

Christ and Culture in Zaire

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Since we decided to retake our authentic names, everybody speaks of a conflict with the Church. This is not the case at all. There is no conflict between Church and State in Zaire." While President Mobutu Sese Seko denies the Church-State situation in Zaire is one of conflict, it is undoubtedly not one of great harmony. When a government expels the cardinal from his own country, silences the churches by prohibiting all religious broadcasts, publications and meetings, and refers to the political party as the proper way to fulfill the word of God, there are some very real problems.

Zaire, formerly the Belgian Congo, is a vast country the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. Its 21,000,000 people include some two hundred different tribal groups, most of which fall within the linguistic category of Bantu. The legacy of Belgian missionaries during the colonial period is that the country is largely Roman Catholic; to be more precise, over half the population claims to be Catholic. More than 60 per cent of the priests and religious brothers in Zaire are still Belgian, but the Church leadership is firmly in Zairian hands. Thirty-eight of the fifty-three bishops are Zairian, and the key positions in the Episcopal Conference and the Permanent Bishops' Committee (the two ruling organs of the Church) are also held by Zairians.

Besides the Roman Catholic Church there are Protestant and Kimbanguist churches in Zaire. Fifty-three Protestant denominations are officially recognized by the government and by the Eglise du Christ au Zaire, the central Protestant organization, representing 15 to 20 per cent of the population. The third organized church, Kimbanguism, is an independent church that emerged from Protestant missions in the 1920's. The church was founded by Simon

Kimbangu, who preached and performed miracles in the Lower Congo and, according to Kimbanguists, resembled Jesus in his life and works. He too raised the dead, healed the sick, assembled twelve disciples, attracted large followings and was tried and sentenced to death by a foreign occupying power for leading what it considered a politically dangerous movement. Unlike Jesus, however, Simon Kimbangu had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment, and he died in a Lumbumbashi prison in 1951. Kimbanguism has grown since then, now claiming 5 to 10 per cent of the population, and was the first African independent church admitted to the World Council of Churches.

In addition to the three Christian churches there are, of course, the traditional religions. Their ceremonies and rituals are particular to each tribal group, but their general beliefs are similar across the country. The traditional religions, considered together as one belief system, could best be called Ancestralism, since they venerate the family ancestors. Even though the traditional religions do contain the concept of a single, powerful God, they believe that he is either too distant or too unhappy with man to help him during normal times. Except for crisis situations such as famine, storm or flood, God would not be worshiped. Instead, one prays to the ancestors; they are related to the worshiper by blood, they play a more active role in family affairs and are thus more likely to respond with needed material assistance. Even the majority of Zairians who consider themselves Christian retain many of these beliefs.

The Christian mission aimed at changing the very basis of such traditional beliefs. According to students of the subject, three changes are especially important for the social, economic and political development of the country. First, Christianity proposed the idea of progress, of development, giving history a goal. The Bantu reli-

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gions have no concept of a future markedly different from the past; changes are cyclical or seasonal. Virtually no African myths or legends refer to the future. Rather, the life of the ancestors is considered the model for contemporary life on earth. In contrast, Christianity introduces the ideas of heaven and eschatology, of the final ending of the world, of the definitive realization of personal and communal history. In secular terms Christianity contains the idea of dramatic changes to come, of a future radically different from the past and present. This includes the notion of progress, which to the Western mind seems an obvious fact of life. It is this belief in progress that probably constitutes an essential conceptual foundation for development. Without it there seems to be little sense in planning, in spending years to acquire a technical skill, in saving money or in investing capital for long-term projects.

Second, Christianity teaches a universal ethic, a brotherhood of mankind. This in contrast with the Bantu ethical system, which usually does not involve those outside the family or tribal group. Hospitality is to be shown the traveler, but Bantu ethics has a very limited notion of the worth of anyone outside the primary group. Christian ethics (in theory, although obviously not always in practice) expands the ethical community to encompass every human being. The idea that a nonrelative is an equal with whom one can plan, work and share is crucial to political development. National integration requires this widening of horizons. Effective administration means that government officials have to adopt a national perspective and not regard their positions as opportunities for providing money and jobs only for their family members. The widening of the ethical system and the idea of a universal community as professed in Christianity would seem to be inescapably linked to what we call modernization.

