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## Towards An African Theology of Christian Holiness: “A Journey From Israel To Africa”

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There are many exciting developments taking place in the Church of the Nazarene in Africa today. None of these is more encouraging, nor holds greater promise for the future of our Church, than the movement to articulate a theology of Christian holiness that is truly African. Borrowing the metaphor from Asian theologian C S Song who speaks of developing an Asian theology as “a journey from Israel to Asia”,<sup>109</sup> the title of this paper reflects my belief that the Church of the Nazarene in Africa is presently undertaking its own “journey from Israel to Africa”, a journey towards the goal of articulating a truly African theology of Christian holiness.

There are many complex issues involved in undertaking such a journey. In this short essay, we can consider only one of them, the question: What exactly do we mean by an “African theology of Christian holiness?” I would like to attempt an answer in two parts. To begin, I offer my thoughts about some things which an African theology of Christian holiness IS NOT. Then I suggest several things which an African theology of Christian holiness MUST NECESSARILY BE. I believe it is very important that we intensively study and openly debate these questions. For it is my impression that church leaders, both inside and outside Africa, have only a vague understanding of what exactly an “African” theology of Christian holiness might be.

### **Some Things an African Theology of Christian Holiness is Not**

Firstly, an “African” theology of Christian holiness is NOT an articulation of beliefs about holiness derived from African traditional religions. While African traditional religions do indeed have their own concepts of “the numinous” or “the holy”, we in the Church of the Nazarene in Africa are

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<sup>109</sup> Quoted by Fukue, Hitoshi, in his paper “Beyond Christ and Culture”, presented to the Guatemala Nazarene Theology Conference in 2002

seeking to articulate a theology of holiness that is distinctly CHRISTIAN. The need to articulate a theology that is truly African must never be seen as granting permission to borrow doctrines or beliefs from other religious traditions. That is the pathway to *syncretism*, a deadly sidetrack from our journey which we must ever avoid.

Secondly, an “African” theology of Christian holiness is NOT a redefinition of the essential nature of Christian holiness. Christian holiness is at its heart being “holy as God is holy”.<sup>110</sup> In other words, it is “Christ-likeness” since Jesus affirmed repeatedly, “I and the Father are one”.<sup>111</sup> No definition of holiness which denies or neglects this essential insight may be said to be either “Christian” or “holiness”.

Thirdly, an “African” theology of Christian holiness is NOT a theology which is valid only for Africans. We must maintain that human beings are, at their spiritual core, essentially alike. We are all created in the image of God.<sup>112</sup> We are all fallen.<sup>113</sup> We all need to be “justified freely”<sup>114</sup> and “transformed by the renewing of our minds”.<sup>115</sup> To be valid at all, any theology of Christian holiness must be essentially valid for all Christians everywhere, regardless of their cultural background. The modes of expression may be African, but the essence must be trans-cultural.

This is not to say that the African *experience* of sanctification will be identical with the *experience* of people from other cultures. In fact, an articulation of unique aspects of the African *experience* of the two works of God's grace will form an essential component of a truly African theology of holiness. However, God is the only source of all holiness - God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.<sup>116</sup> So at its core, in its most distilled essence, that holiness which God gracefully confers on Africans will be the same holiness that He confers on all true saints regardless of their culture or origin.

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<sup>110</sup> 1 Peter 1:15-16; Leviticus 11:44-45

<sup>111</sup> John 10:30

<sup>112</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>113</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>114</sup> Romans 3:24

<sup>115</sup> Romans 12:1

<sup>116</sup> Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17d

Fourthly, an African theology of Christian holiness is NOT one which allows for different ethical or moral standards, which would only apply to Africans. Christian holiness sets one, and only one, ethical standard: Absolute, Christ-like integrity. And it sets one, and only one, standard for moral conduct: Absolute Christ-like purity. Whenever ANY human culture (whether Western, African or other) would have us accept a life-pattern other than that of Jesus Christ himself, that culture is at that point necessarily sinful, and must be transformed if possible, or else rejected outright if it cannot be transformed.

