

(Not for publication or citation)

Indigenization of the Church in Africa

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Introduction

Indigenization and inculturation as concepts are regarded as synonymous in an attempt to Africanize Christian theology. (Dickson in Bujo, 2005: 110-113, Tlhagale 2004:43, Uchem 2002:58, Martey 1996:63 Motlhabi 2008:3). This tendency is observable also among the indigenous theologians of Latin America (Irrarrazaval 2000). However, I believe that more creativity could be adduced by drawing a fine distinction between the two concepts without necessarily tearing them apart. For me indigenization of the Church in Africa should deal with issues such as ritual, religion, myth, liturgy, prayer and worship whilst inculturation of the Gospel should deal with issues such as culture, morality, ethos, taboos, theology and praxis.

Definition of Religion

Indigenous peoples everywhere believed in the existence of a God who was known by various names, a God who was not only regarded as supernatural but also as a creator of the universe. Various rituals, taboos and prayers were developed by adherents to bolster their faith in this deity. Religion is therefore a universal human phenomenon and it is broadly defined by Pratt (2003:3) as follows:

Scholars of religion generally agree that the term 'religion' names or denotes a complex set of phenomena comprising such things as publicly observable behaviours; publicly proclaimed beliefs and ethical systems; some of transcendental reference, or acknowledgement of human existence set in a context that is 'more than' or 'transcends' everyday life; institutional arrangements and social structures; openly available, textual or scriptural sources, and so on.

Some Tenets of African Religion

Starting with creation stories, each and every country, ethnic group and even clan in Africa has creation stories and myths that make an attempt to fathom the origins of humanity and its destiny. The Umhlanga creation story as told by Nguni speaking people, particularly the amaZulu, asserts that humans emerged out of a bed of reeds (Setiloane 1989:4). The Sesotho speaking people, particularly the Batswana, believe that humanity came out of a hole in the ground (Setiloane 1989:5), Mbiti (1970:161-170;1991: 82-84) has made a study of creation myths across Africa and all of them point to the belief that humans, male and female, were created by God to take care of God's creation, that they were made perfect and that God's intention was for them to live for ever.

But what happened that made God withdraw the immortality of the human race? There are various explanations. At the beginning there was a close connection between God and humans by means of a ladder, rope or road etc but through some

accident caused by humans, that connection was broken. Many creation myths say that God withdrew from the world back into heaven due to humans becoming disobedient to God. But because God is neither vengeful nor vindictive, God lessened the harshness of the punishment by giving humans skills, knowledge and codes of behavior in order to survive (Mbiti 1970:171-177; 1991:85-86, Setiloane 1989:38-39).

Coming to ancestors, in African Religion they are accorded a special status. Since ancestors lived among us and entered God's sacred territory, they are regarded as beings who have assumed a higher degree of divinity. Because they know our plight they are best suited to act as (inter)mediaries between the living and God. They are revered and respected but not worshipped. (Setiloane 1989 : 18)

The intermediaries are a link between God the Creator and human beings. It is believed that they have easier access to him (sic) than ordinary people ... (Mbiti 1991:68).

There are other human intermediaries such as medicine people, elders, priests, izangoma, mediums and izinyanga. All of these mediate between humans and ancestors, and according to Pityana(1999:139) are highly prized and much respected. There are also non-human divinities and spirits that can be used as intermediaries but in all instances, they are not worshipped (Mbiti 1970:220-243; 1991:68-69). One more fallacy that needs our attention is what was called "animism". Africans have always attributed some sacredness to certain geographic places such as mountains, caves, valleys, rivers, waterfalls etc, as well as to some animals as well as plants. Those objects were not regarded as deities to be worshipped but were rather regarded as representations of God. (Mbiti 1970:9-157). This process of relating to God should be regarded rather as totemism than as animism. Aply captured by Bediako (1995:213), Johannes Christaller came to the conclusion that people who were presumed to be polytheists should rather be described as monotheists, because they apply the term for God only to one supreme being. In the same vein, I suggest that we stop using terms such as ancestor-cult, ancestor-olatry, ancestor-divination following Alexis Kagame (2006:35) .

Rituals have a crucial role to play in African Religion and culture. Since humans had disturbed the harmony that existed between them and God, it became necessary for them to engage in elaborate rituals and taboos in order to restore harmony. Ancestors had to be venerated and God worshipped through rituals such as making sacrifices and offerings. These rituals are aimed at correcting wrong things, restoring the harmony and enhancing the quality of life in general (Magesa 2002:193-243). Rituals are performed for an individual from the womb to the ancestral world (Mbiti 1991:87-152, Magesa 2002:77-159). Rituals and taboos work hand in hand in order to strengthen the moral fabric of society. This is why I believe that in African religion, rituals cannot be regarded as superstition, magic, or fetish. They have to do with African socio-religious history, ethics and morality.

What should the relationship be between African Religious Beliefs and Christianity? Teffo (1999:157) says that, "God is the centre of African religions" and yet when missionaries arrived on the continent they were unable to accept the fact that African religion was a religion in its own right and not just a superstition and

that God as a Supreme Being had been worshipped in Africa since the beginnings of humanity. Instead of making African religion and God the point of entry, the opposite happened. African religion was ignored at best and demonized at worst. Very few people today such as Thagale (2004:45) still insist on the absence of God in African religion. Let's look at the following examples.

