

An Assessment of Religious Syncretism. A Case Study in Africa

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Abstract Since the coming of the Gospel in Africa, the African Christians have not considered it very significant in their lives. In spite of all the missionary endeavours to dismiss belief in occult and superstitions as demonic, these beliefs are a reality in the lives of many Christians in Kenya. While the western churches are grappling with contemporary anti-Christian doctrines such as existentialism, secularism and universalism, atheism among others, the African churches are busy fighting with magic, witchcraft, and spirit possession among others. This is notorious reality and therefore much time and space need to be dedicated towards investigation on the subject. Some people are asking: is it some kind of liberation theology or African spirituality at its best.

Keywords Christianity, Gospel, Religion, Syncretism

1. Introduction

On 20th October, 1994, the President of Kenya appointed His Grace Archbishop Nicodemus Kirima of the Catholic Arch-diocese of Nyeri to head the Presidential Commission of Devil worship. The commission undertook a thorough inquiry into devil worship. The data collected was so perplexing and scandalous such that the president demanded that they be concealed from the public (Wachege, 2000: 94). The report was indicative that devil worship and occultism pervades all the secular and sacred realms of life, with some faith-healers, pastors, evangelists, priests, sister-nuns, students, pupils, top government officials and common (Citizens) implicated. Very pious Christians are drifting to occultism, thus doubling up as magicians and miracle or wonder workers. This is done either for fame, (money) or as poverty eradication strategy.

In Kenya, Christian crusades, which have become the order of the day, are reported to have brought about healing and conversions, that is, several people rising from wheel chairs, leaving crutches, blind eyes and deaf ears being opened and verified in public. Such occurrences have raised a lot of controversies. Where medical verifications have been sought to confirm the healing, the findings have been more scandalous than affirming the work of the Holy Spirit. Some people call this kind of 'holy spirit' Roho mtaka chafu or Roho Mtaka kitu. Cases have been cited where healthy people have been planted in the meetings with crutches or on

wheel chairs, with instructions in advance, to step forward and abandon their crutches or wheel chairs at the crucial moment of 'healing' (Kigame, 2000). In our media, the televangelists have been seen or heard claiming that miracles and wonderful signs will occur to those who watch and listen to their television broadcasts. They claim that people will be canceling funeral service by bringing their dead person in a casket before a Television screen as the programme is being transmitted, so that the dead will be raised.

2. Objectives

Specifically, the study set to examine the reasons behind syncretism and the demand and relevance of inculturation for cultural development, assess inculturation message to Africa, determine the role of Syncretism and examine the impact of inculturation in African Church.

3. Methods

The study was based on both primary and secondary data collected for a period of two years. The study was principally qualitative in nature based on qualitative techniques of data analysis.

4. Results

The scriptures are very explicit about satanic power or demonic infestation. Leviticus 19:31 states that we should not recognise those that have familiar spirits, neither seek after the wizards because they defile us. Therefore any pe-

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ripheral involvement in the occult opens a doorway for syncretism. One of the biggest doorway for syncretism in church worship is the Christian involvement in occult practices such as visiting seances and fortune-tellers, playing with ones horoscopes, participation in magic of any kind, consulting mediums or spiritists in an attempt to locate some missing object(s), practice of placing curses, hexes, or a spell on someone, hypnosis and acupuncture. The list could be endless. Perhaps Christians need to control of their thoughts and actions so as not to drift to occultism and be syncretistic. While it is a fact that there are some malevolent powers in action, it is noteworthy that dealing with such forces is a big theological problem nowadays. The problem calls for full time ministry to discern and deal with these forces, a ministry that is not for every one.

Some pastors have devoted much time in their ministry to develop contextual African pastoral care for member Christians who consider themselves struck by malevolent powers. A case in point is Emmanuel Milingo, the former catholic Arch-bishop of Lusaka (Zambia). Throughout his priestly ministry, he devoted much time to healing people who were afflicted by malevolent powers (Milingo, 1984). To his dismay he was summoned by the Vatican authorities to undergo a thorough interrogation and psychiatric investigation to ascertain whether he was syncretistic, or suffering from some mental aberrations or delusions. Another case involves Masamba Ma Mpolo, the former Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Vice-president of the Church of Christ in Zaire. In his treatise *Symbols and Stories in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, published in *Bulletin of African Theology*, No.11/1984, he recounts the pains he had undergone in order to overcome suspicion that he was involved occult practices. When the realities of such experiences are fresh in people's minds, any conscientious pastor willing to devote time to the problem of occultism may decide to maintain the status quo for fear of being stigmatised.

