

PENTECOSTALISM AND AFRICAN WORLDVIEW: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between Pentecostalism and African worldview in respect to how African Traditional Religion has influenced the Pentecostal outlook. Africans are people entangled with their culture. Irrespective of the Christian values, Africans “Nicodemusly” embrace the traditional religion. This Pentecostalism observes that it incorporates the African ideas into the religious system because whatever happens to the African man, he terms such attributional to the spiritual realm as Opaku (1978,p.1) in Jarrison (2015,para11) rightly puts it that, “Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do – whether it be farming, fishing or hunting; or simply eating, drinking or traveling, Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next”. No disease, misfortune or even death occurs without spiritual interpretation. Therefore, Pentecostalism moves forward to explain these catastrophes in spiritual terms as the African believes that whatever happens in the physical realm has already been foreordained in the spiritual realm, that is, the physical realm works in paripassu with the spiritual realm. Indeed, in many cultures of the world, and especially in Africa, a major attraction for Pentecostalism has been its emphasis on healing. In these cultures, the religious specialist or 'person of God' has power to heal the sick and ward off evil spirits and sorcery. This holistic function, which does not separate the 'physical' from the 'spiritual', is restored in Pentecostalism, and indigenous peoples see it as a 'powerful' religion to meet human needs (Anderson, 2000, para 6). As religion is polymethodical (more than one method), three methods were employed namely historical, whereby the genesis of Pentecostalism was traced, Sociological which explains how Pentecostalism interacts with the African man and his culture, and phenomenological which discusses how Pentecostalism interacts with African religious worldview.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Christianity, Africans, Traditional Religion, Worldview

Introduction

Pentecostalism as the world's fastest growing movement has penetrated into the interiors to overshadow all other Christian denominations. This is characterized by its emphasis on healing and encounter with spiritual beings that torment the lives of the people. It has come to disentangle the Africans from the shackles of unseen forces, that inflict sickness, poverty, misfortune, and even death. With its aggressive approach to fighting these malignant forces of darkness, it has come to stay and be accepted by Africans who feel, in spite of their Christian nature are disturbed by forces beyond their imagination. Africans are beclouded with the ideas that any unforeseen event that occurs is as a result of the action of malevolent beings. For this, Pentecostalism is congenial with African culture which has an indelibly mark on the people. As supported by Kalu (2007, p.37) in Quayes – Amakye (2016, para 11) “Pentecostalism is pervasive in Africa because it is able to interface with the primal cosmology. Being sympathetic to local cultures, Pentecostalism fulfils Christianity's natural propensity to survive when it takes roots in recipient cultures”.

The Concept and History of Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a derivative of the English word 'Pentecost' which has to do with the fiftieth day as regards the Jewish feast of weeks. Pentecostalism is the movement that lays emphasis on spiritual possession and metamorphosis of the recipient into a new religious being. As stated by Asamoah Gyadu (2006, para 1) , “Pentecostalism may be defined as that stream of Christianity which emphasizes personal salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit. In another vein, Pentecostalism emphasizes a post conversion experience of spiritual purification and empowerment for Christian witness, with the utterance in unknown tongues (Glossolalia/speaking in tongues as the litmus indicator that one has signed in- that is, been baptized in the spirit (Otonko, 2009, p.2). The hallmarks of Pentecostalism are spiritual transformation and speaking in tongues (xenoglossy- as rightly implies which means speaking an unknown human language, that is language not previously learnt, unlike glossolalia which is babbling nonhuman language). This spiritual transition that occurs in the individual is attributed to the Holy Spirit who possesses the individual thereby transforming him to a new religious being. It is this same xenoglossy that actually happened in Acts of the Apostles, chapter two when the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles and they started speaking languages different from theirs, that is strange languages. This was the origin of Pentecostalism. Notwithstanding that Pentecostalism started right from the day the Apostles of Christ received the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit descended on them on that day, generally accepted as the Pentecost day. Modern day Pentecostalism is traceable to Bethel Bible School at Topeka, Kansas in United States of America. Miller and Yamamori (2007, p.18) asserted that it started in this school in 1901 on the 1st day of January when students of the school spoke in tongues under the tutorship of Charles F. Parham. Otonko (2005, pp. 6-10) was of the view that modern day Pentecostalism started with the experience Agnes Ozman had as it concerned “Baptism of the Spirit” and “speaking in tongues”. This happened at Topeka, Kansas in United States of America in a Bible school

