

Missiological Implications of Pietism for Protestant African Christianity

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Abstract

Africa has been called the most religious place on earth. Such religiosity is manifested in several expressions of Christianity. However, the dominance of Christianity in the population has not resulted in the expected societal transformation. There is a significant disconnect between faith and daily living. This article argues that the reason for disconnection is similar to that of Frankfurt and many parts of Post-Reformation Germany. The tide of events began to change when Jakob Spenner pioneered what became Pietism. As Pietism led to a moral-ethical revival in Germany, the same should be replicated in Africa. This article suggests that, as part of the missiological demands of the gospel, African Christians must prioritize biblical preaching and teaching in homes, emphasize the ethical demands of the gospel on Africans, invest deliberately in transformative missions, and disciple local believers for public places.

Key Words: Africa, African Christianity, missiological demands, Pietism, societal transformation

Introduction

In many parts of Africa, Christianity has become a popular religion. A large part of the population professes allegiance to the Church. However, Africa's underdevelopment and ongoing bizarre events on the continent call into question the claims of Christianity being the light and salt of the earth. In recent times, religion on the continent has increasingly become utilitarian. The positive transforming element of Christianity seems to have been replaced with the power to overcome imaginary malevolent forces that plague the average African person. Many Christians on the continent have lost touch with the missiological implications of biblical Christianity.

One may argue that the just painted scenario is not unknown in Christian history. A similar situation provided the background for the emergence of Pietism in Germany. The decadent and lethargic inward-focused Christianity of that era necessitated the birth of a movement that instilled ethical-moral revival with missiological results in the late seventeenth century. Pietism proved to be a significant catalyzing agent for the transformation of society and the emergence of Protestant Christian missions in the eighteenth century.

The task of this study is to present Pietism as a model movement for spiritual revivals. The article shall examine the impact of Pietism on Moravian missions, then call African Christians to respond to the missiological demands of new life.

Pietism

Bruce Shelley wrote that any religion that becomes a popular religion slowly turns into a social and cultural element bound to lose its enthusiasm (Shelley 2008, 325). Seventeenth-century Lutheranism in Germany demonstrated that it had lost its glow by the turn of the century. Scholasticism and confessionalism had supplanted the creativity and the force of the Reformation. The followers of Luther had fallen under the bewitching spell of intellectualism

and had unwittingly turned the Protestant faith into a mental exercise (Shelley 2008, 325). For Luther, faith was an act of surrender to the mercy of God. It was also a matter of personal relationship with Jesus Christ. However, just a few generations later faith had become a mere mental assent to a set of doctrinal truths set forth by academic theologians. It had ceased to be a personal thing. Attendance in public worship and receiving sacraments administered by the minister of a state church were the hallmarks of being Christian in Lutheran Germany. Hence, partly due to the effects of the post-Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), there was general apathy toward religion, and morality sank miserably low (Latourette 1937, 896). Christianity was devoid of its transforming element. It became an academic religion that had no bearing on the daily lives of those who professed it.

Pietism, therefore, was a late-seventeenth-century renewal movement that began within the Lutheran churches in Germany. It was reacting to the unhealthy ossification of the Lutheran Reformation and everything it represented. It was to challenge nominalism, which had become normative in the church. Mulholland described Pietism as an international, interdenominational evangelical movement that sought to revitalize the existing church through small groups devoted to Bible study, prayer, mutual accountability, and outreach (Mulholland 1999, 221). It developed as a reaction against the dry formalism and intellectualism into which Protestant theology had fallen. Protestant theology had become concerned about doctrinal and theological correctness instead of daily Christian living. Lutheranism was concerned with having a theological system that could adequately contend against Romanism and their Reformed opponents (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2014). Hence, by the middle of the seventeenth century, Protestants churches (Reformed and Lutheran) had developed a formal and arid kind of theology that could rival the Roman Catholic's scholasticism. Strangely, it was the system of thinking that the Reformers had reacted against (Tiplady 2000, 503). Religion had become divorced from daily living.

