

MEDIUMS, MARTYRS AND MORALS*

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EVERY UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT and every academic discipline needs its justification. For its own devotees a discipline may well justify itself simply in terms of the pursuit of truth, but for those outside any particular magic circle and especially for university administrators and government piper-payers dividing up a limited cake among many bidders, the justification will have to be couched in some sort of social form. Even the richest university is not likely to maintain indefinitely a discipline whose only point is the esoteric interest of its experts. This is as true of Religious Studies as of anything else and an inaugural lecture seems as suitable a moment as any for mapping out the rough lines of an appropriate *apologia*. Of course, the *apologia* that I offer will not be quite the same as that which my colleagues might provide. Nevertheless, I would hope that my own way of justifying the discipline and the Department of Religious Studies is not merely subjective, but at least a fair appraisal from the viewpoint of today's Zimbabwe of some of the commanding heights of what is, on any standards, a vast and intriguing territory.

I am not the first to attempt this exercise within this university. My predecessor, the first Professor of Theology, Robert Craig, gave his inaugural lecture here on 20 April 1964. In one way he was, to be precise, not my predecessor because he was Professor of Theology, I of Religious Studies. Our department was renamed three years ago. Yet it is noticeable that his lecture was entitled *Religion, Its Reality and Its Relevance*. We were, then, we may claim, in reality a Department of Religious Studies from the start, as we are explicitly today. Equally, when we changed our name, we did not abandon a concern for theology. We remain committed to the view that the University of Zimbabwe needs the study of Christian theology, but that Christian theology here, or anywhere, is almost bound to miss its own target if it avoids its proper context, the study of religions.

Where we part company with Professor Craig and also with his successor, Professor T. A. Burkill, is not a recognition of religion beyond the biblical and Christian tradition, but rather in the localization of that wider recognition. Reading their inaugural lectures, the one delivered in 1964, the other in May 1971, I was struck by the total absence from both of the slightest reference to the traditional religions of Africa. The Department had been

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located very clearly within a tradition of Anglo-Saxon theological thought. It was not located mentally in any significant way within the continent wherein it was placed physically. That was a weakness. The religious experience of Africa is not to be so easily dismissed. It is in fact a highly rewarding subject of study and research, on any grounds; all the more if one is in fact at work in the context of today's Zimbabwe, endeavouring as it is to reappropriate in a living way its innate cultural tradition, while not rejecting — needless to say — the vast positive acquisitions drawn from abroad over the last hundred years. At the heart of Zimbabwe's traditional culture lay the religious understanding of its people. Equally, among the acquisitions of the last century nothing has been more taken to the heart of many Zimbabweans than Christian faith. Our department has to stand upon the knife edge where those two traditions meet.

While theoretically the task of a Department of Religious Studies embraces all religions, there has in practice to be a recognition of priorities; ours is to focus attention upon what is most significant for the society of Zimbabwe and its African neighbours: the three great streams of traditional religion, Christianity and Islam.

These religions, their adherents, their beliefs, their interaction with society, actual or potential, are things of great public significance, for the unbeliever as well as for the believer. The social task of a university department is to concentrate its powers of scholarship, interpretation and pedagogy upon that which manifestly bears upon man, here and now. It is our claim that today as much as ever religion is immensely important for the understanding and enhancement of human experience. It is not something primarily 'primitive', 'medieval', or of antiquarian interest. It is essentially a modern reality, as it has always been, something culturally continuous with the contemporary world, and to be found present in both the latter's conservative and its radical dimensions. The study of religion is an extremely complex, multi-faceted, exercise — a process which cannot be short-circuited, and which is no more safely dispensable than that of any other major aspect of human living. That is the basic ground of our *apologia* — a ground as sound for the believer in any religion or in none. We do not base our existence as a department in a modern university on the ground of the existence of God or the objectivity of the object of religious belief, but on the objectivity and influence of religion itself as an on-going human reality.

