AN EXAMINATION OF VINCENT J. DONOVAN’S BOOK

Publishing details: This book was first published in 1978 (Notre Dame, Ind. Fides/Claretian) and its 11th printing was in 1993 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. SCM have also published some printings.

WHY THE BOOK SHOULD BE STUDIED

This is probably one of the most startling of books to do with Christian Mission since the books by Roland Allen, Donald McGavran and Harry Boer earlier in the century. Allen’s books treat mission under the titles given, that Paul went on the tide of the Spirit to the countries he visited, in which he founded churches according to certain principles by which he worked. McGavran’s book really followed Allen’s and spoke of evangelising clans, tribes and peoples, rather than seeking to win single members of those groups to conversion. Boer takes up the theme of the missionary movement from Pentecost not being primarily based on ‘the great commission’, but on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. With this both Allen and McGavran would concur. Donovan’s book is better understood if we read these other authors. He certainly imbibed Allen and McGavran.

I believe Donovan’s book is one every past or should read for the issues it raises and the pattern of proclamation it pursues, especially in the face of the present patterns of church growth and megachurch building.

1 I am aware that there is a whole body of missiological literature, and keen assessments of how to go about the task of what we call ‘missionary work’, but it seems to me in reading much of it that it is speaking of missionary strategy, of utilising principles of church-founding and church growth and management which are suspiciously like a reproduction of Western ecclesiastical life and polities. In the case of the book under discussion we are confronted by a direct proclamation to a people within the context of their culture, and this is precisely how we should be operating today, even though our situations may prove to be more complicated because of certain historical factors, namely mistakes we have made in our largely unthought through ecclesiologies.


3 I think all pastors should read Os. Guinness’s Dining With The Devil, Baker, 1993, in regard to the present drive for church growth and the mega-church building.
DONOVAN AND MISSION

We gather Donovan’s approach to mission from his preface to the Second Edition of the book, as also his ‘Introduction’ and chapter 2—‘Letter to a Bishop’. In his Preface to the Second Edition he says, ‘The premise of this book is that every theology or theory must be based on previous missionary experience, and that any theory or theology which is not based on previous missionary experience is empty words, and of use to no one. The conviction of the book is the belief that the gospel itself, untied to any social service or other inducement, is a message filled with power and fertility and creativity and freedom. The main thrust of the book describes an attempt to empower a particular people with the freedom and total responsibility of that gospel. This experience, lived out in the lonely pastoral setting of the Masai steppes of East Africa, is far removed from the spreading urban-technological society in which we live. Can the experience of the one world be of any value to the other? I do not know. I can only say the cry of hopelessness I heard then in that desert setting is not much different from the cry I hear today in the wasteland of our cities’ (p. viii).

Donovan spent 17 years in East Africa and in May 1966 wrote to his bishop to have permission to go to the Masai people in Tanzania and simply preach the gospel to them. The Catholic Church had been ‘on mission’ to this people for 100 years, and when Donovan approached the leaders of the Masai tribes they were puzzled as to what he wanted to do, and then why after 100 years Donovan should be about this venture.

DONOVAN AND THE MASAI

I hope you will get the book and read it through, then go back and study it as I think it has immense significance for present proclamation of the gospel and pastoral ministry anywhere. Allen and others who have written on mission in the New Testament have not themselves had the opportunity or occasion to put into practice what they have adduced from the New Testament. Donovan went straight to it.

Donovan had to speak to the tribespeople in their own culture. They had passed 100 years receiving help and education from the Mission, but no person had ever been converted. His listeners tested everything he said along the way. They were hearing him with their own beliefs in God, Man and the creation. Donovan realised God has always worked among all tribes, everywhere, and though culture may offer resistance to the Gospel it is not to be attacked, and in fact the proclaimer can learn from the culture into which he is trying to speak.

Donovan was a bit stunned to learn that there were many equivalent symbols and figures for God in the Masai culture which were near parallels to Israelite usages. He used the historical person of Abraham and God’s call to him to leave his family’s place of living and to go out to another land. Donovan said that a tribe can—so to speak—trap their God into being a tribal deity and deny Him his true universality. Abraham had to go outside his tribal perimeters to be the servant of the God of all peoples and bring this news of God to all. Africans generally have a monotheistic

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4 See H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, Harper & Row, 1951, for the whole matter of Christ’s attitude to culture, culture’s attitude to Christ, and Christ as the transformer of culture. Much has been written in Missiology on culture and we need to know how to approach it, evaluate it, and speak to it, without ourselves imposing our own culture—which we often think to be Christian! This need to comprehend culture and what it is about is presently necessary in our growing multi-cultural society.
understanding of God but marginalise him to their particular tribe. This idea has not been absent in so-called Christian nations! In a way the proclaimer was taking them on a journey with himself and both were living in the story of Abraham and his God. The evangelist was living in it with those who were being evangelised.

