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(103) EVANGELICALS AND AFRICAN ECUMENISM

David N.A. Kpobi

Introduction

Evangelicalism and ecumenism are often considered to be two different strands of Christianity although they are simply descriptions of two approaches to the practice of Christianity and are not necessarily opposed to one other. Evangelicals and ecumenists are indeed united in their zeal to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ and to proclaim him as Saviour of the world. The two approaches are driven by the underlying conviction that give rise to different emphases in the practice of the faith. In this chapter, we focus on relations between these two groups as an aspect of the development of Christianity on the African continent. The chapter is divided into four main parts:

1. Ecumenism in Africa.
2. Evangelicalism in Africa.
3. Evangelicals and the Ecumenical Movement in Africa.
4. Diffusion of the Evangelical-Ecumenical Tension.

Ecumenism in Africa

If ecumenism is to be understood as the efforts of the churches in working together for the proclamation of the gospel, then the ecumenical spirit cannot be said to have been lacking in Africa before the advent of the ecumenical movement of the nineteenth century.[1] Mission in Africa was from the very beginning carried out by different mission organisations representing various Christian confessions, and the denominations were indeed co-operating with each other in many ways. The participation of the African Church in the movement may have been largely obscured by the prevailing understanding that the entire continent was a mission field at the time and that mission co-operation was hardly considered as an ecumenical effort. It is therefore perhaps not wrong to locate the cardinal impulses of ecumenism in Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, specifically at the World Mission Conference held in New York in 1900. It was this meeting that first brought together various mission organisations working in Africa to find ways of co-ordinating their work on the continent. Ten years later, the famous World Mission Conference in Edinburgh (1910) focused much on Africa and decided not to separate mission and ecumenism. The ecumenical spirit in mission that surfaced at Edinburgh found its way into the meetings of churches on the continent, particularly among youth. Even before Edinburgh, mission societies in Southern, Eastern and Central Africa had started organising joint conferences to consider doing mission together.[2] The next World Mission Conference, at Le Zoute in 1926, was therefore significantly convened under the theme,

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[1] The origin and use of the term 'ecumenism' is discussed in a number of publications. Among these, one may consult the following: W.A. Visser 't Hooft, 'The Word Ecumenical – Its History and Use', in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 3rd edition, eds. R. Rouse and S. Neill (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 735-740; and David N.A. Kpobi, *Mission in Ghana – The Ecumenical Heritage* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2008), 9-12.

[2] This included the Nyasaland (Malawi) United Missionary Conference of 1904 in Blantyre, the East Africa Missionary Conference of 1909 in Nairobi, and the meeting of the Alliance of Protestant Missions in Nairobi in 1913. See Jesse N. K. Mugambi, 'The Ecumenical Movement and the Future of the Church in Africa', in *The Church in African Christianity – Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, eds. Jesse N. K. Mugambi and L. Magesa (Nairobi: Initiative Publishers, 1990), 11.

'The Christian Mission in Africa' and was specifically focused on getting the churches and mission organizations to develop a common strategic plan for mission in Africa. In West Africa, this ecumenical spirit resulted in the formation of the Christian Council of Ghana in 1929.[3] Many other activities helped to propel the ecumenical vision in Africa after these, but it was indeed the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 that provided the greatest impetus for the growth of an active and vibrant ecumenical movement in Africa. The inauguration of the All Africa Conference of Churches in 1963 was perhaps the greatest indication of Africa's desire to be a visible part of the worldwide ecumenical movement.

It was no surprise that the growth of ecumenism on the African continent inevitably led to the formation of various other associated bodies to promote different aspects of the ecumenical dream. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) was formed at a meeting of third world theologians in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in 1976 and included a number of African theologians. In 1980, African theologians also met in Yaoundé, Cameroon, to form the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (EAAT) which was a significant indication of how much the ecumenical spirit had become accepted on the African continent. The main motivation for the emergence of these associations has been to provide the ecumenical theological accompaniment needed by the churches in their work in Africa. It is important to note that African Roman Catholic theologians were often part of such meetings and have continued to be since. The Roman Catholic organisation, Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) has demonstrated much commitment in co-operating with Protestant communions on the continent.

