

PARALLELS OF THE EUROPEAN CHURCH REFORMATION AND THE CHURCH REFORMATION IN AFRICA: THE CULTURAL DICHOTOMY AND REFLECTION

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Abstract

History shows us that 'there is no smoke without fire'. The reformation in Europe was not deemed to be schism; reformers cited a number of reasons why the church needed reforming. The South African situation does not appear to have been viewed in the same line simply because what happened in South Africa occurred in an inside the context which could neither authenticate nor validate the reformation. The formation of the African Independent Churches in Africa reflected the same type of historical events within the Protestant Churches as occurred in the Catholic Church in the 16th century. As in Europe, the cultural context played a major role in the reformation of the church which was influenced mainly by the Renaissance.

1 Introduction

In this paper I intend showing how the European Reformation eventually reflected upon the church in South Africa. However, the context and time frame in which these events took place were obviously not the same. My main focus in South Africa will be centred around the African Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs) and the Protestant Churches, while in Europe the church consists of the Protestant movement and the Catholic Church.

The 16th century Reformation may have been the period of transition from the medieval into modernity, but this did not mean the end of church reformation. This period saw the expansion and the planting of Christianity, through the efforts of missionaries, in most parts of the world. Some of these missionaries landed on African soil bringing with them their notion of what they called an authentic church. Most of these missionaries appeared to believe that, in Africa, the church would be perfect, since it had just gone through the fresh process of Reformation. They forgot that the emergence of the new

denominations were due to the church's need for change in Europe. This was the case in Africa with the emergence of the Ethiopian type of churches which, are sometimes referred to as the African Independent Churches (AICs). The interesting thing about the African context, and that of the 16th century Reformation in Europe, are the parallels between them. According to Lizo Jafta (2004), the 16th century European Reformation came as a result of the German's consciousness about their own identity; the same was true of the English, the Swiss and the French. The same can be said of the AICs in Africa during the missionary and colonial period. The fact that European history at that time was marred by the Peasants' Revolt meant that the reformers had triggered a sense of consciousness in their society. Many of these peasants could neither read nor write but were able to catch up with the spirit of the Reformation. It is sometimes tempting to conclude that the version of history written for Africans implies that church Reformation was no longer possible in any context after what had happened in Europe. It is against this background that the AICs should be seen as forming part of the African perspective and the continuing process of church reformation. The Reformation in the 16th century took place under the influence of cultural, political, economic, social and religious contexts and activities. The AICs emerged in the context similar to that of Europe, however, the imprecise use of certain words meant that the African context could not be equated to that of the 16th century. The reason for this, quite simply, was that Africa was a 'wrong continent' for church reform.

The causes of the Reformation in Europe centred around the papacy, the sale of indulgences, the position of the clergy and the inaccessibility of scriptures to lay people. Lack of scriptural interpretation in the vernacular and failure to address the socio, economic, cultural and political context of the time also played a part in the causes of the Reformation. In the African context, reformation involved the non ordination of the indigenous clergy, the unequal treatment of ministers on racial grounds, lack of leadership in the mission churches and work conditions of indigenous clergy, were not adequately addressed (ie socioeconomic reasons and a lack of scriptural interpretation in matters relating to culture and politics). The context of the European Reformation was nationalism, which had become a serious issue as certain countries became conscious of themselves and their identity. The African context followed the same pattern: indigenous people began to adopt nationalism as a form of identity apart from a Christian background and culture that was influenced by the mission churches and that were characterised by inequalities and isolation. In both contexts there were voices which called for the church to reform. The names which come to mind here are, in Europe, John Wycliff, Girolamo Savonarola and John Huss. In Africa, the names that come to mind are Nehemiah Tile, Mangena

