

THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

*AFRİKA'DA HRİSTİYANLIĞIN KÖKENİ VE GELİŞİMİ**

Ian COULTER**

Abstract: This essay provides an introduction to the sweeping of history of the origins and progress of Christianity in Africa. In the interest of narrowing the scope, it is necessary that much of the story has been omitted. The main focus has instead been on the origins and progress of Christianity during the colonial period, particularly highlighting the enormous growth that has occurred in the spread of Christianity over the last 60 years since independence. What prompted the enormous growth and spread of Christianity in Africa during the colonial period and beyond? The answer to this question is multi-faceted, with the need for Western education becoming paramount. European colonial missionaries pioneered Western education throughout the colonies, which in turn became the vanguard for Christian catechetical education and transformation of the people at all levels as operatives in the colonial system. Western education became necessary to the economic survival of peoples. Admittance into a Christian mission school often required the applicant to convert to Christianity. Since Independence, all Christian denominations have experienced much growth through African missionary effort, which is now in the hands of the African evangelists rather than in the hands of the Europeans. It is important to mention that in terms of the African expression of Christianity, the Pentecostal movement have today far outstripped all other forms of Christianity in Africa.

Keywords: Christianity, Africa, Colonialism, Pentecostal

Öz: Bu makale, Hristiyanlığın Afrika'daki kökenleri ve ilerleyişine dair kapsamlı bir tarihçe sunmaktadır. Ancak, kapsamı daraltmak adına hikâyenin büyük bir kısmı dışarıda bırakılmıştır. Bunun yerine, sömürge döneminde Hristiyanlığın temelleri ve gelişimi ele alınmış, özellikle de bağımsızlıktan sonraki 60 yıl içinde Hristiyanlığın yayılmasında meydana gelen önemli büyümeye odaklanılmıştır. Peki, sömürge dönemi ve sonrasında Afrika'da Hristiyanlığın bu denli hızlı büyümesine ve yayılmasına neden olan unsurlar nelerdir? Bu sorunun cevabı birden çok faktörü içermekle birlikte, bunların başında Batı eğitimine duyulan ihtiyaç gelmektedir. Avrupa'lı sömürgeci misyonerler, Batı eğitimini sömürgelerde yaygınlaştırmada öncülük etmiş ve bu eğitim, Hristiyanlık öğretisinin yayılmasında ve halkın tüm seviyelerde sömürge sisteminin bir parçası haline getirilmesinde etkili olmuştur. Batı eğitimi, halkların ekonomik olarak hayatta kalması için gerekli bir araç haline gelmiştir. Bir Hristiyan misyon okuluna kabul edilmek ise çoğu zaman başvuran kişinin Hristiyanlığa geçiş yapmasını şart koşmuştur. Bağımsızlıktan sonra, tüm Hristiyan mezhepleri, Avrupalı misyonerlerin yerini alan Afrikalı misyonerlerin çabaları sayesinde büyük bir gelişim göstermiştir. Günümüzde, Afrika'da Hristiyanlık anlayışı açısından Pentekostal hareketin, diğer tüm Hristiyanlık biçimlerini açık ara geride bıraktığını vurgulamak önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hristiyanlık, Afrika, Sömürgecilik, Pentekostal

* Geliş Tarihi: 28.10.2024, Kabul Tarihi: 13.12.2024. DOI: 10.54132/akaf.1574887

** Ian Coulter, Dr. Biblical Institute for Educational Development, e-mail: ian_t_coulter@hotmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0000-4923-8632

Introduction

There is much to suggest that Christianity first planted itself in Africa 2,000 years ago through the work of the Apostle Mark who created a vibrant center for Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt. The Pax Romana in North Africa enabled Christianity to spread across North Africa. With the coming of Islam in the 7th century, Christianity was placed in Dhimmi (or protected) status under Islamic Law. It was from there that Christianity spread into Nubia informally through the trade routes. The Ethiopian Church, which had independent origins has always been considered an authentic expression of true African Christianity. No effort was made to spread Christianity into sub-Saharan Africa. Some missionary work was done along the western coasts by the Jesuits and Dominican Catholics in the 15th century, but focused mainly on the Europeans in the area, such that little mission work was done among the natives. After the abolition of the slave trade mission work was largely spearheaded by Protestant Christians. Next came the colonial period which lasted from around 1870 to 1960 A.D. Great gains were made to Christianity during this period which enjoyed the patronage of the colonial administrators. The colonial period brought many economic, social, and religious benefits to sub-Saharan Africa. Some of these benefits were positive and some negative. Indeed, the missionaries made some mistakes by downgrading everything in African culture, but today many Africans are finding the freedom to express themselves as Christians in a truly African way free of European culture suppression.