owned by Charles Parham named “Stone Folly”. This school he and his wife named “Bethel”. Charles Parham gave his students an assignment that centered on the Bible's evidence on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and then relate their findings in three days. In the morning of the 31st day of December, 1900, Parham was surprised at the reports of forty students. Though they gave different reports as regards the manifestations of the Spirit as it happened in Acts of the Apostles, but all their reports pointed to the fact that all being baptized by the Holy Spirit spoke in other tongues (languages). In the evening of the same day, seventy-five persons gathered in the school for the evening's Night Watch Service. At the point everywhere was filled with the Spirit. They started praying in order to be baptised in the Spirit as evidenced on the Pentecost Day. As they were praying, Agnes Ozman, who was later known as Mrs. LaBerger recalled that on three occurrences in the New Testament hands were laid upon those in need of such blessing. So she told Parham to lay his hands on her head and pray as seen in Acts of the Apostles so that she might receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. But Parham initially did not want to, but made her understand that he did not speak in other tongues. As she insisted, Parham then laid his hands upon her head. Consequently, a halo surrounded her head and face and she spoke in strange tongues (which was Chinese as later indicated by Parham). This was the first experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit apart from the initial one experienced by the Apostles. This experience of the spirit by Agnes Ozman introduced the genesis of modern-day Pentecostalism.

As seen in another incidence in Otonko (2005, pp. 12 -13), modern day Pentecostalism is believed to have its roots in the Azusa street revival in Los Angeles, United States of America in 1906 which was initiated by a one-eyed black Holiness preacher , William Joseph Seymour, who was once a student of a Bible school owned by Charles Parham located at Houston in Texas. This incidence paved the way for the spread of the Pentecostal Movement worldwide. As rightly put by Synan (1971, p.14):

The Azusa Street revival is commonly regarded as the beginning of the modern Pentecostal Movement. Although many persons had spoken in tongues in the United States in the years preceding 1906, this meeting brought this belief to the attention of the world and served as the catalyst for the formation of scores of Pentecostal denominations. Directly or indirectly, practically all of the Pentecostal groups in existence can trace their lineage to the Azusa Mission.

Genesis of Pentecostalism in Africa

It is obvious that Pentecostalism spread to Africa from the Azusa street revival in Los Angeles that was led by a one-eyed black American preacher William Joseph Seymour. This was in 1906. Martin (2013,p.37) in Manyika (2014, para 2) concurs that “the history of Pentecostalism in Africa is usually traced back to the 1906 Azusa street revival, in Los Angeles,” In another version of its origin from Mashau (2013,p.2) as quoted by Bruner (1970, p.46) and Dayton (1987) respectively”.

Pentecostalism as a 19th and 20th century phenomenon can be traced back to the beginning of Christianity. From a historical perspective, traces can be found in all major trends in the history of the Christian church, that is, in the Early church, Middle Ages, Reformation and post-Reformation. Methodism was in actual fact the modern soil on which Pentecostalism flourished (Bruner, 1970, p.46). This is confirmed by the historical theologian Donald Dayton (1987), who traces the historical roots of Pentecostalism to Wesleyanism and American revival movements of the 19th century.

A Comparative Approach to the Principles of African Traditional Religion and Pentecostalism

Something must be said about African Traditional Religion as Pentecostalism has been vividly explained. The question is then: What does African Traditional Religion mean? African Traditional Religion simply means the indigenous religion of Africans. This religion is part of the African man, any attempt to disengage from the religion could affect the African man as it is just a congenital mark on him that depicts his heritage. This is a religion Africans are born into, as a child being born into a family that professes a particular Christian denomination. Whether Christian or not, the African man follows certain aspects of it as it is part of the culture which cannot be completely eradicated. Therefore, African Traditional Religion is the religion of our forebears which has a belief system like other religions of the world. For Ekwunife (1990) in Kanu (2014, p.6), African Traditional Religion is seen as:

Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africa which are the result of traditional Africans' response to their believed revealing superhuman Ultimate and which are rooted from time immemorial in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted to the present rotaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths, and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings, names and oaths), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space, objects and symbols, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities

African traditional religion... is part of the religious heritage of mankind. Born out of the experience and deep reflection of our African forebears, it provides answers to the stirring of the human spirit and elaborates on the profundity of the experience of the divine-human encounter based on the resources of Africa's own cultural heritage and insight (Opoku, 1993, p.67 in Beyers, 2010, para 3).

Both Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion acknowledge the existence of a Supernatural entity (God) as affirmed by Mbiti (1970, pp.3, 26) in Beyers (2010, para 9) "God takes the highest possible position. Although perceived as omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, transcendental as well as immanent, God is accurately defined as being 'incomprehensible and mysterious". Mbiti wants us to apprehend the fact that God is the most powerful Being, but bearing in mind that there exist other smaller gods in the African mystical world. These gods Africans see as "lieutenants" to the Supreme Being (God), through whom God is accessible. Pentecostalism accepts that the Supreme Being is very powerful than other spiritual forces which torment the lives of Africans. God overcomes these forces that exist in the physical world and that is why He is seen as almighty or all-powerful (omnipotent) and ubiquitous (omnipresent).

