BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF THE 'NEXT CHRISTENDOM'?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTEGRITY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The growing population of Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America is one of the success stories of the Christian faith of the modern era. The central importance of this paradigmatic shift in the gravitational centre of Christianity to Africa has been clearly represented in the writings of Jenkins, Walls and Bediako. However, this rapid growth in numbers of Christians in Africa does not often correspond with the authentic translation of the Christian faith in the daily affairs of the peoples. This incapacity of the Christian faith is seen in the inability of the growing numbers of Christians to transform the public space. The paradox of growing Christian presence and growing poverty, corruption, bad government, disease, failed service delivery and several dysfunctional states challenge the effective impact of this Christian presence. It seems the rhetoric of numbers has not translated directly into Christian practice. Unfortunately, the excitement of numbers and the euphoria of the Southward movement of the Christian faith to the region of Africa and Nigeria in particular have not resolved the problematic character of the Christian faith and practices within this region. In Nigeria, the revival of cultures and the attendant theological enterprise in inculturation have often legitimised the importance of African cultural expressions on Christian beliefs, but also with tendencies of distorting the purity and integrity of Christian faith as a result of misunderstanding. Using analytical methodology, the present article engages the religious dynamism in Nigerian culturalised ecclesiastical space, and the necessity of preserving the Christian faith against cultural expressions which challenge the integrity of the Christian faith directly. Thus, this article argues for the repositioning of the Christian faith in Nigeria in order to fulfil its destined significance as one of the most important treasure houses of the "Next Christendom".

Key Words: Next Christendom; Paradigmatic shift; Africa; Inculturation; Christian Faith; Christian Population; Nigeria

Introduction

Philip Jenkins has described Africa, Asia and Latin America as the "Next Christendom" and the "New Face" of global Christianity since there are now more Christians in this region of the world than in Europe and North America put together.[1] For Jenkins, Christianity

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[1]　See Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Idem, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford

of this region of the global South is strategically positioned by its unique history and cultural disposition to assert a formidable religious influence on the Christian beliefs and practices of global Christianity.[2]

This enthusiasm of the geometric rise in the numbers of Christians in Africa has characterised the writings of Andrew F Walls, who has heralded the dawn of global Christianity with African Christianity becoming the important representative of this Christianity by the sheer force of its numeric strength.[3] In the same way, this euphoria and fascination with the numbers and growth of Christianity in Africa has its forerunner in the writing of David Barret who had earlier predicated its numeric growth.[4] The thrill of this transmigration of Christianity from Europe and North America to Africa has also found expression in the writings of Kwame Bediako who described the necessity for global Christianity to have the unique stamp of African culture because of the significant population of Christians on the African continent.[5]

The unprecedented upsurge of Christian presence in Africa has impacted contemporary theological discourse directly, especially regarding the significant role African theological discourse needs to occupy in global Christianity by the sheer weight of its numeric strength. The significant role of Nigeria as an important stakeholder in this paradigmatic shift of Christianity has been emphasised. Timothy Tennent has described the importance of the Nigerian Christianity as the 'new' representation of global Christianity.[6] In the recent study by the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project of the ten countries with the largest number of Christians, Nigeria was ranked the 6th.[7] This global rating naturally poses the importance of Christianity in Nigeria as a representative Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Unfortunately, this euphoria in statistics and numbers of Christians in Africa has not translated into the discourse on the ethics, morality and the quality of Christian faith on the African continent. Rather, it seems the integrity of the Christian faith is jettisoned away in the midst of the thrills of numeric strength. The integrity of the Christian faith in its history is primarily not driven by numbers, but it is clearly founded on integrity and commitment to the Scriptures. One can understand the irking dimension of this development from the assessment of Onaiyekan when he asserts that "Nigeria was recently accorded the record of being the most religious nation in the world. This was about the same time when we were rated among the most corrupt nations of the world. How we combined such superlatives must remain for us a matter for deep reflection."[8] The problem is compounded by the relapse of many Christians to traditional religion, a development that has made them syncretistic in the practice of the Christian faith. This article aims to analyse the problem of

University Press, 2006); Idem, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2   Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 1.

