

# Vincent J Donovan: Christianity Rediscovered - an epistle from the Masai

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A wonderful, amazing book, beautifully written and of enduring value not just for Africa but also for mission in this country. Donovan was a Roman Catholic mission priest working amongst the Masai of N Tanzania.

## Preface

This book is about the church at home as much as it is about taking the gospel to the Masai; the parish church could very well be the mission compound of the American scene, a beleaguered, outpost colony in an alien world. What is mission - *to have the courage to go with people to a place that neither you nor they have ever been to before*. The book describes attempt to empower a particular people with the freedom and total responsibility of the gospel. *'The unwritten melody that haunts this book ever so faintly, the new song waiting to be sung in place of the hymn of salvation, is simply the song of creation. To move away from the theology of salvation to the theology of creation may be the task of our time'* viii.

## Introduction

Voyage of discovery. *'A participant in a discovery such as this will feel none of the elation and contentment found by a mathematician whose discovery can be satisfactorily demonstrated to his colleagues, nor any of that found in a doctor or a scientist whose breakthrough will soon make itself felt in the world. The experience of discovery such as I am describing is rather more like the loneliness of a person who has climbed to a mountain peak and sees spread out around him the most beautiful panoramic vision and vista and finds it completely impossible to describe that vision, or even to discuss it, except with someone who agrees to climb that peak in turn'*. 2

## 1. One hundred years in East Africa

Phases:

1. First missionaries responded to slave trade - bought slaves, set up mission compounds for them
2. Set up schools; this became the missionary method
3. New independent govts asked for social aid instead
4. West then recognised to be mission field too; and questioning began on the validity of foisting our faith on other peoples
5. Mission became aid; we became a kind of ecclesiastical peace corps

## 2. The Masai

Author was a young Catholic priest in Loliondo mission, nr Arusha. Frustrated that 7 years of mission base has produced not one Christian. Decided to leave base, evangelise by visiting Masai communities on foot.

Summary of Masai way of life.

Agreement with first community to hold weekly discussions of Christian faith.

## 3. A time to be silent and a time to think

Examples of different cultural ways of relating.

*'As I began to ponder the evangelization of the Masai, I had to realize that God enables a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal, racial customs and traditions. In this realization would have to rest my whole approach to the evangelization of the Masai'* 30

As he tried to disentangle the gospel from own culture he had to admit he didn't know what it was. Needed to begin by cleansing his mind - tabula rasa.

Criteria for measuring what the church does today - is it biblical, is it evangelical, is it scriptural?

Paul's missionary journeys - 3 in 10 years, after which Paul regarded his work there as complete. Missionary work is to take the gospel to every area - to evangelise a minority. Plant it, not grow it.

#### 4. A time to speak and a time to act

Accounts of conversations with Masai. Asked what they thought about God, and listened; then you answer their questions, not yours. Astonishing account of how he explained God using their word for God, starting from Abraham, nomadic, and 12 tribes; read it this way and it seems written for them, remote from us.

Their God is a remote, high God. Paganism. Big contribution just to free them from their idea of God.

*'No nation, no culture on earth could ever have come to the notion of continuing creation. It is probably at this point that we begin to realize that revelation, as it comes to us - the gospel, the secret hidden from the beginning of the world - is outside every culture, is supercultural. It comes from outside our cultures and yet is destined for all of them - a supracultural, unchanging message of good news'* 47-8.

No other religion or agency has the capability to bring peace between peoples.

Problems in our background:

- we were sent out as church-builders; to preach the church, not Christianity; salvation is not a magic formula produced by a secret mixture of sacraments and church membership.
- doctrine of sin; selling guilt is not our mission. He tried to convey concept of sin. Should have preached power of forgiveness. They knew about sin; but not about forgiveness. Apostles in NT don't bang on about sin; that comes later, after conversion. The only kind of sin there is in the world is forgiven sin. That's what the good news is.

#### 5. What do you think of the Christ?

How he explained Jesus.

Power of parables; recast.

Breathtaking; notes not possible.



#### 6. The Response

After presenting God and Jesus Christ (over one year) he said he had finished; up to them to decide to accept or reject the message. They did; as community, collectively. Tillich: *beyond everything else, the church is simply and primarily a group of people who express a new reality by which they have been grasped.* 84

Concept of community, which we have almost entirely lost. We have many idols; but individualism and love of organization are two of the strongest. How seriously do we consider possibility that Christianity is really directed primarily at the community? Can it make any sense outside the community?

#### 7. A time for laughter, and a time for tears

Difficulty of finding time to continue evangelism and care for new Christian communities.

One group turned down the gospel because they didn't want to reach outside their community. We do it too.

*'The universal church is not immune to the same weakness. It is amazing, how, in every crisis in world history, the church has the temptation to react in an inturnd way. "Straighten out the calendar of the saints", it says, "or purge some of the more outlandish ones on the list. Reform Canon Law. Revise the seminary curriculum or structure. Make new laws about the priesthood or the religious life. Clean up the liturgy. Tidy up the sacraments. Be good and the world will come to you.'*

And each time the thing that causes the crisis is outside the church. Instead of reaching out and reacting to the crisis where it exists, in a realistic way, the church turns inward and cleans its own house. Some of that house-cleaning doesn't have very far-reaching effects, and the reforms never really touch the cause of the crisis. After a time, the revamped liturgy grows stale and boring; the eucharist ceases to be an *announcing* of the death of the Lord, the sacraments become magic again; ecumenism, forgetting its main purpose "that the whole world may believe", becomes clubby and suburban; and youth goes its own way. The ferment and change and revolution are outside, and an inward-turned church never seems to realize why its reforms do not touch the world.

