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CHRISTIANITY: A BONE OF CONTENTION IN NIGERIA

1. Introduction

Nigeria has not yet attained a republic of its own. It will have a republic when it has a church of its own which controls the country. What we are doing is to worship in churches which are imported from Rome and America. I have not seen a church which comes from Nigeria. You shall have attained a republic when you embrace or have a church which comes from Nigeria... Africa and indeed Nigeria is not yet liberated because they are still attached to the apron strings of America, Roman (sic) and England.¹

The Holy Spirit is in Nigeria, He is in Africa... There is, therefore, not the time to go to Mecca, or Rome, or Jerusalem or even United States of America...²

The above epigraphs underscore neatly the theme of this essay, nationalistic³ motifs in one Nigerian new religious movement, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (BCS). But before going into a discussion of the theme, a brief introduction to the movement is necessary, in the interest of the non-Nigerian reader.

1. Olumba Olumba Obu, *Gospels for Destined 144,000 Virgins and Fathers Farewell Address* (Calabar: Brotherhood Everlasting Gospel Centre, n.d.). pp. 43-44; cf. Olumba Olumba Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology* (n.d.) pp. 4-5. All Brotherhood of the Cross and Star publications cited in this essay are obtainable from the movement's press or from its Everlasting Gospel Centre, both located at the movement's current world headquarters at 34 Ambo Street, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Henceforth, only names of authors, titles and dates (when known) of publications will be indicated.

2. Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology*, p. 2.

3. In this essay the word "nationalistic" refers both to the specific Nigerian and the general African contexts. Sometimes, also, the word even takes on racial ("Black") overtones in Obu's teachings.

With an estimated membership of some two million adherents worldwide, BCS is contemporary Nigeria's fastest-growing and most controversial new religious movement. It came into existence in the city of Calabar, now capital of the Cross River State, in the late 1950's initially as a prayer/Bible-study group with only a handful of (mainly female and children) members. These charter members were mainly people in search of physical healing through spiritual means. The founder and leader of the movement is a seventy-one-year-old charismatic, Olumba Olumba Obu (1918). Subsequently, the group soon became very popular and attracted a large following of all classes of Nigerians in search of physical healing and solution to other social and spiritual problems through spiritual means. Today, BCS has established branches in many African countries and even outside Africa in such places as Great Britain, the United States, India, and the West Indies.

Although BCS claims to be a Christian movement through and through, on account of the christocentricity of some of its teachings and biblicist (especially New Testament) orientation of its theology, many of its doctrines have caused much controversy among other Christian churches in Nigeria. Such controversial doctrines include the deity of the movement's founder and leader whom his followers believe to be the eighth and final incarnation of Jesus Christ and the very embodiment of the holy Trinity; the pantheistic and bisexual nature of God; the relative goodness and evilness of this God; the obsolescence of most of the Bible (especially the Old Testament); the relative perfection of Jesus Christ; the possibility of salvation through a combination of divine grace *and* human effort; the evilness of marriage and the goodness and spiritual meritoriousness of celibacy and sexual abstinence; the eternity of BCS as an organisation (the movement is believed to be co-eternal with God – that is, like God, there was no time that the movement was not in existence). Such controversial and radical teachings have been responsible for the generally negative and antagonistic attitudes which mainstream, historically missionary-related churches in Nigeria display toward BCS.

After that brief introduction to BCS and some of its controversial doctrines, I proceed now to discuss what appear to be the major nationalistic motifs in the movement's ideology.

2. Nationalistic Motifs in BCS

BCS has adopted the name "Brotherhood" to signify its claimed universality. Indeed, the term is interpreted by Obu to include the brother-

hood of all created and uncreated order – human, spiritual or cosmic, earthly, celestial, animate and inanimate.⁴ He claims that “Brotherhood of the Cross and Star is not for one race” and that he has “no business with colour.”⁵

Yet for all its claim of universality, BCS can be unashamedly nationalistic in some of its teachings and pronouncements, as the following discussion shows.

