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Jesus and the Victory of Culture

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Christians generally regard Jesus, the hero and mentor of their faith, as a universal figure with a universal mission. That is a sound Christian theological thought. But historically, everybody knows Jesus to be a well-bred Judaeen. He was not only a Judaeen by descent, he actually lived as a Judaeen and ministered exclusively among the Judaeans, save in a few instances when he had to attend to the spiritual needs of outsiders (Luke 17:17f., Matt. 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30; John 4:1ff.).

Jesus remains the perfect teacher

and the paradigm whose example all Christians strive to emulate in all that they do. Our modern times have witnessed debates by eminent Christian scholars and great church men as to how Christians should relate to culture.¹ In a situation such as this, it is appropriate to look back at how Jesus related to his own cultural environments. That is precisely what we want to do in this essay. Did he accommodate his ancestral cultural milieu? What was his attitude to other cultures such as the imperial Graeco-Roman society? The examination of the historical and political situations in the Roman-Palestine of Jesus' days is necessary for a clear picture of our presentation. Answering such questions as these will help us make an application to the contemporary African church.

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¹ See Jeremy Punt, 'Reading the Bible in Africa: Accounting for some trends-Part 1', *Scriptura* 68:1 (1999), pp. 2-7.

The Historical Survey

Jesus lived and worked in a world which was sandwiched between the Judaeans and the Graeco-Roman cultures of antiquity.² The Judaeans inhabited the Roman-Palestine, never as overlords but always as subjects. It will be recalled that the First Testament ends the history of the Judaeans with their subordination to the Persians as the overlords. The rule of the Persians was itself finally submerged by the vigorous military campaigns of Alexander the Great, a Macedonian prince who was poised for a vast Greek empire. Hardly had he started the consolidation of the gains of his efforts than he died of fever.³ His conquests, however, saw the spread of Greek culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. Of course, Greek culture was already penetrating the eastern Mediterranean world before Alexander's reign; it is noteworthy that his conquests, in no small way, accelerated its spread.⁴

Alexander's generals balkanised his empire into three kingdoms after his death and this marked the beginning of the Hellenistic age which witnessed a series of alliances, intrigues, perfidy and wars. On the whole, Greek culture, otherwise known as Hellenism, was promoted in all the kingdoms. By 30 BCE, the Hellenistic kingdoms had all collapsed. Octavian (later called Augustus), at whose instance the last of the Hellenistic kingdoms fell and

who was then the undisputed Roman ruler, easily established his control over Palestine.⁵ It was under this man as the Roman Emperor that Jesus was born (Luke 2:1). The Roman suzerainty over the then Palestine and indeed over the Judaeans remained intact throughout the Second Testament period.

The Romans are generally reputed for their administrative ingenuity. They were very tolerant of other cultures as long as the latter did not promote rebellion. They did nothing to upset the prevailing Greek culture. The Greek language remained the official language of the Roman Empire, though the use of Latin was equally encouraged. Also, while the spirit of Hellenism was not discouraged, the Romans steadily diffused their own cultural legacies—civil administration and military stratagem.

We should not forget the fact that the Judaeans were traditionally religiously exclusive. Generally, they practised their religious exclusiveness as much as they were able. The inherent hatred for foreign rulers among them remained the norm. They successfully executed a protracted bloody resistance against the Seleucids' desecration of their religion in 167 BCE,⁶ and risked another resistance against the Roman authorities in 66 CE. The latter culminated in the Roman invasion that led to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.⁷ The well-known Judaeans exclusiveness should not be taken to mean that the Judaeans were not influenced by the events going on in the

² J. I. De Villiers, 'The Political Situation in the Graeco-Roman world in the period 332 BC to AD 138', in A. B. du Toit (ed.), *The New Testament Milieu*. Tran. D. Roy Briggs et al. (Johannesburg: Orion, 1998), p. 96.

³ De Villiers, 'Political Situation', p. 101.

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 8.

⁵ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, p. 19.

⁶ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, pp. 323-327.

