

Together with all the saints

It would not surprise me if many readers did not even know where to find the Central African Republic on the map. It is squeezed in between Chad, both Congo's and Sudan, with Cameroon on the other side. The country is burdened by a severely violent past under the rule of the dictator Chief Bokassa in the sixties and seventies. However, during his reign there was explosive growth of Christians in this African country, so that most of its inhabitants now call themselves Christians.

Also amazing is that, in spite of all the suffering he had caused his people, this chief received forgiveness from his people and was allowed to remain in his country after his deposition. It is this same Chief Bokassa that made a large plot of land in the capital of Bangui available for the founding of an evangelical theological faculty for all of French-speaking Africa. Observe God's wondrous way of commanding the hearts of kings and governors.

Unique university

The FATEB is a unique university in the African context. American missionaries supported the institution in order to prevent ministers from the different French-speaking countries from being forced to further their education in the West. Aside from the culture shock that this often caused, it also often led to estrangement and adaptation problems upon returning to the mother country. In addition, the founders sought connection with the churches that had to support the transferral of their students and pastors, in order for them to apply for study at this university. Most of the students have already followed a Bible school training in their own country, or bear the experience of many years as a church minister. The university aims to equip the students in such a way that when they return to their homeland they themselves can teach or fulfil a special function within their churches. In the past years it has become evident that for the most part, those who have studied in Bangui fulfil responsible positions in their own churches.

At this moment the Faculty has evolved into a renowned university, having received both national and international recognition. This has resulted in the fact that – and this may be stated with some pride - it has recently received its graduation rights. The study program has a BA-MA structure (bachelor, master) and it has now become possible to confer a Ph.D. The faculty also offers a three-year course for women. This training makes an important contribution to the education of minister's wives, so that they in turn can teach in their own environment. In addition, the Bible is being translated into all sorts of African languages and it is also possible to follow a course as translator.

The Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui was founded in 1974 by the protestant churches of the Central African Republic. These churches cannot be easily categorised from a Reformed perspective. Let us say that most of them can be best characterised as Baptist churches. In English church culture they would be placed among the evangelicals, Christians faithful to Scripture. The Theological Faculty is open to various protestant denominations, which is why reformed ministers receive ample space to teach their own reformed theology. Since the beginning of the nineties there has been increasing contact between the FATEB and reformed churches in the Netherlands, the latter often supplying guest lecturers. These teachers are sent out by the EVTA (Evangelische Toerusting Afrika) Foundation. Rev. Egbert Brink was the first reformed (liberated) minister to lecture here in 2002 and, more recently in 2008. The student body primarily comprises pastors and ministers from various African church denominations, from different French-speaking countries: Chad, both Congo's, Burkina-Faso, Ivory Coast, Benin, Rwanda, Malawi and Cameroon.

Cultural contexts

In 2002 and 2008 I exchanged Holland for Bangui for a month in order to lecture on the subject of Old Testament exegesis. This education was directed at the explanation of wisdom, especially of the Book of Ecclesiastes. At first I was under the impression that I would be mostly teaching. But it soon became apparent that I would also receive a great deal. It is very instructive to see how God's Word is received in a culture so different to ours. When reading Ecclesiastes with the students, for

example, the “vanity-character” of our reality became all the clearer. In the African culture, as opposed to ours, life is experienced as unstable, fleeting and sometimes blatantly absurd. The relativity of life is part of African culture. At the very moment in which I was lecturing on the meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel* (vanity, fleeting) a helicopter appeared and circled around the university buildings. Immediately fear was in the eyes of the students, for this could mean a coup! And they ducked under their desks... The Central African Republic is not one of Africa’s most stable countries. And shortly after my first stay in 2002 a coup was indeed carried out, with all the accompanying damage. The bullet-holes in the wall were still visible during my last visit. On the other hand it became clear to me how the wisdom of the Ecclesiastic, i.e. the Preacher, was put into practice, so that, in spite of all, one could find joy in an existence in living connection with the Creator. How wonderful and beautiful it was to see how people savour fellowship during a simple communal meal. Such warm companionship and strong sense of community! When returning to western society, one becomes aware of how individualistic western people have become, and how strong the relationships are in Africa. It makes one homesick with longing for that warm heartfelt way of relating to one another. I once asked one of the professors who had studied in the USA what had given him the greatest shock in western society. He answered, the fact that people are capable of living next to you for months without having any significant contact. His neighbour went his own way, lived his own life, totally self-absorbed. The loneliness he experienced and noticed, with so many people around, was frightening. The African culture stresses the importance of hospitality in the same way that ancient- eastern culture did.

