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Growing Disciples in the Rainforest: A Contextualized Confession for Pygmy Christians

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I The need for a contextualised confession¹

In this article, I would like to introduce the readers to the growing church among Aka-Pygmies in the Central African Republic. More specifically, I intend to show how the inculturation or contextualisation of the Gospel message in a confessional text is crucial for an adequate discipling of this Christian community towards maturity in Christ. The need for contextualisation has been widely recognized in missionary circles. The practical example of the need for a contextualised Gospel for

Pygmy Christians shows, however, three aspects of this need which are less generally recognised.

Firstly, it shows that contextualisation cannot limit itself to the non-essentials of Christian faith and practice. Many missionary practitioners work with the assumption that there is a universal kernel of Christian faith and practice, which should be kept intact in every context. Around that we can group a number of peripheral beliefs and practices which we are allowed to adapt from one context to another. Appropriate contextualisation demands, however, that even the most central Christian beliefs should be contextualised. That Christ is Lord and Saviour should be understood in relation to the challenges of real life, of contextual life. This is not only good practice, but also sound theology—the Lordship of Christ extends over all aspects of our lives as we actually live them and his redemption touches the concrete reality of the mess in which

we find ourselves. The *reality* of Christ and his redemption are definitely transcultural; the way in which we *understand* it and in which this *relates* to us is not.²

Secondly, this example of contextualisation shows that a confession of faith has a crucial role to play in this process. Historically, confessions of faith have had different functions. They have been used, for example, as grids for the education of young Christians. Historically, the so-called *Apostolic Confession* has its origins in the teaching young believers received in the essentials of the faith. In this respect, confessions have a contextual character—they teach what the essentials of the Christian faith and identity are in relation to the challenges and alternatives of the specific context.

Thirdly, appropriate contextualisation requires careful doctrinal or dogmatic reflection if it is to be effective. Contextualisation is not just a question of hermeneutics and the appropriate translation of the biblical text in the receptor language and culture. It cannot limit itself to considerations of practical theology or missiology. We need a proper theological and doctrinal reflection on the content of the faith and how this relates to the specific realities and needs of the receptor culture.

II Church planting among Aka-Pygmies

We are talking about a community of Aka-Pygmy Christians in the region of the Lobaye in the Central African Republic in the forested region to the southwest of the capital of Bangui. More recently, many Central African denominations have been involved in mission among the Pygmies communities. One of the first groups to start work among them was the *Coopération Évangélique* in the 1970s. There are now many churches of Pygmy Christians and a growing number of Pygmy pastors and evangelists.

The leaders of the work among the Pygmies in the *Coopération Évangélique* have encountered considerable difficulties in the discipling of young Christians. As can be seen in other young churches in Central Africa, many people heartily accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are baptised. However, after baptism, they often continue with many traditional religious practices that sometimes completely contradict their newfound faith in Christ.

Local leaders have identified at least two causes at the root of this problem. First of all, many of these Christians were not appropriately disciplined. They have heard how they can be reconciled with God and receive eternal life through Jesus Christ, but they have not learned what this should and could mean for their daily lives. Secondly, their understanding of the Gospel often has little relationship with the challenges they encounter in everyday life. As Kwame Bediako from Ghana has noted in another context, they have received the gospel as an answer to western questions and in

¹ An earlier version of this article was published in Dutch as 'De geloofsbelijdenis van de Pygmeeën. Leerlingen van Jezus in het regenwoud', in *Soteria* 24/4 (December 2007), 6-15.

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² See also Benno van den Toren, 'Is there a humanly accessible supra-cultural core of the Gospel message available?', in Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian and Natee Tanchanpongs (eds.), *Global Theology for the Local Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (forthcoming; Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), Chapter 7.

terms of a western worldview, but the message they received did not adequately address many of the dangers and joys they faced from day to day.³

III The process

This insight led to the understanding that what was needed was a structured presentation of the gospel that could be used as a framework for those involved in the teaching of young Christians. We started thinking in terms of a confession of faith, as this was precisely one of the traditional functions of confessions. Such a confession should at the same time be a contextualised understanding of the gospel that would bring the reality of what God has done in Christ to bear on the reality of life in the rainforest.

