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comfortable bourgeois congregation meets in some Western suburbia, they almost alone of all the comfortable bourgeois of the suburbs are regularly exposed to the reading of a non-bourgeois book questioning fundamental assumptions of their society. But since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue. Never before, therefore, has there been so much potentiality [p. 233](#) for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.¹³

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Identity Crisis in the African Church

By Ngoni Sengwe

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This article penetrates some of the causes for the rise of the independent Church movement in Africa which is seeking to relate supernatural Christianity to African world views.

Statistics show that Africa will become a Christian continent by A.D.2000.¹ To some people this may sound unbelievable, but it is true. The church is booming. But while the Christian world is shouting hallelujah for such growth, there is a hidden weakness in this growth.

For instance, David Barrett, a Nairobi researcher, states that this strong surge of growth is tied to the independent church movement in Africa. Barrett estimates that there are 6,000 or more independent churches in Africa, with South Africa alone accounting for more than 3,000 of them. The Kimbanguist Church of Zaire is probably the largest with about three million members. These churches are growing at the rate of 100 every year in Africa. Probably, one out of every twelve African Christians is affiliated with an African Independent Church.² These churches are independent from mission domination and control; they are nonliturgical congregations, adopting and adapting Christianity where they will with real cultural impact.

¹³ I am grateful for permission to quote here some sentences from my paper 'African and Christian identity' which appeared in the Mennonite Journal *Mission Focus* and was reprinted in W. R. Shenk (ed.) *Mission focus; current issues*, Scottdale, Penna. 1980.

¹ Tokunboh Adeyemo. 'An African Leader Looks at the Churches' Crises', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1978, p. 151.

² Independent church may include one congregation. The words *mission church*, *older church*, *historical church* are used interchangeably.

However, missions and mainline denominations have ignored these churches for various reasons: (1) The independent churches are not in 'the camp'. They have been founded by Africans rather than by foreign missionaries and therefore have no connection with the mainline denominations. (2) They are 'foreign' because their structures and worship patterns may not be in line with the Protestant tradition. (3) The mainline denominations are suspicious and cautious because of the dangers of syncretism.

What all this means is that the independent churches have been left to find their own way, develop their own forms, possibly even drift from solid teaching in the Bible, and struggle for a sense of continuity with the total church movement in Africa. This in turn has led the mainline churches to pull back again further. The result: a circle continuously repeating itself. In fact, Martin A. L. Daneel, who has done [p. 235](#) some extensive work among the independent churches in Zimbabwe, has concluded that these churches 'developed under circumstances in which the individual was searching for his own identity.'³

DEFINITION OF AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH

The concept of the independent church movement is a paradox itself and difficult to delineate. At one point, one can find churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim of Nigeria whose prophets probably used the same powers as the traditional diviners. Religious experience supersedes the Bible. At another point, there is the African Apostolic Church of John Maranke that uses the Bible in its ministry but also emphasizes healing. Then at another point there is African Brotherhood Church of Kenya that broke away from the African Inland Church but still maintains some of its forms and structure. The major difference is that it is controlled totally by Africans.

The problem is how to differentiate what is a genuine independent church and what is not. The first task is to define what is an independent church. Is it one that is outside the mainline church, but founded on an African initiative? Barrett, in his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa* adequately defines independency as:

The formation and existence within a tribe or tribal unit, temporarily or permanently, of any organized religious movement with a distinct name and membership, even as small as a single organized congregation, which claims the title Christian in that it acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has either separated by secession from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded outside the mission churches as a new kind of religious entity under African initiative and leadership.⁴

It appears, then, that the independent churches can be renewal movements that are basically Christian, whether or not they remain within the mission church structure.⁵ Herbert V. Klem, former missionary to Nigeria and now professor in cross-cultural communications, describes the independent churches as 'reform movements which are meeting the unpaid bills of the historical churches.' That is, they are meeting the felt needs of the African believers that the [p. 236](#) historical churches have traditionally ignored, or of which they have not been aware.

Various attempts have been made to try to classify the independent churches. There are two major groups: The Ethiopian Churches and Zionist or Aladura Churches.

³ M. L. Daneel, *Zionism and Faith. Healing in Rhodesia* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1970), p.57.

⁴ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.50.

⁵ For example, the East African Revival remained within the mainline denominations.

