

Evangelicalism in Africa

What it is and what it does.¹

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Abstract

Evangelicalism is experiencing spectacular growth on the African continent. However definitions of Evangelicalism continue to be dominated by a western understanding of the phenomenon. An African understanding of Evangelicalism as well as African examples need to feature in discussions of the topic. Evangelicalism in Africa should be understood more by what it does for its adherents than by its doctrinal formulations. Its success on the sub-continent of Africa could be due to the fact that it transacts at the interface of a modern and pre-modern worldview. It meets the needs that an African condition creates and opens the way to what a modern condition demands. It resonates both with the spirituality of Africa and the materialism and individualism of modernity and provides its adherents the sense of agency demanded in the modern world but which is opaque and complex in an African universe. It translates in various and diverse ways, both positively and negatively, into the social, economic, and political structures of African society.

Keywords proclamation, personal encounter, transformation, individualism, dualism, key to conduct.

1. Introduction

Recent figures coming out of the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary suggest that out of the 115 million Christians in Africa about 23% are evangelical, and counting. (Zurlo:2015) This differs considerably from the estimation of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa who seems to think that there are between 150-180 million evangelicals in Africa³ – which exceeds the estimation of the CSGC of evangelicals worldwide, let alone in Africa, as well as the number of Christians in the whole of Africa, let alone Evangelicals! How the AEA arrive at this figure they do not say. It could reflect, as some wag once said, the evangelical propensity to count ears and not noses when it comes

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³ www.aeafrica.org/news/view accessed 22/01/2016

to the discussion on numbers of converts! Whatever the exact numbers, the broad consensus is that the growth of Evangelicalism in Africa has been fairly spectacular.

But the problem with most of what is being said about evangelicals is that it tends to take western criteria of who they are and what they believe as universally true for evangelicals everywhere. David Bebbington's 1989 fourfold criteria of Evangelicalism (now known as the "Bebbington quadrilateral") has been used so often it is now being called "ubiquitous". (Bebbington:1989) These are conversionism, which emphasizes the need for personal conversion, activism which is to do with evangelizing others, Biblicism which is to do with the belief in biblical inerrancy, and crucicentrism which is to do with the centrality of the cross. The main problem with these criteria is that they carry an element of propositional value, as if to be an evangelical you have to believe in certain things as doctrinal verities, of the order of a statement of faith. This kind of propositionalism is typical of western Protestantism, and certainly of western Evangelicalism, but is far less appropriate for Africa where the existential circumstances and consequences of Evangelicalism are so different. Dogmatic Evangelicalism also has its fair share of adherents in Africa but arguably Evangelicalism in Africa is far more about what it does to and for its followers than about what kinds of beliefs it promotes.⁴ This begs the question as to whether the phenomenon that Bebbington is talking about is the same one that occurs in Africa. The fact that there are continuities, both historically and doctrinally, between the evangelical movement in the west and some of what is happening in Africa suggests that it is. But the uniqueness of its African manifestations is too obvious to make the question irrelevant. Western scholars of the phenomenon in Africa, however, continue to use Bebbington as the departure point for their discussion on Evangelicalism, in spite of the fact that it is in Africa where Evangelicalism is growing the fastest and therefore it might be an idea to develop criteria from Africa to define what it is in Africa. (See for example Ranger: 2008, Freston:2001)

In this essay I will attempt to define Evangelicalism with special reference to the African context and then talk about what it does for its followers in Africa and how it translates into the structures of society.

2. Defining Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is that aspect of the Christian faith that emphasizes the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, literally the "evangel", which is proclaimed as an invita-

⁴ Byang Kato was a leading exponent of this kind of dogmatic Evangelicalism. His book *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kato:1975) was a landmark publication that took issue not only with some of the foremost African theologians of the day such as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu but also with leading ecumenical bodies such as the All Africa Council of Churches. His contention was that the gospel message is unique, universal, and transcendent and that any attempts to enculturate it were tantamount to compromise and syncretism.

tion to whoever believes and receives it into a personal encounter with God through Christ that leads to the transformation and renewal of the lives of its recipients. This could be seen as a universal definition of Evangelicalism. The four key concepts in this definition are “good news”, “proclamation”, “personal encounter”, and “transformation”. To take away any one of these concepts is to have something less than Evangelicalism.

