

CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN AFRICA AND THEIR ROLE IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN SOCIETIES

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The third phase of the missionary movement in Africa, which started from the end of the eighteenth and continued throughout the nineteenth century, in twentieth-century Africa led to the dramatic expansion of Christianity called "the fourth great age of Christian expansion". In their attempt to spread the Christian faith, win converts and transform African societies, Christian missions of all denominations opened schools and disseminated education. Scientifically very important was their pioneer work in African languages. By producing grammars, dictionaries, textbooks and translations of religious texts missionaries laid the foundations for literature in African languages. Christian missionary enterprise was no doubt of prime importance in the Westernization of Africa. Africans were, however, not passive recipients of new influences and culture patterns. The adoption of Christianity and the process of cultural exchange were shaped by African choices, needs and efforts to Africanize Africa's Christian experience by securing the roots of Christianity in the African context.

Key words: expansion of Christianity in Africa, Christian missions, the study of African languages, missionary education, transformation of African societies

Before 1800 the chief contact of sub-Saharan Africa with Europe was through the traffic in slaves for the New World. Increasing Western commercial penetration from the end of the eighteenth century and ultimate political dominance in Africa coincided with a massive Christian missionary enterprise. The modern era of the missionary expansion of the Christian Church started with an evangelical revival movement stimulating Protestant initiatives at the end of the eighteenth century, with Anglican and Roman Catholic missions joining up some decades later. Intensified contact with the non-Western world since the late eighteenth century confirmed in the European mind the idea of the

Christianization of those parts of the world which had hitherto been deprived of the message of the Gospel. This third phase of the expansion of the missionary movement in Africa, which continued throughout the nineteenth century up to the present day, may conveniently be dated from 1792 and the publication of William Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, which was called a landmark in Christian history, "the first and still the greatest missionary treatise in the English language".¹

Shortly after the publication of his pamphlet, Carey preached his famous sermon with its two heads, "Expect great things... Attempt great things".² Less than five months later, on 2 October 1792, the Baptist Missionary Society was formed, followed in quick succession by the interdenominational London Missionary Society established in 1795, the evangelical Church Missionary Society created in 1799, the Religious Tract Society and many others. The British and Foreign Bible Society founded in 1804 had the special task of promoting the translation and printing of the Holy Bible. At this period, the bulk of the missionary enterprise was done within English-speaking Protestantism, joined in the 1820s and 1830s by continental Protestantism coming from Germany, Switzerland and France.³ Similar organizations sprang up in Scandinavia, Holland and the USA. Catholic Christianity which came to play an essential role in the evangelization of Africa, revived its work a little later.

The Catholic mission movement in Africa which had started in the late fifteenth century and was given new direction by the foundation in 1622 in Rome of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide by Pope Gregory XV, nearly collapsed under the impact of the French revolution and Napoleonic wars in the late eighteenth century, when many religious houses and congregations in Europe were closed down. It recovered in the first decades of the nineteenth century and revived the work of evangelization in Africa. The Catholic mission movement got a new impulse and a sense of direction when new missionary congregations explicitly directed to Africa were founded in France. French missionary societies played a crucial role in the revival of the Roman Catholic presence in nineteenth-century Africa. Until 1885, apart from the Italian Verona Fathers in North-Eastern Africa along the Nile, all Roman Catholic missions in Western, Central and Southern Africa were French. An impetus given to the African mission was the foundation in France of two new missionary congregations explicitly directed to Africa, Francis Libermann's Congregation

¹ CAREY, William. *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, p. 20.

² *Ibid.*

³ The first German missionary society was founded in 1814 in Basel, then came Berlin, Paris, Leipzig and Bremen.

of the Holy Ghost, based in Paris, and only a few years later, in 1854, of Melchior de Marion-Bresillac's The Society of African Missions (SMA) which, together with the Holy Ghost Fathers, shared responsibility for the west and east coasts of Africa.⁴ Perhaps under the stimulus of, or as a reaction to Protestant missionary activities, two other missionary societies were founded for Africa in the 1860s within the Catholic Church. Daniel Comboni of the Verona Fathers, who had their principal field of work on the Upper Nile, in 1864 attempted to revive the work of evangelization with his New Plan for the "Regeneration of Africa by Africans". The other Roman Catholic missionary institute of immense importance for Africa was the Society of Missionaries of Africa, better known by the nickname White Fathers derived from the Muslim dress which they still wear. It was a new missionary order founded in 1868 in North Africa by the Archbishop of Algiers and Carthage, Primate of Africa and Apostolic Delegate for the Sahara and the Sudan, Cardinal Lavigerie, to maintain a non-proselytizing presence among the Muslims. The Society of White Fathers started in Northern Algeria by the caring for and educating children orphaned by famine and epidemics in this part of Africa in the years 1867-1868, their activities then spread to cover the Algerian Sahara (1872) and Tunisia (1875) and very soon its mission was enlarged to comprise the evangelization of the far interior of West and East Africa.⁵

