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The World's Local Religion Transcript

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The World's Local Religion

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Protestant Christianity began as a European religion but has become a global one. If we had been telling the story of how that happened half a century ago, we would have told a story about missionaries and empires. We would have noticed that until the eighteenth century, Protestants were very bad at spreading their faith beyond their own culture, partly because they tended to insist that converts absorb and conform to European norms: converting the natives and civilising them went hand in hand, and so we would have understood that the change in the tempo and the success of Protestant missions during the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was part of the story of European imperialism, in which imperial success in imposing European norms onto societies across the world meant that European religion could piggy-back on the process. From the perspective of half a century ago, we would have sensibly concluded that this process was probably over. As the European empires were collapsing, or dissolving themselves, as nationalist movements across what was then called the Third World were marginalising or expelling missionaries and proclaiming secular states, the likeliest future seemed that Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, would be shrugged off as colonial rule itself had been.

It has spectacularly failed to happen that way. Instead, as colonial empires have faded away, Christianity has embedded itself across the planet and racked up unprecedented numerical growth. The numbers are tricky and slippery, but on any showing, more than half of Africa's population are now Christians, and the share is still rising. Of those well over half are Protestants, at least if we define 'Protestants' broadly, as I think we must. In Asia, where more than half of humanity lives, the picture is patchier, but there has been spectacular growth in Korea and in China, two very important examples to which I will be returning at more length later. Latin America's case is different, since it was colonised far earlier and for far longer, and Catholicism has become deeply ingrained, but in the past half-century there has been an explosion of Protestantism in the region: a 2014 multi-country survey suggested that 19% of Latin Americans are now Protestants, rising to 26% in Brazil and over 40% in much of Central America. More than half of these are converts. The global explosion of Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular is one of the major stories of our times and it is now clear that this is not in any straightforward sense a colonial imposition. It began that way, but the theme of Protestantism's growth around the world has been its success in turning itself into the world's local religion: adapting promiscuously to whatever situation it finds itself in. In this lecture, I'm going to be taking a tour of some of those local adaptations with you. We will meet some European and American missionaries, but I will be focusing instead on the ability of indigenous peoples all over the world to pick up Protestant Christianity and run with it. And we'll finish by looking at some of the consequences.

Take, for example, perhaps the most unpromising early mission field of all, southern Africa, where the Dutch colonists at the Cape of Good Hope quickly concluded that the Khoikhoi people, whom one Protestant minister called 'the most savage, stupid, and filthy heathens I had ever met', could not be converted: 'because,' as another minister put it, 'they are so used to running about wild, that they cannot live in subjection to us'. Notice how *conversion* and *subjection* are assumed to go together. But in 1737 the Moravian Church, a revivalist sect which was one of the most prolific sources of early Protestant missions, sent a young German named Georg Schmidt to South Africa. He bought a farm some eighty miles east of Cape Town, which he named Genadendal, and established a commune there, gathering a group of Khoikhoi who eventually numbered 28. In 1741, he baptised five of them in a nearby river, which scandalised the Dutch church authorities. In 1743, isolated and worn down, Schmidt returned to Europe, and no-one was allowed to replace him. As a parting gift, he left his Dutch New Testament with a girl whom he had baptised Magdalena.

In 1792, Moravian missionaries were able to return to Genadendal. When they arrived on Christmas Eve, they were greeted by the now elderly Magdalena, who unwrapped her treasured Bible from its sheepskin case. Her failing eyesight meant she could no longer read herself, but she had a young woman read the story of the Magi's journey to Bethlehem for the newcomers. The community had endured in isolation for half a century, meeting to pray under the pear tree Schmidt had planted, teaching their children to read Dutch. The visitors' appearance did not surprise them. God had told them in dreams to expect their return soon.