As already noted the phenomenal growth of faith healing ministries and cultic movements in Kenya today is that they are willing to address the problems of many Africans in ways that appeal to their cultures. With regard to affliction, these ministries and movements are quite ready to deal with the forces of evil directly through exorcism. We have had many cases of afflicted people who have gone to be prayed for in some 'special' churches, and once prayed for claim that they've been healed. The main question that one may ask is 'What is the source of the supernatural healing?' We need to underscore that the basic principle of exorcism is to expel the unwanted archetype by summoning another one of greater power whose command or even presence is efficacious in driving out the personified evil. The majority of people are interested in knowing something about their future or reason behind their affliction. Abogurin (1988: 132) notes that in exorcism, some healers mistake their own wishes for the will of God to ascribe to the benevolent spirits an aspiration which really comes from malevolent forces or from natural dislikes. Bearing this in mind, how are we to evaluate a person who claims that a supernatural healing has come to

him/her?

The first source could be explained in natural terms. In other words, sometimes one is hypnotised to believe that a supernatural experience has occurred, as in the case of hallucination, trances, optical illusions or hyperactive imagination. In this case suffice it to mention that about 80% of people's sicknesses are psychological. In some cases, something strange really happens, but the explanation is that the person undergoing the healing is fooled or tricked in some way. Stage magicians, or the so-called illusionists, entertain people by fooling them into thinking that they have supernatural powers. In Philippines, the traditional medicine-men claim to perform surgical operations which leave no scars or which are done without use of surgical instruments. Kole (1984) notes that these traditional surgeons are actually illusionists. The second source could be that actually something supernatural has happened. Under this circumstance, the source of the healing could be from benevolent or malevolent spirits. Not all what is 'good' comes from benevolent spirits. Malevolent spirits have the powers to bring about substantive results. Christians need to be careful not to ascribe all miracles directly to Godly manifestations. Churches are full of passive people who assume some forms of Godly powers, and so invite malevolent forces to control the Church.

In the wake of secularism, many religious movements such as the faith healing ministries have come sprang up. Most of these movements hold their healing and exorcism sessions in make shift premises such as restaurants, kiosks, halls, bus terminuses, or in the open air. Sometimes they occasionally carry out worship in stadiums such as the case of Crusades and Revivals. These movements proclaim the faith gospel doctrine, inter alia, that every Christian should be healthy and wealthy all the time, and that anyone who is sick and poor has failed in some of his/her life. Due to this health and wealth doctrine, their leaders acquire much wealth and live lavishly at the expense of their flocks (Shorter, 1999).

This wealth is acquired through overpersuasion of the adherents to give money they cannot afford to their leaders on the promise of future prosperity to be gained thereby, and that if they fail to do so, they May lose their healing. For instance, the followers of Oral Roberts, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Sun Myung Moon, whose doctrines are followed by many people in Kenya, are required to observe that (Riley, 1988). The Moonies beg in the streets or sell literature, flowers, candies, etc. for long hours of a day. In most cults, members are rendered powerless by the demands that they turn over all their material possession to the movement, so that any decision to withdraw would be extremely difficult. Thus the members of the cult and faith ministries follow the miracle monger in the hope of obtaining either immediate assistance or eventual improvement in their socio-economic statuses. The poor people due to such reasons as illiteracy, physical handicaps, criminality, or otherwise, are all accepted in these groups. Their predispositions are utilized somehow to the advantage of the leaders of these groups.

Even if a person is employed and has a high standard of living, he/she may be handicapped by the inability to comprehend some social and scientific advances which are commonplace. This may leave him/her baffled and uneasy, with intense longing for certainty to which the faith healers are ready to pander to.