The vast African continent was always present in Lavigerie's thoughts. From 1867 until his death in November 1892 the immense African interior remained the principal object of Cardinal Lavigerie's zeal and from the very beginning he planned an apostolate south of the Sahara. Cardinal Lavigerie, as Professor of Early Church History at the Sorbonne, knew well that Christianity had had a very long history in Africa due to the existence of the ancient Churches in Egypt, the Roman Africa, Nubia and Ethiopia. And though the modern history of the Christian missions in Africa south of the Sahara only started from the late eighteenth century, the Catholics never forgot that they had been there before, in the first centuries of the Christian era and in the Portuguese period, and therefore tended to regard the nineteenth-century missionary enterprise in Africa as a "reprise".⁶ When elaborating the Catholic

⁴ SUNDKLER, Bengt - STEED, Christopher. *A History of the Church in Africa*, pp.100-109; HASTINGS, Adrian. *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, pp. 242-258.

⁵ Charles Martial Lavigerie (1825-1892) was appointed Archbishop of Algiers in January 1867, on 2 August 1868 he was appointed Apostolic Delegate for the Sahara and the Sudan and he became Cardinal on 19 March 1882. For his life see: LAMEY, R.X. *Cardinal Lavigerie. Selection of articles*. Rome, Missionari d'Africa, Archives, Historical Department 1990.

⁶ SUNDKLER, Bengt - STEED, Christopher. *A History of the Church in Africa*, pp. 84-85.

mission strategy in Africa Cardinal Lavigerie always emphasized the legacy of ancient Churches which had flourished and then vanished in different parts of Africa and attempted to draw his inspiration from the examples of the early Church. As Primate of Africa embracing the whole of continent he dreamed of "resurrecting" the early Church of Africa by the "Establishment of a Christian Kingdom" in the heart of Equatorial Africa. He renewed the primatial see of St. Cyprian at Carthage and had a magnificent basilica built there. From his episcopal residence in Algiers Lavigerie started to send his first teams of missionaries to the interiors of the African continent to convert the peoples by converting their kings. This became his strategy for winning the peoples living in the East African Interlacustrine area to the Christian faith.⁷

The expansion of the missionary movement into Africa was part of the growing conception of Christian responsibility for the regeneration of African peoples. The anti-slavery issue and the humanitarian conscience also played a vital role in stimulating European interest in Africa and gave an impetus to mission work. Cardinal Lavigerie's mission strategy was particularly concerned with halting the slave trade in Africa. In 1878 Lavigerie was entrusted with the evangelization of Equatorial Africa. This new apostolic field soon led him with the full support of Pope Leo XIII to secure a federation of the various European anti-slavery societies in L'Œuvre antiesclavagiste and initiate a large-scale anti-slavery campaign, or as he himself called it, "a great crusade of faith and humanity".⁸ The opening up of Africa to forces of change by the four Cs, namely by the introduction or the imposition of the so-called legitimate commerce and Christianity as a key to civilization and eventually colonization was seen by most abolitionists, humanitarians, philanthropists and missionaries as the only remedy. The equation of civilization with commerce became a common characteristics of humanitarian and missionary thought since it was widely believed in the abolitionist, humanitarian and missionary circles that in addition to the general civilizing impulse which commerce would give to African peoples, legitimate commerce would deprive the slave trade of its hold on the West African coast and in the East and Central African interior. Traffic

⁷ Lavigerie's idea was to found a Christian kingdom in the heart of Africa. He saw a precedent in the European Middle Ages. By converting and baptizing the African kings he hoped to win to Christianity the whole nations. This became his strategy for winning the peoples living in the East African Interlacustrine area to the Christian faith.

