The European Missionary Contributions to the Growth of Christianity and Civilization in Africa: Real or Hoax?

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Abstract

The significant role that European missionaries played in the spread of Christianity and civilization of Africa can easily be eroded by any torrent of argument: was the coming of European missionaries beneficial to the social and cultural advancement of the continent; didn't it study the growth of technology and social integration of Africa? However, the fact remains that the Europeans made substantial contribution to the modern development of Africa, which could be identified. Thus, this paper examines the contributions and juxtapose the argument that not much was achieved by the European missionary's arrival. The intention is twofold: first, to appreciate the effort that European missionaries put into the evangelization and civilization of Africa and second, to show the value of the opposition as to motivate contemporary Christians in Africa to contribute their own quota to advance the course of Christianity on the continent. Special attention was given to aspects such as literacy, training of indigenous leaders, health care systems, Henry Venn's principle, and the mitigation of the spread of Islam. Historical and narrative approaches are applied to give the work a qualitative appeal it deserves.

Key words: European Missionaries, Contribution, Christianity, Africa, Evangelization, Civilization.

Introduction

The judgement given by Lord Mansfield, the British Chief of Justice, in 1772 on the liberation of slaves in the British Isles could be a take-off point in discussing the contribution of European missionaries to the growth of Christianity in Africa. The huge number of the liberated slaves created a humanitarian crisis and raised the issues of resettlement. It is reported that most of the ex-slaves who resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone Colony, were already Christians. Thus, they became useful instrument in planting Christianity in many parts of Africa, particularly West Africa. The ex-slaves served as a tremendous force to bring the gospel to their people throughout West Africa (Foster, 1961 & Falk, 2015).

The Berlin Conference of 1814 is another landmark in the discourse of colonial and European missionary enterprise in Africa. The said conference was very pivotal in terms of formalizing and structuring the various "spheres of influence" for European powers (Uzoigwe, 1976). Though, for many Africans, the constitution and outcome of such conference was very unfortunate, just as Uzoigwe described it as "a morally bankrupt meeting and was nothing less than infamous" (184). However, it became the genesis of a whole chain of events which are crucial in understanding the European missionary contributions to the growth of Christianity in Africa.

Furthermore, the aftermath of the conference was vividly felt in stabilizing and ordering the missionary enterprise in Africa. Obviously, the colonial forces were not the only ones who "scramble for Africa"; rather, the missionary agencies were equally scrambling for converts. Consequently, there was an influx of missionary into Africa during the colonial era and this left its marks on the nature and character of the Christianity that eventually flourish in Africa (Barrett, 1970 & Bediako, 2000). Nevertheless, at the exit of colonial forces due to African nations gaining independence, the activities of the missionaries also began to gradually dissipate.

Meanwhile, the influx of missionaries into Africa would not have been possible during this period without the milestone discoveries made in navigation, which became a catalyst and awaken great adventurous interest in many Europeans (Headrick, 1984). It was also an avenue to investigate the veracity of the legendary claims of treasures in distant lands. Although, the invention of compass, the new knowledge and skills of navigation and the larger and stronger vessels led to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it nonetheless paved way for the missionaries to establish the Christian faith on the African soil.

The presence of the European missionaries in African is perceived differently. Many Africa scholars interpret the activities of the missionaries as compensation for the devastating effect of the slave trade and not as ingenuous as it appeared. Again, the missionaries were perceived as Europeans agents of civilization who came to Africa ultimately with a "civilizing mission" (Jacobs, 1982). Against this backdrop, therefore, the paper goes on to discuss some of the major contributions of European missionaries to the growth of Christianity in Africa and at the same time examine these contributions in the light of modern criticism brought about by proponent of exploitation by European missionaries in Africa. The contributions include literacy (education), training of labour force for the mission health care, advancement of agriculture industry, Henry Venn's principles of three-self principle.

Contributions

Literacy/ Education

The missionaries played a significant role in promoting Christianity in Africa through literacy. It began with the problem of language barrier and the need for the use of interpreters (Jordan, 1992). The missionaries soon turned the difficulty of communication into an opportunity for many Africans to be literate. The ex-slaves were very useful at this point as they facilitated the development of dictionaries, grammar, and primers for the study of various vernaculars. This mission effort produced vocabularies and invaluable anthropology information. Many who were sent for training, for example Samuel Ajayi Crowther, later became pioneer missionaries.