⁷ John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p. 16.

wider Graeco-Roman society. It was just not possible for them to completely alienate their spiritual life from that of their neighbours without exchange of ideas in a situation where they shared common political, economic and socio-cultural interests.⁸ The point being made is that, despite the fact that the Judaeans lived as subjects almost all the time, they tried to isolate and alienate themselves religiously from the rest of the then known world. At least, that was the attitude of the Roman-Palestinian Judaeans. The Hellenistic Judaeans were more liberal religiously, possibly as a result of their exposure as immigrants. Jesus was, however, not a Hellenistic Judaeans but a Roman-Palestinian Judaeans. An examination of his attitude to his Judaeans milieu is pertinent to bring within focus at this juncture.

Jesus' Attitude to his Judaeans Background

As a Roman-Palestinian Judaeans, Jesus remained faithful to his background. He clearly knew that he was greater than John the Baptist, yet he consented to be baptized by him (Matt. 3:14-15).⁹ This he did for his regard for the Jewish culture. F. V. Filson, is very correct when he says that,

[h]is supreme rank does not release Jesus from the obligation 'to fulfil all

righteousness'; he is one with his people and must join with them in the acts which express response to God's spokesman and dedication to God's will. His coming to baptism expresses his sense that John is right, Israel must repent and be baptized and by obedience prepare for the coming kingdom; all of Israel, including the Strong One, must share in this preparation.¹⁰

He made use of the parable, an existing teaching method among his people. It was an illustration, a comparison or a story from the realm of nature or even human life; it often had allegorical colours, just like most Judaeans stories.¹¹ The synoptic gospels have a large number of parables credited to Jesus. It is also almost unbelievable that the parables are absent from the gospel of John and other Second Testament books. What is clear is that the parable was not a new creation of Jesus. It was a common teaching method to illustrate the truth. Jesus only found it in use and seeing it as a useful and effective teaching method, he used it with a mastery never before known in Roman-Palestine.

Jesus also made use of miracles, which were widely practised in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds of his day.¹² I prefer to refer to his exorcisms, raisings of the dead and cures as healings inasmuch as each of such phenomena is concerned with restoration of health, the apparent differences between them notwithstanding. The interesting thing here is that Jesus made use of existing common healing techniques. For example, he healed with a word or command (Matt. 8:3, 9:6; 12:3; Mark 5:41; Luke 7:34), by

⁸ See O. E. Alana, 'The Impact of the Healing miracles of Jesus on the Healing methods of Aladura churches in Yorubaland' (PhD., University of Ilorin, 1992), p. 149.

⁹ Matthew alone of all the evangelists has this detail. John the Baptist felt that the Greater One should not be baptized by the lesser one. The Greek imperfect, *diekoluen*, indicates an action attempted but then given up. All the gospels portray John's feeling of inferiority, possibly for apologetic reasons.

¹⁰ F. V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: A. & C. Black, 1975), p. 68.

¹¹ Filson, *St. Matthew*, p. 159.

¹² Stambaugh and Balch, *Environment*, p. 43.

contact and the laying on of hands (Matt. 9:29; Mark 7:33; Luke 7:14), by rebuke (Mark 1:10f., Luke 9:37f.) and by prayer (Mark 9:37f.), among others.¹³

Although Jesus came to inaugurate a universal religion, he chose to preach the gospel, first among 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:24, 26; Mark 7:27); others, apparently non-Judeans, he regarded as 'dogs'! His attitude at this point in time, viewed in isolation, smacks of racism. But when we consider it along with his ministry in totality, it will not be correct to describe it as such. It will be more appropriate to view his action here as an unwillingness to accept non-Judeans in the new commonwealth, which he was inaugurating. He did this because he probably thought that it was a deviation from the original plan of reaching his fellow Judeans first. His hesitation could, however, be accommodated if he was carrying out his ministry within the structure of a timetable, which placed the conversion of the Judeans first, then that of the non-Judeans; a plan that would agree with the common adage, 'charity begins at home'.