The Pietist movement's origin can be linked to the English Puritanism of the seventeenth century (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2014). Puritanism had expanded into the Netherlands, then it spread into Germany as Reformed Orthodoxy among the Lutherans. The various streams of thought about Pietism coalesced in the life and writings of Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705). Spener was a Lutheran Pastor in Frankfurt. Seeing the level of moral bankruptcy characteristic of the city where he ministered, he began the *collegia pietatis* (assembly of piety). It was a sort of Bible Club in which members met regularly for devotional reading of the Bible and spiritual exercises. In contrast to the arid scholasticism of the day, Pietism focused on a relationship with Jesus Christ, not on correct but dry orthodoxy (Tiplady 2000, 503). For them, a disciplined life was far more critical than sound doctrine, the fear of God was prized above empty intellectualism, and personal conversion was of greater importance than nominal allegiance to a state religion. Having assessed the weakness of the orthodoxy of his days, Spener proposed private and public reading of the Bible and greater involvement of the laity within the church's priesthood of believers. He emphasized the practical fruit of Christian living, ministerial training focused on piety and learning above intellectual religion, and spiritually edifying preaching (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2014).

When Spener died in 1705, the leadership of Pietism passed to Hermann Francke (1655-1727). Francke taught and founded Pietist groups at the University of Halle. Nikolaus Zinzendorf, destined to become a dominant force in the history of world mission, received much of his childhood education in Halle under Francke's influence. Zinzendorf wrote of his

experience in Halle that “daily meeting in Prof Francke's house; the edifying account concerning kingdom of Christ; the conversation with witnesses of the truth in distant regions, acquaintance with several preachers... increased my zeal for the cause of the Lord, in a powerful manner” (Mulholland 1999, 222). Under Francke's strong leadership, the University of Halle became the institutional center for Pietism. Furthermore, the university at Halle provided missionaries for what became known as the Danish-Halle Mission. That mission was to become a significant catalyst for Moravian missions.

From the foregoing, one may deduce that Pietism was more than a religious movement. It was a movement destined to significantly impact the history of Christian missions. Pietism had two main aims. First, it set out to stress a personal, functional faith with Jesus Christ. Some have gone so far as to claim that, for the first time in Christian history after the days of the Apostles, the emphasis on personal faith that gave birth to salvation through Jesus Christ as the basis for baptism became prominent (Shelley 2008, 326). Second, Pietists wanted to shift from a state-church Christianity to an intimate fellowship of those who had faith in the Son of God. While they reluctantly accepted state Lutheranism, they were not content with it. To achieve the fellowship of the redeemed, they began to stress the need to spread the word of God through all classes of people (Shelley 2008, 326). These emphases inevitably gave birth to significant lay involvement in church ministries.

Gonzalez has observed that the most significant contribution of Pietism to the story of Christianity was the birth of Protestant missions (Gonzalez 1985, 208). Reference has been made to the Danish-Halle Mission. However, it should be added that the Pietists did not plan to be heavily involved in international missions. They were content to meet the needs of others around them. For instance, Francke had a school for poor children, an orphanage, and a home for widows. The story changed when the Danish king requested missionaries to his colonies in India. The letters written by Ziegenberg and Plutschau from Tranquebar reached Pietists meetings and generated missionary interest. One result was that the University of Halle received more support for training protestant missionaries. Clearly the outbreak of Pietism became a subversive force that catalyzed the rise of the modern missionary movement.

Challenges Facing African Christianity

The earliest expressions of Christianity in Africa were through the Coptic Church in Egypt, then through what became the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Coptic tradition claimed that Mark, one of the disciples of Jesus, played a significant role in the planting of Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first century. From that first Christian century until the seventh-century invasion of North Africa by Islamists, Christianity thrived and became a potent force for societal behavioral modifications (Cairns 1996, 522). Together with Portuguese explorations and traders the Roman Catholics made limited attempts at evangelization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but their efforts did not at all result in the Christianization of the continent. The rest of Africa remained largely unreached until the nineteenth century when Protestant missions, along with additional Catholic initiatives entered the continent from several points in great numbers.

