

Christianity and the Fate of Africa: A Critique of the Debate

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Introduction

Africa's unrealized social, political and, especially economic, potential is the subject of much public debate. The arguments in this discussion revolve around three themes – leadership, colonialism and religion. This paper is a critique of contemporary arguments which conflate Christianity and colonialism in a bid to locate the source of Africa's plight. I argue that while both Christianity and colonialism have shaped Africa's recent past, the merging of the two in public discourse must be interrogated. I propose that the premises of these arguments must be rectified in order to properly situate religion in the matrix of Africa's solutions for its future.

Christianity's failure on the continent is the subject of intellectual discourse and heated exchanges on social media.¹ Known to be noto-

riously religious, the African faithful are uncritical, observers say, in their belief in an imported faith.² Africans' apparent unwillingness to question the motives of a foreign religion hinders progress in a modern world. This modern world is said to nurture prosperity by moving away from religion in pursuit of the benefits of science.³ The argument goes that for Africans to think freely and secure their continent's future, they must rid themselves of Christian religiosity that has little to offer.

"Of what use is this religion in Africa?" ask those who genuinely doubt the value of Christianity for a continent full of woes. "What has this thing done for us since it came?" The failures and excesses, particularly of the Pentecostal preachers, accentuate the frustration and resentment towards Christianity. Layered on top of this angst is the extractive, colonial heritage that attended the missionary years in Africa. This critical argument goes on to assert that African Christianity's provenance in Europe, with its North American cousins, renders it useless for any practical purpose on the continent. Only a truly imperialism-free, "melanized" Christianity can be trusted as a means by which African society can address its problems. Until such a Christianity is found or created, the faith must be treated with the disdain and suspicion it deserves. I note here that these critics do not acknowledge early 20th century African Initiatives in Christianity as a sufficiently authentic African Christianity.⁴

I suggest here that an adversarial engagement with religion in Africa must also be subjected to scrutiny. Africans interested in this debate must apply the same intellectual rigour to ask themselves why they are asking these questions. To put it differently using, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's language, African intellectuals must apply the hermeneutics of suspicion on their suspicion of Christianity!⁵ They need to be critical about their own criticism of the value of Christian faith for the continent. We take a moment now to revisit the history of the argument.

Criticisms against Christianity in Africa

The charge sustained by European trained African pre-independence, and early post-colonial thinkers is that Christianity is a violent, colonial, and white, affront to African progress.⁶ On the charge of violence, Christian history has little it can do to defend itself. A cursory look at ancient and modern history reveals a long, tragic, savage and embarrassing account, in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. One has to admit though, that religiously instigated violence isn't unique to Christianity. That is to say that the charge isn't materially different from human carnage elsewhere in the name of this, or other religions. As a matter of fact, secular humanistic ideas whose devotion to science should have produced human progress have not fared any better. Some of the worst human tragedies came from these intellectual experiments in 'secular, scientific morality.'⁷ History reveals that violence is a human condition with horrific consequences. Religion and ideology are inadvertent vessels of this violence.

The other assertion is that Christianity is colonial. I suggest here that this assertion needs a more nuanced response. Many initial missionaries to Africa South of the Sahara were white Europeans.⁸ Colonialists were also white Europeans. Unfortunately a number of missionaries extolled the virtue of imperialistic priorities of colonial governments.⁹ White settlers and civil servants also facilitated the presence of missionaries who served their religious needs during their injustice filled time in Africa. However, the presumption that because missionaries came from Europe they rendered the faith inherently colonial or white is problematic in many ways. The logic of 'race equals religion' is difficult to sustain. Further more, the argument that Christianity came from European colonial impulses does not account for early Algerian, Tunisian, Libyan, Egyptian, Nubian and Ethiopian Christianities whose maturity and proliferation predates continental European Christianity as we know it.¹⁰

Aside from these patristic and medieval period examples, a closer look at more recent missionary history challenges the colonial label of

Christianity. The temporal gap between the missionary enterprise and actual colonialism in Africa renders the argument at least partially void. On average, most 19th century missionaries began work in sub-Saharan regions, at the mission agencies cost, on average half a century before the substantive colonial invasions.¹¹ Pioneer missionary work started in earnest long before Bismark's imperial convention in Germany. The pioneer colonialists of different European ethnicities poured in after the license given in the 1885 Berlin conference.¹² Colonial entrepreneurs and bureaucrats came into the continent after the missionaries had already outlined the potential of the continent through their prolific writings.

