

THE GOSPEL, CULTURAL CONTEXT AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

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"If I had a thousand lives I would give them to the service of Christ in Africa." Robert Moffat uttered this passionate cry because he had a clear-cut Gospel to proclaim, and Africa as any other part of the globe, was groping in complete darkness without Christ. This is no denial of God's general revelation through nature, conscience, history, and miracles. But it is an admission that "he who has the Son has life" (I John 5:12 RSV). If there was a time in Africa when there was a need of the clean-cut Gospel it is today. It is, therefore, a great privilege for me to share with God's servants my understanding of the Gospel in Africa and the challenge it faces in the area of syncretism.

1. *The Gospel*

The inspired, inerrant Word of God gives us the Gospel and its working power in a nutshell in I Cor. 15:1-4. It is not a part of any people's culture. It is not indigenous to any soil. It is revealed propositionally and must be declared accordingly. The Jews did not have it. The Germans, the Americans, the Africans, the Europeans, needed to get it revealed through a messenger (Rom. 10:9, 10). The Gospel must be received, and it is impossible to receive it corporately, though each individual recipient becomes a member of a group upon his decisive action. The receiving is described as an act of believing and is evidenced by the fact of holding form to the Lordship of Christ. The outcome of acceptance by faith is salvation. Only a drowning, helpless person needs to be saved. All men, therefore, regardless of their ethnic origin are entirely helpless, in fact, spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1; Rom. 5:6).

The content of the Gospel is the heart of its proclamation and the resulting effectiveness. This is why the Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. When I say I believe, the sentence is meaningless unless I give the object of my belief. The center of the Gospel message is not a philosophical, ever-pervading "logos" of Philo or even Justin Martyr. It is not the cosmic Christ present in all religious aspirations of various faiths in the world. It is a historic person, Jesus the Christ. That he lived and died under Pontius Pilate is verifiable. That he was buried and literally rose again is also a convincing fact of one history. A long list of his contemporaries who saw him after resurrection was unchallenged. The best the religious leaders could do was to bribe the guards to conceal the truth (Matt. 28:11-15). No amount of fraud can destroy the truth of God predicted several millenia earlier. That Jesus died, was buried, and rose again is not only an indisputable fact of history, but it is a fact borne out in the lives of more than half a billion people in the world today. He alone as God-man has made the claims of death,

resurrection, and a promise of drawing men to himself, and the claims have been fulfilled. This is the undiluted Gospel for which Christ's sons and daughters in Africa must be prepared to lay down their lives (Matt. 10:34-39).

2. *Contextualization*

This is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenization ever does. We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes for relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary. William Barclay, has rightly stated, "But it is not Jesus' purpose that we should turn all men into one nation but that there should be Christian Indians and Christian Africans, whose unity lies in their Christianity. The oneness in Christ is in Christ, and not in any external change. The unity in Christ produces Christians whose Christianity transcends all their local and racial differences; it produces men who are friends with each other because they are friends with God; it produces men who are one, because they meet in the presence of God to whom they have access."

The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptations. The incarnation itself is a form of contextualization. The Son of God condescended to pitch his tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed (John 1:14). The unapproachable Yahweh whom no man has seen and lived has become the Object of seeing and touching through the incarnation (John 14:9, I John 1:1). The moving old hymn on humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the Lord (Phil. 2:5-8) was evidently an incentive to Apostle Paul in his philosophy of the ministry which was to become "all things to all men." This in turn should motivate us to make the Gospel relevant in every situation everywhere as long as the Gospel is not compromised.

Contextualization can take place in the area of liturgy, dress, language, church service, and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth. Musical instruments such as organ and piano can be replaced or supplemented with such indigenous and easily acquired instruments, as drums, cymbals, and corn-stalk instruments of various descriptions. It must be borne in mind, of course, that the sound of music must not drown the message. Clergy do not have to wear "Geneva" gown or even dog collar. Not only should the message be preached in the language best understood by the congregation, but terminology of theology should be expressed the way common people can understand. But theological meanings must not be sacrificed at the altar of comprehension. Instead of employing terms that would water down the Gospel, the congregations should be taught the meaning of the term as originally meant. One instance is the mustard seed. This is a crop not found in America or Africa. Instead of substituting it with a local grain the term should be employed and the explanation given. While the content of God's Word should remain what it is, the expression of it in teaching, preaching, and singing should be made relevant. Drama and

storytelling, for instance, should be considered more seriously in Africa. Any method that helps the advance of Christ's message should be employed.

