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The Quest for Authentic African Christianity

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In January, 1953, Kwame Nkrumah paid a state visit to Liberia at the invitation of President William Tubman. Addressing a mass rally at the Centennial Pavilion in Monrovia, the future President of Ghana took as his theme: "The Vision That I See." He pointed out that, "...it is better to be free to manage, or mismanage your own affairs, than not to be free to mismanage or manage your own affairs." He went on to explain that it was this conviction which motivated him in 1949 to found a political newspaper, the *Accra Evening News*. The guiding philosophy of those who were behind the paper was contained in its motto: "We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquility."¹

It was this kind of attitude which governed those who fought for freedom in pre-independence Africa. At the moment most African countries have extricated themselves from the shackles of colonialism and oppression as the "wind of change" has already blown by, sweeping away with it the manacles of foreign domination. In its wake it has left, instead, governments run and controlled by the indigenous peoples of those nations. Underlying this attainment of sovereignty is the drive for the kind of power which enables these independent states to control and shape their own destinies. Hand in hand with the achievement of self-determination is the ability to mobilize and harness their resources, with a view to channelling them to productive ends for their respective peoples. On the ecclesiastical front, similar cries are being voiced and echoed throughout the length and breadth of the African continent.

Resulting essentially from European Christian missionary activities in the last few centuries, the Christian faith has found root in Africa. In consequence of this reality, Christianity has become part and parcel of the prevailing pattern in many parts of the continent today. In 1970 it was estimated that by the year 2000, the Christian population in Africa would stand at about 350 million or 46% of the entire population of the continent.² To ensure that this largely nascent manifestation of Christianity attains its own authenticity and distinctive dignity, countless African thinkers and practitioners are engaged in the exercise of trying to analyze it, with a view to helping shape its course and identity for the days ahead.

The Issues at Stake

At the root of this search for authentic African Christianity in many quarters on the African scene are two main premises. One of these premises arises from the widely-shared suspicion that the European purveyors of the Christian faith to Africa did not take it to the continent pure and unalloyed, but rather carried it there clothed in Western European garb. The contention then is that to reclaim the core of the Christian faith, it is necessary that the prevalent forms of Christianity be stripped to the bone to rid the continent of any objectionable manifestations therein. But this is just one side of the coin, the obverse side of it, we may say. The corollary to this is the second premise which represents the reverse side of this coin. Here it is strongly held that apart from stripping the current brand of African Christianity of its foreign matter, and therefore, leaving it bare, pure and unadulterated, we need to dress it in African clothing if it is to be of any lasting significance to the indigenous peoples. The reason for this approach is the firm belief that there are certain indispensable African cultural distinctives which must form part of the totality of the experience of any African, even when he espouses the Christian faith.

In this vein, Professor E. A. Ayandele articulates the nature of the problem before us when he points out that there are four challenges facing the Christian Church in Africa which must be dealt with if its future is to be ensured. To a large extent, the last two of the problems he postulates, i.e., myopic nationalism, and the type of ecclesiastical sectionalism which disavows genuine ecumenism are subjects which ought to be ironed out in the context of the Church throughout the world as these cancerous tendencies are not the exclusive preserves of African Christianity. Taking his focal point as the state of affairs in the mainline institutionalized Christianity, he perceptively puts forth the case in the right order of priority when he states,

Perhaps the most important of these problems to which the attention of those genuinely concerned about the Church in Africa has been drawn increasingly in our generation, is how the transplanted churches from Europe and the New World are to be transformed into the Church of God in which African culture can integrate, in which the African can worship uninhibited emotionally or psychologically "in spirit and in truth."³

Having spelt out the first issue, he then follows this with the second in which he wonders how "institutionalized Christianity in Africa" can take its unique and dignified role as a recognizable entity in the body politic of the world-wide Church of Christ. This quest for authenticity in Africa's brand of Christian thought and practice has been sounded and echoed in widely divergent quarters.

