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Iconolatry and Pentecostal Christianity: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

This work “iconolatry and the African Christianity: the Nigerian experience”, examines the resurgence of the veneration and otherwise the worship of icons and symbols that shook the foundation of the early church history now in Nigerian Christianity. It could be recalled that iconolatry as the worship of images or icons, was one of the major issues in Christian history that led to the iconoclastic controversy in the 8th century of Christianity (c725 to 787). More so, iconolatry was one of the burning issues in the 16th century protestant reformation that vehemently criticized the Roman Catholic Church for idolatry. From the historical perspective of the contemporary trend in African Christianity, especially in Nigeria, this work observed that image worship or veneration has taken a center stage in the beliefs and practices of the entire spectrum of faith in Nigerian Christianity, especially the new Christian religious movements here represented by the Pentecostals. This paper is therefore poised to lead the Nigerian church (Christianity) to cast a retrospective look at Christian history to guide against the obvious resurgent of iconolatry for which the church suffered a great deal in history.

Key Words: Iconolatry, African Christianity, Pentecostal, Pentecostalism, Catholicism, Idolatry, Nigeria, Iconography

Introduction

The history of every religion of mankind is shrouded in symbols; objects, words, gestures or patterns of behavior and liturgy. Such symbols encode ideas, values, aspirations and perceptions which religious groups have cultivated. To Geertz (1973:127), whether dramatized in rituals or related in myths, such icons are felt to sum up for those who avail them. Above all, iconography constitutes a vital aspect of the people’s communication mechanism in verbal and non-verbal forms (Ejizu 2017, pp. 75-89). The same history defines the forms, use and meaning of iconography according to the belief system of any religion. The monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam profess the belief and worship of one God who should not be replicated in any form or likeness. In the contrary, the history of Christianity is replete with controversies at different points in time over the use of icons/images in worship. In the first

three centuries of Christianity, “heathens” were ridiculed for worshipping images which they debunked that they worshipped not the images but the spirit which the images represent. In the seventh century, idolatry took a center stage among the internal problems that rocked the progress of the Christian faith that made iconoclasm one of the most divisive ecclesiastical policies of the Byzantine emperors. Moreover, the evangelical explosion of the nineteenth century spread a divided Christianity between iconoclasts and iconophiles.

The first missionary Christianity to Africa was that of the iconophiles who supported the use of images in religious worship, especially the Roman Catholic Church. This form of Christianity found a fertile ground among the Africans whose host religion (ATR) which is expressed in symbolism and iconography. It is from this background that two modern brands of Christianity emerged, namely: the African indigenous churches (AICs) and Pentecostalism. At its beginning, Pentecostalism was purely iconoclastic in the tradition of the early church and the 16th century reformation. Unfortunately, in the 21st century Africa, it metamorphosed into an unprecedented level of idolatry. Catholicism, ATR and AICs were earlier accused by Pentecostals of syncretism and idolatry, today, the reverse has become the case. The primary focus of this work is therefore not only to ascertain the level of degeneracy in African Christianity, but to attempt to return Christianity in Africa to the Judeo-Christian monotheistic faith and scriptures (Exodus 20:3-5; Deuteronomy 6:4).

Conceptual Definition of Terms

In modern languages, words and terminologies evolve with different meanings, interpretations and connotations which in most cases may differ from their popular meanings especially in their historical genre. Here the need to present a readable text devoid of ambiguities informed the reason for proper and understandable definition of some recurrent terms.

Icon: Livingstone (1977), describes icons as flat pictures, usually painted in egg temporal often on wood, wrought in mosaic, ivory and other materials to represent Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or other saints venerated in the Greek Church. It is believed that through them, the saints exercise their beneficent powers, preside at all events of human life and worship as powerful spiritual channels of grace. This can also mean an image of a holy person used in the worship of the eastern branches of Christianity. Originally, icon is a Greek word for image or painting. At the medieval era, it was a religious image in a wooden panel used for prayer and devotion in orthodox Christianity (Bentley & Ziegler 2000, p. 254).

