

Priest and Anthropologist

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by Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

The points of growth and strain in our personal lives are usually those situations in which we have to fuse together our insights and our duties, or to put it differently to reconcile obligations and calls. These are the points where every Christian has to become in some sense his own theologian, within the terms of the New Testament promise that the children of God are led by the Spirit of God. While most priests are very conscious of not being professional theologians, yet they do develop by pastoral experience a rule of thumb theology in which the insights of grace, mother wit, what the Bishop said, and scraps from the textbooks mingle. Now it is surely regrettable that so little has been done to close the gap between academic theology and this kind of empirical wisdom which often enough needs re-thinking and reshaping but which has qualities which are not always flourishing in an academic atmosphere. My own personal tension is not one of pastoral insight grappling with theological analysis but rather of another double focus—for as priest I must strive to see the people among whom I live as so many persons each besieged by grace, yet as an anthropologist I must see them at the level of the masks of culture and the bonds of society.

Before becoming a member of the Holy Ghost Fathers I studied social anthropology, and did field work in Angola. At the present time I am in the Diocese of Makurdi, Northern Nigeria, and after experience as a bush curate, I have been given the work of making a study of the Tiv people on whom there already exists an extensive but in several ways incomplete documentation. Here, I am trying not so much to discuss missionary work in the Diocese or Tiv religion and social structure, as work out on paper my own theologizing of my work.

A little about the Tiv first of all. Islam has had practically no influence on them. They number in very round figures about a million and a half, of whom about 25,000 are practising Catholics and about 14,000 are members of the N.K.S.T., the local church built by the South African and Dutch-American missionaries. Both Churches have a vast penumbra of sympathizers, catechumens, and lapsed. Despite a later start, the Catholic missionaries gained a numerical lead partly through a less exacting catechumenate than the Protestant one, but also through their energetic development of English-language schooling, coupled with a tradition of bush-trekking. We are deficient in the strong points of the N.K.S.T.: lay

leadership at grass-roots, and a varied Tiv literature including a translation of 'The Hound of Heaven'.

The Tiv are beginning to speak of themselves as a Christian people, and in this the influence of the Christian penumbra is more significant than that of the practising Christians, since there is a gradual spread and absorption of Christian ideas via the penumbra even in areas where practising Christians are very scarce. There seems to be no sign of a pagan revival, or of the emergence of a syncretist religion. The more probable future seems to be one in which penumbra Christians form the majority of the Tiv people. Similar situations already exist in many parts of Africa just as they do in Europe.

In pre-colonial Tiv society authority lay with the elders rather than with chiefs. This authority was to a great degree informal and there was a sense of 'collegiality' among the elders of a given area though there was no all-Tiv council. While wealth and a reputation for wisdom would give an elder a reputation over large areas, there was little in the way of either deference or ornament to mark off such a man, except for certain ritual objects such as the sacred tongs, or the big *ndyer* drum with a religious significance that was both menacing and fruitful.

Tiv religion lacks the more common African patterns. There was no ancestor cult and little or no belief in survival after death. This went with a lack of ideas about the make-up of the human personality, as shown in the concepts of plural souls, found in the cosmologies of other West African peoples, and of any elaborate set of life-cycle rites, by which the individual might undergo symbolic death and rebirth. The Tiv did, indeed, have a belief in a High God, to whom the creation of the world was ascribed and to whom the old men addressed prayers in time of drought and excessive rain, but he was essentially marginal to the great body of Tiv religious practice.

Tiv religion, to describe it positively, was essentially man-centred. The powers which in other African societies were associated with ancestors or witches were, among the Tiv, ascribed to living elders. It was within their power to prosper the land or to destroy it, by controlling or unleashing crop-failure, sickness, failure at hunting, sterility, and so on. These were associated with particular religious objects: drums, pots, with ashes in them, and carved figures, classed together as *akombo*, the name also of the impersonal forces which they in some manner concretized. The significant point is that these forces and sometimes the concretizations were felt to be dangerous to human well-being, that they were nevertheless firmly under the control of whoever had 'mastered' them, and that they were impersonal. While there are abundant rites for purifying those who had in some way infringed the taboos associated with one or other of the *akombo*, there is no sacrifice in Tiv religion, and very little prayer. The Tiv know *pietas* only between men. Much Tiv ritual is esoteric and it is not always easy for an outsider to know what rituals are

