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Reflecting on tendencies in Nigerian Pentecostalism

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Abstract

Today, Pentecostalism has become a prominent part of global Christianity and its existence has been solidified in major parts of the African Continent. Specifically in Nigeria, Pentecostal Churches have spread across the country. Prominent Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria include the Apostolic Faith, the Assemblies of God Church, the Foursquare Gospel Church, the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Living Faith World Outreach (Winners Chapel), and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries. Pentecostalism in Nigeria apart from being a distinct denomination, the beliefs and practices expressed by it have over the decades become attractive to Christians of other denominations who are fast imbibing the Pentecostal forms of Christian expressions. This paper is a reflection on these expressions as obtained within Pentecostalism in Nigeria. It discusses these practices, explaining their effect on Christianity in Nigeria, with the aim of enlightening believers and recommendations are made as to how the Pentecostal churches can improve on some of these practices. The study adopted the descriptive approach, backed by qualitative use of existing literature.

Introduction

The thriving of Christianity in Africa today has been attested to by scholars across the board. Its existence has been solidified in major parts of the continent. Philip Jenkins in his book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* published in 2002 states that Christianity is doing very well in the global south of which Africa is a significant part. According to him, it is not just surviving but (thriving) expanding. Jenkins (2002:2) states that "already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be

found in Africa and Latin America”. If we want to visualize a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela,” and he reiterates that the trend will continue apace (at a fast speed) in the coming years. Twenty years after, this assertion cannot be faulted as the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa over the decades has been highly explosive.

A major characteristic of this expansion is the flourishing of variants of Pentecostal Churches. Today, Pentecostalism has become a prominent part of global Christianity. Jenkins (2002:8) attesting to the blossoming of the Pentecostal denomination across the globe is of the view that today, Fascists or Nazis are not easy to find, and Communists may be becoming an endangered species, yet Pentecostals are flourishing around the globe, and he reiterates that according to current projections, the number of Pentecostal believers should surpass the one billion mark before 2050.

Specifically in Nigeria, though the latest arrival on the Christian scene, its growth has been quite astounding. It is today a flourishing strand of Christianity across the strata of Nigerian society, especially in the southern part of the country. The rapid spread of this denomination had been attested to by scholars, whose writings had featured prominently in academic discourses for the past few decades. Paul Gifford *et al* (1993), Ruth Marshal-Fratani (1998), Obiora (1998), Matthews Ojo (2006), OlufunkeAdeboye (2006), and OgbuKalu (2008), are among prominent scholars who had attested to the expansion of this brand of Christianity in Nigeria. Agang (2014:1) citing Marshall-Fratani testifies to the great explosion, which Pentecostalism had experienced in Nigeria. According to him “Nigeria has been the site of Pentecostalism’s greatest explosion on the African continent, and the movement’s extraordinary growth shows no signs of slowing”.

Observably, some Pentecostal churches are today larger numerically than some historic denominations. Iheanacho and Ughaerumba (2016:289) estimated the number of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria to be around 5 million in 2016. Prominent Pentecostal churches include the Assemblies of God; the Apostolic Faith Mission, Foursquare Gospel Church, the Apostolic Church, and the Church of God Mission. Others are Deeper Life Bible Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners Chapel, Mountain of Fire and

Miracles Ministries, Daystar Christian Centre and the Christ Embassy to mention a few. What makes Pentecostalism in Nigeria so interesting are its various tendencies, one of which is its influence on the first generation mission churches. Just as Pentecostalism is established as a distinct Christian denomination, so also its beliefs and practices are making waves across other denominations, and even influencing other religions, especially Islam (Adekoya 2004:18-20). It is exerting influence on other denominations to the extent that certain practices associated with it are gaining recognition, becoming attractive and are being embraced by members of the older denominations. Consequently, practices which were erstwhile alien to some of these churches are now quite visible within them. These tendencies of Pentecostalism in Nigeria are the concern of this paper.

Origin and spread of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria

The flourishing of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is attested to in various studies hitherto conducted by scholars in the field of church history and missiology. Today there are many Pentecostal churches scattered across the country. Although nomenclature such as Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, Independent, and Charismatic movements have been applied by scholars to describe this group of churches, they are all referred to in this paper as Pentecostals. This is because irrespective of the classifications, they all have certain emphases in common. First, they emphasise the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial experience of speaking in tongues. They also emphasise the manifestations of spiritual gifts or *charismata* such as prophecy, visions and revelations, healing miracles and the practice of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit as are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:4-10.

According to historians, Pentecostalism in Nigeria evolved in three phases through foreign and indigenous initiatives (Ogunewu 2008:62). The first phase spread from 1915 through the 1960s and was characterised by many segments. It started with the mass revival movement initiated by Garrick Braide which eventually metamorphosed into the Christ Army Church in 1918. Garrick Braide was a Nigerian of Ijaw extraction who initiated a mass revival movement within the Niger Delta around 1916 and 1918. Initially, his movement was supported by the church but gradually fell out of favour as a result of certain factors. Consequently, he was incarcerated by the authorities.

Later released, he lived and died in obscurity in 1918. Though Braide never had the intention of establishing a church, however, the movement which he started metamorphosed into the Christ Army Church after his death, which is today acclaimed as the first Pentecostal church in Nigeria (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997:58-64)

This segment also saw the arrival of foreign Pentecostal churches into the country. Among these are the Faith Tabernacle Church from America and the Apostolic Church of Great Britain all around the 1920s and the 30s (Peel 1968:55). Other churches that came in within this segment are the Apostolic Faith (1944), the Assemblies of God Church (1949), and the Foursquare Gospel Church (1955). Lastly, as a result of the personal initiatives of indigenous people, this segment witnessed the emergence of some homegrown Pentecostal churches, among which are the Redeemed Christian Church of God (1952), the Victory Gospel Church (1958), the Gospel Pentecostal Assembly (1958), the Evangel Faith Mission (1962), and the Gospel Faith Mission (1962) (Ayegboyin and Asonzeh-Ukah 2002:81-82).

The second phase emerged from the 1970s and ran through the 80s. In the view of Ojo (1993:161) this phase was a result of the evangelical awakening which erupted in some of the country's higher institutions, especially the University of Ibadan and Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). Prominent among the churches that were founded around this period were the Deeper Life Bible Church of William Kumuyi, the Church of God Mission of Benson Idahosa, the Living Faith World Outreach (Winners Chapel) of David Oyedepo, and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles of Daniel Olukoya.

The third phase could be traced to the early 1990s and saw the emergence of some new generation Pentecostal churches. In this class are the Christ Embassy, House on the Rock, Fountain of Life Church and the Daystar Christian Centre. All the churches established during these various segments are today flourishing across the country, with branches in major cities and villages. In addition, big churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Winners Chapel and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries have also registered their presence in other nations of the world.

Observable tendencies in Nigerian Pentecostalism

Influencing the older denominations

Pentecostalism has exerted tremendous influence on the Nigerian Christian landscape in the last few decades. Although a global phenomenon, the growth in Nigeria has been explosive and impressive. While Pentecostalism developed in Nigeria in phases, the explosion between 1970-1980 has been quite significant. As earlier explained, Matthews Ojo refers to this as the second phase, explaining that the explosion was a result of religious activities at two foremost universities in Southwestern Nigeria – the University of Ibadan and the Obafemi Awolowo University formerly the University of Ife. According to him, these two institutions became the hotbeds of Pentecostalism around this time and produced strong, young agile and zealous youths who helped to spread the Pentecostal gospel across the nook and crannies of the nation, especially within the southwest (1993:161). In the process, a few churches developed that significantly bore the Pentecostal imprint, prominent among which were the Deeper Life Bible Church founded by William Kumuyi, the Church of God Mission of Late Benson Idahosa and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries founded by Daniel K. Olukoya.

Before this time, leaders of the Mission churches have been alleged of obstructing the move of the Holy Spirit in their churches; they were being accused of presiding over a lukewarm church, where the power of the Holy Ghost is no longer effective. Therefore, there was already a yearning for spiritual awakening among members of the older denominations when Pentecostalism emerged, especially during the second wave of 1970s and 80s. Coincidentally, Pentecostalism coming up at this time tends to meet the yearnings of members of these churches, because just as it was developing into a distinct denomination and leading to the establishment of new independent churches, so also the beliefs and practices promoted by it were infiltrating the existing denominations, especially the Mission Churches; hence yearnings for the Pentecostal experience and practices became highly pronounced among them.

Naturally, there were agitations among the youths in certain denominations for these Pentecostal experiences and practices. Invariably, such Pentecostal emphases and practices as personal experience of conversion or the born

again experience, aggressive prayer, night vigils, baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, emphasis on faith healing and miracles, the use of charismatic gifts and holiness of life, were soon becoming audible and visible among certain older denominations. While certain denominations responded acrimoniously to the scenario, others responding positively to it initiated corresponding institutions within their denominations to accommodate and encourage the Pentecostal ethos of the time. For instance, while the Charismatic Renewals Movements were permitted to operate within the Catholic Church, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) initiated the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion (EFAC), all of which maintained high-level Pentecostal dispositions (Kanu 2012: 120).

There are resounding attestations by scholars and stakeholders across denominations as to the influence that Pentecostalism is exerting on the mainline churches. Achunike (2008:11-12) from his perspective as a leader in the Catholic Church describes the situation thus:

Pentecostalism has penetrated the mainline churches indeed; Charismatism is Pentecostalism in the mainline churches. We have observed elsewhere how Pentecostalism has entered and thoroughly influenced and is still influencing the Catholic Church. It has equally influenced other mainline churches while assuming different names. In the Catholic Church, it is called Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria. It operates as Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC) In the Methodist Church, it is called Methodist Evangelical Movement (MEM). And in the Presbyterian Church - is called Presbyterian Young Peoples Association of Nigeria (PYPAN).

Ayegboyin and Nihinlola (2008:220-222) speaking from the Baptist perspectives explain that Pentecostalism impacted the Baptist Church in the two areas of doctrines and practices. According to them, “pastors, leaders, officers and members of the Nigerian Baptist Convention churches reacted in a variety of ways to Pentecostal influence”, and these had produced three groups of Baptist believers and probably churches. Some Churches, especially those led by young Pastors, are either chiefly or fully Pentecostal in disposition. They have accepted Pentecostalism wholesale because they see the doctrines

to be enticing and they are being referred to as Baptist “Pentecostals”. Others are those who are not favourably disposed to Pentecostal practices and are usually labelled “fundamental and conservative”. The third group are those who though still basically Baptists in their theological convictions, prefer and indeed adopted many Pentecostal modes of worship and these may be referred to as liberal Baptists.

The Anglican Church is no exception. Kanu (2012:84), a researcher into the life of the Anglican Church, in his assessment of the influence that Pentecostalism is having on the Anglican Church, describes the Anglican Church as a giant jolted out of slumber. According to him, it seems that Pentecostalism is making the sleeping giant (Anglican Church) wake up from slumber. Speaking further he reveals that various forms of Pentecostal practices which were erstwhile alien to the Anglican Church now characterised the life of the Church. All aspects of the life of the church are affected as liturgy, worship, prayer life, preaching and the evangelisation process now bear the Pentecostal imprint. This is his description of the situation:

Pentecostal practices are now found in most of the Anglican churches in the Diocese of Awka (Anglican Communion) as a result of Pentecostal impact. There is this practice that Christians who are born again must manifest some spiritual gifts. This is a highly spiritualized perception of Christian living. To this end, many young Anglicans in the Diocese do their best to manifest one spiritual gift or the other Those who manifest such gifts are highly regarded. ... These days, preaching goes with prophesy. Preaching now becomes spontaneous. There is also altar call at the end of every preaching session where people are expected to come up to the altar to give their lives to Jesus. People in Awka Diocese just like the Pentecostals now practice the “command by faith” to stop situations like threatening rain, sickness etc. Pentecostal homiletics is choreographed as a ritual of validation and commitment (Kanu 2012:107-109).

He declared that the role played by the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion (EFAC) in entrenching Pentecostal practices across churches of the Diocese has been quite profound (Kanu 2012:111). Invariably, Pentecostal

emphases and practices have today become regular practices among the mainline denominations.

Improved Spirituality

One commendable value that Pentecostalism added to the practice of Christianity in Nigeria is enhanced spirituality. Pentecostalism introduced into Nigerian Christianity spirituality distinctively and glaringly different from that fostered by the first generation western missionaries, in the mainline churches. Spirituality in this context is the sincere practice of virtues and devotional practices of Christian life and worship that bring believers into an intimate relationship with God. Areas of Christian spirituality which have been enhanced through it across denominations are prayer, fasting and faith. Prayer, fasting and faith represent a set of interwoven phenomena within Christianity. They are issues on which virtually all Christian denominations agree, although with variations in their teaching and practices. Though prayer means different things to different people, the consensus is that it is a divine exercise, mostly a request from a human being to a divine personality. Virtually all Christian authors who had written on prayer consider it a request for divine intervention in human affairs; a means of achieving the impossible and a task that must be done in the Christian life (Prince 1973:58-76).

However, with regards to prayer, the Pentecostal and their counterparts of the African Indigenous (Aladura) Churches are on the same page. A common belief among them is that it is not enough to pray, but prayer must be quite aggressive and relentless; grounded on a strong exercise of faith towards God and sometimes backed with fasting for it to be efficacious. Hence from time immemorial they have been identified with aggressive prayer, which has been given various labels by Christians of other denominations. In times past, imprecatory prayers, violent prayers, fire prayers, and stubborn prayers are some of the labels which have been applied to describe and deride the Pentecostal form of prayers. However, these people would not be bothered, but have continued to emphasise that the solution to any adverse situation is prayer. Hence Pentecostal leaders engage their members in several prayer activities continuously. In a typical Pentecostal environment, there are such activities as prayer and fasting for deliverance from demonic powers; seven days of prayer for expectant mothers and those waiting on the Lord; prayer mountain exercises for break-through; fresh anointing for those seeking life-

partners; over-comers' night of miracles and wonders and the like. All these are ways by which prayer is being promoted among the Pentecostals.

Before now, the mainline churches operate on a quiet mode of prayer. The practice of simultaneous, loud and spontaneous prayer was alien to them all. Usually in some churches, in congregational prayer sessions, one person at a time is asked to pray aloud while the other members of the congregation say "Amen" at the end of the prayer. There are even churches where the average members are merely passive participants in the practices of prayer because the responsibility of praying rests solely on the priests; he alone prays while others say "Amen" at the end. Today, however, studies reveal that praying had assumed a Pentecostal dimension and fasting is becoming prevalent across Christian communities irrespective of denominations. Simultaneously, the use of Prayer Mountains which was earlier predominant among the Pentecostals is fast becoming a culture across Christian denominations.

Another area where the Pentecostals have assisted in boosting spirituality within Nigerian Christendom is the place accorded to the Bible in the scheme of things. They have helped to put the Bible at the centre of the Christian life, by setting aside time for Bible Study. Some of them, like the Deeper Life Bible Church, started as Bible Study groups. Though they have their limitations in this regard, their pastors preach from the Bible; demonstrate great proficiency in the citation of Bible texts and some do their best to live the Bible to the letter. The essential content of all aspects of their message(s) is Bible teaching, centering on the personality and works of the triune God – Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. They emphasise that the message of the Bible is addressed to all humanity, and through it, the Holy Spirit still speaks today. According to Johns (1999:79):

The scripture hold a special place and function within the Pentecostal worldview. Pentecostals differ from Evangelicals and fundamentalists in approach to the Bible. For Pentecostals the Bible is a living book in which the Holy Spirit is always active. It is the word of God, and therefore to encounter the scriptures is to encounter God.

Also commendable is the position accorded to the Holy Spirit in their ministrations. Pentecostals do give the Holy Spirit enough room to express Himself in gifts and personal sanctity of life. While certain denominations of the church believe that the era of the Holy Spirit terminated with the apostles, the Pentecostals are of the view that the Holy Spirit is still active in the church today; hence the emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit is very strong among them.

Kanu in his study on the Awka Diocese of the Anglican Church explains that the Pentecostal influence on the mainline Churches has not only altered the prayer life of the people but has a captivating influence on other aspects of church life and practices like liturgy and doctrines.

One has to observe the young ones of the Diocese when they gather for fellowship. It is continuous clapping of hands, dancing, choruses, speaking in tongues and other Pentecostal activities. The use of relics like handkerchief, holy water and the like as used by the Pentecostals to enhance their spirituality is now the order of the day in the Diocese of Awka (85). ... In many Churches in the Diocese, the congregations now pray aloud simultaneously during Church worship instead of the traditional Anglican practice of the service leader saying prayers on behalf of the entire congregation while everybody echoes Amen at the end. The new liturgy also provides for the greeting of peace in which the congregation freely moves about in the Church during worship, shaking hands with one another while some even hug one another. The Anglican mode of worship before now is in the context of solemnity where every worshipper sits quietly, following the directive of the worship leader. Singing of choruses and clapping of hands, which were hitherto thought as belonging to the independent Churches that have no liturgical tradition, now constitute an essential element in many worship services in the Diocese of Awka. ... This was not the case at the inception and most part of the life of the Diocese (95). ... Set apart prayer, fasting, night vigils and serious bible study are now the order of the day in the Diocese. Home cells are fast developing. Groups form prayer groups which they call home cells or house

fellowship. The emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit is very strong. This helps to influence dynamic and charismatic appeals in the Church. The issue of speaking in tongues is now a common practice in the Diocese (108).

Kanu (2012:95) also attested to the fact that this influence has certain positive dimensions. He declares thus:

Obviously, this modern practice of chorus singing and clapping of hands is of positive value. The choruses may lack proper theology but they are Christian intent and they touch the majority of the congregation. Most preachers in the Diocese now begin or punctuate their sermons with charismatic choruses and such sermons verily touch the heart.

Passion for evangelism and missions

The passion of the Pentecostals for evangelism and missionary activities is commendable. They see themselves as the end-time army for the harvest of souls, whose mission is to take the world for Christ. Consequently, they employ varying evangelism strategies, targeting every stratum of society. There is personal and door-to-door evangelism, whereby they do ministry in motor parks, on buses, trains, street corners, and market places. Crusades and open-air meetings are also conducted across major cities, towns and the hinterlands. In Deeper Life, members are kept on their toes for soul-winning, with the popular slogan “souls are perishing.” The implication of this is that there are still many unconverted people in the world who are daily perishing in their sins and the responsibility to rescue them is placed on the shoulders of the believers. This is to encourage every member to be actively involved in the soul-winning activities of the church.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God declares in its mission statement that its goal is to reach heaven and to take as many people as possible with them. To achieve this goal, they would plant churches within a five minutes walking distance in every city and town in developing countries; and within a five minutes driving distance in every city and town in developed countries (Kalu 2008:126). They vowed to pursue this objective until every nation in the world has been reached for Christ. A close observation of the increases of local

parishes of the church across major cities and towns in Nigeria is an indication that the church is making good its promise.

The zeal with which the Pentecostals pursue evangelism, missions and other pastoral activities is worthy of emulation. For example, William Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church, apart from being the senior pastor, also plays a significant role in the outreach evangelisation programmes of the church. At 80 years of age, he still travels across Nigeria and other nations of the world preaching the gospel, all in the interest of evangelisation. Similarly, Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God still takes time out of his busy schedule to lead the “Go-a-fishing” evangelisation programme of his church. Even Benson Idahosa during his lifetime evangelised across the nations of Africa and beyond and the same could be said of others like David Oyedepo and Daniel Olukoya. These efforts have seen Pentecostal churches expanding at home and simultaneously breaking frontiers into other nations of the world in Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Scandinavia. Prominent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria like the Church of God Mission, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, Winners Chapel, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries have spread into other African communities, Asia and the western world. As far back as the year 2000, Deeper Life had its presence in 86 countries of the world (Life Magazine 2000: Cover Page).

Media utilisation

One fascinating aspect of their conversion drive is the application of media and communication technologies in evangelisation. They have continually enhanced their evangelisation programmes and increased their visibility through the use of various media forms. Radio, television, films, literature, books, audio and video cassettes and compact discs, cable television, satellite communications and the internet have been used over the decades by Pentecostal churches to boost their evangelistic operations. Through this, they have been able to send the gospel message to the remotest parts of the world and even to places officially closed to it.

In Nigeria until recently, printed materials – books, tracts, and magazines – have been the traditional media for the dissemination of the gospel and there are Christian authors across denominations. However, the more prolific writers seem to come from the Pentecostal fold. Prominent among them are

William Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church; David Oyedepo of the Winners' Chapel; Daniel Olukoya of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries; Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy; and Sam Adeyemi of Daystar Christian Centre to mention a few. In the same vein, the presence of Pentecostal churches and evangelism was more pronounced on the airwaves when radio stations in Nigeria started accepting commercial religious programmes. The same goes for televangelism in Nigeria. In this, credit should be given to Late Benson Idahosa, for pioneering televangelism in Nigeria and Ayo Oritsejafor, his former aide, who later joined him on the project. Today, there are many preachers on the television network across the nation and also few churches operate television stations in one way or the other, yet, it is observed that the Pentecostals' involvement in this project is still highly pronounced, compared to that of other denominations. All these efforts put together have been avenues through which the gospel message has been propelled into the nook and crannies of the world and they were also the channels through which Pentecostal ideas and practices penetrated the mainline churches (Achunike 2007:95).

Supernatural manifestations

Supernatural manifestations mean the demonstration of the power of God beyond human comprehension. A miracle is a dominant factor in supernatural manifestations, though manifestations could be through faith/divine healing, deliverance, signs and wonders, seeing of visions and interpretation of dreams. However, the issue of miracles is highly contentious. While some believe in it, others do not. Many antagonists of miracles deride claims to it as untenable. One prominent antagonist of miracles is David Hume. Hume ruled out the possibility of a miracle because, according to him, miracles violate the law of nature. He contends that religious people use miracles to propagate their faith (Hume 1966:126), possibly to coerce others into it. In other words, to Hume, a miracle is a hoax designed by religious people to deceive the gullible, probably intending to coerce them into their faith.

Incidentally, the belief in miracles is widespread among religious groups, especially the Christians, however, within the Christian fold, the belief is more prevalent among the Pentecostals/Charismatic and *Aladura* Christians. While many, even among Christian denominations claim that the days of miracle are gone, the Pentecostals affirm its authenticity. They are unwavering in their

faith that the days of miracles are still here with us. They keep sounding it to all, loud and clear that God still possesses the ability to perform miracles and often testify to miracles, which they claim God has wrought through their ministrations. Basing their confidence on scriptural verses such as Mark 10:27, Luke 1:37 and John 14:12 – they reiterate that faith in God can achieve the impossible. In the process, they have helped to develop peoples' faith in God, debunking the view of “the withdrawn God” and/or the death-of-God theology, expressed by some philosophers and antagonists of Christianity. To them God is not withdrawn from the affairs of this world, neither is he dead, but perpetually alive and practically involved in all the affairs of life (Ogunewu 2015:96).

Another dimension to supernatural manifestations is vision. Vision denotes the ability to see beyond the physical, through the application of charismatic gifts. It is seeing through the spiritual eye what the physical eye could not see. An extension of vision is hearing audible voices, which others around may not be able to hear. Other areas of charismatic gifts are divine healing and deliverance. Interestingly, leaders of Pentecostal churches claim to operate these charismatic gifts. They see visions and give prophetic utterances which tend to give direction to their members, enabling them to identify the type of spiritual antidotes, for the different existential problems which generally confront them. Conversely, critics of Pentecostal churches have refused to accept this form of ministry as being authentically Christian; rather, they have maintained that these practices are a mistaken interpretation of the Bible. This notwithstanding, the Pentecostals see the application of charismatic gifts as means of divine guidance. It is considered the promise of God to the Church of which they are a part. This is often connected with Joel 2:28-29 as alluded to by Peter in Acts 2:17-18 on the Day of Pentecost. They believe that it is a promise of God to be appropriated by Christians in the last days, which is now. Observably, these are partly some of the practices that endeared them to their members and which had resulted in the expansion of the denomination.

Women leadership roles

The prominent place accorded women in the leadership of the Pentecostal churches is also admirable. While certain denominations are averse to women's leadership of the church and generally relegated

them to the background in the scheme of things, Pentecostal churches have raised women's leadership to an appreciable level, as women play prominent roles in their churches. Philip Jenkins in his book *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, explains that the patriarchal culture dominates many countries of the Global South, just like in the Jewish community of the Bible. This is a practice whereby women play second fiddle in society. By extension, this culture also became the norm across churches in these countries. Consequently, this affected the positions of women, especially in the mission churches, as many scriptural portions were applied to reinforce the practice. However, speaking further he reiterates that the Independent and the Pentecostal Churches took exception to this, by not only giving prominence to the position of women in the church but also encouraging women to become church founders. He cited the examples of Alice Lenshina, an African woman prophet, founder of a church and prolific author of vernacular hymns; and that of many women in the ministry of the church, emphasising that Global South women have been creative in finding scriptural bases for active ministries (Jenkins 2006:159-168). Today, while the position of women is still a subject of controversy and contempt in some churches, Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria are providing opportunities for women to be active in ministry.

For example, within Deeper Life, great attention is given to the development of women. With about a dozen books written on women and women's affairs; a magazine wholly devoted to the subject; a special weekly service for women and consistent conferences for women leaders, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the development of women is very dear to the hearts of the leaders of the church. According to the leadership, women have a whole lot of ministry to fulfil for God. They could sing, intercede, have a support ministry for their husbands; minister to the needs of prisoners, the aged, the children, the outcast within society, the rural populace, evangelise the unconverted, counsel young converts and those in need (Kumuyi 2000:23-39).

Incidentally, many women have been used by God to accomplish great feats in Christian ministry. Among these are Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army, Mary Slessor, Missionary to Calabar, Nigeria, Florence Crawford founder of the Apostolic Faith and Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Foursquare Gospel Church (Tucker and Liefeld 1987:264, 308, 360, 364). Today in Nigeria, there are many female founders of Pentecostal Churches and many of them are known to be doing well in ministry. This prominent place accorded women by the Pentecostal Churches attracted many of them into the membership of the churches and led to some of them becoming useful instruments in the hands of God, thus having fulfilled ministries which would not have been possible in other denominations. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Pentecostal churches are playing significant roles in society, assisting in discouraging gender disparity, and encouraging the emancipation of women.

Humanitarian and socio-economic concerns

The humanitarian stance of the Pentecostals is highly commendable. They seem to be more of their brothers' keepers than what is obtainable in other denominations. Historically, social ministry has been a functional part of Christianity since its inception. It is on record that major social institutions in Nigeria today were initiated by the missionaries. Interwoven into their mission of evangelisation was the establishment of educational and health institutions. However, partly as a result of the government take-over of schools from the voluntary agencies in the 1970s, the involvement of the church in the provision of social amenities dwindled drastically by the 1980s. Simultaneously around this time, the economic fortune of the country also started deteriorating halfway into the second republic. These resulted in economic hardship for the masses. Incidentally, it was around this time that new generations of Pentecostal churches emerged and through their humanitarian engagements were able to bring succour to their members. Ruth Marshall (1993:16-17) described the humanitarian posture of these churches in this way:

Members organised into small neighbourhood prayer groups encouraged one another spiritually, and whenever one falls sick

or faces financial disaster, members of the small group come to cook, mind children, or pool resources to find the money needed. Many churches set up nurseries and kindergartens, provide medical services (usually faith healing) at “faith clinics”, and counselling services on financial, marital and other matters. Despite the fact that members tend to be poor, there are those members who because of their material success offer possibilities of patronage.

