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Contemporary Africa and Christian Strategy

Michael Cassidy

Africa covers one-fifth of the total land area of the world and could contain within its shores all Western Europe, the United States and Canada, and still have some spare space for most of China. And if the stage is constructed on an epic scale, so also is the play. The plot does not revolve around the ticklish and refined, but around the bold and stark and startling. The players are not motivated by genteel and subtle emotions, but by driving passions of love and hatred and jealousy and revenge and self-preservation and greed. Nor does dialogue revolve around subtle points of Christian theology, but around whether to junk Christianity or keep it. The debate is not over whether Republican democracy or Democratic democracy is best, but whether democracy is workable at all. And dominating everything is the almost unbridled passion of nationalism. Nations threaten to rise against nations. There are wars and rumours of wars. Harold Macmillan spoke of 'winds of change'. There are no winds here. Only hurricanes.

And it is in the midst of these forces that the Church must live and love, and sometimes laugh. It is an exciting and breathtaking challenge.

The second largest continent, Africa stretches 5000 miles from Cape to Cairo and 4,700 miles from east to west. It has some 300 million people in 44 countries. It has 800 languages and 3000 dialects, which as one might guess complicates things right from the start. Said *Time Magazine* in March 1966: 'though it is a geographical entity . . . Africa suffers from such deep and profound differences as to make it seem like a collection of different worlds'.

What is alarming is that these different and so often apparently incompatible worlds are leaping overnight into supposed adulthood. The achievements of centuries in other lands are here expected to be compressed into a few short decades. In fact, of the 44 countries on the continent 33 have become independent in the last ten years. Many of these have already abandoned all but the trappings of democracy, with no less than seven military *coups d'etat* in the last year (June 1965-June 1966).*

This in itself is significant for Christians because it reminds us, as Richard Halverson says, (*Perspective*, Vol. XVIII, No. 12) that 'democracy doesn't work without the Bible'. He adds pertinently: 'The very heart and soul of democracy is the inherent dignity of man and the supreme

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| * 1. 1965 June 19 | — Algeria | 5. 1966 January 3 | — Upper Volta |
| 2. „ November 25 | — The Congo | 6. „ January 15 | — Nigeria |
| 3. „ December 22 | — Dahomey | 7. „ February 23 | — Ghana |
| 4. 1966 January 1 | — C.A. Republic | | |

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worth of the individual. That's an exclusively Biblical concept. It is foreign to non Biblical cultures'.

This is true, and until such time as Africa is much more thoroughly evangelised and imbued with the so called 'Judeo-Christian tradition', both the continent itself and the outside world are going to have to live with the joys and woes of everything ranging from straight dictatorships, to oligarchies of varying quality, as in Rhodesia and South Africa.

Apart from a galloping case of political intoxication, Africa also has very real economic problems which are inevitably affecting its stance towards the outside world, and towards different ideologies from East and West.

Independence, as many nations in Africa are finding, has not brought any economic Utopias. This means that economic development and growth are amongst the continent's major needs. It is significant that the average income of nine out of ten Africans is about \$100 (or £35), and in some states it is less than \$39 (£14) per annum. Covering 20% of the earth's land surface the continent generates hardly 2% of the world's total gross product.

It is quite clear in the light of this that Africa cannot finance its own development. For example, development plans in Kenya call for 90% of the wherewithal from outside. It is small wonder then that Africa appears ambivalent in its political and ideological objectives—now looking to the United States, now to West Germany, now to China, now to Russia, now to Israel. The fact is that it looks wherever there is money, and capitalizing on the cold war in more senses than one, it is playing the game of international blackmail with a considerable measure of success. There is hardly a major nation in the world not falling over itself with Africa-bound largesse sent with the express purpose of winning friends and influencing people.

Quite evidently, if the 19th century saw a political scramble for Africa, the 20th century is seeing an economic one. Through it all Africa is trying to straddle the fence of political and ideological neutrality—but its chances of achieving this goal seem remote. For the ideological forces that are competing for the heart and soul of this strangely schizophrenic Giant are not the kinds of forces that tolerate neutrality.

It may be well at this point to make one or two observations about nationalism in so far as it creates a problem for Christian outreach and strategy.

It would appear actually that nationalism in Africa represents by and large a normal growing-up process in which Africans demand primarily the freedom to determine their own political, economic and cultural future. Africa rejects Western or any form of foreign domination. It wants to assert, as someone has said, 'an African presence, to contribute an African concept to the world's pool of civilization'. It is groping towards the mystique of 'negritude' and African personality.

The process, of course, has been accelerated by education, travel, overseas study, and indeed evangelism, for it is the Bible after all that has

presented the explosive idea of human dignity and equality. Then there was the impatient mood of the historical moment.

