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'Unwanted Sectarians': Spirit, Migration and Mission in an African-led Mega-Size Church in Eastern Europe

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The following article was written and accepted prior to the news that Pastor Sunday Adelaja is under investigation for fraud. Even if it transpires that Pastor Sunday is guilty in some way, we cannot judge the whole church, or the whole work of God, on the basis of failings of a single leader and so the following article (as is the case with all our articles) must be read with discernment.

THE PHYSICAL SIGNS of the Southern shift in Christianity's centre of gravity from the Northern to the Southern continents include the rise of immigrant churches in Europe and North Amer-

ica. The recession of Christian presence in the former heartlands of the faith has, since the closing decades of the 20th century, coincided with the accession of different types of churches full of African, Caribbean, Asian and Latin American immigrants in those contexts. A new book on Christianity and migration by Jehu J. Hanciles concludes that the United States, for instance, would have been moving much more rapidly toward a post-Christian status were it not for the fresh infusions of believers from the Third World, particularly Africa.¹ The evangelical and theologically versatile nature of Christianity in the non-western world means that the South to North migrations of recent times has translated into the formation of new

¹ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

churches and Christian communities. People have moved—whatever the reasons for such movements may be—carrying their ‘ideas, beliefs and religious practices with them’.²

It is therefore not insignificant that at the turn of the 21st century the largest Christian congregations in both Western and Eastern Europe are led by African immigrants. Matthew Ashimolowo leads the 10,000 member strong, Kingsway International Christian Center in London, UK. Enoch Adeboye’s Redeemed Christian Church of God started in Nigeria but now has more than 18,000 members in Europe and Sunday Adelaja leads the Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations in Kyiv, Ukraine. It has about 25,000 members. The three churches, as with a number of immigrant and particularly African-led congregations in Europe and North America, belong to the Pentecostal/charismatic traditions. Pentecostalism and its charismatic progenies now constitute the representative face of Third World Christianity. The movement’s dynamism in worship, interventionist theologies, success in raising mega-size congregations and enthusiasm in the midst of harsh Diaspora conditions invite reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit in migration and mission in the 21st century. As Hanciles would have it, ‘the religiosity of the new immigrants potentially transforms the religious movement into missionary engagement’. And it does so by implicating western societies as sites of new religious interactions.³

Paradigm Shifts in Immigrant Christianity

The phenomenon of immigrant churches is now the subject of a number of both popular and academic studies. Several others appeared ahead of Hanciles’ *Beyond Christendom*.⁴ Most of the churches studied in these volumes have an ethnic dimension to their membership. Immigrant churches have usually attracted minority groups disenchanted with the dry denominationalism and racial insensibilities of historic mission denominations in the host continents of Europe and North America. Thus most African churches functioning within the northern continents are not only led by Africans but are also populated by Africans. The reasons for this development are beyond the scope of this essay but suffice it to mention that whereas in most western contexts Christianity is primarily a system of doctrinal ideas, in African lives, religion constitutes systems of power through which divine interventions in everyday activities are sought and appropriated. African immigrant Christianity with its interventionist theolo-

2 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 4.

3 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 5.

4 Jacob K. Olupona and Regina Gemignani ed., *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007); Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007); Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock, *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (London: Continuum, 2008); Jehu J. Hanciles, ‘Migration and Mission: The Religious Significance of the North-South Divide’, in Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross ed., *Mission in the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 118-129.

gies therefore appeals greatly to the religious worldviews and sensibilities of those who patronize it.

Embassy of God

This presentation focuses on a type of African-led church in Europe whose membership is European. It draws most of its members from the host context. Pastor Sunday Adelaja's 'Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations' or Embassy of God, as I refer to it here, started in 1994. The Soviet regime for many years pursued a vision of modernity and development built on the ideologies of Marxism and enlightened by science and 'free from superstitious belief' that 'rendered religious communities and religious practice anathema': In the words of Wanner:

Antireligious legislation chased the expression of religious sentiment and practice into private, atomized domains, where knowledge of religious practice and doctrine was often, with each passing generation, replaced by ignorance or indifference, even if the sensibility often remained. For some Soviet citizens, however, religion became a refuge, a meaningful identity and mode of living in an alternative moral universe, in defiance of the numerous risks and penalties involved.⁵

In the midst of this 'hunger and thirst' after God, following years of the deliberate persecution of evangelical religion and its followers, a single African Christian has become the instrument through whose ministry

