

GDP growth rate for 1989 so far has been less than 1%. While the current policy package is under stress, this is also a reflection of the extreme pressure on the South African state. For the progressive opposition, this cannot of itself allow political solace because of its real effect on masses of people. Therefore, the research agenda beyond these reflections is that there is a need to investigate alternative macroeconomic intervention based on national and democratic prioritisation.

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# CAN THE TRUE EXODUS STOP AT DAMASCUS?

Review of **THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS : KAIROS AND CONVERSION**. Johannesburg : Skotaville Publishers, 1989. 36 pages.

The most important development in modern Christianity has nothing to do with Darwin, obdurate popes, wayward evangelists or what has become known as "the secular challenge". It is the discovery that large and influential sections of the Christian church, especially in first-world countries, are not only a serious distortion of the central message and example of Jesus of Nazareth and the Exodus tradition of faith which he inherited and helped broaden and spread, but also fall well short of universal goodness.

**The Road to Damascus**, despite its modest size and generally unpretentious style, belongs in the ranks of and is a means of furthering that great discovery, which is its main significance, along with the novel phenomenon of being a joint statement by Christians in seven conflict-ridden countries stretching in a broad sweep from South Korea through South Africa to Central America. The local edition includes ten pages of Southern African signatories from most denominations at the end. Many of them are prominent church and academic figures, an endorsement which will doubtless help the message of the book make an impact among the lay people it is evidently intended to guide, encourage and convince.

What we are given in this document is an analysis of the scandal of Christians on both sides of the bitter conflict in these countries; a condemnation of all right-wing Christians as heretical and concluding call on them to undergo conversion, Saul-like, from being persecutors of Christ to being supporters of the Christianity represented by the standpoint of this little book. That kind of Christianity is portrayed as an active faith which sides

with and stands by the poor and oppressed, drawing on what is seen as the central biblical heritage going back to the Exodus faith. Nothing could be more alien to it than the kind of church that aids and abets imperialist-type domination of the world's marginalized people.

This amounts to the recognition that ruthless exploitative forces have succeeded in appropriating important sections of Christianity into their service. So successful has this tactic been that many whose values haven't much in common with Jesus of Nazareth sincerely think they are his true followers, for example by striving to keep the world safe from communists and their like. Naturally enough, such a travesty of the gospel, thus understood, must be unmasked and denounced, so that a key section of **The Road to Damascus** is the critique of right-wing society and its attendant form of Christianity in the chapter called "Our Prophetic Mission." This is done in terms of five traditional theological evils—idolatry, heresy, apostasy, hypocrisy and blasphemy—whose relevance to present-day political, economic and military forces is interestingly but briefly indicated.

Critics of the now-famous Kairos Document made much of its alleged lack of theological finesse. They could doubtless do the same to this successor. So far as I am concerned, that kind of objection is irrelevant for documents which are designed for a mass readership. It is much more appropriate to perceive that an important and justified ethic of compassion governs **The Road to Damascus**, and then to concentrate on main themes, not doctrinal niceties. If we do that, we can then move to the question whether there is anything substantially new

here. I have already indicated that I see this publication as part of a much larger Christian discovery of a Jesus and indeed a Bible which are in some crucial respects a far cry from conventional, churchly forms of Christianity. To that extent there is not much here that is new; significance, instead, lies in the propagating potential of a readable, inexpensive and easily distributed form of expression – effectiveness of medium rather than novelty of message, one might say.

But despite this reading, there is nonetheless a contention in the book which is both new and controversial. This is the bold assertion by those who composed and signed it that they “denounce all forms of right-wing christianity as heretical.” (p.13) As one who identifies with the ethics behind this book (though not with its theology), and in the interests of real liberation, I would say that such a sweeping rejection carries with it an obligation to provide substantiation : right-wing Christianity must be defined so that we can identify it and convincing reasons must be given to justify the denunciation.

Are we given the necessary definition and justification? Despite the undertaking in the preamble to “spell out exactly” which groups of Christians are being pilloried, none are actually named and instead the buck is passed to Paul Gifford’s book **The Religious Right in Southern Africa**. Rather, the present book characterizes right wing Christianity as something that denies Christian freedom by insisting on blind obedience to authority, fosters spiritual slavery by means of an uncritical use of the bible, creates illicitly antagonistic dualisms between body and soul, politics and religion, etc, and is fanatically anti-communist. Readers are left to figure out for themselves exactly who fits this bill, but at least the necessary hallmarks of heresy are provided.

