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History Comes Full Circle

Byang Kato

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CHRISTIANITY ORIGINATED in the Afro-Asian Middle East. Then it spread to Europe and relatively recently to the Americas and Australasia. It has expanded to the rest of Asia and Africa at different periods with varying degrees of success and failure. Thus, the gospel has reached 'the remotest part of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The very circumstances that prevailed at the inauguration of the church in the Greco-Roman world are now asserting themselves in the world. The parallel is more pronounced in the primarily agricultural economies where man lives closer to nature. The challenges that confronted the church in the first two centuries are now, and will increasingly confront the church.

Religious confrontation

Donald McGavran has given an accurate assessment of today's situation as Christianity meets other faiths:

It seems clear that in the next decades, Christians again, as in the first two centuries, will fight the long battle against syncretism and religious relativism. And for the same reason—namely, that they are again in intimate contact with multitudes of non-Christian *peers* who believe that many paths lead to the top of the mountain. The concept of the cosmic Christ, some maintain, is a way out of the arrogance which stains the Christian when he proclaims Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father. Other Christians believe that the concept of a 'cosmic Christ operating through many religions' sacrifices truth, for if there are, in fact, many revelations, then each voice is approximation of the truth.... As hundreds of Christian and non-

Dr Byang Kato was the first Chairman of the WEF Theological Commission, appointed in 1975 but serving only a few months before his accidental death later that year. Born in Nigeria in 1936, he was converted and after initial training at a local Bible college and service as a youth worker, counsellor and teacher, studied at London Bible College (BD) and Dallas Theological Seminary (STM, ThD). He served as General Secretary of Evangelical Churches of West Africa and of The Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM—now AEA). He was also Vice-President of the WEF. This article is presented as a tribute to Dr Kato's commitment, vision and faith as part of our 30th Anniversary project. It is reprinted from chapter 13 of his book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975) with the permission of the publishers (Private Bag 28963, Nairobi 00200, Kenya). Other contributions from Dr Kato were published in our first issue, October 1977 and in Vol 4 No 1 (April 1980).

Christian denominations spring into being across Africa, Asia, and other lands of earth, some will inevitably hold Biblical and others syncretistic views, of the Person of Christ.¹

The religious challenge of the second century is reasserting itself today. Religions ranging from Greek individual gods to the emperor worship of the Roman world were the order of the day. Whether it was *numen Augusti* (emperor worship) of Rome, the Serapis, derived from Egypt, or the Atargatis of Syria, or even Mithraism of Parthia, religious confrontation was awaiting Christianity. The challenge of syncretistic universalism was to be the task before the apologists.

A similar situation prevails in today's Africa. The defunct gods of African traditional religions are now rearing their heads. A Caius Caligula or Marcus Aurelius (emperors who posed as gods) will sooner or later call for their resuscitation. There are indications that African Christians may even be called upon to pour libation before a political leader instead of serving the unique Lord Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, many Christians in Chad have already laid down their lives to defend the uniqueness of Christ. Persecution is likely to increase.

But the devil has many other avenues for fighting against Christ and his church and he knows where best to succeed. Christo-paganism appears to be the area of attack within the next generations. The battle has started. The unique claims of Christ are

regarded as eccentricities. The relativity philosophy is seeking to make the Scriptures only one of many revelations rather than a special revelation. Christianity is not repudiated but is given the largest room in the camp of religions. It is claimed that the difference lies not in kind but in qualitative teachings. 'Thus saith the Lord' as a propositional revelation is reduced to merely a segment of general revelation or a fulfilment of other revelations. By this process it cannot dislodge other revelations but only improve upon them. That being the case, salvation is no monopoly of Christianity. It is just as possible to be saved through other religions as it is through Christianity though the latter may bring salvation faster. Such is the kind of thought prevailing today. These are theological pitfalls that only a discerning, Spirit-filled Bible-believer can see and refute.

Cultural complexities.

Besides the religious confrontation, there is the cultural challenge that faces Christianity. Christianity was launched within the matrix of Greco-Roman culture. If the Judaistic background provided the revelation, the Greek and Roman cultures were the means of expressing and spreading the revelation. 'But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law' (Gal. 4:4). The fullness of time means more than *pax Romana* (peace in the Roman Empire), or Greek intelligentsia. It includes the total cultural milieu of the Mediterranean world where 'Africans, Teutons, Greeks, Jews, Parthians, and Phrygians mingled in the provinces and cities and

1 Donald McGavran, ed., *Eve of the Storm* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), p. 17.

shared their national heritages with the Latin people.² Christianity was soon to unravel its riches to meet the longings of all these peoples. The test for Christianity, however, was going to be whether it would survive as a unique faith, as the only answer to the human dilemma. Would it baptize cultures or would it be polarized and enmeshed by the multitudes of cultures it would invade?

