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SALVATION THROUGH CONFORMISM? THE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY: THE STORY OF CORNELIUS AND PETER (ACTS 10:1 – 11:18) AS A CASE-STUDY

Albert OWUSU-AFRIYIE, C.S.Sp

INTRODUCTION

Every religion originates within a given socio-cultural context which, one way or the other, exerts some form of influence on the said religion. Hence, some scholars argue that “all religions arise out of the deification of someone’s nationalism.”¹ That is why, in most religions, those who are categorized as saints and prophets are those who are said to have done great and admirable things within the context of the people in question. To this effect, it has been argued that there is nothing like a “universal religion” because of the fact that every religion is a reflection of a particular cultural and historical experience of a given group of people.²

The above assertion, to some extent, holds true for the Christian religion. Historically, we know that Christianity, as a religion, was highly influenced by the socio-cultural milieu in which it originated.³ The majority of the first followers of

¹ASANTE M.K., *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, African America Images, Chicago, 2003, p. 6.

²MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, Editions Menaibuc, 2003, p. 17.

³TAYLOR J., *D'où vient le christianisme?*, Paris, Cerf, 2003, p. 73. This author holds the view that Galilee constitutes the possible milieu where Christianity must have originated. One of the reasons to justify this hypothesis is the fact that Galilee, being far away from Jerusalem, it was easier to distance itself from the Law and the Temple.

Jesus were of Jewish origin⁴ and it is from this milieu that he chose his twelve apostles.⁵ The mission of the early Church was highly tainted with Jewish cultural and religious values and the tendency to “convert” pagans to a Jewish way of life was very high. Several events in the Acts of the Apostles confirm this.⁶ To this effect, the concepts of identity and authenticity would be defined within the confines of the very culture in which the said religion originated.⁷ Salvation, which is the final objective of most religions, will be considered as only attainable by those who identify themselves with the cultural values of the people in whose land the said religion originated. For instance, only those who undergo the ritual of circumcision would be considered as Jews, and whoever refuses to submit himself to this ritual was automatically excluded or refused admission into the group.

With the persecution of the early Christians by the Jewish authorities, Christianity officially parted ways with Judaism and sought its autonomy and established itself as an

⁴See THEISSEN G., *Le mouvement de Jésus. Histoire sociale d'une révolution des valeurs*, Paris, Cerf, 2006, p. 89. The author posits that these groups that existed very early were deeply rooted in Judaism and in fact had no intention of forming a “Church.” This shows that even though they adhered to the new message preached by Jesus, they were deeply in tune with their Jewish origin.

⁵With the exception of Philip and Andrew who had Greek names, all the other apostles had names of Jewish or Aramaic origin. For further information on the identity of each of the twelve apostles, see MEIER J.P., *Un certain Juif Jésus. Les données de l'histoire*, Tome III: *Attachements, affrontements, ruptures*, Paris, Cerf, 2009, pp. 131-182.

⁶See the issue at the heart of the first council of Jerusalem where the participants sought to clarify as to whether the non-Jews should be circumcised before they could join the new Christian faith. Also, Peter's refusal to kill and eat the content of the sheet coming down from heaven simply because he judged them impure according to Jewish laws of purity.

⁷See MBACHU H., *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1994, pp. 240-244.

independent religion.⁸ With its entry into the pagan world, Christianity assumed a new form of identity with new socio-cultural values.⁹ And it is under the influence of these new socio-cultural values that Christianity will spread to other parts of the world.

To the historically observing individual, it is evident that Christianity came to Africa through Africa's encounter with the Western world. The early missionaries who came to Africa would use the same methods of evangelization as the Judeo-Christians in the early Christian communities. Just as the Judeo-Christians felt that salvation could only be attained through a certain form of conformism to Jewish cultural and religious values like circumcision, so also the early missionaries who came to Africa felt that the salvation of Africans depended mainly on their ability to adhere to Western socio-cultural values. And in fact, it is with this idea in mind that the evangelization of Africa will be undertaken.

This mode of evangelization, in recent times, has raised a series of questions in the minds of Africans. Does salvation mean conformism to Jewish or Western ways of life? This question is pertinent in the sense that inasmuch as Christianity was influenced by the socio-cultural milieu in which it originated, at the same time, one can observe that Christianity bears the mark of a certain universalism. In fact, Jesus reserved a special place for the non-Jews or Gentiles (Lk 7:1; 10:25-37). Before his ascension, Jesus explicitly enjoined his disciples to take the Good News to the ends of the earth (Lk

⁸See REGEV E., "Were the Early Christians Sectarians?" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 4 (2011), pp. 771-793. The word *apostynagogos* in the Gospel of John (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) clearly indicates the conflict between Judaism and Christianity. From this moment on, the followers of the new faith will be physically thrown out and banned from participating in activities related to the Synagogue.

⁹MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, pp. 30-31.

