

OLD WINE IN NEW SKINS:

An Old African Worldview in a New Church.¹

1958

How do you account for the violence in Africa that we read about? What began as rumblings of violence have slowly turned into a mighty crescendo of violence and death. We remember the Idi Amin debacle of Uganda. Today, Uganda is smarting from the so-called Lord's Army. The horrors of the Hutus and Tutsis are still fresh in our memory. Sudanese blood is still flowing. It is proving difficult to stem the flow of blood in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Of course, Nigeria has had its civil war. That war is long over, but violence continues to mark a Nigeria supposedly at peace with itself. Monograph One describes the outbursts of violence between Christians and Muslims from 1980-2002. The Miss World pageant in Nigeria led to riots that left over 200 people dead² and prompted frustrated President Obasanjo's outburst, "Enough is enough. We are fed up with these crises."³ During the 2003 election campaign, Aminu Masari, a member of the House of Representatives from Katsina State, warned that "the greatest threat to a successful conduct of elections is political violence and activities of thugs."⁴ Violence had become such a problem that the main opposition party and the Federal Government were both organizing separate conferences on political violence.⁵ So, we should not be surprised then at Abba Gana Shettima's comment, "The resort to violence is...institutionalised in the Nigerian polity."⁶

¹*Christian Courier*, 5 Jun/98. This is an edited version of the original.

²J. Boer, "The Anatomy of Miss World." *CC*, 3 Mar/2003, pp. 12-13. "Nigerian Muslims and the Miss World Pageant." *TCNN Research Bulletin*, Mar/2003, pp. 36-42. See also www.tcn.edu.

³*New Nigerian*, 30 Nov/2002, p. 1.

⁴ Due to several international moves, some documents have gotten lost, so that I can no longer trace the full information needed in some footnotes. Rather than delete them, I leave them in their incomplete state. It is quite likely that the source of this and the following footnotes is either the *New Nigerian*, a Nigerian daily, or the popular Nigerian website Gamji.com. I refer serious students to the Boer file at Yale Divinity School Archives, where many hard documents underlying this article are stored. B. Agande, 2 Mar/2003. See also J. Nwokocha, 2 Mar/2003.

⁵R. Ajayi, 7 Mar/2003.

⁶A. Shettima, "Group Identify Conflicts," <http://www.gamji.com/NEWS1871.htm>.

In addition to inter-religious and political violence, there is even a considerable degree of violence between Christians. A cluster of ethnic groups, all of them identified closely with specific Christian denominations that were nurtured by the same foreign missionary body, have engaged in bitter wars with each other for a decade or more. Wholesale destruction of entire villages, including churches and a denominational administrative centre, not to speak of the thousands of dead. At least one party had modern army weapons at their disposal. A reliable source reported that a top leader in one of the churches encouraged that war and even helped plan it!

How do we account for all these horrible inconsistencies amongst Christians? The aim of this article is not to analyze all the causes for these wars, but, rather, to indicate the continuing influence of ATR and the resulting role of ethnocentrism and their effect on the issue at hand. Neither is the purpose to berate these Christian communities from the vantage point of a superior moral perk.

I am aware that I am a Westerner and that my understanding is based as much on my origin as it is on my 30 years' experience in Nigeria. Nigerians have their own interpretation that is as valid as mine. The most common explanations are those based on colonialism. Having written a doctoral dissertation on that subject, I know all about it. I realize full well that colonialism has and continues to play a role in these matters. However, I am pointing out religious factors often overlooked in this religious question but that contribute to the problem. I like to think that we complement each other.

Parallels in Western History

As I contemplate the issue, I am immediately reminded of the centuries of atrocities and injustices that Western Christians have inflicted upon each other and, indeed, on much of the world. These atrocities have been perpetrated over the centuries by Christians brought up in countries where the gospel has had much more time to take root than in Rwanda and Nigeria.