Colonialist and Missionary: Friends or Foes

In Kenya, there was a long period between the advent of the missionary era in 1844, and the formal establishment of the Kenyan colonial government in 1920. The formal establishment of the colonial political infrastructure was 75 years after missionary entry and 15 years after the railway, the single biggest statement of confidence in the colonial enterprise. Not only did missionaries and colonialists arrive at different times, their priorities were materially different.

Even when colonialism did take root, the relationship between the mission and the government was far from harmonious. Colonial businesses and governments frequently clashed with missionaries. To them, the missionaries seemed too obsessed with the natives. Faced with the choice between colonial governments' political priorities and the prospect of African's quest for religious and educational freedom, missionaries staked their efforts on the latter.¹³ Furthermore, missionaries often quarrelled among themselves over doctrine, worship practices, and, yes, followers- black African converts. That was the reason for the famous 1913 conference on missionary comity in Kikuyu, Kenya.¹⁴ Knowing what we know in Africa, it is hard to discount the tribal dimension of these disagreements among missionary agencies which came from different European ethnic groups.

Eventually, the colonial governments began to exert control and manage the missionaries' movements in the colonial territories. This paved the way for the geo-ethnic distribution of denominational affiliations we see in sub-Saharan Africa today. The result of this government control was a tense environment comprising delicate webs of relationships between missionary agencies, white settlers, and bureaucrats. The point here is that just because they were all white didn't mean the missionaries and colonialists agreed.

It is common knowledge among keen students of religion and politics, that the mission school was the first incubator for revolutionary African activism.¹⁵ The first tier of African political leaders, almost without exception were the product of Christian missionary education.¹⁶ What was it about that Christian missionary experience that caught these intellectuals' mind? We do not have enough room to fully explore this, but suffice it to say that Christianity always contained the subversive message of freedom for all humanity. Themes of equality enshrined in Christian teaching sowed and watered the seeds of activism among these courageous freedom fighters. Those who read phrases like "he who the Son sets free is free indeed," "it is for freedom that He set you free," "all were made in the image of God," "in the image of God He created them," "let justice roll down like a river," "loose the chains of injustice – and set the captives free," and so on, could not help but publicly question the iniquity of colonialism.

The message of the gospel is revolutionary in its very nature. Jesus subverted the human order of leadership, governance, economics, social norms and demonstrated that God can break through these to offer alternatives. These themes of justice and liberation found resonance among many on the continent in the 19th and 20th centuries. Deep Christian reflection on the continent, however, dates much further back than the last couple of centuries.

Ancient African Christian Reflection and Western Thought

Stretching back to the first 400 years of Christianity, African contributions to the establishment of Christian faith and the safeguarding Orthodoxy cannot be overstated. We include in this long list of contributions – the founding of society-shaping monastic movements by Anthony with the fathers and mothers in the Egyptian desert, the crafting of systematic theological reflection by Origen in Egypt, the introduction of trinitarian theology by Tertullian in Tunisia, and the forceful defence of the deity of Jesus by Athanasius. We cannot fail to include Augustine of Hippo’s writings which inspired faith based principles of moral philosophy upon which contemporary Euro-American governance, democracy, leadership and even modern law come from.

European philosophers, secular or religious, alike were shaped by this body work. Africans helped lay the foundation of serious academic instruction in the European academy for over a millennium.¹⁷ Ironically this heritage of African critical thought contributed to a groundswell of intellectual engagement that precipitated in the enlightenment thinking. Without these germ ideas from the likes of Augustine, it is hard to imagine what modern Western thought would be. A brief overview follows below of the development of key strands in this thinking, that eventually brings us to the critical theory used to challenge African Christianity.¹⁸

We begin with Rene Decartes (1596-1650) who interrogated the link between thought and identity. “I think I therefore am,” was the maxim credited to him. His dualism argued that mind and matter are separate and distinct, coming together in the human. A Catholic himself, unaware of the future secular Europe that would inherit his ideas, Descartes offered an ontological argument for God. He tried to show that God is apart from the human, and exists because he is separate. This benevolent God, he taught, offers the possibility for humans to perceive him, and their reality. It must be remembered Descartes’ Europe was in a period of political and religious foment. The church

was behaving badly and the geo-politics was nothing short of tumultuous.