More recently Evangelicals and the so-called Pentecostal-Charismatic Third Wave have experienced more growth on the continent than other denominations. In 1990, about 275 million Christians were in Africa (Cairns 1996, 522), and by 2020 Christianity had grown to “more than 667 million” (Zurlo 2022, 6). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the

phenomenal African Indigenous Church movement emerged (Falk 1997, 452). Often founded by the initiative of a charismatic African, such churches exerted tremendous influence on the African people (Falk 1997, 454). The movement has brought people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ in many cases. However, some analysts assert that unchristian syncretic elements have characterized much of the movement (Falk 1997, 522; Ayegboayin and Ishola 2013, 17-18).

Many observers note that Africa is the most religious place on earth (Bonk 2013, vii; Ajani 2014, 182; Fatokun 2013, 12). This assertion is not without basis. Christianity's stupendous growth to over 667 million, or 49% of the overall population, has already been noted. For their parts, Muslims have grown to 562 million (42%), with Ethnic religionists (practitioners of African Traditional Religion) making up the remainder (Zurlo 2022, 6). An atheistic or non-religious African is practically an oxymoron.

As for Christianity, its numerical growth has not been matched by adequate leadership training. Some are concerned that the deficiency has led to growing syncretism and schism (Cairns 1996, 522). Nihinlola illustrates Cairn's claims by reporting that teaching on the kingdom of God, which is supposed to be the epicenter of the gospel, has been largely compromised in many places in Africa. He explains that African preachers are deviating from the true gospel. Instead of focusing on the life-transforming gospel of redemption, those preachers are preoccupied with other gospels that celebrate physical and material achievement, money, and pleasure. Nihinlola concludes that many African religious activities are primarily utilitarian (Nihinlola 2020, 3).

Such an assessment amplifies Dairo's assessment that, in many parts of Africa, "marketing" God has become a top bracket business. Religion has become the "food basket of the nation" in which market value is attached to everything being done. Dairo has lamented, "One would have thought that religion and the invisible Almighty God would have been an exception to the bargain, but a greater percentage of churches are no more than business centers where sellers and buyers of the special services make a bargain" (Dairo 2010, 195). Indeed, the level of gospel commercialization in Africa is disturbing. This article shares the sentiment of Philip Barnes that gospel preaching in Africa is like rat poison that damages the spiritual health of individuals and churches, slanderous to the purity of Christ's bride, and dishonors to God and Jesus Christ (Barnes 2021, 2).

Yaw Adu-Gwamfi has observed that, like ancient Israel, Africa is in theological crisis. Adu-Gwamfi claims that African Christianity's theological problems manifest in doctrinal and doctrinal aberrations built on deficient prophetic movements characterized by ministers with questionable lifestyles. He adds that there are unbalanced emphases on signs and wonder in many parts of Africa, Christian doctrine based on personal experience of the preacher rather than the Bible, seeking deliverance from spiritual bondage through exorcism instead of repentance, and fixation on prosperity theology. He laments that, paradoxically, there are so many churchgoers without disciples of Jesus in Africa (Adu-Gwamfi 2020, 11). Several other authors have expressed similar concerns about the state of Christianity in Africa (Ango 2020, 37-50; Familuyi 2019, 384; Iheanacho 2009, 104-117; Olaniyan and Okunlola 2020, 159-161). They note that doctrinal differences, liberalism, globalism, and postmodernism are some of the challenges African Christianity faces. The above picture places significant missiological demands on the church in Africa.

