

5

Gifts or Holiness: An Attempt to Explain the Difficulties of Proclaiming the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification in Black Africa, Côte d'Ivoire as a Case Study

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The Christian charismatic movement in Africa raises a doctrinal pitfall, and where it exists it raises both religious and social pitfalls as well. The Church is neither a centre of charlatans nor a hospital. It is the body of the Living Christ made up of sanctified people. To proclaim the doctrine of entire sanctification is to lead Christians so as not to miss the final goal—heaven.

Introduction

The doctrine of entire sanctification as taught by the holiness churches should lead believers away from spiritual malformation. With the goal of demonstrating the obstacles of proclaiming that doctrine, I will address the following outline: the African religious background, consequences for African social life, and the doctrinal question.

African Religious Background

The earliest anthropologists misinterpreted African society not knowing that in sub-Saharan Africa, the civil and religious aspects of the society intermingle. That ignorance influenced the early missionaries who, in turn, adopted a programme of evangelism by assimilation.⁶²

Ancestor Worship

In African belief, the dead interact daily with the living. No longer restricted by physical responsibilities, they keep their family on the right path of cultural and religious traditions. This explains the control the ancestors, or the dead, exercise on the living. More than half of modern

⁶² L'évangélisation, à l'époque coloniale, a produit des assimilés au christianisme mais pas des convertis. Lire pour mieux comprendre « Le pauvre Christ de Bomba » de Mongo BETI, publié aux Editions PRESENCE AFRICAINE, Paris, 1956, 1976.

Africans still believe this.⁶³

Divination

Divination is part of African daily life. The bété⁶⁴ diviner is a “géomancien” who interprets divine messages, dreams, and premonition signs. Among the Baoulé tribe,⁶⁵ a people group from central Côte d’Ivoire, the diviner, or “awafoué” must be both physically and morally capable of transmitting the messages of the gods and of the dead.

Initiation, a School of Mysticism

In the tribal system, young men are authorized to enter into the category of adults by means of an initiation. In the religious context, these initiations permit access to secret societies. In terms of magical practices, they consist in leaving behind the normal human condition in favour of acquiring supernatural powers. The hidden reasons for all of these ceremonies are, first of all, the submission of the whole society to the mystical and tutorial forces, and following that, the selection of an occult elite who sees to keeping the practice of worshipping the dead.

Consequences for African Social Life

Africans remain subject to mystical forces. Their internal life remains unchanged, even if they acquire new morals in regards to consumerism.

No Such Thing as a Natural Death

According to Georges Thomann, “that which frightens the Nényau the most, a people group from the west coast of Côte d’Ivoire, is the sorcerer, the man with the power to kill ... I am convinced that there is in fact a kind of secret society of evildoers.”⁶⁶ Because of sorcery, the invisible hand of a band of criminals, death is never natural. The worship of the dead carves out the mental state of Africans and creates the way for demon possession.

Life Centred Around Fear

By a calling forth of different spirits, the sorcerers feed the people with

⁶³ Reference needed.

⁶⁴ Bété, un peuple du Centre-Ouest de la Côte d’Ivoire, dans « L’image du peuple Bété » de B. HOLAS, publié aux Editions PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE FRANCE, Paris, 1968. p. 35.

⁶⁵ Guerry, Vincent. « La vie quotidienne dans un village baoulé, Editions INADES, Abidjan, 1979 P.106, 107, 108.

⁶⁶ Thoman, Georges. a été cité par B. HOLAS à la page 150 de son ouvrage mentionné plus haut.

relationships that create the following consequences: the first is a terrible fear of the ability of any spirit to hurt us; the second appears like mental bonds, the victims believing that the sorcerers, genies, and “revenants” have the right of life or death over them.

Success by Means of the “Cauris”

Many Africans continue to believe that their success in life depends on diviners and their prescriptions. The popular expression which means to consult a medium, “launch a *cauris*,”⁶⁷ is so anchored in the thoughts of the people that the various intersections of our neighbourhoods are filled with products for offerings. On the subject of the influence that ancient beliefs exercise on modern times, Jean Pierre Dozon writes, “they offer in the life of Ivoirians the possible remedies for their difficulties, their illnesses, their familial or professional failures.”⁶⁸ Therefore, we still see Africans wearing fetishes and amulets.

The Doctrinal Question

In Africa, the danger remains that very few young people invest themselves in theological studies, as long as they cannot produce an income in comparison to what the classic university careers can. Therefore, the field is wide open to charlatans who proclaim themselves servants of God.

