

CHRISTIANITY'S CULTURAL CLASSISM AND THE PROBLEM OF PERMEATION OF FAITH AMONG 21ST CENTURY AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

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Abstract

This paper aims at challenging the 21st century African Christianity to be more responsive in her actions by creatively confronting from within the African culture the fissures existing between the culture and Gospel which is the drama of our time. Adopting an analytic method, this paper sets up that the cultural classicists mentality that characterizes Christianity gives very little or no space for faith-culture integration which by extension hinders the permeation of Christian faith among the 21st century African. This paper therefore, calls on Christianity in Africa to adopt dialectics of faith-culture integration in her modus operandi in order to make Christ accessible and understandable to Africa's cultural frame of mind and sensibility or run the risk of losing much of its force and effectiveness in no distant future.

Keywords: Christianity, Culture, Cultural Classism, Africa, Christian Faith.

Introduction

Christian missionary approach to Africa was more of a monologue and an imposition of foreign culture and ethnocentrism, characterized by pride and superiority mentality with little or no African cultural input and was either consciously or unconsciously inherited by the indigenous evangelizers. This calls for Christianity's radical re-think about African traditional culture and religion to gain insight into how they can overcome their “illusionary” sense of superiority over the adherents of African Traditional Religion. Thus, Christianity in Africa should bear witness to the Gospel through African cultures to ensure the permeation of the Gospel of Christ to African minds. Put in another way, there is need for the dialectics of faith-culture integration by Christianity in Africa. This idea of dialectics of faith-culture integration lies precisely on the fact that culture is the only decisive locus for

evangelization as the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot permeate Africa's sensibilities and mentalities without getting integrated into African the cultures.

Conceptualizing Cultural Classism

Cultural classism denotes “the process of refining and development of humans in accordance with the values (especially the intellectual) considered ideal and exemplary” (Muonwe 23). The first usage of culture in this sense was attributed to the Roman Philosopher, Marcus Cicero (103BC-43BC), who employed it to “qualify a process of refinement of the soul attained through philosophical reasoning, and posit it as an ideal achievement for all human beings” (*Tusculanes* II, 13). In the nineteenth century, cultural classism found its outstanding representation in Britain in the work of a British poet and cultural critic, Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. According to him, culture should be understood as “the pursuit of perfection that has to do with an all-round development of a person in a harmonious fashion, which consist of becoming something rather than having something” (7). People of culture he (Arnold) noted:

Are those who have achieved greatness in the field of classical learning and noble achievements, and thus have reached a certain level of refinement. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to another, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have labored to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of cultivated and learned yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of time, and true source, therefore, of sweetness and light (31).

The above understanding of culture is for cultural classicists the best humans can ever achieve in the world, and should be made available not only to a few but to all. It is in the above sense that Francis Bacon speaks of “the culture and manurance of mind” (4) and Thomas Hobbes of “a culture of their minds” (77).

In this sense too, a cultured person is “a gentleman or lady, a good-mannered and civilized person, an urban dweller who had fine taste” (Muonwe 23). To be cultured one needs to possess those things valued as the refined, appropriate and super taste to life. Culture in this sense “is not what people possess as members of any given society” (Jaeger and Selznick 654). Culture construed in this way denotes, “fine arts, humanism, science, instruction and education” (Hervie 13). An “elite class, which not only determines what is to be cultured, but also disseminates it to those it considers deficient in it” (Brillington 9). This idea of culture, if applied to the society in general, will become synonymous with civilization such that only those the self-acclaimed cultured society or superior culture people thought to be civilized were

believed to possess culture. Thus, every society is valued against a certain standard of intellectual progress and techno-scientific advancement by the cultural classists.

The Dangers of Cultural Classism

The cultural classists' idea of culture is selective. It lends itself to ethnocentrism. Cultural classism splits the human race into two – “those who are fully human and those who are not, making some race always in danger of regarding other race as non-human or under-man” (Lambert 41). Cultural classists' belief is that there is only one (best) way of doing things, a way of acting, and a system of meaning that is universally applicable and valid at any point in time. It represents “a mono-cultural view of the world, which is an impoverishment of the idea of culture itself” (Shorter 19). Cultural classism “encourages the Roman way of life of concentrating solely on the intellectual achievements and neglecting other people's feeling regarding their way of life” (Arbuckle 2).