(a) *Religious Nationalism*

In surveying their contemporary religious history, Obu is saddened that Nigeria in particular and Africa in general are still under the bondage of foreign religious domination (see the first epigraph above). He observes, for instance, that but for his BCS, “no church (or) denomination has . . . originated from Nigeria”⁶ and that “it is only Brotherhood that is free and has brought salvation to Nigeria. That is liberation from (spiritual) slavery to Nigeria and Africa.”⁷

Having made that observation, he asks the following rhetorical questions obviously aimed at embarrassing his audience and thereby discouraging them from continuing to patronise “foreign” missionary religions, and to encourage them to embrace indigenous African religions instead – indigenous religions founded in Africa by Africans:

Did your father ever establish Mohammedanism? Do you know what obtains in Roman Catholic or Mount Zion or Apostolic? . . . Which is the Nigerian indigenous (sic) religion? The one that originates from Africa is not known . . . Africa, are you not under a foreign yoke? . . . Are you not mature enough to have your own Bible? Are you not mature enough to have an indigenous African Church . . . Should we understand that in all Africa there is no person . . . who can . . . establish an indigenous African church for Africans, having a unique system of worship, such that the whites will come down to imbibe?⁸

4. See, for instance, Olumba Olumba Obu, *What is Brotherhood?* (n.d.), p. 4.

5. Olumba Olumba Obu, “Minutes of the Spiritual Council of Churches (SCC)”, 28th April, 1979, pp. 23, 26.

6. Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology*, p.6; cf. Obu, *Gospels for Destined 144,000 Virgins*, p. 44.

7. Obu, *Gospels for Destined 144,000 Virgins*, p. 44.

8. Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology*, pp. 6-7, 9.

As far as Obu is concerned, that Africans had not, until only recently, had their own indigenous churches, is ironical in the sense that this is the time, according to him, when they ought to be experiencing religious or spiritual liberation. Africans, he says, were originally occupying a position of leadership in world spirituality but were later tricked out of that position by the whites who, noticing Africans' inability to make the best of their privileged and God-given position,

immediately capitalised on the weakness of these chosen people (Africans) and seized the word of God from them with a promise that they (were) going to practice it as was required by God. . . . Instead of doing it, they (Whites) have used it as a weapon for cheating, oppressing and colonising the entire world.⁹

Using the biblical story about Jacob and Esau to underscore his point, in which story he sees Jacob as representing the Whites and Esau as representing the Black race, Obu states:

Jacob used craftiness to usurp the birthright from Esau. . . . Can you not notice how crafty the Whites are?¹⁰

Obu is happy, however, that, in spite of the initial spiritual trickery on the part of the Whites, Africans have been able to recover their original spiritual heritage and to recapture their original position of leadership in world spirituality. As a result, the black man, Obu says, will now teach the Whites spiritual matters and lead them to salvation. Obu's joyous testimony of this sudden take-over of world spiritual leadership by Africans runs as follows:

God has never forgotten the blackman. He had already made His promises. . . . He has redeemed His promise by allowing His wishes to be fulfilled in you.¹¹

Commenting further on Africans' fortune in regaining their original spiritual leadership, Obu contends:

The blacks had always depended on the Whites, (but) what do you see now? The glory of the blacks comes directly from

9. Olumba Olumba Obu, *The Supernatural Teacher, Book 4* (1980?), p. 57.

10. Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology*, p. 12.

11. Olumba Olumba Obu, *Easter Pentecostal Assembly Weekly Gospels*, Vol. 1 (n.d.), p. 58; the "promise" in this quotation refers to Romans 9: 25-26. cf.

