

SOME THOUGHTS ON RELIGION AND THE COMMUNITY*

R. GEERLING, ARTS (HOLLAND), M.D. (AMSTERDAM), LL.B. (RAND)

*Hon. Professor in Neurology, Department of Psychology, University of South Africa**President, Southern Transvaal Branch (M.A.S.A.) 1962**'In 't Verleden Ligt 't Heden
In 't Nu Wat Worden Zal.'*

THE SHONA PEOPLE

In considering the possible or probable developments of the future of this, or any country in the world one has to consider changes and developments in other countries over the past centuries. This study may give us some indication of what may or will happen when primitive peoples start developing cultures of higher levels.



(Photo: Jane Plotz)

Dr. Geerling

If we survey the development from the dim past to the present during a period of millenia, as indicated by anthropological findings, it becomes clear that there was a very early development of the family unit and a belief in a life after death—a spiritual world. On this basis various cults developed, some of which still persist in different parts of the world—for example, amongst the various Bantu peoples of Africa, the Jivaro Indians of the Amazon River area in South America, and in some of the South Sea Islands.

Seligman² states that ancestor worship forms the basis of the religious life of the Bantu, that it is primarily a cult, and is everywhere patrilineal (except with the Herero, where it is matrilineal). A man worships his own ancestors in the male line and these are the only relatives he can approach. Belotti,³ writing about the Congo, states that it is possible for a European to distinguish only two manifest forms of belief in the supernatural, viz. (1) the cult of the dead, and (2) the influence of either malignant or benign spirits. In the former case the negroes proceed direct, but in the latter they use the witchdoctors.

The cult of the dead is based on a conviction that something of the dead man must survive and continues to 'live' in the place where he led his earthly existence. That part that remains alive we call the 'manes' (the soul of the departed). The manes continues to take an interest in what happens to his family, to his village and, if he was powerful during his lifetime, to his tribe. Therefore it is well to appease these invisible guardians. Since the living have not the faintest idea what the spirit of a dead man might require, each man makes arrangements to honour him as he thinks best or following what he has been told by his father. Today there are still some who want to bury a pair of young slaves alive, bound to the corpse of the dead father, simply because they will make him happy in the beyond; others raise little altars to their manes, on which they place victuals which they constantly renew—until they begin to forget. Others still bring daily to the grave of the dead man those things which he held dear in life.

Steinmetz *et al.*¹ state that it is most difficult to look into the future of mankind. Yet such a look into the future is imperative if one does not wish to remain completely passive towards the causative factors that are changing the present. These changes are not solely dependent on the happenings in one particular country or area and its organization, culture and spiritual capabilities; but are equally dependent on what is happening in the surrounding populations. The external influence may be even greater than the internal if the external population overshadows the internal by large numbers.

If we survey the development

Gelfand,⁴ in describing the Shona rituals, states that the head of the family conducts the worship and, whatever its origin, the most obvious function of ancestor worship is to maintain the social bond of the family and to keep the other members of the family subordinate to the head, who alone has the power to intercede with the dead. The only exception to the domestic nature of the cult is that the ancestors of the chief are the source of strength for the whole tribe. Just as the chief and his family guide the fortunes of the living, so his ancestors care for the whole people of their ruling descendant. Only members of the chief's family, however, may approach them on behalf of the tribe as a whole. Thus it is that, among the Bantu, religion provides a powerful sanction for the chieftainship and, personally, I would now add, autocracy.

Besides the ancestral spirits, the southern Bantu also believe in a universal deity who was never human. But this universal spirit differs from people to people. Amongst the Shona the deity is known as Mwari or Musikavanhu, who made the earth, created all of us (man, woman and child), brought into being the animal, insect and vegetable worlds, the mountains, the sky, sun and moon, the air which we breathe in order to live—as also all the tribal spirits and ancestral spirits. But the Shona do not know Mwari or approach him directly except through Chaminuka, the great messenger—the link between Mwari and the people. Chaminuka, as also the tribal and domestic ancestor spirit, again has a medium through whom he is approached by the tribe as a whole. The medium is a living person. It would appear, therefore, that it is a system of spiritualism, all acts of which are performed with rigid rituals, which include the drinking of beer and the eating of meat and stiff millet porridge (sadzu). It is believed that the spirits also eat, drink beer, and smoke tobacco left for them at the altar (rushanga), either in the home (ancestral spirit) or at the altar around the Muhacha tree (tribal spirit).

