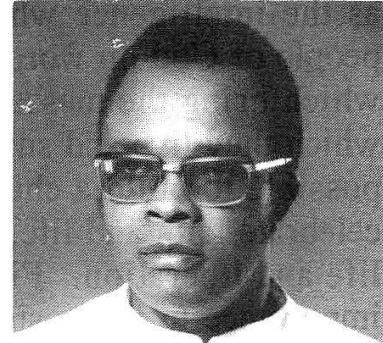


## *Incarnating Christianity in African World-views*

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The call by Pope John Paul II for a Special Synod on Africa to discuss the theme: *The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000*, in many ways can be said to have come at the fullness of time.

The year 2000, is only nine years away. Nimibia, the last African country under colonial rule, became independent in 1989. With the announcement of President De Klerk of South Africa of the intention of his government to dismantle apartheid, the total political independence of the whole of Africa appears to be in sight.

The Christian Churches in Africa are growing very fast. Catholics in 1986 numbered about 75 million or 13.11% of the entire population of Africa. Vocations to priestly and religious life are abundant. Over three quarters of the 481 Bishops in Africa are Africans. The Church has doubled its population in Africa in the past ten years. So the Church needs to reappraise her evangelizing mission at the threshold of the third millenium in order to maintain and exceed the present successes and re-define its orientations and goals.<sup>1</sup>

The evident success of missionary work in Africa is seen in the teeming numbers of Africans who have embraced Christianity. Missionaries, in spite of their constant striving for deeper commitment among their converts, complain of a lack of depth

in faith and commitment. In fact the proliferation of Afro-Christian indigenous churches, according to Trimmingham, was due to the intolerance of missionaries of the tendency of the new African converts to introduce elements of traditional religion into Christianity. This led to formation of breakaway groups. Other explanations of this paradox in massive conversions to Christianity and mixing tendencies in converts are equally interesting.

Horton's thesis is that the conversion from African traditional religions to Christianity or Islam is as much due to the development of the traditional African world-view in response to features of the modern situation as it is to the activities of the missionaries. It would appear, he argues, that the beliefs and practices of the two world religions are accepted where they coincide with responses of the traditional cosmology to other non-missionary factors of the modern situation, and so Christianity and Islam are in fact "catalysts", "stimulators and accelerators of changes which were in the air anyway".<sup>2</sup> Ejizu blames the tendency "to mix" in African Christians on:

the dominant method of evangelism hitherto adopted by the older Christian groups in the country, and failure of the missionaries as well as indigenous church leaders to come to terms with the traditional cosmology.<sup>3</sup>

Central to the problem is the issue of a system of evangelization which could cope with the influx of converts into Christianity and inculturate Christianity in African world-views. Perhaps, in this connection, it will be a help to define more clearly the two key concepts of "evangelization" and "inculturation".

## **Evangelization**

Evangelization has been variously defined as "bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity", "a regeneration of man's culture and cultures in a vital way, through the power of the Gospel".<sup>4</sup> Evangelization usually involves a two phase movement as seen in the distinction often made between *Extensive and Intensive Evangelization*. *Extensive evangelization* focuses on recruiting individuals or communities to embrace Christianity. It does not focus on the depth of the Christianization and the Christian commitment of the individual and the community evangelized. An *Intensively Christianized* community would also witness to the transformation of different levels of

its life, its laws, customs, moral values and its world-view with the light of the Gospel. In the former case (extensive evangelization) church membership is mere adhesion.<sup>5</sup> Intensive evangelization necessarily involves inculturation. One could legitimately raise the question: Could the missionaries or their immediate successors, given the influx into the Church, have coped with the equally urgent task of intensive evangelization? This is doubtful. This is because every intensive evangelization involves inculturation and christianization of not just the individuals and communities, but also the world-view, milieu, and contexts in which converts will live out their faith. This is better done by the evangelized themselves who understand their world-view and have lived and will live out their new faith in these milieux. Hence the evangelization of Africa into the third millennium will primarily be the responsibility of the African Christians themselves. Its focus would be the evangelization or Christianization of African world-views, cultures, institutions and values. Hence the "Lineamenta" has appropriately warned that "the Church in Africa will have to tackle inculturation as a matter of necessity and urgency in her evangelizing mission. Inculturation is most intimately and inseparably linked to the proclamation of the Good News of salvation."<sup>6</sup>

### **Inculturation**

There has been some controversy about the concept and understanding of inculturation. The call by the SECAM report to the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome, for the "incarnation" rather than "adaptation" of the Christian message to African cultures, is theologically more sound and seems to have been adopted by the "Lineamenta" itself.

