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THE IMPACT OF PENTECOSTALISM ON CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, has impacted on Christianity in many and varied ways. To some, the movement is a welcome development, seeking to rescue Christianity from the state of "spiritual impotence" which it had relapsed into over the years to a religion that is able to address mundane and spiritual concerns. To others, it is nothing, but the commercialization of religion. The focus of this study is to critically examine the impact of this religious phenomenon on the Christian faith in Nigeria. Historical and analytical approaches were the methods adopted for this work. The findings have shown that the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has brought vibrancy, flavour, verity and vitality to the Christian faith. The paper therefore recommends that scholars and orthodox churches should be more pragmatic and objective when addressing the issue of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

Keywords: Analysis, Pentecostalism, Impact, Church

Introduction

Pentecostalism is one of the main streams within American Evangelism which origin is traced to the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States of America through the Ministry of Charles Fox Parham in October, 1900 (Obineche, 2004). The distinctive emphasis of Pentecostalism is upon a further experience after conversion (second blessing) namely, the baptism in the Holy Spirit as an endowment of power signified by speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) and upon the listed gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (Ferguson Wright, 1988).

It is a common knowledge that the influence of Pentecostalism has penetrated every aspect of Christianity all-over the globe and has exerted some impact on the Christian religion both positive and negative in different dimensions. In Africa, Pentecostalism has become an indefatigable source of innovation and controversy among the various Christian denominations. Pentecostalism in Africa recorded its initial onslaught when it had its entry into the mainline missionary denomination in the 1960s. It was there it took another phase as charismatic movement and has touched every continent of the world since then (Obineche, 2008). As it infiltrated the church in Africa, it provided the impetus for an entirely new Christian movement outside the traditional evangelical churches. As if that was not enough, it further metamorphosed into a large number of new denominations and indigenous churches which has led to the contemporary upsurge of religious confusion and acrimony in Christianity especially in Africa.

Today, the proliferation of Pentecostal churches and denominations in Africa and their perceptions have defied any scholarly and academic classifications. While some scholars attempted taxonomy of such namely: the holiness movements, the prosperity organizations and the deliverance ministries (Ayegboyin & Asonzeh, 2002), Ojo (2010) gives six classification of Pentecostal churches especially in Nigeria as the faith speakers, the faith builders, the faith transformers, the transformers, the reformists, the deliverance

churches and the modernists. In the same light, Obineche (2004) presents their development as five waves of Pentecostalism: Pentecostal movement, charismatic movement, sign and wonders movement, prosperity movement and the social gospel movement.

Pentecostalism found its way into Nigeria in the mid-sixties through the activities by some American faith-healers and televangelists like Kenneth Hagen, Oral Roberts, William Barham, T.L Osborn and others. From the late 1960s they gained considerable followership in Nigeria. The emergence of Nigeria indigenous Pentecostals like the late Arch-Bishop Benson Idahosa who founded The Church of God Mission with its Headquarters in Benin, in 1968 is a confirmation of this. However, the middle of the 1980s witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. During the period, a large number of Pentecostal churches sprang up in major cities and towns in Nigeria. Besides, this period also witnessed the emergence of key Pentecostals like David Oyedepo, Enoch Adeboye, Uma Ukpai, Wale Oke, Simeon Okah, etc.

The above analysis shows the impact of Pentecostalism on African and especially, Nigerian Christianity and consequently showcasing it as one of the major religious challenges of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The main focus of this paper therefore is to highlight the positive impact of Pentecostal movement on the church in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Analysis: The word “analysis” means, a detailed study or examination of something in order to understand more about it (Hornby, 2006). It could also be defined as the decomposition into components in order to study a complex thing, concept or theory.

Pentecostalism: Pentecostalism, is the religious culture of the Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal churches are a Christian brand otherwise referred to as the third Christian Expression (Falaiye & Ebhomienlen, 2009).

Impact: According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 7th Edition, the word “Impact”, means, “the powerful effect that something has on somebody or something.”

Church: The Greek word *ekkleesia*, translated church, means called out assemblies or communities. In Pauline epistemology, he refers to the church as the body of Christ, one body, seeds of Abraham (Galatians) and bride of Christ (Lindsay, 2007)

The State of the Nigerian Church Before the Advent of Pentecostalism

The purpose of the mission churches is to Christianize and explore Africa. This was begun by Portugal in 1471, when Sixtus VI assigned the work to the Catholic Arch-Bishop of Lisbon. The Portuguese had great zeal for Christianizing oversea countries; this zeal was unfolded in both crusading and commercial activities. The first attempt to Christianize Africa failed for a number of factors that militated against it. The most important factors were the slave trade and the iconoclastic controversy (Bradley, 1957). Apparently, the missionaries did not give up. They were bent on new strategies to have a successful mission in Africa. The Evangelical revival in the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 19th century and the Anti-Slavery Act of 1802, combined to boost the second attempt of the missionaries (Bradley, 1957).