### **Some Things an African Theology of Holiness Must Be**

Firstly, an African theology of Christian holiness must be one which is firmly grounded in the Christian Scriptures. Christian holiness is necessarily *Biblical holiness*. As the Nazarene *Manual* states, the Holy Scriptures inerrantly reveal "...the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not found in them may not be enjoined as an article of faith."<sup>117</sup> God's Word - and only God's Word - is the basis for a valid theology of Christian holiness, from whatever cultural perspective.

Secondly, in light of what we have just said, an African theology of Christian holiness must begin by identifying what the essential core of Biblical holiness is, minus any cultural accretions from Western or any other culture. In certain cases, even 1st Century Hebrew, Greek, and Roman cultural elements must be identified and set aside, so that African theologians may build their theology on the rock-solid foundation of the universal elements of Christ-like holiness.

Thirdly, an African theology of Christian holiness will acknowledge that the concept of Christ-likeness is *trans-cultural*. That is, it transcends all human cultural frames of reference, because being Christ-like is being *like the very person of God himself*. Jesus, the man from Nazareth, was born into a particular culture in which he fully participated. This gives us permission to fully participate in our own cultures as long as they do not directly contradict God's will. But Jesus the Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead stands above and outside any and all human cultures. Christ-

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<sup>117</sup> *Manual Church of the Nazarene 1997-2001*, "Articles of Faith, IV. The Holy Scriptures"

likeness is therefore the only adequate standard of holiness by which all theologies of Christian holiness must be evaluated.

Fourthly, an African theology of Christian holiness will take the universal, biblical core elements of holiness and articulate and describe them using African philosophical concepts and vocabulary. God is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor American nor European. He is the Holy (or Wholly) Other. No one set of human philosophical concepts is adequate to describe every aspect of God's nature or His activity in the human heart. African theologians must evaluate their own culture's philosophical framework, and then express biblical holiness in terms of that framework.

Fifthly, an African theology of Christian holiness must articulate and describe the African experience of the two works of God's grace - initial conversion and entire sanctification - in ways unique to Africans. I firmly believe that there exist external realities - God, other persons, and material objects - which are involved in our experiences. The activity of God, His divine interaction with the human heart, is real apart from our perceptions of it, and does not depend primarily on our ability to describe it adequately.

Still, the personal experiences of each individual are in great measure *subjective*. It is one's own *perceptions and evaluations* of those external realities which constitute the major portion of any individual's experiences. As such, our experiences are shaped by our culture, including the basic worldview underlying our culture, its values, and also especially our mother language. African worldviews, cultural values, and languages all shape the African believer's own perceptions of the daily experiences of African life. So they will necessarily also shape the African believer's perceptions and understanding of the experiences of conversion and heart cleansing. An African theology of Christian holiness will need to articulate and describe the African experience of God's works of grace.

And finally, an African theology of Christian holiness should include some practical guidelines for living a Holy life in African cultural and societal contexts. It will use African life-situations as the *milieu* in which the emerging theology of holiness is tested, critiqued, and perfected. Many thorny questions which are of particular importance to African daily life will have to be addressed, such as: polygamy (both polygyny and polyandry); traditional betrothal practices (*lobolo*); female circumcision and other forms of physical mutilation (whether voluntary or involuntary);

traditional weddings vs. Christian weddings and government weddings; grounds for divorce and remarriage; child-bearing and abortion; traditional “medicine” vs. Western scientific medicine vs. divine healing; corruption and Christian participation in bribery and extortion; and many others.

### **Conclusion**

The “journey from Israel to Africa”, that is, the process of developing a truly African theology of Christian holiness, will be a long and arduous one. But it is a journey which African Christians themselves must make. Missionaries and Western theologians can to a certain extent walk alongside them and help speed them on their journey, by sharing an account of our own “journey from Israel to America or Europe”. We can point out some potential pitfalls and suggest some necessary stops along the way. But ultimately, it is African Christians who, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God, will have to develop an African theology of Christian holiness.