

CHRISTIANITY AND THE AFRICAN

It is sometimes said in travellers' tales that Christianity does more harm than good among the African peoples. It seems at first to destroy their native virtues without building up new ones, to change external observances without giving real Christian character.

There is a certain amount of truth in this, and apart from the more mysterious causes—that first knowledge of the moral law tends, as St. Paul said, to multiply sin—there are many others not far to seek.

The real Africans, the negroes and the peoples called the Bantu, who are nearly negroes, covering the southern two-thirds of the continent, are essentially gregarious. In the village community, which was more or less uniform from the northern tropics to the Cape before the white man came and brought his individualism, there was a most strict community of life. There is a story of some European philanthropist who wrote to a Bishop in Africa offering to finance an orphanage. The missionaries laughed. There was not, and hardly is, in spite of all changes, an 'orphan' among the tribes. The children belonged to the community as much as to the father. Food was virtually pooled in this society; all the community turned out, freely without payment, to build each other's house, to hoe each other's field, to herd each other's cattle. It went to extremes when, as in some tribes, the chief's relatives had to be buried with him, whether they happened to be dead or alive. It was not a Christian community, but it was an essential community of living, in the family, the clan and the tribe.

The result of this was, and is, gregarious conversion. Attempts might be made in vain on individuals of a village or group. The servant of the great Zulu Chief, Tchaka, asked the missionary: 'Would Tchaka be in Heaven?'

The missionary hesitated. (Tchaka in his pointless tribal wars and executions was reckoned to have accounted for a million lives in twenty-five years—an enormous figure for so thinly populated a land.) The old servant then pronounced that it would be better even to be in the other place with his chief. But when a headman or chief was converted there was a following. The missionaries everywhere gave them long probation. But they could persevere if their leaders did. There was no way of knowing that they might not afterwards. They were baptised.

Again, the tribes were very religious, in a religion largely disconnected from Ethics and occupied rather with the obtaining of necessities, especially rain. They believed on the whole in one God, but sometimes an 'absentee god,' as Unkulunkulu, the 'Great-Great-One' of the Zulus, who originally 'broke the first men off from the reeds and made the sun and moon,' but had little to do with his handiwork. Immediately, they prayed and sacrificed to the spirits of Ancestors. This was largely for rain, however; in so far as it was a sanction in morality, it was concerned with two things especially: the displeasure of the Ancestors and the dishonour shown them if a man broke the community laws of life and property, or the elaborate code of sex-morality. But the laws of life and property said nothing about justice and charity to those outside the clan or tribe, and the laws of sex made sacred things contrary to Christianity. Because of the Ancestor Cult, to break the male line was a very serious thing by all their traditions; so that to be held to one barren wife or not to be able to take the deceased brother's wife would be superhumanly hard. Again, promiscuity before marriage in some tribes, and a 'friend' after it in others, was the custom, and not only as a luxury, but as part of an elaborate scheme of sex-development, which was again part of religion.

The result of the religiousness of the people and of the gregarious spirit was mass conversion. But the fear of

tribal sanctions remained strong, and many conversions had, and have, subconscious reserves about them, and many entirely sincere converts are subsequently overwhelmed by them. And the result of the previous lack of identification of religion with morals, perhaps still more of its identification with a contrary code, is that external conformity is not looked upon as hypocrisy in the same way as it is in countries having centuries of Christian tradition.

If one notes carefully, this position is very like that we see in the Old Testament: a tribal acceptance of religion without a complete change of individual character. It is apparently the perennial approach of a primitive people to God. We find traces of it in the early evangelization of all peoples, and in a correspondingly legalistic attitude the Church has to adopt in the use of excommunication, etc. Lists have to be made of those 'outside': e.g., those who are Baptised but have taken a second wife, those who are Baptised but have returned to the Initiation Ceremonies. To change the whole atmosphere by a public expression of moral doctrine public penances are given. Sometimes, on account of the essentially corporate life of the families, a whole family has to be 'cut off' for the sin of one member, although their guilt may be very small. It seems unreal at times, for one with a small fault may be 'outside' and one with many greater sins 'inside.' But it is inevitable. And one has the consolation of knowing that though the statistics of morality may be disheartening, the efforts made in the service of God are very great, and as He had His Providence for those under the Old Testament, and was saving them in spite of all the anomalies, so He no doubt has a way of saving these people who are in so similar a state.

Chaos is caused, naturally, by the Christians 'outside.' X is a Christian, only he is temporarily 'outside.' Y, who is also a Christian, cannot see that he need be much better, especially as a prevalent idea that Baptism is all that really matters in Christianity has been induced by the enormous

propagation of heretical churches. The people have literally evolved hundreds of these. Two hundred forms of Christianity were recently found in one location of 15,000 natives, and the most recent calculation is that there are six hundred such churches in the Union of South Africa alone. Having learnt from the English and Protestant Churches that it is a virtue to 'split-off,' the natives naturally follow the example. And the general result has been that, as stated above, Baptism (which they can grasp from traditional ideas of Initiation) is considered the thing of sole supreme importance. After it there is largely moral chaos, religion without morality.

