

THE IMPACT OF THE INDEPENDENT CHURCHES ON THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

by Kenneth Enang

The appearance on the religious scene of a vast number of independent churches of over 4,600 in the last count¹ in the continent of Africa in the last one hundred years is most vividly described by Prof. Dr. ALAN TIPPETT as a new fact of global significance when he pointed out that with the advent of the new religious movements in the world millions of people are experiencing something religiously and culturally new which may be the determining factor in the world history in the not distant future².

In Nigeria, the last sixty-four years, after the eruption of the first church of this category, have witnessed this phenomenon which is fully unprecedented in the history of its religion and its tremendous religious impact is overwhelming.

Since the first major movement of this kind took roots among the Ijaw people in the Niger Delta in 1915, its incredibly prolific spread has captured almost all parts of the country with a marked concentration in the Southern reaches of the nation. They emerge with bizarre and curious names like the church of the Lord, the Prophet Healing church, the Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, the Fellowship Church and the Apostolic Faith, to mention but a few.

Most of these movements have a breeding ground in areas that have been subjected to western Christian Missionary activities and endeavour breaking away from them. Some possess extraordinary fissility severing away from the new churches themselves in furtherance of their specific aims while a great number of them cluster around the leadership of a charismatic figure not formerly an adherent of any church. In general, they stand in different aspects half way between the Western Christianity in Nigeria and the traditional religion of their particular area.

General Characteristics: The new churches share features which are common on any range of the spectrum to all of them.

1. The acceptance and recognition of the one God of the Bible and the historic fact of Jesus as the God sent Messiah.

2. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit are made evident in ecstatic signs like trances, spirit possessions and speaking in tongues. Prophecy, interpretation of dreams, visions and predictions are other manifestations of the fruits of the spirit.

¹ D. B. BARRETT, *The African Independent Churches in: World Christian Handbook* 1968, 24.

² Quoted after H. W. TURNER, *A further Dimension for Mission in: International Review of Mission* 62 (1973) 321.

3. Healing exercise is a pivot of all church activities.
4. There is a powerful resurgence of African beliefs, traditional African religion and world-view.
5. Central spiritual disciplines include fasting, long prayers and confession of sins.
6. "A strong affirmation of their right to be both fully christian and fully African independent of foreign pressures"³, though not all are devoid of foreign influence, for example, overseas support and literature.
7. An uncritical use of the Bible as the only and exclusive compendium of Christian belief and exercise. Women are given a prominent share in spiritual leadership and administration.

Their impact on our Nigerian Society:

In the context of this general outline, we shall now survey how these new churches exert some impact upon our society.

1. *Politics*: The post-mission new religious movements have in part the christian religion as their matrix. This religion has been a champion of religious and political freedom in many parts of the world. Its Bible has propagated God's liberation of Israel from the Egyptian oppression. Although the Xhosa of South Africa had between 1815 and 1857 sought freedom from the foreigners in a holy war under a divinely inspired leader who was influenced by christian ideals, although abundant evidence prevails about religio-political disturbances not unconnected with religious leaders like John Chilembwe in the then Nyasaland of 1915; the revolts in Belgian Congo from the Epikilipikili movement of 1904 to the Kitawala troubles of 1925, although SIMON KIMBANGU was suppressed in 1921, this general pattern is not traceable with full force in Nigeria.

Our political nationalism has developed more or less with limited anti colonial feelings. Yet the National Church of Nigeria, one of the early and new churches in Nigeria, wasn't completely empty of political motives. It provided an indirect support for the early Zikist movement in the political sphere. Though it remained orthodox and Anglican in policy, the Niger Delta Native protectorate Church manifested independent identity and became about 1920 an issue on the African spiritual and political independence⁴.

The new churches in Nigeria are basically religious in their original concern and activities, for many of their adherents as well as christians from the western churches, have been formed by the liberating message of the Bible and therefore are alive to bear the torch against any political enslavement should it raise its head in Nigeria.

