

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND COLONIALISM IN AFRICA

CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA BEFORE THE SCRAMBLE FOR IT

Worldwide mission is Jesus' great commission: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). In Africa Christianity is neither a recent happening, nor a by-product of colonialism, but goes back to the Apostles' very time. The Church flourished on the northern shore of this continent for 600 years before Islam's advent. Sadly, through Arab occupation, starting in 640, she received a heavy blow, surviving as an oppressed, though significant, minority in Egypt until today. From 700 to 1900 Islam's presence in Africa grew stronger and stronger, conquering either by war or trade many tribes south of the Sahara. On the contrary, Christianity was like a little stream through the desert; yet God's providence never let it dry up and in after World War II it has become a great flood outnumbering Islam. In the same year of the last Christian stronghold in northern Africa falling to Arab assault (697), in Nubia there arose King Mercurios who built up a Christian kingdom from Aswan to the Blue Nile. When it succumbed to Islamic attacks in 1270, there was a rebirth of the isolated, 900-year old Ethiopian Church. Theoretically, she would be the one to expand a truly African Christianity to the whole continent, but it was not so. Her culture flourished equalling that of medieval Europe, until much of it was destroyed by an Islamic jihad begun in 1527.



Ancient Ethiopian church of Lalibela. It was entirely carved in the rock.

By that date, following missionary work in many places under Portuguese patronage, another king was carrying the torch of faith south of the Sahara: Afonso of the Kongo (1506-1543) helped by his son Henrique, the first bishop from Bantu tribes. For over 300 years this king's successors tried to maintain links with the Pope and brought as many as 440 Capuchins into the country (1645-1835).



Sculpture of Jesus Christ from the Kingdom of Kongo (17th century).

They were still desperately calling for new missionaries, like many other Africans had done in those centuries, when the Baptists founded the first missionary society, the Moravians erected the first permanent mission in South Africa, and some 1100 emancipated slaves from Canada founded Freetown in West Africa.



Joseph Jenkins Roberts, born in USA, was the first president of Liberia, founded in 1822 for freed American slaves.

These three events of year 1792 inaugurated the modern missionary era in the continent, well before the scramble for Africa. Its cause was a religious revival in 18th century Europe leading to the anti-slavery movement and then to a great evangelistic effort, first by Protestant British, then by Catholic French. Modern African missions originated as a form of reparation for the historical injustices committed by Christian nations against our continent. To set free slave children and to make up for the former Slave Trade were leading motives to support African missions, now set free from such obstacle to a fruitful evangelisation. This trade's history includes a legal document called the Code Noir (1685), which states: "The slave is a movable commodity". However for the missionary who came to proclaim and realise the good news of salvation in Christ, slaves were beings created in God's image and likeness. They deserved the sacrifice of his young life to make known Jesus, a universal brother, in whom God loved all humans to the point of folly so that in him they too could respond with similar folly.



18th century map of Africa, showing a great part of it as unknown.

One of the main innovations of this period was women's presence and activity. On the Protestant side, there were pastors' wives. The pioneer of modern Catholic missions in Africa (starting in 1819 in Senegal) was St. Anne Mary Javouhey (1779-1851), foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. She had the conviction that civilisation must go together with the Christian faith in converting Africa and determinately tried to put it into practice. Through her exposure of injustice and abuses, her influential activity in circles of authority and her daring initiatives, she aroused enthusiasm, opened closed doors and helped to remove many obstacles to missionary activity.



St. Anne Mary Javouhey, called slaves' mother in French Guyana, where she served them until her death.