That it is news means that it has not been heard or experienced before. It carries with it the concept of *novum*. That it is “good” means that it leads to the beneficitation of its recipients. The giver of the gospel is not always in a position to understand what constitutes good news for a particular set of recipients and therefore may remain ignorant of how it is actually being interpreted as good news. This means that the proclamation of the gospel may have consequences that are unintended.⁵

That it involves proclamation means that it is spoken, or declared, usually, but not always, with words, and that it is heard. The agents of such speech may be many and varied. What matters is not who is doing the speaking but that the origin of this speech is ultimately God and that it is God’s Spirit who brings the Word, which is essentially an invitation, to the hearer. The speaking is about what the gospel is, what it has done, and what it can do.

That it involves personal encounter implies that it demands an intentional response or decision of some kind. That the response is “personal” does not necessarily mean that it is always made only by individuals. Entire communities may respond to the gospel. But Evangelicalism nevertheless stresses the need to appeal to individuals in a community and often introduces the very concept of individualism into societies because of its emphasis on the need for personal decision. In this sense Evangelicalism has the potential to be fundamentally divisive and destabilizing in a society and also for individuals within a society. But it should not be assumed that responses to an evangelical gospel are uniform or predictable, one way or another, for or against. It should rather be seen as a transaction between the recipient and the gospel in which the outcome will depend on the response of the recipient. Thus a multiple range of responses and outcomes are possible when the gospel is proclaimed.

That it is transformative implies, simply, that it is expected to bring change, both to individuals and societies. The extent and nature of this change varies considerably between contexts.

⁵ There are numerous examples of this throughout the history of the Christian mission. The missionaries in the Eastern Cape in the early 1800’s would never have expected that their message would lead to the Cattle Killing of 1850 (see Peires:1989) and those in Zambia in the 1960’s would never have expected their message to end up in the Alice Lenshina uprising. Indeed that women prophetesses were involved in both instances was itself a spectacularly surprising phenomenon.

3. What Evangelicalism does for its followers in Africa

When Evangelicals experience and embrace the good news of the gospel a process of transformation begins. Although there is such a thing as second and third generation Evangelicalism the ideal scenario in evangelical theology is the unique transaction that takes place between each individual believer and God through Jesus Christ. This is formulated in terms of rebirth; old things pass away and all things become new (2Cor5:17). All things become new because the believer becomes new. This is not the adoption of a new religion or new code of behaviour, this is an existential transformation of the individual that brings salvation and with it certainty, well-being, purpose, meaning, and joy.

The following statement by a group of African Evangelicals is elucidating in this regard.

Rightly presented and understood, the gospel of Jesus Christ is capable of meeting the primal man (sic) at the point(s) of his greatest need, providing him with ultimate answers to his longings and effective ways of coping with the persistent problems in his life. Sometimes this will happen suddenly, but, more often than not, it is a process or processes of 'power encounter' between Christian and the primal world-views in which the former transforms the latter's view of God, man, and the 'powers' through Jesus Christ.⁶

The suggestion made by these scholars is that Evangelicalism transacts at the interface of the African and modern universes. It meets the needs that an African condition creates and opens the way to what a modern condition demands. It resonates both with the spirituality of Africa and the materialism and individualism of modernity. Its individualism gives its adherents the sense of agency that in the African universe is opaque and complex due to the plethora of other agencies that have to be negotiated, including ancestors, spirits, a remote deity and a multiplicity of local deities. Such a cosmology has been called 'diffused monotheism' by the Nigerian scholar Bolaji Idowu. (Idowu:1962) These entities have a direct impact on the material existence of the 'primal man' who finds himself profoundly vulnerable in the complex web of powers through which he has to navigate. 'Primal women' in such a universe arguably find themselves even more vulnerable as they are frequently accused of witchcraft, that is of being an agent that is able to manipulate the powers in a destructive way. Although Evangelicals are not known for their concern about women's liberation the empowerment and sense of agency that Evangelicalism

