

Christianity in Africa – Watchdog of Imperialism or ‘drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth’

Anthony Balcomb¹

Abstract

The Christian religion has become deeply insinuated into the world view of many Africans south of the Sahara. The dynamics of the process could be explained in terms of Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus, but one’s evaluation of such a phenomenon depends on the paradigm with which one chooses to interpret it. The paradigm of conquest leads to a negative evaluation of Christianity as an alien religion that has been used by the colonizer to subjugate the masses, and is the preferred paradigm of some sectors of the intellectual African elite. The paradigm of liberation, on the other hand, leads to a more positive evaluation of Christianity as a religion that is consistent with, and supportive of, an African identity. In his book *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe explores these differing paradigms in the persons of Okwonkwo and his son Nwoye. He demonstrates that stories are a more effective tool of interpreting the Christian religion in Africa than paradigms alone because they can ‘get into the skin’ of the protagonists involved which allows for an interpretation of the religion in terms of their own existential experience and not merely through a set of abstract criteria.

¹ Prof. Tony Balcomb is Senior Research Associate with the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is the author of forty eight published articles and chapters in books and of two books – *Third Way Theology – Reconciliation, Revolution and Reform in the South African Church during the 1980’s* and *Journey into the African Sun – Soundings in Search of Another Way of Being in the World*.

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Introduction

One of the central characters in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is Nwoye, who becomes deeply fascinated with the Christian message. 'It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him', writes Achebe,

It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul He felt relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like *the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth*. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled (Achebe 1986:105, my emphasis).

Achebe brilliantly encapsulates two diametrically opposing responses to the Christian mission in Africa in the persons of Okwonkwo and Nwoye. Okwonkwo, in many ways the hero of the story, despises and rejects the Christian message, sensing that it was an assault on his dignity and identity as an African.

If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see (1986:115).

Nwoye, on the other hand, is enthralled by the message, wholeheartedly embraces it, and while it is Enoch who eventually commits the unpardonable sin of tearing the masks off the *egwegwu*, or apparitions of the ancestors, to expose the human faces behind them, thus symbolizing the attack on African culture by Africans who have become converted to the Christian faith, Nwoye arguably represents a moderate majority whose fascination with Christianity causes them to follow it without necessarily forsaking their African culture. These two characters represent two trajectories that

Christianity in Africa has taken, the trajectory of rejection and the trajectory of embrace. For the former Christianity is simply the watchdog of imperialism, the most effective weapon in the colonizer's arsenal, used to rob Africans of their identity and cause them to become the slaves of the colonial master, for the latter Christianity has become the religion of choice, an African religion that they have received and transacted into their worldviews. But there are many intellectual heavyweights in the tradition of Okwonkwo, including Okot p'Bitek (1970), Ali Mazrui (1979), Wole Soyinka (2001), Paulin Hountondji (1983), Franz Fanon (1986), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986), and indeed, Achebe himself. There are also a whole swathe of people in between these two extremes, often practitioners of African Traditional Religion, who have seen no reason to surrender their traditional beliefs but who are accommodating towards others, appropriating from them what they deem necessary and rejecting what they do not. Indeed there is an extraordinary tolerance among indigenous people generally towards other beliefs that is born out of the penchant for inclusion rather than exclusion that is the hallmark of an indigenous worldview (see Balcomb 2014:75).

In what follows I will first briefly outline on a purely statistical level the extent to which Christianity has apparently become an African religion, secondly I will ask some questions about the kind of faith that has been transacted into the African habitus and the processes involved, and finally I will highlight the issues involved when interpreting the phenomenon of Christianity in Africa through the two opposing paradigms of rejection and embrace.

Christianity as the Dominant Religion of sub-Saharan Africa

That sub-Saharan Africa is now overwhelmingly Christian is common knowledge. The latest evidence of this comes out of the 2010 Edinburgh conference of the WCC, which was used as an opportunity to survey the church's mission over the past one hundred years. The success of this mission, especially in Africa, has been nothing short of spectacular. It has, in the words of Kenneth Ross, one of the editors of the *Atlas of Global Christianity* that came out of the conference, 'surpassed even the most sanguine expectations of 1910' and could not have been 'foreseen by any of the Edinburgh delegates' of that year (Kerr & Ross 2010:314). The *Atlas of Global Christianity* gives extraordinary visual impact to the reality of the

shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian faith from the North to the South. In almost all sub-Saharan African countries, the growth of Christianity has outpaced population growth. In 1910 Africa was less than 10% Christian, in 2010 it was almost 50% Christian with sub-Saharan Africa at least 70% Christian (Phiri & Werner 2013: xxvii). Another statistic puts the population of Christians in Africa in 1900 at 8.7 million, projected to be 633 million in 2025 at the present rate of growth (Kombo 2013:105). Philip Jenkins argues against the idea that Africa was ever ‘off the map’ when it came to the Christian religion and maintains that, contrary to other religions in other parts of the world, African Christianity is a grassroots movement that is taking place from ‘the bottom up’, significantly among the youth because of its high mobility across society (2002:43). He also argues that the millions of Africans who have embraced Christianity have done so simply because they have found in it the ‘best means of explaining the world around them’ (2002:44).