3   See Andrew F Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

4   See David B Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

5   See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); *Idem,* "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," *Themelios* 20, no. 1 (1994:14-20).

6   See Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007:105).

7   Conrad Hackett, "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Centre, 2011:11).

8   John O Onaiyekan, *Seeking Common Grounds: Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa,* Vol. 1. (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 2013:61).

dual belonging among Nigerian Christians and to consider what measures could be taken to root the Christian faith deeply in Nigerian Christians. Evidently, the challenge of dual belonging has impeded the Christian faith from producing the desired fruits. The present article engages the rhetoric of growth in numbers of Christians in Nigeria and the problematic character of the faith and practices of Christian faiths' communities.

Historical Stages in the Growth of Christian Presence in Nigeria

The density of Christian presence in Africa rests on Nigeria, the leading black Christian nation in the world. Dogara Gwamna's assertion in line with many other scholars that Africa is a key player to the global shift of Christianity to the South[9] lends credence to this. Interestingly, Nigeria has witnessed a proliferation of churches in a manner that has surprised the world. In urban centres as well as rural ones, there are different churches professing the Christian faith. Besides that, there is exponential growth in the number of converts to the Christian faith, most of whom have abandoned their inclination to traditional religion or who did not belong originally to any religious group but have decided to cling to one.

Historically, Christianity has continued to record giant strides in conversion and growth since its arrival to Nigeria in the 15th Century. Adamolekun has captured this growth in five phases, namely: the period of introducing Latin Christianity in the 15th and 16th centuries; the period of denominationalism and missionary activities in the 19th century from 1842 onward; the period of evolution of independent churches; the period of indigenous African Churches; and the period of the birth of Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches.[10] The first period dates from the 'first contact of Europeans with the natives of the Delta region in 1472 till the close of the 18th century, a period of about three hundred years. During this period, "Christianity failed to gain any permanent foothold in Benin, Warri, Bonny, and Calabar."[11] The second period started in 1840 when missionary bodies set up in Europe and America in the 18th century succeeded in converting Nigerians to Christianity and opened permanent mission stations among the people. This was just after the abolition of the slave trade, which stimulated a fresh religious enthusiasm among the Europeans and Americans. With the support of the missionary bodies, the freed slaves in places like Sierra Leone and Abeokuta encouraged missionary enterprises.[12]

The third period was the evolution of African Independent churches from the late 19th century as "protest movements against the marginalisation of the indigenes within the foreign mission."[13] This began apparently in consequence of the nationalistic spirit that was awakened by the partition of Africa in 1885, which set in motion a new phase of European colonial activities. The yearning for democracy and self government[14] and the discriminatory practices of the white church leaders provoked very sharp reactions from the Lagos elite and also from Edward W. Blyden and James Johnson who were renowned for their

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[9]   Dogara Je'adeyibe Gwamna. *Perspectives in African Theology,* Vol. 2. (Keffi, Nasarawa State: Al-mumtaz Printers and Publishers, 2014:151).

[10]   Taiye Adamolekun. "Main Trends in the Church Growth in Nigeria." *European Scientific Journal,* Vol. 8, No.23, 1.

[11]   Taiye Adamolekun. "Proliferation of Churches and its Impact on National Development in Nigeria." Akinbi, JO. *Towards A better Nigeria.* (Ibadan: Ben Quality printers, 1999:45).

[12]   M Crowther. *The Story of Nigeria.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978:113-114).

[13]   A Ajayi. "The Influence of the Church on the Nigerian Polity: An Appraisal." Being a Seminar Paper Series of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, 1998:4.

[14]   O Kalu. *Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian Story.* (Ibadan: Day Star Press, 1978:337).

Pan-Africanism. The culmination of this unheard protest was the establishment of the United African Church (UAC) in Lagos in September 1891. This was really the first indigenous church in Nigeria.[15] Other independent churches also emerged.

The fourth period gave birth to Nigerian indigenous churches, a phenomenon of the Aladura Movement in the 1920s to 1940s. This was a period of the Christian faith as practiced in Nigeria by Nigerians and was suited to the diversified and aggregated cultural and geographical outlook of Nigerians. This movement was essentially a 20th century phenomenon and it represented, as observed by Omoyajowo: "A reaction against the European complexion of the Western-oriented churches with their completely prefabricated theology and Christianity from their own perspective and to worship as Christian". [16]Other churches, namely, Cherubim and Seraphim emerged thereafter.