In his own way, the President of the Republic of Zambia, Dr. Kenneth D. Kaunda, refers to this when he says, "The more sensitive theologians are beginning to explore what it means to be a Christian in a genuinely African or Asian way."⁴ From a slightly different perspective, it is to this same issue that

the Bishop of the Diocese of Maseno South in Kenya, The Rt. Rev. J. Henry Okullu, addresses himself when in a section on the "Indigenisation of Christianity" he contends that, "If the Church in East Africa is to make its voice effectively heard in the spheres of public life of these nations, then it must speak the language of Africa."⁶ Still at another level of analysis, Professor John S. Mbiti argues that we need to recognize the tragedy that when "organized Christianity" went to the African, it failed him in that it alienated him from what would have been the ideal totality of his religious existence. Mbiti sees this as "... the bitter pill which we must swallow in all honesty. But it is the tragic situation which we as Christians and intellectuals must seek to remedy."⁶ Spelling this task out more pin-pointedly he continues to maintain,

We have to Africanise Christianity, that is, give it an indelible African character. It is not enough to transplant prefabricated Christianity from Rome or Geneva to Kampala or Lagos: that period is now over. We have to produce a type of Christianity here which will bear the imprint *made in Africa* and which will not be a cheap imitation of the type of Christianity found elsewhere or at periods in the past. This involves Africanising church structures, personnel, theology, planning, commitment, worship, transaction of its mission, and financial independence.⁷

Briefly stated then, the problem on hand is that the Christianity which was introduced to Africa is by and large not African in flavour, and often not Christian in its centre. Sometimes unconsciously and at other times intentionally, the European messengers spread Western civilization in the name of Christianity. At other times they tried their best, but failed simply because of their imperfections as part of the human lot. Whichever the case, the result was that because of these limitations, these missionaries could not easily convey "the pure milk of the Gospel", but like the majority of human beings, were unable to emancipate themselves from the cultural, emotional and social frame in which they were accustomed to live and express their religious life in Europe and America."⁸

Having said all this, may we interject here that these efforts should not be misinterpreted as a vicious campaign to vilify and discredit the work of European missionaries and the related agencies wholesale. It would be erroneous to assume that the dislocation under discussion was uniform, and that because this was so, any cure administered in this sphere must be given in equal dosage across the board. From all evidences, it can be safely said that although much of the Christianity that was exported into Africa was defective in that it was overlaid with Western European interpretations, it is grossly misleading to charge that all missionaries were rascals and scoundrels who, in pre-meditated connivance, set out with the intention of suppressing the socio-cultural institutions of Africa, with a view to substituting them with Western civilization. Instances abound in which these agents tried as conscientiously as possible to walk the tight-rope in their mission by taking into account the essentials of the Christian faith on one hand, and an understanding of the culture in which they functioned on the other.

The Call for Thorough Analysis

Very grave responsibilities are linked with the all-important assignment of dealing with the theme of authentic African Christianity. Among other things, in our discussion we need to consider whether in our approach we are called upon to prescribe what ought to be, to describe what has been and still is, or to find some equilibrium in which we deal with both of these aspects. Regardless of which option we decide upon, it will be important that we take into account all the issues and facts involved. Indeed, before we embark on the task of dispensing the appropriate medical remedy for the maladies in view, we need to do some thorough inventory into the nature of the disease, about the requisite prescription, and into the conditions under which the latter has to be administered. Anything short of this kind of in-depth analysis will not do as it would simply lead into our being embedded further in the same quagmire from which we are endeavouring to extricate ourselves.

The objectives spelt out in the nature of the problem before us are so noble and laudable that they call for the serious attention of all who are interested in the welfare of the Path of Christ in Africa. Nevertheless, a lot of groundwork still remains to be done before we can even establish beyond a doubt to what extent the basic assumptions of the two projected premises are justified. There are subterranean intricacies which we must unravel completely before we can confidently embark on the construction of our own lasting edifice. Somehow, one has a sneaking suspicion that while a lot of truth exists in the oft-heard loud protestations, some spade work is called for to enable us to determine categorically what is the undesirable substance that is embedded in the current form of African Christianity on one hand, and on the other hand, which is the proper costume with which to clothe it if it is to hold its ground as staunchly African and at the same time as ardently Christian.

