

# THE PENETRATION OF THE GOSPEL INTO THE MASAI CULTURE

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One of the most important questions for missions is how far the Christian gospel should penetrate into human cultures. Does the gospel change everything, or are there gray areas that should be seen as indifferent to the Christian life? Is there such a thing as a Christian culture, or a culture that was produced by the values of the gospel, which can then be transmitted to other people groups, changing their cultures? Is it possible that our understanding of the gospel is deeply affected by our cultures, so much so, that even the message of the gospel has to be rediscovered when we try to preach it to new people groups? Is there a core gospel message that is always intact in this process?

These and other questions are constantly raised in the context of cross-cultural missions. In this short essay we are not able to answer all these questions, but the example of the Roman Catholic missionary, Vincent J. Donovan, may shed some light on the biblical principles of what we can see as right gospel penetration into culture. Donovan's missionary work was a fascinating example of the principle of disenculturation, and a creative model for non-destructive, respectful penetration of the gospel into culture.

## DISENCULTURATION OF THE GOSPEL

In his classic work on spirituality, Richard Lovelace introduces two important terms as secondary elements in renewals: *enculturation* and *disenculturation*. Lovelace emphasizes that the gospel message has to be disenculturated "so that it may take root in a thousand different cultural and political soils and bring them to full self-expression"<sup>1</sup>. Vincent J. Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered*<sup>2</sup> is an excellent example for the principle of *disenculturation* in the context of the Masai tribe in East-Africa. In order to understand the importance of this issue, it is necessary to examine the two terms.

*Enculturation*. According to Lovelace, there are two kinds of enculturation: destructive and protective. *Destructive enculturation* is "saturation with the godless culture of the surrounding world"<sup>3</sup>. It has been a great danger for the Old Testament people of God, and it is a danger for the pilgrims of the New Testament, too. When elements of the godless culture become part of the gospel, the gospel is enculturated. This is destructive to the gospel, both because its essence is altered, and also because new elements are added to the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP – Paternoster, Downers Grove, Illinois, Exeter, UK, 1979), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (SMC, London, 1982)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 184.

unchangeable message. *Protective enculturation* is a reaction to destructive enculturation: we create fences to guard the gospel from the influences of the surrounding culture, but unintentionally these fences themselves turn into cultural elements that become parts of the gospel. In both cases the new cultural elements, too, are usually transmitted to other people groups whenever the gospel is preached cross-culturally. Thus, enculturation can be a serious hindrance to foreign missions.

*Disenculturation* is the process by which the gospel is freed from its protective shell. The gospel is being stripped off from its cultural “robes” so that it can be presented to new people groups and given new robes in those new contexts, robes that are entirely different from the robes it had in the previous contexts. According to Lovelace, disenculturation is an inevitable condition for all cross-cultural missions.

Protective enculturation had a place in the history of the people of God in the Old Testament. The Mosaic Law was God’s means to protect his people from the destructive influences of the cultures surrounding Israel. The ceremonial laws, the rules for cleansing and dietary customs served the purpose of protecting Israel from the contamination of godless cultures. But it was only a temporary means. As Paul says, it was a *paidagogue* for the covenant people, because they were still immature and still in childhood. But with the coming of Christ the covenant people has come of age and does not need the *paidagogue* anymore.<sup>4</sup> One of the the main struggles of the early church was to grasp this truth and understand the new freedom the people of God had received in Christ. This struggle had at least two important catalysts: the coming of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of God is not a political theocracy but the power of the Holy Spirit among the nations. With the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the curse of Babel was reversed, and the Abrahamic blessing was opened for those who were not the physical descendents of Abraham and who spoke the rest of the languages born at the construction of the tower. This was confirmed in Samaria, when the Holy Spirit fell on some Samaritans, and still further justified when the Gentiles in Cornelius’s house received the same Spirit. The main question at this point was whether these people outside Israel had to become Jews or could remain what they were without having to keep the Mosaic Law. The Jerusalem Council made a firm decision against the future relevance of protective enculturation. The apostles understood the principle of disenculturation, and made their decisions accordingly. The work of the Holy Spirit forced them into this direction.