In the days after Christmas 2004 a meeting convened in Londo to discuss the terms of a confession. (Londo is one of the centres of the work among Pygmies in the Lobaye region.) Different people were invited who could contribute with their specific experience and expertise. From among the Pygmy community there were three participants: two mature Christians who are part of the local team of the SIL, translating the Bible into Aka (Barthélémy Kombo and François Ndingue), and a Bible school student who would soon be ordained as a pastor (Bokodi Richard). Further there were two other African members of the SIL translation and literacy team (Dominique Kosseke

and Jérôme Sitamon) and two other non-Pygmy leaders of the local church (Blaise-Pascal Mbicko and Faustin Kolibo). All of them have a long history of Christian ministry among the Akas. Finally, there were two guests from the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (Nuanga Weanzana and myself) who it was hoped could bring biblical and theological depth to the project.

As a group, we first identified the main challenges of Pygmy life. Then we tried to formulate how the Christian faith related to them (critically, affirming, challenging), bringing in a different perspective, and giving their questions a new orientation in the light of the reality of Christ. In our formulation of the confession, we consciously tried to include all the main elements of the historic faith. A Christian confession should not only address the need of the local community, but also show how this local community is part of the global Christian community, which in its diversity is united in Christ.

Historically, confessions have not only functioned as a teaching grid, but have had other functions. Confessions were also formulated to define the true teaching in opposition to heresy. They were to guard the Christian identity against deviations that touch upon the essentials of the faith. In this way, the Confession of Nicea (A.D. 325) defended the orthodox faith of church against heresies which put the heart of the gospel of salvation in jeopardy. We decided that in our current context the primary need was for a confession concentrating on the teaching function of confessions and less on the defence of the faith against false teaching.

We consciously tried to avoid a third function which confessions have his-

torically had—to define the identity of one denomination against another, meaning that a confession could for example be identified as Lutheran, Arminian, Episcopal, or Charismatic. In the Christian ministry among Pygmies in the Central African Republic, people from different denominations have worked together and we hoped that this confession would foster rather than complicate such collaboration.

Furthermore, for many Pygmy Christians their denominational affiliation is less important than their identity as Christians, and rightly so. Their denominational affiliation is mostly not a result of a conscious choice, but determined by the origin of the evangelists reaching their villages and camps. Becoming a Christian involves a choice; becoming a member of a certain denomination is more accidental. In this respect they resemble many other African Christians. Although we met on the premises of the *Coopération Evangélique*, which is a charismatic group, we decided that specific denominational indicators should remain minimal, unless we considered them vital for the Christian life in this specific context.

All our conversations took place in French and Sango, the two national languages of the Central African Republic. In the exchanges, a number of the expressions were compared with their Aka equivalents to see whether they would make sense in this context. Yet the translation of the French draft in Aka will be a vital part of the process and a check whether the theological formulations can be earthed in the Aka world. And clearly the confession will need to be used for a number of years

in the field and in different churches to be tested by local Christian wisdom. This may lead to a later revision.

IV The role of the professional theologian and of the outsider

The process we followed obviously raises questions about the role of professional theologians and of outsiders in the formulation of contextual theologies. It has often been stressed that Christian grass-roots communities should be the proper subject of localized contextual theological reflection. There is, however, a need for professional theologians in such a process because the professional theologian can help the community reflect on its own experience in the light of the Scriptures and vice versa.

On the one hand, theologians can help the local community in its proper reflections; on the other hand they can help in relating these to the Scriptures because of their knowledge of the Scriptures both in its details and in understanding how these details relate to the message of Scripture as a whole. The professional theologian will also have easier access to the wider traditions of the worldwide and historic Christian community and can bring these to bear on the specific challenges the local Christian community is facing.

