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THE PLACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Dr. Patrick Uchenna Nwosu

Abstract:

In Christian religion, the Holy Spirit has an irreplaceable role to play in uplifting the moral standard of the adherents. In order to strengthen and assure the people of His abiding presence, God poured out His spirit, the Holy Spirit on the face of the earth. Hence, among other things, the Holy Spirit becomes the distinguishing mark of the community that accepts Jesus and upholds the values of the Kingdom of God. However, with the advent of Pentecostalism in Africa and Nigeria in particular, the reality of the Holy Spirit has been abused and confused with other spirits. The paper therefore examines the reality and function of the Holy Spirit in religions. The paper applied historical and analytical methods in tracing the etymological awareness of the Holy Spirit and the present day Nigerian experience. Based on the discussion, recommendations are made to enable people to make discernment.

Introduction

In contemporary African society, with particular reference to Nigeria, Christians under different denominations appear to be practicing a primordial spirituality. By primordial spirituality we mean a religion or Christian practice in which the concept of God is composed of multifarious and localized spirits and souls. The spirits are divided into good spirits and evil spirits, with some of the spirits so crucial and central enough to be mistaken as Holy Spirit. In

Dr. Patrick Uchenna

addition to supernatural forces of nonhuman origins, Christians in Nigeria also believe in the reality of souls of deceased ancestors.

Therefore, in the spirituality of an average Nigerian Christian, multiple superior and inferior spirits are identified: good spirits, and spirit of the dead. In this regard, how to initiate a movement of thought in the life of Nigerian Christian away from primordial polytheism towards authentic monotheism remains a task in the practice of religion and Christian spirituality. How would majority of African Christians, especially in Nigeria, differentiate the Biblical Holy Spirit from localized ancient gods and spirits that exist? Thus, this paper briefly traces the etymology and importance of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (OT) Religion and Christianity with particular focus on the Nigerian society. It argues that the authentic understanding, activities and presence of the Holy Spirit are indispensable in legitimate exercise of Christian spirituality in the church. And that same presence and understanding are needed in today's church.

Etymology of the Words "Holy Spirit"

The Hebrew word for "Holy Spirit" which the Greek has translated as 'pneuma' is "ruah". The Hebrew "ruah" means a breath of wind as it appears in the storm. Applying this idea to God, the Old Testament Religion understood the Holy Spirit as God's irresistible power by which He accomplishes His mighty works. Mbukanma buttressed this point when he noted that,

Among the Old Testament people the Spirit of God was always seen as power which men could receive from God. It made men intelligent and wise.... Bezalel of Judah was given a wonderful skill (Ex.36:1ff). He was given understanding and ability for every kind of artistic work.¹

¹ Jude O. Mbukanma, *Charisms of the Holy Spirit: Meaning, Uses and Abuses*, (Ibadan: Newborne TMC Ltd, 2010), p.12.

It was also within the context of "ruah" as irresistible non-materiality of force that McKenzie said that the Holy Spirit "is the divine element of power".²

When "ruah" is applied to humans, it refers to that in people which reflects the work of God's power. So, in the OT Religion, the Spirit of God was the source of life, the origin of extraordinary abilities, human virtues and skills. God's Spirit was the cause of inspiration and prophetic utterances.

The Greek "pneuma" however, is connected with cultural antiquity of prophecy and divination. It is based on material breath originating from the earth. Danielou saw it as divine complexification that is beyond simple grasp. According to him, the Greek "pneuma" is the material breath, "which in trances enters into the diviner, puts him in relation with perceive connections that escape ordinary consciousness".³

In Greek mind and thought, the fact of the Holy Spirit is a matter of hidden energies in the cosmos, which must be tapped. In other words, the Greeks saw it as a cosmological ascent, a movement towards a higher plane. This understanding may be likened to the evolutionary movement of Teilhard de Chardin.⁴ From the Biblical perspective, the Hebrew "ruah" raises the human body above its nature, bringing it to the level of spiritual solitude or stillness of soul.

Therefore, "ruah" in OT Religion is a mighty wind, an irresistible tempest, divine force that has what it wills. On the other hand, "pneuma" in Greek means the invisible, the immaterial but real active principle of existence. It is the principle that animates all moral and spiritual life. Semantically, the meaning of the word probably developed from the observation and sequence that brings forth life; the wind brings forth the clouds, the clouds rain, the rain brings forth

² John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman Press, 1968), p. 841.

³ Jean Danielou, *God and the Ways of Knowing* (New York: Meridian Books, 2009), p.164.