To say this is not in any way to advocate the imposition of a moratorium on this quest and the resultant debates into which it has plunged African Christian thinkers and the rank and file alike. On the contrary, the proper view would be that this exercise should go on unabated until we have established the validity or lack of the same of these claims. In the meantime we must recognise that there are those obvious elements in either category on which consensus of opinion prevails at all levels and in every sector of the continent. In these spheres, no useful purpose would be served in hesitating to implement the necessary changes, as it is deemed appropriate.

As for the rest, if they are as weighty and as serious as we allege that they are, then let us deal with them with the meticulous attention that they are due, before we come to any definitive steps that have to be taken to rectify whatever is amiss. In this category we include all the hazy, controversial and grey areas of thought and practice where unanimity of view does not exist. It might be argued that pursuing such a course of action is tantamount to resorting to delaying tactics which only undermine the introduction of the sorely needed changes. However genuinely felt this view might be, it must be balanced with the need for building a firm and solid foundation instead of hurrying into easy and unstable palliative remedies. We should definitely shy away from

undermining our credibility by being found guilty of the fact that while criticising, as we must, those who made blunders in the course of introducing Christianity into Africa, we ourselves are sloppy in the way we go about altering the unpalatable situation. In a very timely reminder, Bishop Okullu points out that, "the criteria for formulating such a theology will have to be examined with utmost care in the light of the different stages of understanding prevailing in Africa today."⁹

The Broad Historical Span

While engaging in this enterprise of intensive research, we need to take into serious account the answers, responses and reactions that our predecessors in this same pilgrimage have arrive at. We grant that it is decidedly more admirable and seemingly glorious to be viewed as being in the vanguard of pioneers blazing a new trail than being mere links in a tradition, carrying forth a torch which others before us have lit. Yet, by the same token, it is destructively self-deluding to imagine ourselves as innovators when our real problem is that we have been too lazy to take the trouble and time to discover how those who went before us dealt with these same issues. In our eagerness to wipe European Christian missionary history from our memories we often fail to grasp the fact that there were African Christians before us who sought in their own ways to espouse the essence of the Christian faith, but in the context of the African cultural milieu of their times. The fact that many of them accepted whatever they were presented with as the incontrovertible truth should not lead us to hastily assume that this air of acquiescence was uniformly true.

Even where European missionaries introduced defective forms of Christianity, it would be unfair for us to operate under the assumption that the recipient Africans were so inert as to accept unquestioningly and uncritically the package delivered to them. History would not bear this assumption out as true. Instead, the truth of the matter is that the history of Christianity in Africa is littered with abundant demonstrations of the fact that, once awakened to the truth of the core of the Christian faith, African Christians have sought to right the warped Gospel given to them by instituting trends that were truer both to the essence of the Christian truth and also to the African situation into which the same was established. Through the haze of Westernized European Christianity, Africans were able to look beyond and through the vehicle till they beheld the real central concerns. Once they appropriated the Gospel of Christ for themselves, the entire picture altered so dramatically that things would never be the same again. African Christianity in its proper identity began to take shape from the earliest days as African men grasped that allegiance to Christ was the central theme of their new-found faith. Christianity as it had gone to Africa was undergoing drastic changes, albeit often imperceptible to the indiscriminating eye. These discoveries and their implementation often brought conflict between the more perceptive African Christians and their European detractors.

This kind of assertiveness on the part of African Christians is part of the long story of the presence and prevalence of the Church of Christ in Africa through the years. The grounds for this courageous stand have varied from time

to time, but that it has been there cannot be so easily dismissed. Without this spirit of enterprise in the realms of things spiritual, in church polity, and in church extension, the course of the Christian faith in Africa in all its varied modes would be much worse off than it is today.

For this reason it would do us a great deal of good in our present quest to take a leaf from our predecessors who have struggled with these issues in the past, often under very adverse circumstances. It would be sheer lunacy on our part to assume that we are writing a completely new chapter in this search instead of merely bringing to the fore once again that which has existed in the Church in Africa in different forms over the years. Thus, in all our analysis and assessment, in order to do justice to the issues in question, we need to pause a little and put them in their proper perspective – including the relevant historical precedents, however inconclusive they may seem to us. Their answers, responses and reactions may not augur particularly well for us, nonetheless, they represent invaluable lessons which we can ill-afford to ignore.

