

THE HISTORIC MISSION OF THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES (AIC)

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Introduction

The emergence of the African independent churches marks a radical paradigm shift in the history of African Christianity. Many causes and reasons have been assigned for the emergence and the continued existence of the phenomenon of African Independent Churches (Barret 1967). The purpose of this paper is not to rehearse the much discussed causes of the emergence of the African Independent Churches which have been documented by many writers on African Christianity (Barret 1967; Sunkler, 1962; Baeta 1962; Turner 1966; Larbi, 1995 etc.). The purpose of this paper is rather to evaluate the historical and theological significance of African independent churches in the historical evolution of African Christianity.

The Vision of the Missionary Movement

The religious zeal of the missionary movement that brought Christianity to Africa was as revolutionary as the revolutionary spirit that gripped Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. The missionary zeal of the pietistic revivals that swept through Europe and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced the modern Western European missionary movement (Latourette 1943). For Africa, this missionary zeal meant the ambitious planting of Christianity on the continent as a cure for the slave trade. Inspector Josenhans of the Basel Mission puts this optimistic missionary zeal of the nineteenth century mission for Africa this way:

For thousands of years, the Black Africans, the slave of slaves was lying prostrate on the ground crumpled together; she did hide her true face from her tormentors and traders. We stand under the impression that this Africa now raises her head, unveils her maltreated face and hurries, pouring tears of sorrow and hope towards him who delivers her from servitude, shame and death, and who will lead her children to earthly and heavenly freedom (Debrunner, 1967:103).

This same vision that saw Christianity as the cure for the problems of Africa is articulated by Sir T.F. Buxton's African Civilization society who believed that the only cure for all the evils of slavery was the introduction of Christianity (Debrunner, 1967:105).

However, in the planting of Christianity in Africa, which according to the declaration of the Exeter Hall missionary conference of 1840 was to save Africa through the Gospel and the "plough", somehow became entangled with the colonial and imperialistic aspiration of Western Europe.

Missions and Colonialism

This unfortunate but understandable entanglement of the nineteenth century missionary work with Western European nationalistic and imperialistic interests prevented the missionary movement from making the kind of impact it could otherwise have made on the African society. And to the extent that the missionary movement allowed itself to be drawn into the orbit of the colonial ideology of domination, its vision was somehow blurred. This flirtation with the colonial ideology of domination, based on the myth of the so-called Western European 'civilizing mission' to the rest of the world lured the missionaries to succumb to the cultural imperialism of colonialism. The cultural imperialism is reflected in the strand of missionary perspective that saw the whole missionary work in Africa as the westernization of the African (Akrong, 1991:14). And it was such an ethnocentric view of mission work that saw African culture as the very antithesis of Christianity.

Paradoxically, this same African culture which was denigrated by the missionaries became the spiritual milieu that created the conditions for the planting, the nurturing and the growth of African Christianity. The spirit of African culture, which sustained and promoted the growth of African Christianity also, gave birth to the phenomenon of African Independent Churches.

The movement of African spirituality is the continuous struggle of the African culture and religion to re-interpret Christianity on the basis of the African world view, which defines for African Christians the needs and concerns that the Christian message must address. The movement of African Spirituality was initiated, sustained and nurtured by the AIC, which has made an invaluable contribution to the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa. The historic and theological contribution of the AIC is that, for the first time, they were able to make the essential elements of African spirituality the presupposition for the appropriation of the Christian message in the African context. In this way, they were able to challenge the cultural imperialism of the missionaries, which would have domesticated Christianity, and made African Christians outsiders to the benefits of the Christian message. By resisting the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity, the AIC prevented African Christianity from becoming a mere appendage to Western Christianity. Secondly, by their protest the

African independent movement was able to defend African culture as a creditable vehicle through which the Christian message can be mediated to deal with peculiar African concerns and problems. Thirdly, by rescuing Christianity from the cultural imperialism of the missionaries, the movement of the African independent churches has helped both Africans and Europeans to come to terms with the universal nature and appeal of the Christian message which transcends all cultures, yet translatable into all cultures (Akrong, 1991:24).

The focus on the universal nature of the Christian message in the African protest movement is consistent with the incarnational paradigm of mission as *missio Dei*, that is God's mission in Christ, mediated through different cultures to all human beings. The incarnation as the controlling paradigm of both Christian witness and mission, leads to the profound realization that Christianity is a translatable universal message that can make its abode in all cultures. And anytime the universal translatable character of Christianity is compromised, either through cultural imperialism or local domestication, the essence of Christianity is also lost. Indeed, the power, dynamism, and the appeal of Christianity lies in its translatable character, because it is a religion of incarnation in which divinity becomes part of humanity so that humanity can be transformed to attain the purposes for which it was created (Akrong 1991).

