

Book Review

Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978, reprint 2002).

Before he left his position as Director of the Board of World Mission, Hampton Morgan, Jr. was kind enough to send me a copy of a book that he said had transformed and informed his understanding of missions: Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*. Though the book is now 25 years old, I thought it would be good to review it for *The Hinge* because it does offer such an intriguing perspective on Christian missions, and is particularly timely since the BWM is engaged in a process of examining our missiology for the coming century.

Vincent Donovan is a Roman Catholic priest who pioneered mission work among the Masai in Tanzania in the 1960s, but many of the discoveries he made in missiology actually recall Zinzendorf's vision of missions from the 1730s and 40s. Donovan rejected the century-old practice of Catholic missions which focused on building mission compounds: hospitals, schools, churches, parish houses, aid societies, and political liaisons. He came to the conclusion that such an approach was culturally disruptive, expensive, and ineffective. It made the people dependent on Westerners, and it connected the reception of the gospel to the giving of gifts. Missionaries took children out of their homes and villages, taught them to be Westerners, and sent them back as strangers to their families. The result was not more or better Christians in Africa but more human flotsam washing up in the growing urban slums.

Much of his critique is now old news, but what remains fresh and challenging is the approach he took instead. Claiming inspiration from St. Paul, who was an itinerant apostle who "was Jew to the Jew; Greek to the Greek," Donovan attempted to bring the gospel to the Masai with as little Western imposition as possible. "I was not trying to sell them the school system or Western medicine in order that one day they might accept Christianity. I was trying to convince them directly of the inherent value of Christianity." (p. 23)

Zinzendorf instructed the early Moravian missionaries that they should assume that all people know there is a God and that every people worship God. What they do not know is that their Creator is also their Savior. Donovan began his work with the Masai with a similar assumption, and he acknowledged at the beginning that he had as much to learn from the Masai as they had to learn from him. "I told them I believed that they knew about God long before we came, and that they were a devout and very pious people in the face of God. It was not our belief that God loved Christians more than them, nor that God had abandoned them or forgotten them until we came along." (p. 25) Before he could evangelize, he knew he had to learn and value the culture and the people themselves.

Like Moravian missionaries for ages, Donovan first learned their language with the help of an

interpreter. It was vitally important that the Masai develop their own religious vocabulary rather than have the missionary use inappropriate language. It was highly significant that they chose the word *orporor* for “church.” This was their word for the most fundamental unit of their society: the same age group. This was the social unit that gave identity and meaning to a person’s life. One change that the gospel brought to the concept of *orporor* was that the church became the only mixed-gender social unit in Masai culture. Holy Communion was the only time that men and women had ever eaten together. Had he imposed this, he would have destroyed their culture, but they chose this based on their understanding of God and Christ.

Donovan was a careful student of Masai religion and cultural rituals, and he encouraged the Masai to incorporate their traditional observances in their Christian *orporor*. “I had no right to disrupt this body of customs, of traditions. It was the way of salvation for these people, their way to God. ... An evangelist, a missionary, must respect the culture of a people, not destroy it. The incarnation of the gospel, the flesh and blood which must grow on the gospel is up to the people of a culture.” In contrast to most Western missionaries, Donovan left the moral system of the Masai largely intact and left them to adjust according to their understanding of the gospel. Part of the essential message of the gospel that he handed over to the Masai was the understanding that “there is only one God who loves us no matter how good or how evil we are, the God you have worshiped without really knowing

him, the truly unknown God — the High God.” (p. 44)

Obviously, Donovan was not following the script of Western theology and doctrine in his approach to the Masai. Like Paul and the first missionaries, he brought the people the story of Christ without benefit of the Bible. Scripture could come later. He brought the people the story of Christ without delving into the vexing mysteries of the Trinity or discussions of the relationship of law and gospel. He first tried to convince the people of the need for salvation based on the story of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. It did not go well. Finally he concluded, “After hearing their myths and stories, it seemed a little strange offering ours about a man and woman in the garden of Eden, and a fruit tree with forbidden fruit, as the definitive and final story about the origin of evil in the world, pretending our story were not a myth. ... I never told the story again.” (p. 57)

