

George Mulrain\*

## African Caribbean Christianity

### Early Encounters with Christianity

The Caribbean is the name given to that group of islands situated between the southern tip of Florida, U.S.A., and the northern section of the mainland of South America. "Caribbean" is the adjective derived from "Carib," one of the original Amerindian tribes. The other indigenous people were the Arawaks. The Caribs were warlike, whereas the Arawaks were a gentle people. Both groups suffered a terrible fate with the coming of European invaders in the latter part of the fifteenth century. They were massacred by the Spaniards whose main aim had been to reap profits from their labours. The Spaniards preached the Gospel, but at the same time took away all that they possessed, including their lives.

The Caribbean's first encounter with Christianity was to leave the impression that it was a very harsh, a very cruel religion, which tolerated no other. You either embraced European Christianity or suffered death. The comment of Dr. Phillip Potter on the issue is worthy of note:

When Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean he planted the cross as one of his first acts. But it was the Arawaks and Caribs, and the Blacks and later white, Indian and Chinese indentured labourers who bore that cross for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

With a serious problem of labour shortage created by the vulnerability of the original inhabitants, the Europeans sought to introduce into the Caribbean region a hardier type of person who would endure the rigours of life. They looked to the African continent for the answer. A trade

---

\*Dr. Mulrain is a sociologist of religion and teaches at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and the University of Birmingham, England.

developed whereby Europeans journeyed to the West Coast of Africa and captured or bought men, women, and children. Those unfortunate victims were put on board slave ships and had to endure months of terrible discomfort during a journey which took them across the Atlantic and into the Caribbean Sea. Once in the New Land they were expected, as slaves, to be obedient to their masters and work hard on the plantations, thereby contributing to the betterment of the European empires overseas. It is estimated that at least ten million Africans made the journey out of Africa during slavery.

Slavery inflicted much physical, mental and social injustices on the Africans, as they tried to adjust to life in the Caribbean. They were not free to express themselves, as Africans, in their new land and in fact, the Europeans regarded their culture as barbaric. Consequently, during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the slave trade continued and the institution of slavery persisted, several facets of African culture lasted, even though Africans were forced to adopt European life styles and culture.

One of the most difficult decisions faced by the African slaves was to obey the plantation owners and desist from their religious practices. Religion, to them, encompassed all of life, rather than only segments of it.<sup>2</sup> So that legislation, such as the French Code stating that all slaves should be baptised into the Catholic religion, caused serious conflict in their minds. It should here be noted that religion was not as crucial an issue in the English Colonies. England for example, had always perceived its role as ministering to the needs of the plantation owners.<sup>3</sup> Religious groups such as the Moravians, Methodists and Baptists inhabited the region towards the close of the eighteenth century and saw it as their duty to minister to the needs of the slaves. This explains why Anglicanism tended to be popular among the aspiring middle classes, whereas other Protestant groups were accepted by the lower levels of society. For example, many of the spirits in Voodoo and Shango have their equivalents among the

Catholic hierarchy of saints.

There has always been a struggle among Africans in the Caribbean to decide upon what religion they should give allegiance to. As has already been mentioned, a workable compromise was that of dual membership whereby those who did not wish to lose their cultural roots and who had aspirations towards climbing the social ladder participated in mass during the day, but at night would attend folk-religious ceremonies. With the passage of time, there emerged folk religions whose brand of worship included both the elements of African traditional religion and Euro-Christianity. This has been the picture which obtained during the post-emancipation period. People in the lower socio-economic groups were attracted to folk religions. But there were those in this group who, while not wanting to lose touch with their African roots, adhered to Christianity. It is from such persons that there was to emerge a truly African Caribbean Christianity.