This humanitarian gesture not only helped in bringing members into the churches but also assisted in solidifying their stay. It was at this time around the 1980s that the prosperity theology came with its emphasis on payment of tithes, offerings and wealth making. With this, they help to bring faithfulness in the payment of tithes and offerings to the front burner of Christian life across denominations. They also assisted to bail many out of poverty. Though prosperity theology has its flaws, one key emphasis of the prosperity preachers is being gainfully engaged. They teach that material prosperity has its source in God, yet it is expected to be produced through the work of one’s hand (Ojo 2006:206-207). David Oyedepo, the foremost prosperity preacher in Nigeria today in his teaching often emphasises the necessity of work as a way to breakthrough. He puts it this way:

Can you imagine a student in school that does nothing but read the Bible, pray and fast, when his textbooks are there? He will be the most fantastic charismatic figure (but a failure academically). That is why the Bible emphasizes in James 2:17, that faith without works is dead. Unfortunately, this is where many charismatics have crashed, they substituted work for faith. But faith is fake without work. ... Thank God for faith, but in the school of success, faith is impotent without work (Oyedepo 2003:49-50).

Though the prosperity theology has been messed up in certain quarters, from this assertion of Oyedepo one could deduce the emphasis of hard work as entrenched in the teaching by its early proponents and in fairness to Oyedepo, it is very difficult to find a member of his church (the Winners Chapel) without a source of livelihood. This is because the emphasis on being gainfully engaged and earning a living through legitimate means is ceaseless within the church.

Also, seminars and conferences are held continuously to sensitise members on available business and employment opportunities. This is responsible for the tremendous youth population of his church.

The prosperity theology did not only encourage Christians to earn their living decently, but it also mandated them to be their brothers' keepers by caring for the less-privileged in the society. In this regard, some of the Pentecostal churches have humanitarian outfits through which people are empowered economically, in one way or the other. Often, they organise what they refer to as "poverty alleviation programmes", to bring succour to the lives of the underprivileged. Ayo Oritsejafar, the immediate past president of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), established the Eagle Hand International Foundation through which he has empowered many among the less-privileged, especially within his base, the Niger Delta community (Dike Utih, Oral Interview 2017). Kalu (2008:136) has this to say about humanitarian services from the perspective of a Pentecostal Church:

For instance, True Redeemed Evangelical Mission in Lagos founded an NGO, the African Mission Committee, to "support the RCCG in reaching its vision for Africa in fulfilment of its end time mission of saving souls, particularly the oppressed and underprivileged; to eradicate poverty by providing self-enrichment courses and community development programmes; to educate on and reduce the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in many African countries. The mission offers the less privileged a free educational and vocational training in artisan vocation such as soap making, barbering, hairdressing, and hair weaving.

Also, the RCCG, has a committee known as the Redeemed AIDS Programme Action Committee (RAPAC) whose assignment is to assist AIDS patients medically, spiritually and most times financially. It is also saddled with the task of discouraging youth from pre-marital sex and other promiscuous tendencies. Regular enlightenment programmes are organised to assist the committee in achieving its set objectives (Ayegboyin and Ogunewu 2014:83).

Today, many Pentecostal churches have moved from being mere worshipping communities to being actively involved in the socio-economic life of the nation.

They have commercial outfits that offer employment to many. Some of the prominent Pentecostal churches maintain media ministries that produce various forms of media products – books, cassettes, and compact discs. This, apart from economically enriching the church, also provide sources of livelihood for many – proof-readers, printers, bookshop attendants and other sales agents of the church. Though other denominations too are into operations of commercial establishments, the Pentecostals are more into this than others. For example, from observation, no leader in other denominations can rival the number of books being authored by Kumuyi, Oyedepo and Olukoya on an annual basis. All these tend to give the Pentecostal churches an edge over other denominations.

Disturbing dimensions to the prosperity theology

Prosperity theology which emerged within Pentecostalism in the 1980s was one of the factors responsible for the explosion of the denomination in Nigeria. However, certain abnormalities associated with its practice have occasioned criticism against it across the strata of Nigerian society. This is because just as the teaching has helped bail some out of their economic predicaments, in like manner it has been a source of misery to some. First, while the good intentions of the earlier proponents of the teaching cannot be denied, others had in the process of time polluted it with their selfish agenda, produced several dubious versions of it and turned it into an instrument of financial exploitation. Observably, the atrocities being perpetrated by some preachers in the name of prosperity preaching are no doubt grievous, unpleasant and undesirable. It is glaring that giving to God as is associated with prosperity preaching is being used by some “unscrupulous preachers” to defraud the people of God. Such preachers devise various strategies to fleece the people and many, especially the gullible are falling for their whims and caprices. This type of attitude is criminal and inimical to the life of the church.

Next, the approaches being employed by some prosperity preachers to prosecute their messages had no doubt fostered and entrenched a culture of materialism among some members of Pentecostal churches. The prosperity theology has been taken to a detrimental level to the extent that it is fast becoming a bane of Christianity in the country, as many of the prosperity preachers have undermined essential Christian teachings like salvation and holiness and are now in quick pursuit of materialism. While it may not be out

of place for churches to teach their adherents how to better their lot economically, some preachers have gone to the extreme in the teachings of the prosperity gospel to the extent that today, success in Christian life and ministry is being measured in terms of wealth, prestige and power, with less emphasis placed on salvation and spiritual growth. This has heightened the quest for materialism among Nigerian Christians in recent times so that unwholesome practices which continually portray the church in a bad light before the world are becoming quite pronounced, especially among the youth. Achunike (2007:83) observes that “the Nigerian religious space has been inundated by this form of preaching such that youths seem to believe in prosperity without hard work.”

Some are commercialising the gospel in the name of prosperity. Items such as anointing oil, and handkerchiefs popularly referred to as mantle are sold at exorbitant prices, deceiving the people to believe that such products work wonders and occasion prosperity. An extension of this is the flamboyant lifestyles of some Pentecostal pastors. This had occasioned public criticism of Pentecostal churches in the country over the decades. Some move around in chains of cars. In the observations of Kitause and Achunike (2015:7) “some Pentecostal pastors have been accused of being money minded and not preaching pure Gospel and many of them lead flamboyant lifestyle.” In the same vein, Adasu (1992:447), a Nigerian priest, spotlights the prosperity gospel as a phenomenon which has obliterated and diminished the basic teachings and spiritual fervour of the church in Nigeria.

Offensive prayer language

Prayer is an integral part of every religion, especially Christianity. Prayer, according to the Bible, has many objectives, consequently, the Bible enjoins Christians to pray. As earlier discussed, this biblical injunction has been taken seriously by the Pentecostals over the decades and is today being emulated by Christians of other denominations. However, the purpose of prayer as it is being defined by some Pentecostal churches today and the language being employed to prosecute their prayers is a cause of concern to many well-meaning Christians. While the aggressive prayer pattern of the Pentecostals is to be commended, some of the “foul languages” employed during prayers are, to say the least, disgusting. In some of these churches, especially those operating as Deliverance Ministries, prayer has become the main weapon of

attack to kill the enemy. It is common today to hear prayer points from Christians commanding the death of their purported enemies. You hear such command as - "Enemy of my father's house, what are you waiting for? Fall down and die or be roasted by fire in Jesus's name." Chioma Gabriel (2016:10-21) commenting on this form of prayer lamented a situation in our churches where prayers are offered to kill. She refers to such prayer as 'the die, die prayer' and affirms that it has become part and parcel of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. Such prayer languages are rather unbiblical and leaders of Pentecostal churches concerned should learn to moderate them. The Bible commands Christians to love and pray for their enemies.

Excesses in media activities

The application of the media in the communication of the gospel message is one factor which had assisted tremendously in the expansion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. However, the manner in which some Pentecostal pastors operate their media ministry had fallen short of good reasoning in the recent past. The most affected are the television programmes. While the television is a commendable channel for the spreading of the gospel, the flamboyant lifestyle that some Pentecostal ministers often display on their television programmes negates the gospel, as many of them resort to self-imaging and promotion rather than preaching the gospel.

In the year 2004, the Federal Government of Nigeria frowned at the "*modus operandi*" of some Pentecostal televangelists. Reacting through its agent, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, it banned what was referred to as the "broadcast of unverifiable miracles." A cross-section of the public also reacted in various ways to the issue (Eyoboka 2004). The issue at stake at that time was the broadcast of miracles over television. In some of their television programmes, Pentecostal pastors are in the habit of taking testimonies of miracles, which they claimed have attended their ministrations. While this may not be out-of-place, members of the public considered some of these miracles to be outrageous. Reacting to the situation, the government considering these as an insult to the sensibility of Nigerians placed a ban on the broadcast of such programmes. Today, however, there is still the need for a reappraisal of some of these television programmes to ensure that they are geared towards the preaching of the gospel.

Deficiency in formal theological training

Theological education occupied a pride of place among the first generation mission churches. However, it took the Pentecostal churches some time before they recognized the necessity for theological education for their pastors. In the early days of the Pentecostal movement, there was the misconception among its leaders that theological education is not in any way necessary for church ministers. In fact, education as a whole was labelled as antithetical to spirituality. According to Ojo (2006:236), some pioneers of Charismatic Movements in Nigeria were anti-clerical. They usually paint the picture of the trained clergy as one who had been blinded by Satan with “book knowledge” and cannot (therefore) grasp the essence of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, many of the pioneers of this movement distanced themselves from the acquisition of theological training.

The situation can be said to be better today, as some of the prominent Pentecostal churches now have theological institutions where their pastors are being trained. This notwithstanding, there are still certain adjustments that need to be made in this direction by the churches in this group. First, some Pentecostal pastors are still averse to theological education. These still align with the misconception that all that is needed to lead the church is the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, such should be encouraged to avail themselves of the opportunity that formal theological training provides. Simultaneously, there is the need to upgrade the quality of theological education in some Pentecostal theological institutions. In this regard, Kalu (2008:123-124) commenting on the low quality of theological education in some Pentecostal theological institutions decried the situation whereby leaders in the 21st-century church acting like old-time prophets still depend on grooming future leaders through apprenticeship and unaccredited Bible schools. In most cases, these Bible schools are not open to scrutiny from external bodies, so the quality of the programmes cannot be guaranteed. Many leaders fashion their curriculum by themselves with little or no expert advice. Incredibly too, some of the initiators of these curriculum packages do not possess any theological training. In this regard, leaders of Pentecostal churches still have a lot to do. They would need to allow external assessors to examine their theological education programmes to assist in the upgrading of the training, both in quantity and quality.

Faulty hermeneutics and theologies

The fallout of the deficiencies in theological education is faulty hermeneutics and theologies. Hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation. It is the study of the principles for sound, interpretation of Scripture (Horton 2006:689), while theology has to do with teachings about God and all that pertains to Him as deduced from the Scripture, which invariably produces doctrines or teaching in the church. Both hermeneutics and theology are inseparable because what the Scripture is translated to mean would inform the teaching that would emerge from it. Consequently, to have a sound theology, there must have been a sound interpretation of the Scriptures. While sound interpretation would produce healthy teaching, a faulty interpretation will naturally lead to faulty teaching or doctrine for the church. Some Pentecostal pastors, because of their deficiencies in theological training, are fond of giving wrong interpretations of the Scriptures and this often results in faulty teachings in their churches.

A typical example of faulty hermeneutics among Nigerian Pentecostal pastors is Isaiah 6:1-8:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." ... Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"(NIV)

This scriptural portion describes the call of Prophet Isaiah into the prophetic ministry. The phrase – “in the year that King Uzziah died” is the point of interest here. This phrase according to Don Fleming (1990:193), a Bible commentator is only an indication of the period when the Prophet Isaiah was called into the prophetic office. It only describes the historical setting and nothing more. However, some Nigerian Pentecostal pastors, because of their limited understanding of biblical interpretation, often translated this to mean that the call of Isaiah was able to come through only after the death of Uzziah. In other

words, Uzziah being alive stood as an obstruction to Isaiah's call and it was his death that opened the way for his call to manifest. To them, had Uzziah not died, Isaiah would not have seen the Lord and his call would have been delayed. In this context, they have often told their members that their desire for progress in life may be an illusion for as long as some people remain alive. They reiterate that certain people must die if their breakthroughs are not to be an illusion of a lifetime.

It is in this context that we have situations in some of our churches and prayer centres when prayers are targeted to kill certain presumed enemies as earlier discussed. This type of teaching often creates an atmosphere of mistrust among neighbours and has adversely affected interpersonal relationships, even among Christians. This scenario makes sound understanding of Scripture impossible and immature Christians are produced in the process. It is therefore imperative for church leaders to be given adequate theological training, so that they may possess a sound understanding and consequently be able to give a sound interpretation of Scripture.

Conclusion

Pentecostalism as a Christian denomination has had tremendous expansion in Nigeria in the last three to four decades. Apart from being a distinct denomination, the beliefs and practices expressed by it have over the decades become attractive to Christians of other denominations who are fast imbibing these forms of Christian expressions. Observable, there are various tendencies within Nigerian Pentecostalism. This paper discussed these tendencies, highlighting the implications that they portend for Christianity in the country. In conclusion, generally, Christian leaders should understand that religion is dynamic and subjective to changes continuously; they should therefore be open to positive changes as they might occur within Christianity from time to time. However, as much as changes are desirable, leaders and followers must be wary of swallowing every new belief and practice, hook line and sinker in the name of embracing change(s). This may lead to errors, whenever negative teachings are embraced. The way out is for everyone to develop themselves spiritually, through the systematic study and sound understanding of the Scripture, to mature into a type of Christian who can no longer be tossed around by every wind of doctrine. With regards to the Pentecostal churches,

they are to be appreciated for the series of innovations they have introduced and the influence they have wielded within Christianity in Nigeria. However, they should do a reappraisal of some of their doctrines to correct observable anomalies in their teachings. They should also improve the quality and quantity of their theological education and make it mandatory for all members of the clergy to acquire the training commensurate with their ministerial responsibilities.

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DUST or ASHES: Cremation Choice Among Kenyan Christians

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Abstract

This article explores cremation as an alternative way of disposing of the dead among African Christians in Kenya. It examines the theological justification for this practice as an accepted way of disposing of the dead. The study applies the Zerfass Model² to provide a theological basis for cremation: First, the theological tradition is studied; second, a situation analysis is conducted; third, critical correlations are explored; and finally, a theory is constructed. This study shows that burial predates Christianity, meaning that Christians adopted a common practice in their context. It further shows the weakness of using scriptural accounts as grounds against cremation, which they neither command, encourage nor condone. This study identifies motivations of Kenyan Christians who choose cremation. These reasons include changing cultural norms, exposure, Churches reform of funeral policies, and openness to new thinking. This study proposes that cremation would not offend African customs for

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² Roman Catholic theologian Rolf Zerfass invented the Zerfass Model in 1974. The model analyses a concrete situation which points to the departure of a present praxis. This model used to conduct a study in practical theology provides an outline for the research project that follows a logical framework of four steps: Introduction, Step 1: Theological Tradition, Step 2: Situation Analysis Step 3: Critical Correlation Step 4: Theory Construction and Conclusion (see Zerfass 1974:167-8).

disposing of the dead and offers theological grounds for accepting cremation as a Christian option for disposing of the dead.

Introduction

Every time a prominent Kenyan Christian is cremated instead of being buried,³ a debate ensues among Kenyan Christians on the best ways of disposing of their dead. The real contestation is on whether Christianity sanctions cremation.

The attitude of Christians has not shifted to favor cremation, despite the reforms churches have made on their funeral policies. For example, the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) adopted changes to accept cremations as a way of disposing of the dead in 1999 (ACK, Special Provincial Synod 2000, Min 3.9). But when Manasses Kuria, ACK's second Archbishop, cremated the body of his wife Mrs. Mary Nyambura Kuria in 2002⁴ astonished Christians disapproved of his action. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had relaxed her position on cremation for their followers following Vatican II.⁵

This article examines the debate about whether Christianity sanctions cremation. First, it explains the historical development of burial as a church practice adopted by most Christians in Kenya and highlights various customary African norms for disposing of the dead. Second, it examines incidences of cremations in Kenya, explaining why Christians are taking up this practice. Third, it sets up a critical correlation of the findings in the second step, with the normative traditions of the Kenyan Christians. Fourth, it applies the empirical data and theological discourse to offer a theory for action which

³ On the increase of cremation among prominent Kenyan Christians, see <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/lifestyle/article/2001330357/high-profile-kenyans-getting-fed-up-with-overzealous-burials>.

⁴ The cremation took place on 8th July 2002, at the Langata Crematorium, only two days after she passed away at the Nairobi Hospital. As was reported by Eliud Miring'uh, *The East African Standard* (9 July 2002).

⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74: AAS 58 (1966).

revises the present praxis. It adduces theological grounds that allow Christians to accept cremation as another way of disposing of their dead.

Theological Tradition

The core practice for disposing of the dead among Kenyan Christians remains burial, although increasing numbers of Christians are adopting cremation as an alternative. Upon death people perform particular rituals to care and dispose of the corpses. Bondi (2015: n.p.) identifies such ritualized burial as a primitive sign of religious faith. These rituals shadow a people's gained spiritual tradition, since they understand death as a transition to the afterlife. In this section I explore the historical development of burial as a Christian practice and various customary African norms for disposing of the dead.

Bunson (1991:87) dates the Egyptians' burial rites around c.6000 — 3150 BCE in the Pre-Dynastic Period, long before Judaism and Christianity. The most popular Egyptian practice of disposing of the dead was mummification, which was practiced as early as 3500 BCE. The Egyptians adhered to this practice in order to preserve the corpse buried in the arid sand. Mark (2013:1) describes an example of a preserved body of a person called "Ginger" which was discovered in a tomb in Gebelein, Egypt, dated to 3400 BCE. The Egyptian tombs were graves dug into the earth as the eternal resting place of the body (Khat), which protected them from grave robbers and the elements. These tombs became important in Egyptian civilization, as they used mud bricks to build more ornate graves, the rectangular mastabas. It was from the mastabas they developed the "step pyramids" and later the "true pyramids" (Mark 2013:4).

The Egyptian burial rites were dramatic. They hoped that through their mourning the dead would enter a blissful eternal land through the grave. The burial pointed to a vision of eternity, with the graves containing goods as provisions for the afterlife. Nardo (2004:110) quotes Herodotus (484–425/413 BCE):

As regards mourning and funerals, when a distinguished man dies, all the women of the household plaster their heads and faces with mud leaving the body indoors, perambulate the town

with the dead man's relatives, their dresses fastened with a girdle, and beat their bared breasts. The men, too, for their part, follow the same procedure, wearing a girdle and beating themselves like the women. The ceremony is over when they take the body to be mummified.

The physical body was of immense importance to the Egyptians, as Mark (2013:2, 4) illustrates with the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony. The Egyptians conducted this ceremony to reanimate the corpse for continued use by the soul. They performed it by placing the mummy in the tomb where a priest recited spells and touched the mouth of the corpse to eat and drink, and its arms and legs to move about in the tomb (Mark 2013:4). So, to release the corpse on its journey to the afterlife, the people invoked more spells and recited prayers, such as the Litany of Osiris. Bunson (1991:198) considers, "the mysteries recounted the life, death, mummification, resurrection, and ascension of Osiris" as the core part of the Egyptian practice. Hence, proper burial rituals were very important and strictly observed. Even if one had lived an exemplary life, one would not reach paradise if one's burial did not adhere to all their funerary rites.

These Egyptian burial rites and belief in life beyond death spread into the Roman empire once Egypt became Roman province during the Ptolemaic Period (323-30 BCE) (Mark 2013:1). Other civilizations and religions of the ancient world gained the Egyptian belief and practice about the dead through cultural transmission and trade on the Silk Road. One could also trace the influence of Egyptian practices on Hebrew/Jewish practices during this time, which subsequently influenced Christian practices. There is scant evidence of burial rites and customs of the Church during the first centuries CE. There was no known distinct Christian burial form during the first two Christian centuries. The early Christians observed local burial customs (White 1997:197), which, according to Peterson (2001:195), explains the lack of Christian burial customs. Rowell (1997:19) contends that the rites of burial in the early Christianity were not controversial matters and so did not feature in apologetic or polemical works. Hence, references to them are only incidental, resulting in a dearth of information detailing the Christian burial practices. But, according to White (1997:197), only in the late second century did the first unique Christian concerns regarding in burial emerge. During the church's first three centuries,

cemeteries exhibited Christian care of their dead (Rutherford 1990:6). Roman catacombs bear witness to the early Christian's consistent practice of burying their dead.

Initially, Christians and pagans buried their dead in the same cemeteries. After the fourth century, Christians distinguished their graves, marking them with decorative representation and inscriptions. Christians differed in the burial motif as well. Christians did not remember their dead with sadness and resignation, but believed their dead preceded the living to the shepherd's paradise, "to the place of refreshment, light and peace" (Rutherford 1990:6).

The first Christians followed Jewish burial customs, which they modified to reflect both local practices and Christian hope (Brigham 1979:558). They not only adapted contemporary non-Christian funeral practices but modelled them to reflect their monotheism. This, Childers (1997:443) notes, defined Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Of all their influence in the Roman empire, Julian ranks the Christians' care for their dead in burial as top in converting the empire (Julian, *The Letter to Arsaces*, XLIX). Christians expressed the characteristics of their new faith in their belief in the body's resurrection through the reverence for the body in their funeral rites (Smith and Cheetham 1875:251), giving us a long-established liturgy of the Christian burial rites, comprising the funeral Mass, followed by the absolution over the body and burial in a consecrated or blessed grave. Long (2009:8) described this practice:

They invited once more the community of faith, and in dramatic fashion, to recognize that Christian life is shaped in the pattern of Christ's own life and death. We have been, as Paul says in Romans (6:3-5), baptized into Jesus' death and baptized into Jesus' life: do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

The ACK shares other Christian denominations' understanding of burial as a pious tradition among Christians, a practice which, as McDonald (1971:134) notes, "the church has always tried to encourage by supporting it with an appropriate ritual designated to highlight the symbolism and religious significance of burial". Every death confronts African Christians with the

challenge of disposing of the corpse. They are torn between adhering to the tenets of the Christian faith and their African worldview, which believes that the dead have power over the living. In most African societies, life and death exist together on a continuum. Death is a rite of passage that ushers one into becoming an “ancestor” who continues to live in the community (Oginde 2019a: n.p.). Ocholla-Ayayo (Bondi 2015: n.p.), observes that the event of death amongst the Luo presented a “crisis of life” and an element in the life cycle of the individual. This explains why death and funeral rites, among the Luo and Luyia, involve not only the bereaved’s immediate family but also their extended family and the community at large. Since death means exiting this world and entering the invisible world, proper death rites became a necessity to guarantee protection for the living.

The manner and location of the burial among the Luo is determined by the individual’s status in society, the nature of their death, and their deeds, as well as the rituals performed to appease the ancestors. The displaying of the deceased’s body remains an important part of Luo custom. After observing burial rites, they disposed of the body in a rectangular grave about five feet or deeper. The Luo, like the Luhya and the Gusii, bury their dead within the deceased’s homestead. They also bury their dead infants (including stillborn), although the Luhya methods differ from the Luo in insignificant details. Difference in burial methods, asserts Ocholla-Ayayo (1970: n.p.), highlights the differing social distinctions amongst members of the tribes, thus maintaining the societal order.

The rituals surrounding death amongst Africans are systematic. They keep ancestral links, guide succession and inheritance, and underscore the interdependence and the conjoined relations of living kin. The Luo observed these rites to prepare for the afterlife, which is part of the continuum that fulfils one’s social responsibilities. It evinced the intricate relationship between the dead and the living in Luo nomenclature, which incorporates the name of the spirits (*nying juogi*). While the Luyia used funerals to please the ancestral spirits, strengthened by the notion during *Lisaabo*, a remembrance of the dead ancestors. Hence, the ritualistic slaughter of animals and the serving of food and drinks to mourners.

Nomadic communities, such as the Maasai, did not allow the sick or aged to die in the home. Instead, they took them into the forest, hillside, or lay them abandoned by the river. Once dead, the Maasai buried their dead under a tree in the sitting position with the deceased's chin resting on the knees. They then covered the body with stones. However, these landmarks were weak, allowing hyenas to sniff out the corpse and pull it from its tomb in a practice known as exposure.

The Kikuyu, like the Maasai, practised exposure, discarding their dead to the wild animals. In his biography, Francis Hall (2006:152-3) claimed to have buried victims of the disease himself, since, under the Kikuyu customary law, corpses ought not to be touched. The Meru, like Kikuyu, abhor contamination through contact with corpses. Hence, those who disposed of corpses, including their family members, underwent ritual cleansing and shaving.

But not every Kikuyu threw their deceased to hyenas. The rich were buried. According to Mbugua (2014:72-3), a *kībĩrĩra* was the burial ground where the Kikuyu took their dead. Before burial, they performed rituals which involved a careful wrapping of the body in a sleeping position with the *kībĩrĩra* facing the homestead. These were elaborate rites, costing sheep and goats beyond the means of many. The Kikuyu funeral rites culminated in a full *Gũkũra* ceremony, which showed the deceased person's spirit achieving ancestral status.

Today burial ceremonies even amongst African Christians often involve prayers in a church and at the dead person's home, alongside traditional rituals.

Situation Analysis

Reasons for increased cremation incidences in Kenya vary. I identify them as individual preferences, relaxation of religious opposition, cultural changes, environmental reasons, public health emergency, and worldwide acceptance and analyze them in this section.

Individual preference

The major reason for cremation in Kenya is honoring the departed's wish. For example, Archbishop Kuria honored his wife's preference for being cremated in 2002. According to Maurice Murimi, Kuria's son-in-law, "it was not the

family's decision but the express choice of our mother." Three years afterwards, Archbishop Kuria died, leaving a similar will to be charred. ACK Primate David Gitari, in 2005, did not interfere with his predecessor's wish for cremation.⁶ Justifying his stand, Gitari pointed out that the ACK has always respected a family's decision on internment. The Roman Catholics take a similar position, giving individuals the right to choose the church for their funeral rites and the cemetery for their burial, to the individuals (Canon Law 1985: 1223 #1).

Relaxing religious perspective

Apart from Muslims, who forbid cremation, most religions have considered cremation a legitimate way of disposing of the dead. Although Christian denominations prefer burial, all except for the Greek Orthodox allow cremation. The Kenyan Church is part of other global Christian denominations and shares these beliefs with them. Anglicans/Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists, permit cremation before or after the funeral rite. Presbyterians do not support cremation, but do not forbid it.

The ACK proposed changes to her funeral policies accommodating cremation at its 1999 Provincial Synod (Gitari 2014:120-22). The adopted resolution states:

The African culture has not yet accommodated itself to the practice of cremation. But if a Christian in his or her will wishes his body to be cremated, the church will accept that wish (Min 3.9 SPS/ 07/2000).

