

Christianity and African Cultures

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by Adrian Hastings

The way of teaching any set of ideas must depend upon the context within which they will be understood. If this context is very different for teacher and taught, deep misunderstanding is almost bound to arise. Christian doctrine can hardly be got across to Africans who have not received any appreciable amount of western education – and that is even now the great majority – if the missionary has not first understood something of their own thought world. In some ways the missionary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was actually more likely to arrive at such an understanding than his successors of forty years later. The early missionaries could not open and busy themselves with loads of schools and hospitals. They were almost completely isolated from Europe and were forced to share closely in African society, once they abandoned the attempt to create independent Christian villages. Very probably there was quite a long period before any considerable number of converts was obtained. In this period they had the opportunity to acquire a fine knowledge of the local language, customs and thought forms, and many of them did so, both Catholic and Protestant. In areas and tribes where evangelisation began much later – during the last forty years – this has often not happened. Missionaries have rushed straight into the provision of social services and an extensive catechumenate without any adequate prior initiation into the local tribal mind. The inevitable effect is that Christianity either does not penetrate deeply or becomes seriously twisted; it may be seen as primarily a permit for schooling rather than as a way of faith and life. The only way to avoid this is by a deep understanding of existing African preconceptions and beliefs and by the explanation of Christianity in terms related to them, while at the same time making clear the absolute newness of Christian faith and life. One danger is to teach the faith unintelligibly because unrelated to the convert's existing thought world; the opposite danger is to allow it to be almost wholly assimilated to that same thought world, so that there is no real discovery of Christ. Now the avoiding of both these dangers requires a deep prior understanding of African religion.

In fact neither in the nineteenth nor in earlier centuries did missionaries give much thought in advance as to what they would find in Africa. What struck them, undoubtedly, was the darkness of the continent; its lack of religion and sound morals, its ignorance,

its general pitiful condition made worse by the barbarity of the slave trade. Evangelisation was seen as liberation from a state of absolute awfulness and the picture of unredeemed Africa was often painted in colours as gruesome as possible the better to encourage missionary zeal at home. This tendency was not, happily, universal: Livingstone came to appreciate positive religious and moral qualities in Africa, and indeed the more that individual missionaries penetrated into African psychology the more of value they found, as is evident when the early White Fathers in Uganda – Livinhac and Lourdel – stressed these natural religious qualities in their letters to Cardinal Lavigerie.¹ Since then some of the greatest field anthropologists and students of African customs – men like Fr Crazzolata in Northern Uganda – have been missionaries.

Nevertheless the negative approach has been very strong and, in practice, it remains strong. The tendency continues to treat everything pre-Christian in Africa as either harmful or, at best, valueless and to consider the African, once converted from paganism, as a sort of *tabula rasa* on which a wholly new religious psychology has somehow to be imprinted. That there was plenty to horrify one in the pre-Christian state of Africa is only too clear. Quite apart from the extra enormities of the slave trade, superimposed on African society, it is clear that cruelty and fear were strikingly evident: cruelty especially in great kingdoms like those of Ashanti, Dahomey and Buganda with their frequent blood-baths; fear everywhere – above all fear of sorcery or of being bewitched by others. So much of the positive practice of African customs goes back to this fear of sorcery, to which almost all deaths and other misfortunes were widely ascribed, and to an endless struggle to protect oneself against it.

But the tendency to condemn African things *in toto* has not come only from actual observation, but even more from ignorance on the part of foreigners. African societies were so different from anything he was hitherto acquainted with that without some special training in interpretation, the missionary found himself clueless and revolted. A special training in anthropology, in the study of such societies, was what the missionary needed and still does desperately need, but what he did not, and still, for the most part, does not receive. So far as I know almost no serious attempt is even now made to train the young missionary in advance to understand and appreciate social and mental patterns so extremely different from his own. Instead of this, and for lack of it, many missionaries have been only too convinced of the enormous superiority of the European West, and they have come unconsciously, but naturally, as bearers not only of the Christian message but also of westernization.

¹But Lavigerie's comment on this is worth noting: 'This is contrary to both the findings of all explorers about the other Africans and to your own observations about them in the past'.

