

# An Assessment of the Connectedness of Mainstream and Independent Churches in Africa

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**Abstract** Christianity, if it is to be relevant to Africans must be intelligible to the traditional world view. This paper is an assessment of the connectedness of the mainstream and Independent Churches in Africa. As for relations between the historical and Independent Churches, there is every reason to engage in dialogue to reflect theologically on possibilities of cooperation to become mutually involved in the theological training which the Independent Churches are increasingly requesting so as to emerge with a truly African Theology. This will result in a more effective service and more profound Koinonia in the life of the church. This does not mean that I am advocating for a leveling of theologically questionable points. After all, we are speaking of Christian Churches which like every other Church in this world of ours, have their weakness on account of human corruption. But one point is certain and that is in the process of ecumenical cooperation the historical Independent Churches can render service to one another.

**Keywords** Africa, Church, Doctrine, Evangelisation

## 1. Introduction

Before the coming of the Europeans and Missionaries, the African communities had their own cultural, political, economic, social, religious structures. Religion was central because it permeated every aspect of African life. It was closely tied with social economic, political and family life of the African acting as one big, closely knit kinship group of the family, clan and entire tribe. All African communities conceived the universe as having been created by the Supreme being who was called by various names. They also believed in a number of intermediaries as links between human beings and God the Supreme.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there was European intrusion into African especially by the explorers. The Berlin Conference of 1884 - 1885 saw African divided between the major namely Germany, France, Britain, Portugal and later Italy. All this was for three purpose of markets, sources of raw materials, opportunities for investment and wide fields for the application of new science and technology. Along with them came the European Christian missionaries who introduced new religious beliefs and practiced many of which were unknown to Africans. They also introduced education through schools where unknown to Africans. They also introduced education through schools where reading, writing and arithmetic were introduced. All in all the foreign occupation was justified by what David Livingstone summarized in the 3 Cs namely:

Commerce, Christianity and Colonialization. For him, this was the only way of dealing with the Africans' poverty, ignorant and disease.

This contact of the Europeans and the Africans resulted into many things. At the center of it all was the suppression of traditional African political, social cultural and economic and religious system and an attempt to replace them completely with European systems. The reaction of the African cannot be overemphasized. For our purpose in this paper, we shall examine the emergence of African Independent or Instituted Churches which was one of the reactions of the Africans to the European influence.

There are many factors influencing the origin and growth of Independent Churches. An analysis of the factors influencing their origin and growth shows what mistakes were committed by historical commissioning Churches in the past. Among the host of factors mentioned by researchers as causes of the origin of the Independent Churches, David Bosche (1973) isolated nine of the most significant ones:

1. Poor communication between the missionaries and Africans leading to lack of understanding of the Africans.
2. The white missionaries often proclaimed a superficial, impoverished gospel.
3. The phenomena of rapid social change; industrialization, urbanization and the secularism that accompanies these changes.
4. The poor relationship between blacks and whites which was that of inferior-superior.
5. Precipitating factors such as personal crisis, miracles of healing the ministry of characteristic personality etc.
6. Disillusionment of the African as a result of Christianity

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being unable to meet their expectations.

7. Western denominations who were opposed to one another despite preaching the same gospel.

8. Translation of the Bible into the tribal vernacular made the African to discover that certain things in the scriptures were different from what the missionary had told them.

9. Some traditional structures encouraged the formation of Independent Churches such as those with a centralized and institutionalized political systems e.g. the Luo of Kenya.

## 2. The Term 'Independent'

The term '*Independent*' has been used to emphasize that self reliance and desire of these movements to stand out as distinct from mission founded churches. These churches emerged out of African initiative as a result of pneumatological emphasis especially where this phenomenon was enjoyed in traditional spirit possession.

Such movements also emerged spontaneously through a charismatic leader most likely a prophet who underwent a spiritual experience. Other factors have already been dealt with above.

According to Sundkler (1961), the term independence or its concepts appeared in print probably at an address in Johannesburg in 1904 to the first general missionary conference where the subtitle '*Independence, a recent development*' was used. In ecclesiastical usage the term implies the principle that the individual congregation or church is an autonomous and egalitarian society free from any ecclesiastical control. More recently, some scholars like Koffi Apiiah Kubi (1981) preferred to use the word 'African Indigenous Churches'. In the recent past, Christians from the mission churches have felt they too are independent and indigenous as Africans. (Daneel 1987).

