

“He must increase, but I must decrease”

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‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3.30). These words are offered to us in the fourth gospel as a comment by John the Baptist, not only on his relationship with Jesus, but also on the relationship between two groups of people—his own disciples and those of Jesus. Both had been baptizing. While Jesus himself had earlier been baptized by John, he had now developed a separate movement and more and more people, it seems, were transferring from one to the other. While the two movements were thus distinct, there remained a loose communion and much sympathy between them. Yet, as Jesus’ group advanced, so John’s declined. This can hardly not have been painful for John and bewildering for some of his more staunch disciples. But he accepted it.

I would suggest that this relationship, as also the appositeness of John’s comment upon it, provides a model for the interpretation of a number of subsequent crucial turning points within Christian history.

There is, first, that of the late apostolic period. On the one side was the senior church, that of Jerusalem. ‘You see, brother,’ Paul was told on one of his visits to the city, ‘how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law’ (Acts 21.20). Here was a considerable group of Christians, some of whom had undoubtedly known Jesus personally, some of whom were related to him by family ties, and all of whom were immersed in the scriptures. It was, then, an established and a learned church, confident in its own position, in its seniority, and in the prime importance of its chosen agenda: the convincing of the Jews. Upon the other side lay a growing network of somewhat scruffy little diaspora churches—at Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonika, Rome, and many another Greek and Latin town. They too, of course, had started with a largely Jewish membership but, as the years passed, the proportion of non-Jews grew, while links with local synagogues were

painfully sundered. Soon Jewish converts would be few in comparison with the number of new gentile Christians. The tension between these two wings of Christianity—Jerusalem upon the one hand, the churches of the gentile world upon the other—is one of the principal underlying themes of the New Testament, especially of Paul's letters and of Acts. These gentile churches were younger than that of Jerusalem, and they lacked its learning. Many of their members had not been brought up upon the scriptures, and their knowledge of Moses, of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, must often have seemed pretty superficial in comparison with what was taken for granted in Jerusalem.

Now we know that the future lay with gentile Christianity, that—after the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70—the Jewish-Christian church would almost disappear, but at the time this was not at all so clear. The weight of learning, experience, tradition, lay upon the one side; only growth and an often amateurish enthusiasm, upon the other. Communion remained between the two, but also considerable misunderstanding and a danger of rupture: the collection Paul made among the gentile churches was undoubtedly intended as a gesture of fellowship at a time when schism—or at least a profound, and increasingly all-embracing, failure in mutual sympathy—seemed not impossible. 'He must increase, but I must decrease'. Could the Jerusalem Christians have the vision, the humility, the clear-eyed fortitude, to go as far as that? To accept the implications of the onward march of a mysterious providence which would make of the Church quite quickly something vastly different from what a devout Christian Jew living in Jerusalem around the year 50 would have hoped and prayed for? The shift to a Church which would soon for the most part no longer understand the very language of Jesus, whose authoritative scriptures would be written in another tongue, is something subsequent Christians have taken so very easily for granted that we seldom sympathise with the predicament—painfully and easily misunderstood—of the early Jewish Christian, or think upon the strangeness of that immense cultural and geographical leap the Church made in its first hundred years of existence.

Let us travel on almost a thousand years, to the seventh and subsequent centuries, to ponder the ecclesial situation that had by then arisen. We find a Church in the Greek-speaking lands of the eastern Mediterranean, now grown immensely confident, rather conservative, immersed in subtle intellectual disputation, a church of the state and the establishment: the church of Constantinople and Antioch and Ephesus and all the lands around. I have found it hard, when teaching students in Zimbabwe the elements of Church history, to make sense to them of the fact that all the principal early councils of the Church were held at places like Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon, all located in

modern Turkey, one of the least Christian of countries. The councils were held there because, through all these centuries, that was indubitably the heartland of Christianity: where the bishops were most numerous, the theologians the most learned, the libraries the most extensive, the monasteries the most renowned, the congregations the wealthiest.

Yet again, by the time I am speaking of, we can contrast the elder brother with a younger—the churches of western and northern Europe, of France, Ireland, England, Germany, Poland, in due course Scandinavia and Russia, lands and peoples only recently and pretty imperfectly converted. What can Willibrord or Boniface have mattered to the academics of Constantinople? These new churches were poor, backward and seemingly rather brash. Their buildings could in no way compare with the splendid edifices of the east; their libraries were threadbare; their theologians conspicuous mainly by their absence. And they certainly lacked the accumulation of capital the Church enjoyed in the east.