This inculturation of the process through which the Christian faith is "incarnated" in cultures is bound by its very nature to the proclamation of the Gospel."<sup>7</sup>

It argues that just as the Logos incarnated into the Jewish cultural milieu, illuminated, elevated, judged and purified it, so the word of God incarnated in African culture should elevate, judge and purify African traditions. Thus the Church has maintained the principle of "the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures - and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the church".<sup>8</sup> In this way, each people and each culture can

contribute to enrich the common patrimony of the universal church.

This paper is an exercise in incarnation theology. It will attempt to see how a new understanding of the Word of God or the Gospel message could be incarnated in some African world-views and some cultural beliefs and practices which derive from them. This should lead to drawing from the culture, insights, understandings, practices and ingenuity of the people to express authentically their newly embraced faith. This will enable them to appropriate the faith, live the faith, and witness to Christ in every aspect of their lives. I have already tried to do a similar exercise in an earlier article.<sup>9</sup>

### **African World-views**

A world-view primarily seeks to answer the fundamental questions about the place and relationship of persons with the universe. Prof. Ogbu Kalu describes a world-view as the unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of individuals and communities in them.<sup>10</sup> World-views assist one to explain reality, make one feel secure in an otherwise inexplicable universe and enable one to explain, predict and control events in it. However, a people's world-view does not consist only in the beliefs about the number and relative powers of the beings in them but also, and more importantly, of the laws that govern the relationships between them. So knowledge of the people's world-view is key to understanding their social, political, religious and even psychological problems.

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Within the African world-views all beings can be said to belong to either of two worlds: the visible and/or invisible world. The visible world consists of the material surroundings familiar to people, while the invisible world contains the spiritual beings, the Supreme Being, the deities, the spirits, the ances-

tors and the evil spirits.

The pattern of organisation of the spiritual world varies with each cultural group, just as their ecology and social organization are known to vary. In fact the organization of the spiritual realm of most groups often reflects their ecology and social organization simply because it is designed to explain them.

### *Incarnating Christianity in African World-views*

It has been suggested that incarnating Christianity in African world-views would be a worthless exercise, for two reasons. First, African world-views are not one but many. Secondly, amid the sweeping changes engulfing African societies, African world-views are undergoing fundamental transformations. One should observe, however, that amidst the varieties of African world-views, there is an underlying unity. And amidst the changes, there are elements that remain the same.

Edwin Smith and Parrinder have both pointed out the significant differences between the world-view of many West African peoples, and those of East and Central African peoples. According to Smith, "whereas the West African societies have prominent places for nature spirits in the cosmology...the spirits of the Bantu are mostly those of human beings who continue to live in the unseen world."<sup>11</sup> Thus whereas the Bantu would normally have four categories of spiritual being: the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors and magical forces, many West African peoples would recognize five categories of spiritual beings: the Supreme Being, the deities, spirits, ancestors, and magical forces. There are, of course, notable exceptions. The Tiv of Nigeria have neither deities nor ancestral cult, while some areas of Igboland do not believe in witchcraft.

However, there is much that is common to African world-views: the religious view of the universe, the role of the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors, magic and sorcery, notions about the problems of evil and so forth.

Amidst the sweeping changes in Africa, African world-views are still very much alive and still have very strong influence on the people. The African Bishop's Report to the Synod says that 17% or 64 million Africans are still believers and practitioners of African Traditional Religion.<sup>12</sup> That alone is sufficient reason for taking their traditional religion seriously.

