

Shifting Trends of Christian Evangelistic Methods in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The study tries to understand the reason for the trends and paradigm shifts in the strategies and methodologies of European missionaries and their African protégés now that Christianity had become an African religion. Because there are some concerns as to the authenticity and effectiveness of these strategies, the study is an inquiry into the methods and strategies that the early missionaries adopted, and how we got to this tipping point of emphasizing of "wealth and riches". Are there things contemporary Christianity can learn from their Missionary ancestors? Utilizing qualitative methodology to research, the work avers that too much emphasis on prosperity has negatively skewed the way Christianity is perceived today. It recommends the need for the contemporary Christian evangelists to return to theology of repentance (*metanoia*) if Christianity is to be a force for human freedom and liberation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Christianity has become the most popular religion in Africa thus making some scholars to enthuse that African Christianity is the *representative* Christianity of 21st Century (Walls 1995, Jenkins 2001, Sanneh 2003). In fact, it is estimated that 360 millions of this number live in Africa (Jenkins 2001:13). Analysing this trend may be sign of growth and vitality. But on the flip side it may portend a concern of hollow spirituality considering the trends in the use of sensate strategies and methodologies in recruiting converts. E S Akama (2001) has lamented the absence of genuine conversion of *Metanoia*. These concerns provide the problematics of the essay. How did we get to where we are today, and what can we learn from the past? Is there anything from the past that we can learn to enable us map the future.

In response to these inquiries, the essay briefly traces the historical background of Christian missions in Nigeria and its premises, then later explores the aperture of the evangelistic strategies during the European mission era. Following this, the essay examines the contemporary methods and strategies of Christian Churches in Nigeria and their implications in order to rise above the limitations presented by their strategies. This is to gain insight with regard to the shift in theology of *metanoia* to "wealth and riches". The conclusion is that the discourse of the shifting trends in Christian evangelistic methods and strategies offers insights into the actual crisis of the decline in Christian spirituality. This shows that it is a process of transition to an age of "marketization" of the gospel and the deep challenges the Churches are confronted in reinventing the values of "the old time religion" of Jesus Christ.

Arrival of Christian Missionaries in Nigeria

There are two waves of Christian missionary work in Nigeria. One began in the 15th century and ended about 1800. The other began about 1842 and has continued work since that time. The earliest Christian missionaries were the Portuguese who visited Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta (1482 - 1621). One of the aims of the Portuguese priests was to search for allies to crusade against the forces of Islam. In other words, the Portuguese missionaries wanted Christianity to dominate throughout Nigeria. Their brand of Christianity was Roman Catholicism. However, the effort of the Portuguese priests did not produce a lasting church. Scholars have given several reasons for the collapse of these initial endeavours. They range from the opposition of indigenous religion to the pre-occupation of the Portuguese missionaries with trade and wealth.

The second phase started at about 1842. And this time, the European missionaries were members of the Protestant Churches, which were founded during the 18th century Evangelical Revival in the continents of Europe and America. These were the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), Church Missionary Society (1799), hereafter, C.M.S, the London Missionary Society (1795), the Foreign Bible Society (1803), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1813). During this second phase Christian missionary work in Nigeria was attacked from three directions: the Presbyterians and the Qua Iboe occupied Calabar, the C.M.S and the Holy Ghost Fathers established missions in the Niger Delta and up the Niger, the Methodist, CMS, the Baptists, and the Catholic Society of African Mission (SMA) advanced into the Yorubaland. In all these areas freed slaves and Africans played an important role in the evangelization of Nigeria.

However, from the 20th century African Independent churches emerged from the mainline churches over issues of management and doctrines, especially those associated with prayer and charismatic gifts. Some of these churches include "Aladura" churches among the Yoruba. This trend has continued even since with variegated forms.

Evangelistic Methods and Strategies during the European Mission era

What seems remarkable about the Christian missionaries is not that they were ordinarily zealous evangelists but they were able, despite heavy odds, to become strong and influential. Being strong and influential hinged on the adoption of various practical methods and strategies. One missionary method used was European medicine. They used it to win converts because it demonstrated Christian love in action. The success of the medical activity checked the incidence of mortality and morbidity during the colonial era. The charitable approach to evangelisation was well exploited by the Roman Catholics in Igboland to win more converts than the C.M.S in spite of the fact that the latter had antedated it by nearly thirty years. Some examples of the hospitals and clinics established by European missionaries are IyiEnu Hospital, Onitsha, Wesley Guild Hospital, Ilesha, Wusasa Hospital, Zaria, the leper colony, Uzuakoli, and the Baptist Hospital, Joinkrama.

