

Exonerating the Missionaries: A Critical Analysis of the Impact of “Modern” Missionary Enterprise on the Indigenisation of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Much of the genre of African Christian historiography after the Western missionary era presented a bizarre and apologetic mosaic of the “modern” missionary enterprise in Sub-Saharan Africa. The fact that the missionary enterprise is criticized by Africans does not mean that Africans are ungrateful or have failed to appreciate the significant contributions and the tremendous sacrifices that Western missionaries made towards the development of African nations. Consequently, it is concern of this paper to get the records straight and move from the realms of hagiography to the field of solid African Church history. This paper, employing the historical approach to the study of religious phenomena, analytically attempts to exonerate the nineteenth century missionary enterprise in that region. Striking a hyphen between the past and the present, this paper reveals that there is the tendency of some historians to enter into West African Church history by focusing on activities in the mission fields to the utter neglect of the home base; in other words, the pattern of missionary enterprise in the field can only be explained by reference to where they came from, how and why the missionaries came. It observes that missionaries, in the region under survey, before the First World War were mostly from the artisan class, and consequently posits that this had a detrimental influence upon the quality of theology in the younger churches, and their subsequent criticism of African religions and cultures. It further highlights the salutary roles of the enterprise, not only in the Christianization of the region, but also in the indigenization of the Christianity in the region. Finally, the study recommends that a crucial revisiting of this phenomenon is crucial and indeed unavoidable for self-understanding in contemporary Africa, of its institutions and of its emerging political and religious culture

Keywords: Indigenisation; Missionary Enterprise; Evangelizing; African Christianity

Introduction

Western missionary presence in Africa is a remarkable phenomenon when viewed historically and in terms of the whole continent. It is over 200 years since the first missionaries left Europe for Africa as part of the second wave of “Modern” missionary movement. During this period, an ever-increasing number of Westerners from Europe and North America established themselves in all parts of Africa in the cause of the foundation of the Church and the propagation of the Christian religion. However, the era of the quest for indigenization marked the decline of Western missionary presence in West Africa. The Western missionary enterprise is one of the most important historical events that have for good or bad considerably shaped contemporary Africa and considerably tinkered with its dominant world view and value system. In spite of the efforts of Western Missionaries at evangelizing West Africa, their activities are presented usually presented in bizarre pictures as agents of colonialism and distorters of African cultures. The fact that the missionary enterprise is criticized by Africans does not mean that Africans are ungrateful or have failed to appreciate the significant contributions and the tremendous sacrifices that Western missionaries made towards the development of African nations. Consequently, it is concern of this paper to get the records straight and move from the realms of hagiography to the field of solid African Church history. A crucial revisiting of this phenomenon is, therefore, crucial and indeed unavoidable for self-understanding in contemporary Africa, of its institutions and of its emerging political and religious culture. It is, therefore, appropriate to assess the missionary enterprise in Nigeria and their role at establishing an indigenous Church. While highlighting the achievements of Western Missionaries in West Africa, the study will examine some home based factors, which to a certain degree, militated against their activities.

Conceptualizing “Modern” Missionary Christianity

Missionary Christianity is the term used to describe the period between mid-nineteenth century and the early 1960s; a time when churches in Africa were still subordinate to Western churches. Between 1841 and 1891, five principal missionary societies working in Nigeria included the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), 1842; Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 1842; the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1846; the Southern Baptist Convention, 1853 and 1875; and the Society de Mission Africains (SMA), 1867. P. Elliott Kendall (1978) in “The Missionary Factor in Africa” asserts that the 1775 may be considered the turning point in the development of the “modern” missionary movement, especially in relation to Africa. The abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was instrumental to its birth (Ifemesia 1980:81-102; Babalola 1988:33-40; Daudu and Gbule 2000:15-29; Owete and Obineche 2008:18-32). Other factors include the voyages and writings of explorers such as Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks.

The missionary situation in Africa is complex and full of dilemmas. There is a different emphasis in the concept of mission, and at one time there was unquestionable belief in the appropriateness of expatriates pioneering and leading every aspect of Christian witness in the Third World. This is no longer so because of its adverse effect on the maturity of the local church. The consideration of the

question of missionary enterprise in Africa at that point in history brings into focus the important and far-reaching difference between a traditional understanding of mission as evangelism and the founding of churches, and an understanding that mission has much wider connotation related to all aspects of human life.

