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WHICH WAY FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: WESTERNISATION OR INDIGENOUS AUTHENTICITY?

Tite Tiénou

Introduction

Christianity is alive and well in Africa – at least in that section of the continent called Black Africa or Sub-Saharan Africa. One even detects a note of triumphalism on the part of some who write on the present and the future of Christianity in Africa. They prognosticate a generally Christian Africa by the next century.¹

Justification of Inquiry

The present study is motivated by the belief that African Christianity is currently experiencing the same crisis which is sweeping across the continent. It is a crisis of identity. While recognising that the world's peoples seem to have embarked on a new quest for their identities (as evidenced by the rise of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), in Africa the problem of identity is particularly acute. Edem Kodjo has observed that, of all the continents of our planet, Africa is the one "which is on the quest for its identity and which inquires about its future" in a pathetic way (1985: 89).² It is well-known that the question of identity for Africans is often posed in terms of an alternative between westernisation and authentic Africanness. Christianity usually comes under vitriolic attack for having promoted the cultural and religious alienation of Africans. Christians, especially in countries evangelised in the wake of European penetration, are repeatedly challenged to choose between westernisation or a revival of African cultures, as if these were the only choices possible. Too many people simply assume that "the most important cultural conflict occurring in Africa is between Western civilisation and indigenous forces" (Mazrui, 1986a: 21). Mazrui's axiom must be scrutinised on its merits by all interested in Africa. For African Christians it demands a response.

Statement of Thesis

I submit that the most appropriate response to the question whether African Christianity's choice is between westernisation and indigenous authenticity should be two-fold. First, the validity of Mazrui's axiomatic statement must be questioned. Secondly, as it will be argued, African Christianity is doomed in the long term if it allows itself to be imprisoned either in westernisation or in indigenous cultures and religions. Both of these roads lead to irrelevance. The former will make Christianity irrelevant through foreignness, and the latter will cause it to be superfluous and thereby irrelevant. Consequently the way forward for African Christianity lies in its ability to provide a thorough-going critique both of westernisation and of cultural authenticity, while developing creative solutions to the continent's staggering and multi-faceted problems.

I propose that we examine the question before us first by looking at the lingering effects of a missiological tradition which equated Europe and the West with Christianity and civilisation, and which 'missionised' peoples (especially Africans) with the lack of both. This will then lead us to an evaluation of the claim that in Africa the "ancestral is authentic" (Mazrui, 1986a: 295).

Ideas Die Hard

I realise that one must be careful not to identify the modern missionary movement too closely with European colonialism and the western expansionist spirit.³ But on the other hand one can certainly not paint missionaries *en bloc* as defenders of African cultural particularisms either. In reality, missionary approaches to African cultures included "toleration, translation, assimilation, Christianisation, acculturation and incorporation" (Kaplan, 1986: 167).

The ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance of Western missionaries is not the most important link between them and other Europeans and Westerners, particularly the colonialists. Rather, I wish to point to the direct epistemological foundation of both missions and colonialism as evidenced in the literature,⁴ in order to show why westernisation and Christianity are often viewed in Africa as two sides of the same coin.

When one looks for an epistemological linkage between missions and colonialism, one should examine the literature on mission theory and strategy. It is here that one finds that both colonial doctrine and Christian rationale for mission involve "a sense of mission, of spreading a nation's vision of society and culture to an alien, subjected people" (Beidelman, 1982: 4). Indeed it is undeniable that much missiological strategy, as evidenced in the literature, was (and is?) based on the "obvious" differences between Christian Westerners and "barbarous pagans." Recall, for instance, William Carey's description of the unevangelised peoples of his day:

Four hundred and twenty millions . . . are still in pagan darkness They have no written language, consequently no Bible, and are led by the most childish customs and traditions They are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilisation as they are of true religion (Carey, 1792: 62-63).

Even if Carey did believe that “they appear to be as capable of knowledge as we are” (ibid.), he accepted the prevailing notions of his day. No surprise here, and I do not mean to denigrate the great Carey. Something else is at stake. It is this: Carey and other eighteenth and nineteenth century visionaries of missions set the tone for recruiting missionaries on the basis of pity for poor savages living in situations of material, moral and spiritual decay. As hard to believe as it may seem, the foregoing ideas are still being propagated by some missiologists today, especially in regard to Africa.

J. Herbert Kane, one of the senior figures of recent missiology in the United States, is a clear example that the evaluative terms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries linger on. The fourth edition of his *Understanding Christian Missions* (1986), a book widely used by North American evangelicals, is instructive on this point. He sees Africans moving away from animism, “which has nothing to offer to the educated person” (ibid.: 214). Moreover, in the seven factors which, according to him, explain the growth of Christianity in Africa, we note the following:

(i) “Colonialism . . . was a blessing in disguise in Africa.” The prestige of the colonial officials “rubbed off on the missionaries for they too belonged to the white race.”