Now maybe that story has grown in the telling. But if nothing else, it is an early sign that the region's indigenous peoples could quickly make Protestantism their own. From the 1790s onwards, missionaries poured in, establishing farmsteads modelled on Genadendal and then fanning out across and beyond the Cape Colony's rapidly expanding territory. From the beginning, these missionaries reported intense and dramatic conversions. Their preaching resonated with existing African spiritual practices in unexpected ways. The Christian sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist made self-evident sense to peoples for whom water and blood had longstanding religious significance. African Christians were swiftly interpreting dreams, singing, and displaying vivid emotion in prayer, their cries sometimes drowning out preachers' voices. In 1816 a German missionary reported that 'my hearers were drowned in tears, others were unable to sit or stand', and that once his service was over, they would withdraw together into a field to pray. Their unconverted neighbours tended to despise these displays, seeing it as shameful for adults to weep. Often the missionaries themselves were taken aback, not truly

expecting to have been able to succeed. Robert Moffatt, a Scottish missionary with the Tswana people, wrote that when a revival struck in 1829:

We were taken by surprise ... Although it was impossible to keep either order or silence; a deep impression of the Divine presence was felt. They sang till late hour and before morning dawned, they would assemble again at some house for worship, before going to labour.

For Moffatt, this was authentic but a little alarming. He wanted to channel it into what he saw, a mature, that is, a more Scottish faith, and he remained with the Tswana for a total of forty-nine years. But another Scot, the age's best-known explorer-missionary, David Livingstone, disagreed. He argued that as soon as a 'native Church' was formed, it should be left to its own devices rather than being infantilised by continued missionary support.

We have great confidence in the essential vigour of Christianity. It blooms in imperishable youth wherever it is untrammelled by the wisdom of men. Sow the seed, and it never dies. The Divine Spirit will see to it.

That was an article of faith rather the result of sober observation. But there was evidence for it. Take, for example, a pioneering preaching tour to the Xhosa of the Eastern Cape which one early missionary undertook in 1800-1, with no apparent results at all. It was only in around 1815 that Ntsikana, a highborn but outcast Xhosa singer who had heard one of the sermons, experienced a conversion. Following a vision in which he saw a single bright sunray strike the side of his prize ox, he found himself inspired to begin humming and then chanting early versions of what would become the first Xhosa-language Christian hymns. He also set himself against a millenarian Xhosa prophet, who was attempting to mobilise his people for war against the encroaching Europeans with promises of magical assistance. Ntsikana accused him of self-aggrandisement and of lying to the people, and preached repentance and reconciliation instead, attracting a substantial multi-ethnic following.

The standard narrative of church history in South Africa focuses on the European denominations, and traces the origins of so-called African Independent Churches only to the late nineteenth century, but Ntsikana's and indeed Magdalena's groupings suggest that the phenomenon of Africans forming their own Protestant groups was almost as old as southern African Protestantism itself. What distinguishes the first classic Independent Church, Nehemiah Tile's Thembu Church, founded in 1884, is that it deliberately broke off from an existing denomination. Tile was a Methodist evangelist amongst his own Thembu people on the Cape's eastern frontier, but broke with his white superiors over what they saw as his unacceptable meddling in politics. He hoped to help the Thembu's paramount chief to negotiate an independent British protectorate. And in order to cement that chief's authority, boost his credibility with the British and also save his people's souls, he proposed to establish a state church in Thembuland, headed by that paramount chief much as the Church of England was headed by Queen Victoria.

It did not last: the British colonial establishment swiftly decided that this church was seditious, and after Tile himself died in 1891, the chief admitted defeat and returned to orthodox Methodism. But it did help to inspire a series of other breakaway, African-led churches, some of them remaining fully independent, some of them negotiating links with the black churches of the United States - not that that was always a happy experience. This man, James M. Dwane, was consecrated as a bishop in America's African Methodist Episcopal Church, but he felt almost the same level of colonial hauteur from his black American superiors at he had from his white British ones. He ended up being ordained as an Anglican, and became head of a new, autonomous 'Order of Ethiopia' within South Africa's Anglican Church. This endured until 1999, when it was re-founded as the fully independent Ethiopian Episcopal Church, with Dwane's grandson as its first bishop.

