Assessing Malawian Christianity from a Catholic Missionary Perspective: A phenomenological Approach

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Abstract:
This article assesses Malawian Christianity from Catholic religious missionary perspective. It uses the views of catholic religious missionaries who have been working in Malawi for not less than five years as lenses to shed light on the Christianity existent in some local communities in Malawi. The assessment is based on the Catholic expatriate Missionary perspective to avoid biases. The article assumes that the missionaries as religious people who are foreigners can more objectively point out to issues without any bias regarding Christianity in Malawi.

What motivated this research are the stories of albino abductions as well as killings of the elderly people suspected of being witches and wizards. The research targeted fifteen missionaries who belong to different religious groups of men and women. All the research participants were then serving in Malawi as priests, brothers or sisters of different religious congregations.

The study used qualitative research methodology approaching it from a phenomenological standpoint. The research sample was small because the study did not seek to justify the findings numerically but rather the depth of the generated data. One of the major findings of the research was that although Malawi was a God fearing country with many Christians, there is a lot that requires to be done to improve the Christianity of many members. This is exemplified by so many cases of abduction involving persons living with albinism, the burning of elderly people suspected of being witches or wizards. It can be concluded that if nothing is done to improve the Christianity in Malawi, double standards for many members will continue reigning in many different life styles of some church members.

The article therefore highly recommends review of pastoral works for the church so that it penetrates more into improving Christian life of many members.

Key Words: Abduction, Christianity, Congregation, Missionary, Phenomenology, Religious
1.0 Introduction and Context

Although the Roman Catholic Church has been operational in Malawi for about 130 years now from 1888 (Paas, 2000) there is need to assess its impact and how it influences religious beliefs of her members as Catholic Christians. The article targets missionaries who are working in Malawi as priests, brothers or sisters belonging to different religious congregations such as Montfort, Jesuits, Carmelites, Marist Brothers, Daughters of Wisdom, Medical Missionaries of Africa and Franciscans of different Orders. The major objective of this article is to explore the Christianity of Malawi from the standpoint of the catholic missionaries. It is assumed that the missionaries cannot be biased when they want to point out what wrong in terms of catholic religiosity. The gist of the article is that it strives to expose issues as noted by missionaries themselves during their stay in Malawi. Deep information providing a picture of the nature of Christianity existent in Malawi is generated. The article attempts to venture into a new project of constructing a theology for the modern Malawi with all its current challenges and opportunities as demanded by (Gaudium et Spes, 1965) in O’Brien and Shannon (1999) which encourages the church to read signs of times so that it can articulate its best hopes for humanity. The article also emphasises that there is need for the church to continuously help evaluate what is being offered by the world and act upon it in order to set free the downtrodden. As a God fearing country with large numbers of Catholic missionaries serving the Church, Malawi has not been discussed much in literature and therefore this research begins to fill that gap. It is surprising that after about 130 years of Catholicism existent in Malawi, stories of
gates such cash gate, maize gate, road gate, and jet gate mixed with other stories especially that of abductions of albino people and many more are still rampant. In order to generate deep and down to earth data use of proverbs and stories of abductions have been engaged as tools for constructing an argument for the paper.

First and foremost, there are many stories of albino abductions. One wonders as to why the situation is like that when the majority in some communities are Christians. For instance, many elderly people are left to be killed through beating or burning for being suspected for being witches or wizards. A look at the number of people who gather around places where the suspected elderly people are burnt to ashes or beaten to death, one is left aloof as to whether Christianity exists in Malawi or not. How can Christians who are supposed to be promoting peace and justice the crowd to beat or burn to death fellow human beings for being suspecting them of witches or wizards? What is the difference between the killers if they really did what they are suspected of and those killing the suspects?

