

The Spirit of God in the Natural World

E. Bolaji Idowu

Somewhere in America and Britain, or between those two countries, a "head" was conceived and created. In my language, a head implies a destiny. This prefabricated "head," bearing the specifications "the Spirit of God in the natural world," was sent to me in Nigeria with the request that I should create a "body" worthy of it—a "body" which would enable it to fulfill its destiny. I was thus left to my devices in investigating the actual destiny which this "head" was meant to fulfill in order to create for it an appropriate "body." This led inevitably to the question of definition.

The "head" can be sectioned, roughly, for the purpose of the definition, into two parts. The first part is the phrase "the Spirit of God." Shall we take it for granted that we all understand what this means? After all, we have our Bibles; we have our theological books. I hope, however, that we are not being so supercilious as to think that we can define "the Spirit of God" accurately on the ground that we are able to read about the subject in books. I hope that we have enough theology to be aware of the fact that we cannot define "the Spirit of God" except insofar as the Spirit vouchsafes to us his own definition by self-manifestation through personal experience. I hope that we keep in mind both the promise and the implied warning of Scripture: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. . . . Judas said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will

come to him and make our home with him.'” (John 14:18-23)

The second section of the “head”—“in the Natural World”—I have found rather baffling, for the immediate question which it poses is this: Which world is not natural? Does such a world exist? Theologically, we may answer appropriately that such a world exists. But then, we are thinking of the whole world which is in the grip of sin—the fallen world of which St. John’s Gospel and the Epistles, the Epistle to the Romans and, in fact, the whole Bible speaks.

I have the feeling, however, that the reference of this section of the “head” is not to the whole world. By a process of divination, I have come to see that it is referring to that theoretical, abstract creation which has been given the specious nomenclature of “the Third World”—that is, the remainder of the world, when Europe and America have been subtracted from it. But, is it not a theological tragedy that the church has not only given her blessing to this heresy but has helped to promote it by adopting and using it as a convenient handle? How can the church which has her basis on “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” . . . , “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” . . . , “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth . . .”—how can the church afford to seek to cut the ground under her own feet by such culpably careless conformity to the form of the world? The church came into being to heal the world of personal and racial schizophrenia. By contributing to the erroneous notion of a compartmentalized, trichotomized world, she is only violating her spiritual and moral responsibility, with the result that she is aiding and abetting the perpetuation of the curse of Babel.

I proceed on the assumption “the natural world” refers, in particular, under my terms of reference, to

the world out of which Europe and America have been subtracted! To deal with “the natural world” in this sense is a “tall order,” indeed. The section of the world covered is overwhelmingly wide; and only an unscrupulous pretender will claim to be able to speak out about the whole of such a wide area. Even if one had the time to consult all the literature that is in existence on the subject, one would still find oneself in difficulty. It is being realized more and more today that the world has been treated to too many traveler’s tales, anthropological fabrications, sociological guesswork, and enthusiasts’ distortions—matters relating to this area of the world.

The area under our reference is a wide, wide world of various cultures and varieties of religious experiences which are expressing themselves by various categories each of which can only be fully understood by those who are actually and personally involved in the experiences. This explains why the Western World has been blundering lamentably when it tries to invent terms issuing out of its own preconceived notions for something totally outside its own immediate experience.

Let me narrow down my discussion to Africa. Even here, I must give the warning that I can only be selective and restrict myself to areas about which I have firsthand knowledge, or areas about which I believe that those who have done research there have been sufficiently discerning.

African experience of, concept of, and teaching about, the Spirit are bound up in their experience of, concept of, and teaching about, the living Source-Being. That is, it is not often that they speak of “the Spirit of God” in the kind of distinctive, almost separative way in which Christian doctrine tends to speak of him. There are African names for God which, in fact, should be properly translated Spirit, like the Nuer’s di-

vine name, *Kwoth*; or the Igbo divine name, *Chukwu*—the Infinite or Undimensional Spirit who is Source-Being; or the Yoruba *Orise* which means the Source-Being. According to Evans-Pritchard, the Nuer believe that *Kwoth* is “the very Spirit of the universe;” he is “the Spirit of the sky” or “the Spirit who is in the sky.”

The most vital aspect of African experience of the Spirit is implied in their knowledge of God as Source-Being, which implies his immanence as well as his control and maintenance of the universe. This is an area where Western investigators—those who go out to research as well as the stay-at-home ones—have erred exceedingly.

Writing about the concept of God among the Mende of Sierra Leone, K. Little observed: “In the beginning, there was. . . God. All life and activity. . . derive from him. . . In addition, he invested the whole universe with a certain non-material kind of power or influence which manifests itself in various ways and on specific occasions in human beings and animals, and even in natural phenomena. . . .” And Placide Tempels, writing on the Bantu in his book, *Bantu Philosophy*, read into their belief something to which he gives the name of “vital force,” which appears to be the metaphysical generator and ruler of the universe. Says he, “Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.”