This is where the battle rages the fiercest in Africa. The constant cry one hears is that 'missionaries have destroyed our culture'. The accusation is made in spite of the fact that some of the articles destroyed were charms or objects of idol worship. It is often forgotten that the twentieth century convert is not the first Christian to burn up the bridges linking him with his past life of idol worship. The first converts in Ephesus went to the point of literally burning their books of magic arts for the sake of Christ, thus breaking with their culture (Acts 19:18-20). Not all the so-called African culture is *de facto* culture. So much in the guise of culture is actually idolatry.

It is extremely difficult to differentiate religion from culture; nevertheless, a careful discernment is imperative. Idowu's observation is worth careful consideration. 'A fair attempt at differentiation may be that while culture covers the whole of a people's scheme of life, religion gives direction and complexion to the scheme.'³ If religion is

what gives direction to life, Christianity must necessarily change the life-style or culture of the African. Where such a differentiation is not possible, two alternatives are called for. Either the culture is abandoned or Christianity is compromised. To be more concrete, Stonehenge in England may be used as an example. The shrine was used by the cults for the worship of Druidism. Human beings were offered in pre-Roman days. When the primitive practice was outlawed, the shrine was left for cultural reasons. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a veneration of the shrine was revived. Today, spirit worshippers from the United States spend thousands of dollars on pilgrimages to the pagan shrine in England. They go not for admiration but spiritual adoration. The British Department of Antiquities may be making money and the cultural heritage of the British may be boosted, but what of the rivalry of loyalties between Jesus Christ and Stonehenge?

Applying the same analogy to the African situation, is it worth preserving the 'juju' if the converted Christian will be tempted to go back to 'Egypt' or 'the house of Laban'? Where lies the unique claim of Christ which is supposed to supersede even kin relationships (Mt. 12:46-50)? Should national pride or cultural heritage come before Christ? New Testament Christianity has a strong negative answer to that. 'I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ' (Phil. 3:8).

The matter of either/or affects only the questionable instruments of reli-

2 Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 67.

3 E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1973), p. 5.

gio-cultural heritage. Culture as such can be baptized by Christianity. But once it is done the other way around; compromise has set in. Syncretism will be the end result and the unique salvation of Christ will be made non-effective.

One common error which also may be cited is the lumping together of some fundamental biblical principles with the western culture and repudiating both. The error begins with some early western missionaries who identified the kingdom of God with western civilization. This naive concept is rejected today. On the other hand, there is a call for a new type of African Christianity illustrated in the so-called African theology. To adhere to the inerrant, inspired Word of God as the only *special* source of Christianity is contended.

It is often forgotten that the Apostolic Creed, on which most western church creeds are based, was composed by Europeans, Asians, and Africans. Athanasius, the great architect of the earliest Christian creed and defender of Orthodoxy, arose out of Africa. Other theologians of Africa, Anus and Origen, of course, were not condoned in their false views. Inevitably, many cultural tendencies were passed on to the converts by the western missionary.

Not only was Christ brought to Africa for shelter (Mt. 2), but an African was made to carry the cross for Christ (Mt. 27:32). Monica, the mother of St. Augustine of Hippo, was a Tuareg from Africa. Her terrific influence on Augustine was evident in the latter's theology. Because Africa has made a great contribution to the Europeans, there is no historical basis for

assigning Christianity to the West. As a matter of fact, it was Asians and Africans who organized the first mission board (Acts 13:1-3).

What has been said of African culture, can be said of the western culture. The cultural trends imported with the gospel do not have to be rejected as long as they do not imprison the gospel. Why insist on worshipping in a round building if Africans have begun to build their own homes in the square pattern as the churches built by the missionary? If the organ is already there, why not supplement the organ with drums and other locally made instruments? Africa stands to gain by becoming more creative [rather] than by expending energy on cultural demythologization. It is childish to water down or compromise the gospel in order to impress the world with African contribution. The Spirit-filled believer bathed in the study of God's word has a great contribution to make to the universal Church of Christ.