The missionary establishment generally disliked independent start-ups: not least because when disgruntled black ministers left to set up shop on their own, they usually took their congregations with them, leaving missionaries sore, on the hook for maintaining empty churches, and often accusing their former brethren of pride or greed. Alongside these mere jealousies were more substantive worries. Independent churches might veer into unorthodoxy, whether by incorporating aspects of traditional African religions or by forming personality cults around messianic leaders. More alarmingly still, given that independent churches originated in a rejection of white religious authority, they might be vehicles for political radicalism. From the perspective of a century later, things look a little different. In South Africa as across much of the rest of the continent, it has been independent churches which have been the most powerful engines of Christian growth. Heterodoxy and personality-cults, well, yes, there has been some of that, although it is liable to be exaggerated. As for being politically subversive ... well, we will come back to that, but for now let us just say it has not worked out exactly how those fretting missionaries feared.

Most of those modern African Independent churches, and indeed many of the Protestants I will be discussing worldwide for the rest of this lecture, are what we can rather loosely call Pentecostal: a word which I am using to mean, not only the churches like the Assemblies of God which place a central importance on the experience of speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, but a wider phenomenon of ecstatic, experiential, Spirit-centred Protestantism. So in many African churches which I would class as Pentecostal, for example, tongue-speaking is unusual, but there may be prophecy, possession and exorcism, fainting, trembling, weeping, and there will almost certainly be miraculous healing. The 2014 survey of Latin America I mentioned suggests that well over half of all Protestants in Latin America, rising to 72% in Brazil, Colombia and Nicaragua, claim to have witnessed a miraculous healing. One of the sparks for Pentecostal growth in 1980s Nicaragua was the story of a Sandinista soldier being raised from the dead in the Matagalpa region in 1983 or 1984. In a study of South Africa's Zion Christian Church, one of the country's largest independent Pentecostal churches, every single believer

questioned claimed to have witnessed healings. Individual stories abound. The longing for and faith in divine healing is of course partly a matter of simple practical need, not least in countries with poor medical systems. But healing is not merely a medical transaction; it is a spiritual event, whose inner blessing can be overwhelming even if the bodily effects are disappointing or illusory. Bodily need can, in short, lead to an inner experience of the Holy Spirit which can be as transformative as the experience of speaking in tongues or of prophesying. If the healing turns out to be of no lasting medical benefit, or if the tongues turn out to be an incomprehensible babble rather than the gift of an unknown human language, that is almost beside the point. The inner experience is itself life-changing, regardless of the outward manifestation.

Now as I said, Pentecostalism is a phenomenon which we associate historically with the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century, and with good reason, but it has always been more plural and more global than that. Take, for example, the case of Pandita Sarasvati Ramabai. She came to England from her native India as a young widow in the 1880s, converted to Christianity and was baptised a member of the Church of England. She swiftly became a formidable campaigner for Indian nationalist causes in general and women's rights in particular, and after a tour of the United States, returned to India to found a refuge for widows, set up near Pune in 1890. Initially this was a secular venture, but in 1894 Ramabai had what she called a 'new experience of God's power... the personal presence of the Holy Spirit in me'. The word *Pentecostal* was not yet in general use, but her description fits the pattern pretty closely. She re-founded her refuge, now named *Mukti* ('salvation'), as an explicitly evangelical project. When news of the great Welsh revival of 1904-5 reached her, Ramabai sent her American sidekick Minnie Abrams and her own daughter to Wales to see it for themselves, and the two women returned in January 1905 aglow with excitement. On their advice, Ramabai set up daily early-morning meetings to pray for revival. After six months, the fire caught. The revival that swept through her refuge lasted for a year and a half, marked by long, ecstatic prayer meetings, miraculous healings, over a thousand baptisms, and around seven hundred young women going out as missionary preachers into the surrounding communities. A few months in, some of the community at Mukti also began to speak in tongues - this is before tongue-speaking started in Los Angeles. Ramabai was characteristically robust in denying that it was merely a matter of 'hysterical women'. 'I wish,' she wrote, 'that all of us could get this wonderful and divine hysteria.' The experience had, she insisted, left believers renewed in their moral character and empowered to pray and to spread the Word. She devoted most of the rest of her life to translating the Bible into Marathi directly from the original languages. Her disciple Minnie Abrams wrote a booklet describing the events which was read across the world. In particular, Abrams sent a copy to a former classmate of hers from Bible school, who was now a Methodist missionary in Chile. It was that report which sparked the beginning of Pentecostalism in Chile, which was one of Protestantism's first Latin American strongholds.

