

Cherubim & Seraphim as an AIC

by
Revd John Adegoke
Cherubim and Seraphim Council of Churches

It is a fact of history that most events that mark major turning points come as a result of protest and divergence of opinions. This is clearly evident in the history of the church from the first century. The mission of Peter and Paul to the Gentiles, for instance, produced a marked difference to the Judaistic foundation of the church in Jerusalem. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century also diverged remarkably from the Roman Catholic norm. The emergence of Pentecostalism in the 19th and 20th centuries in various parts of the world also resulted in phenomenal changes in the pattern of Christianity known to Catholics and Protestants alike. This Pentecostal phenomenon has given rise to the emergence and growth of the African Indigenous Churches (AIC).

According to Harold Turner, the AIC were founded by Africans in Africa primarily for Africans.¹ These group of churches have developed throughout Africa, south of the Sahara, from the South through to the East and West coasts of the continent. In each region, diversity of doctrine and culture are evident but certain commonalities are strong enough to enable groupings to take place.

Definitions

AIC has been variously coined by Academics and Writers as:

African Independent Churches
African Indigenous Churches
African Instituted Churches
African Initiated Churches²
African International Churches³

According to Daneel and Robert, African Initiated Churches is the preference of the World Council Churches (WCC).⁴ It is also the preference of most of the AIC because it especially resonates the initiative of the African in not being seen as a replica of either the Catholics or the Protestants before them. I subscribe to this notion as a pastor of one of the AIC.

¹ Turner, H.W., *A typology for African Religious Movements*, (in Journal of Religions in Africa), 1967 p17

² Daneel, Marthinus L and Robert, Dana L., in their Series Editorial to *Zion and Pentecost, The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa*, by Allan Anderson, Pretoria, Unisa Press 2000

³ Gerrie ter Haar, in her paper – Charting mission through migration – ‘*African Christians in Europe*’. Suggests that it would be more appropriate to refer to the African-initiated churches in Europe today as African *international* churches, a term which does justice to both the subjective perspective of the insider who has chosen this term, and the objective view of the outsider who cannot ignore the international distribution of these churches today’ - MISSION and MIGRATION Edited by Stephen Spencer, Cliff College Publishing, Calver, Hope Valley, Derbys, 2008 p49

⁴ Daneel, Marthinus L and Robert, Dana L.

AIC started to take root in Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before then, there were only a few missionary churches from Europe and America. Because the AICs did not fit into any of the missionary church categories, they had to be baptised with new names. It will be helpful to do a simple analysis of the AIC typology so that the fit of the C & S can be clearly identified. There are two main types: the Ethiopian and the Zionist. This is not to ignore the Sundkler classification into three: Ethiopianism, Zionism and Messianic⁵

Ethiopianism

Ethiopianism affirms African nationalism as they teach a traditional form of Christian doctrine. The term also represents what Willoughby refers to as 'reaction against Negrophobia'⁶ There is little or no difference between them and their parent churches in worship, liturgies, clerical vestments and administrative structures. For survival, some of them have recently modified their worship styles (to imitate those of the Pentecostals and Zionists) as their membership continued to decline alongside the mainline churches. Ethiopianism is very common in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Zionism

Zionism is a term that covers churches which are described as 'Zionists' in Southern Africa. Opinions differ widely as to the most apposite nomenclature for this type of churches. 'Zionists' is preferred by Sundkler because so many of the prophetic groups in Southern Africa are Zionists.⁷ The word 'Zion' often features in their names and they have indigenised concepts of a kingdom of God in which the holy city of Zion occupies a focal position in their thoughts, either symbolically or in a concrete sense. Whilst Sundkler calls this group 'Zionists' type churches, Daneel calls them 'Spirit-type' churches because some prophetic movements specifically do not want to be considered Zionist, so that the designation is not general enough. Turner prefers to call this group 'prophet-healing churches'.⁸ The latter is in my opinion the most suitable especially for the West African 'Aladura' group and the Prophet Harris group in the Ivory Coast. The C & S as an Aladura fits into this category. Without the knowledge of what goes on in South Africa, a group of churches within the C & S specifically describe themselves as 'Zion Churches'. Also, some of the C & S churches outside of the Zion group also use designations which include 'Zion'. An example is the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim & Seraphim, Mount Zion.