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) prefers cremation after the funeral Mass and demands burial of the remains in the ground or at sea or entombed in a columbarium. They forbid the scattering or the family from keeping the ashes. Although the RCC pronounced herself on cremation earlier, they were slower in implementing it. During the Vatican II, the Catholic Church reformed her funeral and burial rites to a more relaxed approach, allowing cremation with one very explicit proviso. The RCC codified this modification in the latest Code of Canon Law:

⁶ Archbishop Kuria was cremated on 20th September 2005, a day after his death.

The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless they chose this for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching (Canon Law 1985: #1176.3).

But only recently has the RCC issued instruction on cremation. On October 25, 2016, The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed the objectionable ideas and practices of cremation.⁷

Some Christian theologians advocate for cremation as an alternative way of disposing of the dead. Concluding his research on Kikuyu burial traditions, Mbugua (2014:315–6) urges Christians in Kikuyu District to embrace cremation as a way of disposing of the dead, as this will reduce funeral costs. Cremation for an adult costs Ksh. 50,000 at the Lang'ata crematorium in Nairobi (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.). Kariokor is much cheaper, where the cost ranges between KSh. 13,000 for adults and KSh. 6,000 for children (Mwendwa 2022: n.p.). Further, Mbugua (2014:318) cites the lack of adequate places to bury the dead as another reason for cremation. According to Hitan Majevidia of the Nairobi County Health ministry, cremation should be a workable choice for Nairobi people (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.) because of the scarcity of space in cemeteries within Nairobi.

Changing cultural perspectives

Africans are living under the constant pressures of globalization. It is a pressure to adopt the modern and jettisoning their traditional practices.

When MariaLouise Okondo, the European spouse of the former minister for labour, Hon. Peter Okondo, incinerated him in 1996, the family accused her of introducing Okondo to foreign customs. She went against Okondo's extended family's wish to bury him according to the Luyia-Abanyala customs. One's burial positioning amongst the Luyia has something to do with their "mythology or origin of the clan." Besides, the kin wanted to rid themselves of *bukhutsakhali* (the breath of the dead) through an Abaluyia funerary rite where the bereaved family members shave. But Okondo regarded these

⁷ See discussion in section 4.2 and 4.3 below.

customs as foolish (Okondo 1996:5), arguing that her husband was not bound by Abaluyia customs anymore. Thus, she did not agree with the family's wish.

A former Kenyan sports administrator, Joshua Okuthe's wife, Ruth, cremated him in 2009 according to Joshua's will. Here, Okuthe went against Luo burial customs. His extended family attempted to protest this in court, trying to stop her, but she outwitted them. His family buried his empty coffin at a mock funeral in his Muhoroni home. This was in line with a Luo burial tradition of the cenotaph. Here they buried an empty tomb representing the deceased whose body they bury in another location. The Luo buried a "yago" fruit in the cenotaph or bury it by the lakeshore for someone who died by drowning or whose body they could not recover.

The family of Hon. Kenneth Okoth, the Kibera Member of Parliament who wanted to be cremated had to honour his wish. The individual choice has a chiasma. While African customs often trumped individualism in preference to societal customs, it held that the will of a dying individual is sacrosanct. The Luo espoused belief in the afterlife, which was integral to the belief that a person's social status during life and an individual's last words at death in effect determine his or her relationship with those left. They believed that the elderly have the power to bless or curse, hence their last spoken words could either bless or curse. The last words spoken at a funeral are therefore binding to the relatives. This was prevalent among the societies that revered the dead.

These communities that practiced exposure but adopted burial with the coming of Europeans to Kenya and are bound to change again. Hon. Kenneth Matiba, founder of Ford Asili Party, an opinion leader among the Kikuyu and Kenya people, and a leading politician, chose cremation in April 2018 over burial. Matiba in 1994 (Mumbi 2018: n.p.) rejected a state funeral or "dancing parties and harambees" upon his death. Another eminent Kikuyu who chose the incinerator over the grave is Africa's Classic Professional golf champion Peter Njiru, cremated in 2015 at Kariokor.

Environmental reasons

The scarcity of land, hygiene, and environmental concerns also led to this embrace of cremation. Cremation makes better use of land. To reinforce cremation as a Christian practice, William E. Phipps (1981:222) posits: "as land

becomes scarcer, cremation is more widely endorsed.” Environmentalists, including Wangari Maathai, argue that ecologically cremation is more environmentally responsible. They cremated the Nobel Prize winner Maathai in 2011 and buried her ashes at the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies.

Public health emergency

The church has always justified the cremation of her dead in extraordinary circumstances, argues McDonald (1971:137). The Roman Catholic Church⁸ allowed cremation in emergency cases where the quick disposal of bodies was a civil necessity, thus justifying disposing of corpses by cremation for public good in wartime or during serious epidemic.

Worldwide acceptance

Awareness of benefits accrued from popular Eastern practices makes them more accepted worldwide. The global reality of increasing acceptance of cremation has drawn more Kenyans to consider it. These are no longer constrained by their tribal customs or church dogma, for many well-travelled and exposed Kenyans as reflected in public figures and entrepreneurs such as Mr. Jeremiah Kiereini, the former head of Kenya Civil Service, cremated in July 2019, the same month as the Guyanese Mr. Bob Colemore, the managing director of Safaricom.

According to the Cremation Association of North America, the cremation rate within the United States was 48.6 percent of deaths as of 2015, up from 47 percent in 2014. They predicted that the rate would reach 54.3 percent by 2020. The projected rate in Canada was 68.8 percent in 2015 and 74.2 percent by 2020.

Critical Correlation

In this step, the article explores the critical correlation of the findings on cremation with the normative traditions. It interprets the discourse on disposal

⁸ The Catholic Church has modified its position on the morality of cremation. Prior to Vatican II.

of the dead to show its salient aspects and discusses whether cremation is un-Christian and un-African.

Is cremation un-Christian?

Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM) Bishop Dr. David Oginde, one the most articulate critics of cremation in Kenya, submits that “traditional Christian faith considers cremation as inconsistent with orthodox doctrine” (2019a: n.p.). He echoes conservative theologians such as Rodney Decker (2006:37) who took an “active discouragement” position, because he considers cremation to be defiance of God, a sin. These theologians base their claim on scriptural examples of burials, although no text explicitly commands Christians to bury their dead (Oginde 2019b: n.p.). Cremation, Oginde (2019b: n.p.) insists, was not acceptable among the Hebrews, except as a punishment as recorded in Lev 20:14 and Deuteronomy 21:22, 23. Oginde cites unfaithful Achan and his family, whom Joshua burned (Josh 7:25) but agrees that this was an exception.

Theologians who justify cremation from scriptures cite the account of the charring Saul’s remains. To salvage the honor of King Saul and of his three sons, against the defilement of their corpse by Philistines, the men of Jabesh-Gilead burned and buried their remains (1 Sam 31:8–13). Phipps (1989:122) acknowledges the Bible’s approval of their action. Indeed, David commended the men of Jabesh-Gilead for the honor they gave to Saul in their action (2 Sam 2:4–6).

Since the biblical narratives lack high uniformity and so give a conflicting position on cremation, it will be difficult to use scriptures to condemn the practice. For the Bible never commands, encourages, or condones cremation. It is possible to draw multiple principles from a variety of scriptural narratives. For Decker (2006:34), much of the Biblical materials is descriptive narrative and not prescriptive. Despite this acknowledgement, he insists that inhumation is most compatible with Christian theology and most effective in terms of Christian witness in the West.⁹ But Decker (2006:36) concedes, “I

⁹ This essay has not attempted to discuss the question of Christian practice in Eastern cultures or in countries where cremation may be mandated. I have insufficient knowledge of such matters to try such a discussion.

would not go so far as to declare flatly that cremation is sin. Sometimes it may be acceptable without embarrassment.”

Does cremation offend Christian dogma?

McDonald (1971:136) views opposition to burial as a hatred of Christian customs and ecclesiastical traditions. Those who oppose burial have a sectarian interest. Oginde (2019a: n.p.) connects cremation with the new age movement, which he claims will usher in cults and philosophies, bringing in a human revolt against God.

The church refutes regeneration or reincarnation, reasons for Hindu cremation, as denials of individual uniqueness and the bodily resurrection. The Church affirms human beings are both physical and spiritual. Salvation applies to both, thus challenging the notion of Gnosticism in the first century that viewed the body as evil (Col 2:9). The church further holds that God’s salvation and redemption include both the soul and the body (1 Cor 7:34; 2 Cor 4:16; 7:1; Rom 8:10), which will occur at the resurrection (Rom 8:23). Thus, a human being is complete when he or she is both material and immaterial, making the future resurrection imperative.

So, the once separated soul and body will be reunited at the resurrection, which is understood as a clothing of a naked soul (corpse). But theologians differ on the state of the corpse. Harris (1985:98–100) holds a monistic anthropology position, which expects an immediate resurrection at death. While upholding the corpse’s importance, Decker (2006:21) maintains that, at “death, the corpse in the grave is referred to as a person. For instance, the dead body of Jesus in the tomb is referred to as ‘him’ not ‘it’” (Mark 15:44-47, see also John 11:43). This position that a person — body and soul — is eternal and for which Jesus promised everlasting life (cf. *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, 2016 #3) needs scrutiny.

Believers who are alive at Christ’s second coming will get new bodies, while dead bodies, since buried, will decompose (Eccles 12:7). Present human bodies count for little in salvation, for God has designated new bodies for believers (1 Cor. 15:42-49; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Job 19:25-26). At death, the human body rots. Just like a seed that is cast into the earth, it dies and rots (1 Cor 15:36). Given

that the body is chemicals, it disintegrates at death, as David Wasawo (2014:50–1) explains:

Are we not mostly made of oxygen, carbon and hydrogen, sixty percent of which are in the form of water? Are we not reminded that a man weighing 150 pounds contains 97.5 pounds of oxygen, 27 pounds of carbon, 15 of hydrogen, 4.5 of nitrogen, 3 of calcium and 1.5 pounds of phosphorus? Added to these are a few ounces each of potassium, Sulphur, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, and iron; and traces of iodine, fluorine, and silicon.

Wasawo (2014:51) notes how these elements are combined “to form thousands of very complicated compounds forming parts of cells, tissues, and organs, each performing its allotted function in the sentient being.” But when life is taken out of the body, all these elements revert to the “soil” and “dust” whence they came.

Dignity of the body

The church gives dignity to the human body because it is created in the image of God and is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the human body is her focus from birth to death.

First, unlike other creatures, God made human beings in His image, hence respect for the human body (George 2002: n.p.; Oginde 2019b: n.p.). Although Anglican Bishop Peter Njenga defended Mrs. Mary Kuria’s cremation, he voiced a Christian objection thus: “I think the big problem with cremation is that people believe cremation subjects the body to torture” (Njenga 2002:3). Pope Pius XII affirmed this position while addressing those engaged in treatment of the blind on 14 May 1956 (see Pius 1956: 462-3):

The human corpse has been a dwelling place of a spiritual and immortal soul, an essential part of the human person in whose dignity it had a share. Since it is a component part of man and formed in “the image and likenesses of God.”

Christians gave reverence for the body through burial because of faith in the future resurrection. Because, as Geisler (1998:34) notes: “burial preserves the Christian belief in the body’s sanctity,” the church developed meticulous

funeral rites - rites whereby they applied incense and holy water with prayers that the Lord will receive the person into paradise. So, burial became synonymous with the dignity of the individual's body, causing Oginde (2019b: n.p.) to allege: "For a corpse to be burnt by fire or left unburied to become food for beasts of prey, was the height of indignity or judgment." However, Brigham (1979:558) refutes that proper burial is essential for an individual's bliss in the afterlife, stating that sometimes undignified disposal of the body provided a lasting witness. As St. Augustine observed in *The City of God* (1.12):

And so there are indeed many bodies of Christians lying unburied; but no one has separated them from heaven, nor from that earth which is all filled with the presence of Him who knows whence He will raise again what He created... Wherefore all these last offices and ceremonies that concern the dead, the careful funeral arrangements, and the equipment of the tomb, and the pomp of obsequies, are rather the solace of the living than the comfort of the dead.

Second, Christians regard the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. It receives the sacraments. But this role ceases upon death. Decker (2006:16) concedes that the Holy Spirit does not indwell our bodies after death, yet still makes a limp claim that the body is still united to Christ: "... if the body is a member of Christ due, in part to the resurrection." A person's existence does not end at death, as materialists believe, for White (2021: n.p.) points out, there is a connection and continuity between the human soul and body, otherwise a future resurrection would be unnecessary.

The allegedly preserved body, Phipps (1989:222) contends, "is a Promethean rejection of Isaiah's judgment that 'all flesh is grass' and Paul's claim that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God'". This is because death neither destroys the person nor reduces his or her uniqueness and individuality.

Cremation does not constitute an objective denial of Christian dogmas. Rather, as MacArthur (2022: n.p.) submits, "cremation isn't a strange or wrong practice—it merely accelerates the natural process of oxidation." So, Christians should accept cremation if it meets the demands of due respect and dignity for the body and if the ashes are treated with the same dignity. Phipps

(1989:222) suggests that “a memorial worship service after cremation sets the transitoriness of the physical in bold relief against the everlastingness of the spiritual. The ‘consuming fire’ has transformed but not destroyed the essential self of the person honoured at the service.”

Since Christians adopted and developed the tradition of burial from pagan and Jewish practices, under different circumstances, Christians today may also adopt cremation.

Resurrection of the dead

Given that Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, Christian burial was a witness to the resurrection yet to come (George 2002: n.p.). Burial therefore embodies for Christians the symbolism of the resurrection, giving it a deep religious significance. As for McDonald (1971:135), laying the body in the grave to wait for the last day is better than submitting the corpse to fire. But holding such a view implies that resurrection is physical, a position disputed by Phipps (1981:55):

Paul did not believe that the residual dust in a tomb would be the substance of a new heavenly organism. When the apostle writes about ‘the resurrection of the dead,’ he does not mean the reassembling and the reanimation of the corpse. The expression ‘spiritual body’ (1 Cor 15:44) which he uses, does not refer to the physical skeleton and the flesh that hangs on it. Rather, in modern terminology, it means the self or the personality. Paul’s view is compatible with body disposal by cremation. Contrariwise, those who adamantly advocate earth burial because it enhances resurrection have a weak New Testament foundation on which to stand.

Cremation has no effect on the soul, nor does it hinder God’s almighty power from raising a body to life again. How the body is dissolved and corrupted by death will not hinder its resurrection. For if God can quicken a rotten seed, turning it into something productive, why should it be incredible that God will quicken dead bodies? The dead will change like dead seeds change, being quickened, raised to stalk, blade, and ear.

So, it does not matter to God whether a person's body was buried, cremated, lost at sea, or eaten by wild animals (Rev 20:13). The Almighty can re-create a new body for the person (1 Cor 15:35, 38). For cremation does not affect the soul. Neither does it prevent God from raising up the deceased body to new life.

Is Cremation un-African?

While Christians accept cremation as a choice today, many Africans regard the practice as too radical and too foreign. However, communities such as Meru, Kikuyu, Kamba, and the Kalenjin, that once practiced exposure of corpses, learnt to bury. They might now adopt cremation as well to improve on their customary practices, a reason propounded by Matiba (Mumbi 2018: n.p.): “after all, according to their customs, the Kikuyu never buried their dead. They used to take the bodies into the forest to be devoured by hyenas. Was that not wisdom?”

Westernization among Kenyans blunted the belief that spirits of the dead have influence on the living and the fear of being haunted should anything untoward happen when they dispose of their dead differently. Until now, Africans held that the dead affect the living. One's death allows them to become an ancestor, given that they received an “exact” burial, bounded by abundant religious formalities. Failing to receive such could result in the deceased becoming a malevolent spirit. Hence, the weight given to “proper” death rites as a “guarantee of protection” for the living, to secure a safe transitional for the dead. For instance, the Luhya valued giving honor to the ancestral spirits, hence pleased these spirits through offering sacrifices.

The Luo permitted incineration under exceptional circumstances. Here is a paradox. Africans, among the Luo and Abaluyia, maintained that the dead influenced their living kin. Hence, they adhered to customary funeral rites to counter the dead from tormenting the living. They reject cremation because it cannot satisfy the funeral rite norms of the Luo and may lead to the suffering of the living. It is likewise the Luo customary antidote to such malevolent ghosts. According to Ocholla-Ayayo (1970: n. p.), the Luo exhumed and burn the remains of a departed who are haunting their kin.

This recognition, among Luyia and Luo Christians, that the dead are impotent, has blunted the fear of ancestral wrath, and so disposed of traditional obstacle to cremation.

Theory Construction

In the construction stage, this paper applies the empirical data and theological discourse to offer a theory for action and, thus, revises the present praxis. The theory is aware of the presuppositions of cremation.

As the church expands, she confronts diverse human conditions and encounters new cultures not within the experience of the biblical traditions upon which Christians can find answers. Though we have no concrete biblical injunctions to guide us on how to dispose of our dead, the Bible's broad narratives can help us frame firm conclusions, which ought to be theological considerations, cognizant of our various cultural issues.

The first significant decision by the Council in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, which declared that the new gentile Christians did not have to enter Jewish religious culture, opened Christianity to adopt the cultures it entered. The lack of Christian culture the way we have an Islamic culture (Walls 2000:792–9) points to the cultural diversity and flexibility built into the Christian faith from the beginning. Gentile Christians did not have to receive circumcision and keep the Jewish law, which ended a tribal mode of faith, which included the need for circumcision and keeping the law. This stand opened Christianity to other things.

Christianity lacks a specific Christian lifestyle. Therefore, Christians are to work out, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a way of being Christians in their context. Since disposing of the dead is a cultural construct, not a doctrinal edict, like in Islam, the decision to bury or cremate ought to be theological. McDonald (1971:137) observed that long before the Vatican II changes, the RCC allowed Japanese Catholics to be cremated. Cremation as an age-old national custom was compulsory in Japan. The bishops in Japan negotiated and got a concession to bury priests and members of religious orders and congregations of both sexes.

This theological argument provides a basis for Christians in Kenya to consider cremation along with burial as a way of disposing of the dead. Although both Anglicans and Roman Catholics have adopted cremation, they never proceeded beyond their pronouncement. The ACK, for instance, has not developed cremation protocols or liturgies despite their funeral reforms. Beyond the resolution, they put little effort into preparing Christians for it. A general Christian cremation infrastructure remains undeveloped.

The church should set cremation protocols in tandem with Christian dogma. Through the Holy Office's instruction, the RCC maintains that those who choose cremation must not deny the dogmas, including the immortality of the human soul and the bodily resurrection of the dead. Cremation done in adherence to Christian dogma should enhance and not mute the expression of Christian faith.

Where Christians choose cremation over burial, this wish ought to be clarified to avoid conflict upon death. George Omwansa, (Kinyanjui 2022: n.p.) a council member of the Lawyer Society of Kenya, who has handled several cremation disputes, observed that often the entire family was not aware of the cremation wishes of the departed. As a result, a section of relatives stepped up to oppose cremation in favor of burial, thus causing trouble.

The church in Kenya should give families and individuals choosing cremation guidelines to help them in their decisions, and make sure they cremate as the church recommends¹⁰ and that the cremains are buried in a dignified manner in a person's last resting place either at a cemetery, a church, a columbarium, or a mausoleum.

The church should develop an associated ceremony or liturgy to accompany cremation. While the memorial service can remain unchanged, the church needs to create a liturgy and order of service to assist clergy conducting cremation services and the committal of the cremains.

We also need to develop public and Christian crematoriums. The largest crematorium in Kenya is the Hindu crematorium in Kariokor. Since the Hindus

¹⁰ In Canon Law, Catholics may choose the church for their funeral rites and a cemetery for their burial. This is a choice by law (Canon Law 1223#1).

run most crematoriums in the country, thus, easy for people to associate cremation with Hinduism or modern-day agnostics.

Conclusion

Although the Churches have pronounced themselves on cremation as an acceptable alternative means of disposing of the dead, many Christians remain reticent to switch to cremation from burial. This article has addressed the reason for Christian reluctance by answering the objections raised against cremation. This study was not a biblical response to cremation. Instead it focused on presenting a theological response to the belief challenges facing Christian disposing of their dead. I have, in this article, established a theologically informed course of action, an action that removes the inhibition of Christians in Kenya to cremation as a way of disposing of the dead, consistent with the existing traditions of Christian faith and African customs. This article exposes salient aspects surrounding cremation, establishing that it does not offend Christian dogma, nor does it assault African customs.

In offering a plan for action to revise the present praxis, this study has proposed a way forward for Kenyan Christians, having established that Cremation offers Christians a valid and acceptable alternative to traditional burial.

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The Relevance of Ecumenism in Zimbabwe: A Theology of Identity

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the relevance of ecumenism or ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe as a form of theological identity. The ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe began in 1964 with the formation of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. The formation of this ecumenical council was to fulfil the need for the gospel of Jesus to bring all believers of different denominations together. The sole purposes of this movement were to bring back the unity of the church, justice, and evangelism. From the beginning the ecumenical movements were formed to make sure that the church is witnessing together, acting and organizing together, and responding together to the ensuing political and socio-economic challenges. This article will argue that some of the ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe are no longer committed and focused to their original mandate because of the dynamic and diverse growth of ecumenical movements in the country. The review is based on the relevant literature review as a research methodology and lived experiences and observations of the author concerning the relevance of ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe. This article intends to highlight ecumenical movements under theological pressure due to divergent views of the upcoming ecumenical movements which are proponents of some political parties instead of being apolitical in order to foster unity in the church and the country.

Introduction

Christianity is one of the most fragmented of all religions in the world, including Zimbabwe. In fact, more new denominations are being added to this number day by day, from a global perspective. Although multiple expressions of Christianity could have existed before the 15th century, the serious disagreements of the 16th century resulted in separations that propelled different traditions of Christianity in different directions. The establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 was an effort to institute meaningful ecumenism. In the same spirit, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) was also formed in 1964. Ecumenism was formed with the purpose of restoring oneness among Christians and churches. The main agenda was and is still aimed at fulfilling the mission and work of Jesus Christ to the entire world. However, apart from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Zimbabwe has other ecumenical groups that include the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA), the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA), the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC), and the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations, among others. It is therefore the intent of this article to deliberate on the relevance of ecumenism in Zimbabwe, particularly looking at the issue of unity of the church, justice, peace, and reconciliation in church and society. A brief background of each of the ecumenical movements will be given before concluding this article.

Unity of the Church

Ecumenism refers to the coming together of different denominations that are separated as a result of doctrines, beliefs, traditions, and practices. Kessler (2004:280) defines ecumenism as “the variety of efforts within and among the Christian churches to give visible expression to their unity in Jesus Christ, in response to the Holy Spirit, through diverse acts of reconciliation to heal all their divisions, and through common witness and service to the world.” The central theological affirmation for the ecumenical movement is established in the search for the full visible unity of the church and its common witness to the world as rooted in the scripture, namely in Christ's prayer for his disciples

“that they may all be one” (John 17:21). This verse refers to the restoration of unity among Christians which is the church.

According to Pillay (2015:636), the unity of the church is an embracing unity which promotes the reception of unity in diversity, unity amidst a diversity of doctrinal positions, socio-economic background, gender, cultures, age groups and political affiliations. Unity is not selective but it embraces people from all walks of life. This is one of the major components of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, ecumenism will only be relevant if different denominations can accommodate one another without taking into consideration doctrinal differences.

Sakupapa (2018:2) advances that ecumenical movements seek organisational unity among denominations. According to Kessler (2004:279) churches agree that the term “‘ecumenical’ embraces the quest for Christian unity, common witness in the worldwide task of mission and evangelism, commitment to Diakonia and to the promotion of justice and peace”. Therefore, ecumenism could be regarded as a concept within the Christian faith that aims to restore unity, both amongst and within different Christian denominations, focusing on the themes of unity, fellowship, and collaboration. According to Sakupapa (2018:6) there is an emphasis in the New Testament on the unity of the church which Jesus Christ taught about in the gospel of John (10:16), namely, that his goal is that “there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

Zimbabwe has a “plethora of churches” which range from Mainline, Pentecostal and African Independent Churches (Shoko, 2016:3). In other words, different churches have separated to form different denominations. Kasper (2002:1) postulates that the situation of division among the churches is contrary to the will of Christ. It is sinful and shameful as it is a major obstacle to world mission. In his prayer, Jesus Christ said, “that they all may be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit. (C.C.C., 2011). Therefore, the importance of ecumenism in Zimbabwe is to show visible unity, in order to give credible witness so that the world may believe. Unity is one of the marks of a true church which is treated as a true church. Kung (1968:460) argues that the unity of the church is grounded in the saving

and redeeming work of God in Christ. McGrath (1997:485) assents to the opinion of Kung, saying that the unity of the church is the product of God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus Christ. Migliore (2004:270) opines that the unity of the church is a unity formed in Christ in whom our isolated self-dies and in whom we find new identity in mutual relationship with others.

Theologically the unity of the church is now compromised in Zimbabwe because ecumenical movements no longer speak with one voice. The unity of the body of Christ has been manipulated because some of the ecumenical movements are not representing the body of Christ. Dube (2020) notes that Nehemiah Mutendi, Bishop of the Zion Christian Church and Andrew Wutawunashe, Bishop of the Family of God act as enablers of injustice and misrepresent the religious mandate by assuming the role of regime enablers with their ecumenical movement called Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC). This ecumenical movement was formed after the coming of the second republic on 17 November 2017 after the fall of Robert Mugabe.

The unity of the church is what Christ's prayer in John 17:21 is all about, therefore creating divisions is against the will of God. According to Mahokoto (2014:212) the unity of the church must be visible so that the world may believe. Unity is a gift from God therefore ecumenical movements must unite for the cause of the gospel. It is against the will of God for churches to be divided and to support injustice among members of the society regardless of their political affiliation. Fellowship in unity is the mandate of ecumenical movements whereby churches should come together even in times of suffering. Ecumenism in Zimbabwe is trying its best to address the issue of unity in church and society though it is facing some interference by political parties and government to advance their political agenda using churches.

The unity of the church must find expression in its witness and service in the world. The lack of unity makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for the church to deal with socio-ethical challenges (Mahokoto 2014:279). Church unity is required. It is needed for various aims related to the value of life together and for the sake of the other. It must be a fruitful unity for both the church and the society.

In working together as churches, ecumenical movements are there to process, facilitate, and encourage churches to work together in propagating Christ through unity, development, and evangelism. When there is unity in the church it provides room for it to speak about justice, peace, and reconciliation within the church and society. The nonexistence of the prophetic voice of the religious institutions also contributes to the challenge of moral deterioration in humanity because the church is expected to be the moral compass for society and across the globe.

Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation

The role of ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe is to facilitate peace and national healing. The struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation is a very relevant theological foundation for ecumenical engagement. Justice is at the core or heart of the gospel (Pillay 2015:639). Zimbabwe like many other countries is plagued by political instability, dictatorship, hunger, poverty, corruption, the abuse of women and children, and oppression of the poor. Jesus Christ's main message from the book of the prophet Isaiah (42:1-4) was the gospel of liberation of the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19; Pillay 2015:639).

