

The Gospel of Christ and Inculturation Theology in the Context of Indigenous Ministry

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Abstract

Over decades, the concept of inculturation theology has been a major theological discourse in the African continent and beyond. Regardless of Denomination, one major challenge Christians in Africa and Churches in Africa are facing that has limited the penetration of the Gospel of Christ is the fact that a theology developed exclusively from the perspective of Western industrialized society will inevitably be a warped version of Christianity. In the line of thought of this paper, inculturation is the emergence of many thoughts occasioned by divergent lifestyles. Therefore, the incarnation of Christian life and of Christian message, the Gospel of Christ in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and making it so as to bring about a new creation.

Keywords: Christ, inculturation, indigenous ministry, The Gospel, theology,

Introduction

Many millions throughout the ages have venerated the name of Jesus, but few have understood him and fewer still have tried to put into practice what he wanted to see done. His words have been twisted and turned to mean everything, anything, and nothing. His name has been used and abused to justify crimes, to frighten children and to inspire men and women to heroic foolishness. Jesus has been more frequently honoured and worshipped for what he did not mean than for what he did mean. (Nolan, 2007). In the past there were those from the West who categorically maintained that Africans have no concept of God. Obviously such a statement results from blind ignorance.

On the cultural level a little careful observation would have clearly shown that Africans, prior to the coming of the Arabs, did have an organized society. Their own industries provided tools for farming and hunting, utensils for cooking and clothes to cover themselves. That Africans are deeply religious has always been everywhere evident. Culture is about a people, its language, its dressing, its way of life, its tradition and all that holds a community forth as a people different from another set of people as a community. Indeed, one can hardly find a people or community without a way of life peculiar to it. Culture therefore is as old as the community which practices it and it cannot be divorced from its existence. The issue of the inevitability and dispensability of religion in the life and existence of mankind has been a fundamental issue since creation and existence of man on earth (Abe, 2004: He further postulated that religion is so vital to man that it influences his soul into eternity and that no matter the religion status of any human being, religion is his basic concern. Religion is a major factor either for the cohesive or divisive existence of nations from time immemorial.

The historical linkage of evangelisation with colonisation has regrettably created a lasting impact on the African psyche that seems to be counter-productive for Christianity in the continent. It was as if Africans were presented with a double message – the gospel on the one hand and economic exploitation on the other. Before the trade motivated invasion of westerners on African soil, Africa was fashioned upon genuine orchestrated beliefs, literature, customs, principles, and standards of conducts bequeathed generations. Manners, morals, language, music

and arts were all in use and transmitted as socio-religious institution and heritage to succeeding generations (Bosch, 1977).

Christ and the Gospel

In Greek, gospel refers to a public announcement of glad tidings, such as the news of a birth in a royal family, a victory in war, or a treaty of peace. Gospel was also used to represent the early English 'God-spel', a story about God. This is now not generally used as such but as 'good-spel', which means good tidings. It is also used to translate the Greek word *evangelion*, which originally meant the reward for bringing good news, and later the good news itself. Jesus spoke about himself as a carrier of this good tidings (Luke 4:18-21).

Mark 1:14-15 states 'After John was put in prison; Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" This was directly relational, relevant and the ultimate answer to the apocalyptic hopes of the people. This was the gospel of the Kingdom of God by Jesus. The mystery surrounding this was that the gospel and the bearer of the gospel are one, embodied, enshrined, and incarnated in Jesus.

The meaning of the gospel is derived from its relationship to the notion of the law and rightly interpreted by Jesus. This is seen in Matthew while Paul conveys a view that the gospel fulfils the law and at the same time is the end of the law. The inseparable link between the gospel and the law remains the basis of the Christian identity in relation to its Jewish heritage. Furthermore, the Christian message of God is of both the law and the gospel on either sides of the same message. Thus, the gospel is meaningless without the law while the law is incomplete without the gospel. For the law sets forth what God commands humans to be and do; gospel sets forth what God promises to be and do for those who, having failed to observe the commands perfectly, stand condemned by the law. The gospel can then be spoken of in three aspects: kingdom, cross, and grace.