Even now it is only our contact with the pagan world, with the world that is not Christian, that has kept us honest and true to ourselves. And it is when we have turned in on ourselves, and away from that world to which we were sent, that we have become stale and decaying and irrelevant. A church that turns in on itself is no longer a church. A church that turns in on itself will surely die. Many have died in history.' 104-5.

Ole Sikii - the natural spiritual leader in the community.

Eucharist - with words of institution from Mt, no liturgy. They shared it; breaking own customs about women, whose presence pollutes food... Insisted on neither slave nor free, etc.

If you pass on an interpreted gospel you forget that yours isn't the only interpretation possible.



## 8. Churches: the new, the young, and the particular

Important in building up a young church not to stay one day longer than necessary; they have to work it out themselves. Teaching on prayer. Jesus taught only one prayer; so did he. Pagan idea of prayer is that all prayers are directed to a remote God who set the world in motion and remains at a distance from it, whose intervention would thus be a miracle. 'This pagan idea of God is not far removed from the idea of God so often clung to by members of our Christian societies who no longer teach their children to pray because they don't want their children "to believe that God could interfere with the workings of the universe" just to answer their little prayers, to suspend the unchanging laws of nature for their benefit, to work miracles. After all, they are the same laws which govern human sickness and life and death and set the stars on their course and hold the planets in their orbits.

The framework for this objection to prayer, found even in Christian lands, is strange. It is an objection based on the idea of a closed and finished creation, an idea based on the impossibility of God having any interest in or power over the creation he set in inexorable motion. Indeed, despite the fact that this idea is so often found among Christian people, it is a pagan idea. And it is a real paralyzer of prayer.

*'We Christians profess to believe in a continuing creation. We believe that God is continuing to create and to hold in existence the world and everything in it: the atom, and the molecule, the mountain and the chair, the rocket hurtling through space, the television set, my finger and my mind: that if God ceased to create, took away his creative presence, all these things, and we ourselves, would cease to exist on the instant. This creative power is acting now and here. The purpose of prayer is to open us up fully to that power.'* 133-4

*'Paganism is a closed and fatalistic system. What we are asking them to believe, in their prayers, is not that the laws of the universe are being suspended, but that creation is open-ended and continuing'* 136.

Witch doctor. *'As I witnessed the work of the witch doctor I also felt sad and slightly sick, if not ashamed. Every single thing I saw him do, I recognized, not from my acquaintance with other pagan religions, but from my experience as a priest in our own christian religion. The temples or sacred places kept up at the people's expense and labor; the class apart, witch doctors or priests, the privileged ones, the ones who make themselves the most important in the religious community, the ones who alone can talk to God, whether it be through words of incantation and blessing, or words of consecration and absolution; the ordinary people, especially women, completely at the mercy and whim and arbitrariness and exclusiveness of the holy one - not reaching the throne of God, or even understanding the word of God, except through him; the discrimination against women; the offerings for the sacrifice, and the daily sacrifice itself; the manipulation of sacred signs and relics; the air of unfathomable mystery about it all. There is scarcely a pagan trick that we Christians have overlooked or missed.'* 138

Enlightenment of seeing real community; each one valued, talents of individuals valued by all because present in the community; lack of competition; use of gifts. We have a hierarchic structure, and have produced a hierarchic priesthood; they have a communitarian one, and should be allowed to respond with their own valid form of the priesthood. Rails against concept of priesthood.

## 9. Signs of the times

*'The gospel is the affair of the missionary, and the interpretation of the gospel is the affair of the people who hear that gospel. The gospel cannot be identified with social and political systems, as it so often has been.*

*'The gospel is none of these things. The gospel is not progress or development. It is not nation building. It is not adult education. It is not a school system. It is not a health campaign. It is not a five-year plan. It is not an economic program. It is not a ranching scheme or water development. It is not an independence movement. It is not the freedom fighters. It is not a liberation movement. It is not the black power movement. It is not the civil rights movement. It is not violent revolution.'*

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Identify gospel with system, and you leave future generations the task of disentangling them. Our business is the establishment of kingdom. To accept any system as gospel is to turn it into a religion. Gospel and development are connected; but not identified. We should be uncompromising adversaries of injustice and oppression, of unjust structures of economic and social exploitation, but without necessarily becoming advocates of an opposing political and economic structure and system. We are not advocates of any system, rather adversaries of injustice.

## 10. The winds of change

How they teach. The speaker interjects 'say one', 'say two' etc at intervals, and the audience has to repeat the number; so they have to keep listening...

Our individualism says 'I think, therefore I am'. They would say, 'I am known, therefore I am'.

## An African creed

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen. P 200



Photos from a Masai village near Kibaya, Tanzania, by Alison Morgan

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