One can similarly argue for the need of outsiders in such a process. Where insiders are needed to understand the many-sided issues involved in understanding and living out the Christian faith in a particular context, outsiders can help see the specific trappings of a

³ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 20ff.

local situation and particular culture. As representatives of one or more other cultural contexts, they do also represent voices of the wider universal church. As such they facilitate the formulations of confessions that are both local and global, local expressions of the one Gospel entrusted to the universal church.⁴

Because the Aka-pygmy church is still in an early stage of its development, it has not yet raised its own theologians and the only theologians involved in the formulation of this confession were all outsiders. This creates a significant risk that the theological categories of the outsiders dominate the local interpretation of Scripture and experience, rather than serving them. This accentuated the need for sustained listening to the local believers and underlines the provisional nature of this confession.

V Challenges for Pygmy Christians

When we discussed the aspects of Pygmy life which the confession should address, we looked for different things. First of all we looked to the major challenges Pygmies encounter in their daily lives. Second, we looked for areas in which we felt that Christian Pygmies find it most difficult to live out their Christian life and were most drawn to practices that were irreconcilable with faith in Christ. We did not

only look at the negatives, however. We also asked what their greatest ideals, joys and desires are. Christ should not only be the answer to our greatest needs, but also the fulfilment of our greatest and best hopes.

Though we found a number of challenges that were really specific to the Pygmy community, we also identified a number of challenges that were found more generally among traditional Africans, or among people living in a context of tribal religion, and some challenges that had a more universal flavour. There seems to be a sliding scale between more specific and more universal challenges in this context. Because of this, many elements of our discussion may be valid in other situations.

We noted the following characteristics of the context, which a contextual confession should address:

(1) Pygmy life is a continuous struggle for survival. Life in the rainforest is less romantic than the publications of certain anthropologists want us to believe. This is aggravated by a number of modern influences, such as the exploitation of the rainforest for timber and over-hunting of wildlife by poachers using rifles. Life is insecure and full of worries—will there be sufficient food for the days to come and will the hunting be successful? This is compounded by the many illnesses with few opportunities for effective treatment. There are traditional medicines that can be used, but the rate of child mortality and the low life expectancy shows that these are in many cases not effective.

(2) The spirits of deceased ancestors and other spiritual powers play an important role in everyday life and at

turning points in life. Combined with the struggle for survival, this provides a constant pull back to practices that are aimed at seeking protection in the spirit world, seeking success in hunting and other endeavours, and appealing forces that may be dangerous.

(3) Pygmies fear death deeply, for themselves and their family members. There is also a profound fear of sorcerers, who are believed to live off the 'souls' of the living.

(4) For many Pygmy Christians it is not yet entirely clear if the Father of Jesus Christ is the only God, or if he is one among many whom you can choose to serve and also choose to abandon. There is a strong tendency to combine worship of the Creator God with the service of lesser deities, ancestor spirits, and other spirits.

(5) Most Pygmies have a profound inferiority complex in relation to other Africans. There is a history of centuries of exploitation in which Pygmies were considered slaves of the other African tribes among whom they live. One of my students came from a village that had relationships with Pygmy camps in the surrounding rainforest. He said that the Pygmy boy who was born closest to his date of birth was automatically considered his slave for the rest of his life. Many Africans used to consider them as a sort of sub-human species, closer to apes. Though such slavery has been officially abandoned, the stereotypes and self-image that goes with it is not so easily changed. Even though the proclamation of the gospel has brought considerable change, Pygmies are still a strongly marginalized group in the Central African Republic.

(6) For many Pygmy Christians,

their relationship with their family and clan is more important than their relationship with God. When there is a conflict of loyalty to God or loyalty to family or clan, the latter often prevails. The family is more important for their identity and daily existence than God. This is related to a more general tendency in traditional African religions to understand the entirety of life and religion in relation to the clan and tribe to which one belongs. The good life is essentially living in harmony with the clan. The religion and ethics of the clan are therefore limited in scope: they only have validity for members of the clan, tribe or ethnic group. It is therefore hard to conceive of a universal religion in which salvation comes from another people.

(7) In general, Pygmies do not consider themselves sinful. The only really evil people are sorcerers who feed on the souls of ordinary people.

