

LE CHRISTIANISME ECLATE, by Michel de Certeau and Jean-Marie Domenach. *Seuil*, Paris, 1974. 123 pp. 13F.

This book contains the transcript of a radio conversation between Jean-Marie Domenach, editor of the lay Catholic monthly *Esprit*, and Michel de Certeau, the Jesuit theologian and historian of spirituality. It is followed by some discussion with the studio audience and then each author develops further themes he could only sketch orally.

A lurid picture emerges of French Catholicism as 'Christianity exploded'. The Catholic Church in France has apparently forfeited all credibility as arbiter of truth and right; ecclesiastics are trotted out on television to opine on the same basis as the representatives of any other pressure group or subculture, only more exotic than most. This *folklorisation* of the clergy—what a gift the French have for *le mot juste*—is symptomatic of an aestheticisation of Christianity which also signals increasing scepticism about the Church as an institution mediating 'God': 'Does the silence that speaks in us of the absolutely other require, in order to affect our lives, that it should be publicly anticipated, proclaimed, legislated for and organised by the ecclesiastical institution?' In fact the deeper one's faith the less likely one is to be a practising Catholic; the sacrament machine only alienates the committed believer.

Supposing, then, that this picture is right (and some members of the studio audience clearly felt it was an exaggeration), what future is there

for Christianity? According to Michel de Certeau, what survives is a multiple practice, a variety of ways of behaving, few with any clearly Christian status, 'some waiting for a language, others requiring none'. This all but anonymous current in the general movement of life would nevertheless bear witness to a certain *silence*. Just as a church is 'empty' compared with the houses around it, the word 'God' is a blank in the space of language, *un principe d'évidement*, a blank in the sign-saturated universe which continues to demand and create a variety of analogous intervals. Such 'breaks', whether architectural, physiological or linguistic, intimate a silence which Christians, after all the dogmatic eloquence they have been accustomed to have resonating round them, may at first find alarming, but which may eventually generate a meaning, more modest and more ordinary, which would be all the truer for being so much more reserved.

The disintegration of institutional Christianity as we have known it would thus only be an epoch in the history of the meaning of silence. For a historian of spirituality as steeped in the documents of seventeenth-century mysticism as Michel de Certeau is, but who is familiar also with post-metaphysical philosophy of meaning such as is practised by Emmanuel Lévinas, the prospect is not daunting but liberating.

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CATHOLICS, PEASANTS & CHEWA RESISTANCE IN NYASALAND 1889-1939, by Ian Linden. *Heinemann*, London, 1974. 223 pp. £6.

Colonialism is sometimes portrayed as a monster with three powerful arms: the colonial administration itself, the business interests of Europeans, and the Christian Church. Linden dissects one part of the third arm, the progress of Catholicism in Nyasaland, as it then was, from 1889 to 1939.

When the White Fathers and Montfort Fathers arrived in the early 1890s, Protestant missionary work was already so well entrenched that the Catholics were billed as intruders, a sect alongside the Established church. They soon gained respectability, however, since it was from the Protestant ranks that the independent churches seceded and from Protestant emphasis on individual interpretation of the Bible that the 'rebels' took their cue. Bishop Auneau of the Montfort Fathers notes the choice remark: "Ah, exclaimed a Protestant one day, "if they were all Catholics we would not have any revolts to worry about" (quoted p. 87). Although both Catholic and Protestant missionaries provided secular education as a means of evangelising, the Catholics' failure to provide high-quality

secondary education meant that the élite which emerged in the 1930s was almost entirely Protestant. The Catholic preoccupation with training for entry to religious orders had good results where women were concerned but few men resisted the attraction of a job in the colonial administration to embrace celibacy and the rigorous training required for the priesthood. The last chapter, a detailed profile of one particular mission station, provides evidence for Linden's claim that although 'ambitious men were forced to make a choice between mission and village or the escape to the towns and mines . . . for the majority of Christians it was not a question of either/or, rather of and/and. Christian practice did not replace Chewa culture but grew up alongside it. . . . Villagers would attend mass but they also might participate in nyau dances; a girl might receive her first communion in white dress after detailed instruction and later secretly undergo *chinamwali* to ensure that she got a husband' (p. 203).

In the preface Linden justifies his choice of subject and adds: 'A historian studying the