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Martin Luther versus Us: Assessing the Reformation through the Perspectives of an African Class Raheem Oluwafunminiyi

Abstract

This study takes a look at an African and its encounter with Martin Luther through robust and critical debates. It identifies and examines some contentious issues that characterised the period of Reformation and its effect on European history from a strictly African academic perspective. Though primarily a European affair, Reformation was also similarly witnessed by West Africa in the early decades of the Twentieth Century when independent churches established by Africans split from mainline historic churches and introduced reforms doctrines to African peoples. By collating interpretations of students' responses from the class experience, and corroborating them with extant secondary sources, the study opens the window through which Reformation could be understood in several contexts. It concludes that Reformation is a reminder of the ambivalent nature of religious encounter as assumed in other local frameworks such as the religious schism in early colonial Nigeria.

Key Words: Martin Luther, Reforme, Catholic Church, Europe, AIC

Résumé

Cette étude jette un regard sur un Africain et sa rencontre avec Martin Luther à travers des débats robustes et critiques. Elle identifie et examine certaines questions litigieuses qui ont caractérisé la période

de la Réforme et ses effets sur l'histoire européenne d'un point de vue africain strictement académique. Bien qu'une affaire principalement européenne, la Réforme a été également vécue en Afrique de l'Ouest au cours des premières décennies du XXe siècle, lorsque des églises indépendantes établies par des Africains se sont séparées des églises traditionnelles et ont introduit des doctrines de réforme aux peuples africains. En rassemblant les interprétations des réponses des élèves à partir de l'expérience de la classe et en les corroborant avec des sources secondaires existantes, l'étude ouvre la fenêtre à travers laquelle la Réforme peut être comprise dans plusieurs contextes. Elle conclut que la Réforme est un rappel de la nature ambivalente de la rencontre religieuse telle qu'elle est supposée dans d'autres cadres locaux tels que le schisme religieux au début du Nigeria colonial.

Mots-clés: Martin Luther, Réforme, Église catholique, Europe, AIC

Introduction

On 31st October 1517, German monk, Martin Luther, nailed a piece of paper containing Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. On October 31st October 2017, the 500th anniversary of that significant religious episode in human history was remembered. Several decades before Martin Luther (Luther henceforth) protested against the Roman Catholic Church, only few people had challenged the Pope's authority and some of the Church's religious statutes. To be sure, John Wycliffe, one of the early known critics of the Church once condemned the Popes as having no scriptural justification and regarded the Bible as the scriptural source of reliance rather than the Pope and clerics. He also castoff the concept of purgatory and invalidated the sale of indulgences, clerical celibacy, pilgrimages and a host of other Church doctrines (Kaminsky 1963: 57-74). Typically, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) leaders reacted to such intransigence with either instant death or with excommunication. Wycliffe, for instance, was treated in a most horrific manner even after his death in 1384. Through the Council of

Constance, he was declared a heretic in 1415 and excommunicated. His writings were banned and subsequently burned while in 1428, his corpse was exhumed and ordered to be incinerated (Kelly 1998: 1-28). Commonly referred to as the Reformation, this event split the RCC into two. Nobody would have thought that the Ninety-Five Theses would cause such a major religious split. Luther only intended the Theses to bring about correction to some doctrines in the RCC that he questioned.

It can be argued that for students of history in most Nigerian universities, the Reformation of 1517 is not only unconsciously conceived as one of those passing events in history, most importantly within the framework of Europe's religious experience but also one that could be glossed over. Following 500 years of that event in Christendom, the study examines how the Reformation was encountered in an African class through pedagogy. Some of the major issues raised in the class are identified in this article while the ways in which this served as a platform to challenge a few of the general notions in the literature about the Reformation will be similarly discussed. Following contacts with Christianity from the mid-1800s, and given the prejudices Africans faced by European missionaries thereafter, the need to reform the mainline historic Churches emerged and later led to the formation of African Independent Churches from the early 1900s. Issues around religion often evoke stern debates in many parts of Africa and are usually sources of tensions in most communities. Thus, the debates which confronted the topic on the Reformation in this particular class under study call for some analysis and, therefore, problematized. By collating students' interpretation of their responses from the class experience and corroborating these responses with extant secondary sources, the study opens the window through which the Reformation could be understood in several contexts. It concludes that the Reformation is a reminder of the ambivalent nature a religious encounter as this

assumes in other local frameworks such as the religious schism in early colonial Nigeria.

