Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai by Vincent J. Donovan. Maryknoll , N.Y.: Orbis Books. Second Edition, 1982. 200 pp. Reviewed by James Buswell III

"Are you using that book here too? I have seen it everywhere I have been recently. I must get that book!" So spoke a distinguished missionary-author-missiologist whose path I crossed during a recent two-week teaching mission in Manila. The book in question? This very "Epistle to the Masai."

Imagine a missionary, in a letter from his mission compound, reviewing the four schools, the activities of the hospital, the vehicles, the teaching, the visiting, and expressing his frank appraisal of the active routine relationships of the missionaries with the Masai people as "dismal, time consuming, wearying, expensive, and materialistic."

Imagine, furthermore, the missionary pointing out that "there are no adult Masai practicing Christians" from the mission, and that "there is no probability that one can speak with the Masai... about God." So Vincent Donovan addressed his mission superior in May, 1966, concluding:

Looking at these people around me... I suddenly feel the urgent need to cast aside all theories and discussions, all efforts at strategy--and simply go to these people and do the work among them for which I came to Africa.... I would propose cutting myself off from the schools and the hospital... and just go and talk to them about God and the Christian message.... I know this is a radical departure from the traditional procedure.... But I would like to try.... I have no theory, no plan, no strategy, no gimmicks--no idea of what will come (pp. 15-16).

Gathering the elders in one community and asking them if he could talk with them about God, Donovan was readily given permission, with the added query, "If that is why you came here, why did you wait so long to tell us about this?" With a promise to return in one week, he went a day's journey to another community with the same request. Six community clusters thus were willing to gather their people once a week and talk with Donovan about God. As he made the entire circuit the first time, "surprisingly, the question they asked in each section was the same, 'Why have you not come to us before?""

Thus the author began a one-year sojourn among six different Masai groups in the attempt to fulfill his urgent calling.

"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." It was a role that would require every talent and insight and skill and gift and strength I had, to be spent without question, without stint (p. 64).

His motives were biblical, his approach was reactionary but positive, and his method simplicity itself.

Here I was, at last, face to face with an adult pagan people, with nothing between me and them but the gospel of Jesus Christ. I knew that beyond this work I was now doing, there were no further moves to make. I was not trying to sell them the school system or Western

medicine in order that one day they might accept Christianity. I was trying to convince them directly of the inherent value of Christianity. If I failed here, there would be no going back to some other gimmick to try to draw them once again to receive it. If I failed here, I might as well go home (p. 23).

The rest of the book tells the story of that year, the lessons learned, and the documentation of cultural and spiritual growth as much experienced by the author as by the people with whom he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps of most interest to the readers of this journal are the astonishing number of missiological principles which have become the common parlance of missiologists within recent times which were experienced, documented, and persuasively validated in the field by Donovan largely even before they were encountered in the literature.

Up until the day of that first instruction I had never spoken to a Masai about God. I had only the most traditional exposition of Christianity to present to them, and not the slightest idea of strategy, or missionary principles of first evangelization (p. 250). From the moment I decided to take the step into first evangelization, I knew that I would have to begin anew a whole process of study, in any spare time that would be left to me. Scripture, theology, missiology, even anthropology, in any books I could get my hands on, would fill my nights. Safaris would fill my days (p. 26).

The wonder is that, as he proceeded, his very interaction with the Masai people precipitated so many of these principles in the color and clarity of carefully selected ideal cases, yet without the usual terminology, labels, or rubrics of the missiological literature, and, with the exception of Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (First edition, 1912), and Donald McGavran's *The Bridges of God* (1955), without even reference to the names of those who have become almost inextricably identified with them. The very process of "first evangelization" generated the seemingly spontaneous illustrations, in one case after another, of the most basic of modern missionary methods.

1. The message of Ralph Winter's Lausanne presentation, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism" (1), and of the widely-circulated "Unreached Peoples of the World" poster--the "Pie Chart" of the U.S. Center for World Mission displaying the disproportionate number of missionaries among the reached, as contrasted with the number of those among the unreached peoples is obvious to Donovan.

White missionaries in social and pastoral works in the already established churches make up by far the greatest number of missionaries in Africa today. For many years they have constituted the greatest proportion of missionaries in Africa (p. 178).

With this, an emphasis is made upon the definition "missionary" as contrasted with "pastor" in terms of the difference between the role of a pastor and the role of one engaged in "first evangelization."

By first evangelization I mean the preaching of the gospel for the first time to any group of people, enabling them to hear for the first time the name of their savior, Jesus (p. 31).... The concept of first

evangelization lies at the heart of the distinction between missionary and pastoral work. It is directed essentially to people who have never heard of Christ (p. 32).

