



African Christianity in the Twenty-first Century

OPOKU ONYINAH

In these churches, one would be able to see what the African Christian, when left to himself, regarded as important and relevant in Christian faith and Christian church.” So wrote Bengt Sundkler in his study of the “separatist” churches in South Africa.¹ Sundkler’s observation has now become a fulfilled prophecy.

In the second and third centuries North Africa became the center of Christian activities, producing leaders such as Augustine and Tertullian. During the persecution in the era of the Roman Empire, it is said that many North African Christians chose death rather than recanting their faith. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the church in North Africa became divided through doctrinal issues and internal struggles. The desire for political power replaced the evangelistic zeal. These were among the factors that opened the way for the new Islamic religion to spread across the region in the seventh century. It was the Coptic Orthodox church tradition that survived in the region. Today Copts represent about 8% of Egypt’s population.² The crippling of the church in North Africa denied a Christian voice to the rest of Africa until missionary activities much later. The missionary enter-

¹Bengt G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 17.

²See Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 21st century ed. (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001) 233.

Much of the explosive growth of the church in Africa is due to the spread of a form of pentecostalism that borrows from the West while adapting pentecostal faith to the African worldview. Here an African professor describes that phenomenon.

prise saw sub-Saharan Africa bombarded with Western Christianity. Missionaries tried as much as possible to evangelize the continent, seeing to it that syncretism did not take place. But then, in the latter part of the twentieth century, Christian churches were left in the hands of African leaders. What the Africans consider as important in Christianity is what I seek to address in this essay.

EARLY ATTEMPTS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES

Christianity came to West Africa in the fifteenth century when Portuguese commercial voyages brought Roman Catholic priests to minister among their settlements. Attempts were made to introduce the Christian faith among the Africans. However, little was accomplished, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century only a few converts, some ruins of churches, crucifixes, sculptures, and archival records could be identified. In the eighteenth century, the United Brethren or Moravian Church of Denmark and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel also made various attempts to plant the Christian faith, but with little success. Christianity was, however, steadily established in the nineteenth century through the enterprising missionary activities of organizations such as the Basel Mission, the Bremen Mission, the Wesleyan Methodist Society, and the various Catholic missions. These churches are referred to as mainline churches in this essay.

The nineteenth-century missionary activity was the product of the Protestant Awakening, with all its zeal and commitment. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson warned an audience at Harvard Divinity School in 1838, “The danger of a steady diet of other people’s religion is that it can dry up one’s own resource.”³ To be sure, missionary Christianity contributed immensely to the advancement of the African society. The major contributions included the establishment of schools, the introduction of Western medical systems, and social advancement of African society, such as the abolition of capital punishment and slavery. In addition, the missionaries were responsible for promoting translation, including the creation of vernacular alphabets and production of grammars and dictionaries for African languages.

Nonetheless, in their effort to evangelize and civilize the indigenous people, the missionaries taught that belief in the spirit-forces—such as the gods, fetishism, elves, dwarfs, and witchcraft—was superstitious. Curiously, at the same time they presented the devil and demons as the power behind these spirit-forces. This missionary effort failed to provide for the holistic needs of the people. For Africans, the spirit-forces remained real and life-threatening. It is against this backdrop that some Africans started their independent churches.

AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES

The first reaction against missionary Christianity in Africa was that of a black nationalist group labeled “Ethiopians.” They waged a cultural protest against the

³Cited by Harvey G. Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Cassell, 1996) 14.

white domination of the churches.⁴ A few of the elite broke off to form African churches that resembled the mission churches. Another group of people, often called prophets, from the lower strata of society, with little or no formal education, also challenged the authority of the missionaries through the demonstration of healing that involved a blend of Christianity and African traditional cultural practices. No missionary commissioned such people, yet these prophets helped spread the Christian message in Africa. Some prominent people among them were William Wade Harris, Joseph Babalola, and Garrick Braide in West Africa; Isaiah Shembe in South Africa; and Simon Kimbangu in Zaire. The battle to find a place for such prophets within the mainline churches continued to be a problem until the 1920s and 1930s, when the prophets broke away from the mainline churches and established their own independent churches, marking the beginning of a new trend.

