

CHRISTIANITY AND WEALTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ZIMBABWE¹

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A NUMBER OF studies in Zimbabwe point to correlations between the adoption of Christianity and increased wealth in rural communities in Zimbabwe; and one of the purposes of this article is to bring some of the relevant data together. Much of the data comes from a number of surveys in various rural areas of Zimbabwe in the early and mid-1970s, organized by my one-time colleague in the University of Zimbabwe, Roy Theisen. The data were collected by field assistants, untrained in the social sciences, using long and detailed questionnaires. This kind of procedure leaves unsatisfactory gaps in background information, making it impossible to build up a detailed and accurate picture of the communities concerned. Nevertheless, the statistical information thus produced, supported by reports from field assistants, and compared with earlier studies by Daneel² and Weinrich,³ does raise some interesting questions on the relationship between the introduction of Christianity and socio-economic development in Africa.

Christian missionaries have widely, and rightly, taken an active interest in the material welfare of the people among whom they work. In particular, in various explicit and planned ways, they have been involved in the improvement of peasant agriculture and the generation of wealth through agriculture. In Zimbabwe, the government agricultural extension service to the Blacks was founded by an American Board missionary, E. D. Alvord, who in 1926 was appointed as the first 'Agriculturalist for the Instruction of Natives', in order to broaden the scale of the work that he had been doing as a missionary.⁴ To move to the present, the Roman Catholic Church runs an institution, Silveira House, which relies on considerable financial resources from outside the country to provide a wide range of training programmes, from civics to dress-making. The

¹An early version of this article (summarized in *RAIN* (Dec. 1982), LIII, 7-9) was presented to a conference on Emerging Christianity in Modern Africa at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park, in February 1982. I am grateful to participants at the conference, especially to John Peel, for useful comments. I am indebted to my colleagues, Roy Theisen for access to his unpublished work and for comments on an early draft of the paper; Angela Cheater for detailed criticisms at all stages of the paper's evolution; and Coenraad Brand for help in the final stages.

²M.L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 2: Church Growth — Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques* (The Hague, Mouton, 1974).

³Sister M. Aquina, 'Christianity in a Rhodesian Tribal Trust Land', *African Social Research* (1966), [1], (i), 1-40; 'People of the Spirit: An independent church in Rhodesia', *Africa* (1967), XXXVII, 203-19; 'Zionists in Rhodesia', *Africa* (1969), XXXIX, 113-36.

⁴See M.G. Reid, 'Fifty years: A tribute to E.D. Alvord', *NADA* (1977), XI, (iv), 432-5.

agricultural programme includes training and the organization of co-operatives and loan schemes: in 1981, the schemes involved 553 active groups of 20 to 30 farmers in each, and accounted for an input of over Z\$186,000 in seeds, fertilizers and insecticides. Such planned involvement in peasant agriculture is relevant to some of the data that I will be presenting in this article, but I wish primarily to explore those effects of Christianity on the lives of rural people which were not planned or explicitly intended.

Missionaries might find attractive broad models of conversion to Christianity in terms of increasing 'scale'⁵ or of a movement from 'microcosm' to 'macrocosm',⁶ whereby conversion to Christianity is perceived as one aspect of the opening up of all small encapsulated communities to a wider world with new markets, new ideas, new technologies and consequently to new sources of wealth. Such tidy models do not, however, explain the mechanisms of change: one only has to look at Barrett's study⁷ of the economic and technological development of a theocratic Nigerian fishing community, through an extreme form of encapsulation, to see the complexity of possible relationships between economic and religious issues. A more common feature that does not appear in a model based on scale is that Christianity often facilitates a stratified accumulation of wealth by legitimating the severing of traditional obligations, especially towards kin:⁸ relations are restricted in some areas while being broadened in others.

In Zimbabwe, we are looking at plural societies, in which a number of religions co-exist, and in which members of a single community can have widely differing life experiences and widely differing goals. In such a community, there is usually a pool of socially acceptable religious responses from which individuals can draw, depending on their particular and immediate circumstances.⁹ The result is a religious mobility which belies any uni-directional model of religious change.

One way in which economic variables are relevant to religious affiliation in such plural situations is that wealth generated can be an important aspect of the plausibility base,¹⁰ making particular denominations generally attractive.

⁵See M. Wilson, *Religion and the Transformation of Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971).

⁶See R. Horton, 'African conversion', *Africa* (1971), XLI, 85-108; 'On the rationality of conversion', *ibid.* (1975), XLV, 219-35, 373-99.

⁷S.R. Barrett, *The Rise and Fall of an African Utopia* (Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfred Laurier Univ. Press, 1977).

⁸See, for example, L. Mullings, 'Religious change and social stratification in Labadi, Ghana', in G.C. Bond, W. Johnson and S.S. Walker (eds), *African Christianity* (New York, Academic Press, 1979), 65-89.

⁹M.W. Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (London, Athlone Press, 1969). See also G.C. Bond, 'Religious co-existence in Northern Zambia: Intellectualism and materialism in Yombe belief', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (1978), CCCXVIII, 23-36; and M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Pluralism and problems of belief', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* (1982), LIV, 21-42.

