

Book Review

F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: an African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

Christianity Without Fetishes might sound like the war cry of a missionary, bent on eradicating syncretistic practices. In fact, it is a cry *against* the way the Christian faith has been presented to Africans, by missionaries. The signal comes from a West African professor of philosophy, who left the Society of Jesus, and the priesthood, after becoming one of the leading theologians of his region.

Boulaga sees fetishism (“which localises the sacred, or the divine, and endows persons, effects, or things, with supernatural characteristics and powers”) in the institutions and dogmas of Christianity, beginning with the “foundational, and authorising, principle”, the notion of revelation. “We shall escape the fetishism of revelation, only if we *admit*, with all its theoretical and practical consequences, the metaphorical character of the notion, or expression, of “revelation”, or “Word of God”. (Emphasis his.)

He calls into evidence the sinister social and political effects of missionary discourse, that asserts its own absolute truthfulness. The alienating results of such discourse often give the lie to the very truth they claim to announce. A quote from Kierkegaard, in the last paragraph of the book, expresses what is Boulaga’s own concern, that “it would not be of much use to lead thousands to accept the truth, if, precisely by the manner, in which they accepted it, they were to find themselves excluded from it” (p. 229).

Like Kierkegaard, though, Boulaga launches his “attack upon Christendom” with the intention of rescuing Christianity from it. The second half of his book is an attempt to recapture the truth of Christianity, “upstream, as it were, from where dogmas begin” (p. 85). He will accept a reinterpretation of the “Christic phenomena”, he says, only if it meets two criteria:

- (1) that the questions, strivings, aspirations, and tasks of the time of Jesus still be our own “in a certain way”;
- (2) that the gospel furnish us, not with specific, singular content, but with a model of self-restructuring, in and by history.

He attempts to meet both of these, in a 60-page-long reassessment of the evidence about Jesus Christ, an assessment that dwells, in an enlightening way, on the social and political context of Jesus' message.

He could not finish up, of course, with just a new "way to think about Jesus", but takes the constructive work to a practical conclusion in "Rules of Conversion" (chapter 10), and "Sketches for a Plan of Action" (chapter 11).

This is a difficult book, and I confess to not having understood parts of it. Boulaga's philosophical erudition is abundantly clear, but some of us would be helped if allusions were more explicit, and terms, which are technical, and specific to certain disciplines (e.g., linguistics, philosophy, philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction), were unpacked in this context. His work is not entirely without antecedents, but we are supplied with a mere seven footnotes in 11 chapters; within the text itself, references, by name, to other thinkers, are rare.

In its seriousness, though, the book is an important contribution to the discussion about theology in context, a discussion that he feels is often trivial.

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