

AFRICAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP. BETWEEN CHRIST, CULTURES AND CONFLICTS

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1. Christianity and Culture

The question of the relationship between Christianity and culture is a perennial problem that has endured since the beginning of Christianity. It is a challenge for all churches and a specific challenge for church leadership in Africa.

In his book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr¹ suggests at least five different ways in which this relationship might be expressed. Niebuhr's analysis is helpful for anyone interested in discerning how Christianity has been appropriated for social change in the contemporary world, especially in Africa. It is worthwhile to summarise that analysis.

1.1. Christ Against Culture

When Christianity is presented as an alternative superior to the existing culture, the prospective convert is placed in a dilemma, to follow Christ or remain in 'paganism'. This particular relationship has been presupposed by most missionaries from the North Atlantic to Africa. By 'Christ' they have meant their own cultural and religious heritage, which is supposedly 'Christian'. Since Christianity cannot exist in a cultural vacuum, any claim to preach 'pure gospel' becomes pretentious. A Christian, no matter how puritanical, is a product of his culture. When he goes out to win converts, he does so from his own cultural background, using the cultural tools which he has accumulated through the process of socialisation and education. The portrayal of Christ as being against culture, in practice becomes a declaration of conflict between the culture of the missionary and that of the prospective converts. This produces a serious social crisis. The proliferation of independent churches in Africa is a manifestation of that crisis. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his novel *The River Between*² portrays this crisis in the conflict between Joshua, the staunch Christian, and Muthoni, his daughter, who seeks wholeness in the traditional African way of life. Okot p'Bitek also portrays the same crisis in his

196 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

two long poems, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*.³ Kosuke Koyama⁴ described a similar crisis in Thailand, where local people could identify themselves with Christ, while the missionaries portrayed Christianity as a movement against the Buddhist tradition.

1.2. *The Christ of Culture*

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some Christians consider Christ to be the 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man' who comes to affirm the cultural and religious heritage of peoples. The Gospel is then viewed as the fulfilment of culture, not a threat to it. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is interpreted as an endorsement of this perspective. Christ is then portrayed as the 'Man for All Cultures', who helps people to discern and live according to God's will in the context of their respective cultural and religious traditions. Under this perspective, Christianity cannot be culturally uniform. The churches of the apostolic period presupposed this perspective of the relationship between Christ and culture. Though they were in communion with each other, they retained each its uniqueness and cultural particularity.

1.3. *Christ Above Culture*

Between these two extremes of affirmation and negation of culture, some Christians evade conflict by presenting a Christ who is 'above' culture. Under this perspective, Christianity becomes transcendentalist, concentrating on 'salvation' in heaven and in future. In practice, such religiosity becomes irrelevant to the needs and demands of the present.

1.4. *Christ and Culture in Paradox*

Other Christians avoid the conflict by suggesting a paradox, in which Christ is at the same time identified with culture and contrasted with it. The Church is in the world, though it is not of the world. The problem of this perspective is the lack of clarity with regard to the circumstances under which Christ is portrayed in support of culture and those when culture is negated. Who has the authority to decide on such questions? In the context of the modern Christian missionary enterprise, this authority has been vested in missionaries, who in general have been biased in favour of their own cultures and against the cultures where they are guests.

1.5. *Christ the Transformer of Culture*

The fifth perspective portrays Christ as the transformer of culture, who makes all things new (Rev 21:5). Conversion is viewed as

a challenge for the convert to change his ways and become a new being. St. Paul's conversion is often cited as an example. He was transformed from a 'persecutor' of Christians to a 'perfector' of Christianity. The notion of transformation, however, presupposes that the earlier way of life is not abandoned; it is transformed through adoption of new insights and commitments. If the ingredients of transformation are taken from the invading culture, the resulting change becomes comparable with any other process of acculturation. In Africa, most cultural change under colonial rule and missionary tutelage has been of this kind. It is for this reason that many of the African elites have blamed the modern Christian missionary enterprise for the cultural alienation which Africans have suffered under the pretext of modernisation.

