



## God as Evil?

QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD AND EVIL, THE THEME OF THIS ISSUE, ARE BAD ENOUGH, but what of God as evil? That is the fearful possibility raised by Barbara Kingsolver in her recent novel *The Poisonwood Bible*.<sup>1</sup> What if, as Kingsolver suggests, the Bible functions as poison, the gospel as *bad* news, God as capricious monster?

Kingsolver raises these questions through the story of Nathan Price, an eagerly overzealous if woefully underprepared missionary to the Congo in the troubled years of that nation's struggle for independence—or better, in the story of Price's wife and four daughters, for the issue is not Price himself but the effect on others of his oppressive presence and oppressive message. Price, bent on bringing salvation to the “heathen”—knowing nothing of their culture or the presence of God's creative Spirit among them—in fact threatens destruction, both to his own family and to the Congolese villagers whom he wants to evangelize. He can never figure out their terror of baptism in the river, on which he insists, refusing to hear their outcries over one of their children who was recently devoured by a crocodile. This conflict functions parabolically in the novel, for though baptism does, of course, signify death, Paul hardly means that the baptized should become food for crocodiles. In Kingsolver's view, Christianity—at least Price's brand, but maybe every brand—means death for African culture.

The Bible as “poisonwood” functions the same way. At one level, the confusion is simply a matter of Price's inability to comprehend the tonality of the Kikongo language; trying to proclaim that Jesus is “precious” (“*Tata Jesus is bāngala*”), with his mispronunciation he announces instead that Jesus is “the poisonwood tree”—the “plant that bites” (40). While bemoaning Price's cultural insensitivity and ignorance, Kingsolver also raises the more terrible question: Might Jesus “bite” even with proper pronunciation and cultural nuance? Might the Christian gospel be the wrong message for African culture? Or at least an arrogant and imperialistic western Christian “gospel”—though Kingsolver is not the first to fail to recognize the difference.

All of us can cite similar examples, and so can other novelists. In one way, Nathan Price is simply Elmer Gantry moved east—though Price is never so willfully manipulative as Gantry. Still, in his own way he is equally evil. Like Roderick Elliston in Nathaniel Hawthorne's story “Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent,” Nathan Price, too, has “a snake in his belly” (435), a wild egotism that will never question itself in imposing its view of life on others. Yes, we all know that religion can be

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998). Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in this edition of the novel.

deadly, the Bible poison, God evil—especially Price’s God of sheer wrath who “will not forgive a debt” (413). We can and do use the Bible against one another, use God to enforce our own wills, use religion to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of coming into contact with a God who can kill and make alive, and Kingsolver’s novel is a powerful prophetic piece condemning those missionaries and others who, for one reason or another, have come to Africa only to “hang the coonskin on the wall” (as LBJ defined the U.S. goal in Vietnam).

But Kingsolver means to say more: although Price is the gross symbol of one who does everything wrong, his daughter Adah, with her palindromes and backward hymns, proclaims more subtly the fundamental wrongness of the message for these African people. Finally, it doesn’t seem to matter that those of us who know missionaries have never met a Nathan Price, that those whom we know have come to Africa (where, once again, I write this editorial) in order to give themselves fully for the sake of others and to receive equally from their African brothers and sisters; for Kingsolver, too, knows that “there are Christians, and there are Christians” (435). Her view is more radical—that it would have been better had there been no contact at all between Africa and the west: “If only a river could go uncrossed, and whatever lay on the other side could live as it pleased, unwitnessed and unchanged. But it didn’t happen that way” (522).

This “solution” is a romantic one (and Kingsolver herself comes close, at least, to a romanticized view of a once-upon-a-time pristine and paradisiacal Africa untouched by sin and evil, not unlike Rousseau’s view of the “noble savage”—see especially 519-522); more, hers is an impossible hope, for nowhere and at no time have humans—westerners, easterners, southerners, northerners—not sought what the other side of the mountain has to offer. Worse, her “solution” gives up on the wonders and the renewal made possible by cultural mix, yielding too easily to the cynicism—no matter how often justified—of seeing only the dark and dire consequences of such contact.

The benign neglect solution, which Kingsolver sees as the better way for Africa—even if it means doing without vaccines and medical facilities, for in Adah’s tragic view of existence (which seems to be the author’s) driver ants, Ebola virus, and AIDS are merely some of Africa’s “thousand ways of cleansing itself” (529)—disallows the possibility of God’s doing a new thing. Daughter Leah is correct, of course, that what Africa needs is “a new religion” (525), but so do we all! The tragedy—and our shame—is that Kingsolver along with many others in Africa and elsewhere apparently have not heard such newness in the gospel.

To disallow contact is to disallow the recovery of the Spirit that my colleague Lee Snook found in Africa—along with so many of the rest of us—and of which he writes in his new book, *What in the World Is God Doing?*<sup>2</sup> While Kingsolver may be

<sup>2</sup>Lee E. Snook, *What in the World Is God Doing? Re-imagining Spirit and Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

right, that contact with the west has, for now, made life in Africa worse,<sup>3</sup> it may also be true that God means to use the contact with Africa to save the west. Faith allows such hope, though it must of course recognize that such salvation, like baptism, must kill first in order to make alive.

Further, to see the Bible only as poison is to deny the witness of African Christians who have found life and freedom in its message. It is to dismiss the story of my stone-carving friend Bernard, who—in his words—was, after his conversion, able to replace the fierce and angry figures he had previously sculpted with rich and imaginative forms exploring the beauty and complexity of God's creation. It is to dismiss the story of my nearly penniless friend Judith who—in her words—tells of the peace she found in her difficult walk to a distant clinic, alone and in the final stages of labor, by singing over and over again of her "Blessed Redeemer." No, while religion and Bible *might* be poison, the gospel, if it is gospel, is only liberation—for all, Africans and others alike.<sup>4</sup> That, of course, is what *Augsburg Confession* 7 means by the unity of the church being found in the gospel "rightly preached"—not static words, gotten right once and for all in confessional formulas, but the living word, proclaiming freedom and forgiveness with neither coercion nor condition.

Price's materialistic daughter Rachel is quite right in her observation that "you can't just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it all over in Christian style, without expecting the jungle to change you right back" (515). Thanks be to God! Finally, Kingsolver herself and her characters know that, though we are all complicit (492), the solution is grace: the grace of requited love found by Leah in her African husband Anatole who, at last, "will tolerate me as I am" (401), and the grace of forgiveness, which alone brings peace to Orleanna (Nathan's wife) and reconciliation with her daughters (543). Once more, the tragedy—and the novel's prophetic voice—is that such love was nowhere to be found in Nathan Price's "missionary" message.

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<sup>3</sup>Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga agrees, shocking an audience at the recent Zimbabwe International Book Fair with her contention that donors may be driving rather than relieving African poverty. See David Karanja, "Role of donor support in Africa's development must be questioned," *Harare Daily News*, 10 August 1999, 8.

<sup>4</sup>"*Yakanaka vangeri*," sing Zimbabwean Lutherans after the reading of the Gospel, "*Tanguri takuudza kuti yakanaka!*"—"The gospel is good news; we told you already, it is good, it is good."