God. It has been said that no good thing can come out of Nazareth. Nobody ever thought anything of importance can come out of the black race.¹²

In fact, it is one of Obu's strong convictions that

Africa is the land of salvation. God was born in Africa and all good things must come from there . . . therefore, the whites must come down and worship God in Africa.¹³

He maintains this conviction elsewhere when he says:

The whites are aware of the position, because it was said that 'Ethiopians shall arise,' that is to say that the blacks will rise up. Now the blacks have risen up.¹⁴

Furthermore, Obu believes that "there was no time when the Holy Spirit left Africa (and that) God loves Africa above all."¹⁵

Now that Africa has recaptured her original position of universal spiritual leadership, according to Obu, it is now her turn to evangelize the world, especially the unbelieving, secular White world. As he puts it,

This is the time for the blacks, whether you want it or not, this is the time for the blacks to reign. The whites know this and they have accepted the new turn. . . . They know that this is what has been ordained and so they have to accept it.¹⁶

Obu claims further, in fact, that the prospects of African leadership of the world, especially in the spiritual sphere, were revealed in a vision, at different times and places, to three Roman Catholic nuns who wrote down what had been revealed to them and later sent the same "in a sealed envelope" to the Pope in the Vatican. He describes the Pontiff's reaction to the alleged vision as follows:

12. Olumba Olumba Obu, "Minutes of the Spiritual Council of Churches (SCC)," January 3, 1981, p. 16.

13. Obu, *Easter Pentecostal Assembly Weekly Gospels*, Vol. 1, p. 48.

14. Obu, *What is Nigeria Ideology*, p. 4.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

After seeing what was contained, he (the Pope) sealed the envelope and refused to disclose the contents so that people might not know that an African was going to rule. People have been pestering the life of the vatican officials to release the vision of these three nuns, but no person wants to release (it). If you were the Pope, would you have released it? After reading that the person who will rule the world would be a black man, an African, would you have released it.¹⁷

What I have been discussing thus far represents Obu's prophetic protest against white monopoly of religious leadership in Africa, and call for African active participation and even leadership role in matters of religion in the continent - a call for religious reform in Africa. But besides Obu's religious nationalism there is strong economic nationalism in his teachings. It is to a brief discussion of this form of nationalism that I now turn in the last part of the present essay.

(b) *Economic Nationalism*¹⁸

To begin with, Obu blames the current deplorable economic situation in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general on the colonial masters of pre-independent Africa and secondly on Africans' lazy attitude toward work. According to him, the colonial masters did not give Africans the kind of education that prepared them for the exigent demands of modern economy and technology. Colonial education, Obu maintains, prepared Africans only for white-collar jobs and not for the appreciation

17. Obu, *Easter Pentecostal Assembly Weekly Gospels, Vol. 1*, p. 69. The Editors of *Update : A Quarterly Journal on New Religious Movements*, 8, No. 3 (1986), p. 62, note 8, comment as follows on Obu's story about the message in the sealed envelope revealed to the three nuns: "Obu here undoutably reports the story of the apparitions of May - October, 1917 in Fatima, Portugal with a most unusual twist! The Virgin Mary is purported to have appeared in a small village. A series of messages were delivered to three children regarding the fate of the world, including one 'secret message', given over in writing to the Vatican. Two of the children died in their youth. The sole surviving visionary later became a Catholic nun. The contents of the message have never been made public, although various reports assert that the message was scrutinized by recent Popes, beginning with John XXIII.

18. This section of the essay is based, in part, on my paper "Religion and the Economy : The Economic Manifesto of a Nigerian Religious Leader," presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Hyatt-Regency Hotel, Washington, D.C., U.S.A. November 14, 1986.

and pursuit of manual labour and technical skills which are gateways to modern economic progress. As far as Obu is concerned, colonial education was, to say the least, morally deceptive and in the long run valueless. As he puts it,

The Englishman has deceived you with liberal education. He taught you how to write and keep accounts. After knowing all the accounting principles and practising them in the office, where is your own money which you will count?¹⁹

He underscores this assertion elsewhere as follows:

The introduction of Grammar schools induced people to learn theories, mathematics, science and accounts. Today the system has collapsed. When you complete the course, you are awarded . . . certificates without any employment and at last you sit down and lament because you cannot make use of your hands to produce for your subsistence.²⁰

Having said that, he goes on to blame the white man for introducing into Nigeria, for instance, "the attitude of staying in office," and then asks sarcastically: "You become accountants, teachers and clerks; who are those to produce what you in offices would feed on?"²¹