Political Challenge

Christian martyrs in the second century stood by the mandate of their Founder and Saviour, Lord Christ. They were prepared to render to Caesar his own dues, realizing that he was the minister of God for executing justice here on earth (Mt. 17:27; 22:15-22; Rom. 13:1-7). But when the powers that be overstepped the boundary, the response was, 'We must obey God rather than man' (Acts 5:29). With such an affirmation Polycarp and Pothinus, among others, marched triumphantly to their execution. Salvation to them was not political liberation but eternal redemption from sin. It

might even call for loss of property and/or life; they were prepared to serve their Lord in life or in death (Philp. 1:20-24).

It is gratifying to note that within a few years from now Africa will be entirely free from colonial domination. A Christian should be the most loyal citizen of his country because he is aware of the fact that God has ordained even a dictatorial type of Neronian rule. Moreover, as a citizen of two dominions, he knows what it means to submit to the higher power. But his belief in the absolute authority of the Word of God also forces him to acknowledge the equality of all men. That being the case, the awareness of the existence of other nations becomes imperative. Blind nationalism of a Nazi type should have no place among Christians.

The tendency to identify African culture and religions with political ethos seems to be arising. A rejection of non-Christian beliefs is sometimes taken to mean a rejection of one's own heritage. Adherence to biblical principles is taken for lack of patriotism. It is hoped that no African ruler or politician will think that the evangelical Christian is being unpatriotic when he rejects a religio-cultural practice that contradicts the Christian belief. The persecution of Christians in Chad is very deplorable. The Christians there are not being disloyal to the civil authority. They are only fulfilling their obligation to Jesus Christ in rejecting idol worship. Bible-believing Christians in Chad and elsewhere should be, and in many cases are, the most patriotic. We hope the civil authorities in Africa will take note of this appeal. The evangelical rejection of liberal ecu-

menism should not be taken for rejection of unity either. That evangelicals are also interested in unity is demonstrated in the organization of evangelical fellowships in many African countries. The continent-wide Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar is a further evidence that evangelicals are interested in unity. Rejection of liberal ecumenism is based purely on doctrinal matters. The deviation from biblical teaching so evident in world ecumenism presents a threat to the survival of orthodox Christianity.

The evangelical also rejects veneration of African traditional religions. This is not due to lack of patriotism. It is only to safeguard the unique gospel of Christ, which alone provides the way of salvation. African culture as such is not all bad. But like any other culture it is tainted with sin. It needs to be redeemed. The redemption is a surgical process which hurts. Practices incompatible with the Bible will have to give way. This is not a lack of respect for one's culture. The good part of African culture which meets the biblical standard will be preserved and promoted. Christians encourage the use of local languages through Bible translation. True respect for individuals is the Christian stance. The abuse of what Christianity stands for must not be taken for its norm. Cultural heritage compatible with Christianity can be baptized into Christian enrichment. The gospel content, of course, needs no addition or modification. It is because of this irreducible, immutable message, that Christianity has produced the third race comprising men and women from all races. What is said of Mediterranean cultures can be applicable universally. 'To each of these

three cultures the Christian church owes some of its characteristics, though its genius is not the product of any one of them.⁴

The test for loyalty and patriotism should not lie in ecumenical cooperation, nor in the area where the ruler has overstepped his humanly ordained position. In this area obedience to God and defence of the faith is the necessary prerogative of the Bible-believing Christian. The plea of the early apologists is the same plea by their spiritual descendants in twentieth century Africa:

For we call upon God for the safety of the Emperor, upon God the eternal, God the true, God the living, whose favour, beyond all others, the Emperor desires. ... Examine God's words, our scriptures, which we do not conceal, and which many accidents put into hands of those without the Church. Know from them that a superfluity of benevolence is enjoined on us, even so far as to pray God for our enemies and to entreat blessings for our persecutors.⁵

Humanitarian considerations

Christians in the second century were ignorantly considered antisocial by outsiders who did not know what Christianity was all about. In his directives to Pliny, Trajan vaguely described the Christians in this vein: 'They constitute a very bad precedent,

and are also out of keeping with this age.'⁶ In a similar manner the conservative evangelical can be misunderstood today. He is charged with preaching 'pie in the sky' religion. This is in spite of the numerous schools, hospitals, and clinics that have been operated for many years by evangelicals.