Father Donovan recognized that much of Catholic theology and ecclesiology, even the idea that the priesthood resides only in a select company of males, was culturally conditioned and could be dispensed with in practical terms. He also jettisoned one of the fundamental assumptions of Christian missions, that those outside of the church are perishing. “According to this assumption, we were to consider the Masai a lost people, and therefore had to convert as many of them as possible by converting them in great numbers. That would, of course, imply that all the Masai who died before we got there were lost. Perhaps if we lived in Europe or America and

knew of the Masai only theoretically, we might have been tempted to come to such an unhappy conclusion.” (p. 54)

One of the more intriguing sections in the book deals with helping the Masai with the Christian understanding of God. “They were a bit incredulous to learn that, for all practical purposes, we leave the female out of God, and we consider him only male, which is, of course, as patently wrong as considering God only female. God is neither male nor female, which is an animal classification, but certainly embodies the qualities which we like to believe exist in both. If the Masai wanted to refer to God as she as well as he, I could certainly find nothing theologically incorrect about the notion. Their idea seems more embracing and universal than ours — and not a whit less biblical.” (p. 42) This may help illuminate the fact that Zinzendorf appears to have embraced the idea of the motherhood of the Holy Spirit as a result of Moravian mission work among non-Western peoples.

Certainly there is much that is controversial in this little book, but there is much that is inspirational and challenging. I’m sure many would dismiss his recommendation as pure relativism, but Donovan raises many good points. Though it is a book on missions, many of his ideas may have relevance in our culture as well. When challenged by the Masai as to whether his “tribe” knows God, Donovan had to admit that we do not. “Americans have some kind of certainty that ‘almighty God’ will always bless their side in all their wars. Hitler never failed to call on the help of ‘*Gott, der Allmächtige*’ in all his speeches, in all his adventures.” (p. 45) Like

pagan peoples everywhere, Donovan says, we try to own God instead of being seized by the God who loves all people. We think we have found God and know God, but God is actually the lion who is hunting us.

As one who has spent much of his ministry on the fringes of the church: with atheists, agnostics, non-Christians, neo-pagans, and individualists of all stripes, I found this book refreshing. Much of my ministry has been with those who have rejected the church rather than Christ. They have rejected what they experienced in their congregations, what they hear from preachers on television, what they see on billboards and bumper-stickers, and what they have heard from those eager to save them. They are angry at Christianity, thinking they are angry at God. As we reap the whirlwind of our culture wars and competition, perhaps we need to think like Donovan in our ministry here as well as abroad. Rather than exporting our fruitless doctrinal disputes and individualism, we could rediscover the good news for us.

I would not advocate everything Donovan suggests, but many of his proposals could work in a Moravian context. The most “Moravian” section of the book was also the most moving to me. Donovan rediscovered that Christianity is not a bureaucratic institution; it is a community of the faithful. It is not a secret society of initiates, the *cognoscenti*, or the pure; it is a community of those who know that God has redeemed them. When it came time to baptize the first Masai in history, Donovan divided the village into those who would receive the water and those who would not, but “The old man, Ndangoya,

stopped me politely but firmly. ‘Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During this whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you were not here, at night around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? ... We have reached the step in our lives where we can say, “We believe”.’ *We believe*. Communal

faith.” (p. 92) Donovan learned that everyone was to be baptized or none would be baptized, just as Moravians long ago recognized that there is no Christianity without community.

During these days when all of the forces of the world work to divide us and set us against one another, this is an important reminder from Africa. There is much to ponder in this book, and Father Donovan himself would not expect us to follow his way as a script for all missions, but it would be good to read and discuss this surprising gem. Reading this, though, highlights the tragedy of how energetically Western mission organizations continue to carry our neuroses to the world instead of the good news.

— Craig D. Atwood

Note from the Editor:

Read a good theological book lately that everyone should read?

Write a review for *the Hinge*.

Send reviews, letters, and potential articles to Craig Atwood:

zinzendorf2002@yahoo.com.