The Making of a Reformation Class

As a freshman in few years ago in a Nigerian university, the author offered along with close to 102 students the course, European History, 1300-1789. Like many freshmen admitted to study history at the undergraduate levels throughout Nigerian universities, many students who offered the above-stated course had very little or no idea or basic knowledge of, or background in, history. For reasons that are unclear (Adesina 2102: 7-8), history as a subject was expunged in 2007 from Nigeria's primary and secondary basic school curriculum. The introduction of history courses and teaching of European History in the early part of the first semester, therefore, put virtually all freshmen in a challenging situation. While many students showed little enthusiasm in the beginning, others found it difficult to understand why such a course like European history was included as part of the semester courses. The situation appeared hopeless in the early stages but things took an interesting turn later through the intervention of the class instructor who set out from the outset to engage the students in one of the most meticulous forms of academic mentorship and pedagogy. Concise notes, historical documents and secondary materials were all provided to ease understanding of what was to be expected. About nine to eleven groups were formed and handed topics that further spurred interest in Europe's somewhat tempestuous past.

The author is aware that freshmen may not be critical enough or have the critical ability at that level to take on such an important topic. Again, the intelligence of this author (as a student) may also not have been critically developed enough at that time to engage or interrogate such topic. Furthermore, the author may certainly not know what to look out for in an academic research as a freshman

member of the class. Contrary to the above position, the class author is of the view that most members of the class were already critically prepared by the time this topic was treated. The class instructor, earlier noted, was very instrumental to the academic and intellectual capability of the students while the students themselves put stringent efforts towards achieving their individual class goals. The class steadily allowed critical assessment and most times, stern but intellectual criticisms of the students' presentations which often led to unending debates among fellow students. The class instructor, however, intervened from time to time to either correct or support an opinion and in the closing stages of the class, reacted to most of the contending issues prompted in the course of the presentation. In spite of this, the class instructor did not force personal views on any topic on the students. Students, as the instructor claimed, was allowed to present their positions which may be right or wrong to others but so long the facts are laid bare to prove or disprove the state of an event. With the opportunity to freely express their views without fear – not in the sense that appeared insipid, unintelligible or was forced on others, but in ways that were intellectually thought-provoking, slowly, this initially impassive class was easily transformed. The interests and level of comprehension among students turned out to be impressive. The strict guidance and teaching ability of the class instructor put the students' on the right track. Secondly, students are required to carry out research and present their findings in a class presentation, write tests, submit assignments and at the end of the semester, test their knowledge further through written examinations. Each of these assessments comes with individual marks which students strive very hard to earn. The general student performance at the end of that semester was not only satisfactory but showed how deeply receptive virtually all members of the class were to the course (Personal communication with the Class Instructor).

The Contentious Issues

One of the major weaknesses members of the class discovered from the group presentation was its obvious omission of a determinable history of the Reformation. Members of the class also rejected the group presenters' arguments or position that the Reformation commenced in the year 1517. Though a clear meaning of the term, Reformation was spelled out, the group presenters argued that the event was triggered by Luther's Ninety-Five Theses which for members of the class and the class instructor was unacceptable. For a fitting understanding of how the class engaged Luther, the author examines some of the useful interventions made in identifying and tracing the Reformation to a far anterior period. Similarly, this section centres its arguments on three main contentious issues (itemised as sub-sections below) along with a summary of the interventions given by members of the class. In order not to appear excessively 'Solomonic' in terms of giving an all-knowing point of view, and since the position identified shortly is a culmination of diverse opinions and comments articulated by class members, the author also suggest key sources to corroborate the various viewpoints.