Missions and Enlightenment

Although most of the missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa came from the pietistic tradition, they were nevertheless influenced by the enlightenment evolutionary philosophy of progress.

The enlightenment historians created a unified world history within which all historical phenomenon was interpreted in evolutionary terms (Fabian 1983:33-35), and the cultural question for enlightenment history was not whether one were a Christian or non-Christian. Rather, the central question in relation to people of other non-European cultures was whether they were enlightened, civilized or primitive. The evaluation of the non-European was based on a classification within a grand narrative of progress, which saw the European culture and the goal of human cultural evolution together (Fabian, 146). The worldview of enlightenment moved from a common humanity to a hierarchy of races, on the basis of which all human beings and their cultures were classified. The intersection of common humanity and hierarchy of races gave birth to the theories of socio-biological and cultural evolution. Once one accepts hierarchies as an objective description of creaturely differences in an evolutionary process then one can account for racial differences on the basis of evolution from the simple to the complex, from ignorance to intelligence, and from innocence to sophistication (Hiebert 1995:331).

The enlightenment evolutionary worldview provided the framework within which most missionaries interacted with non-Europeans. They saw non-Europeans not only

as non-Christians, but also as savages, primitives, or fossils of the ancestors of the human race frozen in time. The logic of the evolutionary philosophy of the enlightenment lured the missionaries deeply into the enlightenment ideology of the West, educating and civilizing the non-Europeans as a duty. Stephen Neill notes:

Missionaries in the nineteenth century had, to some extent, yielded to the colonial complex. Only the Western man was man in the full sense of the word; he was wise and good, and members of other races, in so far as they became Western, might share in this wisdom. But western man was the leader, and would remain so for a very long time, perhaps forever (Neill, 1964:256).

The immediate consequence of identifying Christianity with Western Culture as the ideal culture was that, the Christian message was made unnecessarily foreign to African Culture and as a result the African Christians saw Christianity as a foreign religion (Pobee 1992:168). This was possible because the missionaries saw Christianity as the fulfillment of their Culture and not African Culture. David Bosch writes:

*It was however not until the arrival on the scene of the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, the rise of liberal theology and the birth of the new discipline, comparative religion, that the stage was set for an approach according to which religions could be compared and in ascending scale. In the Western world there was no doubt which religion stood as the pinnacle. In almost every respect, every other religion – even if it might be *praeparatio evangelii* was deficient, compared with Christianity (Bosch, 1991:117).*

The enlightenment philosophy of progress, coupled with the ideology of colonialism, created the conditions for the domestication of the Christian message by Western cultural imperialism.

The African Revolt

The spirit that inspired the movement of the AIC was a cultural protest against the domestication of Christianity by the missionaries. The explosion of African spirituality that has been lying dormant in the missionary churches gave birth to an African protest movement, which was able to rescue Christianity from Western cultural imperialism, and also reclaim African culture for the church in Africa. The missionaries were so blinded by the Western culture that, what they saw was only the discontinuities between Christianity and the African culture and not the continuities. The African independent church movement was quick in pointing out the continui-

ties between Christianity and African culture which qualify the African culture both as a *praeparatio evangelii* – and also a creditable and a legitimate vehicle for mediating the message of Christianity to the African society.

The missionaries, to the extent that they saw African culture from one perspectives of its discontinuities with the Gospel rather than its continuities, formulated the message of Christianity from a very exclusive theological perspective which implied that one cannot be an African and a Christian at the same time. The implications of this narrow view of Christianity are that, for an African to become a Christian, he or she must somehow become a carbon copy of a western European. The soteriological implications of this narrow missionary view of African culture meant that salvation for missionary Christianity included liberation from the African culture and religion, and incorporation into the western culture in whose orbit alone the salvation of God is deemed to be efficacious, (Akron 1991a: 18).

The soteriological implications of the missionary theology of salvation undermined the integrity of the Christian message as a universal message for all humankind. Secondly, it delegitimised the spiritual questions and concerns that Africans brought to the Christian message of salvation. Thirdly, it presented a dehumanizing paternalistic theology that tried to define for African Christians what questions, concerns and problems they could legitimately bring to Christianity for answers and solutions. Furthermore, the missionary theology, by delegitimizing the genuine concerns and aspirations of African Christians, only succeeded in raising, in the eyes of the Africans, doubt about the efficacy of Christianity as a religion of salvation. Even more so, most Africans found the central soteriological issues of missionary theology to be peripheral to their concerns and experiences, especially questions of sin, and the sense of guilt which are the main salvation concerns of the Western industrial society, though part of the Christian message does not have the same significance for African Christians who see salvation essentially in terms of issues of daily survival. For many African Christians, the central issues of salvation deal with protection from evil forces, healing, and transformation of socio-political structures that will bring about well being and the fulfillment in life.

