

Redeeming the White Man's God

by Rob van der Hart, O.P.

The violent interruption has subsided and Western imperialism has collapsed against the tenacious pliability of cultures that do not defend themselves by opposing, but by returning to their own perpetual shape, slowly but inevitably, absorbing any marks that have been left and cannot be forgotten.

Christians, too, are having to readjust themselves now that colonialism is officially dead. They are shaking off feelings of disillusion and embarrassment with their own role in this drama, and are finding a new courage and enthusiasm in a willingness to serve rather than to rule, to develop and display a sympathetic understanding of other ways of thinking.

But the basic question still remains: Why did they go out to invade these other minds in the first place? What really inspired the white man to leave his proper abode and to travel out to the four corners of the earth? What gave to his soul that restless urge to preach his belief to all the nations? Was it only a burning love which no man can enjoy without sharing it with others, a fullness of grace that knows no rest so long as there are others who have no share in it?

Or was it perhaps also a need in our God, a longing in him to be taken away and wedded to other continents, to leave Europa and to seek a new bride, to be with people whose souls are still heavy with the divine substance, feeling it and fearing it in trees and sanctuaries, in thunder and lightning, in chiefs and kings, sensing it above all as an unnamed force of compulsion drawing man down into the depth of existence, the spell of the mystery of nature's origin and death?

Was our God perhaps tired of the lightness of our souls that lived by ideas and words alone with no real attachment to the earth? Man is created in the image of God, but God is also made into the likeness of man. And our God, omnipotent and omniscient as he is, may be perishing slowly in the unrelatedness of our sublime concepts, dying with the culture in which he is conceived. Perhaps God felt the threat of becoming a void, and was seeking roots in the centre of the earth in peoples who had not lost contact: a new incarnation.

In a previous article¹ I have tried to give some idea of a new and rapidly growing religious phenomenon, which for lack of an adequate term I clumsily described as the 'nativistic-religious movement coming to terms with Christianity'. I also mentioned a growing alarm among the established Christian Churches, following a long period of astonishing ignorance and lack of interest. Missionaries still exist whose knowledge of this movement is embarrassingly

¹'The Burden of the White Man's God', *New Blackfriars*, June 1972.

limited despite the fact that their Church is now only one of the smallest among a multitude of other religious groupings with Christian links. But more and more reports are coming in that things are not as well as was first thought. Apparently these new quasi-Christian movements have been expanding powerfully though unnoticed, and are now coming to the surface just when everybody had thought that a bright future was in store for the Churches in a decolonialized world. Everywhere prophets are arising as these new religions break through the superficial order which the Europeans had imposed on the land. They preach invulnerability to the bullets of the white man and to everything that is symbolized by them (remember the Congo and Biafra), and they proclaim that Jesus Christ is for the European but that the people have now found their own Messiah. There is indeed reason for alarm if we are still to believe in the world-wide mission of traditional Christendom.

In his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa* David B. Barrett¹ has assembled reasons for believing that at the moment we are seeing merely the tip of the iceberg, only the beginning of this new type of religion; most of it is still under water, that is in the established Churches, and may remain there for some time at least while there is no obvious reason to leave or it is still profitable to stay. Membership of one of the mission Churches is not necessarily a guarantee of devoted discipleship: there are many prophets who say that people can be their followers while ostensibly remaining members of the European Churches. The preacher from the West believes in God in a manner which is exclusive of other beliefs and he conceives of his religion as something centred upon a system of clear doctrines and sharp definitions that are the exhaustive and adequate representations of all man's religious aspirations. It does not follow, however, that this is the only way to look at it. For most peoples, the fact that others approach God under different titles and in different ways does not create a problem: God is known from within and not from without. There is indeed a unity of religion, but it is found at the deep and unapproachable level of the mystery of existence: a unity that defies the uniformity of doctrine. Can we then be so sure that this new religious movement is meant to be something parallel to the white man's institutions? Is the idea not rather to absorb these and give them a place in the traditional patterns of thought and behaviour so as to cope with them religiously?

There may be many who will disagree with Barrett's predictions and argue that we are confronted here with only a passing phenomenon that came into being as an over-reaction against colonialism. Not without justification, so the argument goes, the suppressed races of the world have identified the Christian missions with Western imperialism. They are therefore forced to liberate themselves by

¹O.U.P., Nairobi, 1968.

counteracting the position of the mission Churches with their own rather peculiar beliefs and celebrations.