⁶ Thailand Report No.18, *Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions*, (Wheaton Illinois, Lausanne Occasional Papers, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980, 15) quoted in Howell *The Religious Itinerary of a Ghanaian People*, 1997:1.

brings is clearly not restricted to men. This is born out by the fact that many women have prominent ministries in evangelical circles, especially amongst charismatics. An Evangelical understanding of the gospel claims that the risen Christ has brought these 'principalities and powers' under his control. To receive Christ is therefore to bring the control that Christ has to the individual in such a way that he or she was unable to enjoy under the previous regime. The liberation and subsequent empowerment that the believer experiences in this transaction gives a new sense of agency in a world where individualism is paramount – that is the modern world – and into which the evangelical believer fits hand in a glove because Evangelicalism acts in concert with three essential forces in modernity – the centrality of the individual, the mastery of nature, and the disenchantment of the universe. It has already been argued that the first of these is a central characteristic of Evangelicalism. The second and third are implicit in the above definition. When conversion begins, sometimes but not always with a kind of 'Damascus road' crisis experience of encounter with the risen Christ, there begins also a process or processes of 'power encounter' between the Christian and primal universes 'in which the former transforms the latter's view of God, man, and the "powers" through Jesus Christ'. (See above quote)

African Evangelicalism, according to these scholars, is characterized by an uncompromising dualism between the 'powers' and Christianity. The rupture between these two regimes of power to all intents and purposes appears to be to do with forsaking their African culture and adopting Western culture. There are indeed many aspects of African Evangelicalism that make it an easy target for the postcolonial criticism that it is just another manifestation of the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized; that they are just so many meek little 'Fridays' being 'civilized' by so many 'Robinson Crusoes'. African Evangelicals themselves, however, insist that the Christianity that they embrace has an African, not a European, identity. And there are some interesting examples to support their claim. Three paradigmatic ones in South African history are Ntsikana ka Gaba, Tiyo Soga, and Nicholas Bhengu.

Ntsikana was a Xhosa prophet who had an epiphany-like encounter with Christ through his favourite ox Hulushe in about 1815. He immediately washed the ochre from his skin which symbolized the shedding of his traditional religion, and began to teach repentance from sin and conversion to Christ. He gathered a group of converts around him, composed a famous hymn which contained the first articulations of an indigenous Xhosa Christian theology and only towards the end of his life encouraged his followers to consult with Western missionaries and learn further from them.

Tiyo Soga's father was one of Ntsikana's converts. Soga is representative of a conversion process that took him quite a lot further than Ntsikana down the road towards modernity. He was educated in mission schools and further schooling in Scotland and became a missionary, journalist, and scholar – working to translate both the Bible and

John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* into Xhosa. He married a Scottish woman and was attacked by people on both sides of the racial divide for his apparent mimicry of the 'perfect English gentleman'. His own position on the matter was that he was as proudly African as he was Christian. He became a vociferous and articulate exponent of both Christianity and African nationalism. Both he and Ntsikana have been held up by Africans as early forerunners of African nationalism, which is indicative of the profound influence that evangelical Christianity had in its early formation.

Nicholas Bhengu was a Zulu speaking court interpreter who converted to Christ through American missionaries in 1929. He joined the South African Assemblies of God and became the founder of an evangelistic mission known as the Back to God Crusade in 1959. Hundreds of thousands of people were converted, healed, and transformed under his ministry and the Back to God Crusade arguably became the biggest self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting indigenous evangelical movement in the Sub-Continent. Although the core of his message was salvation through repentance from sin and faith in Christ his understanding of salvation included the restoration of self-confidence and dignity for African people in the face of apartheid. He taught that Christianity was African before it became European and his meetings brought about remarkable healing between the so-called 'red people' (called as such because of the custom of covering their skin with red ochre) and 'school people', in other words the traditional rural black and the urban educated black. His was a form of Christianity that was clearly evangelical, that indeed seemed to meet Africans at the point of their deepest need, and that acted as a bridge to modernity without sacrificing African dignity and pride. (See Balcomb:2005, 2008)