It is at this point that Professor Ayandele, for one, is very instructive when he draws our attention to some West African Christians of the past who grappled with these same questions which so engagingly occupy our attention today. One need not look very far to discover that such examples could be duplicated many times over on the Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa scenes.

As for West Africa, we learn of how between 1892 and 1914 the phenomenal increase in the number of Christians in Nigeria resulted in more responsibilities being shouldered by the indigenous Christians, while the prestige of European missionaries plummeted. There was a revolt against Christianity as it was portrayed by its European exporters. The case against them was essentially in two directions. For one, they uprooted and destroyed African institutions and culture, and secondly, they replaced these, not with the Christian faith in its purity, but instead, with fossilized European civilization masquerading under the banner of Christianity. These men were ready to be Christians but not to be Europeans. They set out to be vibrant Christians, and at the same time, authentically African. The leading voices in this struggle in the West African context were James Johnson, Edward Blyden and Mojola Agbebi.

While Johnson argued that even in pursuing the Christian calling, the "African should be raised upon his own idiosyncrasies",¹⁰ Blyden charged, as Ayandele puts it, that "In practical terms the vandalism of Christian missions should be arrested by the establishment of an African Church based upon the Bible alone, for 'the Christ we worship must be African.'" ¹¹ It is clear that what these Christian African nationalists were fighting was not so much the Christian faith per se, as Western European civilization camouflaged under the cloak of Christianity. Indeed, "There was no thought of questioning Christianity itself, but cultural nationalists sought to discover the 'pure milk of the Gospel' and give it characteristics of the Nigerian situation. When discovered, they argued, Africans should 'demonstrate in practice the Christianity which the white man only theorizes.'" ¹²

In this quest the battle was fought on two fronts or levels. One level was that which dealt with the superficial non-essential that Europeans had introduced into Africa in the name of Christianity. These included such

paraphernalia as mode of dress, names, life-style, and the bulk of the apparatus used in worship. These were to be discarded as useless, and if anything, substituted with their African equivalents. Then there was that level of the essential and fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. The tenets embodied therein were to be taken seriously and accordingly adapted to the African milieu, as they were embraced as the epitome of Christianity. In this way, the essence of the Gospel of Christ could find its own level in the context of the more serious considerations of African institutions and culture.

In all seriousness, they no longer wanted the prevalence of a situation where the distinctive feature of a "Christian is not moral character or allegiance to Christ, but outward dress."¹³ They were tired of the emerging "superficiality of Christianity in West Africa" which was a veneer in which, once one had gone through the motions of the proper ecclesiastical ceremonies, what mattered most was the respectability and acceptability that one attained as a ticket to cherished social functions. The end result was that, "This failure of Christianity to be deeply rooted in the people impelled educated Africans to study their religion in order to see how much features of indigenous worship could be grafted on the 'pure milk of the Gospel'."¹⁴

While James Johnson and Edward Blyden were champions in these spheres, Ayandele faults them for failing to put many of their convictions into practice. Instead he singles out David Brown Vincent, later known as Mojola Agbebi, as the most thorough-going of these Christian African cultural nationalists. He says of him,

The only educated African who approximated a practical cultural nationalist was D. B. Vincent, leader of the native Baptist Church. From 1891 onwards he refused to work for any Christian mission in spite of high positions promised by Bishop Tugwell. Convinced that it was a 'curse' to depend on foreign missions, 'doing the baby for aye', he preferred to be poor but independent. In 1894, while in Liberia, he changed his name to Mojola Agbebi. He cast off European clothing ...¹⁵

What was unique about men like Mojola Agbebi was that disavowing European Christianity did not mean dispensing with Christianity as such. It may even be argued that the opposite was true. In freeing themselves from the shackles of Westernized European Christianity, they were now at liberty to commit themselves more wholeheartedly to the Christian faith as they understood it in the African setting of their day. By 1902 Mojola Agbebi was castigating European Christianity as "a 'dangerous thing', 'an empty and delusive fiction' ..." ¹⁶ Then when touring Britain and the USA in 1903-1904 he returned to Africa, "Repelled by American civilization which he described as a 'snare', and its Christianity, which was a 'counterfeit'."¹⁷ But one of the more forceful of his views came in 1902 when he attempted to make some distinction between the essentials and non-essentials of the Christian faith. In his view;

