

Missiological Responses To The Tension Between Christian Faith And African Identity: A Case Study Of Congolese Christians

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to provide missiological responses to the tension between Christian faith and African identity. African identity is more linked to African cultures which are formed and defined by the African traditional religions. Andrew Isiguzo says that “traditional religion is the center of African identity. Unfortunately, the desire for traditional religious practices started diminishing when the first European missionaries set foot on African soil” (Isiguzo, 2008, p. 181). This reveals that the Christian faith did not leave Africans the same about their identity. Nevertheless, this change in African identity has put Africans in a crisis regarding their belonging. Some struggle to define their identity after joining the Christian faith. They wonder if they are still Africans when they are asked to stop partaking in some African customs and beliefs. The central question for this research is: What can help Congolese Christians overcome the tension between Christian faith and African identity? This question will lead to providing five missiological responses to the tension between the Christian faith and African Identity.

Africa is a huge continent with many sub-cultures regarding each country. That is the reason why in this research, I am not “presupposing that all African societies have the same explanations for events, the same language, and the same mode of dressing and so on. Rather, there are underlying similarities shared by many African societies which, when contrasted with other cultures, reveal a wide gap of difference” (Idang, 2015, p. 97). In this paper will mention aspects of similarity in African cultures while focusing on Congolese Christians regarding the tension between the Christian faith and African identity.

“Africans do share some dominant traits in their belief systems and have similar values that mark them out from other peoples of the world. Some social values, especially in African society cannot exactly be separated from religious, moral, political values. Religion in African societies seems to be the fulcrum around which every activity revolves. For instance, it possesses the concept of a Supreme Being which is invisible and indigenous. It holds a belief in the existence of the human soul and the soul does not die with the body. African traditional religion also has the belief that good and bad spirits do exist and that these spirits are what make communication with the Supreme being possible” (Idang, 2015, p. 100,103,104)

As scholars have demonstrated, the similarity in African cultures lies in the fact that all African cultures are based on traditional religions. African rituals find their meaning and purpose in their traditional religions. It is difficult to separate an African from his traditional religions. However, Christianity has attempted to do so, and that is why tension has arisen between the Christian faith and African identity. The reason is that Christianity is also a religion but with opposite truths and values that contradict African traditional religions. In the paragraphs, I will make the facts of differentiation clearer.

This is a descriptive research. According to Eunsook Koh, “Descriptive research is a study of status and is widely used in education, nutrition, epidemiology, and the behavioral sciences. Its values are based on the premise that problems can be solved and practices improved through observation, analysis, and description” (Koh & Owen, 2000, p. 219). I will describe the major factors that contributed to the spread of Christianity in Africa and how the methods used by missionaries impacted African identity to create the tension that is experienced today by many African Christians. I will highlight the components of God’s mission that form the beliefs and values of Christianity. Finally, I will end up providing five missiological responses to the tension between Christian faith and African identity.

II. Defining Christian Faith And Africans' Identity

Christian Faith

Christian faith is the outcome of Christianity. Christianity is the world's largest religion based on its belief in God in three Persons (God the Father, God the Son, and Holy Spirit). The Bible is the supreme and holy book that reveals God's heart, mission, and plan for the universe through Jesus Christ His Son by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 3: 14-15, Gen. 12: 1-3, Is. 9:5, Jn. 3:16, and so on). It is shown that "today roughly one-third of the people on earth are Christians. Not only is Christianity the largest religion in the world but it embraces a huge variety of forms" (Robert, 2009, p. 1). So, we have the Evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist, Liberal, Methodist, Anglican, Catholic and so. Those different categories practice Christianity differently but their similarity lies in the belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the use of the Bible as their supreme book.

Christianity is not only the largest religion but also the oldest as "it is now almost 2000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ set in motion the chain of events which led to the creation of Christian faith and its diffusion throughout the world" (Johnson, 2012, p. x). The beginning of Christianity was not so impressive, but later on, she embraced many parts of the world. As it said, "for a starting number, Acts 1:14-15 suggest that several months after the crucifixion of (Jesus Christ) there were 120 Christians". Later, the number increased considerably as the disciples of Jesus Christ continued to proclaim the good news He (Jesus Christ) communicated to them about God and His Kingdom (Stark, 1996, p. 5).