Where **Damascus** is seriously open to question is its patchy attempt at justifying the charge of heresy against this species of Christianity, and I say this as one who rejects that species even more vehemently than the Damascus Readers. Their view seems to be that right-wing Christianity is heretical because it **chooses** to distort true Christianity, as though history (or divine revelation) had yielded a tolerably clear-cut and above all authentic original Christianity which right-wing leaders then deliberately distorted into the spiritual lackey of imperialism and inculcated into the unthinking crowds whose faith they control.

Liberative Christianity deserves better than this. Right-wing religion is indeed a dangerous evil and needs to be unmasked. But would-be unmaskers themselves must above all be realists; they must learn to look more soberly at the mixed bag that is historic Christianity; they must learn to see that the rot goes back far beyond Constantine into the ecclesiastical and biblical tradition itself, which harbours its own spiritual and moral problems – like the themes of election, predestination, salvific exclusivism, gross patriarchy and even violence – alongside the undoubtedly noble parts which I myself fully agree are normative, but normative **in our present judgement** rather than historically normative. “True” Christianity – caring, compassionate, open to all truth, active and self-critical to a fault – is a creation produced by those who live by such values, fashioned out of an historico-biblical hodge-podge of resources, deeply attuned to Amos or Nathan but not to Psalm 137 or Esther. Those resources are its raw-materials; they are not the finished product of true Christianity. Cotrary to this book’s implication, there is a path from them to **both** right-wing and liberative Christianity, and therefore the historically correct aetiology of heresy is much more subtle and challenging than the Damascus Readers seem to think, though I certainly agree with them that a major part of the aetiology is to be found in the consumerist materialism which they see as the basic idolatry or false god of our time.

I must also discuss a further, related problem, which I shall introduce in the form of a question : when is the penny going to drop in “progressive” Christian circles, at least in pluralistic countries like South Africa, that there is something gravely imperialistic about the idea that Christianity owns the concept and content of “divine revelation”? In **The Road to Damascus** we are told that right-wing Christianity “is a way of believing that rejects or ignores parts of God’s revelation. . .” (p. 13). But throughout this little volume God’s revelation is obviously assumed to be something we find in or through the bible – not the Qur’an, the Gita or any of the other texts (written or oral) that also claim to be channels of divine revelation. Why ignore them? Doesn’t this make the Damascus Readers’ form of religion just as much “a way of believing that rejects or ignores parts of God’s revelation” as the right-wing religion they justifiably castigate?

Writing this review on the Hindu festival of Divali and having marched in the streets against apartheid side-by-side with Muslims, Jews, Hindus and secularists are experiences which make me specially aware of the offence under discussion; they make me deeply wary of the kind of standpoint that attacks socio-political apartheid but perpetuates spiritual apartheid. It is therefore dismaying to see this problem subtly undermining the excellent socio-ethical values of this book, for how credible is a purported liberative Christianity which remains blind to its own form of imprisonment in the structures of imperialism and exclusivism? In this important but neglected sense, true Christianity continues to be an unrealized possibility, a datum of the future rather than of the present or past.

So I conclude by agreeing that there is a need for massive conversion, but more Christians need to undergo it than just right-wingers. Whether the Damascus Road is a suitable metaphor for that greater transformation I personally doubt, because it builds an element of exclusion into the very foundations of what purports to be Freedom City. Jonah might thus be a better biblical symbol. In the end, then, I suspect that the Damascus Readers, or at least those who wielded their collective pen in formulating this document, have yet to discover the real heretical extent of what they call right-wing Christianity, or their own captivity to its dominationist character. Schubert Ogden was right when he said that liberation theology is as ethically important as it is theologically incomplete and even, in the present instance, I would add, inconsistent, and therefore I end by quoting his own great mentor A.N. Whitehead, who memorably summarized what I have seen in this review as the context of ideas to which both the strengths and the shortcomings of **The Road to Damascus** belong :

“When the western world accepted christianity, Caesar conquered, and the received text of western theology was edited by his lawyers . . . The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly . . . But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.”

The root of the heresy in modern Christianity is thus a corruption of the religion of one who could wash the feet of his friends into structures of domination and hence oppression, symbolized by Caesar. But Caesar’s domination operates in many ways. One of them is at the expense of the poor. Another is at the expense of marginalized religions. The road to Damascus is a welcome exodus message for the former but offers nothing and probably can offer nothing except more marginalization to the latter. I for one deeply regret that a chance to articulate a more complete theology of holistic liberation has again been lost, but I nonetheless applaud the emancipatory direction in which the present document moves. □