

is receiving much attention. In Africa the problem is involved. The indigenous cultures are usually primitive, and in a state of dissolution under the impact of Western civilisation. The Africans on the whole look to Western civilisation for their future. The problem is principally one of attempting to make this process of adaptation as gentle and as fruitful as possible. Here again the heavy work of establishing a solidly trained élite of clergy and laity is of the greatest importance. Only with such an indigenous body of Catholics and clergy, firmly grounded in principles, can the new Church in Africa survive the spiritual disarray which is rapidly coming upon the continent.



SOME AFRICAN 'CHRISTIANS'

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IF there is a 'problem' of adapting or accommodating African rites and beliefs to Christianity, it is one to which missionaries best know the answers. Students of primitive people are better employed in saying what does happen, rather than in speculating as to what might or should happen. The problem posed in theory, in which abstract African rites and beliefs encounter an abstract Christian teaching, can scarcely be the problem which has to be answered daily in practice. This impersonal encounter between two abstractions then becomes a very personal encounter between two people, one Christian, one pagan. Each is held to his religion by something more than the arguments he could produce for it; while the Christian may sometimes find himself nearer to the pagan than his arguments against him suggest. The difference between them makes for uneasiness, if only because it will not remain constant. Christianity and paganism, in the abstract, have a clear line of division, beyond which they are not required to meet on equal terms. A Christian and a pagan, two individuals, cannot so easily remain each on his own side of a formal division. They are bound to feel the strain of sometimes seeming to belong to different worlds, while at other times belonging so palpably to the same. I think that to try to find common 'human' ground between them is to misconceive the difference. This common human ground, in so far as the expression means anything, is

given, in the first place. Christian and pagan are not like two slices of bread, one spread with butter and the other with margarine. To start to look for common human ground—human which is neither human-Christian nor human-pagan—is to reject what is immediately there. It is at once to make the relationship between Christian and pagan into a problem, not a relationship. That is why I think that well-meant efforts, like those of a late Anglican Bishop of Masasi,¹ to adapt African rites to Christian purposes simply by substitutions, cannot for long be very satisfactory. For this procedure seems to me to take from the rites exactly what the Bishop would wish to retain—their spontaneity. It makes them a 'managed' thing. The profoundest productions of African imagination become a vehicle for mere policy, however well-intentioned. To think that rites and customs can thus be applied, from the outside, is to fail really to take them seriously.

The findings of Dr B. G. M. Sundkler, a Protestant missionary, who has made a scholarly study of Independent Churches, or sects, in South Africa,² have some bearing on what I have already written, and I cannot do better than consider some 'unmanaged' African Christians as he describes them.

In 1945, there were known to be in South Africa about eight hundred African separatist churches—sects, as it is more convenient to call them. They (and others not studied) were the unintended results of various forms of Protestant mission work in South Africa. Of the eight hundred, only eight had in 1945 been officially recognised by the Government of South Africa. Recognition, which carries with it certain advantages, is granted to such sects 'on their merits', and according to conditions requiring a review of their history, size, the training and qualifications of their ministers, and the ethical standing of their ministers and members. The sects represented secession after secession from original Christian (and one gathers, Protestant) missions, and from each other. A few of their names may give some indication of their nature. The first five names on Dr Sundkler's list are:

The A.I. Zion Elected Church;
 Abantu Independent Methodist Christian Church of S.
 Africa;

¹ *Christianity and Native Rites*. Essays by William Vincent Lucas, Bishop of Masasi, 1926-44. (Central Africa House Press.)

² *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. By Bengt G. M. Sundkler. (Lutterworth Press.)

Abyssinian Baptist Church;
 Abyssinian Methodist Holy Church of Christ;
 The Acts of Apostolic in Jerusalem Church.

There are many others in whose names 'Africa' is an important word, for example:

African Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion;
 African Correctly Apostolic Jerusalem Church in Zion;
 and others whose names sound still stranger to us, such as the 'African Castoroil Dead Church'. It would be a mistake, I think, to dwell on any incongruity in some of these names. Dr Sundkler, who has known members of such sects, is careful to make no such mistake. Indeed, it seems that one of the factors which has made these and other separations between black and white in Africa possible has been the unthinking assertion, by Europeans, of the infallibility of their own sense of congruity in trifling matters.