3. Religious syncretism

In a recent talk to church leaders in East Africa, the Rev. John R. W. Stott described syncretism as "a fruit cocktail of religions." Eric Sharpe defines it as denoting "any form of religion in which elements from more than one original religious tradition are combined."

Christianity has gone full circle. Christianity in Africa, or in the Third World for that matter, has come to the stage it was in the second century. Just as syncretism plagued the church in the days of apologists, so it challenges the historic faith in Africa today. Donald McGavran's evaluation is quite fitting with the situation obtained in Africa today. The great missiologist writes, "It seems clear that the next decades, Christians again as in the first two centuries, will fight the long battle against syncretism and religious relativism. And for the same reason — namely, that they are again in intimate contact with multitudes of non-Christian *peers* who believe that many paths lead to the top of the mountain. The concept of the cosmic Christ, some maintain, is a way out of the arrogance which stains the Christian Father. Other Christians believe that the concept of a cosmic Christ operating through many religions sacrifices truth, for if there are, in fact many revelations then each voices approximation of the truth. As hundreds of Christian and non-Christian denominations spring into being across Africa, Asia, and other lands on earth some will inevitably hold biblical views of the Person of Christ.

Incentives for syncretism in Africa are not hard to seek. The incentives for universalism (i.e., the idea that all will be saved in the end) are the same for syncretism since only a thin line separates the two ideologies. The reason for growing syncretistic tendencies may be summed up briefly as follows:

(i) The prevailing wind of religious relativism in the older churches is carried abroad by the liberal missionaries in person and through literature.

(ii) The crying need for universal solidarity in the world fosters religious respect one for the other.

(iii) Political awareness in Africa carries with it a search for ideological identity. Some theologians seek to find this identity in African traditional religions.

(iv) Emotional concerns for the ancestors who died before the advent of Christianity force some theologians to call for a recognition of religious practices of pre-Christian idol worshippers.

(v) Cultural revolution calls for a return to socio-religio-cultural way of life in Africa. Since it is hard to separate culture from religion, the tendency is to make them identical and cling on to idolatrous practices as being an African authentic way of life.

(vi) Inadequate biblical teaching has left the average Christian with inability to "rightly dividing the Word of truth." Syncretistic or neo-orthodox teachers bring their views, and even Christian leaders fail to

discern what is right according to the teaching of God's Word.

(vii) The African loves to get along fine with everybody. He therefore does not offend his neighbor by letting him know what the Bible says about non-Christian religions. That is why liberal ecumenism is thriving in Africa.

(viii) Liberal Christianity has done a thorough job in picking up key brains from the Third World and grooming them in liberal schools in the Western world.

(ix) The study of comparative religions without the effort to assert the uniqueness of Christianity has helped produce theologians of syncretistic persuasion.

(x) The genuine desire to make Christianity truly African has not been matched with the power of discernment not to tamper with the inspired inerrant content of the revealed Word of God.

The spirit of syncretism in Africa is predominant today both inside and outside church circles. Otto Stahlke accurately describes the contemporary situation when he writes, "The syncretistic tendency, the attempt to blend and reconcile various religions, is not new, but never before has it been so prominently espoused by a leading agency for many Christian churches. Promotion of this point of view has come from philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, comparative religionists, and some avant garde theologians."

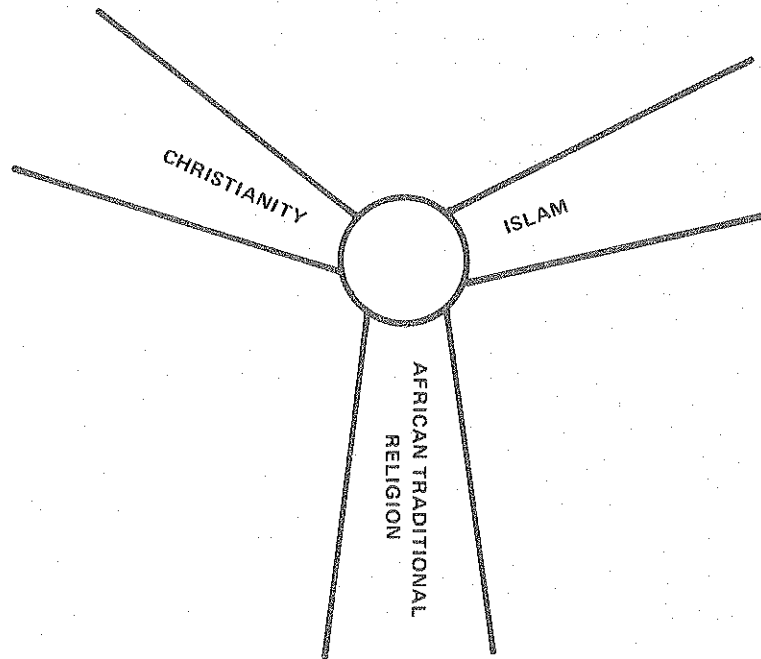
An African anthropologist, Okot p'Bitek, advocates, "In my view the student of African religions needs to soak himself thoroughly in the day-to-day life of the people whose thought-systems and beliefs he wishes to study. He must have a deep knowledge of their language. When attending ceremonies, he must not stand apart as a spectator, but join in fully, singing the songs, chanting the chants and dancing the dances."