³ H. W. TURNER, *African Independent Church*, Oxford 1967, 4.

⁴ H. W. TURNER, Religious movements in the modernization of Africa in: *The Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (1969) 47.

Agents of Unification:

The tribal affiliations in Nigeria before and after our national independence has been incredible. Even in the present administration the divisive influence of tribalism is still threatening our national existence and digging our own graves. On any platform of life and even in unexpected quarters, the impact of tribal components has been strongly felt. The army has not been a great success here despite the programmatic proclamations of the Federal Government to suppress tribalism.

One striking feature of the new churches is their ability to transcend ethnic groups, language barriers and peoples. The Nigerian Aladura group of churches has mounted up a huge ecclesiastical arch spanning many peoples from Nigeria to Ghana and Liberia to Sierra Leone, thus bridging many tribal groups into a single people which honours God in accordance with the rites and rubrics of one single church. Unity of races and tribes is an obvious aim of the christian religion. The presence of some of them in the Christian Council of Nigeria is not only a move to popular recognition of their status but a factor which links them with christians of older denominations.

The early West African Nationalists in the era of E. W. BLYDEN and the origin of the early independent churches in Nigeria at the end of the 19th century were moved by the idea of a single all-African Christian church for West Africa.

In Nigerian towns where military quarters exist, like Abak and Ikot Ekpene, one can observe soldiers of Yoruba origin sitting happily with those from Hausa tribes in an Annang independent church praying fervently to God and looking together, in songs and hymns, for a spiritual satisfaction. There is also evidence of tribal interaction among tribes in other town-based congregations. Thus non-Ibo may be warmly received by the Cherubim and Seraphim in Enugu or Onitsha, inter-marriage encouraged and the spirit of brotherhood elevated.

One can say that where these movements occur in a tribe, the character of such movement alters from tribal to multi-tribal; tribal differentia decline in importance and membership is extended to include people from other ethnic groups. Without this extensive scope, it would be difficult to comprehend why many proud Annang in the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star could willingly move to Calabar to work for several days for their charismatic leader, OLUMBA LUMBA OBU, as it is often alleged, although the divine status and the heavenly reverence given to him could move his members to direct their steps to him just at the word, "go".

Religious impact:

The new religious movements represent in a wider context, an interaction between the immigrant christian religion of Western import and the traditional religion of the African people. Traditionally, Nigerians

believe in a Supreme Being commanding no province and in a College of divinities acting as his intermediaries with specific social and religious roles. In the midst of this belief comes the Biblical monotheism with Jesus Christ as the only mediator between man and God. Jesus Christ is a powerful exorcist and the Holy Spirit a great force in the direction of the church.

The independent churches have accepted this fundamental christian ethos. Their powerful emergence has pushed the belief in the christian God of the Bible and the father of our Lord Jesus Christ to the fore. With a belief in the exorcizing activities of Jesus Christ, the traditional gods are beginning to retire into obscurity. The torrential tropical rain washes away day after day the different shrines of the gods into the rivers to give a place to the setting up of an independent church no matter how small it is where the father of our Lord is held in devotion and praise. In the former religions of the particular tribes, very frequently no formal or specific worship was paid to the so-called *deus absconditus*, to borrow from the language of the Philosophy of Religion. Though there was an informal recognition of a *deus otiosus*, supreme and universal, he was approached through a system of lesser divinities or ancestors. But in the new churches the hidden God is no more hidden, the phenomenological concept of an otiose high God operating in remoteness is replaced by a belief characteristic of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition: God is proximate to man.