It has therefore become necessary to cope up with another term that fairly describes this growing phenomenon that has challenged other churches in Africa to work for more indigenous and endeavor to discourage foreign elements in the quality, liturgy and practice. The term currently in the use besides African 'Initiated' Churches is African 'Instituted' Churches to describe churches that have emerged out of Africans initiative have African context and incorporating the African world view.

For our purpose here, the term will be used interchangeably.

According to Turner who retains Sundkler's typology or divisions, African Independent Churches are divided into Ethiopian and Zionist.

## 3. Ethiopian Type Churches

These resemble the orthodox churches from which they sprung but they also reveal certain African cultural forms such as toleration of polygamy, communion with ancestors and female circumcision. Examples are:- Thembu Church of Nehemiah Tile (Transkei):

- ◆ United Native Church (Nigeria)

- ◆ The native Baptist Church
- ◆ The United African Methodist Church
- ◆ African Christian Churches and Schools
- ◆ African Brotherhood Church
- ◆ Church of Christ in Africa (Nyanza) etc.

These churches were motivated by the desire to cast off the yoke of white domination.

## 4. Zionist Churches

These are most Africanized with healing and revelation as their emphasis. Turner also notes that these churches are also called 'Spirit Type Churches'. 'Healing', 'Aladura (Prayer)', 'Apostolic' Churches.

These churches profess a Christian orientation but looked for a more African way of worship in terms of symbolism, music, dance and a more direct religious experience characterized by dreams, visions, spirit possession and spontaneous emotionalism. There are many other typologies but they more or less resemble that of Turner.

To begin with, theological reflection on the independent churches in African and an evaluation of the different trends are by no means easy matters. The incredible wealth of nuances, contradictions within one and the same church, data that are not always reliable, one's reliance on observers who are themselves outsiders and can only partially fathom what is going on in these churches, the lack of enough documentation for analysis etc. combine to make this an extremely delicate and complex undertaking.

Nonetheless, reflection on and evaluation of the Independent Churches is one of the main tasks facing theologians today. There are various reasons for this:

1. The rapid growth in the number of groups since the beginning of this century has produced a massive Christians oriented movement that cannot be simply ignored.

2. The focal importance of missionary communication between the Christian Gospel and non-Christian religion is another reason for reflection. The independent churches provide religion is another reason for reflection. The independent churches provide a unique opportunity to observe how the African handles his traditional religion when he is outside the immediate sphere of influence of the Western oriented historical churches.

3. Interchurch relations make a theological evaluation of this movement imperative. Such an evaluation will be decisive for the policy determination of the historical churches when it comes rejection or possible ecumenical co-operation with the independent churches.

4. These churches have often a specific Africans cultural twist to their heresy and herein lies their special contribution to the development of the much-talked-of African theology. Some of them would indeed regard themselves as an 'African reformation of the faith over and against western Christianity of the mission'.

## 5. Theology of Independent Churches

When one examines the literature<sup>1</sup>, one observes that such researchers as Sundkler and H. W. Turner who had prolonged contact with Independent Churches, evaluate them very positively without disregarding their less favourable tendencies.

G. C. Oosthuizen, Marie Louis Martin and P. Beyerhaus adopt a far more stringent, condemnatory approach. Oosthuizen bluntly refers to the Independent Churches as 'Post Christian'. In his views, these movements are neither Christian nor traditional. Because of their ethnocentric features they cannot according to him, claim to be Churches of Christ<sup>2</sup>. He apparently characterizes all prophetic churches - that is the Zionist and Apostolic groups - and 'messianic' movements as nativistic, as opposed to what he calls 'sects'. The main characteristics of this post Christian category is the upholding of the traditional cult rather than the word of God<sup>3</sup>. To him then there is no question of a theology since it is not a church we are dealing with.

Bayerhaus who also uses the term 'Post Christian' is even more vehement in his rejection. According to him, the messianic groups rely on a conscious, fallacious existential contradiction of the gospel<sup>4</sup>. He maintains that the Zionists are in a state of self deception because they fail to realize that their concept of God is confined to the human dimension and bears no relation to the mighty and high God. All biblical concepts have been sacrificed and replaced with heathen ones. To him then no Zionist rites have any Christian resemblance.

Bayerhaus' sweeping criticism implies that when it comes to the Zionists and the so called messianic movements, there can be no question of 'churches' with which one could possibly cooperate. All he finds there is confusion and disturbance due to syncretism rather than legitimate contextualization which may be developed and from which other churches could learn. Bayerhaus explicitly states that there is no possibility of serving these churches by means of theological training and development from within owing to the lack of spiritual basis on which it built. The only theological sound approach he claims, would be confrontation through a new presentation of the gospel of salvation<sup>5</sup>. This view is certainly outdated.