¹⁰See P.L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973).

Seen in this way, wealth serves as a symbol which loosely brings together worldly success, spiritual salvation and access to truth and power. As in all symbolism, the significance of wealth lies in the range of connotations that can be variously attached to it to suit the needs of different people.

My emphasis on the relationship between religious affiliation and wealth is not to deny the intellectualist functions of religious belief. In my opinion, it is undeniable that one (but by no means the only) demand which is made of any symbolic system is that it serves to order, and cognitively to control, puzzling events in peoples' lives.¹¹ Although some such events are relatively independent of economic issues, such issues are central to many of the problems that people face, and therefore are likely to be relevant to the religious choices that people make. So in looking at the relationship of Christianity and wealth, we are looking at a range of intellectual and material phenomena, including expressive symbols, intellectual explanations, the unconscious or semi-conscious manipulation of social relationships, and planned strategies for change. It is appropriate now to present some data.

There is evidence that early improvements in agriculture in Zimbabwe were influenced by missionary activity. In an unpublished paper, Professor Ranger¹² has described how, in the Makoni and Wedza Districts, a number of early Christians took to the plough and to advice from agricultural extension workers in the 1920s and 1930s, and as a result became prosperous farmers, producing and selling among other crops large quantities of high quality maize, notwithstanding the recession and legislation controlling the sale of maize. Ranger linked this advance in agriculture to the fact that the early converts to Christianity were to some extent using Christianity to free themselves from the constraints of traditional life, and particularly from the traditional authority of elders. Certainly government officials reported that the youth, and particularly girls, were escaping the control of their elders through missionary influence. In these cases, material development, the introduction of Christianity, and contact with the wider world were all linked.

But simply to see change in terms of increasing scale is not adequate. In 1930 the Land Apportionment Act was passed, delimiting land available to Blacks, and in particular delimiting land available for traditional tenure and use. By the 1930s, land shortages were beginning to become a problem in the tribal areas, and one of the causes of this problem was that enterprising Christian farmers were expanding their lands indiscriminately, leaving insufficient for the youth of their districts or for those who were away in wage employment. Indeed, Ranger sees the growth of new independent churches in the Makoni District partly as a reaction against the established Christian élite. It might have been the case that the traditional élite of relatively wealthy men

¹¹See R. Horton, 'African traditional thought and Western science', *Africa* (1967), XXXVII, 51-71, 94-114.

¹²T.O. Ranger, 'Poverty and Population: Religious Movements in the Makoni District, 1929-40' (Salisbury, Univ. of Zimbabwe, History Dep., Henderson Seminar 51, 1981).

had best access to resources offered by missionaries, to the effect that the new technology merely underlined existing divisions between rich and poor. Or the resources offered by the missionaries may have created new differences of wealth. In either case, the prosperity that some gained in conjunction with the adoption of Christianity resulted in greater imbalance and divisions within local communities. It seems likely that here as elsewhere in Africa,¹³ conversion to Christianity involved a greater emphasis on the individual at the expense of the kinship group as a corporate economic unit. Entry into the economy of the macrocosm involved dropping of some of one's responsibilities to members of the microcosm.

In the more contemporary situation, Theisen's studies have shown affiliation to specific Christian churches to be a significant factor in socio-economic development, although in different areas different denominations are significant.¹⁴

From his first study in Chiwundura in the Midlands of Zimbabwe, Theisen noted that religious influences were important in agricultural development and family security. He also noticed, however, that these influences could not be measured on a simple linear scale relating them to other variables.¹⁵ He gives a brief account of one uneducated tribesman who became friendly with the agricultural demonstrator working in his area, and who began to adopt officially preferred methods of crop rotation and fertilization. During the trial stage, however, one of his children became seriously ill, which was interpreted as displeasure from ancestral spirits at too close co-operation with Whites. The man and his wife started to avoid the demonstrator, and reverted to old agricultural methods.¹⁶ More generally, Theisen's research indicated a correlation between poverty and the practice of traditional religion, through the interplay of a complex of factors. The correlation is real; the reasons for it may be speculative. Poorer people have poorer health; and frequent sickness, together with a shortage of food and other basic requirements for life, lead to greater anxiety. It is in sickness that traditional religion is likely to come to the fore, in demanding the appeasement of ancestors who are responsible for the health of descendants. Ancestors, in turn, are associated with the kinship

¹³See N. Long, *Social Change and the Individual* (Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1968), 216-17; Mullings, 'Religious change and social stratification in Labadi, Ghana', 86; Bond, 'Religious co-existence in Northern Zambia: Intellectualism and materialism in Yombe belief', 24.

¹⁴In view of Dr Weinrich's (Sister Aquina's) comments at the conference that missionaries have on the whole helped only an emerging bourgeoisie (see *RAIN* (Apr. 1982), XLIX, 2), it should be noticed that the wealth of Christians discussed in this article is a relative concept. They remain for the most part subsistence farmers, with support from migrant labour. In Chiwundura, only 5 per cent of farmers obtained Z\$100 or more from agricultural sales in the 1969/70 season. The majority of farmers in Daneel's study of 1966 obtained less than £10 from grain sales, and those who obtained £32 or more were classified in the wealthiest group. Such incomes are far removed from the middle-class origins of most missionaries.