**God is a Lion**

One of the gems of the book is the story called ‘The Lion is God’. Donovan found, as he looked at the early messengers, that they did not talk about sin. Maybe sin was something they would come to know when the miracle of conversion would take place. Meanwhile he told stories, the parables, and—so to speak—indigenised them. They were of the stuff of their background of life. Unconsciously he was pursuing them with everything. One day it seemed to him that he had a crisis of faith, in fact a loss of faith. He was drained of his old way of believing—with the head. They told him the story of the lion, that it pursued its prey. Donovan, they said, was like that, pursuing them. They had not pursued God: God was the lion pursuing them until he pounced on his prey and defeated them. Faith was not a mental believing but a deadly pursuit. The way the story is told is that God is ever after us and once defeated we believe in Him. This is a powerful concept. Donovan revived in his faith and his telling.

**JESUS NOT A DEITY BUT A MAN**

Donovan faithfully presented Jesus as in the Gospels, a man, born of a woman, living in a village, commencing his ministry, telling stories, doing acts, being God’s revelation to all, without necessarily revealing at that point that he was a God; just revealing God. They relished his humanity, his being one of us/them, one in the great story of God going out to be the God of the nations, through this Son.

In all of this no mention was made of the church. The missionary did not preach the church. He preached forgiveness, but not before he had preached the Cross. When they heard the message of the crucifixion they first laughed in disbelief ‘as pagans do’. ‘Then they were scandalised by it as religious people must’. Not thinking in terms of the future they had no hope of resurrection. This had to come through by the message of Jesus’ rising again.

**THE CRISIS OF RESPONSE**

Donovan had told them that all he could do was deliver the message: it was up to them as to what they would do. He was, however, speaking to a group, to a tribe, to clans and not to individuals. All were persons within a close-knit group. Even to approach the leader (legwanan, chief) and the elders he was not really approaching them but the whole tribe. The response would be tribal. The missionary left them for some days and they pondered the matter, the immediate tribe to whom he was speaking eventually responding to and receiving the gospel. Certain stories in the book tell us that the people did know something of sin and sins. They knew the fierce killings of inter-clan fightings—baptising their spears with blood, so to speak—were

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5 This is the emphasis McGavran makes in his *Bridges of God.*
to be deplored. Breaking the tribal law put a man outside the law and an excommunicated person lived a life of misery. A person sinned against had to work up and work out—a ritual of spittle whereby he could forgive the offender: it was a demanding, painful, yet commendable task.

**BAPTISM AND THE RENEWED COMMUNITY**

When Donovan thought some of the listeners were not yet ready personally for baptism he thought he should weed such out. The community would not have that. Whatever their weaknesses the community had decided as one for Christ: they would look after the weak ones within that communal faith. ‘Communal faith’ was a concept Donovan had not met. Now he had met it. All were baptised. When he wanted to get some name for this new community they replied, ‘When we are baptised, we will be become the Orporor L’Engai, the age group brotherhood of God.’ This concept related to their most sacred understanding of a grouping, ‘the age group brotherhood of God’. One fascinating detail is that the people wished to have Christian names and the leader chose that of ‘Abraham’: the story needs to be read to gather the significance of name-changing.

Donovan then describes the ritual that emerged for the baptism, included in which were meaningful rituals that engaged both the word of God and the Masai culture. Some might think this to be syncretism, but careful examination shows that it is not. In all of this the new community was born without a wrenching away from an old culture, yet that culture was transformed, for the people were transformed. It was a culture captured by Christ. Incredibly but wonderfully the principles of their living flowered out into this new but true, believing community.

**Non-Acceptance**

Not all communities of the Masai people accepted the gospel. As some groups had totally accepted it, at least one group wholly declined to accept it. They had thought it over carefully after having listened carefully. Donovan was shocked by the rejection but came to terms with it. We might note that Paul had this experience of rejection, but some in the community, as a group, had believed even at Athens. I am reminded of John 20:19–23 where Jesus spoke of sins being forgiven and sins beings retained. The Jewish Sanhedrin would have to come into this category by contrast to those who received the message on the Day of Pentecost.