It was Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1671) who articulated the value of the state in regulating human society. He theorized about the possibility of an objective science of morality. In his view religious experience of necessity must agree with reason and human experience. Some of these ideas provided the foundation for the interface between religion and state made famous in intellectual circles by the writings of John Locke (1634 -1704). Locke explored ideas about democracy, the definition of church and state, and religious tolerance. These thoughts came from the forge of church-sponsored universities upon which intellectual learning thrived, at the time. Together Hobbes and Locke contributed to the development of the capitalist state responsible for both democracy and imperialism that precipitated the centuries long pillaging of what we now call the global South.

Perhaps the most notable challenge to Europe's religious heritage was François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (1694 -1778). Influenced by Locke's ideas, he ventured to the margins of mainstream thought, exploring the possibility of reason outside the church. Riding on the elite, and popular 'enlightened' disaffection with religious institutions he offered that the Bible and even Christ could be antithetical to reason and progress in society.¹⁹ He roundly rejected the value of the church and Islam for society while maintaining a soft spot for Hinduism and Confucianism. There was virtue, he conceded, in those who gave up much for religious calling. He popularized the (somewhat factual) notion that Christianity came from a violent past. Voltaire's opposition to religion established the tradition of the secular, anti-religious criticism now finding its way among African elites in the 21st century. David Hume (1711-1776), Voltaire's contemporary, contributed to religious skepticism promoting human experience as the sole sources of human knowledge.

The next salvo against religion, in a Europe increasingly enamoured with empiricism, came from Auguste Comte (1798-1857). He argued that the quest for truth occurred in 3 stages - theological

[fetishism], metaphysical [abstract, with an unreliable grasp and use of science], and positivism [concrete, with pragmatic empiricism]. Dissatisfied with the sectarian pursuits of religions of the day, Comte even proposed a religion of humanity, basically the pre-cursor to secular humanism. This 'religion' was Comte's proposal for extra-ecclesial solutions for morality in society.

Despite European "progress" in empiricism and philosophy, the problem of religion in society refused to go away. Each in their own way, these three intellectuals shared a common commitment unmasking 'the lies and illusions of consciousness,' and thereby challenging religion. Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) pioneered a modern interpretation of reality. They urged their students to look beyond the *prima facie*, or obvious meanings to search the less visible and less flattering truths. Children of their times though they were, they pioneered what Paul Ricoeur called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' A term that continues to find much use in philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields in the humanities.

This hermeneutic demanded a reading between the lines to find the omissions, and contradictions to see what is said through what is left unsaid. Such readings of life and thought of necessity required the suspension of so-called absolutes to find the hidden meanings. Michel Foucault (1926–1984) advanced this, now widely accepted, scepticism about absolutes. He questioned the categories of right and wrong, sane and insane, and human nature. He did not deny the binaries but investigated them interrogating what was contingent. Foucault's mission was to show the relationships between power and knowledge.²⁰

By this time religion had shifted in Europe from its foundational role in intellectual discourse to an idea on the same plane as any other idea, fit to be relativised. Others came afterwards to build on these ideas into a fabric of intellectualism whose worldview marginalized religion. Noam Chomsky (1928), for example, a non-religious thinker questioned his own society's ideas of western democracy, capitalism and even cast a disapproving glance at socialism. His view, reminis-

cent of Marxian thinking, saw organised religion as an attempt to control. As we come to the present hermeneutics of suspicion applied against religion, I argue here that, we must not lose sight of the intellectual history that has produced it. More importantly, we must remain cognisant of the role played by early thinkers on the continent.

I write this extremely brief intellectual history to problematize the history of Western intellectualism and its import on African response to religion. For those who saw philosophy, and later on technology, as the solution to the need for God, religion became a dispensable idea. While the Western world shifted from an appreciation of the metaphysical, African thinking continued to essentialize religion. Spirituality remained one of the core elements of their worldview through which they process meaning and their reality. In the words of Mbiti, Africa remained “notoriously religious.”²¹

Africa and Christianity in the 20th Century

It is on this religious substratum that the unexpected growth of Christianity occurred. There are very few such moments in the history of Christianity where this magnitude of increase has been witnessed. From reportedly under 10 million in 1910 to half a billion only a century later.²² Many of the initial 10 million were in the historically Christian communities of Egypt and Ethiopia. The move shifted from over 90% traditional religion to almost 50% average Christian population over Africa, with Africa South of the Sahara accounting for the largest proportions. Much of this growth came about in the 1960s to the 1980s, that is, decades after the missionary era.²³

There aren't many ways to explain this phenomenal growth. One possibility is that the missionaries really didn't leave but evangelized fervently remotely from their domicile in the West. This is not easy to sustain given the evidence. Another possibility would be that the colonial culture and education continued to perpetuate Christianity after the missionaries left. This is a popular theory in various forms.²⁴ While partially true, the problem is that it does not account for the

prolific conversions found amongst Africans through the efforts of indigenous churches, which had little or nothing to do with colonial governments, let alone Euro-American missionaries.