I have recently read some books about medieval culture in the West. It is enough to raise one's hands in holy horror to see how bishops and archbishops, Christian kings and nobles routinely plundered, oppressed, imprisoned and even murdered. They generally abused their positions for purposes of naked power and wealth. A random example is the book *A*

*Short History of Ireland*⁷ by Martin Wallace about the relationships between a dominant Christian England and underdog Christian Ireland. One can only shake his head and wonder what Christianity meant to those perpetrators of aggression, if anything at all. One can ask similar questions about almost all these countries throughout most of their “Christendom” phase.

To come closer to the present, the history of near genocide of native Canadians and Americans is too well documented to deny. The aftermath of black slavery in the U.S. is still very much with us. We think of Stalin’s camps of hell in the land of Orthodox churches. We remember the Holocaust in the land of Luther. We have not forgotten the images of recent ethnic cleansing among Orthodox and Catholics in former Yugoslavia. The struggle between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland has not yet been resolved.

While we may try to console ourselves with the thought that these horrors took place in spite of Christianity, others were consciously based on warped versions of Christianity. The guillotine of Reformation times cannot be erased from history. A recent visit to South Africa made me conscious of the fact that “Christian” apartheid was much more cruel than many of us may think.

So as I seek to explain what is happening in Africa, I do so humbly. I do so in the consciousness that I am also looking at my own history. If, as I will argue, African Christians are struggling with the residue of their Animistic past, the same must be said of Western Christians in relation to both their traditional Pagan and their Greek heritages.

Ancient Worldview

It is possible to explain much of current African turmoil in terms of economic interests. Some very helpful studies have been published along this line. However, studies that limit themselves to economic considerations do not tell the entire story, often not even the basic one. Besides, in this article I am interested in the *religious* factors that have contributed to these wars.

⁷Martin Wallace, *A Short History of Ireland*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1996.

Specifically, the issue here is: Why has the Christian faith of the combatants not prevented them from such atrocities?

At least part of the answer to this question must be sought in the relationship between the ancient worldview of traditional Africa and the new religion of Christianity. The official religious structures have changed and churches have emerged all over the place, but at the deeper level of the underlying traditional worldview there remains a significant residue for many Africans.

And what was the shape of that worldview? At least two aspects are relevant for this discussion. First, the purpose of African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not to serve God or gods; it is to manipulate the spiritual powers to do the bidding of the people, of the tribe and of individuals. This manipulation is carried out by a complicated arsenal of religious rituals.

We have here the very opposite of the Christian religion, which insists that its followers serve God. Spiritual powers are manipulated to serve human interests. The deepest quest is for social harmony and for power. The spiritual world is manipulated so as to satisfy that deep quest.

Millions of Africans, including Nigerians, have moved over to the church. Often they have done so as part of large people movements. People have become dissatisfied with traditional ways. Tradition became an obstacle to progress under the new conditions developed under colonialism.

Religion for Worldly Gain

The Wukari people of Taraba State, for instance, stubbornly held on to their traditional ways, while Takum, only 50 miles away, had accepted the church. It was becoming clear that the people of Takum were benefiting from this change in various ways, especially in economics, education and healthcare. When the Wukari people began to recognize how Takum profited from adopting the new ways, they also started to move towards the church in large numbers. Today there is a large Christian community in Wukari, perhaps greater in number than in Takum.

Another example of this same tendency is the ease with which thousands of Nigerians first converted to the church only to move on again, this time to the mosque. The reasons for such spiritual shopping are generally economic

or political. A Christian with political or business ambitions can often be bribed by Muslim offers of money or position to make another move.

There are innumerable rich Muslims in Nigeria with a Christian background. And why not? If the purpose of religion is to help you satisfy your ambitions, then such shopping around makes eminent sense. You follow the religion that promises to fulfill your dreams.

Issues of money

The point I am making here is that for many people this was a change in religious structure, but the old worldview continued to function at the same time. They expected to use their new religion to gain harmony and power in the modern contemporary setting. For many it was not much more than a method to achieve traditional aims in the modern context. It was no more a way to serve God or for self-sacrifice than was the traditional way.