Another driving force was Francis Libermann (1802-1852), an epileptic Jew become a Catholic priest during 10 years of improved health. It was his society (Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) to start systematic missions south of Sahara. His principles and methods were adopted by later founders, and eventually by the Popes. His aim was not just to baptise as many as possible, but to establish indigenous Churches; key condition was "to form a native clergy and hierarchy rooted in the country". The first means to achieve it was to be the missionary's holiness, preserved by community life. The second means was national detachment and missionary adaptation: "The people must never consider you a political agent of the French Government, but should see in you only the priest of the Almighty... Do not judge according to what you have seen or have been used to in Europe. Divest yourselves of Europe, its customs and mentality. Become Africans with the Africans, and you will judge them as they ought to be judged. Become Africans with the Africans, train them as they should be trained, not in the European fashion but retaining what is proper to them. Adapt yourselves to them as servants have to adapt themselves to their masters, their customs, taste and manners, in order to perfect and sanctify them". The third means was to bring both religion and civilisation: "Our faith will never can acquire a stable form among these peoples, nor will the nascent Church ever have a secure future without the aid of a civilisation which attains a certain degree of perfection... one that is based on science and work in addition to religion". Therefore he insisted on the necessity of founding schools from the very beginning.



Father Francis Libermann, re-founder of the Holy Ghost Missionaries.

The concern to train African co-workers aiming at self-sufficient Churches was common to both first Catholic and Protestant missionaries. It was confirmed by the extreme heroism needed by Europeans for climatic and health reasons: all the 100 missionaries from Austrian Empire, who in 1852-1862 penetrated up the Nile to Southern Sudan, succumbed to deadly fever, except St. Daniel Comboni (1831-1881) who expressed his boundless dedication in the moving motto, "Africa or death". It was a God-given call which made him overcome all difficulties in order to save the Africans. "The first love of my youth was for the suffering man in Africa", he confessed. "The regeneration of Africa by means of Africa itself seems to me the only possible way to Christianise the continent". His axiom "Africa must be converted by Africans" was spontaneously fulfilled by thousands of early converts.



St. Daniel Comboni, bishop of Central Africa and founder of the Missionaries of Jesus' Sacred Heart (Combonians).

Some missionaries thought the ancient Ethiopian Church needed but a spiritual and intellectual renewal through contacts with European Christianity for her to evangelise the the interior of Africa. The Catholics had never given up looking for such contacts. Ethiopia's internal divisions in the first half of the 19th century eased new enterprises from Europe, with three different orientations: Protestant reform of the Orthodox Church, her reunion with Rome, and mission to the pagan Oromo. Only local evangelists had great success among them, laying the foundation of today's Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church, though the Italian Capuchin bishop Guglielmo Massaja (1809-1889) personally baptised about 36,000 people during his journeys of some 7,000 kilometres on foot. When he was old, the Pope made him a cardinal in Rome, but he noted: "I have found here more civilisation but less faith, humanity and upright character than among Ethiopia's 'savages'".



The Capuchin Guglielmo Massaja, Catholic Bishop in Ethiopia.

More important was St. Justin De Jacobis (1800-1860), though he suffered from the Ethiopian century-old distrust of Papacy that sent him. This Lazarist bishop from Italy perfectly adapted to local conditions: following Ethiopian monks' way of life, he ate their food and wore their garments; at home, he slept on straw, and on his frequent journeys he walked bare-footed, staying overnight in a shed or a cave. Notably, he never attempted to introduce Latin liturgy: he adopted the Ethiopian rite and promoted it among his converts. His assimilation with the people was paralleled by his faithfulness to the Gospel. Even his persecutor, the Orthodox Bishop Salama II, confessed: "Never has a Christian observed the Gospel's commandments and counsels more perfectly than he". The way Jesus treated

his disciples was his own pastoral method with priests and virgin women co-workers. When his European confreres felt unable to share his life, he expressed the view that "indigenous priests could suffice to renew the face of Abyssinia" and about 1850 he wanted no further missionaries.



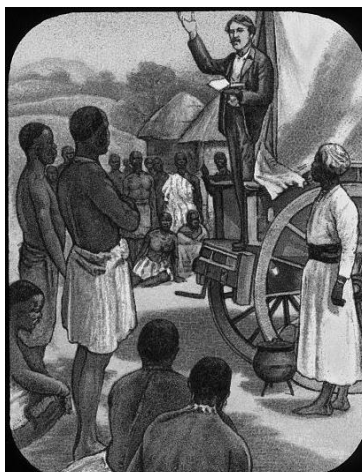
St. Justin De Jacobis, another Catholic Bishop in Ethiopia.