P'Bitek calls for syncretism not only in matters of pagan religious festivities but also in pagan immoral practices. He considers Christian teaching on sex confined to marriage alone as being Western and that it must be rejected by the African. Realizing that Christian ethical teaching is based on God's Word, the university lecturer condemns the Apostle Paul in a derogatory manner. He writes, "This ex-Pharisee who has been described as the ugly little Jew, was a small man barely five feet tall, bow-legged, a chronic malaria patient with serious eye trouble. We learn from Acts Chapter IX that he became a mental case for a short time, and on recovery, he joined the Christians whom he had formerly persecuted. Paul was a great woman hater." Since the "Western world is still a prisoner of St. Paul's thwarted sexual morality" the African should outgrow that delusion and follow the type of morality which allows free sex. P'Bitek considers that African. He writes, "In most African societies, having sexual intercourse with married women by persons other than their husbands is strictly forbidden; but unmarried women enjoy both unmarried and married men." He suggests, "It is important for African leaders to consider whether sexual ethics in their countries should be based on St. Paul's prejudices against women and sex, or built on the African view-point which takes sex as a good thing."

In political circles, recognition of all religions as being good is ideal

for national solidarity. Religious tolerance in almost all African countries is admirable. Christians should continue to pray for men in government that such a peaceful atmosphere may continue. But religious tolerance is quite different from enforced unity or regulated practice against one's religious convictions. The authentic philosophy resulting in enforced unity into one Church of Christ in Zaire would lead on to compromising syncretistic situations. But the worst situation is that which is reported to be taking place in the Republic of Chad. It has been reported that Christians are being forced to undergo circumcision ceremonies which amount to an initiation into pagan rites. It is reported that some Christian leaders have been imprisoned, some churches burnt down, and missionaries expelled because they rejected what would amount to syncretism.

It is rather sad that some Christian leaders are encouraging government interference in religious affairs because they want to encourage ecumenism. The recently appointed head of the Ecumenical Institute, Boisey, Professor John S. Mbiti, writes, "Denominationalism and its proliferation, then, are the product of human selfishness and weakness. Our church leaders in Kenya, present and past, African and expatriate, have made a mess of the church through inheriting and agreeing to accept divisions, through multiplying divisions, and through perpetuating division." The Kenyan theologian continues, "Finally, the information in this Handbook makes one wish to appeal to the Government of Kenya to set up ministry of religious affairs." Situations similar to that of Zaire may not be far away in other African countries. When such



takes place, syncretistic practices of some semi-Christian groups will likely pervade a wider Christian spectrum.

Apart from secular writing and government encouragement for syncretism, the study of comparative religions is another major factor. Most of the universities in Black Africa have departments of religions. The primary goal of these departments, far from being the spiritual growth of individual Christian students, is academic excellence. The tendency is to study Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions in a detached manner. The journal of the department of religious studies at the University of Ibadan best illustrates this. The journal is called *Orita*, a Yoruba word meaning a junction. It has on its cover this design:

The head of the department is a Christian. But the editor of the journal is a Muslim. One explanation of this mixed situation is that the department seeks only to understand the encounter of these three religions in Africa. One evident fact is that the journal presupposes the validity of all these religions and the silence on declaring the uniqueness of the Christian faith. Thus the seed of syncretism and implication of universalism is planted in the minds of theological students, many of whom become religious teachers in schools and colleges. Some find their way to the pulpit. Admittedly some will survive the test and grow stronger, but not a few will end up proclaiming a syncretistic message.

The teaching of African traditional religions in secondary schools is increasingly becoming popular. It is being suggested in some circles that religious knowledge teachers should present just the objective facts of Islam, African traditional religions, and Christianity without any show of what they believe. The young teenagers should then be left to sort out for themselves what to believe. But since there are some good elements in every religion would it not be easier for an immature student to pick up the good points of each and make up a new religion? This may fulfill the aspirations of some theologians that Africa should come up with a religion that is modern and truly African. As a matter of fact, Dr. J. K. Agbeti of Ghana feels that the survival of Christianity in Africa lies with the traditional religions rather than the prophetic Word of God. He writes, "The true theological interpretation of the traditional African religious experience could be a strong springboard from which the tottering Christianity of Africa today may be rescued and rooted more meaningfully in the African soil." Evidently this is a call for a syncretistic form of Christianity.