Much closer

Generally speaking, African culture stands much closer to the Bible than our own culture. Occurrences in the Bible that seem abstract to us suddenly become tangible in Africa. Take for example the account of God visiting Abraham’s tent. That it then takes hours for the meal to be prepared is completely logical in African culture. Also, an African is not surprised when one tells the story of the making of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham. There, forming a blood-street in between severed animals is understandable and tangible.

People also react very differently to certain Bible texts. The phenomenon of polygamy is looked upon differently; taking into account the social aspects and the care for women whose husband becomes a Christian, so that they are not cast out without protection. Yet it is so that a man who keeps his wives is not allowed to fulfil responsible positions in the church. Suddenly there are nuances that are not easily picked up in our western culture. Also critical questions are put forward to western Christians. How can they match the modern male-female relations, where distinctions are levelled out, given Bible texts that clearly make a marked distinction between the two? By accepting cultural phenomena, are western Christians not assimilating? And do not they, too, have traditions from which they cannot cut loose? Do they always find it easy to place God’s Word above their culture? It is surprising that many Christian churches in African countries have a Baptist background. Looking at the important place given to relationships and family bonds, one would expect that these Biblical lines would be picked up, especially in a culture where circumcision, covenant and family tradition play such an important part. It is probable that the fact that the first missionaries in these countries were Baptist has something to do with it. But there is plenty of opportunity to point out these ground rules of covenant and relationships in the Bible with the aid of reformed theology.

Another sensitive matter also plays an important role amongst Christians in Africa. In the old days white missionaries strictly forbade the use of any kind of alcohol. Up to this day this is the common behaviour pattern in most churches. Not that alcohol consumption does not occur... but as a Christian, it is generally just not done. It is even normal that a different drink is used at the Lord’s Supper. The fact that the Ecclesiastic (the Preacher) recommends the occasional use of wine during meals was therefore received with some wonder. Still, it can be wise to continue the discouragement of alcohol among Christians. Many a person knows from experience what havoc alcohol can cause. Abstaining from alcohol has done much good. But it is shocking for them to hear later that the white missionaries themselves did consume their portion of drink, while strictly enforcing the alcohol ban on the black population. This brought Matthew 23:3 to the mind of a student, where Jesus says: So

you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Christian response to Islam

For a while now the Faculty also offers a special program with emphasis on evangelisation amongst Muslims. Prof. Dr. Moussa Bongoyok is responsible for this. He himself is an ex-Muslim, taking his doctors degree in the USA in 2006 on the subject of the Christian response to the radical Islam, *'Responding to Islamism: the wisdom of a holistic approach'*.

Much can be learned from the relationship between Christianity and Islam in Africa. Prof. Bongoyok is inspiring in the way he approaches the other religion with great love and feeling by first looking for common roots. His thesis dealt with the theological response to Islamism (radical Islam). According to him, the fundamental issue is how to give a comprehensive, sound reaction to Islamism. To do this, one must take the underlying causes into account. Why have these Muslims become so radical? The underlying causes have been named in the so-called *Dekmejian, Vol, Woodberry model*. In their model, these scholars claim that it is about a combination of factors (historical, psychological, political, social-economic, ethnic, cultural and dogmatic). They name a variety of causes: aversion to the increasing moral lawlessness in the West, up to and including pornography on TV and the internet, resistance to enrichment at the cost of the South and the East, the conquest of land and sending out of soldiers, the power of the Americans. Next to this, education in the Koran and interpretations of violence texts also play a role.

