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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Christianity in Africa: A Beacon of Hope for Christianity in Europe

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Abstract

World Christianity has experienced several changes including its spread and decline across the world. Following what Andrew F. Walls terms as “Serial character of Christian advance,” Christianity has moved from Europe, its previous heartland to other continents like Africa, Asia and Latin America. Today in Europe, in general terms, Christianity can be described in words such as ‘declining’, ‘empty pews’, ‘dying’, ‘few pews filled with only old folks’, etc. Given the seemingly hopeless nature of the condition of Christianity in Europe, this article seeks to argue that Christianity in Africa provides hope for world Christianity in the light of the dying state of it in Europe, its erstwhile heartland. The article explores the phenomena of globalization and migration as media through which Christianity in Africa provides this hope to Europe and World Christianity at large.

Keywords: Christianity; Globalization; Migration; Hope; Africa; Europe.

Introduction

What started in Israel twenty centuries ago as a group of adherents professing that some man called Jesus Christ was a son of God and came to die as a messiah to the Jews and a saviour of the entire world has become very widespread as Christianity by the relentless and unflinching pursuits of these adherents. Christianity moved beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judea—its initial heartland [1] and spread throughout the Greco-Roman world in the early centuries of church history. Following what Andrew F. Walls [2] described as “Serial character of Christian advance,” Christianity moved from one place to the other; declining in one location and simultaneously resurfacing in another location.

During the 18th, 19th and early part of 20th centuries, this serial character of Christian advance as described by Walls saw Europe as the heartland of world Christianity. In fact there were more Christians in Europe than in other parts of the world [3]. At this era, Britain for instance deployed more missionaries outside Europe than any other country, according to Walls. But by the end of the 20th century, world Christianity experienced a paradigm shift in that Europe was no longer the heartland of Christianity; Africa, Asia and Latin America were [4]. Africa in particular has since become the heartland for world Christianity providing hope for the declining church membership, evangelistic and spiritual fervour in Europe. In this article I attempt to explicate on developments that are making Africa stand the chance as a beacon of hope for the declining Christianity in Europe. I will attempt to give a brief history of Christianity in Africa and also touch on

developments such as globalization and migration which I think are major factors that put Africa in this place of exuding hope for the declining Christianity in Europe.

Brief History of Christianity in Africa

Christianity existed in Africa before the missionary encounters of the 19th century. According to Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim [5], quoting John Mbiti, Christianity in Africa is so old that it can aptly be termed as “an indigenous, traditional and African religion.” The origin of African Christianity has links to the church of Ethiopia [6]. Ethiopia had contacts with the Jews way before Jesus Christ was born. This contact is found in the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as recorded in 1 Kings Chapter 10 [7]. When Jesus was born also, he sought asylum with his parents in Egypt to escape the plot of King Herod to kill him as a baby [8]. The Coptic Church in Egypt values this event and also argues that the good news came first to them through the preaching of the apostle Mark who is believed to have been martyred in Alexandria [9]. Moreover, the case of the Ethiopian eunuch (an African) who met the evangelist Philip on his way back to Ethiopia from a worship time in Jerusalem is often considered in talking about the history of Christianity in Africa. This eunuch who was a high ranking official in charge of the Ethiopian Queen’s finance, believed the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to him by Philip and was baptised by him (Luke 8:27-39) [10].

According to Dyron B. Daughrity, Africans were present on the birthday of Christianity: the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2, because mention was made of people from Egypt and Libya [11]. He also indicates that Africans first preached the gospel to non-Jews before anyone because the account of Acts 11:19 talks about believers coming from Cyrene witnessing to Greeks in Antioch. He further posits that the great apostle Paul could have been ordained by persons including Africans in the church in Antioch as Acts 13 records it. For Daughrity, Africa’s extra-canonical pedigree is equally impressive. St. Anthony the Great, the father of monasticism, was Egyptian. Several African church fathers defined the Christian faith for us as we understand it today: Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian and Tertullian. Indeed, Athanasius was the leading theologian in the Trinitarian controversies as well as in the determination of the biblical canon. Athanasius’s home city, Alexandria, was well known as “the leading academic centre of the ancient world.” Alexandria and Carthage (Tunisia) were pivotal in shaping the earliest medieval Western universities. (...) the most important theologian in Christian history, Augustine (354-430), was an African Berber from Algeria [12].

Moving away from these instances of early forms of Christianity in Africa, it is worth pointing out that sub-Saharan Africa came into contact with Christianity through the missionary efforts of Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, during this missionary times, “(...) for every missionary there were dozens of African leaders,” Daughrity [13] indicates.

Today, out of the 59 countries in continental Africa, 31 countries have Christianity as the dominant religion [14]. Most Christians in Africa today are Protestants and Pentecostals/Charismatics while the Roman Catholic Church draws about a third of Christian number in Africa [15]. The ancient orthodox church which is found mainly in the Nile Valley constitute a tenth of the Christian population in Africa [16]. Christianity in Africa is now more vibrant and energetic than it is Europe. According to Daughrity, citing from Terence Ranger, by 2030 there will be more Christians in Africa than there will be Latin America [17].