These three case studies have been cited as exemplary of an African Evangelicalism that fulfils very specific needs of those who embrace it. They also contradict the theory that Evangelicalism is about mimesis or the 'Robinson Crusoe syndrome'. Ntsikana's experience was apparently completely independent of missionary influence until near the end of his life. During the course of his life time Soga very specifically distanced himself from the racism of most of the early missionaries in the Eastern Cape. Bhengu's operation was entirely self-sufficient and completely independent of white influence. In fact in the Assemblies of God in South Africa Bhengu arguably had far more influence, a much higher profile, and greater stature than any of his white counterparts. The case studies also reinforce the idea that Evangelicalism transacts at the interface between an African and modern way of being in the world and is experienced as empowering for the individual, specifically within a modern context.

These case studies reflect the demand for a crisis kind of conversion experience that involves radical change in the converts' lives that frequently entails the begin-

ning of a transition to a new regime which involves a host of challenges. African Evangelicalism differs from its western counterpart in that its converts are more frequently faced with an array of issues, questions, and problems that are not faced in the already “Christianized” western societies.⁷ In her intensive exploration of the journey taken by the Kasena of northern Ghana into the Christian faith Allison Howell examines the myriads of issues that the African convert has to face. Indeed every single issue that had been learned through socialization in an African culture is now re-examined in the Christian context. From issues around marriage, to family life, to work, to inheritance, to illness, to social strife, to witchcraft, to the role of ancestors, and to death, amongst many others, all pose to the new convert questions that need to be answered in the light of the conversion experience. When life itself is “a problem-strewn passage towards ancestorhood and must be carefully negotiated within the network of relationships that is the central focus and *raison d’être* of religious thought and action” (Kirby in Howell 1997:250) then conversion itself must also involve such complex negotiation. The kind of cathartic individualism that seems to accompany evangelistic conversion in the west does not feature so much here. In a religious context where ritual plays a role in all aspects of life it is difficult to expect a clean break from ritualistic type of behaviour. An equivalent to such behaviour is found in what Howell and other scholars call “keys to conduct”, that is the strong concern about the correct way of doing things in the light of new found faith. Without such a key to conduct, explains Walls,

[T]he relationships, the hierarchies, and the values of the society are alike disturbed. People are left in confusion— they face conflicting obligations, and ambiguities strew the path of proper conduct. Frequently in Africa the adoption of Christianity has been a means of adapting to burdensome and potentially dangerous situations. The search for a new key to life, a yearning to be able to make assured choices with a good conscience, is surely a thoroughly religious motive, even if it is not the one to which missionary preaching has been primarily addressed. (Walls 2015:91)

This explains the apparent legalist behaviour that often follows evangelical preaching in Africa. Pauline notions of “salvation by grace through faith alone”, so important in western Protestantism, are not absent in African Evangelicalism but often do not have the same meaning in the African context where the religious context is so different. This has caused great consternation amongst western Evangelical commentators on

⁷ By “Christianized” I do not necessarily mean that Christians constitute a critical mass in society, although that might be the case in some parts of western society. I mean that the processes of modernization that Christianity has historically energized, including the focus on the individual, disenchantment of nature, democracy, the scientific revolution, and secularization.

African Evangelicalism who are sometimes led to doubt the authenticity of the faith of their African brothers and sisters which for them seems to involve too much emphasis on human effort. The emphasis on the need for deliverance from the “powers” and the assertion of Christ’s power over the powers of darkness is also unappealing for advocates of a Lutheran type “theology of the cross” as opposed to a “theology of glory”.