A third possibility is that African Christians took responsibility for evangelization, articulating their own faith in terms that their compatriots understood.²⁵ This is easy to see in the historical and demographic data available today. The rise of Christianity after the end of the missionary and colonial eras bears witness to this indigenous impulse for Christianity. The most prevalent, and arguably the fastest growing Christianity is the effervescent, exuberant expression that has found its way into nearly every historic mission denomination and catalysed the formation of numerous new independent churches. This Christianity takes African spirituality seriously and aims to articulate life and meaning through its lenses.

This is a Christianity with a markedly different ethos than missionary Christianity even where it shared denominations. The settler, and the white evangelist alike, did not recognize it or care for it. Yet, it survived persecution first from the missionary, then the imperialist, then from its own African intellectuals. It prevailed against the odds, resiliently holding fast to the African psyche. Modern African Christianity's resilience forces us to rethink our engagement with it.

Could it be that this faith finally found a way to dock itself to the African worldview and find sustenance in the indigenous intellectual and spiritual DNA? If so we must ask ourselves where the notion came from that tried to create an Africa apart from religion, or apart from Christianity for that matter. I submit that it is not inherently African to construct a reality without spirituality. We must interrogate the very suspicion that recently emerged about African engagement with Christianity. We must now allow for the possibility that there is more than one way to evaluate the value of religion in society. A hermeneutic of suspicion and intellectual disdain for religion is not the only way. Appreciative, emic engagement can also yield fruitful reflection.

I advocate for a thorough re-examination of the "hermeneutic of

suspicion” that has sought to demean Christianity in Africa over the last 40 years, and most vehemently in the last decade in public discourse. I affirm the cumulative and collaborative benefit of pooling philosophical reflection over the centuries to bring to bear on current issues.²⁶ I also welcome honest critique of the failures of Christian community at a time when the Christian message could have been even more effective against the travails of the continent. However, I urge an audit of the project ascribing Western post-enlightenment priorities to a context without a similar intellectual and political history. The arguments citing violence, and colonialism are no longer sufficient to sustain mature intellectual engagement with the role of Christianity on the continent. African intellectuals must interrogate the very frameworks used against their religious realities. There is an urgent need to reexamine Christianity and its import on Africa’s future using categories and priorities borne from within the continent.

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- South Pacific." *Comparative Education* 29, no. 3 (1993): 333–348.
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1. For intellectual engagement see for example Franco Frescura, "A Case of Hopeless Failure: The Role of Missionaries in the Transformation of Southern Africa's Indigenous Architecture," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28, no. 2 (2015): 64–86.
 2. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1.
 3. Gifford explores some of these themes here Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2015).
 4. This omission of immensely creative attempts at translation of Christianity into African culture is as glaring as it is unfortunate. These contributions to 20th Century Christianity in Africa deserve a greater place in intellectual and public discourse. Kalu and Anderson's work is particularly helpful in advancing this discourse. Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 21st Century* (Trenton, N.J.; London: Africa World ; Turn-around, 2001).