It was the apostle Paul, though, who argued extensively for the disenculturation of the gospel. He called himself the apostle of the nations because he was ready to take the bare message of the gospel to any culture groups in the face of the earth. He was determined to take the gospel *out of* the Jewish culture and *into* the cultures of the nations. Paul demolished the protective wall around the message in order to be able to bring a non-Jewish gospel to all peoples, a gospel that is relevant in every cultural context. “And

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<sup>4</sup> Galatians 3:23-25

unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you."<sup>5</sup>

Vincent Donovan applied the same missionary principle among the Masai tribes. His passion was to save them through the gospel. After a year spent on the mission field, however, he realized that what he had perceived to be the gospel was in reality not the gospel, but a *cultural version* of the gospel. It was a traumatic realization, one that almost caused him to lose his faith. When the Masai asked him if his people found the High God, he had to answer in the negative. From that point on he was constantly on the search for the meaning of Christianity *in the context of* the Masai culture. He was brave enough to begin a long journey *together with* the Masai. This did not mean, however, that Donovan did not have a message to bring to these people. He had a message, but this message was a *disenculturated* message. What he was never sure of in the process was how much the gospel was still a Western gospel, and where was the point when it was entirely bare and naked. He wanted the Masai to tell him what the gospel meant in their context. He believed that the gospel itself was the power of God and had creative energy everywhere where it was presented. "The conviction of the book is the belief that the gospel itself... is a message filled with power and fertility and creativity and freedom."<sup>6</sup>

Donovan's aim was to free the gospel of Jesus Christ from its protective shell. He was ready to pill off the entire Scholastic architect from the message of Jesus. He made a clear distinction between the gospel and the Thomistic interpretation of the gospel, the person of Jesus Christ and Western dogmatic formulations about Jesus Christ, biblical leadership and Roman Catholic priesthood, Holy Catholic church and Roman Catholic church, the grace of God in the visual symbols of the body and blood of Jesus and the philosophical nuances of the doctrine of transsubstantiation, etc. He examined every issue in light of the Masai culture. The result was simplicity and creativity. The gospel could shine in its original simplicity, and the power of God could create new forms and new cultural expressions for the presence of Jesus Christ.

## A RESPECTFUL PENETRATION INTO CULTURE

*Christianity Rediscovered* is a story of the penetration of the gospel into the Masai culture. This penetration was radical and respectful at the same time. Donovan was not satisfied with the the slow and ineffective ways of doing mission that he had seen at his arrival to Africa. He desired something much more radical and much more effective. He planned to evangelize the Masai *in five years*. By

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:20-23

<sup>6</sup> Donovan, p. xx.

'evangelizing' he did not mean education or medical help. He meant the heart-changing gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of hundreds of years of ineffective social help, he wanted a clear answer from the people if they intended to accept or reject the gospel. Donovan followed Roland Allen's principles and practised the "art of shaking off the dust". In this sense his message was radical.

But it was also respectful. He did not go to the Masai in the name of Western culture. He went there in the name of the 'High God'. He did not bring them Western culture (he never brought them financial help!), he brought them the Christian gospel. He listened and watched these people. He went on a 'journey' with them. He trusted in the power of the gospel to produce the necessary fruits. Donovan deeply respected creation and passionately believed that redemption does not destroy creation but redeems it.

How far should redemption penetrate into creation? This is a very difficult question not just among the Masai but in Western contexts, too. Does the gospel create a new culture? Is it indifferent to cultures? Do the two have to live side by side? Are they antithetical to each other? Most people are familiar with Richard H. Niebuhr's categories about Christ and culture. Donovan's original background was probably the Thomistic "Christ above culture" model. This made him easier to believe that cultures contained good elements as well as bad, but it was an enormous burden on him, as well, given the supposedly rational medieval hierarchy of grace and nature. Donovan had to fight the battle with his mind and reject the absolute value of the medieval architect and come up with an entirely new idea of the relationship between redemption and creation.