“in the new churches, worship was a blend of the Bible and the whole spectrum of African tradition and religion”

In the new churches, worship was a blend of the Bible and the whole spectrum of African tradition and religion. Their activities, growth, and creativity have engaged the attention of scholars in the academic attempt to identify the African contribution to world Christianity.⁵ Although these churches attracted many adherents, weaknesses, such as the lack of a theological framework and of accountability from the ministers (which produced some questionable practices, such as exploitation and immorality), caused a decline and eventually paved the way for the popularity of the classical pentecostal churches.

CLASSICAL PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

The origins and growth of pentecostalism in Africa are part of a complex story. Some of the classical pentecostal churches were originally established under the auspices of foreign pentecostal missions. Others were initiated by the indigenous people who had come into contact with gospel tracts that shared the pentecostal experience and practices. These local pentecostal Christians invited the foreign mission to come and take control of their groups. Some independent pentecostals who had been influenced by the Azusa Street revival responded to such calls.⁶ Those churches that came to West Africa included the Assemblies of God, the Apostolic Church, and the Four Square Gospel Church. Soon some of the

⁴Ogbu U. Kalu, “The Third Response: Pentecostalism and the Reconstruction of Christian Experience in Africa, 1970–1995,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1/2 (1998) 3.

⁵Harold W. Turner, *History of an African Independent Church*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967); Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in an African City* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953); Frederick B. Welbourn and Bethwell A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁶Azusa Street is a pentecostal revival that broke out in Los Angeles in 1906.

churches emerged as independent, indigenous classical pentecostal churches. The notable ones include the Church of Pentecost of Ghana, the Christ Apostolic Church, the Gospel Faith Mission, and the Redeemed Christian Church of Nigeria. Some of these churches have branches not only in neighboring West African countries but also across the globe.

Pentecostal denominations arose also in South Africa. These include the Assemblies of God in South Africa (AGSA), Full Gospel Church of South Africa, and the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFMSA). The South African churches became an important influence in the spread of pentecostalism in Central Africa, especially with regard to the anglophone countries, such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. Most of the classical pentecostals who evangelized Central and Eastern Africa were from pentecostal denominations in North America and Europe. Some of these traveled through South Africa and formed contacts that they continued to maintain. The prominent ones include the Apostolic Faith Mission and Full Gospel Church.

*“soon pentecostalism was sweeping over the continent,
winning many converts and also drawing members from
the mainline churches”*

Similarly, the independent pentecostal denominations from Europe and North America spread the pentecostal faith in East Africa. Some well-known ones among them were the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Elim Pentecostal Church from the United Kingdom, and the New Testament Church and the Pentecostal Holiness Church from the United States.

PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS

Pentecostal theology was very appealing to the African psyche. It was presented in such a way that the Bible spoke to the African worldview both in affirmation and in denunciation. On the one hand, the gods, witchcraft, and sorcery were presented as real and powerful. They could destroy life and the destinies of people. On the other hand, God was Almighty, and his power superseded that of the gods. Those who worshiped the gods and practiced witchcraft and sorcery were called to denounce them and come to Jesus. The power of God could be given to anybody who would believe and accept his son Jesus. To receive him was to be born again. The symbol of his power in a born-again person was the baptism of the Holy Spirit with emphasis on speaking in tongues. This was considered a powerful weapon for evangelism. Healing and exorcism were to accompany the evangelistic efforts of those who were baptized in the Spirit.

Soon pentecostalism was sweeping over the continent, winning many converts and also drawing members from the mainline churches. Members from the

mainline churches were asked to receive Jesus again and were rebaptized by immersion.

PARA-CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS TAKE UP PENTECOSTAL MINISTRY

Another trend that made the pentecostal experience sweep across the continent was a network of Christian unions that linked students across borders. In Ghana the members of the Scripture Union (SU) and University Christian Fellowship who had pentecostal backgrounds spread the experience among their colleagues. The Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS) in Kenya facilitated the expansion of the pentecostal renewal in the neighboring countries. Some Nigerians who did their language study in the francophone countries in West Africa (Togo, Benin, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire) spread the experience.⁷

In the 1980s, through their breakfast meetings, the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International (FGBMFI) also helped spread the pentecostal experience throughout the continent. The female counterpart of the FGBMFI was called Women's Aglow. These groups targeted businessmen and women and invited them to their meetings. Through the sharing of personal experiences, many people were won to Christ and encouraged to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues.

