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*Faith and Modernity
in the new South Africa*

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The cover design is based on Adinkra symbols, which are found in West Africa, especially in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Each symbol has a distinctive proverbial or religious meaning. Adinkra means "farewell" and so Adinkra cloth, that is cloth stamped with Adinkra symbols, is usually worn at funerals, as a way of bidding farewell to the deceased.

Faith and Modernity in the new South Africa

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Faith and Modernity in the new South Africa:

Guest Editorial

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The last ten years have brought radical changes to South African society. These changes could be seen in some ways as the final arrival of modernity to the southern tip of the African continent. This would be to define modernity strictly in terms of democracy and the secular society, both of which are indeed recent arrivals in South Africa. But this would be too narrow a definition. Indeed even the terms "democracy" and "secularism" follow their own (undemocratic and non-secular) African contours compared to the European versions of the same phenomena. Modernity is far too pervasive and disruptive a force to be described in such polite and nice terms anyway.

But something profound has indeed taken place in South Africa over the past ten years and it is the task of these papers to reflect on some of these changes in terms of the project of modernity (if indeed there is such a thing as a project of modernity). This is not to say that there is only one understanding of the concept of modernity amongst the authors of these papers. Indeed there is not, as the reader will soon find out.

However we understand it, modernity is one of the great forces *terribles* in contemporary Africa. The first paper "Modernity and the African Experience" attempts to locate the epicentre of this force and follow its shock waves into the African continent. Modernity is defined in the terms used by Anthony Giddens and is located in the African context as a whole. It is "a way of understanding and ordering experienced reality" by separating time and space, disembedding social systems, and reflexively ordering and reordering social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge. Its origins are uniquely and specifically European and its passage to Africa came via the missionaries and colonists. The paper outlines the ways in which a pre-modern culture interfaces with a modern culture. Although the African genius for syncretism emerges out of this conjuncture there are also other ways in which Africans cope with the clash of cultures, including acceptance at one end of the spectrum, rejection at the other end, and a whole range of responses in between. The paper ends with a brief analysis of contemporary, post-apartheid society and the kind of theologues that are emerging as a result of the changes that have been brought about.

In the second paper Laurencia Kwark, a South Korean studying in France and doing PhD research on modernity in the South African context, uses quite a different, apparently European, definition of modernity to assist her. She identifies the essence of modernity as a process of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation, autonomisation and revolt of the conscience, and pluralisation of belief systems. In the South African context she points out that apartheid itself was an expression of modernisation, especially in its institutionalisation of racial categories and the heavy bureaucratisation imposed to enforce this. This produced a fundamental crisis within South African society that manifested itself in resistance and rupture to the society as the "autonomisation of the subject" emerged in the new political culture. This

process of resistance is traced through the political, socio-economic, and religious domains. As the monolith which was apartheid collapsed so new forms of cultural and religious diversity are emerging. Of special interest to Kwark is the fact that while the new society is officially "secular", in that the ruling party has consciously moved away from the religious metanarratives that were the controlling myths buttressing the apartheid regime, it has at the same time encouraged pluralism of religious belief and allowed different religions to flourish. Out of this have emerged the "healing" churches that Kwark views as expressions of essential coping mechanisms in the modernisation of society.

The bulk of the healing churches are the African Independent Churches (AICs) which far outnumber all the other churches put together. (Oosthuizen puts this figure at eleven million though he does not indicate his source for this estimate). The next two papers, therefore, focus on the phenomenon of the AICs and their response to modernity. J. P. Kiernan, a social anthropologist who has done leading research into the AICs, locates the origin of this conglomeration of 4000 different streams in the Tembu church of Nehemiah Tile established in 1882 which led the way in the African resistance against European influence in the Christian church. Equality, a "foremost icon of modernity" was used by the early AICs to justify their secession. The AICs also became the seedbed of another feature of the modern era - nationalism - in this case African Nationalism. A trademark feature of these churches is their great diversity of belief, structure, and leadership patterns. Kiernan recognises in this a freedom of expression that is typical of the modern era! For him, however, the most important function of the AICs is the role they play in providing a support and nurture infrastructure for their members in the urban areas. Cities have a profound tendency to disintegrate the personalities of their inhabitants, and the AICs, with their emphasis on community and caring, serve as a very important safety net for millions of city dwellers who would otherwise be suffering from the serious effects of anomie caused by the collapse of normative community structures.

G. C. Oosthuizen, also an expert in this field, but as a theologian not as an anthropologist, picks up not only on the therapeutic and communal roles that are played by the AICs but on their economic and socialising roles in the processes of modernisation. His assertion is that these churches are extremely important, not only in helping people cope with modernity but in integrating them into the modern condition. He thus contradicts the notion that the AICs are an attempt to escape modernity and promote a pre-modern consciousness. While there are definite ways in which they manifest a revolt against modernity, the overall effect of the AICs is to enable their members to come to terms with it.

The importance of the AICs is reflected by the fact that they also feature in the next article where it is argued that they are not given the theological credence they deserve.