Mokone, James Dwane and Simon Kimbangu. In Europe, Girolamo Savonarola spoke out about the problems of the church as residing in one person, this person being the pope, while John Wycliff argued that the church was a community of equals. For Africa, Mangena Mokone talked against Christian brotherhood in a context of Christian inequality within the church. Like John Huss, Mangena Mokone simply asked: how can Christians discriminate against each other when they call themselves brothers in Christ (Balila 1991:71)? The AICs are seen to owe their historical origin to European and American Pentecostalism, and it is because of this foreign cultural influence that Africans are regarded as being incapable of reforming the church. Jafta (2004) makes it clear that these Christian denominations must be seen for what they are – with their theology and spirituality, both of which express their identity. In this context the African perspective of Reformation tended to focus on the foreign influence in order to justify its intellectual interpretation and functions. This is simply because foreign influence can, and always has, provided the tools of functionalist interpretation and intellectualist interpretation to try and make sense of African Christianity. However, these tools imply that Africans have neither the tools nor the intelligence to sustain their Christianity – and that no matter how indigenous Christianity can be – it will not survive without western influence. In fact, the AICs not only reformed themselves in the face of opposition from the mission churches, but also effected reform among themselves.

2 Reformation within the AICs

African Independent Churches have no links or ties with the churches of western origin and operate independently. These churches originated out of the need of indigenous people to address their worldview. These churches were formed to address and serve Africans. In spite of this unifying factor, there are differences between the AICs, especially on issues relating to liturgy, customs, usages and agendas, all of which have been created to suit the needs of the African people. Their search for independence and rootedness in the African context was a positive step in the development of the Christian faith in Africa and not simply one of disapproval. In this light, the AICs must also be seen differently, since they, too have two categories – Ethiopian and Zionist. Sundkler (quoted from Kitshoff 1996: 107) points out that, within the AICs, one can find churches which can be compared with churches that have western connections, but are not dominated by the West. The Zionists are those without any connections to the West, but which are Pentecostal in nature. Paul Makhubu, who is also a leader in one of the AIC churches, makes the situation clearer by stating that “African Independent/Initiated Churches mean purely black controlled denomination with no links in membership or administrative controls with any non – African church ... the AICs are

churches that have completely broken the umbilical cord with the western missionary enterprise". Members of the AICs themselves consider it important that they are different from each other and that distinctions be made between the Ethiopian and the Zionist type of churches. Churches with western connections are regarded as churches of the law, since they give little or no room to spiritual expression. This is true not only in the worship services, but also in the way these churches are run. The Ethiopian churches are regarded as being close to the mainline churches since they adhere to western forms of Christianity. However, L N Mzimba, who is the son of the founder of the African Presbyterian Church, argues that the "Ethiopian type of churches was born on the foundations of self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating African Churches which would produce a truly African type of Christianity suited to the genius and needs of the race, and not a black copy of any European Church". These churches may not have any links with the mainline churches, but they are regarded as such because they follow the same patterns as the historic churches. Zionist types of churches are regarded as spiritual and do not restrict spiritual expression. For them the rules, regulations and liturgies are subordinate to the Spirit. Their liturgy is such that the Spirit can 'take over'. This is why, in the worship services of such churches, people dance and run in circles as they sing, sometimes accompanied by drums or musical instruments. In the Zionist type of church, the congregation sing and dance until they drop down in ecstasy; this is regarded as Spirit possession. The Zionists, regard the Ethiopians and mainline denominations as being less open to the operation of the Holy Spirit. These churches are regarded as being governed by rules, regulations and prescribed liturgies. Generally, the Ethiopian churches have retained what they observed from the mission churches: the liturgies, hymn books, teachings, organisations, vestments, scriptural interpretation and traditions. The unique thing about these churches is their tolerance of indigenous traditions (unlike the mission churches).

Kruger (1983:11-12) seems to think that the Zionist churches in particular do not comply with the standards found in the Bible and prescribed by the Reformers; he concludes that they have missed the mark of a true church. He bases his view on Zionist churches' emphasis on the traditional custom and ancestor veneration, sacrifices and what he calls the magical view of the Bible. However, he also argues that the Word of God is proclaimed and heard in that denomination. This reflects what Calvin felt about the Roman Catholic Church. This raises the question whether church reformation in the African context, and in particular in the Ethiopian type of church, is possible. This proved to be possible when Walter Matitta from Lesotho established a Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church (MBBRC) after he left the Paris Evangelical Mission Society. Matitta was a person filled with the Spirit;