The gospel of the kingdom is the good news that life with God under the rule of God is available to all who would turn from their rebellion and trust in Jesus as the King. The gospel of the cross is the good news

that through faith in Jesus' perfect life, death for the sins, and victorious resurrection from the dead, men are justified and reconciled to God. The gospel of grace is the good news of God's wonderful acceptance of man not because we have earned it or deserve it but because He gives it to us freely at Christ's expense. The case here is that the gospel is not simply a kingdom message or a cross message or a grace message – it is all three. Our tendency, for a variety of reasons, is to splinter the message, to exalt one aspect over the others, and to diminish the scope and impact of the others. By doing this, it is we who suffer, missing out on the totality of the message of the gospel (Loosley, 1962).

Furthermore, Newbigin (2003) emphasized the definition of the gospel not as a religious experience but a factual statement. Consequently; at a certain point in history; God who is the author, the sustainer, the goal of all that exist, of all being has become present in our human history as the man Jesus, whom we can know and whom we can love and serve; and that by His incarnation, His ministry, His death and resurrection, He has finally broken the powers that oppress us and has created a space and a time in which we who are unholy can nevertheless live in fellowship with God who is holy. The gospel as the proclamation of Jesus is in two senses. It is the proclamation announced by Jesus. However, it is also the proclamation about Jesus – the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us. Considering the above, it is clear that the gospel remains two fold, within the context of the imminence of the end and rightly interpreted by Jesus, united in the one person Jesus, who is both the Christ, the fulfilment of the hopes and promises of the Old Covenant; and the Saviour and Lord, This gospel therefore is to be preached to all and must be understood as the fulfilment of all people's expectation of God's divine intervention as the answer to the needs of humanity and nature across the universe in every time and space.

Clarifying Inculturation

The clarification of the theological content of inculturation can be considered from a variety of angles. Indigenization and contextualization, among others, have been used to define it respectively and collectively. However, while indigenization and contextualization addressed

methodological aspects of adapting Christian faith to a new culture, inculturation is the activity of the on-going interaction or synthesis between faith and culture suggesting a creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures. Just as the *logos* 'took flesh' and entered into the culture of first century Palestine, so must the Christian faith take on the culture of each group that receives the gospel and at the same time be influenced by the culture defining a culturally relevant gospel. This makes the process of inculturation two-fold; the gospel affecting culture and culture affecting the gospel within its contexts. Mullins (1995) gives a similar approach by noting that, in the social sciences, indigenization is understood broadly as the process of transformation that occurs to foreign-born religions as they come into contact with native religion and culture which includes cultural adaptations in social organization, liturgy, leadership, and theology. Here, the native religion and culture determines, influences and promotes the cultural adaptation (Busia, 1950; Anthony, 2012 & Steenbrink, 2001).

An opposite approach in the mission of indigenization is that of contextualization which is focused on transmitting and or translating the gospel through the local idioms and languages of a culture. This is more of a 'top bottom' approach while indigenization is a 'bottom top' approach to mission (Montgomery & Cosper, 2013). Thus, indigenization and contextualization are the two-fold opposition functions of inculturation, as the gospel infuses into the local culture of a people and at the same time takes on unique characteristics and concerns of the culture.

Therefore, Shorter (1999) argues that in inculturation the gospel transforms a culture and is transformed by the culture, not in a way that falsifies the content, but in the way whereby it is formulated and interpreted anew. It is through this process that a foreign-born religion is incarnated into a native religion and culture, just as God incarnated as Christ engaging a culture and revealing the gospel. For Schineller (1990) inculturation is the combination of the theological significance of incarnation with the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation to create something new. According to Walligo (1986) inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and

his gospel of salvation understood by peoples of every culture, locality, and time. It is the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people. It is the continuous endeavour to make Christianity 'truly feel at home' in the cultures of each people. Oderinde (2013) also defined inculturation as a process of reciprocity whereby the Church takes root in the culture of a people and the culture being inserted into Christianity through the process of interpretation and contextualization. It is therefore understood as a dynamic meeting of faith and culture that generates fresh and transforming syntheses of faith and its implication for everyday life.