The Holy Spirit as a Fetish

In Côte d’Ivoire, churches that were planted by locals make of the Holy Spirit a talisman, like protective rings or belts against sorcerers, accidents, demons, and illnesses.⁶⁹ The Christian charismatic movement lends a “magical” understanding to the baptism of the Holy Spirit: someone who is baptized in the Holy Spirit will speak in ecstatic language, prophesy, and work miracles. They will call themselves “prophets” and will become charismatics. Without this experience, according to their sacred language, one would “not be anointed.” On this subject, Wiley and Culbertson make the following observation, “entire sanctification ... is ‘wrought by the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience the

⁶⁷ Cauris : a shell the belongs to a group of porcelain objects, which served as money and as instruments of divination in Africa. - Source : MediaDICO 1999-2001.

⁶⁸ Dozon, Jean-Pierre. « Jésus, Mahomet et tous les esprits », article publié dans le Mensuel GEO un nouveau monde : la terre, n°132 de février 1990. P.100.

⁶⁹ Cette remarque est le fait de mon expérience personnelle. Elle reste vérifiable en fréquentant ces églises.

cleansing of the heart from sin and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, empowering the believer for life and service.”⁷⁰ In the teaching of holiness churches, the believer does not become “super-spiritual,”⁷¹ but rather someone who becomes humble and grateful by action of the Holy Spirit, who eradicates the pivotal root of sin from his heart. It is truly a work of God’s grace.

On the Subject of the New Birth

The biblical passage in John 3:3, “Jesus answered him, Verily, verily I say unto you, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” proves that the idea of the new birth is found in the Bible. But this same idea exists also in African initiation practices. “A process designed to realize psychologically the passage from a state, understood as inferior, of the person to a superior state,”⁷² this is how S Hutin describes the symbolism of the destruction of the old personality in favour of a new birth. In the separation rites of tribal and religious initiation, the same process is at work—destruction of the old personality in order to access a new, superior personality—from death to rebirth. If it isn’t made clear that “entire sanctification begins with regeneration but is completed by an instantaneous work of the Holy Spirit subsequent to regeneration,”⁷³ it is very easy for the new African Christian to be tricked by what appears to be a new birth via initiation rites, one which is much different in both theological and practical terms from the new birth about which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.

A Christianity of Miracles

In Côte d’Ivoire, the prevailing opinion among many Christians would make one believe that churches where the pastor does not cast out demons nor perform miracles are dead. This is the current charismatic stream of ideas. It underscores Luke 10:9, “heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘the kingdom of God is near you’” and other such verses. The problem is

⁷⁰ H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson citing the “Manual of the Church of the Nazarene” in “Introduction to Christian Theology,” BEACON HILL PRESS, Kansas City, 1963, page 253.

⁷¹ Bourdanne, Daniel. « L’évangile de la prospérité : une menace pour l’église africaine », Editions PRESSES BIBLIQUES AFRICAINES, Abidjan, 1999. P.48

⁷² Hutin, S. a été cité par Roger BASTIDE dans son article intitulé « Initiation », publié dans l’ENCYCLOPEDIE UNIVERSALIS, P. 1185

⁷³ H. Orton WILEY et Paul T. CULBERTSON, ouvrage précité, P. 308.

that exorcism is not an unknown phenomenon in Africa. Among the Baoulés, there are several types of exorcism practiced: personal, familial, and collective. The act of casting out demons is not a surprising event for a new African Christian. During religious initiations, the society of spirits gives esoteric instruction, like how to heal the sick. During initiations into magic, public ceremonies are disguised by the sorcerers as simple tests of magic, like the healing of the sick. Holiness churches do not deny divine healings,⁷⁴ but to make them the focal point of the thoughts and the life of the Christian turns believers away from “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Conclusion

The charismatic movement has a lot of disciples in black Africa and in Côte d’Ivoire, in particular because it reminds them of the religions of the past. Healing services (séances) awaken the same emotions as the traditional healer. Pastors exercise on their followers their gifts of healing and miracle-working. They are called prophets and apostles, but they play the role of “geomanciens” and “awafoué.”

The central message of the Bible is holiness, “Be ye holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy ... you will be holy unto me, for I the LORD am holy; I have set you apart from the nations, to be my own” (Leviticus 19:2; 20:26). To proclaim this truth in Africa effectively, we need to be informed about the realities of the terrain. This is what I have tried to do here, for better or for worse.

⁷⁴ MANUEL DE L’EGLISE DU NAZAREEN, « Les articles de foi (article 14)

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