The Reformation from Time Past

What we know of the Reformation could be traced to the schism of 1054, a break of communion between the Greek (Orthodox) and Latin (Catholic) Churches. Arguments in recent times, however, claim that differences between the East and West Churches antedated the 1054 schism. As Eric Plumer (2000: 37) suggests, the division involved developments that spanned several centuries swayed by a number of factors that are theological, political and cultural in nature. To be sure, what is commonly referred to as the 1054 schism was, among others, caused by two distinguishable differences. One, ecclesiastical, which was hinged on how best or whom to manage and administer the Church and two, theological, which was purely on manners of correct interpretations of Church beliefs and true practices or teachings of its

core ideologies. One of the apparent signs of the schism was the forced closure of the Greek Churches in southern Italy and order by the Pope to adhere to Latin religious customs (Dragani 2007: 44). Series of events, thereafter, often bitter and acrimonious, eventually culminated into a total schism that has remained to this day (Runcimen 1997). In effect, the 1054 schism was the starting point (and as the class generally agreed) of the Reformation about five centuries after.

While the moment the Reformation began has been agreed upon, there is the need to identify and examine other events that had direct bearings on the 1054 schism. Though the schism divided Europe's leading religious institution, the Catholic Church was hardly affected. Things would, however, take a dramatic turn in the fourth decade of the fourteenth century when Europe was struck by the bubonic plague (Black Death). In a morbid situation of this nature, many were certain to find succour in a higher authority. The Catholic Church was at the centre of the plague's outbreak, particularly as a significant number, if not all, of the population, looked towards her for spiritual help. As the plague kept ravaging villages and cities, rumours became widespread and blame subsequently apportioned. It was under this atmosphere of fear and trepidation that the Flagellants emerged. Believing that God had brought upon them His wrath, this agency travelled across cities and villages, beating and inflicting various degrees of injuries on themselves in the hope that such performance may save them from their sins. Expectedly, the Church soon came hard on the movement. In 1349, Pope Clement VI condemned the group and ordered its sympathisers burned or executed while those who were said to have recanted were not spared by the Catholic hierarchy.

In fairness to the Church, it had reacted instantly to the palpable situation but most of its interventions were disappointing and heavily

questioned. Instances of violent encounters between the locals and Bishops abound across Europe (Horrox 1994: 116). As priests took on the role of local healers, many kept their faith in the Church but soon became disappointed. This was a period, possibly for the first time, that people's faith in the Church waned. Many quickly saw the inherent infallibility of the Church and at once shattered the confidence reposed in their priests who themselves had evaded their responsibilities to their parishioners.

As part of the comments made in the class in relation to the Flagellant movement, few suggested that the Church could have exploited the spiritual verve of the movement to which people's faith in the Church may not have been shaken or undermined further. One student though agreed but argued that this could never have been possible since the Church was not accommodating of dissent in any form. Another was of the opinion that the failure of the Church to harness these possibilities illustrates the utter chaos it faced throughout Europe and the entrenched disposition of fear that pushed the people into joining the Flagellants or partaking in their spiritual crusades. According to Byrne (2009: 306) whose view was in tandem with those of the class instructor, the apparent criminalisation of the Flagellant group was construed as positive repentance so much that areas least affected by the plague hoped they could find some spiritual prophylaxis from the group.

Since the 1054 schism, the Church had unconsciously opened itself to scrutiny among independent minds (Reilly, 2009: 306). This would soon come to the fore in the heydays of the plague when an English sect called the Lollards finding inspiration in Wycliffe and his teachings – and most notably Wycliffe himself denounced the sudden thirst for wealth among members of the papal class. This group argued that poverty was at the heart of Christian existence and hence, condemned the failing educational and moral principles of the

priesthood (Slavicek 2008: 97). Wycliffe, on the other hand, attacked the sale of indulgences and mass for dead flocks to raise money after the plague had subsided. His most brutal attack was on the Church's continuous use of Latin as the official language of worship which Wycliffe and the Lollards found fundamentally unacceptable. Taking advantage of the bustling printing press, the Bible was translated into English, an act which infuriated the Catholic leadership. Typically, the Church hounded Wycliffe and the Lollards into silence.

