

Christianity Just Cannot Win:

Contradictory Academic Critiques of Missions and Christianity in Africa

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In his article "Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe," Abrose Moyo begins by stating that Africans are generally very religious people, and that "atheism is foreign to African soil." (Moyo, 59) He continues by describing how Zimbabweans still hold to traditional religions in spite of the large numbers who have converted to Christianity. He derives this shallowness of Christianity among Zimbabweans from his observation that, even though "during the colonial era African religions and cultures were heavily suppressed by both the missionaries and the colonial administrators, independence resulted in a revival, or resurfacing, of African Traditional religion." (Moyo, 62).

What Moyo fails to realize is that this return to traditional religion has little to do with Christianity not being suitable or fully integrated into the lives of the people. Throughout Africa, conflicts of all kinds have brought revivals of traditional religions, especially among frightened young Christian (or Muslim) combatants who are for the first time given the opportunity of seeing firsthand the real power of their traditional rituals in wartime. Furthermore, in the Zimbabwean situation, the ZANLA guerrillas consciously allied with the traditional spirit mediums because of their influence in rural operation zones. This is described fully in David Lan's 1985 publication, *Guns and Rain*. In this book, Lan shows how many Christian guerrillas who were skeptical of the power of the spirit mediums quickly gained faith in their powers and did not return to the religion of their fathers – that is Christianity – after the war.

In the same article, after alleging that Christianity had not taken root firmly in Zimbabwe, Moyo turns around to describe how important Christianity is to post-independence Zimbabwe. He writes, "Today Christianity has a place in Zimbabwe

which no politician can ignore.” (Moyo, 63) He then discusses how ZANU, the ruling (and only) party consciously cultivated a close working relationship with the church. Before the struggle began, present Prime Minister Robert Mugabe said, “Christianity for years acquiesced in the policies of successive regimes that, contrary to its morality, impoverished the majority in favour of the minority.” (Moyo, 62) After the war, ZANU began to use Christianity as a means to justify their own often-oppressive policies. Mugabe has equated socialism, ZANU’s economic philosophy of choice, with Christianity and capitalism with un-Christianity. (Moyo, 70)

President Banana wrote that, “a Christian who does not strive for [Zimbabwean] unity [read: ZANU policies] negates his very name of follower of Christ.” (Moyo, 71) In this article, Moyo begins by criticizing Christianity for killing traditions and for not fully taking root in people’s hearts. He then ends by showing how Christianity has in fact taken such a firm root in Zimbabwe that the socialist liberation government legitimates its own policies through the church.

This is all done without Moyo acknowledging the all-important role Christian missions played in the build up to the struggle itself. The very sense of Shona nationalism and unity was aided immeasurably by missionary translation work of the Scriptures into chiShona Union, a project completed in 1949. (Sanneh, *Translating*, 246) The translation of the Bible for the Ndebele was not completed until 1978. (Sanneh, *Translating*, 247) Perhaps the unifying force of this earlier translation was a reason why the largely Shona ZANLA (ZANU’s military wing) was a more influential force in the struggle and the aftermath than the Ndebele-dominated ZAPU and its military wing ZIPRA.

As Lamin Sanneh has pointed out in case after case, the missionary legacy was not one of destroying cultures, but rather propping them up, unifying them, and giving them a greater sense of affirmation of the values, strength and equality of their own traditions compared to all others. In Chapter 2 of his 1993 publication, *Encountering the West*, Sanneh shows how the translation of the Christian scriptures has aided in the development of a sense of a distinct identity beginning with early Christian Egypt and Ethiopia (*Encountering*, 78), and also the

Carolingian Empire (79), Moravia (80-81), the Tartars (82), the Akan (82-84), the Asante (85), the Zulu (87-104), and the Tswana (105-106). In spite of how well argued Sanneh's case is, Africanists such as John and Jean Comaroff and Paul Landau continue to bend over backwards trying to show how irrelevant and impositional Christianity has proved to be in Africa, especially Southern Africa. They have yet to pull the blinding nature of the secular academic world view from their eyes to see the long term legacy of Christian missions in Africa rather than the legacy of short term individual missionaries in particular places. They continue to study Africa through their own atheistic eyes even though, as Moyo writes, "Atheism is foreign to the African soil." (Moyo, 59)

