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GHANAIAAN METHODISTS IN LONDON – IMPLICATIONS FOR BRITISH METHODISM

INTRODUCTION

Philip Jenkins asserts that while the assumption persists that modern Christianity is a religion of the West and the North of the world (focussed on Europe and European-derived civilisations), Christianity will always be regarded as being in decline, since the increasing secularism of these parts of the world is well established. However, his thesis is that once Christianity is regarded accurately as a religion with its centre of gravity much more in the South and the East of the globe, the future looks far more positive. Jenkins states: “*Many of the fastest-growing countries in the world are either predominantly Christian or else have very sizable Christian minorities*”¹.

While this gives great hope for the future of the world church, it does also create great challenges for churches in the West and the North. The challenge is two fold. Firstly for churches in the North and West to recognise this phenomenon and then for them to appreciate that these growing churches have developed differently from theirs. Lamin Sanneh comments: “*what is at issue now is the surprising scale and depth of the worldwide Christian resurgence, a resurgence that seems to proceed without Western organisational structures, including academic recognition, and is occurring amidst widespread political instability*”². These are often areas marked by “*economic poverty, political powerlessness but also religious pluralism*”³.

The churches of the South and East are primarily the product of nineteenth century missions with their roots in Europe and North America. The latter years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century have shown the movement in reverse. With developments in communications and increasing global mobility, churches in the North and West are constantly receiving Christians who have developed their faith in the South and the East. Their faith and discipleship, church priorities, expectations and structures may have begun in a European missionary model of ‘church’ but they have since adapted to African, Asian or Latin American cultures, traditions and ways of life. So the Christianity coming back to Europe is a different sort of Christianity.

No longer then can the churches in the ‘developed world’ be the ones ‘in control’. Now, in order to survive, they need to face the challenge of being on the receiving end of missionary activity. What is more, it is a different missionary activity. Christians from the South and East are not in the main travelling to the North and West primarily with the aim of developing their form of Christianity there. They are travelling for many other reasons: for education, for employment, for a richer experience of life, or as refugees. As they travel, they take with them their faith and Christian lifestyle. Gray expresses this clearly (referring to Africa): “*Christian scriptures and sacraments have, as it were, escaped from the hands and minds of those who brought them, and have spoken directly to the various and very differing needs of Africans. Even within the same society, the transmission of the faith across generations presents startling difficulties; when it is transmitted across continents and cultures, it sometimes appears at first sight to be almost unrecognisable*”⁴.

Due to patterns of migration, the experience of the Methodist churches in London is one example where the issue is particularly noticeable. These churches are increasingly multi-cultural, with some having a membership covering over thirty different nationalities and many different mother-tongues.

¹ Philip Jenkins *The Next Christendom* (Oxford) p.2.

² Lamin Sanneh *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Michigan) p.3

³ Kwame Bediako *Christianity in Africa* (New York) p.128

⁴ Richard Gray *Black Christians and White Missionaries* (Newhaven and London) p.1

This paper considers this issue in relation particularly to Ghanaian Methodists living in London, since the Ghanaian community is one of the largest that has come into Methodist churches in recent years. 'To serve the present age' must involve effective ministry with this community and helping them to realise their God-given potential within a new environment. Most of these churches received migrants from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s, working out ways of including their identity and priorities within the life of the English church. At that stage Caribbean Methodists had been schooled very much within the English Methodist tradition and if anything, they were expecting a rather more formal church tradition in Britain than the one they found. Many of those Caribbean Methodists and their descendants have remained within the Methodist churches in London. A second wave of migration into British churches came later, starting in the 1970s and 1980s and continuing through to the present day, mainly from West Africa. These migrants, unlike their Caribbean predecessors at a similar stage, are very mobile and therefore constantly aware of developments in their churches in Ghana, and they have come, not from a British colony, but from an independent country where Methodism has a high profile in politics, education and economic life.

Methodism in Ghana has developed since the earliest missionaries were there, to become something distinctively Ghanaian. Two of the factors that have had a significant impact on that process, and which challenge London Methodist Churches, are the influence of traditional African religion and the influence of the newer Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Ghana.