Suffice is to mention that many of these faith healing ministries and cults are yielding syncretistic doctrines. The leaders of these churches make prayers a very cumbersome and very complicated procedure such that a Christian believer must seek their intervention so as to be in right relationship with God. Coupled with this is the aspect of making the sense of the selfhood quite burdensome. This represses all the rationality of the adherent, and makes him dependent on the leader of the cult or ministry. The leader plans all the activities for the adherents, and supplies them with some miraculous solutions without any self directive effort to their own. As the healer claims that what he/she offers is supernatural, whatever it may be - healing, supernatural insight, communication with the dead, life on a plane higher than human, fellowship with God, or whatever - the adherents neurotic willingness to take shortcuts, added to the intensity of their need, dynamizes their appreciation of this healer as an archetype figure and makes their mergence with him/her more complete (Riley, 1988: 296). Knowing that he/she is such a reputed person, the leader may even twist and use the scriptures to accommodate his/her whims. The leader uses the cult or ministry as the agency of exploiting the members along whatever lines. He/she may demand sacrifices, offerings or tithes which may enable him/her to lead an lavish, opulent, and trendy lifestyle.

Religion in Kenya has played a catalytic role in strengthening people in their suffering. As problems strike majority of the people, millions are thronging in the churches, cinema theatres, stadiums, and halls for prayers and healing. In such situations some preachers are making their fortunes. While most of the congregation members are living below the poverty line, the leaders of these groups are leading posh lives. They are normally very expensively dressed, exhibit opulence, and live in exclusive luxury. For instance, a casual look private lives of Kenya's televangelists confirms this. They teach that poverty is anti-Christ, and so their members should be rich. It has been reported in our media that when some televangelists conduct a rally in Kenya, they collect colossal sums of money as offering from their, majority of those who are poor (Sunday Nation, 14/5/2000). While some of those seeking healing feel healed and elated by such faith healers, others feel confused. They doubt the miraculous healing because of the crave these healers have for money and wealth. Yet others opine that the exegetical and hermeneutical methods employed by the faith-healers have no Biblical foundation, and are at best an abuse and embarrassment to Christianity.

Perhaps we need to be cognizant of the fact that these are some people who use religion and faith as chewing gum in the sense that they chew it and enjoy its sweetness, and when the sweetness is finished, throw it away. We should be wary

of these preachers who use the Bible to accommodate their whims. These are opportunists whose theatrical gestures in preaching and affluent life are seen by many people as marks of doctrinal certitude. They could probable be false prophets, magicians or sorcerers masquerading as faith healers. The book of revelation clearly warns us that some people will be able to perform miracles, signs and wonders in the last days (Revelations 19: 20ff). Therefore, Christians should not use miracles and wonders as the criteria for discerning the true faith healers.

4.1. Occultism is a Reality

There is no need for an apologetic defence. Although occultism is viewed as illegal and so denied to exist, the laws promulgated contradict themselves. For instance, witchcraft and magic are denied to exist, yet are made illegal to practice (Mutungi, 1977). There are several factors that have contributed to persistence of occult practices today.

First, occultism serves as a protection against the harsh realities of life. It still serves as means of effective protection against personal failure, family problems, malicious neighbours, car problems, witchcraft of others, etc. Second, many people seek occult powers to attain success, prosperity, health and good life. Some have used it to win court cases, succeed in politics, excel in sports and exams, win lovers, etc. In some communities, becoming a medium or a diviner makes an individual gain social prestige (Ndeti, 1972; Moreau, 1990: 125). Third, belief in the occult serves as a means of satisfying hedonistic tendencies in person. The modern economic trends are bringing forth many hardships that create a lot of tensions. Appeal to occultism tend to rise when the society undergoes socio-economic transformations that makes life harder. Occultism further provides an acceptable perception of life in terms of good and bad, evil and sin. Even when a person dies out of a terminal disease, the ultimate question why is answered through occult and so it is hard to belief that a person can die without being bewitched by a living person. Such beliefs are also found in technological areas such as car accident, plane crash, etc. Although all mechanical facts leading to the accident may be quite clear, the bone of contention is that someone, out of malice, must have been behind the cause. Therefore, the real question is not how the accident happened, but why should it be this machine, and not others. Such questions are answered by occult powers.

4.2. Protection and Fortification from Malevolent Powers

In the African traditional society, all misfortunes were believed to be caused by malevolent spirits or other supernatural forces. Health was understood in terms of the vital force or the power in one's soul. All behaviour and practices of Africans were aimed at acquiring the vital force, to live strongly (Tempels, 1952: 44 - 46). This vital force is not only incumbent in the living but also in the living dead and ancestors. Bad health therefore implies that there is disharmony

with the living or spiritual entities. This disharmony may be caused by immoral behaviour from individuals in a society.

