

A REFLECTION ON PENTECOSTALISM AND MONTANISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE INDIGENOUS RELIGION OF CYBELE OR THE GREAT MOTHER OF THE GODS

Robert K. Aboagye-Mensah

Key words

Montanism, Montanus, Cybele, the Great Mother, Attis, Pentecostalism, Indigenous religions, the Day of Blood and the Day of Joy.

Introduction

This study comes under two main sections; the first part gives a brief summary of the indigenous religion of Montanus before his conversion to the Christian faith. The second section draws out five beliefs of the modern-day Pentecostalism that are found in the Montanist movement led by Montanus. We shall then conclude that indigenous religions have some beliefs and practices that are shadows of the reality that are now fully realized in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Indigenous Religion of Montanus

To understand and appreciate Montanism in the context of Pentecostalism we need to know the practice of the indigenous religion of Cybele, the goddess that Montanus served as a chief priest before his conversion to the Christian faith. After his conversion the Christian group he led came to be known as Montanism or the New Prophecy that began either in Pepuza, Tymion or Ardabau in the region of Phrygia of Asia Minor, (now in west-central Turkey).²⁴

The myth surrounding Cybele was that when she was a small child, she was left in the wilderness to die, but she was protected by wild animals like lions and panthers; and “she

²⁴ See, an article, “Magna Mater and the Galli”, <https://pressbooks.becampus.ca/unromantest/chapter/magna-mater-and-the-galli/>

grew up into an intelligent beautiful and headstrong woman.”²⁵ She fell in love with a young handsome prince called Attis (a shepherd). The intense love of the divine Cybele was too much for the mortal prince²⁶, so without informing Cybele, Attis decided to marry Sagaris, a nymph.²⁷ When Cybele heard about this, out of jealousy and anger she went to the wedding feast. The guests scattered when they saw her, and Attis too was terrified. Cybele made Attis temporarily mad, and he fled to the mountains. He fell under a pine tree and slashed himself, and finally castrated himself and bled to death. Cybele deeply regretted and mourned for Attis, and Jupiter consoled her assuring her that the pine tree would remain sacred forever. But then Cybele restored Attis to life, it also brought the world of nature back to life.²⁸

There were two major annual festivals that were celebrated to commemorate Attis and Cybele. The first one, named the ‘Day of the Blood’ and the ‘Day of Joy’ (Hilaria) was celebrated from March 15 to 27. At the festival a pine tree was cut and brought to Cybele’s shrine, where it was honoured as a god and adorned with violets considered to have sprung from the blood of Attis. On March 24, the ‘Day of Blood’, her chief priest, the archigallus, drew blood from his arms and offered it to her accompanied by the music of cymbals, drums, and flutes.²⁹ The lower priests also slashed themselves and poured their blood on the sacred pine. After two days of sorrow and mourning for Attis, the festival ended on the third day of March 27 with great joy, celebrating the resurrection of Attis and renewal of the fertility of nature made possible by the power of Cybele.³⁰

25 “The Cult of Magna Mater”, by Anders Sandberg, <http://legallhistorysources.com/ChurchHistory220/LectureOne/MagnaMater.htm>

26 Ibid.

27 Nymph is a mythological spirit of nature imagined as a beautiful maiden inhabiting rivers, woods, or other locations.

28 <http://www.talentshare.org/~mm9n/articles/montanus/1.htm>

29 “Great Mother of the Gods”, by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Mother-of-the-Gods>

30 “The Cult of Magna Mater”, by Anders Sandberg. <http://legallhistorysources.com/ChurchHistory220/LectureOne/MagnaMater.htm>

The second annual festival that developed later in Rome when the worship of Cybele was adopted by the Romans, was called Megalesia, celebrated each year from April 4 to 10. A key cultic practice during the festival was the taurobolium, – a baptism by blood of bulls. Instead of following the self-castration of Phrygian priests, in Rome bulls were “castrated and sacrificed on perforated roof, and new initiates were baptized in its blood as they stood under the flowing rain of blood from the sacrificial bull.”³¹

According to an ancient myth Cybele was the inventor of pipes and drums, as well as magical medicines for healing sick children.³² Women who needed all kinds of help went to sleep in her temples. She was considered the mother of all creatures, - the giver of life to gods, goddesses, human beings, beasts and plants alike.³³ Cybele was also a protector of life in times of war. In 204 BCE, Hannibal, the general and statesman of Carthage in North Africa, regarded as one of the greatest military commanders in history, planned to invade Italy.