Soteriological Significance of the African Independent Churches

The historic significance of the African independent Churches to African Christian theology is that they resisted the attempt by missionary Christianity to exclude the basic concerns and aspirations of African Christians from the salvation message of Christianity. In this way, the AIC have forced the African Church and African Christian theology to grapple with the questions and concerns that come from what it means to an African in the world. And, by refusing to allow the missionary Christianity to exclude the legitimate African concerns from the salvation discourse, they have rebelled against the half-truths of missionary theology to re-interpret the message of Christianity, on the basis of the scripture, which has a place for African

questions and concerns.

The re-interpretation of Christianity on the basis of the scripture constituted therefore the point of departure of the theology of the African independent Churches. And this is precisely the theological revolution that has given Christianity the fertile soil to grow in Africa. This has made it possible for Africans to give Jesus an African name and a home, as the incarnate Son of God who came into the world for the sake of Africans as well.

This protest, in the name of African culture, led to the discovery of the truth concerning the message of Christ which is addressed to humanity in all circumstances according to the questions and concerns each cultural group brings from their various cultural backgrounds (Barret, 1968:127).

The shift in the hermeneutical circle of African Christianity initiated by the African Independent Churches was able to widen the scope of the soteriological appeal of the Christian message to Africans. And it is in this radical hermeneutical shift that we can locate the magic of the success story of African Christianity. E.A. Ayandale observes:

Unrestricted access to the Bible with its notion of equality, justice, and non-racialism provided the early converts with a valid weapon which they were not reluctant to employ against the missionaries, who brushed aside these ideals in church administration and in their relation with the converts (Ayandale, 1966:176).

With the translation of the Bible, the Africans were able to discover spiritual values and resources, which could be applied to their needs and concerns. These needs and concerns were hitherto, excluded or marginalised from the soteriology of missionary theology. The rediscovery of Christianity by the independent African Churches as a religion of salvation for the African, was the key that unlocked the spiritual values of Christianity and initiated the process of re-interpretation of Christianity from the perspective of African Culture and spirituality. This hermeneutic breakthrough became the framework for the theology of the independent African Churches.

But this paradigm shift in the theology of the African independent churches was also an ideological critique of missionary cultural imperialism which helped to free the Christian message from its bondage to Western culture so that it could also become a message addressed to the African. The "hermeneutic of suspicion" that helped to sustain the integrity of the Christian message even under its bondage to Western culture also helped this new African theology to make a critical distinction between the essential salvation message of Christianity and its western cultural trappings which belongs to the captivity of the Christian message to Western Christendom.

In the final analysis, the vanacularization of the scripture that energized the protest movement against the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity was able to liberate Christianity from the confines of Western culture to assume its proper nature as a trans-cultural universal message addressed to all human beings. This is the theological contribution of the African independent Churches to the evolution of African Christianity. And as a result of this theological innovation, a process of reinterpretation, reformation and renewal of African Christianity was initiated which continues to revitalize the Christian message in the African context.

The translation of the Christian message into African cultural idioms in the theology of the AIC gave birth to an authentic African Christian theology and witness. This new reformulation of Christianity into African idioms was able to inspire African men and women who had accepted Christianity to become prophets, apostles and missionaries to their own people. The great work done by African apostles, evangelists, and prophets in the planting, nurturing and the growth of African Christianity are the visible testimonies of the triumph of an authentic African expression of Christianity in the African independent churches. Unfortunately this aspect of the contribution of African Christians to the success story of African Christianity is often not emphasized in the history of the church in Africa.

Challenges for the Future

The challenges facing the historic mission of the African independent churches are theological, cultural, and socio-political. And for the movement to fulfil its historic destiny, it should be able to redefine its mission in a way that can deal with new issues facing the African society today.