24:47; Acts 1:8). Unfortunately, the apostles seemed not to have executed the directives of their master to the letter. They behaved as if Christianity had the aim of restoring the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6).¹⁰ Similarly, the Westernization of the message of Christ seems to be in total contradiction of the master's directives to build a multi-cultural Church which englobes people from all walks of life irrespective of their socio-cultural background. This attitude will have its own consequences on the lives and culture of those to be evangelized. Not only will the message of Christ be manipulated to serve the purpose of white supremacy, but also, the very culture of the people will be at stake. In the case of Africa, the major consequence in European style of evangelization will lead to the loss of the identity and authenticity of the African people.

This article seeks to propose a rereading of the Bible as a way of equipping African Christians with the necessary tools for liberation from any forms of ambiguities in their Christian life. How can Africans use the Bible as an instrument of liberation by finding the necessary elements for the valorisation of African cultural and religious values? It is in the light of this that we propose to examine the story of Cornelius as an example of how the early Christian community viewed "foreign cultures" and its implications for Christianity in Africa today. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles is arguably the only biblical book which deals vividly with the question of the encounter between the Word of God and cultures, especially what was known at that time as the "pagan" culture.

The place of Africans in Christianity is similar to that of the Gentiles in the first Christian communities. For them to

¹⁰MBACHU H., *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*, p. 240.

be able to fully integrate the new movement, they were constantly asked to "convert" themselves from their former ways of life and embrace Jewish traditions, especially circumcision. In fact, what was considered to be conversion was nothing more than a form of conformism to Jewish religious practices, which, in actual fact, had nothing to do with an adherence to Christian values and practices. This led to a series of crises and confrontations which eventually led to the redefinition of what it means to be a Christian. Henceforth, it became clear that conversion is not synonymous with conformism as the Judaizers thought it to be. An exegetical reading of the story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18 will help us to bring to the fore the need to redefine Christianity in Africa in relation to African cultural values. Salvation will no longer be seen as conformism to Western cultural values but as adherence to the rich human and spiritual values inherent in African culture.

WESTERN CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ADVENTURE IN AFRICA: MISSION AS DOMINATION

The encounter of Africans with the Western world is often considered by some scholars as the most disastrous thing that could ever happen to African people in their existence.¹¹ The ensuing consequences of such an encounter are clearly manifested in the enslavement and the colonization of the African people. In her quest to have a grip on, to dominate and to control the resources of the African continent, the Westerners are said to have put in place various mechanisms which would be used as a way of alienating Africans from their religious and cultural realities. Prominent among such mechanisms was the Christian religion. As rightly expressed by E.E. Uzukwu, "the machine for the realization of the

¹¹MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 222.



colonial ideology was both technical (colonial military superiority) and religious (Christianity)... this link was even foreseen in the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, where Africa was partitioned."¹²

The desire to dissociate Africans from their cultural and religious background was expressed in the "faith" which was preached to Africans by the missionaries. The connection between Western culture and Christianity was expressed in three ways: the codification of religion, the ostracization of rival religions,¹³ and finally, the falsification of history.¹⁴ In this sense, the Christian missionary adventure was seen more as a form of colonization and domination rather than evangelization of the African people. Just as Constantine is said to have used the Christian religion as a political tool for the consolidation of his empire, so also the missionary adventure in Africa is said to have served as a pretext for the colonization and domination of the African people.¹⁵ And as already highlighted, this was done with the help of the missionaries. For instance, David Livingstone, a missionary, set out to open the African continent to what is commonly known as the three C's: Western Christianity, commerce and civilization.¹⁶ Some missionaries such as John MacKenzie went as far as calling openly for the colonization of native

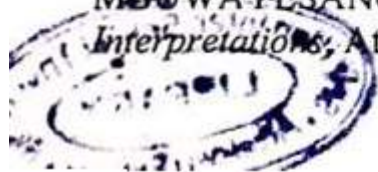
¹²UZUKWU E.E., *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, New York/Enugu, Orbis Books/Snaap Press Ltd., 1996, pp. 29.

¹³UZUKWU E.E., *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, p. 30.

¹⁴MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 17.

¹⁵MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 17.

¹⁶DUBE M.W., "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," in DUBE M.W., MBUVI A.M., and MBUWAYESANGO D. (eds.), *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, p. 2.



Africans.¹⁷ The Church was seen as a close ally of the colonial administration and was accused of having worked for the domination of the African people. Evidently, the priority of the missionaries was to help in defending the interests of their countries of origin. Reading through the history of Christianity, Ama Mazama does not hesitate to draw a line of connection between the Christian religion and state politics.¹⁸

Further evidence of the link between state institutions and Christian missionaries in the colonization and domination of Africa is found in a letter addressed by the King of Belgium, Leopold II, to Belgian missionaries on their way to Africa. This letter has given room for a better understanding of the real intentions of these Christian missionaries. In this letter, Leopold II reminds his countrymen that their “essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials,” they are to interpret the gospel in such a way that Belgian political and economic interests will be protected in that part of the world, that is Africa. If this letter is anything to go by, then it is clear that the early missionaries to Africa had a hidden agenda. Instead of evangelization, they rather came in under the guise of Christianity to colonize. And as one writer asserts, this “letter just shows how much the Europeans undermined the worth and dignity of Africans. The intention was that the African was only supposed to read and not to reason. The culture of dependence was developed at this stage. The subjugation commenced – using Christianity to vindicate this.”¹⁹

¹⁷See DACHS A., *Papers of John MacKenzie*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1975. Cited by DUBE M.W., “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives,” p. 3.

