

African christianity: a living and vibrant repository of christian faith - Part I

Cristianismo africano: um repositório vivo e vibrante da fé cristã - Parte I

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Abstract

Africa continent has played a remarkable role in the formation and growth of Christian faith and culture, right from its infancy to its present state. While much has been written on the topic of Christianity in Africa, relatively little attempt has been made in acknowledging it as one of the pillars of faith in Christendom, a status attributed exclusively to the West and the East. Hence, this article aims at rectifying this perspective by presenting Africa as a significant, living and vibrant repository of Christian faith. This claim is substantiated by giving an overview of the growth of Christianity in Africa to establish its antiquity. The history is divided into four phases: the beginning of Christianity in North Africa, the decline of the early African Church due to Islam; and the colonization or modern period. The fourth phase, the Africanization of Christianity will be dealt with in the second part of this article.

Resumo

O continente africano desempenhou um papel notável na formação e crescimento da fé e cultura cristãs, desde a infância até o estado atual. Embora muito tenha sido escrito sobre o tema do cristianismo na África, relativamente pouca tentativa foi feita em reconhecê-lo como um dos pilares da fé na cristandade, um status atribuído exclusivamente ao Ocidente e ao Oriente. Assim, este artigo visa retificar essa perspectiva, apresentando a África como um repositório significativo, vivo e vibrante da fé cristã. Esta afirmação é fundamentada, dando uma visão geral do crescimento do cristianismo na África para estabelecer sua antiguidade. A história é dividida em quatro fases: o início do cristianismo no norte da África, o declínio da Igreja Africana primitiva devido ao islamismo; e a colonização ou período moderno. A quarta fase, a africanização do cristianismo, será tratada na segunda parte deste artigo.

Keywords

African Christianity.
African Church
Fathers.
African Theology.
Colonization.
Ethiopian Orthodox
Church.
Indigenous
Spirituality.
Mission.
Third Force of
Christianity.

Palavras-chave

Cristianismo
Africano.
Padres da Igreja
Africana.
Teologia Africana,
Colonização.
Igreja Ortodoxa
Etiope.
Espiritualidade
Indígena.
Missão.
Terceira Força do
Cristianismo.

Introduction

When I consider how Africa has grown today to a stage of living Christian values in the garb of its own culture and life, I ponder on how Christianity has become a living reality deep in the heart of the African tradition.¹ As their Christian lives are deeply rooted in the gospel values, the liturgy and other related devotions embodied in their own culture, they are able to respond to the contemporary concerns of people everywhere. Just like the Christians from the East and the West, the Christians from Africa contribute in their own unique way to the evangelizing of the world as a whole. African Christianity has become the heartland of world Christianity, thus providing hope for all.

In this context, one may ask the following questions: What is the historical background of the presence and growth of Christianity in Africa? How did the glory and the great contributions of the early Christians, especially those in North Africa become obliterated in the history of Africa? What is the uniqueness of African Christianity? What are the signs of African indigenous forms of spirituality? Is it possible for African theology to articulate African belief systems and spirituality in consonance with Christianity? In what ways can the African Church contribute to the growth of the universal church's mission today?

This article is an attempt to examine these questions in a two-fold manner, namely: The first is to find out the historical presence and growth of Christianity in Africa, right from its origin during the apostolic period to the present. The second is to trace the inculturated African Christianity infused with indigenous elements that makes it a unique church rather than a replica of the western church as often conceived. Looking at African Christianity in this way can undoubtedly lead to the affirmation that Africa has been an equal source and reservoir of Christian faith, along with the Western and Eastern Churches commonly perceived as the dual sources of Christian tradition. In other words, the African continent could be seen as

¹ During the 10 years of experience as a New Testament lecturer at Hekima Jesuit University College, Tangaza University College, Nairobi, as well as St Charles Luwanga Diocesan Seminary, Windhoek, Namibia, while carrying out my apostolate as pastor, formator and teacher, I was inspired to attain an in-depth understanding of African Christianity. This article, which is the result of my ruminations, is an attempt to explore the tradition and richness of African Christianity. In this attempt I am very much indebted to Fr Vipin Vanchipura, CMI and Deacon James Omondi, CMI for the insightful discussions on the topic which greatly contributed to crystallising my thoughts and ideas, and to Dr Agnes Fernando for reading the text and giving her comments.

the Third Spiritual Power or the Third Force of Christianity with its own uniqueness and contribution right from the time of the Apostles till now, and in the future as well, along with the Western and Eastern Churches.

