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The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion

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This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, August 27- September 3, 1980, pp. 817-820. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

SUMMARY

The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God. Instead, God brought *them*, for the God described in the Bible is none other than the God who was already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity.

The editor of The Christian Century has given me an undeserved privilege in asking me to contribute some reflections on "How My Mind Has Changed" in the

course of the past decade. I wish to apply "change of mind" here to mean theological growth, and not necessarily a rejection of or turnaround from ideas that I may have held ten years ago. Indeed, ten years ago I had no significant theological position. I was like a snail shyly peeping out of its house after a heavy thunderstorm.

‘ . . . In Africa, God Is Not Dead ’

I completed my doctoral studies at the University of Cambridge in 1963, the year that *Honest to God*, by J.A.T. Robinson, came out. That book was followed by a flurry of literature on the so-called "death of God" theology (if "theology" it was, for I would call it "atheology"). Following a period of parish work in England, I went to teach at Makerere University, Uganda, where I remained for ten years until 1974. One read *Honest to God* and a variety of other works in an effort to understand the hot debate then raging in Europe and America. Some people tried to involve Africa in the debate. But to the disappointment of those theological exporters, this fish was not attracted by the bait. A prominent European New Testament professor visited Makerere University and interviewed me on what I thought about the "death of God" discussion. I simply and honestly answered him that "for us in Africa, God is not dead." That finished the interview. On returning home, the learned professor wrote an article using my brief answer as his title.

At Makerere University I taught New Testament, African religion and other courses. Since I myself had never heard any lectures on African religion, I set out to do research on the subject in order to teach the course adequately. The first and most intriguing topic that immediately engaged my attention was the thinking of African peoples about God. So I read on and on, and conducted field research to learn more and more. My findings were used in teaching, but eventually I put them together in a book, *Concepts of God in Africa*, published by the British publisher SPCK (1970). The book comprised ideas that I had gathered from 300 African peoples ("tribes" -- a term that today is sometimes used in derogatory ways). The previous year I had published *African Religions and Philosophy* (Doubleday, 1969).

Some individuals have criticized these books -- and no book is perfect. But whatever the shortcomings of these and my other publications, the materials that

went into these two have raised extremely important issues for me that have continued to engage my reflection. At many points I see intriguing parallels between the biblical record and African religiosity. In particular, the concepts about God provide one area of great commonality. There are also other parallels in social, political and cultural areas, just as there are some significant differences. In one case the thinking and experience of the people produced a written record of God's dealings with the Jewish people in particular. In the other case no such written record exists. But God's dealings with the African people are recorded, nevertheless, in living form -- oral communication, rituals, symbols, ceremonies, community faith. "For us in Africa, God is not dead" -- and that applies whether or not there is a written record of his relations with and concern for people.

A God Already Known

Since the Bible tells me that God is the Creator of all things, his activities in the world must clearly go beyond what is recorded in the Bible. He must have been active among African peoples as he was among the Jewish people. Did he then reveal himself *only* in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and other personalities of the Bible? Didn't our Lord let it be clearly known that "before Abraham was I am" (John 8:58)? Then was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya, as well as Mount Sinai? The decisive word here is "only." The more I peeped into African religious insights about God, the more I felt utterly unable to use the word "only" in this case. In its place there emerged the word "also." This was an extremely liberating word in my theological thinking. With it, one began to explore afresh the realm of God's revelation and other treasures of our faith. I find the traditional Western distinction between "special revelation" and "general revelation" to be inadequate and un freeing. This is not a biblical distinction. If they are two wavelengths, they make sense only when they move toward a convergence. When this happens, then a passage such as Hebrews 1:1-3 rolls down like mighty waters, full of exciting possibilities of theological reflection.

The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought *them*. They proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ.