2. From this follows his dual emphasis upon *the missionary task as finishable if aimed at "peoples" instead of merely at "people."* Notice the progression of ideas:

We should not set out to evangelize everyone, or even the majority of people. We were out to evangelize a minority, but a minority in every section (p. 38). Pastoral work, the tending of the Christian flock, by its very nature and definition will never be finished. But the work of evangelization (the biblical definition of missionary work) in any particular area, by its very nature, must be finishable... (p. 39). Evangelization is not meant to embrace the conversion of every single individual in a country, or a continent, but rather the bringing of the gospel to every ethnic, social, cultural nation in a country or continent--a finishable task (p. 179).

3. The field-based recognition of the community rather than the individual as the objective in focus anticipated later published expressions of *the homogeneous unit principle* (2):

It was not by any design on our part when we began the work of direct evangelization, but perhaps out of sheer necessity because of the structures of life in Africa, that we approached the people on the level of community, that is, on the level of a homogeneous group of people that considers itself a living, social organism distinct from other social groups.... I am quite certain no individual adult Masai would have agreed to participate.... He agreed to take this step only within the framework of his community, bringing his relations and relationships along with him. This was extremely important to my work (p. 84).

Christianity Rediscovered demonstrates vividly the legitimacy of the HUP as an initial contact method, a method of "first evangelization," a method of approach to which a "people movement" is the expected response. It just as convincingly, if implicitly, demonstrates the irrelevance of the many strident (and some more subtle) criticisms of the HUP expressed in terms of homogeneous unit *churches* and the biblically sound expectation that the gospel can unite, even unify a diversified constituency--which is a question strategically different from the methodological principle of initial communication and decision-making within a homogeneous culture.

4. A people movement was inevitably set in contrast to the mission compound approach (3): As Donovan requested of each body of elders their cooperation in gathering the people to talk about God, there was ready assent, "as long as you talk to them here near the kraals, and not far away by your mission house" (p. 22).

At the prospect of the peoples' acceptance of Christianity as communities, Donovan was faced with a new and startling realization:

What would we do then? How could we possibly take care of them as Christians, and still look to the completion of evangelization in this whole area? The ... Mission, indeed, the whole notion of mission compound, would be shattered (p. 23).

5. Being involved so intimately and so intensely with the Masai people, it is hardly surprising that Donovan recognized and utilized (or permitted the development of) a number of striking "ready-

made" cultural channels for various aspects of the gospel for which Don Richardson has provided the name *redemptive analogies* (4), though Donovan never uses the term.

6. Just as strikingly, *Christianity Rediscovered* validates Richardson's thesis of *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Eccl. 3:11)(5).

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...customs and traditions. *In this realization would have to rest my whole approach to the evangelization of the Masai* (p. 30, emphasis added).

7. Lest this approach be misinterpreted, may I hasten to add that Donovan's advocacy of *contextualization* throughout the book (though he never mentions this term either), while allowing the Masai Christians to "have" Christianity and to "run with it" in their own cultural forms, nevertheless is characterized by a high view of scripture as judging the culture:

In any action taken in the name of the church today, one of the key criteria to measure the fitness of what is being done is the Bible. "Is it Biblical? Is it evangelical? Is it scriptural?" are questions that must be asked time and time again (p. 33).... Christianity must be free to prophesy and judge when necessary, and fulfill when possible (p. 170).

8. From the beginning of his first year's sojourn among the Masai, Donovan was forcefully confronted with the stark reality of the need to *inculturate* the gospel into unfamiliar expressions and forms. Entailed in this was the recognition of missionary anthropology's principal methodological procedure, the distinction of the supracultural absolutes of Christianity from its culturally relative forms:

An evangelist, a missionary must respect the culture of a people, not destroy it. The incarnation of the gospel, the flesh and blood which must grow on the gospel, is up to the people of a culture.

The way people might celebrate the central truths of Christianity; the way they would distribute the goods of the earth and live out their daily lives; their spiritual, ascetical expression of Christianity if they should accept it; their way of working out the Christian responsibility of the social implications of the gospel--all these things, that is: liturgy, morality, dogmatic theology, spirituality, and social action would be a cultural response to a central, unchanging, supracultural, uninterpreted gospel (pp. 30-31; cf. pp. 47-48).

