

the teaching of the Gospels". While we look forward to the book on the subject which she is preparing, we hope also that Gerd Theissen will be able to follow up his investigations. The ethical radicalism of Jesus will perhaps come into its own when Lutheran exegesis breaks out of its Pauline straightjacket—or when Catholics take the Gospels literally.

A Nigerian Theologian at Work

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My justification for writing about an unpublished thesis is simply that people ought to know about the work of the Reverend Dr E. A. Adeolu Adegbola, and that publishing being what it is, the thesis is most unlikely to be published as a whole. Hence, an article like this could help in the circulation of ideas.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola is a Methodist pastor from the great Yoruba people of western Nigeria. After considerable pastoral experience, he completed his thesis, *"Ifa and Christianity among the Yoruba"*, at Bristol in 1976, and is, at present, Director of the Institute of Church and Society at Ibadan, western Nigeria, which aims both at keeping Christians thinking, and thoughtful people, who either never were Christians or who have drifted away from the churches, aware that there is at least the possibility of a Christian response to the pressing cultural and social questions of contemporary Nigeria. In this article, I shall outline and comment on his thesis, and indicate some of the new ground it seems to open up. One further word of explanation, as to what "ifa" is. *Ifa* is the Yoruba system of divination. Unlike many other African systems of divination, there is in *Ifa* no element of spirit possession, nor does the client have to tell the diviner what his problem is. The diviner (in Yoruba *babalawo*, father of secrets) may throw down a rope or chain, on which are eight similar objects, capable of giving a heads-and-tails arrangement, or he may hold sixteen palm-nuts in his left hand. He then tries to take them with his right hand, noting how many remain in his right hand, but has to do this eight times, whereas one throw of the divining chain will give him a sufficient number of signs to select the appropriate figure, or *odu*, which is then marked on the divining board. There are sixteen principal *odu*, and two hundred and forty secondary ones, these being called "the children of the *Odu*". Each of these two hundred and fifty six signs has many associated verses. The diviner recites

the verses of the figure to which the chain or the ground nuts has pointed. When the client hears a verse appropriate to his problem, he stops the diviner. For Dr Adegbola, *Ifa* is the major aspect of Yoruba religion, and his thesis is concerned with the changes and continuities resulting from the conversion to Christianity of people whose religious attitudes had been formed by *Ifa*.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola begins by a brisk criticism of the application of theories, whether anthropological or theological, of religious evolution to Yoruba traditional religion. He then suggests that Yoruba conversion to Christianity can be seen as a passage from *Oro* (the word used in Yoruba for traditional religion), which he sees as being the correct performance of ritual, to *Isin*, which means the service of God. His next step is to look theology in the face and see if it can really say anything very useful about Yoruba traditional religion. His conclusion is that it cannot do so, because of the transcendental nature of Christian theism, because of the concentration on belief rather than on ritual, and the dominance of Greek-originated metaphysics.

These considerations lead him to criticize the application of such terms as monotheism or polytheism, immanence or transcendence, to Yoruba traditional religion. Inevitably, this leads Dr Adegbola to a courteous but firm critique of the position taken up by his fellow-Methodist and fellow-Yoruba, E. Bolaji Idowu, in his well-known book, *Olodumare*, that Yoruba traditional religion was a "diffused monotheism", and that worship was offered directly to *Olodumare*. Dr Adeolu Adegbola argues that the Yoruba attitude towards *Olodumare* was one of "faith-regard", not worship.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola, however, is not content to be merely a "critical critic", but then turns to an outlining of Yoruba history and ritual. He calls attention to the complex variations of Yoruba myth and ritual from one area to another, and suggests, surely rightly, that this is to be explained by complex historical processes of diffusion and political domination. "We hold therefore" writes Dr Adegbola "that it is more realistic to treat the objects of worship and cults of the Yoruba in the light of the social history of the people rather than to regard the whole as one intellectually logical complex in which the "gods and goddesses" became the ministers of the Supreme God *Olodumare*, or evolutionary emanations belonging to a hierarchical order populated with a high-god, nature divinities, ancestral ghosts and charms and amulets in a descending order. The former is a theological myth; the latter is a history-of-religion myth." What anti-myth does Dr Adegbola offer?