Missiological Implications of Pietism for African Christianity

African Christianity must prioritize biblical preaching and teaching in churches and homes. A growing phenomenon in Africa is the emergence of motivational speaking. In many parts of Africa, people who pretend to be sophists create blends of popular psychology with light or heavy doses of biblical quotations to create motivational speeches. Many such speakers claim to be Christians and have been erroneously ordained into pastorates. While one is not averse to what is touted as wisdom, a cursory look at many of such speeches reveals that they focus on immediate material benefits such as making money and living comfortable lives. They shift the believer's focus from eternity with God. That was one of the reasons Germany became religiously arid before Pietism. Many have wondered why Christianity spreads so much with relatively little impact on Africa. Part of the reason is that biblical preaching has been replaced with motivational speeches. Upholding the authority of the Bible and adhering to its teachings is one major need of African Christians (Adu-Gwanfi 2020, 23). Doing so demands proper interpretation, the correct connection between application and context, and being able to distinguish between what the Bible describes and what it prescribes. The Bible must be returned to its central place, where it is taught as the final authority for life and daily decisions.

African Christians must also emphasize the ethical demands of Christianity on believers. This emphasis should be a significant corollary to the above. When the Bible is taught as the final authority for daily living, it must place ethical demands on the believers. That was what Spener espoused in Germany. The gospel is not just what God has accomplished in Christ; it also includes God's expectations on every aspect of a believer's daily life. A gospel that places no ethical demand on the believer cannot transform society. The rot in public spaces and civil services is not perpetuated by unbelievers alone. Many aiders and abettors of corruption are people who are either "Christian" in name, speak in tongues for public display, or hold Christian religious titles. Those Christians who will transform society must be made to conform to Christ by renewing their minds. Such renewal must manifest in ethical changes. The church must teach society the value of living the good life for the benefit of everyone. Believers are to model for society the principles of ethical living. Those who teach in educational institutions must participate in building acceptable behaviors and speak against the ills in society. Religious rites must translate into positive community living. There must be no dichotomy between church morality and daily living.

African Christians must take their Christian faith as salt and light into public spaces. Bediako has observed that missionary education in most African countries led to the emergence of African nationalists (Bediako 2000, 97). Such men brought their influence to bear on public service and administration. The present generation of African believers must also take their beliefs and ethical values into the public arena and apply them to critical social issues (Reken 1999, 200). These assertions show that, while Christianity is also a private and personal faith, Jesus taught that believers are to serve as the light of the world. Moreover, Jesus expects that, as a city set on a hill cannot be hidden, believers should not hide their light from the public arena. Jesus expressly indicated that, when a light shines, it is placed where it gives light to everyone. By these teachings, Jesus demands that the life changes in private homes must go into public spaces.

Ajayi has argued that one of the reasons for the failure of Christianity in making the desired impact on society was that, while early missionaries in West Africa concentrated on teaching

people catechism and saying the mass, their Muslim counterparts were regular men in the market, conducting businesses and becoming deeply involved in daily social engagements (Ayaji 1965, 2-4). Hence, the Muslim scholar substantially impacted society more than the Christian missionary. Unfortunately, one observes with concern that Christians are increasingly uninvolved in their societies in many parts of Africa. Many Christians want to become vocational pastors, leaving the market and civil service in the hands of non-Christians. If the trend will be reversed, African Christians should live out their convictions in offices, schools, markets, and everywhere. That kind of societal involvement was what the Moravians demonstrated. They transformed their faith into a missionary force. They took their faith into their daily engagements and won their world for the Lord. Similarly, African Christians should be able to bring their transforming Christian influences to bear on the entire society. That was what Pietists did in Europe. Specifically, Christians must be involved in the political processes, as demonstrated by leaders like Desmond Tutu in South Africa and church leaders in Kenya in the struggle for political pluralism (Bediako 2000, 106-107). The goal is not to create a Christendom but to bring Christian conviction from a distinctively African perspective into nationhood.

African Christians must invest in deliberate missionary enterprises focused on both soul-winning and societal transformation. There is no reason to assume that Africa will break loose from the cycles of poverty, backwardness, and insecurity in her own strength. It requires the missional intervention of African Christians. The church must face the geopolitical realities through the gospel of renewal (Ojo 2011, 87). Mana advocated for the kind of evangelization that creates innovative societies and personalities (Mana 2002, 84). Thus, African Christians must invest in an evangelistic intervention that addresses socio-economic and political challenges as well as promotes meaningful connection between spirituality and every aspect of human life. Society is transformed as individuals are transformed and are incorporated into new churches (Vajko 2011).