One way in which the social importance of religion is demonstrated is the number of its full-time practitioners and their wider influence. It is one task of a university to service the major public professions and to enable their members to maintain and improve their specific expertise. A Department of Religious Studies has the responsibility not only of helping society understand religion, but also of helping religion and its leaders understand themselves. Where this does not happen, not only may the churches themselves be gravely hampered in their work, not only will they be diminished in their self-

understanding and intellectual flexibility, but society as a whole is left with churches which may be no less influential for being less critically self-aware, less enlightened in their approach to the relationship between religion and society. It is, then, greatly in the interests of society to have a well educated clergy rather than a poorly educated one. A university Department of Religious Studies is one way in which society not only recognizes religion but also influences it, thus to some extent ensuring against the dominance of reactionary religion — a danger to which the modern world remains very much exposed as we may observe, for example, in the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran.

A department such as ours should, then, be the point not only at which different religious traditions meet but also where a constant dialogue is in progress between religion and society. Such a dialogue is to be conducted without reductionism. Religion is not here to be explained away in terms of psychology, sociology, politics or economics by any full surrender to the dogmas of Freud, Marx or Durkheim. It is accepted as a reality in its own terms, though its understanding does require the constant intervention of psychology, sociology, politics and economics, as abrasive tools of analysis, for religion does not constitute a segregated area of reality but one aspect of man's finally single experience.

Much of our subject can, doubtless, be studied in other departments and, of course, it is. We have no complaint that Sociology or History prey upon a great deal of religious material. They have the right to take as much as is of use for their own discipline. It is, indeed, a homage to the importance of our subject that they take a great deal. Here, as throughout the academic world, there is bound to be some overlapping, especially at the more humdrum and quantitative level. Yet for the study of religion in itself the quantitative must, I believe, remain of rather secondary significance. We are certainly interested in Christians and Buddhists, but we are basically a great deal more interested in the Christ and the Buddha. If we wish to grasp the specificity of religion and its peculiar power, we need to focus our attention above all upon its high and formative points, upon the people, moments, ways of behaviour which through some sort of special spiritual intensity escape the regular, more predictable patterns of human living (including more conventional religious behaviour) to forge anew a compelling communicable vision. It is this that millions of less intense people subsequently accept as normative in the understanding of themselves and the world.

It is in an attempt to find some sort of structure for the commanding heights of religious experience that I wish now to turn your attention to mediums, martyrs, morals and also memories, and I intend to illustrate this synthesis above all in African terms.

The unpredictable Christ is certainly not to be dissociated from the predictable Christian. One of our primary concerns, indeed, is just how to link them. The sociology of religion suggests a link in the routinization of charisma.

However charismatic the prophet, the charisma to survive must needs be routinized through the establishment of predictable structure including, very especially, ritual structure. Ritual, while not necessarily or specifically a religious phenomenon, is the great common carrier and communicator of religious reality. It is, nevertheless, not self-justifying. Doubtless in established churches ritual can and does, to some extent, become an end in itself (though even then one would probably always be able to find a further hidden agenda, aesthetic or social), but healthy ritual always points, and pretty clearly points, to things outside itself: there is a 'foundation charter' behind it and there is a message of moral and social purpose before it.

Take the 'foundation charter'. It is the nature of ritual to be performed on account of some past authority which it recalls more or less explicitly. At its most explicit this becomes a formal *memoriale*: do this in memory of me. It recalls some unforgettable moment in history, a theophany, the death of a martyr, and the authoritative message of a medium or prophet interpreting that moment. This is, of course, particularly clear in that ritual which, I would suggest, is the most symbolically comprehensive of all — the Christian mass, an explicit memorial meal of the death of Jesus of Nazareth, performed at his own command. But good ritual looks forward still more than it looks back: it renews in fact the essentially non-ritual concerns of the originating moment, concerns of moral and social order, of claiming the future, of symbolically asserting the primacy of the spiritual within the material, of weaving an image of healing and the salvation of man. Ritual, then, while being the common language and tool of religion, is in no way its source or its *raison d'être*. It points to non-ritual. It is striking that the most religiously decisive figures are seldom themselves ritual specialists. Here again the Christian example is enlightening: if the mass is ritual, *par excellence*, it recalls Jesus who was in no way whatsoever, so far as is recorded, a ritualist. Religion is carried on and applied by ritual, it is not begun by it. It is begun, just as it is revitalized, by the medium or prophet, and the martyr.