God is turning Eastern Europe upside down. They have developed a new community of believers, who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, seek to present to the society a 'visible alternative to the hedonism and libertinism of secular society'.⁶

Pastor Sunday Adelaja came to Soviet Belarussia from Nigeria as a newly born-again Christian in 1986 to study journalism. During the period of study he also led the African Christian Students' Fellowship in the then Soviet Union and went on to found the Word of Faith Church in Belarus in 1989. He did not return to Nigeria after studies because of what he described to me as the 'unstable nature of the situation at home'.⁷ Pastor Sunday Adelaja speaks fluent Russian, and preaches mainly in that language. He started the church because, as he claims, God gave him a specific word in 1993 saying: 'I will use people from the former Soviet Union to gather the end-time harvest before the coming of my son....though I am a foreigner, God has given me the ability to go and minister beyond race, culture, and denominational barriers'.⁸ The 'Embassy of God', undertakes aggressive evangelism which has ensured that the church now has congregations all over Eastern Europe and beyond.

For our purposes, there are three main identities that are critical to the self-understanding of 'Embassy of God'. The first is the thoroughly evan-

⁶ Hanciles, 'Migration and Mission', 125.

⁷ Personal recorded interview, Kyiv, May 2004.

⁸ Sunday Adelaja, *Life and Death in the Power of the Tongue* (Kiev: Fares Publishing House, 2003), 25.

⁵ Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 2.

gelical content of its message. The second is the Pentecostal/charismatic orientation of the church which also defines its strong interventionist theology; and the third is the deliberate pursuit of a transnational agenda aimed at influencing and transforming society. Indeed from its logo to the use and display of banners in worship and the international agenda of its founder, the transnational significance of 'Embassy of God' is evident. Catherine Wanner captures succinctly the meaning of the logo as follows:

The symbol of the Embassy of God is a globe with Africa forthrightly positioned in the center. The globe is capped by a golden crown with a cross. Just below the crown is a light emanating from Ukraine, which remains otherwise unmarked. The light from Ukraine shines throughout Europe and the Middle East. Africa figures prominently, but the light and energy of the church emanate from Ukraine around the world.⁹

The name of the church was also chosen to reflect the transnational understanding of Christian mission:

The Church is the representative of God on the earth—His 'Embassy'. Therefore, we—children of God are the citizens of His Divine Kingdom and not citizens of this world! The Blessed Kingdom of God [is] a place of destruction of curses. At the head of every kingdom is a king. Our King is Jesus Christ! He is the Lord of all nations;...Jesus Christ is the Savior for everyone,

irrespective of his age, color or skin, nationality and social status.¹⁰

What are the means and strategies by which 'Embassy of God' attempts to impact Eastern Europe with the gospel and reach the world for Christ? First what 'Embassy of God' challenges or responds to, as far as Ukrainian society is concerned, is what we have referred to as the dry denominationalism of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the spiritual poverty of the society through which the devil is believed to have blinded people. The level of social deviance and dislocation is phenomenal. In an autobiographical work on both his personal life and the church, one of Pastor Sunday Adelaja's Ukrainian pastors says this of him:

This is the chosen of God; he has been planted in Ukraine to help turn around the lives of the people, the country and the history of the Ukrainian people. He is a person of destiny through whom God is saving not only some individuals but a whole nation. A country that was so oppressed, firstly by communism and then poverty and corruption, is now starting to experience freedom.¹¹

In attempting to understand the transnational appeal of 'Embassy of God' it is important not to lose sight of the religious dimension of the life of the church and its global resonances.

¹⁰ Stated in *Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations: 8th Anniversary Brochure* (Kyiv, 2002), 5.

¹¹ Galina Korobka in Alyona Dobrovolskaya ed., *Olorunwa: The Roads of Life-There is God: Portrait of Sunday Adelaja* (Kyiv: Fares Publishing, 2007), 180, 181.

⁹ Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 214.

