

Dual Allegiance and the Adventist Church In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT—Dual allegiance is a major issue confronting the church in Africa resulting in stunted spiritual growth and regression to primal practices in times of intense conflict and crisis. This paper seeks to reveal the unresolved needs and fears that lead to this condition. It begins by discussing the origin and functions of dual allegiance. The paper then proceeds to discuss the factors that make members predisposed to such temptations, which include, the need for protection, fortune and blessing, provision of children, healing, divination, and deliverance. Finally, it concludes by proposing a strategy for dealing decisively with this nagging problem, which involves the cooperation of church leadership and educational institutions, through better discipleship programs, holistic gospel presentation, employing narrative theology, and the development of healing ministries, which are crucial for responding to this hidden plague in the African church.

Keywords: Dual allegiance, syncretism, worldview

I. Introduction

An article featured in the August 2008 edition of *Christianity Today* has the story of pastor Benjamin Ojobu who with his wife was arrested for allegedly using human body parts in rituals for their members (Fortunak, 2008). The pastor's explanation was that he had

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bought the head of a recently deceased young woman for the sum of N3, 000 (the equivalent of \$25) with the intention “to prepare charms for fighting witchcraft and for offering special prosperity prayers” (Fortunak, 2008). Weird as this story may appear to some, the use of body parts for ritual purposes is actually a common feature in West, Central, and Southern Africa. What perhaps made the story intriguing was the profession of the perpetrator; which was a “man of God.”

Such a phenomenon where a person professing to be a Christian resorts to practices that are associated with traditional religions is considered as dual allegiance. Bruce Bauer defines this as a double allegiance that occurs when believers do not find their spiritual needs being met such as, healing, blessing, guidance, and deliverance. He further describes it as, “when people add to their Christian commitment a dependence upon occult powers.” (Bauer, 2007, p. 1). A survey of the world’s mission fields is indicative of the global extent of the issue of dual allegiance because many believers, including pastors still consult with shamans, priests, and other spirit mediums (Kraft, 1999, pp. 412-413). The *Adventist Mission News* reported of a crucial meeting between leaders and mission experts of the Adventist Church in order to deal with this significant problem in which church members retain non-Christian beliefs and practices from their former religions (Falvo, 2007).

The aim of this study is to examine the origins and functions of this pervasive and persistent issue plaguing missions in Africa with the view to finding an enduring solution to the problem. Propositions will be presented which seek to curb, or eliminate, this phenomenon that negatively affects the commitment and growth of members in the church.

Dual allegiance, which has associations with syncretism, has long been recognized in mission circles as a problem encountered when dealing with converts from traditional/folk religions. In the following section this connection will be explored, with an attempt to explain the nature and extent of this problem.

II. Dual Allegiance and Syncretism

Syncretism is defined as the “blending of one idea, practice or attitude with another” (Moreau, 2000, p. 924-925). It “refers to the replacement of core or important truths of the gospel with non-Christian elements” (Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, 2007, p. 305).

Tite Tienou explains that “syncretism, in its very nature, involves a mixing of two religions. As such it refers to a hybrid reality” (Tienou, 2009, p. 1). It is this combination or confusion of belief systems that results in dual allegiance. Consequently, “Syncretistic people have a dual religious allegiance. They are neither totally of one religion nor of another” (Tienou, 2009, p. 3). In Africa, syncretism is evident in the lives of new converts from traditional religion who bring into their Christian faith, beliefs and practices consonant with the old religion. Accordingly, Bruce Demarest states that “the church in Africa today is besieged by a subtle spirit of syncretism and universalism. The new gospel being preached is syncretistic in that it promotes a religion that is a synthesis of biblical faith and pagan beliefs and practices” (Demarest, 1982, p. 101).

When converts from a former religion switch over to a new faith, unresolved needs and fears create gaps in their minds (Kraft, 1996, p. 201; Bauer, 2007, p. 3). The roots of these gaps for the African convert can be found in their culture, society, and worldview. The next section will deal with these factors at the root of dual allegiance.