It must of course be stated immediately that such success has been restricted mainly to Africa south of the Sahara, with Islam being the dominant religion further north. North Africa has its own set of dynamics and it would be interesting to unpack the success of Islam in that region. Neither should it be assumed that the species of Christian faith that was brought to the continent by western missionaries is the one that has always been appropriated by Africans. Far from it. The really successful forms of faith are those that have been translated, in the broad sense of the word, by Africans themselves. It is the process of how Christianity has become part of the African habitus in the form of cultural and symbolic capital that particularly interests me, and it is to this that I now turn.

Christian Faith in the African Habitus

What are we to understand by the following two statements, one from the well-known African scholar Lamin Sanneh and the other from a leading judge in South Africa: ‘Africa has become, or is becoming’, says Sanneh, ‘a Christian continent in cultural as well as numerical terms, while on the small scale the West has become, or is rapidly becoming, a post-Christian society’ (in Kombo 2013:104). ‘He is a Christian’ says Judge Leeuw, ‘like all of us’ (Sibusiso Ngalwa ‘Judging the Judge’ in *Sunday Times Review* 2014).

Leeuw was talking about the appointment of Judge Mogoeng Mogoeng as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and was trying to allay the fears of many critics of the Mogoeng appointment that he would allow his conservative faith to influence his deliberations as Chief Justice. Mogoeng is a member of a Pentecostal church notorious for its belief in the prosperity gospel and made no secret of his conviction that God was calling him to the job. Where else in the world would you get a chief justice who boasts about his faith in this way? And what is the meaning of the claim of another senior judge that ‘all of us [are Christians]’? Does he mean all the judges on the bench are Christians or all people, generally, are Christians? And if the former is the case is it that there are no senior judges who are Muslims, or Hindus, or atheists? Whatever he means it is doubtful that such statements would be made by senior judges anywhere in the Western world, given the extreme sensitivity around the need for the impartiality of the judiciary. I juxtapose these two statements because they serve to underscore Sanneh’s assertion that Africa is becoming ‘culturally’ Christian. But what does *this* mean?

There are numbers of ways of understanding this assertion, one of which is through Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus. Very briefly the habitus is ‘the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them’ (Wacquant 2005: 316). There are three crucial aspects of the notion of the habitus that are relevant for this discussion. Firstly it is created and reproduced unconsciously; secondly it becomes part of the social, and symbolic capital of a society that provides a non-economic form of power and the establishment of hierarchy; and thirdly it is not fixed or permanent but can be changed under unexpected situations over a long historical period.

So what is the meaning of the two statements mentioned above - that is that Christianity has ‘become part of African culture’, and that ‘we are all Christians’ – in the light of the notion of the habitus? It means, first of all, that Christianity has become ‘deposited’ in people in the form of lasting dispositions, trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, act, and be guided in ways which they call ‘Christian’. It means, secondly, that these dispositions have become ‘second nature’ to the people concerned, that is that they are not only not questioned and not only have they become embedded in a kind of subconscious normative rule by which people live but that they denote the possession of a form of social power. Thirdly it means

that the form of Christianity that has been appropriated is shaped according to the social needs of the protagonist rather than some doctrinal norm and will continue to be shaped according to the various social contexts in which he or she operates.

Three things strike one about this scenario. Firstly that there doesn't seem to be much rationality involved in terms of carefully weighed decisions about the materials being transacted into the habitus. As the word 'habitus' suggests, Christianity has become not so much an issue of conscious decision as an issue of habit. Secondly what is eventually appropriated may bear little resemblance to what was originally offered. In other words the unintended consequences of the Christian mission are probably more important than the intended. In other words what Africans have done to the gospel is as important as what the gospel has done to Africans. Thirdly that Christianity has not been experienced as contradictory to an African identity but the form in which it has been appropriated seems to reinforce such an identity.