Africans called God by different names. Missionaries deliberately changed God's indigenous names in order to prove that there was no point of contact between the Christian God and the African God. The Sepedi name for God is Kgobe and missionaries talked of Modimo. AmaZulu called God, Umvelinqane and missionaries changed it to Unkulunkulu. AmaXhosa called God Qamatha and missionaries called God, Thixo and later Ndikhoyo (Mtuze 2008:113). Converted Africans either had their names changed or new ones added. Acquiring a Christian name was compulsory. New converts were named after the saints of the Church and other Biblical figures.

What was the African drum used for? The African drum was used across Africa as a medium of communication. It was used to call people to the royal kraal, it was used as a basic dance instrument and also as an object to invoke the presence of ancestral spirits. The drum together with other instruments that were used for ritual and recreational purposes was banned by the missionaries. But today the African Initiated Churches and other mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church have reintroduced the drum and all sorts of musical instruments, Dance and clapping of hands have also been reintroduce to recapture the African rhythm.

Most rituals in Africa included the use of incense. Many Africans used incense called "impepho". It was used to expel evil spirits and to invite positive energies during particular rituals or rites. In addition, impepho has a calming effect both emotionally and spiritually. Roman Catholics and Anglicans used incense in Europe. Where incense continued to be used in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Africa, a western incense was used, because according to the missionaries, impepho was tainted by "paganism". Sacred or holy objects were used by Africans as a visible sign of God's protection against evil forces. All these were discouraged and discarded in churches other than the Roman Catholic and Anglican. But Africans are practical people and introducing some of those "fetishes" as they were called, would contribute towards making the Church in Africa truly authentic. Relics, crosses, crucifixes, holy water, "segwasho", and similar objects have been introduced in African Initiated Churches. It is high time that the other mainline churches such as Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians follow suit. God's protective power is concretized in those holy objects and paraphernalia because for Africans those artifacts and fetishes are not merely pieces of art.

Let us turn our attention to the thorny issue of ancestor veneration. In spite of the fact that many African scholars have rejected the notion that Africans worshipped ancestors, there are, as I have indicated, still those who insist otherwise. Ancestors are regarded by Africans as integral part of their religious and cultural worldview. For any church to be truly African, she cannot ignore the role that ancestors play in the broader scheme of things. Respecting one's parents does not end

when they pass on. There are a number of testimonies attesting to the notion that ancestors are alive in one form or another in most cultures in the world. "Life After Death" (1997) is a collection of case studies in this area indicating that the dead are always with us. Mbiti (1991 : 125) calls them "the living dead". The Bible, both the First and the Second Testaments, is full of stories about the departed and St Paul in particular refers to them as "those who are asleep". Samuel was returned from the dead by a diviner on the instruction of King Saul although Samuel protested vigorously about having been disturbed from his deep and peaceful sleep.

Thagale (2004:47) refuses to bestow sainthood on ancestors. As guardians of African morality, why should they not be accorded the status of sainthood? As (inter) mediaries between God and humans, shouldn't they be regarded as God's messengers or as guardian angels? The Roman Catholic Church venerates Mary, the mother of God, and has patron saints for all sorts of things and professions. It should be easier to indigenize ancestor veneration without the fear of syncretism that seems to have been the justification of missionaries to shun indigenizing the Church in Africa. The fact is that ancestors cannot take the place of Christ in African Christian eschatology. They know their place and if they think they can take God or Christ's place, they would not succeed. Revering and honoring ancestors is already been done inter-denominationally on Resurrection Sunday when different churches congregate at graveyards. Some churches celebrate All Saints Days, and St Michael and All Angels days every year. Those days can also be used to honor African ancestors as Saints and as God's messengers.

The same attention should be given to African mediums such as izangoma, prophets, prophetesses, izinyanga etc who are links between the living and ancestors. These people have tremendous powers and a hold on Africans in all spheres of life regardless of their levels of education, spiritual and emotional maturity. At the moment, they are either ignored or denounced as possessed by evil and satanic spirits. Is it not possible that God's Spirit uses them for the role they play in society? Most of the congregants consult them anyway at their shrines and surgeries. African Initiated Churches are far ahead in recognizing the counseling and therapeutic roles these mediums and diviners are playing in society. It is very interesting that prominent South Africans including whites, have come forward to declare that they are izangoma. For example, Wally Serote, actress Noninzi Williams, author and academic Mmatshilo Motsei, Metro FM programming manager Segale Mogotsi, two Rhodes academics John Lockey and Penny Bernard are among those who recently heeded the call to be izangoma (Sunday Times, September 21, 2008:33). Of course, the main challenge is how to know a true medium from a false one! In spite of Africa being mostly patriarchal, more women than men populate this category of healers and diviners. Ecologically these people help conserve animal and plant life through various taboos against abuse of certain medicinal herbs and animals. Most of these flora and fauna are totemic and are therefore necessarily protected against abuse.

Conclusion

It is hoped that with African leadership in charge, theological errors made by the missionaries due to ignorance of the African religion and culture, the Church in

Africa will be so much Africanized that Africans would be able to identify themselves with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The foreign garment that the gospel was wrapped in, i.e., Western culture should be removed and in its place, African garment with the necessary alterations, of course, be put on.

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