¹⁸MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 17.

¹⁹CHIWANZA T.H., “The Wickedness of King Leopold II Revealed By His Letter To The Missionaries,” in *The African Exponent* (Oct 6, 2017). An online magazine, accessed on 09 January, 2019 at 10:50pm.

THE BIBLE, THE GUN AND THE WHIP

“Christianity, or European influence, advances with sword or paper treaties in one hand, and the Bible or a case of gin in the other – as it appears to the native mind.”²⁰ These words translate, more or less, the role the Bible played in the colonization and domination of the rest of the world by European colonial adventurers. In the case of Africa, the Bible was suspected of serving as an instrument to put the Africans to sleep and thus facilitate their domination. This attitude is often expressed in the adage “the Bible and the gun,” or “the Bible and the whip.” The Word of God, therefore, was said to have prepared the way for the colonial powers by subjugating the hearts and minds of Africans and weakening their sense of resistance. Thus, to justify slavery, colonization or apartheid, missionaries used the biblical episode of the cursing of Ham by his father Noah (Gen 9:20-25). The accursed Ham is considered as the ancestor of the black people of Africa (Gen 10:6). This, according to them, explains and justifies the misery in which Africans find themselves.²¹ And as one scholar amply puts it, “in sub-Saharan Africa, biblical interpretation, its institutions, and readers will always be related to modern colonial history, for *the Scramble for Africa*

²⁰SUGIRTHARAJAH R.S., *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 45.

²¹BIMWENYI K.O., *Discours théologique négro-africain*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1981, pp. 121-131. Cited by POUCCOUTA P., *Quand la Parole de Dieu visite l'Afrique. Lecture plurielle de la Bible*, Paris, Editions Karthala, 2011, p. 65. See also QUENUM A., *Les Eglises chrétiennes et la traite atlantique du XV^e au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Karthala, 1993, p. 25 who beautifully discusses the impact of this episode in the imagination of the missionary adventure in Africa.

was the Scramble for Africa through the Bible."²² No one can deny the fact that the Bible has often been used to support slavery and domination. This has led to many people considering the Bible as a suspicious document that must be done away with if Africa desires to recapture her freedom from the shackles of Western imperialism.

CONVERT OR BE CONDEMNED: SALVATION AS CONFORMISM

The Western colonial and missionary adventure unleashed a fierce war on Africa and African culture. According to Ama Mazama, the closing of all the Egyptian temples dedicated to the celebration of the original African Trinity, Aset, Ausar and Herou (rebaptised by the Greeks as Osiris, Isis and Horus) falls within the same logic of the inability of the Christian religion to coexist with rival religious systems.²³ Armed with this logic, the early missionaries, consciously or unconsciously, began a fierce demonization of everything "black." African traditional religion is condemned as "false" and other belief systems as "superstitious." Strict Christian monotheism will reinforce the demonization of African Gods who are identified with Satan himself. As Forrest Wood opines, if there is anything that expresses so well the racist nature of Christianity, it is the insulting epithets which characterise all the stories written by the early Christian missionaries who came to Africa. In these stories, African

²²DUBE M.W., "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," p. 4.

²³MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 19. See also NANTAMBU K., *Egypt and Afrocentric Geopolitics. Essays on European Supremacy*, Kent, Imhotep Publishing Company, 1996, pp. 96-97.

traditional systems are termed as savage, pagan, and barbaric.²⁴

This system of colonial and Christian perception of Africa and African cultural and religious values will lead to the justification of the desire of the missionaries to “evangelize” and “convert” the people as ordered by Christ himself (cf. Matt 28:19-20). This is termed as “violent-aggressive Christian conditioning.”²⁵ It was for such reasons that colonization/evangelization was seen as the best thing that could happen to Africans, and thus the need to liberate Africans from “eternal damnation.”

The link between slavery and colonization as means of conversion and salvation of African people to Christianity was officially established in 1452 when Pope Nicolas V published a series of papal bulls which gave the authorization to the Portuguese to enslave sub-Saharan Africans. Church leaders saw slavery as a natural deterrent and as a way of dealing with barbarous behaviour among pagans, especially what they called “black Gentiles.” Based on this logic, Pope Nicolas V instructed the Portuguese king, Alfonso V, “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever... and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions,

²⁴WOOD F., *The Arrogance of Faith. Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1990, p. 23, cited by MAZAMA A., *L'impératif Afrocentrique*, pp. 21-22. See also the Letter of Leopold II to Belgian missionaries in which Africans are described as “savages” and African traditional religion is seen as “fetish.”