Raymond Firth, in his magnificent sociological study *Rank and Religion in Tikopia*,¹ establishes a contrast between the medium and the prophet: the medium does not need to be personally identified with the supernatural message received through him as does the prophet. He is, indeed, more or less unconscious and in a trance, while the spirit speaks directly, not to him but through him, *oratio recta*. The medium has not, as a consequence, to bear personal responsibility for its interpretation as had Elijah, Isaiah or Jeremiah. Once the message is given, the state of spirit possession terminated, the medium's role is over. The prophet, on the contrary, passes on the message he has received through his own deliberate words and actions, *oratio obliqua*. He remains morally one with the word that he proclaims and, if that word is unpopular, he will have to suffer for it. In formal terms Firth's distinction is a

¹R. Firth, *Rank and Religion in Tikopia* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1970), 33-4.

genuine one, and it is certainly possible in practice to separate the two phenomena to a considerable extent. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to argue for a systematic separation of the two. A prophet must obtain his message and mission from some sort of very special personal experience, and that experience is often mediumistic. In a society where mediums are an important part of the culture, a prophet is most likely to be a medium, just as in very priest-ridden churches a prophet is very likely to be a priest.

To illustrate this one cannot do better than to refer to Shona mediums and, very particularly, the part they played in the first Chimurenga of 1896-7. Mediums are crucial to Shona culture and they cannot well be restricted, like Tikopian mediums, within Firth's rather narrow typology. Indeed it is widely true in Africa that the strictly mediumistic activities of the *n'anga* are a fairly small part of a wider pastoral or priestly ministry though not, normally, a particularly prophetic ministry. Through them the ancestral spirits regulate the morals of family and clan. But the mediums of the great Mhondoro have frequently had a wider role. That of Chaminuka in the wars against the Ndebele, that of Nehanda and Kagubi in the first Chimurenga became far more that of a prophet than — in Firth's typology — that of a mere medium.²

In 1967 Professor Terence Ranger in his classic *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7* went so far as to claim — in this representing much earlier opinion — that the religious personalities of the revolt, like Mkwati, Kagubi and Nehanda, were in fact its true political leaders, combining prophetic fervour with an amazingly wide-ranging political skill. Kagubi, in particular, he maintained, played 'a very important role in co-ordinating the rising at a supra-tribal level'.³ More recently other historians, especially Julian Cobbing and David Beach,⁴ have sharply challenged this thesis and demonstrated, on the whole fairly convincingly, that the leadership of the rising, both among the Ndebele and among the Shona, was far more firmly in lay and chiefly hands than Ranger had argued. In terms of power, of the effective initiation and co-ordination of the movements of rebellion, this is doubtless the case.⁵ Our conclusion, nevertheless, should not be that Kagubi and Nehanda did not matter, that the popular mythology which has remembered them so emphatically is somehow groundless. It means rather that their truly religious and prophetic function should not, in interpretation, be over-politicized. Theirs was not so much one of straight political leadership. It is in fact unlikely to be a

²For example, cf. the role of Nuer prophets like Ngundeng, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956), 303-10, or that of Dinka prophets, G. Lienhardt, *Diynity and Experience. The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961).

³T.O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7* (London, Heinemann, 1967), 224.

⁴J.R.D. Cobbing, 'The absent priesthood: Another look at the Rhodesian Risings of 1896-7', *The Journal of African History* (1977), XVIII, 61-84; D.N. Beach, '"Chimurenga": The Shona Risings of 1896-7', *ibid.* (1979), XX, 395-420; D.N. Beach, 'Revolt in Southern Rhodesia', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1980), XIII, 103-8.

⁵Note, nevertheless that, in reply to Cobbing's 'Absent priesthood', Ranger has promised us a further article to be entitled 'The priests and prophets return'.

prophetic stance for a priest to become prime minister even in a state of emergency. His influence is not thereby enhanced. The prophetic role is rather one of the instilling of enthusiasm and a more than rational conviction, of moral interpretation, of the construction and enhancement of an on-going tradition of meaning, of the symbolization of a cause in a single person.