Bishop Smauel Ajayi Crowther (Ajayi, 1965) also employed this as his chief method of evangelization, introducing mission schools into new places by getting rulers and elders interested in the ideas of having school of their own. According to Onu (2018), "the paramount duty of the missionary was to attract people to the mission and the doctrinal refinements would follow". Therefore, the introduction of Western style of education as a tool for evangelization immensely furthered the course of Christianity in Africa, as education became a major strategy for proselytizing the young ones.

The literacy work undertook the Vandevort among the Nuer people around the Nasir mission in Sudan is noteworthy. This missionary linguist and educationist, according to Miner (August, 2003), contributed to "a tradition of the Nuer linguistic description that developed in relative independence of colonial governance in the late nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century". The Western system of education as well appreciated at such a time when there was much of misunderstanding and hostility between the colonial administration and the indigenous people. Thus, the missionaries

proliferated mission schools and saw that as a means of proselytizing a lot of Africans into the Christian faith.

Training of Indigenous Leaders

The European missionaries discovered that if Africans must be evangelized, then it has to be by the hands of Africans (Shorter, 1972). Perhaps, they must have perceived that the supple of European manpower for mission work in African will not always be sustainable. This idea became materialized and was followed through till it climaxes in the consecration of the first black bishop of the Anglican Church of England and Ireland, Samuel Crowther as bishop of the Niger territories. Mention should be made also of J. C. Taylor who was consecrated Ibo pastor at Sierra Leone and was sent by the Church Missionary Society to Onitsha to commence a work (Stock, 1899).

The "Christian Institute" that became the Fourah Bay College in 1827 founded by the CMS is another brilliant strategy the missionaries employed in ensuring the growth of Christianity in Africa. The institute was notable for being the training centre for hundreds of catechists and teachers who served in Sierra Leone and other West African countries (Groves, 1954). Indeed, this institution played a major role in promoting Christianity in the sense that it served as the preparation ground for would be interpreters of the Bible into vernacular languages and Other Christian literature. Also, many who graduated from Fourah Bay College became ministers and made their mark especially in the English-speaking part of West Africa (Groves, 1955).

Furthermore, Daniel Comboni (Collins, 2008), who subscribed to the idea of evangelizing Africa by Africans also developed a "plan" which entailed a proposal for series of training centres along the African coast, where European missionaries could train Africans to undertake evangelistic work. He established schools for freed slaves in Khartoum around 1873, some of which would later be named after him to immortalize his legacies. Moreover, the success of the training of indigenous leaders for evangelistic work was obvious after the CMS withdrew all white missionaries in 1961 and left the work in the hands of African clergy (Falk, 2015).

Henry Venn's Three-Self Principle

The principle of "three-self" largely contributed to the growth of Christianity in Africa. It was an idea that originated in the 19th century by European missionaries who realized that a better way of establishing indigenous churches has to be by a formula of self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Henry Venn who was the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society and Rufus Anderson, the foreign secretary of the American

Board of commissioners for Foreign Missions, were the first to champion the three-self principle (Venn, 1971). This idea was later developed into what was known as "Nevius Method" and became a viable mission method particular by missionaries to China and Korea (Clark,1937).

The concept of the three-self is a mission theory of the emergence of indigenous churches. Shenk (1983) quoting Vennn noted "a church was judged to be indigenous when it was self-propagating, self-financing and self-governing". Venn desired to see the growth of indigenous churches devoid of the culture of the missionaries and independent of mission agency's ongoing resourcing. In other word, churches resulting from foreign missions must be indigenous in the sense that they must have local leaders, financed locally, and engage in evangelism, discipleship and church planting all by themselves. This theory was promoted as core values or guiding principles in shaping the life and ministry of a congregation from its inception.

Furthermore, it is the three-self principle that informed the sending of Samuel Ajayi Crowther from Sierra Leone to Yoruba land in 1845 for evangelical work. It was same principle that made Venn to present Crowther's Linguistic work at Fourah Bay to Oxford University which won him the award of honorary Doctorate of Theology. These were deliberate measures to raise indigenous hands for mission work which would ultimately result to the growth of Christianity in Africa.