Evangelicalism in Africa

'Evangelical' is derived from the Greek *euangelion* that was translated 'gospel' or 'good news', and which became the standard word for the church's mission. The term has however undergone much evolution in meaning over the centuries and became quite important during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The reformer, Martin Luther, used the word with reference to its essential meaning as the core of the Christian message as contained in scripture. He was supported by other reformers like Calvin and Zwingli who espoused *sola scriptura,* and by the mid-seventeenth century both Lutheran and Reformed leaders had accepted the label 'evangelical'. Even the Roman Catholic Church referred to the Reformers as such. The Protestants did not however remain united for long, as evidenced by the rise in the eighteenth century of the evangelical revival or Great Awakening. The evangelical revival began in England as a reaction to the dominance of ritualistic forms of worship in the Anglican Church and the gradual erosion of the spiritual fervour that had characterised the reformation movement. The movement soon spread to the colonies in North America and created a diversified spiritual experience that was responsible for many rifts and misunderstandings among Christians. In the nineteenth century in particular, the term 'evangelical' was reserved for those Christians who resisted what was considered to be liberalising theological tendencies within the Protestant churches. At that time, the term 'evangelical' came to be associated with fundamentalism although it was only some versions of the movement that could be so described. Evangelicalism on the African continent may not be separated from the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century in the sense that it was this revival movement that eventually produced many of the mission organisations that succeeded in introducing an enduring Christian presence on the continent. The 1846 meeting of 'Evangelicals' in London signalled a new attempt to salvage the *sola scriptura* credentials of the movement. Significantly, this meeting resulted in the founding of the British Evangelical Alliance in 1846 which later led to the founding of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in 1951,[4] originally

[3] Kpobi, *Mission in Ghana – The Ecumenical Heritage,* 102-14.
[4] The name was later changed to World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and back again to WEA.

consisting of individual evangelical Christians and later becoming more of a fellowship of evangelical churches.

The end of this century saw the founding of a number of Protestant mission organisations, beginning with the London Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. Others soon followed, all with the single objective of extending mission work beyond Europe and North America.[5] These mission societies were explicitly evangelical and non-denominational in character, and those that moved into Africa came along with the spiritual fervour of the evangelical movement. The churches they founded were therefore nurtured with the ideals of the movement. Later developments, however, indicate that this spirit was not sustained and that many African churches acquired other orientations that would cause another evangelical revival (Pentecostalism) on the African continent in the twentieth century.

The twentieth century presented its own challenges to the Christian world, and the church in Africa did not escape this impact. The post-independence years did not turn out to be exactly what many African Christians had hoped for in terms of co-operation between African churches and the new political leadership. The expected impact of the churches was hardly cultivated by the politicians, leading to some Christians calling on the churches to focus more on evangelistic activities and less on social service. These calls arose particularly among Christians who were inclined toward the 'evangelical' wing of the churches. Some of these church leaders therefore began to establish 'evangelical fellowships' consisting of Christians from various denominations to concentrate on spreading the evangelical Christian faith in Africa outside the structure of the churches. The earliest of these fellowships were formed in West Africa, namely, the Sierra Leone Evangelical Fellowship (1959), the Evangelical Federation of Upper Volta (1961), and the Evangelical Association of Ivory Coast (1962).

Evangelicals and the Ecumenical Movement in Africa

However, the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) would eventually become the foremost gathering of Evangelicals on the continent. The formation of the AEA has been said to have been provoked by the first pan-African theological consultation held at Emmanuel College in Ibadan, Nigeria, in January 1966 under the theme of 'Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs' which was addressed, among others, by two eminent African theologians, Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria and John Mbiti of Uganda.[6] The consultation was held under the auspices of the AACC and dealt with topics including gods, ancestors, the spirit world, the traditional priesthood and sacrifice in the African context. A suggestion at the end of the consultation for churches in Africa to pursue an 'African Christian Theology', in which attention would be given to the primal religions, received a sharp response from the leaders of the growing evangelical movement. The evangelical movement had been planning their own consultation and found justification in responding to the 'liberal' views from the AACC. The evangelical consultation was held at Limuru, Kenya, in February 1966 where the AEA was formally inaugurated.[7] This important meeting was attended by over one hundred evangelical Christian leaders from twenty-three African nations. The meeting had been convened primarily to bring unity and co-ordination to the work and activities of evangelical Christian leaders on the continent. It was also planned as a direct counter-move to the growing ecumenical movement on the continent which