I would like to unpack the last of these a little more but must make reference first of all to the 'non-rational' dynamic involved here. Gabriel Setiloane, perhaps one of the most articulate exponents of the need for African culture to shape Christianity, makes the following startling admission:

I am like someone who has been bewitched, and I find it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which I have been captivated. I cannot say I necessarily like where I am. Second, I rationalize my position by taking the view that to be Christian I do not have to endorse every detail of western theology (Setiloane 1979:64).

Here is an interesting description of the ambivalent relationship that Setiloane has with the Christian religion. It 'bewitches' rather than 'convinces'; the 'rationalization' takes place not prior to its reception but subsequent to it. And such rationalization is precisely to do with what excludes certain western influences.

But what of the issue of power and identity? Through the person of Okwonkwo Achebe describes Christianity as being inimical to African culture. But through Nwoye he describes it as being deeply alluring for Africans. And many Africans seem to have had a similar experience to that of Nwoye, who discovered in his conversion a sense of identity and purpose.

For example there are those who, on acceptance of the faith, feel as though they have been promoted to the status of close relative to Jesus and thus to God. There are other examples of this such as William Wade Harris (see Bediako 1995:92), Alice Lenshina of Zambia, Simon Kimbangu of the Congo, Nehemiah Mudende of Zimbabwe, and the Xhosa prophet Nxele (see Balcomb 2014:120). All of these prophets have gained followings, some of them enormous. Sometimes their stories appear quite bizarre, but the only difference between Nxele believing that he had become the younger brother of Jesus and the apostle Paul believing that he had become a son of God, is the exact nature of the filial relationship. Both are to do with becoming part of the family of God. And what better family to be identified with than that of the divine family of the holy trinity!

If the testimonies of these spiritual leaders sometimes sound a little strange perhaps it is because we have forgotten that the essence of the gospel is good news for the poor. Certainly it was this good news that seemed to impact the lives of early leaders in the African nationalist movement throughout the continent. Was this not the experience of Tiyo Soga, sometimes known as the father of African nationalism in South Africa, but also Pixley ka Seme, John Dube, Albert Luthuli, Nicholas Bhengu, Samuel Johnson and Samuel Crowther? Very often the political and spiritual roles that these African leaders played merged because fundamental to their experience of the gospel was a sense of national pride which translated both into social capital that could be used in a variety of fields and forms in the life of the protagonist.

The generic similarity between the experience of an Ntsikana, a William Harris, a Tiyo Soga, and a Saul of Tarsus, may also be associated with the experience that Pentecostals in Africa seem to be having. The growth of Pentecostalism in the two thirds world, especially Africa and South America, is now a phenomenon of great interest in academic circles, both in social science as well as theology. I was contracted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise in 2005 to conduct research on Pentecostal churches mainly in the Gauteng area and interviewed 30 Pentecostal pastors and leaders with the intention of finding out what the basic message of the Pentecostals is, how they understand themselves - both in relation to the Christian mission in general and in this society in particular, how they structure and embody themselves organizationally, and what sort of interventions they are making into the communities that they find themselves

in (see ‘Under the radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and its potential social and economic role’ www.cde.org.za). What became clear during this research was the extraordinary appeal of the Pentecostal message in terms of emphasizing the worth of the individual self. An encounter with Christ apparently leads to an encounter with the self and the realization of one’s value in the sight of God. It helps people overcome their sense of inferiority and gives them a sense of agency. It could be argued that all the extravagance of Pentecost, all the noise, has, at its heart, the realization of self-worth. Pentecostalism is growing primarily because it is bringing a message that few people can ignore - the message of the love of God and the value of the human individual. It is a message, if believed, that has profound consequences for the individual. This does not mean, of course, that the Pentecostals are without fault, indeed they are deficient in many ways, but to argue that their experience is consistent with what I have been describing as a discovery of self-worth that does not negate but rather reinforces an African identity. This was born out in most of the interviews I conducted. For example Modisa Mzondi of Let My People Go Ministries described the message of Pentecost as the message of Steve Biko.

The essence of our message is freedom from mental slavery. The church is situated in informal settlements where people feel that they are third class citizens. This is why we need to preach the message of freedom from mental slavery. Teach youth to go beyond perpetual dependency. They must be free from the idea that they should be employed by white men. We are trying to teach the young people to do things for themselves. They must be independent (Interview on 2/10/2005).

For Trevor Ntlahola of Vineyard, Zone 3 Pimville,

The message of the church is to take the teachings of Jesus as seriously as those of Marx, Slovo, and Mandela. This means taking care of the poor. We use our money to take people to school, aids care, university, food, etc. We are here because we love Jesus and this means that we must love the poor (Interview on 24/11/2005).

