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(145) THE AU AGENDA 2063 AND THE ROLE OF AFRICAN CHURCHES IN DEVELOPMENT

Obiora F. Ike

'I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem...
The sons of my mother disliked me,
They made me to work in their fields.
Yet my own fields – I could not take care of.'
(Song of Songs 1:5-6)

African Christianity is as Old as Christianity Itself

Christianity in Africa is not a recent arrival. It came to Africa during the time of the Apostles and can claim to be 'the new homeland of Jesus' (Pope John Paul II). Recent statistics show that Christianity has established her message beyond dispute in many countries within the continent of Africa and has become a force to be reckoned with. During his visit in November 2015 to Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic, the head of the Catholic Church described Africa as the 'Continent of Hope' (Pope Francis in Nairobi, Kenya, addressing young people, 27th November 2015), a description which contradicts the daily reality of the harsh conditions, sufferings and challenges which confront the peoples of the continent, even as we write. African Christianity has made the Bible its own. A large number of religious men and women devote their lives to the message of the churches. It is estimated that in 2063, Africa shall have the largest numbers of Christian missionaries compared with any other continent. In the ongoing dearth and absence of spirituality worldwide, Africa is moving forward to becoming a 'spiritual reservoir for the world' (Edward Blyden) and, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, 'the spiritual lung of Christendom' (message at the Second Africa Synod, Rome, October 2009).

Jesus Christ himself as a baby found refuge with his foster father Joseph and mother Mary in Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15) because Herod the King slaughtered many innocent children in his bid to kill the infant child Jesus out of envy. Records show that Africa stayed close to the person and message of Christ, even to the extent of his cross being carried to Golgotha By Simon of Cyrene, an African from today's Benghazi in Libya (Mark 15:21).

Besides the work of Mark the evangelist who brought the faith to Egypt and from thence to the rest of North Africa, the pillars of Christendom rest on the great Augustine of Hippo, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, and even of Origen who wrote his history of early Christianity on African soil, all of whom bear testimony to the 2,000 years of Christian culture. Many stories in the Bible depict the relationship of Africa to Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles records the highly-placed administrator in the kingdom, an Ethiopian eunuch who received baptism from Philip the Apostle and travelled to his country to spread the Good News in those parts (Acts 8:26-40). To this day, history indicates that the Ethiopian Coptic Church has a claim to be the lead over Jerusalem, Rome and Antioch as the historically least interrupted of all Christian traditions since Apostolic times.

At a time when other continents wallowed in paganism and resisted the Christian message, as happened under Caesar in the ancient Roman Empire, the message of Christ found its way into Africa and was joyfully received. Development and civilization in Africa, particularly since the 19th and 20th century, is inconceivable without the history and impact of the Christian message and the work of Christian missionaries.

A Continent Constantly Ravaged but Never Extinguished

History shows that the African continent with all her beauty and glory has experienced the wickedness of other continents, especially of Europe, which devastated her 'gardens' and forced her to work in the gardens of other people, making 'the black and beautiful' (as the Song of Songs quoted above), who share equality and dignity as human beings under the Fatherhood of God, live in slavery, horrific poverty and injustice. What the European colonizers failed to understand was how much the African had to suffer from the invasion of Africa that placed a whole continent into a position of inferiority. The effects of that inglorious past of slavery, colonialism and ongoing marginalization stand as a blot on the continent until today.

It seems that in the present era, the joyful face of Africa has become the sorrowful face of the 'black mother', who cries over so many of her children who languish in misery. The reality on the ground is that of a continent ravaged, leaving millions of victims of injustice, exploitation and oppression – many of them young children and women, victims of famine and fraternal wars. It is in this context that the project of renewing the mission and identity of the church in Africa in service to integral education, reconciliation and human development, corresponds to the Africa Union Agenda 2063 and finds its *Sitz im Leben* and *raison d'être*.

John Baur, a Swiss missionary who worked in East Africa for several years and made the continent his home, narrates the continuity of the Christian presence in Africa. In one of his publications, he states: 'The Church had been flourishing on the northern shores of the continent for six hundred years before Islam was born... The subsequent history of Christian presence in Africa is, for many centuries, like a trickling stream through the desert. Yet God's providence never let it dry up and in our days it has become a great flood watering the whole continent.'¹

The Role of African Christian Churches in Development

The foundation of most of the African churches was laid during the colonial period, 1880-1960. This era brought to Africa many of the modern tools for evangelization and a new method of human development through education, the apostolate of the schools, social and health services and the various economic and political infrastructures which have helped in decolonization and sustained the continent's access to modernization and the benefits of globalization. What would have happened if the missionary enterprise of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had not taken place?