²⁵NWEKE K.C., “Mission As Dialogue In African Context: Proposing The Model of Mutual Enrichment and Syn-Culturation,” in *African Journal of Contextual Theology*, vol. 8 (December 2018), p. 142.

possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.”²⁶

The conversion to Christianity was used as a yardstick to measure the terms and conditions of negotiation between the enslavers and the enslaved. For example, in the 15th and 16th centuries, political elites in the Kingdom of Kongo adopted Christianity and dispatched emissaries to Europe. Kongo’s ruler will use his status as a Christian convert to exert diplomatic pressure to try to reduce the Portuguese slave trade in his kingdom.²⁷ These are clear signs that the Westerners saw slavery and colonization as the only thing that could save Africans from both physical and spiritual damnation. Ama Mazama again cites the remarks made by a certain Pelleprat, a Catholic priest in Guadeloupe in the 17th century who justifies slavery as being for the good of the slaves. This priest saw in slavery a gateway to happiness since in their enslavement, they are said to enjoy the freedom of the children of God.²⁸ Slavery therefore constitutes the price the African had to pay for his spiritual salvation. It was for the good of Africans that the Europeans, through the medium of Christian evangelization, enslaved Africans. This act was supposed to lead Africans to the knowledge of the “true” God. In the same vein, missionaries spoke about “Christian principles” only in the context of the conversion of slaves to Christianity. To this effect, Forrest Wood draws the conclusion that there is

²⁶THE LOWCOUNTY DIGITAL HISTORY INITIATIVE, *African Laborers for a New Empire: Iberia, Slavery, and the Atlantic World*, online article accessed on 29th May 2019 at 11:49 am

²⁷THE LOWCOUNTY DIGITAL HISTORY INITIATIVE, *African Laborers for a New Empire: Iberia, Slavery, and the Atlantic World*, online article accessed on 29th May 2019 at 11:49 am. See also QUENUM A., *Les Eglises chrétiennes et la traite atlantique du XV^e au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Karthala, 1993, p. 25; FASSASSI Assani, *Le péché du Pape contre l’Afrique: Jesus-Christ outragé, l’Afrique courroucée*, Al Qalam.

²⁸MAZAMA A., *L’impératif Afrocentrique*, p. 27.

no difference between Christianity and the enslavement of Africans, and one could be wrong in trying to separate the two.²⁹

The call to conversion will manifest itself in various forms and in all aspects of African life: taking European names, languages,³⁰ dress code (especially in liturgy), cultural values, etc. In summary, it could be said that the mechanisms for evangelization were completely foreign in the sense that they were “fully steeped in Western personnel, Western culture, Western philosophy, Western theology and Western psychology and cultural values – as monogamy, institutional celibacy, flowing garments reminiscent of the Roman toga or Medieval Europe, Western patterns of prayer and incantations, rituals and ceremonials, and Western names and concept of authority.”³¹ This style of life will lead, inevitably, to the loss of identity and authenticity of the African people, a sort of pauperization of Africans in their very existence. This will have consequences on the social, economic, political, ethical, intellectual and the way of perceiving history.³² These and many more have gradually led to the lack of trust in anything Western, especially the Christian religion which came to Africa through our encounter with the Western world. Today, there is a call on Africans to abandon and dissociate themselves from the West so as to regain their identity and authenticity as a people who no longer live under the shadow of foreign influence be it political, cultural, economic, religious, etc. Following from this, there is a clarion call for an

²⁹WOOD F., *The Arrogance of Faith*, p. 28.

³⁰MAZAMA A., *L'impératif afrocentrique*, pp. 247-251.

³¹IWE N.S.S., *Christianity, Culture and Colonialism in Africa*, Port Harcourt, no date, pp. 27-31, cited by MBACHU H., *Inculturation and Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*, p. 298.

³²POUCOUTA P., *Lectures africaines de la Bible*, Yaoundé, Presses de l'Université Catholique de l'Afrique Centrale, 2002, p. 39.

urgent need to decolonize and dewesternize Africa which involves the boycotting of anything foreign to Africa.³³

However, in spite of the human frailties of the messengers and the ambiguous nature of the context of evangelization, the Word of God still remains a force to reckon with and maintains its *extra nos* character. It is nobody's personal property. In this sense, it becomes a liberating force for whoever adheres to it.³⁴ The same way the Bible was used in the colonization and the domination of Africa, the same way the Bible will play a major role in the fight to get Africa back from the colonial clutches.³⁵ The words of Yves Schaaf summarizes the issues at stake: "It is said in Africa that the missionaries came and said: 'Let us pray'. When the Africans opened their eyes after the prayer, there was a book on their knees, the Bible. But their country was taken away. But what the Europeans forgot was that, the Bible contained a bomb which the Africans could use to destroy colonialism."³⁶

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY: THE LIBERATING POWER OF THE BIBLE

If the Western world used the Bible as an instrument of domination of Africa, could the same Bible be used to liberate the African people? In fact, this question is very pertinent in the sense that the Bible contains elements capable of bringing

³³See OKOLO C.B., "The Nigerian Church and Leadership: A Critique," in *NJT* 1/5 (1990), pp. 44-46; SHORTER A., *African Christian Theology – Adaptation or Incarnation*, London, 1975, pp. 21-23. Cited by MBACHU Hilary, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15*, p. 352.