Some church leaders today frown at the missionaries for declaring the unique Lordship of Christ as presented in the Scriptures. Criticizing the presentation of the unique Christ who would not share room with idols, Joachim Getonga writes, "To be regarded as a true Christian in those days, a person had to abandon almost all the culture which he had acquired from his own African society. He had to detach himself from virtually all the beliefs of his parents, throw away his native clothes and put on Western dress or ornaments in order to be accepted into the Christian faith. Tribal dances in particular were considered diabolical." Getonga then appeals to "all Christian preachers to rethink the place of their cultural heritage and to reconstruct what

was destroyed during those pioneering days of evangelization." One is tempted to ask Getonga what native clothes he has in mind and whether he would honestly like to go back to them. What concerns us here is the question of "the beliefs of his parents." African Christians who have found it necessary to burn up every idol have followed precedents set in the Scriptures (Acts 19). Christianity stands to judge every culture, destroying elements that are incompatible with the Word of God, employing compatible modes of expression for its advance, and bringing new life to its adherents, the qualitative life that begins at the moment of conversion and culminates eternally with the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Even some of the most outstanding theologians in Africa have syncretistic and/or universalistic tendencies. Professor John S. Mbiti holds that all men will be saved in the final analysis. He affirms, "There is not a single soul, however debased or even unrepentant, which can successfully 'flee' from the Spirit of God (Psa. 139:1-18). God's patient waiting for the soul's repentance must in the end be surely more potent than the soul's reluctance to repent and turn to him . . . (II Pet. 3:9). The harmony of the heavenly worship would be impaired if, out of the one hundred in the sheepfold, there is one soul which continues to languish in Sheol or 'the lake of fire.'" Incidentally, Mbiti does not believe in the reality of hell or heaven. Christ's teaching on heaven and hell is all symbolic so far as the Kenyan theologian is concerned. Such elements are expected to be a part of the proposed so-called African Theology, which is just a revamping of liberal theology.

Professor E. Bolaji Idowu objects to localizing theology. He would also eschew syncretism. But one wonders where his high view of African traditional religions is leading to. He writes, "To call African traditional religion 'idolatry' is to be grossly unfair to its essence." If pagan gods are not idols, then what are they? Idowu claims with the adherents that these gods are ministers of the Almighty God. To recognize the reality of these man-made gods is to reject the scriptural view of these "dumb idols" (Isa. 2:8, 40:18-20, 41:7; I Thess. 1:9; I Cor. 8:4-6). While it is true that the pagan is conscious of the existence of a Supreme Being through general revelation, his vision of the Supreme Being is distorted because of the original sin. The image of God in man, though not obliterated, is disfigured to the point that he is considered dead in "trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) until he receives new life in Christ. His worship of creatures rather than the Creator can be described adequately only as idolatry. What Africa needs is the unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ who declares authoritatively and finally, "I am the Way the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me," (John 14:6).

4. Conclusion

Syncretism, will increasingly become popular in the Third World. The watered down concept of "Salvation Today" hatched at Bangkok in 1972-73 will give impetus to syncretistic and universalistic yearning in the Third World. The persistent urge for cultural revolution in Africa with external influences from communist and Arab worlds

will energize the challenging force of syncretism. The days of persecution for the Bible-believing Christian may not be too far away. Christians all over the world should pray for more grace for the Third World followers and heralds of the unique Christ. Meanwhile the Bible-believing Christian should respect and pray "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (I Tim. 2:2). Christians in Africa should realize that to stand for the uniqueness of Christ will not be popular as ungodliness increases in the world. There may come a time when Christians will have to say, "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). They may even have to say, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29) and face the consequences that Stephen and others after him faced.

The final word for the African Christian is to make Christianity culturally relevant without destroying its ever-abiding message. The subject of cultural relevance belongs to another presentation. But we may conclude the paper with this appropriate observation from Dr. McGavran. "It (Christianity) purges all cultures — Christian, partially Christian, and non-Christian alike. Since it purges twentieth-century Christianity in a way it did not purge seventeenth-century Christianity, it also purges twentieth-century Bantu religion and Marxist religion as their adherents come to believe on Jesus Christ." Another great missiologist, Dr. George Peters, has issued this plea which must not fall into deaf evangelical ears. "Let me plead the cause of the African churches to save them from Christo-paganism which is a real threat to the future evangelical church of that continent."