Besides the use of medicine, there was another equally important method and strategy that enabled the European missionaries to gain converts. This was the door - to - door canvassing. This strategy implied that the missionaries would go from house to house preaching the word of God to the people. It is told that the Roman Catholic Irish priest, later Bishop, Shanahan lived among the Igbo trekking long distances to visit his converts. This practice endeared him before the people.

The next strategy of court alliance approach. What this method implied was that the missionaries endeavoured to convert the king or chief, or an influential person of the locality. It was hoped that if the chiefs were converted into Christianity then their subjects would follow suit. This strategy could be called "conversion from above". Unfortunately, most chiefs were not converted but only patronised the missionary activity for political and material interest. One notable patron of the missionaries was Chief Indigo of Aguleri, who at the risk of his life and property converted to Roman Catholicism in 1887, and had to emigrate outside his ancestral home to found St Joseph's Christian Village, Aguleri. His conversion in missionary history has been described as "a miracle of grace".

Another strategy was the Gathered colony or the Christian village system. This method involved the redemption and rehabilitation of motherless babies, slaves, outcasts, and twin mothers in homes close to the mission stations. The strategy was expected to protect them from discrimination and persecution, and also to shield them from relapsing into paganism. The Christian villages were provided with amenities such as schools, dispensaries, technical skills to empower the inmates and teach Christian industry.

Perhaps the most important method and strategy, which accelerated European missionary activity in Nigeria was education. The use of education was to destroy "the citadel of Satan" in the country. Converts were taught the 3'R's in order to appreciate the Bible. To encourage school enrolment the missionaries provided the pupils with new and attractive clothes and introduced boarding schools. In fact, it was hoped that from these schools would emerge the future evangelists for Nigeria. Schools were therefore regarded as 'nursery bed of the infant church'. In pursuance of this desire, the Presbyterians opened the Hope Waddell Training Institute, Calabar, the CMS established the Dennis Memorial College, Onitsha, while the Baptist High School, Port Harcourt was started by the Baptist. Each school was expected to propagate the doctrines of its Mission founders.

In addition, the European missionaries used native agents in their evangelistic work in Nigeria. It would be recalled that men like Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and Rolland Allen had advocated for the concept of self-reliance in church administration following Saints Paul's missionary methods (Acts 14:12-23). For instance, Henry Venn had advocated for the policy of "Euthanasia of Missions" or "the Settlement of the Native Church under Native pastors". According to Henry Venn, the policy involved an evolutionary process aimed at establishing independent congregation under native agents while the missionaries moved to new regions. In the scholarly work of WillbertShenk, Henry Venn summarized the goal of a mission thus:

"the raising up of a Native church - self - supporting, self-governing, self-extending. The mission is the scaffolding the native church is the edifice the removal of the scaffolding is the proof that the building is completed. You will have achieved the greatest success when you have taught your converts to do without you and can leave them for fresh in roads into the regions beyond.

The various European missionaries in order to encourage indigenous leadership adopted this far-sighted policy of Venn. In Nigeria mission bodies devised ways of using local agents. The CMS were pioneers in this area by the elevation of Samuel AjayiCrowther to the Bishopric of the Niger in 1864. Other mission bodies like the Presbyterians followed the example of the C.M.S, by ordaining two Nigerians, EsienUkpabio and AsnquoEkanem.

The Native agents were significant in the study and translation of Nigerian languages. Their efforts culminated in the translation of the Bible into the vernaculars. The effort of AjayiCrowther in producing the

Yoruba Bible is a reference point. Linguistic and cultural advantages of African agents over European missionaries provided the African with the cultural lens to read the Bible with their eyes; thus discovering that much of what the White missionaries had condemned like, spirit possession, faith healing, dreams, vision, witchcraft, and spiritualized universe, were indeed not biblical and unscriptural. The reality of the spiritual universe became the precursors of African Independent Churches and strands of Pentecostalism (Allan Anderson 1989, OgbuKalu2000).

The Christian missionaries also adopted the strategy of providing military assistance to consenting communities especially during political and military crises to gain converts. A good example of an area where this was used was in Yorubaland, especially the Egband. For instance, Shodeke, the chief of Abeokuta and his people accepted Christianity due to the military support they got from the missionaries.

Lastly, the European missionaries adopted the strategy of using the clout of the colonial government, that is the use of the power of "Christian England" or colonial power to win converts. The missionaries like the traders threatened to show to the "pagans" the military powers of colonial authority from where they came from. In fact, it was the establishment of British power in the 1890s that secured Christian moorings in much of Yorubaland, such as Ijebu, Ife, Owo, Ekiti, and Akoko.