A look at most proverbs used in Malawi contradicts the spirit of watching others doing evil without assisting to stop them. To demonstrate this point, two proverbs which are common among most Malawian communities were engaged as follows:

(i) “Mwana wamzako ndiwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udya naye” (Your friend’s child is your own child if you invest in that child, you are going to enjoy the fruits from that child); and

(ii) “Chaona mzako chapita mawa chiri pa iwe” (What has befallen your friend is gone tomorrow it will be on you).
One cannot fail to note that the above Chewa proverbs are very much in line with the gospel values of loving your neighbour as you love yourself. From the same proverbs it can also be established that the people of Malawi are Christians and peace loving. From the first proverb, one learns to start helping the children of his or her own neighbour so that they can look after him or her later on. In the second proverb, the philosophy behind is to build a nation that has people who care for one another in times of need. It brings to the attention of many people that if your friends are in trouble today you must help them because tomorrow it will be you who will be in need of their assistance. If you need help from others you must also help others. In my view this is both a Christian and a gospel value calling.

From these proverbs it can be said that no doubt Malawi has good Christians but assessing this from the acts of killing suspects, the opposite can also be said about the Christians found in Malawi. Malawi does not only have people who can do well to others, there are also some bad people who cause trouble for others. Another lesson about Christianity in Malawi can be drawn from the plunder of public money which is popularly known as “cash-gate”, “maize gate” “road gate” and many other gates which leaves a lot to be desired. A closer observation of who were involved in the current scandals does not rule out the involvement of Christian. From what has been shared so far, one begins to realise that Malawi has a mixed bag of both good and bad Christians. As the article progresses in trying to assess Malawi from this standpoint of missionaries, it may not be proper to stop here without looking at lessons that can be learnt from literature as will be shown soon.
2.0 Literature Review

According to O’Brien and Shannon (1999) the church is always concerned of the value and importance of every human being by speaking for those that are most neglected. The church is there to market opinions where people are playing propaganda tricks on each other and through its role should be able to promote truthfulness in the light of the Ten Commandments (O’Brien & Shannon, 1999; Wermter, 2003). Very often, a change in attitudes and in human structures frequently calls accepted values into question (O’Brien & Shannon, 19990). This has been noted to be very true especially for young people who have grown impatient in the progress on more than on several occasions.

People accused of witchcraft have often been treated inhumanly (Lagerwerf, 1992). The Christian missions like the Catholic Church, in this article have always offered protection to such people accused of witchcraft and maltreated. The missionaries ideas on this matter are inspired by the ideas inherited from Europe (Lagerwerf, 1992). However, the recent missionaries who came to Africa reacted against the atheistic philosophy of the previous century which did not accept the reality of the devil particularly with regard to a manifestation of activities in witchcraft as Lagerwerf (1992: 14) stated that:

We can consider their attitude as a reaction against the excessive emphasis on the devil and hell in the medieval period, and against the untold suffering and brutal treatment meted out to witches. All of these factors worked together to discredit belief in witchcraft so that it disappeared from the European scene in the eighteenth century. The Church declared belief in witchcraft as a heresy.
Hutchinson, an Anglican bishop, who published in his Historical Essays concerning witchcraft in 1718, is regarded as one of those who dealt the last blow to belief in witchcraft which came to be seen as a vain superstition. Since as far as they were concerned there was no such a thing as witchcraft, the missionaries were simply not prepared to consider the question whether or not the person accused of witchcraft was guilty of the offence. This attitude cannot be said to have helped the cause of Christ in Africa, for even if the missionaries against the very clear testimony of the Bible, could not believe in the reality of witchcraft and sorcery, these things were very live issues for the Africans (S.U. Erivwoo, Christian Attitude to Witchcraft, in: Afer 1975/1.28)

Catholicism according to McBrien (2008) is not a reality that stands on itself but rather a community of persons who believe in God and shape their lives according to the religious dimension. Thus to be Catholic is first of all to be human.

Progress should be directed to the complete human development (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). The critique must come from the positive understanding and appreciation of the values in society.