### African Caribbean Christianity

The term "African Caribbean Christianity" may, on a very broad level, refer to the types of Christianity professed by Afro-Caribbean peoples. Under this rubric would be included Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism, Moravianism, indeed all the branches of Christianity where Blacks are involved.<sup>4</sup> However, these denominations have in their modes of government and styles of worship, patterned themselves after European modes, hence are not deeply expressive of an African flavor.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was established in Jamaica in 1970 and now has a membership of over 10,000, appeals to followers of the Rastafarian movement,<sup>5</sup> mainly because of its seeming affinity with their "back to Africa" cause. However, many Rastas soon discover, after attending this church for a brief while, that it is not as African as they had supposed it to be. An interesting observation which may be made at this point is that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in its history, which

stretches back to the middle of the fourth century<sup>6</sup> was always ruled by Alexandria, Egypt, and it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that it became possible for Ethiopian nationals to lead the church. In fact, the church only became fully autonomous in 1951.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, four in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, and Suriname, is African in the sense that it has attracted a large number of blacks within the region. Its Africanness is the result of an incident which took place in November 1787 at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., when Richard Allen, a Black American, led a walk-out during Sunday morning worship. He and his followers were protesting the prejudice against Blacks among the white members of that congregation. Eventually a separate congregation developed to cater for the spiritual and emotional needs of Africans. It was a pro-Black congregation, but not anti-white, since the desire of Allen was that persons, regardless of color, could worship God together. Its form of worship is basically Methodist, hence still cannot claim to be fully expressive of African Caribbean Christianity.

A truly African Caribbean Christianity denotes, not simply the brands of Christianity as practiced by peoples of African origin in the Caribbean. Rather, it refers to an expression of Christianity wherein God, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, is worshipped and adored, and wherein some of the African cultural facets which are not in contradiction to the essential Gospel message, have been employed to good effect in the communicating of that same Gospel. Such a brand of Christianity would:

- a. Accept the African world-view with its acknowledgement of a Supreme Being and the existence of a number of lesser spiritual beings.
- b. Admit the possibility of continuous interaction between the physical and spiritual realms.

- c. Admit that the spirit world may communicate with the material world through dreams and visions, as well as spirit-possession.
- d. Alert itself to the reality of evil and evil forces in the world and the need for protection against the same.
- e. Make use, in liturgy, of lively, rhythmic songs and dances.
- f. Acknowledge the priestly functions of both men and women.
- g. Acknowledge that their role includes caring for the spiritual and physical health of people.

There are very few examples of a truly African Caribbean Christianity in terms of the criteria stated above. However, the closest we get to a semblance of it is when we examine (1) the feature of Revivalism in Jamaica and (2) the Spiritual Baptist Church in Trinidad and Tobago.

### Revivalism

The 1860s witnessed the peak of the religious awakening or a Great Revival in Jamaica. It was during this time that there emerged religious movements which were a mixture of African religion and Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

Revivalists perceive of God as ruler of the world, but one who is very distant. This God has under him spirits who are nearer to the world and are interested in everyday affairs. Among the spirits are prophets of the Old Testament, apostles and evangelists of the New Testament, Satan and his chief, Rutibel, and the spirits of ancestors. Jesus Christ makes His presence felt in worship services, though he does not possess a worshipper. It is the Holy Spirit who may manifest himself in this manner. Worship services include drumming, handclapping, offering of prayers, reading from the Bible, preaching, visions, healing, dancing and spirit possession. Revivalist leaders are well acquainted with healing techniques and in fact

employ several of them, such as prayer, fasting, laying on of hands, bush baths, anointing with oil, and exorcism.

Revivalist churches make use of candles, crucifixes and incense, as do Roman Catholics. But their services are African. Women are in the majority and exercise priestly functions, unlike Roman Catholicism. It must be pointed out that there are occasions when onlookers question whether such churches are demonic rather than Christian. This refers particularly to those occasions when the sprinkling of goat's blood may form an integral part of the ritual. Of course it must be admitted that the religion of the ancient Israelites, from which Christianity has derived a great deal, did have the sprinkling of blood as a sign of atonement being made.<sup>8</sup>

One ought to be careful, therefore, that one does not condemn as demonic certain practices which might be alien to modern Christianity, but which bear some relationship to authentic religious activity in the religion of the old Israel.

