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(82) CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

Helen Adekunbi Labeodan

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	73,349,000	46.0%	108,760,000	46.6%	2.7%
Independents	28,708,000	18.0%	39,500,000	16.9%	2.2%
African initiated	27,421,000	17.2%			
Orthodox	42,200	0.0%	64,000	0.0%	2.8%
Protestants	47,430,000	29.8%	61,000,000	26.1%	1.7%
Anglicans	20,100,000	12.6%			
Pentecostal	7,795,000	4.9%			
Evangelical churches	6,000,000	3.8%			
Baptist	5,253,000	3.3%			
United churches	3,350,000	2.1%			
Methodist	2,700,000	1.7%			
Roman Catholics	21,092,000	13.2%	32,000,000	13.7%	2.8%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	48,302,000	30.3%	73,000,000	31.3%	2.8%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	32,461,000	20.4%	48,030,000	20.6%	2.6%
Muslims	73,275,000	46.0%	110,500,000	47.3%	2.8%
adherents of traditional African religions	12,251,000	7.7%	13,500,000	5.8%	0.6%
Baha'is	38,500	0.0%	55,000	0.0%	2.4%
Hindus	30,300	0.0%	40,000	0.0%	1.9%
adherents of new religious movements	16,700	0.0%	22,000	0.0%	1.9%
Buddhists	8,500	0.0%	12,000	0.0%	2.3%
Chinese folk-religionists	4,700	0.0%	7,000	0.0%	2.7%
Jews	1,200	0.0%	1,200	0.0%	0.3%
people professing no religion	451,000	0.3%	660,000	0.3%	2.6%
Total population	159,425,000	100.0%	233,558,000	100.0%	2.6%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

A Survey of the History of Christianity in Nigeria

The 170-year-old story of Christianity in Nigeria has been told several times by different sources from different perspectives. Christians make up to 48.2% of the entire population of the country.¹ Nigeria has

¹ Deji Okegbile, "170 years of the Church in Nigeria – Beyond the Present", www.punchng.com

one of the largest Christian populations in Africa with over 70 million belonging to the church.² The basis for the first missionary movement were European expeditions and trade of the fifteenth century. A search for a sea route to the East Indies and India facilitated the early contacts of Europeans traders with the west coast of Africa, including Nigeria.³ The Portuguese explorers were the first to make this journey to Nigeria. They visited Benin in 1477, meeting the King Ozoula who entered into alliances with the King of Portugal. Consequently, he allowed the Portuguese to build the trading post at Gwalo, Ughoton, and gave them some slaves as gifts. Thereafter, they convinced him to allow some of his sub-chiefs to be baptized in 1516. On the death of the King, however, Christianity vanished.⁴

In Warri, the Portuguese met the Olu of Warri in 1555. He was baptized and adopted a Portuguese name: Saint Sebastian. Later, his son Domingo was sent to Portugal for a period of ten years for a western education. He then came home with a Portuguese wife of high birth. Their son, Don Antonio, who later became Olu was said to have been educated in Christian theology in Portugal. When he ascended the throne, he spread Christianity among his subjects. The benefit from this association was that Warri rulers from 1570 till 1733 became professing Christians. A breakdown in trade relations always meant a break in mission;⁵ the attempt by Portuguese missionaries at Christianizing the people of Benin and Warri failed woefully due to their interest in trade and commerce rather than in mission. Christianity was also made a 'palace religion'. Another reason alluded to was an insufficient knowledge of the religion on the part of people. Often the new religion conflicted with their traditional values. Only a shadow of this first attempt was left at the end of this contact.

An effective missionary work began in Nigeria on 24th September 1842 when Thomas Birch Freeman and two Fanti missionaries, Mr and Mrs William De-Graft, arrived in Badagry from the Wesleyan Methodist church. They bought a plot of land and began holding prayer meetings. Later they erected a small bamboo chapel and gathered the chiefs and people to explain the purpose of their coming.⁶ They attended to the needs of the freed slaves who requested a missionary.⁷ On 11th December that year, a Sunday, Freeman got to Abeokuta and paid homage to King Sodeke who was impressed with him. In the afternoon he held a service with the King in attendance.⁸

The second missionary society to enter the Yoruba Mission was the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Henry Townsend and Andrew Wilhelm arrived at the port of Badagry on 17th December 1842. Townsend, though from CMS did not disregard Freeman's guidance. Oduyoye confirmed that they worshipped together in the Methodist Church on Christmas Day before Townsend left for Abeokuta on 29th December. He was warmly welcomed by the same King Sodeke. Promising to open a station in Abeokuta, Townsend returned to London to be ordained bishop. He came back in 1844 as promised.⁹ He returned to Badagry on 17th January, 1845, to move his team back to Abeokuta for missionary work. The team consisted of the

² Okegbile, "170 years of the Church in Nigeria."