In the 19th Century, the church was introduced in form of denominational entities. The missionaries of each denomination worked relentlessly to spread the faith of their denomination across different parts of Africa, Nigeria inclusive. From 1842-1864, not less than missionaries of eight denominations were already working in Africa with critical emphasis on individualism (Oyalana, 2008). The denominations included the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian and the Roman Catholic. But this was not congenial to the sociological structure of the Africans.

These mainline churches were rather too formal and sociologically different in their religious approach. They gave much attention to doctrinal and theological issues rather than being pragmatic in their dealings with their host communities. The African believes in God and spirits, but he is not interested in defining these realities and most theological terms used in such exercise means nothing to him. Although the evangelization effort of the mission churches made impacts on Nigerians, it was more of sociological or intellectual impact than spiritual. Christian practice among Nigerians especially in the early 20th century was too routinized, a contrast of what used to be known of African attitude to religion. Africans in their religious culture are very spiritually conscious, committed and participate fully in religious practices. Mainline churches were said to lack spiritual vibrancy like revivals, deliverance, healings, miracles and other charismatic elements as are found in the religious culture of the people. Hence most of the Christian converts were syncretic, in the practice of the Christian faith and the native religion. (Lartey, 1924). Imasogie (1986) was apt when he said: It is our view that the average African Christian's commitment to Christ is superficial. The superficiality is evidenced by the fact that when he is faced with problems and uncertainties, he often reverts to traditional religious practices.

From the foregoing, it is imperative to note that before the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, the spiritual life of the church was very deploring; the spiritual fervor of the church had begun to wane. Church services became mere routine, because they lacked the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Rise of Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria

The wind of Pentecostalism started to blow in the geographical location known today as Nigeria in the second decade of the twentieth century. Through the knowledge of the scriptures, and the teachings received through tracts from the Faith Tabernacle in the United States of America, the Diamond Society emerged in the Western part of Nigeria (Peel, 1968). Since then, a great number of Pentecostal churches have emerged both classical and indigenous. These include the Apostolic Church, Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*), Cherubim and Seraphim, Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospel Church, St. Joseph Chosen Church of God, Christ's Chosen Church of God to mention but a few.

The emergence of the *Aladura* Pentecostals, widely circulated in Yoruba land appears to have followed a general trend emerging from within the mission churches which are non-Pentecostal. These were championed by charismatic African leaders who were opposed to the anaemic Christianity and spiritual sterility that had become the lot of mainline churches. These personalities started breaking away from the parent churches on the ground of irreconcilable differences (Oshun, 1983). Similar to what obtains in America and Europe, Pentecostalism has grown far and wide in different parts of Nigeria. Today, Myriads of Pentecostal churches are well established in all nook and crannies of Nigeria.

One thing that is true and clear is that many Nigerians feel more at home with Pentecostal Christianity than with mission-oriented ones.

Three forms of Christian traditions developed in the history of the church: (i) The Orthodox and Catholics as sacramental initiation; (ii) The Reformation – regeneration (new person and (iii) Pentecostals and Charismatic empowerment for witness and vocation (Johnson, 2012). The Pentecostal movement has recorded phenomenal growth due to a combination of socio-religious factors including: Opening up to younger university evangelical Christian leadership, rapid urbanization and the collapse of African economies (Kwabena & Gyadu, 2005).

It is imperative to note that the Pentecostal movement took a new turn in Nigeria from 1980s and 1990s. This could be traced to mass evangelism and televangelism with some direct links with influential overseas church leaders like E.W Kenyon, Oral Roberts, A. A. Allen, Roberts Tilton, T. L. Osborn, Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar and Kenneth Hagin, who by their several visitations and financial grants saw to the establishment of mega – churches for some Nigerian preachers (Onimhawo & Adamu, 2017).

Distinguishing Features of the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

Pentecostalism is a style of the religious beliefs and practices that centres on spirit possession, signs, wonders, miracles and spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues. Other Pentecostal activities include supernatural healing and casting out of demons (Oshun, 1983). The Pentecostals emphasize the gift of God especially the power to heal the sick and celebrate them in enthusiastic services.

Unlike the missionary church Christians, who on returning home from another land, would easily join the mission church of their denomination, be it Anglican Communion or Roman Catholic or Methodist, a Pentecostal Christian generally would always want to found a branch of their own denomination and become another church founder (Falaiye & Ebhomienlen, 2009). For instance, one of the Pentecostal churches in Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria; The Holy Flock of Christ, was said to have been brought to Nigeria through a woman who once lived in Ghana. There, she fell sick, but later received her healing through the church. On her return to Nigeria, she started a branch of the church, at Ekpoma (Oshun, 1983). In the Pentecostal churches, worship services are lively and attractive. They generally beat drums, dance, prophecy and speak in tongues. They also see and receive visions. Their worship services and choruses are inspiring; most of their songs are composed in local dialect or language and to which they dance and gallop with the demonstration of clapping.