Tinkasiimire (2005) challenges the Christians to reflect on what Jesus Christ really means to Christians, the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives and the loving mercy of God the Father, the creator of us all.

Schoffeleurs (2000) acknowledges that it is now a well-established notion that in a number of African structures, religion acted as a key interrogative factor. In agreement to Schoffeleurs’ view Reijnaerts et al (1997) Reinaerts et al. report that:
Sister Jacques wrote, “these poor Africans have a hard life, carrying provisions of food and ammunition for twenty five miles per day in the blazing sun exhausting. No wonder that at the end of seven or eight months they have come to the end of their strength. We have seen several die. Please ask our sister to pray for these dear souls. They find it very strange that we wash them, tend their wounds, and if need arises, feed them like children.

Reijnaerts reports that the same sister Jacques was to give her life in the service of these marginalised, not to say exploited victims of a war which benefited the colonial powers for she died of small pox contracted from one of the patients for whom she cared. One of the first Montfort Missionaries also died of Spanish flu contracted while caring for porters and soldiers (Reijnaerts et al., 1997).

3.0 Methodology

In order to generate information for this article the researcher used qualitative research designs. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen missionaries comprising of three religious priests, five religious brothers and seven religious sisters. Creswell (1998) states that with qualitative research design what is important is the prolonged engagement in the field generating deep information. It is believed that missionaries who are priests, brothers and sisters spend long time in the field evangelising and becoming familiar with the culture of the people. It is in that respect that this research targeted only fifteen research participants as significant as it did not intend to justify the findings numerically rather the depth of the generated data. Apart from generating data from in-depth interviews, I also used observations and document analysis to triangulate the generated data.
The data generated through In-depth interviews were voice recorded, transcribed, analysed and interpreted. Each time that data was collected and transcribed the interviewees attended to.

3.1 Sampling technique and size

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Sampling constitutes a fundamental requirement in research because no one can study everyone everywhere doing everything (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 27). In qualitative research, sampling appears to be generally limited in number in comparison to quantitative studies. Usually the sample size in qualitative studies is small and can even be a single case (Creswell, 1998: 122, Dukes, 1984). The main reason in selecting this small number is to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. For instance, in this case the experience of being a missionary in Malawi as a Catholic Priest, Brother or Sister. In qualitative research like this one, the choice of a site is guided by the consideration of specific criteria. Beginning purposive sampling requires one to first determine the selection criteria that suit the people or sites to be studied (Merrian, 1998: 61). The fifteen missionaries in this study presented almost the same characteristics although each one had its own uniqueness as a Priest, Brother or Sister. For instance, the researcher only chose missionaries who stayed in Malawi for a long time among the Christians.
In addition, the fifteen missionaries were chosen because of their mastery of both English and Chichewa which enabled the researcher to converse with them easily in either English or Chichewa. Another reason for choosing them as my research participants was their close proximity with where the researcher was staying. Staying close to his place helped him to visit them several times depending on need.

4.0 Findings

Through this research both positive and negative points about the religiosity of Malawi from the perspective of missionaries were shared. On the positive points the following were shared:

4.1 Positive points

Among the consoling points that can qualify Malawi to be seen as a Religious country the following came out clearly:

4.1.1 Unity during moments of crisis

It was reported that Malawians were very united when it comes to assisting one another during hard times. For example, whenever funerals occur red life came to a halt for many members of the community. During funerals shops were closed, schools are also sometimes closed so that the teachers together with students could go to help in digging the grave or cooking at the funeral house. Members of the bereaved family were not expected to do any kind of work. They were to seat down, waiting for other people to come and console them in words
or through contributions which are either in monetary or material forms. If the deceased did not attend church services, the immediate members of the community can ask for a religious ceremony usually concluded by a special prayer group whose purpose is to preach in funerals that are not recognised by any other church or denomination.