The Roman military commander at that time, Scipio Africanus was advised that if the Romans could get the goddess Cybele to Rome, they would defeat Hannibal and his powerful army. The advice was followed, and Cybele was brought to Rome, “together with her sacred symbol, a small stone reputed to have fallen from the heavens.”³⁴ The Romans won the war and established the worship of the goddess Cybele in Rome, adoring her as the Great Mater of the Gods (Latin: Mater Deum Magna Idaea). Some of Cybele’s self-castrated Phrygian priests (the Galli) accompanied her to Rome and practiced some form of transgenderism. They made every effort to appear and behave as women. Their linen and silk clothes were a combination of fashionable feminine and priestly dress. ...

31 See, “Magna Mater and the Galli” <https://pressbooks.becampus.ca/unromantest/chapter/magna-mater-and-the-galli/>

32 See, Anders Sandberg, “The Cult of Magna Mater”.

33 “Great Mother of the Gods”, Encyclopaedia Britannica.

34 Ibid.

The Galli adopted female mannerisms and speech patterns and applied an extensive range of cosmetics to enhance their feminine appearance.³⁵ Since Roman law was against self-castration, Roman citizens were forbidden to become Galli priests.³⁶

This is a brief description of the indigenous religion Cybele or the Great Mater of the Gods that Montanus was the chief priest before he accepted Christ Jesus as his Lord and Savior and as a result of that Montanism was born.

Pentecostalism and Montanism

This section focuses on five foundational beliefs of Pentecostalism that are also found in Montanism or the New Prophecy. The first qualification for being a Pentecostal is a conversion to the Christian faith and Montanus and his followers had that experience. From the account of Epiphanius of Salamis, the Montanist movement started in 156 or 157 BCE.³⁷ For Eusebius of Caesarea, the “Father of Church History”, Montanism began in 171 or 172 BCE. Although there is some disagreement on the origin of the movement, as we have just noted, both Epiphanius and Eusebius agree that Montanus rejected the worship of Cybele when he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. In the words of Eusebius, Montanus became “a recent convert to the [Christian] faith... gave the adversary access to himself... and began to speak and prophecy strange things”.³⁸

The second belief of Pentecostalism is that a convert to the Christian faith must receive the Holy Spirit as God’s gift (Acts 2:38; 11:15-18). This baptism in the Spirit must be accompanied by speaking in tongues and prophesying. We get a hint of this happening to Montanus when Eusebius testified that after his conversion, Montanus “began to speak and prophecy strange things”. Cephas N. Omenyo, infers from this testimony

35 Ibid.

36 See, “Magna Mater and the Galli” cited above.

37 *Medicine Box* 48.1-2,

38 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.7

that Montanus and the two women associates, Pricilla and Maximilla had the Holy Spirit baptism, spoke in tongues and later declared themselves the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ Therefore, the Montanists passed the first two tests of being Pentecostals, namely, being born again and being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, in Pentecostalism when a person is converted to the Christian faith, baptized and empowered by the Holy Spirit, s/he must pursue holiness or righteousness. Interestingly, in this respect, the indigenous religion of Cybele that the Montanists rejected had some similarity with Christianity. The indigenous gods and goddess, like Cybele in Phrygia region, were usually referred to as 'Holy and Just'; and their worshippers were expected to pursue justice, righteousness and vengeance.⁴⁰ What the Montanist converts discovered was that their new faith in Christ Jesus actually challenged them to morally pursue much more rigorous living in holiness and justice than that of Cybele. To achieve their objective, according to Tertullian, himself a Montanist, the Montanists seriously committed themselves to the discipline of fasting and prayer. For instance, in addition to the orthodox church's fasting days, the Montanists kept their "own special fasts" and "frequently extended fasting into the evening...and did not drink anything that has the flavor of wine."⁴¹

What makes their rigorous pursuit of holiness so relevant is that Montanism was born when the mainline or orthodox church was going through serious moral decline, and the Church leaders were sadly compromising with the world. Tertullian embraced

39 Cephas N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana*, Uitgeverij Boekencentrum Zoetermeer, The Netherlands, 2002; 79. See also, Robert Aboagye-Mensah, *John Wesley, The Charismatic. Did he speak in Tongues?* Accra: Adwinsah Publications, 2019: 37.