According to Shoko et al (2013:45), the levels of violence and political polarisation experienced in the country calls for the church to come up with useful platform for peace and national healing. Zimbabwe experienced the *Gukurahundi*¹ atrocities in August 2018 shooting which resulted in the "deaths of six people" at the hands of Zimbabwe security forces (Zimbabwe Human Rights Non-Governmental Organisation Forum, 2019:4, 29- 30) and other wounds that continue in the socio-political arena. In ecumenical cooperation, church institutions such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) and the Ecumenical Church Leaders Forum are making frantic efforts to oppose the violence by founding local Peace and Gender Committees (GKKE, 2019:3). In light of the state's abuses of power and use of violence against its own citizens, new

¹ Gukurahundi, a Shona word meaning a series of massacres which were effected by the government of Robert Gabriel Mugabe against the Ndebele people in Matebeleland Provinces and Midlands Provinces in Zimbabwe.

Christian organisations such as the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) and individuals have emerged to question the propriety of this relationship with Zanu Pf which is the political party of the sitting government in the country (Tarusarira 2016:58). Justice must not be an issue to be added to parts of the agenda of ecumenical movements; it is the duty of the church to preach the gospel of peace and reconciliation. Jesus Christ is the model of advocating justice, peace, and reconciliation. Justice is a process whereby injustice is overcome, exploitation lifted, oppression removed, rights restored, and livelihood assured (Pillay 2015:640).

Baum and Wells (1997:7) maintain that reconciliation and peacemaking are part of the Christian calling, for Christian individuals and for churches and Christian organisations. To buttress the same view, Field & Koslowski (2016:98) state that Christians are to continue seeking God's justice through a liberating and healing ministry. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches in 1994 established the Justice Peace and Advocacy programme under their Church and Society department. It was dedicated to training and providing legal assistance to ordinary and marginalized people in their socio-economic and political rights. The programme engages officials from government² and other stakeholders in political powers. The programme's mission even today is to provide economic justice, legal aid and human rights. On women's issues, Justice Peace and Advocacy is focused on providing women with equal opportunity to become prosperous and totally emancipated as we read in the Bible (Galatians 3:26-28). The goal of the programme is to empower women. The department also carries out workshops on issues such as inheritance, project developments issues, and training about HIV/AIDS for caregivers and support groups.

On the Youth and Child Survival Desk, Justice Peace Advocacy sought to improve youths' and children's psychological, social, and economic wellbeing. In this, it has helped orphans materially and otherwise, built awareness and capacity on various activities, as well as helped youth form sports leagues and drama and music groups and programmes. Again, this desk facilitated youth and children related conventions, training programmes, workshops and seminars, and exchange and exposure visits in related areas. To do this, the desk

² <http://relizm.org/category/news/>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

provided training for youth coordinators, Sunday school teachers, and its target group.

The relevance of ecumenism in Zimbabwe is that some of the churches who are not members of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC) of the second republic are speaking with one voice against injustice, abuse of human rights and poor governance. Matsvimbo (2011) avers that Churches through ecumenism worked tirelessly to rescue the desperate situation where people's rights were not respected. Pastoral letters³ from churches, especially pastoral letters by Catholic Bishops' Conference, Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe were written and handed over to the government. These pastoral letters were written to criticize the government for not being accountable for their deeds. By doing this the churches played an important role, especially in 2009, to conciliate a restive citizenry in the face of the crisis caused by bad political and economic decisions in the country. The Heads of Christian Denominations, representing four main ecumenical bodies in the country - Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa - issued pastoral letters and statements encouraging peace in the country. Through ecumenism, the church in Zimbabwe was advocating for peace and tolerance in the country and, as a result, this led to the establishment of the unity government, which was a combination of the three main political parties. The unity government was facilitated by the then president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, as Southern Africa Development Community's representative on 13 February 2009 (Nhede, 2012:2).

Ecumenism allows the church to speak with one voice (GKKE, 2019). The current government seem to be relying heavily on coercive tactics that were developed during the liberation struggle to elicit civilian compliance (Shoko, 2016:6). In addition, Zimbabwe is also faced with a hyperinflationary economy, high levels of corruption, social injustice, human rights abuse, and poverty, among other issues. Contrary to this, the Zimbabwean constitution stipulates that citizens

³ <https://relizm.org/major-religious-zimbabwe/catholic/>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

have the right to peace, equal opportunities, and good governance (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013:18, 19-20, 32-33). In such situations, there should be a voice for the voiceless. To deal with the crises, the churches have jointly raised their voices and are demanding a national dialogue (GKKE, 2019:11). According to GKKE (2019:11) four umbrella organisations, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), and the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA) have teamed up as the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) to host events such as a National Leadership Prayer Breakfast to back their call for a national dialogue. Thus, ecumenism is crucial in ensuring one voice in the call for a national dialogue, and in this regard, one may say that the ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe are pursuing the ecumenism vision.

Pursuant to the above argument, GKKE (2020:1) indicates that ecumenical groups in Zimbabwe continue to be committed to building a united, peaceful, and prosperous Zimbabwe. On the 5th of August 2020, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches directed the formation of a Comprehensive National Settlement Framework proposal which is meant to ease the troubles that are destroying the society. In the same vein, on August 14th, 2020, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a pastoral letter titled, "The March is not Ended," in which they gave a historic perspective, mentioning root causes of current Zimbabwean problems and clearly highlighting the role of the current government in the ordeals the citizens are experiencing (GKKE, 2020:1). Thus, the role of ecumenism in Zimbabwe cannot be undermined since ecumenical groups are tirelessly fighting to transform the nation for the betterment of the general populace. As Kessler (2004:278) notes, genuine ecumenism is transforming and not silencing or oppressing the society.

Evangelism and Mission

Ecumenism embraces a common witness in the worldwide task of mission and evangelism. Even the World Council of Churches (WCC) indicates that it has an ecumenical vision of mission and evangelism (Bosch, 2011:332; Field & Koslowski, 2016:98). Pillay (2015:640) notes that the church is a community in response to *Missio Dei*, bearing witness to God's activity in the world by its

communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed, proclamation and praxis. Therefore, the church through ecumenism is mandated to preach the good news of Jesus to the church and society. The church's main goal is explicitly stated by Jesus Christ in the gospel of Matthew 28:19-20: "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

This is the assignment that the church is to fulfil through ecumenism. It is not an option for the church to be part of the great commission; it is a mandate which has to be fulfilled. Through ecumenism, the church must be concerned with the salvation of every creature on earth, because it is the mandate which was tasked to the church by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Migliore (2004:275) notes that the proclamation of the Word of God is the human testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its effectiveness depends ultimately not on the preacher but on God. Furthermore, he states that the proclamation of the Word of God is based on the witness of scriptural texts. In Christian theology the phrase, "Word of God" has three meanings: (1) the incarnate or the living Word of God, who is Jesus Christ; (2) the written Word of God, or the Scripture and (3) the proclaimed Word of God, or the preaching of the gospel, in present (Migliore 2004:276). Ecumenism can only be and remain relevant in society if the churches are preaching the Word of God with one voice so that humankind can be liberated. Evangelism and mission are the best tools to be employed in order to bring justice, peace, and reconciliation in our societies.

This is crucial in Zimbabwe where there is a great need to reach out in remote areas, care for the less privileged, and provide basic social services. According to GKKE (2019:3) ecumenical groups encourage their member churches to assume responsibility for health and education in the crisis over basic social services. In support of the same view, Shoko (2016:4) insists that the church in Zimbabwe has always been associated with healing mission as part of its broad program to evangelise through medical care and education. Even during the time of the Global Political Agreement, Churches in Manicaland, as an ecumenical initiative, have been running healing and reconciliation workshops

with members of the civil society. According to Shoko (2016:6), these workshops have sought to remind Christians about their role as peacemakers and peacekeepers in a heavily polarized society.

The ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe are relevant in the crafting of national bills. Tarusarira (2016:73) notes that the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) claimed a seat at the constitution-making process table in 2013. According to the Herald newspaper,⁴ the Zimbabwe Council of Churches met in 2019 at their conference centre (formerly Kentucky Hotel) to discuss a bill that sought to formalize marriage partnerships. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches rejected this bill as it sought to promote adultery and thereby reducing the value of faithful marriages desired by God. Hebrews 13:4 says, “Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” In consideration of the above works, one may say ecumenical groups or movements are actively participating in the proclamation of peace and justice in church and society.

Although ecumenism has been relevant in pursuing the vision of mission and evangelism in the country, these efforts are sometimes derailed by the actions of some member churches and individuals. According to Tarusarira (2016:59), churches in post-independence Zimbabwe have failed to provide the essential cognitive, emotional, and moral guidance to the government in dealing with past and present political challenges. When the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and Evangelical Fellowship Zimbabwe attempted to facilitate talks between the main political parties, African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in the mid-2000s, they failed to rise above political patronage after the head of the team Bishop Nemapere started to support the government after having a banquet with President Mugabe (Tarusarira, 2016:60).

Ecumenism in Zimbabwe, on the other hand, is not relevant because the church itself has failed to unite. The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe’s Church

⁴ <https://www.herald.co.zw> . Accessed 21 August 2021.

Constitution (Article 132) lists six churches that it cannot fellowship with (RCZ⁵ *Bhuku yoMurairo* or Church Order Book, 2017: 44 – 45). In fact, it is difficult for these ecumenical groups to preach unity when their member churches are marred with serious divisions and corruption. *The Herald* (Munyoro 2015, Nemukuyu 2018, and Madzianike 2020) published squabbles between Bishop Kunonga and the Zanu PF political that rocked the Anglican Church. Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM) wrangles between Madziyire faction and Chiyangwa faction, African Apostolic Church wrangles between Bishop Mwazha`s two sons, and Mugodhi Apostolic Faith Church quarrels between the main party led by Aron Munodawafa and Washington Mugodhi (the late Bishop Mugodhi`s son), just to mention a few (Taruvinga, 2020). These squabbles tend to indicate that the church is in the world and for the world because she has accepted the world`s values and standards (Field & Koslowski, 2016:99). But the church should not of the world (John 15:19) and should not conform to it (Romans 12:2). Therefore, meaningful ecumenism can only be realised when churches practice what they preach and live as agents of unity, restoration, and justice, and as members of a reconciling body (Field & Koslowski, 2016:99).

The current injustices and corruption in the country suggest that ecumenical groups have failed to seriously challenge repression and oppression (Tarusarira, 2016:60). According to Tarusarira (2016:60), some ecumenical bodies, mainline church bodies in particular, are courted by political elites with gifts, and so they end up siding the oppressors. Tarusarira (2016:73) reports that in 2007 the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance had a meeting violently disrupted by security forces, resulting in arrests and many getting injured.

In consideration of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches mission statement, one may suggest that the ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe seem to have forgotten the reason for the establishment of these organisations. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches` mission statement is to “enable the member churches to proclaim the good news of Christ, to strive for a visible Christian unity in Zimbabwe, speak with one voice on issues of national concern, with a focus on the preaching and teaching of the gospel in accordance with holy scriptures, on ecumenical worship and spirituality, on community service and

⁵ RCZ is an acronym for Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.

renewal, on justice and peace in church and society, and on sound theological reflection/education” (World Council of Churches, 2020:1). Tarusarira (2016:56) argues that ecumenical groups have digressed into politics leaving behind the spiritual issues and teaching of the gospel, and therefore he prefers to call them “religio-political organizations.” However, Bosch 2011:342, argues that although evangelism may never be equated with labouring for justice, it may also never be divorced from it. According to Bosch (2011:342) social justice was at the heart of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament since most of Israel’s kings were challenged by prophets when they had perpetrated or tolerated injustice in their kingdoms.

Ecumenical groups in Zimbabwe have been very critical of the regime’s oppressive tendencies as evidenced by the critical and strong pastoral letters they have published. The church’s fight for justice has been seen by the participation of Zimbabwe Christian Alliance in the 2013 constitution making process. The rejection of the marriage partnerships bill by Zimbabwe Council of Churches in 2019 was a milestone in the church’s pursuit of preaching and teaching of the gospel in accordance with holy scriptures and of sound theological reflection and education. In an effort to fulfil the ecumenical vision of mission and evangelism, the church has also provided health, educational, and social support to vulnerable members of the society. However, the current injustices, abductions, human rights abuses, and corruption may suggest that ecumenism has failed to be relevant in Zimbabwe. Some ecumenical leaders have also been accused of being bribed to side with the oppressors. Rather than the church uniting for the world to see and believe, the church is tainted by divisions as they fail to follow their own constitutions. Churches in Zimbabwe have also failed to unite as one ecumenical body, as different ecumenical movements continue to erupt in relation to the existing religious differences. It is then not unreasonable for one to argue that ecumenism in Zimbabwe does not have much fruits to show or celebrate, and that they are not a living example and also seem to have forgotten the spiritual aspect of their vision and mission.

Ecumenical Movements in Zimbabwe

As in many other countries ecumenism in Zimbabwe is operating in a plural society. Ecumenical movements see things or issues differently. Pillay

(2015:644) notes that ecumenism in Africa is surrounded by crisis and opportunities. The church is there to uphold its identity regardless of the challenges which are arising in the society. In Zimbabwe at present ecumenical movements are increasing in numbers though they are being formed to achieve different purposes. Zimbabwe has several ecumenical movements with different histories and aims, but their core business should be to bring stability and order in the nation. They represent different denominations as is explained below. Ecumenism in Zimbabwe has been developing rapidly, but there are a few reports or documented writings on the activities of the churches so far, focusing and reflecting on ecumenism. These ecumenical movements include:

Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC)

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches is a fellowship of Christian churches and organizations that confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. It was formed in 1964. The purpose of its formation was to bring all Christian denominations and organizations together, so that they may work together to improve political and socio-economic challenges in the country. Zimbabwe Council of Churches⁶ engages government to work together with church leadership in dialogue pertaining to problems within the country. Zimbabwe Council of Churches has 26 affiliates, mainly from the mainline churches and Christian organizations. It is open to any denomination. As an ecumenical board, Zimbabwe Council of Churches takes part in international relations, thus it reports to the World Council of Churches (WCC). Like any organization, Zimbabwe Council of Churches has a governing structure composed of council, officers' committee and an executive committee. The council meets biannually to decide on council policies. The council elects the officers' committee which meets in between executive meetings to assist the secretariat, which is run by the elected General Secretary. The last governing structure is the executive committee. This committee of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches is delegation of church denominations which works in between the council's biannual meetings. It acts as the Board of Directors for the council and delegates to the secretariat the day to day running of the council. The Zimbabwe Council of

⁶ <http://relzim.org/major-religions-zimbabwe/#EFZ>. Accessed 5 August 2021.

Churches⁷ is one of the ecumenical bodies which speaks against injustice in the country.

Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC)

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) is the official assembly of the Catholic Bishops of Zimbabwe. The Conference was established in 1962 and it has a secretariat, which is its coordinating arm. Under the secretariat, there are commissions, each with a specific mandate given by the conference. The Health Commission was established in 2009 to ensure provision of quality health care in Zimbabwe through improving access to primary health care, maternal and child health care, and sexual reproductive health rights and HIV and AIDS⁸.

The Catholic Church act as observers in ecumenical boards. Hence, they validate the idea and participate, but using their union which report to the Pope in Vatican. John Paul II (1995) has argued that the Roman Catholic's view of ecumenism is confined in Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR, 1964) rather than in statements issued before the council, but it sometimes presents a model with the implicit and partly explicit expectation that other Christian churches should reintegrate into the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic ecumenical movement in Zimbabwe is the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference. This movement participates in bringing together the political and socioeconomic and spiritual affairs in the country. It is a formation of representatives of the Catholic faith across the country who are bishops in different dioceses.

Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ)

This movement mainly comprises the Pentecostal denominations and it reports to the World Evangelical Alliance. Similar to the already noted ecumenical movements, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe also aims to

⁷ Echoing, "The march has not ended" <https://kubatana.net/2020/08/16/echoing-the-march-is-not-ended/>. Accessed 5 August 2021.

⁸ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference. https://zimhealthsos.ngo/files/cso-docs/zimbabwe-catholic-bishops-conference-zcbc/3-Governance_and_management_structure--zimbabwe-catholic-bishops-conference-zcbc.pdf. Accessed 4 August 2021.

bring sanity by bringing together Christian ethos into the political and socio-economic areas. It engages the corporate world for the welfare of people. It also comprises a secretariat and council. Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God by the believer. In nature Pentecostalism is charismatic. It was established by Charles Fox Parham in 1900 AD (Hollenweger, 2005). This group was reacting against both the Catholic and Protestant traditions on the notion of the activity of the Holy Spirit during church services. In Zimbabwe, Pentecostal churches include Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (Forward in Faith) which was established by Ezekiel Guti; Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM); Faith in God, founded by Assah Gurupira; Harvest House, founded by Collins Nyati; Word of Life, founded by Dr Shana; Jabula International, established by Bishop Tudor Bismark; Celebration, founded by Tom and Bonnie Deuschle; and several others across the country (Hollenweger, 2005). As an ecumenical movement, they regard themselves as God's mouthpiece for the nation for justice and peace to prevail in the church and society.

Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe, Africa (UDACIZA)⁹

This is another ecumenical movement which partakes in bringing together the political, economic, and social life of people. Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe and Africa¹⁰ represents mostly the indigenous churches, which include all Zion churches, white garment churches, formally known as *Vapostori*, which some scholars describe as apostolic sects. These churches appear more African when compared to the mainline, Catholic, and Pentecostal churches. Some of these churches participated in the emancipation of the Zimbabwean natives from British bondage. They prophesized positively till the regaining of independence in 1980. The African

⁹ Union for the Development Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa.

<https://cite.org.zw/tag/union-for-the-development-of-apostolic-churches-and-zionists-in-africa-udaciza/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

¹⁰ Not much about this ecumenical movement is written down in detail. Its Constitution and the dates of its founding are not available. The author has noticed this gap which needs to be investigated in future.

Independent/Initiated Churches (AIC) sprang from Mission founded churches due to the daily activities in the European churches that influenced many African's beliefs. They wanted to Africanize their way of worship. The missionaries labelled everything African evil. In protest, the Africans (Zimbabweans) like Shonhiwa Masedza founded a movement which accommodated Africans only, and is popularly known as Johane Masowe. Muchabaya Momberume established Johani Marange. Samuel Mutendi founded Zion Christian Churches (ZCC), and Paul Mwazha established the African Apostolic Church, popularly known as Mwazha. Other Independent Churches include Bethsaida, Zion, Apostolic Faith Church popularly known as Mugodhi, Mai Chaza founded *Guta raJehova* and many others. Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa and Fambidzano (Ecumenical Movement for the Development of Zimbabwean Independent Churches) has the same mission and vision with UDACIZA. There is much division among these churches, therefore not much church unity can be emulated from these churches. It is one of the ecumenical movements which is a member of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations.

Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA)

Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) was formed in 2005¹¹ as an advocacy Christian organisation focused on addressing social, political, economic, and humanitarian issues affecting poor and vulnerable communities, mainly in rural areas. This ecumenical movement was formed as a political wing for of the Zanu Pf ruling party. Zimbabwe Christian Alliance was founded by Bishop Obadiah Musindo, aiming to align people to the status quo of the former president, Robert Mugabe. The voice of the church must be heard; hence, the other mentioned ecumenical movements sometimes could not agree with the political will. In this case, Zimbabwe Christian Alliance represents the voice of the church. However, the changing of the Mugabe regime to the new dispensation gave birth to a new movement called Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches, speaking the voice of the church in support of the President Mnangagwa.

¹¹ Zimbabwe Christian Alliance. <https://www.zimbabwechristianalliance.org.zw/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches

The movement of Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches (ZIICC)¹² is led by two prominent figures, Apostle Andrew Wutawunashwe of Family of God and Mutendi of Zimbabwe's Zion Christian Church (ZCC). ZIICC was founded by Bishop Mutendi as a patron to build unity among the indigenous churches of Zimbabwe with the purpose to serve, build, and strengthen the nation and her leaders through prayer and homegrown solutions. They corrected other ecumenical movements at political gatherings seeking to clarify the political will of the current status quo. This can be witnessed when ZCBC on 14 August 2020 called on the government to secure human rights (Pastoral letter of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference). The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance supported this letter, but the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches supported the government and demonized other ecumenical movements. This is the only ecumenical movement which the government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa has invited to lead prayers on Independence Day, Heroes Day, at the funerals of government officials,¹³ unlike in the previous years during the reign of Robert Gabriel Mugabe when ecumenical movements alternated leading the proceeding and services of those departed. Sometime back president Emmerson Mnangagwa¹⁴ promised to offer vast land to the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-denominational Council of Churches at their purported Prayer Day for the Nation. Member churches of this ecumenical body were promised to be given land for free because whenever they hold a press conference they will use it as a platform to attack and silence other ecumenical bodies and to peddle falsehoods against the opposition political parties. Instead of using these press conferences to call for unity, peace,

¹² Emulate Unity of the Churches: President Emerson Mnangagwa authored by Byron Adonis Mutingwende <https://spiked.co.zw/emulate-unity-of-the-churches-president-mnangagwa/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

¹³ Mnangagwa offers 'Indigenous' Churches free State land. <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mnangagwa-offers-indigenous-churches-free-state-land/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

¹⁴ Mnangagwa offers 'Indigenous' Churches free State land. <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mnangagwa-offers-indigenous-churches-free-state-land/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

justice, and reconciliation, they fuel divisions within the ecumenical movements and the nation at large.

Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations¹⁵

Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations is an umbrella body of four church bodies, namely the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and the Union for the Development of the Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa. The Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations speak out against the ills of the government because their mandate is to fight for peace, justice, and unity to prevail in the country. They are non-partisan in the way they execute their mandate.¹⁶ On 17 May 2021 they castigated the government for the abduction, torture, and inhuman treatment of three women from the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance led by Nelson Chamisa. One of these ladies, Joana Mamombe, is a Member of Parliament in Harare.

Recommendations

The drive of this article is to investigate the relevance of ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe. Based on the discussions and findings, the writer recommends the following:

- All ecumenical movements should be members of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denomination, unlike today when only four ecumenical movements are members while others are not members.
- The church must speak with one voice. The theological identity of the church must fit Jesus Christ's prayer, "that they may be one" (John 17:10). In John 17:10 Jesus prayed for the unity of the Church. The unity of the church will help the political parties to respect the church

¹⁵ Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations. <https://kubatana.net/source/zhocd/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

¹⁶ "Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations call for an end to the abduction and torture ill treatment sexual abuse to women and other innocent people in the country." <https://kubatana.net/2020/05/17/calls-for-an-end-to-abductions-and-torture/>. Accessed 4 August 2021.

more than they do today. The unity of the church will promote togetherness among ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe.

- Ecumenical bodies must be on the forefront in advocating for justice, peace, and reconciliation among political parties, instead of watching people kill one another because of different ideologies. The church via the umbrella body of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denomination must be united among one another.
- Churches should hold workshops to sensitise their members about political tolerance and unity among church members in the fight against political polarization in the country.
- Churches should foster the bringing together of all ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe like what the World Council of Churches is in the world. The World Council of Churches represents all churches across the globe. If the church in Zimbabwe speak with one voice it represents the true church which Christ advocated for. The church must be the light of the world. Therefore, if the ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe want to remain relevant they must speak with one voice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the church in Zimbabwe needs to continue and confidently exercise its prophetic voice and try by all means to maintain the unity of the church and be there with those who are on the borders of society. It does not help for the church to preach unity, peace and justice, reconciliation and the social righteousness of God if it stands in opposition to those who undergo injustices in society. The church through ecumenism in Zimbabwe should maintain its relevance, nature, and calling to unity, through service and witness in the society. The church in Zimbabwe believes that individuals and communities can be transformed through the witness of a united church as the body of Jesus Christ and the end result of this is the realization of the relevance of ecumenism. Ecumenism's mandate is a fellowship of humankind through unity, peace, justice, reconciliation, mission, and evangelism. The move of some ecumenical movements noted aims to bring sanity and order amongst all the citizens of Zimbabwe. The relevance and theological identity of ecumenism in Zimbabwe is the goal of the Church, however, it is experiencing not only dynamic breakthroughs but also limitations and

opposition because of some of the ecumenical bodies are partisan in their identity and not theological in their identity.

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Desire and the crisis of nature: towards the ethics of moral theology in an African context

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Abstract

This essay presents a general reception of some of the notable works of Oliver O'Donovan into the African (Nigerian) context. O'Donovan is a leading moral theologian, ethicist, and Christian philosopher, especially in European contexts. This essay is an attempt to receive his thoughts in an African context with the hope of an ongoing engagement and a growing interest in Africa for the contributions of O'Donovan. The notion of desire as an aspect in human nature will be used to interpret the nature of the crisis that we currently experience in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. A brief summary of O'Donovan's second Gifford lecture would be discussed as a key to further articulation of the urgent need to critically assess our moral life in order to find ways to renew and progress beyond the deadliness of chaos which is depicted in desire as an element of human crisis. The idea of hope as a theological category of Christian moral order will be discussed with particular emphasis on the significance of resurrection of Jesus Christ as the leading promise of God's renewal of life. With this essay it is my hope that the moral crisis of the world, not least the African (Nigerian) context, will be creatively stimulated to new directions and perspectives for restoration, healing, renewal of hope, and direction.

The renewal of theological discourse

What is a theological reflection or discourse? This is, of course, an exchange in the ideas of theology which have definite root in the reality of God and who God is in relation to humanity, the world, time, and all creation. There is no one who can be exhaustive in any theological discourse; this is why it begins and ends as a mystery. This means that there is no mastery of the reality of

theology. The best we can do is to be aware and to be drawn to the mystery of God in God's own terms as revealed word and will (De Gruchy 2013). This is the beginning and end of theology. It is not an argument but an invitation. It is the self-revelation of God in word and deed. The movement in theological discourse may be something of an adventure but this does not mean that the human determines where he or she is going. At best it is the God who calls that ultimately guides the way forward. The movement of theology is not out of human determinism; it is a movement that comes out of human obedience to the voice of God which is already ahead of human beings in the theological movement. The theological discourse of the history of human life and interactions remains open-ended in the midst of all the crises of the time in which mankind finds itself in the world.

The discourse of theology in Africa and the world has been constantly shifting its focus and horizon from one dimension to another. The idea of self-discovery has been an ongoing element of doing theology in context. The days of the romantic theology of the medieval era have moved into the rationalistic theology of the Enlightenment era which has given shape to the modern and even postmodern civilization. The contention and tension of life have been the constant bubbles within which the contours of theological movement in human history are discovered. The movement of theological history has come of age in the twentieth century with the transformation of man into another god for his life and time. The sense of human autonomy has been the movement in the modern and postmodern era. This is the political move of human self-discovery and the exertion of self as the king of the world (Toulmin 1990, Brueggemann 1993, 1997). This is seen in human mastery and manipulation of nature to suit human needs and desires. This is the new human condition that leads in the crises of the modern age of identity, self, and world. The human condition in the world has been reduced from being the creation of God in God's own image to being "homo faber" and "homo laborans" (Arendt 1998). This is the human being as a manufacturer of goods and a laborer who delivers services in the world for the sake of survival. The quest of human life in the twentieth century was not for knowing nor for serving either the purposes of God or life for their own sake, rather it was the quest for survival. This is seen also and more vividly in the ongoing social quest for power and survival in African contexts.