4.1.2 Giving Warm Reception to the Visitors
Malawi is popularly known as the warm heart of Africa. A visit to a home of a Malawian showed that you were really in the warm heart of Africa. One felt welcomed with a gentle heart of whoever was found. Walking along the path that passed through the groundnuts field portrays a warm reception of Malawians. For instance, one may fill his or her bag with gifts of groundnuts. Even pastoral experiences point to the same direction. On their own, a religious brother (1) and a religious sister (3)b who were both teachers expressed the following in Chichewa:

*Tsiku limenelo titangomaliza ulendo wathu woyendera aziphunzitsi amene anali pa teaching practice, tidabwerera kwathu ndi matumba a mtedza, maungu ndinso mphatso zina zakumunda kuchokera kwa aanthu akumene tidakapako popita kapena pobwerera kumeneko.*
(On that day on our way home from teaching practice supervision, we returned home with plenty of gifts ranging from groundnuts, pumpkins and many more from the people that we met to and from that area).
It is clear from this experience that Malawians like giving gifts to others. They do that even to visitors whom they may never meet again. In this case, they give without expecting something in return. A visitor is always given something as a remembrance. They also explained that from time to time, they were also invited for meals but they never had time for such meals because they needed to rush to other schools for the same exercise.

A brother and a sister also noted that in rural areas most Malawians share food at family levels. When one family prepares food, that food is shared by extended family members. A man is expected to take the food to the common place where it is shared among men when it is brought in turns. The spirit of giving gifts to others is very much in line with the gospel values. It demonstrates the spirit of love which Jesus Christ held in high esteem when he emphasised loving one another as one of the greatest commandments.

4.1.3 Having a Shared Responsibility of Looking after Children of the Community
A brother and a sister also noted that in Malawi, a child belongs to the whole community. When one is working and visits home to see parents, that one is supposed to carry gifts for the whole community. Many people buy a bale of sugar and distribute packets to the members of the community. Likewise, it becomes the responsibility of the whole village to be responsible for the
upbringing of the children. Any elder is entitled to punishing someone’s child who does not behave as expected. If one’s child has a hut of his or her own, the other ones who do not have their own come to sleep there even if they did not help him. The hut is sometimes built by one child only with the help of his parents who feel happy to see their child taking an active role of building a house of his own. The parents of that boy usually allow him to be sharing the sleeping accommodation with the other boys of the community.

In my view, the spirit of sharing a sleeping place (hut) among boys, promote the spirit of laziness. Other boys do not take the initiative to build their huts because they rely on the one already built by others. Much as it good to share things amongst the people themselves, there is need to start promoting the spirit of hard-work among community members so that they develop their communities.

During a visit to an out-station for Eucharistic celebration the priest noted the following as expressed by himself in Chichewa:

*Tsiku lina ndidaona anyamata ndi atsikana akulima mmunda wamunthu wina pamodzi ine ndi dadabwa kuti chimachitika ndichiani. Ndipo mmodzi mwaanyamata amene amkalima tsikulo*
adandiuza kuti iwo amalimitsa mbuzi yoti anyamata and atsikanawo adye pamodzi ngati ana ammudzi umodzi amene amatha kuthandizina zina ndi zina. Iwonso adandiuza kuti mbuzi ina imene adalimitsa yidali yoti apezere ndalama zothandizira wokamba wina wa mmudzimo.

(One day I saw boys and girls who were working in somebody’s garden as a group. When I asked what it was all about, I was told that it was piece work in exchange for two goats which they could eat as boys and girls from the same community. The other goat was meant for sell to get money to help a certain elderly person of the village)

It is clear from this quote that in this community the people are sensitive to the needs of others. They were working for goats to be sold and realise money to assist an elderly person of their community. They also decided to slaughter another to be shared amongst themselves so that they could eat together as members of the same community in the footsteps of the early apostles.