The achievement of Kagubi and Nehanda should, I suspect, be seen on such lines. It had, furthermore, not a little to do with their dying, executed in a colonial prison in 1898, though it is true that Kagubi's Christian baptism immediately before execution adds a further touch of ambiguity — yet a very authentic one — to his message. He had proclaimed national salvation through the killing of the White invaders. It had not worked. Now by becoming one of the first of his people to be baptized a Catholic Christian, while surely not ceasing to be a Shona nationalist, he did in fact point prophetically enough to the future. Nor should the deaths of Nehanda and Kagubi be entirely separated in our view from that of the Anglican catechist, Bernard Mizeki, upon the other side. The scope of prophetic martyrdom at that point can encompass both. When in April 1977, in the second Chimurenga, Basil Nyabadza, priest of the little church of St Francis, Makoni, was shot at night by security forces beside his church, these two martyr traditions — that of Nehanda upon the one side, Mizeki upon the other — somehow coalesced. Each prophet, each martyr-witness, has his limitation; yet each from a brief localized set of events generates a myth, an on-going *memoriale*, a story with its own in-built moral imperative for people to come.

Eighty years earlier than Kagubi and Nehanda there lived two, perhaps still more remarkable, African prophets — Nxele and Ntsikana. These two Xhosa mediums, one of whom died in 1820, the other in 1821, present in an extraordinary way the intellectual and moral alternatives that Africans had then, and have had many times since, to face. As a recent writer, J. B. Peires, has remarked, 'The contrast between the two would surely be taken for a myth if it were not known to be a reality'.⁶ At the time they lived, British colonialism was pressing upon the Xhosa and driving them eastward from their homes with a ruthlessness that they had previously never experienced. Both Nxele and Ntsikana were mediums who had come into some contact with Christianity. Nxele reacted to become the prophet of violent resistance, a true predecessor to Kagubi. He died attempting to escape from Robben Island. Ntsikana was the pacifist, the preacher of submission, but of much more than submission. He was the author of some of the most powerful oral literature of Southern Africa — his Great Hymn above all.⁷ Like Jeremiah he taught by symbols. As he lay dying, he asked his family to bury him in the ground in the Christian way.

⁶J. B. Peires, 'Nxele, Ntsikana and the origins of the Xhosa religious reaction', *The Journal of African History* (1979), XX, 51-61.

⁷J. Hodgson, *Ntsikana's 'Great Hymn'* (Cape Town, Univ. of Cape Town, Centre for African Studies, 1980).

When they appeared to hesitate he grasped a wooden spade and turned the first sods. Ten thousand men marched behind Nxele in his attack upon Grahams-town, hardly a handful of people were convinced by Ntsikana, yet many millions have since sung his hymns. If prophecy is largely concerned with evil and the proper response to it, it is likely to oscillate between the two poles of militant resistance and pacifism. This has seldom been better shown than in the contrast between Nxele and Ntsikana.

Twenty-five years after Kagubi, in 1921, Simon Kimbangu began one of the most striking of prophetic movements in modern Africa in the country of the Bakongo. He had many of the characteristics of a traditional medium, an *ngunza*; he had also a Christian, Baptist, background and the conviction that God had called him personally to a mission of preaching and healing. His attitude to authority appears consistently pacifist, his teaching both theistic and moralistic. Crowds flocked to hear him. Simon was quickly judged a threat to colonial order; he was arrested, flogged during his trial, and sentenced to death on the flimsiest of charges. The sentence was commuted by the King of the Belgians to one of life imprisonment and for thirty years Kimbangu remained in prison, never once permitted a visit by either a member of his family or a Protestant pastor. He died on a Friday afternoon in October 1951. Out of that long silence grew the Kimbanguist *Eglise*.

Twentieth-century Africa has been replete with prophets and a vast literature has arisen concerning them since Bengt Sundkler wrote in 1948 his seminal *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.⁸ Between them and mediums there are obvious links of similarity or — at times — near identity. Their individual significance varies. Only a few are truly prophetic. As a whole they represent a wrestling between the tradition of the medium and the tradition of the Bible as rural society as a whole passes through the pangs of altering its prime religious identity. If I have selected Kimbangu from among them, it is because he seems to me to express what this is all about at its most decisive but also most enigmatic. There is an apparently unbridgeable gap in causality between those few months of almost incoherent mission in 1921 and the great Kimbanguist church of today. Despite the many books and scores of articles devoted to him, he remains a figure of mystery which we can hardly dissect in cool secular terms. Perhaps more than anyone else in modern African history he is a Christ-figure — medium and prophet, suffering servant, the giver of a foundation charter for what is today a large and thriving community.