Third, Christianity encourages an active participation in the historical task. The teaching is that God is deeply involved with human affairs. Bantu religions are more fatalistic, believing that substantial change must be brought about by the ancestors rather than by human effort in the here and now. The ancestors may be moved by ritual to perform a desired change; Christianity teaches that people can by their own labor effect dramatic changes on earth. The Christian emphasis is on following the example of Christ, who worked among people to help eliminate human suffering, rather than upon changing things through involvement with rituals and services. For the Christian secular, works take on a divine quality. This perspective is at the heart of social activism and of what may be called the Christian work ethic.

Despite these cultural changes encouraged by Christian teaching and their role in development, the government has recently question-

ed the value of the churches' efforts. The President, himself a product of Catholic mission schools and a professed Catholic, has criticized the presumption of missionaries who would impose their views on Africans. "Our ancestors understood that above all there was a Supreme Being. . . . It was the West who, in the name of civilization, came to sweep away everything, including our native religions." God gave "no man a mandate to preach to another race that the only good conception of him is the Western one." The President believes that Christianity actually confused the people. "We believe in God because our ancestors did. But we reject religions that spurned our African religions. . . . We knew one God, and they tried to make us believe in three at once." Mobutu recommends that Zairians return to their traditional ways of worship. "Authenticity shows our original ways of conceiving of and praying to God. Christianity imposed on us other ways which now must be shifted to our authentic ways."

The President sees the Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR), the single political party of Zaire, as the agent of cultural change in his country. "In Zaire, it is the MPR and not the Church that will lead the way." In a November, 1973, speech he explicitly questioned the need for churches, since Zairians can live the Gospel through the Party.

MPR equals service. When we say that, we mean that we should love one another . . . and work hand in hand to combat hunger and misery. Isn't that the message of the Gospel which we apply from day to day? Aren't we therefore going to heaven? All that God asks, we do through the MPR . . . That is what is called the application of the message of the Gospel.

The MPR has taken practical steps to replace the churches. Party slogans and songs speak of the President as "The Prophet of 21 million Zairians," "Our Clairvoyant Leader" and "The One Through Whom Providence Shows Itself to Be Just and Logical." The anniversary of his taking power is a remembrance of "Our National Resurrection," and party halls are called "Temples." Party chants have taken over church hymns, changing the words to sentiments such as "Oh, that Mobutu may be with you!" The television in Zaire frequently shows a sixty-second short in which the President's bust descends from the clouds as the people sing his praises. The mayor of Kinshasa, after Mobutu's speech before the United Nations General Assembly on October 4, 1973, called on party members to give the President "a reception similar to that given Jesus on His return to Jerusalem."

The Party also attempts to fulfill needs and perform functions usually carried out by religion. In the place of a theology it substitutes the political ideology of "recourse to authenticity." This concept is somewhat unclear, but generally means turning

away from borrowed ideas to form a national identity based on traditional cultural values. The main purpose of the ideology is to instill pride and respect in Zaire's cultural past and to shape a new national personality based on that heritage. The government has instituted various measures in the name of authenticity, such as requiring the use of authentic names rather than names of saints (Joseph Désiré Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga), prohibiting the music of white musicians on the radio and greeting foreign heads of state with tom-toms rather than a twenty-one gun salute.

Closely related to the recourse to authenticity is the Party's quasi-religious ritual, which is called animation. The official press describes animation as "the point of juncture of the political and existential aspects of authenticity," and the "national consecration of the vital force, our arrival at the national spirit." Animation is the performance of traditional songs and chants with the words changed to praise the President and the MPR rather than the founding ancestors or the goodness of life. For the recent celebration of the President's eighth year in power, each of the nine regions of Zaire was given one hour to perform its own traditional dances and songs with the new words added. The group from the Kivi Region, for example, performed a traditional dance illustrating the President's U.N. address.