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy*, trans Rene Hague. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 387-403.

crops and the crops sustain the life of people and animals. Reflecting upon this sequence, Ellis wrote that, Living creature breath, Life is connected with breath (Gen. 2:7). Life and death then depend on God's giving of His spirit or breath.⁵ In the light of the foregoing, the precise meaning of "ruah" and "pneuma" as Holy Spirit cannot be adequately located without examining the context of "ruah" both in the OT Religion and in the New Testament.

The Holy Spirit in the OT Religion

As noted earlier, the idea of Holy Spirit is not strange in the world or in the church. This is because the Holy Spirit is understood as the same as God's spirit. According to Iroegbu, "when God acts, it is His Spirit that is in question. When man acts towards God, it is equally the Spirit of God that is the recipient".⁶ Acknowledging the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, and its accessibility to all people today, one could submit that this has always existed as an issue from the OT religion.

The Holy Spirit makes her first appearance in the OT religion in Genesis 1:2 as the Spirit of God that stirred the waters. It is the breath of God, God's quickening breath. This is the Spirit that generates creation from nothingness. This idea runs throughout the OT religion. For example, we read in Job 34:14-15:

If he were to take back his spirit to himself, withdraw to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to the dust.

The Psalmist picked this up and applied it to first creation. "When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renewed the face of the earth," (Psalm. 104:30).

The action of the Holy Spirit is seen as the spirit of Yahweh who seizes upon certain people to arouse them to super human power to

⁵ Peter F. Ellis, *The Men and the Message of OT*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), p. 139.

⁶ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Power From on High*, (Owerri: Assumpta Press, 1994), p. 13.

accomplish certain great works of God.⁷ Within this context Porsch noted that, "even the verbs used to describe endowments of the spirit indicate its vigorous and incalculable nature."⁸

This spirit falls on a person, lays hold of him/her, impels and seizes the whole person. Thus, the man of God, Samuel told Saul: "the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you and you will be turned into another man" (1 Sam. 10:6-7). The same spirit "sometimes took control of kings and prophets, giving them the power to rule and fight in defense of their people" (Num. 11:16-17; Is. 63:11-12).

The Holy Spirit also gives certain people knowledge of God's plan. For Porsch, it is an unmerited privilege God gives to His chosen ones. According to him,

an extraordinary and lasting endowment of the spirit is attributed to the servant of God and messianic ruler. Due to this gift the servant will be able to exercise the office as ruler in accordance with the will of God.⁹

What this implies is that it is the Holy Spirit that leads history through God's chosen ones, and explains it through the prophets. Some examples could be found in 2 Samuel 23:2, Ezek. 2:2 and Is. 61:1-2.

However, Prophet Joel talked about an era of abundant giving of God's gifts. The almighty God's plan is that His people would enjoy the gifts of the Spirit for the reign of the values of the kingdom of God (Joel 3:28-29). In other words, even though OT believers rejoiced fully in their God and enjoyed His blessings, they still

⁷ Jude O. Mbukanma, p.11

⁸ Felix Porsch, "The Holy Spirit", in Karl Muller, et al (eds.), *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), pp.189-190

⁹ Porsch, p. 190.

looked forward to the day when God would pour out His spirit without measure.¹⁰

The Holy Spirit in Christian Religion

Christian religion emanated from OT religion. Over time, it integrated into itself meaning and practices from many places where it has dwelt. Eventually, the religion became more inclusive in its makeup and universal in its teachings than OT religion had been. The ultimate event that gave impetus to this Christian outlook took place on the Jewish feast of the Pentecost. As noted by Ellwood and McGraw,

shortly after his ascension into heaven, those who were gathered in an upstairs room suddenly felt tremendously shaken by a spiritual force they were certain was the Holy Spirit of God mentioned in the Old Testament and whose coming was remembered to have been promised by Jesus.¹¹

Following the Pentecost event in Christian religion the Holy Spirit has received different names. He/She is referred to as:

- (i) the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2);
- (ii) the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9);
- (iii) the Spirit of Christ;
- (iv) the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15), and so on.

For the Christian religion, the Holy Spirit has the function of imparting "Spiritual truth, endows power for Gospel proclamation, releases God's love in the heart, and enables the believer to work in holiness" (Jn. 14:26; 16:13 and Eph. 3:16). Thus, it was through the incarnation of Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit became plenteously spread in the world. Christian religion therefore, becomes associated with the Holy Spirit. Danielou puts it better when he wrote that, "after the ascension, the spirit that was in Him was communicated to

¹⁰ William Dryness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1999), p. 87

¹¹ Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, *Many Peoples Many Faiths*, (New Jersey: Library Congress Press, 1999), p. 307.

the church, which is his body".¹² This outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit ascribes to the church and her members the tools for the services of the Lord's people and for the worship of God. The Bible teaches that after the Pentecost experience, with great power, the apostles went ahead to proclaim the reality and love of the risen Lord. McKenzie noted this fact as well when he submitted that,

the Holy Spirit confers upon those who receive it the qualities necessary to fulfill their mission; it also inspires them to deeds above and beyond the expected, normal habits and attainments.¹³

