

Christianity and Cultures

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There is a paradox—one, no doubt, among many—about contemporary Euro-American culture. On the one hand it has developed a capacity for systematic, and critical, ‘self-consciousness’, unequalled by any other, or by its own ancestral cultures. This is exemplified by the development in the last hundred years, practically from zero, of the human sciences, in particular of psychology and sociology. In Academe, at any rate, the intellectual leaders of our culture live in a world of ‘meta’s’—‘meta-history’, ‘meta-science’, ‘meta-psychology’, and meta-sociology too, I shouldn’t wonder. A capacity and techniques for reflexive thinking have been carried much further than ever before. In the Christian dimension of our culture the ecumenical movement and above all the Second Vatican Council illustrate the same trend; the Church ‘self-consciously’ reflecting on what it means to be Church—and whether and how far it is succeeding in being Church. Ecclesiology (the Church reflecting on itself), is now a most important branch of theology. A hundred years ago, when the word ‘ecclesiology’ itself had a different meaning, the Church’s reflecting on itself was rarely more than one weapon in an arsenal of polemical apologetics.

On the other hand Euro-Americans, in their cultural leaders and in the mass, still retain by and large the serene uncriticised assurance that their—or should I say ‘our’?—culture is normative, and that it is the only authentic realisation of human potentialities. It is, to be sure, not the only way of being human or organising human society, but it is certainly the best, and the only one that has a future. All other cultures and ways of being human are judged in terms of our Euro-American values—at the very moment when, in our reflexive self-consciousness, we are beginning to wonder what those values are, and whether indeed we still have any. That is the paradox.

It is a paradox in which Christianity and the Church or Churches are caught fast, because they constitute an integral part of Euro-American culture, even at its most secular and secularist and post-Christian. What is rather more dreadfully (but not, thank heaven, essentially) true is that modern Euro-American culture constitutes a sizeable part of contemporary Christianity and of the life and mentality of the Churches; a mentality at once self-critical and serenely assured of its normative superiority.

Enter now a penetrating African voice to puncture that sense of

superiority. There have of course been thousands of African voices, not to mention Asian and Latin American ones, protesting against 'white' arrogance in the last 40 years. But I do not remember hearing one quite so sharp and shrewd as this one of Professor F. Eboussi Boulaga, directed against the cultural imperialism of what he calls the missionary discourse of a Christianity of empire. His book is *Christianity Without Fetishes*, published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, in 1984, at \$11.95.¹ One associates fetishes with West Africa, where indeed Prof. Boulaga comes from. It is a word of Portuguese origin, simply meaning 'something made', but defined by the Shorter O.E.D. as 'originally any object used by the negroes of the Guinea coast and neighbourhood as an amulet or means of enchantment, or regarded by them with dread. b. Anthropologically, an inanimate object worshipped by savages as having magical powers or as being animated by a spirit. c. Figuratively, something irrationally revered'. Rather a boo word, in fact, for saying boo to black savages with.

Now Professor Boulaga's point is that the missionaries fairly effectively said boo to the African fetishes they found in vogue among Africans, but didn't notice that the Christianity they were importing was festooned with a whole armoury of European fetishes too. And he does not primarily mean, if at all, traditional European liturgy, whether Catholic or protestant, and Church organisation and so on. He means the absolutist presentation of Christian revelation and doctrine as the *only* valid religious truth about God and man, and as giving immediate and univocal access to the divine reality; Christian doctrine, and—yes—Church structures and ecclesiologies as constructed over nineteen hundred years in an ambience of Graeco-Roman and Germanic culture, through its mediaeval, renaissance and enlightenment phases. Missionary discourse, he says, treated traditional African symbols (being savage and heathen) with the violence of derision, and then imposed its own alien, middle-class Christianity, which was inextricably associated, both in the minds of the missionaries and of their converts, with power; with the colonial power and above all with the overwhelming technological and economic power of Euro-American culture.