The purpose of this essay is to provide the reader with an historical sketch of the main factors that led to the spread of Christianity in Africa from inception with special focus on the impact of European colonialism and Independence on the African people and Church. It is important to look at the past to understand the present. There has much been written on Christianity in Africa that goes into enormous depth as various historians, scholars, and political commentators express the progress of this vital and enduring religion on the soil of this vast continent of Africa. It is not possible in this short essay to be comprehensive, neither to explore much of this or that good or bad thing that colonial government or European missionary did. This essay should be regarded only as an introduction from the Christian perspective. It is for this reason that the author has found it necessary to make several foundational points about Christianity.

1. What is Christianity?

It is important from the outset to have at least a minimal understanding of “What is Christianity?” This is because Christianity in history may at times look very different from the biblical revelation of what it is supposed to be. This of course can be observed in all religions where followers do not meet the standards of belief and practice set by their founders. Therefore, despite such shortcomings, I hope to provide the readers with a concise summary of the biblical revelation of the Christian faith, outlining the

essential characteristics of what it is intended to be.

Firstly, as a revealed religion, biblical Christianity is not the product of human origin, wisdom, philosophy, or development, but came about in the fullness of time through the direct involvement of God in this world. What we are talking about here is the Incarnation of the living and eternal Word of God who came into this world from the bosom of the Father through the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus the Christ (John 1:1, 14). The angel Gabriel called his name, Jesus (MATT. 1:21; Luke 1:31, 2:21), which means God saves (the name Jesus signifies *saviour*. It is the Greek form of Jehoshua (Joshua) (Smith, 1884: 307). Secondly, it follows that Christianity in Africa is not merely the religion of the white man as some have mistakenly thought but has for 2,000 years been embedded in African soil long before the coming of the European missionaries. The third point that needs to be made is that as the visible expression of the invisible Kingdom of God, Christianity is not the same as the culture in which the Church is found but is distinct from it arising because of the reality of God's presence with his people. We must then ask ourselves, "What is Christianity?"

But what exactly is the Christian faith? Dr. H. Kraemer in his book, "*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*" identifies five essential and timeless characteristic features of the Christian faith (Kraemer, 1961: 73-77). These are: (1) Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation (John 3:16). (2) The Christian faith means justification by faith. (3) Christianity is the religion of reconciliation and atonement. (4) In content, the Christian faith is to announce the Kingdom of God, and (5) The Christian faith is a new way or quality of life; namely, a spiritually abundant life lived in reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ (John 10:10). The abundant life that issues from reconciliation with God issues in the experience of eternal life now (Ladd, 1975: 254).

Much has been written on each of these aspects of the Christian faith to repeat here, but it is sufficient to summarize by saying that "Christianity is Christ, and Christ is Christianity." Christianity finds its focus in Jesus Christ for he is at the center of the Christian Faith. It is impossible to correctly understand what Christianity is, without being in spiritual union and communion with the risen Christ. While sitting in a Roman prison, Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles wrote these words: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21 ESV). There is much here to meditate upon as we move on to consider the progress of Christianity in Africa, a place where many Christians have died for their faith.

2. The Early Spread of Christianity in North Africa

The story of Christianity in Africa must surely begin with the impetus of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God upon the 12 Apostles of Jesus when they were gathered in hiding in Jerusalem during the crucifixion of Jesus. The Holy Scriptures record how on the Day of Pentecost, which was seven weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus—and which signals the birthday of the New Testament Church—the Holy Spirit

came from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind and with the appearance of cloven tongues as of fire sat upon each one of the chosen band in fulfillment of the prophetic word: “I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28, 29 ESV) “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4 ESV). They then spoke with great boldness in the public declaration of their faith.

Among the huge crowd of foreigners that were visiting Jerusalem at that time were dwellers from all over the then known world, including people from Egypt and from parts of Libya about Cyrene, which were African territories. Simon, whom the Romans compelled to carry the cross of Jesus was from Cyrene (Matt. 27:32). It is recorded that they all heard the apostles speaking in their own languages declaring the mighty works of God (Acts 2:10, 11). It is impossible to imagine that a supernatural event of this significance would be hushed up, but instead be noised abroad in the home countries and regions of the people who witnessed the apostles speaking to them in their own languages. This event was a reversal of that which happened at Babel when languages were confused by divine fiat (Gen. 11:9). The Bible, which is the holy book of Christianity also records the names of other persons who were of African origin and who took the Gospel of Christ back with them into their home countries.

One such person was a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of Ethiopia, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27–39). It was this man that Philip the evangelist was directed by the LORD to go down from Jerusalem to Gaza and there meet him while he was sitting in his chariot reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. A conversation ensued that upon understanding the meaning of the inspired text, the man was converted and at his own request was baptized. Philip was then carried away elsewhere, leaving the man to return rejoicing to his home country of Ethiopia. It is widely understood that this was one of the ways that Christianity first entered Ethiopia. It wasn't until the fourth century, however, that based on independent evidence that Christianity became firmly established in Ethiopia (Gordon-Gordon, 2001: 310). [Other scholars intimate the same fourth century dating for the establishment of the Church in Ethiopia when they say such things as “There [in Abyssinia} Christianity had been victorious since the fourth century” (Brockelmann, 1964:3). “Aksum . . . by 340 was the kingdom's main Christian see.” (Jenkins, 2008:55).]