Judging by the cultural classists' parameter of culture, some societies are valued as superior and paradigmatic as far as culture is concerned, while others are regarded as cultureless, or at best, low cultured. When this notion of culture held sway in Europe, “the West, who then thought of themselves as the only civilized group of people, assumed that them alone possessed culture; others did not” (9-10). To be cultured, therefore, one needs to abandon his/her own culture and conform to the Western norm of civilization.

Cultural Classism and Christian Religion

Culture in the ancient Roman Empire is “a universal system of values and laws that could be elicited through philosophical reflections and imposed through education and the Roman Empire been the world power at a particular point in time, arrogated the possession of culture exclusively to herself” (Shorter 18). The fortune of Christian religion from “prohibited and secretly practiced religion to legalized religion started in the ancient Roman Empire with emergence of the Emperor Constantine edict in 313 and later became the official religion of the Empire in 380, during the reign of Emperor Theodosius in 379” (Maier 36). With the emergence of the Pontiffs as the head of the church and state, the church saw a “bonding with the state, became a strong religio-political system, and adopted the Roman Empire culture into her doctrine and practice” (Shorter 18).

Around the fifth century, when the Byzantine part of the Empire severed itself more and more from the West and the Roman Pontiffs one after the other inherited the defunct line of the emperors in the West. The “Roman culture became more and more consolidated within the church” (19) and finally became the paradigm for ecclesiastical enterprise. The consolidation of the Roman culture on ecclesiastical

enterprise “impinged so much upon the church's understanding of, and relationship to, people of different cultures, especially those beyond the precincts of ancient Christendom” (Muonwe 29). Christianity being the state religion of the world power (The Holy Roman Empire), at that time adopted “military conquest and corollary expansion to impose their cultural ideal to the whole world” (Mercando 18-19). To become a Christian, “one must imbibe Roman culture (idea, education and mannerism) to the detriment of his/her own culture, while “refusal to imbibe it is tantamount to not being a Christian” (Muonwe 30).

A critical look at some of the papal encyclicals, bulls and other articles of faith attest to the above view. Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Inscrutabili*, declared that “the church being the bearer of the light (gospel) to various cultures of the world, raised people from their savagery, degradation and superstition onto original dignity of their nature” (5). Little wonder Pope Nicholas V. in his papal bull, *Romanus Pontifex* granted the King of Portugal, Alfonso V, “free and ample faculty to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and non-Christians whatsoever to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors of the kingdoms... and convert them to and their use and profit” (23). Pope Benedict XV, in his encyclical, *Maximam Illud*, described non-Christians as “blind people without the knowledge of God and yet to be saved from the dominions of Satan. The non-Christians are under the shadow of death and their conversion to Christianity is an elevation to the light of civilization and higher culture” (451). Pope Pius XI, in the same vein in his encyclical, *Rerum Ecclesiae* speaks of non-Christians as “pagans and unhappy people to whom the church owes it as a duty to elevate from their own status and superstition unto salvation. He categorically declared that it is only the gospel and the benefits of (Roman) Christian culture and civilization that will bring the non-Christians to the light” (67).

In article 72 of *Faith and Reason*, Pope John Paul II argued that the appearance of Christianity in Western culture is an ontological necessity hence: in engaging other cultures, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation from the world of Greeco-Latin thought. To “reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. This criterion is valid for the Church in every age, even for the Church in the future” (72). This view was pursued further by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) in a paper he gave to the presidents of the Episcopal commissions of Asia and their theological commissions in March 1993 that: “faith bounds one to a particular history and that one who becomes a Christian cannot cast off the culture and history of the Church into which the person must enter through an exodus from one's culture” (681-682).