III. Origins of Dual Allegiance

Before discussing propositions for tackling dual allegiance, an understanding of the factors that bring this condition about is needed. Accordingly, Richard Gehman’s question, which demands: “Are there some needs the churches are not meeting with their present ministries and teaching?” needs serious consideration (Gehman, 1991, p. 362). P. Ade Dopamu provides a list of needs that confront Africans, which make them resort to magic and medicine. Among these are: good harvest, flourishing business, success in examinations, good luck, victory, rain for crops, protection against accident, protection from danger, protection against forces of evil, and healing (Dopamu, 2003, p. 444).

A second factor that may be responsible for dual allegiance is the traditional African worldview. Among the features of this worldview is the animistic belief that spirits are behind every misfortune, accident, or trouble; for nothing happens by chance. This leads to the widespread conviction that spirits are responsible for sickness and disease, not germs (Kraft, 1996, p. 52). Osadolor Imasogie, affirming this belief states, “There is no event without a spiritual/metaphysical

cause: hence man must look beyond physical events to their spiritual etiology (Imasogie, 1983, p. 60).

Thirdly, fear of the future, the unknown, evil, failure, shame, loss, and death is a powerful motivator that drives people in the search for power, protection, and prosperity. This element of fear is derived from the heightened perception that the world is saturated with spirits that could wreak great havoc on unwitting persons.

A fourth feature, which appears responsible for dual religious allegiance, is the magical worldview of the African. Magic is defined as an attempt to tap and control supernatural powers and resources of the universe for one's benefit (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005, p. 263). Hence, the belief that nature and divinities can be coerced, controlled, or manipulated, in the interest of the individual or group through proper ritual, means, or the right agency. For this reason, "people make sacrifices to gods and spirits to bargain for healing and prosperity" (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, 1999, p. 174). Consequently, in their search for solutions to their problems, African converts revert to persons and places that they feel will apply the proper rites, sacrifice, or prayer to produce the sought-after results to their predicament. Because the churches teach that God answers prayers with "yes," "hold on," and "no," these converts seek where they are convinced that they can obtain speedy predictable results. The fact of the matter is that, "the most important question for the average folk religion follower is not, 'Is it true?' but, 'Does it work?'" (Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, 2004, p. 304).

Fifthly, the status-conscious hierarchical structure of the African community is another aspect of the cultural worldview that provides inducement for dual allegiance. Poverty is considered a curse, while success provides elevation in status, and is something to be celebrated by family and community. For that reason, every family without ascribed status strives for the means, through hard work, education, or divine intervention in order to rise in the social ladder. The communal nature of the society tacitly pressures families to encourage their children to emulate the successes of others. As a result, rather than simply accepting "the will of God," the typical African convert will seek to employ whatever procedures at their disposal in order to advance their causes materially; whatever these may be (Dopamu, 2003, p. 447).

Although the origins of dual allegiance can be traced to cultural, societal, and worldview factors, the functions served are connected to the desire to resolve personal needs and fears. These needs and fears,

which may not be adequately addressed in conventional conservative Christianity, include the need for protection against evil spirits and witchcraft, the desire for good fortune, the fear of barrenness, desire for healing, divination, and deliverance. In the following section these needs and fears are roundly discussed.

IV. Functions of Dual Allegiance

Bruce Bauer in his article, “Biblically Appropriate Functional Substitutes: A Response to Dual Allegiance,” observes that people resort to dual allegiance primarily because they seek answers to personal needs and fears that Christianity appears unable to address (Bauer, 2007, p. 3). Among these are the need for protection against evil spirits, the desire for fortune and blessings, the reproach of childlessness, healing, divination, guidance, and deliverance from demonic possession.

A. Protection

A keen awareness of the presence and power of evil is always at the fore of the psyche of the African. Stories exist of persons who have become impervious to bullets, and any form of harm from metallic objects, because of the magical powers that they possess (Dopamu, 2003, p. 447). Amulets, charms, and magical potions, which are believed to give supernatural powers and special protection to the users, in an environment filled with insecurity, uncertainty, and fear are known. A believer, overtaken by a sense of dread that resorts to the church, may not have more than a few sentences of prayer made in his behalf. For a young convert from an animistic background this may appear insufficient to efface the specter of evil. Evidently, at the heart of most rituals and practices in traditional religions is a works-based salvation. As a result, it is easier for a convert to find assurance in turning to a faith that offers tokens, fetishes, or prescription of duties to be performed. Such duties, known as “assignments” by certain indigenous churches, may involve praying naked at midnight, taking special baths in streams at odd hours of the morning, or reading aloud certain psalms (Sanneh, 1983, p. 191). A very common practice is the use of holy water, or the application of anointing oil that has been consecrated by the “man of God.”