³⁴POUCOUTA P., *Quand la Parole de Dieu visite l'Afrique*, p. 65.

³⁵DUBE M.W., "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," p. 4.

³⁶SCHAAF Y., *L'histoire et le rôle de la Bible en Afrique*, Nairobi/Lomé/Yaoundé, CETA/HAHO/Clé, 2000, p. 174.

life back to those who seem dead. These words of eternal life contained in the Bible could be used by Africans in their quest for identity and authenticity.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES AND THE ISSUE OF CULTURE

The Acts of the Apostles is, perhaps, one biblical book in which we find the issue of culture clearly stated. In fact, this book "has a positive view of the world." The author, Luke, shows his approval also of those outside the Christian movement. Outsiders are generally regarded as reasonable and open-minded. The Roman Empire is not the instrument of Satan but an opportunity for the spread of the gospel. A close study of this book shows how Gentiles are portrayed in a positive light. They can be "God-fearers" and even the unconverted are portrayed as filled with kindness and intelligence (Acts 28:7-10). From the above, one can deduce that the Acts of the Apostles affirm "the value of human culture and implies the compatibility of Christianity and the African cultures."³⁷

This overemphasized interest in other cultures is not surprising considering the fact that the Acts of the Apostles is, first of all, addressed to Christians of the pagan world, especially those of Greco-Roman origin.³⁸ Luke aims at presenting the different stages of the expansion of the faith and shows the opening up to the pagan world through the power of the Spirit. For the author, all the Christians who make up the Church, whatever their origin are called to experience the same history of salvation which moves from Adam to Israel, from Israel to Jesus, from Jesus to the apostles, from the apostles to the whole universe. Christians

³⁷See the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles in the New African Bible.

³⁸POUCOUTA P., *La Bible en terres d'Afrique. Quelle est la fécondité de la Parole de Dieu*, Paris, Editions de l'Atelier/Editions Ouvrières, 1999, p. 13.

all over the world are called to take an active part in this universal mission (cf. Acts 1:8).

For W. Amewowo, the first Christian communities in the Acts of the Apostles constitute a model for the Church in Africa.³⁹ Even though the situation of the Christian communities described by Luke might not be similar to those in Africa, they could serve, in a certain way, as a model for the Church in Africa.⁴⁰

Another characteristic of the Christian communities in the Acts of the Apostles which could help the Church in Africa is the autonomous nature of these communities. This will help in redefining the relationship between the Church in Africa and that of Europe. Considering the fact that the Church in Africa came to birth through the evangelization of Africa by European missionaries, the Church in Africa is often considered as the "child" of the European "mother-Church." This image, according to the author, need to be changed.

The situation of African Christians today resembles very much that of most of the early Christian converts in the book of the Acts of the Apostles where these individuals and groups had to struggle with the question of cultural identity and the Christian faith. The story of Cornelius, a Gentile who later became a Christian, is a typical example of how the early Christians dealt with the issue of faith and culture. The story takes the reader to the heart of the issue bordering on the need for Gentiles to observe Jewish cultural and religious values as a means of salvation. This situation is similar to what Africans have been going through in their quest for salvation in Jesus Christ. Must they conform themselves to Western cultural

³⁹AMEWOWO W., "The Christian Community in the Acts. Model of Our Days," in *Les Actes des Apôtres et les jeunes Eglises. Actes du Deuxième Congrès des Biblistes Africains Ibadan: 31 Juillet – 3 Août 1984*, Kinshasa, Faculté Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1990, pp. 109-116.

⁴⁰POUCOUTA P, *La Bible en terres d'Afrique*, p. 15.

values before they can attain salvation or can they be saved by just drawing from their rich cultural and religious values just as in the case of Cornelius? The answer to this question will form the basis of the exegetical analysis of the story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18.

EXEGESIS OF ACTS 10:1-11:18

Many scholars agree that Acts 10:1-11:18 is perhaps the most significant text in the whole of the Acts of the Apostles for a number of reasons.⁴¹ In fact, it could be possible, according to these scholars to “remove the other passages from Acts without collapsing the structure of the whole book, the conversion of Cornelius and his household is a pillar supporting Luke’s entire literary and theological construction.”⁴² The double vision to Cornelius and Peter serves as a *prolepsis* to the theology of the whole book. At this point in the book, the reader can easily foresee how God will pour out the Spirit upon all flesh so that whoever calls upon the Lord’s name will be saved. The two visions define one of the major theological themes in the Acts of the Apostles: the place of Gentiles in God’s project of salvation. It is “the test-case *par excellence* for the admission of the Gentiles into the Church.”⁴³ Through the vision, Peter learns that “God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34). In fact, the story of Cornelius will be used several times as a justification for the mission to the Gentiles. In Jerusalem, Peter tells the Judaizers that the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles just as it fell

⁴¹WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 176.