Iconoclast: In this context an iconoclast refers to a person who destroys religious icons, images and symbols, opposes their worship or veneration (Livingstone 1977, pp. 254-255).

Iconoclasm: Is the doctrine, practice and attitude of an iconoclast.

Iconography: refers to pictorial material relating to a subject. It can be traditional or conventional symbols associated with a subject especially religious or legendary (Longman Dictionary).

Idolatry: Webster defines idolatry as the worship of images and symbols. In this work, the words; image, icon and symbols will be used interchangeably to mean and express the same idea.

African Pentecostalism in Nigerian Context

One of the major difficulties in African church historiography bothers on the classification of what constitutes the concept “African Pentecostalism”. This is largely because of the highly

variegated nature of the modern Proliferated Christian religious groups explicating Pentecostal similarities. African Pentecostalism has metamorphosed into innumerable brands of churches in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. Ogbu Kalu asked whether to include some brands such as the AICs in the contemporary light of growing Pentecostal movements to expand its statistics and if such is included, how acceptable would it be in the global view of church historians and in the mind of the biased Pentecostals who have already branded the AICs as “white garment churches”?(Kalu 2008, p. 65).

Rausch affirms that the modern Pentecostal movement traces its origin to the Azusa street revival that grew out of a largely African American Prayer group in Los Angeles in early 1906 under the ministry of Williams Seymour, Parham’s student (Rausch, 2010:930). Scholars identified three waves of the Pentecostal renewal; classical Pentecostal that place emphasis on conversation, baptism in the Holy Spirit, and the charismatic gifts, especially tongues (Wagner, p. 114); Christians from non-Pentecostal denominations involved in the charismatic movement in some main line protestant churches in 1905s and the emergence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in 1967 known for its emphasis on healing and exorcism (Rausch 2006, pp. 346-362) and the Neo-Pentecostal/Neo-Charismatics which includes evangelicals, independent and indigenous churches, and other Christians who no longer identified with either the Pentecostal or charismatic renewal but emphasize on spiritual empowerment and other Pentecostal phenomenon like miraculous cures, exorcisms and prosperity preaching in their struggle against evil spirits (Chesnutt 1997, p. 80-84).

Miller and Yamamori also identified five types of Pentecostalism, though the distinctions are not always clear-cut in practice; these are: Classical Pentecostalism like Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Gospel, the indigenous denominations without any western connection like the winners’ chapel in Nigeria and the universal church of the kingdom of God in Brazil. The third type consists of independent Neo- Pentecostal churches that often refused to organize into denominations, with untrained pastors who use “market-savvy” techniques to attract followership especially among the youths with no background from the Pentecostal tradition. The fourth type is the charismatic renewal which includes the orthodox/mainline Churches (Catholics and Protestants). The last type includes what they called the “Proto-Charismatic Christians” whose roots is not traced to traditional Pentecostalism but affirm many of the central experiences found among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians (Miller and Yamamori, 2007, pp. 25-28).

Despite the multifarious definitions and the unlimited classifications to solve the lingering debate in African church historiography over what constitutes the Pentecostal movement in Africa and since the Pentecostal Movement tends to cast aspersion upon every other religious form; this writer identifies with the argument that sees all the denominational types that emanated in response to the mainline Missionary message as Pentecostals. Ogbu Kalu aligned with some scholars who imaged the African Pentecostalism and AICs as “Bedfellows.” (Kalu, 2008 p. 66) because they have common ancestry/ links and experience several similarities. (Poewe, 1986, pp. 141-158). These, scholars insisted that in spite the estrangement of this “odd couple” (Pentecostals and the AICs), it is certain that the AICs were the second response to the missionary message in Africa.