Inculturation therefore in this study is the continuous processes and events of making relevant the Christian gospel in the African culture through critical reciprocal interaction and assimilation, with the gospel's establishment as the ultimate destiny for the fulfilment of African traditional and cultural religion (Crouch, 2008). In a sense this is known as the tabernacling of the gospel in culture (Arbuckle, 1984). Thus God would encounter Africans as an African and that the missionary had to come as African in order to communicate effectively with Africans, so as to win them over to and for Christ. This conviction of Paul and his approach in Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) has come to be known under different terms such as indigenization, inculturation, Africanization, contextualization, Ethiopianism, localization, accommodation, adaptation and tabernacling as African theologians seek to engage the scripture above (Crollius, 1986). It is such that necessitated comments as; one watches the daily lives and activities of the people and takes account of the rites connected with marriage, birth, death, widowhood, harvest and installation to traditional offices, one learns that a great deal of the normal communal activities of the converts lie outside their Christian activities, and that for all their influence, the Christian churches are still alien institutions, intruding upon, but not integrated with social institutions.

If the faith of Africans is not to die, it must become a vision of the world that they can feel as theirs. Nevertheless, as far as Ela (1988) is concerned, unless the African is educated in European scholarly content, the unschooled African remains an illiterate in his or her Christian belief and practices. Repeating phrases such as 'of one substance with the

Father', and hymns that include 'consubstantial', 'co-eternal', 'while unending ages run', remain only in the abstract with no relevance and thus shallow and not strong, rooted and grounded in the Christian faith. Pobee (1996) argues that language is not to be identified as that which defines Christian faith; there is the responsibility which the gospel and culture debate has to do with distinguishing between the non-negotiable 'essence' of the faith and its negotiable 'accidents'. To this end, there are four models of inculturation that have been explored in Africa for many years. They are termed 'model' to describe how the Christian community throughout its history had related with Muslims (Rasmussen, 1993). Thus, the attitudes are abstracted into models of interacting with unbelievers. These models are expansion, *diakonia*, presence, and dialogue.

The Model of Expansion

This is a model that seeks to spread Christianity through its geographical area and or numerical strength. The main focus is the idea of converting individuals and incorporating them into the church. This tradition has long since been articulated from the early beginning of the Acts of the Apostles and the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. This was a model throughout the 18th-20th centuries as Protestants and Roman missionary activities spread the Christian faith as the main missionary task. However, according to Fredericks, this model has been tainted by its association to power throughout most of Christian history, which carried the connotation of territorial expansion. As a step further, Sanneh (2001) makes the connection between power and the spread of Christianity at the time of maritime expansion of Europe and the beginning of the colonization and exploitation of the non-western world from the 15th century onwards. This idea characterized the missionary activities in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The model has always seen the 'hearer' as one who is to be conquered and converted and it had a serious competitive nature especially in relation to the spread of some religions.

This has been the predominant model of relating to non-Christians throughout the history of the Gambia with the convictions of missionaries that they were called to 'go and make disciples of all nations'. The

understanding was that they were to convert people and plant churches. This was also influenced by the spread of Islam as evangelization was in the context of a perceived competition with Islam. This was not free from political influence, which twined the approach of missionaries as they provided education and medical services next to their preaching while the Islamic militant responded with jihad to expand and other trends of accommodative approach to traditional and cultural religion.

The Model of Diakonia

This model is rooted in and influenced by the scripture of reconciliation as, 'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave Christians the ministry of reconciliation...' (2 Corinthians 5:18). The church thus identifies with God's ministry of reconciliation of the world and serves the other person whether Christian or non-Christian as a fellow human being. This concept stems from both the Old Testament and the New Testament with its ultimate manifestation in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as the great 'diakonos'. *Diakonia* has played a significant role in mission history and often taken the form of 'missionary service'; education, medical, welfare, relief work, and development projects. This understanding gradually evolved and came to mean not only the idea of service to individuals but led to the Church's participation in the ministries of reconciliation, liberation, and social change including questioning power structures.