Before venturing on this precarious journey, I wish to first offer a bird's eye view of the growth of Christianity in Africa. This study, which indeed is not an exhaustive study, includes four phases of the growth of African Christianity: three phases in the first part, namely the beginning of Christianity in North Africa as the first phase of Christianity, the decline of the early African Church as the second phase of Christianity; and the colonization or modern period as third phase of Christianity. The second part sets out to investigate the uniqueness of African Christianity as the fourth and current phase of Christianity in this twenty first century in Africa.

Growth of Christianity in Africa

Christianity in Africa is neither a recent phenomenon nor a by-product of colonialism as is the common misconception. Its roots go back to the time of the Apostles and the disciples of Jesus in the very first century of Christianity. According to ancient tradition, the immediate disciples of Jesus following with great zeal his commission to go and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) landed in Africa in the early phase of the church. St Mark, considered as founder of Egyptian Christianity, is believed to be the first missionary to Africa.² From the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as recorded in 1 Kings 10, one can infer that the Ethiopians had contact with the Jews even before

² There is also evidence for the presence of Christians in Alexandria, the capital of Egypt in the first century itself. See, N. Brockman and U. Prescantini, *A History of the Catholic Church*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1991, ²2004, repr. 2010), 20. They further add: "It [Egypt] was also recognized, along with Jerusalem, Rome, and Antioch, as one of the four ancient patriarchates, with jurisdiction over all of Africa." J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 21, reiterates that it was in the year 62 AD that the first Christian church came into existence in Africa and that St Mark preached the gospel in Alexandria, Egypt.

the birth of Jesus.³ In this sense, God seems to have prepared the African continent for Christianity much before the birth of Christianity itself.⁴

First Phase of African Christianity

The first phase of Christianity in Africa begins with the coming of Christianity to North Africa. The possibility of the arrival of the gospel in the first century in North Africa is accepted without question by many Church historians and missionary historians. Some historians base their theories upon the testimony of the Bible, specifically Acts 2:9-14; 8:26-40; 11:20; 13:1-2; and 21:8.⁵ Relying on such biblical references, John Foster believes that African Christians already had a key role in spreading the gospel in the first century itself.⁶ The story of the Pentecost event (Acts 2:10) indicates clearly that those present at the crucial launching of the church included also people from Egypt and Libya. This means that Africans were present at the very birth of Christianity.⁷ Those who had converted on that particular day would have carried the Christian message back to Egypt-Alexandria in the first century itself.⁸ Another event that links Africa to the primordial age of Christianity is the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch (an African) by Philip (Acts 8:27-40). It is believed that this eunuch who was a high ranking official in charge of the Ethiopian Queen's finance, who also went to worship in Jerusalem (8:27) preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in Ethiopia.⁹

There is a legend that the growth of Christianity in Ethiopia in the early centuries after Christ is linked to this convert of Philip. Herbert Kane, a missionary historian, also insists that the Church established itself in Cyrene (which is located in North Africa). This is dependent upon the testimony of the gospel tradition concerning an African called Simon from Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus prior to his crucifixion (Mk 15:21; Mt 27:32; Lk 23:26), and seemed to have been a follower

³ Cf. D. B. Daugherty, "Assessing Christianity in Africa's Transforming Context," in *International Review of Mission* 103 (2014) 348-362, 352.

⁴ See also Ps 87: "Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon, Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia. 'This one was born there,' they say."

⁵ P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I*, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1882), 26-28.

⁶ J. Foster, *Church History: The First Advance, AD 29-500*, (London: SPCK, 1991), 41.

⁷ Cf. Daugherty, "Assessing Christianity," 352.

⁸ Cf. Footnote 2.