Individually, these sects are less startling phenomena than their great numbers make them appear. Some of them have only a few adherents; and the secessions discussed by the author are mostly from various sorts of Christian missions from which they might have been expected, where little emphasis has been placed on the Church, and much on the individual and the independence and self-sufficiency of the local congregation. Most of them, too, have come from churches in which the test of true Christianity has been made a matter of individual religious 'experiences' by which each member of the congregation might be expected to 'feel' the authenticity of the message. Taken as a whole, however, the sects are interesting in two ways. First, Dr Sundkler shows connections between them and specifically South African social and tribal conditions. I do not refer to these much here. In their most extreme form they are summarised in the stern, but also self-complacent, attitude shown in the following African conclusion to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins:

'Because the Whites rule on earth, the Blacks do so in Heaven. The Whites will go a-begging to dip the tip of their finger in cool water. But they will get as reply: "Hhayyi! (no!)—nobody can rule twice".'

Second, however, Dr Sundkler's book shows in general outline a relationship between some sorts of Christian teachers and the Africans whom they teach, which may be significant for other parts of Africa.

It would be wrong, I think, to suppose that the sort of religion studied by Dr Sundkler is quite clearly nearer to indigenous African religion than it is to some of the Christian mission teaching on which it is based. I do not regard these sects as being pagan African religion, with a veneer of half-understood Christianity. The admixture, or rather compound, of Christian and pagan goes deeper than that—as deep, indeed, as the minds and hearts of those for whom it is a religion. Here we see how some Africans have remade Christianity for themselves from what they were taught. These South African sects have made their selections from what they were outwardly taught, and in open secession from the teaching body. But it is possible also that what they have done in open separation from any universal Christian body represents what others tend to do inwardly, while remaining formally and conscientiously full members of a Church. The very ease with which the transition is made, from being within the mission to being clearly outside it, suggests this. The original Christian teaching which the leaders of these sects received has been openly modified by them, and new dogmas have been proclaimed. But before they could thus appear outwardly, these must have been inward secessions from a teaching which did not correspond with African experience, and which left no room for their experience to grow within it. Nobody re-potted them, so to speak, so their roots broke the pot.

There is undoubtedly, as Dr Sundkler shows, a tendency to fission in indigenous African political and religious systems. But I think that it is the constriction in the Christian teaching received as much as any African tendency to split and splinter into independent groups which explains the attitude of an African politician, A. G. Champion. Favouring the free development of all African Christian sects, he said: 'In that way only can we increase the worship of God in this country. In that way only can we have the full Gospel of Christ taught.' This emphasis on 'the full gospel', of which there are other examples, represents something more than a desire to multiply sects. It is the demand that Christianity should have the fullness which was claimed for it, for what was presented as a full and final religion could not accommodate within itself the good faith of the simplest and poorest people in Africa. I select some of the features of the belief and practices of these sects in order to suggest the shifts in emphasis

which many Africans not only make, but perhaps need to make, in order to give life to the formal instruction they receive.

The fears and hopes felt by members of these African sects are basically those of all men: the fear of being abandoned, or lost, and the hope and desire for a fuller and deeper life, however conceived. From this point of view, many of the adherents of these sects seek only, in their own way, the fulfilment of what has been promised by Christianity as they have learnt it. It is clear that if that fulfilment is not intimately there in the mission church, they will seek it for themselves outside. As a corollary to this, it is clear also that if the vitality of Christian symbol is not an accomplished fact in the mission church, it will become so, for them, outside the mission. The adherents of these sects are none of them content with commemorating a historical Christ, who belongs, in any case, to a historical perspective which must seem to them foreign. In it, Christ is immensely far away, as though they had been taught to look for him only through the wrong end of the telescope. They try to reduce that distance and make Christianity *be* what they think the Gospels teach, not merely an imitation of something in the past. This is particularly shown in the identification, in some cases, of an African prophet and sect leader with Christ (in South Africa, the *black* Christ, for the vital counterpart of a seemingly dead white religion is a black religion). It is shown also in the emphasis on a living God, 'a God with arms, and legs, and love, and compassion', as a Bantu preacher says.

In the sects described by Dr Sundkler, there is everywhere the same determination that Christian symbol should not just denote some abstract conception, or represent a truth which, if we could properly apprehend it, might be otherwise expressed in abstract terms. There is clearly the determination that what is held to be true should be alive and vigorous in symbol and act, apprehended with a single movement of the whole being. They must have been taught that the 'symbol' was something less alive, and something more imperfect, than some idea it stood for; they have cut out the idea, the other meaning, except in so far as it lives in the symbol. They have turned what they were taught into a religion of being and doing, when they found it a religion of mental culture. They have wanted to count their blessings by being blessed, not by mental arithmetic. The virile imagination shown in some of the utterances of the Bantu leaders of sects contrasts

strikingly with the sentimentality and insipidity of much that they (in common with everyone else) must have been taught in this century. I quote, for example, two verses of a hymn by the important leader of a 'Nazarite' sect, Isaiah Shembe:

We stand before Thee,
O beautiful hen,
Thou dost not love
Jerusalem alone.

O love us and hatch us
Wondrous Hen!
We dwell in Thy kingdom
Thou Hen of Heaven.