The African world is mystical as supernatural forces are at work. These forces can be manipulated by man for good or for bad as in terms of medicine for cure or witchcraft for harm. Africans believe that illness or sickness has spiritual undertone, no matter how natural such illness look. Ezudu (2009, p.25) asserts that "African traditional medicine goes beyond the treatment of physical sickness, it also treats man's environment". Quoting Okpor (2001,p.86), Ezudu (2009,p.25 -26) puts in that "African medicine men purify environment when it constitutes problems such as sickness, backwardness in business, lack of progress in life and disunity among men". Many Pentecostal ministers have power bestowed on them by God to heal the sick. Not only that they heal the sick, people come from far and near to seek solutions to their physical, spiritual, financial, and other problems they encounter in life. Therefore, Otonko (2005, p.86) concurs:

in many cultures of the world, and especially in Africa, a major attraction for Pentecostalism has been its emphasis on healing. In these cultures, the religious specialist or 'person of God' has power to heal the sick and ward off evil spirits and sorcery. This holistic function, which does not separate the 'physical' from the 'spiritual', is restored in Pentecostalism, and indigenous peoples see it as a 'powerful' religion to meet human needs (Anderson, 2000, para 6).

Again, African traditional religion recognizes the superiority of life. This has made Africans to value life, and this value placed on life has made them go any length to preserve it.

Idowu (1973, p.206) in Oladipupo (2018, p.437) affirms:

It is well known that in strictly personal matters relating to passages of life and the crisis of life, Africans in hospitals, for example, people who on admission, have declared themselves Christians, and indeed are "practicing" Christians, have medicine prepared in the traditional way smuggled in to them simply because psychologically at least, that is

consecrated medicine with the touch of the divine healer, in contrast to the “European” mere “coloured water”.- In matters concerning providence, healing, and general well-being, therefore Africans still look up to their own religion “as the way”.

Pentecostals recognize the importance of life and they preach against destruction of life. They urge people to embrace Jesus Christ to have long life and be saved by him throughout their stay on earth.

Another aspect of the comparison is healing. Africans are conscious of their health. They believe that good health is wealth as they are industrious. One needs good health to produce economically for the growth of the family and the society at large. No wonder the saying “health is wealth”. With reference to Mbiti (1970), Ezenweke (2016, p.201) was of the view that the people of Africa are health-oriented and the rituals for healing and protection from diseases and evil spirits are characteristics of African Traditional Religion. A major attraction for Pentecostalism has therefore, been its emphasis on healing. Some argue that the traditional African healers used herbs and other natural remedies as well as employing spiritual or supernatural forces in their healing process while the Pentecostals employ spiritual or supernatural practices but recently, it has also been observed that reasonable number of Pentecostal pastors also use herbs and other dietary stuff for healing (Ezenweke, 2016, p.201) . Arnett (2017, p.34) in Smith (2018, p.73) adds “Pentecostals offer a better solution to the problem of evil spirits than does ATR.... Pentecostals proclaim in all-powerful God who intervenes in daily life to save, deliver, and heal”. Otonko (2009, p.124) buttresses the fact by saying:

Finally, the issue of salvation in African worldview coincides with Pentecostalism because the African man is concerned about the good life. The good life that will lead him to belonging to the cult of the ancestors, and this good life can only be shortened by misfortunes such as death, sickness, and deprivation of good things of life. Therefore Oladipupo (2018, p.436) citing Larbi (2016) viewed that “Pentecostalism has found a fertile ground in the all-pervasive primal religious traditions, especially in its cosmology and in its concept of salvation”. And as quoted by Inyama (2007,p.40) from Mbiti (1972, p.15) “ Pentecostals aid the African people to see, to know and experience Jesus Christ as the victor over the powers and forces from which the African knows no means of deliverance”. The Pentecostals take it up as a responsibility to preach to the people salvation wrought about by Our Lord Jesus Christ letting the people know that embracing Our Lord Jesus will save them from eternal damnation. This salvation also embraces salvation from misfortunes caused by evil spirits or forces.

