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How the Traditional World-View persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana

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"To tell the truth, Moruti, ngwan'ake¹, the missionaries have not taught us anything new about God and his workings with man and the world". So replied an old Motswana woman to my question after a long discussion concerning Tswana herbs which she used to cure children's illnesses. The question I had asked was: "What do you see as unique in what the missionaries have brought to us?", all the time my purpose and aim being to assess Tswana Christianity today.

"All they have taught us; the only thing they have introduced to us", she added, after a slight pause, caused, perhaps by her realisation of my astonishment at her first statement, "is tlhabologo". (civilization, meaning, in fact, material progress in the style of the West).

This old lady was a full member of the Methodist Church in that southern Botswana town. She was well-renowned for her zeal in the Faith and her witness to the saviourhood of God through Jesus Christ, to which she was known as a powerful witness in evangelistic campaigns and Easter rallies. But she also secretly practised as a herbalist, specialising in the treatment of children's and infants' illnesses. "Secretly" is not quite right: in fact, it was a secret only to the local minister, who was a young man and a stickler for the "Methodist Laws

and Discipline", and who would have dragged her before the Church courts to strip her of her membership. She prized her membership. She was also a Class Leader and a Committee member of the Methodist Women's Prayer and Service Union (Manyano). At first she had withheld against me, suspecting that I was a "spy" from the Church officialdom. Now that she was relaxed and able to call me "ngwan'ake" (my child), even though she still respectfully called me "Moruti" (minister, padre) she could even sadly express her disgust at the short-sightedness of the Church officialdom which was not able to see that this now "secret" activity of hers was, in fact, a form of prayer life for her and the fulfilment of her Christian commitment. For, like the other dingaka (medical practitioners) I had met before her, she understood her knowledge of healing and its successful practice was "a gift of God", and not just acquired skill or wisdom.

Her statement about the impact of Christianity on Tswana life and understanding of divinity struck me as an echo of what a Tlhaping nobleman had told Moffat some hundred and fifty years before, not a hundred miles away from the same spot:

Munameets, though an early friend of the mission, the travelling companion of Mr. Campbell, and one of the most sensible and intelligent men of the nation, than whom no one at the station had enjoyed equal privileges, made the following remark to the writer in his usual affectionate way, not long before his death - "Ra-Mary, your customs may be good enough for you, but I never see that they fill the stomach", putting his hand on his own, "I would like to live with you, because you are kind, and could give me medicine when I am sick ... Perhaps you may be able to make our children remember your mekhua (customs)."²

Since then Moffat's assessment of African reaction to Christian teaching has been corroborated by missionaries and Westerners, even to this day, whenever they are free and by themselves: viz.

Although they have received much instruction, they appear never for one moment to have reflected upon it, nor did they retain traces of it in their memories, which are generally tenacious. Accordingly, those who, at an early period, made professions to please, died as they had lived, in profound ignorance.³

All too often the African resistance of Western religious concepts and understanding has been supposed to be restricted to these earlier periods of the missionary enterprise and, today, to the so-called Independent Churches. In 1961, introducing his paper on "The Concept of Christianity in the African Independent Churches", Benght Sundkler remarked to the contrary:

We shall deal here with what is officially known as the "Native Separatist Churches". This does not mean that somehow, we already know what the concept of Christianity is in missionary-controlled African churches. For, although one is inclined to assume that the more or less prescribed forms of worship and the translated catechism in the latter churches are an assurance of their orthodoxy, it is not only in groups separate from mission control that new ideas, ideologies and emphases have emerged. In the mission churches, too, there is constant, albeit unconscious, re-interpretation of the Christmas message, with new emphases and accents.⁴

There has been more to it than just "new emphases and accents". There has been a whole new setting

into which the "Christmas message" has been understood, a different world-view and approach to life and things around. Before the African countries became independent and their inhabitants would walk upright among the peoples of the world, before the missionaries lost grip of the "control" they had on the African church life, these sentiments were muffled, practised in secret, or banished to the then so-called "separatist Churches". These days, however, it is more and more recognised, albeit very late, and tragically too slowly that -

...at least of equal importance is the study of religious life and thought of the millions of African Christians who belong to the more orthodox Catholic and Protestant churches. Where do these many Christians fit in the spectrum between the old African traditional religions and the thought-world of the New Testament? One interesting question here is whether one can discern a pattern of continuity or discontinuity between the past and the future.⁵