Summing up the elements in the problem we may note a final one, perhaps the greatest of all. Africa is not going to be allowed to develop slowly. Within the next two generations, so great is the progress in 'education,' most of the native peoples will be able to read newspapers in some European language. Newspapers in their own languages, among them Catholic and Communist newspapers, are to be found several days' journey from a railway station or a motor-road. The 'Bo-Nazi' is discussed away on the Veldt and on mountain-shelves where no white man, except for a possible missionary, has ever been seen. Gramophones and wireless and the chief's iron bedstead (all carried there on the heads of the women) mingle with the immemorial cooking pot and hoe. Rapidly white commerce is coming to determine the whole life of the people, and inducing the ideas and spirit and problems it made in Europe. The migration and war history of the African peoples show an energy and initiative as great as any, their thirst for learning is immense. What all this rapid and unbalanced development may mean for Christianity, considering the lack of depth of Christian character, is a disturbing thought.

Promise of the future is given, nevertheless, by many examples of Africans as wholly and radically Christian as any white man. There are the canonised Martyrs of Uganda, who died for their faith as really as did St. Thomas More.

The first native Bishop has been consecrated. Native priests are multiplying, and even doing work that the European priests cannot do, owing to their intimate knowledge of the people.* There are plenty of individual examples to disprove the impatient idea that it is all making chaos doubly chaotic. But individual cases are not enough, since development, one way or another, must come so quickly. A providential answer has appeared.

By direction of the Sacred Congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, Catholic Action is to be introduced even among the peoples still organised in their old tribal fashion. This makes one wonder at first. What can it, the answer to a European problem, have to do with so different a world? But Catholic Action, designed for the problems of the old world, has a special mission in this new one.

Catholic Action is, roughly speaking, the renewal of the Spirit where it has been obscured by the Letter. It is the substitution of Apostolic Catholic Life, among the Lay-people, for the personal and private religion into which they have drifted or been forced by prejudice. It is the renewal of the universal ideal of Sanctity, in place of the contentment with being a 'practising Catholic,' which has so widely been taken as the only possible ideal, considering the difficulty of combining Catholic with modern life. It is not just an organization; it is an outpouring of the Spirit to renew the face of the earth.

* It may seem narrow that I make no mention of the work of other Churches. Owing to the Protestantism of the chief Imperial Powers in Africa they were often first in the field and, especially the Wesleyans, have done great work. But they can never contribute to the final solution of the problem; first since it is their 'splitting-off' example that causes the growing chaos of the Churches and the travesties of Christian Doctrine that go with it; secondly because their idea of education is the obsolescent European one, learning rather than the development of character, sophistication rather than training for the root duties of life. This sort of 'education' is a major cause of the trouble, rather than a possible cure.

In it can be found the answer to the problem of African Christianity thus:

1. By throwing the responsibility of Apostolic action on the layman, by continual urging of the ideal of Sanctity, it will solve the problem of external conformity without real religion. It will 'form,' according to its 'cell' system, individuals and groups in the perfect form of Christian character, from whom the ideal will be gradually spread. It works the opposite way round to mass conversion. It begins not by collecting converts but by converting Christians to true Christian life. (The problem is not so different, after all, from conformity without deep religion in Europeans. One providential word answers for both.)

2. Catholic Action aims at raising again the Apostolic Social Life, in which the impossible was done and the Jew and Greek were mingled. It should remove an enormous obstacle to the christianization of the Native African—the Colour-bar—to this extent at least, that the native Christians will be given the brotherly co-operation of some white lay-people. The patronage of white Christians is not sufficient. If Christianity is to be proved in act, they must find some co-operation man to man, showing them how it should work out in the family, on the farm, in trade, down the mine. So far the only white man, generally speaking, whom they have met on the level, man to man, is the missionary (or the Communist, of whom more hereafter). The missionary does not live their life. They need to be shown, by those who are their friends and in like position, how Christianity roots into the activities of everyday life. In America, Catholic Action has produced this form of co-operation between white and black; it has begun in South Africa and will grow. It seems that the races are destined to live socially apart, but this link through some 'vocational' people would have inestimable value.

3. The Social Policy of Catholic Action, fully carried out, would go a long way to stave off the danger of Atheis-

tic Socialism, which is feeding on the injustices under which the native peoples smart, and which is congenial to them because of that communism which is so deep in their blood. Should this war alter the various imperial influences in Africa, and let in powers representing this atheistic socialism, in one or other of its forms, the effects can be readily imagined from what has been said.

4. Catholic Action, designed to be rapid and organized, will form Christianity to meet the overwhelming speed at which Africa is developing. Christianity among the Africans will never be able to achieve its formation slowly, as it has in other races. Shortly the African will be a full Christian Character—or he will be a Communist or a Nazi, or some other modern thing—or he may be a martyr.

Ahead lies a great parting of the ways, a superhuman work for the Church. But the providential answer to the missionary's greatest problem has come out from Rome.

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