(8) As many other Africans, Pygmies have a fundamentally pragmatic approach to religion: religious practices are good when they work in bringing healing, harmony and protection. They should moreover work immediately, for Pygmies do not think of salvation in terms of a life to come in a different world, but in the experience of the good life here and now. It is therefore difficult to deal with the fact that many Christians after conversion still face hardship. The traditional gut-reaction would be—if this god or this ritual does not help with our current problem, let us look elsewhere.

(9) Traditionally, the goal in life for Pygmies is to have children and to be respected by the community in an area in which you can excel. They would particularly want to excel in areas that

⁴ For the role of the professional theologian and the outsider in the formulation of contextual theologies, see Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 16-20.

are highly valued in the Pygmy community—hunting, dancing, traditional healing, leading the community, and manipulating magic powers for protection and healing.

All of these points merit deeper analysis. In all of them, we can detect needs and desires that are profoundly human, but also coloured and often distorted by their worldview. In part they are distorted by sinful interests that in their turn also feed on genuine human needs. One of the functions of the confession will be to pick up everything that is true and good in the Pygmy worldview and life and to place them in a new relationship to Christ. This not only means that Pygmy Christians must learn to sift the good and the bad in their heritage. All that is good must receive a new orientation, and a richer meaning, when Christ becomes the centre of life.

In what follows, I simply present an English translation of the confession. After every article, I have indicated between square brackets which specific problems they intend to address. There are of course many more references to Pygmy traditions than those that were mentioned before. One example is the name of *Komba* for the Creator, as the Pygmies have traditionally known him. This name has already been used in the first translation of the Gospel of Luke in Aka. Another is the critical reference to the myth shared with other African peoples, according to which the Creator has withdrawn himself from the world in primeval times.

The confession has a narrative structure in order to fit into a culture where crucial values and truths are communicated in stories—it tells the

story from creation to the end of history. As it stands, the text is of course very dense and needs much explanation, but that is precisely how it is meant—as a grid for further teaching, which may explain one article at a time.

VI Confession

1. There is only one God, *Komba*, Creator of all that exists. *Komba* is almighty and nothing of what he created is stronger than he or than his will. *Komba* made all human beings according to his own image. All human beings therefore have the same value for him. Nobody can consider or treat another man or woman as a slave. *Komba* never withdrew himself from the world, but every day, He takes care of the world and of all human beings. He loves humankind and he has given them the earth as a place where it is good to live. [1, 2, 4, 5]

2. God created humankind, in order that they would live with him, that they would obey him, respect him, and love him as a child loves its father. He created them in order that they would live together in peace and that they would be stewards of the earth. He therefore has a goal for us that by far exceeds having children or being honoured by men. The most important thing is that we live as his children and that we are honoured by God himself. [7, 8]

3. God did not withdraw himself from the world, yet humankind withdrew itself from him. The greatest sin of humankind is that they turned away from God, and that they did not love and trust him as a child its father. Humankind preferred to pray to other gods and spirits rather than to the one

living and true God. When they pray to them, they entrust themselves to powers which cannot help as the true God can help. These powers keep them from their true goal: to live as children of God. [1, 2, 4, 7]

4. God has a plan for all humankind. For him, all tribes and all families are equal. Yet, he began a particular history with one family and one people: the family of Abraham and the people of Israel. He did this in order that through this people all the peoples of the earth may receive his blessing. [6]

5. From this people Israel, the Son of God was born as a human child, Jesus of Nazareth. The Son of God became man in order to bring humankind back to God. He was a son of Israel, but he is Saviour of all humankind. He is not a biological ancestor of the Pygmies, but he came from the Creator of the Pygmies and of all peoples. We all are invited to become sisters and brothers of Jesus of Nazareth. [6]

6. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, suffered for humankind and died on the cross for them. On the cross, he took away the sin of humankind and he broke the power of sin and of the spiritual powers which oppose God and his plan. This victory became manifest after three days, when he rose from the dead and conquered the power of death. Under his protection, we need no longer fear any powers, because he reigns over all. [1, 2, 3, 8]