⁸ Documents sur la Fondation de l'Œuvre Antiesclavagiste. Saint-Cloud 1889; RENAULT, François Fr. Lavigerie, l'esclavage africain et l'Europe. Tome I: Afrique Centrale. Tome II: La campagne antiesclavagiste. Paris, De Boccard 1971; Lamey: Lavigerie, op. cit., Lavigerie. The Anti-Slavery Campaign, pp. 189-206. Cf. GROVES, C.P. The Planting of Christianity in Africa.

in tropical produce and other commodities should replace the trade in slaves to the benefit of both Europe and Africa.⁹ The task of leading Africans on the path of civilization by the expansion of moral and religious instruction and converting the pagans to the true religion fell on the newly established mission societies.

By 1870 there were a number of missionary posts, but, despite some early missionary efforts, religious penetration was confined to the coasts. The commencement of missionary work in Africa was attended by many hardships and trials. After a very short time many missionaries fell victim at a youthful age to the unhealthy tropical climate, were killed or had to be invalidated home. The position of these early missionaries was also complicated by the fact that in many places where religious change was occurring, it manifested itself in the acceptance of a nominal Islam. In West Africa, the push inland from the coast coincided with the simultaneous southerly expansion of Islam which posed a threat to Christian mission work. Islam, which had been present on the East African Swahili coast for nearly a thousand years, began at this time to penetrate into the interior along the newly opened Arab and Swahili trade routes. In many regions Islam preceded Christianity and, paradoxical as it may sound, in some places it actually prepared the way for Christianity. In their struggle for the spiritual control of African societies, missionaries had to diminish the prestige of Islam by proving the superiority of their own religion.

In the pursuit of their primary objective, the salvation of souls, early missionaries often failed. The pre-colonial period was marked by few significant missionary successes. Despite their fervour and zeal Christian missionaries in the early period of their presence in Africa achieved only minimal results in converting Africans. In many parts of Africa Christian missions had to pass through a period during which their religious instruction met with complete indifference. The European impact was most evident in the trading posts along the West African coast. In the coastal enclaves of freed slaves, European trading communities and local Africans there was also a numerous mulatto population. It was in these coastal settlements that Christianity won most significant early successes. The process of the acculturation which had been going on for a long time in and around the European trading settlements and forts scattered along the West African coast got a new impetus and a sense of direction when Christian missionaries began to arrive to Africa. The CMS began to work in the freed slave villages in Sierra Leone in 1804 and the Methodists in 1811. The major early successes of the

⁹ BUXTON, T.F. *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy*. See also BERNAN, Edward H. *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, pp. 3-5.

missionaries were in Freetown and surrounding villages in Sierra Leone, among Afro-Americans and freed slaves on the Liberian coast and in French trading posts at Grand Bassam, Assinie and Libreville in Gabon. Catholic religious orders had long attempted, though unsuccessfully, to establish Christianity in St. Louis and Gorée.¹⁰

The missionary movement which was far from successful during this early period as far as Christian conversion was concerned, met with huge success in another field. In most regions of sub-Saharan Africa outside the reach of Islam, Africans were introduced to written literature through Christian propaganda, the very first books in their own African language were produced to advance the Christian cause. Missions of all denominations disseminated education in their attempt to win converts and to train African catechists. "Transforming Africa by the Africans", was the formula advocated by Cardinal Lavigerie in his instructions to the White Fathers. "The missionaries must therefore be mainly initiators, but the lasting work must be accomplished by the Africans themselves, once they have become Christians and apostles. And it must be clearly noted here that we say: become Christians and not become French or Europeans."¹¹ Missionaries were therefore asked to adapt themselves to the Africans, to strip themselves, as much as possible, of the cultural elements peculiar to them, of their language in the first place. It was believed that without effective and active communication it was impossible to pursue the conversion of the Africans. Missionaries were requested to overcome language difficulties by devoting their spare time to the study of local African languages and by approaching Africans in their own language to minimize cultural misunderstandings and distinctions between themselves and their potential converts. To master the local African language, the White Fathers were actually forbidden to speak to each other in anything else after living six months in the country.¹² The linguistic work and an intimate knowledge of the language were crucial, since through language it is possible to get to know and appreciate its cultural context and experience the relevant culture. The nineteenth-century missionary theory as formulated in the foundation documents of many new missionary societies reiterated Lavigerie's idea and by suggesting that the

¹⁰ SUNDKLER, Bengt – STEED, Christopher. *A History of the Church in Africa*, op. cit., pp. 100-123; HASTINGS, Adrian. *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, op. cit., pp. 248-258 and also ISICHEI, Elizabeth. *A History of Christianity in Africa. From Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 84-88.

