

The State of Christianity in Africa

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Introduction

The church in Africa has been growing very fast in terms of numbers. As the church grows, Traditional African religion has decreased in numbers, and in other times, has been absorbed by Christianity leading to syncretism. Africa was steeped in Traditional African Religion in the past. As it is now, Africa will very soon have a majority Christian population. But the question one needs to ask is this: Does the fast growing African Church reflect the New Testament ideals? One cannot discuss the state of Christianity in Africa without addressing this very important question. This study will briefly address the current beliefs and practices of the African church as well as the challenges that lie ahead of it. In doing so, it will also determine whether the beliefs and practices reflect the New Testament ideals. Because the study is short, it will not be possible to be much detailed as that would need more research and would lead to a large volume of writing.

Beliefs, Practices, and Challenges

First, it is important to understand the forms of Christianity present in Africa today. Roman Catholicism, Orthodox, Mainline Missionary, as well as Pentecostal or Prophetic, Churches are found in Africa. Some of the churches are indigenous while others reflect a mixture of missionary practices and Africanized way of doing things. Generally, the African Church is divided between the Monophysite and

Chalcedonian views. The Coptic and the Ethiopian Churches are Monophysite while the Roman Catholic and other churches are Chalcedonian. It is important to note that the New Testament reveals Jesus as both the Son of Man and the Son of God. This means he is fully human and fully God, rendering the Monophysite view as heretic. John 1v. 1 states that the Word was God and became flesh. God the Son became a man, but man did not become God. The two natures did not unite and become one, with the humanity being “swallowed” up by the divine.

The Roman Catholic Church in Africa continues with its old practices while at other times absorbing Traditional African Religious Practices. One of these practices is the reliance of intercession by martyrs. Burns (2014) states that the early cult of martyrs in Africa is characterized by a reliance on their intercessory influence to win favors from God – particularly the forgiveness of sins. Nowhere in the New Testament does the church seek help from the martyrs. The African Roman Catholic Church continues to practice baptism by sprinkling of water – even to infants, a practice which is not supported by New Testament. Baptism by immersion is the New Testament ideal, and baptism does not bring salvation as taught by the Roman Catholic Church. Additionally, petition of Mary and departed Saints, teaching that there is a difference between clergy and “lay people”, teaching that sacraments infuse grace to Christians, confession of sins to priests, teaching that Mary is a perpetual virgin and the mother of God, among other things not supported by New Testament Scriptures, continue to be part of the African Roman Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the Indigenous Churches, most of which are Pentecostal or Prophetic, have come up with their own beliefs and practices, which should be analyzed in light of the New Testament. The doctrine of “sowing seeds” to get specific material blessings from God is not found anywhere in the New Testament. Despite this, the Prophetic Churches and their members are very vocal about this teaching and anyone opposed to it is labelled a servant of Satan. The African is loaded with many burdens, and if giving money will set

him or her free, no amount of teaching seems to be able to make him or her turn away from “sowing a seed” and expecting to get the specific material blessings one is believing God for. The New Testament teaches about cheerful giving of offerings and support to God’s servants and Christians but does not say one can “bribe” God to get what they want. Despite this, these churches believe in the Scriptures, stress much on holiness, righteousness, love, worship, giving, anointing, and many other good things being done for God’s Kingdom in Africa.

Prophetic Churches are growing faster in Africa today. Ranger (2007) observes that the African Initiated Churches took advantage of failure of Mainline mission Christianity to adopt prophecy, spiritual healing, spirit possession, the idea of holy mountain, and preoccupation with witchcraft. They responded to these needs, which explains why they are appealing to many African Christians today. However, it should be noted that some of these fast growing Prophetic Churches have infused the gospel with practices and spirits which are questionable in light of the New Testament. Many times, the prophecy is not from God’s spirit but from evil spirits masquerading as the Holy Ghost. Angels of darkness have deceived many that what they are getting is from God. But still, the African Indigenous Churches are flourishing, and new churches are being planted each year, due to the power of the Prophetic Ministry. Dada (2009) notes that the operation of the Prophetic Ministry is the reason why the African Indigenous Churches are dynamic. To avoid becoming irrelevant, the Mainline Churches have begun to operate practices found in the Prophetic Churches. There are cases where some African Roman Catholic Churches or Christians have become charismatic, incorporating Prophetic Ministry as one of their worship activities.

It’s very important also to understand that culture has played a big role in shaping the current church in Africa. The church beliefs and practices may be biblical, but there appears a layer of different cultural practices placed on the African Church. The offering of blood to ancestors especially during dowry payment ceremonies, seeking

guidance and help from ancestors, having witch doctors protect homes, among other things, are still being practiced by people professing to be Christians in Africa. Although the gospel was not brought to do away with every aspect of culture, these practices are not supported by the New Testament Church according to the Scriptures. This does not however imply that every African Indigenous Church has infused the gospel with sinful cultural practices and beliefs. Engelke (2010) observes that Pentecostals often renounce, and even mock certain elements of what they refer to as Traditional Religion and African culture which are spoken as “backward” or “primitive” and in many cases linked to the devil. Renouncing these practices has often led to persecution.

