

Re-Examination of the Imprint of Christ in African Culture before the Coming of the Christian Missionaries

Dennis Chiedu Egbogah, PhD

Paul University, Awka

egbogah@gmail.com

Abstract

This piece of work explores the thesis that there are quite a number of things in the culture of any people and in this case Africa, through which the gospel may lean on to spread. Some of these points of contacts are in the legends of the people and their system of government. The culture of the people is very helpful to explain the Christian faith more meaningfully to people. This is because, using those models to explain the gospel makes the faith they receive to be theirs but not as something foreign that was imposed upon them. This work however while acknowledging the culture of the people as a vehicle to explain the gospel, it affirms the uniqueness of Christ and his message. This work is in essence saying that Christ exists in culture but we should make every effort not to see more of Christ in it than it is necessary.

Introduction

To say that ‘the Christian God was at work in Africa before Christian missionaries proclaimed him’ is an understatement. It is to say that God is not new or foreign to Africa before the missionaries came with the name of Jesus. Like St. Augustine would say that he knew God in Greek philosophies, but the only thing lacking then was the name of Christ which he had heard from his mother Monica (St. Augustine Confessions). In fact, some African ethnic groups were already awaiting his arrival through the centuries of their forebears before the missionaries finally arrived. So the claim is actually stating the obvious. We shall attempt therefore in this paper to put across some of the ways in which we think this truth is made manifest in some African cultural traits.

Anecdote: The White Messenger of God in African Traditional Religious Prophecy

A story was told of how a community in Ethiopia that had been impervious to the gospel for several years came to know Christ through what is perceived as a fulfilment of a traditional legend that had been on for several thousands of years. Albert Brandt, an SIM missionary in 1940 had been labouring for several years without success until one day he sat underneath a particular tree to rest. Suddenly, he noticed that people of the village were

coming around him by the hundreds. Quickly, he opened his Bible to John 3:16 and began to read to their hearing. It was after this encounter that hundreds of the people became Christians. Brandt himself wondered why it must be at that place and nowhere else that they could become Christians (Fritz 236).

This story underscores the fact that there are so many things in peoples' cultural contexts that God who himself is a missionary place there as it were points of contact before the missionaries arrived. It does appear that in their legends, 'a certain man would someday sit underneath that tree, read from a black book, and declare to them the truth that they had been waiting thousands of years to hear; God had prepared their hearts through the preaching of this young missionary' (236). This man must have been tired after a long day's walk that he sat under the tree to rest awhile as he providentially fulfils their local prophecy unknown. There are many similar related stories in many Nigerian experiences of conversion during the missionary era.

Analytical Explanation of this Story

To begin with, this story does not necessarily mean that consultation of African religious oracles is permitted for Christians, but it illumines the fact that African's religious past was not without the presence of God, howbeit in a shadowy form. It means that God was using the medium of what they knew to prepare them for his coming. It is like stating what the black American Liberation theologian James H. Evans gave the title of his book, 'We Have Been Believers' (Evans 1992). In this work, he argues that, 'the idea of God is rooted in concrete human experience. This means that any discussion of God must begin with a people's recollection of their encounter with God (53).

This human encounter with God which is almost always embedded deeply into the religious and cultural experiences of all human races is a pointer to what Bediako sees as '*preparatio euangelica*'- preparation for the gospel (Bediako 4). Our story buttresses the fact that African minds prior to coming of the missionaries were not 'tabula rasa.' Their minds were already at grips with spiritual realities. Most of all, they knew the existence of God, 'the ultimate reality' which Evans likens as being 'the transcendent dimension of human experience' (Evans 53). This experience does not come through the agency of anybody, but through the shadowy reflections of God's glory in direct contact with human beings with whom he had always sought to have fellowship with.

The work of Mission has always been referred to as '*missio Dei*', it is the mission of God in the sense that even before the missionaries are sent to any people, he has already made adequate preparations through human interactions in their cultural, social and religious lives. All these experiences are brought to bear on human ability to receive or exercise

response to the message of the gospel when they hear it. The message of the gospel can only make any meaningful impact to the recipient if it can be related to the ideas the person already had. This is the reason why successful missionary work can happen when the missionaries are able to find key concepts especially, about God relative to the environment of the recipients of the gospel. The idea here is what Don Richardson, a Roman Catholic Priest missionary in Irian Jaya in Indonesia expressed in this way:

The basis of our approach is that we believe God is already working through the existing culture, which follows from the belief that God created all things and is present in all of them (Winter and Hawthorne p.c-143).