In the final analysis, the class believed without further probing that the Black Death was the most significant driver of the Reformation and illustrates the link between the latter and the religious dissensions of the fourteenth century. The class observed that failure to reassure the fears of the population and restore their aspirations in the thick of the devastating plague no doubt inspired the people to pursue a closer and more personal relationship with God. Similarly, the Church's heavy grip on the people waned drastically while many discovered that Popes were no less different from them. Lastly, more than ever before, the Black Death opened the Church to a bold challenge within its ranks. Though Wycliffe was basically concerned with ecclesiastical reforms, which surprisingly had been at the centre of the disagreements that finally pushed the Church into schism centuries before a position John Huss had similarly taken the Church regarded all as heretics and their actions religious dissension. These so-called heretics were either forced to recant or renounce their earlier stand against the Church, failure of which they were instantly discredited.

Throughout the period the Black Death lasted, granting of indulgences was not uncommon, specifically for those who were willing to participate in the procession and mass of purification. In the late Middle Ages, indulgences would later be commercialised and abused, a practice the Church had perceptible knowledge of but failed

to confront. Like Wycliffe, this scandal would dramatically form the core of Luther's disagreement with the Church which later triggered the Reformation in 1517.

Interestingly, in the closing stages of this sub-contentious issue, one or two members of the class suggested that the interventions made during the period were purely philosophical' rather than 'theological' as we fittingly saw during the Black Death period. Their argument was linked to the conciliar movement whose leanings, they maintained, was heavily influenced by William Ockham (1285-1347). Though they observed that he (Ockam) was a theologian, his thoughts were more inclined towards logic and critical reasoning. Whether the conciliar movement intervened philosophically or theologically was not important to the majority of the class. They were more concerned with its intentions which members of the class did not fault since the movement initially appeared, as the name implied, a conciliatory body, enabling propositions to end an embarrassing dispute within the Church hierarchy. It, however, took on a radical posture in the event of the meeting of the Council of Basel (1431-1449) which was torn by factions, by renewing the decree Sacrosancta of the Council of Constance.

In any case, it is glaring from the above that the Church had been ushered into even the fifteenth century with more crisis than it could bear. Though the Church came out victorious in all of these, it inadvertently marked a steady end to a united Christendom. As Salembier (1907: v) rightly observe, "All the past trials of the Church appear to revive; all her future cries exist in embryo in this unfortunate schism." By the time papal authority finally returned to Rome with a single Pope at its helm, the Church hoped to surmount many of its obstacles and rebuild a neglected city. As it appeared, subsequent Popes chose to pursue the latter i.e. the rebuilding of Rome than fixing the superstructure of the Church itself. As a

consequence, therefore, Popes, mainly during the Renaissance, habitually became more material conscious than spiritually inclined (Vidmar 2014).

Reformation, Revolt, Restoration or Revolution?

As part of the major contentious issues was the question of whether the Reformation could properly be referred to as a Reformation, Revolt, Restoration or Revolution in the light of all that had occurred between 1517 and the intervening centuries. This question, as it were, divided the class into three camps. However, one of the three chose to sit on the fence with no cogent position to prove its indifference. Incidentally, the group which presented this topic once again failed to state clearly why they believed the event of 1517 was a reformation. As a member of the class, the author regards this behaviour not as an ignorance of the issue at hand but most likely a tacit agreement with the term (Reformation), since most of the group members did not profess the Catholic faith and so, were likely to be non-receptive to a position that would appear pro-Catholic.

While this case was established not many, of course, pitched tents with the Church in view of the interrogation of the earlier contentious issue. As many would come to agree, the Church had always proved contemptuous towards those who criticised it even though all they craved for was spiritual uprightness. The class thought with the end of the sad episode that characterised the Papal schism, the Church leadership would have shifted its hard stand against heretics while appraising itself and also accommodating opposing views that could be weighed through a disputation. It, therefore, explains why only a few members of the class stuck on the side of the Church among whom not surprisingly were Catholics or apologists as some viewed them. The question, therefore: did Luther intend to reform the Church or revolt against it?