METHOD

This paper is the result of a study of various authors' considerations of the subject, both from the point of view of European churches and from an African perspective. In addition, oral history was gathered from interviews with two Ghanaian Methodist lay people in Cape Coast, both of whom are teachers in church schools, one of whom who is also an evangelist in his church; and two Ghanaian Methodist ministers, one currently stationed in Cape Coast, and the other currently with a Connexional role in children's work throughout Ghana. Four interviews were held in London with a young woman from Sekondi who has been in London for seven years, and whose young children were born in London; an older woman from Cape Coast who maintains close contact with her community through Ghanaian associations in London; another older woman in London from Accra who has children living in Ghana, London, America and Canada and maintains a complex network of communication across continents; and a man from Cape Coast, living in London who is a chief in his clan, who is often called on for traditional ceremonies among the Ghanaian community in South London. These four are all members of Upper Tooting Methodist Church, a South London church with a long history of multi-culturalism, where over twenty nationalities are represented, and whose membership is about 60% Ghanaian. Alongside other fellowship groups, this church has a Ghanaian Fellowship.

RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN GHANA

Gray states "*When European missionaries first went to tropical Africa, it was assumed that Black Africans had no religion, no complex satisfying views of the world, of human destiny and of supernatural powers*"⁵. They thought they were 'taking God to Africa' but discovered God was already there. What they found was a variety of religious beliefs and practices related to clan and kinship systems, and a wide diversity of beliefs about supernatural powers and the spirit world. In Ghana and elsewhere this was focussed in particular on relationships with the ancestors, the 'living dead', who, it was believed, had the power to influence the fate and future of their descendants. Much traditional African religion therefore included methods of appeasing and venerating the ancestors, through prayers, rituals and libation. This was followed through into high respect given to the elders and chiefs of the clan. The rhythm of life was celebrated and commemorated through ritual and worship.

⁵ Richard Gray (op. cit) p.2

Missionaries were faced with stark choices, either to denounce all the existing religious practices and impose Christianity, or to ‘reinterpret’ the existing understandings of human relations with God.

European involvement with the Gold Coast (Ghana) began in the 15th century when the Portuguese set up trading posts along the coast. Rumours of the vast wealth of the region filtered back to Europe and other nations began to ‘claim’ land along the coast, establishing fortresses to protect their interests. Christianity in Ghana began with the appointment of chaplains to the trading posts. The first Methodist missionary, Joseph Dunwell, arrived in the Gold Coast in 1834. He, along with many other missionaries, died very quickly from undiagnosed malaria. Yet, even in the short time they had, these early missionaries made a significant impact. The man who stands out in the history of Ghanaian Methodism is Thomas Birch Freeman, who was probably the son of a freed slave of African origin. He arrived in Cape Coast in 1838, survived malaria and set about establishing Methodist churches and schools in that area. His major legacy was the contact he built with traditional kings, first in the powerful Ashanti kingdom centred at Kumasi and then later in South West Nigeria and Dahomey (now Benin). Freeman is revered among Ghanaian Methodists and there are many schools and churches named after him. He spent most of his life in West Africa yet never learned an indigenous language. His missionary journeys were often in a contrived basket, carried by Africans, a clear indication of his assumptions of colonial superiority. Yet his legacy and that of his successors is a strong and respected Christian denomination in Ghana.

When Freeman first travelled to Kumasi he was required to stop in a village on the way while messengers were sent from the king to enquire of his intentions. Freeman took a leaf and asked the villagers if any of them could have made it and when they said no, he proceeded to explain the Christian understanding of creation. This was the start of his careful establishing of relationships with the traditional leaders. In time he was able to challenge some aspects of traditional religion such as human sacrifice, while maintaining respect for other aspects, such as acknowledging the position and status of chiefs.

During Freeman’s lifetime, mission work became established and Christianity grew. Traditional religion also remained important in Ghanaian life. In time some Christians sought independence from their ‘parent churches’ and established new churches of a Pentecostal or charismatic nature, often with the help of resources from North America. With political independence, the missionary denominations also began to develop in different directions from their parent bodies, influenced particularly by both traditional religions and by the new independent churches.

MODERN METHODISM IN GHANA

Relating to traditional religion

The Methodists who were interviewed in the course of this study expressed a range of views about traditional religion. In villages all over Ghana, it is imperative that Methodist ministers establish a good relationship with their local village chief. Inevitably this sets up tensions and every Methodist in Ghana needs to make a decision about the relationship of their Christian lifestyle and discipleship with the traditional religious culture which so often informs their lives. This study encountered three different views.