In the beginning, Christianity was considered by many as an unacceptable religion. It is only under Constantine that Christianity changed "its status from being a cult with the mighty Roman empire to being an officially tolerated religion" (Woodhead, 2004, p. 9). Then over time, "the emergence of Christianity brought about one of the most profound revolutions the world has known". Christianity was then considered to be a "culture-forming religion, and the planting and growth of Christian communities led to the remaking of the cultures of the ancient world along with the creation of a new civilization, or more accurately several new civilizations" (Wilken, 2012, p. 1,2). Christianity being a culture-forming religion justifies the tension between the Christian faith and African identity because Christianity offers a new culture and a new of living to all who join.

After attending the History of the World Christianity Movement at Biola University, it appeared to me very clear that a lot has changed in Africans' identity since Christianity came to Africa. However, some scholars tend to condemn the radical change Christianity brought to Africans, saying that culture is an "organic unit" that must be treated with much respect (Rynkiewicz, 2020, p. 341). That means it is not correct to condemn a cultural practice before considering the entire understanding of that practice by the people. The idea of a culture being an organic unit, made many Africans somehow resist the message of Christianity because they considered it as the weapon coming to change them from whom they were supposed to be and remain. George Yip supports the idea saying that the organic unity of the culture was promoted in the traditional anthropology where culture was 'conceived as internally coherent and organized as a pattern' (Yip, 2014, p. 400).

African Identity

Culture is defined in many ways. For this research, I consider this simple definition that "culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people" (Idang, 2015, p. 99). I mentioned it in the introduction that African identity is linked to its culture. The culture is formed by the African Traditional Religion. Therefore, to better understand the African identity, it is important to understand the beliefs of the African Traditional Religions and then analyze the customs that flow from them. When I read about the history of Christianity in Africa, It seems that Christianity was presented to Africans in a way that created a loss of identity for Africans. And that is still visible today as many African Christians are struggling to define themselves concerning African cultures.

African Traditional Religion is the "indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans" (Awolalu, 1976, p. 1). The Nigerians for example when they have an issue which is beyond human capacity, "they turn to superhuman powers for help. They address their prayers to a 'God', either directly or indirectly through lesser gods or spiritual go-between". On the other side, the Kikuyu people of Kenya, when they want to address their prayer to 'God', all people will gather "under a sacred tree" to do some rituals for the honor of that 'God' (Lugira, 2009, p. 8). The belief in the actions or help of the supernatural being is central in the African Traditional Religions. And that includes good and bad spirits and dead ancestors.

That belief influenced all other practices in African cultures. Some practices could make the spirits happy and kind toward them, while others made spirits angry and pronounced curses on them. Therefore, everyone is obliged to be careful in the way he acts to avoid punishment from superhuman beings. However, not all practices linked to the African Traditional Religions were good. Some lacked a sense of human dignity and justice because the focus was to please their god no matter how individuals felt or thought. That may justify how European missionaries were radical for change in Africans as they spread Christianity (Stipe, 1980, p. 165).

III. Understanding Some Factors Of The Spread Of Christianity In Africa

Many people think that Christianity was unknown to the African continent, and that only through the advent of colonialism that Christianity was introduced to Africans. That is why many say that Christianity is “the religion of the colonizers or a sort of weed to the soil of Africa”. However, some researchers have demonstrated that that statement is not true, because “not only Christianity is one of those religions which deeply influenced and still influences African affairs in general, but simply because it had also been present before Islam arrived to the continent” (Besenyő, 2020).

Some Scholars say that “Christianity has been in Africa virtually since its inception and that the continent’s own adherents to this faith played an important role in the formation and advance of Christianity elsewhere” (Fatokun, 2005). It is really important to admit that “Christianity came very early to Africa, as attested by the Gospels... Even after the rise of Islam cut communications between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Churches of Rome and Constantinople, it survived in the eastern Sudan kingdom of Nubia until the 15th Century and never died in Ethiopia” (Etherington, 2019). And today, “Christianity continues to widen its global net, claiming the allegiance of well over two billion people” (Kollman & Smedley, 2018, p. ix).

