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African Christianity and Problems of Religious Ambiguity

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify the prevailing religious inconsistencies and the problems of ambiguity in the contemporary African churches with a view to finding ameliorative solution to them. Adopting historical, oral interview, theological narratives and phenomenological techniques, the study is out to expose various Christian heresies, errors, inconsistencies and syncretism which consequently generate myriad problems of ambiguity. The study goes further, in its research, to highlight the ailing problems and proffers solutions that would eventually reduce the religious ambiguity to give room for the pure and true propagation for the undiluted gospel of Christ.

Keywords: Christianity, Ambiguity, Syncretism

1. Introduction

Religion is very much and always with the African people. It has been with them at the moment of life – in their innermost being and with regard to the great or minor events of life; it is discussed daily in the newspaper, through the mass – media and manifests in their various festivals. It is with them inevitably; whatever may be their individual avowed attitudes to it based on the attitude to religion of the African people. J. S. Mbiti has rightly described Africans as:

...notoriously religious and each people have its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the department of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. ¹

The above statement indicates the religious ambiguity and how religion has become a very strong element in the traditional background and exacts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people of Africa. From the above background, to preach another religious ideologies, other than African traditional religious beliefs would demand something that would be supernatural in nature. No matter what it would eventually come out to be, the religious institutions would be nomenclature 'African Christianity'. It also becomes almost impossible for an African to completely abandon his fundamental religious ideologies; he would therefore attempt to mix up his cultural ideologies with those of the other ideologies if precaution is not taken. With the nature of Christianity, it preaches and recognizes the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ, above the cultures of every race and nation. This superiority came not as a superimposition; it came as a result of one of those accidents of history over which no one has control. This becomes as clear as we look and trace the beginning of Christianity in its present history in Africa.

Further still, there is the question to whether what we have in African today is in fact Christianity, and not in fact only transplantations from a European cultures with the various ramifications of which are designated Anglicans, Roman Catholic, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists and so forth. We shall however, make a frantic effort to explain, as this work progresses, why syncretism and Monomania are the problems of religious ambiguity in African Christianity.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Some terms of the title need some conceptual clarifications so we can flow smoothly. We shall then treat them one after the other as follow:

a. Christianity

The New International Webster's Dictionary defines the word 'Christianity' as 'Christian religion'. ²

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b. Ambiguity

The term “Ambiguity” is aptly defined by Webster’s Dictionary as: ‘having a doubtful meaning.... Or uncertain’.³

3. The ideal Christianity

Under this sub – heading, we shall endeavour to highlight the true characteristics of Christianity to those who aspire to be Christians. The goal of the apostle’s has been to work and plan churches that are both true to the word of God over the entire world. Richard Gahman said that;

*The Christians in these churches should be Christ – like, following the ways of Christ, impacting Christ in everybody, yet they should reflect the good and wholesome qualities of their culture. Christ should be their model to follow and any other model out that shall be a total deviation.*⁴ According to Christian claims, Christ is unquestionably both fully God and fully man. Though Christ became a human being, he was no less God. Jesus became incarnate, the eternal God born as a human being.

Though Christ was God who came in the flesh, he was by culture a Galilean, first century Jew – speaking the local Aramaic language, living in Palestinian houses, eating food, wearing clothes and walking as any other Palestinian Jew – speaking the local Aramaic language, living in Palestinian houses, eating food, wearing clothes and walking as any other Palestinian Jew during his time. Yet he was faithful to the heavenly father, forsaking all that was hypocritical to the heavenly father, forsaking all that was hypocritical and ungodly.