Christianity was introduced in this area within the recent decennia by missionaries of the various churches. Certain Shona who are practising Christians still believe simultaneously in their own tribal cult. How is this possible? It appears that some Shona would classify Jesus Christ, the Great Spirit of the White people, as another Mondhoro (Mwari spirit) like Chaminuka, who bestows innumerable blessings on the people.

This adaptation is nothing new in religious histories. Fermor⁵ writes: 'The Greeks have always been polytheists, and one of the marks of polytheism is that it keeps open house—all gods are welcome. Swarms of Asiatics moved into the company of the native Greek gods and made themselves at home and, when Christ appeared on the Graeco-Roman scene, there was plenty of room for Him . . . But monotheism, by its very nature, cannot reciprocate this easy-going welcome and, when Christianity became the State religion of the Empire, the expulsion of the old gods after thousands of years of happy tenure, and the reduction of the Pantheon to a private cell, was a serious task.' The question was how to focus the wide scope of their veneration on a single point? 'It could not be done, and a compromise was found. Temples and shrines and holy sites were re-dedicated to Christian saints and converted to basilicas.' The old gods were sanctified and reappeared in the form of saints. Thus Dionysus became Saint Dionysios, Artemis of the Ephesians became a male Saint Artemidos, etc. These saints retained the spheres of influence which, as the previous Greek gods, they had had, e.g. vine, agriculture, etc.

OLD CULTS AND NEW RELIGIONS

A similar process of adaptation occurred when Islam entered Malaysia. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Arab traders

* Valedictory address, Johannesburg, 19 February 1963.

settled in these areas in such numbers that the way was opened for 'teachers'. These teachers were really Mohammedan missionaries. Fay Cooper Cole⁶ states that by this time Islam had developed into several divisions and it was the Shafite sect of the Sunni school that spread to the Indies. This branch had undergone such great changes as it passed through India that it was an Indianized Islam. The ease and speed with which it gained converts was due largely to its adaptability and tolerance; for, though it imposed its main teachings, it found no difficulty in absorbing most of the old beliefs and customs. Even local gods were incorporated with saint worship for, while saints are supposed to be only intermediaries with Allah, reverence for them really amounts to worship.

This means that new religions may incorporate old religions, which then apparently disappear completely. Yet, in these new religions certain old customs survive. Unless one then discovers their origin, such customs seem strange, out of place and incomprehensible. Bouman⁷ remarks: 'Living today under the shadow of an uncertain future, at a time when old and sacred traditions seem to totter and even the Church has to defend itself against a clamorous neo-heathenism, it might seem that even the gods are not immortal. Surveying, however, the religious conceptions from the primitive past to the present, we may be convinced of the immortality of true faith.'

Returning now to the consideration of cults, it is necessary to realize that, in the development of cults and from cults to religions, moral rules and principles develop hand in hand with them. These moral rules and principles, later called laws, are based on the beliefs in the cults and religions. This latter development is automatic and arises from necessity to safeguard the community unit—whether family, tribe or nation. During this growth the moral rules of the community unit become unwritten law, to which the unit conforms. Thus the laws of a country are based on the cult or religion of the unit, even today. However intricate the system of law becomes, basically it is of religious origin, safeguarding the morals, safety and growth of the community.

If one suddenly disrupts these religious tenets, the result will be chaos since, with their disruption, the moral standards must inevitably fall away or must change considerably to conform to another standard. Sudden change in this respect is impossible, for age-old and ingrained beliefs and customs cannot be abruptly done away with. If this is attempted, it leaves a void out of which chaos must emerge. The only method that can be used, if a change is advisable or necessary, is by evolution. Such an evolution requires a period of time stretching over several generations.

POLYGAMY

As an example of this we could consider the custom of polygamy in the Congo and elsewhere, a custom which is regarded as one of the gravest sins in a Christian community. In fact, however, this custom, where it is practised, is one sanctioned by the cult of the community and is a method of safeguarding the existence of the community unit. The rules and rituals of marriage, the conduct of a polygamous family unit, and its conduct at death of the paterfamilias, are all strictly laid down and faithfully followed. This custom, in a population where the females greatly exceed the males in numbers, and where the males are subject to death at an early age because of frequent wars and intertribal disturbances, safeguards the future development of the family unit. Furthermore, there is a distribution of wealth occasioned by the payment of dowries before marriage, especially by the rich, who obtain several wives.