These five perspectives on the relationship between Christianity and culture have all been applicable in Africa. In one African country, and in one particular denomination, all the perspectives might be present, causing tensions and confusions and factions. Part of the cultural crisis in the continent arises from the lack of consensus amongst Christians and churches, on the most relevant and constructive approach *to reconcile Christianity and culture*.

2. Piety and Politics

A second severe challenge for African church leaders is the instrumentalisation of religion in politics. Alan Geyer, in his book *Piety and Politics*,⁵ outlines six approaches through which religion can be used in political mobilisation. In each of those approaches, religion becomes a means to an end – as a source of loyalty, a sanction for loyalty, a sanction for conflict, a source of conflict, a sanctuary from conflict, and a reconciler of conflict. This section explores each of these appropriations of religion, with particular reference to contemporary Africa.

2.1. Religion as a Source of Loyalty

When religion is used as a source of loyalty, the leaders try to wrench social cohesion by appealing to a common faith. The Old Testament and the Koran have often been interpreted as scriptures which portray religion as a source of loyalty. This approach is used both by regimes in power and by groups struggling for liberation. In Africa, the apartheid regime used the Dutch Reformed Church as a source of loyalty among the Afrikaners, until apartheid was declared a heresy by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1983. Islam is sometimes used as a source of loyalty. Such is the case in the countries

198 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

of the Arabian Peninsula. Secular states avoid this approach to religion by constitutionally detaching religious affiliation from citizenship. National cohesion is impossible to achieve when religious affiliation becomes entangled with citizenship. Former Yugoslavia, which seemed united during the cold war, disintegrated when various nationalities claimed their sovereignty on the basis of cultural, religious and historical identity. The civil strife in Sudan revolves around the question of religious, cultural, racial and ideological identity.

2.2. *Religion as a Sanction for Loyalty*

Geyer illustrates this approach by describing the influence of Calvinism on the development of national consciousness in the USA. He shows that the separation of powers between church and state, which has become a dominant feature in that country, produced not a secularist nation, but one in which both civil religion and national patriotism flourished. Citing a book published by Lord Bryce in 1889 under the title *American Commonwealth*, Geyer highlights the features which have characterised American identity:⁶

- Christianity is, in fact if not in name, the national religion;
- the world view of average Americans is shaped by the Bible and Christian theology;
- Americans attribute progress and prosperity to Divine favour;
- political thought is deeply influenced by such Puritan emphases as the doctrine of original sin;
- American constitutional government is peculiarly legalistic;
- American religion is marked by emotional fervour; and
- the social activities of American religion are singularly developed.

In contemporary Africa, the use of religion as a sanction for loyalty can be illustrated in such countries as Ethiopia under Haile Selassie, and in Zaire under Mobutu. In the former, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the symbol of Ethiopian sovereignty, even though there are adherents to other religions. In Zaire, an attempt was made to bring all Protestant churches under one umbrella organisation, as a means of control. This attempt did not succeed, particularly because the denominational missionary links with Europe and North America could not be severed.

2.3. *Religion as a Sanction for Conflict*

Throughout history religion has been used to justify conflict and war, especially in the context of imperial expansion. From the 8th

century onwards, Islam was used to justify Arab expansion across North Africa and into Europe. Europeans used the Crusades to justify invasion and plunder of foreign peoples. The missionary enterprise was fuelled by a similar crusading spirit, in which non Christians were considered enemies of Christ if they resisted conversion to Christianity. Geyer cites Psalm 18:34, 39-40, as an example of Christian-Judaic scriptural references which portray religion as a sanction for conflict:

He trains my hands for war,
So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
For thou didst gird me with strength for the battle;
Thou didst make my assailants sink under me.
Thou didst make my enemies turn their backs to me,
And those who hated me I destroyed.

In contemporary Africa, many civil conflicts are often portrayed in such adversarial terms. It is in Sudan, perhaps more than in any other part of the continent, that religion is portrayed as sanction for conflict. The civil war in Sudan, which has been raging since 1956, is generally portrayed by the mass media as a conflict between ‘the “Arabised” and “Islamised” North against the “Christianised” and “Animist” South’. This adversarial caricature of a very complex problem, tends to oversimplify the dynamics of the conflict, which has historical, political, economic, ideological and cultural dimensions. The media image of the conflict overlooks the fact that there are Muslims and Christians on both sides of the conflict.

