

AFRICAN RELIGION, THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND COLONIALISM: EVALUATION

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Abstract

The Africans suffered humiliation under the Christian missionaries and colonial masters. African religion and culture was devalued and bastardized by the colonial masters, through the missionaries. The data for this research was collected through the primary and secondary sources. During the 19th century, Africa was subjected to the influence of two special powers which changed the face of the continent (Africa) in a dramatic way: Western Christianity and European Colonialism. When distinguishing between these two factors, it should be remembered, however, that they can never be fully separated. This is already evident from the fact that it was a Western or European type of Christianity transplanted on African soil, by The Christian missionaries, also members of the colonialisng nations acted — whether they were aware of it or not — in favour of colonial rule. Even though some biblical scholars, especially of Western extraction, may not fully concur with van deWalt's view, that many of the missionaries did indeed "transplant" their European culture along with their efforts to Christianize the African continent. Judith M. Bahemuka echoed this thought when she opined that the "missionaries preached a foreign Christ to Africa". Could Christ be said to have been properly unveiled to Africa the way the Western Missionaries carried out their proselytizing mission? Is it possible to preach an authentic Gospel that is totally devoid of the cultural heritage of the recipients of the message? One may need to also know whether the African Christian can remain faithful to the Gospel without sacrificing his cultural heritage. How can the African believer identify with Christ in the African setting? These are some of the issues that will be of special concern in this paper.

Key words; Missionaries, Colonialism, African, Evaluation, Christianity

Introduction

Unlike the Western society, according to Idowu, the African Society is notoriously religious. In fact, in the African society religion permeates every stratum of life. The distinction often made in the West between the sacred and the secular is foreign to the religious outlook of the African. Like Bahemuka noted, the traditional African beliefs are communal. It permeates the entire social structure. Parrinder elaborated on this view by observing that religion is all-encompassing; it does not fall within the province of one particular class, even though specialists like the priests are permitted to perform ritualistic functions. Religion in this sense for the Africans percolates into the life of the individual, which makes it impossible for anyone to be part of the life of the community and not be a member of the religious system. Indeed, every member of the community must observe certain transitional rites at certain times in order for them to be regarded as bonafide members of the community.

It should also be pointed out that the concept of God as the supreme God or Deity is basic to the African religious worldview, even though it is sometimes vaguely expressed. G.O.M. Tasie corroborates this claim when he inferred that the supreme deity in African religion is not worshipped directly. There are no shrines or sacrifices dedicated for His worship. This is not to say that there is no belief in the Supreme Deity. Tasie recounts a very intriguing experience Hope Waddell (the United Presbyterian church of Scotland pioneer missionary) had when he visited the Niger-Delta. Waddell Observes:

It seems to me unnecessary to prove to these people that there is a God who made all things... Here (the Delta) as well as everywhere else I got a ready acknowledgement of the existence of one supreme God, the maker of all things.

It is clear therefore that Africans had a knowledge of God before the European missionaries set their feet on the former's soil. The knowledge they had of God was divinely implanted. The deficiency was not in knowing God but knowing Him properly in the Christian sense- a knowledge that also impacted on their relationship with Him. Unfortunately, many of the missionaries may have missed this point. Hence they adopted an evangelistic approach that gave the impression that the natives were infidels who had no inkling of who the true God was.

Missionary Efforts and Colonialism: An Overview

The 19th Century marked the zenith of Colonialism in Africa. It was this period that most parts of this continent was parcelled out by the European powers. As colonialism flourished and triumphed so was a great impetus given to missions. Since missions and colonialism operated in the same regions of the world at particular times it was inevitable that they should meet and mingle. Kane, however, pointed out that the relationship between Missions and colonialism was not monolithic -it lacked uniformity. In some countries there was active collaboration while in others there was mutual distrust and sometime recriminations.

Colonialism and the Devaluation of Social Structures

There is the need to emphasize the way the colonizers exhibited their Western sense of superiority. They considered the African worldview as inchoate and primitive. Africa as a whole was seen as a dark continent- uncivilized, barbaric and morally stunted. This led to a negation of indigenous African culture and the foisting of Western values on the people. Walt identified some ways the colonialists endeavored to do this.