Apart from these and some other reasons for polygamy there is also an ontological reason, perhaps the most important of all, which was first stated by Aristotle E. Possoz in *Elements of Law in Negro Customs* (Elizabethville). He says that in polygamy one need not necessarily see 'only the instinct of reproduction but more generally the expansion of the individual in the hierarchy of the clan, the tendency of every vital force to possess goods, persons or things, whichever they may be'. In other words, the negro, through a multiplicity of marriages, augments his 'vital force' exactly as each new wife who participates in the life of a polygamist augments her own.³

It is pointed out that the claims of the opponents of polygamy that it has been 'abolished' by the anti-polygamy laws are so much wishful thinking: you cannot abolish age-old customs simply by passing laws. Furthermore, they do not take into account the consequences of this remedy, which might in the long run be more dangerous than the 'evils' it is designed to eradicate.

The Catholic Church naturally does not betray its own inviolate laws in order to proselytize; it merely bows to the inevitable and tolerates certain forms of concubinage because intolerance would bring about social evils of the gravest possible nature. Referring to their statistics, the missionaries can show that polygamy is on the wane where the populations are more civilized and living conditions are better, and that it has disappeared spontaneously in certain zones where they have been active.³

At death, the elder living brother of the deceased takes over the wives of the deceased and marries them. Thus the widowed wives remain in the close-knit family structure, and the wives and their children remain under strict control by the family elder. Belotti sums it up as follows: 'And it is beyond question that from a social point of view this is a far better solution than that the widow should be left to live on her own. Raised to the dignity of wife, she will remain an element for good order in society instead of becoming merely dispossessed.' It gives these widows a continued security and status until their death.

THE GILBERT ISLANDS

The inhabitants of the Gilbert Islands in the South Seas⁸ were worshippers of the sun-god, Au, but each clan cultivated a guardian spirit of its own. Yet, although the ancestral gods made it their business to avenge sins among the living, they took no part in the judgment of the dead. The law-giver and ultimate judge was Nakaa. Nakaa, the Judge, was neither fruit of the Ancestral Tree nor progenitor of any human stock, but absolute spirit. All wisdom was his. The legend of Nakaa handed down from generation to generation is worth repeating because it bears such a remarkable similarity to the legend of the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve. The legend of Nakaa, the Judge, the keeper of the gate of death, the lawgiver, whose sentence of old drove men forth from the Happy Land and first brought death among the people, reads as follows:

In Matang of old dwelt Nakaa, the Judge, and he had lordship over all the people. The spirits of Matang also bowed before him, for they feared to look into his eyes. But no land ever seen by man was as beautiful as that land. It was great; it was high; many were its mountains: all manner of trees were there, and rivers of fresh water. The trees were heavy with fruit; there were lakes also with abundance of fish. No hunger, no thirst were in that place, never an ill wind visited it and the people knew not death.

Nakaa had his dwelling below a mountain, in a spot that was very fruitful. And behold! he planted two pandanus trees there, very wide and tall. One tree stood in the north, the other in the south. He said, 'The men shall be gathered under the tree in the north and the women shall be gathered under the tree in the south.' And so it was; the men turned north, the women turned south; each company turned away with its own happiness; and there was neither death nor grey hair among them.

But there came a day when Nakaa was to go on a journey. He gathered the men and the women together in the midst between the trees, and behold! they looked on each other's bodies.

And Nakaa said to all of them, 'I go on a journey. See that ye turn away from each other when I am gone, the men to the north, the women to the south.' He said again, 'This is my word: there shall be no traffic between the men and the women when I am gone.' He said again, 'There is a mark that I shall know when I return, if perchance the men play together with the women.' Those three commands spake Nakaa before he went on his journey.

And when he was gone, the men returned to their tree in the north, and the women returned to their tree in the south, and each company abode with its own thoughts. So it was for a long time. But their hearts were not at ease, for they had looked on each other's bodies. As it were, their hearts were turned over within them.

And after a long time it was night, and a south wind moved in the trees. Cool was that wind and sweet with the scent of flowers of the women's tree. And the scent was blown upon the company of the men where they lay sleeping in the north. Behold! the men stirred; they awoke; their hearts were drawn to the women. They arose. They said together, 'We will go play with the women, for the scent of their tree is sweet.' See them now! They go forth, they are running, they are beneath the tree of the women; they are playing with the women beneath the tree. Alas! the mark of Nakaa is upon them but as yet they know it not.

And after that, time was not long ere Nakaa returned. He arrived, he stood in the midst between the trees, he called the people to him, saying, 'Come gather here before me.' They heard his word. They came to bow before him and when they bowed he took their heads between his hands.

