

INTRODUCTION

DURING THE All Africa Conference of Churches in 1963, it became quite clear to a number of us that the Church in Africa could only attain selfhood and be adequate for her mission when she possessed a first-hand knowledge of the Lord of the Church and was able to express that knowledge in clear accents made possible through her own original meditation and thinking.

It has become increasingly clear, and disturbingly so, that the Church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues. We must be thankful to God that in spite of man's weaknesses and short-sightedness, the miracle of grace has been taking place all over Africa. Nevertheless, we realize that both the tools and the method of evangelism as employed in this continent are now calling very loudly for a careful overhauling.

Unfortunately, hitherto, evangelism in Africa has been based upon the false notion that Africa has nothing to offer as a cultural or spiritual basis for the Gospel. Hastily conducted anthropological and ethnological researches have given the impression that if the European educator or evangelist came to Africa, it must be to introduce something that was completely unrelated to the ways and wisdom of her peoples.

Leo Frobenius, in his book *The Voice of Africa*, tells us that before he visited Africa he had read a Berlin journal—a nineteenth-century document—which had this to say about Africa:

Before the introduction of a genuine faith and a higher standard of culture by the Arabs, the natives had no political organization, nor, strictly speaking, any religion . . . Therefore, in examining the pre-Muhammedan condition of the negro races, [we must] confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and often cannibalistic customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols. . . . None but the

most primitive instincts determine the lives and conduct of the negroes, who lacked every kind of ethical inspiration.¹

Frobenius remarks that he noticed that the explorer Stanley had given to Africa the description of "dark" and "darkest", "a place governed by insensible fetish". Further, he quotes "a great light of the Church" as saying that "the 'niggers' have no souls and are burnt-out husks of men".

Edwin Smith tells of his conversation with an eminent biographer, Emil Ludwig. He had told Ludwig what the missionaries were doing in Africa—teaching the Africans about God. Ludwig was perplexed. Then he made his notorious remarks, "How can the untutored African conceive God? . . . How can this be? . . . Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing."²

Why this exhumation, at this time of the day, of things that should be dead and are better forgotten? But are they really dead? Do these preconceived notions belong only to the past? Some European theologians have for a while now been curious about other people's cultures; however, some of the most prolific authors see little or nothing that is of spiritual value in these cultures and religions. For example, it was Karl Barth's conviction that "all other religions are 'sin', the work of Godless man, or humanistic attempts at raising men to divine level".

Such attitudes arise, one imagines, in consequence of excessive zeal to defend the uniqueness of Christianity and to distinguish it from what in popular but ill-defined terms is described as "heathenism" or "paganism". But surely, if they are certain of their own faith and understand the facts of the Christian faith, should they not be aware that since Christ is *truly* unique, essential Christianity will always shine in its own light, especially through the lives of believers? God is able to defend His own cause, and that not by argument or debate, but by the communication of that life which is more abundant.

We must realize that excessive zeal to protect the Christian faith cannot but be a handicap to its propagation. It constitutes

¹ Vol. I (London, O.U.P., 1913), pp. xiii f.

² *African Ideas of God* (London, Edinburgh House Press, 1950: 2nd edn., 1961), p. I.

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a handicap because we begin by thinking that the effect of God's action depends upon our advocacy. The truth of the matter is, neither theology nor evangelism can be defined in terms of what *we* think that *we* want to teach and say to people. They are properly defined in terms of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is saying to each people in their own native context. Theology and evangelism are not directions as to what *we* think that people should be or what we want them to be: they are declarations of God and His sovereign love and will to all peoples.

And that is why it is essential for theologians to distinguish carefully between "the action of God" and "the reaction of man". The former is constant and ever true with a cosmic significance; the latter may vary, depending as it does upon personal backgrounds, upbringing, moods and prejudices. We see here also the reason why the African theologian cannot afford the luxury of fixed ideas or of striving to conform himself to the category of a conservative or a liberal. Self-identification of this kind could lead to intellectual dishonesty and cramp originality by closing the mind to truth. In C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* the apprentice tempter is instructed to exploit the darling tendency of his victim who "doesn't think of doctrines as primarily 'true' or 'false', but as 'academic' or 'practical', 'outworn' or 'contemporary', 'conventional' or 'ruthless'."³ The African theologian must bear it constantly in mind that he is an apostle of Him who is the Truth, and that his main pursuit is that truth which makes free, not only from conventional sins and errors, but also from the subtle sins of prejudice and intolerance.

We must admit that the danger of idolatry (properly defined) and syncretism is always with us. But while we appreciate this danger, we have nevertheless to realize that we are only placing ourselves in a questionable position if in defence of truth we run away from truth. And half-truth is as much to be condemned as a denial of truth.

Let us be thankful to God that despite man's weaknesses, He has never left Himself without dedicated and discerning witnesses. In his first charge in 1867, Bishop Ajayi Crowther urged the Church "to know what has been done, in what way it has

³ *Op. cit.*, (London, Bles, 1954), p. 11.

been done, to detect our errors and correct them, so as to be able to start with fresh vigour and earnestness in the strength of the Lord in this good work".⁴ Later, in his instruction to his clergy, he said, "When we first introduce the Gospel to any people we should take advantage of any principles which they themselves admit. Thus, though the heathens in this part of Africa possess no written legends, yet wherever we turn our eyes, we find among them, in their animal sacrifices, a text which is the mainspring of Christian faith: 'Without shedding of blood there is no remission.' Therefore we may with propriety say: 'That which ye ignorantly practise, declare we unto you.' 'The blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God cleanseth from all sin.'"⁵ Clearly, Bishop Crowther had realized the vital importance of communicating the Gospel to Africans in a language which they would understand.