What Dr Adegbola does give us is a well, and reasonably concisely, argued case for the centrality of the *Ifa* system in Yoruba traditional religion. It would be best here to give an extended quotation:

"The place of the myth in *Ifa* is that occupied in a scriptural

religion by the 'scriptures'. It may not be too much to say that the myth is the system, so long as it is understood that the myth finds also non-verbal forms of expression which together make the *Ifa* religious system. The emphasis in the *Ifa* system itself has always been on knowledge. So there is a decided advantage in approaching a study of Yoruba traditional religion through the system which lays stress on knowledge and information."

On the one hand, the Odu verses cover the main Yoruba myths about the gods, on the other hand, divination provides the means of taking decisions in uncertainties, so that *Ifa* gives—to use terms that Dr Adegbola would not himself reject—both essentialist and existentialist kinds of information.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola is at pains to stress that he is not reducing Yoruba religion to mere "fortune-telling". He distinguishes five ritual elements in the *Ifa* totality, the divination, the prescription of an appropriate medicine, an incantation or prayer, the performance of an appropriate ritual, and the giving of "practical or moral guidance". He suggests that, while the divination indicates the psychic forces at work, the subsequent actions cover four quests, the making of the medicine being a quest for health, the uttering of the invocation/prayer being a quest for wealth or status, the performance of ritual a quest for children and family continuity, and the advice for moral or practical action a quest for morality. Equally, though Dr Adegbola does not specifically make this point, the structure of *Ifa* action could be related to Godfrey Lienhardt's analysis of Dinka religion in which he sees ritual, both spoken and enacted, as a means of responding to and controlling particular experiences, whether unfortunate or simply puzzling.

We are warned against too narrow an interpretation of the word "medicine". To give Dr Adegbola's own words again:

"The Yoruba word *Oogun* stands for so many different things that the English word "medicine" is not an adequate translation. The Yoruba *oogun* concept embraces variously therapeutic medicine, poison, anti-sorcery devices, measures to ward off spirits and ghosts, psychological techniques to control the mind of another person, and many other things. Although a classification of medicines according to use is easy, being primarily a simple division into those which are therapeutic and those which are non-therapeutic. The distinction which is established in Yoruba vocabulary is chiefly according to the methods used in the preparation of the medicine. A king (*oba*) is the supreme embodiment of medicine. His 'head' has been strengthened with medicines, and nobody dares knock his head against that of the king, as the saying goes. Those who can prepare 'powerful medicine' do their best to get the king's attention and patronage. In fact, there are medicines

which befit only a king's position. Such are the *madarikan* group of medicines, consisting of medicines to strengthen the king's head and heart, medicine to make him popular and give him a following; medicine to empower his voice and even his name, so that those who hear either can be frightened or filled with awe. The psychic nature of a Yoruba king is wrapped up in the power which medicine gives or strengthens. Hence the importance of the ceremonies of confinement prior to coronation and enthronement, leading on to the climax of public acclamation announcing and acknowledging the completion of the making of his psychic individuality".

This analysis of the conception of medicine leads Dr Adegbola on to a number of even more fascinating points, of which the anguish of mind of devout Christians, elected kings, but unable to use the medicines traditionally held necessary for the cultivation of royal personality, is only one. There is also a discussion of Yoruba understanding of health, which is shown to include not only the absence of bodily disease, but satisfactory environmental and social relationships. This leads on to a discussion of the Yoruba concept of evil, which is seen not simply as a matter of individual guilt but as the disruption and disorganisation of relations between a group of people. Dr Adegbola offers a slightly oracular pronouncement on the subject of witches: "Witches may have exaggerated views about themselves—but that is no reason why it should be denied that they are able to do what it is evident they can do". He is remarkably frank in acknowledging that the missionary criticism of Yoruba society as fear-ridden is not without substance, even though he feels this fear to be of living men rather than of gods and spirits. He stresses also that the Yoruba concept of healing does not primarily stress the giving of medicines but rather "making the person feel better by looking after him".

This consideration of medicine leads on to a discussion of the different kinds of invocation/prayer, as an incantation may be an important element in giving efficacy to medicine. In traditional Yoruba prayer, which for Dr Adegbola, cannot be sharply distinguished from invocations, great importance is attached to verbal exactness, and hitting on the appropriate name. Many elements from this background are carried over into Yoruba Christian prayer. A fascinating example is given in the prayerbook composed by the Reverend A. T. Ola Olude, which carried incantational overtones, as in the sub-title which Dr Adegbola explains thus:

"If I call by name a man named *My lot is good*, I call a blessing on myself. By reciting the statements of my own well-being, contained in this book, and ending each statement 'Through Jesus Christ our Lord', I ensure that the statements will come true for me."