Christians coming from tribal traditions of diversified divinities are undergoing a strong religious mutation that it is not the different, single and local gods as is featured in the history of ancient religion where for example, the Magna Mater incorporated many local goddesses of maternity and fidelity or Isis the popular Egyptian deity in the Hellenistic period, which allied with the goddesses Demeter, Aphrodite and Pelagia or the Near East young verile God which combined the attributes of a weather god, bestower of fecundity, vegetation etc, which are responsible for the life favours but the one God of the christians. This strong monotheism stands out in the new churches and influences the people against the polytheistic monolatries of our different tribal religions. A positive impact on the society exerted by this changed consciousness is the ritual performances. In local religious ceremonies partly the clan and partly the affected individual or his family circled around the altar of sacrifice. Today the observable trend in ritual aspirations of the new churches embraces larger numbers of ritual participants, chained together in a spiritual brotherhood.

The affluence of many new churches in every village and town corner has influenced many Nigerians to feel the need of belonging at least to one church. The Old God and the numerous spirits of the Nigerian world have been demoted to give place to arch-angles, angles and prophets. The belief in withcraft has been weakened in many of the new churches as the church leaders combat with prayer from within witch doctors.

Orbiting on the same plane of decline are the traditional magic and medicine. Our native doctors in many parts of Nigeria are no more enjoying the boom of some twenty years ago in their trades. Rather they are now gnashing their teeth with sacred nostalgia at their glory of the past and wail woefully over the lost paradise. Instead of consulting fortune tellers, many Nigerians have resorted to the pastors and evangelists to decipher, through the Holy Spirit, the dark perplexities of human life and to offer directions and alternatives.

Individuals who might want contact with some gods of their former religion have the opportunity of gaining an experience of mystical nature with revelations from God, Jesus or angels. Specifically, the activities of the Holy Spirit have made a great reconciliation between the spirit invaded world-view of the African and the presence of God's Holy Spirit in the World of Nigeria.

United in ceremonies with the old churches when needs be, an ecumenical spirit enunciates their approaches and in this fashion contributes to the reduction of interdenominational animosity and rather promotes inter-church activities.

A missionary spirit characterizes the new churches. They are restless in hunting for new members and for making converts even from the old established churches. Thus the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star with its headquarters in Calabar hasn't only members from the Calabar municipality alone but has many of them scattered on the mainland of the State. The Christ Apostolic is striking great efforts to penetrate with the Christian message areas densely populated by muslims. The Cherubim and Seraphim has branches covering several places and towns in Anambra and Imo States while the Aladura churches springing from Western Nigeria have been missionary in extending its zeal to cover Ghana, Liberia and the Sierra Leone. The Aladura has even established centres in London and Munich — an African missionary endeavour overseas.

Striking in their religious influence is the flooding to townships with praying bands and religious groups. The Sunday appearance of pseudo — Rev. Sisters in their white gowns reaching to the ground and veils, sewn with extra fancy, accompanied by their brothers in Romanlike and theatrical toga of various sizes, convert the usual quiet atmosphere of streets on the day of the Lord into a march-route for soldiers set at battle array.

Not to be underestimated is the booming out of hymns of African origin to fill the air in the evenings and at mid-night. The use of sound boxes now at different social functions can be traced back to those independent churches which gather at city corners in the evening to shout out the name of the Lord at the top of their voices with the help of megaphones and religious records.

Specific religious creativity is highly conspicuous in their new rituals. As mentioned already, the independent churches stand in between the christian religion and the African world-view. In belief, they have

incorporated admirably much from the Bible but in practice there has been a revival of traditional African religious methods — a certain cultural renaissance. Their creativity lies in the equidistance and balance they try to strike between the two religions. Much of the African symbols like water, salt and light have been modelled in their rituals in line with the Biblical drift of thought.

Bible lessons taken literally in many churches are much coveted. In this way the Bible has become the only literature and compendium for the formulation of church policy. Thus a bit of biblical literacy is propagated which illuminates the minds and life of many Nigerians giving them biblical and christian ethics to be a basis of life. We need Christian words to give us some direction in life in a country like ours where moral decadence and wickedness are the reigning tunes of individual and public life.