Health-care System

Aside from the introduction of literacy and providing indigenous leadership, European missionaries also made contributions in the area of health-care. Ross (1955) recognized that "Christians Missions have been almost everywhere the introducers of western medical, surgical, and public health methods and pioneer of trainer of Africans in these skills". Before the advent of the missionaries, Africans were dying in their numbers due to various tropical sicknesses and epidemics despite the traditional medical therapy in place. But the arrivals of the missionaries and their health mission activities changed things, especially after the discovery of quinine with enables the missionaries to overcome tropical diseases. According to Schram (1971), Christian missionaries were the first to establish health-care services for the people of Nigeria, citing Obosi, Onitsha, and Ibadan as places that enjoyed the earliest health facilities. Schram noted that the Roman Catholic Mission, the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the American Baptist Mission contributed to the Nigeria health sector in its formative stage. More important to note was the first hospital built by the Roman Catholic Mission in Abeokuta, 1885.

Furthermore, the Bowen University Teaching Hospital, Ogbomoso, Oyo State; Baptist Hospital, Eku, Delta State; Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, Ilesha, Osun State (also at Benghazi in 1958); and Wesley Guild Hospital, Ile-Ife, Osun State are testament of the immense contribution of the church to health improvement. Due to the high quality of the facilities, affordability, availability and easy accessibility of health-care personnel, government hospitals were no match for the hospitals established by the missionaries in terms of standard. Thus, the government realized this and recognized the church as an important partner in the improvement of health-care in the society.

Considering the aspect of motive, Good (1991) is convinced that the health missions of the church was borne out of the desire to create a conducive environment for the gospel mission to thrive. Missionaries ensured that hospitals and other health-care facilities were stations where their missionary activities took place. It was also observed that African converts enjoys free health-care and many epidemics were eliminated (Mkandawire, 2009). While it was among young people that the literacy evangelical strategy worked more effectively, the Medicare strategy appealed to all who were sick and were in need of health-care.

Just like educational development in Nigeria, it is agreed that health-care has always been key strategy for the church in reaching out and winning converts. The church's effort to create a climate in which parishioners are healthy enough for effective worship gave birth to health mission initiative. Thus, several health campaigns have been carried out, and are still being carried out to create awareness, sensitize, and educate the society on proper health habits. This has recorded huge success owing to the fact that the church has a wide range of influence and ability to penetrate difficult groups in the society.

Therefore, the health mission of the church has helped a great deal in the reduction of infant and maternal mortality cases. Consequently, many Africans became interested not just in the Medicare of the missionaries but also were receptive of the gospel they proclaimed. Thus, it could be asserted that health-care was the bait the missionaries used to arrest the attention of the people in the process of evangelization, and as a result contributed to the growth of Christianity on the continent.

The Bible and Plough Principle

The missionaries observed that to discourage slave traffic, which was an illegitimate trade though lucrative, they must introduce a better alternative. This idea gave birth to the Bible and Plough Principle. This principle entails handing the bible (gospel) to the people on one hand and the other hand, handing them the plough (skill/farming). Thus, the missionaries

introduced some cash crops including cocoa, coffee, cotton, alongside new farming method (Onu, 2018). In pursuant to the principle, the missionaries did not only teach people the bible, they also taught them to engage in legal commerce and make decent money instead of slave traffic.

This idea got the approval of some local chiefs such as chief Akintoye of Lagos, who made efforts to terminate slave traffic through Lagos, making the region accessible to legitimate trade (Stock, 1899). More so, the request made by King Eyo Honesty of Calabar and King Ayamba V to the Queen of England underpins the Bible and Plough Principle.

> One thing I want for beg your Queen, I too much man now, I can't sell and I don't know what to do for them. But if I can get some cotton and coffee to grow, and man for teach me, and make sugar cane for we country come up proper, and sell for trade side, I very glad. Mr Blyth tell me England glad for send man teach book and we understand God all same white man do. If Queen do so I do too much, and we must try to do good for England always… (Macdonald, 1945, cited in Falk, 2013).

This, though with trade transaction undertone, attests to the fact that the missionaries did not hand only the bible to the local people, but also the 'plough' as a viable alternative to slave traffic. Onu (2018) states "the King made request for personnel to be sent to their area for the enhancement of economic, educational and religious prospects as alternative to the trade in slave".