¹⁵R.J. Theisen, 'The Cultivation of Vleis in the Queque Tribal Trust Land' (Salisbury, Tribal Areas of Rhodesia Research Foundation, 1973), Appendix B, 10.

¹⁶R.J. Theisen, 'Concepts of Social Change: Queque Tribal Trust Land Research' (in its author's possession, n.d.).

groups descended from them,¹⁷ and attention to ancestors is likely to emphasize the corporate nature of the kinship group and the relationships of production which involve the co-operation of the group. More generally, ancestors are associated with the past and with tradition: those who most frequently deal with ancestral spirits are likely to be relatively conservative in their general outlook. They are less likely to accept agricultural innovations, and so are less likely to increase their production of food. A further finding is that a lack of security leads to a high birth rate, which, in areas where all available land is already in use, stretches limited resources even more thinly among the population.¹⁸ The vicious circle is complete.

The adoption of Christianity (the alternative to traditional religion) appears to be related to an improvement in the standards of living, though the precise nature of this relationship is not clear. Some church members in the communities concerned recognized this, and explicitly associated traditional religious practices with those who were 'backward' and poor farmers: improved farming is symbolically associated with Christian affiliation. Certainly when farmers discover that correct application of fertilizer is more effective than the blessing of a spirit medium, traditional religion loses some of its power. (Equally, traditionalists readily blame their poor crops on Christians who refuse to take part in traditional rituals.) Theisen conducted further studies in Bare, a war-time protected village north of Harare; in Matshetshe, in the arid south of Zimbabwe; and in Gutu, a densely populated area in south-central Zimbabwe. In all of these cases, Christian families tended to be wealthier, to pay more positive attention to agricultural extension workers, and to feed and educate their children better than traditionalists.¹⁹ These findings are supported by Daneel's studies using random samples across a broader area of Southern Shona country.²⁰

One obvious reason which suggests itself is that the missionary churches have had resources which have not been available to the rest of the population. This factor does not, however, provide a satisfactory explanation in itself. The Christians do not comprise a homogeneous group. In each of the communities studied by Theisen, one Christian denomination stood out as being significantly more orientated to social and economic development than their neighbours. In Bare and Chiwundura, it was the Salvation Army; in Matshetshe it was the Brethren in Christ Church; in Gutu it was the African Reformed Church (the African mission of the Dutch Reformed Church of

¹⁷See M.F.C. Bourdillon, *Shona Peoples* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 2nd edn. 1982), 217-22.

¹⁸R.J. Theisen, 'The Exploding Population Problem in the Tribal Trust Lands of Rhodesia' (Salisbury, Tribal Areas of Rhodesia Research Foundation, 1975): 'Variables of population growth', *Zambia* (1977), V, 161-8.

¹⁹R.J. Theisen, 'The Nutrition and Physical Development of Children in Three Tribal Communities of Rhodesia' (Salisbury, Tribal Areas of Rhodesia Research Foundation, 1977): 'Religion and attitudes to the tribal extension service', *NADA* (1979), XII, (1), 48-51.

²⁰M.L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 2: Church Growth -- Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, 95-100.

South Africa). Other churches with large resources to back them up, and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, did not feature in the same way. Indeed, in Theisen's Gutu study, there were very few traditionalists, and the economic successes of Reformed Church members stood out precisely in contrast with members of the Roman Catholic Church. So one cannot explain the successes of particular denominations simply in terms of the injection of resources from outside the communities concerned.

Theisen also notes that it is not simply a case of wealthier people being attracted to the churches. Members of church families in Theisen's studies did not have significantly larger livestock holdings than their neighbours (although livestock is a significant variable in Daneel's study). Livestock holdings normally correlate with higher crop yields: they comprise a ready investment for successful farmers, and they provide natural fertilizer and draught power. Theisen points out, however, that the church members whom he was discussing obtained their higher yields from capital resources similar to those of the rest of the community. A further point could be made that often it is precisely individuals of traditionally low status in a community who seek wealth and status in new institutions such as Christian churches.²¹

Another important variable that correlates with economic success is education. Christians on the whole have higher educational achievements than non-Christians. Initial conversions to Christianity were made largely through or in response to the influence of mission schools, and the families most committed to education are still usually Christians. Theisen's researches showed generally a very strong correlation between the attainment of minimal education of family heads and their wives (five years of primary schooling in the case of men; women apparently need less schooling for similar effects), and an improved standard of living in the household, including better agricultural methods (and more favourable attitudes to extension services), better nutrition and health among the children, and better standards of hygiene. This suggests that through the provision of minimal education, Christian institutions have helped to improve the standards of living of many rural poor.

But some aspects of Theisen's data indicate that education alone does not explain the improved standards of living among Christians. He divided church members into 'regular church-goers', who attended services at least once a month, and those who attended less regularly. Statistically, the better educated attended church slightly less regularly, but regular church-goers had a significantly better diet and healthier children. Religion is related to rural development apart from the provision of educational services.

