

The Relevant Strengths of the Christian Church
in Africa Since 1960

by
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When the European Conference of Nations met in 1884 in Berlin, two themes dominated the discussions. Africa was destined to become a hinterland for European commerce and trade and each nation was anxious to share in this destiny. The second theme was that expounded by idealists and "missionary types." King Leopold of the Belgians was the champion of the philanthropists. For Belgium, he proposed a free trade area in the heart of darkest Africa whose main purpose was the advancement of the Negro race. Sir H.H. Johnston, who attended the conference, said that the delegates congratulated each other, the Italians wven weeped with joy and the English were ashamed of themselves. King Leopold, we are told, "had in fact attempted the regeneration of Negro Africa He was hailed as a man who would raise the millions of Negroes to a condition of peaceful self-government, free on the one hand, from the curse of the Arab, and on the other hand, from the alcoholizing European." ¹

Johnson mentions a fear which was not publicly discussed at the time, that Africa would fall prey to Islam. The reason was that Turkey was a member in good standing of this conference and insisted that freedom of religion should be inclusive of Islam. The fear however, did not go away. At the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 a fear was expressed to the effect that "if things continue as they are now tending, Africa may become a Mohomedan continent."²

This fear is now rarely mentioned with the exception of a few United States Central Intelligence reports which confuse anything anti-American to be communist inspired. In actual fact, all the evidence is that:

- (a) Africa is the only continent where Christians are increasing their numbers at a percentage rate higher than that of population growth.

- (b) Statistics from Christian churches are lower than those from government records. This means that a large number of people claim to be Christians or to have benefitted from the Christian gospel who are not recognised as such in official church records.
- (c) Unlike in the western world, Christian growth in Africa is still largely as a result of new converts rather than converts from one church to another.

The paradox of this essay, or rather the romance of my research is that the strength of Christian missionaries lies in the very factors which constituted their weaknesses during the colonial period. The Reverend B.T. Beetham, writing in 1967 at the height of anti-European feeling and the end of the colonial era said that:

The day of the overseas missionary in the numbers of the past and present will soon be over....it may prove necessary for a number of reasons, not the least the implacable alliance of some missionaries with their own culture and nationality."³

In almost all the anti-missionary literature, one accusation stands like a sore thumb, that the missionaries were the fore-runners of the merchants and political imperialists. The marriage between mercantile interests, political and christian interests was the brainchild of the Reverend Dr. David Livingstone. The dream had been articulated at the General Conference of the Church of Scotland in 1874 by the Reverend Dr. James Stewart who proposed a missionary memorial in Central Africa worthy of Dr. Livingstone.

..he - (Dr. Stewart) would now humbly suggest as a truest memorial of Livingstone.....an institution...to teach the truths of the gospel and arts of civilized life to the natives of the country...which would grow into a great centre of commerce, civilization and christianity."⁴

The year 1960 marks a date-line in which the majority of African countries became independent. The temptation to despise everything European including the Christian religion, was overwhelming. Public and political "positions" taken by leaders under-estimated the resilience of the Christian churches. The secret, I believe, lies in two factors. The first is that the accusations levelled against the European missionaries were not properly interpreted. For instance, the fact that education provided by European missionaries was very rigidly "European" and made little attempts to adapt to local situations was taken at face value. The Reverend Dr. B. Mtinkulu, the first secretary-general of the All-Africa Conference of Churches found that while the leadership could focus on those institutions and social values of the colonial era that had an impact on the peoples' lives, it was not so easy to do away with them. "These institutions and values did not die on independence day. They remained, and they had become part of the fabric of life" whether the people liked this fact of life or not.⁵

An episode in Dr. Mtinkulu's life will illustrate the point. We can assume that most educated Africans will enumerate a long list of grievances connected with the European education. What is not so commonly known is that twenty years after independence, the systems of education in Africa have followed basically the same syllabi and patterns of the much hated colonial system. Dr. Mtinkulu suggested in Zambia that the English Form Six (the two year university preparatory period) be done away with.

"At the end of my talk, " he wrote, "I was asked if I had myself been through the Sixth Form. I confessed that I had. Whereupon the speaker quickly made the retort: "It hasn't done you much harm, has it?"⁶ The truth of the matter is that with all its faults Africans have realized that the Christian religion and education could not possibly harm anybody.