There are many similarities among these two bedfellows that justify their single classification. For instance, both are innovative, and developed doctrinal emphasis that distinguished them from the inherited traditions of the missionaries’ prejudiced perceptions of the world of power in indigenous African worldview. So, the common origin of the two bedfellows can be best understood with the elements of continuity and discontinuity. It is argued that the covenantal

theology in the Pentecostal arsenal is a peculiar fact also within the AICs. Therefore, both in primal religion and Pentecostal theology, humans and their various communities relate to spiritual powers in covenants with rituals dominate in religious acts, symbols, and oral liturgies among others. Employing the use of libation, Christian sacrificial objects and symbols, incantations and other ritual acts; individuals and their communities covenant themselves to the spirits in the sky, land, water and the ancestral world just as Christians replicate their relationships to saints, angels, Jesus, Holy spirit, and to God. (Allan Anderson, 2000). Kalu further identified four groups of scholars who advocate the linking of the AICs and the Pentecostals based on the pneumatic emphasis to include: H. W. Turner, Hollenen Weger, Rosalind Hackett, Allan Anderson, Kwabena Asamoah Gyadu and C. G. Baeta as the leader. Those who linked the roots in the historical discourse of origins include Poewe and G. Oosthuizen. The third group is represented by Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako who hinged to the kindred atmosphere or shared worldview of the AICs and Pentecostals. The fourth group led by J. B. Tinney and Inus Daneel focused their argument on the social context, ideology and the re-integrative response to social conditions (Kalu, 2008, pp. 67-68).

The foregoing affirms the reason why we have chosen to employ the term Pentecostal and Pentecostalism to represent all strands of Christianity in Africa from the first Africa response to missionary Christianity to mean the *Nigerian Pentecostal experience in Christianity*. This is because the basic issue of idolatry as the focus of our topic here cuts across all aspects of the contemporary Christianity.

Religious Origin of Icons (Images)

Since images are generally found as part of every major religion of the world in the practice of their respective faith, it becomes pertinent here to attempt the origin of images in human religion. The first mention of image is from the creation account where the bible records that man is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). "Image" here suggests the idea of a statue or a representation, while "likeness" qualifies "images" in two ways; (a) "imitation" which shows that man is not identical to God. (b) "Amplification" meaning that man is the actual reflection of God himself as his created analogy (Ferguson & Wright, 1996, p. 328). Moreso, the appearance of the use of any representation of men, animals, or plants, etc., was forbidden in the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20:4) because of the danger of idolatry (Livingstone 1977, p. 256). This shows that God in His infinite knowledge foresaw that his created humans may be substitutable to the fancy of creation either by choice, ignorance or foolishness of what their eyes can admire. That God by these commandments indicated that man has no excuse whatsoever for the choice of serving the creature instead of the creator.

The ancient Jewish tradition from the 1st century BC, describes Abraham's conversion from idolatry and the series of his vision of heaven (Livingstone, p. 27). Although this is only recorded in the apocryphal writings where images (icons) are associated with the worship of idols which was dominant in the Abrahamic religion (Teraphim 31:19ff). In the same way, the use of images pre-dates the history of Christianity in Africa. It is true that the use of images was strongly forbidden in the Old Testament (Exo. 20:4f, Jer.10:3ff), but it gained currency in Israel before the exile (1 Kings. 11:5ff). Images of God (Yahweh) may have been erected by the patriarchs as standing stones or sacred trees (Gen 21:33; 28:18), but were later forbidden and roundly condemned in Deut. 16:21; Exo. 32:1ff; 1 Kings.12:28ff (Williams, 1989).

The Christian Origin of Iconography and Idolatry

The concern of this section is to discuss iconography within the context of Judeo-Christian faith. In the first three centuries of Christianity, the church had no record of the use of images; rather, the Christians repudiated any form of veneration of images. They were often nick-named atheists by “pagans” for their abstinence from anything savory of idolatry as an idea carried from the Old Testament. It shows that iconolatry was only associated with pagan worship in the first Christian century.

However, Newman traced the introduction of image worship into the Christian church to the transfer from paganism; when the converted influential ‘‘heathens’’ introduced the background of image worship into the churches. When such men were appointed into high offices in the churches, they devoted their energies to the assimilation of Christian practices to heathen temples. Initially, the introduction and intention of pictures in the churches was not meant for worship or veneration, rather, to instruct the uneducated in Christian truth. Also, the monastic system perverted the use of images to instigate the sense of idolatry (Newman, 1957, pp. 385-386). Baker (1959, p. 94) affirmed that the use of images in worship became more popular in both eastern and western Christianity since the time of Constantine against the practice of the primitive Christians who rejected the use of any kind of images either in the home or at church.