It is in the activities and functions of the Holy Spirit in Christian religion that one can appreciate the consequence of the Pentecost event. The Apostle Paul says that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was "given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

Importance and Activities of the Holy Spirit

The central emphasis during the period after Easter was the Holy Spirit promised to the believers in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was described as the advocate that was to inaugurate the period of grace. First, it appears as divine and one of its activities is, strictly speaking, the divinization of the soul. It brings believers into the sphere of God. Danielou comments about this activity of the Holy Spirit thus:

it is truly a divine force working in history of the church to achieve the transfiguration of the world and the edification of the Body of Christ.¹⁴

The Holy Spirit therefore, is the soul of the people of God. It dwells and acts in the soul of the person in the state of sanctifying grace.

¹² Jean Danielou, p. 165.

¹³ John L. McKenzie, p. 840.

¹⁴ Jean Danielou, p. 167.

In order to strengthen the people of God to take the risk of Christian practice, God gives the disciples the Holy Spirit. Porsh described it as "the distinguishing mark of the community of Jesus and the characteristic of the new era".¹⁵ Among the people of God, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. It reminds people of all that Jesus has said. In this way believers in Christ are led into deeper knowledge of the mystery of God and religion. Thus, Rev. 1:10; 17:3 noted that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of prophecy and revelation.

The pre-Pentecost people of God were a body living, praying and working without the Holy Spirit. Based on that, they were not strong, not fired, and not God-glorifying. They were hidden in one room (Acts 1:13). Added to the above, they were timid, afraid, dumb founded and they kept their distance from socio-political affairs of the time. Gossips and anger totally overwhelmed them.

The post-Pentecost era occasioned a whole lot of difference. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit made the people that were timid to become courageous. The people passed from weakness to power, from backwardness to forwardness. The Holy Spirit gave the believers boldness. And through the power of the Holy Spirit they became witnesses. As clearly demonstrated in the letter of Peter:

Each of you has a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all graces of God, put yourselves at the service of others... so that in everything God may receive the glory through Jesus Christ (1 Pt.4:10-11).

Again, the Holy Spirit leads the people of God to reflect on the scripture and to see the relationship between God and the history of the world. Confronted with corrupt leadership and political oppression, the people of God made efforts to build leadership around the Holy Spirit especially in the Church. Writing on the importance and activities of the Holy Spirit, Howard- Brook noted that,

¹⁵ Porsch, p. 190.

the Holy Spirit leads the church by helping her to interpret her difficult experience in light of Jesus own life and words. Over and over again the Holy spirit reminds the church of her call to be united with God as Jesus Christ was.¹⁶

God clearly names the Holy Spirit as the one who would help the people of God through painful experiences of persecution, hate and leadership crisis. For instance, today the Roman Catholic Church is passing through value and leadership challenges expressed in sexual abuse and scandal. And it is only the Holy Spirit that could serve as the "balm for a wounded Church."¹⁷

The Nigerian Experience

One of the major outcomes that punctuated the early 20th century in Nigeria was the advent of Pentecostalism. The phenomenon has grown in various forms since then, particularly in the areas of healing, miracles, and prosperity through regular appeal to the Holy Spirit or the Spirit world.

In Nigeria, there are three classes of Pentecostal churches. There are the orthodox Pentecostal churches with recognizable church structures and a system of worship. For instance, the Assemblies of God Church. Members of this Pentecostal gathering make holiness of life their distinct identity in the worship of God. The second group is the breakaway churches that "seceded from their mother Pentecostal churches to become Independent Pentecostal Churches of African origin".¹⁸ The churches within this bracket maintain their classical Pentecostal Spirits. The third group is the charismatic renewal

¹⁶ Wes Howard-Brook, *John's Gospel & the Renewal of the Church*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p.103.

¹⁷ Joseph P. Chinnici, *When Values Collide*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 164.

¹⁸ A.G. Nnamani, "Rising to the Challenge of the New Religious Movement" in *The New Religious Movements: Pentecostalism in Perspective*, CATHAN 18-21 April, 2006.

movements that emerged in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s. To this group of Pentecostals Lado notes that they wondered away and enthroned materialism as their god. He observes that,

This type of Pentecostal churches seem to have drifted away from the holiness ideology that formed the mainstay of the classical Pentecostalism, and have immersed themselves in the popular adoration of mammon. They are thus noted for their theology of material prosperity, display of the pastor's wealth, obligation to pay tithes, hyper-emphasis on healing rituals and so on.¹⁹

The third type of Pentecostalism is the focus of this paper since it has become very popular in Nigeria. Their pastors and prophets give people false promises which account generally for the apparent success they record in the work of evangelization in Nigeria. They propose a model of religion which is attractive to most people in a materialistic world.²⁰ The question is: does the Holy Spirit promise the believer material prosperity and unlimited pleasure without suffering? Earthly riches are not the reward for being a Christian.