We should also not fail to mention the great evangelist known as John Mark, later known only as Mark, who was with the Apostles Paul and Peter in Rome. When these “two great pillars of the Church were martyred in Rome, ecclesiastical tradition affirms that St. Mark visited Egypt, founded the Church of Alexandria, and died by martyrdom” (Smith, 1884: 381-382). There has been much deliberation over whether this history of Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria is legend or reality. A letter from Clement, bishop of Alexandria (c.160–215) appears to support the reality of Mark's

presence in Alexandria (Cannuyer, 16–17). The Coptic Church in Alexandria lay claim to their being of apostolic foundation through the preaching of St. Mark. (Coptic Orthodox Answers: November 22, 2024). [For further information on St. Mark’s history of founding Churches in Alexandria, see Eusebius, 64, 74, and McBirnie, 251–258.]” That there was a thriving Christian community there is further supported by the mention of a certain Jew named Apollos. The text of Acts 18:24 describes him as a man born in Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures such that he did much to convince the Jews in Ephesus, showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ (Acts 18:28)—the expected Messiah of biblical prophecy. One could mention further the great Christian works of Origen, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens, ca. 150-ca.215) and others who made their home in Alexandria and whose writings have influenced and shaped Christianity down through the ages.

By the second century, Christianity had already spread across Egypt and North Africa, taking advantage of the *Pax Romana* and the widespread use of the Greek and Latin languages, which had already become established as the language of trade, the army, of administration, and learning (Hastings, 1999: 193). The Roman town of Carthage had by this time become home to many Christians. Carthage spawned several great thinkers and writers, such as Tertullian of Carthage and Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. It was Tertullian who first used the Latin term ‘Trinitas’ [Trinity] to describe the Triune nature of God in biblical revelation. Augustine wrote on the biblical doctrines of grace, original sin, and the kingdom of God. His writings shaped the Church and were influential in shaping ‘both Western Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation’ (Gordon-Gordon, 2001: 309-310).

The next four centuries of the first 600-year period of Christianity in Egypt and North Africa took a decided turn for the worse when Christological controversy broke out between the orthodox Byzantine and the Egyptian (Coptic) branches of Christianity. Such was the harsh treatment of the Coptic Church by the orthodox Byzantine Church that in 641 A.D. when Alexandria was captured by Islamic armies, the Copts actually welcomed the Muslims into their city as ‘a means of escaping the persecution of the Orthodox’ (Boer, 1969: 64). This situation did not, however, remain the same and in time the Coptic Christians were given dhimmi (protected) status under Islamic Law by the new Muslim government (Cambridge, 1970: 924). The rapid advance of Islam across North Africa displaced the old-Roman Empire in those regions and imposed Arabic as the new national language. They also replaced Christianity as the national religion with Islam as the new religion of empire (Hastings, 1999: 193). Islam today is the majority religion in Egypt and North Africa.

3. The Spread of Christianity in Other Regions

The importance of the Coptic Church in Egypt can be seen by the fact that Ethiopia and Nubia into which Christianity had spread looked to the Coptic Church for its theological understanding of Christianity. There is no record of the Church in North

Africa, Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia ever trying to expand in regions south of the Sahara (Gordon-Gordon, 2001: 310). How then did Christianity enter these regions? Nothing much seemed to have happened until the fifteenth century when Portuguese missionaries of the Jesuit and Dominican orders joined together with traders who sailed around the African coast and often into the hinterland in pursuit of gold and ivory. In 1490 Roman Catholic missionaries went into the Congo and Angola to establish Christianity. Their efforts in those countries did not extend beyond two hundred years. They also went into Mozambique in Southern Africa. In 1560 Portuguese Jesuit missionaries penetrated into Mwanamutapa/now Zimbabwe (Gordon-Gordon, 2001: 310). According to John S. Mbiti, "Most of this work was aimed primarily at European traders and only in a few places did it penetrate into the interior and reach a sizable number of Europeans" (Mbiti, 1990: 225).

In the eighteenth century, the abolition of the slave trade gave rise to the spread of Protestant Christianity in Africa. Between 1500 and 1870, millions of slaves had been exported from Africa to the Americas. "The major carriers were the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and the British and the French in the eighteenth" (Hastings, 1999: 204). The evangelical Christian anti-slavery movement in Britain led to the abolition of slavery. This in turn led to a renewed missionary thrust into sub-Saharan Africa, this time led by Protestant evangelicals. These too sailed around the coast to establish Christian mission stations and small settlements wherever they could.