Social impact

The term social shall be used in a loose sense to welcome a variety of issues.

a) Move toward modern forms of society:

The traditional Nigerian society is built upon a religious cosmology which expresses and offers it support. Influence in politics, decisions and sanctions are made only by chiefs and rulers of tribal institutions who are sort of sacred persons. This is ontocracy.

Coupled with it is gerontocracy. Only the view of the old men have to prevail. Young men and children have to stand in deep awe and reverential respect of them. Religious functions are the exclusive prerogatives of chiefs or older men. Administrative and governmental machineries of the societies are wielded solely by them and people of younger generations are denied a share even in the lowest rungs of the power ladder.

But the new religious movements sweep the ground with the rise of young men to be church leaders and prophets in their own right, thus giving a powerful thrust to the advent of the age of younger people with new ideas and fresh impetus for their church administration which isn't without impact upon the secular sphere.

The foundations upon which chiefs alone stood in traditional societies are shaken when young men raise their voices in matters of religion and politics.

There is therefore a defined desacralization of the Nigerian society and a departure from a specific form of African culture.

When we open the pages of age long European history to read about the struggle to do away with the Sacred Kinship, for example in the French Revolution, and Sacred Monarchs, the transformation from chiefship in Nigeria to a plural religious society in a peaceful way by

the new churches in such a limited space of time, one must commend the churches for their efforts. They are moving ahead of their time.

b) *The Role of Women:*

Our traditional society has no respect for women. Their voices are neither heard nor their advice taken, let alone being given a share in the religious practices of the society. We have a very oppressive religion considered in the setting of this context. When women now see visions, heal, fall into trances and prophesy in the new churches, they are indirectly being liberated from a world-view that oppresses them. They are given their rights. They are changed in their status from passive onlookers to active actors on the religious stage of the nation in parts of the country.

c) *The Change in History Consciousness:*

Behind the cultural transformation of the society lurks the idea of a society set within a different historical perspective. Our traditional society believes in the myth of the eternal repetition of events. We are essentially cyclic in outlook. Thus many Nigerians look behind history to find common origins and mystical past which give orders for the present society. As in other archaic societies, religious concerns lie in the regular and continued renewal of vitalities of man and nature.

Into this repetitive view of history drops the semitic outlook with progress into the future. No phase of time is absolute. People have come to the recognition that history is moving ahead towards a fulfilment. This allows for changes and proper planning. Thus the Ayetoro community of Nigeria could embark upon an extensive economic plan for its dwellers. Elements of flexibility can be introduced into religion and politics and the vitalities of a new African existence given their due place.

Apart from the influence it has in forms of religion and politics, the progressive, historical world view has altered the traditional polygamous state. Although many who establish the new churches do so because they had been denied a polygamous status in their old churches and many in the new churches still retain polygamy, there is a shift of emphasis in the minds of the younger folk. Monogamous ideal is being recognized and upheld.

d) *Assistance in Social Ills:*

The belief in spiritual, evil powers is strong in the minds of many Nigerians. Many who troop into towns in search of jobs abandon their secure environments and are exposed to unemployment and the hazards of town life where employment does not knock on their door.

The consciousness that the Holy Spirit operates in these new churches to reveal the dark obscurities of life drives many into such churches for consultations. The new churches welcome the challenge and move into this area to help. Counsels are given to the spiritually threatened. Those

persecuted by the charms of their neighbours and enemies are given spiritual attention. The unemployed find welcoming hands and other social evils like prostitution, increasing delinquency among the youth and alcoholism are effectively combated.

In this fashion the new churches offer a place to many to feel at home and a sound spiritual basis for their social and religious security.

