

The African Version of Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

Thanks very much for giving me the opportunity to read a paper at this conference. I have decided to speak about the African version of Christianity. To avoid generalizations, I shall, however, specifically speak about the Pedi (Northern Sotho) version of Christianity. I believe that this represents the African version of Christianity among the Pedi speaking Africans.

It is my contention that though God is not bound by any human culture God chooses to operate within or in terms of a given culture. God does not require that the converts abandon most or all of their own cultural systems as a concomitant of their conversion to Christianity. God knows very well that the converts cannot escape their culture. What the divine seeks, instead, is "to cooperate with human beings in the use of their culture for God's glory". Kraft rightly says, "It is allegiance to the Satanic use of that same culture that He stands against, not the culture itself."

God knows that people of different cultures perceive the divine in quite different ways because of their different world views. The strong desire for African Christianity by the majority of the present generation of African Christians endorses this. The missionaries were mistaken to think that the Western culture is the only way through which Christianity can be expressed. God uses any given culture as the vehicle for interaction with human beings. Thus, faith, conversion, and God's Kingdom emerge only through God's interaction with human beings within a given culture. Anything more or less than this is doomed to fail.

1. THE PEDI IDEA OF GOD

The Pedi version of Christianity has always been part and parcel of the evolution of Pedi Christianity. To many Pedi Christians awareness of the nearness of God and his concern with the personal circumstances of believers is an essential feature of their faith. Thus they understand the Christian God in terms of the existential experience underlying the Pedi notion of Modimo (God). Modimo for them retains his/her basis character as the source of all dynamic

power, who is infinitely beyond human prediction, comprehension, or influence. On the other hand, they perceive God as the loving parent who cares for his/her children and who may be approached directly and personally.

In this way they have abandoned the traditional belief in a distant and unconcerned supreme Being. But the belief that God is the source of all dynamic power has affected tremendously their understanding of prayer. Among Zionists, for instance, prayer is used as a magical technique for tapping supernatural power. On the other hand for them the Pedi expression "Ke Modimo" (it is God which is used in case of unexpected death), is a prayer which expresses a sigh of relief. It relieves them of thinking in terms of sorcery. They believe that God is completely in control. By retaining this characteristic of the Pedi notion of God, Pedi Christians still believe that no one can resist what God has done. Thus acquiescence is one of the main characteristics of Pedi Christianity. Pedi Christians place much emphasis on God the parent than on Christ as the Son of God. Jesus for them is the Son of Man rather than the Son of God. They regard him, therefore, as the great of the Church rather than as one with God the partner. Thus they recognise Jesus as mediator who suffered and died for humanity's salvation and set an example of humility, endurance, love, and compassion. As such for them he is not the ultimate authority. He was sent by Modimo. However, they have accepted the idea of the self-disclosure of Modimo as a person in his/her promise. They perceive God as the personal power which needs to be acknowledged as the author, owner and Lord of all reality, and as the source of life and death, the giver of absolute law, which man has to fulfill, the only final judge.

This is God who defines a person's identity as that of the creature of God, meant to be adopted into the privileges and obligations of Sonship. They view him as God who demands exclusive loyalty and challenge humans as having forfeited their purpose and destination by disobedience.

They also accept the belief that God and humans are in a constant conflict because humans are sinners and that God is their Redeemer. As such Pedi Christianity is also characterised by the dualistic view of the relationship between God and humans. This is a new dimension they have added to the Pedi idea of God. It is a novelty unheard of before.

From the unknown beyond, which could not be reached by human religious initiative, Modimo moved into the center of man's devotion, praise, supplication, intercession, obedience, assurance and

hope. He was still the great "beyond, but the proved to have a heart." And this heart could be conquered — in fact it wanted to be conquered.

This idea of the personal encounter with God has, however, caused Pedi Christians to identify Christ with Modimo and the people of God with the flock of Christ. Both are seen in contrast to the non-Christians, a perception which shows that Pedi Christianity is heavily influenced by dualism. On the other hand, however, Pedi Christians make no distinction between the Old and the New Testaments. Thus they conceive Christ as subordinated and instrumental to the purposes and acts of Modimo. Due to this conception Christ is often replaced by other prophets and, such, to some Pedi Christians — especially in the Independent Churches—he has lost his existential relevance and unique significance altogether.