Francis (2017, p. 93), opined that the early mention of icons evolved the Byzantine Russian, Greek, Ukrainian and Coptic orthodox catholic churches in the 3rd century who made profuse use of icons as a physical link to spiritual realms and aided faith among worshippers. Later, the church concept of icons also shifted with the advent of modernism when human knowledge was placed at the scrutiny of empiricism (Baker, 1959, p. 94). By the 6th century, icons assumed an important role in the religious practices of eastern orthodoxy to the point that generally, holy images were used for education, veneration and protection. They held that icon was more than merely a likeness; rather, it was a presence that through ritual acts of veneration; bowing, kneeling and kissing, devotees could gain access to the spiritual power of the holy personality represented by such images (Francis, 2017, pp. 93-109).

Scholars opined that at the beginning of the seventh century, Gregory the Great allowed the use of pictures and images in churches, but insisted that they must not be worshipped. But by the 8th century, the reverse became prominent that prayers were addressed to pictures and images which were surrounded by an atmosphere of ignorant superstitions to the point that Muslims accused Christians of being idolaters (Chidester, 2000, pp. 223-229). Moreover, the seventh ecumenical council of Nicaen II (787AD), was held amidst a bitter argument over the use of images in the church until Emperor Leo III of Syrian (c675-740), having defeated the Muslim armies in 718 and 740, set out to destroy the icons which he believed were the primary obstacles to the conversion of the Jews and Muslims (Renwick, 2002, p. 82).

Iconoclastic Controversy

Littel (1976, p. 58) described the iconoclastic controversy as the major dispute in the Greek/ Byzantine wing of the Catholic Church after the seventh century. These controversies were series of debates about the place of images in worship in the Byzantine Empire between 726 and 843AD. It began when Emperor Leo III (717-814) decreed the removal and destruction of pictures from churches. Although his intentions remain debatable in Christian history, some scholars were of the view that Leo was motivated by the desire to purify the debased Christianity in the East, especially, where the continual raids of slaves (Bulgars, Saracens, among others) had demoralized the entire population and almost destroyed learning. Consequently, Christianity was perceived as being degraded, superstitious, inferior, intellectually and morally debased to Arab monotheism (Latourette, 1999, p. 292). To Leo, image worship is not only an abomination, but a major obstacle to the conversion of Jews and

Muslims. Also, abolition would not only increase unity in his empire, promote peaceful relationship with the Saracens, but would also promote education and the learning skills among his people. This decree sparked riotous protests that lasted over a century (843) throughout the empire. Leo's two successors, Constantine V (741-75) and Leo IV (775-80) continued his policy until it was reversed by Irene, Leo IV's widow and regent of Constantine VI (780-97). At the 7th Ecumenical council of Nicaea (787), iconoclasm was proscribed as illegal (Ferguson & Wright, 1996: 326). Although iconoclasm may be classified into eight periods, but for our interest here, only three periods should be mentioned for their religious and theological relevance to this topic. First, it was observed that in Judaism, King Hezekiah purged the Solomon's temple in Jerusalem including the entire land of Israel of images referred to as idolatry (2 Kings 18:1-37). Secondly, in the Roman Empire, the images of the state religion were destroyed during the Christianization period of the church. Finally, the Protestant Reformation witnessed the concomitant and reciprocal destruction of imagery between Catholics and Protestants (Latourette, 1999:292).