In response to the question, the anti-Church camp settled for one very germane position. They pointed to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses which they claimed contained all of the issues that led to the Reformation in the first place and which they believe was no less a reformation. While this camp could not provide an overwhelming exposition on the Ninety-Five Theses due to limited time, they were no doubt, able to summarise their position using the practice of sales of indulgences as a focal point. The anti-Church camp informed the class on an important fact that Luther was in no way against the doctrine of indulgences but simply the venality around it. "Apostolic pardons are to be preached with caution," quoting Luther, "lest the people may falsely think them preferable to other good works of love."

Not many were impressed with the anti-Church's diverse positions. It was thought they did not quite articulate well why they believe Luther's Ninety-Five Theses was, indeed, a reformation. Though they agreed his actions led to the 1517 Reformation, many were of the view that Luther was simply interested in challenging the abuses around the sale of indulgences rather than upsetting the papacy. This was why even at the Diet of Worms; he was simply intent on finding anyone that could at least challenge his argument scripturally beyond logic or reason. Again, a segment of the class noted that the Church only removed the abuses inherent in the doctrine of indulgences but did not expunge or take its power of authority from the Pope. In essence, the Church was not reformed but only returned to the early Christian Church practice in granting indulgences. The anti-Church camp disagreed; claiming that had Luther not queried the commercialization of indulgences, the Church would have continued with the practice, and without Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, it was possible that the world would have entered into subsequent centuries under one Church led by even more-powerful and corrupt Popes, hence a significant pointer to 1517 as a Reformation. As shall be indicated shortly, the position of the anti-Church camp appears to

hold no water, given that Luther was not intent on breaking the Church into two as it would later occur.

The pro-Church camp, on the other hand, agreed with the position that the Church may have been too punitive in some of its approach towards heretics, yet there were some pre-Reformation Protestants or movements which, despite disagreeing fundamentally with the Church, expressed it in ways that the latter found it expedient to relate with them. The camp cited the example of the Brethren of the Common Life (BCL) whom like Wycliffe and Hus, and later, Luther denounced the amoral practices of the Church. However, unlike these individuals, Geert Groote (1340–1384), founder of the BCL, sought to return the Church to the customs among the early Christians and was motivated to pursue this within. What this illustrates, according to the pro-Church camp, is that while Hus, for instance, exited the Church which sparked a deeper rift in Christendom, Groote, in spite the rot, was inspired to stay and embark on his reforms from inside. By this, the Church embraced Groote despite his difference of opinion with her. In essence, the camp argued, Luther's position was simply a revolt and not a reformation. The anti-Church camp counteracted this position, arguing that the BCL had influenced figures like Luther who had been trained in their schools and so, she could not claim to have had a level of understanding with the Church when one of its pupils had been inspired by its teachings for which a reformation was ignited through him.

Despite the rich arguments and boisterous counter-opinions, the class failed to reach a compromise. Remarkably, the class instructor did not capitulate to either of the camps' positions. Unusually, what the class considered either as a revolt or reformation was to her a revolution and restoration. Her reason was hinged on the fact that for the first time, the Church finally lost its century-old grip on the population while the event created two distinct Christians — one

whose theological beliefs was centred on what is referred to as “Five Solae” and the other on the doctrine of infallibility (see Hazen 2002: 36-38). Secondly, the instructor claimed that some of the amoral practices Luther intended to 'reform' were not itself deemed worthy of reforms by the Church either in theological or ecclesiastical terms and so, reforms were not exacted immediately and even till Luther's death, despite the religious cataclysm he had ignited.

Restoration and not reform was made in terms of enhanced theological education for priests while new religious orders such as the Jesuits, Capuchin etc., all sympathetic to the Church pursued aggressively an end to the spread of the Reformation and the movement it had inspired in several European countries. These orders were significant in their efforts at curbing corruption, immorality and improving the piety of the flock. Lastly, restoration could be seen when the Church met three times between 1545 and 1563 under the auspices of the Council of Trent, and reaffirmed the doctrines and dogmas of the medieval church, chiefly those dealing with Indulgences. Lastly, the instructor posited that when the consequences of Luther's actions across Europe are weighed, principally the violent turn it took, one could not but consider the event in its entirety as a revolution.