Cultural Classism and the Propagation of Christian Faith in Africa

Christian missionary approach to Africa is characterized by the denial of Africa of anything that could be described as genuine culture, and religion being a constituent of culture. Africans were invariably denied of any genuine religion. The missionaries interpreted African religious symbols and beliefs in terms of psychological and sociological theories and whatever does not correspond to their theories, they invented something to fill in the gap that exists in their minds. In the words of Ezekwugo: “the European missionaries had eyes therefore only for the exotic and extraordinary; and where they found none they created one, making nonsense of African culture and religion” (8-9).

The missionaries “haphazardly collected strange customs in order to entertain and fascinate their people at home by ridiculing African religion with negative synonyms as: fetishism, ancestorism, primitivism, animism and totemism” (Amaegwu 40-41). Rather than the missionaries to evangelize Africa within her cultural frame, “they were busy questioning about the mental and psychological capabilities of Africans to conceive God” (Iwe 5). African traditional religion in the understanding of the missionaries became a “religion that lacked the idea of the Supreme Being” (Amaegwu 101). Their pastoral practices became specifically to replace African religiosity with their own by planting the form and content of church and religiosity of Europe in Africa. Even the education system used “communicates the so-called superior values of the colonial masters to the elite among the natives thereby creating a cadre of dutiful bureaucrats to carry out colonial masters' orders” (Thompson 14). To state the obvious, “there is no difference between the colonialists conversion of Africa into a whole range of Western values as well as instilling in them a distaste for traditional African values from the Christian missionaries activities” (Ray 193). All in the guise that “Africa has no culture, no religion and no knowledge of God” (Wilson 29). Given the missionaries lack of understanding of African culture and their blatant refusal to dialogue with it, “conversion into Christianity became conversion from African culture to the “ideal” Roman culture” (Hillman 8), without “the contingency of African culture or the legitimacy of African autochthonous values given any serious thought”(9). All that the missionaries were interested in was “Africans conversion into Christianity and their involvement in the Christian ritual of initiation and other practices in a particular predetermined manner” (11) claiming such mentality to be divine ordinance.

Documentaries of the missionary activities in Africa showed that they never see African culture and religion as anything except an object of ridicule and total extirpation; that it is their burden duty to implant the form and content of church and religiosity of their own. Thus, missionary activities in Africa mainly saw conversion into Christianity as a battle against the African cultural heritage. A German

Missionary Emil Ludwig, who taught that Africa does not know God and that it is the duty of the missionaries to teach Africa how to conceive and worship God asked: “how can untutored African conceive God?” (Smith 1). Elizabeth Isichei who documented extensively on the activities of the Christian missionaries in the Southeastern Nigeria revealed that “the missionaries mainly saw their mission as a battle against the forces of the natives, which they claims endangers the soul” (210). J. C. Taylor in his writing requesting for more missionaries to the Southeastern Nigeria writes; “many come willingly to labour in pulling down the strongholds of Satan's kingdom, for the whole of the Ibo district is his citadel” (48). In the same way, a missionary priest of the congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers warns his nephew concerning the danger of going to mission in Africa saying “all those who go to Africa as missionaries must be thoroughly penetrated with the taught that the Dark Continent is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of devil” (Isichei 210). A French missionary priest Fr. Lejeune was described by his about seventy black catechists in their protest letter to the congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers headquarters in Paris demanding for his removal due to the dropping in faith of the people through his bad examples described him as “Mr Lejeune, who has no patience or courage . . . who is that whip? We hope he will be sent away, he is not a 'Father' but a man who never have pity even unto a dog and who always think he is right in everything he does” (Clarke 97).

The same mentality was both consciously and unconsciously inherited by the indigenous clergy. The first African Anglican bishop in Nigeria, Samuel Crowther, shortly after the establishment of the Church Missionary Society C.M.S. permanent station in Onitsha, in the present day Anambra State of Nigeria wrote in his letter to Henry Venn of the C.M.S. in Fernando Po on July 1857, saying: “many a heart burn to see the day when the Gospel of liberty to the captives of Satan shall be proclaimed on the banks of the Niger (Nwabara 48). Crowther's letter is very much similar to the remark of the Governor-General of Equitorial Nile Basin, 1869 – 1873, that; “without any exception, Africans are without a belief in a Supreme-being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry, nor the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition” (Baker 231).