Africans themselves, seem to be more and more up and ready to say how they experience more a continuity than a discontinuity. And these are African Christians who stand high in the Councils of the Church as devised by the West.⁶ Whenever they are called upon to confess their Christian faith in the presence of men, they are quick to declare, now, that -

Before doing this (i.e. saying what the faith is which is actually in us) we should like to reflect further on hope as this is experienced in the traditional religions of Africa, in so far as this hope is not just something our peoples once had in the past, but is a conception of life which influences the attitude of the modern African...⁷

For

Because of the cultural form in which it is clothed, the Christianity of the missionaries cannot be assimilated, nor can it help (our) people to face up to difficult situations.⁸

The West, or Europe may be able to set up clear lines of demarcation, and explain what they mean when they use the word "religion". For Africa, religion or religious considerations enter into and influence all spheres of life. Therefore, can we speak about "The Wholeness of Human Life".⁹ Space will not allow that we, in this paper, attempt to show how Africa has reacted at every point of its meeting with Europe. However, this emphasises the fact that every point of such contact, even when it has been at the most mundane materialistic level, has had religious effects. Consequently, African scholars and thinkers of religion say openly, these days, that:

The result of the encounter between Africa and the Northern Hemisphere world has been considerable frustration for many, perhaps for all Africans, at every level.¹⁰ (My emphasis).

But for the purpose of this paper we shall need to be selective:

1. Marriage : Africa v Europe

Even before the question of polygamy is raised, the understanding of what marriage is all about posed by Europe through what has been called "Christian or legal civil marriage" has, ever since the beginning, been contested by Africans, as single persons and in their institutions. In Southern Africa churchmen of very high standing have gone to all lengths to circumvent the demands of the "mission controlled" church that there be no exchange of Lobola (bride-wealth) in the marriage of

their children. Their understanding of Lobola as the seal of marriage, more important even than the Church ceremony and the minister's blessing, has persisted (perhaps "unconsciously" as Sundkler says), sometimes even when they themselves are ministers and priests. For, there is more to the exchange of Lobola than meets the Western eye. As the Third Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches meeting in Lusaka in May, 1974 has so clearly emphasized, for Africans marriage is still a union, not only between two persons, but of two or even more family groups.¹¹ The Assembly seemed of unanimous opinion that so it should remain.

But there is even more to the Lobola and the festivities of the African marriage than just the union of the two or more family groups. In the rituals and the slaughtering of beasts small and large, during the negotiations and after, by either side (and this is still done by Christians too), the ancestors, who are part of the family, are invoked. Without their blessing and goodwill, the success of the marriage union would be in jeopardy. This is still so strong in the minds and emotions of the people that responsible parenthood will risk a dishonest attitude to the requirements of the Church in order to be in good relationship with the ancestors.

2. The Ancestors

I discovered how emotionally even I am still attached to my ancestors when I noticed for the first time that, in publishing my meditation: "I am an African", as an example of the expression of Christian sentiments in the African context, the World Council of Churches, Publication Department, had omitted the portion which deals with the ancestors. "To take the ancestors away from an African", remarked a Ghanaian woman - herself a member of WCC staff and a daughter of a very highly-placed Christian minister, "is robbing him of his personality". I felt happy at this

corroboration of my deepest feelings. Few ethnographers and observers of the African scene have remarked about the persistence of the role the ancestors play in African life, even after acceptance of Christianity, University studies to the highest of levels and sojourn abroad.

It often seems as if these Attainments increase the cords by which Africans are bound to their ancestors:

"I came to this University's degree conferment ceremonies" a world-famous African Professor of Theology said to me, "My son is receiving a Ph. D. in Physics. It is important that I be present at this son's academic attainment: He is my father, you know". (Meaning "He is named after my father"). Therefore, showing respect to him is, infact, to continue to show respect to the deceased father.

Another professor of theology in an African university, a Christian minister, born and raised in a Manse, relates how, on returning home after studies in the U.S.A. and at Oxford, his parents slaughtered a beast and, in the traditional fashion, called the whole family to welcome him back. This ceremony, called in Sotho-Tswana, Pha Badimo, thanksgiving to the ancestors, presupposes their presence, and it is they who, in fact, welcome back the returning member of the family. "If I had said 'No' to this", the professor goes on, "I would have been understood to disown myself and my family, living and deceased."