However, the decisive move to bring the Gospel to the heart of Africa came from south. The man who did it without European colleagues' help but in close cooperation with his African brothers, was the Scottish Presbyterian David Livingstone (1813-1873). He made his way into deepest Africa, from Botswana up to the huge Congo Basin, in order to both opening it to the Gospel and suppressing the slave-trade. His surname symbolised his character: a living stone, combining eager vitality with rock-like determination. One revolutionary principle through him became generally accepted by Protestants: "The far interior is to be reached at once", instead of gradually advancing from the coast. "I will open a way to the interior or perish... I will go no matter who opposes, for it is the will of our Lord... The end of the geographical feat is but the beginning of the missionary enterprise". And so it was.



David Livingstone, the best known Protestant missionary in Africa.

Despite criticism as having been more of an explorer than a missionary, he directly started again the evangelization of today's Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. He was found dead in his camp, bent over his bed in prayer. He conceived himself as a "servant to Africa" and respected the local people as "capable of holding an honourable rank in the family of man". From them he secured much good will toward Europeans: his purity of life, his selflessness, his concern for suffering slaves impressed all those who came into contact with him. Because of his friendliness towards the Africans Livingstone became to English-speaking people the ideal missionary. As to his involvement with colonialism, it is evident that he contributed to it by his explorations and even more by his call for trade and settlements, though his intention was to give the local chiefs income sources alternative to slave-trade. Had the colonists treated the Africans as he did, much suffering would have been prevented.



Livingstone preaching during his journeys.

The Eastern shores of Africa were under the firm control of the Arab Sultan of Oman, especially after the Portuguese left Mombasa in 1729. Sultan Seyyid Said enterprisingly moved his residence to Zanzibar in 1841, in order to better control the coastal trade. When he invited the British, the French and even the Americans to open a consulate on the island, it became the centre of trade and politics in East Africa. Although Zanzibar was entirely Islamic, the Europeans' presence made it into the first missionary centre (Catholics, 1860; Anglicans, 1864). The Sultans tolerated Christian missions as part of their trade policy.



Arab slave traders and their captives along the Ruvuma river, 19th-century engraving.

In 19th century Zanzibar was the greatest slave market in the world, with an annual turn-over of 60,000. So, the first permanent Catholic missionaries, the Holy Ghost priests Antoine Horner and Etienne Baur, thought best to begin with a community of ransomed slaves, preferably children. But the island lacked expansion facilities, and life in the city was expensive. Sultan Bargesh allotted them 80 acres in Bagamoyo, the port where slaves from the interior were shipped to Zanzibar for sale. In 1868 all the Zanzibar institutions were transferred to this first Catholic mainland station in East Africa. Within a few years it emerged as a model mission, referred to as the town jewel by the Sultan. Its secret was to foster a Christian civilisation built upon traditional African foundations. Over 200 children there received academic, industrial or agricultural training according to their capacities. Next to them was a Christian village where some 40 couples lived in the monastic tradition of praying and working. Bagamoyo served as springboard to the interior. Chiefs came to invite the missionaries to teach their people "this beautiful religion". Christianity slowly became integrated in the tribal society of today's Pwani and Morogoro regions. Some former slave girls became missionary sisters in their homeland. Many excellent catechists emerged from Bagamoyo planted the Church between Morogoro and Kilimanjaro.



The Old Church at Bagamoyo, the first capital of German East Africa (1886-1891).

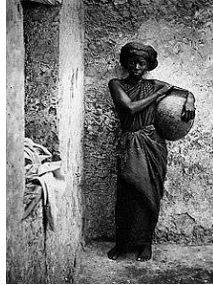
In 1873, British Consul Bartle Frere, convinced the Sultan to forbid the slave trade. The erection of the Anglican cathedral in the centre of the old town, on the area of the closed world biggest slave market, was a monument to joint missionary-government endeavour. Its construction was in fact intended to celebrate the end of slavery. The altar is said to be in the exact place where the main whipping post of the market used to be. The Anglicans too established freed slaves' villages. As a by-product of slavery abolition, they were necessarily temporary. In the 1890s there were over 50 such villages in East Africa. By then the conviction among missionaries grew that it was better to open bush-schools run by catechists in the tribal society. Even if the adults likely rejected the faith, the children would accept it and would found a future Christian society.