Reacting to the denigrations and vilifications of African culture and religion, Jomo Kenyatta said that:

Africans before the missionary is like a clean slate on which anything could be written. This assumption is based on their conviction that everything that Africans did or thought are evil . . . they uprooted Africa body and soul, from the old customs and beliefs . . . with all the traditions shattered and the institutions trampled upon. Africans haven been detached from their culture and religion, followed the white people's religion without questioning

whether it was suited for their condition of lives or not (269). Cases were also reported in mission schools in Kenya where students were sent home due to recurring mental breakdowns, resulting from their inability to cope with and reconcile their traditional worldview with the indoctrination coming from the Christian religion. According to Ochsner Knud:

The psychiatric report following the incidence traced the cause to conversion hysteria resulting from the students' inability to reconcile the two worlds. Ochsner however noted that the situation was even the worse, because they become victims of clash of not just between two but three worlds – the traditional animistic view of life; the distinct cultural pattern of the village congregation with its frequently antagonistic attitude to the traditional religion, to Christian communities and the modern 'godless' world, and the secular society with its emphasis on science and technology (90).

The result of this is that, African Christian adherents began to internalize the stereotypical characteristic born of the prejudices of the Christian missionaries thereby developing a sense of dependence that is rooted in the economic, social structure and also in a psychic sense of inferiority complex.

Cultural Classism and Permeation of the Christian Faith in the 21st Century Africa

Christianity is more than a religious system. It has “generated a culture that has been handed down from generation to generation” (Muonwe 71). Culture is what differentiates a community from the others. It is a vital and important determining factor of how the community reacts, responds and grows.

The 'habitual thought' of Africa is constrained by her cultural frame of mind in many subtle ways that are different from that of the Christian culture. For instance, Africa's views of time, space or casual process is “cyclical as opposed to the lineal view of the Christian thought process” (Obi 135-137). Contrary to the “two-world hypothesis of Christian religion” (Suzuki 181), one world hypothesis of African Traditional Religion derives its validity from an African “interpretation of duality within which opposites are reconciled” (Booth 5-6).

Culture is a “society's way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation” (Linton 56). The missionary's denial of Africans of anything that could be described as genuine culture and religion is responsible for the 21st century Christian attitude towards denigrating the religious sensitivities of the African traditional beliefs and symbols. These include among several others; swooping on the traditional worshipers, destroying their places worship, desecrating their consecrated objects and killing

their totem animals, etc. Culture denotes “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life” (Greetz 89). The missionary's interpretations of African religious symbols and belief in terms of psychological and sociological theories, is responsible for the many 21st century African Christian religious folks rejection of some system of education, most modern scientific findings in biology and geology, while the ones accepted are interpreted to suit their own view of Christianity. Culture constitutes “community-specific ideas about what is true, good, beautiful and efficient” (Shewder 437). The blatant refusal of the missionaries to allow the gospel integrate into African culture accounts for the 21st century African Christian fundamentalists reducing the complexity of the world experiences to strong dualistic and opposing opinions of apocalyptic model such as: clean/unclean, good/bad, true/false, kingdom of light/kingdom of darkness, God-and-we/Satan-and-others. Every culture is “the compendium of its religious institutions” (Fairchild 113). The denigration and vilification of African cultural and religious institutions by the missionaries have created among the 21st African Christians many who have the sense of spirituality but are allergic of religious institutions.

In culture, man develops himself and acquires the knowledge with which he uses to organize and shape his world by developing his talents, bring to fulfillment his potentialities and becomes more human through his relationship with God and fellow men. The above challenges of the 21st century African Christianity arising from Christianity's cultural classicists' mindset, undermines the 21st century African church's maturity to champion new course for itself, making it remain in perpetual adolescence, which cannot be fully matured by itself in essential areas of expression of religious belief and organization. Chukuwudum Okolo revealed that:

Though Christianity has been in Africa for hundreds of years and spite of the large numbers confessing Christians, it has neither penetrated to the root of Africans nor have Africans gone beyond nominal Christianity... all this seems to be superficial. In fact Christianity and Christian conviction are merely skin-deep in the lives of Africans” (24-25).

