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A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

The 1993 Laing Lecture: First Response

Emmanuel Oladipo

[p.27]

It is a truism that the Christian presence in Africa today is an established and vigorous reality. There is no taking away from that. Cry Jesus! The cry is indeed going out, and going out with a cacophony of voices. But it is important for us to ask, Whose voices are doing the loudest crying? And, Which Jesus are they, in fact, proclaiming? Thank God for the testimony of Afua Kuma, that has been so beautifully presented to us. I dare vow that this is not a lone voice crying in the wilderness. Ask any African. They will be able to multiply examples from their own tribe and culture of similar prophetic poetry proclaiming the glories of our Lord.

I want to mention just one of them. I encountered this in one of my journey's across Africa. There is a gentleman, Matthew Ekran, who is a minister of state in Houphouet Boigny's cabinet in Cote d'Ivoire. He is a breed of that rare phenomenon—a politician whose Christianity shines through in his politics. The development of that Christian faith he attributes to his Togolese mother-in-law, an illiterate, but revered prophetess in the church that she founded. Unlike Afua Kuma, unfortunately, this old lady's theology does not bear close scrutiny. But remember, quoting Turner, Dr Bediako started by warning us of the old and new heresies to be found at the growing edges of Christianity in its most dynamic form.

As surely as the sun will rise on the 10th April 1993, two million members of the Zionist Church will gather together for their Easter service on the veld of South Africa, as they usually do every Easter. They are perhaps the largest expression of the Africans crying Jesus, and doing so with what we might call their own indigenous voices. Dr Bediako referred to Joseph Babalola, to prophet Harris, to Kimbangu, and he could have mentioned many others. These were people who founded indigenous churches that are still growing strong today. I have reason to believe from my own studies that these people knew the Lord and the grace that brought salvation down. Alas, the churches that they founded have not been reformed, and, to say the least, they are desperately in need of reformation. But they are growing as fast as any other, and they are proclaiming Jesus the best they know how. Yet, there is a problem: far too much of their theology can only be described as 'Christian' by an extremely elastic interpretation of the word 'Christian'. These groups form a significant proportion of the impressive

[p.28]

statistics of the church in Africa. They have no reason to disguise their syncretism from anybody, and they don't. But, they are winning converts, particularly from the established churches with orthodox theologies. Somehow, these churches manage to scratch where the people itch, in a way that the established churches do not. They count themselves among the Christians, and so do our statisticians. But, should we not take note that it is not the statistics that matter most? We should learn from one of the ancient theologians: that man looks from the outside, but God has a different basis for his judgment.

Thank God for what he is doing; but there is still much more ground to be covered. There is much ground to be covered in reaching out not just to make Christians, but Christians who know the Lord in true reality, who love the Lord, and who are able to demonstrate their love in everyday life, able to demonstrate their love in the midst of the challenges old and new.

There are some very deep challenges that are facing God's church in Africa today. Thank God because there is very much that is wholesome. And the prognosis for the future is indeed bright. In the 1950s, the likes of Dr Bolali Idowu were quite correct to talk of our pre-fabricated theology. Having grown up in the church that he was describing, I can back up his thesis from my own inside knowledge. But we have come a long way from there, and there are very many aspects that one can consider. I remember growing up as a faithful member of God's church, how we used to sing songs that had absolutely no meaning not just to me, but to any member of the congregation! But in fairness to us, we were singing in Yoruba, a tonal language, songs that originated in Latin, and were translated through German into English, and then into Yoruba. And we were singing them to German tunes!

Thankfully, the church in Africa has been growing in every way since then. There is a whole new, well-trained, and articulate generation, who were children then or who were still unborn; they are an ever-increasing multitude of convinced Christian men and women, young and old. They are the ones who are busy writing out a new chapter in practical theology today; at this very moment, at grassroots level and in the context of a continent in crisis. Today they are filtering into positions of leadership, both in the church and in society. They are the ones able to make the voice of Afua Kuma to be heard beyond her village. Some of them have the privilege of being trained in centres of theological excellence, at home and abroad. 'To whom much has been given, much will be demanded.'

Africa is waiting. The whole world is waiting. Waiting for the contribution of this new crop of African theologians.

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