African Pentecostalism in the Context of Global Pentecostal Ecumenical Fraternity: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction: Christianity as Africa’s Religion

Andrew Walls, writing under the theme “Christian Tradition in Today’s World,” observed:

In 1900 Europe (including Russia) and North America together accounted for 83% of the world’s Christians. The continent of Africa accounted for less that 2%. Today, over half the Christians in the world live in the southern continents of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania.¹

Earlier in 1970, Barrett had observed that the numerical growth of the Christian faith in Africa could well mean that “African Christians might well tip the balance and transform Christianity into a primarily non-Western religion.”² The full implications of Barrett’s observation were later spelt out by Walls:

This means that we have to regard African Christianity as potentially the representative Christianity of the twenty-first century. The representative Christianity of the second and third and fourth centuries was shaped by events and processes at work in the Mediterranean world. In later times it was events and processes among the barbarian peoples of North Atlantic world that produced the representative Christianity of those times. The Christianity typical of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the events and processes that take place in the Southern continents, and above all by those that take place in Africa. . . . The things by which people recognize and judge what Christianity is will (for good or ill) increasingly be determined in Africa. The characteristic doctrines, liturgy, the ethical codes, the social applications of the faith will increasingly be those prominent in Africa. New agendas for theology will appear in Africa.³
It may be too much for us to expect the foregoing observation to gain general acceptance, particularly when we consider the way Africa has been portrayed in the past in Western literature. Much of this picture is reinforced by an apparent “conspiracy” of the Western press, which specializes in negative reportage on African issues that is “usually limited to the superficial, the sensational, and the exotic . . . the coups, the starving refugees, the monumentally mismanaged governments, the ugly dictatorships.”

This seemingly surprising story of the emergence of Christianity as the dominant religion in Africa, in a time of globalization, may be interpreted by some as a sign of weakness, i.e., that Africa is unable to react to globalization by revitalizing its own traditional religions. Thus, Africa is compounding her marginalized situation by “opting into exotic religions” belonging to other latitudes. This perspective, however, may be valid only if Christianity is seen as a cultural artifact “honed in the west over centuries.”

The available evidence compels upon us to agree with Walls that at the beginning this story of Christianity appeared to be a Western religion. Appearances were deceptive; there was nearly a millennium and a half of active and expansive Christianity in Asia before the first Western missionary arrived there. Equally, there were Christian communities in Africa that could claim a continuous history from sub-apostolic or early patristic times.

In this paper, I intend to examine the growth and characteristics of the Pentecostal movement in Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century. The discussion is placed within the broader context of the thesis of the shifting of the center of gravity of Christianity from the Western to the non-Western world. I will focus on how the global dimension of the movement is reflected in Africa, and on the challenges and opportunities that this new reality presents to the Pentecostal community. I will argue that the current situation lends itself to the establishment of international alliances and networks between African Pentecostal movements and their

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