The controversy over the role of mediums in the Chimurenga is not entirely unlike that provoked at much the same time concerning the political character of Jesus of Nazareth. What sort of a prophet was he? Just one year after Ranger's *Revolt* Professor S. G. F. Brandon published his remarkable study, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which he claimed that Jesus had been far more of a political figure than the gospels suggest and that it was precisely

⁸B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London, Lutterworth Press, 1948).

as a dangerous rebel leader that he was executed by the Romans. The gospels depict Jesus in frequent conflict with the 'collaborationist' Sadducees and Pharisees, they are quite silent about his opinion of the Jewish nationalist resistance movement, the Zealots. They do, however, consistently portray him as someone who had rejected a pursuit of 'the kingdoms of the world' (Matt. 4:8) as his greatest temptation, who taught his followers in the Sermon on the Mount to shun violent resistance and who, when directly challenged over the morality of paying the imperial taxes, replied 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's'. Yet Brandon, and he was by no means the first scholar so to argue, maintained that this sort of picture of Jesus was a highly misleading one. It was a picture influenced more by the preoccupations of second generation Roman Christians than by the historical facts. For him Jesus' plan during his last free days in Jerusalem had been no less than a 'Messianic *coup d'état*' against the existing order. It was 'dynamic political action of a revolutionary kind', 'a direct challenge to the Roman government of Judaea'. Jesus' action in the Temple was, Brandon even suggests, part of a wider 'concerted attack' in which the main force of the Zealots led by Barabbas assaulted the Romans themselves in the fortress of the Antonia.⁹

Jesus, the Freedom Fighter, the Kagubi, the Nxele, organizer of a messianic *coup d'état*, is a beguiling figure, especially in an age of liberation theology. Alas, while we cannot here explore the ins and outs of this exceedingly learned controversy, we have, I think, to accept that Brandon's arguments have been refuted.¹⁰ Jesus was far too consistently unZealotlike. While he was not by any means an 'other-worldly' prophet uninterested in the things of here and now, justice and oppression, he did quite deliberately transcend the exceedingly narrow, nationalist and essentially reactionary outlook of his Zealot contemporaries. Far from sharing with Barabbas a seat on the revolutionary central committee, he was a good deal nearer to Jeremiah, Ntsikana, and Kimbangu.

Brandon dealt with Jesus a little too much in the way in which Ranger dealt with Kagubi: both tried to force their religious heroes into overly political categories. It is worth noting in passing how well these two books of 1967-8 reflect the religious mood of those years with its rather optimistic rechanneling of religious fervour in political directions — the age of the conference of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, of the World Council at Uppsala. Of course some prophets are, and need to be, a good deal more overtly political than others. On the whole, however, their *raison d'être* is not to organize the coming kingdom on the model of some immediate revolutionary programme. The prophet's task is rather to insinuate and symbolize his vision in a more immediately impractical, a more ultimately undefeatable way.

As we see again and again, he or she may well do this most decisively by

⁹S.G.F. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (London, Batsford, 1968), 146-8.

¹⁰See for example, D.R. Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus* (Leiden, Brill, 1971).

martyrdom, as Socrates did. 'Unless the seed going into the earth die . . . ' There is a strange, almost perverse, consistency in this odd world of ours between prophecy and martyrdom. It is, first of all, a biblical and Christian theme as Professor Geoffrey Lampe has recently stressed in a beautiful little posthumous study 'Martyrdom and Inspiration'.¹¹ Jesus' own scathing denunciation of Scribes and Pharisees as 'sons of those who murdered the prophets . . . Jerusalem, Jerusalem, still killing the Prophets' (Matt. 23:31) doubtless helped to ensure that he himself went the same way. When Stephen, the Christian protomartyr, is stoned to death he is depicted by the author of *Acts* as continuing the tradition. But this is not just a biblical and Christian motif; it is rather a central pattern of religion itself.

In the letter to the Romans Paul commented on the meaning of Jesus' death in oft-quoted words: 'While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man — though, perhaps, for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we are yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 6: 6–8). If Christians have used these verses to suggest the unique moral character of what Jesus did, they could perhaps still better be taken as referring to a peak of creative self-sacrifice which is to be found on rare occasion in many of man's noblest traditions. When Maximilian Kolbe in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz volunteered to replace another prisoner in the starvation chamber, and died there encouraging his fellow victims to the last, he became, perhaps, the most perfect such figure of our age: in that very hell he incarnated a morality of love against one of hate. His memory lives on. But his very achievement of being in the mid-twentieth century a priest-prophet turned martyr authenticates the possibility of many such a person in the more easily myth-derided past. You cannot very easily demythologize Maximilian Kolbe, any more than you can really very successfully demythologize Nxele and Ntsikana or Basil Nyabadza. Nor, for that matter, Nelson Mandela, enduring twenty years of imprisonment on Robben Island for the freedom of his people. These people really do exist. They do accept suffering and death for the sake of the message that they proclaim, and their combination of witness and suffering really does forge an on-going moral tradition, the living memorial or a committed community.