The final period saw the emergence of Charismatic Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. The revival of the 1930s had effects on African churches. The increase in the population of Christians in the country up till 1935 modified church order: some Christians slipped from the traditional network of pastoral oversight, care and discipline and re-grouped themselves into religious societies as evangelical Christian groups or churches. Ojo describes this period as new trends in Nigerian Christianity, by saying that "the re-grouping of minority Christians in the name of Africanisation or indigenisation or acculturation in a movement of revolt against or revulsion of idolatrous traditional cultural values vis-a-vis Christianity, was the beginning of sectarianism in Nigeria."[17] This resulted in the emergence of churches from 1970s till the present date. Evidently, more churches continue to spring up by the day as the project of enlarging the Christian fold continues. But what has been the response of the Christian church to culture in Nigeria?

Cultural Dynamics and the Christian Faith in Nigeria

This section will attempt to explore the relationship between the Christian faith and culture in Nigeria. Issues bordering on inculturation will be given prominence here. Citing Walligo, Kanu writes:

> Inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his Gospel of salvation ever more 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.[18]

An assessment of the success of this project of inculturation has been in raising a truly Christian faith shall be undertaken. From this assessment, it is easy to take a position as to whether the romance of Christians with culture has done either good or bad to the Christian faith. The Christian theology of inculturation is one of the bold steps taken to make the Christian faith at home in the diverse cultures of the world. Efforts have been made to dissociate the Christian faith from the Western culture with which people confuse it. This development has won plaudits all over the globe and has as well given people the

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[15]   Taiye Adamolekun. "Main Trends in the Church Growth in Nigeria," 5.

[16]   JA Omoyajowo "An African Expression of Christianity." Moore, B. *Black Theology: The South African Voice*. (London: C. Hurst, 1973:86).

[17]   MA Ojo. "New Trends in Nigerian Christianity." Being a Seminar Series Paper Presented in the Department of Religious Studies, *University of Ife*, Ile-Ife (16th January 1984:6).

[18]   Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu. "Inculturation and the Christian Faith in Africa." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* Vol. 2, No. 17, 2012:237.

opportunity to express the Christian faith in their respective cultural forms. Africa is among the continents that have really explored the benefit of this Christian landmark, part of the reason being that it has had a history of cultural exploitation. Looked at from another angle, inculturation has offered Africa the opportunity to rediscover itself and value its culture.

The benefits of inculturation to the growth of Christianity in Africa cannot be overemphasised. Through inculturation, Africans have seen many ways that the African Traditional Religion (ATR) is in congruence with the Christian faith. The belief in a Supreme Being, a rich moral heritage and other humane cultural values are among the many things that portray continuity with the Christian faith. However, the challenge of this endeavour has remained the constant tendency to place the Christian faith on the same level with African Traditional Religion. The resultant effect of this tendency is syncretism. Aben establishes a thesis which calls for serious attention. The striking thing about his thesis is that it blames the syncretistic practice of the Christian faith on the works of African Christian theologians. African theologians quite commonly use syncretism in their attempt to develop African Christian Theology and they justify its usage by claiming the African Traditional Religion is a legitimate and genuine conception of God which evidences that Africans have an advanced mentality.[19] Aben takes his argument further by identifying four forms of syncretism evident in the works of African theologians:

(1) Reformulation: this thinking puts African traditional religious beliefs and practices above those of Christianity. It advocates the reformulation of Christian beliefs and practices to fit African ones;

(2) Transformation: this way of thinking puts Christianity above African traditional religion in its conditioning of African souls and minds towards a better understanding of God. Thus, advocates of transformation see that the introduction of Christianity in Africa aims at transforming Africans from merely thinking of God in concrete categories to also conceiving and talking about God in abstract categories;

(3) Dialogue: this view asserts religious equality between African traditional religion and Christianity. Its advocates see the possibility of inter-religious dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity and

(4) Adaptation: promotes religious equality between Christianity and African Traditional Religion, but its advocates add that Christianity is the religious storehouse for unalterable divine truth to us which must be preserved at all costs even in carrying out syncretism.