Obu also blames Nigeria's current poor economic condition on the white man's selfishness and greed in usurping Nigerian land for his own selfish ends, and then turning around to hire Nigerians to work that land for him for only meagre wages on which they could not live decently, let alone save any of it for the rainy day. As far as Obu is concerned, the white man cheated Nigerians who worked for him, because he did not pay them wages commensurate to their labour. In commiseration with his fellow Nigerians, Obu poses to them the following rhetorical question:

Why will you not die of hunger and suffer abject poverty, when you surrender all your lands to the white man to establish rubber and palm plantations for himself, but the following day you emerge with a long application requesting to be employed as an accounts clerk under him?²²

19. Olumba Olumba Obu, *The Light of the World*, Vol. XII (1971), p. 23.

20. Olumba Olumba Obu, *The Everlasting Gospel: The Transcendent Teachings of the Holy Spirit*, Vol. 2, p. 26.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

22. Obu, *The Light of the World*, Vol. XII, p. 23.

Having posed that question, Obu goes on to point out the danger of being someone else's employee, especially a white man's employee, instead of being self-employed :

He (the white employer) can sack you at any time because he is at the head and owner of the work. All your turnover goes into his pocket. Your salary does not reflect your turnover for a month.²³

Then Obu directs his diatribe against those missionary-founded churches in Nigeria which allowed themselves, especially during the colonial period, to be exploited by the "home missions" abroad which, having established in Nigeria for their selfish ends industries, schools and farm projects, "stay abroad to rule in Nigeria, while we only go to seek employment in their establishment."²⁴ This sort of arrangement, he warns, "brings poverty to our country."²⁵

As stated above in the opening paragraph of this section of the essay, Obu also blames Africa's poor economic condition on Africans' laziness and unwillingness to work hard, especially in the area of agriculture. Africans' laziness in this regard, he maintains, is "the only thing that weakens and shakes any nation to its very foundation,"²⁶ or "the canker-worm eating deeply into the fabric of our economy."²⁷ He then calls on his fellow Africans (Nigerians) to take agricultural pursuits seriously and to pay much less attention to white-collar jobs. His specific appeal is that his compatriots should "go back to land and receive the blessing of God Almighty."²⁸

As far as Obu is concerned, "there is no gift more valuable than the surplus land at our disposal. This land is money, but it requires enthusiasm and initiative for her economic exploitation."²⁹

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 24; cf. Obu, *The Everlasting Gospel : The Transcendent Teachings of the Holy Spirit*, Vol. 2, pp. 18-23.

28. Obu, *The Light of the World*, Vol. XII, p. 23.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Pointing to the examples of those developed countries of the world which are wealthy and economically independent because of their viable agricultural programmes, Obu calls on the government of Nigeria, for example, to encourage agriculture in the country:

The Government of Nigeria should as a matter of urgency establish many farm projects at various levels to absorb . . . jobless and lazy young men and women who daily roam our streets.³⁰

He adds that only when Africa is economically independent can she claim to be truly independent. As he puts, "Africa is not yet independent because they still apply for employment instead of being employers of labour."³¹ Indeed, Obu's diagnosis of Africa's poor economic condition and problem of acute food shortage is frank and precise: "There is an acute shortage of food because you (Africans) are lazy to labour with your hands to produce food."³²

That a religious leader should speak out so passionately about the significance for a country of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in matters of food production and the economy, goes a long way to show that there is, after all, an interesting relationship between agriculture, the economy, and religion. One only wishes that leaders in African countries had the kind of economic insight which Obu expounds in his teachings, and made agriculture an attractive occupation for their citizens. Had this been the case among African political leaders, perhaps Africa might have escaped the economic crises which she faces today.

As far as Obu is concerned, the only way out of Africa's present economic dilemma is for Africans to be willing to return to the land – to begin to use their hands in agricultural pursuits. In his opinion, returning to the land means, ultimately, going back to Mother Earth – that is, to God himself who, for Obu, is the only one who can guarantee for a people economic self-sufficiency and integrity. Indeed, Obu articulates unequivocally his vision of economic, political and technological autarky and concomitant international respectability as follows:

If you lack the knowledge and technical-know-how, God advises you to ask from him, and it shall be given you. God is with you

30. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

and He is willing to teach you free of charge the technology of manufacturing.