Theisen related his findings to 'stress', which he measured by means of a variety of economic and nutritional factors, and which includes a psychological connotation. He points out that in the highly stressed situation of the wartime 'protected village' of Bare, the difference between traditionalists

²¹See G.K. Garbett, 'Prestige, status and power in a modern Valley Korekore chiefdom, Rhodesia', *Africa* (1967), XXVII, 307-26.

and Christians became more than usually pronounced: many traditionalists developed negative attitudes to extension workers (who were employed by government) and had total crop failures, while Christians were relatively stable in attitudes and production. Theisen argued that Christianity provides some kind of psychological ability to cope with their new social, economic and technological environments, in a way that fits in with Horton's intellectualist model for conversion to Christianity. The exact mechanism, however, by which Christianity has this effect remains somewhat vague. What is certain is that there are variables at work, in the social organization and perhaps some kind of ethic dominant in particular churches, which are too subtle to appear in the broad, macro-economic picture.

One factor suggested by Theisen is the 'strong internal cohesion'²² of certain denominations, achieved principally through various voluntary associations. The Salvation Army in Bare, for example, had four of these: the Home League, the Auxiliary Home League, the Corps Cadets and the Group of Mercy. The Home League comprised the married women of the Church. They met weekly, dressed in their Salvation Army uniforms, to sing and pray, and to discuss matters concerning the running of the home, including child care, hygiene and various crafts which could bring in a little income or make home life more comfortable. The Auxiliary Home League was for unmarried girls, who were prepared for married life at their meetings when they were taught marriage etiquette and such crafts as sewing, knitting and cooking. The Corps Cadets was for boys and girls, who met weekly to learn about the Bible, and about how to conduct Salvation Army services. The Group of Mercy comprised volunteers who collected cash for the poor, the sick and the disabled, and who worked collectively to provide labour in the fields and any other help for those in need: the work of this group received much favourable comment throughout the Bare community. Of the Salvation Army associations, the women's were particularly significant for household management, since many men at any given time were absent on migrant labour, and many households were accordingly managed by women. All the associations, however, served to unite the members of the Salvation Army into a tightly knit community in which mutual exchange of information and mutual assistance were common practice. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church conducted weekly services in Bare, but had little influence on the weekday lives of its members; and economically, Catholics rated well behind members of the Salvation Army, although on average they were still better off than traditionalists.

There are equivalent associations outside the churches. In Bare, there was a women's society of thirty-six members, which was primarily concerned with helping members to collect funds for expensive household items; the women also disseminated skills of homecraft when they met. There was also a

²²R.J. Theisen, 'Development in rural communities', *Zambezia* (1975), IV, 97.

women's club, a girls' club and a young farmers' club, all sponsored by government agencies: these had a combined membership of just over 100 in a total population of over 4,000. They were hindered by intense hostility towards the government, and, although they may have helped their members a little, they had little influence on the community as a whole.

Another factor relating to agricultural development in particular churches is a long-standing interest in agriculture on the part of certain missionaries. Theisen cites a legend about an early Dutch Reformed missionary who travelled around with a whip in one hand and a seedling in the other. The interest of church leaders in agriculture receives added incentive when a system of tithing a tenth of one's crop to the church is operated, as in some branches of the Salvation Army. Whatever the reason, regular church attendance in the specified churches correlates statistically with favourable attitudes to government agricultural extension services.²³ This does not imply an uncritical acceptance of all that these services offer. There is general dissatisfaction with official advice on animal husbandry, which involves control of the size of livestock holdings, and particular extension workers became unpopular among certain church members when, for example, they strongly advocated growing tobacco against the expressed ethic of the churches concerned, or through supporting the government ban on cultivating vleiland (which is the most fertile land, although its cultivation involves a risk of severe soil erosion). Still less are the church members uncritical of wider government policies. Nevertheless, regular church-goers, encouraged by their organizations, are appreciative of any help offered in the agricultural field, and make good use of this help.

There is also a relationship between crop yields and the consumption of alcohol. Across the populations studied by Theisen, a high incidence of beer drinking correlated with low crop yields. The cause and effect relationship is not clear: excessive consumption of alcohol may result in less attention to farming and low crop yields, or it may equally be the result of stress caused by low crop yields. The churches concerned generally strongly condemn the consumption of alcohol, and it seems reasonable to assume that this prohibition has a positive influence on agricultural output. This is not to suggest a simply utilitarian understanding of the ban on alcohol. A refusal to drink millet beer is a defiance of an important aspect of traditional social life; it also involves a rejection of the traditional way of obtaining agricultural labour, through work parties rewarded by ample supplies of millet beer. The ban on alcohol therefore can be a symbolic assertion of a new system of social and economic relations. We should notice that the ban on alcohol alone does not account for the success or failure of particular religious groups: the Chibarirwe Church in Gutu defiantly allows beer drinking in opposition to the Reformed

²³R.J. Theisen, 'Motivation and Extension in Tribal Communities: Part 1: Livestock Extension' (Salisbury, Tribal Areas of Rhodesia Research Foundation, 1973), 4-5.