Globalization

Given the background of Christianity in Africa and how it is currently growing, it gives one the sense that indeed it can offer the hope of keeping world Christianity moving despite its decline in Europe which used to be the heartland of Christianity until the rise and spread of secularism. But how African Christianity can offer this hope is my concern. I find the phenomenon of globalization as providing Africa the platform and medium to provide hope for Christianity amidst its decline in Europe. Considering globalization as a concept and phenomenon, I like to draw on the definition giving by Robert J. Schreiter: “Globalization (...) is the extension of the effects of modernity to the entire world, and the compression of time and space [18].”

For Schreiter, globalization first works by extension: spreading the effects of modernity to other parts of the world through the help of communication technologies such as faxes, modems, computers and the internet. Giving this feature of globalization, churches in Africa both

Pentecostal/Charismatic and Protestants are able to extend their style of worship and pursuit of the Christian faith to other parts of the world. Today, churches in Africa, especially the Pentecostal/Charismatic ones use the internet to stream their worship services live online to the rest of the world and also put a lot of information about the Christian faith on the homepages of their websites.

They also draw on the technology of satellite to broadcast on channels that can be watched globally. The first effect of modernity that was extended to the rest of the world through globalization was “western culture [19],” but now with this same extension effect, Africa can and is able to transmit the passion, spiritual energy and fervour of Christianity to Europe where these are dying out among many Christians there.

Moreover, Schreiter’s definition of globalization talks of compression which he explains us the compression of time and space such that events occurring around the globe can be witnessed instantaneously through technology. By the compression of distance due to the advent of faster means of transportation such as airplanes, African churches are able to send missionaries to Europe and other parts of the world easier than they could before. Moreover, there is an increasing phenomenon of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa establishing overseas branches in Europe which is partly a consequent of globalization.

Some leaders of these churches also travel to Europe and other parts of the world to preach the gospel. The Light House Chapel International, a charismatic church headquartered in Accra, Ghana, for instance, has an outreach division called Healing Jesus Crusade led by the Bishop, Dag Heward Mills which travels the continents preaching the gospel. That aside, through the compression of time and space, people around the world have much contact with another than before. This happens in the context of migration by which Africans and Europeans get to meet.

Migration

Migration considered as factor that can help and already, in some respects, helps Christianity in Africa provide hope for the declining Christianity in Europe can well be understood in this piece when discussed in relation to globalization as explained before now. By the compression of time and space through the technology of travel, many more people, especially Africans are able to travel easily to different parts of the world including Europe than before. Many of these African migrants move to Europe and other parts of the world for very different reasons. Some constitute an academic class who go for research and higher academic studies (like I am currently doing in Germany); others are on political basis but the majority are on economic grounds [20]: to seek greener pastures and better their lots.

Nonetheless, Asamoah-Gyadu, citing Jehu J. Hanciles, has asserted that, “into whichever category they fall, African migrants have always carried their faith with them to the Diasporas [21].” As they find themselves in this new context, they share their faith with their new neighbours because for them the decline of Christianity in Europe is a call for mission and evangelism [22]. This context created by migration provides a platform for Africans to share their Christianity characterized by passion, energy and spiritual fervour to Europe.

The most important aspect of the Africa Diaspora is African migrant churches. These churches are set up to provide worship and fellowship avenues for African Christians. They do not only attract African Christians, but as a result of their missional and evangelistic identity, they attract other non-Christian Africans as well as Europeans. I have visited some African migrant churches [23] in Germany and found not only Africans but also native Germans who were very much at home with the African liturgical worship: loud singing accompanied with drumming, clapping, dancing and praying aloud which is diametrically opposite to mainline German Lutheran, Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches.

As much as most of these Diaspora churches are mostly Africans in membership like the Kingsway International Christian Centre in UK, others have majority non-Africans in membership like Pastor Sunday Adelaja’s Embassy of God Church in Kiev [24]. The large number of the Africa Diaspora has burgeoned African migrant churches and their corresponding impact on the declining and fainting spiritual strength of Christianity in Europe. According to Daugherty, citing Afe Adogame, Africans bring the gospel to parts of the West where Christianity has faded out or silenced [25]. I agree with Daugherty and think that this task, often referred to in mission studies as

'reverse mission [26]' is tenable in the context of the Africa Diaspora which is a consequent of migration.

Conclusion

Following Andrew F. Walls concept of the serial character of Christian advance, I think that the decline of Christianity in Europe which once was a heartland of world Christianity [27] has caused a paradigm shift such that Africa has found itself as the heartland of Christianity. And with factors such as globalization and its effect on migration, Christianity in African is afforded the opportunity to provide hope for world Christianity. Christianity in African is providing a kind of hope that says that the fact that Europe, the erstwhile centre of world Christianity, is now experiencing a decline in Christianity characterized by empty pews, and few pews filled with old folks, churches converted to restaurant, residences, shops and pubs [28], is no indication that Christianity is declining in general. While believing that Christianity in African can and is providing this hope through the help of globalization and migration, the question still stands to be asked what measures are Christians in Africa, both home and in the Diaspora putting in place to save them from going the same way Europe is going: declining Christianity. This is an area to explore and also for Africans to humbly reflect and work hard to sustain the strength of the pulse of Christianity in the continent.

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