Ethiopian churches stress independence, but their structure resembles that of the 'mother' mainline church. African Brotherhood Church of Kenya is one of the churches in the former category.

The Zionist Churches emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy and revelation. Healing is one of the major tenets of the Zionist Churches.

This emphasis on healing is especially dominant in the rural areas where most of the churches can be found. The traditional African believes that sickness is a deep religious problem and therefore can best be met in the church, but the mission-established churches do not recognize this part of the culture. The prophets of the independent church movement in a sense take the place of a diviner of the traditional society. The prophets accept the authority of the Bible and the traditional world view. But this tie goes further. There is a tendency among the Zionist churches to be legalistic. For example, the Old Testament has a special place in these churches because of its cultural relativity. For the traditional African, it is only natural to hold to the Levitical dietary laws and rules for fasting. Africans can easily identify with the Hebrew life, for the 'Old Testament breathes the nomadic and pastoral life; man's frank and outspoken longing for offspring; the experience of seed-time and harvest; the concreteness of all that is said about God and man'.⁶

CAUSES OF THE INDEPENDENT CHURCH MOVEMENT

Why is there such schism in the African church? There is no one answer. Different people have looked at the causes from different angles. Some see the growth of independent churches as political, while others see it as a sociological problem.

Barrett states that the independent church movement is a result of a clash of cultures, because these churches usually started in areas where the conflict between Christianity, Western culture and traditional culture and religion was intense. Most missionaries had an inadequate understanding of traditional African society. As a result, they attacked some elements of African culture about which biblical faith [p. 237](#) was silent. The people discovered the discrepancy when the Scriptures were translated into their vernacular. The reaction began when people read the Scriptures themselves, S. G. A. Ose Onibere, a Nigerian theologian, says that the independent church movement 'represents the anti-Western reaction of national Christians to their varied encounters with Western injustice, discrimination, paternalism and segregation. African converts came to discover the missions attacked traditional institutions they held dear—institutions which the Bible did not proscribe'. He adds: 'These same missions were seen to have overstepped their biblical authority.'⁷

African historians like Madziwanyika Tsomondo, a Zimbabwean and an associate professor of history at the University of Maryland, argue that the independent church movement arose out of cultural nationalism.⁸

The conflict is not so much between Christianity and African culture, as between indigenous African culture and Western culture. While independent churches espouse

⁶ G.C. Oosthuizen, *Post Christianity in Africa* (London: Hurst, 1968), p.165.

⁷ S.G.A. Ose Onibere, 'Phenomenon of African Religious independency', *Missiology*, January 1979, p.115.

⁸ Madziwanyika Tsomondo, 'Against Alienism: The Response of the Zionist and the Apostolic African independent 'Christian' Church Movements to European Colonialism in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Affairs*, 4:13, January, 1979.

cultural nationalism, this doesn't necessarily mean political liberation.⁹ The movement is a crusade against not only Western values, but also forms.

For example, the independent churches often try to vindicate African culture by showing that it is closer to the biblical way of life, especially that of the Old Testament. Africans can easily relate with Israel's struggle for identity as a nation and as a people of God. For instance, most of the Zionist churches de-emphasize education because they thought missionaries ran the schools with a proselytizing objective. They viewed medical missions as an 'entering wedge' or a bait to trap Africans to accept Western culture. Hence, they relied on divine healing that was administered by the prophets. Almost all Zionist churches do not have paid ministers, elaborate church buildings or seminaries as do the mainline churches. The movements, however, do accept the Scriptures and take pains to demonstrate that there is no conflict between traditional African culture and the Bible.

Another reason for the upsurge of the independent churches was the attitude of some of the missionaries toward African religion. They thought that African religion would collapse with the coming of Western medicine and education. However, they were not aware of p. 238 the African's holistic world view and the functions of traditional religion. For the African, traditional religion was an interwoven part of the social structure. It could not be isolated from the rest of the culture. By suppressing one feature such as traditional religion, by force, the Westerners ended up destroying the whole society. Nevertheless, there were some countries in Africa where schism was avoided. Marshall Murphree, author of *Christianity and the Shona*, attributes the lack of the independent movement in Botswana to missionary strategy. The tribal leaders who are the opinion-makers in the community, were converted at the beginning of the ministry.¹⁰ Consequently, Christianity became the official religion of that tribe.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN WORLD VIEWS

While there could be an element of truth in all these arguments, they are but a simplistic approach to a complex problem. At best, they are but parts of a complex whole. The underlying feature of their whole is the African world view. The adherents to the independent church movement are seeking primarily to restore the whole, especially the place of the supernatural.