The movement of theological discourse has now reached beyond any certain boundary. This makes the nature of theology something without borders. There is no end to doing theology even in the self-awareness of the end of life. The realization of the movement of theological discourse opens it to some kind of unsettlement that leaves it open from within itself. This is why we cannot shut the world out of the church in order to make the church safer and purer nor can we shut the church out of the world in order to make it purer and more reliable. The foundation and reliability of the church is the person of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is only in Jesus Christ that the church remains the church of God and it is only in the person of Jesus Christ that Christian theology takes its sure root and remains true to its identity and mandate (Moltmann 1977 cf. chapter 3). All forms of theology remain anthropological musings without the definite foundation of the person of Jesus Christ. Political theology has invoked so many ways of doing theology in the world that the actual meaning of theology has been largely pluralized in many contexts to almost a vague sense of being and engagement.

In what follows we shall attempt to reflect on how theological discourse and movement has shifted its paradigms in the context of world development to a new critical order of being and action. This new critical order brings theology to the point of action. The action of life is being rediscovered as the outworking of God in the world. This movement helps theologians to relate their theological reflections to their practical deeds and being in life. The attachment of theology and life in the modern era has taken life and theological discourse very seriously in the quest for human survival and in a sense of meaningfulness in the midst of despair, evil, and death in the world. The world of the modern age has indeed come of age in that life has turned to a new dimension as if God does not exist (Selby 1999:226-45). The coming of age of our world has been revealed not only in the maturity of the world as an organism but also in the deterioration of the world as an edifice. The magnificence and wonder of creation have been gradually effacing from the conscious interaction of man in the world because of the loss of interest in what the world was originally. The movement into the new world of human-constructed civilization leaves the entire world at the mercy of the human self and human reasoning. The most acute problem of our age is the moral crisis of life. The moral crisis of life is degeneration in the sense of the being and doing of human life on earth. This moral crisis necessitates our quest for a new turn

in theology, not only as the search for what to believe about God and how to understand some of the knowable attributes of God and the salvific work of God in history, etc. This new movement and quest is also the rediscovery of self in relation to God, other people, time, and the entire world as the creation of God and not just as a human project of history. The new turn of theology in the modern era is the quest for meaning in the moral reconstruction of the inhumane civilization that we human beings have invented for ourselves. The loss of self in the world, the loss of world in the self, and the loss of God in both the self and world have largely left us and our history sterile and empty of the knowledge of our essence. This is why our major response to criticism in life and religion is often fear and the use of force to kill, dominate, and eliminate the other.

In our attempt to reflect closely on a possible way forward from and through the moral crisis of our time in its ironic maturity, we shall consider the works of Oliver O'Donovan, a leading British moral theologian of our time. This contribution is an attempt to further bring the works and life of O'Donovan into dialogue with the African context, Nigeria in particular. This will demonstrate an aspect of reception theory in order to see how significant the life and work of O'Donovan have been not only as a white, male, moral theologian from the West but also as a Christian who has something to share from his faith and moral perspective and as a fellow citizen of a world full of moral crises and tensions. We shall reflect briefly on some of his works, not necessarily in the order of their publication, with some hope for cohesion, not in terms of thorough analysis, but by means of general introduction. This will surely help to raise the interest of people in Nigeria and beyond on why they need to further read O'Donovan, and for him to continue the work of developing a new perspective on the moral needs of our time.

Desire and the crisis of nature

The problem of human desire in relation to the crisis of human nature was reflected upon in O'Donovan's second lecture in his Gifford Lecture series of 2021 under the general title of "The Disappearance of Ethics" (O'Donovan 2021). This second lecture is on the disappearance of the "frontier" which is "time." This remains essential to our human dilemma in the crisis of our human nature. It happens both from within and from without. The concept of "desire"

in itself is not wrong or evil. It only becomes dangerous when it is qualified on the negative. This opens the possibility for a “good desire” or a “godly desire” which moves one to search for that which is good and in conformity with the will and commands of God. Karl Barth judged human ethics only in relation to the “command of God.” It was Barth’s argument that every man (and woman) is under the command of God (Parson 1987:48-65). The freedom or slavery of human beings depends on how they respond to the command of God. The desire of a person is that which is expressed in their sense of being from the inside. But desire in this context means an inner openness to life that drives a person to a certain goal in time. This helps us see that desire is not just a human wish for something. It is an active movement that leads a person to a certain destination. It is not wishful thinking. A wish, on the other hand, is the human response to necessity. For example, those in captivity wish for freedom; the sick, wish for healing and health; and the dying wish to live. This brings wish into direct relation with the notion of hope. Hope is the sense of a human being alive beyond the present. The power of hope lies in the future of whatever the present can be. This is the strength that conquers the evil of a bad present and releases human beings in the full energy of life that moves them into the future. The future of human life is not the product of desire, if desire is the natural expression of what is liked or wanted for the selfish goodness of life.

The problem of desire as a point of crisis is the human critical quest beyond that which is good and possible. The human nature of desire becomes highly problematic in the unnatural sense of the term. This could be excused or judged as the human corruption or abuse of desire and not the danger or evil of desire in itself. The idea of desire as that which is the expression of feeling for power and control as aspects of the pleasure of life is what generally makes desire evil, bad, and dangerous. But not everything bad is actually evil, as argues O’Donovan. A bad tree may be bad but it is not necessarily evil. A good person may be good in how he or she looks, speaks, writes, behaves, etc. but he or she may actually be evil in his or her intentions and desires. Desire is the inner hiddenness of the sense of feeling which is the elemental idea of motive. Human motive is the elemental organ of the judgment of desire. Any desire whose motive cannot be discerned is not a desire. The rich may justify their desire to be richer, but that does not make their desire good or useful. The desire of man is the expression of human feelings in self-contradiction. The man who is alive desires to kill another man who is alive. The man who is

hungry desires to steal from another person who is hungry. The needy adds to the need of others instead of helping to alleviate it. The inter-religious crisis and killing of people, especially the innocent and the vulnerable, is the expression of human desire and the crisis of nature. It is a crisis because that is not what human nature has been created to be. It is not even what human nature is expecting to have for its own self at any point in time. It is the same evil experience that some desire to inflict on others. At the end of the day the entire world of beauty is turned into ugliness, and the world of life is turned into death. This is not what is called transformation in the positive sense of the word. This is nothing but destruction as the product of evil desire.

The sense of an ethical nature in human beings brings everyone to the threshold of desire and the event of its expression in life. The modern world is the invention of the modern man, and the modern man turns out to be the product of his modernity. The idea of man as *homo faber* in the social theory of Hannah Arendt (1998) brings mankind to the point of the organization that could be useful to make the world a beautiful place. But the misuse of that gift renders the world so ugly and destructive in the ongoing human creativity of death. The self-re-creation of man into *homo faber*, one who trades in the game of creativity, leads to the re-situation of the modern man into another god of his time and space. It is in the human conquering of matter and some aspects of space that the human person remains the slave of self.

The world as it was created has been the home of life and prosperity for humankind and all creation. But the world as it has become has become the new 'veil of tears' (Helmut Thielicke). The modern world has become the world of endless desires (Ward 2000: 52). The desire of man in the nature of its crisis has been the space of simulacra (Cox 1965, 1984). Everything is commodified and set for people as a trap. The new cities of the world today are many - some big, others small. Some grow into human mega cities of love and pleasure in the pursuit and expression of endless desires (Drummond 1988, Giddens 1984, Smith and Kollock 1999). The best of human desire is its sensitivity to the quest for the fullness of life. But the danger is that desire will go totally wrong from within itself in the sense that it will turn into the self-enslavement that renders the human self restless from within itself.

The ongoing move in the modern world is that of a human quest that begins and ends in choices. The modern world is restructured into the stages of human choices. The possible is left for the impossible. The goodness of life has been traded for the cheap appearance of the short-lived cycles of human desire. The crisis of human desire is a crisis in the dramatic self-betrayal of mankind into the thickness of the wilderness of life. The commoditization of the modern world has unleashed the endless crisis of value in which the depth of the value of life has shrunk into the wish and thoughts of human beings. The God-given texture of the goodness of life in the likeness and image of God has largely been betrayed to the image of the devil. People in the modern world suffer the crisis of desire and the destruction of the nature of grace. The simplicity of life has been largely forgotten in the depth of a complexity that leaves it deeply wounded from within itself.

The African context like many other glocal (i.e. the combination of the global and the local) contexts of the world suffers from the inner betrayal of the beauty of life in the crisis of desire and the contradiction of its nature. Nature in this context refers back to the originality of life in all its grandeur and value. It is not the endless processes of life as we see them in a dramatic moment. The movement of life in Africa within the vicious circles of death and oblivion as seen in the African sense of social, political, economic, ecological, and even religious contexts is a thing of deep concern. The way of redemption is to think back to Eden and to search beyond the horizons of the now into the eschatological future that lies ahead of us. The magisterial contributions of Oliver O'Donovan in creating ethical discourse from theological critical perspectives have been opened to challenge and stimulate us in our ongoing search for a better world for ourselves and the coming generation. In what follows we shall run through some of the thoughts that O'Donovan has discussed extensively in some of his leading works in order to see how his contributions can continue to stimulate our thinking in the African context in new ways of thinking and living out our faith in difficult and challenging times.

Oliver O'Donovan and the African context

It is the intention of this essay to argue for the possible contribution of Oliver O'Donovan to the formation of ethics and Christian moral theology even in an African context. It is clear that O'Donovan writes in the West, largely for

Western consumption. Nevertheless, it is our interest to also see how useful and significant his writings can be for the African reader. By means of reception, the work of O'Donovan speaks to the global context of theology and life beyond any specific local context. His move to articulate the contours of political theology testifies to this possibility. In his work *The Desire of the Nations*, (1999) O'Donovan outlined a new trajectory for political theology from a Christian philosophical perspective. The nations are envisioned from the larger context of life and this life is the creative gift and activity of God. The political cannot be totally separated from life. The missionary stereotype of seeing the political as a dirty secular game that does not fit the category of theology has been largely dismissed. O'Donovan's argument helps retrieve the value of theology and life within God's given revelation and God-centered ethics. The renewal of life in the African context will be the beginning of an African renewal of its political roots. The political history of Africa with its connection to European and Islamic slavery has dehumanized and traumatized Africa to the point of disinterest in life and action (Turaki 2010). The life of the African people has largely been reduced to violence, self-rejection, and the rejection of others. But the rediscovery of the ethical root of political life from a God-centered perspective remains helpful in rediscovering the value of life as God-given and God-loved. This makes us the object of God's love and not the object of human manipulation in the world. Africa in the midst of God-centered ethics remains inclusive and healed in the blessedness of the presence of God. This vision of God for the healing of the nations remains the significant paradigm that Christian political discourse can take from O'Donovan's perspective.

Furthermore, one of Oliver O'Donovan's seminal contributions that remains creatively significant for the modern world is his trilogy on *Ethics as Theology* (2013, 2014, 2017). O'Donovan creatively moved the foundations of ethics from human random choice and reformulated it in the givenness and vitality of the revelation of God. This rediscovery of the root of moral and political theology remains an opening for ongoing contributions that seek to critically outline the chaos of life in the world. It also calls attention to the basic need for Christian theologians to rediscover the new world of God that emerges from the biblical textual revelation. There is no doubt that the history of human life and the creation of civilization has uncovered abuse of the Bible by human beings as a tool for operation and marginalization. This leaves the Bible

as a “site of struggle” within the contexts of its reception and ongoing interpretations (Musa 2020:27-38).

Nevertheless, a new ethical approach to biblical interpretation and reception remains creatively liberating and restorative (Smit 1990, 29-43). This is the new ethical paradigm that Oliver O’Donovan amongst others has put forward. The three volumes of O’Donovan’s newest contribution to ethics are as follows: *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology, Volume 1*; *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology, Volume 2*; and *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology, Volume 3* (2013, 2014, 2017). In these Christian contributions to ethics O’Donovan brings a new interest not only to the meaning and foundations of ethics but also to the meaning and relevance of theology to modern life. The rediscovery of the meaning and function of the self in relation to the world and time puts the self in the right context of being and action. The disorientation of the modern African person as well as Western people remains chaotic from within and from without. As a result of the loss of our bearings many people move to the point of despair and the loss of self in the process of seeking some kind of meaning and fulfilment in life. The enslaved self and the politically exploited self of the African person remains largely marginalized and traumatized in the arena of the world’s life to the point that violence is the only means of liberation. The use of violence as a means of liberation has not been a good end of the argument. Many people lose themselves in the process of finding life and liberation. Many African contexts today, such as Nigeria, Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Kenya etc., have many of their citizens in the bush as rebels and child soldiers. The African person has been turned apart and alienated from within. The sadness and danger of all this chaos is certainly the loss of self and the reduction of the human self to that of a beast. These evils in the world have turned the world upside down. The only sure route back to the world’s home is the rediscovery of the origin of humanity and the origin of the meaning of life in the world. In O’Donovan’s ethical paradigm, the idea of time is also rediscovered as the ongoing context of life. The tension of the loss of time leaves human life in serious chaos without the peace and concentration needed to pursue the meaning of life in its beauty and goodness. An understanding of time as the created time of God is one of the surest ways of finding peace in time. Human forgetfulness of the role of God in creating and keeping time makes his search and use of time totally inadequate. There is no time for the time when everything seem to melt

in the sun (Vosloo 2015:3-13). The renewal of ethics has its moral contours, but the understanding of its moral roots goes beyond morality. The beginning of ethics is not in the discourse between what is good or bad, right or wrong but rather it is in the discourse between what is given or not given from a God-centered perspective.

The movement of ethics in O'Donovan's contribution opens new contours in which life is not only discovered but also enjoyed as that which has been given and cherished by the creative wisdom and love of God. The love and will of God are the combination of God's single character by which God creates and sustains everything. This understanding of life from the perspective of God's love gives it a healthy and an enduring orientation. Nothing can be lost to chaos when the God of love redeems it in his love. The basis of human meaninglessness is found in the disorientation of life and the reduction of everything in life to the change of evolution. This kind of evolutionary theory leaves life open not to itself but also to chaos. This is where the impossible is made possible and human beings created in the image of God bear the image of the devil. The '*imago Dei*' in the human being is lost to the '*imago diabolos*' from without. The moral crisis of the world and Africa in particular is the manifestation of the '*imago diabolos*' that takes over the actual origin of the '*imago Dei*' in human beings. The route for life and ethics which O'Donovan has taken is largely the route of reconciling people from their inner conflict to the rediscovery of the gift of God's peace and joy. This is what brings hope and meaning to the human being in the modern world.

The lost person is found in Christ by the ultimate choice and love of God even before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4). The movement of ethics in *Finding and Seeking* brings the human being to the point of his or her usefulness as functional beings in the world. The value of human life is being restored in the idea that all human beings have been created in the goodness and love of God and through them that love and goodness are one and the same reality that is being reflected. The human being is an active agent who has been made another subject of life and creativity in the world. There is no idea of the creation of any person in order that he or she may destroy at their will that which God has already created. The creation of humankind in the world is the manifestation of the divine wisdom that the hiddenness of God would not lead to the loss of God in the world. Human beings are the representatives of God

not just as political beings whose social interaction leads them only to making choices. Yes, the free person can make choices and take responsibility for definite action. Nevertheless, in finding and seeking we first discover the movement of God toward humanity and then the movement of human beings toward God in response. This creative response continued to be the rehabilitating experience of human beings in the presence of God in order that that which has been lost may be found. This, for Jürgen Moltmann, opened the door to a new theology of joy in God (Moltmann 2017). Like the woman who found her lost coin or the father whose lost son returned home (Luke 15) God remains a joyful God in receiving the lost back. Theology is joy in God and the experience of God in a human being is an experience of joy because of the generosity of God. The movement of God to find the lost makes the lost valuable in the eyes of God even in their lostness. The love of God is the internal element that makes the move and the connection. This is the character of God as God and still active in the world through the Spirit of God's love and grace.

O'Donovan's discussion on *Entering into Rest* leads us to think not only on the origin of humankind but also on their goal. Where is history moving to? And what should be the goal or the end of humankind? These are salient questions that need careful attention. Humankind as the object of God's love are called in Christ to their ultimate destiny, namely, God. God is the origin and the destiny of humankind. God is the final goal and meaning of human history. This does not mean that humankind has to achieve God as a certain commodity or point of interest in the world. No. Rather, humanity is found and called into God. The life of human beings has its meaning and purpose only in its relation to God as its actual origin and goal. The focus of human history is not to seek and find the pleasures of life in their transience, rather it is to receive the ultimate gift of God's self in the person of his passion. This is the manifestation of the humanity of God as the ultimate revelation in history (Barth 1956, Grzegorz 2015). This is also the beginning of the end of history as seen in Moltmann's theology of hope (Moltmann 1967, 1975, 2012). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is something unique in the history of human life and in the interaction of the divine that has recreated history in the most critically redemptive way and manner. The manifestation of the Jesus Christ as God's own self-revelation marks the end of life in its glorious givenness and opens it into its glorious expectation (Chia 2006). We shall return to this later on with

reflections on the contribution of O'Donovan in *Resurrection and Moral Order*. What is here presented is the new paradigm of the reality of man in relation to the God of love and the actual purpose of human life. As seen in the Westminster Catechism, the chief end of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. (Question and Answer 1) This is not the product of human creativity, rather it is the extension of divine wisdom and grace. Human beings are not evolutionary phenomena that have no destiny beyond metaphysical metamorphoses in different aspects of life and nothingness. People are now given a sure sense of history in the history of God's being and relation to human reality. This in a better sense answers the questions of African Traditional Religion on the unending circle of life without a destination. It is in the eschatological vision of the revelation of God that we discover the fulfillment of human life in the actual restfulness which in its essence is only found in God. It is now the time for waiting the time for preparation and conscious expectation of the advent of the new time of God for the fulfillment of the destiny of humankind.

In his contribution *The Ways of Judgment* (2005) and *The Just War Revisited* (2013), Oliver O'Donovan takes our attention to the heart of the crises of our time. The elemental crisis of human history is the actual Sin of rebelling against the will and purpose of God. This rebellion as sin was actual but not made a destined ultimacy. O'Donovan in *Ways of Judgment* points out how humankind as created agent is being called to make life out of the open-endedness of life and out of situations in which they cannot avoid making choices. The content of human life remains in the creative circle of the choices that people make and in the ways that those choices inform the kind of person that they are or are becoming. There is no arbitrariness in the creative focus of human beings. God stands both in the distance and in the closest proximity with human beings. This is intended to help people discover their basic companion and in divine solidarity to learn wisdom and hope. The ways of human judgment are constant moves between the idea of action and the idea of the will. Critical thinkers and philosophers like Saint Augustine, Kant, Kierkegaard, Barth, etc., have all at different stages reflected on the perversity of humankind and the misdirection of the will to that which is not the will of God. The ways of judgment have become the inner prison of desire and wishful thinking which have incarcerated the same human being in its own natural tendency. The ultimate goodness of God became hard to discover even though it is made

known in the person of Jesus Christ. The moral crisis of the West and the rest of the world is an ongoing crisis not of nature but of humanity (Novak 2000:1-21). The evil we see and experience in the chaotic movement of life is the actual manifestation of the inadequacy of our understanding of the actual origin and purpose of life. This is why life has been dangerously devalued. It is a terrible crime in the history of human life on earth. The criticism of Nietzsche on the need for revaluation of life is an inner protest not only against Christianity but also against the dangerous trajectory of humanity in the modern world. The modern world is in definite danger if the life of persons refuses to be revalued and restored into the true ways of judgment. These true ways of judgment are the ways of self-discovery in the virtues of life. This is a call “back to virtues” (Vosloo 2013:1-12) not as a game change but as a sense of transformation from what is old to what is new. This is essential to Christian experience and history. I wish this could suffice as a response to Nietzsche, Bultmann, and Adolf von Harnack in order to see that the essence of Christianity is the essence of life. This is seen not in the action of the human persons but in the actions of God. The essence of Christianity as the essence of life is the love of God. Everything moves in and out of life from the vantage point of God’s love which gives it its true meaning and the capacity to know and be itself. The virtues of love, faith, patience, wisdom, self-control, humility, etc. are not the human characteristics of being that emanate from the observations of Plato or the thinking of Aristotle or the arguments of Goethe, Hegel, Heidegger, Kierkegaard etc. Nevertheless, with Saint Paul I would argue that these are the elemental fruit of the Spirit that make the practical Christian life Christian (1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:22-23).

In *The Just War Revisited*, O’Donovan follows the path of human wisdom in searching for a godly alternative to the chaos of life. Just war theory is a human reaction to excessive violence. It is a justification of war in context not because of an interest in war or the killing of others but as an act of human responsibility to love one’s life and the lives of others. Yet, it is not a final solution to the crisis of human nature and the ongoing ideological desire in those who want to steal, kill, and destroy. This is the basic ethical tension in the Nigerian context today. Christians in Nigeria face a very serious dilemma whether to learn to trust in God in an absolute sense of loyalty or to use their sense of wisdom to share their loyalty with themselves and their quest for self-preservation. Criticism of human reasoning in the modern sense of the word

started with Kant (McQuillan 2016) but did not find its end in him. Kant only opened the dialogue to an ever limited sense of the binary nature of life as he has observed it. But O'Donovan takes his argument further by raising modern critical questions that show the complexity of the human will to power and to being. This complexity is the natural struggle of the good person to either love the bad person or to kill him. This has been the danger and the invitation of life in Africa today. The evolutionary theory of the survival of the fittest has no good news for the nature of the crises of life in Africa and the larger world today. Survival of the fittest is when the powerful threaten and even seek to eliminate the powerless or the undesirable. This is the danger of the crisis of human desire. For human beings to live and flourish in the joy of life and the goodness of God we need a better alternative. We need to heed the call to the ways of truth and love in compassionate justice, for indeed there is nothing as truly good as the good will which is created by God. This is the purity of the origin of life and the openness of that purity to mature to a certain good fulfilment. The idea of war cannot be the idea of love. The ways of war are only and always the ways of death. The new politics of power in African contexts have pushed so many politicians to use their fellow human beings as weapons for self-protection and the achievement of their certain political goals. This has turned the political arena of the world and of Africa in particular into an arena of human political slavery. There is no freedom when human will is bought with money or dominated by a certain ideology that makes it a slave. This is why many people cannot make their own choices. The age of rationality will not dawn in Africa if this kind of social and political trends continue to grow. The freedom of Africans is not in the hands of the Western colonialist. The freedom of Africans is in their own sense of self-realization and in the true discernment of their God-given gifts for life and godliness. Similarly, the freedom of Western people is found not in anything else but in their own discernment of their origin and destiny in the God of life and love and truth. There is no freedom without truth and God's truth is the content of his justice. There is no freedom, no true life without justice. Just war theory is a rational reaction of the human being as a human being. This is not the final solution, rather it is a demonstration of the hunger and thirst for life in the midst of death and destruction. Wars end when justice is done in love. The destiny of the African nations is left open to the outworking of their own will. The basic place of hope in all its grandeur lies in the horizon of the future.

Oliver O'Donovan discusses the horizons of the future in his *Resurrection and Moral Order* (1986). In what I have observed in this contribution, O'Donovan gives more priority to the reorganization of the moral order of the modern person than the close reflection on the meaning and function of "resurrection" as a theological concept. This helps us understand his approach to the ethical discourse that he pursues in the material. The correlation of resurrection and moral order is the concretion of the renewal of life as God has intended it. Resurrection as seen in Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* is the other side of the project of God's creation (Moltmann 1964). Resurrection is God's new confrontation to the forces of chaos in human history and their subjugation to the enactment of the freedom of man in the freedom of God. Resurrection in Christian theology is the most unique event that leads us into the beginning of eternity as the real life of God through Jesus Christ. Resurrection is the most important sign of the end time. To the kingdom of darkness and evil it is the sign of defeat and to the kingdom of light it is the sign of the victory of God through Jesus Christ (Col. 1:13). This is the new Sabbath of the redeemed in which every aspect of life has been redeemed and restored in Jesus Christ. The Christian experience of Jesus Christ as seen in the discourse of O'Donovan is the dynamic openness of the Christian to the reality of his or her new creation. It is only in Christ that our sense of renewal begins and ends. What emerges is the new nature and the new life in Jesus Christ. In Christ we experience a sharp break from the old self of evil and lostness to the renewed "self" found in the resurrected person of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The theology of resurrection is the revelation of the promise of life in the midst of death. This helps African Christians who constantly face Islamic insurgent extremism that results in gross abuse and the destruction of life. The death of many people in recent years because of the religious intolerance and persecutions that happen across the boundaries of religions in Nigeria remain the modern corruption of the human soul from within itself. This is the gift of death and evil in the context of life. This makes the goodness of life elusive from the experience of those who suffer and die in the midst of tragedy. The idea of resurrection is the new dawn of life that defeats the deadliness of death. The being of God is the promise of the rise of the new "Sun of Righteousness" (Moltmann 2010) which must arise in the midst of the darkness of our time in order to shine the new light of life upon us. This may be an eschatological reality that begins from the "Now" of the believer in the history of Jesus Christ.

The idea of moral order is the promise of goodness in the midst of chaos. Again, this does not follow the theory of evolution but rather revelation. From an evolutionary perspective that which is expected only comes from the old rotten reality. It is not the end of the circle but its continuation and ever widening. But in the revealing presence of God we are invited to experience and testify to something truly new. In reflection on the moral order the renewal of nature becomes necessary. There is nothing natural in the realities we experience today. The nature of things has been distorted to how things have now become. The process of becoming defies the force of the possibility of the end. This means that every end signifies a new beginning (Moltmann 2004). The modern project of life is being moved to a certain fixity that man could call the end, my own end. This is the limit of all human achievement. The idea of revelation in Christian theology defies the force of a certain human fixity on anything. The reality of God who calls life out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) directly confronts the nihilo and moves its fixation into something creatively new. This is the promise that the history of life will not eventually end in moral chaos and the anarchy of human callousness, but in the dawn of a new day for which the rule will be order and love, just order, and the love of justice.

Theology and the moral crisis of Africa

Looking at the dangerous development and move of misdirected human desire that contradicts and destroys human nature, the question remains, “What role can theology play in restoring the order and goodness of life and creation”? The answer to this question is affirmative. Christian theology has a lot to offer in response to the moral crisis of Africa and the rest of the world if it is well understood and taken seriously. In the discussion on the “moral crisis of the West” (cf. Novak 2000) it has been observed that humankind has degenerated or moved away from the God-given position of life and authority which it was given from the beginning of life and in relationship with God. The Western context today has become the new context of the trade of human desires in the arena of the world supermarket in which everything of value is on sale. The value of things has been taken more seriously than the value of life. Human beings take life for granted to the extent that they will trade the worth of human beings for mere things of the world.