His new approach was not so much a new theory, but, rather, a new practise. It was a practise not just because it was practical, but also because it was not ready in an intellectual sense. He began a journey, a discovery, an experiment. And this is what makes the book so exciting! He didn't know how the gospel would penetrate into the Masai culture. He had the gospel and he had the Holy Spirit, and there was the Masai culture. What he did know was that the Masai culture was just as beautiful and fallen as any other cultures, including the Western cultures. "If there is one theme which has been repeated in this book it is that the gospel is the affair of the missionary, and the interpretation of the gospel is the affair of the people who hear the gospel."<sup>7</sup>

Donovan's approach was *minimalistic*. He did not want to change the Masai culture, let alone turn it into a Western culture. This is very different from the older imperialistic approach, and different even from the new developmental methods. *He only wanted change where sin was the issue*. Donovan was reluctant to tell the Masai what exactly the gospel meant in their ethical life. There were only few issues where he seemed to make decisions that affected the Masai culture, as such. One of these decisions was the allowance of women to participate in the Mass and to sit at the men's table when the Eucharist was distributed. But in questions where sin was not an issue, he let culture and gospel have a fruitful relationship. For example, the Mass was celebrated with songs that they had sung in their pagan times. Donovan noticed that it was the simple gospel that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

made the changes, not ethical imperatives. It was the Masai who made decisions about those songs while celebrating the Mass. But the admiring fact was that once they decided that a song was not worthy of the Mass, they dropped the song from their culture, too. The gospel did make an impact on their culture, but only where it was necessary because of sin.

Donovan arrived among the Masai as a “child”. In a spiritual sense he “was born” into the Masai tribes. He went there to listen. He had a message, but he didn’t know what the message would look like in that context. He didn’t know what it would mean for those particular people. He knew what it had meant for the medieval people who formulated the Christian dogmas, but he was not sure that the unchanging gospel had to look the same for Western youth or African Masai. So he waited, asked questions, gave time for thinking and watching. He did not play the role of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to see how the people would react to the message under the influence of the Holy Spirit. “I wondered... how they would play back to me the gospel that I preached to them”.<sup>8</sup> This approach was most manifest in Donovan’s way of forming the Masai church.

Although Donovan as a Roman Catholic monk surely had a strong view of what the Church was, he did not let these views dominate his discovery what the church could possibly mean in the Masai culture. He let them define the meaning of the church in the light of the gospel. “[T]he missionary’s job is to preach, not the church, but Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The church is the response of the people. It might look very different from what the missionary had in mind, nevertheless it is just as much a cultural expression of the power of the gospel as Western churches are.

When the gospel reaches a people where they are, their response to that gospel is the church in a new place, and the song they will sing is that new, unsung song, that unwritten melody that haunts all of us. What we have to be involved in is not the revival of the church or the reform of the church. It has to be nothing less than what Paul and the Fathers of the Council of Jerusalem were involved in for their time – the refounding of the Catholic church for our age. Two things must come together to lead us to that new place – the gospel and the sacred arena of people’s lives.<sup>10</sup>

He let the Masai give a name to the idea of ‘church’. They named it the *Orporor L’Engai, the Age Group Brotherhood of God*. Donovan allowed the Masai to create their own liturgies for the Mass – liturgies that had little resemblance to the Roman Catholic liturgy or any other Western liturgies. But what is most fascinating is the way he made them interpret the role of the *priesthood*:

As I sat with those people underneath the tree, I wondered about the priest. I wondered what they would think of the priest, how they would play back to me the gospel that I preached to them, how the priest would fit into that gospel. So I asked them, ‘By what name would you refer to me in the job or role that I perform in your Christian community, even in the temporary way I do it, until one of you is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. xix.

ready to take over that job? What do you call me? ...They discussed it at length. Two terms which they had been expected to choose they rejected out of hand. *Laibon*, witch doctor, and *legwanan*, chief. ...There was one role in the Masai community which appealed very much to them. ...He was a man anyone could turn for special difficulties and help. ...They were called *ilaretok* and represented an extraordinary aspect of pagan life. The word literally means helpers, yet it carries with it all the overtones and connotations of servants. They were helpers or servants of the community. That is the concept these people chose to represent what they understood of the function of Christian priest.<sup>11</sup>

As a result: the Masai Christians felt that it was Christ who changed them and not Western people. With minimum interference in the Masai culture, Donovan let the gospel itself impact this culture; let Christ himself be born in the hearts of these people; allowed the Masai themselves to find out the consequences of their faith; and thus Donovan authorized these people to discover the most organic cultural expressions and language of what Christianity meant in their context. Vincent J. Donovan's mission among the Masai is a challenging example of the disenculturation of the gospel and a respectful penetration of the gospel into new cultures. In cross-cultural missions we are wise if we listen to his voice.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 128-9.