Spirit and Experience

'Embassy of God', we have noted, belongs firmly to the new Pentecostal/charismatic stream of Christianity with its emphasis on the experiences of new birth, graces of the Spirit and empowerment for ministry. Like the global Pentecostal movement, it challenges the staid, silent, and ordered forms of religion offered by such older denominations as the Eastern Orthodox Church. As forcefully argued by Wanner, all of the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine consider Orthodoxy an attribute of Ukrainian nationality. In other words, a Ukrainian is by definition Orthodox and therefore Christian. In her words: 'Orthodox identity is geographically defined and automatically inherited.'¹² In contrast to the routine processes of incorporation into membership associated with such historic denominations as the Orthodox churches, 'Embassy of God' offers an experiential religion that challenges the inherited Christian identities of the older traditions as inadequate for the Spirit-human encounter. The elements of supernatural interpretations of the enigmas of life, interventions through healing and powerful conversions as Adogame observes, 'appeal to the spiritual sensibilities of Ukrainians' and this is significant if seen against the backdrop of 'a context and people barely getting over the hangover of a Marxist-socialist *Weltanschauung*'.¹³

Sunday Adelaja's 'Embassy of God' is popular because, as members testify, it offers a religious menu that satisfies the spiritual hunger, thirst and emptiness fostered by socialism on the people of Eastern Europe. The sense of release, empowerment and fulfillment that I experience among the members during my visits to 'Embassy of God' are palpable. Adogame further observes, and rightly so, that these features bordering on the supernatural in religion were not totally alien to the Eastern European context but only marginalized through years of 'secular thinking' that characterized the Soviet regime.¹⁴ In addition to his alien background, obviously worsened by his being African, it is the fact that Pastor Adelaja is responding to seemingly mundane complexities of life with religious answers that makes Ukrainian society see his religion as 'foreign'. It is thus not surprising that the Eastern Orthodox Church has become his bitterest critic and opponent.

Mission Strategies

At the root of this approach to the life of the church is how 'Pentecostals *interpret* and *preach* the Bible'. Consequently, Ogbu U. Kalu calls attention to the importance of paying attention to Pentecostal hermeneutics as 'a specific lens for reading the Bible seriously'.¹⁵ The religious discourse reaffirms that Pentecostalism is preeminently a religious movement and

12 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 136.

13 Adogame, 'Up, Up Jesus! Down, Down Satan! African Religiosity in the Former Soviet Bloc—the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations', *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, vol. 37 (2008), 321.

14 Adogame, 'Up, Up Jesus!', 321-322.

15 Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

should be studied as such. The nature of its presence, self-understanding, what it says, does, and how it witnesses are important. People are attracted by its message and by its hermeneutics of trust, its certitudes and claim to stand on the word. Therefore, we should study its theology and practices.¹⁶ Pastor Sunday Adelaja's Christian story and the theological orientation of his church means the Holy Spirit obviously features prominently in the movement he leads, giving it its Pentecostal character. Paul Tillich indicts Protestantism for replacing ecstatic experiences in religion with doctrinal and moral structure.¹⁷ Even before Tillich, Rudolf Otto in his classic work, *The Idea of the Holy*, bemoaned the fact that Orthodox Christianity had not been able to keep the non-rational element in religion alive. Orthodox Christianity had failed to recognize the value of the non-rational dimensions of religion and by this failure, he said, it 'gave to the idea of God a one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation'.¹⁸

My December 2007 visit was during the church's Winter Fast, the second of two that are held annually. The meetings which lasted twelve days were divided into two sessions of about six hours each. Praise and worship alone took two full hours during each six-hour session. This was followed by the word, testimonies, presentations of the various ministries of the church and then

prayer sessions. The prayer sessions were loud, emotional, aggressive and seriously and thoroughly Pentecostal with mass praying in tongues and singing in the Spirit. The focus was not simply on 'Embassy of God' but on seeking the Lord's face to break through in world mission and evangelism and help establish the kingdom of God among all peoples. On the last day, the colours of nations available were prayed over using them as points of contact for God's word to reach and touch the peoples of those countries. This is therefore a thoroughly Pentecostal movement that has set its sights on world mission and transformation. But exactly how is this being accomplished?

The Message

One of the most striking things about 'Embassy of God' is the large numbers of previously 'un-churched' persons who have responded to its evangelical message. This is a message that stresses the born-again experience, that is, acceptance of Christ as personal Saviour as the only way to become a Christian. The evangelical practice of the Altar Call in which persons convicted by the message are invited to make a public confession of sin and acceptance of Christ is standard practice. Being a Pentecostal church Baptism of the Holy Spirit and Speaking in Tongues are also integral to the spirituality of 'Embassy of God'. The presence of converted members of mafia gangs, prostitutes and drug addicts and their public testimonies are having a great effect on Ukrainian society in particular. It is impossible to meet any of the over three thousand leaders and pastors of 'Embassy of God' who has

¹⁶ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, xiii.

