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A Comparative Study of Religions

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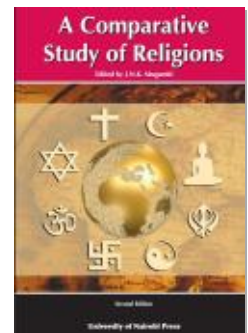
Published by African Books Collective

Mugambi, J.N.K.

A Comparative Study of Religions: Second Edition.

African Books Collective, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/39862.



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Christ and the Church He Founded

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Introduction

Many centuries before it happened, the prophet Isaiah had foretold the coming of the Messiah, his passion and final triumph. From the readings of Isaiah's prophecy we hear of the Redeemer, innocent, persecuted and martyred and finally lifting himself from the depths of suffering to the heights of glory. By the time Jesus was ascending into heaven he had a band of just about a hundred and twenty followers. However, in spite of the small numbers, Jesus had predicted the miraculous and permanent growth of the church. In this chapter we shall address ourselves to Jesus Christ, his first band of followers and the church, which Jesus founded.

Who was Jesus Christ?

The question as to who Jesus was has occupied the minds of men and women for centuries. In a comparative study like this one, this is a question we must raise, if we are to relate Christ to Gautama (Buddah) (567–487 BC) and the religion which he founded, the never ending Brahman of the Hindu religion, Confucius (551–479 BC) and Confucianists after him, the Shinto or the way of the gods in Japan, and Taoism.

To Christians, the human being had body and soul. The body was made up of senses while the soul had mind and will, which gave man mental knowledge. God increased man's knowledge by a special power called grace. Without the power of grace, which came directly from God, everything else was impossible, as man could not know either the natural or supernatural things

adequately. God who created the world and mankind wanted men to be happy forever. Man sinned and this sin prevented him from receiving the Grace of God. And so, God the son took human form in the womb of Mary, was born and called Jesus, lived and preached, died on the cross, was buried, rose after three days and departed from this world leaving behind a group of followers to preach salvation.

These arguments about the person of Jesus took years to evolve and were later summarized in what came down to us as the Nicene Creed, which runs as follows:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty Maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Both of the Father: before all words, God from God, light from light, true God from true God. Begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father: by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the whole by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary: and was made man. He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. He rose again on the third day according to the scriptures; and ascended into Heaven: and is seated at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. And of his Kingdom there will be no end.

The main role of Jesus was saving men from sin and enabling them to enter heaven. It is in the light of all this that we must understand Jesus' humanity, his suffering in the body, his condition after resurrection, his return to Heaven, his presence in the Eucharist preserved by the Christian churches, his delegation of power to his disciples and their representatives, his actions in human history and His expected return to the earth on the Last Day.

In summary, Jesus was the promised Messiah of Isaiah 53 and 61 – a claim that was never accepted by the other renewal

movements in Palestine, which we considered in the previous lecture. In Jesus Christ a preparatory history both divine and human came to a close. In him all the revelations which God had made to both Jews and Gentiles are fulfilled and the redemption of mankind realized.

In his divine nature, as Logos – the word (John 1:1), He is the eternal son of the Father who was an agent in the creation of the world and remains an agent in the preservation of the world. And so his incarnation, his being born of a woman, was a fulfilment of the manifestation of God.

as Jesus of Nazareth, he is the fulfillment of the religious growth of humanity, with an earthly ancestry traced to Abraham by Matthew, the evangelist of Israel and to Adam by Luke, the evangelist of the Gentiles. In him is solved the problem of religion, the reconciliation and a fellowship of man with God.

Early Life of Jesus

Jesus Christ was born in Palestine at the little town of Bethlehem in Judea by the betrothed (engaged) Virgin Mary. The land was generally peaceful at the time of His birth. The early life of Jesus is veiled in mystery. All we hear of him is that when he was a boy of twelve, he astonished the rabbis in the temple by his questions.

Jesus grew up quickly and unnoticed in a Galilean mountain village in a lowly carpenter's shop away from Jerusalem, from schools and libraries. His main instruction came from the beauties of nature, the services of the synagogue, the secret of the communion of the human soul with God, and scripture of the Old Testament which prophesized his own character and mission. Jesus had no contact with Essenes and could only provoke the hostility of both Pharisees and Sadducees.

He began his ministry at the age of thirty following baptism by John the Baptist and probation in the wilderness where he was tempted. The ministry only lasted three years, during which time he chose twelve apostles and seventy disciples. In his teaching he

announced the founding of a spiritual kingdom, which should grow from the smallest seed (mustard seed) to the mighty tree, and working like leaven from within, should gradually pervade all nations and countries. His teachings were punctuated by miracles and signs.