he had the desire to preach the gospel and he possessed the power to heal. The church he established was not Zionist in nature but Ethiopian, since it was grounded on a Reformed confession, as seen in the lifestyle of its members. The members of this church do not participate in ancestor veneration, neither in the worship services nor privately at home. For the Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Reading Church the Bible teaches them that the Holy Spirit is the only spirit through whom people can overcome their woes. The need for intervention by the spirits of the deceased, are not necessary. The confession of this church suggests that their Belgic confession was used as its foundation (even though it had to be reviewed and edited). This suggests that the leaders of this church knew about the teachings of the Reformation: Walter Matitta himself was an adherent of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Orange Free State. Matitta later became a member of the Lesotho Evangelical Church and it was under the supervision of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society that he worked as both an evangelist and an evangelical preacher (Kitshoff 1996:112).

Matitta was helped by Raymond Molupe Mohono, who was also a member and founder of the Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers. Like Matitta, Raymond Mohono was familiar with the Reformed doctrine. He apparently had in his possession a document of Reformed Theology entitled: *In understanding be men: A handbook on Christian doctrine for non theological students* (Kitshoff 1996:112). This small document seems to have been put together by T C Hammond from Trinity College, Dublin. Both Mohono and Matitta came from the background of the Reformed tradition and they were able to draw up the constitution of the MBBRC. The introduction to the constitution states the intention of the church as being for Africa and leading people to perseverance in the true faith in Jesus Christ (Kitshoff 1996:112). This is followed by remarks about the basis of the church and includes a quote from the text of Zech 4: 6; this verse is understood to mean that the church was founded not by the power of human might, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The MBBRC is one of the Ethiopian churches (African Independent Churches) which has no formal ties with the mission churches. Nor does it have a leader with western connections. Its constitution and liturgies were written in Sesotho, which is an indication that the MBBRC is truly an Independent church rooted in the Reformed tradition. This is justified by the intellectual development of the notions of the spirit of nationhood by the Africans as part of the broader ideology of African nationalism. In this context, the Ethiopian churches have been regarded as political institutions that celebrate Africanness and pragmatic self-determination.

In their confessions (Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church) or liturgies the members of the start with:

We believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is one God in Spirit. He has no beginning and no end. He is immutable. He has no body. He is perfect wisdom, justice, truth and beauty. He is the almighty God, the fountain of all visible and invisible'.

We believe that the Spirit of the prophets is the Spirit of God, as the Bible itself witnesses. The same Spirit was also in the apostles. They described what the Spirit had revealed to them in order to preserve that for the generations to come, and to teach them.

We believe in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God. (Kitshoff 1996:113ff)

This means that all five books of Moses, the books of the prophets and the three books of Solomon all form part of the Old Testament scripture accepted by the Moshoeshoe Berean Bible Readers Church. The New Testament includes the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the fourteen epistles of St Paul and the seven non-Pauline Epistles.

The confessions clearly show that the MBBRC has a Reformed faith. Human being are total corrupt and unable to maintain their relationship with God. The other characteristics found in this confession are the Trinity and the role of the Trinity in creation and re-creation. There is reference to the two natures of Christ, the death of Christ, the inspiration of the scripture and salvation through faith in Christ. Above all, the nature of the confession of the MBBRC reflects Reformed Christianity. They also recognise the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. However, the MBBRC added the third sacrament, the sacrament of marriage (Kitshoff 1996:117). Note, however, that the Catholic idea of sacrament cannot be found, especially the notion of Christ being sacrificed on the altar. The recognition of marriage as a sacrament should not, therefore, be seen as part of the Catholic doctrine, but instead as part of indigenous African theology (Kisthoff 1996:117). In the MBBRC, administering of the Lord's Supper is celebrated in the same way as it is in the Lesotho Evangelical Church and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.

