

WHOSE GOD?

Daniel Martin

I grew up with the idea that there is only one God who is the creator of all that exists. This childhood faith, shaped by a Catholic upbringing in Northern Ireland after World War II, has undergone a number of changes since those days. My challenge now, as an adult in this new century, is to find relevant language for talking about faith and God. But, for that to happen, I have to know whose God I'm talking about. The God of my childhood was probably someone else's God: the Fathers of the Christian church? My Irish Catholic culture? My family? I don't even know for sure what the people of my childhood really thought, for no one really questioned the framework. However, for me, cracks have appeared in the façade over the years, that have allowed unexpected things to emerge.

Perhaps, my work as a missionary priest in Africa presented me with experiences that most widened the cracks until my assumptions about God and faith were blown right out of the water. One of the most memorable experiences occurred on Good Friday, 1974. I had arrived in the semi-desert lands of Kitui, Kenya, the previous fall, learned some of the language, and become involved in a number of activities, both religious and secular. In those years, after the nineteen-sixties had challenged some of the fundamentals of missionary work, there was a new emphasis on what was called humanization – health, education, community development – as opposed to, or at least as a counter-balance to, evangelization, the purely religious approach. I worked alongside volunteers – doctors, agricultural experts, engineers, etc. – on projects designed to enhance the physical as well as the spiritual lives of the people who lived in Kitui's challenging environment.

In Kitui, fresh water was perhaps the greatest challenge. Many of the wells that were dug turned out to be extremely saline and could be used only for general cleaning and washing. People usually drew their fresh water from the river beds which were simply highways of sand for most of the year, though when the rains came, these dry gulches became surging vortices of water that carried trees, rocks and sometimes humans in their path. The torrents would quickly subside to a trickle and, a few weeks later, disappear completely. The river, however, was still there under the sand and could be accessed by digging. A young Dutch water engineer had come up with a number of ideas for increasing access to this fresh water supply. I worked with him on one rather fascinating effort to direct rain water run-off into the natural cisterns of a big rocky outcropping. The local people had been using the rocks as water tanks in this way for years, so the project was intended to enhance an already present natural water supply.

The project had gone well, at least in theory: all that remained was for the rains to come to see how it all worked. And so it was that, on this Good Friday, I had been invited with my Dutch colleague to be the guest of honor at the grand opening of the experiment. The local elders had come, along with their priest – the so-called witch-doctor – to offer a kid goat to the ancestors, as the people called the deceased members of the tribe as a way of inviting these spirits to assist the process by pleading their cause with God: to send

adequate rain, and to protect the women and children, who would come to fetch the water, from falling into the cisterns, some of which were ten feet deep or more.

The ceremony proceeded with prayers and chants and supplications, and the goat was slaughtered. As the guests of honor, the engineer and I were offered the choicest part of the sacrifice – the raw liver – to be consumed in front of everyone in all its gory beauty. My digestive tract was stronger than it is now, so I had little difficulty downing the fresh meat. But then, in the midst of all the excitement, I remembered that it was Good Friday. This is a solemn occasion for Christians of all stripes: for Catholics, it was a central event in the religious calendar that involved fasting and abstinence from meat. So, as the goat's liver slid gently through my alimentary canal, I mused on what some of my family, friends, and colleagues might say if they knew: number one, fresh liver on Good Friday; number two, and more to the point of this story, participation in a so-called pagan ritual on this day of all days. To say that I felt a certain conflict of interests is to understate the situation: I was a missionary of the Christian Church, on behalf of the Christian God as my Catholicism defined him, sent to Kitui to promote the Christian way, and here I was implicitly endorsing, if not another God, certainly another understanding of him.

When the ceremony was over, I went back to the mission compound to participate in the Christian Good Friday ceremony that included what we called a "passion play," after the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Everyone participated in the pageant, children and adults alike. The play was taking place around the little tin-roofed church which was about seven or eight miles from the rock where I had celebrated the earlier ceremony. But on the horizon there was a different kind of action taking place in the form of gathering rain clouds. Since it was still about two weeks before the rains would come, and clouds would often form like this without actually producing anything, I paid only passing attention, and returned to the excitement of the play. A few minutes later, however, I looked out again over the heads of the people to see that a cloud had gathered around the rock, dark and heavy-looking. Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning and the cloud above the rock opened to let its amazing burden of water spill onto the newly finished, newly blessed, water catchment. No one else seemed to notice, or perhaps they were simply not experiencing the confusion that was brewing in my mind.

