

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA. A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE.

During the past three decades, New Religious Movements have taken the Sub-Saharan African religious landscape by storm. This new phenomenon of religious outburst which includes Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, is often referred to as the new face of Christianity. Recent statistics are hard to come by. Brigit Mayer quoting the World Christian Encyclopedia (Barrett 2001) says in 2001 there were 93 million Independents and 126 million Pentecostal-Charismatics in Africa (Meyer B. in E.K. Bongmba (ed) African Religions, 2012, p. 156). (1) The presence of these churches is ubiquitous. They have built mega churches. They use high marquis, stadiums and cinema halls. They organize well attended crusades and rallies. They are on radio and are very visible on television. Some scholars even argue that in some places they have superseded the African Initiated Churches. (2)

These new religious movements are already a threat and serious challenge to the Catholic church. It is said that Catholics have joined these movements in droves. The evidence is anecdotal rather than statistical. Nevertheless it is a fact that the mainline churches lose members to this new brand of Christianity.

THE HEALTH AND WEALTH GOOD NEWS

There is a general consensus that the new religious movements place a heavy emphasis on *success*. Success refers to good health, good personal relationships, successful career, overcoming the odds etc. But the emphasis invariably falls on material prosperity such as big houses, luxury cars etc. It is said that God blesses a cheerful giver beyond his or her wildest dreams. But first, a worshipper must give before God can respond generously. The message preached in these churches is positive. They highlight progress, success, breakthroughs, victory, triumph, achievement, open doors, abundant blessings etc. They build confidence and self-pride in people. They create hope. They enhance the values of self-respect and personal dignity. They engender a positive attitude among the congregants. In these churches, size counts. Hence the mega-churches. Numbers count. Hence the use of stadiums and cinema halls for worship. High modern buildings and the presence of thousands of worshippers are evidence of success.

People are attracted to the new churches because they respond to the aspirations of people. The poor are anxious to escape their abject poverty. The unemployed search eagerly for employment. Many are looking for new

opportunities in life. Africans are a cure-seeking people. These churches promise a break-through in every aspect of life. To the upward socially mobile Africans, sermons of wealth are music to their ears. The African continent in general is in a sorry state. Years of neglect has crippled the infrastructure. Shortages of food are not uncommon. The political elite have stolen the resources of their own countries. Poverty is rife. The new churches offer an escape route. Hence their popularity.

The Catholic church would be slow to be over-critical. Their own efforts to build a self-reliant African church are hardly a success story. Many still rely heavily on overseas donations. Nevertheless, the Catholic church would have some serious misgivings with promising people good health (or healing) jobs, and wealth based on the belief that their donations to the church would trigger off some miraculous reversal of their (mis) fortunes. Desperate situations make desperate people gullible. Solidarity with the poor does not mean promising them a pie in the sky. These churches have been preaching material, financial success for the last three decades yet there is no evidence of a widespread significant change in the living conditions of the congregants. Some scholars have even gone to the extent of claiming that these churches inculcate virtues of industriousness, hard-work, moderation, self-discipline and sobriety after the model of the Protestant Ethic articulated by Max Weber. Again, the change of mind set and lifestyle on a broad scale would have brought about tangible results.

USE OF THE BIBLE

The Bible stories are selectively used to underpin the message of success. Stories of how the biblical figures overcame the odds are popular. David slew Goliath. Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho. Job was handsomely rewarded for his patience. Peter was freed from prison. What about the prophets who were so critical of injustice and of the corruption of their leaders. The theology of the Holy Spirit appears to be limited to gifts that are tied more to personal success and not so much to the service and upliftment of the community. The compassion of God entails suffering even martyrdom. The death and resurrection of Christ point to life beyond this world. The theology of these new movements appears to be completely this-worldly. There are passages in the Bible that should be part of the overall dialogue. For example, Christ's reply to the rich young man, "Sell all you have and distribute the money among the poor, then come follow me. But when he heard this he was filled with sadness, for he was very rich". (Lk.

