

“ JESUS & AFRICA”

By Dr. Diane Stinton

1. What is the religious make-up of Kenyan society?

- Kenya is a religiously plural society, with the strong majority being Christians.
- Statistics vary, and of course have to be treated with caution. But they usually indicate approximately:
 - 70-80% Christian
 - 10-15% Muslim, located mainly along the coastal strip and in urban centers
 - 5-10% other, including indigenous religions, Hinduism, and others.
- The Christian population is made up of:
 - Roman Catholics, the largest group which account for about 30% of the population
 - Mainline denominations, with the Anglicans being especially strong within this category
 - Pentecostal and /Charismatics (or Neo-Pentecostal) churches, which are flourishing here as elsewhere across sub-Saharan Africa
 - African Independent or African Instituted Churches
- Despite what these statistics indicate, we must also point out that there is quite a discrepancy between the profession and the practice of Christianity here. e.g. Daystar University conducted a Nairobi Church survey in 1989 and found that less than 12% of the population of Nairobi attended church on any given Sunday morning. So we need to keep this in mind when we think about Kenyan Christianity and the challenges we're facing.
- From the internet source: <http://www.kenya-information-guide.com/kenya-religion.html>

The latest statistics give Kenyan religious composition as:

Christian-Protestant 45% (This includes the Anglican Church of Kenya)
Roman Catholic 33%
Islam 10%
Indigenous religions 10%
Other 2%

2. How does African Christianity differ from Western Christianity?

- I think before speaking of the differences, we need to underline our unity in the Christian faith across the globe. As the Apostle Paul states, there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).
- However, the gospel is both *universal* and *local*, and therefore the Christian faith takes on diverse expressions around the world depending upon the context in which it is found.

3) So what are some of the distinguishing marks of Christianity in Africa?

Of course these are generalizations, but in broad strokes, we could describe a few characteristics:

a) **Vitality or the vibrancy of Christianity here:**

- You can't help but be struck by the visible presence of the Christian faith:
 - e.g. you often hear Christian worship music playing in banks, business offices and supermarkets
 - e.g. posters and banners across the county proclaim the next miracle crusade
 - e.g. *Matatus* (public transport vehicles) are sometimes decorated with pictures of Jesus and slogans such as "Sweet Jesus," "Christ our Hope," "Miracle Jesus!" and "*Yesu ni Dawā*" [Swahili, translated "Jesus is Medicine"]
 - e.g. street preachers seldom fail to attract crowds
 - e.g. throngs of African Instituted Church (AIC) members, colourfully clad in robes and turbans, dance and chant their way along roadsides to the rhythm of drumbeats.
 - e.g. Weekend "*keshas*" (overnight prayer meetings) often compete with local discos to fill the night air
 - e.g. Massive, modern church buildings continue to rise in middle-class districts, while in Kibera, deemed the largest and most densely populated informal settlement (i.e., "slum") in all of sub-Saharan Africa, there are said to be more churches than water spouts.
- So there is a vibrancy within Christianity here in Africa that is truly remarkable.

- Other characteristics of African Christianity stem from the way it has been influenced by traditional African worldviews:

b) **Deep belief in God and in the reality of the spiritual realm**

- Unlike the West, the starting point here in Africa is not whether God exists. A common African proverb says "You don't teach a child to know God." So African Christians are deeply spiritual people in that live with **a deep sense of dependence upon God for their everyday lives, and a deep expectation that God intervenes in their affairs.**
e.g. strong emphasis on healing, deliverance, dreams and visions etc.

c) African Christians tend to **hold the Bible in very high regard as God's Word**, and often interpret it with an immediacy, as though God is speaking directly to them through it.

d) African Christianity tends to be **concrete and pragmatic**, rather than abstract.

- I think in the West, faith tends to be fairly notional: faith is often presented as intellectual assent to certain beliefs, and theology is often abstract and philosophical.
- In traditional Africa, religion was closely intertwined with everyday life and served very pragmatic purposes: you looked to God for health, for food, for protection from enemies, for children – basically, for the well-being of the community. This has coloured African Christianity, which also tends to be pretty down-to-earth, dealing with the everyday realities in concrete terms.

e) Similarly, African Christianity tends to be **holistic in orientation**. Again, in traditional Africa, there was no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Religion had to do with life, and with *all of life*. Therefore – despite the problem of nominalism I spoke of earlier --

f) African Christianity tends to be more **communal**, as opposed to the rampant individualism in the West. Of course, this is rapidly changing in modern times, but I think it's still the case in comparison with Christianity in the West.

So these are some of the characteristics that mark Christianity in Africa: its vitality, its deep belief in God and the spiritual world, its high regard for the Bible as God's Word, its concrete and pragmatic nature, and its holistic and communal orientation.

4) Today, Africa is considered a heartland of Christianity. For those of us who are Christians in the West – we look at what's happening there – corruption, violence, bad governance, and we wonder how it could happen if faith is truly rooted in people's hearts. Help us to understand.