Dr Adegbola briefly compares the Yoruba invocations to the

prayer known as “St Patrick’s Breastplate”.

“The Yoruba pieces surpass it in their sweep of images with the difference that while St Patrick saw in the images metaphors of God’s presence, the Yoruba ones see evidence of the work and ordering of God. More than this, however, is the fact that in the Breastplate the magnificent transition from cosmic reality to the fact of Christ is yet unparalleled in any Yoruba incantational prayer known to us”.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola then turns to consider the element of ritual in Yoruba religion. He has, for him, unusually sharp words for theologians, whether missionary or African, who try and force African ritual into the approved theological categories of sacrifice, since, by so doing, their “academic mind-set hinders a true appreciation of the pastoral and liturgical demands on the Church in Africa today”. He has, however, a kind word for anthropologists, whose approach he finds much more relevant. He himself finds the element of sacrifice (using the words in the strict theological sense) small in Yoruba traditional religion, and shows this by a thorough analysis of the two Yoruba words, *ebo* and *etutu*, which have been translated as “sacrifice”. *Ebo* is really a ritual which reasserts the correct moral and social order. *Etutu* is a ritual which is believed to be in itself effective in achieving its purpose; *ebo* being therefore “expressive”, whereas *etutu* is “instrumental”. While on this point, Dr Adegbola insists that “human sacrifice” is a misnomer, used to refer to the use of parts of the body as ingredients in a “hard medicine”.

Dr Adegbola then turns to the moral aspect of *Ifa*, particularly the moral guidance given in the *Odu* verses. This is fascinating, but difficult to summarise. Though Dr Adegbola does not say so explicitly, his material seems to suggest that it is the Supreme Being, *Olodumare*, who is the measure and sanction of morality, rather than any of the innumerable spirits or cults. If this is so, then there would seem to be a gap in Yoruba traditional religion between the concept of God, who is the foundation of ethics, but definitely not the object of worship, and the rituals, which are presumably seen as instrumental (means to an end) or expressive (statements of an attitude of mind), and are not closely tied in to moral values. Presumably, the attitude of traditional Yoruba to ritual was similar to that of contemporary Westerners to science, seeing it as informative or useful or both, but not as a source of values. This may, of course, be so, or I may be reading more into Dr Adegbola’s text than he would wish; perhaps someone will tackle the problem of the relation of ethics and ritual among the Yoruba. In many African societies, there was felt to be a close relationship between the moral, social, ritual and cosmic orders, but one also finds evidence of a very empirical, results-oriented attitude towards ritual, which can slide into critical iconoclasm.

At this point, I would like to recapitulate Dr Adeolu Adegbola's essential argument about Yoruba traditional religion. Most people who have written about it have seen in it analogies either to Biblical religion or to the religion of the Greek and Roman world. These analogies are irrelevant and prevent us seeing Yoruba traditional religion as it is, a system of knowledge and action, by which the individual can locate himself, his problems, and what to do about them in the overall world-order, and this system is essentially identical with *Ifa*, taking *Ifa* to be, not simply the actual techniques of divination, but the total system of myth, ritual and ethical teaching. Dr Adegbola makes an extremely strong case, and his thesis would still be a remarkable one, even if he had simply confined himself to traditional religion alone; however, all this has simply been an introduction to the nub of his argument, which concerns Yoruba responses to Christianity.

For Dr Adegbola, the nature of Yoruba conversion is to be seen in the survival or transformation of the attitudes which he has shown to characterise traditional religion. He claims that "conversion to Christianity does not necessarily make people less prone to the divinatory attitude, but it is rather incorporated into methods of evangelism used to show the validity and excellence of the new faith over those it came to supplant." He illustrates his point both by describing some attempts to develop Christian forms of divination and by examining the interaction of Christianity and ideas drawn from *Ifa*. He concludes by claiming that there exists now a Yoruba "folk Christianity" (Dr Adegbola's own term) in which a theologically valid Christology is held through imagery and perspectives derived from *Ifa*.