The Anglican Christ Church, a landmark monument in Zanzibar and a prominent example of early Christian architecture in East Africa (1873-1883). mixing perpendicular gothic and Arabic details As most buildings in Stone Town, it is made mostly of coral stone.

CHRISTIANITY'S DIFFUSION UNDER COLONIALISM (1880-1960)

The evangelisation enjoyed a strong African initiative, at the beginning in West Africa, by emancipated slaves from America, who however failed to amalgamate with the traditional society, then through the often heroic testimony and ministry of local Christians. So, the issue of the conversion of sub-Saharan Africa to Christ by far transcends the quarrels of imperialism: it was not the result of treaties, or of military conquest, but touches on the substance of the human person. The scarcity of sources does not permit us to have a clearer picture of the motives for conversion; only some glances into the hearts are possible. Few people accepted the Christian faith out of dissatisfaction with their tribal religion. Sometime defeat by the superior power of modern weapons was more effective. Curiosity may have played a greater role, especially through the link with reading and writing skills that provided new ways of earning. Once in school, young people were touched by Jesus' message. Finally, the African holistic approach to life led the old generation to conclude that acknowledging the superiority of Europeans' lifestyle meant accepting their religion at preference of their own traditions and also of Islam. Even if the colonisers had very different objectives, God used them to win Africa to Christ in an astonishingly short time, so as to be considered the greatest epoch of conversion in the entire history of the Church. The fact that they were all Christians, at least nominally, influenced Africans into imitating them, even if for the wrong reason, such as defeat in battle or keeping a job.



Bantu slave woman in Mogadishu, Somalia (1882-1883).

A particular case was Buganda Kingdom, the only African country that in the 19th century became virtually a Christian nation: in 1875 the first missionary arrived there and by 1900 Christianity was the established religion. In the meantime (1885-1886) 100-plus Anglican and Catholic Ganda were killed for their new faith, but their courage brought forth a new wave of conversions. Surprisingly, in today's Tanzania, the proud paramount chief Mkwawa accepted Benedictine monks at the Hehe capital Tosamaganga (1897), after having rejected the Lutherans and involved himself in a war with the Germans. Similarly, the warlike Ngoni under Nkozi Mputa Gama invited them to Peramiho (1898) which after the Maji Maji Rising (1905-1906) became one of the greatest Christian centres in East Africa. When World War I forced missionaries to leave, the new Christians' faith stuck; local leaders and teacher-catechists did carry on basic Church work and increase the flock.



Map of Africa after its partition by European countries.

The colonial period facilitated the coming of a great number of missionaries and the Gospel's spreading. Under European rule the innumerable tribes became easily accessible as their frontiers were broken down. The economic infrastructure, political administration and especially the improved means of travelling and communications tremendously facilitated the evangelisation. Both missionaries and local people profited from colonial health services. The introduction of a monetary economy with salaried work was often the decisive reason for parents to send their children to mission schools where they learned the Christian faith. These schools were the greatest social service to developing nations and towards the emancipation of women.

Especially after World War I, almost all missions worked on converging lines, concentrating on schools and hospitals. Both Catholics and Lutherans aimed at once to have whole regions evangelised, leaving to future generations the growth of the faith in depth. So, they moved from village to village, erecting a school or a prayer place and entrusted it to catechists and evangelists who had a high moral authority and may be were responsible for about 90% of all conversions. The time up to 1920 can be called the age of the bush schools, where they instructed the catechumens and taught the Three R's (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic). In the years 1920-1940, age of the primary schools, they were much helped, and supplanted, by teachers. The time between 1945 and 1960 was that of the secondary schools, while independence started universities' age. That the Catholic Church overtook the Protestants in Africa was primarily due to its sacramental and civilising emphasis. The Protestants, by putting the Bible in the laity's

hands, favoured Africans' initiative, either as personal apostolate or in the sad creation of countless independent communities. Such churches' death is nowhere registered, but it is estimated that 10% of all them disappear yearly.