The sad events of human trafficking and the wanton killing of the innocent are signs of the beginning of the end of the world of order and goodness and the world's becoming a world of chaos and death. "The god of this age has blinded the eyes" of so many people that they cannot see the goodness and value of life as the good life of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). An important contribution of Sunday B. Agang, namely *When Evil Strikes*, expresses his confrontation with the problem of violence in Africa, with special emphasis to the Nigerian context (Agang 2016, 2017a, 2017b). The sadness of the evil of violence in Nigeria is the ongoing hatred of humanity and of the goodness of God's creation. The Islamic extremists in Nigeria and the rest of the world are bent on destroying that which is good and peaceful. The rejection of the good is the beginning of the destruction of life in its goodness and beauty. The acknowledgement of the presence of evil in religious violence in Nigeria has been the most important point of Agang's contribution. Agang emphasizes a new alternative to the crisis of human nature. Instead of people following evil ways and the transient pleasure of power to dominate others, he argues for an ethic of hospitality and care. It is in our acts of hospitality that we discover the actual connection and unity of our humanity with the humanity of others. This is the creative symbol of our eternal destiny. This is where all that is desired is the good, not just for oneself but for all others. By our desire for the other in love and hospitality we shall find ways of healing the wounds of Africa. We cannot pretend that Africa is all good and that Nigeria is alright because of her religious traditions. The problem in Nigeria has not only been the idea of God in all its complexity and the eagerness of different adherents to project and protect it. It has to be understood that the problem of humanity everywhere is the same, namely, rebellion against God.

The religiosity of the people in Nigeria has in many ways only led them to the self-establishment of their own Tower of Babel, not to the acknowledgement of the good creation of God which must be cared for and the God of creation who must be worshiped. The moral crisis of Africa can be seen in many ways that have emerged within the history of Africa's self-discovery in the return of slavery, though not Eurocentric enslavement but an internal slavery within itself (Turaki 1993). The abuse of power either in social politics or church administration remains an ongoing sign of our captivity and alienation from within. The growing waves of social and religious corruption and bigotry has also been a major contributing factor. Many organizations today have been

reduced to tribal strongholds. Many church denominations in Africa now only identify with a certain leading tribe which becomes the criterion for the admission into the organization and life within it. A sense of occupation and domination has crept into the fabric of African life and has disrupted the unifying philosophy of unity and fellowship in it. This can be seen in the commoditization of life and religion. Human beings enslave and destroy one another in the name of religion. This is certainly the corruption and betrayal of the meaning and function of religion. In Christianity human beings are not seeking God for God has already found them. In other religions humankind is said to be seeking God in the present in order to secure their future. This is an orientation that should bring humanity into a deep sense of soberness and attentiveness especially as to when and how God speaks to them. But in a situation where people steal and kill one another society has only taken another route to a new religion of evil. This is the worship of death which Jürgen Moltmann critically acknowledges in the modern and the postmodern age (Moltmann 2017:3).

Christian theology can be useful in its restorative function to bring some sense of adjustment and the birth of life in the rebirth of hope. The restoration of humanity begins and ends in the new realization of the person and presence of God in the world through the person of Jesus Christ. It is in and through Jesus Christ that the old self of evil and the reign of death is put to death and the new self of God's righteousness and justice is made alive (Eph. 2; Col. 3). The new theology of life today emerges from our knowledge of the God of life. The righteous live with an unquenchable thirst for the "living God" (Ps. 42:1). A new understanding of God as the living God opens the door of life and its goodness to humankind. The theology of life begins in the divine initiative of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. He came that we might have life in abundance (John 10:30). The reality of life is not the achievement or invention of humanity, rather it is the in-breaking of the glorious light of God in the midst of the world of darkness and evil (Isa. 9:1ff). We are like the slaves and relegated people who live in darkness but now have seen the great light of life which shines upon us in all its beauty and goodness. It is in this new realization of the presence of God as the presence of life in its newness that we remain hopeful for its resurrection the death and for its renewal in hope in the living God.

Conclusion

Three points are worth our close attention from O'Donovan's ethics especially as we reflect on the movement of our moral lives in context. First, there is a programmatic shift in time in the context of history with a special emphasis on resurrection and moral order. The concept of resurrection is a great promise of God's renewal of life and time and everything. This was the thesis of Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope* (1964). The life of evil and violence that we experience in Africa cannot end in violence, defeat, and death. Rather hope lies beyond all that destroys in the God who gives life in abundance (John 10:10). Second, the crisis of life and the chaos of nature shall be redeemed by God's power to bring moral order at the end of history. Thus for O'Donovan moral order is that which has been created and promised by God which will only dawn as the fulfilment of history at the end of time. Third, the human quest for justice does not begin and end in human rationality, such as just war theories. Rather such quests shall be satisfied in the reality of God's enactment of justice for all. What remains urgent for us here and now is a life of active responsibility and living hope.

The disappearance of ethics as seen in O'Donovan's Gifford lectures is a reality that demands our sense of acknowledgement no matter how painful or embarrassing it may be. Yet, the hope for renewal remains open in the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:1-2) which leads us into a new understanding and celebration of life as the gift of God, not our human product. The high spirit of modernity must be adjusted in the creative power of the Spirit of God in the sense of our new orientation in the interest of life in its power and sacredness. The acknowledgement of the sacred sense of life as the creation and gift of God is the surest route to the restoration of ethics and the renewal of life in the power of God.

Presentation: I am happy to present this article to Prof. Oliver O'Donovan in celebration of his contributions through his Gifford Lecture series. With all best wishes to future readers.

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Stand firm: A message from a historical perspective to Christians living in hostile contexts.

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Abstract

Humans live in a world overwhelmed by an increasing sense of fear and tension. If they want to understand themselves, they have to understand previous generations before them. Robert Schuller (1986:13) noted that "tough times never last, but tough people do". Many times, shocking waves strike to teach people history. Penalties, hardships and casualties increase when people refuse to be accountable or rarely admit that prevailing hard times exceed the parameters of divine faith. For example, in Nigeria, defenders and critics during times of crisis seem to lock horns for decades of struggles. Denominations across Nigeria for example wondered whether they can survive these tough times, having lost more than two-thirds of their membership in the core north, central and north-eastern regions. This study is a historical-critical analysis of the Christian message to people living in hostile contexts as a way to inspire hope in communities ravaged by violence. The study concludes that terror-weary people can draw lessons from church history to overcome their struggles and hold on to their faith in the context of their violent locations.

Introduction

The research question for this contribution is why should we study the history of the Church? Everything that humans are today is a result of what others have done, said and thought in the past. If we are to understand ourselves as humans, we have to understand our past. This is as true for the distant past as

it is for the most recent past. It is as true of nations and cultures as it is of individuals. This is as true of Church history as it is of secular history. Theology did not originate in a temporal vacuum. Theologians like Tertullian, Augustine, Athanasius and Luther did not just sit down and concoct theology. But they theologized from Scripture as an authentic source of Christian faith because theology is the science of God. Millard J. Erickson explained the word theology well in both a broader and narrower use. Erickson (2013:9-10) noted that “theology in the broadest usage, encompasses all subjects treated in a theological or divinity school. In this sense, it includes such diverse subjects as Old Testament, New Testament, Church history, evangelism, missions, systematic theology, philosophy of religion, Christian ethics, preaching, Christian education, pastoral ministry and leadership and counselling.”

In a narrower sense, he explained that “the word theology refers to those endeavours that treat the doctrinal character of Christian faith such as biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology and philosophical theology.” He further opined that “within systematic theology, there are various doctrines such as bibliology, anthropology, Christology, and theology proper.” However, with regards to matters affecting the Christian faith, there were issues that had been simmering for centuries that finally came to a boil in their lifetimes and they needed to be addressed. This is one of such reasons for Timothy Palmer (2015:161) to argue that “theology is done in context.” The fact that these issues were simmering for centuries means that they were deeply rooted in the past. This is in line with what Solomon said, “there is nothing new under the sun,” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That is why when a person reads a systematic theology by Louis Berkhof (2012:19), “A person is getting the distillation of centuries of reflection on the Scriptures.” They are building on the work of those who have gone before. The study of history is nothing less than a conversation with the past. It is a conversation with real people whose main difference from you and me is that they happened to live hundreds and even thousands of years ago. Why spend time studying history or Church history? Two prominent scholars in the field of church history answered this question. Reading the book by David Hackett Fischer (1972:xx, 86, 87, 88, 89, 338), argued in favour of studying the history of the church:

There are four reasons why church history is an important subject to study. (i). Studying church history serve to clarify contexts in

which contemporary problems exist. (ii). It is useful not merely for what it contributes to the present understanding, but also for what it suggests about the future. (iii). Studying church history can be useful in the refinement of theoretical knowledge, of an “if, then” sort. (vi). Historical scholarship can usefully serve to help us find out who we are. (v). Historians have a heavy responsibility not merely to teach people substantive historical truths but also to teach them how to think historically.

Mark Noll (2000:15, 16, 17, 18, 19) wrote that,

Studying the history of Christianity provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the irreducible historical character of the Christian faith. It provides perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. Church history is as useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with the surrounding culture. It shows how God sustains the church despite the church’s own frequent efforts to betray its Savior and its own calling.

While humans are conversing with the past, they have to realize that they too, are part of the church today, even in contemporary Africa and this piece is written. Mipo Dadang (2018:xii) argued that “history is an inquiry focusing on past human experience in a society with a view towards significant and comprehensive narratives embracing human actions and reactions in respect to the whole range of natural, rational and spiritual forces.” Dadang (2015:xi) enlightened that “rendering a narrative of human affairs is true of ecclesiology history as it is in of secular history. To bring Christian history in the present context why Christians suffer particularly in Nigeria today, there is usually the need to probe about the past to know why heroes of faith stood firm and defended their faith.” Dadang (xii) further opined that “good understanding of church history requires the ability to get inside the minds of those of other times and other places so that lessons are learned that might be applied during current hard situations that bedevilled Christians.” This is profound because while the conversation is held with the past, there is the need to realise that living human beings are part of church history in every age.

So, now the question is, why write on church history? Why should one write on the historical perspective of the church by investigating theological controversies from its early stage to the present day? From a historical account, as would be documented in this work, these early Christians faced problems similar to what the Christian church faces today. This often manifests in a context of tremendous danger as regards what parts of the culture in which humans find themselves do, they reject as being inconsistent with the gospel? What parts do a Christian generation keep as being useful and non-threatening to their spiritual health and their witness to the world? These are questions Christians face in every age and every cultural context, particularly in a pluralistic religious context. Thus Steed and Sundkler (2004:2) argue that “Christian history needs to be written in the context of Africa.”

Reflecting on what these scholars wrote helped me to remember what a dear colleague and friend told me in recent times. A colleague and friend of mine told me recently of a Christian woman she knows who as a Christian spent 18 years under communism in what was then Czechoslovakia. She was separated all that time from her husband and children. This friend of mine made an interesting remark based on this woman’s experience. She said, “when God wants to get your attention, he touches your pocketbook or your health or your family. When he wants to make you a saint, he makes you thankful for a cup of soup, a cup of water, and a place to sleep at night.” So, the early Christian church’s opposition to pagan customs is something many Christians even today can identify with and all of us can learn from. Throughout the history the different stances of the church and state toward each other, ranged from outright hostility to the church by the state leading to various degrees of tension, especially in most of these cases were a result of theological controversies, once the church or individual theologians wanted to stand firm by the truth, they faced brutal treatment.

This work begins with a statement of the problem. It defines the early Christian church. It discusses Christianity in the Roman world and describes threats against Christians and their firmness in faith and theological standpoint through the fourth century in church history. Recommendations for contemporary Christians are offered to help them apply lessons of the past to the present and lay a foundation for future generation Christians to stand firm in the faith.

Statement of the problem

While Christians around the world are experiencing brutal treatment, the same is true in the context of Nigeria where all Christian communities in the middle belt states have come under the wrath of Boko Haram and other terrorists who persecute by killing harmless people in the region for many decades now. Loves (2010:196) lamented that “Jihad has killed over one hundred and twenty million Africans. It has killed sixty million Christians. It has killed eighty million Hindus and ten million Buddhists besides unaccounted hundreds of millions wasted souls since the inception of Islam.” The situation is not different in Nigeria, particularly, in Northern Nigeria and the central states of the country. The nature of persecuted violence against Christians in Nigeria continues to deteriorate. Dadang (2022:5) provides a historical setting in the context of Christian suffering in Nigeria:

Nigeria, like most societies in the world, is a multi-religious society. Before the coming of Christianity and Islam, the indigenous peoples practiced traditional religion. But, between the 11th and the 15th centuries, Christianity and Islam were introduced. Since then, various ethnic groups have tended to adopt either Christianity or Islam.

He reiterates that “the existence of the two religions in Nigeria has brought enormous religious rivalry and crisis. For example, competition for converts and /or for religious, political, and economic dominance has characterized the relationship of religious communities. Each sees the other as a threat.” *Today’s Challenge*, Nigeria’s foremost Christian magazine reports that “3,462 Christians hacked to death by Nigerian jihadists in 200 days, 3000 abducted” (Abu 2021:42) Hundreds of thousands of Christians and even pagans carry emotional scars that hardly heal because almost annually, another round of bloodshed results in fresh losses. This is strong evidence that religious persecutions persist across Nigeria. Examples of bloodshed can be recalled in the context of Nigeria easily. On Thursday 25 September 2020, armed Fulani herds people attacked a Christian community village in Kaduna Vom in Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State and killed several Christians numbering 25 Christians. Religious persecution from Islam against Christians has characterised Nigeria without an end. Speaking of how violent attacks have

come upon Christians has truncated the Nigerian society. Jan Boer (2003:14) describes the 1980s to 2000s as “Nigeria’s decades of blood.” This situation is still worrisome and needs a solution to help Christians stand firm despite their hurts. It is therefore imperative and timely to write and remind Christians generally who fall in this category on how they may respond to violent attacks against them and to learn from their predecessors how they endured. This can help strengthen not only those who suffer persecution currently in Nigeria. This will increase more Christian persecution in Nigeria and the global church as well. Writing the stories of Christians who stood firm in their faith by defending their theological standpoint from history stand as part of encouragement to help the present generation of believers to remain firm in their faith in Christ wherever they find themselves.

Early Christian church

The Christian church in every age, past, present, and the eschaton, consists of all who believe in Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God. These are those who accept him as their personal Lord and Saviour from sin and obey him as Christ, the Prince of Peace of the kingdom of God of the universe (John 1:12-13; I John 5:10-13). Jesse Lyman Hurlbut (2008:13) notes that “The height which marks the starting-point of the Church of Christ, is the Mount of Olives, just outside the eastern wall of Jerusalem.” He affirms the first period of church history to be “the Apostolic Church from the ascension of Christ, 30A.D.” According to Hurlbut, “Jesus newly risen from his tomb in the garden, gave his last command and then ascended to his heavenly throne” (13). He further explains that “the Church of Christ began its history as a world movement on the Day of Pentecost, in the late spring of the year 30 A.D.; fifty days after the resurrection of our Lord, and ten days after his Ascension” (16). Palmer (2015:161) on the one hand asserts that “the Christian church was born at Pentecost. The first Christian theologians after Jesus were the apostles and the other writers of the New Testament.” However, Boer (2003:15) narrated that “it was in, the historic land of Israel, that the church of the New Testament first appeared in history.” He reiterates that “it is difficult to set a date for its beginning. If we say that the church began at Pentecost, we leave out of consideration the life and ministry of Jesus.” He opined that “if we say that the church began with him, we must remember the fact that the ministry of Jesus grew out of the life of Judaism.” Thus, Boer opined that “it is therefore, best

to say that the church arose out of the life and work of its Lord and became a universal witness to him at Pentecost. Their theological standpoint tended to be simple, but having a profound love for Jesus.” Adrian Hastings (2000:16) wrote that “it is with the crucifixion of Jesus around 30 CE that Christianity...begun.” He further explains that “there were many other charismatic teachers and healers in first century Judea. But for no similar individual did a movement in his name spring up after his death. In the explanation of this fact, lies the clue to the emergence of the church.” From a biblical perspective, their theological basis was centred on Jesus, the Messiah, the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus (Matthew 24:36). It was strong in faith and testimony, pure in character and abundant in love. But one defect was its lack of missionary zeal. It stayed at home when it should have gone abroad with the gospel to other lands and other peoples (Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:18-20). However, the Roman world through which Christianity emerged is of significant importance about how the Christian faith suffered violent treatment.

Christianity in the Roman world

Dadang (2015:14) writes that “the world through which Christianity appeared and grew was the world of early Roman Empire. It began from 63 B.C., when Augustus Caesar became the first emperor of Rome until 180 A.D.” Dadang (2015:15) opines that “before Rome became a Roman empire, it was a republic. It had taken its cue from Greek city states such as Athens, which was the best expression of human government. It was the city in which republican virtue could flourish.” He further reiterates (2015:14) that:

During its first two centuries, Rome was master of the west. It was a period amply suited to the growth and spread of the gospel because from Asia Minor in the east to Egypt, in the south and Spain and Britain in the west, Rome held undisputed control, which meant there was peace and stability throughout the Mediterranean region. The goal of Rome was to extend civilization. At the death of emperor Marcus Aurelius, Rome was at the Zenith of its power.

He then concludes that “from that time, Rome began a slow decline. This led to a sense of dissatisfaction, both politically and spiritually which Christianity

sought to answer. But Christians were not liked. They were regarded with suspicion, at first by the general population increasingly by the Roman government” (Dadang 2015:15), noting that, “Christians were regarded as seditious because they said Jesus is LORD. Rather than they saying Caesar is Lord.” The result was the beginning of tough times and persecution for Christians from its onset. The early Christians began to face threats that aimed to disable them as a community of believers in Christ.

Threats that disabled a church

The dictionary defines ‘disabled’ as “deprived of capabilities.” Does being deprived of certain capabilities take away meaning and purpose in peoples’ lives? Does, it takes away their rights to life and religion? Do people who are deprived of capabilities ever reach a point where they should be allowed to die or where others should cause them to die? Is there a difference? The answers to these questions are critical. Historically, the church started with persecution from within. The aim was to disable its growth and stop it from expanding. Stephen was the first in the church to have the vision of a worldwide gospel. It was that which caused him to become the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:57-60). Saul took part in the slaying of Stephen. Immediately after his death, he became the leader in the persecution of the disciples of Christ. He seized, bounded and scourged both men and women (Acts 8:3). The Jerusalem church was broken up for a time, and its members scattered abroad (Acts 26:9-11). Hurlbut (2008:31) narrated that “In the year 64 A.D. a large part of the city of Rome was destroyed in a great conflagration. It has been said that the fire was started by Nero, worst of all the Roman emperors...” He reiterates that:

It was certain that Nero was charged with the crime by common report. In order to clear himself, Nero declared that the Christians had set fire to the city, and began a terrible persecution. Thousands were tortured and put to death. Among them was Peter by crucifixion, in the year 67 and Paul by beheaded, in the year 68.

This is agreed by church historians as the first imperial persecution in the history of the church. According to Hurlbut (2008:33), “the name of the last generation of the first century, The Age of Shadows, partly because the gloom of persecution was over the church.” About the year 90 A.D., the cruel emperor

Domitian began second imperial persecution of the Christians. Thousands of the believers were slain especially, in Rome and Italy. At this time John the last of the apostles was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). Hurlbut (14) narrates that “the first period of church history ends with the death of John, the last of the twelve apostles upon earth, which is said to have taken place about 100 A.D.” Palmer (2015:161) opines that “the end of the first century... all the apostles were dead.” At the end of the first century, the doctrines set forth by Paul in the epistle of Romans were accepted throughout the church as the standards of the faith. John Hunt (2020:1) affirms that “Romans contains profound and life-changing theology and this is one of the reasons why it has been so influential over the centuries.” Hurlbut (2008:35) remarks that: “the standards of moral character were high but the tone of the spiritual life was lower than it had been in the earlier apostles’ days. Yet everywhere, the church was strong aggressive, growing and rising to dominance throughout the world of the Roman empire.” Rodney Stark (2020:13) notes that “early Christians ...were so empowered by the divine spirit that at the first hearing whole multitude in the body eagerly embraced in their soul’s piety towards the Creator of the Universe.” However, the most prominent fact in the history of the church through the second and third centuries is the persecution of Christianity by the Roman Emperors. Hurlbut (2008:40) explains that:

While this condition was not continuous, it was often repeated for years at a time, and liable to break forth at any moment in terrible forms. It lasted in the fourth century until 313 A.D., when the Edict of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, ended all attempts to destroy the Church of Christ.

The Christian religion was forbidden. The last, most systematic and most terrible persecution of all the series took place in the reign of Diocletian and his successors. Hurlbut (2008:45) notes that “In the series of edicts it was ordered that every copy of the Bible should be burned. All churches which had arisen throughout the empire were torn down and those who would not renounce the Christian faith should lose their citizenship.” Dadang (2020:36) observes that “thus, the early years of the church was no doubt a mixture of sweetness and bitterness.” Keven O’Donnell (2009:52) wrote that “energy was previously devoted to training for martyrdom and to the refutation of heretical

teachings which sought to distort the core truths upon which Christianity was founded.” Shelly Bruce (2008:27) argues that “Christian enthusiasm transformed the Spirit of martyrdom into a commitment to God and imitation of Christ.” Dadang (2015:15) documented that “the first expression of Christianity outside of the New Testament is known as the post-apostolic period of church history.” It was a period dominated by several leading Christians who have come to be called the apostolic fathers. They were called the apostolic fathers because, in many cases, these were men who had themselves known and had been disciples of the actual apostles. They were mainly concerned with strengthening the church in the face of persecution. Palmer (2015:161) affirms by noting that “the next generation of Christian theologians is called the apostolic fathers, among whom are Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Ignatius.” Theologically, the apostolic fathers stressed monotheism. They taught but did not develop any systematic theology on humanity and the deity of Christ. Rather, they emphasised obedience to divine law for salvation and the necessity of baptism to forgive sins. They also taught the authority of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus. Boer (2003:17) affirms that:

The Old Testament had spoken again and again of the coming universal character of the people of God. The deepest ground for this expectation was the fact that the God who redeems is also the God who created all things. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel’s contact with the nations was maintained because Palestine itself was a crossroads between the great empires of her time.

Palmer (2015:161) writes that “Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was arrested by Roman soldiers and taken to Rome to be martyred. On the way he wrote letters to six churches and to bishop Polycarp, expressing his deep love for Jesus.” Dadang (2015:19) described the affirmation of Ignatius on the way to martyrdom. Ignatius said, “Near to the sword, near to God; in company with wild beasts, in company with God. Ignatius got his wish and died in the arena in Rome.” Palmer (2015:161) reiterated that “twice in his letter to the Romans, he even calls Jesus God. But he does not explain how the Father and Jesus can both be God while there is only one God.” Yet, Polycarp did not denounce his faith when he was captured and demanded by the Roman authorities to

denounce Jesus Christ. Imagine yourself dragged to the Eagle Square Abuja, Nigeria. The square is filled with people screaming for your blood because you are a Christian? Dadang (2015:21) noted that “the proconsul gave Polycarp one last chance to renounce Jesus and pleaded with him to have respect for his age. Polycarp replied, fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and he has not done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” With these words, and after his long prayer, he was burned to death for his declaration of faith in Christ. After these fathers came the apologists who defended the Christian faith. One of them was Justin Martyr. Martyr was a title and a description of the fact that Justin died as a martyr for Christ. Dadang (2015:32) wrote that “Justin is recorded in church history as one who defended Christians against accusations by the pagans. He demanded justice and fair hearing for those who were condemned without trials.” Ruth Tucker (2004:31-33) noted that “After a trial, the death sentence was pronounced by the judge and Justin Martyr along with five other men and one woman, were beheaded.”

K. Bediako (1992:143) observed that “Justin Martyr, who was martyred in Rome is an example of a contextualised Christian theologian. He argued for a common ground between Christian and the Greek philosopher. For him Jesus is the Pre-existent Word who is the source of all truth.” However, there were a group of Christian writers after the apostolic fathers by the second century. Boer (2003:48) noted that “Our knowledge of the arguments against Christianity comes mainly from a group of Christian writers who are known as the apologists.” Their defense was not with swords but with the pen. A closer study of the apologists show that these were men who made written defenses of Christianity and of Christians before various emperors. They were appearing for justice and a fair hearing and against the idea that innocent people should be condemned for no other reason that for the fact that they were Christians. These apologists played key roles in defending the Christian faith against pagan critics and persecution from the Roman Empire. Irenaeus was an apologist who defended Christianity against false teachings in the church. Shortly after apologists gave way, fresh theological questions were asked. Why did Christianity have to be defended? Who is God and how does the Bible define Him? What did they mean when they mentioned the name Jesus, the Son of God? How does the Bible define the Son of God? It required Christians to dig deeper into Scripture to understand how to introduce God to pagans and how to explain and answer basic theological questions. Early Christians did not only

endure for the sake of their faith in Christ. But they stood firm in their theological standpoint and refused to compromise standards with doctrinal matters. Therefore, they refuted theological heresy.

Theological heresies refuted

During the third century period, there was a significant group of theological thinkers who wrote in Latin. There were two enemies that the church faces at all times which are usually, persecutors who attempt to destroy it from the outside. These are heretics who have distorted theological views and attempt to destroy the church. There were three major theological heresies the early church faced that they were firm in refuting. These are discussed.

Standing firm against Gnostic heresy

Gnosticism was a very complex and confusing system of belief. The name itself comes from the Greek word for knowledge: gnosis. It was a mixture of Greek Platonic philosophy, various forms of Judaism, oriental mysticism, and Christianity. It had its own elaborate mythology. It taught that salvation was based on the possession of special knowledge. It was a secret knowledge that only a few possessed. Palmer (2015:162) clarified that the Gnostics taught that “matter is evil and spirit is good. Gnostic sects claimed to have a secret path to escape the world of matter. The Creator God, they said was bad.” Gnosticism rejected the Old Testament and its God. To Gnostics, Jesus communicated secret gnosis, knowledge, to the twelve disciples. They in turn communicated it to others.

If material creation was evil, then what did Gnostics teach about how to live? There were two schools of thought among the Gnostics. The first was that, because matter is evil, it does not matter what one does with one’s body. A person can live a life of total self-indulgence because what they do with their body cannot affect the spirit. The second thought, an opposite extreme, involved severe asceticism. This school of thought taught that the spirit overcomes the body by denying it. It forbids marriage and procreation and eating of certain foods. Given the evil of matter, it seemed a logical thought to commit suicide. For Gnostics, there is a system of dualism. They taught that there is eternal warfare between God and matter. On the one hand, Docetists taught that the humanity of Jesus was just a deception. Tertullian was one of

the most remarkable figures of the early church. Although earlier, Justin Martyr, bishop Ignatius and bishop Irenaeus offered a basic theological response to the matters that concerned heretical teaching by the Gnostics and Marcion who thought that the Old Testament was different from that of the New Testament and was condemned by the church for his wrong teaching. Tertullian was one of the most fascinating and exasperating figures of early Christianity. Tertullian was from Carthage, North Africa. Kelly (2004:115) was one of the first to use “divine essence or substance,” to describe the Godhead in response to Gnostic heresy. Next to Gnosticism, the early church stood firm against its teaching of Marcion.

Standing firm against Marcionite heresy in the church

Dadang (2015:48) wrote that:

Marcion, like Gnostics, taught a distinction between the God of the Old Testament, whom he described as a God of justice. While he taught that the God of the New Testament is the God of love. According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament is not good in the same sense as the God of the New Testament.