This idea is held by Andrew Walls when he observed that, ‘it is hardly possible to take in a new idea except in terms of ideas we already have’ (Walls 35). Missiologists regard this type of ideas as points of contact. In other words, gospel message must be expressed in a way relative to what people already know about spiritual and physical realities. The apostle Paul said to the Athenians that God is not far from each one of us. It is in him that we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:27, 28).

The point of this therefore, is that the gospel is not for the creation of awareness about the existence of God as such, but that of the proclamation of the new and unique relationship of God with his people through one unique and personal individual, the Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise, they have had enough knowledge of God through ‘general revelation,’ but lacking that redemptive relationship with God through Christ and the scripture and by the power of the Holy Spirit in what Systematic Theology refers to as ‘special revelation.’

The Missionary God

The very first verse of the Bible is set in the context of God who is on a mission. In that understanding, we see chapters 1-12 of Genesis where God was dealing with nations, a fact expressing their origin and affinity with God; also expressing their relationship with one another, thereby bringing a mosaic of their relationships to God. In Genesis 12:3 we see the so-called ‘sevenfold’ promises of God to Abraham in which the seventh ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ is addressed to all nations of the world. We can therefore say that God’s concern for Abraham is in a universal framework of salvation for all nations. The ‘*proto-euangelion*’ (literally the first gospel, usually used to refer to Genesis 3:15) anticipates this universal concern of God. We may therefore, arguably, say that this concern is manifested in the things we see happening in every human cultural settings through which the gospel of Christ can be relevantly communicated with clarity and conviction.

There is some sort of ‘particularism’ when God elected Abraham and established a redemptive relationship with him. Particularism is a term used by some scholars to argue

that God is not concerned about other nations because Jesus said that he was sent only to the lost tribes of Israel. The choice of Abraham and by implication Israel is a divine mission strategy which ultimately has universal application for all nations. Jesus operated mainly within the borders of Israel to prepare a people who will serve as priests to proclaim his salvation to all nations of the world. This is exemplified in the words of the so-called Great Commission in the gospel of Matthew 28:16-20.

Our Christian theology teaches that human beings are made in the image of God. This image has been explained to be lost when mankind sinned. However, the 'lostness' of this image though fundamental, does not necessarily mean complete obliteration of the image of God in human beings. We believe that there is still some residue of this image of God in human beings. If this is understood to be true, it therefore means that the remaining part of this image naturally gravitates towards God with all its limitations and bondage. It is upon this image that God works in humans to prepare them in anticipation of the time when the gospel be proclaimed to them. This image of God in man is what decodes the voice of God in the gospel that often comes through the agency of imperfect human beings themselves.

Government as God's Sign of His Presence in Every Human Community

One very important means of interpreting the presence of God in every human community is the government. The institution that takes charge over every human community has been a very important factor in interpreting God's relationship with them. The reverence they gave their leaders became a paradigm of how they are expected to relate to God. In Africa, many communities came to receive the gospel of Christ through their local rulers. In Igbo land in eastern Nigeria, you can discover this from the church denominations each clan group belong. Usually, every clan through the auspices of their local leaders decide which type of the Christian denomination they will belong. In most cases, their decisions were based mainly on the manner of presentation of the gospel to them especially in regard to the new faith's effect on what the communities hold firmly as pivotal to the community's growth and cohesion. They would not want their value systems to collapse. As a result of the leadership of these clan heads and representatives, it was easy for the gospel to be embraced at the same time by a whole community. We believe that it was God who has providentially structured these communities in this way until such a time when he would make use of them as instruments for the reception of the gospel.

One such relevant story is told by Andrew Walls about the conversion of the kingdom of Northumbria. The king summoned a council to discuss the acceptance of the new faith. Wall commented that it was societal aspirations that dictated the acceptance of the Christian faith in Northumbria. Religion he observed:

Was essentially communal matters: ancestral customs, acceptable modes of life within the community, and the sanctions governing both. It was therefore a matter for corporate discussion and consensual action (Walls 35).

What this implies is that the egalitarian nature of their system of government served as a vehicle for the establishment of Christianity in Northumbria. We may therefore say that God was setting in motion the process of reconciling his people to himself through this system of government prior to the coming of the missionaries. Not-with-standing the obvious disadvantages of this type of mass conversion to the Christian faith, the point still remains that these people will regard their new faith as their own and which they will guard jealously as they do other common societal inheritance.