Let us turn now to a seemingly far more mythical figure — the 'priest-king' destined never to die in his bed of old age, who dominated the vast tapestry of Sir James Frazer's stupendous survey of religious phenomena, *The Golden Bough*.¹² For Frazer the key for the interpretation of religion was the King-Priest in the grove of Diana at Nemi in classical times, awaiting night by night the murderer who would inherit his crown and continue his function. The king

¹¹G.W.H. Lampe, 'Martyrdom and inspiration', in W. Horbury and B. McNeil (eds), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament* (Cambridge, Univ. Press, 1981), 118–35.

¹²J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London, Macmillan, 2 vols, 1890).

must so die as not to die. The king never dies. Long live the king. Upon his death and life depends the life of nature and society. Frazer seemed to imagine that if some such mystical formula can be found at the heart of all religion, Christianity included, then they must all be equally invalid.

Frazer did stand in need of some hard contemporary evidence that such things were not just part of the classical imagination, and he found his best evidence in reports which anthropologists like the Seligmans brought back to Europe early this century from the Sudan about the customs of the Shilluk and Dinka. They indeed, it seemed, really did possess divine kings who, generation after generation, were never allowed to die naturally but either arranged their own deaths or were deliberately killed by their subjects, on the principle of Caiphas that 'one man should die for the people so that the whole nation should not perish' (John 11:50). As the author of the fourth gospel commented, 'He, being high priest that year, prophesied'. Here among Shilluk and Dinka the myth at the heart of all religion was, apparently, still being factually realized.

Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard disagreed. Probably the most distinguished social anthropologist of this century, he had ceased to share Frazer's agnosticism and perhaps in some unformulated way he felt that, if the Shilluk king's ritual murder really never took place, this somehow weakened the ground beneath Frazer's vast debunking of religion. Anyway, when in 1948 he delivered the Frazer lecture, Evans-Pritchard devoted himself to demythologizing Shilluk regicide. He greatly doubted whether Shilluk kings had ever really been killed in the traditional way when they became sick or old. The myth of regicide, he argued, was really simply a cloak for a socio-political order in which the royal power was weak and rebellions frequently occurred.¹³

I greatly admire Evans-Pritchard, but here one has to disagree. It really will not do. The Shilluk evidence in recent times may be inconclusive but that for their closely related Dinka neighbours is not. No-one, I think, can read Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience* and be left with any doubt that, well into the twentieth century, aged Masters of the Fishing Spear really have died at the hands of their friends and followers. If this is true for the Dinka Spear Master, it seems unlikely that mystical regicide never had a factual basis in the case of the Shilluk *Reth*. For the British colonial authority murdering an aged chief, with or without his consent, was — quite understandably — a disgraceful and primitive custom, to be stamped out. I would suggest that, from both the Dinka perspective and that of world religions, it could also be seen as providing a peak of spiritual and moral experience, to be put beside creative martyr deaths in so many other traditions. The identification, world-wide, of hints of Frazer's central myth, far from destroying its inner objective credibility witnesses rather to a sort of trans-cultural spiritual need. The heroic

¹³E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The divine kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan', in his *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London, Faber and Faber, 1962), 66-86.

meeting of such need seems to me already a kind of truth, rather than a kind of falsehood.

