

Looking for Wholeness in an Enchanted World: Healing, Prosperity and Ritual Action in African Charismatic/Pentecostal Churches

Purpose and aims

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the interplay between African traditional worldviews and Western enlightenment patterns of thought in the life of African Charismatic /Pentecostal churches. This is done through the study of the concepts of healing and prosperity as well as ritual action of these churches.

Survey of the field

During the last century, Africa has experienced a most extraordinary growth of Christianity – from 12 million in 1910 to almost half a billion today, or from 9 % to almost half of the continent's population. The change is even more drastic in Africa south of the Sahara where the entire growth has taken place. Since early 20th century, African Christianity plays an important role in social services (most notably education, health care), politics and culture. Recently, African Christianity has begun to play an increasing international role, too. This is due to two developments: First, poverty plaguing the continent forces annually millions of Africans to emigrate. This migration spreads African Instituted Churches (AICs) as well as African Christians of Western established churches around the world. Second, African churches have begun to sound their opinion with an increasing self-esteem in international ecumenical discussions, often confronting Western liberal churches.

The study of African Christianity increased after WW II. The early stage consisted of the African academic theologians' study of African Traditional Religions in relation to Christianity (e.g. John S. Mbiti, Tharcisse Tshibangu, Vincent Mulago, Harry Sawyerr and Bolaji Idowu), paralleled by Western scholars' research on African Christianity, especially AICs (e.g. Victor Turner and Bengt Sundkler). In the second stage, African theologians concentrated on constructive academic theology (e.g. Bénézet Bujo, Charles Nyamiti, Alan Boesak) while a Western interest in the analysis of these was launched, with Mika Vähäkangas' (1999) dissertation on the philosophical and cultural foundations of Charles Nyamiti's theology being the first full-fledged analysis of a single African theologian. Carl Sundberg (2000) studied African Christianity theologically from the point of view of practice thereby bridging theology and anthropology which also opened new views in theology.

The global coverage of African Christianity has removed some barriers: The study of African Christianity can no longer be restricted to Africa but needs to cover also diaspora and utilize multi-sited approaches. In this, Gerrie ter Haar, Paul Gifford and David Maxwell could be named, among others. The former dividing line between African theologians with emic/constructive approaches and westerners with etic/analytical approaches has also disappeared with many African researchers in the West involving in the etic work, too (e.g. Ogbu Kalu, Afe Adogame, African Association for the Study of Religion). Also the dividing lines between theology, religious studies and anthropology are diminishing. Interdisciplinary cooperation increases like my Nordic NOS-HS funded "Interpreting African Christianity: Anthropology and Theology in Dialogue" workshop-project (2009-2010, extended to 2011).

African Pentecostalism finds itself in a tension between four fields of influence. On one hand, there are two Western competing cultural categories in Africa – the traditional missionary Christian and the (late) modern. International Pentecostal and Charismatic interpretations of Christianity belong to the newer Western developments rejecting the old

churches and their formalism and ritualism. While many Western influences tend to play down the traditional strongly spiritual African interpretations of reality, Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity takes these worldviews seriously. Simultaneously, this seriousness is often expressed in a strong reaction against many of the elements of African tradition. In some dimensions, like protecting oneself from evil magic, the African traditional and Pentecostal interests are parallel. Yet, even the strong rejection means that African Pentecostalism creates an alternative reading of the African traditional worldviews. The traditional worldview continues to play an active role in feeding in the agenda for the African Pentecostal worldview. Therefore, one can maintain that the Pentecostal reinterpretation of African cosmos is the fourth cultural category in the life of the believer.

Theoretical Background

Max Weber describes *Entzauberung*, disenchantment, as one of the hallmarks, or even essential dimensions, of modernization. Through disenchantment, the world loses its mystified character, with spirits and god(s) intervening and influencing human life. For Weber, one of the early forces of disenchantment was Protestantism especially in its more radical forms that rejected traditional ecclesiastic teachings on the sacramental efficacy (Weber 1920, 114, 155-159, 194-195). Another major force in disenchantment was scientific rationalization (Weber 1919, 536). However, there are also signs of the re-enchantment in Weber (1919, 554-555) even if this development is much more obvious today (Jenkins 2000; Prado 1994). Re-enchantment means the return of the mystical in the interpretation of reality. The heirs of the radical modes of the Reformation, the Pentecostals, can be counted as strong advocates of re-enchantment through religious experience.

A persistent central theme in African Christian theology has been the encounter between African traditional worldviews and Christianity. The African traditional worldviews can be described as enchanted, and through the introduction of these worldviews in Christianity, one can talk of re-enchantment. There is a rapidly increasing group of AICs which resemble Pentecostalism and charismatic churches. They often imitate some of the international Charismatic/Pentecostal phenomena. However, there is also a great degree of religious innovation involved in the ritual action of these churches. What is noteworthy in this development is that these African churches are heirs to those strands of Protestantism which Weber understood as the avant-garde of disenchantment. When the abandonment of the centrality of ritual action as sacraments played a central role in this development, according to Weber, one needs to raise the question whether African Charismatic/Pentecostal Christians introduce new types of ritual behavior which enable and strengthen re-enchantment.

Many African theologians have described the outcome of modernization and disenchantment as breaking down of the wholeness of life which is understood as a central African cultural value. This wholeness means that life is not compartmentalized in the modern way (e.g. religious-secular) nor is it individualized. Wholeness as a concept refers also to good life where humans are treated with respect, covering also material, social and communal dimensions. The concept of salvation is also essentially linked to wholeness.

This project analyzes how re-enchanted Christianity functions in the world permeated by Enlightenment ideals and values. Each research input sheds light to this central question from the point of view of the human search after wholeness, studying the encounter between re-enchanted African Christianity and the Enlightenment West. In each

case, ritual action is used as a window through which this question is observed. In comparison to Western Christianity, African Christianity is far less doctrine and theology oriented and more life and action oriented. Therefore, it is predominantly through action that African Christians' faith can be understood. Additionally, community and communality play a central role in African understanding of personality, piety and faith. Therefore, special attention will be paid to the social structures of the faith communities. Benedict Anderson's (1991) theory of imagined communities will be of a great help at this point.

Methods and Implementation

This project is thoroughly interdisciplinary, both in research personnel and in approach. The project consists of qualitative studies carried out by each researcher.

The team consists of six researchers: one professor, two post-doc researchers and two doctoral candidates financed through Vetenskapsrådets funding, and one through Lund University faculty of humanities and theology funding. The mix of the academic background of the team is constructed in such a way that the representatives of different fields can contribute to each other with fresh insights. While theology analyzes African Christianity concentrating on the faith itself, anthropology concentrates more on the interaction between African Christianity in its local socio-cultural contexts. The combination of these two approaches facilitates a deeper and more multi-faceted analysis of the research topic.

Significance of the Project

This project represents a step forward in the study of African Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity in the sense that it makes use of the previous research results but proceeds to a setting of a question that is no longer limited to Africa only nor does it treat Africa as the passive recipient of ideas. In this way, African Christians are not alienated as the Others but taken into consideration as creative and active negotiators in the international, intercultural and interreligious scene. Through this point of view, the research carried out in the project will not only shed light on the new dimensions of the fastest growing part (Africa) of the fastest growing religious tradition (Charismatic/Pentecostal) in the world but will also improve our understanding of the modern disenchantment and the late modern re-enchantment processes and their cultural dimensions.

Literature

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