

Challenges Of African Christianity In The Twenty First Century: A Case Study Of Nigeria

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Abstract

The growing number of Christians in Africa is intended to be the hope for the future of the Church of Christ. Far from being the case, Africans have become so gripped by the religion(s) they practiced before Christianity in such a way that they tended to observe “adulterated Christianity.” This explains why African Christianity is beginning to meet with serious obstructions as a result of hangovers from African Cultures and Religion. There is therefore the need to struggle for the future restoration the original doctrines and/or tenets of Christian religion. However, that future is going to be realized only by overcoming the major challenges of African Christianity like functionalism, pragmatism, relativism and rebranding of Christ.

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to explore what has come to be branded and referred to as “African Christianity” with regard to the obstacles posed by the African Cultures and Religion. Christianity did not originate in Africa; it came from the outside of the continent. Between the time of the first coming of Christian Faith to Africa and today, many things have transpired. In point of fact, there have been chains of relations between Africa and Christianity.

Earliest evangelizers appeared to be hostile to African Traditional Religion and Cultures. Perhaps, they did not see the compatibility between what is African and what is Christian. It was, to say the least, operation uproot African cultures and supplant them with all possible imported Christianity, which of course was Western in character. Consequent upon this, “African Christians, in the post-colonial period, increasingly question(ed) the separation of their culture from their faith in Jesus Christ” (Uzukwu, 1996). No sooner had the quarrels and questionings begun than the second Vatican Council was convoked. Burning as the issue of the relation between the message of Christ and cultures of people appeared, the holy gathering could not have afforded to by pass it. Certainly the question of the relation between cultures of the people evangelized and their faith in Jesus Christ was appropriately addressed. The Venerable Fathers of the Second Vatican Council underscored the need for ministering the Gospel to the people in their own form and cultural context; even as they zeroed in on the *aggiornamento* - a term that has become synonymous with the Roman Catholic Church renewal initiated by Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965). *Aggrriornamento* is the process of modernizing the ritual and policy of the Roman Catholic Church especially as it concerns relations with other religions and cultures. In it they called for a new openness on the part of the Church toward the world, and toward other Christian churches and non-christian religions, using the medicine of *mercy* rather than *condemnation* as the means of promoting the Church’s teaching and wisdom. It may be from this historic movement of decision that the Church in Africa got the mandate to Africanize the Word and the Faith. In this light, African Christianity is that Christianity come to Africa and has been dressed properly by, in, with and for the African people. It is a Christianity which maintains its oneness with the Universal Church (Catholic) while reflecting the African context.

In August 1969, when addressing the Symposium of African bishops in Kampala (Uganda) Paul VI acknowledged

that the Church in Africa should not be European, Latin or Oriental but African. It must be first of all Catholic, that is, “entirely founded upon the identical, essential, constitutional patrimony of the self same teaching of Christ as professed by the authentic and authoritative tradition of the one true Church” (Hebga, 1994). In this logical connection, there is bound to be tension emanating between the maintenance of what is strictly Christian and the Continuity of cherished African heritage. It is against the backdrop of this Afro-Christina tension that this work sets out to investigate the problem areas and offer some solution to the challenges of the African Christianity. The study is narrowed down to the geographical entity (Nigeria) which serves as a test case for the rest of Africa as a whole.

2. The Problem In Context And The Perspectives Of The Study

Here we wish to highlight the problem of Africanization of Christianity within a context in Nigeria. Things, they say, are easier said than done. Of course, what took the venerable Fathers barely three years (1962-1965) to stipulate has taken more than three decades to be (well) implemented. Naturally, putting a theory into (real) practice presents a big problem and Africanization of Christianity cannot be an exception. It may be for this uneasy meeting of the African culture and Christian religion that the Secretariat for Non-Christians (now Vatican Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue) in 1988, under Francis Cardinal Arinze (now retired), wrote the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar urging them to give a serious pastoral attention to African Traditional Religions (ATR) incorrectly called ‘animism’. The strongly worded letter states that attention to the traditional Religion is needed because:

- (i) it (ATR) forms the religious and cultural context in which the majorities of African Christians lived and are still living;

- (ii) many Christians (African Christians) at the critical moments of their life have recourse to the practices of traditional religion, to prayer houses, centers of healing, to prophets, sorcerers, or fortune tellers;
- (iii) the traditional religion is still vibrant and dynamic in Africa so much so that even some intellectual elite of some African countries declare themselves adherents to traditional religion.

If the recommendation of this holy office is anything to go by then the better the traditional religion is understood by the ministers of the gospel, the more suitable will be the presentation of Christianity to Africans. Through the careful study of the African religion the underlying felt needs of Africans will be identified so that it will become clear and possible how Christianity can meet such needs. Unless and until this deep theological investigation is carried out, the Church will not be at home in Africa and Africa in turn will not be at home in the Church. The hope of achieving a cordial relation is anchored on the fact that elements of a non-Christian religion (like African religion) and the culture it influences can enrich Christian catechesis and worship and find in them their deepest fulfillment.

