BANTU PHILOSOPHY:
PLACIDE TEMPELS REVISITED

BY

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I

Introduction

The French translation of Father Tempels' book (it was originally written in Flemish) was published in Zaire in 1945 under the title, La philosophie bantoue. Its English translation was not published until 1959. It is with the latter, entitled Bantu philosophy, that we are concerned. The book is divided into seven chapters following on the preface. However, the chapters form an organic whole. The central thesis of that whole is the theory of "vital force". It is first established in chapter one; while chapters two to six relate it to God/divinities, man, and society. Tempels insists on understanding and interpreting the roles of these agents in the light of the theory. He appears to have more or less viewed it as possessing the kind of senses expressed by modern sociological studies in terms of explanatory concept and predictive theory. It is these understandings which obviously underpin the discussion of the final chapter entitled 'Bantu philosophy and our mission to civilize'.

We may now turn to the thesis for a closer scrutiny. Tempels doubts the validity of the various eighteenth/nineteenth century Western definitions of the African world, definitions still in vogue in the twentieth century, which proceed with such definitive concepts as 'animism', 'dynamism', 'mana' etc. To him,

What has been called magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism—in short, all the customs of the Bantu—depend upon a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say, upon their Ontological Principle. (p. 33)

His contention is that these terms are merely blind pointers to a cosmological core-truth and as such mislead, as they cannot lead to that truth. Hence he insists that the studies advocating such terms,
have so often had vague ideas of, approached near to, or even touched upon, the fundamental concept of Bantu ontology. Yet we find scarcely any systematic study of this ontology. (p. 31)

Tempels went on to say that “the key to Bantu thought is the idea of vital force, of which the source is God.”

This notion of ‘vital force’ is exactly what Tempels meant by the phrase ‘Bantu ontology’. However, he uses the term ‘force’ as the African equivalent of, but distinct from, the concept of ‘being’. It is doubtful that there is any concrete evidence for this piece of scholastic manoeuvre; however he went on to claim that,

When we think in terms of the concept of ‘being’ they use the concept ‘force’. Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that ‘beings’ are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that ‘forces’ differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, or mineral forces. (p. 52)

The Thomistic flavour of this analysis couched in the categories of racial/cultural ‘we’ as opposed to ‘they’ is perhaps its only strength.

Having posited his explanatory concept of ‘vital force’, Tempels took the next step of drawing out its implications within the African world. He saw the theory as the axis around which African cosmology revolves. The whole content of African experience of the world, God, spirits and divinities, ancestors, elders, society etc. were hedged in and hierarchically accounted for with this concept (cf. pp. 58-64). He asserts that, “All creatures are found in relationship according to the laws of a hierarchy”. (p. 60) He makes it clear that God as the creator is the originator of all forces and the self originator of His own being which is also force (cf. p. 70f.). Tempels nevertheless is careful to point out that, to the Bantu,

The Created Universe is centred on man. The present human generation living on earth is the centre of all humanity, including the world of the dead. (p. 64)

*Bantu Philosophy* is concerned with making the following points:

(a) The nature of the universe to the African is nothing if not the ‘universe of forces’.

(b) These ‘forces’ can weaken or strengthen the ‘life force’ of the individual.

(c) In the face of the fact that one’s ‘life force’ can be dangerously diminished or beneficially enhanced and strengthened, the best course of action for one is to take care to avoid the diminution of one’s ‘life force’. This last point is crucial to the proper understand-