The first was expressed by one interviewee who spoke of her grave concern about the involvement of Methodist ministers in traditional religious ceremonies. Due to biblical injunctions to respect authority, she said, most ministers would attend such ceremonies but they face compromise when they are then expected to pour libations and pray to the ancestors. She was even more outspoken on the subject of modern village chiefs, many of whom are Christians. She said “*you have some chiefs who claim they are Methodists. But I think you can’t marry the two – if you are a chief, you are a*

chief, if you are a Methodist you are a Christian.”⁶ She believes that people who perform traditional religious practices cannot really be Christian even if they attend church. She then described how the Methodist church is responding, through innovations such as the Methodist Renewal and Prayer Programme, which is an attempt to call people back to their Christian commitment in order to defeat negative spiritual forces⁷.

The second view is that traditional practices are simply a part of Ghanaian culture and have no impact on religious belief. Cultural festivals include processions of the chief in his palanquin to recognise his authority and his role in administering justice. They also include naming ceremonies where the child is introduced to certain tastes and good wishes are offered. Then there is the whole process of ‘enstooling’ the chief, including sending him to a remote area to prove his strength, and allowing him access to the black stool of the ancestors. Some people see these as entirely non-religious practices, and therefore of no threat to the churches.

The third view is an attempt to steer a middle course. Interviewees spoke of attempts not to denounce the traditional practices but to interpret them in a Christian way. So for example, naming ceremonies might be carried out in Methodist households, but instead of a taste of alcohol being put on the baby’s tongue, a soft drink is used. Instead of libations being poured to venerate the ancestors, prayers might be said to God. Sometimes elements of traditional ceremonies are carried out within church services, allowing the church to have oversight of them. For example, the Ghanaian Methodist service book now includes a Methodist liturgy for a naming ceremony⁸. Transforming traditional religions into Christianity could be regarded as dangerous syncretism, but it could equally be seen as one of the most important achievements of theology in an African context.

The ministers explained the complexity of this issue. The Methodist Conference in Ghana has made clear statements against Methodists being members of secret societies. However, when it comes to relating to village chiefs and the traditional structures of Ghanaian society, the church cannot take as clear a position. One minister explained : *“The church is very, very careful. You see our chiefs and the political thing are close. Most politicians use the chiefs.... and what the chief says is final – and that is why in Ghana you wouldn’t want to ... build a church or do evangelism or whatever – the first person you have to get in touch with is the chief – you have to go to the chief and have dialogue with the chief”*⁹.

Many of the early missionaries who attempted to understand these complex relationships, saw a conflict between giving authority to an earthly ruler and giving authority to God. However, in modern Ghanaian culture, these two things are held together by the majority of people without causing problems. God remains the object of worship, but respect is given to those in positions of earthly authority. One interviewee spoke of church ministers being invited to offer public prayers during traditional festivals, and likewise chiefs are often invited to attend Methodist rallies and camp meetings¹⁰. The ministers explained that, at times, the church has drawn attention to traditional practices which are contrary to biblical teaching. There are groups called syncretist churches in Ghana that give equal weight to both Christian and traditional religious practices. Other churches do not generally regard these as either helpful or true¹¹. Some commentators have also drawn attention to the revival of Afrikania, an organised form of African traditional religion which developed in the early 1980s under the leadership of Okomfo Kwabena Damuah (an ex-Roman Catholic priest). He claimed that traditional religion is God’s purpose for Africa. Bediako asserts that the rise of

⁶ From interview 1 in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

⁷ From interview 1 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

⁸ Referred to in interview 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

⁹ From interview 3 in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹⁰ From interview 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹¹ From interview 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

Afrikania has challenged all African Christians into asking questions about their fundamental identity and the 'rootedness' of their faith in the local community¹².

One of those interviewed in London is a chief in his home village. He is a faithful Methodist and a local preacher and rather than denouncing his cultural tradition, he has tried to subsume it into his Christian life, in fact often using traditional ceremonies as an opportunity to teach others about Christianity. He refused to accept the traditional stool of his ancestors because that would have involved him entering the stool room and pouring libation to the traditional gods. He said instead he would pour a libation to the glory of God. The elders determined that he could not therefore inherit the traditional ancestral stool, but would have to have a new stool, which he designed. It includes the image of an open bible. His views have not been universally accepted by his community. He explained in his interview that Christianity in Ghana was initially regarded as worship of the 'white man's god' and nothing to do with traditional life in Ghana. Equally, some Christians would have nothing to do with traditional practices because they started among non-Christian people.