2. RELIGION AND POLITICS

Pedi Christian Churches which advocate separation between religion and politics perceive God as the Creator and law giver who acts through a living prophet for the small community of the elect. The functions of Christ are more or less redundant. At best they view him as the prophet of the whites. The centre of religion for these Churches is the new law, the new way of life, and the new ritual. All these are proclaimed and enacted on behalf of Modimo. Obedience, discipline, and the importation of divine power through the prophet, especially in a therapeutic sense, are all regarded as the basis of religion.

On the other hand the Pedi Christians see religion and politics as one articulate black awareness of Modimo. They perceive God as the God of a whole nation. For them this God has entered into a covenant of "Shalom" (peace and prosperity) with this nation. He/She is the one who calls, enables, and directs charismatic political leaders. He/She is the great actor behind the scenes of history. He/She liberates from oppression, gives the land, and guarantees economic prosperity and justice. He/She is the social reformer. Christ as the suffering servant is replaced by the black liberator who is the representative and channel of the life force of national resurrection and revitalization. Black theology plays a significant role in these Churches. In short, the Pedi version of Christianity is also characterised by the apocalyptic view of the Kingdom of God.

However, the Pedi conceive the biblical Jahweh as a God of the whites, because the Jews were whites. Thus they call for the return to the religious roots of the Pedi society. For them this is the only way of proclaiming judgment on an idolatrous nation. They tend to

value the Pedi belief that Modimo cannot be approached with personal or national concerns and requests. Thus they begin to believe that things just happen and all that is needed is to strengthen the life force which carries one through immediate necessities and frees him from the rest.

3. THE SPIRIT AS GOD'S POWER, LAWS AND GOOD WORKS

Pentecostalist and Zionist churches place much emphasis also on the Spirit (which for them is God's power). They perceive possession of the spirit as the source of knowledge. They eagerly seek power. Speaking in tongues and the use of violent gestures are interpreted as evidence of the working of the spirit. Through prophecy, visions, and dreams it is believed one is able to receive from the spirit knowledge which is hidden from others. From the spirit one receives also the power to overcome the forces inimical to life, and to enhance vitality. It seems the Zionist prophet in a magical way increasingly possesses and controls knowledge and power.

Pedi Christians also place more emphasis on adhering to laws and doing good works than on grace. Thus the Pedi Christianity is as moralistic or legalistic as the missionaries' Christianity. It is, however, possible that this is also the result of the Pedi belief that assistance and good will of the ancestors depend on correct behaviour of the living. This was a rule bound cosmology like that of the Old Testament. Love and peace are emphasized only in a general way. The local churches generally have little concern with larger social and political issues. These issues are left to national and regional churches. Pedi Christians do not consider an action wrong or sinful, if it does not become public knowledge. This is the consequence of a secretive attitude which has emerged from numerous prohibitions during the missionaries' era. Traditional sacrifices are also disguised with Western forms of behaviour; for example, sacrificial meals for ancestors are called dinners or tea-parties.

4. EMOTIONS AND SALVATION

Emotionalism or the elaboration of ritual is one of the outstanding features of Pedi Christianity, because Pedi religion is expressed emotionally rather than intellectually. Sacraments and other liturgical activities are, however, generally accepted in the form in which the missionaries taught them (though the magical nature of Zionist belief and ritual is self-evident).

Zionist Churches interpret salvation primarily in terms of health and vitality. As representatives of Independent churches say, "Everybody knows that healing is very important in our Churches. In general most of the Independent Churches offer salvation here and now.

