

Anglican Christian Ministry in Nigeria: A personal perspective

Introduction

The Church of Nigeria is the second largest province in the Anglican Communion with a baptized membership of over 18 million. There is an issue about the kind of Christianity practiced in Nigeria. The mainstream historic churches adopted a form of Christianity brought by the western missionaries and which to some degree has been changed and adapted to the Nigerian sensibilities and worldview, but has not and is not working for Nigerians in that it has not been able to address the Nigerian Christian's specific social and spiritual needs.

This essay will highlight how the struggle within the Church of Nigeria between the indigenous worldwide view of its members and the western theology preached in the churches has impacted on the practice of the faith by Anglicans. Secondly, this essay will present a brief overview of the relations between Christians and Muslims and how this has been affected by the inadequate theological and spiritual approach from Christians. This essay will conclude by arguing for the church to articulate and practice an authentic African Anglican theology that will resonate with the worldwide of its people and address the personal, social and spiritual challenges they face.

Cultural Challenges

Anglicanism was brought to Nigeria in the 19th century by English missionaries who were not only carrying out the Great Commission but who were dissatisfied with the liberal tendencies in the Church of England. The evangelical theological foundation of Church of Nigeria is owed to the revivalist movement and Wesleyan traditions that led to the creation of the UK Church Missionary Society whose members evangelised Nigeria in 1841. The challenge the Church of Nigeria has faced has been how to integrate Western Christianity with African culture and practice. There is no denying that ministry is contextual. As the Word of God came and dwelled amongst us so the Gospel is ministered to people in their own cultural context.

One other related challenge is resolving the tension between African Traditional Religion (ATR), which is deeply embedded in the subconscious and orientation of the typical Nigerian, and the Christian religion of the colonial masters. It is common for Parishioners who will be at church worshipping God in the morning but then at his or her diviner's (*babalawo*) place in the afternoon to receive prayers for healing or for whatever problems they are facing. There are serious questions here about the quality of their personal relationship with Jesus Christ: why do they still miss their traditional rituals in spite of their Christian belonging? What is the content of the faith taught and preached in our churches? What is the strengthen of discipleship of those in our congregations? If these issues are not faced then we are neglecting our duty as pastors, teachers and messengers of the Gospel of Christ. This again is a spiritual challenge for clergy and a witness to the decline in spirituality in our Anglican churches. African Christianity is mixed with other religions and clergy face a spiritual battle in this area not only in their congregations but also within themselves.

People are understandable seeking solutions to the problems of life and in day to day living. What the individual believer's wants and are seeking are being meet in the Pentecostal and new generation churches. Significantly and precisely because of their inherent flexibility, Pentecostals attain an authentically indigenous character which enables them to offer answers to some of the fundamental issues faced by their members. Pentecostals proclaim a pragmatic gospel that seeks to address practical needs like sickness, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits and sorcery. Matthews Ojo, who writes extensively on Nigerian new Pentecostal churches,

says that they 'are increasingly responding to the needs and aspirations of Nigerians amid the uncertainty of their political life and the pain of their constant and unending economic adjustments'. It is normal that people go to follow rituals and practises that promise immediate returns.

As a way of stemming the exodus from the Anglican Church and the decline in numbers in our churches, a number of ideas and strategies have been proposed by the bishops. One strategy proposed by a bishop is that just like Jesus healed by divine touch then we clergymen should exercise the ministry of miraculous hearings, breakthroughs and wonder works in our churches. It has been argued by another Anglican bishop that our ministry is a 'signs and wonders' ministry. The Gospel of Matthew states that as we go we are to preach saying "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. On this scripture, the Anglican bishop then spoke about a healing that happened in a particular diocese that drew large crowds. He went on to say "the need for charismatic ministers especially healers and miracle workers cannot be over-emphasised if the church must remain relevant in soul winning. The Anglican bishop added that "it is time for the Anglican Church to officially recognise and encourage charismatic ministers who can deal with the problems of members who secretly take their problems to new-generation churches."

This argument is problematic when one examines the Scriptures more fully. The scriptures tells us that Jesus wanted to avoid giving the impression that he was *just* a miraculous healer or wonder worker but to show that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15) We as ministers and clergymen are not to be seen as miracle workers and we should not encourage parishioners to regard us so. Many parishioners indeed have serious problems and physical and psychological challenges in their lives, and they need our prayers and support. But our challenge is not just to provide fixes to people's problems but to point them towards Christ. We have to remember the saying of Jesus in John's Gospel: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." - John 16:33. After preaching John Wesley would sum up what he was doing with the words 'I offered them Christ' - whether it was through what he said, or the way that he said it, or who he was.

