

## BOOK REVIEWS

KLEM, Herbert V., *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1982, ISBN 0878083324, xxiv + 256 pp., paperback US\$9.95.

The work under review “addresses the needs of 70 per cent of the world’s population”, i.e., the immense mass of the non-literates (thus Charles Kraft, in the foreword). It is written by someone who was for eight years teaching Bible and Theology in English to various groups of pastors and students, many of whom were academically qualified to attend university. The field of research was Yorubaland, in Nigeria, and apart from a few references to Alan Tippett’s *Solomon Islands Christianity*, the whole of Melanesia does not enter into the picture. Yet, some of the problems envisaged in West Africa do have a familiar ring, while some solutions given will meet a wider application than just the communication of the Christian scriptures. They do affect all teaching and learning in so called “oral societies”.

Part I of the book (pp. 3-43) describes the complexity, social and communicational, in contemporary West Africa. From mission history, it records the great dependency upon Western schooling patterns. There might not have been a formal policy of requiring literacy for church membership, but, in actual fact, the ability to read (the scriptures) often became part of the definition of a mature believer (p. 33). Hence the negative consequences of limited church growth, of defective leadership, etc.; and in a second period (*pace* D. Barrett’s *Schism and Renewal*) the success of independent churches.

Part II studies the parallel situation in first-century Palestine (pp. 47-93), and branches out to the apostolic methods adopted by Jesus, who relied very much upon the oral arts. According to the author, Jesus is to be counted among the *'Am-ha-arets* (literally, people of the land), which at the time represented close to 95 percent of the total population of Palestine (pp. 76-78). Despite the name-dropping in this section of the book, the evidence adduced is a bit meagre, and does not distinguish

enough between the ascertained contribution of Jesus himself – the *ipsissima verba* (p. 78) – and the adaptations and reformulations which occurred for the purpose of writing and authoritative transmission. Still, the point is well made that, e.g., the Gospels are the products of an oral culture, while elsewhere in the book, when commenting upon the situation in Africa (e.g., p. 119), some of the basic insights of form criticism are adhered to.

Parts III and IV, and also some material from the Appendices, are specifically African, and dwell upon the various means of communication available in a living traditional society; here also one experience is described, which aimed at measuring the level of communication when calling upon modern teaching methods (e.g., books and cassette tapes). Following Donald K. Smith, not less than 11 different signal systems or methods of communication are enumerated. Those which are more explicit – the verbal, written, and pictorial – are more easily capable of being manipulated, whereas the less-detailed and often unconsciously-used signal systems are also less prone to deceive the audience (p. 141).

One will find, in these pages of the book, elements which are comparable to observations made in Papua New Guinea, e.g., in relation to the often-heard complaints of dropping standards in education. Taking a lead from research done with Hawaiian school children, the author notes that the non-productivity of the school system may indicate an evasion of education, because the pupils feel that the accumulation of material resources, or the development of individual skills, “isn’t worth it”. Instead they do show interest in accumulating a “social capital”, i.e., an expanded network of interpersonal commitments, which builds upon the values the students have acquired from their parents. This assessment makes one think of the Melanesian tendency to settle issues in face-to-face encounters, instead of going through all the “red tape”. But one is also reminded of the Western slogan that, in order to succeed in life, it does not so much matter what one knows, but whom one knows.

There are many more implications, which reflect the oral background of the culture. The author lists, among others, the pride in verbal skills (p. 105), the reluctance to write simple English (p. 112), the inclination to indulge in personal praises (p. 114). One may add also the greater importance given to pictorial communication (cf. the number and size of images in local newspapers as compared with papers from overseas). But then, again, there is a growing interest in audio-visual aids all over the world. Even the sample given here of a vernacular text set out in a format to assure maximum readability (pp. 194-195) is not wholly unknown elsewhere (cf. recent Bibles; advertisements). In short, some of the insights proposed by the author have a much wider application, because even the most-advanced culture is partly oral, and possesses the specific advantages of this component.

The book ends with some conclusions and recommendations (pp. 179-188) addressed to mission and church groups: they should study more the needs of oral societies, who, by definition, do rely on oral means of communication. Let us add that the setting in which this communication occurs (say the liturgical gatherings, their places of worship, the seasons and times of the year, etc.) might have deserved a greater attention, and also that – once the need is recognised to add, at a certain level, the written means of communication – all the necessary means should be used to assure a smooth transition (e.g., by favouring casual reading, p. 16).

– **Theodoor Aerts**

BURROWS, William R., *New Ministries: The Global Context*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1980, ISBN 0883443295, 192 pp., paperback, US\$7.95.

The key experiences on which this book is based were had in Papua New Guinea, where the author was a missionary for five years. The Catholic viewpoint, from which the book is written, only serves to emphasise its ecumenical scope, while many Catholics can learn how