

to human situations. Marriage is an immensely complex and delicate human reality, personal and social; a reality which must, above all, share in the freedom characteristic both of sound human life and of the gospel. Here, as in too many other areas, the Church's traditional practice has not adequately respected that freedom; it has done great injustice to some people, caused scandal to others, and in the situation of a very different society, such as that of Africa, it has come largely to pieces. There is no area today in the Church where a drastic re-examination both of theory and of practice is more overdue.

Reflections on a Report by Fr Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

Fr Hastings has touched on many very serious problems in his report, now published as *Christian Marriage in Africa*, and in the previous article, with a compassion and sincerity that draw on wide reading and long reflection. Yet I feel myself out of sympathy with much that he has to say. This may be more to my discredit than to Fr Hastings'; at any rate, let me throw down a few words to suggest that at any rate such differences may be permissible.

First of all, on a relatively secondary point, Fr Hastings takes a view of polygamy which, while he is not the first to suggest it, is still very much a minority view among both Catholics and Anglicans. The direction of the New Testament is monogamous, not so much in an explicit command, as in defining marriage by the image of the union of Christ and His Church in the New Covenant. For the baptized Christian, therefore, polygamy is not an option. For the non-Christian, however, polygamous unions, when they are in accord with the traditions of his society, cannot simply be written off as 'immoral'; to force the disruption of such unions as the price of baptism is much more immoral. Polygamists might therefore be admitted to baptism; and while Christians should regard monogamous marriage as the norm, there are cases where a Christian who has taken more than one wife may be admitted to the Eucharist. Fr Hastings claims that this is the only policy which will be consistent with the 'central precepts of the Gospel'.

I wish that Fr Hastings had been a little more cautious before he made the implied suggestion that those who disagree with him are in

this, at least, sub-Christian. As Fr Hastings himself makes clear in his assembling of relevant materials, the issues are rather complex, and any decision has to be the result, as are most decisions in ethical questions, of a balancing of factors, which is not simply an adding up of credit and debit, but rather looking at different totalities, trying to imagine how they 'wear' in human living, and how they fit into yet wider patterns of the justly possible and the humanly just. For Fr Hastings, polygamy can be situated as falling short of Christianity, yet not as something automatically degrading all that comes in contact with it. As historically the Christian attitude to institutions of this order has been to bear with them while striving to pass beyond them, there would seem to be scope for what the Orthodox call 'economy' with regard to polygamy.

This, of course, calls up all sorts of wider moral issues, notably the sharpness with which boundary lines between the permitted and the prohibited are drawn. Few things are more astonishing than the ways in which ages and societies vary in the way they are severe or tolerant towards similar acts of transgression. Yet this surely does not mean that all treating of particular issues as absolutes is wrong; some turn of phrase may carry upon itself a whole range of values, assent to or refusal of which may be a test for innumerable consciences at that given state of society, even though in the very long run the two positions might settle down to peaceful coexistence. An inflexibility which may have become absurd may have been at one point of time prophetic; one thinks of the attitude of English Roman Catholics to attending Anglican services. The choice of a very clear commitment to monogamy may be a prophetic *kairos* for African Christians, even if, since human beings are as they are, its working out is messy and unnecessarily painful—one recalls H. W. Turner's fascinating account of the pull towards monogamy felt in the missionary-free Church of the Lord¹, or the earnestness with which, as Monica Wilson quotes them, the Nyakyusa preachers warn their people against polygamy.² The very nuanced attitude of Fr Hastings does reflect his own position as a member of a monogamous society; but to the members of a society which has traditionally welcomed polygamy, a distinction between the baptizability of polygamists and the unacceptability of polygamy for those already baptized may seem not merely rather fine but totally illogical. I am alarmed, rather than impressed, by Fr Hastings' citation of the parallels in the attitudes of European Christians to war, dictatorship and slavery; are not these awful warnings?

My difference of opinion with Fr Hastings extends, I feel, to a more fundamental issue. As are many other people, Fr Hastings is deeply perturbed at the gap between the numbers of Africans who have

¹See H. W. Turner, *African Independent Church* (O.U.P. 1967), Vol. II, pp. 247-250.