Traditional views about the powers of ancestors and the possibilities of communicating with them, can, he believes, be transformed into Christian practices. So he pours libations but turns them into prayers to God through Christ. He firmly believes that only Christianity can counteract the dangers of misdirected spiritual activity and that rather than simply denouncing practices that are 'of the devil', it is better to give them to God through Christian prayer. Many Ghanaians believe in curses and in the ongoing influence of their ancestors, and such beliefs have a powerful influence on their lives. That is why he believes that Christian prayer is so vital.

Some regard the honouring of ancestors as a perfectly natural part of the journey from African traditional religion to Christianity. If the missionaries found God in unexpected places, then the religious history of such places must be respected and honoured.

Relating to 'experience based' Christian denominations

'Experience based' denominations (Pentecostal or Charismatic) are characterised by worship that is informal, responsive and dramatic. Many present their 'biblical heart' as their main characteristic, with a particular emphasis on biblical accounts of God intervening to help his chosen followers. Biblical accounts of healing miracles feature strongly in their message, and deliverance ministries were very prominent especially in the 1980s and 1990s. It is easy to see how close such views are to the emphases of African traditional religions. Through his study of the 'new churches' of the Greater Accra region, Gifford contends that the attraction of these churches is their claim to have answers to issues of modern survival, particularly considering success and wealth creation. Often these are focussed on the special holy 'man of God' who is able to conquer the evil forces believed to be preventing success. Gifford maintains that the emphasis of many of the new churches is on size, numbers and expansion, and the churches have names reflecting this: "Winners' Chapel", "Victory Bible Church International" or "Power Chapel". Members are encouraged to give sacrificially in order to receive¹³.

Gifford's study also uncovered a clear difference in theology between the 'older' and 'newer' churches in Ghana. Whereas the Christianity brought by missionaries often emphasised the love of God for the poorest of society, these newer churches maintain that the missionaries only told half of the story. Gifford quotes the words of Shorter and Onyanha "*This charismatic Christianity is about success and wealth, which is a Christian's proper state. If a Christian is without them, something is very wrong*"¹⁴. The impression is that the missionaries deliberately kept African people away from the full truth in case they became too powerful with the 'gospel of success'. However, even though

¹² Kwame Bediako (op.cit.) p.17f and Paul Gifford *Ghana's New Christianity* (Indiana) pp.41-42

¹³ Paul Gifford (op. cit) p.ix (preface), pp.44f and pp.61f

¹⁴ Shorter and Onyanha *Secularism in Africa: a case study* (Nairobi) quoted in Paul Gifford (op.cit) p. 46.

the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are not part of the Christian Council in Ghana, those interviewed spoke of very cordial relations between the Methodist church and these newer denominations¹⁵. Perhaps the historical distance from the nineteenth century missionaries has helped to restore good relationships.

Methodist churches and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have had an impact on each other in many ways in Ghana. Methodism's structured liturgy, hymnody, practical holiness and the class system have all been included within the life of Pentecostal churches in various ways. Pentecostalism's informality, open prayer, clapping, dancing and drumming are all now often seen within the life of Methodist churches in Ghana¹⁶. Although many Methodists still strongly prefer the structure of Methodist liturgy, the introduction of informal elements into Methodist worship has kept some people within the Methodist Church who might otherwise have gone to worship in Pentecostal or Charismatic churches¹⁷. One interviewee remembered the early 1990s when young people were leaving the Methodist church in Ghana for the attractions of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. That was the time when the Methodist church deliberately took measures to keep them, particularly by exploring the whole area of healing and deliverance ministry¹⁸, which suggests a connection with the emphases of traditional religion. Gifford also claims that 'mainline' churches were forced to adapt if they wanted to keep their members. He quoted the words of a 'loyal Methodist' who claimed that Methodists are no longer leaving in the numbers they once were for the Charismatic churches, "*because we are now doing all they do*"¹⁹.