He lifted the hairs of their heads with his fingers, he searched, he searched there; and alas! he found his mark upon them; he saw grey hairs among the black, and he knew they had not hearkened to his word. He said, 'Ye have played together under the women's tree', and the people answered nothing.

And Nakaa said again, 'Because ye could not hearken to my word, ye shall leave the land of Matang for ever.'

Then the men and the women entreated him, saying, 'Drive us not forth. If thou hadst not gathered us together, we should not have looked upon each other's bodies, and our hearts would not have been overturned. This was thy work.' So also the spirits of Matang spoke for them.

And his heart was softened, but only a little; he said, 'Sometimes ye shall see Matang in dreams. Yet ye shall not come near it. Think not to land upon its shores.' And when the people wept, he said, 'Enough! There shall be no return to Matang.'

He said again, 'Here be two trees, the men's and the women's. One of them ye shall take with you, the other shall remain. Which tree do ye choose?' And the men answered, 'We choose the tree of the women.' And Nakaa said, 'Ye have chosen the tree of Death. So be it. The tree of Life shall remain in Matang. Ye shall have Death always with you. And because this is my tree that ye take with you, the ghosts of your dead shall find me sitting at the gate between the lands of the living and the dead, and none shall escape my net or my pit whose way has not been straightened according to my word.'

And he gave them the ritual called Te Kaetikawai (The Straightening of the Way), saying, 'Perform this over your dead, that they may escape my net and ye may escape my pit.' And he said, 'Let no man lie with his sister, or eat the totem of his father's, or do dishonour to his father's bones, if he would escape the stakes of my pit.' And he said again, 'Ye shall bury your dead in mats plaited by women of the leaves of the tree of Death. That is also my word to you.' These were the judgments of Nakaa when the people had chosen their tree; and we have done his will from that day to this, lest the spirits of Matang turn away from us: for the spirits of Matang fear the eye of Nakaa.

And when the people lifted the tree of the women to take it away, Nakaa plucked leaves from it. And he wrapped up in the leaves all the sicknesses and pains known to mankind — tooth-rot, and stomach-ache, and rheumatism, and coughing and fever, and fading away — a multitude of ills; and he pelted the heads of the people with the leaves, and those things have been with us ever since.

Alas! there is no return to the shores of Matang, no, not even in dreams. But Au of the Rising Sun will return to us one day with his Company of Matang, for this he has promised. And the gate of Nakaa is not shut for us when we die, for if we obey his words it will lie open before us, and the way will be straight to Bouru, and Marisa and Neineaba. And there we shall be happy, for there the ancestors await us and we shall be gathered with them for ever.'

Thus ends this legend of Nakaa on which the religious beliefs and customs are based.

In this religion a very strict moral code was developed under which polygamy was authorized. This code had its sanction in the religious beliefs of the community. Its purpose was again the safety of that community unit, and security for the individuals in that community. The son of a free-born island family would usually take himself a wife when he was about 20 and she 15.⁹ It was part of the normal marriage contract that some of the ceremonial bride's younger sisters (or, if she had none, perhaps a chosen cousin or two) would accompany her as confidants and helpers into her new home. In principle, their duty of loving-kindness towards her extended, when they reached maturity, as far as helping her to give nightly comfort to her lord, and bear him children as he willed. In practice, however, the average husband's initiative in this direction was severely crippled by his wife. Not that she could blankly refuse him if, after several years of marriage, he proposed to elevate one of her companions to the honourable and permanent status of secondary wife in his household; only, it was she, not he, who did the choosing, and her nomination went to the least attractive of her sisters.

This system led firstly to an authorized polygamy and secondly to a certain amount of security for the less endowed among the women of the tribe. Also, if these sisters or cousins, at the age of maturity, did not become secondary wives, they could be married off to another under the usual marriage-contract rules, against payment by the groom or his family of a piece of land.

Enforced Monogamy

At the turn of the century, Christian missionaries had been at work in these islands for about 50 years, and local British administration for about a decade. The administration then suddenly, on authority from Britain, forced monogamy upon this community by law. The effect of this law was that all secondary wives were regarded as harlots, and their previously legitimate children as bastards. This sudden stigmatization had an enormous psychological effect, resulting in a tragedy

of suicides amongst secondary wives and also amongst ceremonial wives and husbands. Eventually this caused a marked depopulation of the islands, and at one stage extinction of the tribes was feared. However, for various reasons, this mental shock was overcome and, since about 1915, the population figures have risen once more. Yet this measure of monogamy — forced upon them by law — has destroyed their basic moral rules relating to sex and the stern code of reciprocal duties and moralities, and has replaced it with nothing more than so-called immorality, which has driven them further and further away from the Christian ideal of sex restraint.