Church, and yet its members are among the wealthiest of all church groups in the area.²⁴ Nevertheless, a ban on alcohol is a significant factor in most of the religious systems which are related to increased agricultural production.

We come now to the question of church rules and control. Theisen classifies the Salvation Army in Bare, the Reformed Church in Gutu and the Brethren in Christ in Matshetshe as 'proscriptive churches', in that all strongly emphasize prohibitions, such as those on alcohol, on smoking and particularly on traditional religious practices. These he contrasts with the Anglican and the Methodist churches in Chiwundura, and the Roman Catholic Church in Bare, Gutu and Chiwundura, which pay less attention to such prohibitions. The organization of proscriptive churches is relevant here: they all give a degree of autonomy to local congregations, which in turn are controlled by their local church councils. These councils are in close touch with all members of their respective congregations, and are well informed on the activities of members. They also have the power to impose sanctions, usually in the form of some kind of suspension of rights of membership, to maintain the clearly defined taboos of the churches. In this way, these churches are able to maintain more rigid control over their members than is possible in non-proscriptive churches.

Possibly, Theisen here is simply focusing on the negative side of tightly-knit, co-operative communities: I have mentioned the 'internal cohesion' of certain churches which Theisen relates to the economic successes of their members. Certainly the difference between 'proscriptive' and 'non-proscriptive' churches cannot be reduced simply to a matter of sanctions and control. The Methodists in Matshetshe, who did not achieve the economic successes of proscriptive churches, also give a degree of autonomy to local church councils, which also operate sanctions against breaches of certain church regulations. They are particularly strong on marriage rules, demanding that all married couples hold a Methodist marriage certificate and denying membership to any who are 'illegally' married. They discourage many traditional practices, but do not take a very strong stand on issues relating to traditional religious beliefs. The stand against all traditional religion is characteristic of all 'proscriptive' churches.

This is perhaps a significant symbolic defiance of communal norms and values. Returning to the case of Bare, the Salvation Army had a permanent church, which stood out from the crowded and hurriedly assembled huts of the residential area, and from which every Sunday the uniformed army ostentatiously marched out behind their band through the village, ostensibly to attract new members to their congregation. People who were happy to stand out in this way, were also prepared to reject the demands of traditional religion, and took a more favourable attitude towards the efforts of employees of govern-

²⁴See M.L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 1: Background and Rise of Major Movements* (The Hague, Mouton, 1971), 262; *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches, Vol. 2: Church Growth — Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, 95-9.

ment extension services, notwithstanding the prevailing wartime feeling against anything to do with government. Equally, they had few inhibitions against behaviour, and particularly success, which according to traditional values might have laid them open to suspicions of witchcraft. They had turned themselves into an exclusive group, who were free to innovate in a variety of ways.

This freedom from the values of the wider society requires strict conformity to the values of the exclusive group. The cohesion of the proscriptive churches is bought at a price, and two of them were suffering losses in membership. In Matshetshe, a number of people had been leaving the Brethren in Christ Church for other churches in the area, ostensibly on the grounds that their former church was too inflexible in its application of its rules. People have also been leaving the Reformed Church in Gutu, a point which leads us on to Daneel's researches on independent churches in Gutu.

Daneel looked at the social background of the peoples that he was studying, including their economic statuses and agricultural production. Although the few relatively well paid professionals were usually members of mission churches, the overall picture was that members of independent churches had more livestock and produced greater agricultural yields than did members of mission churches, and that traditionalists were poorest of all.²⁵ The independent churches in question would come under Theisen's classification of proscriptive churches, in that they emphasize prohibitions against all forms of traditional religion, and most of them against alcohol, tobacco and sometimes against all forms of medication. The detection and cleansing of witches is a perennial practice in the more popular of the independent churches, which further suggests an intolerance of any deviance from community norms.

A number of problems arise out of Daneel's material. Theisen argues that independent church members are less successful than members of proscriptive missionary churches. When Daneel's data on the Roman Catholic Church and on the African Reformed Church are separated out from the broad category of 'mission churches', we find that statistically Catholics were only slightly more wealthy than traditionalists, and that Reformed Church members were comparable from the economic point of view with members of independent churches. In agricultural production, the Reformed Church had of all groups the largest percentage of high producers and were second only to traditionalists in their percentage of low producers. A further point that needs to be taken into consideration is that family size tends to be larger in the independent churches than in mission churches since the former allow polygamy, and consequently their production must be spread over a larger population.

It is possible that outside the area in which independent churches were numerically dominant (that is, outside the areas studied by Daneel),

²⁵See Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 2: Church Growth — Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, 56-67, 93-100.

independent churches sometimes acquired the status of poor peripheral groups. This view is supported by Dr Weinrich's study of a southern Shona community in the early 1960s.²⁶ She presents a picture in which Christian mission churches were at the top of a class structure measured by education and income, pagans were at the bottom, with independent churches in between. Her data on agricultural income, however, included only two families from an independent church, too few for any conclusions to be drawn; and the rest of this data supports the ranking given by Daneel, with Reformed Church members more successful than Catholic and traditionalists poorest of all (although Weinrich has these further behind Catholics than does Daneel). The variations could be due to changes over time, the gaps between less successful peasants closing as land becomes increasingly scarce, or they may be due to variables relating to the different locations of the three sets of data.