The 'success' of the Charismatic churches in Ghana (they are regarded as the fastest growing denomination), is partly due to the structures they set up to maintain contact with the people they attract. The Methodist church holds large 'crusades', and finds many people responding, but, according to one minister, then does little to maintain contact and link people into the fellowship of a church. This is gradually being addressed, but the challenges remain. The Charismatic churches are now using a vast range of modern technology and it can be hard for other denominations to 'keep up'²⁰. Gifford claims that the 'mainline' churches have given way entirely in this arena. "*The mainline churches utilise their considerable funds, gained both locally and from overseas, in development; It is the newer churches, which are hardly at all involved in education or development, that sink a large part of their resources in media*"²¹. Charismatic churches have grown, according to Gifford, because they claim they can remedy many of the problems facing Ghanaians in today's world and "*it will change you from a nobody into a somebody*"²².

The profile of Methodism in Ghana

Religion is generally strong in Ghana, and those following different religions generally relate amicably. Every roadside business displays a religious quotation or a prayer, so it is common to see, for example: "God is Gracious taxi" or "Jesus Saves hairdressers".

Within this, Methodism has a strong presence in the country. When a Methodist Bishop makes a statement, it is frequently quoted by the media. The Methodist Conference sends communiqués to the government, and these are taken very seriously. When Ghanaian Methodists are asked why they are Methodists, most will say that it is because all of their family are Methodist, and therefore it naturally became their faith community. That could be true of any Christian community around the world.

¹⁵ From interviews 2 and 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹⁶ From interviews 1 and 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹⁷ From interview 4 held in London April 2007 and interview 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹⁸ From interview 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

¹⁹ Paul Gifford (op.cit) p.39

²⁰ From interview 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

²¹ Paul Gifford (op.cit) p.33

²² Paul Gifford (op. cit.) p.195

However, for a Ghanaian Methodist, this strength of identity comes not only from their church, but also from their education.

There are many Methodist schools across the country, from the tiniest basic primary school to the large high schools, the most famous being Wesley Girls School and Mfantsipim Boys School (both in Cape Coast). In Accra the Methodist Church is in the process of building a Methodist University. Churches of all denominations have a strong concern about education and most are currently engaged in building their own denominational universities²³. The ministers interviewed believe that the most effective evangelism is now being done through the schools. One of them reflected: “*People who went to Methodist schools, they are Methodists now. They were not Methodists but when they went there, our hymns, and the teachings – they are Methodists now*”²⁴.

In political life, Methodists are prominent. Many Members of Parliament and cabinet ministers are Methodist and currently there are six Methodists who are members of the Council of State, who advise the President on all areas of the running of the country²⁵. Methodism therefore has a far higher profile in Ghana than it does in Britain, forcing migrants to reassess their expectations when they settle in Britain.

GHANAIAAN METHODISTS IN LONDON

The role of traditional religion

In London, some committed members of the Methodist church go from a morning Methodist service straight to worship in a spiritualist church. There they can find the connection they are often seeking, both with their own tradition and background and with their beliefs in the ongoing influence of the ancestors.

This creates a major issue for the Methodist Churches of London, but one that is largely not being addressed. Often these practices are kept secret, particularly from non-Ghanaians, perhaps through shame or a sense that others would simply not be able to understand the importance of such practices. However, if the London Methodist church is to be relevant to its communities, surely it has to understand why elements of traditional religion remain so vital in many people’s lives. To denounce them will only make these practices more secretive.

Interviewees in London explained how important it is to them and their community to continue worshipping in the Methodist church and Methodist tradition. They are not looking to leave Methodism and embrace the spiritualist churches, but they are looking for a way to enhance all they appreciate within Methodism. One said that Methodism gives them a clear and uncompromised identity as Christians, and access to baptism, both of which are important. Some would argue that these Christians are wrongly trying to ‘have the best of both worlds’. However others might believe that these people are in fact living out real and deep ecumenism. The word ‘ecumenism’ is used here to refer to a dialogue between traditions that is held within one person. This is the ecumenism that is most relevant to many Ghanaian Christians now living in London. It is a sharing between traditions that has its roots in the depths of Ghanaian history.

