GOD'S WAYS IN THE BANTU SOUL¹

MISSIONARIES of the last generation were accustomed to express a profound horror of paganism. For the majority, the rites and customs of African savages were the work of the devil. On more than one point, certainly, they were right. In our day, however, the attitude to primitive religions and moralities has changed. We endeavour rather to find the rays of light, the premonitions of truth which are discoverable in the social and religious system that prevails among the black tribes, and we are always glad to have succeeded in bringing them out afresh. To what is this change due? In the first place, from a more profound study of the native soul, we have learnt to distinguish better between elements which are frankly bad and reprehensible (such as the ideas of sorcery), and praiseworthy aspirations indicated by certain rites. Then the theory of evolution, which undoubtedly contains much truth, has completely transformed our point of view. Science has shown us that primitive or semi-primitive peoples are passing through a phase of development through which our fathers also passed; indeed, the animistic conceptions of the savage have left undeniable survivals in the life of civilized nations. These pagans are our brothers, brothers whose growth has been delayed, brothers still wrapped in the mists of earliest infancy; but already they are waking and commencing their forward march. And we have more hope for their future than our predecessors had, because some ages back we were very like them, and the same factors which have raised us to spiritual life and to civilization are going to transform them also, till at last

¹ This article, written in French by M. Junod, has been translated by the Rev. Professor H. R. Mackintosh, New College, Edinburgh. Owing to lack of time the translation has not been submitted to the writer in South Africa.—Ed.

there has been accomplished the dream of the Apostle Paul : a unified humanity, in which all races shall be conjoined under the dominion of Christ.

For there are two ways of understanding evolution. The idea may be captured by the materialistic monism of a Haeckel, and represented as excluding the personality of God from the world and from history—everything being produced simply by the play of natural forces. We who profess Christian theism reject such a conception decisively. We find more inspiration by far in the genial spiritualism of Drummond. In our judgment, humanity has grown up like a child in his father's house. God has loved and guided him from his cradle, rejoicing whenever a smile crossed the youthful face; God has treasured lovingly every gleam of intelligence that has shown in his eyes, every word of truth uttered by his lips. And He has punished severely all his mistakes and faults, for humanity has sinned. But the child has grown, and soon he will recognize his Father, and will serve Him with eager love.

That is why we are entitled to search for traces of this divine education among primitive peoples. To do so is not only justifiable, it is useful and timely; for in studying the African soul sympathetically we shall find points of attachment for the high and pure conceptions of Christianity.

The subject is an immense one, not to be exhausted in an article in this Review. I shall limit myself to an examination of the main features of religion, of magic, and of taboo among the South Africans, for these are the three principal departments of their psychic life. Let us enquire whether divine educational action may not have played some part in the formation of their characteristic ideas.

What I have just said applies particularly to the Thongas of Delagoa Bay and of the Transvaal—of whom I have made a special study—but also to the Zulus, the Soutos, and the majority of the Bantu tribes. The languages of these tribes present such affinities that it has been found

possible to class them as one family ; and in the same way their customs and rites, or rather the ideas from which these have sprung, appear to be very similar throughout the whole Bantu country.

The Bantu religion invariably exhibits a strange dualism. On the one hand, the pagan adores the manes of his ancestors, naming them *shikwambo* (plur. *psikwambo*) in Thonga, and *badimo* in Souto. On the other, he believes in a Supreme Being, a kind of All-Father, to whom however he does not always pay worship. Let us consider first what modern anthropology calls manism. I said that the Bantu adores the manes of his ancestors. Is 'adore' the precise word ? At all events, he does not kneel before these spirits of the departed ; he is not afraid to insult them in his prayers or to address them with extreme familiarity ; really the manes are still in his eyes the spirits of men, and in no way transcend the human level. None the less he fears them ; he scrupulously discharges his duties towards them ; he will not eat an ear of millet from the new crop without having first performed the rite of *luma* ; he will solemnly consecrate the first-fruits of the field to these mysterious beings, and will pray them to bless the village. These gods are essentially personal ; they are the father, the grandfather, the uncle, the grand-uncle whom he has known, and who perhaps have died recently ; further, they are the ancestors on the father's and the mother's side—indeed, the whole pantheon of the dead whose memory has been preserved. And they will be irritated if one forgets to give them their share ; they will raise stormy winds ; they will crush men by falling trees ; they will send epidemics ; they will destroy the produce of the fields ; they will give free course to sorcerers' enchantments. Thus in a certain degree they possess omnipotence ; omnipresence too they enjoy, for they are able to follow with their eyes all their descendants scattered over the country ; finally, they have the omni-