In the nineteenth century, the greatest impact to the spread of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa came with the antislavery movement in Europe and the United States. The British sent their freed slaves to Sierra Leone, while the Americans sent their freed slaves to Liberia. During their captivity in foreign lands, many of the slaves had become Christians. Now back in Africa, the freed slaves propagated their Christian faith to their fellow black Africans. One such person who propagated his faith was Nigerian born Samuel Adjai Crowther (d.1891), who became the first African Anglican Bishop of West Africa. Much to the consternation of the Christian Churches in Freetown and Lagos, "when Crowther died, he was not replaced by an African" (Hastings, 1999: 208). This turn of events gave rise to the growth of independent Churches that were free from missionary control, which like the Ethiopian Churches, was led by Africans. The liturgical and doctrinal standards of the Churches from which they came were retained in the new independent Churches (Hastings, 1999: 208).

The entry of Christianity into East Africa came about as the result of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) partnership with Ludwig Krapf (d.1881), a German Lutheran missionary, explorer, linguist, and traveler who was contemporary with Scottish missionary, David Livingstone (d.1873). Krapf engaged in the translation of the New Testament into the language of the Oromo people of southern Ethiopia but was unable to complete this task because of the expulsion of all Western missionaries

from Ethiopia. He later went to Kenya where he also engaged in translating the New Testament, the Book of Common Prayer, and other documents, such as dictionary and grammar of the Swahili language. (Project Canterbury: November 12, 2024). The translation of the Bible or parts of it into local languages has always been a significant factor in establishing Christianity in Africa. This is because the use of local languages has not only helped Africans to read the Bible in their own language but also helped Christianity to take root in the hearts and minds of the people.

The next historical event that had a major impact on the spread of Christianity in Africa was the 100-year period of European expansion in what has been called the "Scramble for Africa." There was both a scramble to seize sovereignty over territory and a "Missionary Scramble" for the souls of men. Both of these independent movements were seen by Africans as related. The missionaries have henceforth always been thought of as the agents of colonialism who were there to work side by side with, and to do the will of, the colonial governments. This could not be helped in the thought of the native people because both the colonial government and the colonial missionaries all came from the same place, such that it was understood that the colonial government had brought in their own style of the Christian religion to impose upon them.

Before going further, let us be clear on what exactly is Colonialism? According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another." (Stanford, October 16, 2024). This process of gaining domination is never humane because it always involves subjugation even by the means of force and loss of human life. The terrible inhumanity of colonialism in its violent disposition and political domination of one people over another, though it has been going on since time immemorial, is never easy to stomach. In it is witnessed the ugly death throes and rebirth of a people as they are taken over and try to survive under foreign administration.

4. Christianity in the Colonial Period

One of the many significant things done by early British and German explorers, such as David Livingstone, Henry M. Stanley (d.1904), and the German missionary, Ludwig Krapf, was to draw early maps of the areas they explored. The thing about a map is that it enables others with less humanitarian motives to think about that old adage of "divide and conquer." There was some reason for this kind of thinking because of the great changes that were taking place in Europe and the Americas at that time. With the Industrial Revolution came the creation of machines that were able to take the place of manual labor in the sugar cane, and cotton fields, displacing much of the African slave labor on which it had come to depend. The increase in productivity brought about by the use of machines instead of men, led to a growing population that needed feeding together with the question of how to invest the excessive wealth that came from this new means of production. The world of industry and technology now needed to lay

its hands on the natural resources of other lands to sustain its incredible growth. The European solution to this problem was take control of the natural resources that Africa could provide.

More maps were made. This time at the Congress of Berlin (Hastings, 1999: 216) in 1885 where the Europeans began partitioning Africa into colonies. This process went on until the early part of the twentieth century. By the time they got finished drawing the boundaries, 48 new African states had been created (Boahen, 1987: 95). The maps were arbitrarily drawn and took no account of traditional boundaries, ethnic groups, and native languages, scale of size, internal trade, and access to seaports. Then began the European Scramble for Africa.

During the first three decades of the colonial period other African states suffered high levels of attrition in the population. There was great loss of life involved when the colonial powers met with resistance and opposition from people all across Africa. For example, “The population of the Belgian Congo fell by 50 percent, and that of the Herero by 80 percent, as a result of the oppressive and inhuman treatment of the colonizers during the period” (Boahen, 1987: 95)

The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952–1960) claimed many lives on both sides. The colonial government killed anybody who was on the side of the Mau Mau, and the Mau Mau killed anybody who was on the side of the colonial government. The Mau Mau were freedom fighters in the war against Colonialism. The words “Mau Mau” has specific meaning in Swahili. The first Mau is an abbreviation of the phrase ‘Mzungu Aende Uraya’ which means “White men should go abroad.” The second Mau contain the syllables for the phrase “Mwafica Apate Uhuru’ which means “Black man get freedom.” Uprisings also took place in other territories where there was fighting between the African people and the European colonizers.