Bediako quotes Kenneth Cragg’s wry observation “*if the old is taken away, to whom is the new given?*”²⁶, clearly showing his understanding of how important it is to recognise the role of tradition and culture in the life of human beings. Yet the problems do not disappear. If pre-Christian traditions are to be recognised and honoured, that leaves open the possibility of compromising Christianity, made particularly complicated when it comes to the question of honouring the dead. Bediako has

²³ From interviews 1 and 2 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

²⁴ From interview 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

²⁵ From interview 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

²⁶ Kenneth Cragg *Christianity in World Perspective* (London) quoted in Kwame Bediako (op.cit) p.191

raised this crucial question in terms of Christianity in Africa in general, as to whether Africans 'worship' their ancestors or 'venerate' them. Many commentators have debated this question and some have concluded that Christianity can be regarded not as the vital replacement for all that went before but as its ultimate fulfilment. Bediako expresses this point: "*Christ, by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit power, can rightly be designated, in African terms, as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor*"²⁷. A comparison from the Christian traditions of Western Europe is the honour given to the saints. They are not themselves worshipped though an external observer might conclude that that is exactly what is happening. In fact one way that has been found of honouring the traditional African veneration of ancestors has been to channel it into the church's commemoration and prayers for the dead.

In London among faithful Methodists, traditional ceremonies continue. So for example, on the first, fifth and tenth anniversary of a loved one's death, the family may gather around his or her grave. There prayers are said, and libation is poured. Some may feel this is simply a tactile way of saying prayers. God is thanked for the life of the person who has died, as some alcohol is poured on the ground. God's support for the family is requested as more is poured, and so on. Other people may interpret such a libation in the traditional way, regardless of the words that are said, and may believe that, through it, the elder or chief is in fact communicating with the ancestor, or expressing concerns for the well-being of the ancestor²⁸. One interviewee noted that not all Christians were happy with the continuing practices concerning libation, but then simply said that it still mattered to her because her ancestors had done it. She was simply following her tradition²⁹. Another stated that to let go of these traditions could lead to the accusation that you are behaving "*like a white person*"³⁰.

Whatever the view taken of the place of traditional religion in the lives of Ghanaian Methodists in London, there is no doubt that it remains an important element in their identity. Possibly it becomes even stronger when they are living outside of Ghana. When there is a problem or a dilemma in the lives of many Ghanaian Christians, they instinctively look to traditional religion for a solution. Surely ministers and those with pastoral responsibilities in London Methodist churches need to seek sensitive understanding of this instinct and discuss how it connects with Christianity, also helping Ghanaians to work such a connection out for themselves. Given the secretive nature of some practices, such debates are not straightforward, but there are increasing numbers of Ghanaian Methodists in leadership positions in the London Methodist Churches, giving them a stronger voice to be able to explain this to those of other cultures.

Some people regard the tradition as entirely secular. So they might, for example, name their child in a traditional ceremony at home before bringing the child to church for baptism. Along with their 'day name', they are often also named after an ancestor, with the hope that that ancestor's qualities will be received by the child³¹. It is likewise inevitable that Ghanaians in London will group together for certain events. Migrant groups the world over seek each other out in order to keep their shared identity alive in a foreign context. The numbers of Ghanaians now in London make it possible for them to meet in smaller community groups. One of those interviewed in London spoke of her role as the 'Mother' of the Cape Coast Association in London. This is not a religious group but a celebration of a shared heritage in the Cape Coast region. Such identity is frequently expressed through parties with much dancing, celebration, sometimes the wearing of special cloth for the occasion and the maintenance of certain traditional rituals, such as the formal greeting of the people seated at the top table³². Ghanaian Methodists can perhaps help their London churches to understand the importance of such events and groups, and to distinguish between secular tradition and religious practices.

²⁷ Kwame Bediako (op.cit) p.217

²⁸ From interview 2 held in London April 2007

²⁹ From interview 3 held in London April 2007

³⁰ From interview 4 held in London April 2007

³¹ From interview 4 held in London April 2007

³² From interview 3 held in London April 2007

Developments in worship

The Methodist Church in Ghana currently has a strong focus on ensuring that its members hear, understand and know the bible. They have sought ways of making it accessible to people who may not have had much formal education, particularly through choruses based on biblical stories, and through study groups. Perhaps London Methodist Churches have not consciously or specifically responded to this.