Marie - Louise Martin who at the beginning concluded theologically that messianism is largely a case of spurious eschatology and a false Christology, Pneumatology and ecclesiology<sup>6</sup> admitted the limitations of the original approach.

If we are really to come up with the theology of the African Instituted Churches, we would have to analyze in depth their sermons (based on preaching in various contexts and by

different leaders) so as to determine actual theological trends. It would also require prolonged observation of both ceremonial and daily life of the Church as well as interviewing significant members of the clergy and lay members to gauge the process of Christian formulation. Only then would a fair theological exposition be at all feasible<sup>7</sup>. But even then a theological evaluation would have to be extremely cautious and purely provisional in view of the dynamic and constant process of change in the churches.

What this paper will endeavor, therefore is to single out some more important theological trends, point out their significance and point out what they can contribute to African theology.

In the African issue of concilium (1977) G. Eschach deplores that 'there is no heresy in Africa!' which would provide a dynamic challenge as heresies have always done in the Christian history - but only 'sliding away' which evade the necessary confrontation<sup>8</sup>. Turner on the other hand declares that 'there are numerous and new heresies in the independent churches' and he goes on to enumerate about a dozen of them<sup>9</sup>.

Once more, the distinction between secession born African churches and the prophet born spirit churches is essential. The former, seceding as a group, have been intent to remain faithful to the theological tenets of their mother churches as well as her discipline - only being more liberal in the admission of polygamists<sup>10</sup>. Theological deviations are restricted to the spirit churches, but in most cases they would be better qualified as defective or exaggerated teaching than formal heresies<sup>11</sup>.

It is important to note as Turner admits that on one hand there is often a special African cultural twist to these heresies and therein lies their specific contribution to the development of African Christian theology<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, these independent churches reveal the culture-bound nature of western doctrinal formulation and theology especially in the doctrine of the church. Some of them would indeed regard it as "an African formulation of their faith", restoring the full power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit, the Christian community sense, the place of the laity etc<sup>13</sup>. On many of these points the record of the better Independent churches would present a striking contrast. Therefore, in both ways, whether they be heretical (which they are not wholly) or be they authentically African, or both, Independent Churches pose a very serious challenge to the mainstream churches - the same questions that African theologians are asking.

African independent churches then have a lot to contribute to African Christian theology as attempts are being made to incarnate the Christian message in African culture.

<sup>1</sup> Daneel Inus, *Quest For Belonging*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987 pg. 246

<sup>2</sup> Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa*, London University Press, 1968 p xiv

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 73 - 75

<sup>4</sup> Beyerhaus, "An approach to the African Independent Church Movement" in *Ministry*, Vol. 9, 1967, pg. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pg. 73 - 75

<sup>6</sup> Martin M. L. Kimbagu - *an African prophet and his Church*. London: OXFORD University Press, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Daneel Inus. *Op. Cit.*, pg. 247.

<sup>8</sup> John Baur, *Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Africa*. Nairobi Paulines 1994, pg. 349.

<sup>9</sup> Turner. Pg. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Lecture Notes.

<sup>11</sup> John Baur, *op. Cit.* Pg. 349.

<sup>12</sup> Turner, *op. Cit.*, pg. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pg. 109.

## 6. Proclamation as a Focal Point

Independent churches take proclamation of the word as a focal point of their liturgies. For them, attention is integral: the central figure of the leader, events of the church, witness of the people who have been prophetically healed, etc. There are usually also pure evangelical message accompanying this such as those about Christ the vine, (and we the branches), Christ the healer and Christ the savior.

Bosch pointed out that the western mentality is conditioned by a dichotomous dualistic anthropology which divides man into two separate entities - 'soul' and 'body'<sup>14</sup>. This view concurs neither with scripture nor with African traditional conception. Both Pietism and the social gospel are products of this dualistic approach resulting in the sick soul being treated in church and the sick body in the hospital without any real integration of the two.

In this regard, Independent Churches in their preaching restore the balance and mitigates one's theological reservations about the supposed one-sidedness. It is this tremendous diversity of approaches in the preaching which quite rules out one-sided categorical pronouncements. Besides the multiplicity of 'circumstantial' or contextualized sermons reflecting the experiences of the group is a reaction against a preaching of the gospel which has not taken the African's holistic life view into account.