In Nigeria, there are people who claim to have received spiritual powers and experiences. They go ahead to exercise the spiritual powers without recourse to any authority. In other words, the use of the Holy Spirit under different guise in today's Nigeria takes place without anybody's discernment and approval of such claims. This kind of behaviour has become very common, especially among later day Pentecostal. Ndiokwere says

the presence of one who claims a spiritual authority to deal with evil forces is decisive, he has the principal function of destroying all demonical powers and influences and thus assuring those who come to

¹⁹ Ludovic Lado, "African Catholicism in the Face of Pentecostalism", *Concilium*, 2006/4, (London: SCM), p.25.

²⁰ Jude O. Mbukanma, p. 157

consult him that they are free to go about their business without fear of harassment.²¹

In the early church there was a central authority that offered practical directive to various church communities as a way of discernment and ensuring order among God's people. In the church then, the claims of the power of the Holy Spirit required that such claims be thoroughly discerned before putting them in use. But today, the Nigerian situation and experience of the Holy Spirit activities are not subject to discernment process. This is perhaps, due to the fact that many Christians with special gifts would want to set up their own churches for the purpose of prosperity and fame. They would want people to believe that they have been called by God with the Holy Spirit as the only witness. Yet, they exhibit power outside the glory of God, they make money and become famous by all means. To this end McGee notes that, "God is looking for men that will go on mission heedless of the cost, trusting Him to supply all the needs, but regrettably in Nigeria as in elsewhere, some pastors would not go unless there is a sack of money tied to the end of their call".²²

This calls for a proper understanding of the Holy Spirit, her activities and presence in the church. Many gullible Christians are easily led astray because of false spiritual guides, miracle workers, and healers all over towns and villages in Nigeria. This is well summarized by Isiramen in these words

The manner with which the believers accept the teachings of these preachers which do not manifest in practical reality can only find explanation in the phenomenon of delusion which makes them rejoice over expected miracles that often do not come. They are even admonished to confess positively by claiming they are rich, even while they remain poor and that

²¹ Nathaniel I. Ndiokwere, *Search for Security: Freedom from Sinister Forces that Threaten Life in African Society*, (Enugu: SNAPP Press, 1990), p.22.

²² Gary B. McGee, *Miracles, Missions and American Pentecostalism*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), p.149.

they are well when in the actual sense, they are sick.

These Biblical assertions are enforced in heightening the delusion of the Nigerian people.²³

Again, in Nigeria today, one observes an error in the spiritual orientation that fosters a relationship with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of running away from suffering and embracing prosperous life. The pursuit of material wealth in the name of the Holy Spirit is a clear case of illicit diversion and abuse of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. People who go after material prosperity in the name of the Holy Spirit operate at the level of primordial spirituality. This is because Christ did not die on the cross so that human beings can have prosperity on earth.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to trace the origin of the concept of Holy Spirit both in the OT religion and in Christianity. The paper submitted that the reality of the Holy Spirit existed right from the OT religion till date. The people of various times knew and experienced the Holy Spirit as the power of God. They understood it as breath of life given for the glory of God and service to humanity.

However, the advent of Pentecostalism affected the authentic understanding and manifestation of the Spirit of God among the people. The emphases now centre on spiritual states and their expressions through ecstatic phenomena, miracles, speaking in "tongues" and so on. Again, due to lack of central authority in most churches in Nigeria, each member lays claim to the Holy Spirit without discernment and approval by anybody. Yet, most of the forces mistaken for the Holy Spirit may be principalities and powers from different places. We see the evidence in the fact that the goal of the people operating with such powers are to attract followership, acquire money and fame.

²³ Celestina O. Isiramen, "Pentecostalism in the Nigerian Society: A Therapy or A Delusion?" in *The New Religious Movements: Pentecostalism in Perspective*, CATHAN Conference, April 18-21, 2006, p.288.

The Place of the Holy Spirit in Christian Practice:...

So, this paper articulated the importance and activities of the Holy Spirit which are geared towards "the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The paper submitted that the Holy Spirit has no hidden agenda and therefore, we should be weary of leaders and people who parade their powers for self-centered interest rather than for the glory of God. Bill boards advertising the presence of the Holy Spirit in Christian Churches are literary everywhere in Nigeria. This is a very dangerous trend which is the error of the 21st century Christian ministry in Nigeria. In all, the Holy Spirit remains important for the people of God to receive renewal and be prophetic enough to challenge the injustice and corruption in the Nigerian society.