The Apostolic Faith Mission also come under this description although there are little differences between 'Zionists' and 'Apostolics' but not as marked as with the Pentecostals. Both Zionists and Apostolics emphasize the working power of the Holy Spirit including dreams, speaking in tongues, visions, prophecy and healing. They are not too preoccupied with 'speaking in tongues' which is the hallmark of the Pentecostals, who regard it as the 'initial evidence' in the baptism with the Holy

⁵ Hollenweger, Walter J., *The Pentecostals*, p149, SCM PRESS LTD, 1972

⁶ Oosthuizen, G.C., *Post Christianity in Africa*, (p33)

⁷ Daneel, Inus, *Quest for Belonging*, Harare, Mambo Press, 1987, p38

⁸ Ibid p40

Spirit.⁹ In West Africa, ‘Zionism’ covers churches like the Apostolic, Christ Apostolic, Faith Tabernacle, Musama Christo Disco, Divine Prayer Society, Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ, the Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star and Prophet Harris group in the Ivory Coast. Peel has quoted a leader of one of these churches who wrote scathingly about Joseph Babalola (of the Christ Apostolic Church), one of the most powerful Aladura prophets, as joining one of the ‘churches mighty in prayer but weak in Scripture’.¹⁰ This remark apparently refers to the high level of faith healing that characteristic of Aladura churches despite the gap in education and training for ministry that was common to the founding prophets. This is in direct contrast with the systematic education and training of ministers of the missionary churches, whilst those education and training did not necessarily include teachings in faith and efficacy of prayer. Because of this differential in education and training, these group of native churches were not recognised as Christian churches. They were variously labelled as ‘Sects’, ‘Cults’, and some other derogative descriptions. They would not be accepted into any ecumenical groupings for this reason. Their plight is similar to the non recognition of the early Christian leaders by the Pharisees and Scribes simply because they came from the background of Galilean fishermen.

Messianic Groups

The term ‘Messianic’ is basically a sub-division of ‘Zionism’. It is a term used to describe groups which, centred around a dominant personality, claim for him special powers involving a form of identification with Christ. Hayward argues that when this identification with Christ becomes substitution, the group has ...’moved outside the sphere of the Christian Church’.¹¹ Nathaniel Ndiokwere expressed dissatisfaction with this kind of definition and argues that an AIC prophet must necessarily possess special powers, which make him unique in his community. Such a prophet does not, and cannot usurp the identity of Christ who has given him these powers.¹² The scripture does speak of the ability of men rising in status to being god with the small g if the definition of being god is identified with having supernatural powers. The narrative of the miracle of Paul in Lystra convinced the people to declare ‘The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men’. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius..’ (Acts 14:11/12). Because of the uniqueness in spiritual powers, some of them have been accorded names and titles like: Jesus of Achalla, Jesus of Ikot Ekpene, Jesus of Oyingbo. Samuel Mutendi in Zimbabwe, Simon Kinbangu in Congo, Prophet Harris in Ivory Coast and Olumba Olumba in Nigeria are typical examples. Have they usurped the missiaship of Christ?

Sundkler initially used mediation at the gates of heaven as a criterion for a basic distinction of Messianism. The crucial question to be asked is, who stands at the gates of heaven, Jesus Christ or the Black Messiah? If the answer is the latter, then Christ’s mediatorship is either violated or superseded and the designation ‘Black Messianism’ is applicable. Sundkler researched into this problem and explained that many Zionist

⁹ Turner, Max, *Power from on High, The Spirit is Israel’s Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*, Sheffield, SAP, 2000, P446ff.

¹⁰ Peel, J.D.Y. *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba*, London, OUP 1968, p138

¹¹ Hayward, V.E.W., *AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCH MOVEMENTS*, Research Pamphlets No.11, London, Edinburgh House Press, 1963, p71

¹² Ndiokwere, Nathaniel, *Prophecy and Revolution*, London, SPCK, 1981, P9/10.

prophetic leaders were attributed with the functions of ‘custodian of the heavenly gates’ yet this special task was never interpreted in an exclusivist sense as replacing Christ as Mediator.¹³ I personally find this explanation satisfactory and there is no sufficient reason for raising the question of substitution.

Cherubim & Seraphim (C & S)

The C & S is part of the sporadic visitation of the Holy Spirit to many parts of the world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Certain prophets were called and of those who persevered, their ministries grew in differing proportions to what we can see today in the Pentecostal and other charismatic movements around the world. There was the Welsh revival which was prevented from thriving as if it fell on a ground full of thorns that choked the revival into extinction! There was the Zionist revival in South Africa which has thrived to become the largest Christian denomination in the country today. Similarly, the ministry of Simon Kinbangu in Congo has become the National Church in the country today. These ministries apparently fell on fertile grounds in the areas where they operate. The Azusa watershed in America has also thrived, evidently due to the enormous publicity it was accorded in a big country with strong economy and wealth. The ministry of Orimolade leading to the founding of the C & S amongst other Aladura churches in West Africa has also developed in proportion to the opportunities open to it, despite operating in a multi-religious society in Nigeria where the Muslim mission preceded that of the Christian. Recent religious violence in the country, especially in the Northern part, is due largely to the continued evangelical Christian incursion into the Muslim heartlands.