The prophet takes over the whole range of activities of the traditional medicine-man and combined them pastorally and medically in the context of the church. His task literally reveals a comprehensive approach embracing the entire spectrum of sin, disease, sorcery, evil spirits, agricultural and other economic activities<sup>15</sup>.

The African has a holistic view of life - it is integral. Everything is experienced as a whole which affects the human person. Western Christianity with its dualistic approach to life resulted into a disintegrated African Christian - one who is Christian when things are okay but when faced with crisis has recourse to diviners and sorcerers. The independent churches have given a break-through to look at evangelization of the African integrally. Anyone who wants to construct African Christian theology must take these basic elements of the African tradition and interpret them in the light of the Bible. The whole person must be addressed: his social, political, economic, cultural and religious life.

Proclamation of the word must take all those aspects of the human person not just the soul. It must permeate into all the departments of life. The African has no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the spiritual and the material areas of life<sup>16</sup>. Any African Christian theology worth its name must take this into consideration.

## 7. Sacraments and Discipline

In most independent churches we find the sacraments of baptism and communion. Although there may be distortions in the practice of these sacraments e.g. witch-hunting, they still have value to people in trouble. The way in which baptisms are solemnized is sufficient evidence that the Biblical essence of a transition from the old life to a new fellowship in the name of the Trinity is fully realized and is moreover in many respects depicted more beautifully than in some historical churches<sup>17</sup>.

The African is dynamic and attaches a lot of importance to ritual. Sacraments are signs of God's invisible grace. The African man wants these signs to be manifest as elaborately as possible to bring about the meaning of that which it signifies. Some prophetic churches use baptism as a purificatory rite and certain prophetic 'witch-hunting specialists' employ it as a form of Christian technique to conduct witch-hunts in afflicted village communities. although to some extent distorted, independent churches can be credited for venturing into an area that mission churches labeled superstitious. In this way, they have contributed to Christian theology in Africa and offer the raw materials for inculturation. The Christian African theologian has already a starting point.

As regards to discipline, the majority of Independent Churches are characterized by legalistic trends which derive both from customary law and Old Testament prohibitions. The ethical code of the churches which to a great extent reflect their identity in society and generally maintained through strict disciplinary procedure<sup>18</sup>. The practical effectiveness of such procedures is that enough time is spent in church court proceedings to do justice to the human factor by considering a wide range of circumstantial factors involved in each case, establish guilt in addition to that of the accused and applying the realistic disciplinary measures which stimulate behavioral improvement rather than alienation. The zealously guarded religious legalism is mostly counterbalanced by the traditional legal procedures of 'settling matters right', which in the context of the church court manifests itself as a kind of indigenized pastoral care. Hence, it is not only a matter of meting out punishment for misbehavior but also of repairing wrongs done in relationship through reconciliation and facilitating response to the challenge of spiritual renewal. In this case, independent church court procedures are an expression of Christian concern comparably top if not more effective than those of many of the historical churches.

In all African societies, social order and peace are recognized as essential for the maintenance of the solidarity of the community, otherwise there is disintegration and destruction<sup>19</sup>. Sin is an offense against the community and its consequences affect not only the individual but also the whole body of his community or relatives. Since guilt has a communal dimension, restriction too must be done communally.

<sup>14</sup> Bosch, (1973) pg. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Daneel Inus, op. Cit., pg. 251.

<sup>16</sup> John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Heinemann Oxford, 1969 pg. 2

<sup>17</sup> Daneel Inus Op. Cit, pg. 252.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pg. 205.

<sup>19</sup> Mbiti op. Cit., pg. 205.

Historical churches like the catholic church believes in individual confession to a priest. This does not meet fully the African concept of reparation of guilt which always has a communitarian dimension. Independent Churches have taken this up and this has helped in making the African feel at home and belong to the Church.

African Christian theology must take this into consideration. Any theologizing in Africa by Africans must have the communitarian mentality of the African people in mind if they are developing moral Christian theology.

## 8. Christology in Independent Churches

Ernst Danman<sup>20</sup> pointed out four possible conceptions of Christ in Independent Churches:

(a) A view of Christ who basically agrees with that of the historical church from which the movement was born (e.g. the African Methodist Church).

(b) Although Christ is given a place in credal pronouncements in the realities of religious experience he is a background figure (e.g. the Musama Disco Christo Church in Ghana).

(c) Christ is wholly superseded even in credal pronouncements (e.g. the Nazareth Baptist Church of Shembe).