Similarly, the Aro Expedition of 1900 to 1902 undertaken by the colonial power speeded up the evangelisation process in Igboland. In fact, the destruction of the Aro Oracle made the missionaries to penetrate into the Igbo heartland. This strategy had drawn the ire of some African historians who have caricatured them as imperialist at prayer (Ayandele1966) and cultural iconoclast (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999)

Contemporary Evangelistic Methods and Strategies of the Christian Churches

Writing on the changing trends in evangelism method of past European mission era, Dr. E.S. Akama protests against the way the "new" churches had deviated from the old method of "preach, teach, and baptize to that of "preach, baptize, and teach". According to him the change in approach has denied the people of the intellectual content of evangelism.

A striking missionary strategy and method adopted by the Christian churches today is the organisation of Revival Services and crusades. Thus public places, like market places, motor parks, community squares, and halls are flooded by all shades of evangelists and listeners. In most of these Revival centres emphasis is on miracles, faith healing exorcism and deliverance from curses and demonic attacks. Most often these miracles and healings are advertised to the general public. A contemporary example of the advertisement of miracles is Chris Oyakhilome's "atmosphere of miracle" crusades.

The emphasis on faith healing strategy today has given rise to charlatanism and proliferation of independent churches. The **African Guardian** summarized the nauseating situation thus:

*"All manner of crooks across the land,
Veritable devils' advocates, social misfits
and drop-outs, suddenly profess divine
inspiration and extra-ordinary power to heal
and to confer good fortune. The truth about all this is that they are
based on personal greed and a wanton zeal
to commercialise the Lord's Temple rather
than on doctrinal differences".*

Dr. Mbang, the late patriarch of the Methodist church of Nigeria blamed this too much emphasis on miracles and faith healing on the church leaders' pre-occupation with prosperity and riches. E.S. Akama corroborates this assertion when he says that the crusades and Revival meetings have become variable avenues for fund raising rather than soul winning. As Esther E Acolatse put it there is no doubt that the breakdown of the economic and socio-political structures have created an apocalyptic vision "that drive the masses to churches and who are fed falsehoods about prosperity while being robbed blind by the pastors who should be caring for them; anew form of Simonism it seems" (2018:211). This kind of strategy does not engender faith in those who would respond to the gospel but rather in the end it paralyses and pauperizes the masses the more.

The other contemporary method adopted by the Christian churches today is the use of tracts, pamphlets, posters, banners and stickers. It is a simple and profound evangelistic strategy. Pamphlets contain scriptural texts, expositions and sermons of other people. Many Nigerians have been converted by reading these literatures.

Indeed, the use of stickers is common among Christians in the country today. One finds them on cars, commercial lorries, and on wares. There are such stickers as "It is well with my soul: Jesus Christ", "Jesus saves", "Angels on Guard", "I am Glorious", and so many others that defy description. The users of these stickers use them not only as adornments but as expressions of their faith. Psychologically, the use of the stickers allays fear and assures the drivers and their inmates of divine protection. Paradoxically, the user of these car stickers are the worst traffic contraveners today.

Another veritable strategy adopted by contemporary Christian churches today is the use of electronic media and Internet facilities. Radio and TV are rife with church programmes. Some churches have been gone Internet. Every now and then, 'tele-evangelists' appear with expensive clothes and funky hairstyles to preach the stereotyped message of "my God is good", or "my God is not a poor God". In their emphasis on prosperity theology, they have forgotten the gospel message of repentance, conversion and salvation (*metanoia*).

Finally, the contemporary Christian churches have also adopted the strategy of establishment of schools, especially Universities. While the establishment of these universities may be a logical reaction to the all too pervasive moral decadence in our conventional universities, there is the undercurrent that they may be veritable channels for the award of honorary doctorate degrees, considering the Nigerians craze for honours and titles. The churches that have established universities are the Adventists (Babcock University) the Baptist (Bowen University), the Cherubim and Seraphim (Moses Orimolade University).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present religious situation in Nigeria is chaotic and as such needs caution to handle. In spite of the emergence of the so-called Spiritual or Pentecostal churches, and a number of congregations, the increasing rate of moral decadence is disquieting. This calls for a serious evaluation of the evangelistic strategies in use. It is either that the methods and strategies are to be reinforced or discarded and new ones introduced in order not to mar the genuine intentions of the European missionaries and undermined the spirituality and liberating praxis of Christianity. We agree with Dr. E.S. Akama completely.

Footnotes

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