Birgit Meyer’s work (1999) amongst the Ewe of Ghana reveals a very similar pattern. For the missionaries of the Presbyterian Evangelical Church the life of faith meant salvation from the world, the flesh, and the devil, the full time pursuit of righteousness, and eventual heavenly bliss sometime in the future. For the Ewe Christians it meant a constant struggle against the spiritual forces that sought their destruction in the material present. When introduced to the concept of the devil Ewe Christianity translated this in terms of all the things in their culture that prevented them from progressing along the path of Christianization which was equivalent to modernization. Meyer traces the history of the various secessions from the EPC precisely over the issue of the efficacy of church faith and practice to meet the physical and spiritual needs of their members in this-worldly terms. Temptation for Ewe Christians had nothing to do with the “broad way” of Pietist theology but with the possibility that traditional ritual practices were also potentially efficacious in bringing about the required results in terms of one’s well-being in this world and therefore needed to be practised, even if it were “by night”. The transition from ritual practice to internal faith was a huge one for the Ewe to take, as was the notion that evil and sin was not something that happened to you but something you did.

4. How Evangelicalism translates socially, economically, and politically

4.1 Socio-economic influences

That religious faith translates into feelings, values, attitudes, capacities, propensities and tendencies within social contexts has been deemed axiomatic since Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. An important piece of research that takes as its departure point Weber’s hypothesis and in which this author took part has been done by a capitalist think tank amongst Pentecostals in the South African context. Since it has been asserted in this discussion that Evangelicalism in the sub region meets the needs that globalization creates, it would be important to look more carefully at what this research uncovered.

The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) based in Johannesburg undertook research amongst Pentecostals mainly in the Gauteng region between 2005 and 2007, but also in Cape Town and Durban. This research consisted of interviews with pastors aimed at investigating their basic message, surveys investigating how their faith had penetrated the fabric of society in terms of values, attitudes, and

behaviour, and interviews with Pentecostal politicians and business people in order to investigate the role their faith played in their respective work arenas. It should be born in mind that the study was hardly 'objective' in the sense that it was without an agenda. This was a capitalist organisation looking for signs that would benefit a capitalist economy. This should not detract from its importance however.

In this research the influence of Evangelical faith in the socio-economic sphere was discernible at three levels – the psychological and emotional, the impartation of skills, and the moral. According to the research (CDE:2008) there are a number of benefits that the faith induces on a psychological level: believers find meaning and identity and therefore can 'put up with the meaningless and dis-identifying world of the megastructures', the 'emotional rejection of worldly concerns relaxes them and releases energy for the same worldly concerns, precisely because these things mean so little for them', and a buoyant and positive mood is promoted amongst the faithful that is often in sharp contrast to the pessimism and low morale that exists around them. This is besides the benefits that religious faith in general brings to the areas of hypertension, longevity, depression, suicide, alcohol and drug use, and youth delinquency. All of these contribute significantly to a kind of spiritual and social capital that in turn translates into a healthier and more productive citizenship. (See Centre for Development and Enterprise:2008)

On a skills level many Evangelical churches provide opportunities to communicate a simple message, organise promotional efforts, make lists, use telephones, solve personality clashes, set goals and reach them, come to meetings on time, run them efficiently, and implement the decisions made there, do household budgeting, get training in marriage and sexual disciplines, meet life partners, and learn the basics of household budgeting. Such opportunities for skills training are especially important in the African context where the institutional infrastructure for such training in civil society is usually very weak. (See also Gifford:1998)

On the moral level the Evangelical faith elicits a condition that Weber famously described as 'this-worldly asceticism'. This refers to the evangelical believer's attitude to worldly pleasures that are deemed sinful and therefore forbidden but at the same time emphasizes hard work, honesty, and the deferral of gratification and instant consumption, all in the context of a world view that is free of magic and superstition and therefore favours predictability and 'rational' planning – all of which adds up to sound economic habits such as frugality, saving, capital accumulation, and economic advancement. This combined with stable relationships in the home and an emphasis on education makes for the dream, upwardly mobile middle class citizen bound only for success in a capitalist society.