On the Regent village of Freetown, "boys were encouraged to learn different trade which made it possible for the colony to produce carpenters, bricklayers, surveyors, smiths and tailors" (Eche, 2018). These are multiplier effects of the Bible and Plough Principle, putting the culture of legal commerce in place. More so, the enterprising prowess among the ex-slaves, especially the Yoruba people was equally encouraged. "They engaged in trade along the coast of Lagos" says Eche, having "bought a small ship which they named 'Wilberforce'". These commerce activities and the desire of the Yoruba people to return home contributed to the spread of Christianity in Africa.

Mitigation of the Spread of Islam

The Muslim invasion of Africa, particularly through the North, brought a major setback to the spread of Christianity on the continent. Beginning with the advances in Egypt around 640, the Muslim went through Ethiopia and southward into Nubia as well as Sudan. The Christian witness became practically non-existence in North Africa, following the Muslim

invasion; even though there was serious resistance. For example, due to Muslim pressure the Christian emperors of Ethiopia through a joint effort of church and state defended its region against Muslim attacks. This explains why emperor Menelik could refer to Ethiopia as a Christian island in a Muslim sea (Glover, 1960).

Europeans missionaries understood that the best strategy to the spread of Christianity in Africa has to be by bringing to a halt the forceful spread of Islam. Taking advantage of the Portuguese encounter with the Arabs in the 16th through 17th centuries which tremendously curtailed the Muslim advances in Africa, the missionaries began to make series of effort to spread Christianity. For example, the Church Mission Society sent five missionaries to Egypt in 1825. While three of them were saddled with the responsibility of strengthening the Oriental churches, two were sent to Ethiopia to promote a revival (McLeish, 1927).

Similarly, meaningful Christian work did not take root in Sudan until the Muslim group known as the Mahdists were defeated in 1899 by the British. It was after the British had restored order in Sudan that mission work continued (Cornevin, 1960). The formation of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) is also an attempt to address and halt the spread of Islam in Africa. The missionaries were fully aware that Muslims were bent on Islamizing Africa especially the Northern region, thus they joined forces to mitigate that agenda through various mission agencies. This implies that the scramble for Africa also had religious undertone. The European missionaries through dogged determination to enslave Africa gave it a Western Civilization that ushered in modern era of science and technology in the continent. If the European missionaries were not enterprising the spread of Christianity, the southwards across the Sahara to West Africa and perhaps to Nigeria in general should not have been possible. According to Adiele if the back Africans were not integrated into the workforce of missionary who knows what happened to the Borbori of the Africans who were neglected with gospel and later became Muslim traders and bearers of Islam's faith (4).

The Negative Criticism of European Missionaries Activities in West Africa

The success of European missionaries in evangelizing Africa and also contributing to the socio-economic developing of the region is always subjective and very relative issue because, there are many variables under consideration when the subject is in public domain. These variables are seen in different eyes by whosoever is discussing it. The Christian contributors would surely be influenced by the glorious things the church had said about this while, the Muslim scholar would feel that the African continent should have fair better if the Western missionaries did not invade it. Even the "neutral

educationist", depending on his or her natural tendencies might be tempted to see the whole argument as mere human progressive capabilities made on continuation. Bab Fafunwa, as an educationist believed that informal education system of African was not after all unproductive rather fundamental enough to ginger development and social order (1974). Western education was equally functional but departmentalized knowledge to the disadvantage of progressive minds. The missionaries were interested in making people "read and write" to enable them understand the bible and to an extend serve in the literal section of the church as catechists, interpreters and even church clerks. Therefore, the early education introduced was common 3Rs – read, write, and arithmetic without the aim to promote science education (Ajayi, 1965)

Some of the missionaries did not believe that black Africans were incapable of grasping abstract issues and so cannot succeed in modern science and logic. This is very evident in Rev. Townsend opposition to T.B. Macaulay becoming the principal of a new Anglican Church Grammar School at Abeokuta, after the death of the pioneer principal, Mr. Paley within few months of assumption (he assumed office on 1st January and died April, 1853) (Ferguson, 1978). His season may be trivial when seen in the light of events in the world where Africans are excelling in different fields of human endeavour. Townsend felt that Africans with half education were pompous and easily felt they have achieved much (Ajayi, 1965).