The Masters of the Fishing Spear, we are told, 'carry the life' of their people, they are 'the lamps of the Dinka'.¹⁴ Mediums, they and they alone are possessed by the divinity *Ring* (flesh) which, Lienhardt explains, is 'the principal inspiration of masters of the fishing-spear, the grounds of their ability ideally to "light the way", to pronounce and define truth, to prevail in prayers, and to reconcile conflicting groups and interests'.¹⁵

In much of this the Spear Master is not very different from many other sacred chiefly figures. What is special to him, as to the Shilluk *Reth* and the divine queen of the Lovedu, is that he is also *ex professo* a martyr-to-be. He does not kill himself. In some cases he may indeed be killed by his people against his will, but typically and also in many cases in historical fact, an aged Master has invited his people to bury him alive — not for his sake but for theirs. Lying in his grave, he will give his people his last advice. When he ceases to speak, they will cover him with dung and out of death, freely accepted, life will be renewed. In a typical Dinka text we read how 'He will not be afraid of death; he will be put into the earth while singing his songs. Nobody among his people will wail or cry because their man is dead. They will be joyful because their master of the fishing spear will give them life'.¹⁶

Strange and horrifying as such a rite may seem to the outsider, is it so much more strange than the sacrificial willingness of many a soldier to die for his country, or, again, the confidence of Jesus when going to his death: 'He began to teach them that the Son of Man must . . . be killed, and after three days rise again' (Mark 8:31)? In the Spear Master, as in Jesus, we have a bonding together of the bearer of absolute truth, sacrificial death and the ordered ethical life of man, the new covenant — medium, martyr, morality.

The death of a Master of the Fishing Spear is not merely exemplary, indeed it is hardly exemplary at all; it is, rather, vicarious and expiatory. It is in fact redemptive. It seems silly for Christian theologians to want to whittle down the sense of Christ's death into a matter of mere exemplarity, when the martyr deaths of historic figures across the world are clearly so much more. Martyrdom is the sealing through suffering and death of commitment to a cause held absolutely with love of one's fellow men, in a way so powerfully to commend the martyr's message as to require its remembrance: its handing on, its *traditio*. It originates a memorial ritual and around it a moral community. The further martyrdom of disciples reinforces the strength of both. Each dying Spear Master renews the meaning of the rituals. The death of each freedom fighter, we may well remember this 16 June, Soweto Day, enhances the sacred significance of their cause. The early Christians triumphed especially through their uncompromising commitment to the acceptance of martyrdom: *Sanguis*

¹⁴Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, 316, 141.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 300.

martyrum. It is through the constancy of the martyr and the near-martyr confessor in prison — whether it be the prisons of ancient Rome, of Auschwitz, of Robben Island, of the Gulag Archipelago, that prophecy is proved, that certain principles of living are witnessed to compellingly as having an absolutely absolute claim, come fair weather, come foul weather, upon man.

Within the material order it seems impossible to find an absolute morality. It is neither morally good nor bad that a volcano erupts to destroy the towns and kill the people in the vicinity. It is not wicked for a lion to devour a lamb, nor for a crocodile to snatch to her death the woman washing clothes in the river. If man is but the development of the lion or the ape with an enlarged cranial capacity, he may grow more shrewd in his lifestyle, more calculating in his treatment of others, but a principle of material utility cannot turn itself into a quite different one of moral obligation. In material terms there is no evident reason why we should not wipe out a backward tribe and give their land to the more technically advanced. The survival of the fittest is a sensible enough norm in terms of the overall advantage of the race.

If man is perennially conscious that the order of power, of efficiency, even of the greatest benefit of the greatest number, is not an adequately exacting norm for the conduct of human affairs, it is because we cannot escape the sense of there being an absolute morality. Man is not, obviously enough, compelled to be good, but — unlike the crocodile — he consciously belongs to an ethical world in which action is always judgeable in ultimately moral terms. Like Kant I find it hard to make sense of such a predicament except by positing an ultimate, objective and divine principle of ethical value which, as Thomas Aquinas would say, is what we call God. Nothing less can leap the hurdle from the pragmatic and the utilitarian to the absolute.

The moral sense exists, I am suggesting, in a way that is, at least implicitly, theistic, but its objective referent and its power to command are never well secured by reason alone. In practice it needs to be channelled and goaded on by the authority of specific revelation. That is where the medium, the prophet, the martyr is so decisively important — together with his memorial, even the centenary celebration of his death and burial in Highgate Cemetery.