40 See, Mark Cartwright's article on Phrygia Religion, <https://worldhistory.org/phrygia/>

41 Tertullian, *Fasting 1* cited in Angus Stewart, "Was the Church Right to condemn Montanism?"

Montanism for this reason, and therefore persuasively defended the rigorous moral disciplines of the Montanists.⁴²

An eighteenth-century theologian, who was greatly influenced by and endorsed the Montanists' pursuit of holiness in line with Tertullian was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley had observed that whenever the church is going through moral decay and retrogression, God raises up a remnant who worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth to revive the church to pursue holiness that would positively impact society. Thus, for Wesley God sent Montanism "for reviving what was decayed, and reforming what might be amiss".⁴³ Wesley believed that Montanus, a believer in the Lord Jesus, filled and led by the Holy Spirit, "was one of the holiest men in the second century".⁴⁴ Again, writing on "The Real Character of Montanus", Wesley stated:

It seems, therefore, by the best information we can procure at this distance time, that Montanus was not only a truly good man, but one of the best men then upon the earth; and that his real crime was, the severely reproving those who professed themselves Christians, while they neither had the mind that was in Christ, nor walked as Christ walked; but were comfortable both in their temper and practice in the present world.⁴⁵

Here Wesley is referring to his own personal Aldersgate conversion experience. After Wesley's conversion on May 24, 1738, he pursued 'Scriptural holiness' that later impacted Wesleyans like Charles Parham and William J. Seymour.

42 Robert L. Wilken, "Tertullian, Christian Theologian"

43 *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition Complete and Unabridged Volume VI, First Series of Sermons (40-53), Second Series Begun (54-86), Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, Reprinted 1984, 328.

The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition Complete and Unabridged Volume XI Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, Reprinted 1984: 485

44 *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition, Unabridged Volume VI, First Series of Sermons (40-53), Second Series Begun (54-86), Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, Reprinted 1984: 328.

45 *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition Complete and Unabridged Volume XI ... Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, Reprinted 1984: 485-486.

The outcome of their commitment to Wesley's teaching on holiness led to the Azusa Street revival in 1906 that gave birth to the modern-day Pentecostalism. For this reason, Walter J. Hollenweger described John Wesley as the grandfather of modern-day Pentecostals.⁴⁶ So, the Montanists too did not only have personal faith in Christ Jesus but having been baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, they also vigorously pursued holiness and justice.

The fourth belief of Pentecostalism is that in Christ Jesus all persons, male and female from all ethnic groups are equal, and this belief was also found in Montanism. As we know on the Day of Pentecost all women and men who were present in the upper room "were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Spirit enabled them" (Acts 1:12- 2:4). Again, on that day all the people who had gathered there from all the nations heard the Jewish disciples "declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:11; cf. Galatians 4:26-29).

Before Montanus was converted to the Christian faith, he was a chief priest (archigallus) of Cybele, and together with Priscila and Maximilla they venerated Cybele as the mother of all creatures. Since Cybele was Great Mother/Mater "the cult was a highly ascetic order which placed women spiritually above the men and respected them as such".⁴⁷ When Montanus, Priscilla, Maximilla and the other Montanists became converts to the Christian faith, there were two things that they had to accept. First, that it is not Cybele, but Jesus Christ who is the One by whom and for whom all things were created - "things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:15-16). Second, that in Christ Jesus all persons, male and female have equal access to the Holy Spirit, and therefore men and women are spiritually equal before God.

46 See, Robert Aboagye-Mensah, *John Wesley, The Charismatic: Did he speak in Tongues?* Published by Adwinsa Publications. 2019: 5

47 <http://www.talentshare.org/-mm9n/articles/montanus/I.htm>

The fact that Montanus had no difficulty as a bishop in appointing Priscilla and Maximilla as prophetesses of the church means they had understood the implications of their new faith in Christ Jesus where all persons are equal. In fact, later the Montanists appointed men and women as bishops. Cephas O. Omenyo, probably had this in mind when he stated that, "Montanism believed the Holy Spirit continued to speak through prophets who could be male or female. In fact, when the Montanists became independent of the established church, they had women bishops".⁴⁸ Thus, Montanus and his followers put into practice the logical part of their new faith in Christ where both men and women have equal access to the Holy Spirit. Consequently, both men and women, are qualified to occupy the same leadership positions in the Church. Unfortunately, this biblical conviction of the Montanists did not go well with the leadership of the mainline church at the time. And even today, not all Christian denominations, including some Pentecostals, accept women into high office as Bishops or Apostles/Prophetesses.