In West Africa including Nigeria as asserted by Jongeneel (1997) & Falaye (2016), missionary schools were built as early as the 18th century, and the 20th century characterized a great number of schools and developmental projects. After the independence of many African countries most of those schools and hospitals were nationalized and there had been the influx of many aid and relief non-governmental organizations. This posed the important question of what distinguished Christian *diakonian* from secular aid organizations. In many African countries, and Nigeria for instance, the model of *diakonia* had characterized the missionary efforts with hospitals and schools as instruments for spreading Christianity. Really do we see a Christian denomination that does not own at least a primary school and each

local church strive to have her own private school. This gradually lost its evangelical motive to one of service to society as a sign of the Kingdom. The mainline churches including the Baptist Church therefore focused not in evangelizing muslims but at spreading the christian influence in society and creating good will for the christian community.

The Model of Presence

The model of presence comes with the understanding of witnessing among people through the silent testimony of living and working with the people. It has a conscious respectful approach to the faith, beliefs, traditions, and cultures of the 'other' with the attempt to witness in a non-confrontational way by sharing life. The old tradition of presence is traced back to the monastic tradition of exemplifying actions like that of Francis of Assisi stressing the idea of the value of presence in a Muslim society. Missionaries were therefore instructed to go and live among Muslims, adopting their culture, their dress, their food, and their language in order to gain their confidence, creating the atmosphere for future witnessing. Model of presence is taking the form of friendship. This is done with the approach of silent presence drawing convictions from the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth during the first thirty years of his life (Mullins, 1995 & Crollius, 1986).

The Model of Dialogue

This model encourages an open attitude and respect to people of non-Christian faith with the willingness to be challenged and changed through the encounter within an organized or religiously pluralistic setting. There is the common understanding of the non-Christian and the Christian alike as fellow pilgrims in the journey of life and faith in God. True dialogue with a man of another faith requires a concern both for the gospel and for the other man. Without the first, dialogue becomes a pleasant conversation. Without the second, it becomes irrelevant, unconvincing, or arrogant. Dialogue in the African setting comes with the priority of 'dialogue of life'; the reality of living in a religious pluralistic society. It would be safer to suggest that the model of *Kenosis* for mission and ministry is a model that combines all the positive aspects of *diakonia*,

presence, and dialogue and at the same time puts in a new all encompassing framework seen in the emptying of the self in Jesus' incarnation.

The Model of Kenosis

In Philippians 2:5-11, Jesus' self-emptying act in the incarnation is the model of *kenosis*. Jesus emptied himself by sharing our humanity and by living among us in order to show the love of God for humankind. Thereby, the underlining principle of a shared humanity as modelled by Christ becomes the 'blueprint' for Christian witness. The idea of identification also plays a role as the individual identifies with the other in all aspects of life especially to those on the periphery imitating Jesus' example of laying aside power and status. This self-emptying act entails a radical contextualization for identity, which encompasses culture (inculturation), religion (interreligious dialogue) and the social political setting (liberation). It is highly relational and interactive in nature within the context of the community and thus carries an attitude of flexibility and adjustment centred on people.

The ultimate aim of *kenosis* is to glorify God in the understanding of Christ's reconciliation of the world. In this willingness to seek, the other, to respect the other in his culture and religion while sharing our deepest convictions about God, models a paradigm for a joint human pilgrimage towards God. In some African countries, there is the reality of a shared humanity between Christians, Muslims, and African traditional and cultural believers. It is the basic common participation of the same daily activities like going to school together, naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and working together that relationships, friendships, and faith is built and shared. In this shared human experience, *kenosis* becomes a radical self-emptying as a necessity to establishing meaningful relationships with people of other faiths and cultures. It is through this approach that the village catechist lives out daily: he works on the land, teaches in the school, eats the same food, and visits the neighbours in the evenings. His presence in the village and participation in the village life is in itself a sign of the love of God (Stinton, 2004).