18.23). Clearly, St. Francis of Assisi would be a problematic model to follow.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND HIS DISCIPLES

We are still in the throes of Easter. One of the salient points made by David Bosch in his Mission theology, is that there is an intimate relationship between Jesus' mission and that of his disciples. The disciples are expected to emulate him. The commissioning follows after he has shown them his hands and his side. In other words mission involves pain, suffering, opposition, even death. Mission is not a triumphant adventure. Bosch points out that Paul's mission is characterized by weakness, affliction and suffering:

“in my flesh I am completely what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church”. (Col. 1.24)
and: “I can carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body”. (Gal. 6.17).

A theology of success and triumph appears to down play or even deny what is essentially at the core of the Christian mission, the cross. Mission and martyrdom are the two sides of the same coin. The cross means victory. But it also entails weakness, affliction and suffering. (See Bosch : Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission p. 3-16) (3).

DELIVERANCE FROM (EVIL) SPIRITS

Spiritual forces (be they ancestral or evil spirits) are still considered to be the stumbling block to success hence the need for exorcism in order to open the doors of success and well-being. A significant number of African worshippers still belong to a worldview that perceives persons as porous. In this “enchanted” world, demons and ancestral spirits can possess people. Paul Gifford writes: “Here we have an explanation for the ready reception of the faith gospel, which likewise bears so decidedly on the here and now”. He goes on to say that the key reason for the proliferation of these new churches is this spiritual worldview. (4) This position is in stark contrast with those who claim that the new churches are part of a modernity that emphasizes personal choice and individuality. From an African viewpoint, it would be difficult to accept that “the only minds in the cosmos are humans”. (5). Spirits too exist. On the question of exorcism, the Catholic church acts with great caution even though exorcisms continue to be practiced. This however does not mean that the Catholic church does not

look with suspicion at the proliferation of prophets. These prophets are self-anointed. They see the services they offer as a legitimate business. Because they are self-appointed, they fall under no regulatory body and are not accountable to any person. Such practices are clearly open to abuse.

MASS MEDIA

The Catholic church could learn a thing or two from the new churches. These churches have not been coy with regard to the use of television, radio, DVD's and printed media to market their services and to promote the public image of their pastors. This also explains the phenomenal growth of the new churches. Their message reaches out to members of the public while the Catholic church continues to depend on the limited Sunday pulpit to spread the Gospel message. The new churches are clearly creative, innovative, and display strong entrepreneurial skills. Their pastors are religious businessmen who have amassed wealth within a relatively short period of time.

FURTHER COMMENTS

- Prayer Catholics pray less than the members of the new churches? I think that here we are in the realm of opinion. Within the Catholic church apart from Sunday Masses, there is a growing practice across the continent of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament by individuals and groups. This practice speaks to a deepening personal spirituality and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Pilgrimages (at Diocesan, national and international levels) are common, and are a popular expression of piety.
- Women presence If two-thirds are said to be women in the new churches, the same can be said of the Catholic church. In some countries women sodalities are vibrant and very visible in their huge numbers. Some offer a variety of services ranging from counseling to doing charitable work. It is true that women do not participate in the hierarchial structures of the church, but they do offer a lot of services within the church and in society. The new churches are just as patriarchal as the Catholic church. Their leadership is dominated by male pastors.
- Laity Admittedly the Catholic church is a hierarchically structure church with little room for lay initiative and contribution. The new churches are led by lay people. But the lay leaders are a class of their own. In spite of its hierarchial structure, the Catholic

church has many lay movements who play a significant role in faith formation, catechesis, counseling, human formation and works of charity. Examples of these movements are: Women and men sodalities, Knights of da Gama, Catholic Women's League, Fokolare, Schoenstatt Family Movement, Engaged Couples, Marriage Encounter, Legion of Mary, Daughters of St. Anne, Sacred Heart Sodality, St. Anne's Sodality etc.,

- Education The Catholic church continues to play a pivotal role in the field of education including university education in a number of countries. The church can claim to have educated many significant role players in most countries. The church is still very active in the health sector.

These involvements tend to be overlooked when the new churches and their contributions are discussed.

CONCLUSION

Ecumenical dialogue between the new churches and the historical mission churches appears to be what is missing. Dialogue would enable the two parties to exchange views, to be critical of each and to shape and influence each other. The unity of all those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ continues to be of paramount importance.

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