⁴²MACDONALD D.R., *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases From the Acts of the Apostles*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 19.

⁴³WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 176.

on the Jews at Pentecost. Again, when Peter attended the first council of Jerusalem, he made reference to the Cornelius episode to justify the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 15).

The significance of the Cornelius story is further situated in its immediate context.⁴⁴ Just before the story of Cornelius, Luke recounts two brief stories concerning the activities of Peter as an apostle: the healing of Aeneas (9:32-35) and the restoration to life of Tabitha (9:36-43). Each of these stories leads to faith on the part of Gentiles. The double reference to faith which came as a result of impressive healings is considered by R.D. Witherup as "preliminary to the faith which is about to happen to Cornelius and his household (10:2)."⁴⁵ That is why he calls on readers to see the context of the Cornelius story not only as geographical but also as theological. What God is doing, through the encounter with Cornelius, goes beyond a mere act of healing. We see God himself intervening to incorporate Gentiles into the Church through the action of the Holy Spirit.

The literary importance of the story of Cornelius is equally demonstrated by its position in the narrative. It serves as the transition from Peter to Paul who, henceforth, has become the major figure in the evangelization of the Gentiles.⁴⁶ As J. Dupont rightly puts it, "the baptism of Cornelius constitutes the culmination of Peter's apostolic career, his decisive contribution to Luke's history, after which

⁴⁴WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993), p. 49.

⁴⁵It is interesting to note that Tabitha is described as "completely occupied with good deeds and almsgiving." (Acts 9:36). Luke will use similar words to describe Cornelius: "devout and God-fearing... who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people" (Acts 10:2).

⁴⁶WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 65.

he has only to fade away, yielding the spotlight to Paul."⁴⁷ The text under study is unique in the sense that it recalls some of the most important themes that we find in the Acts of the Apostles: conversion, hospitality and table fellowship, word and deed, witness, and acceptance of the Gentiles. It also widens our understanding of conversion: that God's will may lead to situations least expected.⁴⁸

The above exegetical and theological reasons show how the story of Cornelius binds together the narrative structure of the Acts of the Apostles. Its centrality highlights the whole theological enterprise of Luke who sets out to justify the inclusion of Gentiles in the history of salvation. Even though God had chosen a people for himself, this choice is neither limited exclusively to Israel as a people nor to a particular historical period. It rather englobes the whole of humanity at all times. However, in spite of this evidence, the story of Cornelius is sometimes not given the needed light it deserves. Most often, scholars try to study it as a way of showing how Gentiles were converted to Christianity. For us, this story, far from being a simple story of conversion of a Gentile to the new Christian faith, goes a long way to show how other cultural and religious values could be inculcated into the new faith. The next step of our study is to demonstrate this fact.

SALVATION THROUGH DEEDS

The Cornelius pericope is often treated as a "major story of conversion in Acts" and that the supposed conversion of Cornelius and his household is considered as the conversion

⁴⁷DUUPONT J., *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, New York, Paulist Press, 1979, p. 24.

⁴⁸WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 65.

of a people or a nation to Christianity.⁴⁹ It is in this sense that they wish to see Cornelius as a representative figure and a paradigmatic Gentile convert in the works of Luke: he and his household are "symbolic of the Gentile Church (or house-church)."⁵⁰ He is the first Gentile convert in the Acts of the Apostles.⁵¹ By this, they claim that Gentiles need to go through some form of "conversion" before they can be part of the Church. Some scholars interpret the baptism of Cornelius as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on him and his household as proof of his "conversion."⁵²

From the above observation, one realizes that the major word which is used by scholars to characterize the story of Cornelius is that of "conversion" which translates the Greek word *metanoia*. In the context of the New Testament, the word is defined as "to change one's mind," "change of mind," or "conversion." It could even go as far as denoting some form of remorse or a feeling of regret for a fault against a brother (cf. Lk 17:3f; 2 Co 7:9f).⁵³ Situated within this context, one gets the impression that Cornelius must be a person who needs

⁴⁹WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 56.

⁵⁰WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 56. See also DUPONT J., *Etudes sur les Actes*, p. 77; ESLER P., *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 161-62; WILSON S.G., *Luke and the Law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 72; WALL R.W., "Peter, 'Son' of Jonah: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of the Canon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29 (1987), pp. 79-90; JERVELL J., "The Church of Jews and Godfearers," in TYSON J.B. (ed.) *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1988, pp. 11-20, esp. pp. 12-13.

⁵¹WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 171.

⁵²WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 64.