[5] The best-known ones were London Missionary Society (1795), Edinburgh and Glasgow Missionary Society (1796), Netherlands Missionary Society (1797), Church Missionary Society (1799), Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1813), Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (1815), and the North German (Bremen) Missionary Society (1836).

[6] The proceedings and presentations at this conference were edited and published by Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth under the title, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969). Other prominent speakers at this consultation included Vincent Mulago, Harry Sawyerr and Stephen Ezeanya.

[7] The association was originally named the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) and bore that name until 1993 when it was changed, probably because there was no need to separate Madagascar from Africa.

was considered not to be in the best interests of the rapid evangelisation of the continent. One of the objectives of the AEA therefore has been to 'mobilize and empower evangelical churches and mission agencies for total transformation of Africa through evangelisation and effective discipleship'.[8] As at the end of 2014, the AEA was made up of thirty-six National Evangelical Fellowships and para-church organisations.9

The AEA was founded with much active support from the World Evangelical Association based in London which considered the activities of the World Council of Churches in Africa, represented by the All Africa Conference of Churches, as promoting liberal theology and fostering syncretism in African Christianity. The WEA was unhappy with scholarship grants to Africans by the WCC to study theology in known liberal universities and seminaries in the West. They contended that such African scholars often promoted a theology that was moving Africans away from the centrality and authority of the Bible and encouraging the growth of syncretistic African Initiated Churches (AICs). The WEA consciously pursued an attitude of non-co-operation with the global ecumenical movement and was eager that their African collaborators shared this. Besides the WEA, two other international evangelical mission organisations had influenced the formation of the AEA in 1966. The USA-based Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association (IFMA) and the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association (EFMA) had in 1962 jointly established an 'Africa Evangelical Office' in Nairobi to 'protect' evangelical churches from ecumenical influences.[10]

The WEA found support among a number of African scholars, including the Nigerian Byang Kato who became a leading advocate for evangelical theology in Africa.[11] Kato and others, including Tokunboh Adeyemo, worked hard to gain a following from among theologians and ordinary Christians in Africa. Kato did not hide his objection to what he and others considered as the undue influence exerted on African theological students in western universities to imbibe western-formulated doctrines that were inimical to the growth of the church in Africa. One of his statements to this effect was typical of such abhorrence:

> It is unrealistic to expect so many students from the Third World to digest Aquinas, Tillich or Cone and return home unaffected.[12]

In furtherance of the objectives of the AEA, its General Assembly meeting in January 1973 chose the theme of 'Christian Education Strategy', making it a platform for Byang Kato to launch his African Evangelical theology as a counter-teaching to the liberal theology of the AACC. Kwame Bediako observes that for Kato 'the rationale for the existence of the AEAM consisted in its being an "evangelical" counterblast to the "ecumenical AACC"'.[13] Kato and his colleagues had been incensed by the meeting of the International Mission Conference of the WCC held in Bangkok in 1972-1973 where participants focused on what they described as 'liberating' Third World churches from 'old-fashioned' missionary theology. Kato and others were predictably alarmed at the proposals from this meeting which they saw as an imposition of ecumenical theology on African churches. In addition, Kato who became the first General

[8] Association of Evangelicals in Africa – www.aeafrica.org (10 accessed December, 2014).
[9] www.aeafrica.org (10 accessed December, 2014).
[10] See David M. Howard, *The Dream that will not Die: The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship 1846-1985* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1986), 67.
[11] Byang Kato was born in Nigeria and became General Secretary of Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA). In 1973, he was appointed General Secretary of AEAM, and the following year 1974 became Vice President of the World Evangelical Fellowship.
[12] Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 140.
[13] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the 2nd Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 396. Bediako also discusses in detail Kato's position on the evangelical-ecumenical divide, 391-407.