In the same view, Christ ought to become incarnate in the life of every believer everywhere. Christians in Africa or elsewhere should live out the life of Jesus Christ daily. Their standard should be the teachings of the bible. But their cultural clothing should set them apart of African or anywhere in the world. Above all, barbaric, paganistic practices which includes what is strangled and from unchastity⁵, should be jettisoned. This then implies that some of the African cultural beliefs must undergo proper transformation to conform to those of the Christian religion. We have realized that sometimes Africa churches fail to remove or they practice both along side. No wonder, the gospel meets opposing powerful forces practiced by Africans. Sincerely; the African society is replete of idols, mysterious powers, divinities and regard such idols and divinities as an end in themselves but as means to an end. When the missionaries first preached the gospel to the Africans they faced these mysterious powerful forces opposing Christianity. Their approach was stylistic and very systematic. They, the missionaries, did not compromise the faith. They did not engage in syncretism under these tremendous pressures. It is possible that the missionaries did not specially attack the worship of the divinities but their message was clear. They might have thought that “the gods made with hands are no gods at all”⁶, like what apostle Paul told the Ephesus. The lessons from Acts 19: 1-14 is that the gospel cannot be changed, compromised, accommodated or adopted to make it more appealing to some people. The Gospel is the gospel to the Bible and cannot be changed. The basis is that even under great pressures, the gospel must remain original and undiluted pure; it must in spite of the ritual practices of Pocomania and Syncretism. We shall now create some sub-headings to explain the terms ‘procomaina’ and

‘Syncretism’ and how the two acts crept into the African churches.

4. Pocomania

*The term ‘pocomania’ originated from Jamaica. According to Zira Brecilis/ ipapress. www. Ipak.org.jamaika/first. Itmt, it is Jamaica voodoo in the world of spirits. It happens at once, someday sometimes, in remote, muddy poor villages in Jamaica where men, woman travel. As if in the spirit world where the Holy Spirit and other will talk to them and advise them... thus begins Pukumania, the ritual of pocomania... through decades African slaves transported to Caribbean colonies, the Jamaicans intimately preserve and practice semi – secretly these ancient spiritual practices in Revival churches where the Christen Holy spirit found an important place among other spirits in the world of the spirits. Thus the world ‘pocomania’ simply implies a mixture of religious idea and with African sorcery.*⁷

From all indications, some African churches imbibed this ritual and practice it side by side in their churches. Time and space will only allow us to cite few examples of the ritualistic pocomania practices. For instance in Ghana, churches confront fake pastors using some magic wands to perform miracles in the church – www. Christianity today. Com/ct/ 2012/may/magic wand. Html.⁸ Another critical example is a notable issues cited in ‘All Africa. Com/stories’ called ‘the millennium gospel mission’: the police in Osun State, arranged 23 worshippers including an octogenarian, who use charm to call people to buy palp after urinating on a #20 (twenty naira note). This church according to the same information was a fetish church.⁹

There is another striking story of fetishism in one church like the one retrieved from interest “West African Gbo ‘fetish’ priest in patakari jacket adorned with “Gris amulet/talisman, in hoodoo”¹⁰. Another pastor for instance is a notable internet citation where one Pastor, T. B. Joshua’s head quarters church is based in Ihotu Village Lagos – Nigeria. He claims to be the third child of the Virgin Mary who continued from where Jesus Christ stooped”. Mean while, our research reveals another river located between Togo and Ghana in West Africa called “river Kufo” where many people do go to acquire fetish means and to assail to big positions. Many Nigeria so – called church founders/overseers have also been said to go to the same river to acquire fetish means to seduce many members into the body of their churches and enable them perform some fake miraculous healing.¹²

5. Syncretism

We shall now use this sub- heading to highlight the term ‘syncretism’ particularly on the area it concerns us and how it crept into some of the African churches.

The root meaning if the term ‘syncretism’ comes from Greek language and the term ‘synkretismos’ was said to have comes from the custom of the people who lived on the Island of the Crete in ancient.¹³ *The Funk and Wagnall’s Dictionary defines the term ‘syncretism’ as: A tendency or effort to conceal various systems of philosophy or religious opinions against a common opinion.z*

One might say that the term *syncretism* is the result of trying to unite or combine opposite or contradictory beliefs from two different religions. It is also the outcome of trying to bring together two beliefs or practices which cannot mix.