Prayer-books and hymn books, harmonium dedications, pew

constructions, surpliced choir, the white man's style, the white man's name, the white man's dress, are so many non-essentials, so many props and crutches affecting the religious manhood of the Christian African. Among the great essentials of religion are that the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached unto them.¹⁸

Comprehensively African

Coupled with this task of exhaustive investigation is the need for clear-cut definitions. It is along these lines that it must be obvious that a proper understanding of what is meant by authentic African Christianity is fundamental as it will help us avoid the employment of any misnomers in our discussion. This raised the necessity of much care so that in our concept of African Christianity we do not end up sowing and dispensing half-baked and ill-digested ideas in which the Africa we posit is that which only exists in the realm of the abstract and imaginary. Such a faulty perception could mislead us into finding ourselves embroiled in a struggle against a non-existent enemy who happens to be merely a figment of our own imagination.

All too often, we are tempted to anachronistically lag behind by speaking to a selected Africa, which, although very real, yet is not fully representative of the dynamic Africa of all time in its many and varied forms. If we adopted this comprehensive view, we would be saved from the tendency of extolling one period of Africa over the others or one sector of even our present sub-cultures at the expense of the rest. The rationale for this larger view is that even in the midst of the drifting sands brought about by the furiously blowing winds of change, there still remains that central strand with the barest modicum of a common denominator which distinguishes the sum of Africa culture and personality in all its shades and facets as something readily identifiable.

Of course our task in this connection would be made eternally easier if, instead of dealing with a dynamic reality, we were confined to a static entity. As it is, however, the bedevilling factor of change has played havoc on the entire state of affairs and dictated otherwise. Consequently, whether we like it or not, we are called upon to confront the new situation that we have been forced into. Under these circumstances, as the core of the indisputably recognizable Africa culture faces the winds of change, we have three options before us. We can stand acquiescently helpless in the path of this wind, and therefore open ourselves up to be blown by it however and wherever it desires; we can resist it head on, and be prepared to face the resultant consequences; or we can hoist our sails deftly in such a manner that while being affected by the impact of the wind's force, we convert it into our willing servant.

This latter alternative could prove to be our best way out of the present dilemma. Adjusting to this attitude can help us to inculcate the Christian faith into our lives, while at the same time emerging out with our African identity intact. To do this effectively we will need to realize with Okullu that,

... making Christianity indigenous does not mean engaging

in a cultural excavation to resuscitate the Africa of a hundred years before Christianity came. African culture is what we are today and tomorrow. The Church's task is to speak to the people of East Africa here and now in the varied forms and degrees of their development ... It must speak to him in today's language and his today's situation and his today's aspiration.¹⁹

Centered in Jesus Christ

The task before us is truly awe-inspiring in that while taking into account the African milieu, it has to highlight Jesus Christ as the focal point in the Christian faith. As precedents elsewhere in the world have shown, the answer to this challenge will not be a once for all solution. It will be a problem which will recur time and again each time that the essence of the Christian faith becomes blurred by its interaction with the relevant cultural manifestation. Throughout the history of Christianity there have been those alert voices that have periodically called upon the Church in their respective times and localities to re-align itself with the centrality of Jesus Christ in all of its functions.