At this point it is necessary to examine the actual growth of the Christian church before dealing with the second issue, that of religion as a force in favour of modernization. If we use the Roman Catholic Church in Tanzania as an example of general church growth, it is surprising that the church has kept the same rate of growth before and after independence. It doubles its membership every twelve years. The figures are as follows:

Table 1. Roman Catholic membership.

1948	675,000
1958	1,250,000
1968	2,350,000

Source: W.B. Anderson: The Church in E. Africa (Tanzania 1974) p 146

The Reverend David B. Barrett has compiled a list of figures for the whole continent of Africa. These figures show a steady growth in the number of African Christians at a rate of 6 percent per year. Secondly, they show that when the church statistics are compared with government statistics, (a fact we mentioned earlier), the churches have persistently underestimated their own strength. The figures are as follows:

Table II. Total Christians in Africa 1965-1970.

<u>Sub-Saharan Africa</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1970</u>
Protestants	21.3%	28.5%
Roman Catholics	33.3%	44.6%

Orthodox	7.6%	8.3%
Independents	6.5%	8.7.%
Total: Churches statistics	68.7(29%)	97.2(28%)
Government statistics	97.4(32%)	126.4(37%)

A brief comparison with the actual population figures will help to underscore the fact of actual church growth on the African continent.

Table III.

	<u>Total Population</u>	<u>Christians</u>
1900	118 million	4 million
1960	275 million(estimate)	75 million
1970	346 million	97 million
2000	768 million	351 million(46% of population)

Source: Adapted slightly from D.B. Barrett - Review of Missions January 1970

Again, if we are to believe Barrett, while church statistics show that a steady incline leading to 46 percent of the population south of the Sahara by the year 2,000; the government statistics show a steady decline in numbers of non-christians (excluding Moslems) to almost zero by that year. The growth of Islam has not been due to conversions but due to natural increase in their respective populations. These facts contradict the two general assumptions, namely that Islam is growing by leaps and bounds and secondly that the association with European imperialism has been a death-blow to the Christian church in Africa. The Roman Catholic missiologist, Father Adrian Hastings believes that by the year "2,000 there will have been a widespread breakdown of the Church in Africa, simply clogged by numbers," because there is no conscious planning at all to cope with the increase in numbers.⁷

Brief though the above exposition is, it should give us an appreciation of the viability of the Christian churches in Africa. We can now turn our attention to the motif that runs through this paper; the relative strength of the church. The central argument in favour of the Christian church is that it has been the mid-wife to the twentieth century. The twentieth century is associated with rapid industrialization and the rapid decline and shift of rural population. In the early fifties of this century, 95 percent of the African population was rural. Thirty-years later only 70 percent still live in the rural areas. In South Africa, almost 50 percent have migrated into the urban-mining metropolitan areas. Those who were opposed to European imperialism (as were the Moslems) saw rightly that the old family bands and structures would be doomed in the new society. "In the small face-to-face communities of the old traditional life, the extended family system with its obligations and ties was an excellent arrangement for providing security and a feeling of belonging."⁸ This, some scholars have termed the moral efficiency of primitive peoples. I believe that here is the centre of our argument. The moral efficiency of the traditional society does not work in the new environment of the city and may appear even to be ridiculous. Indeed, the system works to the detriment of the "go-getter, who seeks to improve himself and use that improvement for the benefit of his immediate family. Here at once the old idea clashes with the new - the good as communal with the good as individual."⁹ It is not by accident that the old medieval religion gave way to the Protestant ethos of which Max Weber has so mightily spoken of. The purpose of any religion, if we can believe B. Malinowski, consists of two things, to bring about social cohesion and to bring about mental stability. But the African traditional religion, because of its reliance on the community cannot bring about social cohesion in a technological society

that does not recognize group achievements but places emphasis on individual performance. This point should not be taken to extremes. It is of course important to be a cousin of the minister of labour. It will give the individual access to the labour market but by and by, the individual must prove his own worth alone. The struggle between the old and the new is going on in Africa and sometimes the old is grafted to the new, and so it should be.

In the transmutations that are taking place in Africa, very often the Christian church has taken over the functions of the extended family. When my father was a pastor in a mining district, our house became the centre for migrants seeking work. But only those migrants who belonged to our church and had testimonials from their previous pastor stopped by. Very frequently also, when one of these migrants entered a hospital, the name of the pastor was mentioned as the next of kin and therefore the person responsible for burial arrangements. The significance of an education is still not to be underestimated even though the Christian schools have now been forced to accept all children in their area irrespective of denominational affiliation. The Reverend W.B. Anderson wrote about the Luo country in Kenya in 1974 along this vein. Luo country is one vast poverty stricken area "from which those without an education have no way of escape." The Christian church that started work there was the Legio Maria (Legion of Mary). It brought a new spirit of freedom from witchcraft and enslaving habits, and helping the unfortunate people to stand up for their rights.¹⁰ Obviously, the traditional habits were not aggressive enough to cope with the vicissitudes of modern day Kenya politics and lobbying for new schools, health and agricultural amenities.