Much of that was obviously inevitable and Africans have gained greatly in the secular as well as in the religious spheres from the work and therefore the presuppositions of the missionaries. Africans today would be the last to denounce all the processes of westernization that have gone on. Nevertheless the educated African may feel that behind much of this there was a certain implied insult to the more humble but genuine values that were, and are to be found within the authentic traditions of African society. We need to appreciate those values; they have not been obliterated by the wave of westernization (though their influence on the more educated is surely fading) just as they were not destroyed by the vices which existed in African, just as much as in every other society. It is to such values that the present day stress on 'négritude' appeals; and, with so many more facilities and opportunities for study than his nineteenth century predecessor, the modern missionary has a duty to appreciate and to make use of such values in his building up of the supernatural society. Grace builds upon nature, and nature exists in Africa as elsewhere. There is much of enormous positive value in African traditions and religious consciousness, and there is still time to make use of it for the creation of a genuinely African Christianity.

The purpose here is not to provide an adequate treatment of this theme and its practical realisation, but simply to offer a few lines of approach to the basic missionary task which is neither in Africa nor anywhere else the imprinting of the Christian thing upon a *tabula rasa*, but rather the conversion of a natural consciousness of things good and evil into a new vision of a world transformed in Christ.²

A first point to make if one wants to get African society into focus is that it has a past, its own past. We do not speak now of the possible African origin of mankind, nor of ancient Egypt and subsequent societies possessing literary records, but simply of the tribal societies of central Africa. History does not begin with the arrival of the whiteman. That event enters into an existing story, and for many peoples an old story. Respect for a people involves a consciousness of their past and in this we sometimes fall down very badly. A good example of a long past is to be found in Buganda's story. Mutesa II, the present Kabaka, began to reign in 1939. He is the thirty-fifth king of Buganda and generations in that country are much the same length as elsewhere. Mutesa's great-great-grandfather, Suna II, began to reign in 1826, eleven years before the accession of Queen Victoria, great-great-grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II. Going back thirty-five reigns from Elizabeth II takes us to Henry III and the thirteenth century, and it is likely that it

²For a deeper insight into the positive content of African religion, reference may be made to such books as Fr Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy*, John Taylor's *The Primal Vision* and Geoffrey Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion*.

was in the thirteenth or fourteenth century that the Ganda kingdom began to take shape in the area round modern Kampala³. It extended in subsequent centuries. Not only the kingship, but the whole social structure of Buganda – the clans, the counties, the chieftainships – have a well verified history going back for centuries, and the shape of the country and the mentality of its people cannot be understood apart from its history. Their religion, both their present and their past religion, have to fit into this framework – just as the Christian religion can only be understood elsewhere in its historical context: ‘And there went forth a decree from Caesar Augustus’

Buganda has a longer recorded history than many African tribal societies; that is characteristic of a monarchy, which always becomes a focus for the preservation of a people’s story. West African dynasties, such as those of Benin, Oyo and Ife, go back still further. Where monarchies are lacking, memories are shorter too. But history is recorded of necessity in all institutions and ways of behaviour and it is such a society with a tradition and a way of life of its own that the missionary has to approach and respect.

If the past of Africa must be seen and respected, so also must her variety: tribal variety and individual variety. It is desperately difficult not to generalise constantly about Africans, but it is extremely dangerous. I am sure, from personal experience, that Africans differ as much among themselves as Europeans do and it can be as meaningless, and basically as insulting, to declare that Africans feel like this or like that as to say the same of Europeans. Of course there are important and recognisable tribal characteristics – common social structure, religious beliefs and so on – but these are not necessarily common to all peoples, but to a tribe or group of related tribes. Belief in a unique high god seems common to all or almost all African peoples, as also does a preoccupation with sorcery, but there are many other things which are of crucial importance for one tribe but of none at all for others.