Stories of the Welsh revival of 1904-5 were also being read enviously by missionaries in, of all places, Korea. One of the things that makes Korea an interesting case is that it is the only significant example of Christianity being the anti-colonial religion, since Korea was at this point coming under Japanese dominance and many Koreans hoped - vainly, as it turned out - that America might defend their independence. There had been a trickle of converts and much interest in and welcome towards Christians. But missionaries did not want adherents who found Christianity politically useful or materially beneficial. A few years of concerted prayer for revivalism to take hold culminated in a ten-day-long church conference planned in Pyongyang, now the capital of North Korea, in early 1907. A meeting on 6 January, where 1500 Korean Christians were present, turned into an extraordinary evening of public penance. One astonished missionary wrote:

Man after man would rise, confess his sin, break down and weep, and then throw himself on the floor and beat the floor with his fists in a perfect agony of conviction.... They would break out into uncontrollable weeping and we would all weep together. We couldn't help it.

The following night matters were the same, only more so:

Every sin a human being can commit was publicly confessed that night. Pale and trembling with emotion, in agony of mind and body, guilty souls, standing in the white light of their judgment, saw themselves as God saw them. ... The scorn of men, the penalty of the law, even death itself seemed of small consequences if only God forgave.

When the conference finally broke up, the revival rippled out across the country, not least in the mission schools. Thirty thousand Koreans applied for baptism that year.

This is what one missionary, J. Z. Moore, said about these events:

Until this year [1907] I was more or less bound by that contemptible notion that the East is East and West, West and that there can be no real affinity or common meeting ground between them. With others I had said the Korean would never have a religious experience such as the West has. These revivals have taught me ... that ... the Korean is at heart, and in all fundamental things, at one with his brother of the West.

To remove the spectacles of subtle, pervasive racism with which Westerners of this generation viewed the world was remarkably difficult, but Moore's eyes had been opened. Indeed, he was so impressed by the piety he had seen that he now thought 'the East not only has many things, but profound things, to teach the West, and until we learn these things we will not know the full-orbed Gospel of Christ'.

Control of the Korean church now rapidly transferred from missionaries to Korean leadership. The last non-Korean moderator of the Presbyterian Church stepped down in 1919. Korean Protestantism's distinctive features began to emerge. There is a distinctive apocalypticism, practices of memorising and reciting large chunks of the Bible. One particular practice that emerged during 1907, which remains common in Korean churches to the present, is unison prayer, in which all those present at a meeting pray aloud at the same moment, each devotee standing and saying his or her own individual prayer. It is a form of collective speaking in tongues, in which secrets can be spoken aloud in company but remain unheard, and in which repentance is both searingly individual and profoundly corporate.