Like a religion, the MPR prescribes social conduct for its members. It prohibits women from wearing pants suits, miniskirts, lipstick or wigs, and the men from wearing suit coats or ties. The Party has its own work program, called "salongo," which requires each member to work on community projects each Saturday. These rules of social conduct are enforced by party disciplinary units rather than by the regular police or the military. The MPR responds to the need for identity by stressing that each Zairian is a party member the minute he or she is born. It has its own symbols, such as the President, his mother, Mama Yemo, and the party village at N'Sele. It celebrates its sacred days, such as the Day of the Party, May 20, and the day Mobutu took power, November 24. Also like a religion, the party claims to be of primary importance in the lives of its members. According to the slogan, the MPR is *avant tout, tout le reste après*. President Mobutu stresses that the party "has first claim on the lives of Zairians."

It is not surprising that in recent years the churches and the political party have clashed. Each attempts to answer the needs of Zairians for meaning, identity, values and participation. The problems surfaced when the Cardinal, Joseph Malula, criticized the policies of the Mobutu government, first during a Mass celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Leopoldville riots on January 4, 1959, and then again during a Mass celebrating the tenth anniversary of the country's independence on June

30, 1970. On both occasions the sermon was delivered in the presence of the President, who, in 1970, was accompanied by the King of Belgium. The Cardinal spoke boldly on both occasions, contending that the government lacked a sense of distributive justice in the Thomistic sense of the term, since high officials lived lavishly while the masses starved. An angry President challenged the Cardinal to present his views in the Kinshasa Stadium where the President could respond, rather than in church where he was unable to speak.

The next public clash came in December, 1971, when authorities required Catholic seminaries to form JMPR branches (the youth wing of the party). The bishops adamantly refused to let the party organize the seminarians of John XXIII Seminary in Kinshasa. This became the test case, and the school was closed for months while negotiations went on between the Political Bureau and the Permanent Bishops' Committee. Finally both sides compromised, and the JMPR was allowed into the seminaries under seven conditions which, in effect, nullified the Party's effectiveness there. The most important conditions stipulated that the seminarians not be urged to engage in politically militant activities, that all student contact with the Party be made through the religious superiors, and that no official be appointed from outside the seminary to handle party activities.

While these negotiations were going on the Catholic Church publicly opposed the party edict requiring the adoption of authentic names. The Church's opposition diminished, however, when Paul VI issued a new baptismal rite on February 17, 1972, and an episcopal note on March 4. The papal action gave parents freedom to choose any name for a baptized child, although still urging that names refer to a Christian mystery or a Christian virtue.

Also during the same period the Church questioned the value of "the recourse to authenticity" as a guiding ideology. The January, 1972, *Afrique Chrétienne*, a Catholic weekly, editorially warned against a return to the past which is "gone forever Since our world is no longer that of our ancestors, their concept of life cannot be ours either." It also warned against "obtaining fleeting satisfaction by ransacking our colonial past and by loud clamoring for recognition of the right to be ourselves. It is not by resuscitating a philosophy discredited by past routes that we will win the battle of the modern world." In the same week the editorial appeared the Cardinal further angered the President with a pastoral letter that criticized the party for using church tunes and prayers with the words changed to praise the President rather than God.

After the editorial and pastoral letter the government decided to take severe measures. On January 24, 1972, the Political Bureau deprived the Cardinal of the honorary Order of the Leopard and ordered him to abandon his residence within forty-eight

hours. The radio started calling him a "renegade of the revolution" and one who is "so drunk as to let drop his chalice of subversive liquor on the head of the authentic Zairian revolution." Harsh words for a cardinal who had been a leader in the country's drive for independence and in the Church's own authenticity campaign to adapt Catholicism to the local culture. On February 12, 1972, Joseph Cardinal Malula boarded a plane for Rome and was not allowed to return to Kinshasa until the following May.