As convincing as Aben's arguments may be especially regarding the types of syncretism among African theologians, it is difficult to accept all he has proposed here because it stigmatises the quest for contextualisation and trivialises the enterprise. Thus, it is better to lean on scholars such as Tersur Aben, who prefer to use the concept 'synthetic faith' rather than syncretism to describe the quest for inculturation. Synthetic faith here refers to the type of faith that allows the person to be truly Christian and truly African. This is exactly the goal of inculturation, namely, the ability to express the Christian faith in a way that is peculiar to our culture in order to maintain our true identity as Africans and as Christians.

It is worthwhile to state that Christ is not against any culture. What he does is to eliminate elements of culture that are opposed to the will of God, thereby raising the culture to God's standard. Within such a framework, it is easy to posit that Christ may be of

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19   Tersur A Aben. *African Christian Theology; Illusion and Reality.* (Bukuru, Plateau State: African Christian Textbooks (ACTS), 2008:99).

culture, but He is also above, against and a transformer of culture.[20] As a transformer of culture, Christ or the Christian faith permeates cultures to heal people of practices that hinder them in fulfilling the will of God. The neglect of this important dimension (Christ as the Transformer of Culture) of Christ's relationship with all human cultures has made Africans carry the Christian faith and African Traditional Religion on the same voyage. This is, indeed, the crisis of the Christian faith. But to what extent has this crisis been felt?

The Problematic Character of Christian Beliefs and Practices in the Nigerian Church

There is no doubt that the number of Christians in Africa and Nigeria in particular has grown remarkably. The Pentecostal wave has taken a better side of it. This growth has been characterised by the proliferation of Christian churches. But what is the fate of the Christian faith amidst this growth in numbers? Nigeria, which is among the most religious nations in the world, also bears the record as being one of the most corrupt nations in the world. It is no exaggeration to hold that the level of evil in Nigeria is directly proportional to the growth in the number of Christians. The sweeping statement of Hegeman as cited by Udoh that "only one out of ten self-named Christians in West Africa practices true Christianity"[21] is not difficult to understand. This is evident in the daily happenings in the nation as there is poor governance; corruption; justice is a rare commodity; there is no transparency and accountability in the management of the people's affairs; human rights are abused without remorse; and human life has no protection or dignity. All of these depravities are carried out by most of the people that call themselves Christians. This is nothing but the counter-productivity of the Christian faith.

It is pertinent to reflect on the ethical implications of the Gospel really to point at the direction of this discourse. The main drive in Christian spirituality is that the professed faith should be a lived faith. In other words, Christians should practise what they believe. By implication, in an atmosphere where the Christian presence is overwhelming, there should be a corresponding drive towards an exceptional way of life that is guided by refined ethical principles. This thesis does not augur well within the Nigerian context because as daily experiences show, the dominance of the Christian faith has only given birth to dominance in evil practices and immoral acts. Here lies the problem with the celebrated geometrical rise in the number of Christians and Christian churches in Nigeria.

The increase in the number of Christians will remain questionable in the face of the immoral acts in the Nigerian polity unless the Gospel values permeate every aspect of Nigerian life. Within this expectation lies the need for authentic belief in God and obedience to His commandments; a system that promotes justice, respects the dignity of life and the human person; a political system that is transparent and accountable; and a society that promotes morality in all its guises, among others. These are the fruits of an authentic Christian life that is lived in theory and praxis. It is worthwhile to reiterate here that it is not just how far the faith has gone, but also how deeply rooted it is in the life of Nigerians. Otherwise, the growth in number will count for nothing, but another form of idolatry that is wearing the Christian garb to seduce patronage.

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[20]   In his book: "Christ and Culture" Richard Niebuhr identified the different ways in which Christ-Culture relations could be viewed. Christ of Culture and Christ, the Transformer of Culture are some of those ways.

[21]   Dominic Udoh. "Superstition and Syncretism: Setbacks to Authentic Christian Practice in Africa." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 2, no, 7 (2013:35).