Tertullian wrote *Against the Marcion*. Marcion was a heretic. Kelly helps us to understand that Tertullian’s major contribution to Christian theology was in forging a vocabulary in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ. Tertullian was the first Christian writer to use the idea of the Trinity in connection with the Godhead. He was also one of the first to use the word “substance” and “person” in connection with the Trinity. Substance describes the divine essence that is shared in the Godhead. The Father and the Son share the same divine essence and are united in one divine substance. This development served as major theological thinking that emerged during the third century of the Christian faith. In the fourth century, the church eventually triumphed over persecution to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Before this, efforts were made by the Roman government to stamp out Christianity. Some of the Emperors who wanted Christianity thrown out of the empire were: Nero (54-68); Domitian (81-96); Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and Decius (248-251).

Looking at it from a political perspective, the 4th Century church had cause to expect a period of peace. Having overcome and endured years of persecution from an empire determined to exterminate the Christian church, faithful overcomers defended the gospel. Constantine had become a Christian. Imperially, his new faith was officially recognized as the religion in the very empire that had made efforts to destroy the church entirely. It was hard to know the emperor's motive. He attributed his coming to the faith in 312 to a vision on the eve of a battle. In his dream, he saw the words, "By this conquer" engraved on a cross. In the few days that followed, Constantine conquered his enemies and remembered the envisioned cross as his turning point. God had spoken to him at a particular time when life and death hung on the scale. Recognizing his dependence on a power that transcends mortal comprehension, Emperor Constantine paid homage to a sovereignty more powerful than his own. Susan Wise Bauer (2010:1) asserted that "Constantine dissolved the standing bodyguard that had supported Maxentius to the throne. He packaged Maxentius's head and shipped it south to North Africa as a signal to his own supporters that it was time to switch allegiance."

Leigh Churchill (2001:171) opined that "the Edict of Constantine promised protection, and friendship declared in AD 313 marked a new chapter in the world's Christian history in Europe." Nevertheless, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus (Matthew 7:21). No cleric in the empire would learn that lesson better than Emperor Constantine himself who discovered that declaring people Christian does not really make them so. But certainly, there is no human history that free from conflict or turbulence. Christian church history has given that background that no period is free from violent realities. They also describe cultural conflicts over eating meat already offered to idols and divisive theological inquiries. During the Patristic Era, between the ends of the first through the close of the eighth centuries, leaders of the church struggled with Gnostics. In its inability to conquer the Christian faith in open confrontation and argument, like Boko Haram, the Gnostic sect attempted to subvert Christianity by applying Christian labels to its neo-Platonic worldview that the Absolute God could be reached through mystical experience. But Gnostic heresy was decisively defeated. Yet, there was another heresy that the early church had to stand firm on to give a Scriptural explanation of the person of Christ.

Standing firm in defense of the Person of Christ.

In its history, the church experienced internal disputes. Constantine was confronted with unparalleled problems which inflicted a deep cut on the very heart of the Gospel. It concerned the nature and person of Jesus. In what sense can the church affirm that Jesus was the Son of God? How was Jesus identical to the Father and in His role in creation? The battle that fractured Constantine's realm was different from earlier crises which dealt more with the church and cultural tensions. But this major theological crisis in the history of the church concerned the person and work of the Savior. Danny McCain (2004:116) concurred, "Jesus, the Man-God, came into the world to save sinners. He is, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the coming King..." Biblical evangelicals fought to uphold the beliefs when the heretics came to the city. Beautified by the media in search of novelty, a popular Arius can wreak havoc on guardians at the gate. It was all about the incarnational Jesus which was centred on his human and divine union. The debate was caused by the refusal of Arius to accept the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Arius argued that only a created being could effect salvation for other creatures and rejected the claim that the Son of God can be the same essence as the Father. Arius taught that the Son of God was not coeternal with the Father. If God begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence and from this, it is evident there was a time when the Son was not. In simple terms, Arius opined that the Son of God was a created being. The Son was created before the rest of creation, but he was created in time. The Son was a creature but exalted over all other creatures. For Arius, to worship Jesus Christ as divine in the same sense as God was tantamount to idolatry. He taught that the Son of God was Son by virtue of His adoption, not His essence. God adopted Jesus as His Son. The Son responded obediently to God's will, thereby earning divine status. According to Arius, salvation was achieved by attaching oneself to this obedient human being who paved the way to heaven. Arius and his followers' said Christ is God, but not in the same sense as the Father was God.

Although the battle was initially an engagement between Arius and Bishop Alexander, Arius's prominent opponent was Alexander's protégé and successor, Athanasius. Alister E. McGrath (2013:46) explained that "the outlook of the Alexandrian school of which Athanasius was a representative was strongly soteriological in character that held on to the tradition of the

human and divine natures of Christ.” David Horton (2006:676) documented that “the council of Chalcedon gathered more than five hundred bishops in AD 451. They affirmed that Christ is simultaneously fully human and fully divine.” Chad Brand, Charles Draper and Archie England (2003:1952) opined that “Chalcedon declared that Christ was “born of the Virgin Mary and acknowledged the two natures unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, preserved and united in one person.” Finally, McGrath (2013:26) concluded that the council of Chalcedon expressed the incarnation of Jesus Christ as one person with two natures – the human and the divine. The union between God and the incarnation of God in Christ attracted a major theological discourse after Nicaea. The battles over Christology were not about the pre-incarnate Son of God. How did God become incarnate? How did Jesus keep His full humanity and still remain fully divine? Redemption required a redeemer who was united in his person, the nature of God and human nature, yet without confusing the two natures. How did divine Jesus have to be Saviour? How human did He have to be spotless? For Jesus to be the true redeemer, He must be everything that God is. Jesus must be everything that we are but without sin in Him. There were four things needed in any orthodox doctrine of Christ. First, Christ must be truly God. Second, Christ must be truly man. Third, Christ must be one person and, fourth the divine and human natures in Christ must be united. Jesus was not two persons but one person. Jesus was one divine eternal Son of God who assumed a complete human nature without sin. Jesus the God-man accomplished redemptive work in both natures. Millard Erickson (2013:659) concluded that “the biblical and historical material supports the view that Christ has both a human and divine nature united in one person.” Boer (2003:108) reiterated “He is fully divine and fully human. The early church accepted him as a man, and confessed and worshipped him as God.” J.N.D. Kelly (2004:205) wrote that “prior to the beginning of the fourth century all creeds and summaries of faith were local in character. It was taken for granted that they were enshrined and universally accepted faith, handed down from the Apostles.” Kelly (2004:206) reiterated that “they owed their immediate authority, no less than their individual stamp, to the liturgy of the local church in which they had emerged.” Kelly wrote,

In a new type of creed, the motive of testing orthodoxy was primary. The creeds were deliberately framed with this object in view... The creed of Nicaea was the first formula to be published

by an ecumenical synod. Consequently, it was the first which claimed universal authority in a legal sense.

Kenneth LaTourette (2003:159) argued that the “Nicaea creeds identified the issues, clarified Christian thinking and enabled the majority to reach a common mind. In this paradox, it presents the nature of the church as it has actually operated in history.” Nicaea brought the awareness to the reality that without a clear focus on this historical Jesus, fully God and fully human. Nicaea understood this and insisted that the focus of Christianity remained true to Jesus Christ, the one who said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Athanasius was a person in the life of the church, committed to biblical orthodoxy; he remained resolute and suffered at the hands of those who sought to undermine the church’s integrity by worshipping idols derived from their culture. In the history of the Christian church, Athanasius stands tall as one who spent his life defending the truth. Athanasius insisted on the biblical idea that Jesus Christ was “begotten, not made.” This came to be known as the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son (*Homooousios*). There is no difference between God and the Son in Scripture (John 10:30). The Nicaea Council adopted “Homooousios” as the best Scriptural expression of the relationship between God and the Son. It clarified the *person and work* of Christ. It applied the victory of revelation over rationalism. Arius wanted to make human reason supreme over Scripture. Christ and God are of one essence. Indeed, the distance between God and humanity has been bridged through in the Godhead (John 3:17; 5: 30, 11:42; 14:26;16:7; 17:18). The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the union of the divine and the human natures in one person (John 1:1-4, 14; 10:30). Jesus needed to possess both the divine and human natures to redeem humanity (John 1:29). Divine power was necessary to affect the redemption and the human being was necessary for the redemption to be accomplished (Colossians 1:13-14, 19-20). The Logos that became incarnate in Jesus Christ was never without human nature. Christ’s relationship of potency was an entirely voluntary act of self-renunciation (Philippians 2:6-7). The relationship of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ remained united (John 10:30). Millard Erickson (2013:659) concluded that “the biblical and historical material supports the view that Christ has both a human and divine nature united in one person.”

Boer (2003:108) reiterated “He is fully divine and fully human. The early church accepted him as a man, and confessed and worshipped him as God.” There is a clear indication that early followers of Christ offered sacrifices for the sake of their Lord. So, they were stigmatised. Rodney Stark (2020:176) concluded, “religious stigmas consist of all aspects of social deviance that attach to membership in the group.” These early believers practised sacrificial Christianity. Today, in the contemporary Christian faith, the challenge is to always endeavour to overcome and stand firm.

Contemporary application

The costly demands in question concerning these tortures are not simply monetary costs analogous to the purchase price of secular products. Indeed, they seemed to be gratuitous costs accompanied by sigma and sacrificial attitudes common to religious groups who are usually distinct in not compromising their faith. Against this background, considering the historical perspective during the early period of Christianity is of paramount importance. Questions to ponder are, how much did it take to be and remain Christians? How possible was it that the costs of following their messiah strengthened their commitment to the Christian faith rewarding the faithful believer for a good cause? I have watched some Christians in Nigeria who appear rational in giving their money and time to social services. They are usually willing to enforce strict rules surrounding sex and marriage because of their religious beliefs. But I have observed that they often fail to ask an important question which is, how could a rational person accept torture and death in exchange for intangible religious rewards?

For the early Christians, they thought it worthwhile to make the supreme sacrifice. Their faith in life everlasting and the divine made it possible for the Christians to face death and bravely. The affirmation that most converts would live to see the Parousia was emphasised by the apostles (Mark 13:30), although many of the converts began to pass away without having seen “the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). Luke recorded a similar assurance in Acts, “this same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11b). Dadang (2017:62) concluded that “the hearts of Christians clarified, reinforced, restored, and promoted an understanding of

God's gracious gift through bearing witness to Jesus Christ and remaining firm in the theology of the cross of suffering and constantly following him." This affirmation is in contrast to the religion of Islam in Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world. The fact is that Islam never faced this problem because of its rapid growth during Mohammed's lifetime. This was because more often, the expansion of Islam was done by conquest and treaty rather than by personal conversion, and gave no occasion for disappointment. Monday Daniel (2009:21) affirmed this when he wrote that "over centuries in Islam there developed ideas that are critical to today's problem. Thus, jihad becomes an urgent necessity in order to reclaim all lands that ethnic communities have lost to Islam." This is the very situation in the modern Middle East, Plateau, Southern Kaduna, and the entire Middle Belt where Islam is making aggressive efforts to conquer the ethnic communities by forcefully taking over their lands. Daniel (2009:27) argued that "Islamization begins when there are sufficient Muslims in a country to agitate for their religious privileges." This is more reason why Boko Haram and terrorists' activities have refused to end in Nigeria. Unfortunately, peace is not actualized in the power of the gun bullets. Rather, peaceful co-existence comes when both the hearts of Boko Haram members and all other terrorists surrender their hearts to the love and power of Christ. The difference between Christianity and Islam is seen in the fact that the early Christians endured all sorts of insults poured on them to the point of many becoming martyrs was because they believed that God had forgiven them so that they can earn His salvation which is contrary to the teaching found in Islam. Dadang (2014:20) categorically opined that "there is no forgiveness in Islam because the religion is based on good works and man's efforts to reach heaven." Thus, Christians living in a violent context such as the one obtainable, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are to follow the example of the early church Christians. Sunday Bobai Agang (2016:121), using Zachariah's hymn as an example, encouraged Christians that "the feet of those who turn to Jesus Christ for salvation... in spite of their circumstances, they will serve Him in righteousness and holiness." This means that no period in church history is free from suffering for a person's faith in Christ.

Summary and recommendations

The story of the early church from the first through the fourth centuries as discussed showed that there has never been a period in history when the

church was free of difficulties. John, the apostle concluded with words of encouragement to Christians. John said, “Hold on what you have, so that no one will take away your crown” (Revelation 3:11). The early Christian church stood firm despite the assault they suffered because of their faith in God. Dadang (2017:18) opined “today, millions of Christians are suffering and dying at the hands of godless tyrants particularly in Nigeria and other parts of Africa and the world at large because of their Christian faith.” Thus, while Christians around the world seem to encounter regular brutal treatment of which Nigeria is not an exception, it is time to appeal to the Christian faithful to know how to offer a response through this article to help strengthen the persecuted church everywhere in hostile contexts. To achieve this, some recommendations are inevitable. First, is that prayerfulness is always the most important priority for all children of God living in hostile environments given their faith. The spiritual and moral implication for Christians in hostile contexts has biblical virtue that provides guidance to stand firm no matter the level of brutality. Pray for God’s enemies and those who persecute (Luke 23:46). The early church responded to persecution with prayer when Peter was arrested and put in prison. The believers prayed earnestly to God for his deliverance (Acts 12:5). Secondly, peace is the ability to contain pain in the face of violating a group of people because of their faith in Christ. Peace is not necessarily the absence of persecution. Third, all Christian virtues are rooted in the theology of the cross which lies in Christ’s redemptive work, love, forgiveness and reconciliation (Galatians 2:20). The idea of love is in connection to “turn the other cheek,” except in any case where self-defence may be applied. Fourth, explore relational dialogue. This is an active dialogue which allows for identifying and application of common grounds to create room for accommodation and respect for each other’s views and rights. Fifth, the universal church should mobilise believers from other places towards providing practical help or rehabilitation for fellow Christians who are devastated. Christian communities are attacked and their houses are torched and they are chased away making them homeless. In most cases, such Christian communities have no option rather than to flee and stay with their relatives. But, the majority of them usually are not in a position to return and rebuild their houses. This practically happened in Christian communities like Jebu Miango, and Maingo villages, Yelwa Ziggam, Riyom LGA, Barkin Ladi LGA, Bokkos LGA, Part of Mangu LGA, and Jos South, all in the Plateau State of

Nigeria. Rehabilitating these Christian communities is often not a priority for the government in question.

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Christian African emerging adults' epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible with particular reference to contextual evangelism

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper was to demonstrate that among the emerging adults of Mamelodi, Gauteng, South Africa, there appears to be a perceived lack of comprehension of the epistemic authority of the Bible. It currently hinders the proclamation of the gospel in a significant and contextual manner, within a Charismatic, Catholic and Lutheran Church. The construal of Biblical authority is from a conservative evangelical perspective and does not purport to represent an ecumenical construal of such authority.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher explored Christian African emerging adult's epistemic understanding of the Bible, focusing on contextual evangelism. Fifteen participants (eight males and seven females) from three different denominations (Catholic, Charismatic and Lutheran) participated in the study. The researcher conducts a case study to investigate her perception of a lack of understanding of the Bible's authority. The findings based on the interviews reveal a disturbing neglect in reading and understanding the Bible and applying biblical principles in participants' lives. This thesis concludes with a summary of a clearer understanding of the Bible's authority amongst emerging adults.

Introduction

In 2013, the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) conducted a self-reporting survey concerning Bible reading practices in South Africa (Smith 2013). Their objective was to determine whether Christians still read their Bibles, to what extent they do so, and if they still believed the Bible. The results indicate a very high commitment to Bible reading and that Christians apply biblical principles in their lives, believing in the authority of the Bible (Smith 2013:5). This survey is a realistic view of Bible literacy in South Africa considering 4,151 people responded (Smith 2013:5). However, there were concerns that as the age of participants decreased, their engagement with the Bible decreased.

The survey was conducted online, resulting in Christians who have little or no access to the internet, especially those living in rural areas, being unable to participate. According to Statistics South Africa (2013:51-52), there are more households in metropolitan areas that have internet access at home (16,4%), compared to families in rural areas (2%). In the SATS study, all nine of the provinces participated in the survey, but only two were statistically significant: Gauteng and Western Cape (Smith 2013:15). Although Mamelodi (a township in the Gauteng province) was not separately identifiable, Smith (2018: personal communication) has reason to believe that Mamelodi participated in the survey. Smith (2013:30) further concluded that even though 33% of people read less than a chapter a day, it was probably not enough to develop a healthy knowledge of the Bible. Nonetheless, this raises more questions about this research. Do emerging adults believe in the Bible's authority at all, and to what extent do they engage with it. If it is to a small degree, how can this be increased?

In the USA, a similar survey was conducted by *Pew Forum 28* (Pew Research Center 2010) concerning religious knowledge; the results show a lack of collective biblical knowledge and that Christians need to learn the foundational truths of their faith again. More and more people (Christians), according to the forum, do not regard Scriptures as the Word of God, which results in that they are not motivated or interested to read it. However, the *Barna Group* conducted a survey in 2018 to examine behaviours and beliefs about the Bible among U.S. adults. The results show that, despite shifting

cultural trends, Americans still read the Bible and it remains a powerful, transformative tool in their lives. According to *Pew Forum 28* (Pew Research Center 2010) the challenging news was that knowledge of “one’s religion” was very feeble. It seems, there is a sharp decline of Christianity as the dominant or prevailing worldview that it once was, and the author attributes it to the above indicators. Despite all of this, the *Barna Group* concluded in 2016 that Christians in the US still practice their faith in a variety of ways and there are more churched than unchurched Americans.

Cameron (1983:154-155) writes about the Bible’s authority, that it is the central message that runs through the Bible (although this perspective has been contested by some scholars, a conservative evangelical perspective presupposes this as foundational). He further explains that it is not only the authority of Holy Scripture that is at stake but also the authority of its divine author. Cameron (1983:154-155) emphasised that the “entire structure of Christian theology stands or falls by the authority of Scripture”. If people doubt the Scriptures’ authority, they will see no importance of why they should even read it. If Christians do not hold on to the inspiration or authority of the Word of God, what are they building their beliefs and theology upon?

If this is true about the centrality of Scriptures, believing that the Bible is God’s Word, that it is inspired, inerrant, and truthful, then what about the centrality of the message of the Bible, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the core of God’s message to humankind, and it must be central to the way we do theology (Smith 2013:13-14).

According to Matthew 4:4, Jesus said, “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. Similar to our physical bodies requiring daily nourishment, our spiritual life should be maintained by the daily nourishment of the Word of God (Grudem 2020:118). This begs the question, how can emerging adults read and stay engaged with the Bible? What will it cost, or what efforts would it take to accomplish this? Maybe a fresh encounter with the Scriptures is needed; discovering its infallible truths, believing that it can transform people’s lives.

Donald & Harrington (2016:1-7) note that a church crisis is nothing new and one of the “most important spiritual resources in times of crisis in the church have been Scripture”. According to Asumang (2014:54-77):

it is the sacred responsibility of conservative Bible scholars to work as hard as possible to prevent the Bible from becoming irrelevant in the coming decades.

Asumang (2014:54-77) further states:

Maybe it’s time Christians; first and foremost, need to learn the foundational truths about their faith. Which includes a basic knowledge of the contents of the Bible and how the Bible’s teachings have been systematised into a framework of doctrine by various branches of the Christian faith over history.

Johnson (2015:54-76) states God gave Scripture to his people for many reasons, one being to promote spiritual growth, thus the necessity of reading the Bible. Perhaps Smith (2013:13-14) was correct in his findings that there is a need to change the way theology is conducted. Could it be that over time, the manner of “doing theology” was fragmented, even though teaching the distinctive doctrines of God, the Bible, and the trinity, but have emerging adults been shown or assisted in how to live and act in ways that glorify the Lord faithfully?

Authority and epistemology of emerging adults

The author investigated Christian African emerging adults’ epistemological understanding of the Bible with particular reference to contextual evangelism via semi-structured interviews. Based on these interviews, the findings show negligence in reading and understanding the Bible and applying biblical principles in their lives. Although they still believe that the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative, and very important to read, an epistemological understanding of it is lacking.

The study was conducted with 15 participants (8 males and 7 females) from 3 different denominations (Catholic, Charismatic and Lutheran). The required criteria included the following:

(1) young men and women between the age of 18-25 years and

(2) emerging adults who are Christian believers and attend their churches regularly.

Background

The research concept was triggered by a survey conducted by Dr Kevin Smith of the South African Theology Seminar (2013) concerning *Bible reading habits in South Africa*. Much of this study's findings corroborate the findings of that survey. The research objective was to gain insight into emerging adult's Bible reading practices, specifically in the township of Mamelodi, Gauteng, South Africa.

Overall, this study's participants showed a low percentage of commitment to reading the Bible daily for themselves and accepting the authority of the Word of God. However, they apply the teachings, which they predominantly heard via the preaching of the Bible in their churches. Many of them do not read the Bible daily. However, there is a high level of belief in the importance of reading the Bible. Traditional beliefs and morality also have a high level of consensus and their commitment to seeking to apply biblical values to their daily lives. For example:

- 96% believe in the importance of reading the Bible, however only 29% read their Bibles daily.
- 49% have read the Old Testament, and 51% have read the New Testament.
- 89% believe in the authority of the Bible, 95% believe that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins, however only 58% believe that human beings are sinful and need a saviour.
- 80% believe that the Bible is relevant for today and addresses the problems emerging adults face.

There are also some tendencies in the information that should concern and motivate church leaders to do something about it. These include the following:

- 29% of the participants read their Bibles daily.
- 14% of the participants indicated that they have never read their Bibles.
- 63% believe that Christians go to heaven and 17% strongly disagree that unbelievers go to hell.
- 67% (agree/believe) that one may not consult a medium or traditional healer known as a Sangoma.
- 66% believe that one may not venerate the ancestors.

There remains a need for the church in South Africa to understand the extent to which the emerging adults read, know, and believe the Bible.

Methodology of the study

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in appropriate venues that facilitated dialogue after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The interviews ranged between 40-60 minutes each. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, the procedure of the interview (including note-taking and digital recording), the risks involved (none known), the benefits involved (a contribution to the research), and the assurance of confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews using ten open-ended questions were conducted. Recorded interviews were transcribed and, after that, coded by hand as well as using Microsoft Excel.

Interpretation of the data

The author encountered several challenges while interpreting the data, which will be explained. The author is representing qualitative data on a quantitative scale. Participants were asked to give their opinions on a series of percentage scales. In each case, the response judged to reflect the most positive engagement with Scripture was assigned the value '100%', and the minor positive response the value '25%'.

For example, on the statement, ‘Believe in the authority of the Bible’, the following numerical values are assigned to responses:

Strongly Agree	100%
Agree	75%
Disagree	50%
Strongly Disagree	25%

On an average 25%–100% scale, 60% would be an average score, and 80% would be a high agreement level. However, if one uses a 25%-100% scale to ask confessed Christians whether they believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the average comes in at 60%, one should undoubtedly be dissatisfied. The author hypothesises that all believing emerging adults would strongly agree with that statement, hoping for an average of 100%. If one were to ask 100 believing emerging adults whether they agree that human beings are sinful and the participants were to return the following responses, would one consider it good or bad?

As an example, here is the statement, human beings are sinful and need a Saviour:

Strongly Agree	58%
Agree	16%
Disagree	19%
Strongly Disagree	7%

Using the formula previously described, these participants would return an average score of 58% on a 100% scale. This would be both encouraging and discouraging. On the one hand, it would be encouraging that 58% of the participants firmly believe the statement. On the other hand, one would be disappointed that 7% do not agree at all.

In comparison with the survey conducted by the South African Theology Seminary, the author faced similar challenges. Throughout the interviews, the average scores ranged between 50% and 75%. In other words, they are all in the region that would be considered strong agreement on a standard survey. However, given the nature of the questions and the participants’ composition,

the author asked emerging adults who do attend church services and are involved in their church activities about their level of agreement concerning Christian beliefs.

Summary of the overall findings

The objective of this research was to gain insight into whether emerging adults still read their Bible, how often, and their epistemological understanding of the Bible. 80% of the emerging adults indicated that they are committed to applying the Bible's truths in their lives; however, 22% indicated that they seldom read the Bible, and 14% never read their Bible. These percentages lead to many questions: How can emerging adults apply the Bible's truths to their lives if they do not read it, or as some suggested, they do not understand the Bible. The author hopes that this study will inspire more research and reflection to find solutions to assist emerging adults in changing their Bible reading habits.

Emerging adults

This article articulates foundational questions of the research: Who are emerging adults and what are the challenges and changes that they face? There is no consensus concerning the age of emerging adults, with existing literature suggesting the period between 18 and 25 years of age (Arnett 2000:469-480, Bonnie and Stroud 2015:1-5). More recently, Arnett (2014:569-576) considered the age range of 18-29, now known as emerging adulthood in developmental psychology. The United Nations General Assembly (2005:23) twentieth-year review describes youth as persons between 15 and 24. However, in South Africa, emerging adults are persons between 15 and 35 years of age, with the reason given for this extended age being unfavourable circumstances that crippled many of these older youth during their role in the struggle against apartheid (Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation n.d.:2-3).

Emerging adulthood, as defined by Arnett (2015:473), is the period that's neither adolescence (age 12-18 years) nor young adulthood (age 18-35), also described as the in-between age. These young people have left the dependency of childhood and adolescence and have not yet accepted the

normative responsibilities in adulthood (Arnett 2015:469). The National Youth Policy (2014:1-36) explains that emerging adults do not see themselves as adolescents, yet they also do not see themselves entirely as adults. Mkandawire and Soludo (1998:3-4) concurs and further explains that generally, emerging adults indicates an interface between childhood and adulthood. He also states that no serious attempt has been made to formulate the age of emerging adults entirely is within South African youth structures.

Côté (2014:1-25) challenges Arnett's (2004:9-18) findings regarding identity exploration, overwhelming choices, self-centeredness and instability, which apply to all social classes. He also argues that this emerging adulthood theory fused the transition to adulthood rather than recognising the diverse ways in which young people come of age. He offers more convincing variations such as socio-economic factors. Other scholars (Schwartz, Tanner and Syed 2015:3) have argued that the emerging adulthood features reflect Western values, such as being self-focused and independent in sharp contrast to other cultures like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Côté (2014:1-25) also illustrates that Arnett's findings are universal and that some emerging adults are well prepared and equipped to find their way into adulthood, whereas others struggle.

Other factors such as cultural and philosophical trends and institutional and internal dynamics in emerging adults' lives might better understand the emerging adults. However, the author's subjects provided greater insight into a topic that needs further research, especially in the South African context. Setran and Kiesling (2013:1-2) suggest that even though this is such a critical stage in emerging adults' lives, their spiritual formation has hardly been a topic of inquiry in Christian education literature. More scholarly research is needed in this field.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2015) describes emerging adults as follows:

... a developmental stage that is neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both, spanning the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18 to 25. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by

relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations.

