

African Religious Identity; a Socio Political Analysis of an American Church and its Colonial Influence in Southern Africa

Reverend Lampsford Mbulawa African Methodist Episcopal Church

This paper is an analysis of the role a church based in the West plays in the African community from a socio-political perspective. The yardstick measurement applied in this analysis is based on the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), which grew out of the emancipation of slaves. The AMEC is predominantly African American with various church districts in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Liberia.

AMEC came late into the colonial theology game. History tells us that colonial theology came in two stages to Africa; the first as a missionary imperialism, and then as continued part of the colonial policy or as 'the Missionary Charter.' As missionary imperialism it facilitated the conquest of Africans-land dispossession, and political subjugation –until Africans remained with the Bible in their hands. Since the Berlin Conference in 1885 the British Empire became the world power. As an imperialist power Britain understood her relations with colonial peoples as divine providence. These peoples had to internalise colonization, hoist the British flag and petition: “God save our gracious King...Send him victorious...Long live to reign over us.” This national anthem provided the roots for reformulation of the missionary imperialist doctrine – first military conquest, then the Bible. (G.C. Oosthuizen, 1969)

The second stage became phenomenal when the Bible settlements through various colonial governments. These missionaries pursued mass evangelisation of Africans by foisting upon them colonial theology. They reinforced their theological view by adopting the missionary charter. Basically the colonial theology posited that God is the harbinger of material, racist and class contradictions, but he is far removed from the human condition to settle anything. Or God is concerned with the spiritual life especially, if not exclusively, after death.

Currently, in the post-colonial era, evangelism is spreading across the continent like mushrooms. This evangelism comes in various forms such as ministries, cults and an infusion of some more particularly orthodox churches such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Christ and Baptist Churches. The issue thus becomes how are these religions affecting Southern Africa identity? More importantly, based on the significance of the church institutions in today's societies should churches, particularly the established ones such as AMEC be viewed at the same level with non-governmental entities such as the World Bank, International Red Cross, and Amnesty International? Like AMEC, these institutions are based in the west, have branches in Africa, and promote western policies that sometimes conflict with national or cultural identity.

AMEC makes an interesting case study in the context that it is of African American origin dealing with Africans in Africa. The assumption is that AMEC's policies with Southern Africa would be different as both groups have the same heritage. This paper will demonstrate otherwise. Southern Africans in AMEC are treated differently from their brethren from a policy-making perspective. Colonization practices dominate. As stated In

Africa They Say: A Plea for Africa Jurisdiction in the Church of Africa (Reverend L.M. Mbulawa, The Communiqué, May 2000 Edition), “democracy has become a culture to strive for; transparency has to permeate to the grassroots level and mass political consciousness is gradually socio-economically maturing. Unfortunately, colonial structures are still found in AMEC, even though these in the democratic world have been overthrown and their influence is withering away in the scorching heat of the democratic culture.”

One could argue that AMEC is acting no differently than some of its African brethren who are Presidents and treating their people worse than the colonial masters. An examination of the material presented by various authors on this matter will determine the impact of religious identity on AMEC members in Africa as religion affects the moral fibre of our being. This impact will be analyzed to assess its role on Southern Africa identity from a socio-political perspective