The worst contradiction to the practice of the Christian faith is the relapse to traditional rites that are not congruent with the Christian faith. In the name of inculturation, many Christians have endorsed cultural practices that are unchristian. The concern of Kanu could be understood when he notes: "Many clergy men and women and laity fear that what we call inculturation may turn out to be another form of what fetish priests, witchdoctors and fortune tellers do in African Traditional Religion."[22] Christians are very comfortable visiting witchdoctors. Most times they even carry charms and engage in rituals that are unchristian. The explanation they give is that the two practices (Christian and traditional) are complementary to each other and where one fails, the other replaces it. This is dual allegiance which the first commandment[23] of God abhors. Onuzulike confirms this when he cites Knitter thus: "According to the Holy Bible, the first commandment is not to have any other god besides God. 'Therefore, using other channels other than Christ is idolatry.' All idols and sacrifices should be abolished because the big brother and our dearest ancestor, Christ, has paid the price on the cross."[24] God Himself made it clear that He does not share His glory with anyone.[25]

This is a perturbing problem to the authentic practice of the Christian faith in Africa today and Nigeria in particular. Ntrie-Akpabi gives a pictorial description of an African Christian which is also true of a Nigerian Christian. According to him, it is that of "a man divided into two halves: the right hand held a Bible pointing to the Church, and the left hand held a fowl pointing to the traditional shrine."[26] Udoh expresses this point clearer by observing that "[the] majority of African Christians live ambivalent spiritual lives with an exterior allegiance to the God of Jesus Christ, but with an interior and perhaps a more pro-found allegiance to the God of their forbearers who refused to give way to the new God. There is a wide gap, a split, or is it a dislocation of many Africans recently converted to Christianity."[27] Writing with particular reference to Catholic Christians, Udoh roars that thousands come to our churches. Our cathedrals and chapels are filled to capacity every Sunday and during important celebrations like harvest and bazaar. A lot of people also make huge donations for the maintenance of the Church. Still many also avail themselves of the sacraments. But often, there are reports that practising Christians are equally idol worshippers. They wear idols, erect hidden shrines in their homes. They hide fetishes in their shades in the market stalls and in their workshops.[28] It is, indeed, true as Ntrie-Akpabi has observed that "even though it is impossible to measure the faith of an individual, practical faith experience or how most African Christians live their faith points to the fact that they live double lives: partial fidelity to the Christian God and partial allegiance to traditional religion; Church service in the morning, a visit to the ancestral shrine in the afternoon."[29]

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[22] Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu. "Inculturation and the Christian Faith in Africa. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2 (2012:243).

[23] I am the Lord your God, you shall not have any other God before me.

[24] Uchenna Onuzulike. "African Crossroads: Conflicts between African Tradition Religion and Christianity." *International Journal of the Humanities* (2008:165). [PF Knitter. *Pluralism and Oppression.* (Maryland: University Press, 1998:33)]

[25] Isaiah 42:8.

[26] Vincent Ntrie-Akpabi. *Inculturation as Self-Identification: An African in Search of Authentic Christian Identity. A Theological Enquiry among the Ewe of Ghana.* (Porto: Universidade Catolica Portuguesa, 2016:2).

[27] Udoh. "Superstition and Syncretism", 35.

[28] Dominic Udoh. "Superstition and Syncretism", 35.

[29] Vincent Ntrie-Akpabi. *Inculturation as Self-Identification*, 78.

There seem to be different views as per the explanation for this attitude of Nigerian Christians. The major view rests on the fact that Nigerians like other Africans cannot dissociate themselves completely from their religion and cultural beliefs. In this light Ntrie-Akpabi notes: "…since Africans would not dissociate themselves completely from their religions and cultural beliefs, they tend to blend the Christian faith with traditional religious belief even if they contradict the Christian faith. This created instability, dualistic attitude and identity crisis among African Christians."[30] The point made here seems to stem from the anthropological crisis of African identity noted by Mpasi when he observes: "It is not a secret to say that African personality has been distorted by historical events such as slavery, exploitation and colonisation. An African identity is suffering from anthropological crisis."[31]