³ Akpenpoom Dzurgba, "A History of Christian Mission in Nigeria: a Developmental Approach." *Asia Journal of Theology* 5, No. 1 (1991): 186.

⁴ David N.A Kpobi, 2005, "African Chaplains in Seventeenth Century in West Africa" in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed Ogbu Kalu (Department of Church History, University of Pretoria: Pretoria), 141.

⁵ Kpobi, "African Chaplains," 41.

⁶ John Ferguson, *Some Nigerian Church Founders* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1971), 4.

⁷ A good number of freed Yoruba slaves that were converted Christians requested specially for white missionaries to continue to minister to them and secondly to minister to their heathen brethren who had sold them into slavery. One such plea was from James Ferguson. Warraru, the king of Badagry at that time countersigned Ferguson's letter of appeal to Rev. Thomas Dove, a Methodist Minister in Freetown in a letter dated March 2, 1841 to send a missionary to Badagry.

⁸ Ferguson, *Some Nigerian Church Founders*, 4.

⁹ Deji Ayegboyin & F.K.U. Asonzeh, "Taxonomy of Churches in Nigeria; A Historical Perspective," *Orita*, 34, No.1-2 (2002): 68.

Rev. and Mrs Townsend, the Rev. and Mrs Gollmer, the Rev. and Mrs Crowther with their two children, and Mr Marsh, a catechist. The plan was obstructed, however, as a result of the death of King Sodeke. Thus, they waited at Badagry for eighteen months and seized the opportunity to establish the CMS church in Badagry, on 9th March, 1845. Townsend and Gollmer continued the study of Yoruba, while Crowther continued the translation of the Bible into Yoruba and began the translation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

Later, they proceeded to Abeokuta in July 1846 where it flourished exceedingly. The relationship between the missionaries and the Egba rulers could best be described as a symbiotic one.¹⁰ Oduyoye explained that Egba was so important to the missionaries because Abeokuta was a home to all and a city of refuge for those dispersed by war. Despite this seemingly cordial relationship, some of the Abeokuta people saw the overbearing attitude of the missionaries and developed a degree of distrust of them. They felt the white men came only to tap their lands' resources, force them to obey their foreign rules and, later, dominate them as they did in Lagos.¹¹

The third missionary society in Nigeria was the Scotland Mission, known as the Presbyterian Church. The Scotland Missionary Society started its work in Nigeria in 1846 through the initiative and the willingness of the Jamaican Presbytery.¹² As from 1839, the Presbytery started to think about sending a mission to Africa. This was because the Negroes of the Presbytery began to have a great concern for indigenous peoples in Africa. After adequate information had been gathered about the continent of Africa, between 1839 and 1840, the Presbytery took a decision in 1841 to send missionaries to Africa.¹³ They sent the Rev. Hope Masterdom Waddell, his wife and another Scottish couple to Calabar. They arrived on 10th April 1846.¹⁴

¹⁰ The missionary activity helped in checking the intrusion of Dahomey because they might have captured Abeokuta if not for the military intervention of the British Government. However, this relationship did not eventually favour the Egbas as this made them to remain perpetually the subject of the British government and the missionaries. In spite of this, they enjoyed British support in many ways, including the ousting of Kosoko the king of Lagos in 1851, general development, prosperity in trade and politics of the Yoruba region.

¹¹ Adewale O.Ogunrinade and Friday Abu Ogbale, "Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (MCSE-CEMAS-Sapienza University of Rome), Vol 2 No 2, July 2013. The presence of the British in Lagos led to the enthronement of Akintoye (after Kosoko had been deposed), who signed a treaty which made Lagos a protectorate of the British Government. The British had been poking into the affairs of the Yoruba people, the intertribal wars, and taking sides from Lagos to buttress this claim.

¹² The Scotland Missionary Society, which was formerly known as the Edinburgh Society since 1796 set up the Scottish Mission in Jamaica in 1824. Another missionary body known as the United Session of Scotland also started its ministry in Jamaica and through the merger of the two societies the joint Presbyterian Church in Jamaica was formed. For more explanation see J. Kofi Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Mission and Church Foundations 1842-1919* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 1986.