Financial giving is crucial in Ghanaian Methodist Churches. It is not unusual for four separate collections of money to be taken during one church service. Each one is accompanied by singing and dancing, and there is often an element of competition involved. There is a strong expectation that people will give, and give sacrificially. When London Methodist Church Councils have anxious conversations about whether they should even mention the topic of money to congregations, many Ghanaians are somewhat bemused. However, in assessing levels of giving in Britain, British Methodist churches also have to realise the commitments being carried by most Ghanaian Methodists in Britain. They are constantly sending money back to support their families, communities and churches, and when there is a family death, the Ghanaians who are away from Ghana are often expected to finance the funeral. 'Dance up collections' in London Methodist Churches are always appreciated since they give the Ghanaian and other African Methodist people an instant reminder of their church life 'back home'.

The length of worship services are always mentioned whenever differences between Ghanaian and British Methodist services are discussed. This is not easy to resolve in multi-cultural congregations³³. Many Ghanaians feel that limiting the time is in fact limiting the work of the Holy Spirit. The fabled 'African time' is an element of this. When a service is expected to be long, it does not matter quite so much if you arrive late, but if you do that for a service in London, you will have missed significant parts of the service. The need some feel to go to other churches as well as their Methodist church, may simply be due to a desire to worship for longer than a Methodist service in London generally allows.

Some interviewees spoke of the greater sense of participation in Methodist acts of worship in Ghana. There would be space in the service for people to pray aloud in their own way, a great deal more singing, shouting, dancing, and clapping, and all the different groups in the church leading different parts of the worship³⁴.

Developments in structures, leadership and organisation

Methodism in Ghana is characterised both by belonging and very clear structures and discipline. One of the people interviewed in Ghana explained that these were the key reasons why she remains a Methodist. "*The structure, the administrative structure, the bible class system, the society, the class system ... we have a systematic way of doing things and I seem to like it like that*"³⁵. This is very true to Wesleyan tradition. Members are loyal to their class and also belong to a host of other groups. There is a strong desire among many Ghanaian Methodists in London to replicate these structures but they have come into churches in London where many small groups have died out. Class meetings still operate in some, though on a much less frequent basis, and no longer attended by every member of the church. Traditional British groups like Women's Fellowships are dying out in many Methodist churches in London, so it is interesting to find a revival of interest in these groups among the Ghanaian community. The London-wide Methodist Ghanaian Fellowship have in recent years been developing groups such as a Men's Fellowship, a Women's Fellowship, Christ's Little Band and the Susanna Wesley Auxiliary, thus replicating the groups they belonged to in Ghana. Some individual

³³ Mentioned, for example, in interview 3 held in London April 2007

³⁴ From interview 4 held in London April 2007

³⁵ From interview 1 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

churches have also recreated groups like these. In Ghana the idea of these groups is to ensure that every church member hears the gospel in language that is accessible to them regardless of their amount of formal education, that they are supported as they explore their faith and that there is a discipline to their discipleship (regular attendance at group meetings and rehearsals is expected and enforced in Ghana). It is hard for many Ghanaian Methodists to discover a much less emphatic discipline in London Methodist Churches, which have focussed in the last forty years on being inclusive and flexible in the light of both their changing populations and increasing secularism. Here is a challenge to London Methodism to rediscover its roots with the help of the Ghanaian community, and also a challenge to Ghanaian Methodists in London to understand that some compromises are necessary when living in such a diverse society.

The Ghanaian Fellowships that now exist in some London Methodist Churches can help people to address such challenges. One interviewee in a London church explained that these fellowships have become a significant source of support for people laden with huge expectations from their home communities. The Ghanaian Fellowships, frequently using indigenous languages, offer help to people who may not have had much formal education, as well as helping London Methodist churches to understand the nature of Ghanaian Methodism³⁶. When a Methodist in Ghana who had visited churches in Britain, was asked whether there was anything that the Ghanaian Methodist church could teach the Methodist church in Britain, she replied “*we have to teach them to go back to their first love... I think that the British Methodist church brought us something good and it looks like what they brought us is dying in their country and we must send missionaries to see if we can sort that out*”³⁷.