Muslims often complain that under colonial occupation Islam suffered because the occupying powers were Christian. This statement has to be qualified. Some administrators would positively recommend missions to the people, or insist that they frequent the mission school, but generally they kept on religious neutrality.

The British tried to be fair and positive, even to Catholics, only prohibiting missions in Muslim territories, like Northern Nigeria and Northern Kenya. Preferential or negative treatment remained restricted to local officials.



General C. De Gaulle from North Africa started France's liberation from Hitler's Germany.

The French were often anticlerical, rather hindering than backing missionary work. In spite of overseas minister Gambetta's declaration that anticlericalism was not "an article for export", it was the policy of most of their colonial administrators, though in practice there were considerable differences, as in Togo. A big number of the French colonies in West Africa had an Islamic majority at the time of the Europeans' advent. Fearing to disturb Muslim supremacy and consequently "French peace", the administration generally favoured Islam's rather than Christianity's spread. Since official policy required the missionary to be French nationals, they were mostly Catholics. But many governors and officials gave the missionaries the cold shoulder and made the people feel that at heart they were against Christianity. Their negative policy changed after World War II, when the new Christian government under C. de Gaulle massively supported mission schools, making the Church suspect of colonial collaboration in the eyes of the emerging elite affected by Marxism. A case apart was Senegal President L. S. Senghor, the practicing Catholic who more than anyone else contributed to Africa's cultural self-esteem: he understood how to be truly African and truly Christian.



L. S. Senghor promoted the values of African culture.

In German East Africa (today's Mainland Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi) the colonial administration shamelessly favoured Islam and greatly supported its extension into the interior by using exclusively Muslim personnel. So they got convicted that it was an Islamic country, though at Independence they had been out-numbered by Christians; then they growingly opposed president Nyerere's secular policy. Muslims' great handicap was the fact that Christian missions built schools dispensing Western learning while they refused to establish any but Islamic madrasas. They were at a special disadvantage where education was left to missionary initiative and subsidized by the government, as under Britain and Belgium. This was the most direct profit the missionaries drew from the colonial powers.



Mwalimu J. K. Nyerere's foreign studies were supported by missionaries.

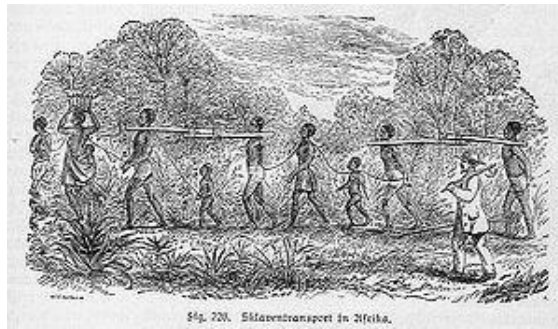
To strike a just balance, if it is true that at the beginning every mission was an essay in colonisation, it is also true that "every mission school was a step to independence" as K. Nkrumah once said. "The rise of our country is properly due to the missionaries. To their work and their assistance I and others owe what we now are". The cooperation of mission and colonialism was the milieu in which African leaders were formed, soon to question both.



Communist President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

MISSIONARY INVOLVEMENT WITH COLONIALISM

The missionaries' activities are a topic open to debate today. They played manifold roles and stimulated cultural, political and religious change as is usual in every meeting of different people. Historians still discuss the nature of their impact and question their relation to European colonialism in the continent. How far were Christian missionaries instrumental in bringing on it? How much were they influenced by the colonial mentality?



Slave transport in Africa.

"First the explorer, then the missionary, then the soldier": this famous saying was originally made by Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia after Italy's attempt at conquering his country in 1896. There were explorers who invited missionaries, but nobody has tried to prove that the Italian aggression, taking place 20 years after the last missionaries' expulsion, was due to their instigation. Menelik was referring to the historical sequence without implying relationship of cause and effect.



Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia.

