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SAGA Bulletin

The famous quotation of John Mbiti: 'African is incurably religious' is often translated into Dutch in wordings that, retranslated from Dutch into English mean: 'Is Africa incurably religious?'. The question was taken up at the SAGA meeting of April 3, 2001. Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum formulated the seven theses which are published below. An article on the subject will be published in Exchange late 2002.

Jan Platvoet & Henk van Rinsum

Is Africa incurably religious?

Okot p'Bitek *versus* John Samuel Mbiti

1. Mbiti himself never wrote: 'Africa is incurably religious'. But he did say: 'Africans are notoriously religious' (Mbiti 1969: 1; 1975: 27). He implied that they deserve this reputation, for he asserted that they have traditionally been, and still are, 'deeply religious', live in 'a religious universe', and possessed, and still retained, 'a religious ontology' (Mbiti 1969: 1, 15, 262; 1975: 27, 198).
2. Mbiti's view that Africans are 'notoriously' and 'deeply' religious' has been accepted by many Africans and others as a statement of fact. It has been further developed into such views as 'Africans are inherently religious' (cf. Shorter & Onyancha 1997: 11), and 'Africa is incurably religious'. In contrast, Europe is seen as having secularised completely. Therefore, it must be re-evangelised by African Christians (Shorter & Onyancha 1997: 1).
3. Mbiti's view of Africans as 'notoriously' and 'deeply' religious laid the foundation for a highly successful, post-colonial, pan-African Christian (counter-) 'invention of tradition'. It is a widely accepted, modern, ideological identity construct of a paradigmatic, polar, strategic, retrospective, and – at least partly – mythical kind. By means of it, politically expedient mirror images (of Africa as religious, and Europe as irreligious) are created and maintained. Its political and cultural purpose is to counteract (and execute revenge upon) earlier European inventions of Africa as 'savage', 'cannibalistic', 'primitive', with a 'pagan', 'idolatrous', 'superstitious' religion 'of fear', 'magic', 'witchcraft' and 'witchdoctors', etc. Cf. Mudimbe 1988, and Chidester 1996 on the 'invention of Africa'; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1993 on 'inventions of tradition'.

4. This highly ameliorative view of 'African religion' is not supported by historical data (cf. Platvoet 1998). Neither pre-colonial Africa nor modern, postcolonial Africa are 'deeply religious' in the meaning intended by this 'invention of tradition'. African traditional religions were lax, pragmatic, utilitarian religions, based on reciprocity, with a high 'turnover' of gods, spirits, charms, amulets, 'medicines', etc., that had been proven ineffective. They were also adoptive and adaptive. In the colonial period, Africans resorted to Christianity *en masse* from 1920 onwards because its schools provided them with the literacy and the education they needed to obtain jobs in the rapidly expanding colonial economy, and its hospitals with modern health care. Pentecostalism practising faith healing, and revivals preaching the prosperity gospel, draw numerous followers now because of the same pragmatic search for material 'salvific' goods and instruments of economic prosperity and social upwards mobility. Shorter & Onyancha (1997) found that urbanisation, consumerism and traditional pragmatics are sources of a massive 'unchurching' and secularity among the poor (especially the young males) in the metropolis of Nairobi and the adjoining rural area of Kiambu. Their findings for Nairobi seem more representative of the religious situation of modern Africa than Mbiti's romantic myth.
5. The Ugandan poet and scholar, Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982) polemicised against Mbiti's interpretation of 'African Traditional Religion' (ATR) in the 1960s and early 1970s already in several articles and in his book *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971). He rejected it as a 'Hellenising' discourse, which smuggled Western-Christian metaphysical attributes into African beliefs of *jok* – the term by which the Acholi of Northern Uganda refer to the spiritual world – and imposed invalid theistic and monotheistic perspectives on them (cf. Van Rinsum 2000). *Jok*, however, is a quite general and vague concept, the meaning of which depends upon the contexts in which it is used. These are always 'this-worldly'. p'Bitek stressed the utilitarian character of African indigenous religions.
6. Okot p'Bitek accused his teacher Evans-Pritchard, other Western-Christian anthropologists, missionaries and African-Christian theologians of being 'slaves of their definitions' (p'Bitek 1963: 16) in their imposition of (mono-)theist models on African traditional religions (ATRs). By doing so, they exercised power of definition over African traditional believers as 'the Other' that proceeded from the (Western-Christian) world of the definer. It violated the African indigenous religions of 'the Other' by imposing its Western-Christian defining marks and definitional strategies upon it.
7. Referring to the Honest-to-God debate in Europe in the 1960s, Okot p'Bitek rejected the (mono)theist paradigm prescribed by Western-Christian scholarship (European and African) and replaced it with his a-theist programme of the 'de-hellenisation' of the study of the indigenous religions of Africa. In doing so, he proved to be an early product of the secularising 'seeds of destruction' (Platvoet 1998) which formal Western education had planted in Africa through the school system developed by the Christian missionaries in colonial Africa. Though p'Bitek acknowledged the important role of religion in African society, and so also the need to study it, Western education set him off on the road towards unbelief: 'I admit I am neither a Christian nor a pagan. I do not believe in gods or spirits. I do not believe in witchcraft or supernatural forces. Heaven and hell do not make sense to me, and for me metaphysical statements are nonsensical' (p'Bitek 1972: 31).