Kingship is a good example. It is very easy from the striking examples of the West Coast and Lacustrine monarchies – Dahomey, Ashanti, Benin, Yoruba, Buganda, Bunyoro – and others like the Zulus in the south, to start generalising about the African’s deep sense of kingship and to go on to seeing this as a wonderful foundation for the doctrine of the kingship of Christ and so on. I have heard it done. Where there is this sense of kingship, all that may be well and good, but the striking truth is that very many Africans are moved not at all by the aura of kingship. They had no kings, nor

³Roland Oliver puts the origin of Buganda’s present dynasty in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, cf. Oliver and Matthew, *A History of East Africa*. I would think a rather earlier date preferable, just as the kingdom of the Kongo, which was excellently organised when the Portuguese arrived there in the late fifteenth century, must go back at least another hundred years.

any equivalent in their society. Thus in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in pre-European days, of 101 tribes counted, 45 had no chiefs at all, 47 had only district chiefs and but nine had central chiefs – kings in any recognisable sense.⁴ Great peoples like the Kikuyu had no sort of tradition of monarchy whatsoever, while other peoples like the Baganda are absolutely impregnated with it.

This is a matter both of practice and of idea. The two are not separable. Initiation rites play a very great part in the life of some societies and little or none in that of others. Marriage customs, codes of politeness, all such things differ vastly from people to people. Evangelization should start to work from what a people holds and how they are organized. Methods which might be successful with a tribe organised on a clan basis could be strikingly unsuccessful when employed with a people whose society is grounded in an age-set system. Equally it is obvious that methods geared to sedentary peoples will not be suited to semi-nomadic, pastoral tribes. This does not mean that the latter cannot be evangelised, but that they cannot be evangelised in the same way.

All this is simply an appeal for the recognition of Africa's rich variety, a variety which missionaries can ignore, and often have ignored to their cost. The striking differences between the outward success of missionary work among one people and its failure for years with another can have been due to the uniform character of the methods used which have proved suitable in one set of circumstances but have been adhered to throughout.

Something which is common throughout Africa is a way of expressing truth: the sapiential way. Proverbs, enigmatic sayings, mythical stories – these are the means whereby the traditional beliefs of African folk have been expressed and passed on. It is a way of thinking like that to be found in the Bible, and it at once makes of the Bible a book attractive and understandable for Africans. That should have been the greatest source of strength for the missionary, but it has often failed to prove so just because we ourselves have grown so unbiblical in our approach to religion: a scholastic terminology and way of treating things has coloured even African catechisms. Here again what is necessary is the recognition of the value of the Biblical-African approach for its own sake. It is not enough to take a proverb as a starter for a piece of scholastic teaching; it is necessary to express Christian doctrine in the sort of way that really brings the start of recognition from the hearer, not merely a stunned acquiescence. Jesus himself, after all, is the best of teachers and his approach was the African one through and through: proverb, metaphor, parable.

What do Africans express through these things? One thing which is absolutely certain is that when the missionaries first came to Africa, it was not to an irreligious land: on the contrary it was to a

⁴Huntingford. In Oliver and Matthew *A History of East Africa*, p. 91.

world already loaded with religion that they brought their message. That religion varied greatly and it is not my intention to try and describe it here, but only to point out a few of its primordial stresses which evangelisation should make use of, rather than denounce or ignore. What is striking is that the deepest beliefs of Africans seem to have been good and right, and, when purified, a real foundation for a supernatural edifice. Certainly the great goods of African tradition – the belief in one high god, the close family solidarity, the co-ordination of spirit and matter, the basic moral values, education seen as the acceptance of the accumulated wisdom of the elders, and finally, in many societies, the deeply democratic recognition of the rights of each individual within the tribal community, so long as he fulfil his duties – these goods seem to outweigh the bad things – an exaggerated faith in the powers (often malevolent) of the ancestors, belief in sorcery and witchcraft, the dictatorial monarchies, the lack of a developed moral attitude to those beyond the tribal group – and to offer a ground on which the tree of the gospel could fittingly grow.

Let us consider briefly the chief elements of really positive value, from the Christian viewpoint, to be found universally, or widely, in African religions. The first thing, most certainly, is belief in one, first, high god, the source and father of life and of all things.⁵ What struck Europeans on first coming to Africa was the multiplicity of African devotions, the consciousness of spirits present in everything. And there were gods of all kinds, mostly ancestors or ancient heroes, now in some sort of deified state but also other nature gods, of storm, thunder and wind, of earth and sea and lake. The concern of Africans seemed to be chiefly with praying to and placating these individual spirits or divinities. It often took Europeans some time to realise that behind all these, in the belief of every, or almost every African people, is the great god, the first god, he who made the other gods as well as all else, the limitless, the wise one, the one you meet everywhere. The most striking religious phenomenon of Africa is its basic monotheism and this we need to make far more use of than we have done. It is true that missionaries seldom tried to introduce a new name for God; they found the name already known and rightly adopted it. In doing so they recognised a great truth – that they were not introducing a new god to Africa but they had come to reveal more fully to Africans the father they had already known and about whom they had many proverbs and wise sayings.