These parallels, at the same time, show the shortfalls, particularly as far as the mission churches are concerned, who have failed to adopt the new cultural milieu. In the past their mission has overlooked both the needs of the local people and their worldview. Unlike the African Independent Churches (in particular the Ethiopian type of churches), culture has always been taken into consideration even in their liturgies. An example of this can be seen in the Thembu National Church, which was founded by Nehemiah Tile who left a mission church, explicitly citing the mission church's lack of cultural sensitivity. Tile composed a

prayer which recognised the Thembu king, the tribe, property, and the ancestors (Balial1991:56). In this particular case, the Ethiopian type of churches, were ahead of the mission churches in terms of enculturation. In the European context, the reformation was solely for the purpose of enculturation, depending on the church's geographical location. However, the Ethiopian churches took up the challenge and made sure that Christianity was contextualised within the fold of the African culture and tradition. The most visible signs of enculturation can be seen mainly in the Zionist churches, which now practise healing as a central part of their worship.

In an attempt to rectify the situation, the mission churches have also begun to do a certain amount of introspection. They now make an active attempt to keep their members and they try to be relevant to the local situation and the needs of indigenous people. It is due to lack of enculturation that many indigenous people are leaving the mission churches, while the past failure to be relevant to Africa's cultural and traditional context has finally forced the mission churches to open up to the process of enculturation. The Ethiopian churches have been ahead of their time and, at the same time, have given the mission churches a challenge they can no longer ignore. As a result, these churches have found themselves without any alternative but to go along with what the Ethiopian churches have started.

This has prompted some mainline or mission churches to do some introspection; this can be referred to as reformation from within. In many ways, this was a Catholic reformation, in that they started to look for faults in their own denomination. The Methodist Church did this when it started to acknowledge the methods used by the AICs to win members to their churches. The Methodist Church began to allow the healing methods similar to those adopted by the Zionists to be used in the church. In other words, the Methodist Church became, in effect, a multi dimensional church which now tries to be both western and African. In the African context, one can now see in the mission churches signs of Ethiopian styles of worship. This is especially true of the *manyano* organisations. These organisations have adopted the style of worship used by the indigenous people: singing accompanied by either hand clapping or the beating of drums. In these organisations, both men and women wear colourful uniforms. As in the Ethiopian churches, this has become an acceptable thing in those mission churches influenced by the *manyanos*. These uniforms, as in the Ethiopian churches, have a meaning and can be related to either nature or some scriptural incident. At the same time, these denominations find themselves caught up in a situation where they want to satisfy those worshippers who aspire to be African and those who aspire to be westerners. This is particularly of the Methodist Church, which has joint services that consist of both cultures, especially as far as

the singing in concerned. The music in the Methodist Church includes songs accompanied by the piano (western culture), followed by songs sung in the vernacular accompanied by dancing, the beating of drums and hand clapping. This shows just how much the African Initiated/Independent Churches have achieved in terms of reforming both the ecclesia and the worship services. The mission churches found themselves forced to 'soften up' to African culture which, during the colonial era, they regarded as non-Christian. This only comes after four centuries of western dominance; the mission churches have finally come to realise how much they need to reform and come to terms with the foreign culture which they entered as missionaries.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion it is important for one to note that reformation cannot only be confined to church tradition and doctrines. It is a phenomenon which affects both the sacred and the secular lives of worshippers. The most important thing that needs to be kept in mind is that reformation is about a total change in the life of both the church and the people affected. Change is something that needs to be seen holistically. In Europe, reformation took many dimensions: it was influenced by its geographic locations, culture, tradition and the way of life. The transmission of western culture, worship and way of life to Africa, through the missionaries in no way helped to create a sense of a new beginning in the indigenous people. Instead, it fuelled a sense of determination to resist and transform the dominant culture into a compromise (as we have seen in the mission churches we discussed earlier). This shows that the mission churches could not have reformed their ways of worship, and even began to understand the lives of the indigenous people without taking seriously African socioeconomic and political reforms. The formation of the AICs occurred when they were regarded as 'breaking away' from the dominant forms of Christian religious culture. In spite of these 'breakaways' the mission churches ended up following what, in the past, they referred to as schisms. This means that the AICs became the custodians of Christianity in Africa in the way that best suits their socio, cultural, economic and political context (Mofokeng 1990:47). Africans consider being a Christian to mean being who they are and doing what appeals to them the most.

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