science which follows from omnipresence : in a word, they are gods. To sum up, I should say that these ancestor gods of Bantu manism in no sense possess the transcendence and moral excellence which we attribute to Divinity as properly defined ; nevertheless they are gods as much as and more than many of those whom the Greeks called *theoi*.¹

Beside this essentially animistic cult of ancestors the Bantus—I think I may say all the Bantus—have beliefs of a quite different kind, which must resemble deism. They believe in a Being indicated by different names according to the different tribes (*Leza*, *Nyambe*, *Nzam*, etc.), confused or blended sometimes with a hero who created humanity, sometimes with the sun, sometimes with the heaven or sky (*ciel*). This Being is rarely the object of a cult, but he is feared as one who transcends the level of humanity. Among the Thongas he is called *Tilo*, the sky ; but in his character there is very little which is personal. He is a formidable power manifested on certain occasions, above all in unusual phenomena. He presides at the birth of twins ; he sends storms and rain (hence the curious custom of conjuring the thunderbolt through twins as intermediary). His function seems very subordinate, but the more one scrutinizes the background of the tribal mentality the more clearly this function is defined. Thus the other day I learned that albinos also are regarded as born under the special influence of the sky ; they were ‘scorched’ by him prior to their birth ; hence their character in part, and the repugnance felt towards them. The sky knows thieves and aids magicians who help him to discover them. In short, he is a god. But is he God ? In any case the sky is transcendent, but among the Thongas he is hardly personal, and no sacrifice is offered to him. He is a god of magic rather than of religion.

These ideas may be formless, they may amount to

¹ For a more complete statement see *The Life of a South African Tribe* (Macmillan), vol. ii. pp. 346–88 and pp. 389–408.

animism or deism, but they are really a valuable preparation for the acceptance of Christian theism. In fact, the surprising experience men have had over and over again is this: Proclaim the God of the Bible among these tribes, and you will meet with virtually no opposition, hardly with astonishment, on the part of the most convinced pagans. The natives, it is true, are extremely polite; they rarely contradict the white man, whom they regard as much superior in wisdom to themselves. Is it from politeness that they concede your point of view so promptly? I think not; for if you attack one of their social customs—polygamy, for example, or cattle marriages—they will show much less disposition to accept your argument. Even if they adopt it in a platonic sense, to please you, they will soon return to these practices to which they cling, while if a native abandons his belief—his pagan theology, I was going to say—he abandons it for ever. He will perhaps be a very imperfect Christian, and, morally speaking, a very inconsistent one; you may even have to exclude him from your congregation for grave faults; he will go the length of breaking off all connexion with the Church; but he will never return to the cult of the *psikwembo*. His faith in the ancestor gods has received its death-blow. The only explanation of this fact, verified a thousand times, is that Christian theism has in a way absorbed and thus destroyed his previous ideas. And this is how I conceive the psychological process in the soul, for instance, of a converted Thonga. When he hears proclaimed the God of Heaven, *Shiwembo leshi mga tilwen*, the Being who is at once Father and the Creator who resides in heaven, the native unites in a living synthesis his vague conceptions of the ancestor gods and the sky god. A combination never before effected takes place, and the notion of the heavenly Father captures his intelligence with such power that it can never be relinquished.

Although the experiences just described belong to the domain of moral liberty, not of physical necessity, I should

not hesitate to compare them with certain well-known facts in physics and chemistry. Just as the union of a base and an acid produces a salt, and it is often impossible to decompose the substance thus obtained into its primitive elements, so the mind of the black who has once believed in the Christian God is unable to return to belief in the ancestor god and the sky god. Or rather, I should say, comparing the genesis of the new conviction to the production of the electric spark : just as the meeting of a charge of negative electricity with a charge of positive electricity gives rise to a flame due to the union of these two forces, so the combination of the idea of the ancestor god and that of the sky god, produced when faith in the heavenly Father is born, so illumines the mind of the convert that he no longer gropes in the darkness of his old animism. A revelation has taken place which can never be forgotten.