1907 was also the year when the first self-styled *sunbogeum*, Full Gospel or Pure Gospel Church was founded in Korea, with a Pentecostal-style emphasis on healing and God's love made real in this life. Many churches have taken on that label, but it is associated above all with this one, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, the largest single congregation in the world with around 700,000 members: this is only the central hall; there are dozens of others joined in by CCTV. It was founded in a tent by a pair of penniless seminarians in 1958. By their account, it was based on their highly distinctive practises of prayer. Choe Ja-Sil, the older of the pair, developed a practice she called 'triple prayer', combining prayer in tongues, prayer while fasting, and nightlong prayer vigils, and trained the church's cell-groups in the practice. She died in 1989, but to this day, more than 80% of the church's cell group leaders are women, and women outnumber men amongst its formal ministers – even as the church restricts formal preaching and pastoring to men. Meanwhile, her younger disciple Cho Yonggi, who at 80 is still leader of the church, had a slightly different practice: 'specific prayer', being led by God to pray for very particular outcomes. For example, early in his ministry (so the story goes) he prayed for a bicycle, and a desk and chair for his office. God, however, told him to be more specific. So he prayed for 'a desk out of Philippine mahogany, a chair with a steel frame and little wheels on the bottom, and a bicycle made in the USA'. The following day, although troubled by doubt, he preached that he had actually received those things – which, as of that moment, he had not. His congregation, knowing that he was as near-destitute as they were, were incredulous. Yet by the time he was challenged to produce the objects, donors had provided them.

A preacher's tale, of course. But Cho extended this principle far beyond bicycles. He would spend whole nights in prayer, such that by the morning he was too hoarse to speak: passengers at the bus station near the tent church complained about his loud praying. He prayed for healing, fully expecting miracles, but also, crucially and notoriously, for worldly prosperity. God, on this view, does not want his people to be poor, but to enjoy what this world has to offer. If they pray in faith for wealth, they will receive it.

This so-called 'prosperity gospel' has been much derided, not least by other Korean Protestants, but in its Korean context it is not quite as crass as it looks. Never before in human history had any mass human society lifted more people out of poverty as fast as in South Korea in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The Full Gospel Church was founded amongst the urban destitute, dislocated people who did not know that they stood on the cusp of an extraordinary economic boom. Even secular economists used the word 'miracle'. The prosperity for which these uprooted city workers prayed poured down on them. How could they not thank God for the blessings they were receiving?

At the same time, a different but weirdly parallel story was unfolding in Korea's giant neighbour. China had attracted more attention from missionaries than any other single country in the nineteenth century. By 1949, when China fell under Communist rule, Chinese Christianity was highly visible, with its strongest presence in the cities, and it was making a transition from missionary leadership and support to indigenous control, but it still had a long way to go. It was widely seen as a westerners' religion, and still widely resented as such. It was also associated with the defeated Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, who had himself been baptised Protestant in 1930, but whose conversion, like many others, seemed in retrospect to be about convenience and political positioning. The new Communist regime saw Christianity as doubly doomed: both as a matter of basic Marxist principle, in which religion's destiny was to wither, and in the particular Chinese case because it was an imperialist imposition, which a newly strong and unified China could shake off. Those two assumptions drove the regime's early policy: Christianity, like other religions only more so, would be fenced off and then allowed quietly to die in peace. As the new premier Zhou Enlai explained to Christian leaders in 1950:

We think your beliefs untrue and false, therefore if we are right, the people will reject them, and your church will decay. If you are right, then the people will believe you, but as we are sure that you are wrong, we are prepared for that risk.

That might sound like a fair and bracing challenge, but in practice during the 1950s and early 1960s pressure steadily ratcheted up. All Protestants were expected to join a single, so-called 'united front' church organisation, to sever all foreign links, to avoid proselytisation or any kind of youth work, including baptising children. The numbers of churches were progressively restricted, such that in Shanghai, for example, the number of churches fell from over 200 in 1949 to 11 in 1965. Numbers of clergy were also capped. Getting time off work to attend church on a Sunday became difficult. Known Christians had their careers blocked, they were barred from the Communist Party, and they might be obliged to attend political study sessions on the evils of religion, or to denounce fellow-believers as 'rightists'. Any movements that refused to go along with the policy were suppressed with some severity, and several leaders endured long prison sentences. Unsurprisingly, congregations shrank fast. In 1963 there was not a single baptism in Shanghai, and only four over the following two years. And all this, it turned out, was prelude: with the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, all Chinese

churches and temples of any kind were closed, and would remain so for thirteen years. It looked as if China had successfully suppressed Christianity.