According to Isaac Deji Ayegboyin and Michael Adeleke Ogunewa who wrote on *the Advent, Development, and Impact of Christianity in Africa*, in the Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Africa, “the advancement of Christianity across Africa occurred in phases. Some parts of Northern Africa came in contact with Christianity in the first century, and the faith then flourished until the 8th century, when Christianity suffered near extinction. Providentially, Christianity made a sudden reappearance in the 15th century, followed by a spectacular and enduring re-emergence in the 19th century in West, East, Central, and Southern Africa” (Sooryamoorthy & Khalema, 2023, p. 118,119).

Isaac Deji Ayegboyin and Michael Adeleke Ogunewa (Sooryamoorthy & Khalema, 2023) say that:

“The Acts of the Apostles points to Africa’s early contact with the Gospel. The first mention of such contact was that of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-28), the Ethiopian had opportunities to witness for Christ in Africa. Later, in Acts 18:24-28, mention was also made Apollos, a convert from Alexandria in Egypt. The church in Northern Africa flourished in the cities of Alexandria, Carthage (Tunisia), and Cyrenaica (Libya) for some centuries before the incursion of Islam into the region” (Sooryamoorthy & Khalema, 2023, p. 119). Africa’s second encounter with Christianity took place from 1500 to 1800 when the faith was introduced by Catholic Portugal into many parts of West Africa, including Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and the Kingdom of Kongo” (Sooryamoorthy & Khalema, 2023, p. 119).

A lot can be said concerning the spread of Christianity in many parts of Africa, however, a few details will be mentioned in this research to help us understand the critical reality around the tension between the Christian faith and African Identity. Some examples are with Egypt, as in North Africa, where “a mass turning away from old religion towards Christianity seems to have begun in the middle of the third Century and to have been virtually complete by 400, with the exception of a few neo-pagan aristocrats”. However, this move “has been associated with the sufferings of the Egyptian peasantry and with the relative deprivation of Jewish and Egyptian elites”. Surprisingly, many individuals were converted into Christianity by the courage of the martyrs” (Isichei, 1995, p. 26). Though the spread of Christianity occasioned the suffering of many, at the same time, that suffering was used to attract others to embrace Christianity.

Many strategies were used on how to effectively spread Christianity. For example, “in 543, Theodora sent the Monophysite monk, Julian, to Nubia, instructing the governor of the Thebaid to stop any other mission. Julian converted Nobatia to Christianity, beginning with the court” (Isichei, 1995, p. 30,31). This was one of the strategies to convert the leaders so that their followers would join in mass. Unfortunately, “Nubian Christianity developed in great isolation. Between 639 and 641, the Arabs conquered Egypt, and from then on, Coptic Christians were a diminishing minority in a country under Muslim rule”. However, the isolation did not stop the force of Nubian Christianity. It survived and flourished for Centuries (Isichei, 1995, p. 31). That shows that Christianity was accompanied by a mighty power beyond human explanation which I call the transformative power of Christianity.

Understanding the spread of Christianity in Africa according to Derek Cooper (Cooper, 2016, pp. 124–138):

It can be considered that less than a century ago Europe divided Africa according to its own interest in search of natural resources, human slaves, and territorial expansion; colonized it and left when the situation became too challenging to maintain. However, at the same time, European colonization paved the way for Africa to eventually become the most Christianized continent on the planet, as the missionaries among colonizers also sought “to enlarge their Christianity empires by converting the indigenous Africans” (Cooper, 2016, p. 125). According to Cooper, Christianity found its way through the selfish interest of the European colonizers. That led Africans to think that all that was done by Europeans either missionaries or colonizers was all part of Christianity.