This is indeed an attractive theory with plenty of evidence to speak for it. It is attractive because it *explains* these, sometimes very odd, variations of the Christian message as only accidental forms that will disappear as soon as the unfortunate historical circumstances that caused them have been overcome and the painful memory of them has been erased. It is also an attractive theory because the European appears so noble in acknowledging the guilt of his ancestors that helped bring these 'deluded' religious groups into being.

Now, there can be no doubt that rebellion against oppression has played a major role, so much so that the movement has commanded the attention of the colonial rulers before Church authorities had even heard of it. The prophets drew large crowds by preaching liberation from white supremacy through divine intervention. Angels would come down and fight on the side of the black man and they would teach him all the knowledge that the whites had so carefully kept within their own institutions of education. Of course, oppression must not be understood only in the narrow terms of external political and economic power. It consists in the suppression of the mind and in the imposition of a highly technical and sophisticated civilization on a primitive culture. It does not always come directly from the white man either, but may also be felt from within, coming from the people themselves when the new countries find themselves organized according to alien structures.

But Christians now prefer to dissociate themselves from this suppression; their advanced theology knows of no marriage between faith and commerce. We have, so they say, never preached the Pure Gospel and the missionaries of the previous generation have contaminated themselves with the colonial powers so that people could not distinguish between the liberating message of the Gospel and the ruinous presence of the white man. Only very reluctantly were political and spiritual leadership handed over to the natives, who were at first thought to be unable or not developed enough to take such responsibilities upon themselves. No serious effort was made to speak the language of the people and they were never encouraged to express their religious emotions in their own tongues and their own music; they had to be content with foreign formulations of the faith and to sing the hymns that the missionaries brought from their home countries. Indeed, there was reason for rebellion.

So there had to be a reaction among those who had embraced the faith. And, the argument concludes, this had to take the form of a rejection of European domination. The nativistic-religious movement is basically a matter of breaking-away, of separatism and independence: the dark man making it unambiguously clear that he is capable of running his own affairs. Such reactions are bound to be exaggerations: the frustration goes very deep, too deep to expect a

calm discussion of the grievances. Moreover, many leaders are illiterate with only a scanty knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine.

Thus speaks the Paternalist, and he continues: In such situations Christian beliefs easily become confused with traditional religion; the old gods return so as to console the oppressed. We need to be patient, tolerant and understanding. We need to show that the Church is now on the side of the oppressed. Indigenous formulae have to be found for traditional Christian doctrines, and local customs have to be incorporated in the liturgy. 'Adaptation' is the banner under which, once again, the Church will conquer the whole world.

There are, however, a few facts that do not fit this prognosis. Largely hidden behind the rebellion there are signs of other factors at work which are of less incidental and more fundamental order. One of the basic studies in this area is Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.¹ Here the author makes the distinction between two types of Independent Churches. The first he calls Ethiopian Churches (Ethiopia is for the African the mighty country from which he may expect his salvation; it also has ties with the Bible). These are the ones that seceded from the mission Churches mostly in protest against white domination. Naturally they try to compete with their mother Churches in splendour, doctrine (and, so it seems, in inter-Church rivalry). The other type which Sundkler distinguishes, the Zionist Churches, did not come into existence by breaking away from the established Churches, but were founded directly among the people under the inspiration of an American chiliastic movement which has as its centre Zion City (Illinois). Zionism does not try to imitate; it rather tends to accommodate selected aspects of the Christian religion into its own life.

Now, if we do not take the meaning of the terms too literally, we may perhaps apply this distinction between the Ethiopian and the Zionist Churches to the whole of the movement which we are discussing. If this were basically a matter of rebellion we would expect a flourishing Ethiopian Church with little opportunity for Zionism to develop. But this is not at all the case. Sundkler could already show, and since then it has become even more apparent, that generally there is a tendency to leave the Ethiopian Churches and join Zionism. So, initially, the movement appeared to be predominantly a search for independence, a misguided seeking for emancipation from a weaker position both spiritually and materially. But that is how it appears to us, who are so conscious of our own strength and our ability to dictate our will and thoughts to the world.