Secondly, the traditional world-view is continually reflected in the thoughts and attitudes of African Christians and Muslims.

Thirdly, one has to reckon seriously with the conscious recovery of a neo-African culture by the intelligentsia and their considered rejection of Western systems of thought and evaluation. The Report to the Synod warns:

The African is proud of his culture and religious tradition. Since there has been great confusion between Christianity and Western culture, the African is thinking of going back to his traditional religious practices.<sup>13</sup>

This essay will focus on a number of elements common to most African world-views which can effect the desired inculturation. Here, I will comment briefly on each of these characteristic elements. A number of African Independent Churches have had some experience of inculturating Christianity in African world-views which are useful for our discussion. At least, one can reflect on their endeavors and learn from their successes and mistakes.

### **The Religious View of the Universe**

"Africans are notoriously religious" says Mbiti. Religion permeates into all the aspects of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it. The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the supernatural and the natural, which is so characteristic of Western world-view is strikingly absent in African world-views. Rather characteristic of African world-views is what Taylor has described as "that sense of cosmic oneness which is an essential feature of primal religions".<sup>14</sup> The booklet *Meeting African Religions* published by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (previously the Secretariat for Non-Christians) expresses it thus:

The "mens Africana" has the intuition that there is a power transcending the universe...this vision of the world is spiritualist because it brings man face to face with transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

One has only to remark that it is a similar religious world-view that undergirds the Biblical message. However, Jewish religion affirms that Yahweh, and no other, is Lord of all nature as well as Lord of history. African world-views believe that the deities, spirits and ancestors underpin and control different spheres of the world order. Events in the life of the individual, the tribe and the nation are interpreted as the interplay between the human and the divine. Hence, a person seeks the approval of God, the deities before embarking on even the ordinary af-

fairs of daily life. There is, however, an essential difference between this spiritual view of the world and the biblical one. The biblical religious world-view is essentially monotheistic, and, God's intervention builds up to the history of salvation which has its culmination in the Christ event.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of colonialism and modernization, accompanied by secularization and materialism, on traditional society was a devastating experience for most Africans born and bred in the pre-colonial African traditional society characterized by this spiritual view of life. Western Christianity preached by the missionaries, which had accepted the secularised world-view, offered them no relief. Furthermore, the biblical world-view, in contrast to the Western world-view, is nearer the African world-views. Thus spiritual churches of the African Independent Church Movement (AICM) were a protest against this attempted secularization. The "Sunday by Sunday" worship spirituality offered by the established churches was just not enough for the groups which wanted more. They first met for some "extras" as praying bands, and later became independent churches with a Pentecostal type of spirituality.

It would appear that Pentecostal spirituality with its emphasis on emotional outbursts of possession by the Holy Spirit, belief in visions, dreams and prophecy, had greater appeal for the Aladura churches. There is evidence in at least one case that the pioneers of one of the churches, i.e., the Christ Apostolic Church, were in contact by correspondence with the Faith Tabernacle of the United States. Opting for the Pentecostal type of spirituality in my view is a protest against the legacy of secularization and materialism brought by colonialism and tolerated by the orthodox churches. Other measures taken by the Aladura to stem the tide of secularization include creating sacred places like "The Mercy Land", sacralizing conspicuous spots like hills and streams, display of holy objects like wearing the soutane, holy water, holy oil, etc. Barrett notes that this trend is characteristic of AICM all over the continent--holy villages, holy places for vigils, renewal centres, open-air worship sites, etc.<sup>17</sup>

How should Christianity be incarnated in African culture or African Christianity respond to the process of secularization which Euro-Christian culture is exporting to all parts of the world? Islam has consistently resisted this secularization. The

Islamic revolution in Iran demonstrates how violent the rejection can be. The problem of the secularity of the state is a serious political issue in many African countries. Should Nigeria be a secular state? Muslims in Nigeria say no, Christians say, yes. Should religious groups run schools and hospitals? Should religious symbols, e.g., the cross, be displayed in public places? Should there be prayers before public functions? These are questions asked by Western Christian-minded people in Africa. For Muslims, these questions do not arise. The state itself should be religious. For the Aladura, for example, these questions should not have arisen. Given the chance they would opt for the sacralization of the whole of life, including the state, for "The Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the world and all its people." (Ps 23)