Jesus saw many flaws in the religion of his earthly forebears, which was in the form of the scribal Pharisaism of his day. For instance, the law, which demanded the full obedience of the people, was never obeyed. In that way, it bred hypocrisy and dishonesty. Although he was very critical of those flaws, he never repudiated his ancestral religion altogether. He came not to

abolish the law but to fulfil it, he would assure his people (Matt. 5:17-18). Although Jesus never pronounced the establishment of a new religion throughout his ministry, Christianity indeed emerged as a new religion with the events of the day of Pentecost under his able apostles. It must, however, be noted that the hostilities between Jesus and the social political elite of his day¹⁴ clearly pointed to the fact that the Jesus' movement could not for long remain within the control of scribal Pharisaism. But while Jesus was alive, he carried on his ministry within that context.

On the whole, he was well disposed to some of the religious practices of his day. He practised almsgiving (Matt. 6:2), which was honoured in Jewish life. He approved of fasting (Matt. 6:16), which was observed twice a week by all earnest Judeans. Like all devout Judeans, Jesus regularly went to the synagogues for prayers (Matt. 12:9; Mark 3:1) and teaching (John 7:14; Mark 11:15-17) and freely paid his temple tax (Matt. 17:27). Although he disregarded ceremonial laws to express and give help such as healing on the Sabbath day, it was his wish that the Judeans lived within the framework of the Mosaic Law.¹⁵ That was why he ordered the leper to go and show himself to the priest in accordance with the Mosaic Law (Matt. 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:4). And like other Jewish rabbis, Jesus had a group of disciples, the Twelve, to under-study him so they could propagate

¹³ For details of Jesus' healing techniques, see O. E. Alana, 'A Study of the Healing Techniques of Jesus', *Journal of Religious Studies* 27:1, 2 (1996), pp. 88-96.

¹⁴ See Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social values of labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge, 1988), pp. 3-32.

¹⁵ Filson, *St. Matthew*, p. 110.

his beliefs after him.¹⁶

Jesus and the Graeco-Roman Milieu

As Judaeen as he was, Jesus clearly recognized the force of other cultures, particularly the Graeco-Roman. He respected and was obedient to the Roman authorities. He paid tax to them: that was why he would not advise his fellow Jews otherwise (Matt. 22:15-21; Mark 12:13-19; Luke 20:20-26). Indeed, some of the religious rites observed today by the church, which were personally inaugurated by Jesus himself, can be traced in origin to some of the practices of the Graeco-Roman Mystery Religions. The resurrection motif is, strictly speaking, not explicit in the Second Testament. It is, however, paralleled in the Mystery Religions, though not without basic fundamental differences arising from their distinct religious backgrounds.¹⁷ The rites of baptism and the Eucharist, which were unknown in the religion of the Second Testament, were prominent practices of the Mystery Religions of the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁸ From their traditional Roman backgrounds, such rites were appropriated into the religious routine of some of the religious sects within the scribal Pharisaism of Jesus' day. The Qumran sect members, for instance, practised baptism by immersion and served religious meals,¹⁹ that could be likened to the rite of Eucharist in

Christianity. John the Baptist also practised baptism by immersion. Jesus evidently encountered all these practices, yet took them over, not as they were, but within a new context.

Generally, Jesus had a high estimation of his cultural backgrounds. He was a fine Judaeen but very dynamic and pragmatic; always ready to make use of the common but valuable religious and social currents within his environment. He was no rebel against his Judaeen cultural heritage²⁰ but he was nevertheless a cultural reformer. He did not jettison his cultural heritage; rather, he reformed those aspects of the culture that he believed could be of benefit to his ministry. Then he went ahead to utilize them as such. So, in the light of what has been discussed about Jesus' attitude to his cultural backgrounds, what should be the attitude of the church toward the inculturation of Christianity in Africa, as elsewhere?