But they used the names of the God who was and is already known by African peoples -- such as Mungu, Mulungu, Katonda, Ngai, Olodumare, Asis, Ruwa, Ruhanga, Jok, Modimo, Unkulunkulu and thousands more. These were not empty names. They were names of one and the same God, the creator of the world, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One African theologian, Gabriel Setiloane, has even argued that the concept of God which the missionaries presented to the Sotho-Tswana peoples was a devaluation of the traditional currency of Modimo (God) among the Sotho-Tswana.

No doubt there still remain much research and reflection to be done in order to work out a consistent theological understanding of the issues entailed here. But the basic truth seems to be that God's revelation is not confined to the biblical record. One important task, then, is to see the nature, the method and the implications of God's revelation among African peoples, in the light of the biblical record of the same revelation.

Revelation is given not in a vacuum but within particular historical experiences and reflections. When we identify the God of the Bible as the same God who is known through African religion (whatever its limitations), we must also take it that God has had a historical relationship with African peoples. God is not insensitive to the history of peoples other than Israel. Their history has a theological meaning. My interpretation of Israel's history demands a new look at the history of African peoples, among whom this same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has indeed been at work. In this case, so-called "salvation history" must widen its outreach in order to embrace the horizons of other peoples' histories. I am not a historian, and I have not done careful thinking in this direction. But I feel that the issue of looking at African history in light of the biblical understanding of history is clearly called for.

A Massive Expansion

My research into and teaching of African religion has led to another important area of development. In Kenya I grew up in home, school and church milieus which held that the African religious and cultural background was demonic and anti-Christian. In this overpowering environment, one simply accepted this stand and looked at the world from its perspectives. Later, my theological studies in America and England did not challenge this position, since that was not a living issue for my

professors and fellow students. But upon my return to work in Africa, and upon careful study of the religious background of our people, there emerged gradually the demand to examine this issue and to form my own judgment.

The statistical expansion of the Christian faith in Africa in this century is one of the considerations that led me back to the issue of its relation with African religion. In 1900 there were an estimated 9 million Christians (accounting for about 7 per cent of the population of Africa). This number has since grown rapidly, to the point that in 1980 there are estimated to be 200 million Christians (or about 45 per cent of the population). This massive expansion within a short time is unprecedented in the history of Christianity. What factors are responsible for it?

We can list some obvious and often publicized factors. They include the work of missionaries (of whom there are about 40,000 today, without counting their family members); the work of African Christians in evangelism and pastoral care (their numbers are infinitely greater than those of overseas missionaries, and include men, women and children, both lay and ordained); the role of Christian schools; the translation and distribution of the Bible (which is now available in full or in part in nearly 600 of Africa's 1,000 languages); and the ending of the colonial era during the decades 1960-1980. But I have discovered that there is also the fundamental factor of African religion, without which this phenomenal expansion of Christianity would not be a reality. Of course, behind all these factors is the Holy Spirit working through them.

There is not space here to argue the case for the role played by African religion in the establishment of the Christian faith in Africa. We have already noted that the overseas missionaries did not bring God to Africa. God was not a stranger to African peoples. Spiritual activities like prayer, thanksgiving, and the making of sacrifices were well-established facts of life for the existence and continuation of the community.

The Church in the African Scene

It is in this complex of religiosity that the preaching of the gospel makes sense; it is this preparedness that has undergirded the spreading of the gospel like wildfire among African societies which had hitherto followed and practiced traditional

religion. Consequently, people are discovering that the biblical faith is not harmful to their religious sensibilities. This is, obviously, a general statement, one which needs detailed elaboration. But in practical terms, there is a Christian Yes to African religiosity. It may be, and needs to be, a qualified and critical Yes. But it is nevertheless a working Yes and one that demands theological understanding. A close geographical correlation exists between the location of African religion and the rapid expansion of the Christian faith. This is not an empty coincidence. It is the southern two-thirds of Africa (including Madagascar) which we can rightly call Christian Africa, as the northern one-third is Muslim Africa.