He was hated and persecuted by the Jewish hierarchy. He was betrayed by one of his chosen ones, Judas, was condemned by the Sanhedrin, rejected by the people and denied by Peter. Surrounded by his weeping mother and faithful disciples, he prayed for his murderers, and, finally committed his soul to his heavenly Father and died with the exclamation: "It is finished". Thus, Christ died, was buried and rose again from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven.

The Pentecost and the Foundation of the Church

Before Christ ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to go and wait in Jerusalem until he sent the Holy Spirit to give them power. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon earth took place ten days after Christ had ascended into heaven. It could not take place without the preceding resurrection and ascension.

The Passover festival was very important in the Jewish religious calendar. It reminded them of how Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, had delivered them from bondage in Egypt. It was a time of great joy. It was a Pentecost, the fiftieth day after the Passover festival, when the apostle and disciples were assembled that:

‘A Supernatural sound resembling that of a mighty rushing wind came down from heaven and filled the whole house where they were assembled and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit’.

Following the descent of the Holy Spirit, the disciples spoke in tongues. People thought they were drunk, but Peter preached a sermon that led to the conversion of three thousand people. These events cemented the foundations of the Church, which we shall define simply as: the community of believers in the risen Lord.

After this, the believers returned to their homes and villages – this marked the beginning of the spread of the church, which Christ founded by the pouring of Holy Spirit. But this birthday of the Christian church was only the beginning of a greater spiritual harvest that prophet Joel talked about when he said that the Holy Spirit shall be poured out on all flesh, and all the sons and daughters of men shall walk in the light, and God shall be praised with new tongues of fire for the completion of his wonderful work of redeeming love.

From Jerusalem to Antioch

The church, which was founded at Jerusalem was a purely Jewish institution. It was first led by Peter and later by James, the Lord's brother. Soon the Jews who were living in the Hellenistic world joined the infant church and developed a missionary spirit. As a result of the new missionary zeal, the gospel was preached in Syria among the gentiles (non-Jewish people) who also joined the community of believers.

The Christians at Antioch were very keen to have preachers sent to them. Barnabas and Paul (a persecutor converted to Christianity) were sent to them. This marked the beginning of Gentile Christianity. By the close of the apostolic period, churches had been founded in most parts of the Roman Empire.

The step from Jerusalem to Antioch led Christianity from the sphere of Palestinian Judaism to that of Hellenistic culture. The gospel was not only taken over in different languages but was also expressed in a different thought system.

Among the people who were joining the church were Jews who had accepted the teachings of the Pharisees and who regarded the religion of Christ as an extension of Judaism. According to these peoples, converting people to Christianity was seen merely as increasing the number of adherents to the laws of Moses. As a result, these Judaizers insisted that the gentiles had to be circumcised according to the law when they became Christians.

This position led to a controversy which forced Paul, Barnabas and Titus to travel to Jerusalem to consult the elders there.

The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem

The church was already twenty years old when the agitation of the Judaizers brought it to the brink of a split, which would have seriously impeded its progress and threatened its final success.

The subject of the consultation at Jerusalem was two fold: to settle the personal relations between Jewish and gentiles apostles and to divide their fields of work; to decide the question of circumcision and to define the relation between Jewish and gentile Christians. The resolution was the recognition of Paul and Bernabas and their spheres of influence among the gentiles. On the question of circumcision, it was resolved that gentile converts to Christianity were not to be forced to observe the Laws of Moses provided they abstain from meat offered to idols and from strangled animals and from blood. They were to beware of heathen life.

The meeting in Jerusalem was the first church council in Christianity history. Its importance was categorical to the future of the faith. If it had not taken that decision, perhaps the church would not have reached us, as the gentiles could have rejected the Jewish practice and blocked the way for the spread of the faith. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that circumcision is widely practiced.

The Characteristics of the Apostolic Church

Christianity as understood by the apostolic church was not merely a doctrine but a total way of life: a new moral creation, a saving fact which was initially embodied in Jesus Christ and later released by him to embrace the entire human race and bring it into fellowship with God. Thus, membership of the Apostolic Church came as a new life: regeneration, a conversion and sanctification, restoring harmony and peace to the soul. The entire substance of the apostolic teaching was the witness of Christ, the gospel and

the free message of the divine love and salvation which appeared in the person of Christ. Salvation was seen to be secured to mankind by the work of Jesus, calling for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. That salvation was to be completed at the second coming of Christ, which the apostolic church expected to be very soon.

The New Testament tells the story of the life and mission of Jesus and the consequence; the teaching of one mind, the mind of Christ. He gave to his disciples the words of life, which the Father gave him, and inspired them with the spirit of truth to reveal his glory to them.

Activity

1. Describe the development of the Christian church, from Pentecost to the Council of Jerusalem.
2. Explain the importance of the Council of Jerusalem.
3. What is meant by the statement that the Christianity of the apostolic church was not merely a doctrine but a total way of life?
4. Give an account of Jesus meeting with his disciples after his resurrection.