But as in Korea, missionary-led Christianity was not the only story. I do not have time today to do more than glance at the weirdest and most blood-soaked episode of indigenised Chinese Christianity, or quasi-Christianity, in the so-called Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of the mid-nineteenth century: a huge rising against the Qing dynasty led by a failed civil servant who had had a vision, read a first-generation Chinese Protestant tract, and concluded that he was Jesus' younger brother and had been called to establish a heavenly kingdom in which only God was emperor, not some blasphemous human. He set up a theocratic regime which imposed a quasi-Christian quasi-modernisation across a swathe of central China for much of the 1850s, enforcing it with apocalyptic severity, in which, for example, any soldier who could not recite the Ten Commandments correctly was summarily beheaded. It was eventually suppressed by the Qing, with reprisals on a genocidal scale: the total death toll is normally estimated at around twenty million. It left China's rulers from then to now with a conviction that religion in general and Christianity in particular are dangerous. Whether it helped to seed the spread of more orthodox Christianity in later years is more contentious, but it is, at least, a striking coincidence that the areas of Christian strength in modern China map closely, though not perfectly, onto the regions once held by the Taiping regime.

More to the point, early twentieth-century China had seen the emergence of a number of independent Chinese-led churches, from one-man revivalist outfits to more structured denominations like the True Jesus Church with its messianic leader, or the Jesus Family, a group which embraced strict communal living in its own villages in the 1930s, or the Little Flock, a group with some debts to the Brethren which embraced radical egalitarianism and opposition to structures, forms or hierarchies of any kind. All of these were of course suppressed with some ferocity by the Communists. But they showed already that a genuinely popular, indigenous Chinese Protestantism was possible under the right circumstances, and bizarrely, the right circumstances seem to have been those of the Cultural Revolution.

One of the foremost historians of Chinese Christianity reckons that Protestant numbers increased five- or six-fold during this period. It seems that even before the total suppression of the public churches in 1966, some believers began to meet for worship and fellowship illegally, in private, in their homes, instead. During the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, these so-called 'house churches' had the stage to themselves. It is not unusual for Protestants in modern China to point out, proudly, the woods or mountainsides where their predecessors gathered by night for worship during the Cultural Revolution, legends which are doubtless true but which do not perhaps tell us very much. Strikingly, though, there is very little evidence that this was happening in the cities, the old heartland of Chinese Protestantism. There may have been some house groups in Nanjing, but oral history work undertaken in Shanghai has so far uncovered no evidence at all of underground Protestant groups meeting in that city, merely, at best, two or three members of a single family sometimes meeting in near-silence to pray or to recite memorised portions of their now-illegal Bibles.

Urban believers could do no more than hunker down and wait for the world to change. But their rural brethren needed less patience. Communities of the supposedly suppressed True Jesus Church and Jesus Family swam back into being. A formidable network of underground congregations emerged in the early 1970s in Henan province, an old stronghold of the Little Flock. In the 1980s Protestant growth in the province would spark official alarm about 'Christianity fever'.

How was all this possible? Well, the Communist Party itself must take a good deal of the credit. All the purges and denunciations achieved their aim: they broke the association between Christianity and foreign imperialism. Kicking away the Chinese churches' missionary crutches was not kindly meant, but some at least of them discovered that they could still stand, and those who had already left missionaries behind them were no longer tainted by association. The rural Protestant who, in 1996, told a researcher she was surprised to learn there were any Protestants outside China may have been an outlier. But when the Party forced Protestants to stop being imperialist running dogs, they did them a favour.

