

Comment

Corruption--not many of us talk about it much unless lots of other things are going wrong too. Nigerians have been talking about it for a long time.

"If I go back to Nigeria, into a job there, I know what that will mean--I shall have to do as the others do or I'll be out," a young Nigerian was saying three weeks before the overthrow of President Shagari and his democratically elected but decadent government.

Not corruption but the slump in the world oil market is the main cause of Nigeria's numerous economic woes. What, though, was most striking about the eclipse of Nigerian democracy, on New Year's Eve, was the fact that so few Nigerians did more than shrug their shoulders on hearing about it. They are independent-minded, politically alert people, and their country was one of the few in Africa where newspapers could safely publish headlines lashing government policies. But disillusionment had gone too deep. It was not only a few big politicians who were corrupting or corrupted. It looked as if corruption was becoming almost a way of life, as many Westerners trying to get through Lagos Airport have discovered literally to their cost.

We Westerners, though, had better halt for a minute before getting judgmental about all that immorality. Corruption is the trading (normally for cash) of power which is not supposed to be for sale. In practice, as the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ has said so savagely in his novels, the line between corruption and clever business practice is devilishly difficult to draw--especially in the developing countries. If you believe that "market forces" are the only forces that really count it is ludicrous to take too strong a moral line on corruption. Once again, we are all in this together. It is we, from the West, who have supplied the ideology and done much to create the social and economic conditions needed to allow corruption to boom in a great country like Nigeria in the way it has. Glib explanations of it in terms of "mismanagement", "tribalism", "regional rivalry", etc. are not good enough. Though in 1960 the Nigerians got back their country, the British could not give them back their innocence. Long before the boom in oil prices suddenly so cruelly offered the promise of seemingly unlimited easy riches to what had been a Cinderella country, its inhabitants had begun to be exposed to the values of Western consumer society--to its materialism and individualism. Already the traditional life was crumbling. The old bonds of community, which very effectively kept people's predatory urges under some control, were already breaking.

By and large, it is the things about Western culture which *New Blackfriars* has criticised most consistently which are most in evidence in Nigeria. Yet in at least one important way Nigeria differs from the modern West. It is not godless. While, every day in the West, roughly 7,500 people in effect stop being Christians every day in Africa roughly double that number become Christians, and quite a lot of these are Nigerians. Christianity and Islam are both flourishing there. Arguably, rather as, in the Mediterranean world of two millenia ago, people feeling the effects of individualistic Hellenism found an alternative to Christianity, so people in Nigeria today, feeling the effects of the blast of Western individualism, are finding an alternative in this world faith or its great rival.

Ironically, in Nigeria corruption too is a way of coping with change, not simply a product of it. As the abandoned kids on the streets of Naples know, regular criminal activity, even part-time, slots you into a social network which can be supporting and protective. That is why the pressure of moral indignation alone is not going to get Nigeria's corruption wiped out (and here, in place of "Nigeria", we could, of course, insert the names of a score of different countries).

In theory, Christianity and corruption are irreconcilable alternative ways of coping with change. If Christianity offers in principle the promise of community in a society whose structures have been undermined, corruption offers in practice networks of influence and patronage, a social location, a way of belonging. In fact, in Nigeria (and many other places) many Christians do not see how irreconcilable they are. And the incompatibility between them is only likely to become evident as the so-called "social dimension" of Christianity is seen to be, for many developing countries, not merely an important extra attached to the rest of Christianity but the only sound cement available for laying the permanent foundations of a truly new society. This is obvious enough to quite a lot of Latin American Christians. It is very far from obvious to many Christians in other parts of the world's southern half.

Western Christians cannot create an authentic African Christianity, but they can help to send up friendly warning signals, surely?

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