In the early church history according to Tsunao: *elements of magical beliefs were carried into the church. Pagan charms Egypt were given a Christian blessing and used to heal the sick.* The name of the Trinity was pronounced over a magic drink. Part of the gospel was used with the magical effects.¹⁵ Time and space would not permit us to mention more examples of how syncretism crept into the early church and spread into North Africa. The fact was that the Gospel has been lost in syncretism. This is as a result of the fact that Africans can hardly part from their ways of life.

6. The Presence of Syncretism In The Contemporary African Churches

History or past events can possibly re-occur in a similar dimension. This sub-heading shall be used to explore the various ways syncretism crept into African churches that is further generating religious problems and ambiguity. More than ever before and for one reason or the other, a large number of people are being converted into the Christian religion in Africa. Without adequate briefing and discipline as remarked by Gehmann:

The early or first generation converts brought with them elements of their past traditional religion which conflicted the gospel. Many baptized Christians are not even saved. Christianity independent of western Christ traditions is leading the churches into theological syncretism. None of this gives hope for the future thereby leading the church worshippers to a blind alley.

However, syncretism in Africa must be understood within the larger context of Christianity worldwide. The present wave of syncretism characterizes both the older churches in the west and among the older churches in the third world. The present threat of syncretism has many causes which join together in a powerful movement towards commercialization including other odd things that bring about religious ambiguities into the churches.

7. Problem of Ambiguities In The Contemporary African Churches

This part of the study is out to grapple with the problem of ambiguities in the contemporary African churches. We may not bother to define the term ambiguity since we have previously done so. However it means doubtfulness.

The major problem of ambiguities is clearly noticeable amongst the ever increasing proliferation of churches springing up over the place. Such noticeable erupts from such Christian practices such as baptism confirmation, laying on of hands glossarial, marriage, holy Eucharist and harvest. Church administration and pastoral are other areas of concern. Hierarchical tussle and position consciousness have also split a lot of churches. Although it is scripturally true of first epistle to the Corinthians 12:4 – 12, 27 – 29 and Ephesians 4:11 – 13, that varieties of gifts in the church and the issues of leadership depends on God's endowment of his gifts; but hypocrisy and holier – than- thou attitude are the prominent characteristic issues in some churches today. Also, monetary, material acquisition and greediness have wrecked some congregations. Doubtful means or stylistic devices have been coined into fake prophecies to extort money into the coffers of individuals by the so-called new churches founders/ overseers to the detriment of indigent church goers.

Of recent, the making of knights and dams in some orthodox churches, preferably in Nigeria churches is a programme meant, as it were, to honour and appreciate some dignitaries are expected to act as soldiers of Christ. Such investiture programmes in honour of such dignitaries are originally meant to discourage them from becoming members of secrets cults. Unfortunately and to anybody's chagrin, some members are suspected to be turning to anybody else there by weighing a lot of negative influence towards the churches social and political administration. There is also a similar movement existing in the churches in Gabon called Buriti; a kind of secret society whose members are found in some churches. In some orthodox churches in Nigeria are numerous members of the Ogboni societies which originated from the western side of Nigeria. Some of the men and women members of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF) cult have become prominent members of the churches in Nigeria. Surprisingly enough, some high rank priests in the orthodox churches are also found to be prominent associates of the dubious group. Different from the office of Bishop, Deacon and elder in Paul's pastoral letters (1Tim. 3:1-16) respectively are prominent officers among secretarial or Pentecostal churches. What they term as "Church Founders" or simply "Overseers" among some of the orthodox churches are numerous. There are some such self made positions or offices like *bab –ijo/baba egbe, Iya –ijo/iya –egbe* all Yoruba terminologies meaning "man leader" and "women leader" respectively.

While the holder of the above offices be very useful to the churches where they operate, some of them if not properly checked, could behave like local champions, disturbing the administration, controlling the finance and the priest of the church. Some do it to the extent of attacking the priest where he dare preaches against their evil perpetration.