The shock of being literally forced into the abstract exercise of decontextualizing his Christian faith in order to communicate it is vividly portrayed:

As I look back on the whole adventure now, I am certain that if I had known the difficulty involved in the process of meeting a pagan people with a Western version of Christianity, I would never have had the courage to begin. Fortunately, my naiveté was boundless.... Every single thing I prepared to teach them had to be revised or discarded once I had presented it to them.... The original, traditional teaching of Christianity....was so revised, adapted, distilled, and filtered in the process that by the end it was hardly recognizable (p. 25).

For one not in the habit of attempting to disentangle the culturally relative strands from the essentials of Christianity, and with experience in the expressions of that Christianity limited to one's own culture and worldview, the stresses of "culture shock," in the popular sense, are mild in comparison with the strains of rendering the gospel into other cultural forms.

At that moment facing me was that vast, sprawling, all-pervasive complex of customs and traditions and values and dictates of human behavior which was the Masai culture, a nation in the biblical sense, to whom I had to bring the gospel. At this point I had to make the humiliating admission that I did not know what the gospel was. During those days I spent long hours thinking long, difficult thoughts, and sometimes frightening ones, about the momentous task that faced me--the bringing together of a culture and the gospel (p. 31).

9. Finally, in our sampling of missiological principles demonstrated and validated in Donovan's experience, we note how he came to realize that for a people homogeneous in their social structure, their cultural pursuits, and their values and worldview, there was a homogeneity of religious supernaturalism, all-pervasive in its application to mundane and particularly to crisis situations, and equally relevant to what Western cultures would call "secular" concerns. With this came the recognition that Christianity, to be indigenous, must be made practically and meaningfully relevant just as comprehensively to every concern, particularly to each and every crisis situation, both personal and environmental--that in presenting "the whole counsel of God" he had to impart a *Christian philosophy of crisis* (7):

There was no area of Masai life that was not touched by their traditional religion, and now they saw Christianity continuing and fulfilling this process. Their entire life was sacramental, filled with effective signs as real as the things they symbolized. There was no way I could tell them that Christianity was less than that.... I could not leave any gaps in their lives, vacuums to be filled by the reservoir of paganism surrounding them. Christianity had to be as all embracing and pervasive as the paganism it was replacing and fulfilling. In seeing this for them, I began to see it for myself as well (p. 186).

Time and space do not permit our reviewing how Donovan instilled into the new Christian communities a responsibility for a missionary outreach of their own; how the village elders solved the problem of the definition and function of church leadership (or the gradual evolution of Donovan's own realization of the full contextualization of mission church leadership!); of the many expressions, customs and cultural institutions which served as redemptive analogies; of the author's ideas on the Christian concept of "development"; of the thrilling discourse which finally imparted the person of Jesus Christ and the incarnation in meaningful and receivable terms; of the enthusiastic adaptation of leadership in song, prayer, and worship in Masai forms by the groups which accepted the Christian witness; or of the personal consternation experienced by Donovan when, after his year's odyssey among the six groups of Masai communities, he heard the leader of one say, "We cannot accept your Christ or believe in him. We do not want baptism. Forgive usour answer is no!"

Even with this rather exorbitant amount of quotation, it does not begin to do justice to the riches of detail, to the practical spiritual insights, some from the author and some from the Masais, and the teaching on evangelism and the nature of "mission" and the "church" contained within the context of the year's experience.

In conclusion, just as in other dramatic episodes of the launching of an enterprise or the development of a movement of self-realization for dependent or minority peoples, such as in the widely celebrated case of the Cornell-Peru experience at Vicos (8), there is sometimes a note of scepticism which creeps into the comments of those who have had occasion to inquire into the results or the state of affairs in succeeding months or years, and who find, or think they find, less than the anticipated development of the situation, at the site of the initial contact. However, the tendency to deprecate the original encounter thereby tends to be misapplied or short-sighted, and usually unaccompanied by any analysis of events or conditions which have intervened. Thus, no matter what has or has not developed among the Vicosinos since the well-documented intrusion of Alan Holmberg, or among the Masai since the equally novel intrusion of Vincent Donovan, it is as episodes of empathy, as models of innovative method and of transcending one's own culture (9), and in the strategy and lessons learned in the doing of it that they possess lasting value as classic case studies in cross-cultural communication.

#### **ENDNOTES**

- 1. Winter, 1975.
- 2. McGavran, 1972; Wagner, 1978; Kraft, 1978.
- 3. McGavran, 1955.
- 4. Richardson, 1974.
- 5. Richardson, 1984.
- 6. Barney, 1973.
- 7. Buswell, 1975; 1976.
- 8. Dobyns, Doughty, and Lasswell (Eds.), 1971.
- 9. Hall, 1976.

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