Ferdinando ties the problem of syncretism among Christians to the concept of worldview which he considers as tenacious, and so making it difficult for people to change or abandon their beliefs and moral values that have been passed on from generation to generation. For Ferdinando, the tenacity of worldview – its resistance to change – is evident when people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ while continuing to hold worldview beliefs that conflict with it.[32] Going by this explanation, there may have been a huge number of African Christian converts, but African traditional worldview continues to shape their beliefs, so that many professing Christians may hold beliefs and behave in ways which are incompatible with the Christian truth that they have embraced outwardly. In consequence, their Christian faith may seem at times to be little more than a veneer that has been glued over the surface of their lives while underneath nothing much has altered; the gospel of Jesus Christ has not penetrated the depths of the original worldview and so lives are relatively unchanged.[33]

Dual allegiance is counterproductive because among other things, it breeds confusion about good and evil. A person of dual allegiance is a divided person who struggles always to satisfy two different demands that are opposed to each other. As the centre cannot hold due to conflict, the person in question is shattered. This is the consequence of the kind of spirituality among many Christians today. But how can Christianity in Nigeria live up to the need for its global significance?

The Prospects of Christian Beliefs and Practices

That the Christian faith is growing exponentially in Nigeria is a blessing to be celebrated. But a growth in the number of Christians without a corresponding growth in the depth of the faith is nothing to write home about. It is good news that African Christians can comfortably express their Christian faith in a fashion that does not dent their identity as Africans. However, this faith must be expressed in forms that distance it from syncretism. In the first place, African Christians must understand and accept the fact that African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not synonymous with Christianity. Even though the two religions share a lot in common, there are other areas in which they are at conflict. These areas of conflict establish the line between true practice of the Christian faith and its syncretistic practice. Syncretism sets in when African Christians ignore these conflict areas and consider them as complementary options to the Christian faith.

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30   Vincent Ntrie-Akpabi. *Inculturation as Self-Identification,* iii.
31   L Boka Di Mpasi. "The Theology of African Churches." *Trends in Mission: Towards the Third Millennium.* Ed. W Jenkinson & H Sullivan. (New York: Orbis Books, 1991:53).
32   Keith Ferdinando. *The Battle is God's: Reflecting on Spiritual Warfare for African Believers.* (Plateau State: African Christian Textbooks (ACTS), 2012:4).
33   Ferdinando. *The Battle is God's*, 5.

Moreover, African Christians should not capitalize on the current interest in African Traditional Religion as a way of its absolute endorsement. Most of the scholars with interest in this area are not adherents of the religion as such. Their current effort is part and parcel of the bold step taken to correct a historical mistake of the past which considered anything African as subhuman, substandard and evil. It is, indeed, part of the candid efforts being made to reconstruct the African battered past. This goes well with Kanu's position when he writes that there is need to study African Traditional Religion in order "to help the African reconstruct his past, understand the present and effectively plan for the future."[34] Keen attention to their works reveals how they try to conscientise the world on the rich religious values inherent in the religion and calling on the world not just to pass unfair verdict on it as being evil. All of this is part of the efforts aimed at appreciating the rich African culture of which this religion is part.

There is need for African Christians to dissociate from the thinking that Christianity is synonymous with Western culture. This is the misconception that makes people turn the whole issue to the battle of cultures with the attempt of one trying to conquer the other. The Christian faith is independent of any culture, but dialogues with all cultures. Some of the cultural trends that do not conform to the Christian faith are not particular to only African culture. Rather, these trends also exist in other cultures. For instance, polygamy that has been one of the contended issues between the Christian faith and African culture is not only an African thing. The Christian faith has always spoken to cultures that marriage is a union between a man and a woman. Christ Himself established this monogamous principle[35] during His ministry here on earth. This is the message Christ speaks to all cultures without any exclusion. African Christians should look at the Christian faith as above all cultures, and so should serve as a principle of life for all religious practices. It is only within this framework that African Christians can understand why certain cultural practices should not be absorbed into the practice of their Christian faith.