⁹ Cf. Daugherty, "Assessing Christianity," 352.

of Christ. His two sons, Alexander and Rufus, were also well known to the Christians for whom the Gospel of Mark was written (Mk 15:21; Cf. Rom 16:13).¹⁰ Daugherty is of the opinion that it was the Africans before anyone else who first preached the word of God to non-Jews. He bases his argument on the account in Acts 11:19-20 which speaks about the believers coming from Cyrene witnessing to Greeks in Antioch as it is clearly said that the Lord's hand was with the men of Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:21).¹¹

Similarly Egypt was blessed by the presence of Jesus and his parents, who fled to the land of Egypt to escape from Herod's attempt to kill the baby Jesus (Mt 2:13-15).¹² Though no churches or converts were linked to this episode, it is foundational in the Coptic liturgy, which states in parts, "Be glad and rejoice, O Egypt, and her sons and all her borders, for there hath come to Thee the Lord of Man."¹³ For the Coptic Church in Egypt this is a remarkable event; and it is also said that the good news could have come first to them through the preaching of Mark who was martyred in Alexandria.¹⁴ All these are indications of the living tradition in Egypt of a vibrant Christianity in the early centuries.

Besides the evidence of the Bible, the expansion of Christianity in the first century can be confirmed by several historical references. Tertullian testifies to the conversion of the indigenous tribes, like the Moors, in places where the Romans did not reach. He asserts that the expansion of Christianity in the area did not result from the Pax Romana, but from individual itinerant African Christians.¹⁵ John C. Thiessen also mentions the movement of early Christian refugees from Jerusalem to

¹⁰ Cf. H. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1978), 10.

¹¹ Daugherty, "Assessing Christianity," 352. He further posits: "the Apostle Paul was probably ordained for ministry by a group that included Africans (Acts 13:1-4)."

¹² For further details, see Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 20: "In Cairo they venerate a Church built over a place where the Holy Family supposedly dwelt during its sojourn in Egypt: persecuted in his own fatherland, Christ sought the hospitality of the Egyptians." He further adds (22): "the earliest proof for the existence of Christian community in Egypt around the year 100 is found in many Papyri discovered in various sites."

¹³ Cf. P. Schaff, *Eusebius Pamphilius, Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, (Michigan: Harper and Brothers, 2006), 78. He adds (80): "When Jesus was persecuted by the European Herod, God sent him into Africa; by this we know that Africans have naturally a true spirit of Christianity."

¹⁴ Cf. S. Kim, and K. Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 64. See also footnote, 2.

¹⁵ Cf. Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0308.htm> (accessed on 7th November 2017).

Morocco to avoid the persecutions of Titus in 70 AD. He further observes that the graves of early Christians were found in Cyrene among the tombs of the Jewish community.¹⁶ An early church historian, Cardinal Lavigerie (1825-1892) affirms that Africa can claim a long history of Christianity because of the ancient churches in North African countries like Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia.¹⁷ So by the end of the second century, North Africa had already a large population of Christians.¹⁸

The tradition of the church equally maintains that the African church produced such spiritual and intellectual giants as Origen, Athanasius, Cyril, Tertullian, Antony the Great, and Augustine along with many martyrs persecuted by the Roman Empire: for example, Cyprian, who joined his fellow African martyrs, Perpetua and Felicitas who, along with several other African Christians, were martyred in 203. At the early stage of Christianity in Africa, the church was very much characterized by martyrdom. For instance, killings in the amphitheatres such as that of Blandina and others at Lyons in 177 AD, and of Perpetua and others at Carthage in 203 AD, dramatized government action against Christianity. Surprisingly in times of persecution, the progress of Christianity seems to have been especially rapid in this part of Africa in the third century. By the turn of the second and third centuries, Christianity was continuing to grow and appeared increasingly successful. From time to time there was persecution; and in spite of that Christianity in Africa continued to spread in various parts. The long martyrdom of the Scillitans from 180 AD, for example, provides the earliest evidence of Christianity in Africa outside Egypt. It describes the trial of twelve small-town Christians, seven men and five women at Carthage, the provincial capital. They refused to take an oath demanded by Caesar, and refused to accept a thirty day deferral of their case – so Saturninus, Proconsul of Africa, condemned them to death.¹⁹

The continent has also produced in the early age of the church popes with African roots, like Pope St Victor I (189-199), St Miltiades (311-314) and St Gelasius

¹⁶ J.C. Thiessen, *A Survey of World Mission*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1961, 182.