Nor is he alone in this understanding. This presence of the dead is felt all through Africa in spite of Christianity and Western sophistication. (The very professor quoted above prides himself in the fact that he is equally at home among his people in Africa as he is in Europe, especially England).¹² It is presupposed and taken for granted in all meetings between Africans - as when I was pick-pocketed on a Johannesburg suburban

train. I felt the hand slip into my back pocket where I had paper money. The train was packed, and I cried out "Who is that?" When I was able to turn round the money was lying on the floor of the compartment. No one could be charged with having done it. I was glad I had my money back. So were my fellow travellers. They congratulated me: "Badimo ba gagu ba na le uena" - your ancestors are by your side. In spite of the fact that I was in my clerical attire as it was Sunday morning and I was on my way to lead a service, they did not say, "Your God, or your Christ was at your side".

Ah ... yes ...! It is true.

They are very present with us ...

The dead are not dead, they are ever near us;

Approving and disapproving all our actions,

They chide us when we go wrong,

Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,

For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel
at home.

They increase our store, and punish our pride.¹³

3. Life is more than physically perceived

"Man Killer of Blacks is Hypertension" stands a headline in the "Star", a reputable paper in Johannesburg, dated Saturday, 13th July, 1974. This is the finding of a professor of African medicine at the University of Witwatersrand, Harry Seffel:

"He blamed the high incidence mainly on psychological stress to which the urban African was exposed. Among these stresses he listed ancestral spirits (!), Tokoloshi..."¹⁴

It is quite understandable that bringing such a world-view into a late twentieth century metropolis, which Johannesburg is, should bring about complications. This accounts for the increase in the consultation of dingaka in the urban setting over against in the settled traditional

setting of an African village. Consequently, many rogues and charlatan bogus dingaka prosper in the cities more than in the rural areas.

The main point here is that the Africans "world" of witchcraft (I use this word without the derogatory sense it often carries in the literature of Western scholars!) and related ideas concerning the cause and cure of illness, does not leave him when he enters the city. So it should be. For all this is based on an understanding of a relatedness of persons in community, which is foreign to the European ideas, and the principles on which urban life is founded. Another expression of this search for a fullness of life as is known in the traditional setting, is the Independent Churches. Bengt Sundkler, Fred Welbourn, B.A., Ogot and other writers on the subject, witness to this hunger for "A Place to feel at Home"¹⁵ of the African in a Western type city. He comes with a different set of values and understandings and is frustrated that they no longer seem to hold. Therefore he looks for crutches. The Western type church does not help. Often he discovers that the bogus ngaka also does not. This, to me, accounts for most of these churches being against the use of dithlare, medicine, of any kind.

4. The Independent Churches

But there is, according to my reckoning, more to the Independent Churches than their study so far, from Sundkler to the present day, has acknowledged. Often they have been seen as an arena of carthasis for the politically oppressed, an interesting sociological phenomenon, and all kinds of reasons have been found to explain their cause, from Zionism, Pentecostalism and all kinds of heretic sects from abroad, to Ethiopianism and African nationalism locally. Seldom have they been seen for what they are, viz: attempts, however crude and untutored, of the

African genius to hold its own, a preserving of the African indigenous understanding of the workings of divinity (or shall we say straight away "GOD"?) In this way they form the vanguard of African resistance to the corrosion caused by Western theological teachings on the "ways" of religious thinking and practice (the ritual, the dance, etc.) which takes place in the so-called "mission controlled" churches. For, when one of Sundkler's "Bantu Prophets", in an effort to account for why he hived off, declares, "Our greatest problem is this: never to be treated as human beings",¹⁶ his is uttering a deeply theological statement. Indeed, such a statement could be seen as wax to a political fire which is already smouldering, especially in Southern Africa. But if we remember that the word he must have used would be umuntu (person) and we understand that ubuntu (Zulu), botho (Sotho-Tswana) or ubuntungushi (Bemba) is a concept much deeper than the European word "person" or "personality" can translate, meaning the very essence of being, the equivalent of "the soul" in Western Christian language, we shall realise that we are dealing with deeper things when we speak to Independents. In his own way, therefore, the Independent Churchman was attempting to fit his theology of MAN, learned from his mother's knee, with his every-day life's experience in his contacts with the West, and found that it denied him this humanity.

