Perspectives

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

HOW QUICKLY THINGS CHANGE. WHAT IN THE WORLD IS AN ARTICLE BY AN Oxford-educated African woman on "Women and Ecology in Shona Religion" doing in a Religion and Politics issue of *Word & World*? It is hard to imagine such an article in the early issues of this journal, less than 20 years ago.

One answer to my question is that scores of Luther Seminary students and many faculty have now sung praises to Mwari (the Shona word for God) out of the various hymnals of Christian churches in Zimbabwe, so they, at least, are quite interested in the cross-cultural and theological dimensions of using a traditional name for the deity to describe the biblical God.

But such a limited concern would probably not have sufficed to land such an article on the pages of this journal—probably not even the personal relationship established when the author, Dr. Isabel Mukonyora, spent time as a visiting scholar on the Luther Seminary campus. No, the issue is far more sweeping, as Ray Bakke tells us, also in these pages. It is no longer the case that we westerners are taking the gospel to the nations; the nations are coming to us. Guess who's coming to dinner! In the 1967 movie, the surprise was that the new dinner guest was an African American (Sidney Poitier). In 1999, the surprise is that the new guests at the Eucharist are not only African Americans, but Africans—and Asians and Latin Americans and Middle Easterners and people from every corner of the globe.

All of a sudden it is not enough for readers of journals like this one to care about the perpetual (and important) American issue of the separation of church and state. Like everything else, religion and politics take on a global perspective, even in many a local congregation. People from Islamic countries tend to see these things very differently from European Lutherans schooled in the "doctrine" of the two kingdoms (though that notion, too, will be challenged by James Nestingen in one of the articles in this issue). People from traditional native cultures understand very well that religion has great political consequence. Isabel Mukonyora's article takes on particular significance in light of the recent decision by the Zimbabwe Supreme Court to rescind laws granting rights to women, no matter what the legislature or the constitution says, because the judges found these laws to be in conflict with "the nature of African society."[1] Seen in that light, Mukonyora's concern to show a place for women in traditional Shona religion is not at all merely an esoteric matter of interest only to a few comparative religionists or fortunate participants in a seminary cross-cultural experience. The well-being of millions of women is at stake, and the issues are supremely difficult: the honoring of tradition versus mov-

[1]Neely Tucker, "Reversal of fortune," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 4 April 1999, 6A.

ing with the new insights of a brave new world that is anything but traditional. Mukonyora makes things even more complex with her assertion that the *use* of Shona tradition might be more patriarchal than the tradition itself. Clearly, she initiates a discussion that needs to happen in her country, and that the rest of us need at least to be able to understand.

But do the readers of *Word & World* need to be in on it? Perhaps they *need* not be, but, in our opinion, it will not be without value. Questions of religion and justice are valuable for their own sake, of course; but in this case, whether or not a reader ever meets a Zimbabwean, Mukonyora's article can serve as a case study for the way traditional and modern values interact—an issue of "religion and politics" that will have its implications anywhere. Pastors and theologians need to be schooled in *how* to think of these things so we can apply that thinking in the particular communities we are called to serve. We need to have considered data, so we can react with knowledge as well as with feeling.

Further, a study of the place of women in traditional religion can also serve to provide a new point of contact with the social world of the Bible. What about the role of women there? How are we to deal with that in our daily preaching and teaching, as indeed we have to do? Mukonyora's differentiation between the religious interests of Shona women (fertility, family) and those of Shona men (tribal identity, hierarchy) bears a striking similarity to observations made by scholars like Erhard Gerstenberger in his study of Old Testament politics, religion, and gender.[2] Present cross-cultural concerns open the door to revisiting the cross-cultural concerns that are always involved in the careful reading of biblical texts.

Early in the curriculum at Luther Seminary, students must take a course called "Reading the Audiences." They learn to exegete the communities that they will be called to serve, just as, one hopes, they learn to exegete the texts and the tradition that they are called to preach and teach. The two are different but not unrelated. Skills and attitudes learned in the one will assist in doing the other. The motivation for each is similar as well: we do this exegesis, biblical and sociological, not for the sake of winning games of biblical or cultural trivia, but in order to proclaim the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ with power and truth, in order to apply the challenging law of God with justice and equity.

So, we welcome Mukonyora's article. Come next spring, and the good Lord willing, she will be teaching christology to Luther Seminary students in Harare. Here, she is teaching all of us to broaden our horizons as we think about how religion and politics interact. Broadening horizons is one form of freeing from bondage, and certainly we are all for that!

F.J.G.

[2]Erhard Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).