- (1) Western forms of education and government were imported without any regard to the traditional structures already in place. Of course this turned out to be a "mixed blessing" to the indigenous people.
- (2) The idea of the family was radically redefined. In place of the extended family was the idea of nuclear family. This change later had great repercussions on the cohesion of family ties. The concept of the nuclear family was a borrowed ideology and it has done much harm to the social fabric of the African continent.
- (3) Other ideological constructs like urbanization and socialism also came on board. These were totally new phenomena, like putting new wine in old wine bottles, for the Africans who were used to communalism as a way of life.

Perhaps we need to reiterate the point earlier made that the missionaries were, in the most part, allies to the colonialists. And where this was not the case they unconsciously acted out the script of the colonialists as it became evident in certain aspects of their missionary approach.

The Missionaries and Evangelization Strategies

The evangelization strategies adopted by the missionaries in the evangelization of Africa were conditioned by a mindset that was largely jaundiced. Africa had been pictured as lacking religion and sound morals. Evangelization was therefore seen as a form of liberation from awful barbarism. The missionaries did not see and appreciate the positive aspects of the religious and moral qualities in Africa. Against this backdrop we shall further endeavor to crystallize the missionary enterprise in Africa.

What the Missionaries Did Wrong

(1) Failure to Distinguish between Western Culture and Christianity

It is pertinent to mention at this point that the experience of religion is never done in a cultural vacuum. Religion is, as always, transmitted through local culture. When this is not done there is confusion or alienation. Unfortunately, the missionaries neglected or ignored this aspect of reality in their attempt to evangelize Africa. They saw the converted African as a sort of tabula rasa on which Western cultural values needed to be ingrained." Or else he is not truly converted. The problem was perhaps ignorance on the part of the missionaries. They could not distinguish between the Gospel and its Western cultural dressings. This confusion made the missionaries to view the "cultural form as a real part of the Gospel". Curiously, the African converts also believed that his conversion was incomplete until he fully accepted the Westernized version of the Christian faith... Considering how the missionaries, like the colonial rulers, regarded the culture of the local people with disdain it is very easy to castigate them. True, the missionaries imported Christianity to the African continent in a freighter that carried excess luggage such as their personal prejudices and predilections, ethical and legal codes moral and social taboos. But it should be noted that religion and

culture have always cohabited. Thus when the two elements have existed for a long time together in the same milieu it is virtually impossible to separate them. Kane posits that it would be as "easy to extract, the salt from the sea as to remove Christianity from Western culture". This fact should temper critical judgments on the missionaries for their misdeeds.

(2) The fallacy of superior Civilization.

The missionaries uniformly considered the Western civilization as superior to that of the African. But on what basis is Western Civilization superior? Any categorization on the basis of generalization is highly subjective. Several African historians would disagree with the missionaries evaluation of African civilization before the colonial regime. Rodney writes about the impression of the first Europeans to visit West and East Africa. They were of the view that African development or civilization was comparable to that which they knew in the West. Rodney further relates a graphic picture painted of the ancient Benin Kingdom by the Dutch who visited the city in about the 15th century.

The town seems to be very great. When you enter into it, you go into a great broad street not paved, which seems to be seven or eight times broader than the Warmoes street in Amsterdam... The town is composed of thirty main streets, very straight and 120 feet wide apart from an infinity of small intersecting streets. The houses are close to one another, arranged in good order. These people are no way inferior to the Dutch as regards cleanliness.

There is, however a natural tendency to rate one's civilization as superior to all others. This tendency is not new. Among the Greeks the barbarians were regarded with contempt; the Jews saw the Gentiles as inferior and as such unworthy of the gift of salvation. When the missionaries landed on the African soil they perhaps were disgusted with some of the things they saw: poverty, superstition, disease, etc. But that was only half of the story, which, of course, was the seamy side. They had a blind spot and were unable to see African civilization in its totality. The way this lopsided perception impacted on the evangelization process will become obvious as we consider the next point.

