

- 8 "A comparison of the nutritional status of two Konkomba villages varying in degree of accessibility to Western influence with a special emphasis upon the nutritional status of vulnerable groups within the villages", Thesis presented for M.Sc. degree at the Faculty of Science, University of Ghana by Ms Denice Williams, 1978. Ms Williams' approach to her work is ideally suited to conditions in Western Africa, more so than most other rural development projects established by the Church and deserves to be better known.
- 9 "Food and Nutrition in Self-Reliant National Development: the Impact on Child Nutrition of Jamaican Government Policy", Thomas J Mardione, Medical Anthropology, University of Connecticut, Winter 1977.
- 10 Cf. CTS edition nn 14 and 15.
- 11 Romans 15:25-28.

Contemporary Christianity as a Religion of Nature

Adrian Edwards CSSp

While my cook is preparing chicken soup, to be followed by the actual chicken and some yam cakes, I ought to fill in the interval of anticipation by explaining my situation and my problem. I might perhaps equally well fill it in by drinking some sherry, but it might be better to keep that luxury for the guests who may come at the week-end.

My situation is this; I am a Catholic priest, with some training in anthropology, in charge of a mission in a rural area of the Rivers State of Nigeria. For the article I want to write, my library is extremely limited. I beg my readers not therefore to grumble at inadequate, nay minimal, footnoting, and the absence of exact quotations.

My problem is this; how correct is the claim that contemporary Christianity differs from all other manifestations of religion in being unconcerned with nature?¹ It may be seen, in an approach which goes back, I think to German Idealism, as a historical religion, the moment of the Incarnation marking the beginning of the end for the nature religions; or it may be seen as a religion essentially concerned with relations between persons, having, with the progress of science, sloughed off the cosmological ideas on such absorbing questions as the exact date of the Creation, the

1 To be honest, this article is intended as a counter-argument to those advanced by Professor Robin Horton, formerly of the University of Ife and now of the University of Port Harcourt (both in Nigeria). See Horton's essay in *Rationality* (edited B. Wilson), Blackwell, Oxford, 1970, which reprints two articles on "African traditional thought and Western science", which first appeared in *Africa*, 1967. If I were giving a detailed analysis of Professor Horton's work, I would wish to stress a number of positive elements of value.

topography of Hell, and the necessary function of mosquitoes in the designs of a benevolent Providence, which were found so fascinating in earlier centuries. The “disenchantment of the world”² has made the universe no longer a mirror of the Creator, but the morally neutral backdrop against which the true drama of redemption is played out, where the human face of God is looked for only in the knowing and loving of human beings by each other.

Here we find, it seems, the parting of the ways. The foregoing description of contemporary Christianity might be acceptable to both Christians and unbelievers, but for the Christians this would represent a Christianity in some sense free to be itself – its loss of cosmic orientation being as valuable as its loss of political establishment. For the atheists, on the other hand, this limitation of Christianity to the universe of persons is the last stand of the “God of the gaps” is a very considerable defeat, since the God of the Christian centuries was for the ordinary churchgoer a God of nature and of power over nature, to whom one prayed for health, children, good harvests, and incompetent tax collectors. A God to whom one prays for greater authenticity in one’s personal relationships can scarcely have a similar drawing power. If it can be shown, however, that the Christian God is still the God of nature, at least within some mainstream Christian denominations, as distinct from adventurous individual thinkers on the one hand, and very conservative and/or naive strata of adherents on the other, then generalisations about contemporary Christianity may need re-phrasing.