B. Desire for Fortune or Blessings

A basic need in all religions is for blessings that will ensure harvest and good fortune. For the African, these blessings do not just come without something being done to ensure this. In the traditional worldview, sacrifices need to be carried out and rituals performed so that the desired results may occur. This understanding is brought by the young convert from the traditional religion into the Christian faith. Furthermore, because suffering, hardship and evil are considered as a curse from the gods, whatever can be done to receive divine approbation is sought by the African believer. Also, since the message of the church seems to show more concern for the other life, than for the present life, this encourages the converts to seek for help wherever it may be found (Sadiku, 2004, p. 127). This phenomenon is what has made the “Prosperity Gospel” preached by the Pentecostals to have such a powerful appeal in this region of the world where poverty is endemic (Hackett, 1998, p. 260).

C. Barrenness

Childlessness is a condition that is deemed a reproach by Africans. Similarly, the inability to produce a male offspring is regarded as a problem for the traditional African woman. While science may have explanations for these, such answers prove inadequate for the African who believes that nothing happens by chance. Usually, the burden is that of the women who are subjected to immense emotional pressure from in-laws, spouses, and the community. In such a scenario, the women are often persuaded to do something to change their lot. Local movies, and stories, which are reflective of society, depict the levels women have to go to have their burdens resolved. Among such include, seeking the help of mermaid/water spirits often widely referred to as “mammy water” (Fuller, 1994, p. 40).

D. Healing

Charles Kraft in his missionary experience in Nigeria discovered that the germ theory of disease did not “make a very convincing explanation to a traditional Nigerian” (Kraft, 1996, p. 56). This is because it is generally believed that diseases are caused by spirits. David Oyedepo, founder and Presiding Bishop of Living Faith

Church Worldwide, one of the largest Pentecostal congregations in Nigeria states unequivocally “Sickness is a spirit” (Oyedepo, 1996, p. 40).

This perceived spiritual source of every illness leads the African to seek help from clergy or native priests who they believe possess healing powers. The average African first resorts to the spiritual leader when ill before considering going to the doctor. This predisposition always puzzles Western missionaries that would rather do the reverse. Churches that do not have a strong emphasis on healing ministries, therefore, find their members leaving for places where they feel their problems can be resolved spiritually. Some churches in Nigeria have even developed specialized healing ministries. Helen Ukpabio concentrates on delivering people under the possession of witchcraft spirit; the Laughter Foundation claims to provide barren women with “fruits of the womb”; T. B. Joshua heals those suffering from HIV/AIDS; while Mountain of Fire and Miracles focuses on casting out demons of all specifications (Ukah, 2007, p. 15).

E. Divination

The need for guidance is fundamental to adherents of traditional religions. The means by which the followers accomplish this is through divination. Divination, “is a means of penetrating or probing the unknown or future by supernatural means” (Obiyemi and Adeniyi, 2003, p. 531). It “is universally concerned with practical problems of everyday life.” (Ajayi, 2004, p. 113) Some of the forms of divination practiced by the Yorubas, a major tribe in Nigeria, include: *Erindinlogun* which involves the casting of sixteen cowries, *Agbigba*, which employs a set of strings, *iyarin tite*, sand printing, *obi dida*, kolanut casting, *omi wiwo*, water gazing, *owo wiwo*, palmistry, *owo wiwo*, money gazing, *wiwo oju*, eye gazing, and *digi wiwo*, mirror gazing (Ajayi, 2004, p. 113). Of all the divining forms available the Ifa divination is considered to be the most important, reliable, and popular; the diviner or Ifa priest is called the *Babalawo*.

The services of the diviners are often sought in moments of crises; personal or corporate. Also, because the African believes in a supernatural cause for every effect, the help of the diviner is sought to unravel the factors or persons at work behind each happening. Often, when tragedy strikes, as in the death of a promising person, the question arises, “Who, or what, is responsible for this?”