Since bad health implies diminishing of vital force, it is imperative to know the areas where this vital abounded according to African beliefs. According to African traditional beliefs, vital force is being diffused in all organs of the human body. However, some parts have a higher concentration of this force than the others. These are the organs that are perceived to be the cradle of enmity, hatred, envy, jealousy, evil speech, false praise or lying eulogy (Tempels, 1952: 47). Thus, hair, blood, saliva, breath, faeces, urine are perceived to be highly concentrated with life force, and are therefore the materials most sought by those who wish to harm life. Also included in these materials is the eye, which plays a great role in destruction of vital forces. A person with evil eye can be driven by envy or jealousy to cast a spell on an innocent progressive individual.

To restore health, a diagnosis was needed. In the African traditional society, there were specialists who were vested with the responsibility of redressing wrongs, and thereby restore the vital force. These were diviners, in other words, persons who had supra-normal powers in favour of life. They would find out a witch or a spirit which had caused the illness, and give the procedures necessary to curb the menace (Turner, 1970). Consequently, diviners or medicine-men were the spiritual police who exposed the enemies of life (witches) to the community.

Diviners, witch-doctors, or medicine-men also played a key role in protecting life from being diminished by its enemies. Their knowledge and power would enable them give medicine for curing diseases, exorcism, making an enemy sick, seizing thieves of garden crops or trapped forest animals. They would also give medicine for good fortune, love, success, security of person and property, and also medicine against sorcery and witchcraft (Peek, 1991: 103). This medicine could be in form of herb, parts of animals or birds, charms and amulets. The medicine could be drunk or applied, or hang on certain parts of the body as in the case of charms, amulets and talisman.

4.3. Modern Perspective

Nowadays, there are many ways in which a person can get protected and saved from malevolent powers. Since many people belong to different religious persuasions, I will base my argument on Biblical aspects of protection and fortification.

We are living in a world full of evil things and Christians are called to be bold that and steadfast in faith. Nowhere in the Bible is a Christian called to be soft in warfare against evil. According to the Bible, the best defence against evil is to lead a holy, spirit-filled life. This is equivalent to leading a harmonious life in the African traditional society. Disharmony in life in Christianity implies disharmony with God. In addition to leading a holy and spirited live, Christians are called to be sober of spirit, alert, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (1 Peter 5: 8; II Cor. 10: 5ff.).

Putting on God's armour can replace all the traditional use of magical paraphernalia or any occult practices.

It is amazing that many Christians are unknowingly using magical paraphernalia and occult objects such as amulets, fetish and talisman to protect themselves. In these objects, something occult such as hair, magic, water or blood is incorporated into the object. These objects include crucifixes, pendants, ear-rings, wedding or engagement rings, hagstones, etc. Similarly, Christians are unknowingly using demonic marks in their daily lives. Demons use these marks as the most effective and quickest way of identifying their adherents (Brown, 1992: 285). By using them does not mean that one is evil. The danger is that using such marks easily unites one with the demons, and this causes one to easily succumb to demonic wishes. Some Christians accept and use such things as Bible, crucifix, cross, icons, and pendants as protective objects from demonic attack. They use them in just the same manner amulets and fetishes are used. That is keeping them under their pillows, burying them at entrance of gates, putting them in foundation of their houses, wearing them on certain parts of their bodies, carrying them in their cars or handbags, etc. Suffice, it to say that although this may appear Godly, it may be contradiction of Christian values. Some people are using such ideas to spread occultism among Christians.

Among many Christians, there exists a belief that the relics of Jesus Christ, Apostles, or Saints have some miraculous healing powers. These relics include bones, clothes, or other precious materials from them. One of the persons who made this belief popular was Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine. In 326 AD, she went in to a cave near the site of Calvary where Jesus and two thieves were crucified, with the intention of having the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The main difficulty was to know which one was which since she found three crosses. To test for the one, which Jesus was crucified, a sick woman was called upon to touch all the three, and the one which cured her was identified as the cross of Jesus Christ. Further confirmation was made later when a dead man was laid on it and he came back to life (Makumira Consultation, 1967: 47). In modern times, these facts sound like superstitions or belief in occult, but the truth is that they are held by many people as attested facts. Many examples of such nature may be cited, but owing to limited scope of this paper, the two will suffice for now.

