

When South is North: Familiar faith of ordinary people

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North is North, and South is South, and never the twain shall meet. Well, actually, they do. In a globalized world, people move freely, carrying ideas and practices with them, and some of the resulting meetings and mergers can be surprising, even bracing.

Witness, for instance, John Sentamu, who in 2005 became the archbishop of the ancient see of York, founded in the year 627. By ancient tradition, York is the second most important see in the Church of England. Sentamu is Ugandan by birth and practiced as a lawyer in that country until he fled persecution under the regime of Idi Amin. Although he was “kicked around like a football” by Amin’s thugs, he acknowledges that he was more fortunate than many of his friends, who did not survive. Coming to England, he was ordained an Anglican priest.

From his inauguration as archbishop, Sentamu gave notice that his would be a distinctive voice. On a minor point, he demonstrated a personal skill in African drumming far superior to that of any of his predecessors. He has a lively sense of humor. When visiting Pope Benedict, he brought an appropriate gift for the Bavarian pontiff—a shipment of the Holy Grail beer brewed in his own archdiocese. More seriously, he denounces racism, imperialism and police brutality, and complains that the modern British financial system operates on rules borrowed from Alice in Wonderland.

Phrased like that, Sentamu’s views sound no different from those of a conventional left-liberal cleric. But his African background gives him credentials to speak on issues about which native-born English bishops would be far more nervous. Sentamu grew up in a world in which Christianity is no longer associated with imperial expansion, but is rather the familiar faith of ordinary people—a thoroughly African faith. It is, moreover, the deeply rooted and well-beloved religion of many nonwhite British people. He feels no need, then, to apologize for Christian mission, for the

“risk-taking and love” of the missionaries who built churches. His parents told him to take every opportunity to laud those efforts, to tell anyone who would listen “how grateful we are for the missionaries who risked their lives to bring the good news of God’s salvation to Uganda.”

The archbishop wins conservative admirers for his willingness to speak out on the sensitive theme of multiculturalism. Over the past half century, Britain has become a racially and religiously complex society in which official policy demands full recognition and respect for each diverse voice. While the goal is noble, many complain that it is pursued—in the schools especially—by praise for every culture except the traditional white Christian society that remains in the majority. Sometimes, complain conservatives, any expression of pride in Englishness is treated as a manifestation of racism.

Archbishop Sentamu has no such concerns. He “cannot understand how those who were shaped by the Christian gospel dislike the culture that nurtured them.” In a much-quoted speech he declared, “Multiculturalism has seemed to imply, wrongly for me, let other cultures be allowed to express themselves but do not let the majority culture at all tell us its glories, its struggles, its joys and its pains.” Lacking a big vision—the overarching notion of a Great Britain unified in common values—multiculturalism had instead created a divided country, “a society which is ill at ease with itself.”

Sentamu’s African background also shapes his attitude toward Britain’s religious diversity. Liberals have long been dubious about Christianity’s claims to a special place in English life with its growing Muslim, Hindu and Sikh minorities. But Sentamu—the outsider—condemns any attempt to underplay the distinctive Christian contribution to shaping English society. He is shaped by his African experience of intense religious conflict and the repeated persecution of churches at the hands of Muslim regimes, and this experience shapes his response to discussions of a multifaith society. He warmly praises other faiths, and he sees mainstream Muslims as the church’s natural allies against unthinking secularization. But far more outspokenly than most Anglicans, he urges Muslims to integrate socially, and he denounces all who fail to expose and condemn violence and extremism.

Over the years, Euro-American Christians have noted the expansion of African Christianity around the globe and wondered how it would affect their own lands. Few expected someone like Archbishop Sentamu, a man confident about modern

Christian history and quite comfortable with public expression of the faith in a secular world.