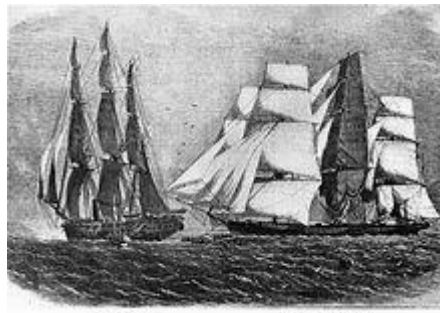
Direct invitation from the missionaries happened in Uganda. But then the almost universal conviction was that Europe's occupation of Africa would be the only means to suppress the slave-trade, and that colonisation would bring to the Africans the blessings of the Gospel and the Western civilisation. It was because Germans' occupation of Tanganyika's coast threatened the Arabs with a total loss of trade in East Africa and persuaded them that it would be best to expel all Europeans by building up first a powerful empire in the interior. Their four attempts at such empire in the year 1888 supported the conviction that the greatest plague of East Africa was the Arab slave trade, and that the only choice was between European rule bringing civilisation and Arab rule maintaining slavery. Occupation being seen as inevitable and beneficial to Africa, some missionaries cooperated with their fellow citizens to secure that local people's territory be taken by the mother country so that their own denomination could gain Africans easily than those prevalent in other European countries. Missionary influence in the colonial annexation is clearly established only

for Malawi, where Presbyterians called on the British, whose Prime Minister gave in for the fear of losing their votes in Scotland if he permitted a Catholic Portuguese takeover.



Slaves in eastern Africa - illustration from late 19th century.

Africans could not keep living as in the past, without contacts and interchanges with external world. The main problem is that they encountered Arabs and Europeans in a condition of weakness, being materially too much in delay especially in front of the modern world. Moreover, they were for this reason often totally despised. Without considering here Arabs' view, in colonialist eyes too, there was nothing the Africans could be proud of: they were "savages" to be civilised or "big children" to be educated, their cultures were only tribal customs, and their religions foolish superstitions. In their eyes, servility was African's greatest virtue. What they failed to understand was how much the African had to suffer from their invasion that placed a whole continent in a position of inferiority creating a permanent complex. On their side, the missionaries as a rule were willing to study African languages, customs and history, but many succumbed to that sin against Africans' honour, lacked of adaption to local culture and contributed in degrading its many values. The educated Africans followed European manners. Only after the disillusion produced by colonial rule African culture was again respected and sought for.



Capture of slave ship Emanuel by HMS Brisk.

Often there was an undeclared solidarity among white men, especially if settlers and missionaries had the same nationality and faith. Individual missionaries who did not comply with the discriminatory code of behaviour were derided. European paternalism hesitated to entrust Africans with tasks of responsibility. Lack of trust accounted for the missionaries' doing much for the people but little with the people. They dominated the whole Church life. Though the catechist did the main work in teaching the catechumens, it was the missionary who supervised it and sat over the final examination. Again, the catechist watched over the flock's discipline, but the missionary set rules and made judgments. The sharing of responsibility with African priests or pastors, and the eventual handing-over was far-away on the horizon. The earliest and most radical reaction was the founding of independent churches, so as to freely develop African leadership against European spiritual and cultural domination.

To admit missionaries' shortcomings is not to deny their great merits, religious motivation and heroism in giving up their home country's comforts, especially in the early times. Despite a general colonial mentality among them, they exercised a mitigating influence among colonists, protesting against abuses and succeeding in their suppression. Even missionaries who had advocated a protectorate, as in Malawi, became very critical of the way it was introduced. But in those early times missionaries were more independent and abuses more flagrant. They worked unaided by the government and managed the finances at their own discretion. With the colonial administration they were often in contrast, having to defend the rights of their African wards. The substantial governmental grants-in-aid for schools after the 1920s made many missions more dependent on colonial authorities. On becoming part and parcel of their school system the missionaries became more convinced of the blessings of colonialism and less critical of its evils.



School in South Africa.

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF MISSIONARIES' WORK

Some observers believe that the missionaries did great good in Africa, providing crucial social services that would have otherwise not been available to the Africans.



Dispensary in Shinyanga Region.