### **God and the Deities**

In African traditional religion God is one and many. God is creator and controller of the world, who leaves the day to day administration to the deities. Therefore, deep personal worship and communion are with the deities and rarely with God. This gives the impression that God is withdrawn and unconcerned. Worship of the spirits tends to be manipulative, worship of God, where it is found, is one of resignation. For, God is all powerful and no matter what a person may do, God will always win out.

Aladura theology, which is a form of inculturated Christianity to safeguard the unity of the Godhead, expelled the deities from the Godhead, and banished them as evil spirits who are still powerful but work against humans. Involvement with and care of the world is now the responsibility of the Supreme God. The type of worship formerly given to the deities is now transferred to God. This tends to be manipulative. Prayers to God have predictable results. The obtaining of results is conditioned by the observance of a number of taboos. The obtaining of results is essential, for religion if anything, must ensure the enhancement of one's life in this world. God is morally concerned. Anyone who pleases him will be rewarded. Those who dare approach him unworthily will be punished.

Aladura spirituality thus projects an image of God similar to that found in the Old Testament. God is seen as a *Rex Tremendae Majestatis*, a God of Justice, who would punish sinners who



dared approach him. The God of Love, who manifested himself in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, is lost sight of. Their Christology sees Christ as the wonder worker, the exorcist who sends the devils packing, and rarely Christ, the suffering Messiah, a model for accepting and bearing sufferings that come our way. The Holy Spirit is appreciated for the emotions with which he ladens those he possesses, and for the gifts of "Agbara" which enable the beneficent to perform wonderful deeds.<sup>18</sup> Rarely is the Spirit seen as Sanctifier who indwells a saintly soul. One dares to say that these beliefs and attitudes are not the preserve of the Christians of the Independent Churches. They are shared by a large number of members of the orthodox mission churches because they are aspects of Christian beliefs that correspond to the traditional African world-views. Intense catechesis is necessary to effect a balance between these aspects of the orthodox Christian theology which are still vague to the ordinary Christian.

### **Life Enhancement**

Any incarnation of Christianity into African world-views must look seriously at two important traditional African beliefs: the belief that the goal of existence is life-enhancement, and the belief that life itself is a spiritual combat. Thus Newell Booth writes, "if religion is defined in terms of ultimate concerns, we can say that for the Baluba, this is focussed on the enhancement of human existence rather than on the natural world or the divine."<sup>19</sup> "It is as if God exists for the sake of man" adds Mbiti.<sup>20</sup>

According to this philosophy, human life is enhanced as long as a person lives in harmony with the Divinity, humanity and nature. Thus, a person feels responsible to maintain this order and harmony, and constantly prays and consults divination and engages in rituals to restore this harmony when it is disturbed. Good health, long life, children and prosperity are signs of enhanced life, while constant deaths and misfortunes are signs of diminution of life.

This quest for life becomes an obsession when it is linked with the equally strong belief that life is a spiritual combat between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The mission of a person is to ensure the victory of life over death by enlisting

the support of the good spirits: God, the deities and ancestors to overcome the powers of darkness: evil spirits, witches and sorcerers. A person does this "through prayers and rituals of all types. This is the whole essence of African religion" says Mveng<sup>21</sup> This, one could also add, is the whole essence of Aladura Christianity and the spirituality of many African Christians.