The age range of 18-25 years has been selected for this study because of research conducted by Arnett (2000:478-479) and Bonnie and Stroud (2015:4-5). According to Arnett (2000:469-470) and Bonnie and Stroud (2015:1-2), there is no definitive agreement concerning the age of emerging adults with existing literature suggesting the period between 18 and 25 years of age. Although emerging adulthood is virtually non-universal, Arnett (2000:479-480) suggests that emerging adulthood would most likely be found in highly industrialised countries. Thus, indicating that occasionally in traditional non-western cultures, emerging adults were purported by entry into marriage. However, this assumption has changed. Emerging adults are extending their higher education, enhancing their career opportunities, which results in other responsibilities being put on hold like, marriages and parenting.

It is essential to highlight that not all scholars agree that emerging adulthood is a new stage of human development. Others contend that it is a highly fluctuating process that resists stage-like characteristics. Côté (2014:184-185) challenges Arnett's (2004:373-374) findings regarding identity exploration, overwhelming choices, self-centeredness and instability, which apply to all social classes. He offers more convincing variations such as socio-economic factors. Other scholars (Schwartz, Tanner and Syed 2015:3) have argued that emerging adulthood features reflect Western values, such as being self-focused and independent in sharp contrast to other cultures like Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (n.d.:36-37) states that unfavourable circumstances caused intellectual and developmental challenges amongst the emerging adults, which is evident in the so-called "youth" within the township of Mamelodi. Socio-economic data clearly show that the most of township residents are inadequate and that the unemployment rate is very high. However, with increasing globalisation, the critical factors of the economy (which sometimes aid to emerging adults changing jobs frequently) and emerging adults seeking higher education, it is purported that in the 21st century, emerging adults will become normative worldwide. Nevertheless, the length and content (critical factors of the economy) may still differ between countries.

Examining the challenges

Emerging adulthood has received the least attention in Christian education literature and constitutes the most far-reaching challenges to church and theology (Setran and Kiesling (2013:1-2). How can the church assist emerging adults during this transition period in their lives? Young people are leaving church at high rates in America and Europe (McDowell and Wallace 2019:27). Christian leaders and academics have spoken a great deal about the disengagement of emerging adults from faith communities (Setran and Kiesling 2013:7-8) while the spiritual narrative of emerging adults' culture has shifted — toward secularism and away from the Bible and Christianity (Kinnaman & Hawkins 2011:49-50) Emerging adults and the church are living in the tension of profound cultural change.

McDowell and Wallace (2019:32) argue that young people are far more articulate and well researched because the internet is accessed easily, resulting in scepticism. Kinnaman & Hawkins (2011:49-50) added that few would debate that humans live in a knowledge economy and a creative age. In their studies, the Barna Group (2018:15-16) found that one of the influences on emerging adults is that they find themselves in a world saturated by digital technology. They further attest that the ever-present digital technology has a far more significant impact on emerging adults; it changes the way emerging adults process and interact with information. Not only this but the Barna Group (2018:17-18) strongly advised that there are neurological implications such as “memory problem-solving, concentration, addiction and risk-taking behaviours”. Another factor that the author, from personal observation, wants to add to the list is the lack of entrepreneurial skills evident in emerging adults as they do not have to find solutions by themselves. Instead, they visit different search engines such as ‘Google’, which seems to hamper their creativity. Sefl and Rhom (2017:1-2), quoting Michael Harris, concurs and adds:

The Googleization of knowledge - that ultimate searchability - creates a great bounty of potential avenues for research. It cannot, however, become a substitute for the strange vagaries of human intuition and creative leaps. We need to insist on

absolute randomness, and a significant degree of pure, haphazard discovery, in the tools we use to explore our world.

Stefl and Rohm (2017:1-2) propose asking:

Have I paused to exercise my brain and wrestle with (even if for just one minute) possible solutions before looking to the wisdom of the Internet?

They further add, though it is tempting to do so, depending too heavily on what others have achieved in the past can draw one into the traps of tradition and an accumulative, rather than revolutionary and disruptive, innovation.

Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011:48-49) further suggest that emerging adults face other unique challenges, such as relativism - "what is true for me may not be true for you", believing that right and wrong are subjective. They also face cultural factors (alienation and scepticism of authority figures). Setran and Kiesling (2013:9-10) add that it can be a very arduous and lonely journey, accompanied by depression and anxiety, for most emerging adults. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011:194-195) further claim that emerging adults deal with profound technological, spiritual and social changes that characterise our time. The changing nature of access, new questions about authority, and increasing relational and institutional alienation. The disconnection between the generations and the immense gap between the two worlds also contribute to emerging adults' loneliness. Seff and Rhom (2017:1-2) conclude with a quote from Nicholas Carr:

What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a geyser on a Jet Ski.

Epistemology and ontology

Epistemology

This article explores the nature of epistemology, focussing on emerging adults' understanding of the Bible's authority. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and origin of knowledge (Collins English Dictionary 2018) and asks the question, "How do we know what we know?" Keener (2016:155-172) advocates embracing an epistemological revelation when it comes to the Bible, stating that Christ must ultimately be Lord of one's epistemology as well as everything else. He indicates that a more in-depth knowledge of the Bible is required to know who God is and further asks: what would an epistemology look like with God's biblical revelation of God as its starting point? He posits that one might speak of Christian epistemology as epistemological preaching, founded on historical evidence and confirmed by God's own Spirit. Johnson (2013:15), on the other hand, believes that the Christian's scriptures could be theologically described as the beginning and ending with an epistemological outlook.

Udefi (2014:108) writes that an

African epistemology is understood by those who propose it. Thus, the African conceptualises interprets, and apprehends reality within the context of African cultural or collective experience.

He further states that African epistemology is based on their acceptance that such concepts of knowledge, truth and rationality can only be interpreted using African concepts. An African cultural experience contrasts starkly against that of a Western or non-African conceptual framework as these are of extreme polarised opposite thoughts regarding epistemology. However, Reagan (2004:1-6) proposed that it is not unrealistic to contemplate how we can learn from Western and indigenous educational traditions. Airopoman and Asekhano (2012:13) raised whether Africans have a peculiar way of knowing different from non-Africans. Moreover, is universal epistemology not applicable for Africans? They conclude that African epistemology must not be peculiar, but it must be available and meaningful to non-Africans because epistemology has to do with the nature of knowing.

Jimoh and Thomas (2015:55-56) suggest that there could be different approaches and perspectives as to how we understand the world around us; nonetheless, we cannot continue to allow a discourse within geographical boundaries, such as when we say African epistemology or Western epistemology. Epistemology, or any form of discipline at all, can be supposed to be the same all over. Kaphagawani and Malherbe (1998:206), too, advocate that wherever epistemology is practised, it is the same. There is no such thing as an explicitly African epistemology. Udefi (2014:116) further states that the people fighting for a specific unique African epistemology do this out of a need to redeem Africa, seemingly devastated during colonialism.

In summation, the author posits that both Western and African thought processes ultimately lead to the realisation that we are dependent on a transcendent being for our reasoning and epistemology methods. This is the universal element of philosophy that we have a common denominator in the transcendent God of creation. This discussion also leads into another branch of philosophy, namely 'ontology', which deals with existence.

Ontology

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with being (Collins English Dictionary 2018) and asks questions such as, "What things exist? What categories do they belong to; is there such a thing as objective reality?" Freeman (2016:1-4) suggests that the language of being is employed to speak about the nature and character of salvation, the same terms and imagery being used to talk about the Trinity and Christ's two natures. Geisler (2000:110-112) supports this and states that theology's ontological ground can be better perceived when theologians speak about God's nature and act—for instance, when they explain divine eternity. Why are Christians or humans so hesitant to build their ontological convictions from Scripture and per with its guidelines as Canale (2008:16) raises the question? They are probably conditioned by the inertia of a tradition established on the assumption that objective or ultimate reality is timeless.

Canale (2005:5-8) also believes that philosophy, particularly ontology, plays a grounding role in evangelicals' theological beliefs, but by and large, they have little interest in it. He further states that most evangelicals think their thought and teachings have no relation to or contact with philosophy. Nevertheless,

theology and ontology are valid and complimentary, and on this hermeneutical and methodological basis, Christian theology was born and constructed. While Scripture does not address ontology in the technical style of academic circles, it certainly has a lot to say about issues such as God, human beings, the world, and knowledge. The evangelical way is to build theology on biblical thinking. Wiles (2008:1-12) believes that one important feature is that the Bible's authority is foundational to the traditional Christian theologian, to the Church and above all, to Christ himself.

To conclude, emerging adults will benefit if they fully grasp the ontology of the nature and character of the church, having a complete understanding of the relation of grace and salvation, which is foundational to the truth of the message of the Bible, naturally leads into the priority of the contextual proclamation of the gospel.

Contextual proclamation of the gospel

Kiesling and Setran (2013:6-7) raised two fundamental questions while researching emerging adults' spiritual formation.

First, what does the gospel have to offer emerging adults during their formation through the adult transition? Second, what do emerging adults, shaped by the gospel, have to offer to the church and the world?

Therefore, this section will explore the contextual proclamation of the gospel based on the above questions.

The Lausanne Covenant (2009:39) defines evangelism as:

Spread[ing] the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that, as the reigning Lord, he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, intending to persuade people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. The

results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.

The Third Lausanne Congress hosted in Cape Town in 2010 proclaimed that African brothers and sisters could rejoice in the extraordinary growth of the Church in Africa. While Africans were cognizant of their suffering under apartheid in the past, there was a sense of gratitude for spreading the gospel and the sovereign work of God in recent history. At the congress, challenges were raised: How does the Good News relate to Africa's situation, where the struggle against poverty, disease and ignorance continues (Editors IBMR 2011:60).

If the gospel is to have a profound impact on African people, it needs to be culturally contextualised. Kato (1975:39) points out the relevance of Christianity to Africans today. His work's goal was to advance the ambition expressed in his famed rallying cry, "Let African Christians be Christian Africans!" This is a continuing challenge regarding the African church today. Wiryadinata (2015:1-15) argues that the gospel, according to African people, cannot be sufficient unless and until it is formulated to function in a concrete or specific situation while remaining biblically accurate. For some Africans, the Bible seems to reflect their cultural life because the culture is the message's vehicle. However, there is a tendency, according to Stott (1986:74-75),

to absolutise culture and minimise the cultural changes which conversion ought to imply and that people who accept the gospel ought to retain their traditional culture.

Newbigin (2014:11) asserts that even though God accepts human culture, God judges human culture and that "the gospel, therefore, is to be addressed to the whole human community, since the real human of its people is bound up inextricably with the language and culture of the whole".

The author wants to point out that the three denominations studied proclaim the gospel in their unique context. The Lutheran church believes that conduct and belief should go hand-in-hand. Others should observe one's lifestyle, and that is why they do believe in the preaching of sound doctrine. The Catholic church will put up a tent and launch a crusade, preaching the gospel. The Charismatic church believes in going out on outreach, sometimes locally,

proclaiming the gospel in malls, on the streets to the homeless and in hospitals. However, the church also takes teams to neighbouring countries, preaching the gospel. In this manner, Africans (emerging adults) who hear the good news from within their cultural context and express the gospel in their thought forms and philosophy will address contextual issues such as polygamy, family structure and the spirit world. This emphasises the need to authenticate Christianity's teaching on the authority of the Bible to emerging adults.

There will never be another gospel; Christians should realise that they hold in their possession the only message of salvation the world will ever hear. Whether, friends, family, and co-workers are ever to be set free from their sins, it will be because someone proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. That is why Jesus commissions to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded them" (Mt 28:19-20). Packer (2013:44-45) says that evangelicals were unable to pass on to emerging adults an orthodox model of faith that could take root and withstand the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars the church spent on youth pastors, Christian music, advertising, and media have created a culture of young Christians who know little about their faith except how they should feel about it. Emerging adults have strong convictions about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey the Bible, the fundamentals of doctrine, or the experience of moral disciplines. This will lead to future generations of Christians who are going to be ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures. As the culture and the worldview shift, the church too must continue to research the concerns of emerging adults so that she can be prepared to resolve and strategise effectively in reaching emerging adults for the kingdom of God.

Christianity's teaching on the authority of the Bible

The author focuses predominantly on the authority of the Bible. Four arguments will validate Christianity's teaching concerning the authority of the Bible. The first argument is the Bible's inspiration. Biblical writers believed they received supernatural divine influence to write the Holy Scriptures. Erickson (2013:225) defines the inspiration of Scriptures as the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation which resulted in what they wrote being the

Word of God. It is also defined as: “that extraordinary or supernatural divine influence vouchsafed to those who wrote the Holy Scriptures, rendering their writings infallible” (New Bible Dictionary online:2019). Therefore, the divine inspiration of the Bible originated from God, who sovereignly influenced the writers of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, resulting in the Bible being the very Word of God.

The second is the divine authority of the Bible. The authority of Scripture implies that all the words in the Bible are God’s words in such a way that to distrust or defy any word of the Bible is to disobey God (Grudem 2020:73). Therefore, the Bible asserts itself to be the spoken word of God – both the Old and New Testaments. Erickson (2013:240) asserts that one finds oneself in a world with many distorted ideas and incorrect opinions and the Bible is indeed a source of guidance. When one interpretes it correctly, one can entirely rely upon it in all that it teaches. “It is a sure, dependable, and trustworthy authority” (Erickson 2013:240). Geisler (2011:182) emphatically declares that the authority of the word of God never changes nor will never pass away. This statement underlines the Bible’s promise: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mt.24:35; Is.40:8).

The third argument states that the Bible cannot teach error and that the Bible is without error; that the Bible is entirely truthful in all of its teachings is the doctrine of inerrancy (Erickson 2013:246). The Chicago statement (Themelios n.d.) affirms inerrancy as follows: “Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud or deceit”. Erickson (2013:259) explains that

the Bible when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written,

and because of the purposes for which it was given, is entirely truthful in all that it affirms. There is a clear and emphatic affirmation that the Bible is trustworthy, reliable and without error. This fact reflects on the character of God and is foundational to our understanding of everything the Bible teaches. Thus, the Bible is the churches’ only rule for faith and conduct.

The fourth argument is the Bible and inculturation that indicates the “presentation and re-expression of the Gospel” in forms and terms proper to the culture (New Catholica Encyclopaedia 2010). This indicates the continued dialogue between the Word of God and a particular culture and the

eventual infusion of the Gospel values in the culture in such a way that their values become inalienable part of the culture (Ukpong 2015:33-34).

Katola (2014:283) considers inculturation, as a process that presents the gospel message in such a manner that the word of God becomes “sympathetic and compliant with human ecological realities of the people”. Thus, the gospel then should be presented in such a way that it can be applied to all people so that humanity will be conformed more and more to the image of Christ. A challenge for the church is to present the biblical Jesus to emerging adults within a postmodern world that is changing so that they can transform and educate their culture. When the Christ message and local culture interact, its presentation and lived experience change. Malphurs (2007:33) states that the cry of the hearts of this generation is their desire to experience God and his presence. Rather than attend church, they want to be the church, part of the family of God. Kanu (2012:242-243) adds that many Christian communities in Africa need to be organised along the lines of the idea of the church as the family of God. Smith (2006:283-284) states that

African theology is rapidly becoming central to mainstream Christianity in Africa and among the thousands of African Christian diasporic communities and a force to be reckoned with.

There are more arguments such as the necessity of Scriptures, but the author has discovered that these four arguments will serve as themes and will form the basis for validating the Biblical teachings authority, due to the inadequacy shown in semi-constructed interviews the researcher had conducted with participants. This debate contributes into the development of a specific theology relating to the Bible’s authority in the context of emerging adults.

Developing a contextual theology, based on the authority of the Bible, for African emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25 residing in Mamelodi

Upon analysing the data gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with emerging adults, the researcher discovered that emerging adults struggled with a general identity crisis, namely, their distorted worldview, culture and sexuality is a result of relativising truth. Stonestreet and Kunkle (2017:3-4) quoting Samuel Rodriguez raise the following questions:

Will the next generation (emerging adults) be defined by the radical cultural shifts taking place, or will the culture be defined by a generation committed by the radical love, redemptive truth, and restorative grace of Jesus?

Is there a biblically focused roadmap that can guide emerging adults in navigating the difficult challenges of worldview, sexuality, and sexual orientation? In other words, can one equip emerging adults with a biblical worldview, by having God's design for males and females and truth that is knowable and corresponds to reality? The author suggests that the development of a contextual theology will assist emerging adults in finding their way amid the multiple challenges that they are facing.

Magezi and Igba (2017:1-2) write that there is an ongoing difficulty in defining African theology for two crucial reasons: (1) the quest for a definitive African theology is a relatively recent endeavour and (2) the vastness and complexity of the African continent. They further suggest that African theology should also seek to develop contextual African theologies with global relevancy, but it should be derived from Scriptures and Christian tradition. Mbiti (1976:164) describes African theology as the theological reflection by African Christians. Suppose theology is generally understood as reflection and discourse about God, African theology then is that theological effort that is embarked mainly by Africans and non-Africans familiar with the African environment, and who seek to respond theologically to these issues. Theology derived from the interplay of Christian tradition, or any aspect of it, on the one hand, and African cosmology or any aspect of it on the other. In addition, Nyende (2007:3-4)

contends that the Bible is fundamental to a theology that claims to be Christian and it is

incumbent on those who wish to articulate an African theology to use the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a Christian theology.

Nyende (2007:3-4) further indicates that the goal and intent of Christian theology can be summed up as the “building and sustenance of Christian communities in faith, ethos and cultus”, adding to the need of contextualisation of theology.

In essence, contextualisation is a way of connecting the never-changing Word of God in the ever-changing world and its all-purpose contexts. Johnson (2011:62) suggests that the content of Christianity does not need to be changed to fit into the culture. Instead, culture is transformed by Christianity as Christianity uses cultural language as well as symbols in its communication of the unchanging gospel.

This concept opens the possibility of approaching the Bible and reflecting upon the Christian faith in new ways in the light of needs and priorities peculiar to emerging adults. Besides, Bevans & Tahaafe-Williams (2011:9-10) write that churches should consider how emerging adults can engage in theology, as well as how young people need to be trained and cultivated as theologians. Theology is the birth right of the entire church, and this includes the world’s emerging adults. Bergmann (2017:2-3) concurs and adds:

Far too little attention has been paid to the fact that the dominant context for theology has been Eurocentric, male and rational, according to the Enlightenment paradigm. Even when the voices of the “marginalised” are occasionally admitted to the discussion, seldom are they given full status; on the contrary, they are frequently relegated- yes, to the margins- on the grounds that “praxis” somehow does not merit recognition as “real theology”.

However, Matheny (2012:14-15), in quoting Kofi Appiah-Kubi speaking at the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians held in Ghana in December

1977, summarised the upshot of these new developments for theologians. He declared, “African theologians” are trying to

find a theology that speaks to our people where we are, to enable us to answer the critical question of our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 16:15, ‘Whom do you (African Christians) say that I am?’

This question, according to Bevans (2002:97), the contextualisation of theology, the effort to explain Christian faith in terms of a particular context (African Christians) is indeed a theological imperative. For Bevans (2002:97) doing theology in context is not something optional, it is a mandate. De Vries (2016:6-7) adds that the contextualisation of theology “is both an objective and a subjective, both a corporate and an individual exercise”, a continuous process in which Christians in any cultural settings formulate and apply God’s word. The strength of contextual theology is that it stresses that the gospel is relevant to every culture precisely because it transcends every culture. To conclude, Clark (2012:15-16) writes that contextual theology will deepen the church’s appreciation for God’s gift of diversity, gender, cultures, gifts and circumstances. For Clark (2012:15-16), it offers the church a multi-splendored identity, a new appreciation for its unity, catholicity, basically a new model for doing contextual theology rooted in Christ Jesus, the capstone and head of his church.

Conclusions and recommendations

The author sought to identify strategies that employ an epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible with reference to contextual evangelism of Christian African emerging adults within a Lutheran, Catholic, and Charismatic church in Mamelodi, Tshwane, Gauteng. It was conducted to contribute to an accurate contextual proclamation of the Bible. The goal was to develop practical strategies arising from the findings to help the broader Church address one of the challenges facing emerging adults, namely, a comprehensive epistemological understanding of the Bible is lacking. Further research and recommendations will assist the church’s influence concerning emerging adults reading and studying the Bible.

Rosen (2000:15-16), surmises that it is suitable for human beings to know, rather than be ignorant, thus providing the foundation that it is suitable for emerging adults to have an epistemological understanding of the authority of the word of God. That human beings are reliant on a transcendent being for their methods of reasoning and epistemology, was the one of the findings of this study; emerging adults would benefit if they truly comprehended the ontology of the nature and character of the church, having an understanding of the relation of grace and salvation which is a foundational truth of the Bible. The Bible in its simplicity and paradox, leads humankind to God and his plan to redeem a fallen world. The proclamation of the true gospel relies on Biblical truth and the understanding of the existence of the Godhead and his redemptive plan. The concept of the contextual proclamation authority of the Bible to emerging adults was explored, with the finding that as the culture and the worldview around one changes, the church too must continue to research the concerns of emerging adults so that it can be prepared to strategise effectively in reaching emerging adults with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, Jesus Christ of Nazareth is not only the primary proclaimer of the good news, Jesus Christ, is undeniably the *Good News* (MacArthur 2017:101-102). Objectively all preachers and teachers should proclaim Christ's gospel that effectively transforms the lives of emerging adults during different eras and in different places.

In this final section, the researcher summarised the process and findings of the research study that aimed to equip emerging adults with an epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible. No matter how complex or complicated the issues, we need to address them wholeheartedly and as a matter of urgency.¹ Corinthians 15.58 (NIV) highlights this,

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

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Muriithi K 2022, Review of *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders*, by C Mbewe, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 154-157

Review

God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders.

Mbewe, Conrad, Crossway, Wheaton, IL: 2020, ISBN 9781433566424, 288 pp.
Review by Dr Kevin Muriithi¹.

Statistics show that Christianity's point of gravity is shifting to the Global South. Especially the church in sub-Saharan Africa is impacting the church's narrative. In many African villages, towns and cities, churches of various stripes and shades colour the landscape. On the other hand, there have also been rising cases of various deformities in the Church's life in Africa, from false teachings, pastoral malpractices and syncretistic beliefs. Dr Conrad Mbewe, the "Charles Spurgeon of Africa" as he is affectionately called by some, is senior lecturer at African Christian University and pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia. He has written the book *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders* to try "to get the Church in Africa to be more biblical" (p. 16). Mbewe notes the Church's influence in African societies from the provision of healthcare services and its status as a symbol of the divine. However, Mbewe also observes that while African Christianity illustrates great zeal, he borrows Paul's description of a "zeal that lacks knowledge" (p. 17).

What is commendable is that Mbewe appreciates the debates surrounding gospel and post-colonial contextualization. However, what I find encouraging is that he seeks to remain biblically grounded by observing that the calling of the Church from different nations – Greek and Jew – is to form one body in Christ, which may have different expressions depending on the context. However, Christian principles are the same, even though they may be "applied differently" in varied situations (p. 16). Mbewe then discusses a litany of important doctrines of the church, while at the same time utilising illustrations

¹ Presbyterian University of East Africa

and concepts in African thought and life, and thereby makes the book applicable to Christian leaders working in the church in Africa.

The topics that Mbewe addresses include the nature of the church, the mission of the church, the gospel and the church, membership in the church, discipline in the church, ordinances or sacraments in the church, pastoral training in the church, the relationship between church and state, among many other important topics. These are important explorations that would seek to widen the understanding of the church among Christians in the continent. For one, I found the discussions on membership, money and discipline of importance. On membership, I commend Mbewe's serious reflection on the place of conversion within the life of the church when he argues "Church leaders should jealously guard the door into membership in the local church. Only those who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ should be allowed to come into the church's membership" (p. 73). To illustrate his African contextualization, he utilises the African matrilineal system of inheritance to reveal how it is central in ensuring a pure line of relationship for the purposes of rightful inheritance. He then uses this illustration to unpack the spiritual significance of conversion to the life of the church, and the inheritance of the saints in Christ.

Mbewe is also not afraid to wade in the waters of "tithing", which occupy much of African ecclesiology. Weaving his own personal narratives, he returns to unpack the practice of tithing in the Old Testament and applies it within contemporary practice when he notes that "through the symbiosis of the tithe system, the New Testament church is sustained in all its ministries just as the Old Testament church was sustained" (p. 143). Mbewe expands on this ministry-focus by exploring the importance of financial stewardship for the maturity of the African church in taking "its place in the missionary movement that will usher in the Lord's return" (p. 146). This connects giving to the African church's growing role in reverse missions. Additionally, this missional-focus offers a corrective to the "men of God" who utilise the principles of tithing to fleece the people of God, and to enrich themselves. In his discussion on discipline, I find Mbewe's delineation of formative discipline and restorative discipline helpful (p. 178-180). While formative discipline is more positive in its formation of Christian character through preaching, for instance, restorative discipline is more corrective and is applied where there is spiritual

malnourishment. These are helpful distinctions to make, especially where the practice of church discipline is misunderstood as unnecessary, or practised in ways that harm the flock of God rather than seeking the spiritual wellbeing of the entire body of Christ.

While Mbewe discusses pertinent issues that unpack “God’s design” for the church in Africa for a new generation (p. 275), as a Presbyterian in the reformed tradition, I would critique some finer points. For instance, Mbewe’s call for leaders to jealously guard the membership of the church by examining conversion, if taken to an extreme, could water down the doctrine of grace, which is central to Reformed theology and practice. Within the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, we distinguish between visible and invisible members of the Church. Visible members are all those who would associate with a local church, both converted and unconverted, while invisible members are all those who belong to Christ by faith in him through grace alone, through conversion. Membership in a Presbyterian Church is to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. While elders examine these professions of faith, salvation is an act of God by his unmerited grace. Thus, we welcome those who profess faith, knowing that “jealously examining” does not equal to members describing the doctrine of justification by faith. This critique passes on to Mbewe’s understanding and practice of baptism. Baptism in the Baptist tradition is limited only to adults with immersion as the valid mode (p. 115). I would argue, both from biblical exegesis and historical theology, that this is a narrower interpretation of Scripture, given the unanimous practice of the Church in history and particularly among the Reformed churches, to which Mbewe belongs. While Reformed Churches agree with Baptists on adult baptism, they widen the recipients of Baptism to children of believers. In this understanding, Baptism is not a profession of belief, as such, but it is a sign of the Covenant of those who belong to God – synonymous with the practice of Circumcision in the Old Testament, which was commanded by God to the covenant heads of families (such as Abraham in Gen 17). In my view, such an expansion properly places Baptism within the foundation of God’s gracious relationship with his Covenant People, as opposed to man’s imperfect professions to God’s revelation.

Outside of these “finer points”, Mbewe’s book provides significant help to leaders seeking to shepherd their congregations God’s way. In my assessment,

Mbewe does a great service to the Church in Africa by offering broad principles that explore God's design for the Church from both biblical interpretation but also with the relatable African imagery and illustrations. While many of us have been blessed by the work of systematic theologians writing for the North American context, Mbewe's voice is much needed to those who minister within noisy villages and buzzing cities, as well as among postmodern millennials and convinced traditionalists, realities that are a mark of the life within much of African societies.

The African Theological Journal for Church and Society (ATJCS) is a scholarly journal publishing in any applicable theological discipline, focussing on the church and its role in societies within the African context.

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