**THE EUCHARISTIC COMMUNITY**

In Donovan’s book we do not find everything neatly parcelled and finally tied off. He has many questions to ponder, answers that are required to be given. Being a Roman Catholic he seeks to find the place for ministry which would be that of a priest. If I read him correctly he believes in the priesthood of all believers, but does not find a place for a sacerdotal priest nor does he seem to accept apostolic succession of a priesthood. Like Allen he certainly rejects the age-old missionary thrust by means of mission-compounds, protection for new converts within the missionary compound perimeters, and fostering of churches, as well as the importing of pastors and clergy from outside the culture of the new community.
He describes the ‘eucharistic community’, showing how the people viewed the Eucharist, came to it as a community and celebrated it in ways which naturally sprang from their ancient culture. This section is very moving. It will not be moving for those who hold traditional ‘missionary’ ideas: it will even seem like syncretism, which it is not. At the very end Donovan was seeking to know how the community could proceed without a priest such as he was, though in fact he was really a teacher–evangelist, a proclaimer, yet one who was with them in the life of the new community in which the tribal legwanan and the elders still led their people, though not in the way we might understand to be strictly biblical eldership. Donovan’s approach would be seen by his peers as most radical, but many of us might see it as simply biblical, especially if we are discerning readers of Acts and the Epistles, and realise the nature of teaching given to new converts from pagan situations.

In chapters 8 and 9 Donovan takes up many of the issues that Allen outlines in his books and this is one of the great values of the book we are now examining. It should be closely studied. Under the heading ‘A Pauline and a Vatican View’ he is at variance with the latter, but his reasoning is valuable. Supporting him is what he calls ‘the eucharistic community with a mission’. In other words this gospel has firmly taken root in the new community and is spreading to other communities. Donovan’s work of bringing ‘indigenous churches’ into being is still proceeding, but other missions have sought to ‘indigenise’ the churches they brought into being, so that African bishops and African clergy are the order of the day, but for the great part they are proceeding along the old lines of compounds, large buildings, clerical patterns the missionaries had brought from the West—and so on. It can be questioned whether, in fact, these are truly indigenous communities. Donovan leaves us with this picture.

**AN EVALUATION OF THE BOOK CHRISTIANITY REDISCOVERED**

This short time of presentation and discussion can only be a brief introduction to the book. I believe we should read it time and again, and go over it carefully, seeking to grasp the author’s mind. Some have said he is a universalist, some that he espouses syncretism and others are uneasy about his Catholic ethos, his dogmatic understanding of Christianity, and the church and of the sacraments, to say nothing of missionary ministry. I would question these evaluations as simplistic. I have an admiration for the way he has broken out of his former ways of seeing things, his acceptance and use of non-Catholic writers—missionary and otherwise. He has a genuine humility regarding his own ministry and achievements.

We need to see that there is a good missionary history as well as traditional patterns which tended to reproduce the church systems, polities and Western cultures which missionaries tended to think were Christian when they were not necessarily so. Many Bible and Missionary Training Colleges and Seminaries have studied the books we have mentioned in our paper. Many missionary societies have either espoused indigenous principles, or have partly absorbed them into their practice. Donovan is not the first and only missionary to do what he has done: it is simply that others have not written books. The fact that this book has been written and is before us is important. He is claiming, in fact, that no one should carte blanche be a missiologist who has not been a missionary, and then that that one should have practiced the proclamation and church founding after the manner in which he was involved.

His book by no means tells the whole story, but it confronts us with immediacy. What are we doing in our churches? What cultures do we have in our denominations?
For example, how much do we think Western democracy to be Christian? What of the incredible ‘mix’ we have these days in historical and textual criticism, changing hermeneutics, proclamation, teaching, worship, polities, promotion, managerial skills, social activism, psychological and therapeutic clinical treatments—and so on? How do we approach our churches which are in this ‘mix’ with the same gospel Donovan brought to the Masai? The most powerful of all questions which needs to be answered is, ‘What is the gospel?’ With it is the other question, ‘How does Christ come to the cultures and what does he do in, with and through them, and what is the ultimate outcome of his Lordship in history in regard to them?’ These are questions to which we must address ourselves.
This is not primarily about the life-styles, cultures, politics or structures of churches. It is not about the different ecclesiastical architecture, modes of worship, or reshaping of liturgies. It is primarily about preaching the gospel to people within the cultures of the Church and the churches and the historic continuity of intra-denominational structures, as also with the variety of cultural elements within a denomination as, say, the Uniting Church with its melding of historic denominations and its emerging new forms, as also the Anglican Church with its historical streams of High Church, Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical faith and practices.