Catholicism and Iconolatry

As characteristic of every religion; different religions, cultures and societies develop the use of icons from important images that symbolize their objects of reverence, admiration and awe. The organized Christianity was said to have created images to represent the iconic essence of dead saints, angels, the Virgin Mary and even Jesus (Newman, 1951, p. 387). Here, the choice of the Roman Catholic Church is because she represents the origin of organized Christianity and the pivot in the history of Christian iconography. Before the first Catholic (universal) council in 325, Christianity had assumed several forms, characteristics, and non-scriptural distinctive. Among such were the idea of visible universal church composed of the bishops, the sacraments that possessed the magical kind of transforming grace, institutional priesthood which alone is qualified to administer sacraments, the recognition of Episcopal government (bishops) among others (Baker, 1959, p. 70). These were found in what was considered Catholics (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Anglican catholic). It was by the end of 2nd century that the word catholic came to be applied to the church (technically meaning both universal and orthodox). It is to this point that the history of iconography and its derivations in organized Christianity is traced to Catholicism (Okoronkwo, 2017, p. 93-109). Catholics use images/icons such as the crucifix in religious life and prayer with depictions of saints. They also venerate images and liturgical symbols by kissing, bowing, and the sign of the cross before and after prayers. They point to the Old Testament patterns of worship by the Hebrews as examples of certain places and objects used in worship which may have been treated with reverence or veneration rather than worship even the Ark of the with the images of cherubim associated with many miracles (Exo. 25:18-22).

Several interpretations are proffered by Catholics on Exodus 20:4 "you shall not make for yourself a carved image ..." (NIV); that the image of Christ receives the Latria (worship) to God, but no reverence to Christ's image as a thing (material). As for the image of saints, the worship is "dulia" rather than latria, while the BVM receives "hyperdulia". That the worship of whatever type: Latria, hyperdulia or dulia can go through the icon, image or status as to the prototype (St John the Baptist in Summa); that the incarnation of Jesus makes it plausible to venerate icons in order to preserve the faith of the incarnation. However, both arguments in favour or against veneration of Christ is incompatible with the Christology defined by the council of Chalcedon (451 Chalcedonian creed). The images possess no divinity or virtue on account of which they are to be worshipped/venerated; petitions can be addressed to them, and no trust is to be placed in them either; the honor which is given to them is referred to the objects which they represent, "through the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover our

heads and kneel, we adore Christ and venerate the saints whose likeness they are” (council of Trent, Sess XXV, *de invocatiome Sanctorum*, in Baker, 1959, pp. 94-98). Before now, it remained ahistorical evidence that it is the Roman Catholic Church that makes the elaborate use of icons in their worship and liturgy.

Later the church) was divided within itself over the issue of iconolatry, hence the iconoclastic controversy that lasted over a century. One of the major contentions in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was over iconolatry. The early formation of the evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity opposed and criticized the Roman Catholicism on iconolatry. Although, the later mounted its defense over the accusation, all strands of Christianity associate them with iconolatry till the later development in the 12th and 21st centuries that witness the involvement of almost every Christian denomination in iconolatry in various ways.

Protestantism and Iconography (Images)

Although the protestant reformers were divided over the use of images in worship; image worship and veneration was one of the major issues that sparked off the 16th century reformation. Martin Luther did not object the use of religious images par-se, but objected to the various beliefs associated with them; especially the practice of invoking the saints often associated with images (Latourette, 1999). In his response against the iconoclasm of Carlstadt (c.1480-1541), Luther argued that “since images were merely outward things that were neither evil nor good in them, we may have them or not, as we please, if they were to be permitted in the church, (Chidester 2000, pp. 223-229). Zwingli removed images from the churches in Zurich except the crucifix which he said does not signify any deity but only the humanity and suffering of Christ and a sign to Christians. He criticized the fact that “Christian love was being lavished on inanimate objects to the detriment of the true images of God as wealthy citizens endowed Masses for the dead to speed up their journey through purgatory” (Chidester, 2000). The earliest catechism of the protestant movement of the 16th-18th centuries (Heidelberg 1563), West minister (p. 164), and Fisher’s 1765) detailed how the creation of images was counter to the second commandment prohibition of images of any sought. Many Protestants hold that veneration and worship are for all practical purposes, identical. Today, contemporary Protestants are no longer against such religious art, icons or pictorial symbols.