The examples that Dr Adegbola gives of the interaction between Christian faith and *Ifa*-shaped perception are certainly varied, ranging from the evangelical piety of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who was the first African to become an Anglican bishop (in 1864), to the *Ijo Orunmila Adulawo*, an attempt to combine an *Ifa* content with forms taken from the Christian churches, but in which there is an explicit rejection of Christ as Saviour. The figure to whom he devotes most attention is the Reverend E. M. Lijadu (1862-1926), a clergyman who eventually broke with the Anglican Church not on any question connected with *Ifa*, but through his performing ordinations on his own, an eccentric outcome of his concern for the development of forms of ministry suited to Yoruba social and economic conditions. Dr Adegbola's interest in Lijadu here is mainly in his attempt to apply the praise-names given to Orunmila, the deity to whom the origin of the *Ifa* system was attributed, to Christ, and thus to see in the *Ifa* system a providential preparation for Christianity. On the evidence provided by Dr Adegbola, Lijadu's efforts seem to have been free from syncretism, and to have been welcomed by some, at least, of the other Yoruba Christians. Dr

Adegbola does enter a caveat, that Lijadu does not seem to have seriously considered if there were praise-names of Orunmila which could not be applied to Christ. This encourages me to enter a further caveat that it would seem that Lijadu's enterprise belongs to the history of Yoruba Christian piety rather than of Yoruba Christian theology. Prayer and worship provide the imagery and metaphors which theology then has to turn into concepts. Lijadu did offer Yoruba Christians a variety of ways for talking about Christ from within their own cultural tradition; he did not go on to the further task of seeing in what sense the analogies between Christ and Orunmila are real or only apparent.

Turning from individuals to movements, Dr Adeolu Adegbola examines with sympathy the Christology of the Aladura, a multitude of pentecostal, faith-healing churches, originating in the early twenties. He sees two sources for the combination of intense faith in the efficacy of prayer and ready recourse to dreams and visions for personal guidance which characterise the Aladura. One source lies in the abiding Yoruba concern with religion as a means of providing the knowledge and activity required for problem solving; the other in the personal piety which pioneer missionaries transmitted to their Yoruba converts, and which, as Dr Adegbola notes, was characterised by:

“waiting and looking for divine guidance, resorting to prayer in cases of ill-health, praying for a miracle to happen, praying together aloud in unison, expecting results from praying from a great distance”.

With the Christian repudiation of *Ifa*, Yoruba Christians took eagerly to the trust in prophecy and the expectation of divine intervention that characterised the early Christians of whom they read in the New Testament. Aladura Christology sees Christ as the Guide and Healer, “He who hears our prayers and Himself intercedes for us in our utter need.”

Against H. W. Turner's suggestion that Aladura preaching bears “only a muted testimony to Christ”, Dr Adegbola argues that even where there is not explicit reference to the healing action of Christ, it is He who is believed to act. But if we accept that Aladura piety is both Christian and Yoruba, do the mission-founded churches offer a piety that is Christian but not Yoruba? Dr Adegbola argues that very many adherents of what is essentially an Aladura piety are to be found in the mission-founded churches, but they receive little appropriate encouragement from their clergy. Wishing to be fair, he selects two missionaries, the Anglican S. S. Farrow and the Methodist W. T. Balmer, (both of whom died in the nineteen twenties,) as advocates of policies which could have led to a more effective indigenisation.

This leads to Dr Adegbola's recommendations for indigenisation in the present situation. Interestingly, now that a specifically

Yoruba form of Christian piety has developed, he sees the way ahead not in terms of greater adaptation to Yoruba tradition in Christian worship nor those of the development of specifically African approaches to theology, but rather in the witness and service of committed Christians to the larger community.

“For our age in Africa, the triumph of Christianity will finally be found to consist not only in the extent to which native rituals are redressed in the garb of biblical stories and myths, not only in the evolution of new rites and associations to replace the ancestral ceremonies and secret societies of the past, but rather in the revolution which Christian principles and ideas can bring about in our social ideas and political practice”.

The Christian Churches can best serve Yoruba (and, presumably, any other Nigerian) society by creative criticism than by uncritical acceptance. It is some measure of the genuine originality of Dr Adegbola's thought that while he considers that the mission-founded churches largely fumbled the task of cultural adaptation, yet the urgency and relevance of this has passed its historical peak, and that indigenisation must take place in the “light of the future”.