¹⁷ Cf. V. Pawlikova-Vilhanova, "Christian Missions in Africa and their Role in the Transformation of African Societies," in *Asian and African Studies* 16 (2007) 249-260, 251.

¹⁸ It can be observed that in the early stage of the history of Christianity, the spread of Christianity was limited to the countries of North Africa, Egypt, Nubia (present Sudan) and Ethiopia. Moreover, Churches in these areas maintained close ties to eastern Christendom and made many important contributions.

¹⁹ For further details, see, Tertullian, *Apology*, Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 37.

(492-496). Apart from these, the father of monasticism, St Anthony the Great (251-356) was Egyptian. Several African church fathers, who laid the theological and scholarly foundation of the Christian faith, are people like Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian and Tertullian. In the second century there was a catechetical school established at Alexandria and this became a prominent theological college in the third century. Later, it was Alexandria and Carthage (Tunisia) which were instrumental in shaping the earliest medieval Western universities. St Augustine (354-430), one of the greatest theologians of early Christianity is also from Africa (Algeria).²⁰ One cannot deny the fact that Alexandria (in Africa) was considered as one of the three important church centres in the ancient world along with Rome and Antioch.

The Church had been flourishing in North Africa (and Egypt) during the first six centuries; and they formed one great communion with the other countries around the Mediterranean Sea. This communion could certainly be seen from a commonwealth of nations bound together politically by the Roman Empire and religiously by the Christian Faith. For a long time, Egypt and North Africa held a leading position in the universal Church: Egypt in the Greek-speaking eastern part, and North Africa in the Latin-speaking western part. It is true, therefore, that:

By the third century the centre of Catholic Church life had shifted to the African coast. Rome was the home of popes, but it was still predominantly pagan. North Africa was the only area in the West (plus Armenia and Asia Minor in the East), to have a majority of Christians by 400 AD. While Rome was the governing Centre, Africa was the theological heart of the Church.²¹

There are two main opinions amongst historians concerning the reasons for the expansion of Christianity during the third century in North Africa. According to K.S. Latourette, the main reason for the expansion of Christianity was the 'rapid Romanization' and the mass conversion of heretical communities,²² whereas for J.S. Mbiti, it was the similarity between African culture and Christianity.²³ Mbiti, in his book *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, describes the status of the Church in North Africa as unification between Christianity and African Culture. He maintains

²⁰ Cf. Daugherty, "Assessing Christianity," 352.

²¹ Brockman and Prescantini, *History of the Catholic Church*, 35.

²² K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity Vol. I*, (Michigan: Harper and Brothers, 2006), 92-93.

²³ J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 126. See also N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1997), 126.

that the monotheistic concept of God in the African mindset helped the North African people to accept Christianity easily. At the same time, he makes it clear that the traditional attitudes of respecting a prophet as a representative of gods, or, making much of prayer as a channel connecting the dead and the living, played a key role in achieving the Christianization of North Africa and also a larger part of Africa. For him, the form of early North African Christianity is a fusion of certain characteristics of apostolic Christianity based on Latin Christianity and some ancient African cultural elements.²⁴ In his perspective, African Christianity is the integration of two cultures born out of biblical Christianity and African traditional religions.²⁵

In the same vein, W.H.C. Frend, in his book *The Donatist Church*, focused his attention on the similarity between rigorous Christianity and traditional African religious attitudes: monotheism; respect for the prophet; sacrifices for the dead; and the monotheistic concept of God.²⁶ These enormous religious experiences of the Africans in the early age of the church resulted in the decline of the worship of Saturn, the all-powerful national deity, after the mid-third century, and mass conversion of Saturn worshippers to Christianity.²⁷ He refers to factors relating to mass conversion, such as fasting, miracles, asceticism, pilgrimage, martyrdom, and other religious forms. However, he argues that conversion did not mean the severance of religious relations between African traditional religious practices and Christianity, but rather their modification from Saturn worship to Christianity.²⁸ As a consequence of the expansion of Christianity, the worship of Saturn, a traditional religion, almost ceased between 240 AD and 275 AD.²⁹ On the other part of the continent one of the oldest Churches in Africa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which dates from the fourth century has also contributed significantly to the growth of Christianity. “Yet it seems to have exerted no direct influence on, nor taken part in any extension of the Christian faith to the rest of the continent.”³⁰

²⁴ Cf. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 67.