At the first of this university's new series of public lectures the Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, while outlining the sort of university he wanted, appealed for both socialist philosophers and socialist theologians. We were, of course, in our department pleased at this explicit recognition of the need for both its sections, but there was at that point some laughter and the Prime Minister twice repeated 'socialist theologians'.¹⁷ I wonder why exactly people laughed. It is not a particularly new idea. Professor Craig may not himself have been a socialist, but undoubtedly the subject which was most his own and on which he wrote his principal book was *Social Concern in the Thought of William*

¹⁷R.G. Mugabe, *The Role of the University in the Process of Social Transformation* (Harare, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Public Lecture Series 1, 1983), 5.

Temple.¹⁸ Temple was, of course, the most influential figure in English church life in the first half of this century. He began as a philosopher don at Oxford, and he died as Archbishop of Canterbury. Now it was Temple who declared as long ago as 1908: 'The alternatives stand before us — Socialism or Heresy; we are involved in one or the other'.¹⁹

That was surely a word of prophecy, even if it could also be judged the seemingly simplistic words of an enthusiastic young man. He himself might have wished to qualify it later but he would not, I think, ever have repudiated it. Temple was not a medium — the socio-cultural pattern of twentieth-century Britain takes other forms — but he was in the eyes of many a great prophet. So, if Craig was the disciple of Temple but also the founder of our department and one of the most influential figures in the development of this university, of which he was Vice-Chancellor for many years, we are entitled to claim that our own foundation charter includes within it a commitment to theological socialism. We do not need to invent this prophet's mantle today but only to wear it appropriately for our time.

I do not want to explore here the issues of what socialism should really mean for us except to say that it does, I believe, consist less in a particular system of economics or politics or even a theory of history, and very much more in a passionate ethical commitment to seeking, through the adjustment of social structures, the good of all, the poor and the weak first of all. Probably Temple never really worked out what he meant by it; in that he would not be unusual. To understand its relationship to religion today, I would turn rather to martyrs like Camilo Torres and Oscar Romero, or even to that present labourer in the shipyard at Gdansk, Lech Walesa. What all these people would agree about is that religion, especially the religion of prophets and martyrs, and Christianity very much in particular, is all about morality — a relevant, liberating, contemporary morality, personal and social. Christianity has often been exceedingly spiritualized but, like most African religions, it does basically relate morality very deeply to the material and the communal — to bread and wine, to flesh and blood, to bodies. Temple, to quote him once more, was not mistaken when he called Christianity the most materialist of religions. It is, indeed, all about 'flesh'. Certainly religion cannot escape from morality. It may be confirmatory or it may be challenging to existing society, to the *mores* of our world. It may, of course, like the Spear Master's death, be both at once. I would hold that the contemporary moral challenge of prophetic religion should be at once socialistic and personalistic in a ceaseless urging of justice for all, and by all I mean all.

To what conclusion have we come? I have sought to provide, in a somewhat rambling manner, a basic model for religion as a working primary

¹⁸R. Craig, *Social Concern in the Thought of William Temple* (London, Gollancz, 1963).

¹⁹'The Church and the Labour Party', *The Economic Review* (1908) quoted in J. Fletcher, *William Temple: Twentieth Century Christian* (New York, Seabury Press, 1963), 180.

reality, recognizable world-wide across human experience but illustrated here by a Christian African dialogue. Is it true? The religion of the Dinka can hardly be valid for the non-Dinka, but it worked pretty well for the Dinka. Is the spiritual achievement of the dying Spear Master invalidated, or is it not rather enhanced by that other figure of the young carpenter, all blooded with beating and a crown of thorns, going yet eagerly to his death 'for many' on the hill of Golgotha? Are both just myths? As Peires has said of Nxele and Ntsikana, each must 'surely be taken for a myth if it were not known to be a reality'. Where does the one begin, the other end?

The study of religion remains rooted in the study of history. The people we have spoken of are real people; their deaths, real deaths. Are their dreams, their convictions, their inner willingness to suffer and die for truth and goodness and the freedom of their brethren, as they see them, just myths, or reality too? That the religious leaders and systems of the past were limited enough and in part self-deceiving is not hard to believe. But if they were wholly deceived, then our world is surely a drearier place, the arena only of material pressures, of the survival of the fittest, of sophisticated up-graded crocodiles, of some accidental concourse of atoms. Mediums, martyrs, morality, these things stand together to assert absolute ultimacy of meaning over non-meaning, and it is to the human sense that ultimate meaning is perennially worth searching for that, within this university, our department, both Philosophy and Religious Studies, is committed. That is our *apologia*. I believe it to be a sufficient one.