Kalu (1980) in a general introduction to his edited work, *The History of Christianity in West Africa* observes that there is the tendency of some historians to enter into West African Church history by focusing on activities in the mission fields to the utter neglect of the home base. Yet the stories of the various missions are so interwoven with the histories of the metropolitan countries from which they came that the pattern of missionary enterprise in the field can only be explained by reference to where they come from, how and why the missionaries came. Nevertheless, the organization, funding, recruitment and training methods of missionary bodies explain the rate of expansion, anxiety to show results, dominant theology and attitude to indigenous cultures exhibited by missionaries in the field. The upsurge of missionary activities in the nineteenth century arose from many factors, which are usually captioned with the slogan, "For Gold, Glory and God". Anti-slaves jostled with proponents of legitimate trade in advocating a "Bible and Plough" programme. Evangelicals and spiritual pietists in Western Europe shared the same goal as the "Black Back-to-Africa" movements in the U.S.A.; who wanted to recreate the lost African glory. Liberated slaves were very anxious to carry the new religion to their native homes.

It was not easy to recruit men and women willing to go overseas. It was difficult to recruit qualified clergymen to answer the call. Women and children's charitable organizations organized gigantic fund raising projects. The high mortality rate among earlier adventurers did not help to dispel the image of Africa as the "white man's grave". Invariably, missionaries before the First World War were mostly from the artisan class, and this had a detrimental influence upon the quality of theology in the younger churches. In the face of such conditions missionaries had to be flexible in their strategies: they allied themselves with royal courts, set up Christian villages, bought up slaves, canvassed door-to-door, established welfare and charitable institutions – schools, hospitals, clinics – and increased their reliance on indigenous agents. In Nigeria the enormous growth rate in the 1900s forced the white missionaries to pay closer attention to the recruitment of indigenous agents and, the obstinate whites who failed to do so found themselves restricted to the coast, leaving the interior unevangelized.

Njoku (2005:218) in his study, "The Missionary Factor in African Christianity, 1884-1914", postulates that Christian missionary enterprise is one of the most important historical event that has for good or bad considerably shaped contemporary Africa and considerably tinkered with its dominant world view and value system. He asserts that a crucial revisiting of this phenomenon "is crucial and indeed unavoidable for self-understanding in contemporary Africa, of its institutions and of its emerging political and religious culture". He aptly remarks that European missionaries, as well as, African agents played an active and pivotal role in the "missionary enterprise".

One Side of the Story: The Nationalist Paradigm.

Njoku's (2005) study lays bare the circumstances of the missionaries who came to Africa and the varied approaches they adopted in their work of evangelism. He observes that Western missionaries hardly had any serious dialogue initiated between Christian theology and the theology of the traditional religions, between the Christian liturgical and ritual practices and mode of worship found in the traditional religions. There was a general assumption on the part of the Christian missionaries – Western and native – that the traditional religions were inferior and devilish. There was also a general disregard for sacred objects, spaces, places, shrines, and taboos. Violation of these sacred places and objects, were the rule rather than the exception among the Christian missionaries.

Christian missionaries belong to the group of religions referred to as “religions of the book” because of their dependence on such sacred texts as the Bible and the Koran, were understandably fixated about their idea of “texts” as essentially “written” texts. The idea of “oral” texts as veritable organ for storage and transmission of a clear body of knowledge was strange to them and regarded as inadmissible and “hard” evidence. Njoku (2005: 218) resonates this view when he asserts that:

The dominant adoption of the oral techniques and forms of storage for the theology of the traditional religions was partly responsible for the reduced visibility of the theology of the traditional religions.

The social and psychological background of Western missionaries influenced their disposition to Africa. Majority of the European missionaries came from the poor and rural societies of Europe. This made them people not just on adventure, with very little at home to look back to, but indeed as a group of people in search for name and fame. Carving out a respectable identity for themselves was, therefore, a powerful motivation for embarking on missionary work in places like Africa.

Missionary methods and techniques for conversion included indoctrination of new members; this gave rise to the need for the recruitment of interpreters, who also acted as powerful catalysts in the effort to reduce the indigenous languages to the written form, to develop dictionaries, grammars and primers for the study of various vernaculars. Sadly, enough this active role is often down played, and credit for such linguistic efforts given to their European missionary counterparts, whose names eventually appear as sole authors and translators

Beyond the problems of communication posed by the language and cultural barrier, preaching by European missionaries, with intension to persuade the people rationally to abandon the faith of their ancestors and embrace the Christian faith, was at best a statement, but in general, it failed to convince the adult population. The areas of convergence in beliefs, namely, the place where the Christian doctrines echoed the traditional values and beliefs merely re-enforced the conviction of the elders about what they already knew and firmly believed in. These areas of doctrinal differences often seemed to produce jarring notes in the ears and religious sensibilities of the people. Such Christian doctrines were simply illogical and nonsensical. The threats of heaven and hell did not produce the kind of results

the missionaries hoped for. Hence, missionaries introduced extra-doctrinal techniques for conversion; these included the Western education and orthodox medicine.

