

CONVERSION AND THE RESISTANCE OF CULTURE

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THE EVENTS IN RWANDA, when numerous Christians (among them some priests) were implicated in the massacre of the Tutsis [and Hutus¹], once again raised the question: what influence does Christianity have on the conduct of those who assert allegiance to the faith? It is claimed that the behaviour of many atheists is often infinitely better. Reactions such as these, of surprise, sorrow and, at times, loss of faith arise from an individualistic view of the way the Christian message operates. It is presumed to have an influence on each person in relation to the degree of his or her personal conversion to Christ, independent of the environment in which that person lives. But such an account fails to mirror the reality of the situation. The Christian message can only be received and make sense within a cultural context. No matter how authentic the process of conversion may be for the person involved, the world-view possessed by that person, because of the culture where he or she is inserted, continues to seem 'obvious' in most of its aspects and is not immediately altered. No doubt, in the long term, the Christian message does have an influence on some of those aspects, but that process may take centuries (and is still far from complete even in those countries long considered to be Christian).

Culture as a Way of Seeing the World

The notion of 'culture' is problematic. As long as it is thought of in terms of customs, values or even of identity, then in our changing world it seems inappropriate to speak of 'culture' as something relatively stable and consistent. Nevertheless, experience shows that in every society there persist certain hidden factors, largely unconscious for

¹ Although fewer in number, many Hutus were also killed in the 1994 massacre [Translator].

most of those involved, which have an important bearing on the way members of that culture see the world.²

In every society there exists a particular type of situation that is perceived as a threat to the way the society lives together. The possibility of some area of experience which is felt to be troubling and to inspire worry and anguish deeply influences the whole course of that society's existence. It is against such a backdrop that events and situations are always perceived and lived; special attention is given to what may lead, on the one hand, to what is troubling and, on the other hand, to what may provide ways of avoiding trouble. The conflict between these two poles sets up a sort of *mise-en-scène* within which all happenings and situations are interpreted, depending on whether they can be classified as more likely to be dangerous or more likely to be liberating.

Such a scenario provides a commonly accepted frame of reference, which is unconscious yet remarkably stable in historical terms. It is accepted without discussion as 'obvious' both by individual members of a society and by the social and political movements active in that society, even if in other circumstances it would seem to be quite the opposite. All new situations and happenings are perceived through this lens, just as much as those that are habitual. Such a perspective becomes deeply engrained in the way one's mind works by the mere fact that it is constantly before one's eyes and the eyes of those with whom one discusses a subject. Some examples, taken from France and the USA, where local perspectives of this sort have been supposed to have a universal value, can be very revealing in this context.

In US society, life in general is continually structured around the fear that one may find oneself at the mercy of another person and around the correlative desire to remain in control of one's own destiny. There is a particularly striking expression of this—all the more significant as it occurs in a text of major significance in the USA—in the eighteenth-century founding text, *The Federalist*.³ Taking one short chapter (51), which deals with the structure of the institutions of the Union, we can see that there is this ever-present sense of danger, implicit in the words 'insecure', 'insecurity', 'danger', 'attack'. Against this danger, the desire

² Philippe d'Iribarne, *Penser la diversité du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); also 'La force des cultures', *Le Débat* (November 2009).

³ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005).



to find protection is constantly affirmed. If one asks, ‘what is it that is so feared?’, the word that is repeated on several occasions is ‘encroachment’: ‘to trespass or intrude (on or upon the rights, property, etc., of another’.⁴ It is against any such intrusion that the need for protection is felt.

In the USA, almost any occasion can bring into play this dual motif of either being or not being in control of one’s destiny. Many aspects of US society only become intelligible to the outsider when such attitudes are taken into account: the almost sacred right of each individual to self-defence (meaning in reality the right to possess firearms); a reluctance to have any exterior authority intervening in a domain proper to the individual, as can be seen when reform of the health system is proposed; and the refusal to accept the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice or the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.

In French society a different experience is feared above all others: a situation in which, through either fear or self-interest, you are obliged to defer to someone who has the power either to harm you or to grant you certain favours. There is a good example of this in the writings of Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) referring to the *Tiers État* (‘Third Estate’) in the pre-revolutionary French political system:

⁴ Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary.