So, the stress may have been deep and painful as Christianity and colonization were purchased at the same time but the issue of Christianity pre-dominated. As a way to protect themselves from the oppression which accompanies Christianity “most central Africans practice some form of Christianity”. Some joined Christianity not because they were convinced to adhere to the Christian faith but only because they did not have another alternative. Unfortunately, “despite the high number of Christians per country, many Central African nations continue to struggle from warfare and political strife”. In particular, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are undergoing a persistent political and religious challenge (Cooper, 2016, p. 126). I think that can be because some become Christians not because their hearts surrendered to the Christian faith, but only because it was the only option to have peace. So, the countries seem Christianized but not are Christianized with the transformative power of Christianity.

History reveals also that the people in Kongo largely adopted Christianity as their religion under Afonso’s reign, though many at the same time maintained traditional African religious customs. “The Portuguese presence in Congo came with as many curses as blessings. In addition to the introduction of Christian spirituality, the Portuguese became embroiled in the slave trade. By the middle of the sixteenth century, they were exporting three to four thousand African slaves annually. This number increased each decade” (Cooper, 2016, p. 127). This is another stress that aligned with the spread of Christianity.

The second major factor that contributed to the spread of Christianity in Africa was the commitment of Christians to maintain an uncheckable faith despite their suffering and finally became a candle of hope to other people. But above it all, the more evident factor of the spread of Christianity in the 15th to the 21st centuries was the work of the Spirit of God changing evil for good as the Christian faith came through colonization. The colonizers were after a selfish interest while God was fulfilling His redemption work in the lives of Africans.

However, it is important to mention that the impact of Christianity on Africans appears positive to some scholars while the majority judge it to have a negative impact mostly concerning African cultures. According to them, the impact of Christianity on Africans is negative because it oppressed African cultures to promote a new one which appears to be a foreigner.

IV. Presenting The Components Of God’s Mission Alighted In Christianity

The tension between the Christian faith and African Identity may be justified, according to me, by a lack of a good understanding of the reality of humanity and God’s mission on earth or the understanding of sin in the world. Below, I am presenting the three components of God’s mission which explain widely some realities about humanity, which may show the need for missiological responses to the tension between Christianity and African Identity. God’s mission has three components:

The creation of the universe and humans followed by human falling into sin (Gen. 2-3): God’s mission begins with the creation of the universe and humans (Gen. 1-2). God created everything beautiful and gave the management of his creation to Adam and Eve who were created in God’s image (Gen. 1: 26-28). God explicitly shared his divine nature and power with humans so they may reflect his nature and rule over the earth and animals (Horowitz, 1979). However, God gave them an instruction to follow as a sign of their obedience and trust in God. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve failed to exercise the abilities God gave them. Instead of trusting God’s love and God’s good plan for them, they believed in Satan’s lies (Genesis 3: 1-6). Their disobedience to God’s instruction opened the door to sin and its consequences in the world. By obeying Satan, Adam and Eve subjected themselves to Satan’s rule and power. According to Walter Diener, ‘Scripture teaches that sin leaves men separated from God and spiritually dead’ which also leads to all types of slavery (Diener, 2015, p. 1).

The consequences of sin can be summarized into three realities (Gen. 3: 1-24):

- Separation from God’s glory and presence manifested when Adam and Eve realized that they were naked and hid themselves away from God. This was the spiritual death. Therefore, once this spiritual death occurred, a lot of human initiatives were not in alignment with God’s will. One example of it is the creation of human culture. Human culture is formed and developed by humans already separated from God, under the rule of Satan. That shows clearly, the need for redemption not only of human but also their cultures, as a lot of cultural customs were not done with a godly discernment of its content.
- The broken relationships between humans with God, between man and woman, and humans with the other part of the creation.
- Physical death. This particular consequence of sin did not occur immediately when Adam and Eve disobeyed even if God had already declared it. But it happened a few years later when Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8).

However, the disobedience of Adam and Eve even though God was not pleased with it, it did not affect God’s love for humans and His creation. John 3:16 says ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ (NIV version). Many theologians

agree that John 3:16 is the central passage of the Bible exposing God's love for the lost, God's agenda for humans. Botha and Rousseau say that 'John 3:16 is probably the most popular and widely proclaimed proof-text for God's love for all of humankind' (Botha & Rousseau, 2005). The redemption of human and His creation is the central interest of God.