I sometimes think of Theodore of Tarsus, that remarkable Greek who became Archbishop of Canterbury in the seventh century, and his colleague and close friend the African monk Adrian, abbot of the monastery of St. Augustine at Canterbury—two sons of old and learned churches. What a struggle it must have been for Adrian to shape his school of theology in the wilds of Kent, but at least he had forty years in which to do it. I ask myself what they can have thought of English Christianity at that time. It certainly lacked the subtle sophistication they had been accustomed to in Carthage or Athens. And yet the balance was again about to shift decisively. For the future of Christianity, Canterbury would matter enormously while Carthage, Tarsus, Ephesus would soon be almost lost, weighty only, rather sadly, in the archaeology of religion. 'He must increase, but I must decrease'. Could they have had the vision and the detachment to see it that way? To sense something of the extraordinary mobility of the Christian community, the capacity not only to gain lands but also to lose them, to switch languages and cultures, to have this odd sort of pilgrim history, despite the Church's contrasting power to put down deep roots, to build superb churches, to be incarnated in a million communities. How very different and less mobile has been the mood and the geography of Islam!

And so, leaping another thousand years, let us turn to consider our modern predicament. We can, perhaps, best make sense of it in the light of these earlier situations. For centuries the Christian heartland has been Europe. 'Europe is the Faith,' declared Belloc provocatively. For a long while, it seemed true. There was nothing geographically Catholic about the Christian Church at the end of the Middle Ages, in the time of Martin Luther and Thomas More. Even

the few surviving remnants of Christianity in the non-white world—in Persia, China, Nubia or Ethiopia—were either disappearing or under very great pressure. And no one in the heartlands much cared. Even in the subsequent centuries of enhanced missionary activity Christianity hardly seemed to take root elsewhere, except in a very colonialist manner.

Then, suddenly, and hardly before the twentieth century, there appeared the modern break-through into the southern hemisphere. There were, I have estimated, some one million Christians in sub-Saharan Africa in 1900, five million in 1925, 25 million in 1950, one hundred million in 1975, maybe two hundred million today. Precision is impossible in such a matter, but the general reliability and meaning of those figures is hardly contestable. Add the already more vocal churches of Latin America and important parts of Asia. The growth is fantastic in the poorer continents, the poorer strata of world society, just as the decline in Britain, France, Italy, is equally undeniable. 'He must increase, but I must decrease'. There seems to be required a strange balance of gain and loss: the rejection of the elder brother, the election of the younger. Of course, just as in the first century, or the eighth, the difference in learning, sophistication, experience, appears very striking. We certainly cannot compare the theology departments, the libraries, the academic paraphernalia, of third-world countries with those of Oxford, Tübingen or Louvain. These ancient centres retain unquestionably their intellectual mastery coupled, perhaps, with a certain insouciance as to the world around them. It may be just a slight indication of this that my own *History of African Christianity 1950—1975* is not even to be found in the library of the Theology Faculty of this university.

The younger churches of the southern hemisphere are clearly not ready, nor do they desire, to go it alone. They still need to tap the learning, experience, and extended heart of their elder brethren at their best. They can still benefit from, and greatly appreciate, a Theodore of Tarsus, an Abbot Adrian, a Mother Teresa. Nevertheless, if we have eyes, we should be able to discern that at the moment we are living in the middle of another of these decisive shifts in Christian history. By the end of the century a considerable majority of Christians is likely to be living in what we call, loosely, the southern hemisphere (including, that is to say, India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Mexico, all geographically north of the Equator), and a previously almost unthinkable breakthrough into the non-western world will have been accomplished—the fruit, one may say, of awkwardly obstinate 19th-century missionaries, of the power of biblical translation into a hundred languages, of the most elementary mission schools, of all sorts of obscure interaction, of trade, and marriage, and belief, of mind and body but—above all and in all—of a sudden

sense of recognised identity between the masses of the third world and Jesus, a crucified carpenter, a man who wrote nothing and had nowhere to lay his head: a leap of faith and hope. It is not just a matter of counting heads but, far more, of creativity in worship, dynamic witness in life. The impact of the figure of the martyred Archbishop Romero of El Salvador says it all, or of Bishop Tutu, or that strange prophet of Zaïre who spent thirty years in a colonial prison and whose son, whom he never spoke to, leads today a church of more than a million faithful—Simon Kimbangu. One could go on, almost indefinitely, naming teachers, martyrs, prophets, who have been incarnating Christianity anew in lands where until recently it barely existed: creating for it new sources of dynamism, new heartlands.

We cannot, needless to say, write off the churches of late 20th century western Europe any more than we could write off the churches of the east in the age of John Damascene or even that of Gregory Palamas: their very sophistication is needed to balance or restrain the often uncritical faith of their younger brethren elsewhere. The total witness of a world's communion requires a harmony combining a matured and analysed experience with the excitement of youthful enthusiasm. Nevertheless, it is hard not to discern the direction the strange providential pilgrimage of the Christian community is taking today, gently distancing itself from the over-subtle and the over-affluent, seeking anew the poor and the oppressed. We cannot claim to chart in advance the plans of God, but we can to some extent see them at work and detect in them a certain logic of foolishness, whereby within the very community of Christianity the rise and fall of the Magnificat is experienced anew. It is bound to be both exciting and painful. It may help a little upon either side if we can recognise the biblical and historical precedents and can then, with John the Baptist, say with calm confidence in the ways of God 'He must increase, but I must decrease'.