It is therefore not surprising that some scholars have asserted that ‘Liberation

theology opted for the poor at the same time that the poor opted for Pentecostalism' (Miller & Yamamori 2007:215). If there is any truth in the assertion of Dr David Niringiye, assistant bishop of Kampala that 'Africa's crisis is not poverty; it is not AIDS. Africa's crisis is confidence. What decades of colonialism and missionary enterprise eroded among us is confidence ... We Africans must constantly repent of that sense of inferiority' (in Phiri & Werner 2013:xxx), then any theology that empowers and fosters dignity must surely be given credit for this.

What I have presented so far in this article is evidence for the argument of the embrace of Christianity in Africa. But this does not resolve the conundrum that is implicit in the title: that is that it has also been seen as the watchdog of imperialism, that it represents the mental enslavement of Africans, and that, in the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, it has been used to 'capture the soul and the mind' of Africans in order that they might be further exploited by western imperialism (wa Thiong'o 1986:67). Indeed all that I have said so far in terms of the success of the Christian religion in sub Saharan Africa could just as well be used as evidence for the theory that it has indeed captured, or, in Setiloane's words, 'bewitched' Africans. Instead of taking the path of brave resistance, as did Okwonkwo, they have taken the path of least resistance, as did Nwoyo, and allowed themselves to be robbed of their African identity. In other words, the facts that are presented to argue that Christianity has been embraced because it does not contradict African identity could just as well be presented to demonstrate that it has robbed Africans of their identity. It all depends on the paradigm which you choose to interpret the facts. And it is to the issue of a paradigmatic approach to the role of Christianity in Africa that I must now turn.

Understanding Christianity in Africa – A Paradigmatic Approach

First of all I need to explain what I mean by the concept of a paradigm. I must stress that this is my own very simple definition that I have constructed for the purposes of this essay so it should not be assumed that it is applicable elsewhere. A paradigm is a theoretical construct adopted by a particular community of scholars that is used to interpret a specific set of facts or phenomena. To interpret something via a paradigm is to admit that there is no such thing as one, objective interpretation, but that the interpretation must be

understood in terms of the set of criteria that the paradigm offers and which has been pre-determined by the scholars concerned. A paradigm shift may occur when a paradigm loses its ability to interpret persuasively the facts in question and therefore becomes incoherent and implausible. But different paradigms may be used simultaneously to interpret the same set of facts and produce different outcomes with different levels of plausibility.

In the context of this essay the set of 'facts' in question is the extraordinary success of the Christian religion in Africa. The extant paradigms that are competing for a plausible interpretation of this phenomenon revolve around different understandings of the essence of the Christian religion, that is Christianity as a foreign religion designed to be part of the colonizing strategy of the west (paradigm 1) and Christianity has such a close affinity to African culture that it can, and has, been easily translated into the African context from where it liberates and empowers (paradigm 2). Advocates of paradigm 1 might argue that the success of Christianity in Africa is not because of the credulity of Africans who have allowed themselves to become brainwashed on a massive scale but the cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the western world that has imposed its will on the rest of the world and made it impossible for non-westerners to resist. They might further argue that although Christianity has become hopelessly compromised in providing the ideological basis for the exploitation of the world's resources it still remains the most powerful religion of the capitalist west which accounts for its hegemony throughout the world due to neo-colonialism and globalisation. Put simply, Christianity in Africa has been so successful because embracing it is the only way to survive in the modern world. In Chinua Achebe's words, things will fall apart if you don't accept it. Did not Okwoko, the brave opposition warrior, die, even by his own hand, because he resisted it? And did not Nwoye, that little traitor, survive and flourish?

Advocates of paradigm 2 argue that the success of Christianity in Africa is because of the ease with which it translates into an African religion, was prepared for by African Traditional Religion, was spread not by Europeans but by Africans, and involved not the Westernization of African culture but the Africanization of the gospel. They believe that African expressions of the faith have burgeoned throughout the subcontinent not because Westerners are exceptionally good at selling their product but because Africans found in it what they were looking for. It explains why

there is a demise of the faith in Europe and an explosion of the faith in Africa. It suggests that we need not bewail the loss of African identity because of Christianity, but rejoice in the flowering of African identity because of Christianity.

And what of the so-called ‘community of scholars’ that have constructed these paradigms? Who exactly are they? Overwhelmingly the architects of paradigm 1 are African intellectuals, novelists and philosophers who are vexed by what they see as the oppression of their people and have tried to understand what exactly the dynamics of what has happened are. The architects of paradigm 2 are African theologians such as Kwame Bediako (e.g. Edinburgh University Press: 1995), Lamin Sanneh (e.g. Oxford University Press:1995), and John Mbiti (e.g. East African Educational Publishers: 1992), who have all attempted to explain the dynamics of what has happened through the lens of a totally different paradigm, that is one that accepts the validity of Christianity for the African context.