Pentecostalism in the Christian Church, is more pragmatic than dogmatic in approach and practice. It stimulates the worshippers to be inquisitive about the mysteries surrounding their lives. The Pentecostal churches appreciate the needs of their members in this regard. Hence, there is provision for consultation with the spiritual leaders concerning life challenges. Another distinguishing feature of the Pentecostal Churches, is in the area of preaching. Preaching of messages in the Pentecostal churches, are always vibrant and prophetic. They are either full of promises or caution members of impending danger and the need to change one's lifestyle (Falaiye & Ebhomienlen, 2009). Socially and religiously, Africans believe in community life. The community life is unreservedly expressed among the Pentecostals.

One of the characteristics of the missionary churches is denominational rivalries and doctrinal difference. This made the relationship among them to be generally poor, unlike the Pentecostal churches where communal life is a common feature (Falaiye & Ebhomienlen, 2009). This communal relationship is manifested in the existence of ecumenical bodies like the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN), and the Pentecostal fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). Again, testimonies during service is highly encouraged among the Pentecostals (Njiri, 2001). The new wave of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s is a bit different from the African Independent Churches (AICs), both in preaching and in attitude to African culture. The AICs preached a message of freedom from sin and colonial oppression along with an exaltation of the African culture. On the other hand, the new religious movements are occupied with the preaching of personal salvation, deliverance from ill health and poverty. The rich are exalted and not blamed for oppressing the poor. On the contrary, they are evidence of God's blessing and are to be emulated (Onimhawo & Adamu, 2017). Poverty is said to be due to sin and lack of faith. It can only be overcome by prayer, fasting and generous donations to the pastor (Shorter & Njiru, 2001).

The leadership is based on a personal charisma of the preacher, pastor or prophet or evangelist. The personality of the leader must be overwhelming as he/she connects people with God, mediate healing power and minister grace to them. One sometimes receives the impression that in the new religious movements, the person of Jesus Christ is eclipsed by the leader as his words are God's words. To give the leader tithe or financial contribution is to give to God Himself and to earn a reward from God. The leader is given maximum exposure. The sitting of the worship is theatrical as these churches are actually built like theatre with galleries where the whole service takes the character of theatrical performance. The leader exercises considerable power over the minds and hearts of the audience (Shorter & Njiru, 2001). Unlike the African Instituted Churches, the new Pentecostal movements are usually urban phenomena. They abound in cities and towns where it is possible to assemble a large and instant crowd. These towns and cities provide a fertile ground for the new religious movements because they are centres of wealth creation with an affluent minority that are stupendously rich alongside the urban poor beset with inhuman living conditions of poverty, sickness, stress and unemployment. This is the perfect scenario for the new Christian movements as they offer people a problem –solving Christianity.

Impact of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

The Pentecostal movement has impacted on the Church in Nigeria in many and varied ways. However as aforementioned in the introductory part of this work, this section of the paper will be considering mainly, the positive impact of Pentecostalism on the growth of Christianity in Nigeria.

There has been an unprecedented and significant growth in the number of Christian religious movements and churches, especially in the past four decades. The number of Christians in Nigeria has grown from 21.4% in 1953 to 49.3% in 2010 (Pew Forum, 2012). The "Academic study of Religion in Nigeria" screened these new emerging churches to include: the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winner's Chapel, Christ Apostolic Church, Deeper Life Christian Ministry. Evangelical Church of West Africa, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, Christ Embassy, The Synagogue of All Nations, and the evangelical churches in general amongst others (Onimhawo & Adamu, 2017). There is no vacillation to

the fact that the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has brought vibrancy, flavor, verity and vitality to the Christian faith. The Pentecostal movement revived, revamped and rejuvenated the spiritual life of the church in Nigeria. This Christian group has helped in enhancing the spiritual life of the church in Nigeria.

Before the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, churches were not holding vigils and Christians were not fervent in their prayers as it is today. Many orthodox churches, even believed like the Jehovah Witnesses, that divine healing had ended with the Apostles of Christ in the first century A.D. The Pentecostals believed in the practicality of the gospel. They believed that if Jesus Christ could raise the dead, they too can do the same. The Pentecostals brought spiritual liberation to communities. Unlike the mainline churches where only the clergy can do ministerial duties, the Pentecostals give liberty to their members to express their spiritual gifts. Pentecostal churches were the first to recognize the need to empower their members. This they do by providing job opportunities, financial aids and skill acquisition programmes for their followers.