On education, Daneel agrees with Weinrich: mission church members are on the whole better educated than members of independent churches, and traditionalists have on average less education than any Christian groups. A further point made by Theisen is that independent churches have outstandingly high rates of infant mortality, due partly to their reluctance to seek medication at least until their faith-healers have patently failed. Theisen also points out that, in his studies, children in the independent churches were smaller and had all the symptoms of being less well nourished than children of other Christian churches. This fits in with Daneel's finding that although Reformed Church members tended to harvest more grain than their counterparts in independent churches, the former sold less: and they had higher supplementary incomes in wage employment. Although Daneel's data show a correlation between the independent churches and successful agricultural production, this success does not necessarily correlate with development in other spheres of life.

The treatment of sickness is important. Daneel states that healing is the most specific power of attraction to the popular 'spirit-type' churches.²⁷ The prophets and faith-healers in these churches claim to be able to exorcise troubling spirits that cause illness — and the anxiety that goes with it. The fact that affliction and its solution is important in conversion to these churches points to the importance of adequate intellectual explanations for disquieting events. But it also points to other problems which may be causing anxiety, and which may be partly resolved in independent churches: economic problems over daily subsistence, political problems concerning domination by Whites, identity problems in a changing world, and others. Daneel makes little reference to attendant kin of patients seeking healing, and presumably, as has been found elsewhere,²⁸ healing is sought and received on an individual basis

²⁶Sister M. Aquina, 'Christianity in a Rhodesian Tribal Trust Land', 1-40; 'People of the Spirit: An independent church in Rhodesia', 203-19; 'Zionists in Rhodesia', 113-36.

²⁷Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 2: Church Growth — Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, 186-8.

²⁸Mullings, 'Religious change and social stratification in Ladadi, Ghana', 71-9.

rather than in the context of a kinship group as is the case in traditional healing; this in turn suggests that the problems resolved in independent churches relate to the changing structure of social relations in which individuals are free to choose their own ways and their own associates.

An important point which emerges from Daneel's material is that economic success is not a guarantee of popularity. The independent church members are successful in peasant agriculture, and these churches were clearly still growing rapidly at the time of Daneel's study. But the Roman Catholic Church was also growing (membership in the Gweru diocese, which embraces Gutu, had increased by over 70 per cent in the seven years leading up to 1966) with little corresponding economic advantage to back it up; while the Reformed Church was losing as many members as it was recruiting, notwithstanding the relative wealth of its members.

Daneel discusses in some detail the difference between the Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Gutu.²⁹ He was primarily interested in differences which could explain the greater number of defections from the Reformed Church. He argued that the two churches had few practical differences in most fields. The Catholic Church, however, fortuitously started to introduce schools into Gutu shortly after the Reformed Church had caused frustration through enforced retrenchment; and in recent years the Catholic authorities had made a popular political stand against the White government which contrasted with the non-committed approach of the authorities in the Reformed Church (a point which Daneel, perhaps, underplays). Nevertheless, Daneel argued that the most significant difference between the two churches was in their approaches to traditional customs and religion.

Daneel points to a theological difference between the Roman Catholic view that man can acquire naturally a degree of goodness and of knowledge of God, and the Protestant view that without grace man is utterly corrupt. This difference has resulted in different approaches to traditional culture. The Roman Catholic Church (at least in recent years) has tried to adopt and adapt much of traditional culture, even incorporating traditional rites in honour of ancestral spirits into Catholic ritual. The Reformed Church, on the other hand, has been rigidly opposed to various aspects of traditional cultures: certain traditional marriage procedures are disciplined as adultery; the Church took a radical stand against beer drinking (which has become slightly lenient in practice in recent years); nor are traditional expressions of joy in ululating, clapping and dancing allowed in services; any participation in traditional rites is condemned. A further point made by Daneel is that the Reformed Church formally brings disciplinary offences before a council and imposes sanctions, with the result that it is seen to implement its rules more rigidly than do Catholics.

²⁹Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: Vol. 1: Background and Rise of Major Movements*, 188-281.

The aspects of church organization which Daneel sees as making the Reformed Church less popular are closely associated with those that in Theisen's view have made its members economically successful: tight organization and control, and an intolerant exclusiveness towards other points of view — the converse of breadth in the scale of social relations.

There are, however, other possible interpretations of the data. One pays attention to the different social and economic forces that operate at various stages in a person's life.¹⁰ The Reformed Church was the earliest Christian denomination in the area, introducing to people the resources of missionary organizations. Whether because enterprising young men were able through the Church to free themselves of the restrictions of elders, or because the wealthiest in the community were best able to tap the resources provided by missionaries, leading church members, as elsewhere in the country, quickly became identifiable as a wealthy élite. At a later stage in a man's life, he might seek to increase his wealth and status by increasing the size of his family — polygamy necessitated conversion to an independent church. In this model, it would be relatively wealthy Reformed Church members (though not the controlling élite) who convert to the independent churches. Alternatively, a reason for conversion could be frustration among middle-ranking Reformed Church members at the economic and political control of the wealthy élite, which would explain the low incidence of middle producers in the Reformed Church.