(d) Messianic attributes of Christ are transferred to the group leader-the Black Messiah is totally identified with the Biblical Messiah (e.g. Simon Kimbangu).

Commenting on the identification of the leader with the Biblical Messiah, Daneel says that despite the "custodian of the gate" function, the mediatorship of Christ has not been superseded and his authority and kinship remain unaffected<sup>21</sup>.

In the Zion Sabbath Church, for example, whose prophetic activities are also based on the work of the Holy Spirit, it may happen that in the course of a faith-healing ceremony, Christ would be thrust dramatically and deliberately into the foreground. Christ is present directly and focally, not a peripheral figure merely mentioned in passing as it is done in speculative theology. Indeed at the heart throb of Zionism, we find him as healer and savior. There is total dependence on him<sup>22</sup>.

When the interrelationship between the inspiring, healing spirit of God and the living Christ is so vividly manifested, we have every reason for us to conclude that the independent churches have a clear vision of Jesus Christ: an involving theology. This is a great contribution to African Christians theology. The African needs an active Christ, an involved savior not a Christ who is always 'seated at the right hand of God'<sup>23</sup>.

No wonder, Africans are attempting to go beyond the initial question of speculating the possibility African theology. Theologians like Charles Nyamiti, John Mbiti, Benezet Bujo,

J. S. Pobee and others are out to construct a new liberation theology for Africa. Mbiti's special efforts was to try and compare African concepts with the Biblical message<sup>24</sup>.

Charles Nyamiti even wrote a book, "Christ our ancestor" which is basically a Christology from an African perspective.<sup>25</sup> Benezet Bujo calls Christ a 'Proto-Ancestor' who lived the African ancestor ideal in the highest degree and brought that idea to fulfillment<sup>26</sup>. To him Jesus brought life and life-force, in its fullness: he worked miracles, healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, raised the dead to life, etc.

All these and others are attempts by systematic African theologians re-incarnate Christ in African culture. Christ must be involved in the life of the community. African Independent Churches set the pace decades ago and mainstream churches are now following suite; thanks to the independent churches.

## 9. Pneumatology in Independent Churches

In the Independent Churches, prophetic faith healing where the prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit, diagnoses the disease or problem of his patients and either applies or prescribes therapy. The spirits activity is an extension of scripture which continues to be the key criterion, despite the fact that there are occasional misinterpretations. This interpretation of the Christian Spirit reaches into traditional world view at far more existential level than was possible for the historical churches with their western theological norms and doctrinal purity.

There are some assertions that the Holy Spirit is seen as an impersonal force possessed by the Messiah figure and 'given' to is followers at his pleasure. Daneel refutes this in the context of the Shona Prophetic Churches<sup>27</sup>. He conducted interviews among the prophetic office bears who attributed the Holy Spirit to God's initiative and not any human being. prophets often declare that they only receive guidance from the Holy Spirit after fasting, prayer and seclusion.

## 10. Eschatology in Independent Churches

Although there is a tendency towards a one sided realized eschatology among the Independent Churches and particularly the prophetic movements, they have a lot of wealth that can be and has been modified by African Christian Theology.

Independent Churches have an intense yearning for an intelligible revelation here and now, a longing to be deliv-

<sup>20</sup> Danmann, 1965 pg. 1 - 21.

<sup>21</sup> Daneel, op. Cit., pg. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg. 258.

<sup>23</sup> The Credo.

<sup>24</sup> J. S. Mbiti., New Testament Eschatology in African Background. London 1971: Christ and the Younger Churches, London, 1972 pg. 51 - 62.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Nyamiti, Christ As Our Ancestors, Gweru 1984.

<sup>26</sup> Benezet Bujo, African Theology in its Social Context, Nairobi : St. Paul 1986 pg. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Daneel, op. Cit. 262.

ered from evil and enjoy a new fellowship of joy and happiness<sup>28</sup>. This longing assumes perspective only against the background of the black man's traditional concept of time which as explained by Mbiti, is oriented mainly to the present and the past (*sasa* and *zamani*)<sup>29</sup>. The future as conceived by the western linear mind was virtually non-existent. It was such a world view that the western missionary proclamation came with a strong soteriological message and an apocalyptic emphasis which projected salvation on to this, to the Blackman, non-existent dimension of time. In as much as salvation cannot be seen and experienced in the immediate present, it was meaningless. This disillusionment which attended the unfulfilled future promises such as the delay in the second coming and the apparent absence of salvation from the daily accumulative and political dilemma of the Blackman could only intensify this longing. Hence, joining prophetic and 'messianic' movements represents albeit sometimes unconsciously a desire to experience the realization of the unfulfilled eschatological hopes now in the present.