... what can an unfortunate non-privileged person do? He has to attach himself to some magnate by every sort of base means; to buy, for the price of his values and human dignity, the capacity to call, when necessary, upon the protection of a *somebody*.⁵

This process of being linked to a patron in a servile role and of winning favour through grovelling, of losing one's personal dignity, was something that had to be avoided.

In contemporary France, the possibility that one may have to demean oneself in order to obtain somebody's favour or to avoid somebody's disapprobation remains a key consideration. In business, for example, a tension may arise between the need for efficiency, on the one hand, and the rejection of what appears to be a servile attitude towards those who, in some way, either as manager or client, are in a position to grant favours provided that one meets some stipulations that they impose. In such cases, referring to professional standards, with all the criteria and practices accepted by a profession, may allow someone to avoid the appearance of subservience to the exigencies of another out of either fear or self-interest.⁶

Anyone who visits different regions of the world will find many other sources of anguished preoccupation that astonish the casual observer. For example, in Cameroon there is a fear that those who seem to think well of you may in fact be plotting secretly hostile manoeuvres against you;⁷ in Bali, there is a fear of the anarchy that might result from any collective loss of emotional control.⁸

Cultures and the Reception of the Christian Message

'Powers' and 'Vested Interests'

An example of what is involved here may be taken from the translations into different languages of a phrase from the letter to the Romans (8:9). One can find printed on the same sheet a French version:

⁵ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, 'What is the Third Estate?' translated by Michael Sonenscher, chapter 2, in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 100.

⁶ See d'Iribarne, *Penser la diversité du monde*.

⁷ Alain Henry, 'La révolution des procédures au Cameroun' in *Le Tiers-Monde qui réussit*, edited by Philippe d'Iribarne (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003).

⁸ Clifford Geertz, 'Person, Time and Conduct in Bali', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

'*Vous n'êtes pas sous l'emprise de la chair, mais sous l'emprise de l'esprit*', and an English one, 'Your interests ... are not in the unspiritual, but in the spiritual'.⁹ Clearly this English translation is not the only one that could be offered, but it is important to see that, while this one is possible in English, a word-for-word equivalent in French is difficult to imagine.

The use of the term 'interests' in this context reminds one of a remark by Tocqueville about the United States of America:

Moralists ... content themselves with inquiring whether the personal advantage of each member of the community does not consist in working for the good of all; and when they have hit upon some point on which private interest and public interest meet and amalgamate, they are eager to bring it into notice. Observations of this kind are gradually multiplied; and what was only a single remark becomes a general principle, and it is held as a truth that man serves himself in serving his fellow creature and that his private interest is to do good.¹⁰

It is quite possible, therefore, for a moral and spiritual outlook to be cultivated while remaining in the context of self-interest. But such an outlook has to be associated with a concept of self-interest that is more than one just based on egoism. Thus in *The Federalist* (chapter 6) 'true interest' is linked to 'a benevolent and philosophical spirit' and contrasted with 'momentary passions and immediate interests'.¹¹

The role given to self-interest here links up with the central fear of not being in control of one's destiny that characterizes US society. How do you go about defending your own interests if not by protecting yourself from the harm that may be caused to you by external forces? Good conduct, as *The Federalist* asserts, lies in not allowing yourself to be taken over by 'momentary passions' and those 'immediate interests' that are presented as likely to exercise 'an active and imperious control over human actions', and so act as a sort of external force able to exert control. One can find a similar way of encouraging ethical conduct in a modern handbook that urges children to be willing to forgive. There the arguments used take the form, 'Forgive, even when there have

⁹ Taken from a handout giving the texts of the day distributed in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, 24 March 1996. The English is from the Jerusalem Bible.

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *On Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), volume 2, 121.

¹¹ Hamilton, Madison and Jay, *The Federalist*, 24.

been no excuses or reparation Don't allow your life *to depend on the conduct of someone else.*' Or again, 'By showing kindness to the aggressor you regain *control of the situation*'.¹²

In the verse from the letter to the Romans, a literal translation of the French wording, '*être sous l'emprise*', that is, 'to be under the control' of an external power, even if that power is the Spirit, would strike the wrong note in a culture that gives such importance to each person's control of his or her own destiny. Similarly, any formulation that involves 'interests' would be accepted with difficulty in France. It would immediately be read as suggesting a lack of magnanimity; whereas a phrasing that advocates allegiance to something noble (the Spirit), rather than to something low (the flesh), is likely to be well received.