Challenge for the Church in Africa

The church should not shy away and look the other way when her hero, perfect example and role-model is there to look up to in knowing what to do on the issue of Christian attitude to culture. From what is known of Jesus' attitude to his cultural milieu, it is clear that every local church is free to interact reasonably with her host culture. The church in Europe should be free to take as much as could be helpful for the gospel of Christ from her host culture just as the church in Asia should explore the rich cultural heritage of her host societies for the benefit of

¹⁶ Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 45.

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, p. 238.

¹⁸ See James Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*. 2nd Ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 145, 343.

¹⁹ Price, *Interpreting*, p. 343.

²⁰ Filson, *St. Matthew*, p. 83.

the gospel. Indeed, the church in Europe has long realized this and has utilized it to advantage. From the distant past, the Europeans started infusing much of their culture into the church. Today, it is difficult to draw a line between an aspect of the European culture that was brought into Christian practice at a point in time and Bible-based Christian culture (which again is heavily laden with Judaeo and other Mediterranean cultures). For example, most of the marriage practices in the church today that are gleefully referred to as 'Christian marriage practices' have their antecedents in the Roman and European cultures and not necessarily in the Bible.²¹

It appears that the real problem is not whether the European cultures are compatible with Christianity. It has long been decided by the Europeans themselves that they are, since they are 'civilized.' It is the cultures of the Two-Thirds World countries like African countries, which the Europeans considered, and probably still consider, 'uncivilized' and thus incompatible with Christianity. There is no doubt that their judgement is unfair and very misleading. It arose out of the mistaken practice of judging the customs of the Two-Thirds World countries on the basis of their compatibility with modern western ideals. Such a practice often 'leads not to understanding but to misunderstanding'.²²

With regard to Africa, Christians there have been active in taking as much as possible of their rich cultural heritage into their practice of

Christianity. It is interesting to note that the initiative to do this came from the ordinary church men and women who were in most cases non-literate.²³ But they were knowledgeable in the word of God as proclaimed by the Bible. Perhaps the European type of Christianity that was introduced to Africa was too 'foreign' to impress them or to actually touch their lives just as was the case of North Africans in the first five centuries CE.²⁴ It could also be a divine act. Some African church men and women rose up to the challenge of establishing local churches among their peoples so that they could practise Christianity as Africans, that is, without having to jettison their cultural identity. This effort was a bold attempt to put the stamp of African cultural heritage on the Christianity practised by Africans so that they can be proud of being African Christians. This was what led to the rise of African Independent Churches, some of which date back to the end of the nineteenth century.

Today, most of the Christian denominations in Africa are sympathetic towards the African cultural heritage. African theologians are also rising to the occasion, not only in approving of the steps taken by

²³ Most of such church leaders never had the opportunity of formal education but managed only to learn to read the Bible. Others merely learned the Bible by heart without being able to read it at all.

²⁴ It should be remembered that Christianity failed in North Africa mainly because it was throughout a Latin affair. No efforts were made to make it relevant to the cultural ecology of North Africa. It was too 'foreign' and thus could not touch the lives of the common people. Despite the fact that some success was harvested in that it produced eminent theologians and Church Fathers of the calibre of Origen, Athanasius and Clement, it could not compete with Islam, which appeared to have more bearing with the *Sitz im Leben* of the common people. Thus, Islam displaced it almost everywhere.

²¹ See O. E. Alana, 'Christianity and polygamy in Nigeria', *Journal of Arabic & Religious Studies*, 7 (1990), pp. 17-30.

²² John Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1964), p. 138.

their non-literate kinsmen and women in years back, but also in making strong cases for a more aggressive inculturation of Christianity in Africa.²⁵ One particular problem of this exercise is that African church leaders seem undecided as to how far it could go. Out of a possible sense of inferiority, they still turn a blind eye to the inculturation that takes place in some areas.