Viewed thus it is not surprising that the prophet or Black 'messiah' - in response to his people's needs - should establish a colony which - as 'Zion City', 'Moriah' or 'Jerusalem', implies the realization of redemption and salvation in this life. In the midst of the fragmentation of tribal customs and social changes with the attendant frustration and insecurity, the paramount leader of the new community stands as a prophet, king, messiah - even as God<sup>30</sup>. Probably, the Dutch missiologist, Camps was correct when he said that the Blackman's cyclic concept of time - his orientation to the past and constant preoccupation with the ancestors - impedes the western idea of progress. "What Africa needs", he says "is a new technology of time and of the ancestors so that they can wholeheartedly and from within accept progress"<sup>31</sup>.

Herein comes the contribution of Independent Churches to real African Christian Theology. By answering the Blackman's wish to 'live with the ancestors' through a rite that recognizes the direct link between the living and the dead, while at the same time placing the 'living dead' in a new light-their future share in a life hereafter in Heaven - new ideas of life and progress are introduced into the care of their religion.

In this way, the process of possession in the name of Christ crystallizes and the old approach acquires new meaning in the context of the Church<sup>32</sup>. This means that the dangers of a realized eschatology and distortion of Christian salvation into present security well being, health and the like are not necessarily affirmed. What we find are positive impulses helping to affect a balance in the polarity between the eschatological 'already' and 'not yet'.

In many respects the intimate corporate life of the Independent Churches is a corrective to the lack of '*Koinonia*' in

the historical churches. By contrast with the sober rationalism of the latter, the former express inhibited emotional joy. Here the New Testament '*agalliasis*' (rejoicing, exuberant joy) is in evidence as it was at the feasts of the early Church.

As Bosch points out, the need for warmth and fellowship is not only a spontaneous religious need among African but express a yearning in the midst of the disruption and confusion in the modern Africa<sup>33</sup>. To many Africans joining an Independent Church is a step of desperation in the midst of change and uncertainty, an attempt at retrieving something of their lost security. In the alien environment of the modern city and in a place of the crumbled extended family, the intimate church community provides a true 'place to feel at home'<sup>34</sup>. This new community is marked by mutual concern and voluntary service.

The weekly church gatherings when members appear in festive mood in colorful garb, wearing distinctive insignia, aware of recognition and status within the group and all that are per excellence occasions when the drabness, drudgery and problems of life can be forgotten. These feasts are a conglomeration of every religious activity: preaching, song, dance, prayer meeting, prophecy, confession, planning of church schedule, 'court sessions' and so on, with as the climax, the communion<sup>35</sup>. As in the ZCC (Zion Christian Church) of Mutendo, this crescendo of communal experience is an incentive to mission so that mutual service is turned outward to the world in preaching repentance. The interrelationship between fellowship, communion and missionary activity confronts the historical churches with certain questions that call for urgent attention. In view of the spiritual stagnation and complacency that obscure fellowship in the historical churches, the example of the Independent Churches present a challenge to reflect a new on Christian *Koinonia* in modern African life. African Independent Churches are small communities and people congregate in one house, church etc. This has contributed to the idea of Basic Christian Communities where people are offered a place they feel at home. It allows for ministry, pastoral care and counselling. Each person is ministered to in the context of the community. In this way, the theology of the Church as family of God can become relevant to the African people.

In this sphere, the Independent Churches manifest variety, originality and flexibility that can teach historical churches much. Their adaptation to the indigenous approach includes dramatic, emotional, repetitive and mobile dancing: a form of religious expression which is consistently spontaneous and hence authentic. As in the traditional cult the ritual contains guidelines, but within this context there is plenty of scope for variation and improvisation. Sermons are based on the inspiration and insight of the moment rather than systematically developed ideas. Proclamation is lived, danced, acted out with constant interaction between the Bible reader, preacher and congregational response. If necessary, a sermon

<sup>28</sup> Martin, 1964. Pg. 135.

<sup>29</sup> Mbiti, op. Cit, pg. 15 - 28.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, op. Cit, pg. 131.

<sup>31</sup> Camps, 1971., pg. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Daneel, op. Cit, pg. 269.

<sup>33</sup> Bosch, 1973 pg. 76 - 77.