A British official by the name of Captain Frederick Lugard (d.1945) arrived in force with his soldiers to bring the Nigerian tribal groups under British suzerainty. This eventually led in 1914 to the creation of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria and in 1960 to the independent state of Nigeria. In Uganda, where the struggle of imperial power between the Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Traditionalists, and the Ugandan Kabaka Mwanga (the Monarch), Captain Lugard took over the reins of government placing it in the hands of the British. In doing so, he suppressed the Muslims and supported the work of Protestant Christianity (Mbogo, 2020: 129-130/258-259). This provided great impetus for Protestant Christians to continue their mission work in Uganda. It is important to note that Uganda was a British Protectorate that was never colonized.

5. The Impact of Colonialism

The impact of colonialism on Africa is both positive and negative with Eurocentric historians thinking that the positive aspects far outweighed the negative aspects.

Many in the African perspective hold the reverse to be true with the negative aspects outweighing the positive aspects (Boahen, 1987: 94-95). Though these differing aspects need to be expressed, one also needs to consider the impact of colonialism on Christianity in Africa during that period. Let us first of all try to set down what is commonly understood as the positive aspects of colonialism as understood from the Eurocentric perspective, then go on from there to assess the negative aspects from the standpoint of African historians. The impact of colonialism affected every area of traditional life, including social, economic, political, and religious life. In his book on "*African Perspectives on Colonialism*," A. Adu Boahen makes the following points on the positive and negative impact of the period:

5.1. Positive Impact

Seen from Eurocentric eyes the colonial period resulted in much benefit to the African people. In the first place, the old system of barter economy was changed to a monetary system of cash transactions. This greatly increased the value of land and cash export crops, such as tea and coffee, and led to the accumulation of wealth. Unfortunately, the profits made from export crops did not feed back into the monetary wealth of the local people, who were used as instruments of cheap labor in the process of supplying the European economy with the natural resources they needed. Nevertheless, benefits slowly accrued to the people in the form of the development of better housing, piped water into the villages, increase in the standard of living, and in the overall general health of the people (Boahen, 1987: 104). These benefits, however, were not widespread and unevenly distributed especially in rural areas and many people still lived in a condition of impoverishment as they do today. Much benefit also came through economic reform, which integrated the African economies into the world economy and banking systems. This would not have been possible without the colonial economic system being in place (Hastings, 1999: 217).

A second benefit was the establishment of Western education in the development of primary, secondary, boarding school, college, and eventually university education. This has not always been seen as beneficial as still many people in Africa are illiterate and did not benefit from education. Not everyone could go to school. There are many people who are still illiterate. One criticism is that the schools did not teach technology, thus ill-equipping them for full participation in the more advanced technological sectors of the economy. On the other hand, the necessity of transitioning from rural village life meant that there had to be an emphasis on reading and writing. In time the educational system advanced to the building of universities, which produced what is known as the educated African elite. It is this same elite group of people that later spearheaded the overthrow of the colonial system and became the backbone of the African civil service (Hastings, 1999: 104).

A third important benefit of colonialism was the spread of the two great universal religions of the world. Christianity and Islam. With the implementation of colonial

administration, Christianity was able to spread beyond the coastal areas into the hinterland and beyond into East and Central Africa. With the introduction of Western Education, many more converts were gained for Christianity than in all the previous centuries combined. “Islam also gained a lot of ground thanks to the patronage especially of the French and British colonial administrators” (Boahen, 1987: 104). The missionary success of Islam, however, was not carried out by missionaries, but was “so largely in the hands of traders” (Arnold, 1997: 419) who continued to spread Islam along the trade-routes as it had always done (Hourani, 1992:85).

5.2. Negative Impact

With the close connection that missionaries had with the colonial government, particularly in the sphere of Western education, it should not be surprising that the European missionaries were seen as agents of colonialism in all things good and bad. For example, in Kenya, the Christian colonial missionaries were seen to be working hand in hand with the colonial government, and henceforth got the bad wrap for anything negative that the government did. Because the missionaries had mastered the local languages, the various departments of government administration used them to draft agreements in the purchase of land, and in the settlement of white expatriates, often to the disadvantage of the local people. The famous expression of the first Kenyan President, Jomo Kenyatta (1889–1978), aptly captures the dynamic of the situation. “When the missionaries came, we had the land, and they had the Bible. They taught us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened our eyes, they had the land, and we had the Bible.” (Goodreads, October 2/ 2024).

Africans also lost their traditional way of life in the colonial period. Quoting Boahen: “The colonial administrators and their allies, the European missionaries, condemned everything African in culture—African names, music, dance, art, religion, marriage, the system of inheritance—and completely discouraged the teaching of all these things in their schools and colleges. Even the wearing of African clothes to work or school was banned” (Boahen, 1987: 107). Whereas the African people were and still are communal in their approach to life, the European missionaries were not, instead emphasizing the individual rather than the group. In his famous book, “*Facing Mount Kenya*,” the first Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta provides insight on other missionary failures that were sure to be felt by the people during the transition into the colonial system of administration.

