

Against Incomplete Religion

Martin Jarrett-Kerr

Towards an Indigenous Church by Bolaji Idowu (OUP Students' Library 5s.)

tonight, you'll regret it. I will remember your faces and names!"

We drove out into the road and the Africans got off.

"How much they must hate the white people," the writer said with a frown on his forehead as the Buick sped on. "Can you call them barbarians if they murder some white people when they get a chance?"

Earlier that year enraged and frustrated Africans killed two white people at Paarl. There had been other killings too.

Now I knew what the main cause was behind these murders and riots. It was the slave system of apartheid that gives every white man the right to treat anyone who is not white with contempt and to subject him or her to humiliation.

"Do you still want to be white?" I asked myself. I knew it meant joining the evil forces at work in South Africa; doing the things that are expected of white people here. But it was too late now. I was already a victim of the white man's bait, although I did not fully realise it then. Once the drawbridge over the colour barrier was pulled up there would be no return for me to the sufferings I had seen and often experienced.

IT WAS ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF JANUARY 1963, when I arrived at my lodgings one evening to find a bulky registered letter awaiting me. The landlady had signed for it. I started to open it nervously, not quite knowing what to expect.

Next moment I was looking at my photograph — as a white South African citizen. Yes, it was my identity card. The very second I saw my picture as a white man, I stopped thinking of people who are not white as my equal. I felt like a being who has been projected from hell into heaven — where I would be beyond the sufferings of colour discrimination. I would never come back, it flashed through my excited mind, never in creation!

The first one I thought of was my white father. Tomorrow I would first call in at the factory and explain to the personnel manager what had happened and ask him to give me the day off to attend to my business.

I was lucky enough to find my father at his office next day, for Parliament was not yet in full session. I showed him the card. He congratulated me in a way I had never been congratulated before.

"Now you are a real white man. You must always stand by us. Don't ever associate with Coloureds, Indians and Africans. They are not your equal now. Stop going to that woman in Elgin. Very soon you will meet a white girl. You are good looking. Avoid discussions about your background. Tell anybody that your parents met with an accident and that you would rather not discuss the tragedy."

I agreed with my father. Now I did not hate him any more. I did not regard what he had done as wrong, in fact I did not give these things a second thought.

I was white. There was no more any need for me to hold my breath when I walked into a place reserved for white people only. No more mental agony about colour for me.

I was about to get up and leave when my father spoke again.

"Wait a moment," he said and got up. "I want to give you a present."

I was not expecting any money from him. He had given me the legacy of a secure future, his white heritage. I was glad that he was white. Never mind the more than £60,000 he had got some years ago when he sold the farm on which I had been born. I was glad to be his illegitimate son instead of the lawful son of my black foster father.

We got into my father's smart car and drove to a garage. He bought me a secondhand motor-scooter on condition that the salesman would teach me to drive that afternoon. He also gave me a cheque for £100. I had never had so much money in all my life.

"Bank at least the half of it," he advised. "You can buy whatever you want with the rest."

Within two days I had a driver's licence.

That Saturday afternoon I went to my mother in Elgin to say goodbye. I explained to the family that I was now a "Boss." They accepted the fact. My fosterfather, with his hat on one knee, supported his chin with his right hand while he stared at the floor. My mother was pouring black coffee.

On my way back, late that afternoon, I stopped the scooter on a hill. I got off and looked back once more. The kopjes and valleys never looked so green before, the sky never so blue. Nestled somewhere in a valley far away, where I could vaguely see miniature columns of smoke spiralling into the quiet sky, was the home of those who had raised me from babyhood to manhood. They were once my parents and now I am forbidden by apartheid to see them any more.

The scooter-motor exploded into action and I drove away forever from what was so dear, but not profitable, to me, into the white man's paradise. . . .

[When Dawid de Vries failed to turn up at my flat, I contacted him at his work. He was a different man. When I spoke to him he addressed me as if I were dirt. He made it very clear that he was now a white man and my superior. Although he had previously begged me to write his life story, he now refused to give me any more details. There would be no return to you people, he told me.]

Dawid de Vries was so carried away by his white identity card that before he severed all ties with his former friends, he first showed it to as many of them as possible.

According to the existing law Dawid did not really qualify for a white citizenship. He lived a lie during his transitory period. Although he lived with white people in a white area, he never severed his association with the Coloured community. Until the time he received his identity card, he actually only slept in a white area. He associated with Coloureds during that time. He went with them to cinemas; he spent practically every week-end in Elgin; he visited the beaches with Coloureds. But he has found his way into the white man's paradise where he will stay until it is no more.]

[Concluded]

THE REV. PROF. BOLAJI IDOWU is professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan. This little book is made up of three radio talks he gave in Nigeria in 1961. They are an entirely justified plea for a true indigenisation of the Christian Church in Africa. He points out that even apparently accurate translations of English words (of prayers, hymns, ec.) into African languages may remain wholly "foreign" and even distorting through ignorance: e.g., most Nigerian languages are tonal, so that a song is made up of words and tune together; thus an exact verbal translation into Yoruba of "miserable offender" will, if put to a certain European tune, become "miserable one afflicted with tuberculosis of the glands." But more still: the spirit of Christianity must be able to express itself through African modes of feeling, gesture, life. The "separatist" church movements in West Africa (and this is true throughout the continent) have grown precisely because the traditional Christian Churches seem cold, inexpressive, distant: they seem to provide "an incomplete religion . . . something which begins and ends in Church buildings. . . . It does not seem to be something that is efficacious for them in every moment and every area of their lives." For, he reminds us, "to Nigerians nothing has meaning apart from the sanction and blessing of religion"; but precisely this universality of meaning was found in the "sects," not the "churches." Prof. Idowu's account of one or two of these movements is most illuminating. His book is valuable. It is perhaps a pity he did not correct one error: it was true in 1961 that the Roman Catholic church used exclusively Latin in services; but this is changing — indeed perhaps Prof. Idowu should make mention of the second Vatican Council, for he will now find many Roman Catholics on his side in these matters. But I hope all Christian bodies will listen to him.