actually performed and which exist only in imagination. Thus, the stories of the wizards who gather to feast on the flesh of their kinsfolk are the mirror of resentment felt against the privileges of the old; in the witch hunts which swept across Tiv country nearly forty years ago, many District Officers took such accusations as literally intended. Even sympathetic observers have felt that Tiv religion is little more than the exploitation of the young and the ignorant by the old and the wily. Against this, we should note the more positive side, expressed rather in belief than in ritual, of the ultimate prevalence of the forces of good, exemplified in the ideal of the good elder with cool heart and gentle speech, and in the belief that once a year, before sowing begins, representatives of the elders of all Tiv land gather on the legendary Mount Swem, whence they return, bringing with them the assurance of prosperity for the new crops. When old Gbiishe, one of the leading magico-medical practitioners among present-day Tiv, had been telling me about this, he threw in 'And you go too, and you meet Jesus Christ there'—a syncretism which throws one's mind back to the age of Beowulf and the Mabinogion. Tiv religion is ultimately an anthropology rather than a theology; what it seems to be saying is that the world is under the control of man, and that misfortune is ultimately traceable to disharmony and envy among men. The world is seen as a dangerous place but one in which human action can avert or repair disaster. Put in this way, Tiv religion is not so very different in its principles from that of modern humanism even if the Tiv *akombo* are less evidently a sign of man's mastery over nature than are the techniques at our disposal.

In this light, 'missionary adaptation' becomes a very ambiguous phrase. If Tiv religion has as its basic article confidence in the mastery of technique, rather than humble supplication, or fraternal communion, then any adaptation must be of appearance rather than of substance. Now one can think of cultural symbols which have become deeply ingrained but are in fact bogus, such as the Scottish clan tartans, devised long after Culloden, or the mumbo-jumbo of the opening of the Welsh Eisteddfod, but romanticism of this kind is hardly Christian. Let's take a closer look at the meaning of adaptation.

One fashionable line of argument runs thus. The liturgy mirrors and expresses the life of the Christian community which in turn is shaped by it. Liturgical adaptation in Africa means seizing the key symbols of African cultures and incorporating them in the liturgy. This view (which seems to be a Christian synthesis of Durkheim and Jung) is certainly preferable to the *tabula rasa* approach, but I must question some of the associated presuppositions. Thus in the question of Christian and African sacred symbols, I have quite a number of times been through the symbolism of baptism and the Mass with bush congregations, and it has seemed more satisfactory to emphasize the

general human symbolism rather than the occasional links between the two ritual idioms. When putting over the idea of water as life giving, I call out 'Where's a farmer?' and then ask him 'What would happen to your crops if it didn't rain?' rather than make any comparison with the *akombo* rites which are performed by the side of streams so as to carry away evil. Again, it is profoundly true that the missionary is to a great degree tapping pre-existing spiritual resources, as we see in the New Testament teaching on how those who were already of the light recognized the light and came towards it. Yet these underground currents of grace are not necessarily connected to the ritual institutions of the society, but rather, in so far as they are socially expressed, spread out through the wider range of values: mutual aid in farming, help for the impoverished, the welcome given to strangers, and so on.

What does seem to me most unsatisfactory in this 'adaptationist' approach is a more general theological weakness rather than any inapplicability to given African conditions. It seems to leave out of account the degree to which any acceptable theology of liturgy must be a theology of the Word, must see all worship as needing not simply reading from Scripture or preaching, but a sense of the inrushing, creative-destructive, call from God. Any system of ritual tends to fossilization; thus the conscience of ancient Greece moved away from the cult of the gods of Olympus; thus, too, did the mechanical Mass-saying and Mass-going of the later Middle Ages provoke the appeal of the Reformation to the individual's religious experience. It is the degree to which the rituals of a society are open to the moral consciousness of that society that gives them whatever teaching power they have. Otherwise, it will become a meaningless set of burdens; and perhaps such a development in particular tribal religions may help to explain particular cases of mass conversion to Christianity—for example, that of Hawaii in the early nineteenth century. At any rate, the concept of the priority of evangelization over liturgy as the instrument of the formation of the Christian community seems to be the viewpoint of the new Testament, if we look carefully at First Corinthians or Hebrews.