7. The Son of God returned to heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit in order that he would live in men and women so that they would know that they are children of God. Becoming children of God does not depend on our own efforts, but is a gracious gift of God,

which they are invited to accept by faith, entrusting themselves to God. The Holy Spirit renews men and women, so that they may live as children of God. The Holy Spirit guides the new community of those who belong to Jesus Christ. He helps them to proclaim the Good News to all people. More and more peoples, families and individuals are invited to experience the victory of Jesus Christ and to live as children of God. [6]

8. The powers of sin, of death, and the spiritual and human powers that are in enmity with God continue to be active in this world. God still permits them in order to give to men and women in the whole world the possibility to hear the Good News of the victory of Jesus. The children of God also experience difficulties in this intermediate time. Sometimes they are hungry, they are ill and they die. Yet, they keep courage, for they know that the powers of evil are already conquered. They see the power of God manifest in their lives, when the sick are healed, when evil spirits are thrown out, when oppressed people are set free, when sinners are converted and when they experience the power of God in their weakness. In the most difficult moments, they know that their most precious treasures, the love of God, to be his children, and eternal life, can never be taken from them. [1, 2, 3, 8]

9. As children of God and as the community of Jesus, we wait for his return from heaven. The dead are also waiting for this moment and in the mean time they have no influence on the lives of the living. When Jesus returns, the death will rise. Jesus will judge them and will destroy all evil. He will establish justice and a renewed

earth and a renewed heaven. There, all the children of God will forever live in peace with God and with each other. [2, 8, 9]

VII Lessons for the wider church

The formulation of this confession of faith is of course a picture at a given moment of a process that will need to continue. In the coming years it will need to be tested to see whether this text will provide an adequate basis for a teaching program for Pygmy Christians. It will also need to be confirmed whether a wider group of churches can recognise this text as an appropriate expression of the scriptural message and an adequate formulation for their context.

As it stands, this confession already illustrates the three points made in the introduction of this article. First, it shows that the contextualisation of the Gospel needs to touch the central tenets of the Christian confession, so that those central convictions can have their redemptive bearing on the world of the Pygmies. Then it gives an example of how a confession of faith can provide a model for expressing these central tenets in a systematic way, which in turn can be worked out in a variety of teaching programs and formats to address the different needs of groups within the community.⁵ Finally, it

shows us that contextualisation is a profoundly theological enterprise: it touches directly on the way we understand God and his relationship to us.

Some readers may disagree about certain theological expressions used, both in respect of their faithfulness to Scripture and also their aptness to express Scriptural truth in this context. Yet, these disagreements itself lead us directly into further doctrinal discussions, which hopefully would lead to a deepening of the theological understanding needed for an adequate and faithful Christian witness in the Central African rainforest.

Looking at this confession from different angles shows the importance of sound contextual doctrine and therefore of critical doctrinal reflection for the Christian life. This becomes clear, when we see how this confession can have the four functions of doctrine developed by Alister McGrath in another context.⁶

Doctrine and a confession such as this function first of all as 'social demarcation'—they show what is essential for Christian identity and how the Christian community should be different from the surrounding world. Doctrine and a confession such as this function secondly as a rule for the 'interpretation of narrative'—they help read and understand the much larger narrative of Scripture and therefore function as a guide for sound preaching in the community.

Doctrine and a confession such as this function thirdly as a guide for the

'interpretation of experience'—they help Pygmy Christians to experience the joys and difficulties of their lives in a different way and to live out the Gospel in relation to them. This is especially important considering that a significant pull toward syncretism lies in the fact that many young Christians tend to experience major parts of their lives the old way. Therefore the old answers continue to seem the most helpful ones and the Christian faith

often seems rather irrelevant in comparison.

Fourthly, doctrine and a confession such as this present us with a 'truth claim'—they show us what our reality is like and therefore what the deepest truth of our life and world is and what we should make of it. We hope that this confession may play such a liberating role for our Pygmy brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁵ For other examples, see Jaroslav Pelikan & Valerie Hotchkiss (eds.), *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, volume 3 *Statements of Faith in Modern Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 35-80.