After the emotion of these events receded, the government, in order to avoid future clashes, silenced the churches. In late 1972 it banned all religious radio and television broadcasts anywhere in Zaire, and at the same time banned all religious youth groups. In February, 1973, it prohibited the printing, selling or distribution of religious publications. These measures were explained by government authorities as necessary to assure "that the national masses be oriented by one and only one source. Mass communications must be exclusively engaged in the process of the authentic Zairian revolution."

A month later the state made its most drastic move against the churches, prohibiting all religious meetings and retreats outside of one's own city. This action was in response to the distribution of a 1972 report from a bishops' meeting which was highly critical of the government and was secretly smuggled out of Zaire and published in Belgium.

The ban on meetings and retreats, like those on broadcasting, publishing and organizing youth groups, applied to all three Christian churches in Zaire, Protestants and Kimbanguists as well as Catholics. This surprised some, since the government's verbal attacks were directed exclusively against the Roman Catholic Church and since President Mobutu had stated that he "had no problems with Protestants or Kimbanguists, since they do not receive their orders from abroad" as do Catholics from the Vatican. In June, 1973, a full two months after the prohibition of meetings and retreats was announced, the Minister of Justice clarified the government's position and applied the ruling only to the Catholic Church. Just recently, in April, 1974, some Catholic bishops from different parts of Zaire were allowed to meet together for the first time in a year, and the ban against the Permanent Bishops' Committee, the Full Episcopal Conference and some future bishops' meetings was "provisionally" lifted.

It appears that the problems between Church and State in Zaire have largely passed. The Catholic Church now finds itself unwilling or to a large extent unable to criticize state actions. The Cardinal may be fearful of being expelled and denounced again and is publicly silent. Moreover, he and the President have made up, with President Mobutu comparing their past disagreements to the way

"brothers fight when the parents have left the house. Nothing really divides us now."

To demonstrate the healing of past wounds, the President gave Cardinal Malula a new house and attended the housewarming party, during which Church leaders joined officials in party chants and animation. The year-long disbanding of the Permanent Bishops' Committee and the Full Episcopal Conference has decentralized the Church, at least temporarily making it more difficult to take a united position in opposing state policies. While the lifting of the ban against bishops' meetings remains "provisional," which will probably be a long time, the bishops will be leery of criticizing governmental actions. They may confine their meetings to purely administrative and liturgical and spiritual concerns. Above all, the continued prohibition of broadcasting and publishing has made the opinions of the Church less important, since they cannot be widely disseminated.

With all media firmly in the government's control, the Church is able to get its story to the people only by word of mouth, through the priests. Furthermore, with the Party firmly entrenched in most areas of Zairian life, the state may decide not to push for further church involvement in the Party. As time passes the Party will feel more secure and thus less inclined to create a confrontation in order to show its power. Because of the mobilization of youth by the JMPR and the ban on religious youth groups, the Party will come to feel that it, and not the churches, will win the primary allegiance of the young, that the future lies with the Party and not the churches.

Despite their clashes, Church and State are in fundamental agreement about the direction of cultural change. The three most basic changes furthered by Christian teachings—the notion of progress and development, of a future different from, and better than, either past or present; the idea of expanding the ethical system to widen traditional allegiances and identities; the nurturing of a work ethic for improving life on earth—are also major elements in the Party message. Both Church and Party condemn sorcery, fetishism and tribalism as being detrimental to progress, to human relations and to true religious faith. The churches and Party fundamentally differ on what they hope to substitute for traditional beliefs: the President and the MPR or Christ and the Church? authenticity or Christian theology? Party dictates and the *Manifeste de la N'Sele* or Church leadership and the Bible? And yet both Church and Party attempt to change traditional culture in order to advance social, economic and political development. It is possible that, when this development has been more fully realized, the government will rethink its policies. There is finally no reason for permanent hostility between the Party and the source from which it derives the elemental ideas of development, namely, the Christian churches.