Inevitably however as the movement rushed precipitately forward with no timetable but 'today and now', the restraints and checks which are built into more advanced societies, but which are minimal in Africa, ceased to operate at maximum efficiency. So ends became absolute, and means, relative. Ends were seen as final; means, as incidental. Thus nationalism has become a pseudo-religious force with no ethic save the majority vote and the requirements of the desired end. Christianity can never tolerate this. The *vox populi, vox dei* idea is deadly and totally contrary to the Biblical view both of the depravity of man and the holiness of God. The devastating apotheosis of the nationalistic voice, whether white or black, has to be resolutely resisted by Christians. The Church must always condemn nationalism when it serves causes beyond its legitimate bounds, and when it reduces all life and value to a narrow equation with the so called liberation struggle.

The Christian must also remind those who are intoxicated with the temporal and material that man does not, even in Africa, live by bread alone. This may not be popular, but it is important. For political advancement and economic progress may, in the absence of the redemptive message of Christ, simply create societies where one can enjoy one's rebellion against God in a little more comfort. The vote, a full stomach and a place in the sun do not of course prevent a man from being eternally lost. And what shall it profit . . . ?

Both individually and corporately men must be called to live their lives under the judgment of the Word of God. This involves commitment to means as well as ends. It creates an allegiance above and occasionally in, opposition to, the state. Amongst other things it slows things down, nationalism included, from man's pace to God's.

In connection with the nationalistic movements it is often said that these are Communist inspired. Actually this would be hard to substantiate though there is little doubt that in many places these movements have been Communist infiltrated.

It is noteworthy that way back in 1920 Lenin expounded one of the Communist obligations as 'to help, not merely with words but with deeds, all the liberation movements in the colonies: to demand the expulsion of the imperialists from the colonies'.

Therefore, while one must resist the temptation to see a Communist under every stone one must nevertheless be alert to the fact that Communists have sought to infiltrate nationalist movements and have often inflamed the nationalist spirit to unreasonable heat and intensity. The communist effort appears to be directed primarily at separating African territories from the Western world and securing from them an initially neutralist national line-up. The theory, which has not so far worked too well in practice, is that neutral countries can then be wooed and won into the Communist bloc.

Interestingly enough Moscow had shown little interest in Africa before

1957, but in that year the Soviet Africanist Co-ordinating Conference was held. Out of all the Soviet specialists on Africa only two at the Conference had even visited Africa.

However, in 1958 a special African Department was created, and a special African commission appointed under Prof. Ivan Potekhin. He urged thorough study of 'the African mentality', and a rapid securing of economic control, particularly through infiltration of African trade unions.

Potekhin also preaches that Africa has lost its true cultural identity through imperialism, but that this can be truly rediscovered with the help of the Soviet Union. Red China, of course, thinks that she is the best cultural catalyst at this point—as, unlike Russia, she is not white. There can be little doubt that both are misguided.

Anyway, in Communism Africa has a powerful force with which to reckon, even though according to Soviet estimates there are only about 50,000 active Communists today in Africa south of the Sahara. They estimate that there were 5,000 ten years ago.

The Christian Church by contrast has some 52 million members South of Africa's religious divide—the tenth parallel of North Latitude. The difference between the fifty thousand and the fifty million? The majority of the former are truly active in propagation of their beliefs, while the majority of the latter are asleep at the switch. The Early Church grew by every member witness. Never before in history was there such a desperate need for the rediscovery by Christians of this simple formula.

Apart from Islam, with its 90 million adherents and very rapid rate of expansion (supposedly some seven times that of the Church), Christianity is the main religious force in Africa today. It has had a long, chequered, and colourful history on the continent. The Christian Gospel may have been preached here within months of Pentecost, and it spread so rapidly that by the end of the second century a very strong church had been established. Names like Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Clement and Augustine brought renown to the North Africa church and lasting contributions to the church at large. But internal dissension, lack of missionary vision, isolationism, and a tendency to 'Romanize' rather than Africanize led to the collapse of the church in the face of Moslem militancy in the seventh century. This was 'the church that disappeared' and for reasons that we do well to heed today. It disappeared so completely that very little further Christian advance was made until the 19th century, though Portuguese missionaries were in the Congo in the 15th and 16th centuries, and in E. Africa in the 17th.

However, when the great missionary advance came in the 19th and 20th centuries, it came with tremendous impact. Indeed the church has been the main civilising influence on the continent. It has been responsible for most of Africa's schools, and hospitals, and has brought millions to know the Saviour.

But there have been serious weaknesses. Amongst the more obvious undoubtedly have been the rigid denominationalism of many missionaries (i.e. 'my denomination has a prerogative on truth'), an over-close identi-

cation of the gospel and colonialism, a false insistence on cultural change along with conversion, and in some cases a perversion or distortion of the New Testament message. All this must stop, or yet another African church will disappear. Indeed no effective strategy for the future will emerge unless or until the church will seriously evaluate both its mistakes and achievements in the past.