Because the gospel is currently being preached through the media, public culture has also had its influence. Democracy and media in Africa have helped spread the gospel, leading to growth of the African Church. In many nations, the state does not fully control religion. Englund (2011) writes that Pentecostals got unprecedented possibilities for public manifestation using commercial structures for spread of the gospel. The simultaneous turn to democracy and commercial media allowed for manifestation of Pentecostalism as a public religion. This has been made possible by the fact that many African countries have tried as much as they can not to interfere with religious activities. However, in Islamic North Africa, Christianity has continued to face restrictions and proselytizing is not allowed.

Africa is also growing economically, and modernization is evident in every country. Vorster (2013) states that modernization has various effects on religion. In South African context, liberal constitutionalism has curbed the coercive power of the Christian religion in the public realm, but it has also created space for freedom of expression in public realm that invigorates religions. This has resulted to religious tolerance which is good for the growth of the church. South Africa has the largest percentage of Christians in Africa.

The African Church has not been left behind in defining who Jesus or God is. The quest to know Jesus is alive in Africa today as it is in other parts of the world. Clarke (2011) observes that Christians through the centuries have tried to understand and express the meaning of Christ in terms that are meaningful to their culture and worldviews. In Africa, Galgalo (2012) notes, the image of Jesus is that of a conqueror. This brings the theme of liberation theology. Africans need deliverance by a conqueror from mental, economic, and cultural enslavement. Jesus is also seen as an ancestor in Africa who can be consulted in times of need. In the New Testament, it is not wrong to understand Jesus or God in view of one's culture, but it becomes wrong when one begins to worship God as one of the many ancestor spirits or gods which are part of the Traditional African Religion.

The African Church of today is involved in a hot debate about several critical issues. One is whether women should be allowed to be in charge of churches or not. Women have of late risen to leadership positions, especially in Pentecostal or Prophetic Churches, but in the Mainline Churches this is not the case. The New Testament does not discriminate women and women should be allowed to fulfill their calls in whatever capacity God calls them. The African Church is also resisting influence from the west in matters of homosexuality and same sex marriages. The debate is hot, and the African Christians have vowed not to accept those evils. The New Testament does support a church which allows and promotes homosexuality and lesbianism.

Although there is hope that the African Church will keep growing, it is faced with a galaxy of challenges which it must overcome. Ilo *et al* (2012) states that the contemporary picture of Africa is one of failed states, marred by chaos and anarchy, corruption and greed, hyper inflationary trends, poverty and disease, ethnic rivalries, and religious conflicts. These factors will continue to negatively impact the African Church for the foreseeable future. In the Islamic African nations, Christianity will continue to be under threats despite some Muslims

converting to Christianity here and there. Also, even though Traditional African Religion is declining, it will continue to negatively affect the African Church as many Christians often revert to it when they feel God has ignored them, or has taken too long to respond to their cries.

Despite the challenges the African Church is faced with, it has taken position as a civil society, and its voice has been heard addressing various matters. Nahinlola (2017) notes that the church is a civil society. A civil society is an important sector in every modern society. Civil societies promote democracy, good governance, rule of law, equity, transparency, and accountability. The African Church has been at the forefront correcting and advising the governments on various issues.

Before concluding this short study, it is good to mention some of the Ministers of Indigenous Churches pushing the gospel forward in Africa today. They include David Oyedepo of Winners' Chapel, Nigeria; Godman Akinlabi of Elevation Church, Nigeria; Arthur Kitonga of Redeemed Gospel Church, Kenya; Wilfred Lai of Jesus Celebration Center, Kenya; Shepherd Bushiri of Enlightened Christian Gathering, South Africa; Theo Wolmarans of Christian Family, South Africa and Tom Deuschle of Celebration Ministries, Zimbabwe. These are just a few examples.

In conclusion, it has been found that, Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, as well as the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches are found in various states in Africa. Prophetic Churches are growing fast with the Mainline missionary Churches also beginning to operate elements of the Prophetic Ministry. Some of the beliefs and practices of the African Church are not reflecting the New Testament ideals. Culture has had its influence on the African Church with some Indigenous African Churches infusing Traditional African religious practices into their worship activities. The African Church views Jesus as a conqueror, who has come to deliver them from their bondages. South Africa has the biggest percentage of Christians. The

African Church has a hope of growing, but it is faced with many challenges like poverty, Islam, disease, Traditional African Religion, among others. The church has taken its position as a civil society, and has been advocating for good governance, equity, democracy, and many other things. The study has been short, but has attempted to address the issue at hand. The Church of Africa is surely dynamic, and will continue to be so.

Sources

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