Coleman's (1986) book, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, is a factual and incisive analysis of the emergence and growth of Nigerian nationalism, and the country's eventual stride towards nationhood. The study is richly documented and detailed exposition of the factors that underlay the rise and growth of independence, nationalism and indigenization. Among other social and historical factors, Coleman (1986) identifies Christianity and Western missionaries as the precursors of nationalism and indigenization. He opines that unlike traders, missionaries did not limit their endeavour to port towns, rail or river lines, or commercial centers. Rather they undertook to penetrate the most remote areas in the interior with the determination to remain there until Christianity was firmly established and traditional societies transformed.

Tropical Africa was a special interest to Christian missionaries. Several reasons can be adduced for this. Firstly, were the frequent early explorers' exaggerated accounts of primitive savagery and barbarism on Africa. Africans were portrayed as benighted souls in dire need of salvation. Secondly, in comparison with other non-Christian worlds, Africa offered far greater opportunities for Christian evangelical activity. The exceptional stubbornness of Islam and the strong resistance of Hinduism, Confucianism and Buddhism in Asia made Africa appear especially inviting as a mission field. Thirdly, as the "white man's grave", the area presented an opportunity for personal risk and sacrifice, as well as, for heroic martyrdom. Fourthly, interest in the trade; religious enthusiasm had been generated in movement for its abolition, and the white man's association in that traffic had stung Christian consciences. It is, therefore, not without significance that among the first native agents of Protestant Christianity in Nigeria were apprehensive regarding the spread of Islam.

The impact of Christian missionary endeavour was determined by the cultural predispositions and situations of the several respondent groups as by the efforts and activities of missionaries. To missionaries, renunciation of the old order of things was a prerequisite to the acceptance of the new. A representative for the International Missionary Council has argued that:

The missionary is a revolutionary and he has to be so; to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the belief, the customs, the apprehensions of life and the world, and by implication, on the social structure and bases of primitive society. The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this, because colonial administrators, planters, merchants... perform a much more severe and destructive attack (Coleman 1986: 97).

This rationalism was based squarely on a persistent major assumption that the "primitive" religions are all destined to perish and disappear.

Because they were technologically superior, Europeans came to Africa convinced of white supremacy in all things and, in the early phase, many Africans accepted the same idea that nothing in the structure of African social life is worth

preserving. Such missionary prejudices and perspectives had an instrumental value to the nationalists in their efforts to amass grievance and to create and propagate the image of an unregenerate imperialism. The nationalist in this context were the “Ethiopians” upon whom any work on indigenization is built; they were the first indigenous agents who attempted to make Christianity a place to feel at home.

In another vein, missionary enterprise, in several respects, provided the instruments for reintegration. One of its most important contribution was an unwitting stimulus to African cultural and, later, political nationalism using the vernacular press. Missionaries were the first to undertake seriously the systematic study of African languages. They financed and sponsored not only the development of a system of orthography but also the translation of the Bible, Christian and educational literature into the vernacular.

Another scholar who sees the phenomenon under discussion as a product of political struggle for leadership is Amucheazi (1986). In his study, *Church and Politics in Eastern Nigeria, 1945 – 1966: A Study in Pressure Group Politics*, Amucheazi (1986) sees the Church as a pressure group, and devotes an entire section of the study to Nigerianization and leadership structure of the church. He asserts that in the Protestant churches, indigenization progressed with the expansion of the Church, and that as early as 1858, the Presbyterians had formed a local presbytery on which devolved the actual management of the Church. In 1862, the primitive Methodists joined their counterparts in other parts of the country in forming the Methodist Church Nigeria. He observes that the C.M.S. was from the start led by Africans and even with the suspension of Crowther by the British clergy towards the end of the nineteenth century, majority of its staff remained Nigerians. On the eve of the Nigerian civil war “only a small fraction of the clergy were expatriates” (1986:34). The main thrust of his argument is that the “missionaries” who evangelized the interior of Africa were Africans themselves.