The 21st century African Christian denominational fissure of 'born again and non-born again' mentality with aggressive preaching often brings about contempt rather than love and respect among fellow Christians. The very high level of religious syncretism, neo-paganism, fanaticisms and secularism among the contemporary African Christians is overwhelming evidence that Christianity has not impacted much on the psyche and culture of the African. This calls for a type of Christianity that is deep-rooted in the African culture and one that is conscious of its own history

and challenges of outside influence.

Dialectics of Faith-Culture Integration as the way out of the Chokeholds

There is no society in the globe “that has not got a culture, which is their own distinctive set of values and ways of life reflecting their specificity as a people with peculiar circumstances at a given time” (Kraft 51). Dialectics of faith culture-integration is “a missionary approach that calls for evangelizing people within their culture so that the locus praxis of faith will be properly permeated and addressed to ensure authentic and adequate expression of faith within the shifting sands of cultural variables” (Muonwe 59). It re-enforces the conviction that the peculiarity of the historical and cultural experiences of different people calls for distinctive approach to evangelization, in order to address their unique and legitimate hopes and aspirations. Dialectics of faith-culture integration does not only respect the varieties that exist in Christian tradition but also the integrity of other religious traditions. It is an approach that not only allows the church to be open to the diversity of human cultures but also encourages it. With dialectics of faith-culture integration, “it is easier for the Christian faith to integrate with cultures without denigrating them or treating them with any form of impertinence” (61). In terms of formulation of Christian doctrine, dialectics of faith culture-integration emphasises the particular and the concrete situation in which people live and where they witness to the faith is bore, and does not merely presume a universally permanent doctrine valid at all times and in all circumstances.

Dialectics of faith-culture integration has flexibility and openness to the truth no matter where it comes from, because, “it is an attitude of dialogue, respect and friendship between people of different religious worldviews” (Emefielkenga-Metu <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/metu.htm>). Dialectics of faith-culture integration will help the Church in Africa to liberate herself “from the burden of her total dependence on the Western Church's claim of possessing the monopoly of truth, her imported theology and form” (Parapally 83). It will also help the Western church to learn from the rich wisdom of African cultural heritage to the enrichment of her teachings, culture and theology as well. Just as God assumed the human nature in order to offer his salvation to all, “the Gospel should be allowed to assume different cultures of the people to whom its message is addressed” (Kreamer 9).

In the African setting, dialectics of faith culture-integration would mean utilizing African concepts, wisdom, proverbs, philosophy and worldviews which serve as prism through which the people perceive and express who God is, the nature of human person, the meaning of the world around them and their relationship with it. The more these resources are utilized in the proclamation of the gospel, the more Africans will come to a better understanding of the gospel, and all the more its dynamism and challenges to their situations manifested and addressed. Through

dialectics of faith culture-integration, Christian faith is integrated into the culture of different people. By this integration, the faith is well received because it has been made their way of life-their culture. African Christianity needs a faith that is open to history; a history that is interpreted in the light of African culture and not a foreign spiritual construct, interpreted through the lenses of a borrowed Western theological categories, or a total package that comes from outside. It has to be faith that is meaningful to Africa, make African lives and culture come alive and arisen from the interaction of Africans' daily existence with the reality and person of Christ to create African Christian imagination which should lead to anamnestic solidarity. This means that Christian faith must find home in Africa and the home should give birth to faith in Africa with the original event of the Christian faith-the Incarnation-in which God finds a home and gives home to all.

Conclusion

In faithfulness to the divine initiative: “go into the world and proclaim the gospel to all nations” (Matt 28: 28). The nations which the Gospel is to proclaim is living by men and women who are profoundly linked to different cultures, and the proclamation of the gospel cannot avoid integrating the gospel into the cultures. Faced with the challenges of very high cultural diversity in proclaiming the Gospel to all men and women, dialectics of faith-culture integration is indispensable in Africa, because Africans are among the people who make up a single community of God and has God as their origin and goal who must receive the gospel clearly and authentically.

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