Pentecostalism and African Religious Worldview

People's worldview is the conglomerate of their culture and experiences which are dynamic as time goes. People's worldview draws heavily on their surroundings and their cultural past. It is not static but is constantly being reinterpreted and reformulated in the light of new experiences within the community and stimuli from external contacts (Metuh, 1981, p.49). Again Osuagwu (2010, p.8), said “the way a people picture the world, the cosmos as ordered and functioning is their worldview or cosmology. To understand a people's worldview and understand the key elements of their culture is to understand them”. Therefore, the African macrocosmic world is bipartite comprising of the visible world (where man and other natural things exist) and the invisible world (where the Supreme Being and other spiritual forces and also the ancestors live). The visible world is caged by the invisible world as the spiritual forces exert influence on the visible world of humans. Africans are overwhelmed with fear of the spiritual forces that inflict all sorts of mishaps on them. With this ideology that the spiritual realm affects the physical realm, Africans are ready to accept any religion that intertwines with their religious beliefs. Pentecostalism accepts these beliefs and has come to transform the African belief system.

Africans believe that sickness, death and other calamities that befall a man have spiritual interpretation as the death of a man is seen as the action of a harmful spirit or witch controlled by human being to do its heinous act. Asamoah, 1955, Asamoah-Gyadu; 2004, 2007; Adewuya 2012; Arnett, 2017) in Smith (2018, p.72), articulate “Almost all Africans believe that evil spirits are real, and that they play a role in all that happens. In particular, insidious spirits either cause or exploit everything that happens, such as sickness, misfortune, and calamity”. Thus Pentecostalism went a long way towards meeting the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of African people, offering solutions to life's problems and ways to cope in a threatening and hostile world (Otonko, 2009, pp. 12 -13). For Otonko (2009), Pentecostalism has positioned itself to tackle the problems of Africans which come in different forms. Through prayers and fasting, Pentecostals have overcome the activities of wicked spirits that torment the life of Africans who according to Asamoah, 1955) in Smith (2018, p.72) cannot drive away from their minds the belief in supernatural powers no matter how the church disallows it.

Africans seek to embrace any religion that preaches freedom from the hold of satanic forces, freedom from curses and other practices that restrict the individual from expressing his will. Pentecostalism has come to prove to Africans that any force other than God has no power over an individual as the power of the Most High defeats other powers, thereby, removing the spirit of fear which has been part of the African man.

Positive Impacts of Pentecostalism on African cosmology

Pentecostalism is successful in Africa because it has identified itself with the African worldview. As Otonko (2009, p.11) rightly puts “Pentecostalism was therefore readily accepted in Africa because it expressed African lifestyle”. In another book Otonko (2005, p.32) adds “Pentecostalism has been so widely embraced by Africans and more so,

Nigerians because many of its tenets are seemingly in agreement or coherence with African worldview and way of life”.

Anyanwu (2004, pp.53-54) highlights reasons why Pentecostalism has been successful in Africa. For him, Pentecostals with their charisma challenge the spiritual powers and forces that have kept Africans in bondage for decades by involving in power encounters and prayers of deliverance, thereby loosening the hold of these malevolent spirits on Africans. Again, Africans who were often tortured by fear could not save themselves. Spiritual power was in the hands of the few specialists and spiritualists such as the diviner, the magician and sorcerer or the priest. These Africans living in fear experience Christ and those who are powerless receive charisma from on high. Pentecostalism has come to release Africans from anguish as they encounter serious challenges in form of sickness, accident, death and other calamities. Pentecostals combat these misfortunes through prayer to reverse their influences on Africans, therefore Smith (2018,p.71) affirms “African Pentecostal churches often go to the other extreme, embracing a warfare worldview in which the entire Christian life is seen as a war with evil spirits. Believers are responsible to enforce their God-given authority through combat prayer”.

Recommendations

1. It is obvious that Africans cannot be separated from their Traditional Religion no matter the preaching of the church as it has become part of them because they are born into it, therefore those aspects of African Traditional Religion that are good should be imbibed.
2. Some good aspects of the African culture which is part of African Traditional Religion have died off, that is, those aspects that are concerned with human behavior (habit). These aspects such as respect for elders, as concerns greeting; disengagement from notorious habits like stealing, sexual immorality - which has now pervaded the society - should be encouraged. These good aspects should be properly taught to the young ones to make a better society.
3. African Traditional Religion should be taught at all levels of the educational system, so that the religion of our forefathers will not be completely exterminated from the surface of the earth, as it goes “a people without religion, are a people without culture”, because religion is embedded in culture. Culture is part and parcel of a people, that is why Pentecostalism is readily accepted in Africa because it goes hand in hand with African worldview.

Conclusion

The African world is bisected into two different worlds – the visible and the invisible. Whatever happens in the visible world has already been planned in the invisible world of the spirits. That is why the African who lives in the visible world interprets any misfortune as spiritual. There is no mishap that befalls the African man that doesn't have spiritual undertone. This belief has made the Pentecostals readily available to aid in warding off these evil forces that make the life of the African man miserable through their aggressive prayers.

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