First of all, a word on the degree to which “traditional” or “primal” religions do provide explanations of the order of nature. Unless very serious qualifications are added, this claim smacks too much of the nineteenth century when armchair anthropologists happily ransacked libraries for vegetable myths and solar heroes. It was one of the great achievements of Durkheim and his school that the degree to which traditional religions reflected and served social rather than natural relationships became recognised. Of course, this led to excesses, such as the way in which analyses of ancestor cults and sorcery and witchcraft beliefs, which are particularly susceptible to this kind of approach, predominated over studies of other aspects of African religion, and this has perhaps led to counter-exaggerations, in, for example, attempts to impose systems of binomial classification on every aspect of traditional cultures. But it seems fairly agreed by now that the cosmic ideas of a particular culture are filtered through that culture’s social self-awareness. Roy Willis in his readable *Man and Beast* compares and contrasts, as the examiners say, three African cultures, Nuer, Lele, and Fipa in their attitude to animals. For the Nuer, their cattle, and particularly their oxen, provide satisfactory paradigms of their

social order, but the wild life that surrounds them is intellectually uninteresting. Their social gaze is inward. For the Lele, on the contrary, the forest and its animals, particularly the enigmatic pangolin, offer rich intellectual, as well as physical, nourishment, in healing contrast with squabble-ridden village life. Finally, for the Fipa, the domestication of pythons seems to offer an acceptable symbol of the transformation of nature into culture. Evidently, traditional cultures understand nature through the instruments they have developed in understanding their social life.

This is not quite the same as saying that natural symbols are simply so many pegs on which cultures hang their understanding of social structure in waiting for the social sciences to emerge. While one has to be very cagey indeed before identifying supposedly basic human needs and instincts, there does seem some kind of human need, which may of course be partially suppressed, or considerably stimulated, in differing cultures, for a link between his human nature and the order of biological and even physical nature. V W Turner, in his studies of Ndembu (Zambia) culture³ has shown how the three concepts, one might say Platonic ideas, of whiteness, redness and blackness bring together a very wide range of meanings, objects, signs and situations cutting across the worlds of society and nature, and the ideas of microcosm/macrocosm, so significant in Europe up to the seventeenth century provide another case of inter-acting analogies between the admittedly separate orders of culture, nature, and spirit. To put it in a different way, medieval and renaissance Europe saw nature as having written into it meanings of a metaphysical order, which were not simply imposed on it by the human will. This concept of an imposed meaning from outside is, very often, what we understand by symbolism, rather than the revealing or strengthening of some innate reality.

But are these concepts of inter-acting analogies between different orders of being, and the revelation of hidden truth, rather than the imposition of meaning, still found in contemporary Christianity? If so, it still remains profoundly concerned with the world of nature as well as with the universe of persons. I would argue that it is, and, in support of this, quote from the liturgy of the Easter vigil rite, more precisely, the blessing of holy water.⁴ "Bless this water: it makes the seed to grow, it refreshes us and makes us clean. You have made of it a servant of your loving kindness: through water, you set your people free, and quenched their thirst in the desert. With water the prophets announced a new covenant that you would make with man. By water, made holy by Christ in the Jordan, you made our sinful nature new".

Here, and elsewhere in the Easter Vigil service, water is given the status, not simply of a ritual item, as a particular vestment

might be, nor even of a primary symbol, in the way that water is in so many ritual systems throughout the world, but of a natural symbol that has been historicised, caught up in God's plan for saving mankind through and in history. To some extent, of course, it is also necessary to have the actual wet stuff on hand. The same symbolisation of history, coupled with making nature historic, is to be found earlier in the same service at the very beginning, with the blessing of the new fire and of the Easter candle. This prayer begins "Father, we share in the light of your glory through your Son, the light of the world. Make this new fire holy, and inflame us with new hope". Afterwards, as a commentary puts it, "The priest traces on the candle the sign of the cross, the symbol of death and life, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, for Christ the beginning and end of all things, and the numerals of the current year since Christ is present here and now". The candle, although an artefact, is also a natural symbol, since it carries light and fire, signs of truth and transformation. It is also specifically a symbol of time, and thereby also of Christ, who is seen as someone living in time, who also sums up time, and re-patterns time, including the immediate present into a total presence. Later on, in the prayer called the "Exsultet", the night, which has been at first simply the contrasted setting to the lighting of the fire and the candle, is now given a value of its own, being identified with the night of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and the night of the Resurrection, and is apostrophised as "Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth and man is reconciled with God".