(ii) Missionaries in Africa had more power than they would have had in their own countries because of the African “tribal” social structure which required blind obedience to “chiefs.”

(iii) Since Africa had no religious systems, missionaries encountered no resistance. “Africa is the heartland of animism and the people there knew nothing else until the coming of Islam and Christianity.” Animism, Kane says, cannot stand up to the insights of Western learning.

(iv) “The missionary was held in high esteem” because “he was regarded as belonging to a superior race” (ibid. 219-221).

One can be forgiven if, after reading Kane, one concludes that for him Christianity and the White man’s civilisation were identical. Onward, then, Christianise, colonise and civilise! I know that Kane was not an expert on Africa. Yet, the fact that his publishers let his assertions about the continent stand for twelve printings is evidence enough that ideas do indeed die hard!

Whether we like it or not, the similarity between the Carey-Kane missiological tradition and the mythology of colonialism is disturbing. In both cases, one begins with the assumption that the world is divided into camps, generally two: Europe/West depicted as white, civilised, rational and Christian; and the rest of the world (particularly Africa) viewed as non-white, primitive, irrational and pagan. This binary division of the world does not disappear when non-Europeans and non-Westerners become missionisers. They do, of course, abandon the racial and/or colour distinctions; but they still tend to associate redemption of the non-Christian world with its "improvement" or advancement. A case in point is the history of the African-Americans' involvement in missions to Africa.

These evaluative concepts, taken as facts, serve as the foundation for what may be called the bulldozer ethos of both western missions and colonialism in Africa. Like a bulldozer, missions tended to level other traditions so that the construction workers might erect buildings in "international style" on the new sites.

Historically, of course, and long before the rise of European imperialism, Christian missionising has sought to convert "pagans" from idol worship to that of the only true and living God (cf. 1 Thess 1:9). The legitimacy of desiring conversion is not questioned here. Rather, the matter under scrutiny is the means by which this conversion was achieved. Many participants in the modern missionary movement seem to have accepted Ninian Smart's depiction of the religious world of the so-called small-scale peoples as a jungle where the many trees represent various gods and spirits. With this assumption in their minds, they promote Christianity in such a way that "the jungle is leveled, so that One Tree can be planted, that Tree which represents the One God" (Smart, 1983: 57). When the levelling is done by people who are convinced that western ways and Christianity are identical, it has a net result of portraying the Christian God as a Euro-American tribal deity.

This is how Eugene Hillman highlights the Euro-American captivity of Christianity: in Africa it is presented in a "dazzling garb of foreign wealth and power . . . [making it appear] as a superior tribal religion" (1980: 347). It should be no surprise, then, that Africans, novelists, playwrights, politicians, academicians and even churchmen saw missions as a form of western imperialism.⁵

Curiously enough, even as Africa was going through a period of major political changes in the early 1960s, some mission theoreticians were openly advocating westernisation as a prerequisite for authentic Christianity. L. Elders, for example, argued that Christianity cannot subsist in a fully developed form unless it is rooted in a civilisation which has "the same essential characteristics as western Christian civilization" (1962: 5-6). Fortunately, such opinions are now clearly in the minority. Nevertheless, they are part of the history of missions in Africa and their widespread acceptance in the not-too-distant past

reminds us that resistance to westernisation will always call us, African Christians, to ask: which way should we go? Should we propagate westernisation (of which we are accused) or should we join the “freedom fighters” in their cultural and religious resistance to westernisation?

The Slogan of Resistance: The “Ancestral is Authentic”

Contrary to what J. Herbert Kane affirms, Africans from the start were never convinced of the superiority of the White man or of his ways. Like any people would, Africans fought the foreign intruders. The process of resistance is documented in studies such as Nazi Boni's *Histoire synthétique de l'Afrique résistante* (1971) and P. M. Mutibwa's *African Heritage and the new Africa* (1977). The record shows that they were vanquished and European rule was established in most of the continent. But the fact remains that resistance to westernisation is not a new phenomenon in Africa.

And as European colonialism continued to entrench itself on the continent, Africans began noticing glaring contradictions in its programme. For example, the perceived that the goal of westernisation could only lead to alienation. For, as the Bambara proverb says, “Even if a log remains in a river for one hundred years, it will not become a crocodile.” The French colonial philosophy of assimilation, with its intention of making the Africans into “French people with a black skin” only succeeded in creating resentment in those who internalised much of French culture (see L. S. Senghor, 1988: 22-23, 137). Similarly, the British policy also created a situation of conflict between cultures (see J. Brooke, 1987: A4). In a sense, cultural and religious resistance to westernisation in Africa is based on the double realisation that complete westernisation is impossible and that structural changes (that is, changes at the level of material culture) need not entail the rejection of the souls of our cultures. But how can we recover our cultural identity?