The Cultural Revolution itself brought Protestants three blessings in, it must be said, a very convincing disguise. First, the movement's brutality was counterproductive, as Maoism slowly lost credibility and the victims gained it. For the first time in its Chinese history, Protestantism was unambiguously the religion of the oppressed rather than of aggressors or collaborators. Second, the sheer chaos of the Cultural Revolution created new freedoms in practice even as they were being denied in theory, especially in rural areas. The Red Guards' onslaught was terrifying, but hardly systematic. A movement which targets the educated is unlikely to have a well-running bureaucracy. By 1968, different Red Guard factions were close to civil war and the state's administrative control was faltering. In rural areas especially, discreet believers could suddenly get away with quite a lot.

Third, in one critical sense, the Cultural Revolution actively helped the Protestant cause. Its attempt to build a new, Communist culture self-evidently failed, but its effort at destroying existing Chinese cultural patterns was another matter. A cultural scorched-earth policy makes it easy for invasive species to take root, especially if their seeds have already been widely distributed. As one disapproving Chinese academic put it in the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution 'caused a vacuum to form in the minds of many people, giving an opportunity for religion.' Here Protestantism's unique advantage came into play: its weightlessness. Unlike all of its religious rivals, even Catholicism, Protestantism had no material requirements at all. It cost no money, needed no professionals and left no evidence. It did not even need Bibles (which was as well, since the Red Guards had ensured that there

were none), as long as there were people who could remember the stories, or short-wave radios which could pick up transmissions from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Philippines. It needed prayers, and songs, and faith, and the name Jesus. One travelling exorcist and storyteller of the time, interviewed thirty years later, sounded almost wistful for those heroic days. The miracles which had once flowed so plentifully, she observed, had become far fewer, but that was only to be expected:

Now we don't need those works anymore, for now we have the Bible, the hymnbook, and pastors who preach. At that time, we didn't have any of these. The only thing was that God spoke to you directly.

The talk of miracles is important: plenty of testimonies suggest that miracles, both the promise of them and their actual experience, were critical in attracting converts and convincing sceptics. The prominence of women evangelists, again, is also important: this rural Protestant resurgence was overwhelmingly female, over 70% on most accounts, and the Chinese church remains one of the most female-dominated in the world. Two other spiritual themes stand out from these accounts. One is the ability of Protestant Christianity to find meaning in and draw strength from suffering and persecution, a trait which has always made Protestantism stubbornly hard to eradicate by force, which was particularly valuable during the Cultural Revolution, and which remains significant in China down to the present. The other is the way that Protestantism in China came to be associated with outstanding moral rectitude. But, for example, one 1987 study of rural Protestant growth by a non-Christian Chinese sociologist commented on converts' moral transformation, from healing ancient quarrels, through abandoning alcohol and tobacco, to returning money to shopkeepers who had given them too much change. 'People from all walks of life, including numerous cadres (despite the fact that they are nonbelievers), all speak well of these people.' Christians in many ages have aspired to this reputation. Few have succeeded.

One feature of that reputation is a strict ethic of non-resistance to their oppressors. Chinese churches have – at least until recently, there have been hints of something different in the face of the most recent crackdowns – Chinese churches have tended to be punctilious in refusing to confront the regime, in cooperating with the police as far as they can, in avoiding conflict of any kind. That brings us to one final question which I would like to finish with, drawing these various cases together. The cases of local, indigenised Protestantism around the world which I have talked about are extremely varied, but they do have one thing in common. These Protestants have found themselves under politically repressive regimes of one sort or another, from the military dictatorships of Korea and Latin America in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, to the Communist regime in China and the apartheid state in South Africa. And with only a few exceptions, these indigenised, local Protestant groups have deliberately and self-consciously refused to protest against their rulers. In Korea under Park Chung-hee's dictatorship, one Presbyterian Church joined with many Catholics in openly opposing the regime, and developed what it called *minjung* theology, a theology of the masses, analogous to Latin American liberation theology. There was interest in *minjung* theology from thinkers all around the world, and a string of conferences, publications, and so forth. But within Korea it fell flat. That one church did increase its membership by 11% in the late 1970s, but the much larger mainstream Presbyterian Church grew by over 70% in the same period. There is a similar story in South Africa, where the theological opposition to apartheid came from the international denominations such as the Anglicans, the Methodists and indeed one wing of the Reformed Church, whereas most of the African Independent churches were determinedly apolitical and some even carried favour with the regime. In 1985, as the newly-formed United Democratic Front was mobilising civil-society groups for an unprecedented wave of resistance to the apartheid regime, the African Zion Christian Church invited President P. W. Botha to preach at its Easter 1985 service, and invested him with a church honour. Likewise, Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile was met with a joint declaration by 32 Chilean Pentecostal and evangelical denominations stated that the coup was 'God's answer to the prayers of all the believers who recognised that Marxism was the expression of satanic power'. Pinochet became an active patron of the Pentecostal Methodist Church, used their huge church in Santiago as the site of his annual national thanksgiving service, and even asked its pastor to serve as a minister in his government. I should add that he refused.