How does all this fit into my argument that contemporary Christianity still finds the order of nature (a term which I do not mean to equate with the totality of scientific knowledge) relevant? I would argue that the Easter Vigil service (which in its present form is the result of very recent and severe pruning) gives Catholic worship a dimension which relates it to the powers of nature beyond and outside the doing and saying and hearing of a particular community. If we look at the image of time presented by the Easter Vigil service we can see that it is not simply the sequential, irreversible time, whose presence in Western culture is often ascribed to the influence of Christianity, nor a Hegelian-Marxist "history", a growing, all-enveloping consciousness, at once man-made and man-making, serving to separate man off from the world of nature. Again, the time epitomised by the Easter candle is not simply the "great time" of some writers on comparative religion. It is both a here-and-now time, as shown by the date marked on the candle, and a time open to the all-at-once of eternity, since the candle stands for the eternal and incarnate Christ. It is a time which reconciles linear time – Christ is both Alpha and Omega,

beginning and end – with recurrent time – Easter, coming round once a year, is identifiable with the other nights of the escape from Egypt and the Resurrection. Finally, it is historical time, linked to certain specific events, which breaks into nature, giving some aspects of it a historical dimension. Thus involvement of nature in revelation operates (a process brought out in the prayer for the blessing of water and perhaps still more strongly in the prayer over the new baptismal water) both in the enabling of mankind to “read” nature as a system of divine signs and in the selection of such natural substances as water and wheat to serve as the prime matter of sacraments.

Clearly, any consideration of the sacraments must involve some reflection on their roots in nature, even if this has often been obscured by over-concentration on them as aids to individual piety. Fortunately, the new prayers for the offering of the bread and wine reveal this dimension, thus, “Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made”. The “nature” with which the sacraments are concerned is mainly man’s bodily nature, but this is of course part of the wider creation, both animate and inanimate. Such charming Genesis episodes as Adam naming the animals or Noah sending out the dove hint to us that man’s stewardship over nature by no means excludes a tinge of fellow-feeling. Mankind, as we are frequently assured, has come of age; but were ecologists to show in their concern for imperilled nature something of the playfulness that some of the saints showed towards their animal friends they might obtain a readier hearing. This point needs to be made since I have heard a Catholic scientist argue that the ecological crisis is in part a consequence of Christianity’s rejection of nature.

Sacraments, then, draw on nature for their raw materials, and the symbolism which they employ of eating, drinking and washing is a relevant symbolism in the sense in which the arbitrary symbolism employed, say, in designing national flags is not. Yet the raw material which they use has already in some sense been “pre-processed” by its incorporation in the historical dimension of the Biblical revelation, as we saw in the Easter Vigil prayers. This argument can go a step further if we look at the eschatological dimension of the sacraments. The resurrection of the flesh, which need not mean the resuscitation of the actual body I have here and now, but rather that there will be some physical element, albeit not subject to the conditions of time and space we know, in the ultimate make-up of human personality, is very clearly taught in the New Testament.⁵ It is not, perhaps, much stressed in present-day preaching, but has at least the relevance of being a standing answer to criticisms of Christianity as body-hating and narrowly concerned with individual souls. In Catholic prayer and the-

ology, the Eucharist is seen as in some sense a promise and seed of this future bodily resurrection and the celebration of Mass appears as something which actually hastens on human existence towards the wind-up of history at the Parousia,⁶ as theology precisely terms the Day of Judgment. Our understanding of the Parousia is certainly unclear, but it seems worthwhile to stress that even if we exclude angels blowing trumpets as being but figures of Biblical rhetoric, the Parousia brings together the completion of individual destinies, the rounding-off of human history, and the transformation of human bodily existence.