2.4. Religion as a Source of Conflict

The religious conflicts in Palestine-Israel, India (Punjab and Kashmir), and Sri Lanka are examples where religion is a source of conflict. In Africa, the declaration of Shariah in Northern Nigeria is another example. The civil strife in Algeria can also be cited in this context. One important question is whether in the 21st century it will make political sense to organise nations and states on the basis of religious identity. While religion is important as a pillar of culture, it ought not to divide peoples whose survival can be sustained only through interdependence.

2.5. Religion as a Sanctuary from Conflict

This approach to religion can have at least two meanings. First, it can mean the retreat of religious leadership and laity from involvement in social controversies, on the ground that religious commitment does not permit social engagement. Second, it can mean that in

200 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

times of conflict the victims caught in crossfire will find refuge and sanctuary in places of worship. With regard to the first meaning, there is a long tradition in Euro-American Protestantism, in which Christianity is used as a justification for withdrawal from social action. The Puritan emigration from Europe to the Americas was thus justified. Those who refused to conform to the norms of the political establishment took sanctuary in their religion, and fled to the Americas where they established their own social system based on the separation of church and state. Within the same country, religious individuals and communities can withdraw from engagement in social affairs and retreat into individualistic pursuits. William Lee Miller observed such a tendency in North American Protestantism. Such withdrawal and retreat leads to political alienation. Geyer explains the withdrawal and retreat as follows: in part, he suggests, the Protestant withdrawal from politics is a function of the Protestant withdrawal from the city. That withdrawal reinforces the Puritan image of the city politics as corrupt, machine-ridden and Catholic-controlled. The retreat into suburbia leads to the following liabilities:

- the escape from the invasion of racial and religious minorities removes Protestant leadership from the stage of those domestic conflicts for which there is now a worldwide audience, while actually intensifying those conflicts within American society;
- the abandoning of urban centres weakens Protestant identification with those unsolved economic and welfare problems which threaten the country with domestic stagnation;
- Protestants become more vulnerable to the artificial compartmentalisation between domestic and international issues, leaving them increasingly with the paradoxical combination of a sentimental internationalism and a socioeconomic conservatism;
- the retreat from the city is a retreat from exposure to the cosmopolitan and intercultural influences of the city; and
- Protestant participation is increasingly withdrawn from such national and international centres of foreign policy discussion as New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago.

Geyer's analysis of North American Protestant withdrawal and retreat from politics is helpful in explaining the social aloofness of African Christianity. The withdrawal and retreat from public life has been exported to Africa through the modern missionary enterprise, with all the liabilities highlighted above, especially in the post-colonial period. In view of the fact that the African elite has been trained mainly in institutions owned or sponsored by missionary agencies where these principles of withdrawal and aloofness have been incul-

cated, it is understandable that campaigns for political transition in Africa have been lukewarm, if not dormant. Where political activism has been vigorous, the activists will either have been trained out of such missionary establishments, or rebels alumni critical of those principles.

2.6. Religion as a Reconciler of Conflict

It is ironic that although peace on earth and goodwill amongst humankind are key principles in the doctrines of most religions which claim universal appeal, in practice all the promoters of these religions have generated conflict whenever they have come into contact with peoples of other cultures and religions. Part of the reason for this tragedy is that universalistic religions have almost always become tools for use by expansionist principalities and powers. In response to this paradox, the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1954 formulated nine guidelines⁷ to facilitate peaceful coexistence between and amongst nations. Considering that these guidelines were formulated at the beginning of the cold war, they were quite progressive. If they had been followed, many international conflicts could have been avoided:

1. All power carries responsibility and all nations are trustees of power which should be used for the common good.
2. All nations are subject to moral law, and should strive to abide by the accepted principles of international law to develop this law and to enforce it through common actions.
3. All nations should honour their pledged word and international agreements into which they have entered.
4. No nation in an international dispute has the right to be sole judge in its own cause or to resort to war in order to advance its policies, but should seek to settle disputes by direct negotiation or by submitting them to reconciliation, arbitration, or judicial settlement.
5. All nations have an obligation to insure universal security and to this end should support measures designed to deny victory to a declared aggressor.
6. All nations should recognise and safeguard the inherent dignity, worth and essential rights of the human person, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.
7. Each nation should recognise the rights of every other nation, which observes such standards, to live by and proclaim its own political and social beliefs, provided that it does not seek by coercion, threat, infiltration or deception to impose these on other nations.
8. All nations should recognise an obligation to share their scientific and technical skills with peoples in less developed regions, and to help the victims of disaster in other lands.

202 *Responsible Leadership: Global Perspectives*

9. All nations should strive to develop cordial relations with their neighbours, encourage friendly cultural and commercial dealings, and join in creative international efforts for human welfare.

The United Nations system was designed to promote peaceful coexistence. However, it appears that the powerful nations can always impose their will and power on the weaker ones, even when the former are in the wrong. We can only hope that the future will give birth to a New Order in which the strong nations will restrain themselves and protect the weak rather than dominate and exploit them, while the weak in their turn will have the courage to assert themselves in order to share their intellectual and cultural resources for the good of posterity and all humanity.

3. The Future of Religion in Africa

During the 1980s and 1990s many books were published in Europe and North America on the present features and future prospects of religion in Africa. Some sociologists of religion have predicted that Africa will become increasingly 'Christianised'. As evidence of this trend, they have alluded to the dynamism of African Christianity, especially in tropical Africa. Most of these predictions were made by foreign observers using macro-statistical indicators and variables. African scholars have been much more cautious in their predictions, taking into consideration their acquaintance with actual situations and contexts. For example, they have expressed concern that the numerical growth of Christianity in tropical Africa is not matched with corresponding theological growth and institutional development. There is too little African theological literature written by Africans for consumption by Africans. How could a religion grow without its own theologians? Portuguese priests baptised thousands of African Christians in Angola during the 16th and 17th centuries. They must have boasted the number of converts that they had made. However, that early Angolan Christianity did not last, because it lacked internalisation and theological originality. How long will this dynamic African Christianity last?

Roland Oliver warned in 1950⁸ that Christianity in Africa risks expanding at the circumference while disintegrating at the centre. He was referring to the rapid numerical growth which was not matched by a corresponding growth in theological and institutional development. Half a century later, this caution is still valid. African Islam faces the same risk. The construction of mosques in African cities and rural areas does not necessarily suggest numerical expansion of Islam. In the end, both these religions will survive in Africa, in the long

term, only if they produce African theologians who can appropriate the African cultural and religious heritage in such a way as to make African Christianity and African Islam at home amongst Africa's peoples.

If both succeed, African Christianity and African Islam will have two things in common: the African cultural and religious foundations on the one hand, and the Abrahamic tradition on the other. The challenges of urbanisation, industrialisation and secularisation will take their toll on religious propaganda, unless the promoters of religions in Africa will communicate in terms with which the African youth and students can identify. Liberal capitalism has brought advertising to the doorstep of even the remotest homestead in Africa. Religious clerics and laity can hardly match that record. This is the challenge that expansionist religions have to face in coming decades and centuries in Africa.

It is clear that religion is given a very high public profile in Africa. Religious leaders are invited in conflicts between political factions. Religious agencies have become dispensers of relief goods and services, including food, clothes and medicines. Social services such as schooling and medical care are provided largely by religious agencies. Under these circumstances, is it possible to envisage the secularisation of religion in Africa? If Asia and the Arab zone are instructive, we may expect that Africa will not follow the North Atlantic model. Rather, religion will continue to have a central role for many decades, perhaps for centuries to come.

NOTES

- ¹ Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975.
- ² wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ, *The River Between*, London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1967.
- ³ p'Bitek, Okot, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971.
- ⁴ Koyama, Kosuke, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1974.
- ⁵ Geyer, Alan F., *Piety and Politics*, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 39-40.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 126ff.
- ⁸ Oliver, Roland, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, London: Longman, 1970 (1st edition: 1952).