Was this simply a lucky break for these people? Or had their prayers worked? Had God heard them--or their ancestors? But which God? Whose God?

I pushed the thoughts aside, figuring I would get back to this interesting little divine joke later on. By this stage, the pageant was reaching its own climax and Andrew, our resident "thespian," was being 'nailed' to a make-shift cross. As the crowd joined in the general melee, the skies above us suddenly darkened, in true Biblical fashion, and there was a flash of lightning followed by a loud explosion of thunder. Down came the rain, cold and shocking. The final scene of the pageant collapsed in disarray as everyone rushed into the church where they broke into the spontaneous laughter that always greeted the arrival of rain in Kitui. As the noise level rose with the rain now pounding on the tin roof, people began to sing and dance. This time I was simply stunned, and sat amid the singing and dancing, filled with wonder.

It seemed clear that God did not distinguish between Catholics and pagans, but rained equally on both. That I already knew. But it seemed also that God heard the prayers of all his people. I suppose that didn't surprise me either. In that sense, nothing had changed for me. However, what began to be reinforced was my dawning realization that mission was not about creating a single, homogeneous organization. While there was much that western Christianity had to offer to Kitui, the people of this place had much to share with their visitors. We all believed there was only one God. For most tribal people, he was a distant reality who was hardly interested in the concerns of people like you and me. To them, it was pointless trying to contact this remote figure if there was a problem; it made more sense to go to the next level beyond themselves, namely the ancestors – the spirits of the dead – who had lived there and knew their problems, who were still family and would want to help, and who were now, presumably, in a position to do so. People directed their prayers to them. *Ngai* (the name for God) was certainly to be acknowledged, but not much more.

So, what was so different about the Christian way? Well, the God of Jesus was supposedly interested in his people, and actually engaged in their lives. Who wouldn't want to know that the God you thought distant and uncaring, approachable only through mediators like one's ancestors, was actually much more like a deeply caring father who was present to your every need and concern? Jesus was very clear in his explanation of his 'way' of relating to God: it was a matter of loving God by loving one's neighbor. Wouldn't it be enough to share the essential message with these people and let them figure out how to integrate it in the context that they obviously knew better than any outsider?

I had long since found that the essential message of Jesus was, in fact, already present here: loving your neighbor as yourself is not something that any community has a monopoly on; certainly the Christian communities of my homeland (*Northern Ireland*) were not making much of a success of it just then. So what exactly were we doing here? In time, I began to see, from the example of many of my colleagues, that it was more a question of simply *living* this essential Christian way among these people whose lives were challenging in the extreme. To do so meant that relationships would grow and perspectives be shared in a way that allowed new insights about life to emerge that would then impact both sides of the exchange, as it does in any good exchange between equals.

At one stage I had feared that missionaries had become the unwitting accomplices of the western market, simply preparing people for the world of consumer goods that was on the way. There is a part of this that is true, I suppose: the missionary schools did educate children away from their traditions and proclaim the values of another world, while the hospitals to some extent created a new market for western drug companies. But, there was much more going on than this. As I heard many times from African people, the missionaries, with obvious exceptions, were good people who cared for them and asked nothing in return. Sometimes, the missionaries were somewhat righteous, implying that their way was the more developed, civilized way, but in spite of this, what came across was genuine love.

As it has turned out, Africa, of all the continents, has been left out of the western economic development model. Africa has really been abandoned by the west, while the missionary movement, as I knew it, has lost momentum and even credibility in a world that reflects on it in much the same way as I have just done. There is indeed a more fundamentalist missionary effort abroad, but it bears little resemblance to the missionary world that I knew, and even less to the ideal of mutually enhancing exchange.

I often think it would have been wonderful to have done it all differently. For a while, in those heady post-'60s years, it felt like we might truly engage with the African psyche, rather than simply attempt to get it to wear a western hat. For a time, it felt like we could really *give* the Christian message to the people of Kenya, without strings, and assist them in integrating it into their own wonderful world.

For a brief moment, there was no divine dichotomy, no question of whose God: rather, one incomprehensible mystery that is the foundation and ground of every expression of life; an expanded world that contains us all, alive and dead; an interconnected world that relates through knowing and loving, and enriches all of us in the process.

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