⁵³*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV, p. 999. See also INGELAERE J.-C., MARAVAL P., PRIGENT P., *Dictionnaire grec-français du Nouveau Testament*, Villiers-le-Bel, Société biblique française, p. 97.

some change from a former way of life to a better one. But if ever at all Cornelius is seen as a figure of conversion, the question still remains as to how this conversion must be understood, especially when situated in the context of the text and the New Testament as a whole. As we have already observed, conversion means a change of one's mind or a feeling of remorse for a wrongdoing. However, in the story of Cornelius, none of the above definitions can be strictly applied to the state of Cornelius. In fact, the word or the concept of conversion in relation to Cornelius appears nowhere in the text. The verb *metanoeo* or the noun *metanoia* is used nowhere in the text to describe Cornelius and his household.

From the general context of the pericope, the supposed conversion of Cornelius can only be understood in the sense of his status as a Gentile. Cast in the light of Jewish customs and traditions, Cornelius being a Gentile, then surely needs to "convert" so as to be part of the people of God. This is confirmed by Peter's refusal to eat anything unclean which translates the attitude of Jewish people towards Gentiles as unclean people. However, a close reading of the story gives us a different picture all together and brings one to question the idea of conversion in the story of Cornelius. In the opening verses, Cornelius is presented as "devout and God-fearing... who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly" (Acts 10:1-2). These verses emphasize the piety of Cornelius and he is presented as a typical example of the devout and godly. This is repeated severally (Acts 10:2, 4, 22, 30).⁵⁴ Not only does Luke talk about the piety of Cornelius but he also demonstrates it.⁵⁵ It is precisely because of such characteristics that the angel tells Cornelius that his "prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a

⁵⁴WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 176.

⁵⁵HAENCHEN E., *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 302-303.

memorial offering before God" (Acts 10:4). He is not accused of ignorance of Jewish scripture as in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) nor as in the case of Paul who was a persecutor of the Church (Acts 9).⁵⁶ Even in a Jewish religious context, Cornelius could still be considered as a pious man. The time at which the vision occurred "the ninth hour" (10:3; cf. 10:30) proves, once again, that Cornelius is indeed a man of piety. The ninth hour is the moment when pious Jews usually go to prayer (cf. Acts 3:1).⁵⁷ Haenchen goes further by arguing that "the mention of the ninth hour... shows not merely Cornelius' piety but at the same time (like *phaneros*) the reality of the occurrence; it takes place in broad daylight."⁵⁸

Another element which demonstrates that Cornelius is a pious man is the way he addresses the angel: "sir." For A.F. Segal, one easily reads deeper Christian meaning into the title *kyrios* used to address the angel, thus demonstrating his total obedience to God's word.⁵⁹ We again find the pious nature of Cornelius expressed by the way his servants describe him: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation..." (10:22). Through his righteousness and generosity, Cornelius has succeeded in gaining the favour of the whole Jewish nation. This demonstrates that, as radically attached as they may be to their traditions, Jews must sometimes go out of their way to admire people who do not necessarily practice Jewish religious and cultural values. Peter himself will later confirm Cornelius as a

⁵⁶WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 48.

⁵⁷BRUCE F.F., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1951, p. 103. Cited by Witherup, p. 55.

⁵⁸HAENCHEN E., *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 346.

⁵⁹SEGAL A.F., *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1990, p. 7

pious and righteous man who is acceptable to God (Acts 10:34-35).

Indeed, the presentation of the story of Cornelius as the “legend of the conversion of a godly Gentile”⁶⁰ clearly demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the whole enterprise. If Cornelius is already godly, then the issue of his conversion must be viewed from a different angle. The way Luke presents Cornelius as a representative of Gentiles is to show that the Gentiles are not as bad as the Jews might think, and that “there is not much to choose between a Jew and a Gentile. There is no need for Jews to look down their noses at Gentiles as if they were an inferior breed, for God has shown that the pious centurion is subject to his guidance and blessing as much as any thoroughbred Jew.”⁶¹ In Acts 10-11, the question of the entry of the Gentiles into the new Christian community is solved once and for all. God has clearly shown that the Gentiles can be part and parcel of the community as Gentiles without necessarily becoming Jews first.⁶² Probably, instead of Jews calling on Gentiles to convert, they might rather be in need of conversion as clearly demonstrated in the character of Peter in the text. From a supposed converter, Peter, and eventually the Judaizers, will go through a radical conversion after his encounter with Cornelius. Even though he seems to be the one sent by God to “convert” Cornelius and his household, the whole process will turn out to be an eye-opener for Peter and those who think and behave like him.

THE CONVERTER CONVERTED

The characterization of Cornelius sharply contrasts with that of Peter. Cornelius the Gentile seems to be more in

⁶⁰WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 172.

⁶¹WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 176.

⁶²WILSON S.G., *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, p. 192.

tune with God's project than Peter. While Cornelius responds immediately to the command given by the angel to send some men to Joppa to bring Peter (Acts 10:5-8), on the contrary, we see Peter not only hesitating, but also questioning the message given to him in the vision (Acts 10:14-16).