(3) Failure to Indigenize Christianity

This was a minus for the missionaries. They failed to indigenize the Christian faith among the local people. They mistook the form for the substance and thus insisted that Christianity must remain Western in motif. This failure to indigenize the faith was manifested in various ways. The churches were built with Western architectural designs like the spire, bell and cross. Only hymns with Western tunes were considered appropriate for worship. Local musical instruments were forbidden. In short the liturgy was transplanted wholesale from the West to the African church. The immediate consequence of this for the African Christian has been given expression by Steve Biko:

"Where people are subjected to a religion that is far removed from their cultural make-up then elements of disgruntlement begin to be noted and sometimes open deviance is soon displayed". Sometimes the reaction may not be "disgruntlement" or "open deviance", it could manifest in hypocrisy. The adherent simply feigns conversion to the faith, which is foreign and Western, when indeed he is not.

(4) Perceived Alliance between the missionaries and Colonial Rulers

The perception that the missionaries were working in concert with the colonizers cannot be dismissed as lacking substance. They did not only travel in the same ship, served under the same flags they partially helped the colonialists in realizing their mission of "civilizing" the "natives". In return the colonial government offered the missionaries free land and heavily subsidized their schools and other missionary projects. Of course there was a price the missionaries had to pay as is often the case when church and state coalesce. The Gospel was sometimes compromised. The excesses of the colonialists were brooked and allowed to pass by without a voice of dissent by the church.

It would be unfair to the missionaries not to concede to them the victories won and the successes achieved. Hence it would be appropriate to mention some of the things they did right.

What the Missionaries Did Right

(1) They were willing to make sacrifices

In the epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul expressed his willingness to give himself in service for his converts. He writes "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:8). This may also be said of the missionaries. They were ready to sacrifice their comforts in their home field "that I (they) might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22) in the far-off lands of Africa.

Kane aptly described the disinterested love demonstrated by the missionaries in the following words:

Their self-sacrificing love carried them to great lengths. Time and again they placed their own lives in jeopardy to protect the lives of others. When typhus, yellow fever, bubonic plague, and their dreadful epidemics swept the community, missionary doctors and nurses remained at the posts to tend to the sick and bury the dead.

The missionary exploits of David Livingstone in Africa is legendary. Before he died in 1873 he had transversed much of Africa's vast territory, bringing the Gospel message to the natives. Significantly it was said of David Livingstone that he not only discovered Africa, but the African too. His reports arising from his personal encounters with the evil of slavery also gave impetus to the move to abolish slavery in the civilized world.

(2) They Developed interest in Indigenous Languages and translated the scriptures

The missionaries in most cases had to learn more than one language, if they were to be effective in reaching the indigenes with the Gospel. And this is not often quite easy, because most of the languages had no written form. The assumption that African languages are primitive has been proved wrong by the experiences of some of these missionaries. Indeed Dan Crawford, a missionary in central Africa discovered a language that had nouns in twelve genders and verbs with thirty two tenses! Hardly believable. These missionaries took the task of translating the whole or parts of the Bible into native dialects. This was a praiseworthy effort to Africanize the word of God.

(3) They Built schools and Hospitals

The saying that "knowledge is power" is widely acknowledged. In Africa, the missionaries were the purveyors of formal education. It was this education they received from mission schools that equipped them for the various nationalist movements which eventually sent the colonial rulers packing. The clinics and hospitals built by the missionaries contributed in no small way in stemming the tide of diseases that ravaged the continent.

(4) They Initiated Social and Political Reforms

This they did rather indirectly as they could not overturn the prevailing social and political systems. Through teaching and preaching, much of the societal evils were removed. A case in point was that of Mary Slessor (1848-1915) who was a missionary in Nigeria and worked in Okoyong area and at Itu among the Igbo people. To her credit, she succeeded in waging a battle against witchcraft, drunkenness, twin-killing, and other cruel customs. She acquired outstanding skills in the languages of the natives and had almost uncanny insight into the African mind. She came to Nigeria through the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, lived among the people, and influenced the people, even as she was influenced by the people.