²⁵ Cf. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 133.

²⁶ W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, (Oxford: OUP, 1952), 79- 80.

²⁷ Cf. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 348.

²⁸ Cf. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 104.

²⁹ J. G. Davies, *The Origin and Development of Early Christian Church*, (New York: SCM Press, 1952), 113.

³⁰ T. A. Beetham, *Christianity and the New Africa*, (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 7.

It is likely that the outstanding expansion of Christianity in the first four centuries resulted from the reconciliation of their traditional beliefs, with Christianity rather than a mere conversion to Christianity. One cannot conceive of African Church history and growth without considering its relationship to the traditional African religious attitude. African Christianity was mainly built on nominal African traditional religious attitudes; consequently, African religious assimilation led the Church into confusion and the eventual decline of the North African Church.

Second Phase of (African) Christianity

The second phase of Christianity in Africa is characterized by the decline of the early African Church during the time of the Islamic invasion. As seen in the first phase, the story of Christianity in North Africa was a golden period of African culture in the earlier centuries. This was unfortunately short lived, and the spread of Islam brought about the destruction of the Churches in North Africa between the seventh and the eighth centuries. The decline and total disappearance of this flourishing Church in North Africa is a sad fact of history. The Arab Muslim invasion of North Africa, which began around 643 AD, was completed by the capture of Carthage (698 AD) and Ceuta (709 AD). When the Muslim Saracens began their invasion (around 642-643 AD), they realized that the main power in North Africa was with the inland Berbers. Accordingly, they adopted the policy of assimilation and co-operation with the Berbers. In order to control the country and to defeat the Byzantines, the Arabs recruited the Berbers into their army, and sent Muslim missionaries amongst the Berber tribes. As a result, many Berbers cooperated with the Arabs and were converted to Islam.³¹ Eventually, when the Muslims commenced their spread toward the north of Africa, they had to fight only one battle to destroy the Byzantine army in Subaytila.³² The Muslims took Carthage in 698 AD, and completed the conquest by 709 AD.³³

³¹ Cf. A. D. Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain*, (London: Rutledge, 1989), 55-83.

³² Taha, *The Muslim Conquest*, 31.

³³ Bauer observes that the main reasons for the decadence of Christianity in North Africa are the following: First, the missionaries failed to evangelize the Berber group, the so-called indigenous group in the society. Second, the evangelizers failed to use the local language (Berber tongue) in their mission process; and finally, the people lacked the pastoral assistance of the leaders

Another cause for the decline of Christianity was the pressure exerted upon Christians and pagans to convert to Islam. Following the Arab-Muslim invasion in North Africa Christians were permitted free exercise of their religion on payment of a tax and agreement not to proselytize. Around 720 AD very heavy pressure was exerted by Caliph Omar II on the Christian Berbers to convert to Islam. This led to a rapid conversion of the Moors, followed by a gradual process of attrition. Thus Islam succeeded in weakening the Church in North Africa, which eventually led to its total disappearance. Despite Mohammad's teaching, political tension among nations, and religious dispute within Christianity helped the spread of the Muslim religion in already Christian African countries like North Africa, Egypt, Nubia (present Sudan) and Ethiopia. The Muslims gradually brought about the extinction of Christianity, reducing the number of bishoprics to three for all Africa by the time of Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085 AD). Even these three bishoprics disappeared entirely by the thirteenth century. The Arab-Muslim invasion brought about a serious decline in the Christian population, due to casualties in battle and the flight of many to Italy and Gaul.