²Monica Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (O.U.P. for international African Institute, 1959) p. 198.

received baptism and the very much smaller numbers of those who marry in church. He feels that this, and its consequence, the very large number of African Christians who are excluded from the Eucharist, are very much the fault of church authorities, and that action should be taken, for instance by recognizing customary marriages of Christians as valid, to reverse this massive excommunication. Rather surprisingly, he does not discuss the probability (to my mind) that baptism has been far too often given to the very ill-instructed, nor does he (and this is, even allowing for the need to compress material, one of the great weaknesses of *Christian Marriage in Africa*) help us to understand what has led the poorer, non-élite Christians in such areas as Malawi to accept church marriage in very considerable numbers. Perhaps our disagreement is due to Fr Hastings being what might be called a High Church Roman Catholic whereas I am a Low Church Roman Catholic. High Church Roman Catholics tend to see the leaders of the Church as moulding and controlling the lives of ordinary Christians; hence both the apparent successes and the evident failures of the Church are ascribed to her human leadership, which is therefore sometimes unduly praised, at other times unfairly blamed. Low Church Roman Catholics see the Church as, very much, not shaping the societies in which she is present, but rather as being shaped by them, almost to the point of absorption, and accept dutifully, but unenthusiastically, the institutional side of the Church, while believing her real vitality to be something almost hidden.

From a 'High' point of view, the very limited degree to which church marriage has been accepted in Africa must be seen as a fearful indictment of the transplantation of institutional Christianity. Yet the making present of Christianity in Africa can be seen not as a high-handed and ill-planned moulding that failed to take, but as a long, slow process of absorption of elements that came from the outside at the rhythm, and according to the needs of the indigenous societies.¹ By far the greater part of the actual putting-over of Christian belief was done by African catechists, teachers, and pastors, who naturally used the modes of thought characteristic of their own cultures. This is not to deny the revolutionary nature of Christian, or for that matter Islamic, conversion; but even if conversion often brought some advantages, it was not something purely imposed from above.

If, then, from the beginning of missionary work, African Christianity took very rapidly a local colouring, it is surely right to see it not as missionaries acting on a *tabula rasa*, as admittedly they

¹For some accounts of African conversion see C. G. Baeta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (O.U.P. for International African Institute 1968), particularly pp. 123-199, and, for a mature assessment which applies to Islam as well as Christianity, see Humphrey J. Fisher, 'Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa' in *Africa*, January 1973, pp. 27-40. My 'Low Church' view of Christianity in Africa largely follows Fisher.

themselves sometimes saw it, but as a force with its own strengths and weaknesses. There is strength, certainly, in the awareness of a close yet transcendent God, and in the new dimensions of fraternity, cutting across tribal lines; there are also weaknesses, which seem to stem in very large part from a limited sense of the Incarnation. For very many African Christians Jesus Christ is a wondrous being, more than man yet not fully the equal of the Father, and this inevitably affects church life, making it legalistic and impoverishing its sacramental quality.¹ It may be that every Christian community has to come to grips with the reality of the Incarnation in its own history and its own cultural context, as the Christians of the Roman Empire did in the age of Nicaea, and the medieval Church did in the age of the friars. Perhaps this is only beginning to happen now in Africa; and perhaps too this can only be done through and by Africans.

If this line of argument is valid, then the gap between the numbers baptized and those getting married becomes understandable, since the Christianity of black Africa is very similar to other 'early Christianities', baptismal and theistic, rather than Eucharistic and incarnational.² It is not so much that marriage difficulties block Christians from the Eucharist, as rather that the centrality of baptism overshadows in the minds of converts the need for the other sacraments. This gives a more optimistic view of the Christian presence in Africa, perhaps in other parts of the world too, than that which Fr Hastings has adopted; but it seems to be a view fairly consistent with what happens in Africa. Fr Hastings' statistically-founded pessimism is too near to the statistical optimism of certain missionary magazines; reality can elude quantification.

¹The best account of a group of African Christians is still John V. Taylor's *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, S.C.M. 1958. For outspoken criticism of African neglect of the Eucharist, see John Mbiti in Baeta, *op. cit.*, pp. 340-1; for the situation in an independent Church, see H. W. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-220. Although polygamists were admitted to full church membership, the proportion of communicants to total membership was extremely small; statistics for the Sierra Leone-Ghana diocese of this Church showed only forty-five communicants as against 2,483 members in 1958-9.

²For an interesting study of a south Indian Christian community see P. Y. Luke and John B. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*, Lutterworth Press, 1968.