It must be said that these attributes do not apply to the so-called 'prosperity gospel' in its more extreme forms. The glorification of rampant consumerism, rein-

forcement of the 'big man' syndrome in Africa, and the exploitation of the religious beliefs of ordinary Africans by 'servants of God' who make millions through the apparent gullibility of their followers can hardly be associated with asceticism, rationalism, or frugality. However it must also be said that the association of Evangelicalism with capitalism in general lends credence to the theory that Evangelicalism is the 'watchdog' of neo-liberalism in Africa just as the Christian mission was the 'watchdog' of imperialism in the early nineteenth century. Analysing religious practice in terms of its pragmatic usefulness in the context of a hegemonic economic system is one thing; to argue its veracity on the basis that it reinforces the values, practices, and institutions of such a system is surely another altogether. Arguably the role of any true religion, including the evangelical variety, is to express solidarity with those who have been marginalized by the values and practices of an economic system and not valorise how it acts in concert with them. Perhaps more rigorous thinking needs to be done by Evangelicals themselves concerning the meaning and integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ and how it should manifest in a 'fallen' world.

4.2 Political influences

Significant work has been done on the role of evangelicals in politics in Africa (eg Balcomb:1995, Freston:2001, Ranger:2008). Although the evangelical approach to politics is consistent with their individualistic understanding of salvation in general this does not mean that they do not play a significant role in the political arena. They demonstrate a wide range of interventions into such an arena, from the belief that populating it with 'born again' people will ultimately change the face of politics, to blatant support of the political status quo on the basis of Paul's teaching that political powers are ordained by God, to opposing secularism in the belief that it is anti-Christian, to the 'can do' approach that one can do anything through Christ who strengthens you, including start and lead Christian political parties, and even influence entire countries to become more Christian – evangelicals do it all. President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya was a member of an evangelical church who believed that he could bring Christian love and unity amongst the Kenyan people, as did Frederick Chiluba of Zambia who, to the delight of the evangelicals, declared Zambia a Christian nation. Unfortunately both of them succumbed to the temptations that accompany positions of power and tarnished the image of evangelicals in politics as a result. Indeed conspicuous by its absence when it comes to the direct involvement of evangelicals in the formal political arena is a dearth of understanding of the pitfalls involved that could have been gleaned by a cursory examination of the two thousand odd years of Christianity's attempts at involvement in such an arena. In other words the problems associated with the notion that God comes to you *de novum* are no better illustrated than in the political arena. In the South African context, for example, opposition to the apartheid regime by some

evangelicals translated into uncritical support for the forces of the democratic revolution which, on the other side of a changed status quo, translated into identification with the new ANC government until this also compromised them. On the other hand those whose political quietism translated into support for the apartheid government in the name of obedience to scripture soon also found themselves thoroughly compromised with the apartheid regime. (See Balcomb 2004) Evangelicals, in other words, have found it particularly difficult to navigate the tempestuous political waters of the sub-continent.

This does not mean that evangelicals have not had a positive influence on the development of democracy in the region. But once again this has been mainly indirectly through the inculcation of individual agency and the provision of voluntary associations which provide the space where the basic principles of democratic practice can be worked out in an atmosphere where self-worth is encouraged and relationships of equality, mutual acceptance, tolerance and respect emerge out of a common faith and sense of a common destiny. These communities also provide a moral and spiritual compass for their members which enables them to participate in popular discontent with government, especially with respect to corruption. Moreover their theology of the powers is not always restricted to the spiritual sphere. The 'wrestling' against wickedness in high places can translate into more institutional participation in politics. However the divine authority that they believe they have may militate against notions of tolerance, diversity, and pluralism.

5. Conclusion – interpreting Evangelicalism through different paradigms

Evangelicalism in sub-Saharan Africa is a phenomenon that is too powerful, too popular, and too pervasive to ignore. How it is understood depends on the paradigm one uses to interpret it. It has been understood by Africans themselves in two different ways – firstly as a function of the neo-liberal project of conquest and secondly as a function of the liberating gospel. The truth is probably to be found in a combination of both of these perspectives. The existential reality of Africans is that they live in a world that is powerfully influenced by forces that are both modern and pre-modern. Evangelicalism enables them to transact between these forces in a way that many clearly find at the least helpful, at the most liberating. This may not fit easily with ideal conceptions of the gospel, from whatever theological perspective these are constructed. But this is probably of little concern to evangelicals themselves.

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