Despite all these positive achievements made by the missionaries the fact remains that when they were leaving the shores of Africa the churches they built were still encumbered with colonial influence which has continued to wean these churches from their cultural heritage.

Inculturation: The Way Forward?

Inculturation, according to Waligbo means "the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and His message of salvation evermore understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time" in every cultural milieu." One may therefore conceive African inculturation theology as the attempt to Africanize Christianity. Unfortunately, the Western missionaries could not do this. They could not separate their cultural orientation from the Gospel proclamation. Hence the seed of the gospel could not really take root since it could not acclimatize to the imported foreign environment. The call for a "deeply Christian and authentically African" theology is not new." There is an urgent need for a fresh revelation of Christ to the African Christian.

Preaching Jesus in the African Context

J. Anda perceptively observes that there are some things in the culture of a people that the Gospel should change and there are others, those that have nothing to do against the message of Christ, which should be allowed to the people in the practice of Christianity".

The idea of inculturation does not imply that every aspect of the African culture should be employed in the propagation of the gospel. This could easily lead to syncretism. The move to eliminate colonial influence in African Christianity has recently taken a curious turn by the call for a ban on missionary "moratorium".

This is not just a call for a ban on missionaries taking leadership positions in the African church, since their physical presence in most African churches today is negligible. What advocates of missionary moratorium are contending for is the total elimination of missionary influence. By this they mean that African churches cannot be free from Western influence if they continue to receive financial assistance from them, There appears to be wisdom in this since he who pays the piper dictates the tune. But the practicability of the moratorium is another thing altogether as many of these

African churches, even the so-called independent churches are heavily dependent on the West for financing. The call for a truly African church will appear more convincing if African churches can first learn to be financially self-reliant and not tie themselves to the apron string of the West. Having emphasized the need for self-reliance in financial matters there is also the urgent need for the overhauling of the liturgy of many of the African churches so that it will reflect the African way of life.

One area the White missionaries exhibited rigidity in worship as they tried to establish churches on the African soil has to do with musical instruments. The drum and other traditional African musical instruments were literally banned. Only the pianos, the accordions and sometimes guitars accompanied European hymns sung to the tune of the West. These relics of Western way of worship are retained in many African churches, today. It does not depreciate the preaching of Christ if musical instruments that are African in conception and application accompany worship in African churches. Rather they would enhance worship and make the worshippers have a genuine worship experience.

The development of African Christian hymnology that follow the African pattern of singing and worship is long overdue. Though some of the African independent churches have ventured into producing such hymnology there is still the need for the more conservative African churches to take a cue. And the church in Africa will be better for it if such bold steps are taken. A caution must however be given here. Introducing Africanness to African worship is not the same as rowdiness and noise. Jesus is not glorified when the worship scene is bereft of decorum, serenity and reverence.

One other area where the Africanization of the Gospel has not met with much success has to do with language. Language, it is commonly agreed, is the heart of culture. It is true that in many African churches today the gospel is transmitted with the native tongue, serving as medium. But in many of the elitist churches, especially in urban centres, the means of communicating the gospel is English. The multiplicity of languages in Africa makes it difficult to preach Christ in such churches in a particular local dialect. The establishment of churches along ethnic lines has done little to help the situation. Unfortunately, the modern African churches do not possess the particular charismatic gift of tongues (this is not to be confused with modern tongue (glossolalia) expression that is so common in mostly Pentecostal churches, today) demonstrated on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2), which made it possible for the hearers to hear the gospel in their native tongues. Still, conscious efforts should be made as much as possible to ensure that the gospel is preached in the vernacular. Perhaps there is no better way to Africanize the preaching of Christ than adopting this method.