<sup>34</sup> Welbourne and Ogut, A place to feel at home, Oxford/London. 1966.

<sup>35</sup> Daneel, op. Cit. Pg. 272.

may turn into a debate and of sermon continues for too long, the congregation puts a stop to it. Preaching fluctuates between serious proclamation, sober teaching and sudden cries of joy (Alleluia!). It flows into rhythmic dance and song in which everybody joins then resumes like the waves of a tide when the dancing feet and flattering robes are stilled<sup>36</sup>.

Sermons are interspersed with prophesy, confessions, testimonies to joy or grief, laying on of the hands, faith healing and exorcism. Thus the need of the individuals is shared and carried by the church. Demons are addressed, cursed and expelled by means of numerous symbolic acts. If something is funny, people laugh without in any way marring the seriousness of the matter<sup>37</sup>.

To the western mind such an indigenous expression of religious activity may appear disorderly and chaotic. To the African it is the most meaningful response to God's word. They express inhibited joy in response to the African need for religious celebration. This goes to challenge the formality and rigidity of liturgies in historical churches with their western rite of worship. These liturgies most times leave the African empty and untouched.

Meaningful African Christian theology can borrow from Independent Churches. Some revivals in the historical churches like the Charismatic renewal have adapted many aspects from liturgies of African Independent Churches and probably this explains why more African people are thronging there.

Having analyzed the theology of Independent Churches and its contribution to the much talked of African theology, one should not rush in a fallacious conclusion that everything is fine in these churches. There have been and there are distortions, misinterpretations, confusions and even outright heresies in these churches. To avoid a one sided good view about the contribution of the Independent Churches to African Christian Theology, we shall examine some of the distortions found in these churches.

As already mentioned, scripture in the Independent churches is focal and accepted as final authority. Fragmentary interpretation seldom result in wholesale misconception about soteriology, anthropology, sin and other theological issues.

At the same time there is a tendency to single out certain texts-such as those referring to Ethiopia or Zion and supply them literally to the church in question out of a desire to identify directly with the first Christian Communities. This can result in a exclusive manifesto for the church based on a mistaken 'exegesis' of texts. Often this is more of a desire for a Biblically than a deliberate distortion of Church truths.

In the course of their sermons, one may feel that too much attention is focused on the central figure of the leader (e.g. Mutendi) on the events of the church or the witness of the people who had been prophetically healed. Sometimes, there is a risk that the proclamation of the word will be affected and pushed to the background. Also some documents like

Mutendi's 'church history' and Johane Maranke's 'New revelation' are sometimes used as a substitute for the Bible<sup>38</sup>. Dannel points out one of the churches among the Shona where the book '*Guta ra Jehova*' (City of God) by Mal Chaza's movement replaced the Bible.

The sacraments of baptism and communion as already pointed out are found in most Independent Churches. True, some prophetic churches use baptism as a purificatory rite and certain prophetic 'witch-hunting specialists' employ it as a form of Christian technique to conduct witch hunts in afflicted village communities. one must acknowledge the distortions of the true meaning of baptism and the misconceptions to which this may give rise. When it goes out of proportion it even leads to lynching of the suspected witches.

In the independent Churches, sometimes Christ is given a place in credal pronouncements but in the realities of religious experience he is at the background e.g. the Musama Disco Christo Church in Ghana. The Nazareth Baptist Church for example, Christ is wholly superseded even in credal pronouncements. Other Independent Churches transfer messianic attributes of Christ to the group leader - the Black Messiah is totally identified with the Biblical Messiah (e.g. Simon Kiambangu). This is a distorted Christology. In fact, the Mindlo consultation of 1962 laid down quite rightly with regard to the identification of the Church leader with Christ:

"It should be noted that when this identification becomes substitution, ... the gap has moved outside the sphere of the Christian Church"<sup>39</sup>.

Two great dangers beset Christology in the Independent Churches. One is that the enormous emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic groups result in the impoverished Christology. Turner's observation of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in West Africa more or less applies to other Churches as well:

"It is not so much that Jesus Christ is ignored, as that his divinity is taken for granted and his humanity overlooked so that he is in reality absorbed in the term of God, whose present manifestation in the spirit of more importance than his historical work in the flesh"<sup>40</sup>.

Thus on the whole it would be more correct to speak of an implicit partially superseded Christology rather than a misconstruction and conscious denial of Christ<sup>41</sup>.