The Christian, walking in the steps of the Saviour, must follow the Lord's example. While it is true that Christ cured the sick and fed the hungry, he rhetorically asked the ephemeral adherents, 'For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?' (Mk. 8:36). Although man is a total personality, Christ did put the soul's salvation in reference to future life above earthly existence (Lk. 12:5). Social concerns have their place in the Christian mandate. But the serving of tables must be given second place (Acts 6:2, 4). Man's life does not consist of material possessions. Affluence in the western world has not necessarily promoted spiritual life. For Christians to make social concerns their primary task and neglect the effort to win souls for eternity amounts to fattening a calf for slaughter. This the Bible-believing Christians cannot afford to do.

Dehumanization is the socialist slogan commonly employed to ridicule the soul-salvation concerned believer. But is it not in the Bible that true humanization can be seen? A person without Christ has not attained the ideal status God meant him to have. Man was made in the image of God. The image has been defaced and the unbelievers are

4 Tenney, *New Testament Times*, p. 77.

5 Henry Scowcroft Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 10.

6 Bettenson, *Documents*, p. 6.

considered dead and estranged from the living God (Eph. 2:1; Col. 1:21). Humanization comes only when one becomes a Christian. From that moment of encounter with Christ, the hell-bound Christian becomes truly man as he is 'mystically' united with God-Man, even Jesus the Christ of God. This is the true humanization the Christian is commanded to proclaim (Jn. 20:21; Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 15:1-3). The Christian may feed all the hungry people in the world, and pay all the bills of liberation movements of the society. His primary task is not done. His primary task is preaching the gospel of soul salvation. He should mourn, 'It would be misery to me not to preach' (1 Cor. 9:16, New English Bible).

One final sentimental issue in Africa is the matter of the ancestors who died before they ever had the opportunity to hear the gospel. The solution ranges from those who affirm that they are in heaven because they were good or religious people to those who call for prayer by the living Christians with the hope there is still a chance for the dead. Aloysius Lugira strongly objects to any thought that his non-Christian, but good, religious grandparents, will be in hell.⁷ Harry Sawyerr suggests, 'We would therefore, go on to suggest that the prayers of African Christians might in the providence of God lead to the salvation of their pagan ancestors.'⁸ He further bases universal sal-

vation on God's omnipotence.⁹ John Mbiti calls for *Sanctorum Communio* in the sense of direct communication between the living and the departed saints.¹⁰ If this communication is possible and cherished by the Christian, it is not farfetched to suggest that one can also witness yet to one's unsaved ancestor. There is, however, no scriptural basis either for second chance repentance or for direct communication with the deceased.

On a humane basis alone, can one suggest the possibility of the unevangelized ancestor? By logical deduction some theologians have proposed salvation for such people on the basis of God's grace. J.N.D. Anderson places it on the basis of God's mercy.¹¹ According to Anderson, salvation is possible for those who have never heard. He pleads their cause as those in 'whose heart the God of all mercy had been working by his Spirit, who had come in some measure to realize his sin, and need for forgiveness, and who had been enabled, in the twilight as it were to throw himself on the mercy of God'. It should be noted that Anderson isolates certain ones whose heart the Lord might have touched somehow. Such persons, if there were any, would not be the ardent religious worshippers. Rather, they might be 'atheists' in regard to pagan worship, like Socrates. Such promptings should also be differ-

⁷ Aloysius Lugira, private interview, Kampala, Uganda, January 20, 1973.

⁸ Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), p. 95.

⁹ Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism*, p. 112.

¹⁰ John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 148-49.

¹¹ J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), pp. 101, 102.

entiated from the claim of a direct special revelation. The latter is contained in the canonical Scriptures (Heb. 1:1; 2:3, 4). Anderson's position may be granted on the basis of deductive speculation. The more scriptural basis would rather be that if God had been dealing with any person apart from the gospel witness, he would provide the way for that would-be Christian to hear the gospel and accept it to be born again. The case of Cornelius is the precedent (Acts 10:35).

For the rest of the heathen who died before the advent of Christian evangelism, it is humanely wished that they found their place in eternal bliss. But the Word of God gives no warrant for such a view. Humanity does not live in neutrality. Since the original fall, the total race of Adam has been condemned to death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Salvation in the biblical sense is passing out of this death dungeon (Jn. 5:24) into the dimension of life. The members of the Adamic race are all stillborn (Rom. 5:12). Not one of them deserves to live. But the undeserving favour of God has made salvation possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of the second Adam is described as to only 'abound to many' (Rom. 5:15). Christ is universally available to all men everywhere at any time. This is how far biblical universalism goes. But its effectiveness applies *only to those who receive the offer*:

If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man's fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he

does not deserve, of being made righteous (Rom. 5:17, Jerusalem Bible).