- They spread faith in Jesus and baptized many converts who would follow him in loving anyone.
- Among African religious beliefs, culture and traditions they despised and demoralized, there were twins' murders and human sacrifices.
- They fought slave trade which was later abolished and equality and liberty for all was encouraged.
- They improved communication and transport which in turn led to the opening up of Africa's hinterland.
- They put an end to inter-tribal or inter-village wars and established a stable and peaceful society under one leader (centralization).
- They paved the way for the improvement of agriculture through establishing experimental farms and plantations where better crops, methods and equipment were introduced.
- They established hospitals and clinics which offered modern medicine plus research in tropical diseases like malaria, small pox, yellow fever and sleeping sickness which had claimed many lives.
- They introduced the European system of management and styles of dress and architecture which have been adopted by many people in Africa today. Mission stations developed in towns.
- They studied African languages and translated the Bible into various of them.
- They established printing presses and published books and newspapers.
- They opened up primary and secondary schools as well as training colleges for teachers and trade schools for craftsmen. Africans emerged as doctors, lawyers, clerks, as well as catechists and priests who played a great role in spreading Christianity. In technical schools, carpentry and brick laying skills were obtained.
- In societies that were traditionally male-dominated, female missionaries provided women in Africa with health care knowledge and basic education.
- They contributed to the rise of nationalism through education where a new African elite, educated mainly in English and French, emerged and started demanding for independence.



Monument to slaves (a few human figures in chains emerging from a pit), in the square next to the Anglican Cathedral in Zanzibar.

MULTIPLICATION OF INDEPENDENT AFRICAN CHURCHES

Sometime this movement to religious independence is seen as positive, maybe an ideal of defence of African-ness, but we need reflect on it. There is no clear-cut way to establish the reasons behind the foundation of any free church, much less of all, but the issue could be clarified in relation to two basic category: Colonialism and Protestantism. The colonial mentality of European superiority caused a lack of adaptation and a failure to dialogue with Africans, to listen, accept, trust and share. So, it fostered anti-European feelings among them and in many cases was the immediate reason why the African pastor, followed by his flock, left the mission church. But Protestantism could well be called the main cause: being itself a secession movement, it offered the formal justification for protesting and leaving the mother church as M. Luther did. Having come in Africa in multiple denominations, Protestantism made a similar African pattern look normal. Being essentially lay, it made easier for lay leaders to start an independent community. Catholicism's emphasis on unity, hierarchical leadership and sacraments could not favour a similar tendency.

At the beginning (from 1892 on) there was the dream of one great African Church, embracing all tribes of the continent and being born from the meeting of the gospel with African men and women, without European leadership and culture. The first black churches were movements of protest against colour ban or missionary domination or cultural alienation within the Church. But their life did not deviate from that of mother churches.



William Seymour, leader of the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, USA (1906-1909), which started the worldwide Pentecostal movement.

A second wave, arising in the 1920s and consolidating in the 1960s, was of charismatic character. As a rule, a prophet or prophetess, gifted with healing powers, gathered followers which soon became so distinct that they had to form their own community. All these charismatic churches have their deepest roots in their African religious heritage. To a great extent they appreciate the Bible focusing on the Old Testament as it is seen confirming dreams and visions as means of God's communication, legal taboos, polygamy and healing. This last activity is not only considered the proof of the prophet's divine mission, but also brings to the Africans precisely the fulfilment of their expectations: relief from sickness and protection from evil. As long as this specifically African need is not cared for otherwise, new independent churches will not cease to spring up especially among the simplest persons. The lack of a historical sense prevents them from realising that the Old Testament has been perfected by the New, and from considering any developments through the centuries of Church's life. Apostolic tradition and succession, unity and catholicity are never considered. In this and other points the leader's lack of formation is a serious deficiency.

Moreover, African symbolism neglects the historical Jesus and focuses on the glorified Christ whose Spirit is believed present in the word of the Bible as well as in local prophets' inspirations. Sometimes such a prophet becomes a black Messiah representing Jesus himself and the functions of the traditional medicine man are projected on him. Through him Christ the healer brings salvation into the here and now by producing health and joy; eternal salvation recedes into the background. Here too, spirit possession plays an important role. Many healers preach more on the devil than on God. Public exorcisms strengthen the fear of demons and induce people to demonise their sickness and problems. Their show-business approach and their similarity with witch-doctors' healings confirms the missionaries' view that in this field, to revalue traditional religion may only lead to an increased superstition. In many cases it looks as if the old kind of magic is simply substituted for another. More dangerous in practice is the identification of the prophet's dreams with revelations of the Holy Spirit, who could inspire to hunt witches or to refuse modern medicine or so. These considerations suggest that true inculturation has to be primarily Christianisation of Africans' soul and world. Even in Europe the Church history has been an un-ended process of overcoming magic.