We can see from this that the early teachers of the Christian religion in Africa did not take into account the differences between the individualistic aspects embodied in Christian religion, the communal life of the African regulated to customs and traditions handed down from generation to generation. They failed, too, to realize that the welfare of the tribes depended on the rigid observance of these tribal taboos and rights, through which all members of a tribe, from kings and chiefs down to the lowest and most insignificant individual, were bound up as one organic whole and

controlled by an iron-code of duties (Kenyatta, 1978: 186).

On the plus side it must be said that missionaries opposed the slave trade wherever they found it and often spoke out against the shortcomings or injustices of colonial rule. Kevin Ward in Chapter 6 of Hastings book, *A World History of Christianity*, observes that: “Missionaries were at the forefront of disclosing the atrocities of the rubber plantation economy of the Congo Free State; they were critical of forced labor in various East African British colonies; they advanced themselves as spokespersons and defenders of native interests in settler dominated colonies like Kenya or Rhodesia, with all the implications of paternalism which such a claim conveys” (Hastings, 1999: 217).

In the social field, “There was in the first place, “The downgrading of the status of women in Africa.” There was no access for women into the professional fields. The role they played was to serve only as traders and farmers. There were also far more facilities for boys than for girls (Hastings, 1999: 107).

By far the serious and lasting impact of the colonial period has been psychological. I can do no better than to again quote Boahen:

The final and worst psychological impact has been the generation of a deep feeling of inferiority as well as the loss of a sense of human dignity among Africans. Both complexes were surely the result not only of the wholesale condemnation of everything African already referred to, but, above all, of the practice of racial discrimination and oppression to which Africans were subjected throughout the colonial period (Boahen, 1987: 108).

In the field of religion and especially that of Christianity, one of the most negative consequences of the colonial period in African perspective was the importation of every Christian denomination and sect from Europe and the USA. These denominations experienced a lot of growth in the years that followed. In 2010, the largest of these groups consisted of the Protestant Churches (53.7 percent) and the Roman Catholic Churches (22.8 percent). Africa also hosts a smaller number of Orthodox Churches, which includes the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. The Protestant denominations include Anglicans, Baptists, Lutheran, Methodist, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. The countries that host the most Protestants include Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa (Gordon Conwell-*Global*, November 22, 2024).

As has been pointed out, many African Christians were already trying to express themselves in a truly African way. When a multitude of foreign Churches of different denominations established themselves in Africa, it was though the European forms of worship were being imposed upon them. Many of the local indigenous population did not understand the variety of Church denominations and movements, nor the

differences between them. The Roman Catholic Churches, which for a long time conducted their services in Latin was not understood by the people. This has now changed, however, and they are today using the vernacular language of the people. In Protestant Churches while retaining the words of hymns, the European and American hymn tunes have not always been appreciated in favor of something more rhythmical in the African style. After a while, the inability to express themselves as Africans have led some to start their own independent Churches.

6. The Emergence of African-initiated/independent (AIC) Churches

During the colonial period, the European denominations promoted men in accord with biblical principles as the primary leaders of the Church. After independence, the desire to shake off the colonial forms of imported Christianity and to develop a truly African expression of the same that did not suppress, led to a reaction in the African –initiated/independent Churches to ordain women into Church office. It is not uncommon that African Churches today have a majority of women both in the congregation and in various leadership positions.

The whole discussion of women’s ordination into church office has been one of immense concern and debate among the Churches. The advancement of women in civil society is amply discussed by Eric Masinde Aseka in a section of his book on “Gender politics in post-independence East Africa.” The upshot of his text is that “The principle of equality of women and men is enshrined in various United Nations conventions dating back to 1948 and is contained in national constitutions” (Aseke, 2005: 212). While this may be the case in regard to leadership positions in civil society, the Church operates under a different principle in which the Bible provides authoritative guidance for the government of the Church through its officers. The most complete treatment of the subject can be found in Edmund P. Clowney’s book on the Church, and in particular on the chapters dealing with “The structure of Christ’s Church,” and “The Ministry of Women in the Church” (Clowney, 1995: 199–235). The central thought here is that just like in the human family the man is the head of his household under the headship of Christ, the head of the Church, so in God’s family it is the male headship that is ordained by God to be authoritatively appointed officers, who just like as in a human family, care for Christ’s Church. According to the New Testament, A wife should not have authority over the man but be in submission to him (Eph. 5:22–23). On the other hand, husbands are commanded to love their wives “As Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25 ESV).

As in the home, women in the church are subject to male headship, and not to exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12; cf. 3: 4; Eph. 5:22–23). The teaching office in the Church exercises authority through the ministry of the Word (2 Cor. 12:29; 1 Tim. 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:14–4:5; cf. Heb. 13:7, 17). For this reason, he [the apostle Paul] does not permit women to teach in the Church. . . . It is authoritative preaching that is

forbidden (Clowney, 1995: 229).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to go much further into this discussion. The reader, however, is encouraged to obtain and read chapters 8, 14, and 15 of Clowney's book for a comprehensive and in-depth treatment of the subject.