The mainline churches believe in the separation of the church from the state; however, the Pentecostals have a radical approach of influencing the government. The voice of the Pentecostals is always very high when it comes to addressing national issues. The Pentecostals do not relent in calling the government to order, when it promulgates bad decrees or laws. Again, the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, have also enhanced women participation in ministry as well as their social cultural liberation in Nigeria. The floodgate for women entrant into the cadre of clergy and religious leadership was opened, as sex polar was no longer a condition but the function of divine “calling and anointing” with charismatic ingenuity for the Christian enterprise (Iheanacho, 2017). Women became empowered to found new religious movements and ministries even within the Protestant denominations (Iheanacho, 2017). As a result of the prominence accorded women in the Pentecostal organizations in Nigeria, some mainline churches have relaxed their rules given women ministerial responsibilities.

The Pentecostals were the first to discover the true meaning of prosperity. Before the advent of Pentecostalism, the Church used to be identified with poverty. Many Pentecostals viewed salvation as deliverance from sin and demonic influences. In their opinion, material poverty is a type of disease from which Christians should endeavour to be healed completely. Christ they claim became poor so that his followers might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). According to a foremost Nigerian prosperity preacher, According to Bishop David Oyedepo, cited in Oyinloye (2001), “Jesus descended from His throne to take us into glory, thereby making wealth a part of our redemption package”. Jesus did not only come to save us from sin, He also came to rescue us from the consequences of sin, prominent among which is poverty. In Oyedepo’s estimation as cited by Oyinloye (2001), poverty is a sin against redemption. This is because redemption does not stop at cleansing man from sin, it restores him to dignity, health and wealth. Although this type of gospel was initially associated with the Pentecostals it is becoming a common feature in both the Pentecostals and mainstream Church denomination. Today, people are no longer referred to as being “poor as church rat.” The Pentecostals made the world to know that poverty is not a mark of holiness and a passport to heaven. Before the advent of Pentecostalism, the church in Africa and Nigeria in particular had been contented with poverty.

Furthermore, after the secularization of mission schools the Pentecostals were among the first to establish and build tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Examples are:

Covenant University, Ota, (Living faith, A.K.A Winners Chapel), Redeemer University, Ede (Redeemed Christian Church of God); Benson Idahosa University, Benin City (Church of God Mission); Joseph Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti (Christ Apostolic Church).

Negative Impact of Pentecostalism

Having enumerated the positive impact of Pentecostalism, it is imperative to highlight some of the negative sides of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

First, is their “naïve biblicism”. many pentecostal preachers do not go to seminaries bible schools to receive pastoral training, hence, sometimes they preach out of content and context. This so-called “men of God”, issue statements and make rules for their congregation as if they received them from heaven. Most members of the congregation (especially those that are not well read), swallow the pills from these preachers hook, line and sinker .

Second, so many pentecostal preachers impress falsehood on their followers through extra biblical practices. There are some who would ask members of their congregations to go and price casket and bring the value in cash to them so that they would die. Some continuation preachers can use any method to collect money from their members.

Third, is the extortion in the forms of sowing seeds tithing. In this wise, exploitative tithes that are more than the bible’s stipulated one-tenth are imposed (Asah, 2005). Other burning issues within the Pentecostal churches are “self-succession” that is prevalent, false prophecies and emphasis on prosperity etc. However, in spite of these weaknesses their impact cannot be dismissed.

From the foregoing, it will be important to note that the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has made positive impact on Nigerians and the church in particular.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Pentecostalism has done a good job in making Christianity more real and indigenous to Nigerian Christians. It has also made many to be more dedicated to their faith. Their achievements in the area of making converts also deserves commendation.

However, it is a common thing these days to hear about some Pentecostals ministers who involve themselves in the practices of spiritism and necromancy all in the bid to have well populated churches. However, Pentecostalism should not be employed as a Christian forum in which the biblical doctrines can be compromised. There is need for the Christian leaders to create forum where such compromises when noticed, can be addressed with a heart of love to bring those who are involved to understanding. Though Pentecostalism may have both positive and negative impacts on the church in Nigeria, in concluding this paper, this researcher wishes to note that the positive impact of Pentecostalism on the church in Nigeria, far outweighs its negative impact.

Recommendations

- i. The recent Company and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) law may be helpful if implemented. This is because, so much properties and money in the hands of Pentecostal church leaders and pastors have exposed them to the temptation of extravagant lifestyle and that has changed the focus of their sermon from salvation to prosperity; making them crave for the best that money can buy, while the vast majority of their followers live in abject poverty.

- ii. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) should make it mandatory for all Pentecostal pastors to have better bible training. This calls for a good pastoral training.
- iii. Improved knowledge of the bible by all Pentecostal preachers will help them to give good interpretation of the Bible.
- iv. Believers should test all spirits to avoid being manipulated by false prophets and unscrupulous elements within the polity.

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