In the Christianity's multiple fragmentation, to a degree unheard of in any other continent, the African background again plays a decisive role. It is one of the besetting sins of native organizations that everyone desires to be the leader. Sometimes the justification for secession is the traditional custom of splitting off from the father's kin. Finally, to the potent social reality of the extended family there corresponds a small religious community where everyone can feel at home: well over 90% of all independent churches have around 100 adherents each. The average African doesn't regard churches' multitude as a scandal: fatalism, conservatism, care for identity and feeling at home in a small community seem to be stronger than the African gift for dialogue, reconciliation, solidarity and hospitality which could be so useful in order to overcome historical divisions among denominations. For the Catholic Church, promotion of Christian unity remains one of the priorities: it is demanded directly by Christ's will for his only Church in order that she may be the sign and instrument of the unity of the human race.

CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA

Those who knew history approached the age of Independence with serious doubts: would Christianity be swept away together with colonialism? Yet, the common African person still felt attached to the fatherly priest of his church and the motherly sister in the hospital, clearly distinguishing them from other white people. During the 1991 celebration of the 500th anniversary of Christianity in Angola, the Marxist Minister of Justice L. Dias recalled how there had come first the soldiers, second the missionaries and third the merchants; then he mused: "What would have been our sad fate if only soldiers and merchants had come?" For their goals had nothing in common. The evangelising mission essentially had nothing in common with the conquest and the monopolisation of raw materials. Whereas military men and merchants were involved in this imperialistic work, the missionaries instead came to live with their African brothers and sisters to give them God's good news, revealed in Jesus Christ as a Trinity of love, creating all humans in his image and likeness. While soldiers and merchants did violence to Africa, stripped it and left it for dead, the Gospel missionary went there to care for it, to raise it and to re-establish it with his dignity, on the road of a history to be built together, as a history worthy of God and worthy of the new man which in his turn the African has become.

Colonialism gave way to independence and out of the mission there grew the local Church. African Christians were able to distinguish between the substance of the faith and its European garb. Those who threw away both were an

insignificant minority, and the missionaries' expulsion was a transient event affecting a few countries only. On the contrary, after the Independence, there was an accelerated growth. With notable exceptions in Western Africa, Christianity has become the majority religion in most countries south of the Sahara. It has serious problems, like infiltration of secularism, continuous fragmentation among denominations, need for a deeper incarnation of faith in the African personality, lack of true spirituality in many leaders reflected in an exaggerated preoccupation with money, power and sex. However it is certain that local Christians have made the Bible their own, and African Catholics highly esteem the sacraments. Large numbers come together for Sunday liturgies, exhibiting an exuberance and vitality which is characteristic of African culture. Women and men serve in different ministries to build up Church and society. New parish structures are visible and are working, such as basic community. Schools and medical services co-ordinate their facilities to respond more effectively to the needy. Christianity enjoy much public esteem and confidence. A fuller Christian living is obviously relevant to the struggle for a better society, but there is a deserved conviction that the African Church has much to offer to the whole world. We can hope well for the third millennium.



Ethiopian pictures about Jesus' life.

Against the unreal temptation of desiring to go back to pre-colonial way of life or totally defending African original culture, we need to be open-minded like Tanzania's father, J. K. Nyerere, who wrote: "We are all what our past known and unknown has made us. We and our grandfathers have learned and adapted from nature, from ourselves and people of Europe, America and Asia. This we shall continue to do just as men and civilizations throughout the world have done. In determining our future out of the lesson of our present and past we shall be working a new synthesis, a way of life that draws from Europe as well as Africa, from Islam as well as Christianity, from Communism to Individualism".