5. Discussions

Throughout his earthly life, Jesus Christ committed most of his time to healing the sick, casting out demons, cleansing the lepers and raising the dead to life. Prior to his end of earthly ministry, Jesus commissioned his apostles to carry out and continue his work. After the apostolic age, there are incidences of healing miracles. This implies that the apostolic commission does not only apply to those whom it was addressed. It does not also mean that the church should not be involved in the healing ministry. God still uses certain

people to show his healing powers, but in a very extraordinary way.

There is need for the ministry of exorcism and deliverance as well as need for a dynamic contextualization of Christianity in Africa particularly in the mainline Churches. There are claims by some people that faith healing and exorcism in some churches have helped to relief some of their problems. This has made the mainline churches to lose credibility. Instead of the mainline churches facing the problems of exorcism squarely, they stigmatise those members who join the 'prayer' churches by saying that they have joined a bad faith. After their problems are solved in the prayer churches, these Christians are faced with difficult task of choosing between loyalty to a church which could not offer them the kind of consolations they were seeking, and cult or ministry they got their problems solved.

There has been some misunderstanding between Christians as to the role of the church in coping with issues of witchcraft, sorcery and spirit possession. Some churches deny the existence of the phenomena, and argue that we should not prejudice the credibility of hospitals, dispensaries, and clinics by stating that some diseases are demonic, and so cannot be handled medically. Others concur that the phenomena is a reality, and so we should call a spade a spade, and simply talk to evil spirits in their own terms if at all we are to succeed in making stop tormenting the afflicted person. Consequently some churches particularly Protestant denominations, independent churches, and faith healing ministries have been blamed for building churches of the possessed ones. The mainline churches also do not go unblamed. Some people blame them for sheer ignorance of the realities, and label them as places unknown to evil spirits. For instance, Aylward Shorter, a catholic priest refers to how the attitude of Roman Catholic Church has gradually changed with regard to phenomenon of spirit possession. Referring to a cult of Jinn flourishing in South Western Tanzania, he underlines that no priest took trouble to investigate the cult seriously. He further notes that the cult was immediately condemned by the church as a form of devil worship, and its manifestations as diabolical possession. All on all, churches should offer a viable characteristic forms of healing. These forms must be more wholesome, acceptable, more biblical, more nurturing so as not to jeopardise the social ethics. They should stand together against devil worship or cultic rituals now being used in disguise by many churches.

6. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to give a survey of some aspects of prayer or worship in some churches. From the days of inception of Christianity in Africa to the era of rise of cultic movements and faith healing ministries, miracles have been performed. Nowadays, there are televangelists who are known to be crowd pullers. These televangelists have been reported to give spiritual, mental and physical healing. While some people dismiss miracles as nature's misbehaviour, and

claim that they have no empirical basis, others believe that miracles do happen through the hands of a few selected people.

In our lives, we experience a lot of existential conflict. These conflicts bog us to a dilemma of whether we are spiritual or earthly, saintly or demonic, united or separated, lovers or enemies, save or paganistic. All in all, the essence of Christianity is to build a church, with anticipation of attaining the Kingdom of God. It is a great challenge for Christians to seek for genuine evangelisation and orthodox catechises in the wake of the macabre phenomenon of devil worship an other diabolic cultic rituals. These phenomena are fast deceiving, segregating and destroying the Church as the family of God, thus drawing people further away from the Kingdom of God.

As explained earlier, the contact between Christianity and African culture has historically been a monologue, with the former being not only prejudicial against the latter, but also culturally more assertive and ideologically aggressive. The author hereby admits that this is quite sensitive and crucial, and therefore calls for thorough inquiry. What the author has brought to the fore is simply a microcosm of what the African society is experiencing. This paper provides a challenge for further pursuit of matter in question. Hitherto, we have come across issues such as Christianity speaking about African culture and religion, various authors being reticent or apologetic about African culture, Christianity providing the basis of morality in African society, and many other paradigms which are out of suffocate the African culture. The issues articulated in this paper raise a clarion call for scholarly approach into articulating the issue of Gospel and culture within the context of inculturation and globalisation through the lenses of inter-religious dialogue. I contend that within the confines of this paper, I have accomplished the task at hand in spite of some of the obvious shortcomings.

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