5. "What more shall we say?"

Space does not permit that we should treat all the areas of resistance to which African world-views are holding tenaciously against the impact of Europe. But they are many more, such as the few I will now mention:

The attitude to cattle among pastoral African peoples like the Sotho-Tswana (and even the Xhosa) of South Africa, where Westernisation, education and the money economy have not removed the urge for a man to own

cattle. Observing jokingly to a friend, a high official of an African University in Southern Africa, that he was going to his cattle post on a Sunday morning and not to the church service, I was dumbfounded when he replied, in much more serious vein than I had spoken, "What shall we say? Is it not perhaps a way of worshipping, too, for as one sees these cattle one praises God deeply for his gifts."

Initiation, especially among the Xhosa and the Sotho of Southern Africa. Here the greatest breach of the Christian code, the words heard most when Christians confess to their priests or ministers, are "Ngwan'ake o titimetse" - my child has run off to the Initiation School. Often the parent could have connived at it, or even aided and abetted.

To put an end to this unnecessary compulsion of the people to live a double life, the Methodist Conference in South Africa was, in the late 50's, persuaded to appoint a Commission to study "Christian Life and African Life and Custom", the hope being that perhaps material might be gathered to remove the outdated regulation which made a parent punishable when his child went to the Initiation School. As convenor and chairman of the Commission, I was inundated with letters from unexpected quarters: African members of the Church who resented this threatened digging into the private lives of themselves and their families. "It will reveal too much of our ways of life to the white people". Some conference-appointed members of the Commission, ordained ministers, refused to serve on it, either out of private convictions or for fear of going against public opinion.

Land. Land was not only the property of the living, but of the total community of the living and living dead. The latter's good disposition made possible rain in season, the harvest and plenty for all. When one

understands what religious undertones are associated with land, how, therefore, the place of man's birth and upbringing is "a holy place", because there he meets his ancestors, only then will one be able to comprehend the depth of insult and the feeling of being raped and dismembered of the victims of wholesale removals of villagers and townspeople in Southern Africa, whether it be Mozambique, Rhodesia, South West Africa (Namibia) or South Africa itself. It is this kind of despoilation and desecration of the people's very sanctuaries and shrines, which leaves wounds which ages will not heal easily. For when the Bantu say of themselves or one to another that they are "Mwana we mvu" - son of the soil - it is so. They are tied to the soil, body, mind and soul. A child's umbilical cord is buried into the soil, the same soil into which his ancestors are buried, thus linking him to them where they are. If he is removed permanently from that place the cord which ties him to them is broken. Old people in Southern Africa often say, "Is it a thing to be wondered at that our children are as wayward as they are, stealing, murdering, raping and doing things which are contrary to botho/ubuntu". For Africans understand very deeply the Jewish exiles' cry of shock when their Babylonian captors asked them to sing their beautiful songs and play for them on their harps: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137.4)

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to avoid the use of the word "religion", or even to deal with specifically religious ideas of the Africans. It is because I am myself of the conviction that the concept "religion" is a Western phenomenon, defining the deity (GOD) whether it be a Supreme Being, Father, Brother or Mother, and even capable of dying. To do this in this paper would be importing foreign categories and trying to force the African unders-

tanding to stand or fall according to whether they make sense to them. Besides, it is in proper manner of the African understandings, especially the Sotho-Tswana, not to try to measure MODIMO (THE DEITY);¹⁷ nor was MODIMO ever conceived of as a "person", as the concord of the word indicates even to this day. MODIMO, translated GOD by the missionaries, was always the numinous, Ungeheure, Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans of Rudolf Otto.¹⁸ I have often remarked how, to this day, an African Church service properly conducted still captures this mood, and is charged with an eeriness which one finds with difficulty in any other Church worship setting. For -

...we must acknowledge that the dialogue with the primal world occurs not only outwardly... but also inwardly when both the institutional structures and individual lives of Christians in the older churches... the primal inheritance is operative here also in varying and largely unknown degrees. Past attitudes towards African primal religions have been such that it has been exceedingly difficult to acknowledge this inheritance..."¹⁹