The Relevance of Language Differences

Why are these linguistic differences significant? Clearly the translation of biblical texts and theological language in general are relevant here. But they are not the only factors. Such ways of speaking are indications of a whole unquestioned relationship with the world that is affected by the Christian message.

Thus in the US context the Christian message speaks to those who receive it by pointing towards a way that offers freedom from the external forces that threaten to control them. It is largely to the extent that it is able to provide new insight into such forces that it may gradually be able to change their way of being. It does this by allowing converts to see that 'momentary passions' and 'immediate interests' are not in reality things that belong to them and have to be defended at all cost against external intervention but, on the contrary, are exterior forces that threaten to exercise 'an active and imperious controul' over their actions.¹³ Clearly such an outlook has some effect on the way that US Christianity is lived and one can imagine that it adds strength to the feeling of Christians that they are called to undertake a crusade against the forces of evil, whether they be outside or inside (as with the 'revival' movements).

Similarly, in a French context the Christian message tends to speak to those who receive it as resonating with their desire to avoid the sort of humiliation associated with bowing to anyone who can either harm

¹² David W. Schell, *Un temps pour le pardon* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 12 and 34.

¹³ Hamilton, Madison and Jay, *The Federalist*, 24.

them or grant some favour. In certain circumstances the message may encourage a heroic refusal, in defence of their faith, to submit to those in power, no matter how great the cost.

There are comparable reactions in those societies where Christianity is more recent, except that they may appear more surprising in so far as they are less familiar. One example may be taken from the account of an African conversion.¹⁴ Here the cultural context is one where, in general, the predominant fear is of what is being plotted against you behind your back. The account reveals signs of this fear: 'We, the Senufo people ... have all sorts of fears ... of death, of being poisoned, of jealousy, of evil spirits'. Ordinarily to combat these fears they have recourse to 'fetishes' and 'amulets'. It is within such a context that its hearers have received the Christian message.

The protective force of the action of Jesus and of God is perceived as being more powerful than the traditional means used for protection, and therefore able to 'replace' them as being more effective. Faith takes the form of a belief in this greater power, but it may not have immediate effect:

How is it possible for me to throw away [the fetishes] when I am so afraid? If I do reject them, the evil spirits are always sure to come: I will be ill, I will not have protection against the evil spirits, all this ...¹⁵

Eventually, acceptance of the process of faith leads one to overcome the fear:



Senufo fetish

¹⁴ Raymond Deniel, 'Dramane Coulibaly: le chemin d'un chrétien africain', at <http://www.spiritualite2000.com/Archives/temoins/temoins5-01.htm>. Also 'En Afrique, Jésus nous libère', *Christus*, 212 (October 2006), 454-457.

¹⁵ Deniel, 'Dramane Coulibaly'.

Later I said to myself 'If I *believe*, Jesus can protect me' At that time I had with me a fetish that I could not throw away ... it was more powerful ... I wanted to get rid of it, but I was afraid. Nevertheless, I plucked up my courage and decided to throw it away. In the name of Jesus, I kill the force of this fetish with holy water and I implore you, my God, to give me the force so that I will no longer have fear; it is the fear that gives me evil thoughts After several months of prayer ... I felt strong enough, (thanks be to God!) and I no longer had fear of this fetish. I said to myself, 'I shall not go to any more *charlatans*!'¹⁶ ... And I said, 'Good! I know that God is strong, that Jesus is powerful', and if I feel any more fear, I shall turn at once to prayer.¹⁷

To Have an Effect on Cultures Takes Centuries

When the Christian message is accepted and enters into the heart of a culture, it does have an influence on that culture. But such an influence, which requires a reconfiguration of what looks 'obvious' within a culture, does not take place at once but over the course of centuries.

French Notions of honneur and grandeur

In France, for example, the Christian message has led, over a historical span of time, to a reinterpretation of the notions of honour and greatness. In a culture that tends to see any service to others as implying the humiliation of servility, a way of thinking has developed that promotes the greatness of service to the poor. Such service can more readily be accepted as honourable when it is inspired not by fear or sordid self-interest, but by a chivalrous attitude that is all the more noble as it is directed at helping those incapable of either providing favours or causing harm. On a wider scale, a way of thinking has developed which permits various forms of humility to be linked with a superior form of greatness. As Bossuet says, in referring to *le néant de toutes les grandeurs humaines*, 'the nothingness of all human grandeurs':

It is time to point out that everything which is mortal, no matter what one may add on the outside to make it look great, is by its

¹⁶ The word 'charlatan' is used here to designate a diviner or seer, and in the French of Cameroon there exists the verb *charlanter*, meaning 'to consult a *charlatan*'.