The advancement of women to Church office has not only been confined to the Independent African Churches. Even the mainline Protestant denominations in recent years have experienced many more women applying to receive training for ordination. In such Churches, however, the women officers often do the work of ministry among women and children, while guidance and oversight are provided by the ordained male leadership. Today, 60 or so years after gaining independence from the colonial powers, the motivation for women to apply for ordination is not so much a reaction, but more of a quest for equality with men. (Episcopal: November 2024). The legitimate expression of women's leadership in the Church is currently being modeled through the efforts of Anglican Mission's Africa (AMA) in its "Discipling a woman transforming communities model that trains women in social outreach, family ministry, psychological support, counselling and evangelism and discipleship. The stated mission of AMA is "To Equip, Empower and Release Christian leaders as agents of Spiritual and Social Change in society (AMA). [This is an undated publication of Missions Anglicanes Afrique.]

Many new African Initiated Churches start up by people with no theological training. The Kenyan government for example, being aware of this is now demanding that Church leaders have academic credentials that qualify them for the ministry. (La Croix International, November 22, 2024). The poor economic situation has often been a motivating factor for some Christians to start Churches, thinking that they can obtain a legitimate income from their portion of the tithes and offerings given to the Church from the Christians who follow them. The outcome of this is that the Christians in those African-Initiated Churches have no theology to shape their understanding of Christianity or the Church. This places an over-emphasis on religious experience rather than on biblical authority.

There is a great need in the African Churches for biblical teaching. Many people do not have Bibles, especially in the rural areas, as they are not easily available or too expensive to purchase. Even when Bibles do become available, much teaching is needed to guide Church members in understanding how the Bible is organized. Beyond this, there is the need to develop an appreciation of the great biblical doctrines of the Church that have instructed Christians throughout the ages in what the Bible teaches about God and His relationship with man. A book by Wilbur O'Donovan, called, "*Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*," (O'Donovan, 1997), *attempts to relate biblical Christianity in the African context—this book will go a long way in providing Africans with a biblical theology.*

7. The Renewalist Movement

This section of my research essay leans heavily on the comprehensive and masterly work of Nimi Wariboko: “*Pentecostalism in Africa*,” of the Boston University School of Theology (Wariboko, November 25, 2024). Though there are many varieties of Pentecostalism in Africa. The renewalist movements usually include the Pentecostal, Charismatic, and African-initiated/independent Churches. The difference between Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches is that the Pentecostal Churches place a major emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues (Glossolalia) as a major feature of their religion, whereas the charismatics though many of whom still speak in tongues, the Church allows for other “Spiritual Giftings” of the Holy Spirit as legitimate expression of the Christian faith. For a full discussion on the words “Charismatic” and “Pentecostalism” please consult the *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Richardson and Bowden, 1983, November 2024).

Wariboko describes three principal types of movements within Pentecostalism. These are (1) the spirit-empowered movements, which arose either independently or out of Western mission Churches. (2) The Churches established in Africa by the Western Pentecostal denominations (such as the Assemblies of God, Four Square Gospel Church, and the Apostolic Church), known as classical Pentecostal Churches, and (3) the neo-Pentecostal or charismatic Churches. All of these movements grew exponentially in Africa both before and after Colonization. The main difference between then and now is that whereas Christianity entered Africa in the nineteenth century through the famous missionary efforts of Livingstone, Krapf, and others, in the twentieth century it was being carried on by African evangelists. “The competence of African evangelists in translating the message of the gospel into local idioms and worldviews, correlating existential problems to the resources of the Christian faith, brought about remarkable success” (Wariboko, November 2024).

In 2015 the population of Pentecostals (renewalists) in Africa was estimated at 202.92 million, constituting 35.2 percent of the continent’s Christian population of 574.52 million and 17.11 percent of total continent’s population of 1.19 billion. But in sub-Saharan Africa, renewalists constitute 36 percent of the Christian population (of 564.5 million). This exponential growth had been fueled by conversions from traditional African religions, vernacular translations of the Bible, overall population growth, urbanization, improved transportation and communication systems, and evangelism by Africans themselves rather than by foreign missionaries, among other factors. (Wariboko, November 2024).

The dynamic movement of African Pentecostalism is complex. To provide a simple way of classification, many leading African scholars have distinguished between three periods of development, each with their own shift in emphasis of their message. The first period extends to the development of the movement up until 1980. The major

emphasis of their message during this time was on holiness and sanctification. The next period covers the decade of the 1980's during which time the message shifted its emphasis from holiness and sanctification to that of prosperity, healing, and deliverance ministries (from Satanic' powers). The third period from the 1990's onwards, African Pentecostalism has increasingly seen its success as evidence of their being "divinely sanctioned change leaders ushering in a new Africa." (Wariboko, November 2024). In short, Pentecostalism today is the African expression of Christianity that has been so longed for by many Africans. What then in summary has been the reason for the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Africa.

On the whole, the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Africa can be attributed to the movement's core message. Its spiritual and theological outlook resonates with sub-Saharan Africans as it draws from the interior of the African worldview. The message is principally about spiritual empowerment, or access to divine power to meet human needs amid daily struggles of power. (Wariboko, November 2024).