### The Spiritual Baptists

The Spiritual Baptists were first known early in the twentieth century as Shouters in the island of St. Vincent. They were a group of working class people, chiefly Africans, whose worship was a combination of Yoruba elements and Eurochristianity. They worshipped on the streets or in small chapels. Their altars were decorated with candles and flowers. Worship included singing, clapping of hands, ringing of a hand bell, preaching, healing and possession of the Holy Spirit. Emphasis was placed upon being born again through baptism by immersion. Because of the noisy nature of their worship, laws were passed in St. Vincent in 1913 which made their activities illegal. When they spread to the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago, they were forbidden by law to worship. This was in 1917. However, by 1951, they were again permitted by law to worship in their unique way. When the movement spread to Barbados in 1957, it was given easy access.

Eudora Thomas regards the Spiritual Baptist faith as being "based on

the fundamental beliefs of the ILE-IFE and the practical experiences of African life."<sup>9</sup> For example, Spiritual Baptists have an initiatory process of "mourning" which takes place for a short period of time — it may be three, seven, fourteen, or twenty-one days. The initiate is placed in a secluded room and is frequently attended by a spiritual guide. During this time, he/she fasts and prays. Dreams and visions may serve to reveal the spiritual gifts which he/she has for Christian service. According to Rev. Thomas, "the rite of mourning is representative of the culture and social life as practiced by the slave who were brought to Trinidad and Tobago; it is an African custom that has been retained."<sup>10</sup>

Rev. Thomas makes reference to the fact that the Spiritual Baptists have developed because of both African and Eurochristian influences:

Even though the essential aspects of the Shouter Baptist religion were brought from Africa, eventually many aspects of western Christian traditions were included. Many Yoruba elements have been retained in the worship of the Spiritual Baptists. As the rituals of Yoruba were transmitted and adapted from their original forms elements of Christianity were added. It is this mixture which has become the Spiritual Baptists and which can be seen in the liturgy and practices of contemporary Spiritual Baptists."<sup>11</sup>

In both Revivalism and Spiritual Baptists, we see an attempt to indigenize Christianity. The respect for the African traditional world view as well as a number of other features, already outlined, would suggest that these two phenomena constitute the nearest we have got to a truly African Caribbean Christianity. In both Revivalism and Spiritual Baptists, women play a very significant role, by virtue of the fact that (a) they exercise spiritual authority, and (b) they are in the majority. The other point to be noted is that these groups are still, by and large, a phenomenon of the lower socio-economic groups. The Revivalists in Jamaica have come into public focus and this is in no small part due to the work of the current prime

minister.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the attention of a former prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago<sup>13</sup> helped the Spiritual Baptists to gain greater respect among the population.

### African Caribbean Christianity and Pentecostalism

One of the most noticeable features of Christianity in the Caribbean today is the continual growth of Pentecostalism. Whereas many of the so-called "mainline" or historical churches across the region are experiencing a drop in their membership, the Church of God and Pentecostal groups are growing by leaps and bounds. Take the case of Jamaica. According to figures available from the Department of Statistics, between 1943 and 1982, the Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist churches suffered drastic losses. In contrast, the Church of God, Pentecostal Churches, and the Seventh Day Adventists increased significantly.<sup>14</sup>

#### Church Support In Jamaica

	1943	1970	1982
Anglican	350,000	276,000	154,000
Baptist	318,000	319,000	217,000
Methodist	109,000	108,000	70,000
Moravian	50,000	51,000	32,000
Catholic	71,000	142,000	108,000
Church of God & Pentecostals	53,000	362,000	512,000
Seventh Day Adventists	27,000	127,000	151,000

Jamaica has always had a very high percentage of Africans in its population. At one time it was as high as 95%. We are, therefore, correct in assuming that African Caribbean people are opting for Pentecostal-type churches, as opposed to those historically linked with Europe. This should not come as a surprise, seeing that Pentecostalism began as a Black move-

ment,<sup>15</sup> gained popularity within the Black community in the United States and spread to other parts of the world, taking root especially in areas of high concentration of African peoples.