Africans do not speak in terms of a computerized universe, a world charged with a self-generating, self-directing force which in its turn maintains the universe. As I have said, Africans see God as Source-Being; he gives being to all. All live and have being because he continues in being and governs all things by his own living power. Both K. Little and P. Tempels, like those who have been making a toy of the word *mana*, have seen without recognizing, observed without understanding, what Africans know and experience about the control and maintenance of the universe. There is

an undeniable sense of this *dunamis*, but its secret eludes them. As I have observed, it would seem that the real problem of Tempels was one of communications. He keeps surfacing again and again and correcting himself: he observes correctly, “The sage ‘par excellence’ is God who knows every being, who comprehends the nature and quality of each God is force; possessing energy in himself, the mover of all other forces. . . .”

John Middleton observes correctly that Lugbara see God as being “the ultimate source of all power and of the moral order” And Godfrey Linhardt discovered that to the Dinka, “*Nhialic* is figured sometimes as a being, a personal supreme Being even, and sometimes as a *kind* of being and activity which sums up the activities of a multiplicity of beings. . . . The Dinka are in a universe which is largely beyond their control where events may contradict the most reasonable human expectation. The divinity who is sometimes a kindly Father is also the divinity which is manifested in the non-rational forces of nature and hence has non-rational as well as rational attributes.”

According to African belief, all powers and authorities “in heaven” or on earth derive from Source-Being. They *are* because he permits or commissions them and *are no more* when he withdraws from them. I will illustrate this from three categories of beings:

1. *The divinities.* These are ministers with portfolios in the theocratic kingdom of the universe. Recently, an Irishman, a professor of political science, argued this point with me. He thought it was wrong to speak of theocracy in Africa. This is because he has been led astray by appearances. Where the divinities or spirits are recognized, they are known always to be derivatives from deity. An African pressed for an answer may say that God “created” them. In reality, the oral traditions show that they were brought into being by him; one

could almost say that they were engendered. Anyway, they have no absolute existence, their powers are delegated. That is why, very often in Africa, the name of the divinity in each locality either derives from the name of deity, or that deity and the divinities bear the same generic name and are distinguished by qualifying words or suffixes.

2. *The human.* Essential being is put into humanity by deity. Without this, one would not be a person. While an arch-divinity may be commissioned to fashion physical parts, it remains the absolute prerogative of Source-Being to put something of himself into an individual to give that person personality and life. And one remains a true personality only by maintaining a good relationship with Source-Being. Here again, it is illuminating that the name for the essential person derives in one way or another from the divine name. One may summarize African belief in this context with the word of the Psalmist: "When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust." (Psalms 104:29)

3. *Society.* Society is God's ordinance. John Middleton observes that to the Lugbara, "God is not outside society, but rather above it completely. . . . He is said to be 'behind' all people and all things, as their creator, and may be in indirect contact with all forms of social action. His presence unites them into a simple scheme, of which the divisions are complementary and cannot be understood in isolation."

The Yoruba structure will afford an apt illustration. In the Yoruba system of government, *the Scepter* belongs to Olodumare (Source-Being). When the earth was to be created and equipped, it was the sceptre given to the archdivinity which enabled him to carry out his assignment and accomplish the task. When the sixteen persons who formed the nucleus of the in-

habitants of the earth came to possess the earth, their leader was vested with authority which came from Source-Being through the arch-divinity. Thus, today, all kings and rulers of Yorubaland are regarded as derivatively divine rulers. This should be elaborated further, for emphasis. At the installation of the Ooni of Ile-Ife (the spiritual head of Yorubaland), he has to worship at several temples: at one he receives his title; at another he receives the crown, but neither the title nor the crown makes him the ruler of the people. It is when he has worshipped at the temple of the arch-divinity and received the scepter that he becomes the ruler of the people with derivatively divine quality of rulership. The ritual at this temple is sacramental: The ruler-to-be must eat part of the divine being, symbolized in scrapings from the effigy of the arch-divinity and mixed with certain other ingredients. The ruler literally "eats" kingship or royalty from something out of the body of his predecessor (meaning that royalty is an unbroken continuity), and from something of the divine, to give him the divine quality of kingship. Thus, the honor, regard, and veneration given to him are consequent upon the divine quality. Two things become important now: It is expected of him to become endued with charismatic virtues. Once he loses the divine scepter, people know it and he himself will decide "to go and sleep," or this will be demanded of him. He has finished and he has nothing more to do on earth. What happens in the case of Ooni is true of every Yoruba ruler who is in the right tradition.

It must be observed that the rituals and sanctions of rulership are being overlaid by the current political situations in Africa. With the coming of colonial rulership and the consequent subordination of African rulership to the colonial royalty, the making of kings and rulers in Africa has become a dual undertaking—the traditional ritual which is the really meaningful one to

the people, and the sanction and giving of the royal staff by the colonial ruler, which is a mere imposition with outward recognition by the "outsiders." The colonial system has been inherited by the current political structures in Africa. Who knows whether it is not this violation of religious traditions and the imposition of political, often unedifying, systems, upon Africa which are making for the societal chaos which we are facing today!