Missionaries and African Christians are often at loggerheads, especially over issues of money and power. Often missionaries do not understand the African church leaders and pastors. These leaders seem so materialistic and power hungry to missionaries. Abuse of office and misuse of church finance seem to be the order of the day. They seem to show so little self-sacrifice. Of course, Africans rightly recognize the same in missionaries!

There are various reasons for the struggle referred to above. One is simply that the African concept of money and its use are inherently different from and in some ways contrary to Western concepts. An underlying factor is the difference in the psychology of overwhelming poverty and the psychology of comparative wealth.

Power Complex

Another major factor is that the basic worldview of many Africans has not changed. Now the church structure, church position, church money and church ritual are to serve as the new and modern source of power and harmony, especially power. The strong desire for power and money is based on that largely unchanged worldview.

Some years ago, the position of Nigeria director was vacant in my mission organization. A Nigerian church leader encouraged me to go for this position. He was surprised when I told him I was not interested in administration. How could I not desire the power that goes with that position? he asked. I told him I was not interested in power, an answer he found hard to understand.

Bribery and corruption are a feature of human life in all cultures. They are part of the human condition. But they are, it is well documented, extremely prevalent in Nigeria. The reason, I submit, must again be sought in the traditional worldview underlying the Christian veneer. That worldview provides no motivation to oppose bribery and corruption. In fact, it encourages it. If bribery and corruption are the way to individual or tribal power, then those are the things to pursue. At that point, the demands of the newly adopted faith will have to be ignored. Religion should not inhibit my progress or reduce my power; it should serve to increase those factors in my life.

The Tribe Comes First

Tribalism is another characteristic for which Africa is famous. In the traditional worldview, one's identity is deeply rooted in the tribe. Benny Vander Walt of Potchefstroom University, a long-time foe of apartheid, refers repeatedly to Africa's communalism – an over-emphasis on the community.

All members of the ethnic group are obligated to advance the harmony and power of the group. Traditionally, this is a loyalty that stops at the border of the tribe. One has little or no obligation to members of other ethnic groups. In fact, any harm done to such members is tolerated as long as it enhances the well-being of your own tribe.

The continuing effects of the traditional worldview in the church automatically brings bribery, corruption and tribalism as well. Why have the churches failed to nip bribery and corruption in the bud? To do so would go against the traditional view of the purpose of good religion. Why is tribalism so rampant in the church? Because the traditional view of community or communalism still reigns in the church.

The new religion and the church's power are useful in so far as they enhance the well-being of the tribe. They will be ignored by many if they prove inconvenient to the tribe. As inconsistent as all this may look to the missionary, it is perfectly consistent with the traditional worldview applied to the new situation. Africa has always taken over from the West selectively and on its own terms.

Many True Christians

I must hurry to prevent a possible misinterpretation of what has been said so far. I am definitely not suggesting that all African Christians and all African church leaders have retained this traditional worldview. There are many millions who have truly converted to Christ. I have many close friends among them.

Many have suffered deeply because they gave themselves to Christ. They have sacrificed much, some even their lives. The church would not be there today without them. I salute these Christians and have learned much from them. They shake their heads and shed tears as much as the rest of us. Unfortunately, they are not yet the majority.

Have the efforts of both African and Western missionaries been thwarted by the old wine in the new skins? By no means. The church is there. The Bible is available in many languages. The structures and the other tools of God for the completion of the task have been firmly established, even if they are constantly changing. There are millions of genuine Christians. There has been and continues to be an unprecedented movement towards Christ for which I, along with the angels in heaven, rejoice.

Patience Required

However, human nature being what it is, we must be patient. The mills of God grind slowly. He is not a revolutionary but a transformer. The leaven of the Holy Spirit is busily penetrating the hearts of more and more people. Negative aspects of traditional culture and worldview are under continuous attack by that Spirit. God is chipping away at them, deleting some aspects, transforming others.

The same is true, of course, for the church in the West. We are not all that different from each other. Whether the worldview that militates against and slows down the full appropriation of the gospel is Animistic African or, as is the case amongst Westerners, ancient Paganism and Greek thought, both are old wine in new skins--and neither fits comfortably.