5. For a summary see G. D. Robinson, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique by G. D. Robinson," *Premise II*, no. 8 (September 27, 1995): 12.
6. Few intellectuals were as effective in forcefully advancing this agenda than the venerable literature professors and authors, Okot p'Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. See Christopher Wise, "Messianic Hallucinations and Manichean Realities: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Christianity, and the Third World Novel," *Christianity and Literature* 45, no. 1 (1995): 31–51; Frederick Hale, "A Ugandan Critique of Western Caricatures of African Spirituality: Okot p'Bitek in Historical Context," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 21, no. 2 (2008): 19–31; Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (East African literature bureau, 1970); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child*, vol. 3 (Penguin, 2012); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*, vol. 4 (Penguin, 2015); Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (East African Publishers, 1995).
7. Twentieth century world wars and communist regimes stand out as stark examples here.
8. There are important, less known but no less significant exceptions from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Coptic Egypt. See for example Andrew F. Walls, "Sierra Leone, Afroamerican Remigration and the Beginnings of Protestantism in West Africa (8th-19th Centuries)," *Transkontinentale Beziehungen in Der Geschichte Des Außereuropäischen Christentums*, 2002, 45–56; Ugo Zanetti, "The Ethiopian Church, an Adult Daughter of the Coptic Church," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2016): 11–31; Otto Meinardus, "A Brief History of the Abunate of Ethiopia," *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 58 (1962): 39–65.
9. See for example Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 29–55, <https://doi.org/10.4314/jsr.v29i2>.
10. Some have argued that these early expressions are not really African Christianities. The argument is beyond the scope of this paper, however it is worth mentioning here that these Christians saw themselves as Africans. See "Council of Carthage (A.D. 419): The Code of Canons of the African Church," 419AD; Athanasius, "Ad Afros Epistola Synodica: To the Bishops of Africa," 368AD.
11. 15th Century Central-West African initiatives came from a Europe that was very different from the context that produced the 1885 Berlin Conference imperialism. Though similar to 19th century colonialism in its penchant for dehumanization, 18th century slave trade had different political and economic priorities. For 19th Century mission and exploration, see for example Frederick D Lugard, *The Rise of Our East African Empire: Early Efforts in Nyasaland and Uganda*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1893); Johann Ludwig Krapf and E.G. Ravenstein, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labors during an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa* (London: Ticknor and Fields, 1860).
12. Afe Adogame, "Conference Report: The Berlin-Congo Conference 1884: The Partition of Africa and Implications for Christian Mission Today," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no. 1 (2004): 186–90.
13. See James Karanja, *The Missionary Movement in Colonial Kenya: The Foundation of Africa Inland Church* (Cuvillier Verlag, 2009); John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, no. 2 (1999): 206–229; Robert L. Tignor, *Colo-*

nial Transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu, and Maasai from 1900-1939 (Princeton University Press, 2015).

14. J.J. Willis, *The Kikuyu Conference: A Study in Christian Unity* (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1913).
15. Lamin Sanneh eloquently argued this point in Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis Books, 1989).
16. Henry Muoria, for example, was a leading Kenyan intellectual voice for liberation and the product of the mission station. See H. Muoria Mwaniki, *Kenyatta Ni Muig-withania Witu* (Nairobi: Mumenyereri Press, 1947); Wangari Muoria-Sal et al., *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria*, vol. 10, *African Sources for African History* (Brill, 2009).
17. Oden made this case forcefully in Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010).
18. Any overview of Western intellectual history will of necessity be limited, more so, when offered in the context of an article like this on. I offer the caveat that this brief account leaves out many threads some might consider important for this discussion. Nevertheless, I consider it necessary to sketch the Christian, African, and European, ancestry of the arguments used to disparage Christian faith on the continent.
19. This is now a familiar thought pattern upon which religiously liberal societies base their morality and social functions.
20. Power and knowledge are essential themes in Critical theory which tries to assess societal function and culture on the basis of power relationships. Critical theory belongs to this intellectual ancestry with thinkers like Karl Marx and Emmanuel Kant as important shapers. Many will remember Marx's maxim that religion is "the opium of the masses," because of its potential to control them.
21. There are a few who are attempting to challenge this notion. Platvoet and van Rinsum, for example think that Africa's religiosity is a myth stemming from John Mbiti's "religionism." Their arguments are hard to sustain given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. See Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, "Is Africa Incurably Religious?," *Exchange* 32, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 123-53, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157254303X00190>.
22. Todd Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, "Status of Global Christianity 2019, in the Context of 1900 to 2050" (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2019), www.worldchristianitydatabase.org.
23. "Sub-Saharan Africa Will Be Home to Growing Shares of the World's Christians, Muslims," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed October 2, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/19/sub-saharan-africa-will-be-home-to-growing-shares-of-the-worlds-christians-and-muslims/>.
24. See some discussions on this here Mark Bray, "Education and the Vestiges of Colonialism: Self-Determination, Neocolonialism and Dependency in the South Pacific," *Comparative Education* 29, no. 3 (1993): 333-348; Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "The Burden of English in Africa: From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism," *TESL-EJ (Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language—Electronic Journal)* 6, no. 1 (2002); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (Psychology Press, 2001).
25. Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Mark Shaw and others describe this phenomenon as translation – the entry of Christian message into the thought, life, and culture of

the recipients. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 1st edition (Maryknoll, NY; Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 1996); Sanneh, *Translating the Message*; Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010).

26. This includes the Western intellectual heritage I have described above.