I am not primarily concerned with Boulaga's criticism of the missionary achievement of the Churches, which is severe and trenchant, and almost certainly not quite fair. Here is just one long quotation to illustrate:

Christianity's abstraction adjusts it to the bourgeois world. Its spiritualism gives it a good conscience and a high ideal of itself. After a few hyperbolic questions about gratuity, human helplessness, and the primacy of charity, things come down to merit, money, and competition among interest groups that are more real than the communities of faith. The

missionary shares this scale of values. As we have seen, the missionary is closer to the colonists, even bad colonists, than to the sheep of his or her flock. The Christian mysteries are often 'legends' for missionaries, things to be preached and professed, things whose being actually consists in this preaching and profession. They will be prompt to drop them and pass to the teaching of morality, the virtues that make one respectable, and toil. The ethics thereby proposed will be no whit different from a middle-class ethics. The neophyte encounters a society where religion can function as ideology. Ideology serves to propagate the ideal image of oneself. Ideology is the sharing of the sacred, but nothing so sacred as material goods. In ideology the offer of what is declared to be the most precious thing of all can go hand in hand with the refusal of what is most elementary. (p. 60)

I think it is hardly likely that *all* missionaries were closer even to bad colonists than to their flocks—but the picture is indeed recognisable.

What calls for closer scrutiny is his diagnosis of a more basic defect in Euro-American Christianity, which is both cause and effect of the religion's all too successful inculturation in a violent, arrogant and aggressive culture. This defect is the scant respect shown by Latin Christianity, and the Protestant and reformed variations on it, to the negative or apophatic theology of God. Here let me quote him again, with a few asides of my own (in italics):

The African religious experience is long since in possession of the datum that there are no symbols to express the nature of God. (*I don't think this can be wholly and universally true; if it were, it would mean that there were no home-grown African fetishes—which is hardly in accord with the evidence*). That language about God is, and can only be, anthropomorphic and metaphorical (*I would prefer 'analogical'*) is itself an ancient legacy of reflective thought. The need to make these (*datum and legacy?*) an active dimension of the common consciousness and of emancipating practice is incumbent as a historical task (*he means for African Christians*) merely from the fact that the missionary religions (*including Islam, presumably*) have hidden these by their 'success', making the positivism of revelation the foundation of their claim to a hegemony and monopoly of the meaning of existence. To be sure, they have tolerated negative theologies as a privilege reserved to those rare virtuosos of speculation and mysticism on the margins of the institution, while the institution itself has been organized and functions according to the principle of authoritarian and substantive

mediation. Here we have as it were a double-truth theory, in the service of the power of those who know over those who neither can nor ought to, and an institutionalization of duplicity—both of which seem to us who pay the bill for such an order of things to be difficult to defend. (p. 13)

I think he is right in saying that the Catholic Church at least (one of the missionary religions) has ‘tolerated’ negative theologies. It could scarcely repudiate them without repudiating its own most authentic traditions. ‘Now we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does’, says St Thomas Aquinas². Whether this doctrine is taught in seminaries is a matter of luck. But it certainly does not seem to get down to the catechisms. ‘What is God?’ asks *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, in its post-Vatican II edition of 1972, authorised by the bishops of England and Wales; and it answers, as we all know, ‘God is the supreme Spirit, etc.’³ No *via negativa* here, no sense, not the slightest inkling, of all language about God being analogical (or anthropomorphic and metaphorical). This is the stuff to give those who neither can nor ought to know.

It is Boulaga’s contention that this makes them dependent, and is indeed designed to do so, on the ‘authoritarian and substantive mediation of the institution’. You ask the question ‘Why?’, and you get the answer ‘Because I say so’, ‘I’ being the Church, or the magisterium. That is the authoritarian element, with which we are not unfamiliar. By ‘substantive mediation’ he means, I think, that the institution (the Catholic, or any other Church) claims a monopoly of mediating divine truth, or the truth about God to men, and implicitly claims that its dogmatic formulae and its institutions encapsulate and univocally present the truth. No other mediations, no other symbolic representations are valid or possible, or true.

Whether the authoritarian dogmatism and cultural intolerance are caused by the indifference to the *via negativa*, or the other way round, or neither, we do not have to decide. Together they constitute what Boulaga suggests is the ‘fetishism’ of Latin Christianity—including, *mutatis mutandis*, its Protestant ‘successor’ Churches. It is worth noticing that they are the creation, not exactly of the official teaching, but certainly of the long established policies of that magisterium we are hearing so much of nowadays; which shows that the proper respect we all owe duly established ecclesiastical authority ought *never* to be uncritical; which is a conclusion not very acceptable to the authoritarian mind...