THE DANGER OF SUDDEN CHANGE

The foregoing indicates the argument that, in these religious matters and moral codes, sudden impositions by law may result in chaos and tragedy without any beneficial effect. What can we learn from all this? Can we learn a lesson for the future?

There is ample proof in this country that, if tribal customs and control are broken and not replaced by another code of life, then chaos must reign supreme. Europe and its different off-shoots over the world have attained a certain culture through development over many centuries and on the basis of a Christian doctrine. This culture is proudly called the Western civilization and mode of life. Now the European countries, collectively called the Western nations, wish to see this country impose upon the indigenous populations this mode of life — that is, democracy with its parliamentary systems — little realizing that the religious basis and foundation of the indigenous cultures does not lend itself to such a sudden imposition. On a previous occasion I attempted to point out that, politically, the indigenous populations, by reason of their cults and religions, must be autocratic and cannot be otherwise.¹⁰

Similarly, in religious and moral matters, unless the cults and religions gradually develop and change, or are incorporated, into the new religion, there must be chaos. A religion cannot be imposed; it must grow into a whole by acceptance. This acceptance is only possible if the religion is tolerant and adaptable to that which has gone before. In Africa, Islam has made great strides, more especially in Central Africa. It is not impossible that it will make great strides towards the south. This will be due to the fact that Islam is adaptable and can incorporate the existing cults in the form of saint worship. Similarly, it is one of the reasons why the Roman Catholic faith has been more acceptable to the indigenous populations than Protestantism.

It is interesting to note that Christian communities in Central Africa have been thinking on these lines in an attempt to form 'an independent African Church'. This was revealed in a short newspaper article¹¹ in the following words:

'If an independent African Church is formed, men might be allowed to have as many wives as they want and ancestor worship could be an integral part of the Church's philosophy.'

'The question of a truly African Church — which was the main theme of the first all-African Christian Youth Assembly in Nairobi recently — will be the subject of discussion at a non-denominational conference to be held in Lusaka from 11th to 15th April (1963). It is being organised by the Rev. R. F. Trudgian of the Methodist Church in Lusaka, and will be attended by well over a hundred Christian youths . . .'

'Mr. Trudgian added: "On the question of polygamy, it has been said that instead of barring a man from the church until he only has one wife, it would be better to accept him and then let him learn for himself that it is wrong."

'But, on the other hand, people say that a man could not be a true Christian this way because he is going against one of the basic principles of Christianity. These and many other issues will be up for discussion.'

If this attempt succeeds it means that here in Southern Africa the same would happen as at the Catholic mission stations in the Congo, where the Catholic Church does not condone polygamy but 'bows to the inevitable'¹² for the time being, in the hope that this age-old custom will disappear over a period of two to three generations.

The solving of this problem is of paramount importance to Southern Africa. To reach any solution at all, the basic

cults and religious principles of the various population groups will have to be carefully considered. In the absence of such consideration, no possible prediction as to the future can be made, except that a too rapid enforcement of Western ideas upon population groups who are not ready for it will cause chaos.

REFERENCES

1. Steinmetz, S. R., Barge, J. A. J., Hagedoorn, A. L. and Steinmetz, R. (1938). *De Rassen der Menschheid*, 2nd ed. N.V. Uitgevers Maatschappij. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
2. Seligman, C. G. (1959): *Races of Africa*, 3rd ed. London: Oxford University Press.
3. Belotti, F. (1954): *Fabulous Congo*. London: Andrew Dakers Ltd.
4. Gelfand, M. (1959): *Shona Ritual*. Cape Town: Juta & Co.
5. Fermor, F. L. (1958): *Mani, Travels in the Southern Peloponese*. London: John Murray Ltd.
6. Cole, F. C. (1945): *The Peoples of Malaysia*. New York: Van Nostrand Co.
7. Bouman, K. H. (1949): *Forgotten Gods*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
8. Grimble, A. (1956): *A Pattern of Islands*, 10th ed. London: John Murray Ltd.
9. *Idem* (1957): *Return to the Islands*. London: John Murray Ltd.
10. Geerling, R. (1961): *Med. Proc.*, 7, 116.
11. *The Star*, Johannesburg, 18 February 1963.