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A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

The 1993 Laing Lecture Second Response

F. Peter Cotterell

[p.29]

This year's Laing Lecture has been in some sense a critique of traditional North Atlantic theology, and has initiated a process of debate into which we must enter. For me, perhaps the most memorable phrase in the lecture was a quotation from Andrew Walls:

'Christian theology is taken into new areas of life, where Western theology has no answers, because it has no questions.'

It is always the case that an agenda for theology is available to theologians from the total world in which they must necessarily live. But it is repeatedly the case that the actual agenda identified and adopted by theologians is one set by an altogether more elite constituency, that provided by other academic theologians, mostly past and occasionally still present. The consequence is that the literature published by theologians of undoubted ability is written to other theologians, in a language they alone understand and published at a price they alone can afford. On the other hand, popular Christian literature is characterised by being relevant and available, but often actually in error. And sometimes the error is serious.

Dr Bediako has pressed upon us with great effect the importance of oral literature. It is often said that certain peoples are 'illiterate'. I know of no such peoples, unless one accepts a peculiarly western understanding of literature as being necessarily written. The fact is that in Africa, as also in this country, there is a popular oral theology, or more properly, a number of oral theologies, each of them more-or-less systematic and more-or-less biblical, and each related to the real issues of contemporary society. This must be the case, for oral theologies die when they become irrelevant. There are no libraries within which an oral theology can be artificially preserved.

These highly relevant oral theologies develop out of what Turner has called 'unsophisticated churches'. I would want to take issue with Turner here, since the term 'unsophisticated' appears to me to be pejorative, and roughly equivalent to 'ignorant'. The so-called unsophisticated churches consist largely of people who allow God to be God, and do not require him to submit his actions to his academic peers for their approval. In Narnian terms Aslan is not a tame lion. The tradition of the North Atlantic theologians is to insist that the raging and

[p.30]

unpredictable Aslan of the Bible should be tamed in the circus ring of the universities. The metaphor is not altogether inept.

However, I must not fall into the trap of uncritically idealising oral theology on the one hand and totally dismissing the work of the academic theologian on the other. The one is sometimes wrong, just as the other is sometimes right. Oral theology, in responding to the immediate context, often tends to produce a deficient Christianity which can be corrected when the translated and properly exegeted Bible is brought into the context. The written word

then passes its authoritative judgment on the oral word. We welcome Dr Bediako's recognition of the powerful contribution made to the church in Africa by missionary Bible translators.

Indeed, we must welcome a new phase in the assessment of the missionary contribution to the world church. Over the past quarter of a century we have been too close to the events to be able to produce anything like a balanced appraisal of the work of the missionaries, too close to the influence of western imperialism, and to the nationalistic feelings which eventually threw off foreign domination. It is good to have a perspective that so many of the historians of our day have not been able to give us because they don't share in Dr Bediako's faith. Those who have been outside of the experience of the missionary movement cannot understand either the sacrifices that that movement required nor the consequences of those sacrifices, the profound changes that have been wrought, not only in African society but in societies across the world. Too often Christians have allowed themselves uncritically to accept the assessments of the journalists and politicians who could never be expected to understand the mission of the church. But now we begin to see that not everything the missionaries did was bad. That mistakes were made I must accept. But still I am proud to have been part of the great missionary movement of the twentieth century.

I must thank Dr Bediako so profoundly for his lecture. In it he has offered a fresh evaluation of the mission of the past, and a new task for our theologians, not the re-processing of ancient data, but a determined grappling with the pressing questions and the emerging oral theologies of an agonising world. It is the task of listening to, and understanding the vibrant experiences of the 'untaught', experiences of a God who invades our lives, who transforms us, who gives to us a hope that nothing else can give, and somehow of turning that into something living, which can be shared with future generations.

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