity' begs a number of questions. A more thorough analysis and a greater willingness to make theological distinctions might have led to a different conclusion. More surprising, however, are his brief allusions to the Puritans, which see their significance mainly in terms of their disruptiveness: 'Puritan zeal drove England to civil war in the 1640s ..', while largely (though not entirely) ignoring their huge pastoral and theological importance (and their contribution to the creation of Mark Noll's own nation!). Moreover, given its importance in the history of Christianity there is relatively little discussion of theological liberalism, and again no assessment of its devastating consequences, although Noll does quote Niebuhr's penetrating critique: 'a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'

Nevertheless, despite qualifications such as these, the book remains a fascinating study of some of the crucial movements within the history of the Christian faith. To conclude once again with the cover blurb: 'This is history that is both readable and compelling.'

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***The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective:
A Study of Demonology and Redemption
in the African Context***

Carlisle UK: Paternoster Publishing, 1999
(450 pages, paperback; ISBN: 0-85364-830-1)

If you are thinking of "must" books to buy in the year 2000, here is one that should definitely be at or near the top of your list. Dr Ferdinando has served for many years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), most recently as principal of the distinguished *Institut Supérieur Théologique de Bunia*. Here, in work based on doctoral research at London Bible College (UK), he offers a comprehensive overview of a topic of utmost relevance to African Christianity. And he does so in a manner that displays the best of evangelical biblical scholarship.

The unifying theme of this magnificently conceived and magisterially composed study is the complete, all-encompassing "triumph of Christ" as a manifestation of the universal sovereignty of God. Written from the perspective of Africa, this text seeks nevertheless to transform the traditional pessimistic religious perspective by means of a Word-illuminated focus on the significance of Christ's sinless life and sacrificial work of redemption on the cross. In the penetrating light of our Lord's overwhelming victory over all satanic forces of wickedness, both biblical demonology and African occult are revealed for what they are and relegated to their temporary, subordinate and subdued place in this world, as they await their ultimate destiny in God's final judgement. That is the essence of the fundamentally optimistic and encouraging message of Scripture that Ferdinando carefully documents for us.

In his introductory chapter, Ferdinando directs attention to a major problem facing African Christianity today that stands as the central focus of the book. As Dr Osadolor Imasogie of Nigeria has put it: "The usual resort of the African Christian in crisis situations is a reversion to African traditional religious practices." Christ might be

able to save from sin, but the redemption announced by the missionaries seemingly offers no response to the profoundly *felt* need for salvation from witches and evil spirits. The result was [and is!] a syncretistic amalgam of Christian faith and traditional religion, with a whole area of reality remaining unredeemed by the gospel.

Ferdinando next considers some of the principal "methodological problems in the study of African traditional religion" (chapter 2), including the broad and diverse nature of the subject field, the amorphous status of unwritten indigenous religious beliefs, the potential for distortion in one's personal perspective on the subject, the misunderstandings that result from cross-cultural translation, and the influence of alien analytical presuppositions (e.g., of "functionalism"). This is followed in chapters 3-5 by a very useful summary of African traditional religion, with special emphasis upon traditional beliefs concerning the spirit world, witchcraft, sorcery, and magic. References are made either in the text or in footnotes to studies that span the sub-Saharan continent, resulting in a wide ranging if necessarily selective overview of the topic. Chapters 4-5 each includes a sub-section drawing attention to some of the insights, coupled with outstanding problems, that derive from typically rationalistic, skeptical, anti-supernaturalistic "Western interpretations" of the spiritual phenomena under discussion. Then in his helpful "conclusion" to Section One (chapter 6), Ferdinando points out the crucial existential dilemma encountered by traditional worshippers and their sympathisers (i.e., those who are not yet free of ancient ancestral beliefs).

For them "demonic" witches, sorcerers and [malevolent] spirits remain a constant menace, and salvation consists in the repeated frustration of their attempted destruction of life, but can never be final or definite (p. 131).

The bulk of the book (Section Two) then presents a comprehensive, progressively developed study of the proper biblical response to the ever-threatening dominion of darkness, as represented in the Old Testament (chapter 7), post-biblical Judaism (chapter 8), the Synoptic Gospels and Acts (chapter 9), the Pauline Epistles (chapter 10), the Johannine Writings (chapter 11), and the

General Epistles (chapter 12). Each chapter contextualises the prevailing conceptions, beliefs, and practices connected with the "spirit world" as these were manifested in Bible times. Particular emphasis is placed on human suffering and the forces of evil since these dominated the thinking and lives of people then, and also now in many parts of the contemporary world (not only in Africa!). Ferdinando counters all such fundamentally pagan beliefs with the biblical alternatives set forth in the sequence of biblical materials surveyed. Throughout this discussion, the significant differences between the biblical and African perceptions of evil powers of the occult world are pointed out, as are the disparate responses that are offered to these ever-present threats to one's body, life, and spirit. Ferdinando believes that it is in this confrontational, contrastive, and Word-constituted manner that the war must be waged by the believing community--and won--in this ongoing, often covert battle for the eternal soul of Africa.