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RESEARCH PROJECTS IN AFRICA

CHARISMATIC RENEWAL IN GHANAIAN MAINLINE CHURCHES

Researcher: Cephas Omenyo, Lecturer, University of Ghana
 Research Period: 1997-2002
 Character of the research: The research is will be presented as PhD thesis at the University of Utrecht
 Supervisors: Prof. Dr. J.A.B. Jongeneel (IIMO); Prof. Dr. Kwame Bediako, (Akrofi-Kristaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology, Ghana)

Description of the project:

The aim of the research to study the influence of the charismatic/Pentecostal movement on six mainline churches in Ghana. In the past, the mainline churches in Ghana were against any phenomenon, which was not perceived as rational. Thus the history of the Church in Ghana is pregnant with instances of Pentecostal movements which could not find places in the churches and thus were compelled to become independent churches.

The charismatic resurgence is currently sweeping across the mainline denominations in Ghana. Generally it finds expression in charismatic renewal movements. While these movements have become catalysts for renewal in some denominations, they have also been the cause for conflict and misunderstanding others. At the same time members of the various charismatic renewal movements are determined to remain in the "impoverished" churches and revitalise them with the introduction of charismatic/Pentecostal spirituality. The mainline churches in Ghana are thus compelled to take a stance towards the charismatic movements.

The movements attract church members of varied backgrounds including pastors, catechists, presbyters, literates and illiterates, young and old. They assume a posture and ethos typical of any Pentecostal church. Spontaneity, exuberance and enthusiasm generally mark worship within the movements.

The movement can be seen as a reaction to a conservative "alien" Western Christianity with its concomitant imported patterns of ministry, liturgical forms, hymnody and theological emphases.

The phenomenon of the charismatic renewal in the mainline churches is one of the most challenging issues of Christianity in contemporary Ghana. Unfortunately, it has not received the needed scholarly attention. Its study and assessment is therefore due.

The study uses the phenomenological approach, and therefore is multi-dimensional. Particularly, historical, theological and sociological models are employed.

What is SAGA ?

SAGA stands for Study and Advisory Group for Africa. It is an initiative of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (IIMO) of which it forms a part. It functions as a platform and pool of expertise for theological and anthropological scholars in the fields of Religion, Theology and the development of Christian Churches in Africa.

SAGA seeks to record the expertise available in its fields of interest in The Netherlands and Belgium .

In 2000 SAGA has started a series of brief meetings (not exceeding two hours) where scholars in one of the fields of interest present and discuss the results of their research before or after publication.

SAGA envisages promoting the exchange of African and Dutch scholars in specific fields of interest.

SAGA seeks possibilities for Dutch students in theology to do a part of their studies in Africa and maintains contacts with various Theological Faculties and Departments of Religious Studies in Africa.

Dr. Gerard van 't Spijker
 Co-ordinator SAGA

PERSONAL MOTIVES FOR RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN THE GRASS-FIELDS OF CAMEROON.

Researcher: Caroline Angenent
 Research Period: 1997-2002
 Character of the research: The research is will be presented as PhD thesis at the University of Leyden
 Supervisors: The research was supervised by Prof. M.R. Spindler, until his retirement in 1999. At present it is supervised by Prof. E.G.E. van der Wall. Both of the History of Christianity Department, University of Leyden.

Description of the project

The study wants to investigate the motivations for conversion in Africa with an emphasis on the religious arguments provided by converted persons themselves. It tries to answer the question why individuals change their religious affiliation in a situation where more (world) religions are on offer. Field work has been performed in the Grassfields of Cameroon, an area where Islam, various Christian denominations as well as African traditional religions (neither of them dominant) are represented.

Research results so far include the confirmation of an ongoing conversion process in which individuals, rather than groups participate. A variety of motives has been attested, including peer pressure, marriage, disappointing moral behaviour of church leaders, and witchcraft fears. A detailed study of these motives will reveal to what extend these are indeed religious motives, or rather social or "functional" incentives.

Motives that were clearly religious in the sense that they referred to a specific difference in the old and new theology were only recorded with some members of the new religious movements (locally known as "born agains"). In fact the interviews revealed that lay people, whether converted or not, only have a very superficial knowledge of the official doctrines of their church. It is for that reason that the description of witchcraft beliefs ("everybody" beliefs in witches) will play a central role in this investigation, as these are expected to constitute an important part of the religious understanding of the people.