In his study, *The Religious Factor in the History of West Africa*, Nwosu (1998) devotes an entire chapter to discuss the role of missionaries in the development of nationalism in colonial Africa. His discussion portrays missionaries as embers of nationalism. Amongst the “negative” aspects of missionary activities that evoked nationalism was missionary condemnation of African cultural and religious beliefs and practices. They include the use of African names, naming ceremonies, second burials, new yam festivals, initiation rites, title taking and other forms of traditional institutions, which were largely social in nature and did not in any way conflict with Christian beliefs. Nwosu (1998:57).

Preventing Igbo converts from taking titles or from being initiated into those cultural societies meant that they were automatically excluded from political participation since leaders were, as a rule, selected mainly from the rank and file of titled men and members of those societies.

He aptly remarks that the enculturation of the *Okonko* society was instrumental to the spread of Christianity in Umuahia, and that because of the general positive attitude of the Roman Catholic missionaries towards African Culture many early nationalists emerged from the Roman Catholic Church.

He sees indigenization as a protest against the religio-cultural genocide, which Western missionaries perpetuated against African cultural values and practices. There is nothing that fans the embers of indigenization more than a rejection or denial by a foreign agency of the rights of indigenous people to participate in the leadership of a political, cultural social or religious organisation. He finally points out that the emergence of New Religious Movements (NRMs) under African initiative and leadership was a product of power tussle between Western Missionaries and indigenous agents.

In his scanty attentions to the subject matter, Iwe (1976) failed to discuss the impact of the phenomenon on African Christians and the future of Christianity based on indigenization. Western missionaries were instrumental to the recruitment of indigenous agents. Iwe's (1976) claim that Christianity came to Africa fully steeped in western personnel is easily unpacked by the fact that most part of Nigeria was evangelized by Africans who were ex-slaves during the first, second and third Niger Expeditions of 1841, 1845 and 1848 respectively. He failed to realize that it was the natives who bore the brunt of evangelizing their kith and kin. We also disagree with Iwe (1976) when he states that African culture had no sophisticated apologists and well-groomed efforts to defend it against the unwarranted incursion of the west. He failed to realize that a Western, Henry Venn, was a staunch crusader for the indigenization of Christianity in Africa (cf. Williams 2000; and Shenk1993;).

The other Side of the Story: The Concentric paradigm.

Platvoet's (1996) article, "From Object to Subject: A History of the Study of the Religions of Africa", demonstrates that missionaries are not to be out-rightly condemned. It highlights the contribution of missionaries to the study of African religions, culture and society. He asserts that their theological outlook was both inclusive and liberal (1996: iii). They provided the theological bases for the historical-critical study of the Bible as a literary document – instead of it being regarded as the pure and unalloyed "word of God" – and for the historical and comparative study of the other religions of mankind. He points out that some Western Missionaries postulated on various theological grounds that non-Christian religions were also proper religions, permitted, or even ordained, by God, and with at least some function in the divine economy, and some salvific efficacy, therefore, they must be respected, studied, and encountered as communities of co-believers of a different religiosity. These pan-African Western missionaries, Platvoet (1996) observes, were well trained in theology, as well as philosophy. It gave them a frame of mind bent towards articulations, systematization and generalization of beliefs and other cultural concepts. Western missionaries constructed a historic, romantic view of the African indigenous religions, as part of past static, stable, well integrated societies. Western Missionaries and their protégées, no doubt, subjected African religions and cultures to "Judeo-Christian" categories.

Wessels (1990) in his book, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus is Received and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures*, contends that it is impossible to pass on a pure form of Christianity separate from the culture in which it is embedded. Experiences reveal that missionaries can only transmit the faith from within the context of their own culture and presuppositions. Their awareness of this

phenomenon and openness for change will vary, but there is no such thing as one “true” or basic form of Christianity behind or beyond its social milieu (although Christians may agree to certain creedal forms and values). Wessels (1990) assertion does not rule out the doubt that missionaries have held extremely ethnocentric views of non-Western societies, and that “Saving the heathen” was a motivating force throughout much of the “modern” missionary period. Besides, missionary practices were demanding of the apostolic times, some cultural equivalent of circumcision. The fact that the missionary enterprise is criticized by Africans does not mean that Africans are ungrateful or have failed to appreciate the significant contributions and the tremendous sacrifices that Western missionaries made towards the development of African nations. Rather it is because Africans want to get the records straight and move from the realms of hagiography to the field of solid African Church history.