But how exactly can we characterize these two paradigms and why are they so important? I would like to suggest that paradigm 1 could be characterized as the paradigm of conquest and paradigm 2 as the paradigm of liberation, and they are important not only because they are the constructs of some of the greatest thinkers that Africa has produced but because they profoundly influence how Christianity as an African project is to be understood and evaluated. Space does not permit me to unpack exactly what the implications of these two paradigms are for the evaluation of such a project. However I would like to illustrate the effect of these paradigms on one’s thinking by referencing my own experience of them, somewhat in the tradition of story-telling rather than abstract theoretical discourse.

A Concluding Confession

For as long as I can remember one of my major interests, both academically and existentially, has been Africa. For most of my academic career I have worked within what I have called in this essay the paradigm of conquest. When I travel to places such as Ghana, which I have been doing every year for the past twenty years, I have never ceased to be amazed at the extent to which the Christian faith saturates that society at every level, a phenomenon that has caused me a certain amount of unease. But at the same time I am also amazed at how non-western this faith is. I say ‘non-western’ in this context

and not ‘African’ because I want to make the point that what strikes me is that the kind of faith that is being embraced there with such passion has only vague resemblance to the species that I am used to in the west. The unease that I experienced is not because of the species of faith that is being practiced, indeed I find this reassuring, but what I perceived as the apparently enormous credulity of the people of this country. How is it, I have asked myself, that Africans are so unquestioning, so uncritically accepting, so filled with the capacity to believe? But what I have not realized until recently is that I have felt this way because my perspective has been profoundly influenced by the notion that Christianity has conquered these people and not liberated them. What I am seeing then, is not people who are experiencing the ‘drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth’, but people with weak knees and callow minds, who have been brainwashed, hoodwinked, and subjugated. I have only recently had cause to reflect further on my own response to this situation in the light of the possibility that my view was being influenced by the paradigm through which I was interpreting the facts. Such a view is not without certain ethical implications. My judgement of the Ghanaians’ faith boiled down to the fact that I was questioning its authenticity because I saw it as symptomatic of some kind of character weakness. This was directly related to the paradigm of conquest through which I was interpreting the reception of Christianity. If, however, I took more seriously the perspective of the Ghanaians themselves concerning their faith I would have to acknowledge that they understood the phenomenon of their faith in a completely different way, more in line with what I have called in this essay the paradigm of liberation. When seen in this way my previous judgement betrayed a certain arrogance on my part because it assumed that my understanding of what constituted authentic faith was the correct one. I have since come to the recognition that it is more appropriate to attempt to view the phenomenon of Christianity (and for that matter any religion) in Africa through the eyes of Africans themselves rather than through my own. But, as has been argued in this essay, there is not only one African perspective on this matter.

I have told my story here to illustrate that paradigms, though mere constructs, powerfully influence our way of viewing reality, and if applied inflexibly they also might distort our view of reality. One of the problems of viewing things paradigmatically in the way that I have described is that the criteria that are used in a paradigm dictate the way that we apprehend the

truth of a matter and will not allow us to see things that contradict these criteria. The paradigms I have spoken about in this essay demand that we see the phenomenon of Christianity in Africa either in terms of conquest or in terms of liberation. But the truth of the matter is that it is far more nuanced than this. The genius of authors such as Achebe is precisely that they are able to explore these nuances in the stories of the characters that they create. So instead of constructing paradigms they create stories. Perhaps we, too, need to listen to the stories of those who have embraced the faith as well as not embraced it, to find out what exactly it is that they have embraced and why they have embraced it, and what it is that they have not embraced and why they have not. In other words more credence needs to be given to the agency of ordinary people in the way that the Christian faith has been transacted, assimilated, and insinuated into their lives. Such stories need to find their way into our theological curricula and become a central part of shaping our theological agenda. And if they shatter our paradigms then so be it, because at the end of the day it is the stories of people that will demonstrate what happens to the Christian message, what it has done to them and what they have done to it. Not just the stories of the dead but also the living, not just of the past but the present. This does not mean that we can forsake the task of constructing the paradigms because there is a constant and dynamic relationship between the stories that are told and the paradigms that they infer. Such paradigms are necessary as long as they are seen as provisional and do not distort but rather enhance our appreciation of the truth of such a matter as the phenomenon of Christianity in Africa.

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Anthony Balcomb
Senior Research Associate
School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Balcombt@ukzn.ac.za