In contrast, Pedi orthodox Christians interpret Christianity as primarily concerned with other — worldly salvation. Thus they use prayer to alleviate hard-ships rather than to remove them completely. On the other hand, the Zionists use prayer to drive out evil spirits, witchcraft familiars, or the powers of sorcery. Laying on the hands, a violent and emotional activity carried on in an atmosphere of suspense, are all parts of prayer. The Zionists shun traditional techniques of healing and Western medicine. Many Pedi Christians today believe that their ancestors will send misfortunes, if they neglect certain important traditional duties or customs. Thus belief in ancestors remains the main feature of the Pedi version of Christianity. Dreams and other experiences are often interpreted as visitations from ancestors. Similarly, certain fortunate events are regarded as blessings from ancestors. Ancestors are perceived as a bridge through which God's power is transmitted to the living.

Many Pedi Christians ascribe certain events in their own lives to sorcery and witchcraft. Thus these two are seen as the enemies of Christianity. They are the embodiment of the devil.

Pedi Christians in general believe that Jesus did not come to destroy people's customs, such as ancestor belief and ritual, as stated in Matt. 5:17. They, therefore, identify witchcraft familiars with the demons and evil Spirits Jesus drove out. Diviners and medicine-men are regarded as supplementing God's aid to humans. So to neglect their assistance would be a way of tempting God by taking unnecessary risk.

This short survey of the interpretation of Christian traditions by the Pedi Christians shows that Western Christianity has in itself failed utterly to meet their aspirations. It has instead created in their lives a serious religious vacuum. It has taken from them a religion which was functional and useful in their life. Thus the Pedi Christians have created viable syncretisms of their own as supplements, but are forced to feel guilty about them and hate them. In order to fill the vacuum, Pedi Christians have combined Christian religious faith with their traditional values and practices. This is a very significant point, because it shows that people, whether missionaries or not, will always develop their own version of Christianity which is in line with their own culture. This does not, however, mean that the present Pedi Christians are free of the missionaries' influence.

5. DYNAMIC CHRISTIANITY

Pedi Christianity is a very dynamic form of Christianity which yields numerous questions for theological reflection. To dismiss it as syncretism is to miss a golden opportunity for theological reflection. It is indeed a fertile source for the construction of African theology

which is of the utmost importance for our day. This Christianity needs to be analyzed and understood by theologians of all persuasions in South Africa. It needs to be investigated and understood thoroughly rather than dismissed as syncretism. It is unique in that it combines biblical Christianity, western Christianity, and Pedi traditional values and practices. Thus it provides a forum for theological debate in South Africa and gives a tremendous hope for the emergence of eminent African theologians in South Africa.

It challenges these emerging African theologians to stop reflecting on the ideas of Western theologians. People have been theologizing and are continuing to theologize in terms of Pedi culture and what they now desperately need are the professional theologians to guide them in their journey toward a more dynamic Pedi Christianity. It calls these theologians to be theologians in their own right, i.e. in terms of their unique historical and cultural situation. It is only in this way that these theologians can make a substantial contribution to a world-wide theological debate.

CONCLUSION

In their own way the Pedi Christians have combined religious faith with their traditional values and practices. Their perception of God and His Kingdom, therefore, is to a large extent moulded by Pedi cosmology. Thus the task of theology in Pedi society is to discover the symbolic meanings which the Pedi derive from the doctrines of God and of His Kingdom. Theological task in Pedi society cannot be effected and transformative unless it is informed by anthropological analysis of the Pedi cosmology. Theology must in other words aim at making the Pedi customs more suitable vehicles for God's Kingdom in Pedi society, and to make Pedi Christians feel that they are God's co-workers. Pedi Christians should be viewed as Christians who have entered the kingdom of God with their own culture and world-view. The gospel message is meant to transform the Pedi culture and world-view so that they can be used for the glory of God.

NOTES

1. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in culture: A study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980) p. 106.
2. Ibid
3. Berthold Adolf Pauw, *The Influence of Christianity. In the Bantu-speaking people of South Africa*, 415-40 ed. W. Hammond-Tooke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974). p. 432.

4. Klaus Nurnberger, *The Sotho Notion of Supreme Being and Impact of Christian Proclamation* (Journal of Religion in Africa 7 (1975) 174-200) p. 196.
5. *African Independent churches, Speaking for ourselves* (Institute for Contextual Theology, n. d.) p. 28.
6. Berthold Adolf Pauw, *The Influence of Christianity*, p. 37.