Pentecostal worship undoubtedly attracts Afro Caribbean people because it is lively, bringing into play all the exciting musical rhythms, handclapping, dance, possession by the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. There is much spontaneity in this type of worship and a high level of congregational participation. The African world view is adhered to. Pentecostals believe in the existence of the ministering angels who render assistance when one is confronted by evil forces, spirits and demons. It is also noticeable that, as in African Caribbean Christianity, so too in Pentecostalism, women exercise a tremendous amount of spiritual authority.

Even though within Pentecostalism there are to be found some of the features which we associate with African Caribbean Christianity, the real attraction of this brand of Christianity lies elsewhere. According to research done by Professor William Wednoja<sup>16</sup> the rapid growth of Pentecostalism, as experienced in Jamaica between 1950 and 1970, had links with social change and modernization which were then affecting the society:

Such modernization was closely paralleled by the growth of Pentecostalism, and this association does not appear to be coincidental. Pentecostal membership has grown with the GNP and over the same period of rapid growth. It seems reasonable to conclude that economic change is the primary independent variable responsible for the growth of Pentecostalism, although intervening variables such as changes in social structure, personality and values appear to be the direct results of economic change and the proximal causes for religious change. There would also seem to be a feedback effect of religious change reinforcing economic, social and psychological changes. That is, while Pentecostalism arose in response to modernization, it has also taken on the role of reinforcing modernizing trends.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Wednoja also associates modernization with Americanization. Thus, Pentecostalism somehow has direct links with American culture, even as it is committed to a new and changing society. It is possible to lend support to these findings when we notice the strong ties which have been established between Jamaican Pentecostals and those from the United States of America. It is not the culture of Africa, but rather that of America which plays the major role in the existence of Caribbean Pentecostalism. In fact, there are Pentecostal churches in the Caribbean which in addition to receiving American missionaries and American money to support outreach projects, rely upon American religious broadcasts, beamed by satellite, for their spiritual food.

The North American orientation of Pentecostalism has not always been to the advantage of the Caribbean region. On the one hand, there is the tendency for churches to overlook the felt needs of the Caribbean and instead of addressing them creatively, they propose solutions which will please those who watch from the North. For example, there is a need for Christians in the Caribbean to be more interested and actively involved in the political issues of liberation and development. But many of our Pentecostal preachers are reluctant to articulate political views lest the members of their congregations become too revolutionary, and lest they be accused of being "communists." On the other hand, Pentecostalism has refused to be identified with the ecumenical efforts of the Caribbean Conference of Churches in addressing issues of liberation and development, which are perceived to be not merely socio-economic concerns but theological ones as well. It is, therefore, not as committed to the Caribbean as are the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Spiritual Baptist Church of Trinidad and Tobago which are all members of the Caribbean Conference of Churches. It is lamentable that the Pentecostals are not ecumenically involved at this level. The future of the Caribbean hinges upon the ability of its constituent institutions to work together for the achievement of common goals.

If the Church, as an ecumenical body, can give a lead in this direction, then the future will not be bleak, but rather bright and hopeful.

### Conclusion

It is important for Christianity in the Caribbean to reflect facets of African culture. This in itself is a liberating thing. As has been noted about the region's history the culture of the slaves was regarded as inferior and barbaric. As long as the slave trade, coupled with the institution of slavery, lasted there was always the feeling that everything African was all wrong and that everything European was all right. Not only was the idea of Black inferiority prevalent among the whites. It was also the feeling among Blacks that they were of lesser worth than their white counterparts.