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 117.

¹⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 3.

not been an ex-prison convict. Their dramatic and profound conversion stories have brought 'Embassy of God' to a stage where government agencies bring social deviants to Pastor Sunday Adelaja to do with them what has been done to all the others.

The fundamental message that is preached by Pastor Sunday Adelaja that Jesus is the Saviour of the world has also brought about many dramatic conversions involving former members of the Orthodox Church. As a result, 'Embassy of God' is included in the numbers of new religious movements that the Orthodox Church classifies as 'unwanted sectarians' in Ukrainian society.¹⁹ Former members of a historical church with a proud past and tradition are turning their backs on an Orthodox Church that is part of the political establishment and embracing a new movement led by a theologically unsophisticated alien who is literally turning their world upside down. It is these transformations evident in the lives of former drug addicts, prostitutes, leaders of mafia gangs and converted politicians that have brought Adelaja to attention and given him international significance.

Interventionist Theology

The strategy that Pastor Sunday Adelaja has employed is to bring nonbelievers under conviction and 'to yield such impressive and rapid growth', Wanner notes, 'trades on spiritually rooted understandings of illness and cure.' The original and core membership of the church is made up of recovering addicts and their grateful family mem-

bers, who see the addict's cure and transformation as a 'miracle', testimony to 'God's grace'. In December 2007 I discovered that each of the groups of people who had received the Spirit's intervention and been transformed from all kinds of social vices has been constituted into different ministries that reach out to their own. Former alcoholics, prostitutes, the homeless and the like now have ministries that reach out to those struggling with the problems they had until God found them through Adelaja's ministry.

Natasha was an alcoholic wreck when she met Adelaja. She is now one of the most senior pastors at Embassy of God and for those who knew her in her previous life Natasha symbolizes for them a clear case of return from 'death' to 'life'. Indeed, Pastor Adelaja himself considers that he broke through in ministry as a result of the conversion experiences of his initial membership. The story is best told in his own words:

People ask me where my breakthrough in ministry started....My breakthrough came when I left the pulpit and went to the streets to look for the outcasts....when I reached out to them, doors opened wide for my ministry. Someone in our church knew of a hospital where drunkards were kept, so I began to go there and beg for the doctors to give me an hour to be with the patients. I would bring along Natasha who testified to how she was delivered from alcoholism, and then I prayed for the patients. There, my ministry began.²⁰

19 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 4.

20 Adelaja, *Churchshift*, 97-98.

It is testimonies like these that brought Pastor Sunday Adelaja and his 'Embassy of God' to attention. The testimonies were powerful, they brought in the numbers and it is these numbers that have given him transnational significance as one who is charismatic and who has a credible and proven ministry.

Influencing Society in the Power of the Spirit

The socio-economic dislocations that Soviet society suffered in the wake of the collapse of communism meant that people were looking for hope in the midst of hopelessness. Thus one of the key strategies of 'Embassy of God' is to empower people through physical wealth that they might in turn influence Ukrainian society. The church encourages members to bring Christian influence into economics, real estate, banking and industry, entertainment and indeed into any other area of life in which the Spirit chooses to locate an individual. Pastor Adelaja gave them a practical example by getting actively involved in the Orange Revolution. At our December 2007 meeting, his explanation for getting involved in Ukrainian politics was simple: 'communism edged religion out of public space but democracy ensures freedom of religion and worship'. He therefore figured that getting involved in such a revolutionary movement helped to restore democracy and contributed to the great influence that he now has in the society. As Adogame notes, the involvement of local influential figures, captains of industry and

leading political figures in 'Embassy of God' 'will undoubtedly have visible political, economic and strategic implications for its continued visibility and growing institutionalization'.²¹

Conclusion

'Embassy of God' is but one example of how God is using minority groups such as single immigrants to impact Europe and North America with the gospel. This has been referred to by some as a process of the reversal of Christian mission in which the geographical origins of the early missionary enterprise have become the mission fields of the 21st century. The exploits of African led mega-size churches in the contemporary West recall for me the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, 'But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.' It was unthinkable just two decades ago that African Pentecostal Christian immigrants could be the people through whom God might restore vitality to the lives of people in the former heartlands of Christianity. However, through these minority groups, the Spirit is working by drawing attention to the viability of the gospel of Jesus Christ in former Christian contexts that have jettisoned Christian values in favour of moral relativism and secularization.

21 Adogame, 'Up, Up Jesus!', 319.