The question of identity

One interviewee in Ghana commented: “*In Ghana we have our problems but when you go outside you see, Ghanaians are one and you know they’ll come back one day – they’ll come back to Ghana. That is our style*”³⁸. When a Ghanaian Methodist is asked what their primary identity is, they are more likely to say “Christian” when in Ghana, but “Ghanaian” when outside of the country. National identity is so strong, and maintaining it, when away from their cultural norms, is vital to many Ghanaians living in London. Denominational identity is also strong, with many people holding to their Methodism with fierce pride. That same feeling has been noticed in London Methodist churches where, although there is a clear recognition that global Methodism can worship together, the sense of being uniquely a Ghanaian Methodist is still very strong. The differences are strong enough to make them feel somewhat different from other Methodists, even worshipping in the same church community.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that Philip Jenkins is right in his assertion that churches in the North and West of the world must learn to celebrate the growing Christianity of the South and the East, if Christianity is to have any hope at all. That assertion has many implications. It impacts on ecumenism in Britain, because Ghanaian Methodists in Britain already hold ‘ecumenical’ relationships within their own selves in terms of the relationships that are always being worked out at a deep level, between Methodism, traditional African religion and the newer churches in Ghana. Ecumenical work needs to take these relationships into consideration alongside developing relationships between ‘mainstream’ denominations. It impacts too on the assumptions made in British Methodist churches about structures, organisation, worship and discipline. Most Ghanaian Methodists in London worship in multi-cultural churches where, in many cases, they are in a majority. For the church to be true to all of the traditions within it, there has to be a high level of mutual understanding. The churches of London need to learn to appreciate that Methodism has

³⁶ From interview 1 held in London April 2007

³⁷ From interview 1 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

³⁸ From interview 3 held in Cape Coast, Ghana February 2007

developed differently around the world, and as different ‘Methodisms’ arrive in London churches, they need to be recognised as equally authentic.

Perhaps now is the time to move away from the guilt complex that has dogged much European consideration of nineteenth century missionary history from the vantage point of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries³⁹. Many Western Christians are ashamed of the imposition and moral superiority that was taken along with the Christian message into Africa and elsewhere in the world. Paradoxically they often feel impressed by the work and resilience of the missionaries and pride at the legacy they have left. Now is the time when the conflicts of those feelings can be laid to rest, as Christians arrive in Britain from cultures that have made Christianity their own, building both on missionary heritage but also building on the relationship with God that is rooted deeply in traditional societies and cultures.

It is possible to regard the Christianity being brought to Britain in the modern world as syncretistic and even pagan, but perhaps such attitudes can be changed once Western Christians get to know Eastern and Southern Christians, experience their devotion, and witness their demands for worship, teaching and bible study. If they have obstacles to overcome in terms of balancing the demands of culture and tradition with the teachings of Christianity, those are no worse than the obstacles and temptations facing other Christians in the increasingly secular West. In fact it is the Christians who are crossing the global divide who are giving the church a new sense of hope. Rather than dismissing this Christianity simply because it is different, perhaps the churches of the North and the West of the world might wake up to the fact that these are the very Christians who can stop the downward spiral of decline. Are the churches of Britain, Methodist churches among them, prepared to receive in humility the gifts being offered to them by Christians whose roots are in the South and the East of the world, and to work together on developing a new and relevant Christianity for the global multi-cultural twenty-first century?

Bediako ends his study with the assertion that African Christianity has not attracted as much attention as might be expected considering its “*massive presence*”. He concludes that this is precisely because it is no longer associated with the West in the way that it once was⁴⁰. If this is the case, then the migration of African Christians to the North and West of the world should make a real difference not just to the countries where they settle but to the impact of Christianity on the world.

The Rev. Dr. Claire Potter June 2007

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³⁹ This suggestion is made by Lamin Sanneh (op.cit) p.74 among others.

⁴⁰ Kwame Bediako (op.cit) p.263

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do Methodists approach discussions with people who follow traditional African religions, and with Pentecostal and Charismatic churches? How should they approach such discussions? Should Methodists use a clear doctrinal position as a criterion against which other traditions are measured? What are the alternative ways of approaching such debate? What effect might alternatives have on the depth and quality of the discussion?
2. This paper has explored three alternative ways of approaching traditional religions : (a) rejecting them as evil or pagan, (b) regarding them as a harmless part of secular culture, and (c) assimilating or interpreting them in a Christian way. Which of these three is the most effective one for the Methodist church to take in the modern world? Is the answer different in Ghana than it is in Britain?