The solution proposed by Ali Mazrui, and others, is simple and winsome. First, let us realise that “the ancestors of Africa are angry” and that they have “pronounced the curse of cultural sabotage” (Mazrui, 1986a 11). Secondly, let us reject the foreign influence called westernisation and believe that the “ancestral is authentic” (ibid.: 211, 295). These are the arguments behind the attempts to revive African traditional cultures and religions. They have had a measure of success because, as some claim, “since independence in many areas there has been a great resurgence and renaissance in African Traditional Religion” (Onwurah, 1987: 190).

We should be careful not to misunderstand Mazrui and those who reject westernisation. They are not calling for a return to pre-colonial African cultures. Indeed, Mazrui clearly asserts that “contemporary Africa cannot be understood simply by reference to its history” (1990: 137). Rather they advocate the development of modernity without westernisation. As Mazrui

puts it, the two imperatives for Africa's redemption are "looking inward towards Africa's ancestors . . . [and] looking outwards towards the wider world" (Mazrui, 1986a: 295). Elsewhere Mazrui makes the case for what may be called the Yoruba model of the triple cultural heritage, where the indigenous culture absorbs the foreign ones: "Yoruba culture has absorbed both Westernization and Islam – and still insisted on the supremacy of the indigenous" (Mazrui, 1986b: 14). Such then is the meaning of the axiom: the ancestral is authentic. It is a call for cultural (and religious) synthesis grounded in Africa's past. How acceptable is this to African Christians?

African Christians are generally not opposed to reconciling themselves with their cultural traditions. They are not the Trojan horses of westernisation. Many of them seek to preserve their cultures. The real question is: what exactly does the Yoruba model of the triple heritage mean? Is it possible to keep one's indigenous culture triumphant and, say, be fully Christian?

We note further that Mazrui's call for a synthesis between the three major cultural forces present in the continent (Islam, Western Christianity and indigenous culture) is not entirely new. Mazrui's "triple heritage" or "trinity of cultures" is actually a revival of Kwame Nkrumah's ideas contained in his book *Consciencism* (1970; see especially 78-106, chap. 4). Mazrui seems to have departed only slightly from Nkrumah who argued that materialism was the basis from which African traditional society would "digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements" (*ibid.*: 79). Mazrui, for his part, argues against both materialism and westernisation and views indigenous culture with its religious ethos as the best remedy to these corrosive ingredients.

Before we consider the Christian response to Mazrui's triple heritage, we do well to pause and ask: is the ancestral *the* authentic? I agree with L. Keita who has taken issue with the position that only cultural traits which are considered "traditional within Africa society are regarded as authentically African" (1987: 92). In that sense the ancestral cannot be accepted as *the* authentic, except in that it provides the general vantage point from our present outlook on life. Even ordinary Africans realise that one's ability to change will enhance one's future. For, as a proverb has it, "if the rhythm of the drum changes, the dancer must change his dance step as well." That is the reason why

the idea of a triple cultural heritage as it relates to contemporary Africa is a trivial one since there is no modern society of any importance whose sociological structure is not the result of the fusion of technical and cultural inputs from alien sources" (Keita, 1987: 92).

Armed with such rebuttals, we are now ready to address ourselves to the opening question: which way for African Christianity? Will it be westernisation or indigenous authenticity?

In the discussion so far, I have shown that we should resist such attempts to oversimplification. African Christianity must choose neither westernisation nor indigenous authenticity. Africans, like other peoples, must realise that the era for slogans is past, and African Christians must realise that “the first freedom is the right to be different” (Ki-Zerbo, 1989: 11).

In particular, I am calling African Christians, especially the Protestants among them, to live by the Reformation ideals of allegiance to God alone as he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ and Scripture. We cannot accept any historical manifestation of the Christian faith as normative. We recognise no centre of the Christian faith except Christ himself. We should therefore continue to resist westernisation which disguises itself as Christianity.

And as African Christians exert their right to be different, they should also have the courage to stand firmly for the fact that their allegiance to “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” will necessarily entail a distancing from some elements of indigenous cultures. Rejecting aspects of the traditional heritage certainly does not in itself make them un-African, any more than those Africans who propose to live by the triple heritage are thereby less African. Modern Africa may to varying degrees affirm its heritage, but (wittingly or unwittingly) this is always a selective affirmation; no modern African can or does endorse the traditional heritage *en toto*. Too much has changed. If modern Africans have a “right to be different” in relation to the West, they also have such a right with respect to Africa’s traditional culture. And so do African Christians. If choosing to become a Christian necessarily involves detaching oneself in some respects from one’s traditional culture and religion, that is a legitimately African stance to take in modern Africa. Otherwise, why bother to change at all?