Here, I am convinced, is the reason why the Bantu accepts the Christian God so easily. The thought imposes itself upon him as beyond dispute. But what does this prove, except that under the imperfect form of animism and primitive naturism, the divine Father had begun His work in the pagan soul ? He had made Himself known in some measure to this child of the bush, giving him a presentiment of His Fatherhood by means of the relationships of the human family, and of His infinite greatness by means of the cosmic phenomena of which the sky is the scene. To raise to unity this dualism in which so many peoples have remained, was the work of another race. What was needed above all was a special revealing influence in which the strong God of Abraham became, in man's consciousness, the holy God of the law and the prophets, and the loving God of Jesus Christ. But all this in germ was in the Bantu's heart, and he has found no difficulty in grasping, in the plenitude of His manifestation, the God whom he had confusedly perceived through the rites of ancestor worship, and the superstitions of naturism.

Magic holds in the life of the Bantu a place even more important than religion. By magic I mean all those rites and practices by which the savage strives to deal with hostile influences, either impersonal forces of nature, or living men acting as wizards, or personal spirits taking possession of their victims. In perfect ignorance of the true succession of causes and effects, and never having scrutinized scientifically the processes of nature, they believe in the existence of forces which they seek to subdue, in order that these may be forced to contribute to their happiness or at least not plunge them in misfortune. Among certain tribes these forces are conceived rather in a pantheistic fashion, that is as *mana*; among the Bantus they are almost always referred to personal agents by whom they are exercised. The aim of the magician is to succeed in discovering them, to conquer them, and to make them his servants. And what pains he takes to succeed! See him consult his small divining bones, which by their admirable arrangement answer all possible questions regarding the cause of sickness, the reason for accidents, and the means of preventing either. Here the magician is still only a diviner. But in order to struggle with the hostile force and subdue it, he becomes in turn medicine-man, administering charms and drugs, exorcist, forcing the hostile spirit to make itself known and allow itself to be appeased, and witch-doctor, unveiling the dark intrigues of the so-called casters of lots, and denouncing them to public punishment or to the rigours of trial. Here we plunge into superstition at its worst, and assuredly magic is the dark side of paganism. For magic, basing its practices as it does on certain absurd axioms (such as the action of like upon like, or of the part on the whole ¹), is absolutely anti-scientific, and frequently anti-moral and anti-religious. Could God use this truly diabolic means to prepare the advent of His kingdom in the Bantu heart?

¹ Cf. *op. cit.* vol. ii. pp. 412, 521.

Christianity is absolutely opposed to magic practices, and the more opposed the more spiritual it is. At the same time there is one point at which it approximates to magic. It believes in the existence of a supernatural force for the acquisition of which man can hope, namely the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ—not merely an influence void of personality, but the power of regeneration, of salvation, of new life. Now I can testify that the converted Bantu believes in the Spirit with all his heart. The predominance given to this element in the Christian life in the religion of the Africans is most striking. They wait for the Spirit somewhat like a charm to bring them always victory, occasionally perhaps to the detriment of individual moral effort. It is always easier for them than for others to surrender themselves to the working of the *Moya*, as the Spirit is called; and do they not owe this happy disposition to their old belief in the existence of independent forces? If it be so, the magic which has wrought them so much ill has nevertheless not been wholly useless.

The same may be said of taboo. Taboo plays an immense rôle in the life of primitive peoples, from one end of our planet to the other. Anthropologists have said so much on the subject that it is perhaps superfluous to recall what taboo means. But to make sure, I may be allowed to quote the definition I have given, in the work cited above, with special reference to the South African tribes. 'Any object, any act, any person is accounted taboo or *yila*, that implies a danger for the individual or for the community and that must consequently be avoided, this object, act, or person being under a kind of ban.' There are taboos of all sorts—alimentary taboos, certain eatables being forbidden to certain classes of persons or to the whole tribe; cosmic taboos, certain actions having to be avoided lest nature should refuse rain to the thirsty ground; physiological taboos, inspired by the excessive fear of defilement which is thought to attach to certain

phenomena, such as sickness, death, or the birth of twins—all of them phenomena which yield a fatal contagion. This contagion can be avoided only by the performance of a crowd of protective or purificatory rites. Such conceptions are as old as the world.