It is, however, a fact that Christianity grew at certain points in time under Islamic rule, and declined during and after the Crusades. Nonetheless, Christian presence along the Nile continued to be important till the fifteenth century in Nubia and until much later in Ethiopia. A very interesting fact regarding the Christian Kingdom of Nubia (present Sudan) is that it flourished after the Islamic Crescent was already established over North Africa between 700 and 1200 A.D. These Nubian Christians lived almost in complete isolation until they succumbed to Turkish aggression in 1270. A separate Ethiopian church persisted, having some contact with European Christians in the thirteenth century. In short, in the second phase of Christianity, African Christianity largely disappeared as Islam spread. The exception to this however was the minority Coptic Church in Egypt and a small Christian community in Ethiopia. Serious missionary efforts did not begin again until the sixteenth century. Hence this period can also be called the persecuted and dormant phase of Christianity in Africa.

(Bishops and Priests) as they remained mainly in the cities. And during the time of persecution they left the cities, and were not available for the people. See Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 29-30.

Third Phase of Christianity

The third phase of the growth of African Christianity is the colonization and modern period in the history of the Church.³⁴ The age of Christianity during the arrival of missionaries in Africa is characterized by twofold motives: Mission and Colonization. Christian missionaries preceded or accompanied colonization. Evidently, Roman Catholic missionaries followed the steps of Catholic colonists, and Protestants followed suit with the colonizing efforts of Protestant nations. This was mainly because Catholicism and Protestantism were the religions of the European colonial powers. As a part of colonization many of the European countries got interested in Africa, and they sought African colonies both for their territorial expansion and for new economic and market possibilities.³⁵

The first European missionaries to Africa were the Portuguese who brought the Gospel message at a time when Western Christians were still undivided, and all owed allegiance to the See of Rome.³⁶ French missionaries played a significant role in the renewal of the Roman Catholic presence in nineteenth century Africa especially in western, central and southern Africa. The quality of these missionaries, who sought to convert the indigenous peoples of Africa to Christianity, was generally very high. For the growth of the society, the missionaries were engaged both in the proclamation of the gospel, as well as running schools, dispensaries, hospitals, and churches. The concern for justice was preached in churches, and taught in schools. The great champion of this missionary method was Dr David Livingstone (1813-1873), who founded missions and explored great parts of the interior of Africa. Between 1853 and 1856 Livingstone walked across Africa from west to east, exploring the Zambezi River; he became the first European to view the Victoria Falls. He also walked across what is now South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania and Eastern Congo (Kinshasa) and recorded these journeys.

³⁴ Pawlikova-Vilhanova, "Christian Missions in Africa," 256: "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 the 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."

³⁵ One can observe that the African colonial period continued after World War II and lasted for most colonies until the 1950s and 1960s when they became independent.

³⁶ Cf. Beetham, *Christianity and the New Africa*, 7.

In the explorations along the African coast during the fifteenth century under Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), priests generally accompanied the expeditions. They served as chaplains to the new trading settlements and as missionaries to neighbouring African peoples. A continuation of the crusades, Portuguese expansion along the coast of Africa from Ceuta (1415) to the Cape of Good Hope (1486) and Mozambique (1498) was the start of the first evangelization of Africa in medieval times. For several years the kingdom of the Congo (south of the lower course of the river Zaire or Congo) gave rise to great hopes. Portuguese missionaries baptized the king in 1491 and a Congolese church blossomed under the reign of Alfonso (1506-1543), a 'very Christian king.'³⁷ By 1500, the Gospel had been preached at the courts of the kingdoms of Benin and Congo. A son of the king of Congo became a priest after receiving training in Portugal; he was elevated to a bishopric in 1518. By the mid-seventeenth century the Jesuits had established a monastery in San Paulo de Luanda, which by then had superseded the capital of Congo, San Salvador, as an ecclesiastical centre.³⁸ In these periods several congregations came to African countries, for example, the Capuchins by the Congregation of Propaganda to Congo, the Lazarists from France to Madagascar, the Holy Ghost fathers to Senegal, and so on.