On the European continent, one of the most under-rated voices in this direction was that of the Danish thinker, Soren Kierkegaard. Charging that the Church of his day had failed to grasp and live up to the demands of Christ, he felt that while most of its members were comfortably happy with their station in Christendom, real Christianity was alien to them. In opposition to the open-ended approach of those around him, he put forth a masterly summation of the exclusiveness of the Christian faith when he said of Jesus Christ, "He himself is the way, that is in order to make sure that there is no deceit as to there being several ways, and that Christ went on one of them -- no, Christ is the way."²⁰

In the United States of America, the eminent church historian, Martin E. Marty, wrote disapprovingly of the new shape of American religion as it appeared to be in the latter part of the 1950's, castigating it as the Christianity which had been so much eroded and corroded²¹ to the point of remaining nothing but "religion-in-general",²² he challenged it to return to the centre by recapturing "the Biblical view of man in community; the revelation of God in the form of a servant; and the Remnant motif as an impulse for the sacred community."²³ With all due credit to Martin Marty's proposal of a Christian "culture ethic" for the United States of America, it was left to the Christian statesman, Martin Luther King, Jr., to give the most pungent directive to conformist American Christianity. Convinced that "if the church of Jesus Christ is to regain once more its power, message, and authentic ring, it must conform only to the demands of the gospel,"²⁴ he went on to explain,

Living in the colony of time, we are ultimately responsible to the empire of eternity. As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty to any time-bound custom or earth bound idea, for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality -- God and his kingdom of love -- to which we

must be conformed. ²⁵

It is clear that even in the Western and European world, there are those, who having come to grips with the Gospel of Christ, have not wanted to settle for the caricature they are presented with in the name of Christianity. They have spoken against the practice of parading Western civilization and culture, coated with a razor-thin layer of Christianity as a poor substitute and fake imitation of the real thing - faith in Christ. In his usual skillful way, C.S. Lewis dismisses the popular European conception of Christianity as merely a commendable ethico-moral system. As he points out, "If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance." ²⁶ Rather than view Jesus Christ "as a great moral teacher," He should be seen for what He is as the one to whom we must surrender "and call Him Lord and God." ²⁷

If Christianity is truly universal, as we allege it is, then it must recommend itself to every culture in an amicable way, while at the same time transcending the limitations of the particular cultural set-up. The man in Australasia, in the Americas, in Europe, and in Africa should be comfortably Christian without surrendering his own cultural distinctives to any other culture but that of Jesus Christ. By the same token, the central core of Christianity as manifested in any given locality should be such that it is readily identifiable by others from outside it as truly Christian. As the Bible tells us, in I Corinthians 3:11, where Christianity is concerned, "There can be no other foundation beyond that which is already laid: Jesus Christ Himself." For us in Africa our battles in this sphere would be in vain if we reject European Christianity for being non-Christian only to replace it with an African Christianity which is so overlaid with our own cultural matter that it fails to meet the tests of true Christianity when it is subjected to close scrutiny. To wind up with the kind of end-product which is African at the expense of being Christian would be self-defeating as all the endeavours of our exercise would boomerang in our very faces.

Professor Mbiti believes that even where organized European Christianity failed to fulfil the religious aspirations of the African man, "Christianity can do this, not as a religion but as a way of life ... Our Lord Jesus Christ did not start a religion. He called men to become citizens of the Kingdom of God ... To be a disciple of Christ meant to be so intimately united with Him that Paul could rightly speak of Christians as 'the Body of Christ'." ²⁸ Bishop Okullu concurs with this view when he recognizes that the new African Christianity which we construct in the place of the corrupt one that we are setting out to discard, "must be Christ-centered in order to enable the theologian to communicate with all Christians for the building and establishing of the Church." ²⁹ When we are anchored on "this solid ground our adventures in the quest for authentic African Christianity will be more liberating than it would have been otherwise. With Bishop Stephen Neill we join the chorus that, "The old saying 'Christianity is Christ' is almost exactly true. The historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls." ³⁰ Even the hallowed and cherished African Christianity that we set out to erect must conform to this central prerequisite, that it be Christo-centric above all else.

Conclusion

In the same way in which we criticize the Christian preaching and teaching of yester-years, and instead applaud trends of our day, there are those who censure* present-day preaching while nostalgically looking back on the patterns of by-gone generations. In this vein, in a perceptively interesting commentary, President Kaunda of Zambia compares and contrasts the preaching and overall Christian approach of his earlier growing-up years with those of his adult years. Asserting that much of present-day preaching is deficient in passionate conviction, he points out that its chief characteristic is that it "consists of a bout of moralizing about world affairs or some agile juggling with intellectual propositions which chase each other's tails until the congregation is dizzy."⁵¹ While abreast of its times, this one-dimensional approach does not get to grips with the total needs of the man in the pew.