The fifth belief and practice of Pentecostalism is ecstasy. Here I am using the term ecstasy or ecstatic utterances in its wider usage in the early church to include all forms of visions, being in a trance, prophesying, and praying in a comprehensible language or in tongues that need interpretation (Acts 11:4-10; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 14:6-12). In this context, I am actually following Tertullian's definition of ecstasy as spiritual quality that was given to man when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Tertullian referred to what happened to Adam in this text as Adam's "ecstasy of sleep".⁴⁹ According to him, a second example of ecstasy was when God assured Abraham that "a son coming from his own body will be your heir", in response to Abraham's fear that a foreigner, Eliezer of Damascus will

48 Cephas O. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*, 79-80.

49 See Angus Stewart, "Was the Church Right to Condemn Montanism?" Cited from Epiphanius, *Medicine Box*, 48.4.6; 48.5.8.

inherit him because he and Sarah were childless. Abraham had an ecstatic moment when God put him “into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.... On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land”. (Genesis 15:2 and 12, 18). Tertullian described this ecstatic vision as “ecstasy of fear”.⁵⁰

A third example of a broad understanding of ecstasy is the process that led to Cornelius’ conversion (Acts 10). Peter fell into a trance, saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth, containing all kinds of unclean animals and he was asked three times to kill and eat but he refused. The outcome of his ecstatic experience was when in obedience to the Lord, Peter went to Cornelius’ house and presented the gospel to all the people present.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (Acts 10:44-46).

A fourth example of ecstasy is Paul’s description of his vision of being caught up to the third heaven and he did not know, “whether it was in the body or out of the body, God knows” (2 Corinthians 12:2-3). In this ecstatic vision, as Angus Stewart has pointed out, Paul’s bodily senses were dimmed but his mind remained conscious. The mind remained active as he participated in another world and was able to recall and relate to others afterwards what he saw and heard⁵¹. This is uniquely true about biblical ecstasy where prophets like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel could vividly recall all that happened to them after their ecstatic or visionary experiences.

Surely, ecstatic utterances including prophecies are found and practiced in other religions, including the indigenous religion

⁵⁰ Epiphanius, *Medicine Box*, 48.7.8.

⁵¹ Angus Stewart, Op. Cit. See also, A. Daunton - Fear, “The Ecstasies of Montanus”, in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica*, vol. 17, part 2 (London: A. Wheaton & Co. Ltd., 1892): 649.

of Cybele/Great Magna Mater. But one major difference in the ecstasies of Cybele priests and that of biblical prophets and Christians is that when the priests of Cybele were possessed or were in ecstatic mood, their minds, speech and actions were completely taken over by the demonic spirits such that afterwards they could not remember what they had gone through. Nonetheless, when the Montanist Christians were filled and led by the Holy Spirit and became prophets and prophetesses they had full recollection of all that had happened to them after their ecstasies or ecstatic utterances.⁵² Their faith in Christ Jesus, filled and led by the Holy Spirit gave them authority and power over demonic spirits, unlike that of Cybele worshippers (Romans 7:6; cf. Romans 8:14-17).

Concluding Remarks

There are other beliefs and practices of Pentecostalism that have some similarities in the indigenous religion of Cybele that time and space will not permit us to discuss fully in this paper. For instance, the worshippers of Cybele celebrated 'the Day of the blood of bulls and the Day of Joy' but remained enslaved to demonic powers. But when the Montanists, like the Pentecostals believed in Christ Jesus, "who is the head over every power and authority" (Colossians 2:10) they were given victory over the principalities and powers and the demonic forces. Indeed, their faith in the power of the blood of Christ Jesus empowered them to "extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16).

The Montanists came to understand that the festival of 'the Day of blood and the Day of Joy' of Cybele was "a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:17). So, after they had encountered the reality in Christ Jesus, the Montanists were able to use their musical instruments, songs and dancing in the worship of the triune God in ways that enriched their lives and their diverse ministries. Interestingly,

52 Ibid.

the modern-day Pentecostals too have come to realize that the Triune God has not left himself without a witness in the beliefs and practices of their indigenous religions. They firmly believe that through the preaching of the “good news about Jesus and the resurrection . . . now he commands all people everywhere to repent” and “be baptized with water and with the Holy Spirit” (17:18, 30; Acts 11:16), and become living witnesses of God’s love, grace and power in the church and in the whole world.