Secretary of AEA, intended to fight against what he and others considered to be the promotion of the study of African religions and Islam by African universities. In his *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, Kato devoted three chapters to discussing ecumenism and ecumenical theology and the dangers that this posed to the development of true 'Biblical Christianity' in Africa. He condemned what he saw as 'poisonous elements' in the WCC's 'theology of ecumenism'.[14] He accused the ecumenical movement, represented in Africa by the AACC, of making it too easy to accommodate all kinds of theological positions, explaining that, as far as he was concerned, the only reason for studying the primal religions of Africa was to expose its idolatry and falsity, and not to treat it as *praeparatio evangelica* as the AACC was doing.

The Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA)

Given the frosty relationship that was developing between Evangelicals and the ecumenical movement in Africa, it was not surprising that other measures were adopted by both sides to promote their objectives. One of the measures adopted by AEA was to organise the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA) in Nairobi in December 1976. The genesis of PACLA is closely related to the famous International Congress on World Evangelisation held in 1974 in Lausanne, Switzerland. Forty-five Christian leaders from Africa attending this congress used the opportunity to hold a pan-African meeting to plan for the rapid evangelisation of the African continent. Calling themselves 'Concerned Evangelicals', their main objective was to push forward their agenda of evangelical Christianity for Africa as a counter-movement to the theology of the AACC and the WCC.[15]

The group appointed Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda and Michael Cassidy of African Enterprise (AE) to ensure that such a meeting became a reality. Gottfried Osei-Mensah from Ghana, who was a member of the Lausanne Committee, joined this team and took over the organisation of the conference.

PACLA was in session for ten days in Nairobi, 9th-19th December 1976, financed among others by grants from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, African Enterprise and World Vision. In all, there were 737 delegates attending from forty-eight African countries. Eight objectives were set for this meeting but we highlight here the seventh of these which more or less captures both the spirit and intention of the meeting:

> To clarify the contribution under God which the African Church, as part of the worldwide body of Christ, can make in the cause of Christian world mission.[16]

The organisers invited representatives of the AACC and other 'liberals' to the meeting, including John Mbiti and John Gatu, in spite of objections from some evangelical leaders, including Kato. One workshop group was devoted to a discussion of 'Ecumenism in Africa'.[17] The other topics and subjects discussed at this meeting encompassed everything relating to the preaching of the true gospel in Africa and all aspects of mission as they affected the African continent at the time.[18] The speakers included such stalwarts of the evangelical movement as Billy Graham and John Stott. Indeed, John Stott made a presentation on 'Theological Tension Points in Ecumenical-Evangelical Relationships'. Some participants also criticized the AACC emphasis on Christian-Muslim dialogue which, in their view, was taking up much of the time that could otherwise be more usefully employed in winning converts to the church. Moreover, such

[14] Kato, *Theological Pitfalls,* 140-41.
[15] Michael Cassidy and Gottfried Osei-Mensah, *Together in One Place:The Story of PACLA* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1978), 31.
[16] Records of the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA) Collection 172 held in the archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, IL.
[17] 'Programme of the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly', schedule for Tuesday, 14th December 1976.
[18] Cassidy and Osei-Mensah, *Together in One Place*, 1978.

dialogue had not produced much result in terms of reducing or ending conflicts among Christians and Muslims on the continent.

By the end of the meeting, the Evangelicals were strongly resolved to continue to pursue the establishment of 'Biblical Christianity' in Africa. The story of PACLA, including the history and proceedings, was published jointly by Gottfried Osei-Mensah and Michael Cassidy in 1978.[19]

Diffusion of the Evangelical-Ecumenical Tension

Evangelical-ecumenical tensions in Africa have subsided considerably in our day. The latter part of the twentieth century and much of the twenty-first have seen the lessening of tension between African Evangelicals and other Christians on the continent. A close look at relationships among the various traditions gives the impression of more tolerance and desire for co-existence. What could be the reasons behind this changing state of affairs? What has changed? The response to this question is both simple and complex.