So the case for the prosecution – and it is often talked about in these terms – is that modern indigenised global Protestantism is the dictators' friend, and is inherently politically right-wing, if indeed it is not actively supported by the CIA and by American denominational links. There is some truth in this. The moralising, self-help ethos which sees politics as inherently corrupt and corrupting, and which looks to God's power rather than the state's power for salvation, does fit more easily with the modern centre-right than the modern centre-left, although the racial egalitarianism, anti-nationalism and the strong line on domestic violence would lean the other way. It is also true that most of these churches have long assumed that Marxism is the enemy, a feeling which is generally reciprocated. But I think our wish to label them as right- or left-wing both misses the point and reveals a deeper oddity about the modern world: that is, the widespread conviction, which has dominated European and European-derived societies since at least the French Revolution, that politics fundamentally matters, and that most human problems are susceptible of political solutions. Even when it does not produce utopianism, this pervasive gospel of politics leads us to presume that there is moral value in political engagement, such that, for example, we regard it as virtuous to take an active interest in political affairs, and we applaud when extremely vulnerable peoples across the world engage in political protest at considerable risk to themselves and with very uncertain prospects of achieving anything. Now I am as much a believer in the gospel of politics as anyone else, but I do think it is worth noticing that in the context of human history, this is a rather odd belief. After all, most of what makes for real happiness in most human lives has nothing to do with politics, and a great deal of human misery is apolitical too. The really radical, disturbing and dangerous idea that modern indigenised Protestantism has been quietly promulgating is that political life is simply not very important, and that it needs to be kept firmly

in its place. China is I think the test case here: the so-called house churches there, whose numbers are impossible to judge but which almost certainly exceed fifty million people, have the same political mood as indigenised Protestants elsewhere – that is, patriotic acceptance of the legitimacy of their rulers, punctilious avoidance of confrontation and obedience to the law as far as that is possible, a determined refusal to engage with political issues, and a wish to be left alone to run their own affairs and to call on God for help. The difference is that while many merely authoritarian regimes have been willing to accept and work with that kind of apolitical withdrawal, a proper one-party state cannot. In that context, the very attempt to carve out an apolitical space is a politically subversive act.

Our own age has produced two huge international religious movements, comparable to one another in their timescale, their scope and their global reach. One of them, jihadist or revolutionary Islam, has attracted enormous attention, chiefly of course because it is explicitly and centrally political and indeed military in its ambitions. The other, renewalist or broad-Pentecostal Protestantism, which has gone from a standing start to half a billion adherents in a century, has been almost unnoticed, chiefly, I would argue, because it has showed so little interest in political issues but has focused instead on renewal and resourcing the lives of individual believers and of communities. How long it can maintain its political blind spot remains unclear: certainly in parts of Africa where these churches now form near-majorities, Protestants of this kind are being drawn into politics, not least by those who want their votes. But for the time being, at least, this does remain a local religion, not only in its variety but also in the sense that it is focused on localities, communities and individuals, even as it quietly turns itself into the local religion of the world.

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