The Europeans get this knowledge from God after much self-sacrifice and devoted prayers. Why don't you seek glory for yourselves?³³

Obu's economic proposals discussed here illustrate neatly his characteristic creative ability to be pragmatic and to be in tune with the times. In fact, it may be said that his religion operates first on the natural, practical, this-worldly sphere – the sphere of human needs and experiences in the here and now – and then gradually raises itself higher and higher into the supernatural, "impractical," other-worldly sphere – the sphere of the unknown, of the beyond, of the mysterious and miraculous. For in his economic proposals, he first points up Africans' existential need for "technological-know-how" and economic self-sufficiency, for instance, and from there he directs their attention to an other-worldly source from where this needed know-how may be obtained. In doing that, Obu seems to have brought heaven down to earth and tried to marry the two. Peter Berger describes this way of theologizing "an inductive approach," by which he means "an approach that begins with ordinary human experience, explores the 'signals of transcendence' to be found in it, and moves on from there to religious affirmations about the nature of reality" – a procedure which goes "from the human to the metahuman."³⁴

But Obu's economic proposals are also significant in another theoretical respect, namely, the challenge it poses to that age-old prejudice that all religious visionaries are by nature and vocation apathetic to and unconscious of the socio-economic realities of their societies.

3. Conclusion

The question which one may ask at this point, ultimately, is whether BCS is a national religion or whether it represents religious nationalism. The answer is simple: To the extent that BCS is not a state religion

33. *Ibid.*, cf. Olumba Olumba Obu, *Easter Pentecostal Assembly Weekly Gospel, Vol. 1: The Realm of the Holy Spirit* (1982), pp. 15, 19.

34. Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), pp. (ix), 124.

embraced by most Nigerians – let alone by most Africans – it cannot be considered a national religion. However, to the extent that it is concerned, even tangentially but passionately, with issues of national interest – religious, economic, political – BCS represents a religious response to grave issues of national concern. Indeed, some would argue that the movement represents a religious reaction (opposition) against religious and economic domination by colonialists and neo-colonialists in Africa.

To the extent that is so, the movement's own efforts in economic activities and its suggested solutions to issues of national development in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, may be referred to as "religious nationalism," that is, religious approach to issues of national interest. It is in this connection, Bryan Turner reminds us, that "religion often plays a crucial role in the inception of nationalist identity and ideologies . . ." ³⁵ For Obu's reaction or opposition to colonial and neocolonial religious and economic programmes in Africa is to be seen in the light of African new religious movements' quest for religious and cultural identity. ³⁶

The almost excessive nationalistic overtone in Obu's teachings would seem to be an indication of a conscious effort on Obu's part to make his movement relevant to the contemporary African (Nigerian) religious and socio-political situation and thus to make his teachings palatable to Africans in their contemporary *sitz im Leben*. In doing this, he consciously or unconsciously helps to reinforce secular expressions and demonstrations of African nationalism. In other words, through his religious nationalism he sacralizes and reinforces secular nationalism, thereby making his teachings relevant to contemporary Africans in their existential milieu, thus illuminating the congruence between sacred abstractions and concrete profane realities. Thus, Obu's religious and economic proposals illustrate the difficulty of separating religion from mundane national issues and concerns. No religion has ever been absolutely other-worldly.

So far, so good. But BCS' religious nationalism may become counterproductive for a young movement which aims at popularising its

35. Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory: A Materialist Perspective* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 207.

36. See my "The Quest for Identity in African New Religious Movements," a lecture delivered at the University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, West Germany, November 15, 1988.

very existence and ideologies at the universal level. The counterproductivity may come about when the non-Nigerian members of the movement become uncomfortable with the almost excessive nationalist sentiments of Obu's unashful pronouncements. Such discomfort may lead to divisiveness and disintegration within the rank and file of the movement, illustrating the important sociological fact that nationalist sentiments are not always functionally integrative in a multinational and culturally or ethnically diverse social group.