There are scholars who see in taboo—these essentially utilitarian prohibitions intended to avert dangers whether fictitious or real—the source of morality. I do not share their opinion, at least so far as the South Africans are concerned; for in their case one finds a whole code of elementary and natural morality which is independent of taboo. The notion of moral evil (in Thonga, *biha*) is certainly different from that of taboo (*yila*). There is no doubt that God has illumined the conscience of the pagan Bantu by revealing to him long since, and with clearness, the distinction of good and evil. The folklore of these tribes is irrefutable proof. In it one regularly finds goodness, pity and modesty rewarded, while pride, disobedience, sloth and even egoism are punished.¹ The anonymous writers to whom we owe the popular tales of South Africa have done a moralizing task; and if, as is probably the case, these writers are not isolated individuals, but the tribe itself creating its folklore by a work of collective invention, is not this a demonstration that God Himself has directed the evolution of these races and has committed to them the seeds of truth?

But taboo itself, this strange and on the whole absurd code of prudential prohibitions, does even it not reveal preparatory divine action?

We must note the extreme importance of the notion of defilement in the bulk of these taboo prescriptions—the defilement arising from contact with a corpse or with certain specially dreaded secretions; the defilement caused by sickness of whatever kind; the defilement of certain inferior conditions, such as infancy or adolescence, from which extrication is secured through very painful initiatory

¹ *Op. cit.* vol. ii. p. 203.

rites; yet men and women submit voluntarily to suffering, even to shame, and to practices which wound a very lively feeling of decency, in order to escape from these contaminations and, in addition, to reach a state of higher purity. There is a real aspiration after purity in certain pagan sexual rites which to us Europeans of the twentieth century—so little prepared to understand the mentality of these primitive peoples—appear most repulsive; and one is amazed at the seriousness with which these strange ceremonies are carried out. But let the Bantu, enlightened by science and instructed by revelation, satisfy himself that physical defilement is of little importance; let him understand that moral defilement is the great taboo, of infinite peril for human life, and in keeping himself clear of it he will exhibit the same energy which once he employed to purify himself from dreaded contacts. If once he sought no more than physical purity, thenceforward he will aspire to holiness. The longing for material and ceremonial purity will have traced out the path to aspiration after sanctity of heart and life.

Amongst the blacks there is a keen hunger for life, and for the Thongas, the word by which they denote life, *butomi*, is a great word. Life for them used to be principally health of body, the full expansion of physical being. But mark how Christianity has widened their horizon. They have learned that this word has a significance infinitely higher than they thought. Ours be the task of conducting them towards the summits of the spiritual life to which all unawares they are being led by the tortuous paths of paganism!

In closing this brief study, which might have been developed on a much larger scale, may I be permitted to draw the attention of my colleagues to the vast practical importance of these results from the missionary point of view? If it be true that paganism is not simply a mixture of gloom and vice, if, as Justin Martyr contends,

in the obscurity there are discernible streaks of light which foretell the advent of full day, the Gospel ought to be presented not merely in its antagonism to pagan error but also as the fulfilment of former aspirations. Missionary teaching will rightly seek points of attachment in the past, and will thus become more living and intelligible. Christianity will no longer be a crowd of white men's dogmas, to be accepted unreflectively. The native will understand that revealed truth is in harmony with the best elements in his ancient creed, and he will assimilate it much better. For the missionary himself, the study of the pagan system will be invested with a wholly new interest; his preaching will change its character and will inspire more confidence. He will no longer be the theorist teaching the ideas of a superior race, but the elder brother guiding his younger brethren towards the hill of holiness, where the Father bids all his children gather.

Far be it from me to extenuate the immense distinction between primitive animism and the theism of Christ. I believe in a positive revelation vouchsafed to Israel through the ministry of the prophets and through the mission of Jesus. As little as that of Buddha or Zoroaster could the religious genius of the Bantu priests and magicians have availed to procure for men the Gospel of salvation and holiness. But belief in the uniqueness of the Christian religion in no way forbids us to recognize the work of God among the most backward races; and for these beginnings also we may bless the Father of lights!

HENRI A. JUNOD