Here we are led inevitably to the subject of "revelation". It is enough now to say that unless we get our theology right at this delicate point we shall continue to be, in our evangelistic efforts in Africa, little more than "babblers and chatterers, spendthrifts of our time". If we are true to the spirit of the Bible and of our faith, we must admit that God's self-disclosure is, in the first instance, to the whole world and that each race has grasped something of this primary revelation according to its native capability. To deny this, as some have been trying to do, is to approach theology with a cultural bias and be traitors to truth. As Professor H. H. Farmer says in his book, *Revelation and Religion*, "The idea of revelation is found, in more or less perspicuous form, in all religions; we could even say in all cultures." He maintains that the universal impulse to worship and the consequent practice of worship is a result of one central impulse—that of "one divine personal will seeking all the time to make itself known".⁶ "... the one living and personal God" making Himself known, keeping a grip on men ... this implicit sense of the one living God ... when it became explicit, did so in a form conditioned by the general mental level and by the polytheistic system of ideas; it took the form of a belief in the one High God who is supreme over all and to whom all other

⁴ Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop* (London, Simpkin, 1910), p. 277.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁶ *Op. cit.* (London, Nisbet, 1954), p. 105 f.

supernatural powers are therefore subject . . . Belief in the High God was the primitive man's way of apprehending, and responding to, and expressing, the self-revealing pressure upon him of the one God."⁷

As I have pointed out elsewhere,⁸ the question which we must face frankly is the one raised by C. H. Dodd in his book, *Gospel and Law*—" . . . is the God of our redemption the same as the God of creation?" Even Kraemer was aware of a question with the same import: Is the God who spoke to Adam the same God who speaks through Jesus Christ?⁹ To answer either question in the negative is to create an artificial divine vacuum between the creation and the moment of God's climactic revelation and thus land ourselves either in a subtle form of Marcionite dualism or in semi-deism.

There is no doubt that the urgent predicament of the Church in Africa today is that of the apparent foreignness of Christianity. And this, as we have pointed out, has resulted from the erroneous notion with which evangelism was bedevilled from the start. By a miscarriage of purpose the Church has succeeded in preaching to, and in teaching, Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of the white man. But what has happened to the God as known to their forbears—the God who is the foundation of their traditional beliefs? He remains still with them. And so we have left them with two Gods in their hands and thus made of them peoples of ambivalent spiritual lives. This impedes the progress of evangelism; it also results in a very dangerous kind of polytheism. Indeed, African nationalism is already calling into being a political God of Africa in contradistinction to the God of the Europeans whom a prominent politician once described as a God of oppression, a God of greed and injustice.

Of course, the Church only cuts the ground from under her own feet if, by a deliberate act, or through carelessness in her theology, she preaches a God who is the possession of any particular section of the human race. This would be a God who is "too small" and therefore cannot be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ H. H. Farmer, *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁸ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards An Indigenous Church* (London, O.U.P., 1965), p. 25.

⁹ *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London, Lutterworth, 1956), ch. 14.

One of the major assignments before those who seek to communicate and inculcate the Gospel in Africa is that of understanding Africa and appreciating the fact that they must learn to address Africans as Africans. As Ernst Benz has warned, "One of the first difficulties to confront even an experienced enquirer into foreign religions is in fact that he more or less unconsciously takes his own point of view as normative for religions in general. It is difficult to avoid this pitfall . . . The mental habits of Western Christians and their philosophical presuppositions are carried into their field of study . . . and so this makes it difficult for them to understand the set-up in another culture or tradition".¹⁰ This applies also to those Africans whose outlook has become "Westernized".

We must lay to heart also the warning of the Reverend Placide Tempels: "Any one who wishes to study primitive people . . . must give up all idea of attaining valid scientific conclusions so long as he has not been able to understand their metaphysic. To declare on *a priori* grounds that primitive peoples have no ideas on the nature of beings, that they have no ontology and that they are completely lacking in logic, is simply to turn one's back on reality. Every day we are able to note that primitive peoples are by no means children who are just afflicted with a bizarre imagination. It is as Men that we have learned to know them in their home."¹¹ Tempels goes on to write, ". . . a better understanding of the realm of Bantu thought is just as indispensable for all who are called upon to live among native people. It therefore concerns . . . all who wish to civilize, educate and raise the Bantu. But, if it concerns all colonisers with good will, it concerns most particularly missionaries."¹²

"If one has not penetrated into the depths of the Bantu personality as such, if one does not know on what basis they act, it is not possible to understand the Bantu. One is entering into no spiritual contact with them. One cannot make oneself intelligible to them, especially in dealing with the great spiritual realities. On the contrary, one runs the risk, while believing that one is civilizing the individual, of in fact corrupting him—work-

¹⁰ "Obstacles to Understanding other Religions", in *Relations Among Religions Today* (Leiden, Brill, 1963), p. 101.

¹¹ *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1959), p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.