They pray and after prayers many, twisted by different problems of life, expose in confidence the burdens of their hearts to their fellow church members, especially the elders and pastors, who treat them with an admirable degree of patience and devotion. The words of communication they enter into have at the tail end nothing short of a tremendous relief to burdened souls. John Henry Newman has creditably pointed out that by "means of words the secrets of the heart are brought to light, pain of soul is relieved, hidden grief is carried off, sympathy conveyed (and) counsel imparted"⁵.

e) *Shaping of Conscience:*

A marked distinguishing feature in the new churches is the beneficial influence they exert upon the shaping of their adherents' consciences. Our society has a shame culture instead of a guilt one. And with that it is pretty difficult to get our people to arrive at the knowledge of what are wrongful acts in the society. A man can damage his wife and family through his marriage infidelity. No pricks of conscience are felt here as far as his deeds are not exposed. Abortions because of the fear not to bear the shame of an illegal child-birth are now winning a joyous approval of the majority of our Nigerians. Here shame overpowers the conscience. The bribery given to cover up disgraceful deeds perpetrated by highly placed individuals is a direct offspring of a culture of shame.

It is into this culture that the new churches drop their message. The conscience of the people are called back from their exiles and moral slumber. People are preached to to distinguish between right and wrong, to listen to the voices of God in their consciences. Where they went wrong, fasting, prayer and the confession of sins wheel things right again. Added to this it is pleasantly noticeable that the members of these churches resist wrong deeds, not because they are afraid of public exposition but rather because of damaging their relationship with God and of poisoning their consciences. In an amoral and unjust society like our own, the efforts to show the people the supremacy of conscience and guilt over mere shame is a praiseworthy pursuit, a necessary reality for the basis of the moral survival of the people.

f) *The Ministry of Healing:*

Another area of pastoral activity in the new churches is to be found in the medical realm. Our hospitals are woefully equipped, the conditions

⁵ Quoted after HAROLD STAHLER, *Speak that I may see Thee*, New York 1968, (268) 27.

in the few we have are beyond human capacity to endure. Patients are exposed to long hours of waiting for days before they are treated. The attitude of some medical personnel make many detest hospitals. Some of our impatient native doctors grabbing with financial dissatisfaction abandon the hospitals in favour of exorbitant private clinics.

It is not the health of the people which is uppermost in the minds of some but their economic advantages. Where the quality of hospitals could be improved by the presence of willing and trained medical doctors, perhaps of foreign origin, uncalculated measures check their coming into the country. Hospital bills run astronomically high to scare patients away. In a society like ours, you only meet frustrated people in the sphere of health. Here do the new churches open up new grounds for medical services. They heal.

As the spirit directs, many curative steps are taken to relieve the pains of those who have no faith in hospitals because of the existing conditions. Psychosomatic troubles found in a developing nation like Nigeria are offered no avenues of growth. Women anxious about childlessness receive successful assistance. To offer all these treatments recourse is not taken to the practices of traditional medicine but prayers, fasting and confession of sins and faith in God are the usual means. This is an impressive impact upon our society. The help given to the poor who cannot meet the swallowing hospital bills is a commendable exercise.

Ambiguities

While the new churches are positive in different directions, some of their practices are negative to the society. It is of no proper influence when churches like the Apostolic Faith, the Christ Apostolic and others, consolidate hopes and faith in prayers, holy water and fasting, ignoring medical treatment that could bring a faster relief or surgical attention that alone may save life. A woman from the Apostolic Faith died in Okon last April in her first pregnancy for exercising refusal to accept hospital and maternity care.

The unrealistic attitude of many church leaders who raise themselves to celestial figures and status can hardly be described as meritorious. Of greater danger is the fast tendency of some churches generating into pseudo-religions or mutating into commercialized healing homes where the use of prayer alone turns to be a new form of the old traditional magic. In such healing centres, it is not the health of the patients which claims importance but the economic fortunes of the charlatans, quacks and commercial pirates.

The strong this-wordly-concern with present and fast blessings is not a complete mark of a true church. Where the cross is expelled from Christian experience the authenticity of such a church carries a large question mark. Despite these ambivalences, the rise and spread of these churches are interesting and fascinating and should arrest our attention more than it has hitherto been the case.