In December 2012 I was in Helsinki to deliver a keynote speech at this same venue on a related subject, for a different audience but with some of you present. The title of my presentation then was “Poverty and Prosperity in Africa.” In that paper I looked at the relation between religion and the economy from an African perspective, in which economic prosperity is seen as related to spiritual growth and believed not to be achievable without creating the right spiritual conditions. I argued that for many African believers spiritual growth is an intrinsic part of human progress, in which spiritual wealth goes together with material prosperity.

In the present paper I continue the argument. This time my focus will be less on the money aspect and more on the mission aspect of churches in Africa, and especially on the way African-initiated churches (i.e. home-grown churches) consider their mission in the world today. For present purposes I take ‘mission’ to be understood in the broad sense as proposed to me in the original invitation as “Christian churches’ and groups’ responsibility towards the outside world”.

Western Power and African Dependency

In recent decades, the historical mainline churches have come to understand their mission largely in terms of ‘development’, that is, as an effort to enhance the quality of life and further the material welfare of the global poor. However, churches in Africa as well as African theologians have been especially sensitive to the degree of dependency implied in development relations. As early as 1986 the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) published a report with its own analysis of the causes of poverty in Africa, in which it criticized the

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churches’ continuing dependence on outside assistance and the lack of strategies for developing long-term programmes rooted in a vision of social transformation.\(^2\) Even longer ago, in the 1970s, Emmanuel Milingo, then Archbishop of Lusaka,\(^3\) had asserted that Africa had been turned into a continent of beggars and to an alarming degree been made dependent on Western development aid. As a long-standing critic of development policies in Africa he criticized both Western and African development agents and blamed the African political elite for keeping their own people poor.\(^4\) In that sense he did not see any difference between Africa’s new political leaders and the old colonial masters: “They have sat in the chairs of the former rulers, and have assumed both the power and the riches of the colonialists, meanwhile they have left their people in the same misery in which they lived for many years.”\(^5\) During a thanksgiving service at the 17th anniversary of Zambian independence in 1981 he lashed out at the country’s elite, accusing them of perpetuating a system of self-enrichment through nepotism.\(^6\) It is worth noting that even today, more than half a century since most of Africa gained independence, many African states are dependent on international aid for half their budgets.

It is only recently, and for a variety of reasons, that Western development agents have begun to realize that they may have to change their policies in such a way as to adapt them to the specific context of Africa, incorporating an African worldview, which is often religious. Moreover, this remains a controversial matter. Meanwhile, African views of development have hardly been able to make a significant impact on international development programmes and policies. Since the 1970s, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (known as the Bretton Woods institutions) have been largely responsible for the ideological direction of development debates worldwide. Their influence has often resulted in policies that have been widely seen as externally imposed. In Africa, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s

\(^3\) Milingo had been appointed Archbishop of Lusaka in 1969. He was removed from his seat by the Vatican due to a controversy about his healing ministry. The various aspects of the conflict have been analysed in Gerrie ter Haar, Spirit of Africa: The Healing Ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia, London: Hurst & Co./Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992.
\(^4\) An early and most outspoken example are the series of lectures presented in 1976 in Canada (London, Ontario) to students of the Divine Word Centre that were originally published in mimeograph, and republished in 1994 in Australia: Emmanuel Milingo, Development: An African View, Broadford, Victoria: Scripture Keys Ministries.
\(^6\) Ter Haar, Spirit of Africa, 207.