¹¹ LAVIGERIE, Cardinal. *Ordonnance au sujet de la direction des Séminaires*, 1874. In: *Instructions aux missionnaires*, p. 250.

¹² LAVIGERIE, Cardinal. *Chapitre de 1874*. In *Archives des Pères Blancs*, B-18, 1; Lavigerie, C. *Instructions aux missionnaires*, pp. 70-71, 134-135, 145.

Christian Church in Africa would develop its own particular forms of expression, it tended towards an adaptive missiology and a pluralistic understanding of Christianity advocated by the present day African theology. In the nineteenth century, civilization meant different things to different people. Lavigerie almost never spoke of civilization and instead insisted in his Instructions on the acceptance of cultural diversity and non-European ways as crucial to a missionary's central purpose. However, the praxis of the missionary enterprise in general turned out to be different and the ideal and vision of the missionary founders were not effectively implemented.¹³

Scientifically very important was Christian missionaries' pioneer work in African languages. Unwritten local languages had to be learned and written before the difficult but vital task of religious instruction and the preparation of religious texts could be undertaken. The first generation of Catholic missionaries in different parts of the African continent met the expectations of their founder. Some White Fathers became great scholars and outstanding linguists and their linguistic work laid a solid foundation for all missionaries who came after.¹⁴ The teaching of literacy was also a concern of the White Fathers mission. By producing alphabet sheets, word lists and grammars, later full-scale dictionaries, textbooks and manuals, translations of portions of the Gospels and later of the whole New Testament, Catholic missionaries helped to create the pre-conditions for the building up of the literary tradition and the written literary language. Christian missionaries of all denominations spent many years exploring local African languages and translating portions of the Bible, Prayers and Hymns into African languages. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Bible in African society. Missionaries supplied the vernacular African languages with a written form and provided the beginnings of a translated literature. The missionary translators naturally began with biblical literature, the Gospel of Mark being often the first choice. The publication of the Bible in full or in part, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress from This World to that which is to come* in British Africa, were usually the first major publications in most African languages and in many cases the Bible remained for a long time the only publication that people could read in their mother tongue. Vast literacy campaigns were based on the translated portions of the Bible. Ability to read a gospel used to be a requirement for baptism in many, mostly Protestant, churches and also in the Roman Catholic order of the White

¹³ LAVIGERIE, Cardinal. Instructions aux missionnaires, p. 98; Hastings, A. The Church in Africa, op. cit., pp. 286-293.

¹⁴ DIEMER, E. Essai de Bibliographie des travaux bibliques des Pères Blancs en Afrique. In Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire XVII, 1961, pp. 127-134. Also Monchamps, Georges Mgr. L'Œuvre Linguistique des Pères Blancs d'Afrique. 1904.

Fathers. The latter had all the books published in their headquarters in Algiers, but many other main missionary bodies established at their mission stations their own presses and started to produce religious literature locally.¹⁵ As early as the nineteenth century some missions started to publish newspapers in African languages. Soon in addition to publishing educational and religious books, they started to produce also history and geography books, ethnographical accounts and collections of oral literature. Producing the books which were the first documents of the written form of the language, the missionaries thus created the pre-conditions for the building up of the literary tradition and the written literary language. Apart from Swahili and Hausa, nearly all African languages had first to be reduced to writing before translation and publication of the Scriptures could be made. This aspect of the missionary work, the reduction of a number of African languages into a written form, the translation of the Bible, hymn-books and prayer-books into Swahili and other East, West and South African languages and the instruction in reading and writing which went with the work of conversion, has in the long run proved to be just as important as the conversion itself. This concern for African languages developed by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries laid the foundations for literature in African languages reduced into written form. Christianization went with reading and writing, with the rise of African literatures. In this aspect the missionary work proved to be a truly creative force within the history of the African peoples and societies, transforming their lives materially and mentally perhaps more radically than any other impact before or after and perhaps more deeply than Africans themselves had imagined and realized at that time.¹⁶

The consequences of missionary activities were manifold. Missionary education has generated a great deal of debate. Early missions schools grew out of the desire to spread the gospel. Conversion and education or training went hand in hand. The primary goal of all mission societies in Africa was the

¹⁵ Some of the earliest mission presses on the continent were in South Africa, a mission station in Lovedale started to publish in Xhosa in 1823, the Marianhill Mission Press printed books in Zulu and the Sesuto Book Depot in Morija in Basutoland produced publications in Sotho.