Jesus Christ stated as his mission: 'I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly' (John 10:10). This mission is also the agenda for the role of African churches in development. Development is integral and includes social, economic, political, religious, technological, cultural and personal dimensions. Development implies the promotion and preservation of life, the enhancement of life, support for life and the fight to save life against all forms of the 'culture of death' which technology and the blind drive for development bring.

The churches have a role to play in development in Africa. Together with Agenda 2063,² there is a need to respond to the problems of the continent. These include working to heal the many divisions ravaging the continent and promoting a culture of unity, peace and development. They also include issues of religious peace and inter-religious dialogue, ecumenical dialogue within the churches and with the state; the application of Christian social principles in governance, leadership and family. These principles and values elucidate the values of solidarity and community, environmental consciousness, respect for Mother Earth

¹ John Baur, "2000 Years of Christianity in Africa- an African Church history", published by Paulines Kenya, 1994, 17.

² See „The Future we want for Africa”. African Union Agenda 2063: <http://agenda2063.au.int/>.

and the responsible use of created goods, protection and respect for property including its equitable distribution, the value of work and its promotion through the use of skills, self-help initiatives, poverty eradication projects in agriculture and its allied products. Furthermore, the role of the churches in development go beyond the pulpit with a specific concern for the less privileged through health care programmes, protection and working for the aged, building up the young, protection of life for the unborn and respect for life at all stages.

The churches' legitimacy must be measured on its stand for life. African churches become relevant in the AU's Agenda 2063 if they challenge all elements that contradict the dignity and guarantee of life, whether in business, politics or economics. The Christian churches play a role in educating people to a culture of subsidiarity thinking and democracy founded on participation, respect of competencies and division of power, the rule of law and its respect by the high and the low. This role is promoted through massive education of the young and the aged towards justice, the integrity and preservation of creation, ecological practices, health and well being, the integral development of society and the human person. If the churches are to remain relevant, then they must teach, practise and work for the common good of all, while pointing to this need in wider society.

The AU Agenda 2063 Applied to Questions for the Christian Churches

With the benefit of hindsight and with envisioning of the next fifty years, using the AU Agenda 2063³ as criteria, the challenges of the present – which impact on both the Christian churches, religious groups in general, the larger society and particularly the young who are the future – include the problems of secularism, urbanization, acculturation, westernization, modernization, globalization, relativism and growing individualism and its attendant alienation, especially evident in the cities of modern Africa. The questions which logically arise are the following:

First, how can religion, religious values and traditions, morality and the Christian message stand up to the 'Signs of the Times' in 2063, retaining its values as 'the light of the world and the salt of the earth'? (Matthew 5).

Secondly, how can the message of Christianity be authentic and convincing to the world of the African 'Areopagus' displaying a disunited Christendom with seemingly unending divisions and fragmented denominations, all claiming authority in the name of Christ? The constant influx of new sects, growing numbers of independent African churches, Pentecostal movements, American-style one-man-show preachers, and the occasional manifestation of 'dubious claims and deceit in some for monetary gain' over a poverty-stricken believing populace looking for healing and salvation, calls into question the role of the African churches in the unity and development of Africa.

Thirdly, how can African Christians feel at home in the 'European garb' of their culturally influenced churches at a time when the themes of enculturation hold sway with demands for culturally rooted authenticity, 'back to basics' movements and the need for a deeper incarnation of the gospel into the African personality?

Fourthly, how can the African churches, true to the message of Christ, construct and reconstruct an integral vision of development of the whole person? How can African churches in collaboration with the agents of the state, build up the development of the human family in Africa, founded on principles of justice, equity, mutual respect, the biblical concepts of mercy and forgiveness, healing, inclusion, the guarantee of freedom and human rights? How can these essential Christian values be made the charter for orientation in the formation of all agents of youth, schools, government institutions, and civil society? The AU Agenda needs to be communicated in harmony with the evangelization and social teaching of the

³ See popular version: http://agenda2063.au.int/en/sites/default/files/agenda2063_popular_version_05092014_EN.pdf.

churches and brought into contact with initiatives of the World Council of Churches, the Second Vatican Council, the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians, and the Bishops' Conferences of the various regions and countries within the continent.

Finally, and indeed seriously, taking into consideration the divisions inherited from the past which has led to senseless wars ravaging the continent – how can we rediscover and emphasize the role African churches can play for healing, sanctifying, leading and teaching in prophetic service and exemplary leadership of the peoples of Africa.

The answers to these questions constitute the role of the African churches alongside the Agenda 2063 of the Africa Union in the development of the African woman and man. It remains an agenda which is open for participation by the churches, as it is the churches who know that such an agenda to be achieved is possible only under the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit who 'makes all things new'. The challenge and the role of the African churches in development is through the renewal of their own mission and identity in service to integral education, reconciliation and human development. Only a renewed church can truly contribute to the AU Agenda. Agenda 2063 is a sure path for a proper partnership of and with the Christian churches in Africa.