African Independent Churches (AICs) and Iconolatry

A little explanation here may help to clarify some obvious problems of nomenclature in this aspect in the study of African Church history. The brand of churches here referred to as African independent churches also has two designations with the same acronym as AICs. These are African Indigenous churches and African Initiated churches. These three designations refer to the churches founded by Africans or through African initiatives. These brands of churches were formed from western missionaries who showed no practical evidence of their message and ideal of equity, justice and non-racism which encapsulate their biblical witness to their host Africans. By their study of the classics, the history of colonialists, their imperialism, and church administration, the early African converts developed nationalistic ideas and motivation to agitate against the practice of these missionary ideals. This led to the formation of the first African Independent church tagged Ethiopianism in March 1888 (White, 1967, p. 85). Preferring the term “African indigenous churches” (AICs), Ayegboyin and Ukah (2008, pp. 1-27) opined that these are the churches that made concerted efforts to adapt Christianity to the African condition rather than accept the foreign structure of Western missionary religion (George, 1994:51-107). This therefore means that these churches are churches that are formed by Africans, governed by Africans with African theology and cultural worldview. In Africa, these churches are classified into denominational types and names according to their mode of

worship but virtually explicate similar characteristics. While some are identified by uniforms/garments, others are without. So their different classifications and groups include: Separatists, Ethiopian, Zionists, Prophetic Movements, praying churches, Pentecostal churches among others (Obineche. 2012, pp. 25-48).

Our concern here, is the concept of African Christianity (ably represented by these brands) to image worship or veneration in relation to African religious worldview. The Christian movements in Africa were surrounded by a syncretistic fringe that consists of movements with non-Christian religious systems at their center. Christianity came to meet a polytheistic African society that was full of religious symbols, images and icons. So when the missionary Christianity came with its own symbols and icons, it met with not much problems with African converts. Therefore, when the independent African churches broke away from the missionary churches, their theology was cut between the influence of the two religious' cultures (Christianity and ATR) in the use of symbols and images in worship.

Examples of these indigenous movements were William Wade Harris of Liberia who dressed in white robe, worn in a white turban on his head, a bible, Dambo cross, a gourd of water, and mostly moved bare-footed (Ayegboyin 2008, pp. 1-27). Others include Garrick Braide of the Niger Delta, Nigeria (1910), Simon Kimbangu of Belgian Congo, and Isaiah Shembe of South Africa among others. In all these, there was one observable characteristic or the other in the use of icons and iconolatry in their worship even to the point that the prophets and founders of these AICS were being venerated and worshiped by their followers with their pictures and images placed at their places of worship whether alive or dead. In Nigeria, other contemporary examples of newer forms of AICS emerged with their modern forms of iconolatry. Such include but not limited to Olumba, Olumba Obu (O.O.O) of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, Guru Maharaji, cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), the celestial church of Christ (CCC) among others.

Pentecostalism and Iconolatry in Nigeria

The emergence of Pentecostalism is another significant landmark in the history of the world Christianity in the twentieth century Nigeria. However, the claim by some scholars that Pentecostalism was imported into Africa has been contested. It is obvious, at least, in the case of Nigeria that some brands of Pentecostal denominations like the indigenous movements thus far discussed appeared in the second decade (1920s) of the twentieth century mostly as unprompted and autonomous prophetic mass-movements (Falk 2011, pp. 452-460). It is no gain saying that the introduction of Pentecostalism and the Pentecostal brands of Christianity has brought both bane and blessings to Nigeria Christianity. Pentecostalism is credited for adding flavor and life to what was often regarded as the "lifeless" worship in the missionary Christianity termed "orthodox".

Today, the paradigm of the discourse of iconolatry has two dimensions from the orthodox perspective of the inherited tradition and the modern evolution of image worship. In the Roman Catholic and other orthodox churches and denominations, there is no doubt that they retain the traditional form of veneration of images such as the image of Jesus, the Blessed virgin Mary (BVM), observance of the saints day, the crucifix, vestments of varied colours, Holy water and Holy places, sales of indulgences, relics, penance, Rosary, special thrones, stain glasses, artistry pictures on church windows and doors, staff, rings, painted works etc. Among scholars and followers of these systems, they are seen as means of transmitting Christian truth without controversy.