More than ever before, contemporary African-Christian intellectuals are much preoccupied with the resolution of the problem that arises at the meeting of Africans and the Christian faith. Many elements in Africa, for sure, can be employed in the service of the gospel but not everything is acceptable in the marriage of culture and faith. African values, such as: the sense of the sacred, respect for life, honesty with neighbors, sense of community, family spirit, uhuru and ujama, spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred and symbolism in the religious worship, could be of immense help to the Church in Africa. On the contrary, the deep rooted orientations of Africans toward their gods or deities and their worldviews bordering on functionality, utilitarianism, instrumentalism and relativism pose some danger to African Christianity. On the positive note, the excellent values ranging from the sense of the sacred to the symbolism in

religious worship are very much acceptable in the course of advancing the frontier of Christian religion. However, the other side of the coin presents some challenging trends which form the fulcrum of our discussion. This concern for an assessment of the key challenges to Africa Christianity is raised against the mental frame of the fact that if adequate diagnosis is not made in the process of evangelization in catechesis, in pastoral practice, ...the Christian faith of the people remains only superficial.... [and can collapse at difficult moments of their lives](Ehusani, 2003).

3. The Key Challenges Of African Christianity In Our Century

There may be other perspectives from which the problem of African Church can be seen and treated but we want to handle the foundational challenges. They are called “key” challenges or “foundational” issues because on them do all other problems hinge. Human mind is the director of almost all meaningful activities and as such any issue that touches on the mind or consciousness becomes primordial. Thus the triple challenges of functionality, utilitarianism and relativism are derivatives of the African Consciousness. If Christianity must make any meaningful progress in its evangelical drive it must begin with the following concerns:

- 3.1 Challenge arising from functionality
- 3.2 Challenge from the point of view of relativism
- 3.3 Challenge from the perspective of rebranding

3.1 Challenge arising from Functionality: Average Igbo people in particular and all Nigerians in general, seek the nature or essence of any entity through its proper function. This method, which strives towards ontology from functionality, is valid (in some respects) because no entity without human interference can act contrary or outside its nature. To this extent Obi (2002:15) notes: “ ‘To be’ for the Igbo is to perform the appropriate

function peculiar to the referent.” Being as function is validated by the Igbo proverb, ‘agwo emero ife oji buru agwo, umunwanyi ejili ya kee nku’ (if the snake does not function as a snake, women will take it for a rope in tying firewood). In other words, a snake is recognized as such when it acts according to its nature. Along this line of reasoning, Obi (2002:7) concludes that: “For the traditional Igbo, the essence of divinity is power or better still being powerful. Any god that becomes powerless has no right to expect the Igbo to continue to serve (worship) him.” The people of Igbo acknowledge the power of a god or deity and cultivate that power but whenever the god in question consistently fails to prove itself powerful, they reserve the right and reason to discard it and seek other gods. By the same stretch of orientation, a priest is a priest when he performs the appropriate functions of a priest but if he breaks the rules of his god and defiles himself he and his god become abandoned. Within this frame of understanding, African Christians would expect Jesus Christ of be very powerful always and everywhere. If Jesus is God, the highest of all known deities, he has to prove Himself; otherwise the people (African Christians) may sooner or later abandon Him. For Jesus to be God and enjoy the honour due to a God, He has to perform actions proper to a God who has the ultimate power in all circumstances of their existential situation. This is incredible especially in Christianity where God is conceived to be free to do whatever He likes (Ps. 115: 3). The Christian God cannot be discarded on the basis of function. Thus, African Christians would have to contend with this growing tension between freedom of the Christian God and being as functionality characteristic of African worldview.

3.2 Challenge from the point of view of Relativism: For a typical African Person, there is a multiplicity of gods who are responsible for the various aspects of life and needs of the society. Relativity here means that each community and occasion had its own god peculiar to their existential situation. Different occasions needed different gods for effectiveness. In such a

plurality of gods there is bound to be competition for the stronger and the strongest since people patronized more the god that proved to be stronger than others. Perhaps, there was no unicity among the deities; as Christians believe their own God to be (unity among the three persons in one God).

Obviously, if this worldview of our people, thanks or no thanks, to the traditional religion, is not changed during the process of conversion from ATR to Christianity, then problem arises as we can observe today. In our country Nigeria presently, people have graded the “Jesuses” at work in the various places of worship. This brand of relativism is implicit more than it is explicit. It manifests itself in the people’s modes of worship and journey s of faith. Thus, for a typical Nigerian new convert, the Jesus at work in his or her home parish is quite different from that Jesus at work in the Adoration Ministry Enugu Nigeria (AMEN) or that of the Catholic Prayer Ministry of the Holy Spirit Elele, Nigeria. It may be that Nigerians in this context still carry the old orientation of relativism among the deities; a carryover indeed.