If Africans knew the one god, it must be admitted that he had become somewhat remote to them. Many tribes even have stories of how the high god had departed far away. Some have no worship

⁵Cf. *African Ideas of God*, ed. E. Smith, Edinburgh House Press, 1950; also G. Parrinder *African Traditional Religion*, 1954; and *West African Religion*, 1949; where fuller bibliographies can be found.

for him at all, others little in comparison with the attention paid to lesser spirits. The first father is pictured as somehow uninterested in the world he has brought forth, benevolent but practically ineffectual. It is here that the Christian teacher can come in. Our father in heaven, the one who made everything in the first place, is not as you have pictured him. On the contrary: he does still care for us, and to prove it he has sent us his son. The coming of Jesus is both the confirmation and the reversal of African monotheism. And it is the reversal too of African polytheism. The world of spirits, of semi-deified ancestors, whose details and imagined power vary so greatly from one people to another, has all been built up to fill the gap created by the remoteness of God. Here is a mentality akin to that which St Paul criticises in *Colossians*. The closeness of Christ, God with us, must fill the gap and must show too that neither is the Father remote. In the presence of the Son, we find the proximity of the Father.

Very much, however, of the cult of ancestors is not really a type of polytheism but simply a recognition of continued communion and a ritual way of commending parental authority and filial dependence in the family group. Man is not alone in life. From birth to death he is a member of a wide family with complex clan relations merging into the wider tribal ones. Here again everything differs in detail from people to people, but not the sense of intense corporateness which nearly always goes with simple rural communities. In life and in death man is one with his family, with his ancestors. We are in them and they are in us. It is a people not cut asunder by the valley of death. All this is expressed for the living by the customs of clan and extended family and for the dead by the cult of ancestors. For Catholics at least all this should be easily accepted as an intuition of value and something to build on; even if we recognise in much of its practice a fear of the dead that we cannot share, we too believe in a close communion of living and dead. We have thought it too often our duty to destroy, whereas in these affirmations of natural religion we should find rather the finger pointing to the fullness of communion of all men in Christ. God is the god of our ancestors, of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob: the long lists of names we utter solemnly in the canon of the mass are those of ancestors in the faith. An outward ritual of respect for ancestors whether ecclesiastically canonised or not, is both a human thing and a Christian thing and it is one of the great offerings that African psychology can bring to the service of faith but which we, perhaps have hardly seen how to make use of.

God is the first source of life. It is life, strength, vital force that one receives with one's clan and must respect in all things. This is the idea that has been seen by many as central to traditional African religion, to what can be called the African philosophy: a life that comes from on high but that all men and all things somehow

participate in. Natural intuitions perceive central truths without the distinctions that subtle examination later provides. That is very true of African religion but the point is that the intuitions are valuable ones and that people whose minds have been formed in them need to be carried into the fuller sphere of revelation across, and not in disregard of their first perceptions. And they have so much to offer. Take again the sacrifices of natural religion or the meal as a sacramental action. Many African peoples have a real consciousness of the purpose of sacrifice, of the sin offering, the gift whereby to re-establish communion with God or with the ancestors. Again a ritual meal may be seen as the means of restoration of peace between men: 'Let us eat out of the same spoon, drink out of the same cup, and be friends again', say two Thonga brothers who have quarrelled and wish to be reconciled.⁶ It is through such things used rather than cast aside, that the Eucharist can be made meaningful. If something of the real meaning of traditional African practices has not been first understood, all will be condemned outright by the missionary, fearful of pagan superstitions, and he will then have to build a new religious structure where he has roundly rejected all that could make meaning of it in the minds of his hearers.