The idea of covenant of God with Israel is set in the context of their environment in the 2nd century BCE. It was a covenant patterned according to the Suzerain treaty of a ruler who has authority over all other kings and lords. The Ten Commandments is assumed to have been structured in similar fashion as this treaty (Wright 100). From here, we could deduce that God gainfully employed the system of government familiar to the Israelites when he entered into this solemn relationship with them. It is with this understanding that this paper attempts to put forward the opinion that God has always been there in African culture before the missionaries came and this could be applicable to any culture for that matter. God has put in place some structures in every human society with which the gospel may more fully be understood by them.

African Cultural Religious Traditions and the Gospel

Throughout church history, religion and culture have played vital roles among the recipients of the gospel. It forms the basis through which the gospel penetrates the life of the people. In Africa, Christianity gained deep roots because already there were various ‘conceptual categories’ of the ideas of God in symbols that expresses the nature of God. Common among these symbols are the signs of holiness in their shrines. They are usually surrounded by tender palm fronds in some societies and with several paintings of white chalk. When Christianity came, it was not difficult for them to identify those aspects of God’s nature from their own religion. John Mbiti believes that the African religious past has helped to a great extent to the spread of Christianity in Africa (Mbiti ii). He however warned that:

However much African cultural –religious background may be close to the biblical world, we have to guard against references like ‘the hitherto unwritten ‘African Old Testament’ or sentiments that see any final revelation of God in the African religious heritage (59).

Coupled with these religious signs, Africans give names to their children based on their religious experiences. Such names in Igbo culture as: Ekenechukwu, meaning, thanks be to God. Chinedu, meaning, God leads. Chidi, meaning, God is sovereign and absolute in power and authority. Unlike some of their western counterparts, names were not given because of its sound, but as a result of their interactions with both physical and spiritual worlds. Names are meant to summarise their life experiences with God and they are at home with the biblical names and symbols for God.

It is on the basis of this understanding that Kwabena Damuah argues that 'conversion should always take into consideration a person's individual cultural baggage, which is anything but tabula rasa' (Damuah 1971 in Bediako 29). Kwame Bediako would insist that the reason why the names of the gods in Africa survived unlike their Semitic, Graeco-Roman and northern European Teutonic contexts in the phases of evangelisation was because there was retention of these traditional African religious names for God during the missionary era (55).

Viewed from this background, we can visualise the imprint of God in all cultures prior to the reception of the gospel. We can now see that religion and cultural identity of any people forms part of the process through which God prepares those that will conform to his image. And for the true identity of any people to be clear and without confusion, their past historical experiences should not be divorced from their ongoing life experiences. Any group of people that totally gets assimilated into the culture of other people, runs the risk of being confused without definite ideological and cultural identity of their own.

Andrew Walls states this in the following manner:

'If any man is in Christ he is a new creation' does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind continues to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is as true as groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches- including our own (Walls 8).

As we have already indicated in this paper, the revelation of God to the people of Israel was in a cultural context. Their identification of the name Yahweh as unique and different from all other gods of the surrounding nations was because it does not seem to have a resemblance in other culture or their experience. It was because of their former religious experiences that they came to understand that name to embody absolute uniqueness among all that they have experienced. Sequel to this is the cherub and the columns in Solomon's Temple that Archaeologists acknowledged have been influenced by the religious traditions

of the Canaanites. Ernest Wright says these and other items in Solomon's Temple had antecedents in 'a long history in the theology and symbolisms of Canaan' (Wright 141).

Suggestion for Action

It is the suggestion of this paper that the gospel messengers should always take into account the cultural identity of the African people. There are so many good value systems in their culture that are vital to societal growth and continuity and these can be sensitively and delicately preserved and harnessed for effective communication of the gospel message to them. Granted that some of these values are seriously intertwined with their religious beliefs, the attitude must always be that of not throwing away the baby along with the bath water. The Christian theologian also must communicate in such a way as to reflect these cultural conditions in their presentations. But effort should also be made to curb a wholesale adoption of these cultural things lest they become big theological monsters to upset the faith of those we are trying to protect. Christianity should challenge certain elements in culture which are dear to the heart of the people, but which are harmful in essence and challenges the sanctity of the gospel of Christ. Cultures that do not respect human dignity however well valued by the people should be creatively transcended under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

In essence, what we argue here is that the gospel must also try to eradicate certain cultural factors which may even outwardly be promoting societal growth, but which are odious to the faith of the church. We must always be alert to identify such things, but we certainly must not act rashly. The Christian missionary ought to know the whole truth about any such cultures and find alternative means of correcting them within that culture under the prayerful direction of the Holy Spirit.