Many people who joined the student movements and the business fellowships left mainline churches to join the pentecostal movements.

RESPONSE OF MAINLINE CHURCHES

The loss of members raised an alarm within the mainline churches. Some of the churches set up committees to investigate why people left the mainline churches to join the African Initiated Churches.⁸ As a response to the findings of such committees, renewal groups were formed within the mainline churches. The practices of such renewal groups followed those of pentecostal churches; they offered a theological response that corresponded to the religious and spiritual needs of Africans. Currently it is often difficult to identify the difference between a pentecostal/charismatic church and a mainline church. After a mainline church has gone through its traditional liturgy, it now often shifts to the informal and spontaneous pentecostal way of worship—singing, drumming, clapping of hands, and dancing. This type of worship is now becoming more and more characteristic of African Christianity. Some pastors and theologians have called this the pentecostalization of Christianity in Africa.⁹ It has changed the theology and form of Christianity in Africa dramatically.

⁷Matthews A. Ojo, "The Church in the African State: The Charismatic/Pentecostal Experience in Nigeria," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1/2 (1998) 25–32.

⁸J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Boston: Brill, 2004) 63.

⁹Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001).

PROLIFERATION OF CHURCHES

Nevertheless, the freedom of worship within pentecostalism, the lack of formal theological training, and the springing up of renewal groups have led to a proliferation of churches. From 1 Peter 2:9–10, pentecostals assert that all believers are priests. Therefore, sensing the call of God in one's life or receiving a new vision could be taken as indication to begin a new church. In such independent churches, the leader has authority to direct the affairs of the church and is considered the first among equals. New churches continue to split out of old ones. Ogbu Kalu rightly observes, "Leadership becomes dependent upon proved worth and charisma and not upon inherent right. As soon as some detect a fault, a weakening of charisma or autocratic exercise of power, a split occurs."¹⁰ Thus, many churches have sprung up. Six or more churches can be accommodated in one school building, with worship in different classrooms. There are churches at every corner of the various countries in West Africa, with different and exciting names, such as Jesus Is Coming Again Church, Last Stop Church, Amen and Amen Church, Family Christian Life, and the True Church.

PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY

In these new pentecostal and charismatic churches, people bring not only their Bibles, but also notebooks and pens to take notes during the service. Pastors and other speakers produce preaching materials on tapes, videos, CDs, books, and magazines for members' consumption.

"the emphasis is on the experiential, the relational, and the emotional, with freedom to interpret and appropriate the multiple meanings of biblical texts"

A major consideration in pentecostal spirituality is spontaneity, demonstrated in orality. Pentecostal hermeneutics seeks to keep experience and Scripture in a dialectical relationship. The Holy Spirit is thought to uphold the truth in life experience. Thus the emphasis is on the experiential, the relational, and the emotional, with freedom to interpret and appropriate the multiple meanings of biblical texts. The preference is for narrative texts. The text is often read eschatologically as the intrusion of the kingdom of God into the present and as empowerment for living out its promises. The sermon is presented in a way that invites the hearers to respond. Soon the believers begin to speak differently and through personal testimonies share the new faith with others. These believers share the faith with others in public transport, at open places, and at any given opportunity. Radio and TV evangelism is on the ascendancy as an extension of the pulpit. Advertising posters are seen all over, promising transformation of life, prosperity, and healing for

¹⁰Ibid., 18.

those who would attend services of healing, deliverance, and prayer, or conventions and conferences.