The C & S started simply as a group of believers in the power and efficacy of prayers. At the beginning there was no name given to the group. Later, when the number grew and registration became imminent, the group resorted to prayer and fasting in search for a suitable name. After a few days of praying and fasting, a visioner in the group saw the letter ‘SE’ in the sky with the rest of the word being obscured by cloud. Later another set appeared as ‘RA’ in the same manner. Upon investigation, a clergyman from the United Native African Church helped to interpret the combination as ‘SERAFU’ (SERAPH). Upon hearing the interpretation, the Founder, Baba Aladura Orimolade rose and stood in the middle of the assembly room, turned to the four corners of the room and pronounced: ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, this Society will be called ‘SERAFU’. The whole assembly then rose and shouted ‘Alleluiah’ signifying unanimous acceptance and approval with joy. Thus, the group became known first as ‘Egbe Serafu’ (Seraphim Society). Through vision and directive at a later time, Archangel Michael was named as Captain and Patriot Saint of the Society.

After some time of naming the group as ‘Seraphim Society’ a woman narrated her dream to prolong the name. In her dream, she saw a large company of young children dressed in beautiful white garments and she was instructed that the name ‘KERUBU’ (Cherubim) should be added because KERUBU ATI SERAFU (Cherubim and Seraphim) are like twin angels in heaven who should not be separated. Thereupon, the Society was renamed Cherubim & Seraphim Society. Thus, it became widely

¹³ Daneel, Inus, Quest for Belonging, p41

recognised that the C & S is the only church whose name came through vision and can be identified functionally in the Bible, especially with the affinity of Cherubim & Seraphim with the Throne of Almighty God. Moreover, the group became the first Christian body whose members are all robed in white garments in Nigeria. It is recognised that in South Africa, the Zionists are similarly robed in white garments. So also is the Church of Nineveh in Kenya. The wearing of white garments can theologially be viewed as apocalyptic because the Lord's Prayer says ... 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven' ... This quote from the Lord's Prayer is comely especially for the Cherubims & Seraphims, who in heaven are robed in whites (Rev. 7:13-15).

Bible translation

The translation of the Bible has enabled uneducated Christians like the Founder of the C & S to resonate with the knowledge of God, the power of God and the love of God. A simple narrative in the Gospels saying 'ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you' (Matt.7:7) has given the typical African believer the confidence that the Word can come alive in the Christian who dares give it a try. There have been enormous positive results accruing to the believer as he continues to grow stronger and stronger in faith and belief that 'with God, all things are possible' (Matt. 19:26).

This confidence prompted Prophet Moses Orimolade to go solo outside of his Anglican Church to promote the ministry of healing from place to place in Nigeria until 1925 when the Cherubim & Seraphim came into being as a church. At the beginning of his itinerant healing ministry, Orimolade had no ambition to establish a church. His intention was to continue to minister deliverance to those in bondage.

According to tradition, the first translation of the Bible took place in Africa. 70 Jewish translators had gathered in Alexandria in the 3rd century BC to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This 1st translation known as the 'Septuagint' (after its 70 Jewish translators) became the definitive Bible of the early church. Translations were made into the Coptic and Ethiopian (Ge'ez) languages very early in the history of the church.¹⁴ David Barrett has pointed out that 'it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Bible in African society. Vast literacy campaigns are based on the translations through the Bible. Africans perceived, that God was addressing them in the vernacular in which was enshrined the soul of their people.'¹⁵ Africans have often been struck by the spiritual vitality they find in the vernacular scripture by comparison with the nominal religion pertinent in the historic churches. They saw God as – the God of the living, the God of revival and new life, the God of miracles, the God of action, the God of power, the God of Exodus and of deliverance. So one finds numerous bodies arising with such names as:

The Church of the Living God (Kenya)
The Action Church of Ghana
Power of Jesus around the World (Kenya)

¹⁴ Mbiti, John S., BIBLE AND THEOLOGY in African Christianity, Nairobi, OUP, 1986, P77