Our attitude to culture should bear in mind the warnings given by Lamin Sanneh that:

The claims of God, however successfully mediated and embodied in earthly structures, must ultimately be seen to be in radical tension with them, for obedience to God overthrows other rival sovereignties that make their home in culture. Missionaries are under obligations to signal loyalty to God as fundamentally indivisible, although in practice they cannot coerce people into compliance (Sanneh 32-33).

With this understanding, such theological reflections of using the ancestors to represent Christ just to make the gospel to appeal to the people Championed by Charles Nyamiti (1984) and echoed by Bediako (217) and others are not so comfortable positions. Although they argued, especially Bediako, that ancestors should not be rivals to Christ, but by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension he can rightly be called Supreme

ancestor. However, this does not exclude the danger in that. In the surface, it may seem as a good position, but judging from what the term ancestor connotes in various African communities, that notion will distract the people from the real things of the Christian faith that is Christ. The Christian faith requires that there must be a total exchange of loyalty before one may truly be his. Continual loyalty to the ancestors side-by-side our loyalty with Christ would be a big drawback, a huge luxury that has overwhelming negative faith price tag for African Christianity; and such luxury we cannot afford.

Understandably, Nyamiti who is the major proponent of this position may be representing a view of Christians who invoke biblical saints in their prayer. There is a Christian opinion that pursues the use of African ancestors in good standing in their communities because they may better present their needs to God than would biblical figures who may not understand their culture. Inasmuch as we want Christ to be properly incarnated in the African culture, we should equally avoid making him our local champion. He transcends all cultural barriers and local affinities. He is Christ for the whole world. We must avoid undue parochialism that made the Jews not to see beyond their immediate situation. Besides, using ancestor model to communicate the gospel to Africans is very detrimental to the Christian faith in view of what 'ancestralship' connotes. Christ in his person falls far short of who an ancestor could be in Africa. First, he did not marry and so among most African societies he was a waste. Secondly, his early death means that he could be a malevolent spirit seeking revenge for his early death especially because he would not be received among the ancestors because of his young age. Third, he does not qualify to be invoked in African prayer because of the above shortcomings. There are quite a number of other qualities attached to the status of an ancestor that disqualifies him in that regard.

The last contribution of this paper is also to observe that African culture though still seemingly intact in some villages are now beginning to give succour to admixture of many cultural orientations. This boils down to the old time truth that culture is dynamic. Some cultural adaptations may fit into new mission areas where there is no western civilisation and education. The missionary should try to adapt his or her message to suit their audience at any given time and places. Most importantly, the missionary in Africa must listen to God at all times and in all places to know what he is saying to any group of his people. This is because, it is the Holy Spirit that will take what belongs to Christ and make it known to those who have not known him.

Conclusion

It is the considered opinion of this author that the issue of contextualisation and enculturation is beginning to take a toll on the faith that has been received through the missionaries. For while we are struggling to immerse the gospel into the culture of the

people for relevance, great majority of our educated and emerging youth population are getting more educated and more advanced in knowledge of the new world of internet. It is true that in the villages many youths are relapsing back to traditional religion; those really involved are mainly with low educational exposure. The great majority of our youth population are in the city and are more concerned about what the advanced society may offer them than trying to figure out old existential questions.

Today, Neo-Pentecostal churches are offering them fitting alternatives to handle old questions. We must know that the old questions of the late 20th century are different from that of the early 21st century. New technologies are emerging and languages are changing very fast and are adding new ways of expressing thoughts. We should follow the youth and understand their culture. When we do, we shall discover what is their new point of contact and imprint of the divine so that, we may more meaningfully meet them at the points of their needs. The Neo-Pentecostals are there with them already; the mainline denominations should follow suit.

References

- Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion. Edinburgh: University Press, 1995.
- Bediako, Kwame. Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in Africa and Experience. Yaounde: Regnum Africa, 2000.
- The Confessions of St Augustine
- Evans, James H. We Have Been Believers. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Fritz, Paul J. Sermons for the Nigerian Pastor. Jos: Calvary Ministries, 1989.
- Mbiti, John S. Bible and Theology in African Christianity. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Nyamiti, Charles. Christ Our Ancestor-Christology from an African Perspective. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.
- Pobee J.S. Towards an African Theology. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979.
- Walls, Andrew F. The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Walls, Andrew F. The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Winter Ralph D and Hawthorne Steven C. eds. S.V. 'Do the Missionaries Destroy Cultures' by Don Richardson in Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1992.
- Wright, Ernest G. Biblical Archaeology. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962.