INSPIRATION FROM WESTERN PENTECOSTAL PREACHERS

It must be acknowledged that this charismatic renewal in Africa was buttressed by the ministries of some Western pentecostal television evangelists. In the 1970s and 1980s, books and cassettes from Western preachers—especially Americans such as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Reinhard Bonke, and later on Benny Hinn—were used to enhance the preaching of many local ministers. Many sermons by African pastors were derived from materials drawn from these ministers, especially Roberts's seed faith principle, which is centered on prosperity, and Hagin's faith healing. Another trend (during the latter part of the 1980s and 1990s) was an interest in books and cassettes (both video and audio) that sought to increase people's awareness of demons and how to exorcise them. Prominent among these materials were the books and cassettes of Derek Prince, Don Basham, Fred Dickason, Charles Kraft, and John Wimber.¹¹ According to these materials, a person can be a Christian, baptized in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, yet may still be subject to demons and curses until these are revealed and dealt with by the Holy Spirit. Casting out a demon or renouncing a curse can be a lengthy process, and it is only forceful exorcists who can attempt it.

This view is significantly different from that of the classical pentecostals, who had refused to accept the possibility of a Christian being possessed by a demon.¹² However, since this theory appeals to the African worldview, it was welcomed. Consequently, some Christians began to reinterpret these teachings in culturally relevant ways and put them into practice throughout the continent. The outcome of this reformulation is what I refer to as "witchdemonology."¹³ The beliefs and praxis are an amalgamation of the beliefs and practices of Western evangelical/pentecostal churches and the African worldview. Although the contemporary practices of African Christianity were greatly influenced by Westerners, Africans have contextualized all of this to suit their purposes in such a way that it is no longer foreign. We turn now to the contents of these current practices.

CONCEPT OF SALVATION

Obviously there is a strong emphasis on the born-again experience. Salvation is seen as transformation and empowerment. This means salvation must produce a

¹¹Don W. Basham, *Can a Christian Have a Demon?* (Monroeville, PA: Whitaker, 1971); C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession & the Christian* (Chicago: Moody, 1987); Charles H. Kraft, *Defeating Dark Angels: Breaking Demonic Oppression in the Believer's Life* (Tonbridge, UK: Sovereign World, 1993); John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism: Signs and Wonders Today* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992).

¹²See William K. Kay, *Inside Story: A History of British Assemblies of God* (Mattersey, UK: Mattersey Hall, 1990) 337.

¹³Opoku Onyinah, "Contemporary 'Witchdemonology' in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 93/370–371 (2004) 330–345.

visible effect in the lives of believers, such as the discontinuation of smoking, disco dancing, drinking, and fornication. Salvation must necessarily include the healing of sickness and deliverance from the demonic. Salvation must include prosperity and fruitfulness. Failure to experience these benefits as a Christian is interpreted as the presence of demons or ancestral curses in the person's life.

Demon possession occurs when a demon comes to live in a person without his or her consent. Witchcraft is taken as an advanced form of spirit possession. Yet often, the terms "witch" and "witchcraft" are used synonymously with the terms "demon," "demonology," and "evil spirit." Against this backdrop, it is assumed that almost all traditional priests are witches.

Ancestral or generational curse is the belief that the consequences of the sins committed by the progenitors are recurrent in their family lines. The effects of these curses in a person's life include chronic or hereditary diseases, mental breakdowns, emotional excesses, allergies, repeated miscarriages, unnatural deaths, such as in suicides and accidents, continuing financial insufficiencies, frequent breakdown of marriages, and abnormal behavior, such as extreme anger tantrums or extreme reservedness.

TERRITORIAL SPIRITS

Ancestral curses are linked with a strong belief in the territorial spirit, specifically promoted by Peter Wagner, emeritus professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles.¹⁴ Demons are thought to have specific geographical assignments, depending on their rank in the hierarchy. It is assumed that the real sources of African problems are the controlling powers of various territorial spirits such as poverty and idolatry. Again, Africans' involvement in the slave trade and bloodshed has opened this demonic door. Taking a cue from Wagner, some African scholars such as Professor Oshun and "Evangelist" Nwankpa have stressed the need to wage "spiritual warfare" against these spiritual enemies to set the African continent free.¹⁵ Many respond by putting up powerful national and international prayer ministries to intercede for Africans. Africa-wide intercessory bodies include Intercessors for Africa, AD 2000 Prayer Track, and 10/40 Window.