A more important conclusion drawn by Boulaga himself is that this ‘fetishism’ of Euro-American Christianity, especially of Latin (Roman Catholic) Christianity effectively blocks the achievement of the Church’s *universal* (Catholic) mission. He says very well that the universalism of

Christianity or of the gospel, its being for all people, all peoples, is not something given, but a task imposed and to be undertaken. It is not achieved by cultural imperialism, but on the contrary blocked and inhibited by such a policy or approach.

The gospel is not universal and valid for the whole of humanity because it is a set of universal truths. What the gospel is in fact is the particular, concrete person of Jesus of Nazareth, recognized as the Christ, the Son of God, by a small group of Jews in the first place, living in a particular critical point in time and space; it is this same Jesus making his own particular and personal response, in obedience to his Father's will, to the particular situation of the Jewish people at that time, and enjoining a similar response on his followers. The response, to put it in a nut-shell, was to turn the currently accepted values of society on their head; that is what the kingdom of God means and involves. For consistently making this kind of response Jesus was put to death—and, we may add, was raised from the dead by God. Boulaga calls this 'the Christic model'.

This model, the gospel, something particular and concrete, localised and dated becomes available to all, becomes universal, by being translated, continuously, into other particular, concrete, localised and dated situations—not by being formulated in abstract universals. The most outstanding success in this process was the translation of the gospel or Christic model from first-century Palestinian Judaism to the greater Graeco-Roman or Hellenistic world, and its eventual conquest of that world. But here the gospel was either too successful or not quite successful enough; not quite successful enough in turning the values (especially the intellectual values) of the Hellenistic world on their heads; too successful in getting itself formulated in the abstract universal terms characteristic of that world and its cultural inheritors. So the gospel, the Christic model, contrary to its *intrinsic dynamism*, has been encapsulated and petrified, like a fly in amber, in one particular culture, or at least one set of cultures, which has seriously inhibited its translation into other cultures—and its critical turning of *their* values upside down.

This failure in what we should call genuine catholicism has been masked by the fact that the Graeco-Roman culture has become in its Euro-American inheritors the dominant culture of the world; so the Christian Church or Churches indeed exist all over the world, universally. But this apparent 'catholicity' of Christianity, even and especially of the Catholic Church, is deceptive. The Catholic Church, for example, remains overwhelmingly a Latin Church, even though we have stopped speaking Latin. Boulaga suggests that the first and archetypal failure in catholicity was the failure of the gentile Churches of the first and second centuries to accommodate in what came to be called the Great Church the Judaeo-Christians.

How to release the gospel and its intrinsic dynamic from this hard Euro-American shell, this hard Latin shell, this capsule? Boulaga concludes his book by giving four 'rules for conversion'; they are labelled *personalization, historicization, aesthetics and universalization*. In other words, Christian truths must be personalized in order to become believable, faith must be a process of historicization, Christianity must become a redemptive aesthetics, and universality must be recognized as made, not given. The last point we have already touched on; the first three I do not fully understand. But what is clear is that the work of release, or of applying the Christic model, can only be performed in local Christian communities. It cannot be directed, or controlled, or laid down from the centre, from Rome. Rome, the Holy See, can encourage or discourage it, but cannot possibly, in the nature of the case, do it. What the Roman Church (that local Church in Italy) and its bishop should do is apply the Christic model in Rome to the Roman situation, and, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, 'preside over the process in charity'.

- 1 *Christianisme sans fétiche*, Editions Présence Africaine, 1981; ET *Christianity without Fetishes*, translated by Robert R. Barr, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1984, US £11.95.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 3, prol.
- 3 q. 17; published by CTS.

Prayer as Bleeding

Melvyn Matthews

Prayer is a form of bleeding, a wound which we may not staunch. Its source is in the incompleteness of the human person and its continuance depends upon that incompleteness, that wounding being maintained. To be a prayerful and spiritual person requires an affirmation and an acceptance of one's incompleteness. It requires a realisation that the important thing about human beings is their incompleteness. Human beings are characterised by the unstaunched wounds within their nature. They reveal these wounds by being those who continually and consistently look towards the future, always seeking a new heaven and a new earth, always hoping, always moving forwards. Doing this is what makes us human. To settle into a final completeness of understanding is to accept an ideology. To believe that you have found a complete explanation, a way of seeing things that explains and welds into a complete pattern all of the inconsistencies of life, this is to lock oneself into a diminishment of the human person. To believe that you have