Following Emancipation, there was the colonial era which persisted until the second half of the present century. Again colonialism had its effects upon people's thinking in the Caribbean. The whites, who were in the minority, held the significant administrative positions, whereas the masses of Blacks had to be satisfied with menial jobs or no employment at all. It has, therefore, always been necessary for Caribbean people to be reminded that they need not feel any less than human because they are Africans. Marcus Garvey<sup>18</sup> was convinced about the dignity of the Black person. This was the gist of his preaching in the 1920s. As Rastafarianism developed in the 1930s, its message was equally about the worth of African culture. The Black Power movement which gripped the region during the 1970s also had much to say about the beauty of Blackness.

Christianity in the Caribbean must reflect African culture because in so doing it affirms the God-giveness of that culture. For too long Christians have learned to appreciate no other culture than that of Europe, no other way of worshipping God than that of the European. Whereas Revivalists in Jamaica and Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad and Tobago have helped to forge a truly African Caribbean Christianity, it is now left to other denominations to reassess their brand of Christianity with a view

to making it more reflective of the culture of the majority. It must be remembered that in Caribbean culture, Africa has had the greatest input.

However, in trying to forge a type of Christianity which is culturally relevant, people in the Caribbean have to remember that theirs is a plural society. Not only have Africans made the Caribbean their home. The Caribbean person may equally be of Indian, Chinese, European or North American origin. Just as we maintain that the cultures of Europe and Africa are God-given, so too must we admit that in Indian, Chinese and North American cultures there are valuable elements which can be incorporated into Christianity to make it more meaningful and relevant to the Caribbean. If such an ideal can be fully realized, then there is bound to emerge within the Caribbean a type of Christianity which is unique and exciting.

### Notes

1. Philip Potter, "Foreword," in David I. Mitchell, (Ed.), *With Eyes Wide Open* (Barbados: CADED, 1973), p. 5.

2. See John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1977).

3. In Jamaica, it was not until 1816 that an act was passed to give slaves Christian teaching. Equally worthy of note is the fact that the Lutheran Church came to British Guiana (present day Guyana) in 1743, but no attempt had been made to convert the slaves to Christianity.

4. See George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1978), pp. 21-50.

5. The Rastafarian movement views Ethiopia as a heaven upon earth mainly because the late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia is considered a great prophet, if not the Messiah. For an extensive treatment of Rastafarianism, see Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians*. A theological assessment of the movement is found in George M. Mulrain, *Ibid.*, pp. 324-335.

6. Scholars date the advent of Christianity in Ethiopia from the time of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Queen Candace was probably the first significant Christian in Ethiopia. However, it was in the middle of the fourth century that Christianity was declared the state religion.

7. One of the popular revivalist movements was Bedwardism. Its founder, Alexander Bedward (1859-1921) is often referred to as the father of modern revivalism in Jamaica.

8. *cf.*, Leviticus 7.

9. Eudora Thomas, *A History of the Shouter Baptists in Trinidad and Tobago* (Trinidad: Calaloux Publications, 1987), p. 47.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 51

12. Prime Minister Edward Seaga has done much research on Revivalism, *cf.* "Revival Cults in Jamaica," published in *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 June 1969.

13. The late Eric Williams, former Prime Minister of the twin island republic, often attended functions of the Spiritual Baptists or invited their leaders to state occasions.

14. This situation was highlighted recently by Professor Carl Stone of the University of the West Indies in a "Daily Gleaner" feature, February 1988.

15. Pentecostalism as a movement is supposed to have been initiated at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, California.

16. William Wednoja, "Modernization and the Pentecostal Movement in Jamaica" in Stephen D. Glazier, ed., *Perspectives on Pentecostalism: Case Studies from the Caribbean and Latin America* (Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1980).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

18. For an assessment of Marcus Garvey, see Rupert Lewis and Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Garvey, Africa, Europe, the Americas* (Kingston: Univ. of the West Indies, 1986).