As can be deduced from the story of the Pietists, the missiological implication of a transformed life demands that those who have experienced the gospel's transforming power must show it to others. Hence, they became involved in what coalesced into the Protestant missionary movement of the nineteenth century. Looking back, African believers have had a significant impact on African nationalism. Christianity led to the emergence of new elites, who led toward social and political transformation in many African countries (Ayaji 1965). In the 1990s, Christians were involved in active political processes in several parts of Africa. However, much of that activity ended in charade (Ojo 2011, 80-81). At the moment, African Christians must focus on the prophetic mandate of confronting evil in society through evangelistic preaching and teaching. They must also widen their scopes of activities to include witnessing to the economic and social arena. Interestingly, the Church has the answer in the Bible to most of the challenges bedeviling the continent (Ojo 2011, 83). Furthermore, by their number, Africa's many churches, through their witness, can significantly impact public morality and promote values such as accountability, discipline, diligence, and transparency.

African Christians must invest in leadership development for public places. One of the blistering challenges facing African Christianity is the dearth of authentic leadership in public places. African nations are deficient in exemplary, honest, purposeful, and sacrificial leadership. He argued that leaders who model Christian faith, biblical obedience, and true discipleship are in great need for the transformation of African society (Nihinlola 2020, 4).

Furthermore, the Church must promote values such as accountability, transparency, and diligence, which will impact individual lives and governance (Ojo 2011, 84). The challenges of lack of unity, prosperity, and lack of development should not be seen as needing to be handled by only a select few (Ayankeye and Odeleye 2017, 1). These are collective concerns of all Africans, including Christians. Sadly, many African Christians erroneously believe that politics is a dirty game. They adopt the keep-free-from-politics attitude. Hence, they huddle in churches, scrambling for church positions. Some will even resign their jobs in public spaces to become full-time church workers or vocational pastors. This approach is at variance with the declaration of the Second Vatican Council, which noted that a breach between faith and socio-political involvement is one of the most significant errors of this generation (Pope Paul VI 1965). It is a mistake for believers to think that they should shirk their responsibilities because they do not have a lasting city on earth. Such an attitude is a betrayal of their commitment to the One who created heaven and the earth. Even so, because of a lack of leadership training many African Christians do not know what to do in high offices. They have not been prepared for it. Christian discipleship has not been integrative enough. Hence many African Christians do not understand the Siamese relationship between daily Christian living and political involvement. Nihinlola suggests that Africa needs good leadership in both church and society. He postulates that one way to develop such leadership is for theological educators to embody and exemplify principled, godly, Christ-centered, and servant leadership, serving as role models to learners who will, in turn, offer Christian service and leadership with transformative impact on African society (Nihinlola 2020, 4). Bediako believes that, while Africa is not likely to produce a new Christendom, it must witness to the gospel, live in joy, and strive for peace, justice, and democratic freedom for all. He adds that Christian evangelization and nurture are essential elements in the process whereby a society's outlook, value system, thought patterns, and socio-political arrangement are permeated by the mind of Christ (Bediako 2000, 106). In other words, Christian discipleship in Africa must include leadership development and competence building for public service. Christians must be intentionally trained to combine their academic training with Christian values that can transform the workplace. African Christians must be helped to see involvement in politics and other policy formulation positions as a missionary task.

Conclusion

One of Africa Christianity's many challenges is the disconnect between religious experience and daily living. Many Christians in Africa are Christians only when they are in a religious gathering. Skeptical observers from virtually every part of the continent call into question Christians' claim of calling themselves light and salt of the earth. The kind of Christianity popular on the continent seems to be grossly utilitarian. It either aids or abets the rot in society.

This article has sought to show that the disconnect between religion and daily living in Africa is not without precedence. A similar situation in Lutheran Germany provided the background for the emergence of Pietism. African Christians must emphasize biblical preaching and ethical demands of the gospel, take the gospel to public spaces, invest in missionary ventures, and develop leaders for the public places.

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