However, many churches are more concerned with running programmes and activities almost to the neglect of the spirituality of the life of the church and its members. Unfortunately, in the Anglican churches, as the emphasis on spirituality fades, our worship become characterised by expectations of blessings and healings rather than leading one another into the presence of God, encountering his transformative power, and submitting to him in humble adoration.

Muslim-Christian Relations and Religious Freedom

Since the mid 20th century the relationship between the two Abrahamic faiths has declined. Nigerian Christians are faced with the challenge of peaceful co-existence, and inter-religious tolerance and respect. Security against Islamic terrorism has become a major challenge to the church and in the ministries of all Christians. The freedom of Christians to profess and live their faith in Nigeria is threatened. How do we deal with Islamic terrorism and what should clergy be preaching and teaching congregations as what the most appropriate Christian response should be?

The bible tells us to love our enemies. I believe that we will do well to try and get to know our Muslim neighbours and continue to dialogue with them. As the former Anglican Bishop of Kaduna and now the Secretary-General of the Anglican Communion, Rt Rev Josiah Idowu-Fearon says "The Anglican position on Christian-Muslim relations is based on "Generous Love," a booklet that states clearly our theological rationale on relating to our Muslim neighbours. The Anglican Church has a ministry of hospitality and a ministry of sharing. We must see where we can relate

to others. Unfortunately, some Anglican leaders do not embrace the official positions of the Church, making dumb comments such as “Muslims do not have a monopoly on violence.” Despite this ignorance, I do not believe in quarrelling with Christians or Muslims. The Koran does not consider us to be infidels.”

Archbishop Josiah Idowu Fearon goes on to say another major challenge is that many Christian leaders, the so-called Evangelicals, they do not adhere to this mantra of loving your neighbour, and as a result they dislike my commitment to tolerance. They look at Christian-Muslim relations from a political point of view. I do not believe that I am here to convert, but rather to be a witness, and they dislike this perspective. Caliph Ali, the fourth of the rightly guided Caliphs, once said “People are naturally enemies of what they do not understand.”¹ The vast majority of Muslims all over the world are not Islamists, and Christians living in Islamic countries are not always persecuted and often have freedom to live and share their faith. As Colin Chapman said, “If it was possible for Saul the Pharisee, who persecuted Christians, to turn to Christ, why should we not believe that Islamists can be changed by the message of the Gospel?” The Christian response in my opinion is to see Muslims not as people to be feared and resisted, but as neighbours to be loved (Matthew 19:19; 22:39).²

The position taken towards Muslim and Islamic faith has often been very uncompromising given the violence and killings perpetrated in the name of religion for political ends. In Nigeria, Islam is maligned and referred to in negative terms. Many Christians hold negative view of Islam and Muslims. Islam is presented mainly as a challenge, a threat, and an enemy to Christians and Christianity. The Pew Forum (2010) found that among Nigerian Christians, 38% have negative views of Muslims as compared to 13% of Nigerian Muslims holding negative views of their Christian counterparts.³ This attitude towards the other faith will continue to affect Christian practice and discipleship until better relationship with Muslims is fostered.

Conclusion

There are cultural and theological problems with the kind of Christianity practiced in Nigeria. The theology and hermeneutics of the historic churches of the missionaries by and large have not and is not working for Nigerians. Recent work in African Pentecostal theology point to how the indigenous African Pentecostal/charismatic churches have a theology and a pneumatology the is compatible with the cultural realities of Nigerians.

In addition, the confrontation approaches and attitudes to relations with Muslims expose a western theological framework that is inadequate when applied to the African contexts had a deleterious impact on the welfare and spirituality of clergy and thus on the care and discipleship of parishioners.

To meet the needs of Nigerian Christians in the 21st century, a carefully developed, articulated and authentic Black African Theology that speaks to the mind of the Nigerian, is contextualised to the African cultural setting and proclaims the gospel of liberation and freedom in Christ that allows the human being to flourish and live in peace and harmony with God and neighbour.

¹ <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/josiah-idowu-fearon>

² Colin Chapman, A Christian Response to Islam <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/christian-responses-to-islam-islamism-and-islamic-terrorism-by-colin-chapman/>

³ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population (October 7, 2009), <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=450>.