From our personal observation and as a trained priest in one of the orthodox churches in Nigeria, the above named exclaimed offices in the local churches have been seen to be elevating far away from what the set organization of the church is. The spread and growth of the gospel is not their utmost concern. They are rather interested in the internal intrigues and local politics in the church than the growth of the church, so they can have their way. They can also strike off internal instability to cause disobedience between the priest and his authority. They also know how to destabilize the church administration. In the early churches, similar faction was rearing its ugly head within Corinthians brethren when Apostle Paul wrote to let them know that:

...like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, another man is building on it. For not another foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid which Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stone, wood, hay, straw- each man's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

From the above, Apostle Paul forewarned the kind of people who may attempt to disrupt the first hand transmission of the undiluted and solid gospel of Christ which he had preached. In any case, if another gospel preached by another person, at the end of the day survives

the final test such a gospel preacher would receive a reward but on the contrary; the wrong and the inadequate will be swept away.

8. Solutions to Problem of Ambiguities In Africa Churches

This heading is out of proffer solutions with various points as follows:

- I. Since the body of Christ the church, is one and indivisible, the entire church denominations should constitute a forum or come under a synergy where true doctrines under one faith in Jesus Christ will be reached, and where all syncretic practices/movement not based on the bible by some denominations would be trashed out completely;
- II. A united catechetical theological college be established with branches at strategic locations where all interested and aspiring African priest should go and acquire theological knowledge based on the bible as handed down by the apostle, as this can only settle all the doctrinal ambiguities;
- III. There should be enough and well trained pastors to catechise the new converts who would eventually spread the true gospel to the interiors the new converts who would eventually spread the true gospel to the interiors of African churches;
- IV. The new converts should be properly disciple. This will give adequate instructions so that the faith which brought the convert will not eventually be founded on errors. For, without participation it might become merely formal, without fellowship it might become irrelevant. The most important fellowship it might become irrelevant. The most important thing to prevent ambiguity and problem is the relevant teaching of the word of God to help immature Christian grows, develop and mature in the lord.
- V. The contemporary new generation converts are advised to properly get rooted into the faith in Jesus Christ to enable them withstand any outburst of persecution or schismatic eruption;
- VI. It is high time all Africa Christians denominations eschewed destructive criticisms among themselves that could only engender more confusion and problems within the church;
- VII. African churches should constitute a common front to fight against any contrary group with the agape love, as a matter of utmost necessity and seriousness to win them to the fold of Christianity by practical examples and;
- VIII. It is not very certain whether the early Christian missionaries paid any second missionaries again as apostle Paul did to the gentile churches which enable him settle some critical doctrinal issues. Probably, if they had done so, some of the syncretic movement which grew and spread sporadically from the African churches would have been nipped in the bud they had such hind-sight at their background.

9. Conclusion

The early missionary evangelist who brought their foreign religion to the Africans did not arrive to meet a religious

vacuum but met a people who already had their indigenous religion known as African traditional religion (ATR) deeply grounded in their indigenous religion, is the fundamental concept of the same God which the foreigners came to preach. The Africans, they have forgotten, are from the heterogeneous background. The missionaries, it is, with their western cultural ideologies came to establish churches in the land of the Africans under the auspices of the Anglicans, Roman catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc, dominations from different background, each with its various theological doctrines. However, all the denominations had a general focal motif to preach the same faith in God through Jesus Christ. The recipients were a complex people of different linguistic economic, social – cultural and religio – political background. Added to this background was the insufficient catechism by the foreign evangelist which consequently contributed to the half – baked early or the first hand African recipient of the gospel. Consequent upon this was that the Africans independent churches where being founded along side with African ethnic – religious doctrines and their ways of life. Such practices could also look like good African ethical values that were incorporated into their liturgies used in their independent churches. The co-mixture of the western evangelist’s biblical church doctrines and that of Africans independent church doctrines definitely gave birth to heresies, syncretism polluting and generating religious problems in the African churches. However, it is believed that the solutions proffered by this paper would adequately minimize and solve the various religious ambiguities in African churches. This, it is believed will also provide source of materials for further research for, particularly church history research scholars, historians and the theologians.

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