- This is the very real, and the very difficult question that any thinking Christian in Kenya must face.
- There are no easy answers to it, but a few comments in response:
 1. Without suggesting any kind of blame, we must understand **the impact of the modern missionary movement on contemporary African Christianity**.
 - For example, the close association of **Christianity and colonialism meant that Africans often converted to Christianity as a means to become "civilized," or to gain respectability and upward social mobility. It was a means to an end, rather than a genuine conversion to the person of Christ.**
 - 2. Another impact of the western transmission of the gospel here in Africa is that **the so-called "spiritual" was often separated from the rest of life. All too often Christian mission was about saving souls, rather than preaching a holistic gospel that addresses all of life's realities, like politics, business etc.**
 - For example, until recently, Kenyan Christians were generally taught that they were not to get involved in the dirty game of politics – a view that was regularly reinforced by the former President Daniel Arap Moi, a self-professing Christian himself.
 - So what this means is that despite the vitality of Christianity in Africa, the gospel has not always been appropriated in ways that bring about the kind of Kingdom transformation that this continent so desperately needs. This is a crucial area that we as Christians in Africa need to address.
 3. Then a final comment: without a doubt, Kenyans, and Africans more broadly, must take responsibility for what is taking place across their continent. Yet we must take into consideration **the very complex factors that contributed to making Africa what it is today. These include the historical factors of**

centuries of slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, as well as the devastating effects of poverty, disease – including the HIV and AIDS pandemic, natural and human disasters etc. We don't need to rehearse all the ills of Africa. What we are suggesting is that Christian faith is forged in the midst of our everyday realities. In the case of Africa, it is often forged in the midst of widespread adversity. And as Bible indicates, when our faith becomes tested, it might be purified as gold, or it might come up as dross. I think we're seeing both of these outcomes in African Christianity, as we do elsewhere on earth.

- So before we ask the hard questions of Africa, I also think we have to ask them of our own context in Canada or elsewhere in the West. How would our faith fare if we lived in conditions of political insecurity, a weak judiciary where there is often no legal recourse for wrong-doings, economic poverty, a lack of social insurance etc. I must confess I'm taken aback when I come home and hear the kind of things that people complain about in the West. So I daresay we might need to look at the other side of the coin, and say that African Christians look at the West with its affluence, its materialism, its consumerism, its immorality, and equally question: has faith truly taken root there?

- Therefore the point is that we all have blind spots in our understanding and expression of faith, and we need one another in the body of Christ. We need western Christians to speak prophetically into our situation here in Africa, and we also need to allow African Christians to speak prophetically into our situation in the West.

5). What is the value/significance of African Christianity at this point in history?

- It demonstrates, for the first time in history, the *universality* of the gospel: not only in theory but in practice → as African Christians understand and appropriate the gospel in light of biblical revelation *and* contextual realities
- Mary's magnificat: that God brings down powerful and raises up the lowly. i.e. no one could have foreseen the massive accession of Christianity in Africa in the 20th century. Yet now that it is indeed a heartland of the Christian faith, it is gradually taking up a leadership role within the wider scope of world Christianity e.g. in mission, in leadership: WCC headed by Kenyan Samuel Kobia, the strength of the African Anglican communion, the proliferation of African Churches in Europe and North America

6) What difference is Christianity making to Africa and to Africans?

- Again, a huge question and a difficult question to answer, particularly in a minute or two. Yet **despite the valid questions of the authenticity or credibility of certain expressions of Christianity in Africa, I argued in my recent research on African Christology that in fact there *is* empirical evidence to suggest that the gospel *is* making an impact in the areas of personal formation, social transformation, and church reformation.**
- For example: **Christians have been at the forefront in responding to the present crisis in Kenya**
e.g. Archbishop Desmond Tutu the first to arrive for peace talks

e.g. media statements from all sectors of church leaders

e.g. local church leaders immediately met and took action with a 4-pronged approach:

1. Politically: urged both sides of the political divide to meet and settle their disputes, to bring about peace

2. Socially: providing shelter and relief to thousands of displaced people

3. Spiritually: initiating widespread prayer and counselling throughout the country

e.g. immediate call for a national day of prayer

e.g. Pentecostals (and others) called for 3 days of prayer and fasting

e.g. meeting of national church leaders at the Anglican Cathedral

4. Communication through the media:

e.g. inter-faith prayer service aired on all media channels yesterday evening

- Christianity in Africa will continue to shape both individual and social identity, thereby contributing positively to the transformation of the continent.

e.g. the role of the churches in the democratization of Africa in the 80s and 90s has been documented → the Christ paradigm shaping what takes place in the public sphere.

7). What is your hope in the midst of this situation?

- First of all I have **tremendous hope in the people of Kenya, particularly the Christians**

- what we're seeing is a very strong people's movement as every sector of society comes together to call for peace: business and professional communities, NGOs etc. But certainly the Christians are playing a major role in responding to the crisis.

- e.g. church service yesterday:

- outpouring of confession and repentance, and a public acknowledgement that the long history of socio-political grievances in Kenya *must* be addressed adequately to help heal the nation
- genuine prayer for those directly affected by the current crisis here
- a powerful declaration of being *Christians* first, *Kenyans* second, and only then part of their kinship communities.
- A strong denunciation of tribalism, as incited even through current smses and emails
- An insightful analysis of the current situation, taking into consideration the tribal politics, the socio-economic factors, and the spiritual factors such as the lack of respect for God and for life as demonstrated in the burning of churches
- A call from Psalm 11 to take refuge in God, and to live righteously no matter what the cost.

- **Ultimately my hope is in the Risen Christ**, who has always demonstrated his presence and power in the midst of human weakness and suffering. He is the one who will see us through this situation, and will purify our faith even in the midst of this adversity.