But now African Christians, especially those in positions of leadership,²⁰ seem to be determined to express their Faith without denying their origins. This is the "African Identity" in Church and religious circles which first hit surface at the WCC Conference of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism at Bangkok, December 1971 - January 1973, continued to express itself in unmistakeable language in the bid for "Africanisation" at the All Africa Conference of Churches" Third Assembly in Lusaka, May, 1974, and came up again under the title "A Statement of African Challenge" at the WCC Faith and Order Consultation at Accra, July-August, 1974:

...for all Africans, even after many years of Christianity, and standing fully within

the Christian Revelation, the spirituality and world-view of their fathers is still very present. We feel, therefore, that all the expressions of the Christian Faith up to now, from whatever area which makes up the Christian Church (Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant) do not speak to us at the depth of our situation, past, present or future. However, when we come to the Crucified One straight out of our cultural and historical situation, it is then that He has meaning, and becomes not only our Saviour, but also Saviour of All Mankind. He then helps us to see God as the One and Only, the Inscrutable and Incomprehensible. For, from our unique heritage, we bring the view that God is Uvelingqaki, One whose beginning or end no man can know or describe, Unkulunkulu, a Power greater than all powers; Modimo, that which permeates all and gives it life and Lesa, the ground of being of all that is.²¹

FOOTNOTES

- ¹"moruti, ngwan'ake" - literally, "Minister, my child". Rather unusual, as "moruti" is an address of respect, and "ngan'ake" of endearment.
- ²Moffat, R., Missionary Scenes and Labours, London 1842 p. 246. (Munameets should be "Monwametse" "do not fill the stomach" - they do not satisfy, they are insufficient for life; mekhua (customs): "Religion" is a European term. What the missionaries imparted was always understood as their "way of life" (mekhua - to follow Moffat's spelling), equivalent, and in competition with "mekgwa ya bo-rra rona" - the ways of our fathers - i.e. African Traditional Religion and Practice. It would appear that Moffat left out some very vital sentence following "when I am sick." The sense requires that there should follow "but I still cannot accept your mekhua".
- ³Ibid. p. 246
- ⁴African Studies, 20th April 1961, p. 203
- ⁵Per Hassing in Preface to M. J. McVeigh: God in Africa, Hartford, U.S.A., 1974, p. xix
- ⁶See in particular: Ellingworth and Kwesi Dicksons: Biblical Revelations and African Beliefs, Lutterworth, London, 1969, and add to the list Father Engelbert Mveng, R. C. Camerone, Lecturer in Theology, Pastor Seth Nomenyo, Togo, Theol. Secretary of C.E.V.A.A.
- ⁷WCC: Faith and Order Commission : Giving Account of the Hope in us. Documents for Discussion, p. 51 "Report of the Yaounde E and O Seminar".
- ⁸Ibid. same document, p. 47
- ⁹Report of the WCC sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies Consultation held in Ibadan, Nigeria, September 1973. The report is entitled "The Wholeness of Human Life : Christian Involvement in Mankind's Inner Dialogue with Primal World-Views".
- ¹⁰Report of WCC Faith and Order Consultation, Accra, 1974: Uniting in Hope. WCC Geneva, 1975. p. 33

- ¹¹See Report of the "AACC, Lusaka 1974 Assembly", Section on Home and Family Life.
- ¹²The question is whether the Europeans also accept him as fully "European".
- ¹³This is what the SCC editors omitted from my "I am an African".
- ¹⁴Tokoloshi is a medium of the witches, notorious in Southern Africa. The word used by a white man is shorthand for "The African's unseen world".
- ¹⁵This is the appropriate title of Welbourn and Ogot's book on the Independent Churches in Western Kenya", published OUP, London, 1966
- ¹⁶In an address at a Consultation on the Ind. Churches at Mindolo, 1962
- ¹⁷The translation of the Sotho-Tswana MODIMO with "God" could be a devaluation, especially these days when Western theological concepts have reduced the activities and spheres of the latter. MODIMO is a much wider, deeper and all-embracing concept. Until Christian theology is ready to accept this as the concept for its "God" too, it is a mistake to translate MODIMO with "God". For this reason, to do justice to the Sotho-Tswana concept, I translate MODIMO with DEITY or DIVINITY, meaning the total sphere encompassed by either word.
- ¹⁸"Das Heilige", Marburg, 1917, ubique
- ¹⁹"The Wholeness of Human Life" S/E, vol. IX/4/1973, p. 2
- ²⁰See note 6 above
- ²¹WCC Faith and Order Commission : "Uniting in Hope", p. 34.