The instructor's views were evidently unacceptable to both camps. The anti-Church, in particular, claimed that all the restoration efforts as illustrated by the class instructor were simply reforms irrespective of how they were pursued. They claimed that if Luther did not press for a change in the nomenclature, the Church would have remained drenched in corruption and theological transgression. The pro-Church, on the other hand, argued that what the instructor referred to as revolution was simply a century-old rift between princes and the Church battling for greater independence and had little to do with Luther's angst with the Church. Despite the multifarious opinions,

each camp, nevertheless, held on to what it believed was the appropriate interpretation of the 1517 event.

Luther: Protestant or Hypocrite?

Did Luther take hypocritical positions throughout the period of the Reformation? A member of the class provided a very brilliant submission which many, perhaps out of a lack of proper grasp of the particular issue, readily agreed to. Two examples were cited to support the 'hypocritical' thesis. Using the German Peasants' War (1525–1526) as the first case study, the submission claimed that Luther had warmed himself to the revolting peasants, on the one hand, and also his Catholic adversaries, on the other hand. Rather than show undying support for the commoners who were battling with a common enemy, Luther berated them Fulbrook 2004: 42-43). In his Admonition to Peace (1525), Luther (1967), although, called the war “a disastrous rebellion,” he put the blame on the “blind bishops and mad priests” who he thought lived “a life of luxury and extravagance” for which “the poor...cannot bear...any longer.” As it appeared that the peasants were demanding for justice, Luther soon extended his unalloyed support to them but this did not last for long. Luther called the princes in *Against the Robbing and Meandering Horde of the Peasants* (1525), to “smite, slay and stab” the commoners either openly or in hiding (cited in Rupp and Drewery 1970: 121-126). Asked why Luther chose to stay on the side of the aristocracy, sufficient answers could not be given. Some were of the view that since Luther had once been given protection by the Elector Prince Frederick III of Saxony and even went ahead to secure assurances from the Church that Luther would be provided easy passage to and from the Diet of Worms, it may fittingly explain why he backed the princes as a way of showing appreciation. Another position claimed that his bid to expand his Lutheran movement was likely to prove unsuccessful under a war-torn Germany and so,

despite that, his ideas had prompted the war among peasants against their feudal overlords, he chose to smite the commoners.

The second case study given was on Luther's 'hypocritical' position for and later against the Jews. In *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523), Luther berated the Church for its reactionary attitude towards the Jews. He demanded that all Jews be treated kindly to encourage them to “become genuine Christians” who would “turn to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs.” In a sudden twist, like he did with the peasants, Luther moved against the Jews. In series of attacks characteristic of anti-Semitism today, Luther in *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543), encouraged reprisal attacks on the Jews “so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them” (cited in Michael, 1985: 343-344). When pressed again on reasons Luther took such uncharitable posture, we were informed that he (Luther) was frustrated by the Jews' insolent attitude to Lutheranism which the former thought the latter would 'convert' into. Refusing to shift from Judaism altogether, Luther tagged the Jews unchristian, hence his call for their persecution.

At the end of the debate, it was very difficult to take a definite stand on the above-stated issues. Many were unsure of the sides to take but embraced those positions they possibly believe illustrate the facts on the ground. Others were also satisfied with the divergent opinions espoused which further helped to broaden their horizons. No doubt, Luther was a Protestant in the real sense of the word, yet a good number of the actions he took, notably his impudent position against the papal authority and Catholics as a whole, illustrate not only his continued frustrations with the Church but all the embodiments it stood for.