The Aladura response to this belief is very attractive to many African Christians. African Christians accept that worshipping the deities, consulting oracles and diviners and making charms are wrong, but they cannot be persuaded that the assumptions of life-enhancement and life as a spiritual combat are wrong. This is why many Africans in mission churches hold on to their charms and privately engage in rituals to the gods in times of crisis. Mission churches which operate out of the Westernised world-view, have for long engaged in the futile exercise of trying to convince them to give up these assumptions of the African world-view. This is why they easily join into the spiritual churches. For unlike the mission churches, the spiritual churches accept the assumption that life is a spiritual combat, and that religion should ensure life-enhancement. The spiritual churches quickly assure the people that they have the means of ensuring their safety once they give up their gods and their charms, i.e., prayers, dreams, prophecy and the Agbara/charisma of their leaders. Much to the amazement of the mission churches, they see their strongest members surrendering heavy charms at Aladura revivals.

Recently, some Catholic priests in Nigeria have begun to organise revival ministries using this Aladura approach. They argue that you must begin to work with the Africans where they are, not where they ought to be. The spirits may not be real (debatable) but their fear of the spirits is real. If you ask them to surrender their charms, you must offer them some alternatives to assure them of adequate protection. The scenes of the crowds which gather for Fr. Godwin Ikeobi's prayer ministry, at Fr. Emmanuel Edeh's Catholic Prayer Ministry services at Elele, Port-Harcourt diocese, and at Fr. Osuigwe's in Lagos diocese validate the effectiveness of this approach.

## **Communal Dimension of Spirituality**

African traditions have effected a symbiosis between their recognition of a human being as an individual person, and as a member of the community. The uniqueness of an individual person with a unique mission is well illustrated by the West African beliefs regarding "destiny" referred to above. An Igbo proverb says, "Two brothers may come out of the same womb, but no two people have identical destinies". Yet perhaps one of the most original values in African religious traditions is the Africans' sense of community. Life to be meaningful must be lived in community. From birth an African learns to believe that "I am because I belong". The basic community is the family which is made up of the living, the dead and those yet to be born. It is at the same time a residential, social and worshipping community. The clan, the tribe and the nation are family communities. Participation in the life of the community at whatever level is considered a strict duty and the right of all.

Barrett has noted that African revival movements both within the established churches and the independent churches all centre around the basic African concept of the people of God as a community, and the legitimacy of Christianizing African traditional concepts and practices.<sup>22</sup> They are often based on the traditional social structural patterns of small face to face communities rather than divisions into large territorial units and large impersonal congregational gatherings characteristic of the established mission churches.

Relationship within the group is characterized by fellowship, "agape", communal life and sometimes communal ownership of land and agricultural commercial enterprises. In some places there is "The Lord's Acre", i.e, plots for church crops. There is also stress on philanthropic funds, burial societies and mutual help societies. At the same time, the small size of the communities permits the pastor to give needed spiritual counseling and attend to the other needs of individual members.

The orthodox churches must urgently find solutions to the problem of the large numbers of their fast growing congregations. They are often more aware of their gains than their losses. However, with the large numbers and limited number of pastors they can do very little to assist the spiritual growth of their faithful. The , AMECEA (Association of Members of

Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa), which unites the Catholic Episcopal Conferences of many East African countries seems to think that the answer lies in organising their faithful into Basic Christian Communities (BCC). This experiment seems to have had some measure of success in Latin America. Since 1976 they have been working on how the BCC might be realised in their own African contexts.<sup>23</sup> The Independent Churches' experience will certainly be very useful.

### **This Worldly**

African traditional religions are essentially this worldly. They are primarily concerned with the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events. Religious cult is expected to guarantee long life, health, and prosperity. A person looks up to religion to provide security and protection against the machinations of evil spirits and human enemies. A human's mission on earth is to realise a God-assigned destiny. Success depends on how a person marshals the favourable forces through rituals, sacrifices, vows, offerings, and medicines to neutralize the machinations of the forces of evil. Divination reveals to a person the snares of the enemy and the appropriate ritual remedy to apply. This is in fact the central concern of traditional religion. Prof. Kalu presents a characteristic but extreme situation:

A votary would variously plead with patron gods, placate evil spirits and end up threatening the god that if he failed to perform, his grove would be overgrown with grass. After all what use could there be in a god, or charm, which failed to yield dividends?<sup>22</sup>