In the church or sect founded by this man, we are told that the founder has taken the place of the Son; and there seems to be a general tendency for the Third Person of the Trinity to be regarded as more *remote* than the others. Paradoxically, I think, this can only be explained by supposing that Christ's humanity has been stressed, in the teaching received, at the expense of his divinity. Christ, for them, has become identified with the sentimental pictures of a white man in religious oleographs and mission bibles. It is not surprising that these Africans should seek a figure nearer to them, and also further from them, than is represented in the picture they see, and perhaps the teaching they receive; nearer, because not merely a white man, however 'good', and further, because not merely a man. It seems to me that they ask no less certainly, though more simply, than Eliot:

What is this face, less clear and clearer
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—
Given or lent: more distant than stars, and nearer than the
eye.

What they have learnt of Christianity will not answer that question; an African prophet will.

There is a sometimes impressive ability among them to recreate what is believed. It is a sort of meditation which must have been little in evidence in the churches from which the secessions were made. It is partly this meditation by Africans which has given a specifically African character to the belief and rites. It seems certain that the nature of traditional meditation has never been taught to many of these Africans; they have been taught religion

as though it were thought about ethics. Dr Sundkler himself writes:

'Each denomination and missionary organisation from overseas brought its characteristic denominational one-sidedness, its own particular kind of Christianity. Generally speaking, the Christian Church was by these organisations presented as a preaching and teaching institution only, whereas the rich devotional heritage of the Church universal was not transmitted to the young African Church in the same degree.'

They therefore returned to their own devotional heritage, as present in the dance, dreams, spirit-possession and rites of purification. It is noticeable that they did not take over what they knew of Holy Communion; and I think the reason for that is that they rejected the merely imitative and commemorative features of what they had been taught. Dr Sundkler again writes:

'Some of the Protestant Mission Churches from which the independent Churches broke away, presented to the African the pattern of an altarless Christianity, where Holy Communion was only infrequently practised.'

And he points out how the equivalent of Holy Communion has been converted into a purification rite. I doubt, however, if this is, as he suggests, a specifically African change of emphasis. What is of interest is the introduction of this new emphasis, into what had clearly been taught as a purely token act. They had not been taught that God was really present in the Communion; but they could really cleanse themselves with real water. The African interpretation is a literal interpretation, and where there is a minimum of the literal admitted within the mission, literal interpretation creates innumerable new rites. This is apparent everywhere in Dr Sundkler's study. I quote, for example, part of what he writes about Baptism, which has developed, of course, along lines suggested by the more extreme Baptist missions:

'Baptism must be in a river, with rapidly flowing water, preferably below a waterfall. In this way one is assured that the water is efficacious in washing and rapidly removing sin, sickness and pollution. The stagnant dead water in the font or dish of the Mission church is not efficacious. The living water gives the spirit.'

There are many such examples which show the importance which

these Africans have attached to the efficacy of the act, that they should not, so to speak, *pretend* and worship with tokens, where they have the materials for a sacramental act. The rites described by Dr Sundkler show a conviction that human beings, in their religion, receive the power to operate with an intrinsic effectiveness, and that what they do is not a mere mime. Where they have found reflection, they have substituted action; and where they have been taught that religion is something which goes on 'in their heads', they have made it something which they can do with their whole selves. For example, Dr Sundkler describes a method of ordination within one of these sects:

'The journey culminated in the ordination act on the holy mountain Nhlankakazi. The prophet anointed his ordinands with holy oil and told them to bring each a very heavy stone from the bottom of the mountain up to the place used for their Church gatherings: "These stones are your oath that you have surrendered yourselves to God. These stones will be a testimony before God".'

Nothing could be further from the religion of 'morality touched by emotion' which had been taught as Christianity.

I have given an account of one side only of these sects. Much in them shows not imaginative life, but that craving for an excitement of the other world, which of course commonly accompanies an urban life which grows daily more sordid and joyless. Even in their most hysterical manifestations, however, there is no doubt that one of the appeals of the sects is that they seem to offer a religion in which the imagination can live and act, and not simply a set of principles and precepts. They offer their adherents a fuller life, whereas the original mission churches offered them only thoughts about a fuller life, which clearly did not become actual for them. These mission churches of which Dr Sundkler writes may not be the only ones in which there is a danger that the church may appear to be rather an annexe of the school, than the school an annexe of the church. The results of this are clearly seen in Dr Sundkler's book, where in many cases the mission school teacher has been forsaken for the African prophet, and the rules of mission ethics forsaken for quasi-sacramental acts. It is an instructive commentary on half a century of Christian teaching in South Africa that some of those taught should have in their creed as Dr Sundkler says, 'no longer a place for the pale White Christ'.