The practice of sharing things among community members can be noted in many communities in Malawi. It was not only unique to the community visited by the missionary. I also have seen many young people who have built shelters for the elderly, help them to work in their gardens. All these are really indicators of the religiosity of the people of Malawi.
4.1.4 Caring for orphans and street children

In most communities, orphanages have been built where needy children who lost their parents are kept. Volunteers are seen coming to assist the children in different areas from providing free education to giving donations of different items. Some people like teachers come as volunteer teachers to assist the needy. They spare some time to offer free lessons to the needy children of the community. Old clothes are also sent to such places for the same children.

For the missionaries, this spirit of always being sensitive to the needs of others must be upheld, as it is very much in line with the gospel values. It is through this spirit that we can build a peaceful community where people can live as brother and sisters. What remains is the fact that such communities are not many. We need more efforts to establish more communities that care for needy children and the elderly.

4.1.5 Buildings that are friendly to people with walking challenges

The missionaries also noted that most buildings are friendly to persons with walking challenges. People using wheel chairs are seen accessing services in banks, churches, hospitals, schools and other institutions.

In my view, this is a correct observation but what remains is the designs of such facilities. I have noted that most institutions where such facilities are put, the designers did
not consider the steepness of the structures themselves. Most of them are not very friendly to people who use wheel-chairs as they are very steep. If a physically fit person who does not use a wheel chair, can hardly manage to use a structure meant to be used by someone on a wheel chair because it is too steep that can also be impassable for the physically challenged. One suggestion is to be trying them before releasing the builders or inviting persons with the walking challenges themselves to try them themselves so that money is not just spent for something that is existing but never used for the intended purpose. In addition, entry points to reach such points of entering the churches must also be scrutinised. What I have noted is that in many church buildings, the community just mind the entry point into the churches, but do not have time think of the pavements that lead to the church entrance. For instance, one may note that the entry pavements to the Church door have steps.

4.2 Negative perceptions

On the negative side the following points came out:

4.2.1 Belief in witchcraft

It is so amazing that one wonders whether there are Christians in most communities of Malawi. The research participants were dismayed at the stories of witchcraft practices. For instance, they sometimes hear that even pastors and priests are strongly involved in witchcraft practices. It was reported that in
Area 25 of Lilongwe City police once fired a gun in the air and tear gassed an angry mob that was baying for the blood of a local pastor who was rumoured to have turned into a giant snake. The mob vandalised a building of that pastor which was used as a prayer house. The mob took away some property including chairs that belonged to the pastor.

According to the priest, whether it is true or not but the fact is that that pastor was accused of having turned into a snake. This indicates that people in Malawi though Christians, believe in witchcraft as something that is real and exists. Even if it is true, that the pastor turned into a snake, the picture of religiosity disappears once the mob starts burning someone’s house. Where is the spirit of forgiveness as taught by the gospel values? Why not leave the matter to God to judge for himself?

In Neno, Mwanza district, four people were beaten and burnt to death for being suspected of being witches and wizards. It all started when a woman of 17 years of age died of lightning on the midnight of 25 January 2016. Some people suspected the four old people as the ones who caused her death. According to Nyasa Times of 26 January, 2016, the four suspected witches were identified as: Byson Kanjete (aged 73), Eliza Enosi (aged 86), Elenefa Kanjete (aged 76) and Idesi Julius (aged 69). These were severely beaten and killed.
In Nsanje, seven men were burnt to death one by one in turn for allegedly possessing human bones intended for use in witchcraft. Malawi Human Rights Campaigners, Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) has condemned the Nsanje district gang which sent them on fire using petrol.

When one attains the age of eighty or ninety he or she develops some conditions which make other people think that that person is a witch. For instance, some may develop red eyes because of the smoke from cooking fuel or others may develop milky eyes. Sometimes these conditions may also be caused because of medical conditions such as conjunctivitis.

The priest was shocked and worried at the rate to which the gospel value is penetrating in the people’s hearts in Malawi. He lamented saying:

*Kodi chimene sitikupanga ndi chiyani kuti anthu azilepha kumvetse mau a Mulungu? Kodi anthu opemphera sangathe kukhululukira anzao?* (What is it that we are failing to do so that people understand the gospel values? Is it not possible for people who pray to forgive others?)