The biblical answer to the question concerning those who died before hearing the gospel seems to be that they go to hell. There is no clear basis for optimism in this case. No one deserves to be saved in any case. So the question of God's partiality does not arise. Humanely speaking, one would wish that all men will be saved. But there is no scriptural warrant for that position. God's omnipotence must be matched with his omniscience and judicious action. His grace and love must not overshadow his justice and holiness. The challenge for the Christian is to weep over the two and a half billion living souls without Christ. An implicit faith in God's Word and an absolute assurance in Jesus Christ as the only solution to the sin problem which is responsible for all human ills is the only bulwark and offensive weapon of the Christian.

Safeguarding Biblical Christianity in Africa—A Ten Point Proposal

One: Adhere to the basic presuppositions of historic Christianity.

1. That God has revealed himself in general revelation, in creating man in his own image, through man's conscience, and through creation of the world as a whole (Rom. 1:18-23; 2:15-18).
2. That non-Christian religions prove man has a concept of God but they also show man's rebellion against God (Rom. 1:18-23).
3. That God has redemptively become

incarnate in Christ for the redemption of mankind, but only those who accept his offer of salvation can be saved (Rom. 5:17).

4. That the principle of continuity in the sense that God's image in man has not been obliterated, and general revelation, though it cannot be read correctly, is still a *de facto* revelation. But running parallel with this is the fact of discontinuity in the sense that God is now producing a new man in the formation of the Body of Christ (Eph. 2:15).
5. That the Bible alone is the final infallible rule of faith and practice. Its verdict cannot be challenged in any court of law since he is the final court of appeal. This propositional revelation is fully inspired, inerrant in the original manuscripts, and faithfully transmitted (2 Tim. 3:16; Jn. 10:35).

Two: Express Christianity in a truly African context, allowing it to judge the African culture and never allow the culture to take precedence over Christianity. To do otherwise would isolate African Christianity from historical Christianity, biblically based. This cannot be done by creating an 'African Theology' as understood by some African theologians today, but rather by:

1. Expressing theological concepts in terms of the African situation. The insights of western theologians over the years must be appreciated. But the squabbles of the West do not have to be the pattern for the younger churches. The final word has not yet been said in expressing Christianity. But the Bible content remains unchanged.

2. 'Scratching where it itches.' The African problems of polygamy, family structure, spirit world, liturgy, to mention a few, need to be tackled by evangelical African theologians and biblical answers presented.

Three: Concentrate effort in the training of men in the Scriptures, employing the original languages to facilitate their ability in exegeting the Word of God. In-depth knowledge rather than mere superficial mechanics in the ministry should be the primary concern.

Four: Carefully study African traditional religions as well as other religions but only secondarily to the inductive study of God's word. The New Testament writers and the early church evangelists did not consider it worthwhile to spend too much of their energy in the study of non-Christian religions. All non-Christians belong to one and the same group—unsaved. The sinful nature needs no study analysis as its outworking is clearly manifested in daily life.

Five: Launch an aggressive programme of evangelism and missions to prevent a fall into the error of the doctrinal strifes of third-century Christianity in North Africa (at the expense of evangelism).

Six: Consolidate organizational structures based on doctrinal agreements. Fraternal relationship such as is being shaped by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), is strongly urged. The gregarious nature of the African calls for a fellowship so much needed; yet it does not need to be an organic union, neither does it need to be a unity at any cost.

Seven: Carefully and accurately delineate and concisely express terms of theology as a necessary safeguard against syncretism and universalism.

Eight: Carefully present apologetics towards unbiblical systems that are creeping into the church. This calls for more leadership training.

Nine: Show concern in social action but bear in mind at all times that the primary goal of the church is the presentation of personal salvation. As individuals are converted, they become instruments of revolutionizing the society for good. The church is not a department of social welfare for the

government. It is a body of individuals called out to prepare the world for the second coming of Christ.

Ten: Following the steps of the New Testament (Church, Christians in Africa should be prepared to say, 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Philp. 1:21). Africa needs her Polycarps, Athanasiuses, and Martin Luthers, ready to contend for the faith at any cost. The Lord of the church' who has commanded Bible-believing Christians to 'contend earnestly for the faith' (Jude 3), has also said, 'Yes, I am coming quickly' (Rev. 22:20). May we give the reverberating response, 'Amen, Come Lord Jesus.'

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