¹⁷ Deniel, 'Dramane Coulibaly'.

own nature incapable of being raised on high However, is not that which must return to God, who is Himself the original and essential greatness, of itself great and lofty? That is why when I said to you that greatness and glory are simply pompous names among us, empty of sense and reality, I was referring only to the incorrect use that we make of these terms. But if truth must be said in all its purity, then it is neither error nor vanity which invented these magnificent terms.¹⁸

Such a reinterpretation, in a specifically French context, of the notions of honour and greatness is itself indebted to a previous work of reinterpretation of these concepts at the heart of the Christian world. And no doubt such a development was influenced—though precisely *how* remains to be analyzed—by the fact that it took place so differently over the centuries in France and in countries dominated by Islam (Spain being an intermediate case). Already in St Augustine there are passages that discuss what it is that causes dishonour.¹⁹ Contrary to the assumptions of his time, he asserts that it is not what one undergoes, but what one does that can cause dishonour; he relies for this teaching on the gospel sayings that link impurity to what comes from the heart rather than to any external cause. Again, one might note how St Francis gave new meaning to poverty by weaving it into the network of chivalry ('Lady Poverty').

The Christian Message and the Diversity of Cultures

Such interchanges between the Christian messages and different cultures do not imply the annihilation of the world-view characteristic of each culture. In those areas where Christianity has been long established, such world-views have held out during centuries, and there is no reason to think that something different will happen in countries that have only recently been Christianized. It is at the heart of each type of world-view that the Christian message has to establish new paths. Thus, one should not be shocked that in India Christian members of a higher caste find it very difficult to associate with those coming from lower castes. Or again, for Christians in Rwanda, it is not surprising that there is a persistent tendency to view

¹⁸ 'Oraison funèbre d'Henriette d'Angleterre' in *Oraisons funèbres* (Paris: Garnier, 1998), 162, 168, 174.

¹⁹ 'On Voluntary Death Because of Fear of Punishment or Dishonour', *City of God*, chapter 17.

each other as a sort of witch-doctor whom it is right to try to eliminate.

Conversely, the influence of the Christian message on the world-view held by a particular culture—and thus on the way it goes about interpreting events and situations—does not disappear as if by magic when those whose outlook it governs profess to be atheists. It is enough to consider everything that depends on the meaning attached to failure, to doubt and to division, with what this implies about the possibility of seeing the conflict of ideas as part of day-to-day life—an essential ingredient of life in a democracy. It is not mere chance that great differences are to be found in this regard between areas influenced by Christianity and those influenced by Islam. Thus the mere fact of someone declaring allegiance to either atheism or Christianity is not of itself enough to gauge how far that person's world-view is structured by the influence of Christianity.

What is characteristic of a human society does not depend on the values, often poorly specified and diverse, held by individuals within that society. Rather it comes from the fact that the meaning taken on by events in the life of a society and the manner in which that life is organized are marked by a specific type of fear that has to be allayed. In the USA: is my destiny controlled by another? In France: do I have to bow to someone who can harm or benefit me? In Cameroon: am I the victim of some plot being hatched by a person who looks so friendly? And so on. As the messages of salvation that aim to be universal become incorporated into a society, they acquire meaning and are received according to the way they come to resonate with such fears and with the desire to overcome them. With time, a language, representations and ways of being begin to emerge that allow the new perspectives opened up by these messages to find expression in a specific way linked to how they make sense in context. This emergence makes it possible for the messages to be widely accepted.

In the process each culture maintains the orientations that are peculiar to it, but there is a tendency to establish innovative ways of giving shape to the way of being in the world that is special to that culture. Such an evolution can only be seen on a scale of centuries. We can see the effects where Christianity is long established, even if they still seem constantly to be evolving. One should not expect dramatic

changes to take place where Christian communities have appeared too recently for—*a priori* improbable—ways of escaping from the fears that dominate a culture yet to have been established.

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