This rapid spreading of the Christian faith where people have been predominantly followers of African religion provokes interesting questions. That which had been seen as the enemy of the gospel turns out (to me) to be indeed a very welcoming friend. African religion has equipped people to listen to the gospel, to discover meaningful passages in the Bible, and to avoid unhealthy religious conflict.

Theological development in Africa must inevitably grow within this religious setting. For this reason, some African theologians take African religiosity to be one of the sources of theological reflection (besides the Bible, Christian heritage, etc.). A conference of mainly African theologians, held in Ghana in December 1977, said in its final communiqué: "The God of history speaks to all peoples in particular ways. In Africa the traditional religions are a major source for the study of the African experience of God. The beliefs and practices of the traditional religions in Africa can enrich Christian theology and spirituality." These statements await further exploration by African theologians. Currently I am about to complete a book on this question of the encounter between the biblical faith and African religion.

The church is composed largely of people who come out of the African religious background. Their culture, history, world views and spiritual aspirations cannot be taken away from them. These impinge upon their daily life- and experience of the Christian faith. So the church which exists on the African scene bears the marks of its people's backgrounds. No viable theology can grow in Africa without addressing itself to the interreligious phenomenon at work there. I feel deeply the value of biblical studies in this exercise, and the contribution of biblical insights in this development.

The Quest for Christian Unity

I have concentrated these comments on the role of African background in my theological reflection. There are other areas of exploration in which I continue to be engaged. There is no room to describe them, and I can mention only two or three of them briefly. My doctoral studies in New Testament eschatology led me also to the field of Christology. I want to reflect and write on this topic, but somehow it makes me feel frightened. I want to make a pilgrimage into Christ. I want to walk with Jesus of Nazareth on the shores of Lake Galilee and the hillsides of Judea, through the gates of Jerusalem. I want to see his healing hand, to hear his word that exorcises evil spirits.

For six years I worked with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. That experience gave me a face-to-face encounter with the ecumenical movement and left a lasting mark on me. It sensitized my thinking in many areas, one of these being the quest for Christian unity. I have seen the quest more sharply. I cannot claim that I have witnessed much progress in that quest at the organizational level, but perhaps I had expected too much. The council made me aware, perhaps even frightfully so, of the problems of our world. The council's programs in response to these problems are impressive. They constitute an important channel of the church's prophetic witness today. The WCC's very existence as a council of churches is a living hope. But, it has been a sorrowful, disappointment to me to experience the fact that some individuals who exercise great power in the council are not angels: they sometimes practice the exact contrary of those values and goals to which the council is committed. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the World Council of Churches is a great witness of the Christian response to the prayer of our Lord that we may all be one. And this witness deserves one's support through service and prayer.

A Tilting from North to South

The concept of the church as the body of Christ in the whole world is another growing development for me. I have been greatly enriched by working at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, 1974-1980. It is here that I have discovered the church in Burma, in the Pacific islands, the house church in China, the basic Christian communities in Latin America, the struggling church in South Africa, plus countless

other endeavors of Christians all over the world. I have met here the church not only in its geographical outreach but also in its historical roots -- seeing, for example, the rich traditions of the Orthodox Church, the universality of the Roman Catholic Church (even though it is based in the Vatican), the reconciling positioning of the Anglican Communion, the dynamic vitality of African independent churches, and so on. I have received much in a short period. It will keep me chewing for a long time, and it will most certainly feed my theological development.

I am very excited, for example, by the estimate that in 1987 there will be a statistical balance of Christian population between the north (Europe, Soviet Union and America) and the south (Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania). After that date there will be more Christians in the south than in the north. This statistical tilting of Christendom from the north to the south, after 2,000 years, holds tremendous prospects and challenges. Its consequences for theological and ecclesiological developments are yet to be faced. They will certainly be overwhelming, and I feel very excited about them.

The theological horizon continues to expand. I am tantalized by the fact that my vision cannot cope with that horizon. But I am grateful for that one step I may be taking under the light of this vision. So, "Lord, help Thou my unbelief!" Amen.

PREVIOUS

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