¹⁶ See PAWLIKOVÁ-VILHANOVÁ, Viera. Bible Translations into African Languages and the Rise of African Literatures. In *Philologica LII Biblické žalmy a sakrálné texty v prekladateľských, literárnych a kultúrnych súvislostiach*, pp. 285-298. Also PAWLIKOVÁ-VILHANOVÁ, Viera. Biblical Translations of Early Missionaries in East and Central Africa. I. Translations into Swahili. In *Asian and African Studies*, pp. 113-122, PAWLIKOVÁ-VILHANOVÁ, Viera. Biblical Translations of Early Missionaries in East and Central Africa. II. Translations into Luganda. In *Asian and African Studies*, pp. 198-210.

winning of converts and therefore a heavy religious emphasis was common to all mission schools. They established schools because education was deemed indispensable to their aim, but always placed religion at the forefront of the school curriculum. Most missions provided only basic education to ensure the inculcation of proper Christian principles and enable Africans attending the mission schools to become good Christians. Denominational rivalry was closely connected with school expansion, each denomination founded its own school system. Africans were thus provided with several educational options. Missionary domination of the education system was characteristic of all colonized areas, except in Francophone Africa.

Cultural contacts with the West were no doubt led by the missions and were defined above all by their intention to transform African societies. Missionaries, who were themselves products of the Western Christian civilization, carried with them their cultural values and had little doubt about the superiority of their culture. They took from it its conventional features, building churches and schools in the European style and imposing the habits and ethos of the Western Christian civilization on their converts. In Christian mission stations, which served sometimes as a refuge for freed slaves, with their own schools, churches, hospitals, stores, and plantations, missionaries exercised a strong superintendence over the moral lives of their converts, banning polygamy, dancing, singing, ancestor-worship and many other customs. Settlements established in different regions of Africa by White Fathers and other Roman Catholic or Protestant missions were actively developed as self-supporting economic communities, where the virtues of hard work might be learnt alongside protection from the temptations, such as polygamy and many customs associated with traditional life and religion. The forms of religious service missionaries used, though translated into African languages, were reproductions of the liturgy of their home church, replete with hymns. A Christian became "one who abandoned the customs". Missionaries carried with themselves their cultural values which determined the form of education provided. Both White Fathers and Protestant missionaries hoped that in providing education they would also be able to form Christian character. The schools they established were often boarding schools because missionaries believed that in an atmosphere of the boarding school far removed from the traditional cultural influences of their homes, new converts would more easily give up all or most of their traditions. The school system promoted Western values and desires. Missionary schoolmasters provided a total culture pattern, including church attendance, Christian morality, table manners, etc. All this led to the segregation and alienation of converts from their families and their societies. The education provided by the missionaries had the effect of detribalizing their African converts, some missionaries believed that their converts could become genuine

Christians only if they became Europeanized and they were producing black Europeans. Africans who attended the early mission schools became a new élite no longer able to identify completely with the traditional society. Sometimes the first converts came from among the lowest strata of traditional society or from among liberated slaves, however, their conversion secured them a new status often defined in terms of clothes, school attendance and associations. At other times the ruler himself and the upper strata of the society embraced the Christian message. The missions here supported their work of conversion by establishing schools for the sons of chiefs.

For Africa the missionary movement represented the first and most important facet of Western contact. Christianity provided access to a civilization and culture pattern which was bound to conquer African societies. The adoption of Christianity also meant acculturation into the world of Western civilization, ideas and technology, with Christianity went also Westernization. Despite the instructions of the nineteenth-century missionary thinkers and theorists, Christian missionary enterprise was of prime importance in the Westernization of Africa. The impingement of Western cultural norms, lifestyles and beliefs rudely shattered African societies. However, Africans were not passive recipients. The process of Westernization and cultural exchange was shaped by their choices and needs. By deflecting or selectively absorbing Western influences, Africans themselves were instrumental in the formation of a new cultural synthesis. A new African élite educated in the mission schools and churches eventually started to challenge the missionary dominance of the mission churches and continued European dominance.

Carried by the missionaries, in the twentieth century Christianity invaded the whole of Africa. The dramatic expansion of Christianity in twentieth-century Africa which has been called "the fourth great age of Christian expansion", has shifted the core of Christianity from Europe and North America to Africa, Latin America and certain parts of Asia. A struggle continues on the African continent among African Christians and theologians for an Africanization of Africa's Christian experience by securing the roots of Christianity in the African context.¹⁷

¹⁷ BEDIAKO, Kwame. Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion.

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