Another instance where the need for divination could result in dual allegiance is when people seek after the interpretation to their dreams. The traditional African believes that dreams are a medium through which portentous messages are conveyed from the deities unto mortals. However, the Western training of modern ministers makes them view dreams as merely having a natural or psychological explanation. Consequently, the convert is left perplexed, unsatisfied, and uncertain of the competence of the minister in spiritual matters. This results in a search for anyone who will give an acceptable interpretation to their dream.

F. Deliverance

The belief that spirits can possess and control the lives of people is quite common in the sub-region of West Africa. Such persons may be initiates to a cult, society, or deity. However, another group which could be considered as possessed are those who have, consciously, or unconsciously, become initiated as witches or wizards.

Mysterious deaths, diseases, barrenness and lack of success are ascribed to witches (Obiyemi and Adeniyi, 2003, p. 531). This idea is captured in the Yoruba proverb: “The witch cried last night, the child died today. Who is not aware that it was that witch which killed the child” (Obiyemi and Adeniyi, 2003, p. 531). Local Pentecostal Churches also believe and teach this concept. The result, according to Sonnie Ekwowusi in his commentary in *THIS DAY* newspaper, is that in some churches, parents, in-laws, and house-maids have been accused for the evils that certain homes have experienced (Ekwowusi, 2009). This overwhelming terror of evil spirits, fueled by the African belief that some persons possess the powers to change into certain creatures, large and small, has led some to fear animals such as cats, geckos, ravens, and bats. The presence of a gecko for instance may be a portent or purveyor of evil, thus it must be eliminated to forestall evil. For the Yorubas, the appearance of the giant rat during the day was considered portentous and if such a rat strayed into the living area during the day, evil was imminent (Obiyemi and Adeyemi, 2003, p. 528).

In the villages, stories are told of persons considered to be magically powerful so they can mutate into hippopotami, leopards, elephants, or any other wild creature at will in their bid to cause bodily harm to their enemies. Interestingly, although such stories and similar versions are rife around the country and continent, no one can

claim to have seen this transformation or mutation occur. The sum of all this is, that deep-seated in the worldview of people of this region is a magnified perception of the power of the devil, and his agencies. As a result, people with such beliefs regress to the old customs during moments of crisis or tragedy, in order to bring back stability to their lives.

Knowing these predisposing factors for dual allegiance is helpful in developing a strategy for dealing with the problem. The final part of this study outlines a set of propositions to respond to dual allegiance.

V. Propositions for Dealing with Dual Allegiance

Any effective plan to address the issue of dual allegiance must involve church leadership and its educational institutions. Intentional plans to respond to dual allegiance need to be designed, and implemented by the leaders of the church in consonance with the theology faculty in the educational institutions. Among the recommendations are: better discipling programs, holistic presentation of the gospel message, the use of narrative theology, and the development of healing programs.

A. Better Discipleship Programs

At the heart of the problem of dual allegiance is what has been recognized as the incomplete conversion of new believers. John Mbiti observes that “full conversion is never a point in history: it is always a process affecting the inner man and his total environment. It may take several generations to reach maturity in a given community” (Mbiti, 1990, p. 257). Thus converts who backslide, or apostatize, are simply indicating that they have found neither a meaningful identity, nor sufficient security, in the new religion (Mbiti, 1990, p. 258). Obviously, there must exist inadequacies in the existing methods of discipleship, if at all any is done. It will be appropriate to design contextualized bible studies that recognize the underlying beliefs and concepts peculiar to the region. Such lessons should cover relevant topics as State of the Dead, The Great Controversy, Theodicy and the Problem of Evil, Christ’s Resurrection Power, Biblical Healing, and The Power of Prayer. Furthermore, these lessons should seek to build

faith such as would conquer the fear associated with primal faith systems.

Before commencing the discipleship programs, effort should be made to understand the backgrounds of the members, in order to discover such issues that concern them and how to deal with these contextually; using the word of God. This is what Paul Hiebert refers to as critical contextualization. These studies should help reveal whatever gaps that Christianity may not have resolved. For, as Benjamin Ray acknowledges, “Unlike Western religions, African thought does not conceive the source of evil to be a fallen god or spirit like Satan or the Devil. Instead the source of evil is located in the human world among the ambitions and jealousies of men. The source of evil is thus demonic humanity: the witch or sorcerer” (Ray, 1976, p. 150).