An aspect of Christian enterprise and versatility became obvious during the reign of terror in Uganda between 1971-1980. A lunatic military officer,

General Idi Amin siezed power and proceeded to slaughter all possible elements. The slaughter was quite unheard of in Africa, though the incarceration of members of political opposition parties is almost universal in Africa. Since the newspapers and the audio-visual media is also in the hands of the respective governments (or effectively controlled by threats of closure and incarceration) the real problem of who will "speak unto pharoah and say let my people go" became a problem of who will bell the cat. I need not remind this learned audience that there was no problem of what to say to the "cat", but the problem arose from the fact that the speaker would in all likelihood constitute a wholesome meal for the cat. The analogy is gruesome but I beg your permission to persue it. In the case of Uganda, according to Mr. Henry Kyemba, Minister of Health in that government, General Amin sometimes tasted the blood of his victims, an act of ablution demanded by African custom in cases of murder. Mr. Kyemba, we shall only mention in passing, was never known to have improved the health of any Ugandan citizens, but to the contrary falsified the death certificates of those whose health General Amin had terminated. Members of the Learned Conference, please bear with me for a while. I cannot pass a good story. In December 1978, Mr. Kyemba was told by a confidential source that his master, General Amin thought that he (Kyemba) had become too healthy for his own good. It is true that Mr. Kyemba escaped to Great Britain with his health intact and write the expose of which I have recounted to you. The question has not yet been answered. Under such circumstances, who and in whose name was to lift up his voice? Bishop W. Lurum, a small, tireless and fearless Anglican Bishop, wrote a letter to General Amin saying in no uncertain terms, in heaven's name, the slaughter must stop. The Bishop was matyred. The point however has been made, during the colonial as well as in the post-independence period, very often there is nobody to speak unto pharoah. It remains the

undisputable duty of the Christian church and the black leadership of that church, in the name of God, to speak out. This is the prophetic role of the church irrespective of the governments in power.

In conclusion it is important to mention that while this paper placed emphasis on the relative strength of the Christian churches in Africa, it is not implied that there are no weaknesses. We shall mention a few in passing. The major weakness throughout the colonial period was that the Christian church was associated with European imperialism and culture. For instance, in Kenya, very many Christians found a Christian wedding too expensive, an obvious contradiction in terms but no less real. It seems that there was pressure for the groom to pay for an expensive bridal gown and a ring, both of which would consume a year's salary for a peasant. These two expensive items have nothing to do with the Christian ideals of marriage. As in some Negro churches in the United States, the dress code of certain churches involves such expensive accoutrements that some people find it too expensive to attend service regularly. Further as the economy takes on a more sophisticated outlook, and creates rigid monetary classes, the simple Christian fellowship of equals is being strained daily. An important minister of government insists on bringing his bodyguard into the church. Even though they await him discreetly in the cloisters, they are not as inconspicuous as they profess to be. Worse still, the minister may insist on being called the "Honourable gentleman," contradicting the very essence of equality before God. The tragedy is that this is by no means novel. In the colonial days, European Christians insisted on drinking from the communion cup first, before it was soiled by the other black members of the congregation.

The author of this paper is aware of these and other problems. However, despite these problems the Christian church has shown resilience beyond the expectations of its enemies and friends.

Footnotes.

1. E.D. Morel - Red Rubber (London 1905) p XVIII.
2. Report of the World Missionary Conference - Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian world Vol. I. New York 1910 p 20 f.
3. T.A. Beethan: Christianity and the new Africa (London 1967) p 158.
4. Glasgow Herald. 10th June 1874 Church of Scotland Library Reference A 360.
5. B. Mtinkulu. Beyond Independence (Friendship Press, N.Y. 1971) p 13.
6. Ibid. p 59
7. D.B. Barrett: Review of Missions Journal Jan 1970, article entitled "A.D. 2,000: 350 Million Christians in Africa." p 49.
8. B. Mtinkulu op cit p 49.
9. Ibid.
10. W.B. Anderson, The Church in East Africa(Tanzania 1974) p 148-149).