African Religious Awakening: The Rise of the African Independent Church

If Europe was originally the birthplace of the Reformation, how is Africa linked to this epoch? Examples are drawn from colonial Nigeria, given the peoples' constant opposition to European Christian networks, particularly from the mid and late nineteenth century. From the 1850s, European colonizers alongside Christian missionaries from the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist Missions made steady inroads into West Africa. Unlike the colonizers, the missionaries arrived with the intention to preach the gospel which hastened the spread of Protestant beliefs among colonial peoples. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), acting under the rubric of the Church of England, was instrumental to this experience. The primary objective of the CMS was to establish independent and self-administrative African churches through its missionary works. Africans were, therefore, trained in various capacities most of whom actually became masters in their own right. The newly educated and well-trained Africans hoped through their new status could be promoted to the post of catechists, assistant bishops etc., and in a short while, African bishops. Their hopes were soon dashed after it appeared European leadership of the Anglican Church was not receptive to the idea of advancement for Africans within its fold. As a result, and reminiscent of the events of 1054 and 1517, a schism within the Anglican fold broke out in 1891.

Before the schism in the Anglican Church which ultimately led to the formation of the United Native African Church, the Baptist Mission had witnessed a similar break up 10 years earlier i.e. in 1881, leading to the immediate establishment of the Native Baptist Church (Barrett 1970). Related cases of schisms during this period were noticeable in the Presbyterian Church in Calabar and the Lagos Methodist Church (Gbadamosi and Ajayi 1980: 369). The consequence of the schism in the Anglican Church calls for particular mention here. By the turn of

the century, precisely on 13 October 1901 in the Lagos colony (a British administered territory), the African Independent Church (AIC) made history. Having semblance with some of the factors that led to the schism in the Catholic Church, for the Anglican Church, this went beyond doctrinal differences.

While the AIC was formed by Africans to cater for the spiritual needs of fellow Africans (Daneel 1998: 23), its doctrines till date ironically adhere somewhat to the doctrine and liturgy of the Anglican tradition (Akebiyi 1995). Among some of the AIC's major points of disagreement include racial discrimination, adoption of cultural/traditional beliefs, Western spiritual imperialism etc. In the case of the latter, it was glaring that a good number of African Christians who had earlier expressed criticisms of African Traditional Religion found it difficult to detach themselves from their African or traditional worldview. It could, therefore, explain why once the AICs were formally organised, a handful of the local African customs and traditions were integrated as part of the practices and teachings of the Church (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997). The leadership structures too were at best in consonance with those applicable to their respective traditional kinship systems (Bengt 1960). By this, Africans began to operate through its own cultural expressions. Indeed, as the Catholic Church had treated Protestants and pre-Reformation movements and figures, so did the Anglican Church treated the AICs. For instance, in connivance with the British colonial authorities, the CMS leadership harassed and frustrated the early AICs by refusing to lease out to them pieces of land to construct their new churches. Zealous members had to resort to self-help in response.

Despite the AIC's doctrinal connections with the orthodox or mainline historic churches some of its practices locally embedded. Gbadamosi and Ajayi (1980: 361), for instance, polygamy which had been incorporated into the AIC was nevertheless a highly contentious issue

among members. Unlike the CMS doctrine where children from polygamous marriages were not allowed to be baptised and their parents viewed in abhorrence, the AIC believed differently. One J.K. Coker, for instance, who was instrumental in the formation of the AIC in Lagos, was accused by the Anglican Church leadership of not only baptising polygamists but also conferring traditional titles on members. He dismissed the accusations, arguing that holding a traditional title, according to Ayegboyin and Ishola (1997), did not invalidate his standing “as a Christian who must seek the salvation of all.” Inspired by Coker's fearless position and constant criticisms of the Anglican Church, African Christians elsewhere urged him to help establish the AIC in their domain.