In contrast to this, there is the Christian faith as practiced by his parents and their peers in his childhood. Although by our standards some of their religious perceptions would be outdated, "crude and over simple", yet they stand out as giant in that, inherent in their Christian approach was that efficacious element of redemption which made an impact on all who were involved in it. This is why it is contended that whatever else it may have lacked, its greatest asset was that it had the power of transforming the lives of countless men who came in contact with it. Kaunda observes,

It was this power of the Gospel which enabled humble, and often unlettered village men to stand in the pulpit of the old brick church at Lubwa and speak with tongues of fire. They had passion, real passion, a quality noticeably lacking in much modern preaching ...⁵²

President Kaunda confesses that even today, his life has been profoundly moulded by the power of the Gospel that he encountered in his earliest days. Firmly wedded to what his parents taught him about God, he considers it to be so much part of his personality that in times of crisis he finds himself reverting "instinctively to the passionate simplicity of the old religion."⁵³ As the very basis and foundation of his life, he finds that these moments of reflection open up a fresh desire in him "to share the certainty and assurance of those village Christians - the hope against hope that the God they never doubted will not let me down either in my hour of need."⁵⁴

What is filtering through in all this is the fact that the Christian faith as Europeans had introduced it has gone through the sieve of the African mind and being, undergone such tremendous changes that it has emerged as no longer Western European Christianity but rather as something truly African and unashamedly Christian. This is the picture portrayed in these further words.

There was nothing sophisticated about their faith, but it was real and strong and wholesome. And it was a Gospel with power which changed men. There was power in my father's preaching and in our lusty hymn-singing. When those Lubwa

Christians sang the old chorus— "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb" — they meant it. And they could point to members of their family, neighbours and friends who had been brought to Jesus and freed from all the dark forces of evil and superstition which never seemed far from the surface of the old life. My father died when I was eight years of age and no one who was part of the great congregation who attended his funeral could doubt the reality of Eternity.³⁵

It used to be anathematic in many circles to consider this portrait of Christianity and the allied mood of Independent African Churches as representing the Christian faith. Although they have been despised by the mainstream of Christianity in Africa as being driven by excessive enthusiasm, they have in their own way found the kind of equilibrium which had made the Christian faith they embrace African, without sacrificing for once its central distinctives. However humbling, demeaning and unpalatable it may be, we need to turn to these forms for lessons which may be helpful to us in the days ahead. Ranger is right when he says that in the past these churches have been viewed,

... as though they were an abnormality, almost a disease which needed some special explanation, which might be diagnosed and perhaps cured. It seems to me to be more sensible to regard African independency rather as one of the many different forms of African Christian initiative.³⁶

Now the tables are slightly turned in certain circles — namely academia — where it is now in vogue to consider these same groups, albeit from the safe distance of academic and intellectual non-involvement, as the epitome of African Christianity. Either attitude is regrettable. If they are truly Christian, they should not be discriminated against as obsolete and obscurantist. At the same time, it is indecently dishonest for the so-called African Christian intellectuals to endorse them wholesale uncritically for the persons who need the throbbing of the drum while they themselves find comfortable sanctuary in the dull, sleep-inducing music of our elitist cathedrals, churches and chapels. No, we cannot have our cake and eat it too in the hypocrisy of academic research. The religious sphere, particularly in the African context, is the last arena for those seeking mere intellectual titillation.

It was the African political theoretician and practical revolutionary Amilcar Cabral (1924–1973) who said, "I am a simple African man, doing my duty in my own country in the context of our time."³⁷ We too need to emulate him in our Christian vocation with all that this practical idealism involves in our endeavour to arrive at authentic African Christianity.

Notes

¹ Kwame Nkrumah *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (London:

Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1959), p. 152.

² David B. Barrett, "A.D. 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa", in *International Review of Mission* (New York, January, 1970), p. 47.

³ Emmanuel Ayankanmi Ayandele, *A Visionary of the African Church: Mojola Agbebi, 1860-1917* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), p. 3.

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