It is however, not enough to speak in the language of the people; the missionaries tried to do this and yet the churches they raised were more Western than African. Thus if the African church is to completely wean itself from the Western influence it should do more than this and endeavour to revive those aspects of African religious belief and experiences congruent with the Gospel but which were either neglected or ignored by the missionaries. A case in point is the belief in angels. Like Hastings correctly observed the belief in the existence of angels, even though not denied is not very popular in the religious worldview of the West, today. But they are immensely popular in Africa." Why? Because Africans believe in a world of spirits which easily translates as angels to them at the point of conversion. Of course, there are good and bad angels just as there are good and bad spirits. Africans are more easily able to relate to the Christian faith when it has a conceptual meeting point with particular areas of traditional beliefs.

Still, another area where Africans can easily relate to Christianity has to do with the role of dreams as a religious experience. The typical African believes in the efficacy of dreams in giving direction to one in perplexing situations. He believes that dreams are vehicles for divine communications. The fact of conversion hardly changes this belief. But unfortunately the role of dreams was not part of the missionary message. Today, God still communicates with people through dreams. Emphasizing this aspect of the African experience is nothing more than authenticating their innate religious experience which is, at any rate, in consonance with the biblical paradigm.

On the state of Christology in Africa, Mugambi has identified several Christological paradigms in African Christianity." We shall briefly examine a few of these paradigms to further articulate the need to preach Christ in a manner that reflects the distinctives of African Christianity.

Christological Paradigms in African Christianity

(1) Cultural Paradigms

The missionaries did not see much in the African culture that had, a correspondence with Christianity. Hence, African culture was denigrated. When Jesus related the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). He was trying to teach the lesson of neighborliness. This aspect of cultural paradigm in the Bible is part and parcel of African cultural heritage. Africa is noted for hospitality and neighborliness. Christological paradigms can be built on this reality.

(2) Genealogical Paradigms

The idea of Jesus as Ancestor has been canvassed by some African Christian theologians like Nyamiti. Chidili elaborated on this concept by noting that if Africans claim Jesus as their Ancestor it is because they discover in Him invaluable qualities also found in their ancestors." Mugambi however cautions that using Ancestor as Genealogical paradigm should clarify the genealogical paradigm in the Gospel rather than confuse."

(3) Ritualistic Paradigms

The Jewish ritualism in which Jesus was brought up is evidenced in the fact that He was circumcised on the eighth day; at the age of twelve. He was present at the temple as required of every first born son. Notably, the traditional African life is also informed by ritualistic practices. If Jesus has been identified as the fulfiller and reformer of rituals then there is a compelling reason for the African church to be ritualistically congruent with the ritualistic paradigms of the Gospel.

(4) Charismatic Paradigms

Jesus' charismatic stature was incomparable, arising, as it were, from His matchless spiritual gifts. The gospel account of Mark lends credence to this: He taught with authority as nobody else did. He commanded the evil spirits and they immediately took leave of their captives (Mk. 1:21-22, 27). The missionaries played down on the Gospel charismatic paradigms but rather emphasized only those gifts that have to do with preaching and conversion. But it need not be so for the African church. The charismatic paradigms should be explored and employed for evangelization.

The Christological paradigms in African Christianity that have been discussed as identified by Mugambi are by no means exhaustive. More of these paradigms would emerge as African Christian theologians join in the effort to recover African Christianity from its colonial trappings

Conclusion

The challenge of evolving a truly African Christian theology will continue to engage African Christian theologians. A measure of success in this direction may have been attained in certain respects but it appears the African church still need to do much shedding of Western influence if she is to acquire Africanness in its identity and proclamation. Today, Jesus as Savior, as seen through the missionary prism gives a rather distorted or confused image to African believers. It is however amazing that despite the fact that the Gospel was brought to Africa in Western "clothes" there has been a phenomenal spread of Christianity. But the spread should not be mistaken for authenticity as it has led to superficial Christianity. This is evidenced by the fact that the average African still considers the Gospel inadequate for his whole life. That is why all over Africa today many Christians live in two worlds; the traditional world characterized by African culture and the Christian world characterized by Western culture. Decolonizing Jesus in African Christianity is one sure way of saving the African from this crisis of identity.

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