Incarnated Christianity should take a careful look at this tendency which is still very strong in African converts. The Aladura churches have tried to accommodate this through their claim that they are able to diagnose the causes of this world's misfortunes by means of dreams and visions and to be able to avert or remedy much misfortune by means of prayer and ritual.<sup>23</sup> They believe that prayer to God, properly conducted, brings definite, predictable results in the world of space and time events. Thus prayers can cure diseases, bring financial success, secure promotion and so on. The effectiveness of prayer is conditional on the observance of a number of taboos, e.g., against the eating of pork and contact with menstruating

women. The effectiveness of prayer is enhanced by use of the psalms, and some symbolic objects like candles, perfumes, incense, etc.<sup>24</sup>

One may object to the Aladura methods of satisfying the this-worldly aspirations of their members. However, one must admit that the Christianity brought by the missionaries has tended to neglect the legitimate this-worldly aspirations of its adherents. The Gospel narratives are full of accounts of crowds who flocked after Christ to obtain some healing and other this-worldly requests. And, in most cases, Christ granted their requests. Incarnated Christianity should pay more attention to the people's this-world requests and work out some rites and rituals for presenting these requests. This, however, should not overshadow the spiritual goals of Christianity which are other-worldly, e.g. eternal life.

## Conclusion

On the one hand, there is a close correlation between evangelization and inculturation and on the other between inculturation and the people's world-view. Evangelization is spreading or sharing the Gospel message. The purpose of all evangelization is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (Jn. 20:31) This is also the aim of inculturation. To be effective the presentation of the Gospel must be adapted to the conditions, situation, and understanding of the people to whom it is addressed., For as St. Thomas of Aquinas says *quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur*. This is an essential principle of inculturation. On the other hand a people's world-view is like a compass with which it finds its way through this vast, strange and often threatening universe. So it becomes absolutely necessary that to influence the lives and destiny of African peoples the Gospel must be incarnated in African world-views.

A century's preaching of the Gospel in Africa has produced the paradoxical result of being simultaneously a resounding success and a failure: a success in the teeming numbers who have accepted Christianity; a failure in the degree of commitment. There are persistent reports from all over the continent that many African Christians live double lives. They mix tradi-

tional and Christian beliefs, or syncretise the two sets of beliefs. Missionaries accuse Africans of half-hearted response. Africans accuse missionaries of misunderstanding their cultures and traditions. Both are correct; no one is to blame. The collapse of African traditional social structures on which traditional religions are based have forced Africans to take refuge in the Christian churches (and in Islam). Islam in Africa, according to Trimmingham, accords its new adherents citizenship status and allows them time to adjust before expecting them to comply with the full law and responsibilities expected of a Muslim. Christian missions in Africa reversed the approach. It allowed them a brief period within its ranks as "refugees" during which it hastily instructed them (the catechumenate). Then it admitted them into the full citizenship of the Kingdom of God (through Baptism). They are then accorded the full rights of a citizen with full responsibilities and are expected to perform. Who is to blame if they fail to perform?

This paper has primarily addressed the question of what has gone wrong and what can be done about it. The answer is: for the Gospel to impact and direct the lives of African peoples it must be incarnated in their world-views. Just as "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us", and was able to save us, so also for the Gospel message to remain alive in Africa and provide salvation to Africans it must be incarnated in Africa. The effectiveness of this solution is as clear to me as the moon. What is not clear to me is how to proceed with the task of incarnating Christianity in African world-views.

What I have done in this paper is to study the efforts at inculturation in some independent churches in Nigeria and to evaluate the results they achieved theologically, and then to make some suggestions based on their successes and failures.

Effective inculturation begins when viable theological suggestions are applied to the whole area of pastoral life: evangelization, catechetics, the liturgy, homiletics, the sacraments, and the ordinary daily religious life of Christians. There should be cooperation between inculturation theologians and competent ecclesiastical authorities who are the people's pastors. In other words, inculturation spans the whole area of theological and pastoral ministries in the Church. Pastors must support the findings of theologians; otherwise all will be nothing but fine talk unable to effect the much desired intensive evangelization.

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