Another reason for conversion from the Reformed Church to independent churches could be political. This could be symbolic: a reaction against a church which is associated with South Africa and which made no political stand on behalf of its Black members. The political factor in some cases certainly operated at the level of leadership: ambitious individuals cutting themselves free from subordination to a foreign authority, to acquire more autonomous authority in an independent church. Or the political factor could be construed in material terms; some people may have considered it to be to their greater material advantage in the long term to take a strong nationalist stand, rather than to compromise such a stand in the Reformed Church for short-term access to resources.

The data do not enable us to separate out these factors. In practice, they are all probably influential, together with the medical and religious factors emphasized by Daneel, with particular individuals joining for different reasons.

The wealth of independent church members does coincide with Theisen's emphasis on the importance of control and exclusiveness. The independent churches accept much of the traditional cosmology in terms of explaining events, and in particular of explaining sickness in terms of spiritual causes.

¹⁰Following Bond, 'Religious co-existence in Northern Zambia: Intellectualism and materialism in Yombe belief', 23-36.

They reject, however, traditional afflicting spirits as evil: spirits relating to families or local communities are to be exorcised rather than accommodated, and only the universal high god is to be appeased. Although the independent churches may offer substantially identical replacements for some traditional religious practices³¹ and are usually sympathetic to backsliders,³² in their ideology they all reject traditional religion in any unmodified form. Most reject the consumption of alcohol and smoking. The point I wish to make is that the religious groups which have a distinctly higher standard of living than others in rural populations are those which encourage a positive rejection of aspects of traditional culture, symbolic of their immersion into new patterns of social relations.

Nevertheless, in the independent churches there is also an emphasis on positive aspects of religious behaviour, including weekly attendance at services, style of dress, styles of family life (including polygamy), and close community ties within the churches. Theisen's data indicate that regular church attendance is as important as proscriptions; and admission to a mission church is often associated with new forms of behaviour (such as those learned at school). I suggest that what is important is that the churches in question encourage a strong community identity, reinforced by distinctive modes of behaviour.

In specific instances, church behaviour includes a factor which provides a clear economic advantage. A. P. Cheater's study³³ of a small group of farmers belonging to one of these independent churches, who had migrated to a freehold-farming area, shows a development of their success in agriculture. In this relatively wealthy area, a group of fourteen farmers belonging to the independent church of Apostles of Maranke stood out from the community at large as being property-owners of considerable substance. Cheater analyses this economic factor in terms of the exploitation of female labour. Female labour was an important factor in the freehold farms generally:³⁴ although in this progressive community polygamy carried the stigma of backwardness, the Apostles' religion appealed to Old Testament precedents in order to legitimate the institution, which they espoused as an ideal. Through the labour of women in polygamous households, male heads were able to increase their outputs and profits, and to invest in capital equipment for their farms. This advantage in available labour was reinforced by the tight network of mutual aid within which the church members operated, which in turn was reinforced by an ethnic factor whereby most of the church members had a common place of origin.

³¹See M.F.C. Bourdillon, T. Mashita and M. Glickman 'Traditional religion and an independent church', in M.F.C. Bourdillon (ed.), *Christianity South of the Zambezi: Vol. 2* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1977), 193-209.

³²See, for examples, Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona*.

³³A.P. Cheater, 'The social organization of religious difference among the Vapostori we Maranke', *Social Analysis* (1981), VII, 24-49.

³⁴See A. P. Cheater, 'Women and their participation in commercial agricultural production: The case of medium-scale freehold in Zimbabwe', *Development and Change* (1981), XII, 349-77.

I do not wish to generalize from this rather special case. The vast majority of independent church members studied by Daneel were not emergent capitalists. Indeed, Cheater points out how in a number of ways the Vapostori whom she studied had modified aspects of church organization and life style to fit in with the bureaucratic institutions in the freehold community. Nevertheless, the case of the freehold farmers highlights a number of important points. The Vapostori provided an ethic which had a clear economic advantage; this advantage was recognized by church members; nevertheless, the expressed motives for attending services and the organization of the Church were based on religious rather than economic issues.

Finally, this case emphasizes the fact that the rejection by independent churches of traditional culture is often selective. Polygamy, which has economic advantages for men, is usually maintained. So are accusations of witchcraft, which help to control church members — especially women. Traditional explanations of illness maintain their force, with modified ways of dealing with them. Independent church members reject, however, the traditional economic order and the cults which purport to maintain it. Indeed, an important aspect of their ideology is to mediate between a need for the traditional cosmology to interpret misfortune, and a rejection of the cults concerned with control over family and land, which had patently been surpassed both economically and politically. Equally, they reject any suggestion, whether patent or subtly symbolic, on the part of mission churches that White people are superior to Blacks.

I shall now try to draw the data together into some conclusions. The first is that the broad schemes of change in terms of an increase in scale or a movement from the microcosm to the macrocosm obscure the social mechanisms working in individual communities. To understand religious changes, one needs to know something of the political, economic and social contexts in which they take place. These contexts involve a fluidity of relationships over time.