Inculturation and interreligious dialogue therefore are not just optional for the interested few, but according to the model of *kenosis*,

they belong to the core of the christian calling to imitate Christ in his self-emptying love for people which brings a deep appreciation of the culture, religion, and socio-political framework of the other. This process leaves the christian community, in this case some christians, with the freedom to review the structures, institutions and theology they have inherited from the missionary age to fit the present age because the other person rather than the structures is central. *Kenosis* is the answer for the christian witness in Africa, with specific focus on the traditional and cultural religion taken into consideration all the effects of *kenosis* and with the approach of *skenosis* (tabernacle) (Shorter, 1999).

The Model of Skenosis

The word *skenosis* used by Pobee (1996) as referred in John 1:14, the 'tabernacled' of the one and eternal word of God which must be active in each particular culture with no one culture deemed normative for either mission or the gospel. This is presented with a fourfold image:

- It holds us to a non-negotiable word of God, which transcends time and place but must nevertheless be translated to become comprehensible in new times and contexts.
- .Whatever validity a construct coming out of this struggle has is essentially and necessarily temporary; like a tent dwelling, it cannot be for all time.
- It cannot therefore live in isolation, but must be attentive to the living stream of tradition of the living communities of faith.
- Because the word of God is the key, it will make a critique of the culture of the particular community. Like all true prophecy the word of God contains, words of hope as well as of condemnation.

Going by Pobee's submission on *skenosis*, this paper argues that one can conclude that the context of the scripture is merely presenting the entrance of God in human form in the person of Jesus into the world, thus Pobee is doing *esiges*. Nevertheless, for the context of inculturation in an African setting, I argue that the implicational meaning of the very word *skenosis* 'tabernacled,' cannot be left out of the process of engaging with the Africans.

The existence of God is taken for granted in Africa. So is His word within African traditional and cultural religion. It is assumed that it transcends time and space and contextually brings meaning. The characteristics of the temporal nature of a tent as in 'tabernacling' also agrees with the specific nature of God's Word within the African traditional religion contextually as it is always open to new meanings in different times and places. The implication of 'tabernacling' means temporally living within an area. For the African, one is considered living in an area when one has fully engaged with all living and non-living factors within that area. Thus my position is that the gospel in *skenosis*, is not only about its entrance into the world, as some may limitedly understand, but an entrance and full existence temporally within an area at every given time and space. Again, at the apex of the African worldview is the divine who is involved in all things, directs, critiques and guides, and is in whom all things are fulfilled (Yates, 1994; Stone & Duke, 2006).

With all these aspects at work *skenosis* can be fully interpreted in this context with the reciprocal engagement of the Nigerian and the gospel. The contextual indigenized interpretation and understanding of *skenosis*, is already inculturation at work. The emphasis of the above implication of *skenosis* brings a standard with which the communal life is to be seen in the light of the gospel thus the gospel remains a non-negotiable truth that brings the true meaning and ultimate desired end of the traditional and cultural realities of any community. Warren, (1961) and Warren (1971) noted that the flexibility and relevance of the gospel cuts across time and place as it is essentially and necessarily temporary like a tent-dwelling, thus applies differently for various times and age. This leads to its *kenosis* functions of *diakonia*, presence and dialogue within the setting of God's mission of reconciliation effected through a shared humanity.

Conclusion

Unless the Gospel of Christ is seen, accepted, and preached as a universal one and that can be preached in all languages it will remain a pending issue. The whole idea has been to make Christianity respond adequately to the facts and specifics of other world cultures, including African culture. This fact gave the paper the platform to examine some models that

could help drive home some points in the broader perspective of inculturation theology and the Gospel of Christ in Africa.

Indigenization or Africanization undoubtedly became necessary, following the failure of the European missionaries to 'root the gospel message solidly unto the African word of meaning, reality-structure, survival thrust or the African conceptual framework. There is no doubt that the task of inculturation is quite difficult, but not impossible.

Recommendations

- Christian faith should be made real in an African situation because the Christian faith is one, but the manner of expression varies from time to time, from place to place.
- Christians should endeavour to guarantee the future generation by cultivating a safe cultural habit in their liturgies.
- Cultural values should be transformed through their exposure to the Christian message and the insertion of Christianity into indigenous cultures.
- Africa should pay closer attention to the contents of the culture of the recipients of the Gospel of Christ

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