It is thus about preaching the gospel as the whole counsel of God, as the gospel of the Kingdom, the gospel of salvation, the everlasting gospel—that which is good news to all humankind and only bad news to those who are about the business of obtaining self-righteousness by their own energies and capacities—those who believe it is within the powers of human beings to accomplish this. It is the gospel which brings men and women into participation in the New Man who is Christ, that is, the community which lives in and by the unity of the Triune Godhead, and which subsists in and by the holy Law of God, the Law of the Divine Community, Himself. This Law which to sinful men and women is the Law which condemns them to judgment and death becomes, via this gospel, to be the Law of life, the Law of love to God and to the neighbour, the latter being not only those in need but those who tend us also in our need.

This, then, is the gospel which can help us to subsist rightly within the polities we have inherited, devised or espoused, for it is a gospel which can so transform our images of God and humanity that we can live together as the eucharistic, societal and eschatological community. Thus loving, we will not idolise the modes, liturgies and theologies we have developed to express our worship and service to God, to the Holy Community and to the world, but be open to the transformation of these eikons which
can have their true being and life in the ‘express image’ of God’s Being, that is, Christ himself along with his holy Bride whom he alone has cleansed and will cleanse, beautified and will beautify, glorified and will glorify. As such the Community of the living image, Christ, will not be an immutable, fixed and cultic community, but the one which refuses to be ideological, iconoclastic and utopian, and which has Christ its Lord walking amongst its constituent communities—these various golden candlesticks of shining witness—reproving, rebuking, encouraging and transforming. He walks as Lord of the Bride until the day of the great Marriage Feast of the Bride and the Lamb when humanity via Christ’s humanity will be wed to his Deity and inducted into the mystery of God—the eternal fellowship of Man and God, as by grace, the glorified humanity partakes of the Divine nature.

EXPERIENCES OF THE PRINCIPLES AS WORKED OUT BY THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

I have had the privilege of preaching the gospel in 25 countries, and to many tribes and cultures within those lands. I select a few relevant incidents.

(i) The Gospel in a Prison Camp

For certain reasons I went through almost two years of trying to see the gospel as relating to all situations of life, especially the life in our Prison group—growing to 36—which met almost nightly to open the bible and to try to understand it, especially as it spoke to us. We determined, as far as was possible, to lay aside all presuppositions and conceptions we had accumulated over the years. I am sure that is not possible, but when we studied a passage such as the Sermon on the Mount it was certainly alive to us. For example, loving and forgiving our enemy—not worrying about tomorrow in regard to food, drink and clothing, and trying to do to others as we would have them do to us. Out of this mixture of men of various church affiliations, and some with none at all, a community developed which moved quietly in the life of that camp. The principle of this life is shown in that magnificent book by Ernest Gordon, *Miracle at the River Kwai*. On returning home I had hoped to work this principle out in society in and within and through the church. I was not equipped well enough to convince folk of this principle, but have always sought to do so personally. When eventually I read Roland Allen’s books I was greatly encouraged.

(ii) Christians’ Caste Problems in Pakistan

Many Christians carried their caste origins into the churches. Records of Vestry Meetings and Parish Councils speak of the elitist elements which dominated congregations often causing perpetual divisions. On occasions I have seen it divide converts from the Punjab of more than one generation, and scheduled caste folk of the Sindh province. This is an extremely complex matter, but I have seen the gospel dissolve difficult situations. Our ‘caste’ problem is also here in Australia in many forms.
(iii) Culture Will Prevent Folk Hearing the Gospel

In 1970 I toured a number of countries in South East Asia. I was told (a) you will never see Chinese (Thais, Filipinos, Japanese, etc.) weep. I saw them weep. (b) Missionaries told me in all seriousness that the concepts of sin are not found in particular cultures. The idea of a saving crucifixion or even crucifixion are unintelligible. We first must teach such concepts and develop a special vocabulary, and this may take, even, generations. So much for Corinth! Response: I saw people of the cultures mentioned above weep when they heard the gospel and somehow the ideas of sin, crucifixion, etc. became intelligible: folk became converted.

HOW DO WE BREAK THROUGH CULTURES?

I believe it is by preaching the gospel, though not a la our western gospel such as we have in certain missions and crusades. At the risk of sounding simplistic I would point to two matters of the gospel as penetrating all cultures and making great sense. (a) I Corinthians 1:17—2:5 tells us it must be the word of the Cross for this is the wisdom and power of God—Christ crucified, and (b) the doctrine of the Trinity, the Fatherhood of God’s family, revealed by Christ, and incorporation into that family dissolves the barriers of caste, gender, social position—and so on. Both these elements really constitute the gospel proper. If we are loth to preach them, or unable to do so, nothing of any value will be achieved.

We need to ask ourselves whether these elements are being properly preached in our own land, in our churches, and whether we, personally, understand them, live them and proclaim them.