Conclusion

Discussion on the relationship between westernisation, modernity, Christianity and indigenous authenticity will no doubt continue in Africa. This is so because our continent has experienced modernity and Christianity as part of the package called “the colonial situation”, whereby a minority of occupants managed to change the minds of a majority and made them doubt their own humanity. African Christians have a contribution to make by refusing to be trapped in the sterile debate which argues for either westernisation or indigenous authenticity. How? By focusing the discussion on Africa’s current problems and opportunities as it faces the future.

In Africa the debate on modernity is often viewed as an examination of Africa’s present in light of Europe’s past and present (Mushete 1989: 6). We need to change that and examine Africa’s present in light of its own past (both near and distant), with a view to the continent’s future. Whereas advocates of indigenous authenticity argue for Africa’s transformation without abandoning

her ancestors and gods, African Christians seek Africa's transformation on the basis of commitment to God, maker of all things and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This commitment strengthens them in their resolve to assume an essential role as part of a vigorous movement for the continent's moral, material and spiritual redemption. With other Africans, African Christians are proud of accomplishments in Africa's past: in that sense, African Christians are fully and authentically African. African Christians focus on the continent's future where Jesus Christ, the hope of the world, will bring peace, justice and love. Beginning now.

ENDNOTES

¹The name of David Barrett has become linked to the prediction that Africa will become generally Christian by the year AD 2000. It is instructive to note that, as far back as 1956, Roland Oliver, calling attention to the geometrical progression of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa since 1912, conjectured: "If things were to go at the same rate, there would be no pagans left in Africa after the year 1992" (*How Christian is Africa?* London: The Highway Press, 1956, p. 8).

²A sampling of the recent literature shows that Edem Kodjo is not alone in his assessment of the African predicament. See, for example, Kwame Bediako "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions" in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World*, V. Samuel and C. Sugden, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 87-88; Mubabinge Bilolo "African Religion Face to Face with the Challenge of Christianity and Techno-Science" *Inter-Culture* xvi.1, Cah. 78 (1983) pp. 16-31; Robert J. Cummings "Africa between the Ages" *African Studies Review* 29.3 (1986) pp. 1-25; Ali A. Mazrui *The Africans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1986) pp. 11-12, 21, 295; Constantine M. Mwikamba "A Search for an African Identity" *African Ecclesial Review* 31.2 (1988) pp. 91-107; and Emeka Onwurah "Remaking of African Traditional Religions under the Influence of Modernity" *Journal of Dharma* 12 (1987) pp. 180-91.

³I agree with Lamin Sanneh's assessment that the missionaries' emphasis on translating Scripture into vernacular languages "undercuts the alleged connection often drawn between missions and colonialism" and that "missionaries in the field have helped to promote indigenous self-awareness as a counterface to Western cultural importation" ("Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex" *The Christian Century* 104.11 [1987] pp. 331-32; see also his "Pluralism and Christian Commitment" *Theology Today* 45.1 [1988] pp. 21-33). While we should heed Sanneh's corrective to the one-sided vilification of missions, we must not completely whitewash the western missionary enterprise. That would be irresponsible since there is too much evidence to the contrary. Also, René Maunier, in his *Sociologie Coloniale* (T. I., p. 85), argues

that the main effect of colonisation is to provide the colonised people with a sense of identity and unity which, in turn, will be sued against the colonial masters. So even here Sanneh's position does not completely erase a link between missions and colonialism. Colonialism produces a counterforce against itself.

⁴We should not forget that some of the apologists for European colonial intervention argued for an important role which religious missions could fulfil in securing Europe's dominance in the subjugated lands. See for example Paul Leroy-Beaulieu *De la colonisation chez les peuples* (T. II, 5 ed. Paris: Guillaumin et cie, 1902) pp. 654, 656. The conscious witness of such apologists is incontrovertible.

⁵The disruptive nature of European colonialism and missions has long been a favourite of African novelists. One thinks of the writings of Nigerian Chinua Achebe, Cameroonian Mongo Beti, and Guinean Camara Laye in earlier times. More recently, the Ivorian J. M. Adiaffi has taken up the theme in his *La carte d'identité* (1980). See especially where the French *Commandant de Cercle*, Kakatika, declares that France, in her generosity, has bestowed everything on the Africans, things they were lacking: culture, art, science, technology, medicine, religion and language (p. 33). Note the similarity with religious language when Kakatika says that France has guided the Africans on their black path with her white light (*ibid.*). V. Y. Mudimbe of Zaire has done the most thoroughgoing theoretical critique of missions, colonialism and the social sciences from an African perspective in books such as *L'autre face du Royaume* (1974), *L'odeur du père* (1982), and *The Invention of Africa* (1988). On the effects of colonialism on Africans, consult the work of Nigerian Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us* (1987) and *Decolonizing the African Mind* (1987).

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