The redemption of humans from sin (Gen. 3 to Rev. 20): After the fall in Genesis 3, the mission of God was oriented to the redemption of humans and all the creation from sin and its consequences (John 3:16). The redemption work of God is being opposed by the power of sin and Satan's strategies to disorient human attention and focus, to attract them far away from God and keep them as a subject of sin (Eph. 2: 1-3, 6: 12-13; Jn. 8:44, Rom. 3:23). Some examples of the consequences of sins misleading the reasoning of human in Gen. 4, Cain killed his young brother because of jealousy, (Gen. 16), Sarah asked his husband Abraham, man chosen by God to doubt about God's promise to them and committed adultery with Agara as a way for them to have a child, as that was a cultural custom of their time. This supports the fact of the redemption of both humans and their cultures to align themselves back to God's will/agenda/plan.

The new earth and new heaven (Rev. 21-22): This is the final action within God's mission to restore everything for himself (Revelation 21-22). This third action will be completed after the church has also done faithfully her mission within God's mission which is to be the channel of the redemption of human and their cultures, the redemption of the political system, and so on. Even if this redemption plan will only be completed during the second coming of Jesus on earth (Col. 1:12-14; Rev. 11:15). In the book Apocalypse (7:9), it says that all nations (culture) will surround the throne of God and glorify Him. But, none of the nation/ culture will surround the throne if not yet redeemed. Therefore, I can paraphrase (Apoc. 7:9) saying: all redeemed nation/ culture will bow before the throne of God. So, will the African cultures be among them? The answer is yes, Africans will surrender to the transformative power of Christianity to become the channel of the redeemed of African cultures.

V. Missiological Responses To The Tension Between Christianity And African Identity

Under this point, in addition to what I have already developed earlier, I will provide five missiological responses to the tension between the Christian faith and African identity by responding to the central question of this research:

What can help Congolese Christians overcome the tension between Christian faith and African identity?

The first missiological response that can provide a balance between Christian faith and African identity to Congolese Christians is to acknowledge and appreciate the positive aspects of Christianity and the great sacrifice and commitment European missionaries made to spread Christianity to them. Because, though a lot is said about how Christianity oppressed Africans by forcing them to compel "labor and then military enlistment into a speed and type of change they had not dreamed of" (Ross, 1955, p. 162); however, no one can ignore the input of Christianity into Africans' lives in many aspects of their existence.

Christianity has occasioned tangible changes in many African aspects, I can cite "the horizontal change, across the whole range of concepts and practices of life -in thought, language, religion, political and social organization, land, marriage, inheritance, occupations, economics, housing, disease causation and cure, recreation, communications of all kinds, and in nearly every other aspect of life" (Ross, 1955, p. 162). Other scholars emphasize the same idea saying that "Since its establishment, Christianity has made great achievements in the areas of education, healthcare, and rural development" (Sibani & Nyama, 2024).

The second missiological response is to understand that African cultures had some rituals that were oppressive and painful which the transformative power of Christianity has fixed. Victor Turner (Turner, 1973) said that Africa is well known for its multiple forms of rituals oriented to ceremonies such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, and initiation into priesthood. Some of those rituals lacked a sense of human dignity which Christianity has corrected. I have observed in many Congolese cultures many cultural issues related to marriage, puberty, and death are fixed by the transformative power of Christianity. Many rituals are no longer acceptable because the power of God for the redemption of humans and their entire cultures is at work.

"In the Akamba traditional society the woman who married an Iweto (singular) was herself a married woman, who was either barren or had given birth to Paul M. Kyalo 75 daughters only. After initial consultations between her and her husband, they choose the girl whom they want to incorporate into their family. The wife, in her husband's presence or in the presence of one of the elders from her husband's family, designated or pronounced the girl to be the wife of her son who was never born. Then negotiations began if the proposal was accepted. In all marital unions consent of all parties was highly sought. The duty of looking for genitor (the man with whom the iweto will bear children) fell on the woman's husband" (Kyalo, 2011, p. 74,75).