We are inclined to ask, particularly in terms of the history of the AIC, how the above compares and contrasts with the 1517 Reformation in Europe. First, it would be recalled that language was one factor that influenced the acceptance of the Reformation, particularly in Germany and England. Since the Bible was written, interpreted and preached in Latin, it proved difficult to understand and further alienated many. This was similarly the case with African Christians, many of whom were non-literate and could barely reconcile with the 'Europeanised' Bible used as part of the religious instructions in the mainline churches. Perhaps, for more people to be able to read and understand the gospel in the local dialect, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, one of the early Christian converts and first African Bishop, translated the Bible into Yoruba (published in 1900) and later, Igbo. Crowther's effort could be seen as a motivating factor which pushed Africans in the mainline churches to produce new Yoruba translations of the Bible later used copiously in the event of the formation of the AICs.

Clearly, the Reformation emerged in reaction to a number of theological disagreements which spurred the formation of protestant movements across Europe. Although this was not part of the active

ingredients that led to the emergence of the AICs in parts of Africa, they share some similarities within the context of theological pronouncements later translating into ecclesiastical practice. The Reformation turned multiplicity into strength but brought adverse problems in diversity, paving way for a dispute over theological positions which in the end revealed that Protestantism was, indeed, a divided house (Hillerbrand 1968: xv). Understanding of the gospel and correct interpretation of the Last Supper became a disappointing controversy for a very long time. Just as the AICs at their early stages witnessed these turn of events, ecclesiastical practices differed, nonetheless, from one AIC to the other as some embraced syncretic beliefs while others a mix of Protestant Christian and traditional forms of belief. This new African religious movement, nevertheless, had little to worry about theological positions. In spite of their 'African' classification, the AICs still retained the doctrines or practices of the mainline churches in a non-reformed position. The Zionist churches in Southern Africa, for instance, embraced the original Zionist tradition traced to the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, Illinois, United States of America while the Aladura (prayer group) church predominant in Southwest Nigeria is associated with the Faith Tabernacle of Philadelphia, United States of America.

In contrast to the above, and as far as the European Reformation was concerned, there are no evidence that suggest a Messianic form of belief or practices which give the church leadership Jesus-like attributes as evidenced within a strand of the AICs. Protestant Churches did not place emphasis on power and sanctity on its leadership. It would seem that Martin Luther is worshipped among Protestants but this is not the case. In fact, Protestants reject Marian dogmas and saint veneration as evidenced in the dogmatic practices of some AICs. Evidently, the Reformation differs in the two contexts, given the differences in the doctrines of the Protestant Church and those of the AICs.

The AICs have faced significant modifications in recent times. While some of its early traditional practices have been subsumed under modernising systems or practices, they are a reminder of similar experiences in Europe in the sixteenth century. Understandably, many of those who had criticised the Church was mainly figures who were not only part of the existing intellectual class but were readily influenced by some of the societal upheavals, on the one hand, and progressive attainments, on the other hand (McGrath 2004). To be sure, the overbearing influence of colonial rule or policies in West Africa had a far-reaching effect, particularly as it helped to galvanise the few intellectual class at the time to take bold steps against not only foreign domination but also European missionary control with strong ties to the former. This social dynamic was in many ways responsible for the schisms in the mainline churches and emergence of AICs in quick succession with notable reforms.

Conclusion

As 1517 marked a turning point in history, Luther influenced the urge for scriptural independence never known to man. Yet, 500 years after, debates continue to rage on multifarious aspects of the Reformation. Unlike his forerunners, however, Luther could be given credit for providing a deeper understanding of the scriptures and those dealing with penance, salvation, and righteousness. By developing his own ideas of the 'true' faith and formulating them into a doctrine of justification, Luther went above many in articulating a unified Protestant theology, particularly those concerning the Eucharist to which Protestants and several other non-Protestant denominations conform to till today.

Though the Reformation was and still stimulating, liberating and democratising, practices in the Protestant churches appear to be tilting towards some of the exact practices the fire of Protestantism/reformation was originally lit for. For an African class

which is the focus of this article, some of the contested issues were explored which illustrate the ambivalent nature religious encounters assume in specific situations or contexts. Though quite a few questions were left unanswered, a huge chunk of the class was of the collective view that had the Church been receptive to change centuries before the Reformation, Luther may have passed unnoticed. Again, if there was cause to challenge the Church, the consequences may have been less problematic as to leave a scar on Christendom then and 500 years after.

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