One such area relates to traditional healing practices. The importance attached to health among Africans is immense. To them, 'health is wealth', and they go to any extent to preserve it. In recent times, health has become an elitist commodity, quite beyond the reach of the common people as a result of one problem or another, ranging from poor economic situations of many African countries to self-centredness of some leaders whose only business in government is looting of public funds. In the state of helplessness, many Africans find an option in traditional healing. It is also more appealing because it is cheaper.²⁶ 'Spiritual' churches have become beehives of healing activities. Some of the 'spiritual' churches are still averse to any form of African medicine; their insistence is on fasting and prayer alone.

However, a number of them across Africa have gone far in the use of traditional medical practices in their healing ministries. Even some of those who do this cannot own up to it in public. They simply tell any

researcher or inquirer that they do not make use of traditional healing practices and they are always quick to point out that their church's constitution abhors such things. But our fieldwork among the Yoruba of Nigeria in the last decade clearly shows that some of the 'spiritual' churches that deny the use of traditional healing practices, in reality do use them. One may want to query such hypocrisy. Perhaps they are afraid of being ridiculed by the western-oriented churches and the elite who may view such practices as incompatible with Christianity. Did Jesus not interact with the common healing techniques or practices of his age, including those that were magical? He did, though always within a new context, epitomized by his salvific mission as the messianic Son of man.

As he is the ultimate role-model for all Christians, it cannot be correctly said that imitating Jesus is against the scripture. The bold efforts being made by some churches in the inculturation of their healing ministries, especially in making use of common traditional healing practices, should not be uncritically rejected. Jesus' practice in his day is analogous to what is going on in 'spiritual' churches in Africa. The genuine concern of all Christians should be on how this is done. The issue is beyond whether or not such a thing is scriptural. It is my belief that it is. The focus should be on ensuring that the essence of Christianity is not compromised in the process.²⁷

To ensure this is to see that the whole process is christocentric and theocentric. Christ and God alone must be at the centre of the healing

²⁵ It seems that the whole world has come to accept this reality in Africa as elsewhere. Even in academic circles, it is fast becoming the vogue these days to read the Bible against a particular African cultural context.

²⁶ A. O. Nweka, 'Healing: The Biblical Perspective', *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, 7:1 (1992), p. 34.

²⁷ See Alana, 'Healing Techniques', p. 95.

exercises. If there are any deities or spiritual forces behind traditional healing practices, they need only to be banished in the name and blood of Jesus and he (Jesus) becomes the power of such healing practices. This indeed will be a true inculturation of Christianity in Africa and of course a sure Christianization of the rich African cultural heritage. The task is enormous but all it requires to get it accomplished is courage, and this should not be elusive any longer.

Conclusion

The message of Jesus on the relationship between Christianity and culture is clear in the very many ways in which the Master himself interacted with the two cultures in which he grew up and worked. He did not merely accommodate both the Judaeian and Graeco-Roman cultures of his day, but indeed went further to tap their most valuable currents for the benefit of humanity and for the glory of God. African Christians cannot do less. They have to follow the legitimate footsteps of Jesus. When Christianity arrived in England, the English people rightly

saw to it that it was anglicized, just as it had earlier been made to carry the imprints of the imperial Roman society.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Africa is presently the centre of gravity of Christianity. This is in view of the seriousness with which Africans take Christianity in contrast with the relaxed way Christianity is now being practised in some western countries.²⁸ The current apparent lack of courage to prosecute an aggressive inculturation policy in respect of church matters by some African leaders must be abandoned. African Christians must now take the initiative to see to the devolvement of a truly African Christianity. This will be a service to mankind and to their Lord in which they cannot afford to fail.

²⁸ This view receives the support of western scholars. For example, see C. M. Tuckett, *Luke. New Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 1996), p. 114; J. Drane, *Son of man: A new life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 8. Also see M. Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology [Luke 4: 16-30]* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 1995), p. 195.

Sagacious Folly

*The bankrupt wisdom of an inverted world,
Reproaches sacrifice.
But the logic of the cross transcends sophistry,
To function on a deeper plane,
Where sacred folly is profound
And holy weakness strong.*

From *Becoming . . .* (poetry reflecting theology) by Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia. (used with permission)