I certainly don't mean to say that there is no need for liturgical adaptation in Africa, or that we should confine ourselves to Bible services and preaching—though that would be no more an excess than the principle enunciated by one contemporary theologian, namely, that one should not come to Mass unless one means to come to Communion; this would in the greater part of this parish leave me with a congregation composed of my catechist and my cook, with perhaps the local teacher. No; what I am arguing is that before the liturgy can become the mirror of the local community there must be a time for the word and the Spirit to form the range of charisms which will give it Christian creativity. The first task of the missionary is to do the work of the seeding time; and the maturity of the Christian

community of a given country lies not so much in its being able to supply its own priests, as in the presence of a range of charisms which indicate a certain at-homeness of the Holy Spirit within that community.

Opening out, then, from my awareness of my double and perplexing vision is yet a further wide problem. The birth of social anthropology was but part of a great wave of self-awareness which is still striking Western men—and the present strains and tensions in the Church are the necessary mirroring in the Community-for-others of this wave. It is not simply a drift from traditional moral standards—rather the realization that we are as necessarily men of particular social roles and cultural values as we are men of flesh and blood. In the Church this takes the form at an important but superficial level of liturgical reform and organizational *aggiornamento*, at its deepest level it finds its personification in Pope John, the Church without rhetoric but somehow still the same. But where in all this are the missions? The traditional pattern granted a meagre measure of support, rhetorically compensated for by a prominent niche in the textbook presentation of the universal and apostolic Church. If social anthropology gives one somehow a different set of insights, does not the moment of self-awareness spell a more general questioning of the meaning of missionary work? Hasn't much of the ideology of missionary work been inspired by the power-drives characteristic of Western man? And will not the servant, witnessing Church of the future have to abandoned organized proselytism instead of being content to welcome all who are drawn to her because they have seen in her the God-given man-mirroring sign of *agape*? And, at another level, isn't the anthropologist's principle of suspension of moral judgment much preferable to the surely paranoiac dream of reshaping the culture of Asia and Africa on the pattern of the Christian peasantries of Europe?

To take the second question first, there is of course much in the professional code of anthropologists (just as there is in the codes of other professional groups) which should remind us priests that it is not we alone who have the sense of vocation—the emphasis on a habitual direct contact with the people, implying a substantial fluency in the language and a readiness to overcome boredom or revulsion. But the attempt to build up anthropology, and its distinctive insight into the way cultural conditioning and social participation form man's essential second skin, into a total ethic would land us in the cyclical cultures of Spengler or the reshuffling jigsaw puzzles of Levi-Strauss, culs-de-sac of a hopeless humanism. If, however, we take the great image of the prophetic books, of the word of God constantly breaking into every human effort to build a closed society and add to it the great signs of the New Testament, the Resurrection and the Parousia with their implication of a doomed and profoundly hopeful world, we begin to see the variety of human

cultures not as a collection of fragile and irreplaceable statues but rather as so many sketches for a design which will some day include what is best in all of them.

And perhaps these images of the word of God going forth from and returning to the hand of God, and of the empty tomb burst open from within, will help us to see whether the missionary effort of the Church is as dispensable a form of triumphalism as the uniforms of the Swiss Guards. The trouble with the word of God, as Jeremiah and Jonah both found, is that it has to be proclaimed. Whatever forms future missionary work may take, its abandonment is outside our range of choice. If we reflect on the way the Incarnation is the union of the Word both with a particular human nature but also with all mankind, it becomes evident that our preaching is essentially a making of contact with what is ready going on in the world—Christ drawing all men to Himself. The preaching of the Gospel does make this implicit, hidden presence of Christ explicit. For those who are called to be the mouthpieces of this preaching the situation is rather as though (if my readers will forgive me) the roles of the characters in the eleventh chapter of St John's Gospel had been reversed and Lazarus had been called upon to raise Jesus—a call which would surely have filled him with overwhelming humility.