In the first place, the last twenty-five to thirty years have seen the rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movement in much of Africa which has been one of the greatest challenges to the existence of the mainline western-founded churches. In most cases, the attraction of these newer churches lay in their tendency to combine elements of evangelicalism with American mega-church practices. This was a development that attracted many youth from the older churches and even caused a number of local evangelical fellowships to become churches. It also resulted in the older churches adopting 'evangelical' attitudes and practices alongside their orthodox ones. Many of the older churches are now responding to the growing quest for spirituality among both the young and old in Africa, and thereby denying Evangelicals any reason to continue to accuse them of lacking 'spiritual warmth' and vitality. The evangelical movement therefore now lacks sufficient reason to consider historic mission Christianity as a real threat to the spread of Christianity in Africa. It appears therefore that the 'hostility' that once characterised relationships between evangelical and liberal Christians is being steadily diminished. In the same vein, ecumenical formation which, in Africa, was historically rooted in the youth movements and lay training centres of Protestant denominations is experiencing a steady decline. Again, the WCC has in recent times devoted much resource to reaching out to Evangelicals and Pentecostals as well as to Roman Catholics.[20] Whilst this has been interpreted by some Evangelicals as an attempt to broaden the ecumenical movement, many others have welcomed it, if cautiously.

No one need be surprised at these developments since the signals had been present all along. We have indicated earlier that the fact that a continent-wide assembly like PACLA was organised in 1976 was an indication of the lack of confidence in the efforts of the AACC in evangelising the continent, and particularly the fact that the objectives of PACLA were strikingly similar to what the AACC claimed to have been trying to do on the continent. It was significant, therefore, that the second PACLA meeting held in 1994 was jointly sponsored by the AACC, AEA and Africa Enterprise (AE), This was the clearest indication that the main players in Christian mission in Africa were beginning to read the signs of the times and were embarking on 'a translation of such signs into new insights of what it means to be the church as a living organic community of faith'.[21] We also agree with Detlef Kapteina that the invitation of so-called 'liberal theologians' to the first PACLA meeting was already a strong signal against 'Kato's rather

[19] Cassidy and Osei-Mensah, *Together in One Place*, 1978.
[20] The Global Christian Forum, first organised in Nairobi (6th-9th November 2007) was one such initiative of the WCC. Participants included historic Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostals and Evangelicals of many different shades.
[21] Nicholas Otieno, *Journey of Hope – Towards a New Ecumenical Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 23.

polemical and defensive criticism against non-evangelical African theologians',[22] and an indication of some willingness within the evangelical camp to seek a more conciliatory working relationship with others.

We would also cite the project that produced the *Africa Bible Commentary* which was an initiative of the AEA but which was embraced and promoted as a laudable project by non-Evangelicals on the continent. Indeed, the concern expressed by the General Editor, Tokunboh Adeyemo, in his General Introduction to it, regarding the quality of the church in Africa, was shared by both Evangelicals and other Christians on the continent.[23]

Finally, Africans today find themselves having to live more and more in multi-faith environments requiring co-existence with religions they might have considered strange or unacceptable. It is therefore no longer convenient or even wise for Christians to separate themselves into Evangelicals, Protestants, Pentecostals, etc. Therefore, we would reiterate what is arguably the greatest challenge facing the church in Africa today, namely, harnessing the various expressions of Christian theology on the continent, subjecting them to serious reflection and employing them to create a community that is positively responsive to the gospel. Uniformity in theology can in no way be the aim of such a process. Solidarity in mission, if it succeeds in sifting the chaff from the real stuff, should enrich and not impoverish Africa's experience of God.

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[22] Detlef Kapteina, 'The Formation of African Evangelical Theology', *African Journal of Evangelical Theology,* Vol. 25, no. 1, (2006), 78.

[23] Adeyemo had stated that 'the Church in Africa was a mile long in terms of quantity but only an inch deep in terms of quality': Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), viii.