African Christians must give the Christian faith a new face. This new face requires that the growth in number should correspond with the growth in the depth of the faith. The sweeping assertion of scholars like Gwamna regarding the Christian faith that "it is not how far, but how deep"[36] expresses this challenge clearer because as Ojonemi *et al.* have observed: "Nigerians profess God in principles (words) and not in practices (actions)."[37] There is need to establish a balance between the growth in number and depth of the faith. The overwhelming number of Christians professing the Christian faith should also be found practicing the faith everywhere since no dual allegiance is a guarantee for any success. There will always arise moments of conflict, and it is this conflict that stifles the potential of the Christian faith towards bringing positive changes in the Nigerian society. Nigerian Christians must practice inculturation within its boundaries and avoid bringing in foreign elements. When this is done, Christ would have significantly transformed the African culture and healed it of elements that are needing healing. At this point, the culture would have been raised to the standard.

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[34] Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu. "African Traditional Religion in a Globalising World."*International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE),* vol. 1, Is. 1, 2014.

[35] In Mark 10: 6-9, Jesus says: "But from the beginning of creation *He made them male and female. This is why a man leaves his father and mother, and the two become one flesh. They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh.* So then, what God has united, human beings must not divide."

[36] This expression was used by Gwamna to describe the counter-productivity of the Christian faith in Nigeria where the number is growing but the real practice of the faith is in crisis.

[37] Ojonemi, Paul S. *et al.* "Deficit in Religious Practice in Nigeria: Implications for National Development," *Developing Country Studies* 4, no.4 (2014:191).

In the array of the evident growth in number of Christians, the Nigerian Church needs to go beyond its aforementioned inadequacies in order to prepare itself better for its special role in the next Christendom. It implies, therefore, that there is need for proper theological education. Theological education is necessary to ensure that both Christians and their leaders are properly guided in their Christian struggles. Gwamna emphasises the importance of such training when he writes: "Theological education provides men and women a sound biblically-based theology that will contribute to God's kingdom here on earth and enable them to significantly impact their respective societies."[38] Many Christian leaders. especially of the Pentecostal brand of Christianity. are criticised for the 'weak' theology and empty spirituality they dish out to their members. This development has given the Christian faith a bad name and made it appear hypocritical. Gwamna prefers to characterise this as part of the hermeneutical challenges confronting Pentecostalism in terms of the need for sound theology, biblical contextual hermeneutics, the call for commitment to the hermeneutical task, the need to codify Pentecostal theology and monitoring Pentecostal theology in Nigeria.[39] Thus, going beyond these excesses will restore hope in the Christian faith and spell out its potential in a setting that holds it suspect. By and large, for Nigerian Church to play its role properly in the next Christendom, it must ensure that it confronts the many challenges facing the practice of the Christian faith in Nigeria as already noted above.

Conclusion

The growth of the Christian faith in Nigeria remains a blessing that should be cherished. However, the "Next Christendom" should not be merely increasing numbers of Christians but it should entail the integrity of the Christian faith because the growth and expansion of the Christian faith will only have meaning when it is balanced by depth of the faith. In its history, Christianity has been concerned with numbers, but with few who practice the basic tenets of the Christian faith. There is the need for authentic emphasis on Christian beliefs and practices. Christianity in Nigeria must pursue a depth in the context of its shallow profession of the Christian faith. By the depth, it must seek to place value on Christian professions of the faith and Christian practices. It means too that Christians will not be divided in their allegiance to the basic tenets of the faith. This is the point where it could be said that conversion has assumed its complete form. While inculturation theology must be practised by the Nigerian Church, it should be done within limits following guidelines. All of this is necessary to avoid chances of syncretism which puts the Christian faith in crisis. It is no exaggeration to underscore that the negative results emerging from the lives of Christians today in Nigeria are as a result of syncretism. A syncretistic faith is a faith in crisis struggling to satisfy two opposing masters that are condemned to constant conflict. Practising the authentic Christian faith, that is, faith devoid of syncretism is the only guarantee for positive results for African Christians. This could be done by harkening to the voice of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that there is no other God except the one who created the heavens and the earth in whom all things move and have their being. When Nigerian Christians move away from dual allegiance, the glory of the Christian faith will shine and bring changes in society in new authentic ways.

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[38]   Dogara Je'adayibe Gwamna. *Perspectives in African Theology,* Vol. 2. (Keffi: Al-mumtaz Printers & Publishers, 2014:191).

[39]   Dogara Je'adayibe Gwamna. *Perspectives in African Theology,* Vol. 2:146-147.

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