Most missionaries expected the African Christians to reject all their traditional beliefs and rituals, especially those pertaining to ancestral worship. They expected these Africans to reject their world view. But a people's world view cannot be destroyed. Says Victor Hayward in *African Independent Churches*: "Traditional churches have failed to provide the African with a Christian world view to replace the one he has lost, with the result that in times of crisis he is very liable to fall back upon heathen attitudes and customs, simply because he understands these, but does not know what he ought to think or do as a Christian in such a situation".¹¹

The Western approach to the gospel often was too intellectual in its catechism and organized services that did not appeal to the traditional Africans. The daily problems of witchcraft, sorcery and ancestor worship were on the whole ignored. When such cases

⁹ Tsomondo, p.10

¹⁰ Marshall W. Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), p.163.

¹¹ Victor E. W. Hayward, ed., *African Independent Church Movements* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p.10.

were faced, some mission churches merely disciplined the believer. In few cases was there any serious dialogue.

Indeed something must replace what has been lost, Aspects of p. 239 African traditional religion could have been used as steps towards explaining the gospel.

The close association between the traditional world view and the beliefs and practices of the independent churches make some theologians suspicious. Bengt Sundkler in his famous book, *The Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, concludes that independent churches are a religious movement bent on a return to the pagan religious past.

For example, the fast growing Aladura ('the church that prays') Churches of West Africa have pastors who are both healers and prophets. They do not use Western medicine. 'The important and definite aspect of Christianity for Aladura is not belief in a creed but the experience of deliverance through a restored relationship with God and Jesus Christ'.¹² Some of these though have developed some questionable doctrines in an attempt to achieve 'cultural integrity and spiritual autonomy.'¹³

Further, some of the faith-healers seem to invoke the same powers as the traditional diviners do. For example, it is not unusual for a Zionist prophet to prescribe some countermeasures against witchcraft and sorcery that are very similar to the ones the medicine man recommends.

There is always the danger of syncretism if there is no proper spiritual leader. One temptation that looms in most independent churches is that the Bible tends to have a secondary place in the life of the church. Religious experience becomes the authority.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRIDGE THE GAP

The gap between African independent churches and the mainline churches can be bridged by observing one of the basic communication principles: starting at the point of understanding. Granted, there are elements in the independent church movement that are questionable, but what good will it: do to the body of Christ to major in the nonissues? It can only help the chasm widen. With that in mind, I make the following suggestions:

1. The mainline churches ought to recognize the good that is in some of the movements. Some church leaders, like Tokunboh Adeyemo, secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), claim that the growth of the movement stems from a theological malnutrition. Says Adeyemo in *Christianity Today* p. 240 (July 20, 1979): 'Theological deficiency of churches in Africa has led to the rise of many sects, heresies, cults and numerous other false movements all over the continent.'¹⁴ Adeyemo, however, seems to be giving a very simplistic cause. In the first place, most of these independent churches have been started by lay people, many of whom are not theologians and have very little formal education. Daniel Iselaiye, Nigerian teacher and pastor, maintains that these churches grew out of a need that was not met in older churches. 'The independent churches have set out to integrate Christianity with the best in traditional religion,' Iselaiye states. They do it by chanting the Psalms, dancing in worship and reciting biblical history. Consequently, people can identify with them.

2. Most of the mainline churches need to restore the sense of the supernatural. Fortunately, there are a few pastors ministering in this vital area. One of them is Simon

¹² Robert Cameron Mitchell, *African Primal Religions* (Niles, Illinois, Argus Communications, 1977), p.90.

¹³ Harold Turner, quoted in *Schism and Renewal* by David Barrett, p.95.

¹⁴ Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'The African Church Struggles in Her Third Century', *Christianity Today*, July 20, 1979, p.16.