From these quotes above, one notes how amazed the priest was to see how people can kill each other without any sense of compassionate to one another.
4.2.2 High levels of syncretism

Many people in Malawi are seen wearing charms for protection. When a baby is born, her parents make the baby wear charms around the neck, waist or ankles. Even if they believe in Christ, they still have something additional to protect the baby from any harm. Someone may look very strong in terms of faith but one wonders when you note that apart from relying on the Bible, the same person also trusts in charms.

On another note, from time to time it is heard that the person preaching is not the one we think he or she is, the real one is at home resting and enjoying himself. It is believed that such priests or pastors, use magic to turn into something resembling a human, wearing the face of the person we think he or she is.

A missionary priest also observed through someone who returning from a church service telling him that the person preaching was not real. Although he did not believe him, but a mark of doubt of whether his job as a missionary was being well performed or not still remained in his heart. The religiosity of people of Malawi from this perspective, can be said to be very syncretic. Not only do people in Malawi rely on the Bible, but also in additional protective measures especially the wearing of charms and use of many other concoctions.
4.2.3 Jealousy people

When someone in the village is noted to be acquiring wealth through hard work, he or she is often discouraged using all sorts of means. For instance, the person may be accused of using “juju” (special concoctions and medicine that make people rich) to acquire whatever worthy he or she has. Most people that have maize mills in the villages have often been asked to move them away from their villages because the owners are suspected to be killing people in the village to be keeping their monies. Whenever, a funeral occurs, the first suspects are people that have maize mills or big grocery shops.

5.0 Conclusion

In order to come up with the proper image of Malawi as being a religious or not religious nation with many Catholic members in some communities, there is need to provide evidence that can showcase things happening that either portray or fail to portray the character and picture of Malawian Christians from the perspective of Missionaries. A friend in need is a friend indeed. By being old, an individual lacks a lot of support in different aspects such as spiritual, psychological, material to mention but a few. Matthew 7: 16 advises that we shall know them by their fruits. It is in this context that we can best judge the religiosity of citizens through their fruits which manifest themselves in deeds. The picture of killing other human beings by beating or burning does not provide a good picture of Malawi as a religious nation. Situations that require the voice of the Church are still rampant.
5.1 Recommendations

In the Malawian Constitution, it is clearly stipulated that no one is supposed to call the other person a witch or oneself to admit that he or she is a witch. From this perspective, it clear that burning or calling each other as a witch or a wizard, is not a welcome gesture. In this respect this article recommends the following:

(a) The need to know our society with its all her beliefs especially existence of witchcraft;
(b) The need to have advocacy groups against mob justice;
(c) That judicial system need to improvise ways of cross examining bewitching activities;
(d) That government need to recognise existence of witchdoctor and witchcraft activities;
(e) That there is need to recognise the conflict that exists between secular and religious laws; and
(f) That the witchcraft act be revisited in our constitution.

5.2 Implications for the future Malawi

Looking at what is happening in Malawi today, there is need to consider putting up laws that will be protecting citizens especially the old from mob justice. If the trend of killing old people continues, and the church and state remain silent as it is today, we shall have a society without elders who may be instrumental in providing advice to
the youthful generation. What is happening in Malawi is that whenever people have reached the age of between 65 to 90 or more, the local community members consider them as witches or wizards and every effort is made to get rid of them by killing them. The youth today are seeing these practices and carry on with the culture of killing the elders of the community.

In addition, the practice of killing the elders of the community will render the community a great challenge when it comes to developing maize mill business. It is believed that business especially that of maize mill is run on blood of people. Most of the people that were accused of being witches or wizard are said to be selling the people they kill to the business community of maize mills or shops. This practice demonstrates how retrogressive such cultures are. The church therefore need to strive to establish a religious community that believes more in God than in superstitions.

References


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