In politics and governance, the European missionaries showed much of their bias and prejudices toward black Africans. The notion about Africa on education influenced their support to the colonial administrators. The product of their grammar schools are as good as being cashiers and clerks in the church and trading companies of the day. Even those who were ordained clergy ended up as sub-ordinates to the white clergy no matter the number years' experience acquired and service rendered to the church. The Crowther experience and subsequent creation of Niger Delta Pastorate in 1892 were as a result marginalization of black clergy and labour in the CMS controlled domain (Obuofaribo, 1990). White clergy were not willing to serve under Samuel Crowther but were ready to serve in Onitsha or Lagos where the European Bishops held sway. Many junior clergies were snobby and disobedient to the authority of Bishop Crowther (Anyabuike, 1996). Some scholars had argued that the attitude of these white missionaries might have added to the death of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, 1891 (29).

The common picture of the missionary mentality is extended to Thomas Jefferson Bowen, an outstanding missionary of the Southern Baptist Conference, who on retirement in America 1856, after six years of meritorious service in Nigeria, freely went into

colonization project that proved a mirage (Ajayi, 1965, 48). His effort, some may claim was to provide accommodation and secure a better future for black Americans. Bowen struggled to establish a colony between Lagos and Abeokuta in form of Sierra-Leone pattern. However, the American Congress did not pass the motion after he had expended a huge sum of money. Politics and economics seemed the determinate action and interest of the Christian missionaries.

The vision of Thomas Fowell Buxton (the Bible and the Plough) that transformed Christian evangelism is commerce oriented. He proposed a commerce that would replace or substitute slave trade that was illegitimate trade. His advance was that the state should pursue a policy that encouraged evangelism and agriculture. Give the Africans the gospel and at the same time teach them to farm and produce cash crops that would be useful to their colonial masters. The idea grew and was accepted because, "there were those wished to find markets for the products of Britain's new industries… (Ogbu, 1978).

It is no doubt that Christianity and colonization contributed to the civilization of Africa, especially Western Africa, but, the adverse effects of the attitude of the European missionaries and the concomitants of this civilization one may ask has it benefited the Africans? If one may consider the view of Ampitan that such civilization "brought some impressive things to Nigeria… it has conservely introduced some negative…". Youths are exposed to scam via the use of internet. The easy going and innocent youth of Nigeria before the advent of the white men, are now internet fraudsters, "lazy youth" etc (2011). Probably without the incursion of the European missionaries and colonization into Africa, the peoples' civilization should have evolved on its own. The argument is that nature has a way of taking care of itself, Africa would have grown its own civilization that should have contributed to the global economy and socio-political advancement of the world village.

Having examined some purposed contributions of European missionaries to the development of Christianity and civilization of Africa and also the hard knocks against them, the paper sees the good tention of the early proposals of the Buxton's "society for extinction of the slave trade and the civilization of Africa" as defined by a "journal of a visit to the encampment", August, 1844 as outline by Ajayi as apts:

- Adopted effectual measures for reducing the principal languages of Western and Central Africa into writing
- Prevent or mitigate the prevalence of disease and suffering among the Africa;
- Encourage practical science in all its various branches;

- Investigate the system of drainage best calculated to succeed in a climate so humid and hot;
- Assist in promoting the formulation of roads and canals, the manufacturing of paper and the use of printing press;
- Afford essential assistance to the native by furnishing them with useful information as to the best mode of cultivation, as to that production which command a steady market and introducing the most agricultural implements and seeds. The time may come when the knowledge of the mighty powers of steam might contribute rapidly to promote the improvement and prosperity of that country (1965).

A proposal as such as above, is with all good intention to prove the lives of the people it was meant for. The important question is, have these ideas carried out in Africa and achieved? The success, some may argue, is the yieldstick for the intention and willingness to achieve. The willingness to achieve propelled the missionaries to come to Africa and some of their achievement are there for people to see and a test to them. Though some may ask, how afar is their successes and achievements assisted the modern outcome of our civilization?

Conclusion

The history of the growth of Christianity in Africa is incomplete without the mention of the immense contributions of the European missionaries. It is not out of place to describe the missionaries as the ones who sowed the very seeds of the gospel in most part of Africa, which have grown and bore fruits in terms of multiplicity of churches. Regardless of their shortcomings, the efforts of the European missionaries in the evangelization of Africa and the eventual growth of Christianity on the continent can never be undermined. Early literacy, training of indigenous leaders, the Henry Venn Principle, healthcare systems, mitigating the spread of Islam are various ways that European missionaries contributed to the growth of Christianity in Africa.

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