African religion was one of ritual functioning through symbolism. It is striking how important symbols are in Catholic liturgy and traditional prayer forms, and yet how in the course of time we have, to a very large extent, destroyed their practical effectiveness, both by blindness to their power and by tying them up with little rubrical details. The great symbols of life—water, the meal, light and fire — are really central to the practice of our religion. But you can hardly see it now. Baptism no longer *appears* as a washing, the mass as a meal. We have taken these things across in their dried up state and offered them to Africans and been surprised that they have not understood or been satisfied. One of the striking things about the African separatist Churches, which have grown up throughout the continent, has been their replacement of emaciated symbols by expressive ones that answer to the need for symbolism of the whole man.

A final characteristic of traditional Africa that one must mention is the expression of participation in an action by means of dancing and drumming — of rhythm. It is simply the way the African crowd expresses its common sentiments, and the total barring of it from the Church's worship may merely prevent the new Christian from expressing himself in the only visible, sacramental way he can appreciate, and the Catholic at least should believe in the sacramental principle.

All this is a very brief statement of what traditional Africa has to offer in the religious field. It is a first missionary principle to begin

⁶Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 87.

with the beliefs of the people you approach, as Paul did at Athens. Now though some Protestant missionaries might have had difficulty in finding room for many of these African attitudes, Catholics should not have done so. Communion with the dead, an expressive sacramental system, a lively liturgy, are all Catholic things. What is sad is that our approach to their prototypes found within the African world view has differed so little from that of Protestants. As one non-Catholic missionary remarked referring to John Taylor's *The Primal Vision*: 'If this is really African religion, why have Catholic missionaries not done so much better than Protestants? The African soul seems naturally Catholic'. In fact of course our doctrines, the sacraments and many practices do make a great natural appeal to Africans; vestments, medals, holy water, processions: Africans feel so much more at home with all this than with traditional Protestant worship. This helps to explain why very few separatist churches have broken away from the Catholic missions, but many from the Protestant.

Our difficulty has often been one of initial communication. Paul could know the mind of the Athenians more easily than the nineteenth-century missionary could enter into the mind of Kikuyu, Ewe or Zulu. But the principle remains the same, and if today we sense a certain anaemia in much of our African Catholicism we may guess that part of it is caused by failure to adhere to this principle, failure to insert our clearly defined doctrines within categories meaningful to the convert's mind. Of course the old beliefs had to be not only added to but also purged. Respect for ancestors had, at least in places, turned into their deification. Ritual sacrifice had been twisted, among some peoples into the reckless destruction of human life. Consciousness of the spirit world had become a haunting fear from which man was never free. There is much to be put right, but it needed to be understood before it could be put right and to be used in the building up of the kingdom of light and not merely dismissed as the unmitigated works of darkness.

In the context of all this, what are we to say of the meaning of 'conversion' for an African? What is he converted from – what to? It would not, as we see, be correct to describe his conversion as one from polytheism to the one God. For some that might indeed be a fairly true statement, but for most they knew the one God before they heard the Church speaking of him. In the Church's preaching they learn more about him, they see him alone, no longer half hidden behind a host of lesser beings, they learn to love him more, but they aren't exactly or necessarily converted to him just as a Muslim is not converted to the one God. What the African pagan is converted to – just as the Muslim is converted to – is Christ, and, in him, to the fullness of the Trinity. In fact the Christian missionary has never been sent to preach monotheism as such. It is on Christ that the preaching has been centred from apostolic times; it is

Christ that we preach today and it is to Christ that every non-Christian is converted. From this point of view his religious *status quo* is indeed immaterial; whether monotheist, polytheist or atheist, he is converted when he comes to believe in Christ and to share in the fellowship of the Triune God, and such conversion is always necessary.

It is salvation in Christ and the communion of his body which we call the Church that the missionaries came to preach in Africa and that we have equally to proclaim today. But this unique proclamation that constitutes the Christian message in all places and for all times has to be expressed in a form that can be understood. If there is no faith without preaching there is equally no conversion without a hearer and a hearer with a past, with his own old testament awaiting the good news of the new. The new is always the key, the old is always the lock. But key has no meaning without lock, and it is to the wealth of tradition, of natural intuition or original revelation or whatever it may be, embedded within the thought world and practice of each African people that the Christian message in Africa must provide the key. The wisdom of old Africa is as vital to the health of her new Church as was the old law of Israel to the beginning of Christ's kingdom. Man must enter the new community, not as a stripped nonentity, but as the bearer of gifts for the new Adam.

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3. Allegorical Novels

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Amos Tutuola: *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Faber 15/-

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