In my opinion a clear diagnosis is made in this model, but no more than that. What good is it to you when a doctor suffices with making a diagnosis, but does not supply the medicine!? In his thesis, Prof. Bongoyok came to the conclusion that a diagnosis alone is insufficient i.e. that something should also be done. Sometimes actions are initiated, be it on a small scale. In France an attempt was made to prevent extremism by financing a school for imams, by gaining indirect influence. But this will never suffice. Usually only certain aspects are touched upon, while one should try to tackle as many causes as possible, in all areas. Political solutions also do not cut it. Much more has to be done. The challenge is to approach and exercise influence over every one of the causes mentioned. Islam cannot be judged in its totality. One might compare Islam to a giant forest, harbouring a great number of currents and many different directions. Some groups are violent, others are not. As far as violence is concerned, he is of the opinion that both Christians and Muslims should reject this. For violence has no friends. Violence brings devastation to those at who it is aimed, but also ends up destroying those using it. Violence is never a solution: it starts by killing others, and ends with killing each other. History in different African countries has proved that most clearly.

The situation in Iraq is also proof of it. It started out as a war between Muslims and non-Muslims, with the Shiites already rejoicing that the Americans were helping them. But soon Shiites and Sunnites started killing each other and attacking each other's mosques, under protest of prominent Shiites who were strongly against this.

Thus one cannot state *in general* that Islam is, at heart, a violent religion. That depends strongly on the interpretation of certain texts. It is true that some texts take on a violent tone. You have to differentiate. There are groups within Islam that, together with Khomeini, say: the most pure joy can be derived by killing someone in Allah's name. But certainly not all Muslims agree with this. A moderate Islam does also exist. In Algeria, for example, the government shut down several churches, but a group of prominent intellectual Muslims made a strong public protest. And in Burkina Faso local Muslims helped build a church and provided materials free of charge.

Christ's international work

There was much to discover about the way Christ works in different cultures from within the various African countries. Christianity is the only religion that has broken through in every continent, every ethnic group, in every culture. In the 21st century Christianity is the largest religion in North and South America, Oceania, Southern Africa, the island realms in the Pacific, Asia, South Korea, China, and the Philippines. And still the explosive growth of the 2000 million Christians continues: 560 million in Europe, 480 million in Latin America, 313 million in Asia. Can this growth continue up

to 2025, and in the Southern Hemisphere? Most of the 2600 million will then be living in Africa and South-America. If the growth continues, 70% of all missionaries will, in the future, come from the third world.

God's Spirit works through all those cultures. He speaks all languages, and makes us understand each other. All those life-dwellings furnished so differently. But there is nothing wrong with differences - all those 13000 different peoples in the world. Everybody belongs to a people and a language. We all need each other, for they are God the Father's people, and Christ is Lord of all the nations. We need all those cultural differences in order to know the love of Christ and to see that no one binds together like He does. The bond is already there when you meet a totally different culture, if you are willing to accept it, without trying to force your own habits and traditions on others. You are amazed at the space - how wide and long and high Christ's work is!

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

If you are willing to learn from each other, you do not glorify your own house-style! The catching enthusiasm, praise and worship in Latin America, the quiet in Asia, the reflection and creativity in Europe and America, hunger for the gospel in Africa. We cannot do without them and they cannot do without us. Paul's intense prayer in Ephesians 3:16-19 ends with the glorification of God. With fullness of God, filled to the measure of the fullness of God, that is three times over. It started with the power of the Spirit, being filled by God with faith, love and knowledge. That is all you have to do – go in this direction with God. Becoming full of God, more and more as you go. We are always inadequate in our prayers to God. But when God starts working in a person's life, something grows, full and fuller with God, until His presence fills even the tiniest corner. God's Spirit will not be satisfied before it does. Christ said: My Father's house has many dwellings. A palace to live in. God will dwell with them, all those different peoples, God Himself be with them (Rev. 21:4). God is all in all! The Spirit is in full control. So that people may forever radiate the Glory of God and Christ. Together with all the saints, a multi-coloured multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev. 7:9) - *The Internationale* everlasting!

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