Being presented as the leader of the Twelve and who had known Jesus, one would have expected a more mature faith on his side. He seems not to be as God-fearing as Cornelius who probably had never heard about Jesus and his message. He clearly demonstrates his lack of trust in God by refusing to kill and eat because, according to his words, he has never eaten anything "profane" and "unclean." (Acts 10:14; cf. 11:8). This shows that Peter, the orthodox Jew, is still imbued with his Jewish culture which prohibits the eating of certain types of animals and reptiles. As a good Jew, Peter tries to remain faithful to the laws concerning ritual purity in Lv 11 which forbid unclean animals because they are considered as the source of a great ritual uncleanness.⁶³ Peter is so steeped in his Jewish origins that he simply refuses to see the possibility of God granting salvation to non-Jews.

The character of Peter seems ambiguous and dishonest in the text. While he chooses to stay in the house of a tanner whom some rabbinic sources consider as unclean⁶⁴, he continues to toe the party line by refusing to eat what he claims as unclean.⁶⁵ Peter seems to be confused about the meaning of the vision.⁶⁶ He is the first to resist heavenly direction as well as God's initiative.⁶⁷ It is not until he reaches

⁶³MALINA B.J., *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Atlanta, John Knox, 1981, pp. 134-137.

⁶⁴M. B. Bat 2.9; m. Shabb 1.2; m. Meg. 3.2.

⁶⁵SPENCER S.F., *Acts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, p. 113. Cited by MILLER John B.F., *Convinced That God Had Called Us*, p. 203.

⁶⁶MILLER J.B.F., *Convinced That God Had Called Us*, p. 208.

⁶⁷JOHNSON L.T., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 185.

the house of Cornelius that he gets the full meaning of the vision. In Acts 10:28, Peter is less perplexed about what the vision means: "God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean."⁶⁸ It is in this context that "Peter needs a conversion of heart that will widen his vision of just how broad God's repentance and forgiveness and mercy apply."⁶⁹

This calls for a redefinition of the concept of conversion in the pericope under study. Cornelius and his household convert to the new faith but not in the sense of conforming themselves to Jewish cultural and religious practices. Their conversion consists, first of all, in opening up to the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Secondly, it is about self-awareness. Even before Cornelius knew about the Christian community, God had found favour with his way of life, especially his hospitality towards the Jewish nation. Also, he is a man of prayer and devout in his adherence to the work of God. The angel and the Holy Spirit come to confirm what Cornelius possesses already. They draw his attention to things that he might not have been aware of initially. As a Gentile, Cornelius only needed to be guided to the good things in his life and how he could use them for the good of humanity. That is why he did not necessarily need to conform to Jewish religious practices before being considered as a member of the Christian community as demanded by the Judaizers in Jerusalem. The outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius and his household is a confirmation of this reality. Even before baptism, Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit as a sign of God's approval of his way of life.

⁶⁸MILLER J.B.F., *Convinced That God Had Called Us*, p. 209.

⁶⁹WITHERUP R.D., "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," p. 49.

CONCLUSION: AFRICA, OUR WAY TO SALVATION

Our study of the story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18 has shown that conversion does not necessarily mean conforming to a certain way of life. Peter, a die-hard Jew, as well as the Judaizers in Jerusalem are gradually brought to the realization that God does not take notice of cultural affiliations in dispensing his salvation to humanity. The Jews, though the chosen people, do not have monopoly over salvation. Rather, anyone who fears God and does his will finds favour with him and can therefore have access to salvation.

This same message could be addressed to the people of Africa who are still struggling to come to terms with and free themselves from colonial shackles concerning their faith. Africans are constantly called upon to behave like the white man if ever they want to have access to God. But taking precedence from the story of Cornelius, Africans can begin to chalk a new path of faith in God. Henceforth, they do not need to conform themselves to Western style of faith in order to be saved. All they need to do is to deepen their already God-approved cultural and religious values which will surely lead them to salvation in Jesus-Christ. The Spirit blows where it wills (Jn 3:8). Just as the Spirit blew through the house of Cornelius, so also it will blow through Africa if only we become aware of the richness of our cultural and religious values. All that God needs is a people who are God-fearing, devout, hospitable, and prayerful. Our salvation will come through our ability to develop and apply these values which have already found favour in the eyes of God.

That is why there is an urgent need for a change in paradigm where the Church will go back to the original message entrusted to her by Jesus-Christ. There is the need to help African Christians to focus on what is necessary for salvation. In the case of Cornelius, salvation came to him and

his household because he practised human virtues like almsgiving and hospitality. These are the values which helped him to find favour with God and not his belonging to a particular ethnic or religious group. All these values are enshrined in African cultures. Christians must be encouraged to develop them and put them at the service of their brothers and sisters. These are surely the things that will lead them to salvation. African Christians must therefore not worry about imitating Western style of life, be it cultural or religious, in order to be saved. As rightly highlighted by Luke, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to God (Acts 10:34). This was the hard lesson that Peter and his fellow Judaizers had to learn upon his encounter with Cornelius. And this is the same message that is addressed to Africans today as they seek for identity and authenticity in their Christian faith.