No doubt the misdeeds of the previous generations of missionaries and colonial rulers have contributed greatly to the movement, but perhaps not in the way that is usually understood. It begins to look

¹O.U.P., London, 1948.

as if underneath the rebellion much deeper causes are hidden, coming to the fore now that our general confession of guilt has taken the steam out of rebellion. In our anxiety to 'explain' the Independent Churches at all costs, we are perhaps too keen to confess to mistakes, arguing that the white man was too powerful for the primitive and that he had imposed upon the conquered races a burden of beliefs and technical achievements which they were in no position to resist and which had to be thrown off after emancipation was granted.

But is this true? Have we really been so strong as we like to imagine?

I suggest that we are seriously misled by primitive man's readiness to accept the European faith and culture. It is not a sign of weakness but of strength, the strength of someone who is able to accommodate alien beliefs in his own life which remains basically undisturbed unbroken, eternally resistant through a tough resilience in the face of which the aggression from the West breaks down. Christianity has certainly left its marks in other parts of the world, but its sharp definitions of God, world and man failed to cut out for primitive man an exact religious identity, and the carefully delineated actions of worship become mere elements in a religious concern which is so wide and deep. They are drawn down by the quiet depth of a mind still united with the earth and its mysterious powers of birth and death, life and destruction, good-and-evil intertwined; here the rational clarity of an ethical God does not count.

What justification, then, is there for rejecting our early missionary efforts as mistaken interpretations of the 'true religion'? Is such a confession of guilt not in fact an obscure affirmation of a doctrine that is still superior, is it not the ultimate in arrogance?

'The Christian, with his theology grounded in the doctrine of the transcendence, must pass through an agonizing abnegation if he is to understand imaginatively how essentially this-worldly is the closed circle of being which is the African world, and how little it needs a transcendent God', says John V. Taylor (*The Primal Vision*).¹ We have, indeed, failed to see this, but this failure is perhaps primarily the expression of need felt by the transcendent God of the Christians, who was tired of staying with the white man and complying with his doctrines, because there he was so unredeemably caught in the vicious circle of rationality, spinning round in his own perfection with no darkness to illuminate, no chaos out of which to create life.

This same concern with the clouded inwardness of existence, a real sensitivity for the mystery of life, has indeed troubled the European imagination during twenty centuries of 'stony sleep'. It is the 'something else' that seems to elude capture in the precise formulations of ethical orthodoxy, and finding no accommodation in a religion that is too ideal, too perfect, it returns, a chthonic power,

¹S.C.M., London, 1965, p. 88.

disguised and utterly destructive. In our time we find it recurring in unclean philosophies that before the emptiness of an Absolute Idea seek to redeem the human soul by means of the Absolute Negation. We find it in the artists for whom total dissolution has become a necessary spiritual force. And, in a less sophisticated way, it entices modern man into a growing fascination with witchcraft and satanism. When the mighty and compelling force of evil is repressed by rationality, it lives on in the human mind as a dangerous and tormenting urge, erupting in the barbaric wars of senseless devastation that so often mark the presence of civilized man.

Philosophers and artists have attempted to restore the Western soul to an awareness of the mysterious and shadowy depths, where transcendence is not known as an abstract idea but is sensed as something immediate and real. In the experience of the incomprehensible interweaving of good-and-evil, of joy and misery, love and hate, life and death, the imponderable abundance of things may once again be encountered.

But such things can only be revealed, or perhaps better unveiled; they cannot be reconstructed or taught.

For some people they are still present. For them transcendence is not something in front of them, an idea to be thought about and made sense of. The divine is just there, in the tangible environment, immediately, without reason having to make desperate attempts to bridge the gulf between a cold, profane world and an absolute concept of God. For such people transcendence is present in chiefs (or prophets), in houses, food, the shades of the ancestors who bestow benevolence and disrupt it again in anger and unrest.

So total and consuming may be the experience of this immediate transcendence that little room is left for the God who is in the skies. He withdrew himself—so it is believed—away from the closed circle into an unreachable heaven, leaving man behind, doomed to live for ever surrounded and oppressed by this ambiguous divine dimension.

The people come together so as together to carry the burden of such a life. In dancing and singing they encircle as it were this dark and powerful mystery, isolating it from the world, with the dual purpose of pushing it away, holding it at a distance, and of being able to discern what is in it, to see whether the message is one of grace or one of terror.