The main point, however, is that by and large, the basis of kingship is still the sacramental ritual of scepter-receiving. The scepter is a moderating factor. The ruler cannot rule according to his own whims and, technically, he cannot become a tyrant (although, in practice, like several of his counterparts in history who have the consciousness of divine quality, he could develop a royal megalomania); it also keeps the people law-abiding because they know that in respecting and obeying the king, they are respecting and obeying the divine will. Here again the current political system in Africa, where the President or Prime Minister now has political precedence over the natural ruler, is posing a problem.

The king, according to the traditional constitution, is a cohesive factor in society. But this is in consequence of the fact that Source-Being is fundamentally and ultimately the cohesive factor of society.

In this connection, we must bring in the factor of covenant which is vital to the being of society in Africa. Every person born into traditional African society is born into a covenant relationship, with a tutelary divine power (and consequently with Source-Being) and with his fellowbeings in the same covenant group. Whether covenant is a community covenant, between two persons, or among a group of persons for any special purpose, the divine will is always supreme. Every entry into a covenant situation, or every

covenant-making, is governed and under the superintendence of the divine Spirit.

Incidentally, if we are failing in our evangelistic efforts anywhere in Africa, the reason is to be found in the fact that Christianity is still to be presented as covenant faith, covenant between the living Lord and the believer. African elders are telling us rather loudly that Christianity is a fashionable religion with little spiritual and moral anchor. Hence the rise of the independent churches which had their origins in protest against "unspiritual Christianity;" and hence the resurgence of certain African cults as a danger signal.

The experience of the transcendence-immanence of Source-Being is ever a reality to Africans. They recognize the greatness, the majesty, the all-purity of Source-Being. They are also aware of his presence in the world as Source-Being who gives being and continuance in being to the world and its fullness. Thus, the Nupe of Nigeria say, "Soko (Source-Being) is far away;" and at the same time say, "Soko is in front, Soko is in the back." The Igbo call Source-Being "the Great Spirit of the skyey heaven" and at the same time, "the Infinite Spirit of the created order." The Edo sum it all up when they give him the name of "Osanobwa"—"Source-Being who carries, sustains, or maintains the created order." The Yoruba express the concept of the transcendence-immanence in the myth of the abortive *coup d'état* organized by the hosts of heaven to wrest the government of the created order from Source-Being. They demanded of him to let them run the universe for an experimental period of sixteen years. He gave them the freedom to make the experiment for sixteen days to begin with. For that period he left things entirely in their control. It was not yet eight days, however, when the machinery of the universe ground to a standstill and a threat of total extermination came upon all creatures. The hosts of heaven had

to hurry back and confess their folly; then Source-Being set things in motion again and all was well. It is the belief of the Yoruba that things go well when the human submits to Source-Being; things become very difficult when humans seek to act independently of him.

One more important point: The *Paraclete* is an ever-present reality to Africans. Unfortunately, the situation is affected by the curse of Babel. This needs careful explanation. Everywhere in Africa (as far as I can judge) we have not only the belief that it is the spirit which Source-Being puts into an individual that makes a person of that individual, but also that one has a spiritual counterpart which is a companion and guide throughout life. This companion, guardian-angel, or counterpart, is called either by the same name, derived from the name of Source-Being, as that of the "inner person," or by another name which is descriptive of his function. The significance of this fact to Africans is that the "essential person" as well as the spiritual counterpart has a cult which symbolizes the fact of the strong belief that apart from the spiritual, the material has no cohesion or meaning, and will therefore be ineffectual. One must therefore keep in good relationship with the companion by means of sacramental rituals.

I have given the companion the name *paraclete* because it is my conviction that the idea of the *paraclete*, in connection with the nature of Source-Being, has ever been present with us in one form or another. With the curse of Babel the sense of that which is the cohesive factor of integrated personality, both of the individual person and of the corporate being of society, was lost. And while, therefore, we retain the sense of the inevitability of the spiritual companion for real, meaningful life, we can now only see, in consequence of spiritual astigmatism, the companion in terms of ourself alone. Thus, each person in Africa has a guardian angel who not only guides and protects selfishly

and possessively, but even also enters into conflict with, or is afflicted by, another person's *paraclete*—even the parents,' or wife's, or husband's *paraclete*. The *paraclete* may turn against one if the person does not keep the *paraclete* in a state of contentment.

This is the point at which Christianity should come to the rescue. Jesus Christ came to deliver from the curse of Babel. The church, born on the day of Pentecost, is meant to reverse the curse of chaotic misunderstanding into the *koinonia* created by oneness of spirit which is oneness in the Spirit. The church, by her nature, is in a position to unify the world of Africans by showing them that the multitude of conflicting or friendly *paracletes* are only shadows, in their minds, of the *Paraclete*—Creator Spirit by whose aid the world's foundations first were laid; the One who creates all things new, controls our will, subdues the rebel in our souls. This is the Spirit of Source-Being whom Africans believe to be the One who brings all into being, sustains and controls the created order and gives life that is real and meaningful to human beings. As they believe there is only the one Source-Being, so must they believe in the only one *Paraclete* for their own permanent well-being.