Any account of the Church Missionary Society, a Western institution, towards the indigenization of Christianity in Africa would be incomplete if such an account did not deal with their labours in giving form to the chief languages with which they have come in contact, and in translating the Holy Scriptures and other useful books into those languages. In his book, *Anglican Mission and the Development of Education in Igboland, 1857-1920*, Onyeidu (2004), observes that from the beginning of the missionary enterprise in Sierra Leone in 1804, the Church Missionary Society had instructed her foreign and native agents to study the language of the people, make it a language of instruction and later translate the Scripture into those languages (2004:80). He further postulates that the study of Nigerian languages closely followed the progress of the gospel from the Colony to modern Nigeria. In Yorubaland, it was resolved by the agents of the Church Missionary Society that vernacular education should be the basis of education. With respect to the present Kogi State, Onyeidu (2004: 83) commends Rev. J. J. William, a Westerner, for his translation of the Holy Scriptures into Igbira language. He remarks that the translation work into Ijaw language was under the auspices of Rev. Harry Proctor, an European, whose whole-hearted service, will for many years would be a fragrant in the memories of the Ijaw speaking people. Proctor translated the portions of the Bible, the prayer book and hymnbook into Ijaw language.

With respect to Igboland, which is the main focus of his study, Onyeidu (2004:90) observes that the translation work in Igbo eventually succeeded is a tribute to the self-sacrifice, determinative of agents, such as Archdeacon Thomas John Dennis, the chief Igbo translator of the Christian Missionary Society, who was himself an Englishman whose masterly understanding of the language endeared him to the people. Language is a fingerprint of a people. It provides a logical means of defining and delineating them. No people can achieve greatness without a literature of their own. Their thoughts, their history, their art and culture-pattern, in fact, their whole story, must be recorded in a way that they can feel to be their own.

When we evaluate missions, it is important not to take this reality as static. Missions have to be seen in terms of changing paradigms throughout the history of the Christian era. New models come and replace old ones, or they may co-exist. Secondly, it would be unwarranted just to accuse missionaries of causing cultural alienation. Distinction must be made between the different methods of different missionary institutions, churches and colonial rulers. All these factors make the

missionary phenomenon in Africa a very complex one that can never be oversimplified in a neat category. Different circumstances produced different results. It would not be fair, therefore, to make too many generalizations about the Western missionary venture.

Furthermore, missionaries have not had only one theology of mission all the time. It has evolved. One could even wonder if the experience of this evolving nature of mission theology is not itself responsible for today's openness of Christian theology towards world cultures. For instance, it is widely recognized today that the origin of the ecumenical movement has its roots in the missionary experience of modern times. More so, what is known as African theology sprang from the confrontation between missionary Christianity and traditional cultures of Africa.

Conclusion

The study so far reveals that Western Missionaries in Africa operated in spite of their limited knowledge of African Cultures and, therefore, of African spirituality. As such missionary enterprise paid paltry attention to African cultural values. The current missionary approach, on the contrary, gives recognition to African cultures and spirituality. It insists on letting the Church experience growth on the native soil, tended by native hands with native moulds. This approach also aims at transforming dialogue of the Christian faith with African cultures. This is a task that indigenous agency, theologians and missionaries can no longer postpone. Christianity should not be allowed to be part of a process of denationalizing converts so that they become Anglicized. Rather it has to be indigenized in order to be placed in an advantageous position. The soul objective of Christianity should be evangelism and not Europeanization. Christianity should not be seen as furthering the interest of the evangelizing nations at the expense of the one being evangelized.

In the propagation of the Gospel among nations, missionaries must be prepared to let them have it without its English cultural trappings, which, although, is valuable for the missions, but unsuitable for the natives; otherwise they obstruct the progress of the Gospel. The danger of producing native churches that are nothing else than face-similes of the mother Church and, therefore, disqualifying them from taking up a national position and exercising a national influence should be avoided. The Church should be allowed to develop in a way appropriate to the culture in which it is planted.

The natural movement from mission to a native Church is analogous to human growth. Behaviours that are entirely appropriate in childhood are fraught with mischief in manhood. Thus as the indigenous Church emerges into manhood it must be released from "leading strings". If this does not happen, there will be failure, which is already evident in the infantile feebleness that would be observed in many mission churches because they were not trusted to go alone. The missionary ought to have been like a parent learning to let go or like an elder brother finding that his younger brother had suddenly come of age. The predicament of the Church in Africa is that the missionary enterprise produced a Church without its own theology, liturgy and polity. This weakness of the historical missionary enterprise could be a sign that this type of religious organization can no longer serve as an adequate bearer of the Christian missionary outreach to the ends of the world.

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