This worship itself is a need that reaches out to heaven, and is thus also a cry asking to be reached: an unspoken prayer for light in the burdensome density of the religious dimension of the life of the people.

Then came the invasion from the people who thought that they had the most perfect understanding of God and the world. And they came in the belief that they were sent to fill up the hole that the dark man had left in existence. The white man saw hunger, disease and

ignorance, and he took the land, improved agriculture, built hospitals and schools, intending to cut through the string that binds man to pain and suffering. He had a mission, a vocation.

But alas, it did not always work out as a liberation; we did not sever the black man's link with his fatal destination. The presence of the European in the name of the omnipotent God has certainly left its marks, and they cannot be ignored, but these marks are often also scars. One cannot deny the religious reality of imperialistic Christianity or simply replace it with the 'pure Gospel'. Missionaries who now want to dissociate themselves from their colonial past fail to recognize this.

The Independent Churches, however, know better. They know that this colonial Christianity is something with which they have to cope religiously. It is both a blessing and a curse, bringing both deliverance and disruption, thus sharing in the same ambiguity of the divine dimension of existence.

When therefore we see the new prophets adopting (such an odd and incongruous) collection of 'Christian' elements, this should not mislead us into thinking that these are accepted because they appeal to a simple imagination. Sometimes enormous religious importance is attached to something so trivial as wearing a colonial uniform, or dressing oneself up in an odd combination of European clerical outfits. Phrases and words from European languages, both secular and religious, are recited with great devotion, while their meaning is apparently lost in gibberish, or they are embroidered with devout care on banners and robes. This strange urge to bring completely uncongenial 'Christian' elements within the circle of worship baffles the adaptationists and makes nonsense of their ideologies. It must, however, not be understood, I think, as a confirmation of the positive value of these elements. Rather it is a way of coping with a Christianity which brought both grace and terror and so has become a part of that same imponderable transcendence by which man's life is surrounded.

Now, we Christians can obviously not fully accept the situation as it is. Christ has indeed entered into the hearts of the newly converted, but it is not the Christ we know. It is a Jesus who shares too much in the religious ambiguity of deities and other divine forces. We must react, for not defending our own heritage means spiritual suicide.

But does that mean that we should try to come to some sort of doctrinal or institutional unity? I fear that it will not be difficult to arrange something of the sort and buy this movement with some official recognition. Eventually we will succeed in tempting the prophets into signing documents that would establish this. After all, it is quite easy for someone to give support to doctrines if doctrines are not the first thing that matters, and it can be very advantageous to become a member of a large and powerful institution. But what

do we gain by this? Then that 'something else' that cannot be captured in doctrines and institutions will once again be exiled and doomed to live on in all those peculiar sectarian forms with which twenty centuries of Christendom have been cursed. And we may lose a last serious opportunity of preventing Christianity from becoming a meaningless rational abstraction, killing off all religious instinct.

Most of us now realize that the redemptive act of Christ does not consist in connecting the absolute idea to a world of dead things, and at long last we are ridding ourselves of that silly notion called 'secular theology'. We are coming to realize that Jesus Christ only makes sense as mediating the Father in a world of religious meaning, that there is no New Testament without the Old. We are therefore developing a genuine sympathy, yes, even a longing for all that is primitive, for a man whose soul is still heavy with the divine.

Yet, despite this change of mentality, we are not in a position to help ourselves, let alone others. Immediacy cannot be achieved, but it is to be found or given, and no amount of understanding will lead us into it. So our sympathy and longing are in fact the expression of a need which we ourselves cannot satisfy. It is not a need to fill up a hole, but rather to re-find in what appeared to be a hole the religious density of existence, so that we can give assent to a God who matters, who has substance.

If we can recognize this need in ourselves we will also know that we are the blind men who cannot lead others. One would therefore be inclined to think that, for the time being at least, we should not try to achieve more than a peaceful co-existence between the established Churches and the Independency movement. Perhaps we ourselves should stay put, leaving it to others to make all the converts to Christianity. Our task should then consist in offering our services: the knowledge of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition, so that they may recognize in the Christ, who lives already in them, the fulfilling revelation of God.

To render such a service is, for example, one of the main aims of the Christian Institute in South Africa. It is a genuine offer, because ultimately it springs from self-interest, from the desire of Christians not so much to increase and multiply as to find and rediscover their own soul.