DEMONIC DOORWAYS

There are many "doorways," "gates," or "openings" through which demons are said to enter people and can be passed on to their families or others. Idolatry of any kind is said to be a major opening. Other demonic doorways, which propo-

¹⁴C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Engaging the Enemy: How to Fight and Defeat Territorial Spirits* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993).

¹⁵See Emeka Nwankpa, *Redeeming the Land: Interceding for the Nations* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1994) 9; Chris O. Oshun, "Spirits and Healing in a Depressed Economy: The Case of Nigeria," *Mission Studies* 15/1 (1998) 33.

nents of this ministry assume, are involvement in sinful deeds, such as adultery, homosexual acts, premeditated lies, repeated acts of masturbation, and fornication. Involvement in any other religion apart from the “one prescribed by the Lord”—that is, evangelical Christianity—is considered demonic. Other issues that may attract demons to people include any type of emotional pressure from childhood experiences, such as pressures from homes where parents were in conflict with each other, where children were rejected, or where one or both parents were alcoholic, cruel, or abusive, especially through sexual abuse. Again, it is propounded that demons may enter human beings through emotional traumas like the death of a loved one or survival in a car accident, in murder, or a building explosion; those who watch such incidents on television are also said to be vulnerable to demonic entry.

“involvement in any other religion apart from the ‘one prescribed by the Lord’—that is, evangelical Christianity

Based on this belief, those who got involved in early African Initiated Churches (AICs), such as the Aladura, Zionist, or Separatist churches, are considered to have made a pact with the occult and demonic. Often in church services former members of the AICs confess their indulgence in idolatry and sorcery and are offered prayer for deliverance.

DEMONIC COUNTERPARTS

It is assumed that all evil acts have their demonic counterparts. For example, a demon of fornication enters the one who fornicates, while the demon of lust enters the person who watches pornographic videos or pictures. While the Bible reveals the seriousness of sin and the need to address it through Christ (e.g., Eph 4:25–32), this ministry claims that all evil acts and experiences come from demons. The logical inference is that demons are at work any time evil behaviors or diseases become manifest in the lives of both Christians and non-Christians.

According to these teachings, anyone, including Christians, could be a witch, demon possessed, or could inherit ancestral curses. It is claimed that, in addition to salvation, every African Christian needs deliverance from witchcraft, demons, and ancestral curses or diseases before they will be set free.

DELIVERANCE PRAYERS

Prayer (for deliverance) often begins with “spiritual mapping.” This is an attempt to identify the specific power behind the problem or the doorway that led to the problem. Strategic spiritual warfare is designed to confront the powers. The weapons for such warfare are drawn from biblical metaphors, including the axe of

God, the arrows of God, the finger of God, and hailstones. The powers are “bombed,” “bound,” “stamped upon,” “caned,” and “stoned.” This is often done through gestures as people walk around, shout, or rebuke. After meetings many claim to be healed or delivered.

The Christian missionary enterprise that began in the nineteenth century has almost flooded Africa south of the Sahara. Nevertheless, the type of Christianity that the missionaries introduced has changed drastically. African Christianity has been “pentecostalized” into a sort of Christianity that Africans think will help them. This new Christian experience in Africa evolved through African ingenuity in the appropriation and adaptation of evangelical pentecostal Christianity from a variety of sources. For many, this modern Christianity has replaced missionary Christianity and the Christianity of the early African Initiated Churches, yet it continues to embody elements of both predecessors.

This current Christianity requires that salvation must be transformational and empowering; it must produce a visible effect in the lives of believers, such as the extinction of drunkenness, disco dancing, and fornication. Christianity must necessarily include the healing of sickness and deliverance from the demonic. When a Christian’s life is devoid of sin and demonic presence, the Christian is expected to be fruitful and prosperous. Daily deliverance is therefore needed for those who are not experiencing these benefits.

The approach apparently suits many in the African cultural setting, and as a result many people have flocked into the churches. The explosive growth of the church in Africa is due, at least in part, to this contextualized form of worship. The question remains, of course, whether this form of Christianity will over time continue to meet the needs of African people and how it will relate to other expressions of Christian faith. History will tell. ⊕

OPOKU ONYINAH is the rector of Pentecost University College in Accra, Ghana. His current book project is Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Africa.