Ultimately, a better model of discipleship should result in a changed worldview; from magical, to Christian—full submission to the will of God, for “magic is the opposite of Christianity” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, 1999, p. 177). This change in worldview is imperative, “otherwise the new beliefs will be reinterpreted in the forms of the old worldviews. The result is Christo-paganism;” this is a term connoting syncretism (Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou, 1999, p. 176).

B. Holistic Gospel

The church must be seen as a place where the total needs of the believer must be addressed. Rather than a situation where the church is thought to be only interested in the spiritual needs of the members, programs need to be designed, and implemented, to respond to poverty, health needs, and the emotional life of converts. Also, the concept of the church as a family ought to be adopted to satisfy the communal nature of the African (Healey and Sybetz, 2006, p. 107). The great appeal of the Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches has its origin in the fact that not only do they resonate with the African holistic and communal worldview, but their worship is African: “spontaneous, thoroughly experiential, celebratory and participatory” (Healey and Sybetz, 2006, p. 299).

C. Narrative Theology

The African culture is by and large an oral one where stories are highly valued. This is in contrast to the Western society which

“increasingly depends on the world of sight,” (Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou, 1999, p. 174). An implication of this cultural predilection is that in the oral, African culture, with its myths, parables, and folklores, “believing is seeing.” Conversely, with the Western visual culture of science and technology, “seeing is believing.” If a solution to the problem of dual allegiance is to be found, the church in Africa needs to replace the stories and myths that are responsible for fuelling the worldview of the locals with Biblical narratives that will demonstrate the power of God and His direct involvement in the affairs of the faithful. This process can be reinforced through drama and skits that breathe life into the stories and serve to make them contextual and relevant. Another device that will be beneficial is having testimony sessions that showcase the power of God to deliver, rescue, and heal in seemingly helpless situations.

Also, germane for consideration is the methodology of communicating the gospel. The conventional mode adopted by the church has been the rational, syllogistic method, which entails a logical sequence, beginning with a premise and terminating with a conclusion. However, the stories told from childhood to the African remain deep-rooted and not easily dislodged. Since the gospel message can be seen as the story of salvation, depicting God’s acts through human history, a new paradigm needs to be espoused for preaching the gospel. Instead of dry dogma, the anecdotal and parabolic model of Jesus, which is in harmony with the African method, should be adopted.

This new approach to doing theology in Africa is recommended by Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz in their book, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. There, the authors use proverbs and myths, found in the local African traditions, as a bridge to contextualizing the communication of the gospel. This approach will definitely be more effective in evangelization and thereby help to curtail the issue of dual allegiance.

D. Develop Healing Ministries

Perhaps more than anything else, the quest for healing is the leading cause for dual allegiance among Africans, because, “healing is central to the African worldview” (Healey and Sybertz, 2006, p. 298). The desire to satisfy this need, which is absent in conservative churches, encourages converts to seek other avenues for help. African churches, therefore, that need to eliminate dual allegiance among

their members must design healing ministries based upon Scriptural premises, and devoid of syncretistic forms. Prayer for the sick, the use of anointing oil, deliverance from demonic harassment, and freedom from generational curses, should be discussed and programs developed to respond to them.

Another dynamic to be considered, is the ministerial formation of persons preparing for gospel ministry. Because the African worldview makes a member to visit the home, or office of the pastor, as the port of first call when ill, ministers greatly need instruction on biblical healing before entry into ministry. Included in the curriculum should be courses on spiritual and natural healing. These courses should provide education on the anatomy of sickness, from the physical and spiritual perspectives, and natural therapies that could aid in healing minor ailments. Efforts should be made to teach students how to appropriate the vast amount of spiritual resources the Scriptures possess for healing. Church leadership should also provide the pastors opportunity for updating on a regular basis, either annually or biennially.

VI. Conclusion

Although the specter of dual allegiance has long been with the church in Africa there is hope that this nagging issue can finally be brought to a decline. As church leadership invests the necessary effort through better planned, intentional discipleship programs, holistic contextualized programs, relevant, relational presentation of the gospel, including engagement in healing ministries; the picture is bound to change for better. Enabling members to discover the first hand power and goodness of God over evil in their experience, as well as responding to their questions and needs, will bring to new life a church that will glow with the glory of God.

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