In modern Christianity, the churches and denominations which once abhorred the practices and worship have today, tactically and publicly embraced the worship and practice of imagery. The veneration and worship of image in the contemporary Christianity has assumed a higher dimension emanating from Pentecostalism. Such forms include the new sales of indulgences: holy oil, holy handkerchief, pictures of “great pastors” and general overseers, and commercialized forms of materialism with intangible images like exotic cars, architectures, protective aprons and stickers among others. The most popular sites in Nigeria today on bill boards are pictures of church founders and their wives. The once symbol of the cross and dove that symbolized the Holy Spirit have been replaced by pictures of individual founders (gods) of the church. Adherents of such churches do not only stop at the founder’s pictures on bill boards, but make copies of these pictures for their homes, shops, cars and other conspicuous places where prayers can be said through them whom they refer to as prophet, daddy, mummy, man of God etc.

It can be said that the attempt to contextualize Christianity into the African worldview may be one of the reasons why the African Pentecostalism have deviated into syncretism and iconolatry. This is because, since the African religion is enhanced by the very nature of African communal life setting, the concept of church as a family should be adopted to satisfy the communal nature of the Africans (Obineche, 2004, pp. 24-31). The great appeal of Pentecostalism has its origin in the fact that they do not only resonate with the African holistic and communal worldview, but that their worship is mostly African; spontaneous, experiential and celebrative so that the communal life of the Africans where the worship of deities (here representing the Christian icons and images) reinforce the faith of African believers to meet their needs and respond to their fears. But to avoid being syncretistic, these churches have to modify some African beliefs and practices to get along with the wind of change (Christianity). To them, believe in the veneration of saints brought by the missionary Christianity which is the direct equivalent to ancestral worship, became a welcome blend to polytheistic African society.

This confirmed the existence of iconophiles in Nigerian Christianity. Before now, iconolatry was seen as the exclusive allegation on Roman Catholicism by other group of Christians and denominations. But today, there is hardly any Christian Religious denomination in Nigeria that does not practice the use; veneration and worship of images in different shapes and forms such as badges, bangles, stickers, flags, rings, chains, crucifix, insignia/ emblem, pictures, holy water, even the founder’s name among others. Some pay partnership and membership subscriptions upon which their prayers may be answered which replaces the sales of indulgences in which they believe salvation and forgiveness were anchored.

The Effect of Iconolatry in Nigerian Christianity

The effort of the iconoclasts did not end either with iconography and iconolatry in Christianity in the seventh and sixteenth century Christianity. The Western missionary Christianity to Africa introduced diverstated opinions in religious worship and practices which the Nigerian Christianity has followed and thereby practicing what they earlier rejected. Today, orthodoxy, traditional religion and Pentecostalism are at pal.

Almost every Christian denomination in the 21st century Nigeria is adoring, venerating or worshipping one form of image or the other. For instance, those churches who would not celebrate “Saints Day” are now celebrating it as “Founders Day”. Those who abhorred praying through the Blessed Virgin Mary are now praying through the prelates, founders or general overseers, (GOs). While salvation and divine favour is given to the highest material bidders, glorified images of the hero ministers are not only placed on conspicuous places in the churches and homes, but are being venerated. Contemporary Pentecostals not only initiate saints, but

create titles as in the indigenous African culture such as high chief to chief apostle etc. It may be concluded here that the bane of the 21st century Christianity in Nigeria is not only iconolatry but syncretism.

Conclusion

Our discussion thus far has arrived with the following findings:

- That Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Pentecostalism brought their iconoclastic religion and doctrinal differences into the African Christianity which is similar to the polytheistic African milieu.
- That the African society saw in Christian worship and veneration of saints, the replica of their fertile culture of ancestral worship.
- That Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has imbibed the full and even higher level of the practice of image worship than among the orthodox Christianity which they earlier criticized.
- It is discovered that the African indigenous churches are at home with both the orthodox iconolatry and the syncretism of the African Traditional Religion as their modern way of contextualizing Christianity in Africa.

While it has been established that iconolatry whether as veneration or worship still exist in all brands of Nigerian Christianity, Christianity is therefore advised to cast a retrospective look at history for the real interpretation of Exodus 20:4. Modernization, Pentecostalism and contextualization should not be used by any Christian generation as a yardstick to apostasy

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