Cultural and theological challenges

So far, the success of the AIC has been the translation of Christianity into the cultural idioms of the African context that can address the needs and concerns of the people. On this level of theological reinterpretation, the movement has done only the first part of the dialectics of hermeneutics: This is the part that has to deal with the contextualization of the Christian message, which entails the reinterpretation and re-appropriation of the Christian message in terms that are relevant and understandable to African Christians. However, since the Christian message is a universal and a Trans-cultural one that both addresses and judges all cultures, the AIC have to enter into the second level of the dialectics of hermeneutics which will be the critique of aspects of our culture and beliefs that deprive us of the full benefits of the new life which the Christian message brings. It is such critiques of our culture that will bring about the transformation of our culture and make it a creditable vehicle for the translation of the Christian message along side other cultural forms and patterns that have made contributions to the Christian heritage. The theological critique of our culture or the evangelization of African culture should include, the fear of witches and evil

spirits which is sustained by an unhealthy and unchristian dualistic interpretation of the world, that invariably leads to the construction of what has been described as a "witchcraft mentality", an interpretative scheme for explaining all misfortunes. The perpetuation and the consolidation of this "witchcraft mentality" in some of the new churches, especially the Charismatic variety of the African independent churches are, re-enslaving many African Christians to the culture of fear that characterized our religion and culture before the advent of Christianity. And today, with the revival of witchcraft accusations, families are breaking up while helpless and defenceless old women are being lynched.

Secondly and more importantly, the dualistic world view that undergird the witchcraft mentality has led some churches into the re-demonization of African culture as a culture from which one should be delivered or liberated. And for this reason, there is today, a tendency for an uncritical rejection of African culture, in lieu of Western culture, in the so-called deliverance ministries of some Charismatic churches. These developments in the Charismatic varieties of the movements are undermining the integrity of the historic mission of the AIC that rescued African Christianity from the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity. It is important to emphasize here that, our culture is the only human voice by which we can express our response to the Gospel. And if we demonize our culture because of the lure of western culture, then we are demonizing ourselves and depriving ourselves of any creditable means of responding to the Christian message. The World Council of Churches' Bangkok conference on Mission and evangelism, reminds us that culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ (Bangkok Assembly 1973). Therefore anytime we deny or demonize our culture we are rejecting God's gifts to us that can allow us to worship praise and respond to His call. And no church can effectively face up to its challenges if it does not embrace the Gospel within the cultural and religious heritage of its context (Akong 1991).

Socio-political

The other great challenge facing the historic mission of African independent churches is in the area of active participation and engagement in society. The challenges posed by the post independent African society needs a renewed mission of the church to the society whose aim should be to help find solutions to some of the socio-political and economic problems. Increasingly, the socio-economic and political forces are becoming important factors in the society, and they affect our values and our understanding of salvation. These socio-political and economic forces are raising new questions about the meaning of salvation which had hitherto been ignored or not been addressed. The challenge to Christian witness on the whole, and to the historic mission of the African independent churches in particular, whose aim is to make the salvation message of Christianity relevant to the needs of the African society, means social engagement. Therefore without a special mission to the poor and the needy as part of the historical mission of the independent churches, its mission will be incom-

plete. The holistic nature of the African view of salvation that inspired the movement would be betrayed if African independent churches fail in their mission to the poor and the needy in the society.

Unfortunately today, in what can be termed "popular Christianity" in Africa, these problems are often traced to witches, demons or ancestral curses rather than to the socio-political and economic forces that have produced them. If the AIC will continue the holistic mission to the African society, then they must contribute to the very social processes whose failure have produced the anxieties, which push people to seek spiritual solutions for purely mundane things that can be corrected by social and political action.

Part of the historic mission and witness of the African independent churches should be active participation in the process of nation building by providing our political culture with new religious symbolism that can unite us irrespective of tribe, gender and class. Another area of challenge to the African independent churches should be participation in the building of a democratic culture for the African society. The All African Conference of Churches posed the political challenge to the Christian witness in the African society thus:

We recognize that the sorry state of our continent is not only to be blamed on external factors, but also internal forces in particular, we recognize that the absence of security for citizens, the passive lack of accountability, democracy and respect for human dignity whereby a majority of the people are denied the freedom to apply their physical and mental capacities in efforts of their choice, to associate and express themselves freely and to participate in development and other matters affecting them, is responsible to a large extent, for Africa's predicament that has ironically seen Africa's conditions crucially deteriorate since independence (AACC, 1995).

The mission of the African independent churches in the socio-economic and political sphere must be an effective participation in the society so that they can contribute to the quest for a new vision in our society.

The historic mission and destiny of the African independent churches is not yet complete. This movement can look back to the past with pride because of its contribution to the development of African Christianity but unless it re-defines its mission in the light of the prevailing socio-economic and political challenges, it would not have completed its agenda and thus its historic mission.

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