Other Africanists have come to recognize the unifying power of mission work within ethnic groups throughout Africa, although they fail to acknowledge the contribution of Sanneh's work to such an understanding. Perhaps this is because they now wish to take it to the other extreme. The study of tribalism and ethnic rivalries as being creations, rather than as ancient and inherent hatreds, has become quite popular in academic circles. The work of scholars such as Terrence Ranger (*The Invention of Tribalism*) and Mahmood Mamdani (*Citizen and Subject*) are two recent examples. Another is Leroy Vail's edited volume, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, in which he credits missionaries with being guilty of creating particular tribal identities, and therefore, tribalism itself. Instead of Christian missions as being destructive to cultures, it is now being accused of sowing the seeds for the terrible ethnic conflicts which have plagued Africa for decades. As in the example of Ambrose, Moyo's double-edged critique of Christianity being both foreign to Zimbabwe and also being instrumental to Zimbabwean politics, academics just do not seem to want to award anything positive to Christianity in Africa.

However, as the following example will show, there is some validity to Vail's theory. There is presently an ongoing ethnic conflict around Takum, Taraba State, Nigeria between Kuteb and Jukun (the historical "oppressor" of the Kuteb) factions. In an informal report on the conflict from the director of the mission body which works in the area, we see clearly how in this case the church has been used as an arena for exacerbating division and conflict. He writes,

Tragically, the church has had little influence in stopping this kind of violence. In one way Christianity has intensified tensions because the Bible teaches that all men are equal. Before the coming of the gospel, some tribes believed they were better than others and should rule the “inferior” people. But as the oppressed tribes accepted the Gospel, they began to realize that they too were important and equal before God. The Kuteb tribe is almost completely Christian, but when 25 years ago they perceived that the Jukun were attempting to dominate the church, the Kuteb left and formed their own denomination. Many Kuteb young men who started the fighting are members of the Kuteb church. Most of the Jukun fighters are members of the original church. Often the tribe is lord, not Christ. (Vreeke prayer letter, p. 2)

A factor he failed to mention was that the Kuteb translation of the Bible was completed under the direction of Dr. Robert Koops (now based in Serrekunda, Gambia) only a year before the present conflict began. Was Kuteb nationalism raised to a new level because they now had their own Bible? Does this explain why the present conflict has reached a level that previous conflicts did not come close to? When the Kuteb requested the translation of the Bible into their own language, missionaries resisted it precisely because they knew it would exacerbate the regional ethnic tensions. In several other cases, Nigerian church leaders have been the ones resisting Bible translation projects in Taraba State. Will the translation of the Bible into Chamba, another minority ethnic group in the area presently allied with the Jukun, turn them into another formidable faction in the fight to control Takum?

With this and many examples like it show is that far from killing African ethnic sensibilities, missions, Christianity, and translation work have very nearly created them. However, academics cannot be let off so easily that they have their cake and eat it too. Lamin Sanneh has made it very difficult for anyone with academic integrity to write off missions in Africa as a completely destructive force. In a desperate attempt to avoid “giving Christianity good news,” academics are now heading for the other extreme. They are now portraying missions as a negative force which heightened ethnic tensions and turned hitherto peaceful African

“tribes” against one another. Although there is some validity to this argument, it does not look at the big picture in the same manner viewing missions only as destroyers of culture fails to do. Rather than hide the truth, Africanists need to free their thinking from secular biases and study Christianity in Africa as a movement whose speed of growth has reached miraculous proportions.

Seeing missions and Christianity as forces which only destroy cultures on one hand or turn people against each other on the other only turns African converts into helpless victims of a grand Western Christian conspiracy. Africans have, largely without any great coercion, converted in the millions to a religion which the western world attempted to dominate for itself. Christianity is now so “African,” that when Africans immigrate to countries like the United States, finding a church is an important part of making them feel comfortable in their adopted home. For many Africans, Christianity is now firmly part of their cultural identity. The recognition of this and explanations as to how this came about would be a more reasonable focus for academics who instead continue looking at Christianity as something eternally “unAfrican.”

SOURCES

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