Although economic success in peasant agriculture normally results from relations with the macrocosm, a key factor in this success is often an ability to cut oneself off from some aspects of traditional community life. A change in religion can often provide an ideological justification for breaches in traditional moral behaviour. Christianity offers a new way of life, and those who act in violation of certain traditional values, whether it be to refuse to spend money at a neighbour's beer drink or to hoard surpluses in order to educate one's children, can give their behaviour a certain moral respectability by selectively appealing to their new religion, provided that religion is socially acceptable.³⁵

³⁵If a church is too disruptive of traditional values, justified behaviour in the eyes of its members may be rejected by the community at large. See Bond's account of hostility in Uyombe, Zambia, to members of the Lumpa sect (G.C. Bond, 'A prophecy that failed: The Lumpa Church of Uyombe, Zambia', in G.C. Bond, W. Johnson and S.S. Walker (eds), *African Christianity*, 137-60).

Male members of independent churches use religious ideology to justify polygamy to their economic advantage. One way in which religion can assist certain people to improve their economic status is to relieve them of the constraints of social values and obligations.

Another way in which religion can help to improve people's incomes is by creating tightly-knit co-operative communities. In such communities, individuals necessarily lose a degree of autonomy. Life styles are communally determined and carefully controlled. Behaviour in such communities contrasts with the broad tolerance that one might expect as societies increase in scale and incorporate a variety of values and cosmologies.

As societies increase in scale, a wider choice of possibilities may be made available to its members. These are likely to break up what homogeneity of practices and values may have previously existed in any society. Contact with the wider world is thus likely to result in divisions within a society being accentuated — especially divisions based on wealth differentials. The social relations of individuals within the society do not necessarily become broader. Indeed, they are unlikely to do so while their primary material interest remains within the local agricultural community.

As a plurality of options becomes open to individuals in society, they become less totally tied to the kinship or neighbourhood groups into which they were born. Symbolic systems which focus on these groups lose their force. Individuals who successfully enter the world which encourages individual initiative for the acquisition of wealth and status are likely to adopt a cosmology in which the old symbols focusing on corporate groups are replaced by symbols which allow a freedom of association. A Christian church provides a ready cosmology, together with a set of social relations with people who have chosen, and are able to follow, a given style of life. Seen in this way, the various Christian churches are responses to stratification, as much as causes of it. The way of life prevalent in a particular church may be as much a barrier against relationships with those who cannot afford the life style, as it is a result of the help given to church members: in either case it becomes a symbol integral to church affiliation.

In practice, all the studies I have referred to took place before the independence of Zimbabwe. It is not certain that Christianity will continue to carry overriding connotations of progress. Even in the 1960s, traditional religion, centering on legends of a glorious past, began to attract many politically progressive persons.³⁶ Since independence, there have been cases reported in which traditional spirit mediums are leaders in the improvement of farming techniques, and show initiative in overthrowing outdated customs: this is accompanied by adapting traditional genealogies in order to unite fragmented local cults into a unified national religious system.³⁷ Whether such

³⁶See P. Fry, *Spirits of Protest* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), 107-20.

³⁷This comes from as yet unpublished research carried out by David Lan.

religious initiatives will prove successful remains to be seen. For the moment they are simply a warning against assuming that Christianity will maintain its past superiority over traditional religion in encouraging agricultural innovations.

My emphasis on the relationship between material interests and religious affiliation is dictated by my topic. I agree with my Marxist colleagues in rejecting a conception of the symbolic order which attributes to it a dynamic autonomy divorced from economic and political processes in human life. But I also agree with Wim van Binsbergen when he points to the limitations of any current Marxist approach with respect to religious symbols.³⁸ Whatever the material base that gives rise to, and supports, certain symbols in the first instance, the symbols appear to acquire an autonomous power to influence behaviour, which I suspect defies a Marxist framework. I have no clear solution to the understanding of symbols — perhaps my own confusion is a more accurate portrayal of their nature than any neat theory. But I would like to return to Horton's emphasis on the intellectualist function of religion. One demand made of a symbolic system is that it helps people to order, and cognitively to control, puzzling events in their lives. Economic processes comprise an important core to these events, and consequently must be influential in determining the acceptability of any symbolic system. But the influence of a symbolic system on the economic order implies the importance to behaviour of some kind of intellectual completeness. Economic processes do not comprise the totality of events to be explained: there are political events at both macro and micro levels; there are relations with friends and kin, many of which are dominated by psychological rather than economic factors; there are sickness and other personal misfortunes; and there are many puzzling events which impinge on peoples' curiosity rather than their interest. Consequently symbolic systems come under these relatively autonomous influences as well.

The success of different forms of Christianity in Africa, as of other symbolic systems, depends on their ability to cope with a wide range of problematic events — in general terms, to relieve stress. We should, however, be careful to discern precisely what kinds of problems are being solved in any one situation, and we should not presume that proven success in any one field (such as agriculture, where success can be easily measured) implies a more generalized success in others.

³⁸W.M.J. van Binsbergen, *Religious Change in Zambia: Exploratory Studies* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 69.