There are, of course, other aspects of Christian faith, other than the liturgy, which point to a concern with nature. Few doctrines have been more abused than the idea of Providence, God's control over, and concern for, even the most trivial and seemingly fortuitous events; one recalls Disraeli's Mr Wordie, who wrote a history of the Peninsular War in fifteen volumes to prove that Providence is always on the side of the Tories. Yet any limitation of the idea of Providence, as distinct from balancing it with other Christian doctrines, such as human free will and the autonomy of nature, mutilates Christian theism into some form of deism. We need, certainly, an understanding of Providence which does not have God sticking the celestial equivalent of a finger into the world process every time one of us gets down on his knees, but equally we need to remember the assurance of the Gospels that God watches over birds and lilies. It might be suggested that such human potentialities as psycho-kinesis and telepathy provide analogies for some kind of providential action which would be within rather than over and against the powers of nature; but I do not feel myself very fitted to develop this point. What I am anxious to stress is that the Christian belief in Providence indicates that the Christian view of nature is very far from being a mere blank, still less either a hazy pantheistic at-one-ness or the fashionable taste for doom-watching and gloomy soothsaying. If the world is God's by origin, and under His ultimate sovereignty, He has the self-imposed obligation of making some kind of a success of it.

Contemporary Christians are admittedly less inclined than those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to look for cosmological information in the Bible, though even in those centuries there were such warning voices as that of Cardinal de Berulle, who remarked, "The Bible teaches us to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go". But to me it is not at all clear that the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions have had the impact on Christian belief and the numbers of believing and worshipping Christians as is often claimed. Changes in social relations, rather than in the amount of scientific knowledge available, are surely responsible for the apparent irrelevancy of the churches in modern Europe.⁷

I have argued the case for contemporary Christianity in one of its forms having something to say which is relevant to our understanding of nature, if we do not take “understanding” as being necessarily the same as verifiable scientific theories. One could go on to further reflections about how the idea of God as Creator has relevance for Christian understanding of morality, but this would demand rather a different argument.⁸

- 2 Max Weber's phrase for what he considered to be the continuous increase of rationality as the determining norm of human activity.
- 3 Notably *The Forest of Symbols*, Cornell University Press, 1967.
- 4 These quotations are taken from *The Veritas Missal*, Liturgical Books, 1974.
- 5 Cf St John's Gospel, 5:28-29, and the First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:12-54
- 6 In the reformed order of Mass this idea is stressed by the acclamations that follow the consecration, e.g. “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus come in glory”. Obviously, this idea of the Eucharist as acting in and on history, not simply by its impact on the particular group of worshippers present, but rather through its trans-substantiating impact on the order of nature, needs much more consideration than I have given it here. It may be suggested that the “new” theories of the Eucharist, popular in the early sixties, which stressed the change of meaning rather than the change of substance, would fit in with an acceptance of Professor Horton's position.
- 7 Social anthropologists have usually argued that in those societies which have a strongly held belief in witchcraft a decline is unlikely without either changes in those aspects of the social structure where conflict leads to witchcraft accusations or a marked fall in child mortality. The only significant dissenting voice seems to be that of Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, who argues that the decline of belief in witchcraft among the upper class in England in the later 17th century was the consequence of the spread of scientific knowledge. I am certainly not an expert on the period, but I feel that a careful examination of shifts in relations between the social classes, and of social relations and their cultural content within the upper class, might produce alternative explanations. Thus, in a society where there is an increasing use of spatial distance to indicate differences of social rank, an increasing stress on the moral autonomy of the individual, and a diminishing emphasis on duties to poorer neighbours and relatives, there is likely to be a decline in the sense of some non-empirical but physically effective element in social relations. Beliefs in such an element can take the form of witchcraft (though they could also take other forms, such as blessings and curses).
I am not arguing that witchcraft beliefs are on all fours with religious beliefs in general, but I suspect that the “decline in religion” usually ties up with shifts in the cultural elements that make up the individual's identity, rather than increases in academic knowledge or even political consciousness.
- 8 I have made an attempt to reopen discussion on the idea of created nature as the foundation of sexual morality in my “Ethics and Nature”, *New Blackfriars*, March 1979. That article was actually written after this one.