8. The Characteristic Marks of a Biblical Church

With the rapid expansion of the Churches that make up the renewal movement in Africa and recent growth of the mainline denominations, such as the Anglican Church it is important to be able to distinguish the characteristic marks of a biblical Church; that is, a Church that recognizes the authority of Scripture and puts it into practice. What then are the distinguishing features of a Church that functions on biblical principles? These are (1) Worship, (2) preaching of the Word of God, (3) right administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and (4) Church discipline of members (Clowney, 1995: 99-115). With these in mind, one then has to determine on what authority the Church functions, whether it be (1) the Church as the authority as in Roman Catholicism, (2) the human mind as authority by which all supernatural events in Scripture are relegated to the realm of fairy tales, thus reducing God to what the human mind can understand, or (3) whether the Scripture is the authority as demonstrated by Christ, when he said in conflict with the devil, "It is written" (Matt. 4:4-6) or elsewhere "have you not read" (Matt. 19:4). With no theological education some of the Churches are in danger of interpreting the Scriptures along the lines of human reason and thus falling short in some way or other from biblical standards. When a person is called by God to be a part of Christ's Church he is given (1) new life, (2) a new standard, (3) new community, and 4) new relationships that spring from reconciliation with God and with each other, and with all men as is possible. The right way to interpret Scripture is by comparing Scripture with Scripture. In view of all the above, theological education is of vital importance to many of the African Churches. One of the greatest strongpoints of the African Churches is the call to prayer in which their calling upon God is most vehement.

9. Christianity in Africa Today

Christianity has become widespread across the African continent and has witnessed enormous growth over the previous 100 years. For example, in 1910 there were reputed to be nine million Christians in Africa. In the year 2010 the number jumped to more than 560 million, a roughly 60-fold increase in the share of the African population. (Pew: November 11, 2024). Christians from all denominations make up the Christian population in Africa, which today is estimated at around 734 million Christians. (Gordon Conwell-*Status*, November 11, 2024). When taken as a percentage, Christianity in the year 2010 was embraced by 48 percent of the total population (Gordon Conwell-*African*, November 11, 2024).

In the 21st century, there has been a notable shift in the centers of Christianity from Europe and North America on an easterly trajectory, such that it is now estimated, “That Africa will contain more Christians than any other continent” (Hastings, 1999: 193). The Pentecostal Christians have experienced enormous growth in Africa and now represent more than a third of all of the continent’s Christian population. (Wariboko, November 11, 2024).

The future growth of Christianity in Africa especially in the urban areas has been much aided by the development of a lingua franca that can be used for regional communication, such as Swahili or Lingala, Amharinya or Hausa, and Afrikaans and for international communication through the use of French, English, Arabic and Portuguese. The translation of the Bible into vernacular tongue have provided the local people with a standard by which to gauge the claims of Western cultural superiority, and to find the value of their own African expression of Christianity independent of Western forms (Hastings, 1999: 192).

Conclusion

This essay began with the question, “What was it that gave rise to the enormous growth and spread of Christianity during the colonial period and beyond? The answer to this question is multifaceted which involves looking at the past to understand the present.

One of the most significant events of the past during the colonial period was the introduction of Western Education. The European colonial missionaries pioneered Western Education through the colonies, which in turn became the vanguard for Christian catechetical education and transformation of the people at all levels of society as operatives in the colonial system. Admittance into a Christian mission school often required the applicant to convert to Christianity.

The importation of European denominations of Christianity into the African culture and suppression of all forms of African dress and cultural practice during the colonial period gave rise to a quest for a truly African form of Christianity independent

from the Western mission churches. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages have provided the local people with a standard by which to gauge the claims of Western cultural superiority, and to find the value of their own African expression of Christianity independent of Western forms. This movement now considered as part of the renewalist movement which under the umbrella of Pentecostalism has enjoyed considerable growth since Independence. The main reason for success of this movement is that it has “taken Christianity deeper into the African psyche, culture, space, and worldview” (Wariboko, November 2024).

By far, the majority of African Christians today embrace Pentecostalism, which is the fastest growing and largest expression of Christianity in Africa. In fact, Pentecostalism, which includes the Charismatics, and African-initiated/independent Churches can today be thought of as the long sort after African expression of Christianity in which Africans express their faith in a truly African way. The reason for the success of this movement has been fueled by conversions from traditional African religions, vernacular translations of the Bible, and evangelism by Africans themselves rather than by the foreign missionaries. The African evangelists have been very adept at showing how the central message of Christianity can address and adapt itself to the African psyche and worldview, while addressing the needs of daily life.

The conclusion of these findings is that the spread and exponential growth of Christianity in Africa is directly related to the fact that the African people have been able to take hold of Christianity and make it their own. They can now free to express themselves as Christians in the African way and not in way of the European models imposed upon them during colonization.

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