The second danger is that the same Independent Churches show a tendency to underrate the cross or to see it as a stumbling block. In the struggle against disease, want, injustice there is a need for a king and a sovereign, not a suffering Messiah in whose followers the strength is weak is consummated. Here it is very easy for the '*Christus Victor*' to overshadow the crucified Christ and for the theology of the glory to outweigh the theology of the cross.

<sup>36</sup> Daneel, op. Cit., pg. 273.

<sup>37</sup> Lecture Notes, October 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Daneel, op. Cit, pg. 252.

<sup>39</sup> Turner, op. Cit, pg. 31.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. pg. 344.

<sup>41</sup> Daneel, op. Cit, pg. 258.

## 10. Conclusions

The work of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic churches particularly the Zionist and 'Messianic' movements is complex. Oosthuizen devotes an entire chapter to the misinterpretation of the Holy Spirit in the Independent Churches<sup>42</sup>. His chief objection is the confusion of the Holy Spirit with the ancestors. The prominence given to ancestor's worship and the transfer of the ancestors functions to the spirit not only leads to the usurpation of Christ's role but also the total exclusion of the total of the connection between the Holy Spirit and scripture.

Observers have mentioned yet another form of conceptual fallacy in the prophetic movements, namely the syncretist distortion of the personal spirit of God to an impersonal, manipulated force. This causes a depersonalization of God and changes the sovereign spirit to an impersonal force an 'it' which man can control.

The prophets and messiahs so to say 'possess' the spirit like an impersonal power they get hold of it in their own way: a monopoly of the paramount leader. He can 'give' the spirit to his/her followers. Obviously, such a transformation of the Holy Spirit into a manipulate force that can be used by people in their group's interest must render their Biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit unrecognizable.

Eschatology in the Independent Churches had a tendency to be a one-sided realized eschatology especially in prophetic movements. Sometimes, the leader such as Isaiah Shembe is referred to as the 'God'<sup>43</sup>. Their Eschatology is materialistically or secularistically distorted. Oosthuizen finds that in all 'navistic' movements, Eschatology is secularized because its interpreted in terms of the Blackman's existential situation. He claims that in these movements, it is explicitly stated that all enemies will be born of the old<sup>44</sup>. The accent is on material affluence - an Africanized Utopia in which Christ plays no part and where the Black Messiah sees to the health, fertility and material needs of his followers<sup>45</sup>.

Because of this concentration on an Africanized salvation in the present the eschatological polarity between the 'already' and the 'not yet' vanishes. Because the future kingdom is at it were grabbed by force (seizing and snatching the future), the perceptiveness on eternal life and Christ's return disappears. This always leads to disappointment and frustration.

Much of what the Independent Churches do and experience emerge as their own genius' creative and enthusiastic response to the gospel, a contribution for which they themselves are solely responsible without any conditioning by missions. This is something which merits positive acclaim. Whatever their excess, distortions, misinterpretations or even heresies, they raise a very important question to the historical churches namely how to make Christianity fit into the African culture. This is now the job of African Christian

Theologians.

Christianity, if it is to be relevant to Africans must be intelligible to the traditional world view. As for relations between the historical and Independent Churches, there is every reason to engage in dialogue to reflect theologically on possibilities of cooperation to become mutually involved in the theological training which the Independent Churches are increasingly requesting so as to emerge with a truly African Theology. This will result in a more effective service and more profound *Koinonia* in the life of the church. This does not mean that I am advocating for a leveling of theologically questionable points. After all, we are speaking of Christian Churches which like every other Church in this world of ours, have their weakness on account of human corruption. But one point is certain and that is in the process of ecumenical cooperation the historical Independent Churches can render service to one another.

Because the church remains the 'pillar of truth' the mission church with its historically based ecclesiology and insight into heresy can minister to the problems of truth among the Independent Churches. Conversely, the prophetic leaders with their untrammelled enthusiasm can contribute to a new missionary vision and impetus in an often slow moving church. But especially in the field of pastoral care the prophetic faith healers can make a very special contribution because they always occupy themselves with bringing the gospel message into the traditional and conceptual world. Even if this is not done consistently and systematically, a requirement which westernized white and black theologians are inclined to a set and even if it is at the level of intuitive experience, its great value for the evolution of an authentic African Theology is unquestionable and must be respected accordingly.

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<sup>42</sup> Oosthuizen, op. Cit. Pg. 119 - 142.

<sup>43</sup> Sundkler, op. Cit. 278.

<sup>44</sup> Oosthuizen, op. Cit. Pg. 83 - 84.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pg. 96.

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