Mundeta of the United Church of Christ in the Chipinga District of Zimbabwe. He is a chaplain at Chikore Hospital. With the help of his wife, he interviews patients whom he detects may be possessed by evil spirits. There is a public burning of amulets dedicated to the ancestral spirits. He and his wife sing hymns to the spirits. They expel the spirits through prayer and the laying on of hands. 'In this way,' observes Daneel, 'an attempt is made to represent the sovereignty of Christ in as concrete a manner as possible to those who need much more than mere medicine treatment.'¹⁵

3. Since the independent churches tend to emphasize the Old Testament, it can be used as a tool to explain the gospel. The Old Testament has cultural similarities with those of traditional Africans. In the past, the mission churches have ignored and neglected the Old Testament. The Old Testament can be the most effective tool to reach the traditional Africans with the gospel. Having introduced the gospel through the use of the Old Testament, one can proceed to teach the New Testament. Temba Mafico, a Zimbabwean theologian, argues that the ignorance or neglect of the Old Testament has produced slow and superficial results.¹⁶

One of the ways of showing that Christianity is not a white man's religion is by having a culturally African church. A group of Christians among the Yoruba of Nigeria proved that it would be done. They chanted the book of Hebrews to a Yoruba art style. The Yoruba art p. 241 style gave it an African identity. Yoruba tradition says that the composer is the owner of the song. Therefore, the Yoruba owned the gospel. The non-Christian Yoruba people knew that no white man would have been able to compose it.

4. Church growth specialists have advocated the concept of the three selfs: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. It is time to add another self: self-identifying. Self-identifying seems to be the cry of the independent church movement in Africa. Self-identifying comes by recognizing the good aspects of each culture and trying to root the church in African soil. Reflecting on the leadership pattern in independent churches, Daneel said: 'The centrality and near-deification of the main leader result from efforts to relate the Christian message to the African world of thought and belief, in a manner the white missionary was not capable of. Leadership position links him with the socio-political situation.'¹⁷

African theologians concede that there are weaknesses in some of the indigenous churches. But they are quick to point out their accomplishments. Says Onibere: 'In these independent churches God has at last spoken a language intelligible to the Africans'. The result has been indigenous churches 'with local leaders, adapting liturgy to culturally acceptable worship patterns, meeting the physical needs of the people with healing ministries ... and promoting the communitarian character of traditional African society.'¹⁸

5. The phenomenal growth of the indigenous churches, which Barrett concludes is 'unparalleled in the entire history of the expansion of Christianity,' reflects a gap between the mission church concept of Christianity and the African one. Dialogue or interaction is necessary in order to bridge the gap. Most mission churches have nursed a negative attitude towards independent churches. Each side needs to listen to the other.

¹⁵ Daneel, p.58.

¹⁶ Temba Mafico, 'The Contribution of the Old Testament to Missionary Effectiveness in Africa', *Missiology*, January, 1979, pp.110-111.

¹⁷ Daneel, p.57

¹⁸ Ose Onibere, *Missiology*, p.115.

6. Historical churches cannot overlook the areas of need, such as solid Bible teaching in most independent churches. Change comes slowly, but through a meaningful dialogue both groups can learn and minister to each other.

CONCLUSION

From these churches may spring the renewal that will bring Africa into evangelicalism. On the other hand, it might swing the other way. As **P.242** long as mission churches ignore these independents, they may be curtailing a solid growth process much needed in the harvest. As it is now, as long as the historical churches steer away from the independent churches and refuse to communicate the gospel in cultural patterns understood by the Africans, there will be a growing number of churches that could swing either way, to the evangelical or to some other position.

It may well be that missionaries and national Christians must allow these churches to find their own level of worship. The mission churches may have to learn to tolerate what appears to be contrary to the way Christianity was introduced by the Western missionaries and test them on the true Spirit of Christ and not on the Western spirit of culture.

There is every possibility that these 6,000-plus churches could become a mainspring for the future of African Christianity. But if they are pushed off, isolated, and left alone with no continuity with other church groups and missions, they may move into an indigenous form of old worship that will probably have no semblance of Christianity.

Mission churches should reach out to these independent churches to fellowship with and to show them the love of Christ. Historical churches must prove their viability and make the gospel appear intelligible, while demonstrating its message in life and action.

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The Church and its Theology

Tite Tienou

Reprinted from Perception, April 1982, with permission

This summary of a message given at the General Assembly of AEAM held in Malawi in 1981 speaks of the importance of Biblical theology for the African Church.

INTRODUCTION—DEFINITION

It is more than appropriate to devote this General Assembly to the Church and its varied ministries in our continent. Although some may think of the Church as a dispensable institution, we are properly concerned with building and nurturing Christ's Church and enabling her to carry out her ministry in the world with due honour and glory to her Lord! This is, must always be, our highest concern because it is the Lord's!