Dr Adeolu Adegbola knows far more about what he calls “official, priestly, ecclesiastical Christianity” in Yoruba country than I do. I cannot help wondering, however, whether he has not overstressed the contrast and the lack of interaction between the two aspects of Yoruba Christianity, the imported institutional aspect, and the folk religion. All the mission-founded churches, with the exception of the Catholics, have been effectively indigenised as regards their clergy for some time, and even in the later nineteenth century there were quite a number of Yoruba clergymen. Presumably, even those aspects of church life which appear most clearly to be carried over from the European missionaries are perceived and participated according to the values of folk religion. Again, the way in which at least one of the main Aladura churches, the Christ Apostolic Church, has tended to evolve towards the model of the mission-founded churches by stressing the pastor's role at the expense of prophetic leadership, suggests that church institutions which were originally imported are now accepted as relevant and valid in the Yoruba situation.

After this very brief summary of *Ifa and Christianity among the Yoruba*, which leaves out unfortunately a number of very fascinating points raised by Dr Adegbola, for instance a comparison between the way of getting rid of undesirable aliens in contemporary Britain and that in traditional Yoruba society, perhaps I could try and look for the wider relevance of his method. The first question which comes to mind is whether this is really theology or excellent social anthropology. I ask this because various attempts to relate theology to social science have been disappointing—either

somebody who is reasonably good at one has a kind of scissors and paste knowledge of the other, or else the two are weirdly lumped together by someone who has the prophetic urge rather than the prophetic gift. With Dr Adegbola, however, one's uncertainty arises because excellence is difficult to categorise. Perhaps it would be best to describe him as a theologian who has absorbed a great deal of what social anthropology has to offer, and has set it in a historical context, rather than see him as either a historian or a social anthropologist. At other times and in other places, theology has after all absorbed much from history, jurisprudence and philosophy.

But what has social anthropology to offer theology? If the theologian is the most committed of people, the social anthropologist should be the least committed—for one the starting point is what is already given, for the other the starting-point is a capacity to accept whatever shall be given. In reality, things are not quite so delightfully dialectical. An anthropologist who merely observed and classified people's behaviour from outside would produce an anthropology (indeed, alas, there are anthropologists who do precisely this) which would be as unsatisfactory as is behaviourist psychology. Even an anthropologist who could enter into the skin of another culture and then emerge from it to return to his own entirely unchanged would thereby prove a capacity for imitation rather than perception. What social anthropology at its best has to offer, surely, is the discovery of the meanings implicit within a culture and the making of them into a translation accessible to people of other cultures. The anthropologist is not simply a camera with the shutter open, to quote Isherwood's phrase about his Berlin stories. He has the burdensome privilege of the concealed creativity of the good translator.

The meanings of a culture are not simply reducible to the attitudes of mind of the people who share it, but are built into social institutions, rituals and even material objects. For a continuity which is something more than mechanical imitation, a cultural tradition needs some kind of creative renewal, a re-experiencing of the original event in every generation. The growth or transformation of a culture's meanings needs an effort of moral investment, as distinct from, though not necessarily absolutely separate from, social planning and cultural policy. When ritual and symbolic aspects of a culture disappear or become largely ornamental, the cause may be either changes in the wider social environment or the lack of commitment on the personal and community levels. This is, or should be, fairly obvious; nevertheless, it seems to be neglected in discussions of the impact of missionary activity, where there seems to be an idea that, given the knowledge of traditional cultures to which anthropology aspires, formulae for cultural indigenisation can be produced with the same probability of success as a

cook expects from a well-tried recipe. It is greatly to Dr Adegbola's credit that he rejects this cookery-book approach and shows us instead the gradual transformation of meanings which occurred in the lives of men such as Lijadu and in a more gradual and less explicit way in the growth of Yoruba folk Christianity.

It is no disparagement of the real originality of Dr Adeolu Adegbola to say that his work fits into the understanding of the consequences of missionary work which has developed over the past twenty years, beginning with J. V. Taylor's seminal *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, just as his discussion of Yoruba traditional religion should bring finally to an end the futile monotheism-polytheism debate and help students to see Yoruba traditionalism as fitting the general typologies of African religion, with guidance in decision-making as a primary concern, the importance given to invocation prayer as defining and making effective ritual action, and ritual itself seen as a restoration of the orders of nature and society, disturbed by human fault, rather than the manipulation or supplication of spiritual beings. There do, of course, exist many aspects of both Yoruba Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion—not to mention Yoruba Islam, with its millions of adherents, which has received very little academic study—which seem to appeal for further research. But it would be a tragedy if, through non-publication, Dr Adegbola's thesis were to fail to have the impact which it merits in its own right and as a potential catalyst for other scholars.

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