And here we come to some of the less obvious failures. Undoubtedly this absence of the willingness to evaluate must be ranked amongst them. The importance of evaluation, self-evident to all commercial enterprises, seems to be largely unappreciated by the church. Perhaps an excessive fear of intruding upon an area of divine responsibility and sovereignty, has led many to ignore the phenomenon of 'results', or 'success', or 'effectiveness'—all words to be used with great caution, but to be considered nevertheless.

It would appear from the New Testament that when the Gospel is communicated in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way, there should be some response. 'I have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain'. (John 15: 16) '. . . By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit'. (John 15: 8)

Quite often the absence of response to the Gospel is blamed upon the 'hardness' of the recipients. This may sometimes be true—but it is not always so. Could there not be other causes of failure? Maybe the message is wrong. A message that is not truly Biblical will not be attended by the supernatural blessing of the Holy Spirit. Maybe the method is wrong. People vary in cultural, aesthetic and social outlook. A method that will reach one person will perhaps offend another. Alternatively the music in a service may be alien to the culture or aesthetic taste of the listeners. The American Gospel Song, for example, is not everybody's cup of tea. The problem with many of us in the evangelical wing of Christendom is that we become irrevocably wedded to some particular forms of ministry and activity and seem to feel that heresy consists as much in altering the form as the essence. This is patently false.

Or again the problem may be not with either message or method, but with the messenger. Lack of preparation or prayer, judgmental attitudes, negativism, rigid dogmatism in inconsequential areas of theology or behaviour, can all restrict the power of the Gospel and limit or nullify response.

Another danger lies in the not uncommon phenomenon of answering questions no one is asking. This basically is the problem of relevance, or the point of contact. It is always necessary to ask ourselves if we are coming in on the wave length of our listeners. To have an audience and speak to it irrelevantly is little short of criminal, for it leads to rejection of the Gospel on the incorrect assumption of its irrelevance.

Worse only than having an audience and speaking to it irrelevantly is having no audience at all. It has been truly observed that the Gospel has not lost its power, but its audience. This is our fault. Far too often we are not fishing where the fish are. Like the disciples we need to cast

our nets on the other side of the ship. Somehow or other most Christian fishing is done in Sunday services. Not surprisingly there are only a few nibbles and rarely a bite. Actually, unless all the church members are very active in bringing the unconverted into church, the fishing is so much wasted effort, for the fish are on the golf course!

This raises the potential of the 'special meeting' (and here for the moment we come from Africa closer home). Perhaps it might be a series of lunchtime films (e.g. Moody Science) for business and professional men. Hold these by special invitation in a hotel—a venue which holds no fear or threat or associations of boredom—and you will have an audience. They might even then come to church. Or maybe the meeting might consist of a tape-recorded talk in a home, a Bible study in a student dormitory or lounge. How about bull-sessions over a sandwich-lunch in the office of a Christian business man? or else breakfast meetings for political leaders, as put on by International Christian Leadership?

All I am urging is that real thought and planning go into our evangelism and that we fish where the fish are. It is impossible to give too much thought to the problem of locating the right waters. The disciples asked Jesus for advice. We could do no better.

In Christian strategy and planning we should also remember the diversity of tools and media available to the twentieth century church. There are films, tape-recordings, slide-shows, film strips, radio, television and a multitude of teaching aids available to the teacher or preacher with the initiative to seek them out.

There is also the printed word. Samuel Zwemer wrote 'No other agency can penetrate so deeply, witness so daringly, abide so persistently and influence so irresistibly as the printed page'. Everyone engaged in Christian witness should ask himself whether he is getting maximum mileage out of literature. Is he using the book-stall, the volume, the pamphlet, the religious press, the secular press? Is he drawing on the literature agencies—Pocket Testament League, Scripture Gift Mission, Christian Literature Crusade, etc.?

The Christian leader needs, in addition, to ask himself whether he is channelling the energies of the whole church properly. Christianity is not a clerical, but a lay movement. Indeed Paul says that the different divine gifts are given so that the 'saints' may be equipped and trained 'for the work of the ministry' (Eph. 4: 11-12). It is tragic but true that the church has the largest body of untapped manpower of any organization the world has known. Its *modus operandi* is as insane as the football team that goes on to the field with three men.

Finally, in terms of strategy in its broadest terms it would appear that two priorities should be kept in mind. First is the need to touch the cities, and second is the need to touch the leadership circles within the cities (students, businessmen, politicians, etc.). On the whole, the twentieth century church has ignored the strategic target of the cities. However, it is those within urban areas (in Africa 6% of the population) that shape the destiny of those in rural areas. And the 6% in the cities are themselves

governed in their ideological and spiritual commitments by that very small proportion of people called 'opinion makers'. These must be a prime target if the twentieth century church in Africa or elsewhere is to hold its own.

But when all is said and done—when we know our field, our methods, our message, and our strategy, there remains above all else the prime need to know our God. For unless we know Him—intimately, warmly, vitally—it is as certain, as day must follow night, that we will not be able to make Him known.