But all these missions had faded away almost completely by the end of the eighteenth century. Among the many reasons advanced for this failure are:

The alliance of the Portuguese with the overseas slave trade, the political effect on missionary policy of the patronal rights of the Portuguese crown, the difficulty of training African priests in Europe and the absence of any seminary in Africa, the smallness of the effective cadre of missionaries whose efficiency and numbers were continually reduced by climate and disease and at the end of the period, the setback in Europe successively experienced through the expulsion of the Jesuits from Portugal and elsewhere, the anti-clericalism of the French Revolution and Napoleon's actions against the Pope.³⁹

Moreover, Western missionaries were not successful at the beginning of their missionary work as they were mainly focused on coastal areas. Another challenge they faced was the difficulty to convince the Muslim people to embrace Christianity while they worked for the salvation of souls.⁴⁰

³⁷ During colonization period the strategy adopted by missionaries was to first convert and baptize the African kings so that the whole nation can be Christian.

³⁸ Beetham, *Christianity and the New Africa*, 8.

³⁹ Beetham, *Christianity and the New Africa*, 8.

⁴⁰ Pawlikova-Vilhanova, "Christian Missions in Africa," 253: "The major early successes of the missionaries were in Freetown and surrounding villages in Sierra Leone, among Afro-Americans and Fronteiras, Recife, v. 1, n. 2, p. 415-430, jul./dez., 2018

The planting of the Church in Africa in the modern period began with the non-white settlers from the areas of the New World where former slaves were settled in Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and also England, who were already Christians before their return to the continent of their fathers. They were members of various denominations like Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, etc. The missionary activities of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries actually gave rise to modern Christianity in Africa. With the exception of churches which enjoy a historical association with the early church (such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Church), virtually all the denominations in Africa owe a direct or indirect debt to the missionary activities which in many ways inaugurated the contemporary Christian era in Africa. The main challenge of the missionary movement, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, was how to address the issue of preaching the Gospel effectively when it is performed by representatives of so many different Christian denominations. This issue eventually led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. By 1962, the Roman Catholic Church responded to it with the pronouncements from Vatican II, especially through the decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. It is true that Africa has been a significant participant in the development of this contemporary understanding of the Church. Since 1957, when Ghana became independent, and hosted the first continental gathering of the churches, there have been several continental movements to bring African expressions and definitions to Christianity.⁴¹ Indeed, beginning with Kampala 1963, the challenge of relating African culture to Christianity, and the task of uniting African denominations, among other challenges, shaped the definition of the Church as a carrier of the salvific message. The convulsions of independent movements also forced the Church to realize that it cannot sit on the sidelines when its members are engaged in nation

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 Goree.”

⁴¹ The examples for these movements are the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), and the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM).

building.⁴² It was also a growing need of Christians in Africa to make a lasting impact on ecumenical, cultural, and spiritual issues.

White missionaries of the nineteenth century had indeed brought their European culture to Africa. However, while some preached the gospel from a European perspective without any regard for the local culture, many missionaries were acutely aware of the importance of respecting indigenous cultures. But, in general, the missionaries interred the African culture and primordial way of life which created a gap between the locals and the missionaries. Some missionaries even believed that the converted Christians would become real Christians only if they become Europeanized Christians or black Europeans.⁴³ In short, one can notice three stages of growth in the third phase of the African Church, during this colonization and modern period. The first stage is that of the African church led by a white missionary church with a foreign culture. In the second stage, many African priests who received training from missionaries started taking the initiative to lead the church. In the third stage, African priests were trained by their own African priests, and hence they were now capable of developing Christianity that was truly Christian and truly African. As Pawlikova-Vilhanova rightly observes, “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.”⁴⁴

So the next stage is to explore the uniqueness of African Christianity today from an African perspective. In fact, this vibrant presence of Christianity today in all the countries of the African continent with its own cultural riches and treasures makes Christianity in Africa a significant pillar of the Christian faith, or the fourth great era of Christian expansion, which will be discussed in the second part of this article.

⁴²J. N. K. Mugambi, *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations*, (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997), 60.

⁴³ Cf. Pawlikova-Vilhanova, “Christian Missions in Africa,” 258. He adds further: “The adoption of Christianity also meant acculturation into the world of Western civilization, ideas and technology, with Christianity went also Westernization.”

⁴⁴ Pawlikova-Vilhanova, “Christian Missions in Africa,” 258.

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