



# THE LEADING EDGE

by PHILLIP E. JOHNSON

## The Heart of Africa

MY INTERNET READING has once again led my attention toward Africa. On December 27, 2008, the London *Times* published a short article by Matthew Parris with the long and attention-grabbing title, “As an Atheist I Truly Believe Africa Needs God.” The even longer subtitle summarizes the bottom line: “Missionaries, not aid money, are the solution to Africa’s biggest problem—the crushing passivity of the people’s mindset.” Parris doesn’t explain why he is still an atheist, but he does a stunning job of explaining why his view of Christian missionary efforts in Africa has drastically changed in recent years.

In late 2008, Parris returned to Malawi—which he knew as Nyasaland when he was a boy there—to visit the work of a charity that helps provide rural Malawians with safe water. Parris was impressed with the humanitarian work, but he was even more impressed with the changes he saw in Africans who had become strong Christians. Gone was the passivity he had been accustomed to see in their faces and manners, replaced by a confidence and self-reliance that he felt he had to credit, despite his atheism, to their new-found Christian faith. “Christianity changes people’s hearts,” he concluded. “The rebirth is real. The change is good.”

We are left to wonder how a spiritual message that Parris believes to be untrue could have such a visible and healthy effect on converts. If a God who doesn’t exist can work such miracles, think what he could do if he really is what the missionaries say he is. I could speculate on how Parris might explain the paradox, but I hope he will attempt it himself in a later essay.

Very well. But if Africa needs the faith that Christian missionaries bring, what about post-Christian, Islamizing Europe, or even superficially Christian North America? Andrew Rice nailed that question in the *New York Times* on April 12, 2009, in a long article with the short title, “Mission from Africa.”

Rice began by introducing his readers to Daniel Adajy-Adeniran, the Nigerian pastor of a storefront church in the Bronx, who intends to evangelize the whole United States. His pentecostal denomination, called the Redeemed Christian Church of God, was founded

a few decades ago in a Lagos shanty-town. It has since gained millions of adherents in Nigeria, at the same time building a worldwide missionary network to over 100 nations. Pastor Adajy-Adeniran is spurred on in his ambitious mission by the certainty that the Holy Spirit is working through him, aided by the earthly factor of demographics.

Rice reports that Africa has the world’s fastest-growing population, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, a fact that implies that the horrifying AIDS epidemic may not be claiming as many lives as some imagine. This population growth has been accompanied by an even greater growth in the number of African Christians. So great is this growth that scholars are now saying that the population center of Christianity is shifting away from Europe and North America to a vast region loosely denoted as the “Global South,” but more usefully described as the nations to which Europeans used to send missionaries and colonial administrators.

These days, the traffic in missionaries, and even Catholic priests, is going in the opposite direction. (According to Rice, the world’s largest Catholic seminary is now in Nigeria, and probably they send priests to Ireland by now, as well as to the United States). This is thrilling news.

Still, I will not be joining the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Its worship style is too boisterous for my tastes, and I worry that a church that is so eager to expand may inadvertently take in some swindlers who are looking for a credulous population to exploit.

Yet, although my head is cautious, my heart is with the Nigerians. I love stories of underdogs achieving impossible triumphs, and for a Nigerian church to save the world by discovering a spiritual truth that we complacent citizens of the “developed” nations cannot see or have forgotten would be one of the greatest underdog triumphs ever. I just hope the Nigerians can match in street smarts what they have in enthusiasm, so they can dodge the pitfalls on the way to glory.

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