In two final summary chapters (13-14) Ferdinando recapitulates his essential argument. In fact, this would be a good place to begin if one wished to gain a succinct overview of the book as a whole. At the risk of oversimplifying (and perhaps leaving something out), let me offer the following synopsis of Ferdinando's main points:

- a) God is in total sovereign control of the universe that He created and will one day judge; His divine rule extends over Satan, demons, and all other forces of wickedness.
- b) Christ obtained present and ultimate victory over Satan and evil powers on behalf of all people through His redemptive, sacrificial death on the cross.
- c) The primary purpose of Christ's substitutionary life and death, however, was to atone for people's sin, which is the real cause for human suffering and bondage to Satan in the world.
- d) People are responsible for and must repent of their own sinfulness; they cannot blame the devil or demonic forces for their lost condition.
- e) The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to create and to strengthen faith, which enables people to defeat all forms of satanic attack and to live victorious lives no matter what their physical circumstances in this world.

f) Christianity does not guarantee safety and freedom from demonic malevolence or personal suffering in this life; for many believers the struggle against such hard testing will continue on a daily basis right up to the grave, when they will receive the glorious reward of Christ's triumph over sin, death, and Satan.

g) In reality, the "parasitic powers" of evil (i.e., dependent upon human sin, p. 302) are of secondary importance in the Scriptures, which from beginning to end focus on the wonderful works and ways of God, especially on behalf of His saints.

Ferdinando applies these basic truths in a concluding section where he presents "some implications for the African church" with regard to: the gospel, evangelism, pastoral ministry, medical care, and theology (pp.396-407). To be sure, the issues raised here could well contribute to the overall mission statement for any church community or denomination on the continent. Although there may be (depending on one's doctrinal viewpoint) several topical slights or omissions (e.g. the operation of divine *providence* in the world, the function of God's Law in rebuking human sinfulness and in guiding sanctified living, and the place of the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in the believer's life of faith), the rest of Scripture is well covered as it pertains to the author's masterfully contextualised "study of demonology and redemption in African perspective." The work is supplemented by a final "excursus" dealing with the interpretation of the difficult Pauline expression *ta stoiceia tou kosmou*: "elementary principles/ elemental spirits of the world" (pp. 409-416), as well as by a comprehensive 33 page bibliography.

Few if any controversial issues or problematic passages are avoided or ignored in this excellent exegetical and pastoral overview as Ferdinando clearly and concisely—in Hebrews-like fashion—sets forth a convincing case of Scripture's bold affirmation of the omnipotent supremacy of Christ. He is our all-sufficient Saviour and Lord, who enables Christians everywhere to deal with the varied, culturally-conditioned attacks of Satan in their lives, as well as the temporal suffering or oppression that they may be presently facing. Syncretism or accommodation to ancient ancestral beliefs, practices, values, and/or perspectives is not the answer. Only an ever-deeper, personally applied understanding of what God has already done and

will do for us in and through Jesus the Redeemer will do. No compromise is possible--only a fuller, faith-founded commitment to knowing and living Christ more completely. What an encouraging message!

This text is an absolute must for church leaders, pastors, theological students, and educated Christians throughout Africa--east, west, north, and south. *However*, in order to render it more accessible to many potential users, it needs to be reproduced in a simplified, more economical edition. Several suggestions come to mind in this respect: replace complex vocabulary, revise complicated argumentation, reduce the number of footnotes (or eliminate them altogether), provide translations instead of original-language citations of biblical passages, and periodically introduce some summary diagrams, charts, or other graphics. As soon as possible such an edition should also be translated into French, and into other major languages of Africa. Ferdinando's glowing vision of Christ's supreme triumph confidently puts the Scriptures in the forefront (where they rightly belong) in the life-and-death battle of contemporary African Christianity with diabolical deception of all forms, whether traditional or modern. His biblically-based optimism is as spiritually educative as it is personally contagious. Indeed, may it serve to inspire many similar works by believing biblical scholars in Africa, as we embark upon a new millennium of God's gracious guidance, provision, and protection.

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