¹⁵ Barrett, D.B. ed., World Christian Encyclopedia, Nairobi, OUP 1982 P29

The Holy Chapel of Miracles (Lagos)

These and many more have arisen out of insights derived from vernacular scriptures. ‘

Mbiti, agrees with Barrett, who maintains that the AIC break with the mission churches has thrown them back even further on to the Bible in their search for legitimating and continuity with historic Christianity. From this point of view, therefore, the AIC across Africa has taken on the aspect of a drive to recover a more biblically based religion. He went further to assert that the AIC has, perhaps a greater dynamism and vitality of creativity than mission Christianity.¹⁶ I would have expected such a comment to come from an AIC leader, but Mbiti is an Anglican priest! Perhaps he is an honorary Apostle of the AIC!! In worship and theology, he would be more at home with the Cherubim & Seraphim Church!!!

Inculturation

The AIC did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. The rise was conditioned by a number of factors including spiritual, cultural, political, social and economic. During the second part of the 20th century, faith healing and ministry grew significantly because the factors that gave rise for the demand for deliverance and healing had not receded. Elom Dolvo argued that inculturation is one of the major factors. He defined it as a local process of making Christ and the Gospel message of salvation known and understood by people of different cultures, localities and time, using the resources of their culture to promote meaning, acceptance and owning the Gospel. He contends that ‘inculturation in Africa strips the Christian faith of some of its missionary (Western) cultural context in exchange for African cultural idioms that make it relevant and ingrained in its new context’¹⁷ Elom’s description means that Africa can now put a round peg into a round hole. Previously, it was a square peg in a round hole which left gaps that required filling up. Inculturation is the means by which the gaps can be filled in the African setting.

Substitution of water and oil for herbs and medications is one of the key factors leading to the sustained growth of the AIC. In the African traditional belief, herbs prescribed by herbalists have spiritual powers to effect deliverance and healing, or to provide a solution to problems. Similarly, the African believes that water, when sanctified by a prophet, has been charged with power by the Holy Spirit for the same or better results. This change in the substance of the water is similar to the medieval doctrine of ‘transubstantiation’ by which ‘the bread and the wine are transformed (at the level of unseen substance) into the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, while retaining their outward appearance. This explanation is enough to dispel the criticism that the new ritual can be tantamount to traditional rituals or a continuation of them.

Within the AIC, contextualisation can find a comfortable home among the Zionist and Messianist cultures. It is partly applicable in Ethiopianism but not at all in Pentecostalism. There are numerous Jewish-biblical themes which can be developed to provide effective bridges into this kind of African worldview. It is important to

¹⁶ Mbiti, J.S., *New Testament Eschatology in an African background*, London, SPCK, 1978, P31/32

¹⁷ Dolvo, Elom, in EXCHANGE, *Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, p29

understand the African worldview if theology and indeed, Missiology is to be meaningfully applied to meet the spiritual needs of the African.

The Test of the Pudding is in the Eating

The testimonies of ordinary members throughout the AIC is sufficient to convince the curious that this movement must necessarily grow and multiply. The chorus of a Cherubim & Seraphim Hymn reads:

*It is decreed from the Heavenly Court, that this Church must multiply;
It is decreed from the Heavenly Court, to grow from strength to strength;
Till there is no more blindness of mind, lingering round in the world;
Till the death of the Redeemer, would no more be in vain.*

Amongst other visions and revelations, this song was recorded from the mouth of a prophet of the church when he was in a trance for seven days. It has since become one of the most popular indigenous thanksgiving hymns of the church. Praying for results is very endemic in the religion of the African. Before Christianity, he found satisfaction in the traditional religion. With the advent of Christian missionaries, the African found that the church prayer fell short of satisfaction. With the advent of the AIC mission, efficacy of prayer seems to be restored.

The difference between the traditional religion and AIC Christian mission is that the latter operates through the power of the Holy Spirit to find solution to problems; whilst the former operates through pagan means, within the environment of a mixture of good and evil. Both offer comprehensive spiritual packages whilst the missionary model offers partly spiritual and partly scientific or secular; and yet far from being comprehensive and satisfactory. This is how the African will evaluate the strands, and this is what enables him to make a choice. The effect is that the AIC membership grows significantly to the detriment of traditional religion whilst it poses challenges to the missionary model for revival. With the presence of the AIC in Europe and America, the debate continues amongst missiologists as to whether AIC have brought or are bringing a new brand of Christian message to Europe and America in reverse mission.

John Adegoke (October 2009)