Average Nigerian worshippers do not seem to understand the unity among all the auto-manifestations of God to his people in the various Christian Prayer ministries. If they realize the oneness of the One Jesus, the God-man, in all these places of true worship, they will stop running from one prayer center to another thinking that Jesus is relative to the ministries and their ministers. As deities surpassed one another in power and ability from village to village so also they (Nigerian converts) think that the Jesus of one prayer center is more powerful than that of another prayer center. And some, by so doing, underrate the Jesus of their own home parish. And the parish priest in order to prove the powerfulness of his own Jesus on the home front may be tempted into performing some funny practices and engaging in queer imitations. And any imitation is a limitation (*c.f. John Mason’s Imitation is Limitation*)

3.3: Challenge from the perspective of Rebranding:

Rebranding or renaming of Jesus is in vogue in Nigeria now. It is the practice whereby ministers of the gospel merely call Jesus Christ all those names given to the deities of old. Of course, this style of evangelization makes some promises even as it portends big dangers. Realistically, people feel at home with the preaching system of presenting our Lord Jesus as any of the powerful deities such as *Jeso anyi bu akata muo ka ibe ya ogo* (which literally means “a deity higher than other deities”), *Jeso bu oko kpapi, or lalawu or ogwugwu*, (the most powerful of deities in the land of Nigeria) and so on. This manner of casting Jesus in the mould of the deities of old (Which we have chosen to call rebranding) is reminiscent of the traditional religion where the guiding principle is *do ut des* (I give so that you give me in return).

One thing is clear, if you present Jesus in that “deitic” mood, then the people will relate to Jesus accordingly. In that case, Jesus exists to serve the immediate needs of human beings whenever the people approach him just as they had known in their relations to deities. And if this is the case, then Jesus is no longer free. This manner of evangelization rehabilitates the old mentality of the people and puts Christ in danger of abandonment should he consistently fail in his duty of providing the needs of the people. There is a meaning in naming Christ with any of the powerful deities’ names. Using such famous name to relate with Christ can bring the people closer to God. But problem arises when people approach Christ with the “deitic” attitude. In this case, Christ becomes one new deity, a new brand of deity, a rebranded deity. We have to watch it.

4. Concluding Remarks

All we are saying is that all is not yet well with Nigerian Christianity. In the discussion, we noted some of the challenges facing Nigerian Christians as they enter a new religion namely Christianity. Despite the big numbers we find on the pews in the

various churches there is still a tension between the traditional world views and the demands of Christian religion.

It is against this background that Asogwa (2008:15-16) observed that "...in spite of the obvious and commendably progressive inroads of Christianity into most of Africa (like Nigeria), one still finds it difficult to extricate its practical demands from the influence of traditional elements and idiosyncrasies... among professed Christians, one observes a number of customs and traditions that give rise to tensions and attitudes that are unacceptable to Christian principles."

Therefore, the great challenges of the Nigerian Christianity all border on proper handling of the traditional carryovers and hangovers. Crying against this ugly development in the Church in Nigeria, Ekwunife (2007:85-86) remarks that: "Among various Christian groups such formulae like 'Holy Ghost fire,' 'the Blood of Jesus,' and 'in Jesus' name, Amen' have been so perfected and formalized that their effects are thought to manifest themselves instantaneously." He goes further to quote one of the famous spiritual masters around the South-Eastern part of Nigeria as saying that he (the master) taught the prayer formulae which are seen as intercontinental ballistic missile, which could be fired straight on target, many miles; the spiritual strategies for overthrowing the satanic kingdom and enthroning God's kingdom (Ekwunife 2007). However, for professor Ekwunife, they look like magico-religious appliances for actualizing the Christian desire. Actually, one needs to see for one's self the postures and prayer performances of these Nigerian Christians during charismatic or other Christian gatherings. The air, says professor Ekwunife, is punched with Karatic jingoism. But what a disorientation?

A critical look at the attitude of Nigerian Christians (the vast majority of course, to prayer) reveals a heavy traditional hangover. They tend to pray to the Christian God in the manner they used to pray to their gods and deities of old. They think that by shouting and using many "Karatic jingoisms" God will hear

them more quickly. Certainly, the God of the Christian religion behaves in a very unique way quite different from the very being and operations of the local deities. Traditionally, the adherents of ATR commanded their deities through those magico-ritual prayers but the adherents of Christian religion pray not so much to tell God what He should do. Rather than commanding God, Christians pray to understand the will and commands of God in order to abide by them. Christians God is free. He is free to do whatever He likes (*cf. Mtt 20:15, Ps. 115:3*).

Finally, it can be concluded that the growing number of Christians in Africa is a hope for the future of the Church of Christ. However, that future is going to be realized only by overcoming the major challenges like functionalism, pragmatism, relativism and rebranding of Christ. Unless and until Nigerian Christians come to know the basic principles of Christian religion and practice them instead of the mumbo-jumbo practices they do today, the challenges will always be there. Authentic Africanization of Christianity begins by inculcating in the believers the central idea that the Christian God cannot and should not, in any circumstance, be approached with the unacceptable mentality of Africans towards their deities. This is where the journey begins if any progress must be made in the direction of making an African Christianity that is authentic and attractive to God.

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