Many other Congolese tribes had similar practices of stopping self-expression, freedom in people's mindsets, discrimination, and lack of justice. According to me, many of the African rituals did not promote human dignity. The reason is that today some of them are no longer applied because Christianity has shown the way by rescuing people from their ignorance.

The third missiological response is to know that Christianity is a transformative power by its nature because Christianity moves with the power of God. God's power has been available to rescue people from their loss, their ignorance, and their pain so that they live the fullness of life that God created each person to live on earth. Research has demonstrated that "Christianity, is not something in a separate compartment of life called church or missions or worship. It is an integral, inextricable part of life, all life" (Ross, 1955, p. 164). Christianity leads to a new life. It causes a change in the person's worldview and provides a new direction in purpose's achievement individually and collectively.

The fourth missiological response is to separate Christianity from Western culture. Many tend to consider Christianity as part of Western culture. As it said, "the Africans early tended to regard all Westerners as representatives of Christianity, all these Westerners' political, economic, social, racial, personal patterns and actions as representing Christianity" (Ross, 1955, p. 163). As I mentioned earlier all cultures need to be redeemed as people are being redeemed by the power of God. The redemption of cultures does not only concern African cultures. That means the Westerners who spread Christianity in Africa were also not perfect regarding their culture which is why some of their actions, reactions, and practices offended Africans. Africans did not only resisted to the message of Christianity but also the Western culture.

The fifth missiological response is to embrace the change of the transformative power of Christianity with a contextualization mindset to experience the fullness of life as Congolese Christians and become the candles of hope for the entire Africans. I don't think that the transformative power of Christianity aims to kill or wipe away African culture. The purpose of the transformative power of Christianity is to redeem African cultures from its damage as part of the consequences of sin so that Africans will reflect their true nature and values in alignment with God's word and plan for them. In addition to that, as it said in John 8: 12, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (NIV Version). That shows that it is normal that the Christian faith occasioned many changes in African cultures because the gospel brings light and Jesus is the light. Africans must avoid thinking that they could have joined Christianity and remain completely the same. Change is a key component of the Christian faith. The only specificity of this change is that it brings us to become the better version of who we were made to be, not to kill our identity or oppress us because Christianity aims to restore God's image in all redeemed from sin and its consequences.

VI. Conclusion

I would like to clarify that I am not against African Cultures, because I, myself, am an African. The issue is that as an insider, I have observed how dangerous the tension between Christian faith and African identity is as it produces spiritual instability in the lives of many Congolese Christians. That is why I found it very urgent to provide these missiological responses to help Congolese Christians find a balance between Christian faith and African identity which will cause harmony in the way they will then live their Christian faith as redeemed and restored African Christians.

Isaac Deji Ayegboyan and Michael Adeleke Ogunewu, say that "given the current Christian numerical growth in Africa, it can be asserted that Christianity will remain a formidable force to be reckoned with in the life of the people" (Sooryamoorthy & Khalema, 2023, p. 119). But I doubt that this may be automatic evidence based on what is happening in Africa regarding the practice of syncretism on one side as some Africans combine the Christian faith with traditional beliefs including its rituals and the desire to get back to the African traditional religion on the other side as some Africans are undergoing inner crises related to their true identity.

Therefore, according to me, though Christianity is now well spread in Africa, the issue with African Traditional Religions is stopping the fullness of authentic Christian faith in the lives of many Christian Africans, particularly Congolese Christians. So, in addition to the five missiological responses, I am recommending to Congolese churches and Christian organizations the following:

- To never minimize the influence of African Traditional Religion over African Christians.
- To emphasize teachings on the holiness of God and the influence of sin in human life and cultures.
- To start addressing seriously the danger of syncretism in Christian life.
- To increase a biblical discernment for daily life that pleases God, because Christians find their life standard in the Bible (the Word of God).

Finally, the five missiological responses to the tension between Christian faith and African identity can be materialized through this simple formula: *What + How + Why + Bible = Christian life*. Every Congolese Christian should learn to question the culture's practices before deciding on how to act and react regarding the origin and purpose of each practice. Congolese Christians should admit that by joining the Christian faith, they

automatically accepted the redemption process of their life, and of their way of living (culture) through the transformative power of Christianity.

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