¹³ In line with the decision, as George Blyth and Peter Anderson (who were both Scottish Missionaries in Jamaica) were recuperating in England after falling ill in Jamaica, they met sea captains who advised them to look towards the direction of Old Calabar for a result-oriented missionary work. The two missionaries sent a letter to the chiefs of Old Calabar showing their willingness to come over for missionary purposes and the reply was enthusiastic. The Calabar chiefs were conceived that the presence of the white missionaries would increase their trade chances with other parts of the world and further give them and their children great avenues to be taught how to read and write faster. When they came, they (chiefs of Duke and Creek towns) encouraged the missionaries whom they accommodated to instruct their people and introduce the town people to legitimate trade, apart from trade in slaves.

¹⁴ S.A. Fatokun, "Pentecostalism in South-Western Nigeria with Emphasis on the Apostolic Church, 1931-2001," Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Kofi Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Mission and Church Foundations 1842-1919* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986).

Baptist mission work in Nigeria could be traced to the arrival of Thomas J. Bowen, on 5th August 1850 at Badagry.¹⁵ Due to the wars in the Yoruba areas, the roads that led to Igboho were closed and he could only get as far as Abeokuta. For a period of eighteen months, Bowen stayed in Abeokuta as the guest of the King and the CMS and other missionaries there. So he used the opportunity to study the Yoruba language and vocabulary and, in 1862, published a book entitled, *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*. He visited the King of Ketu who received him warmly. However, due to the intolerance of the King's chiefs, he was advised to leave. He proceeded to Ijaye and soon after that left for America,¹⁶ but returned to Nigeria newly wedded. With him came also J.H. Lacy and his wife and J.S. Dennard and his wife. However, due to the scourge of malaria, the Lacys were sent back home while the Dennards died. The Bowens reached Ijaye and erected a chapel in 1854. They then moved to Ogbomoso where the work was successful. Apart from the Ijaye and Ogbomoso stations, other stations were established at Oyo, Shaki, Igboho and Ilorin with the help of other Baptist missionaries.¹⁷ The Baptist Mission's story among the Yorubas and in Nigeria was a success. It resulted in the formation of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in 1919.¹⁸

The Catholic missionary re-establishment started in 1860. On 17th February 1862, Father Borghero visited Lagos and was overwhelmed by the great reception accorded him. Before this visit, he had chosen a place called Ouidah in Dahomey where a considerable number of repatriated slaves were settled, and he established a Roman Catholic community consisting of 'quasi-African Catholics'.¹⁹ Brazilian Catholics, missionaries and peoples from Sierra Leone and Cuba who had been expelled from Lagos in 1851, all took advantage of the peace²⁰ in Lagos to return. These were the people who welcomed Father Borghero in 1862. He departed but returned in 1868 to set up a station as expected, but could not stay long. So he appointed Father Bouche as the superior of the station. However, Father Bouche also did not stay long there, and was replaced by Father Cloud. Father Cloud's contribution to the development of the agricultural settlement yielded good results. His vision was really in line with the general Roman Catholic educational policy of the time: to train children to make use of their intellects and hands. Father Cloud's initiative was boosted by a Roman Catholic layman called Sir James Marshall, an British trader and a supreme judge for Lagos and Cape Coast, who advised Cloud to ask the Governor of Lagos for a nine-mile strip of land at Topo along the coast near Badagry.²¹ The land was granted on 26th July 1876 and Topo was given its first superior, under Father Poirer. Topo developed greatly.²² More attention and credence were accorded the

¹⁵ See Bowen's Diary, August 1850.

¹⁶ Kurunmi, the chief of Ijaye, asked him to select any site of his choice for his mission. After choosing a site, he ran into a series of problems, which ranged from lack of money to build a house, to his poor state of health. Therefore, he went back to the United States of America.

¹⁷ S.A. Fatokun, Pentecostalism.

¹⁸ Thomas O'Connor High, *Outlined Notes on the Expansion of Baptist Work in Nigeria 1850-1939* (Ibadan: Caxton Press, 1970), 35.

¹⁹ Patrick Grantley, *Mission to West Africa: The Story of the Society of African Mission (SMA) 1856-1907* (Rome: SMA, 1991), 160.

²⁰ Lagos around this time was free from the violence of the wars that it had sustained, especially the 1851 bombardment by the British. Kosoko was deposed as king and Akintoye signed a treaty with the British to discontinue the slave trade and to allow safe and legitimate businesses to take place. This peaceful environment attracted many people who had fled Lagos to come back.

²¹ Kofi Agbeti, *West Africa Church History*.

²² In the arrangement, Topo was a free zone for local Nigerian families, who were offered residence there. The condition for staying there was to farm and the beneficiaries would pay back their rent in kind, and assist in clearing and cultivating farmland. This system was aimed at steering the youth from depending on clerical professions and the government alone. This achievement soon suffered a setback because of the drift of youth and children on the farmland from the settlement to towns such as Lagos and Porto-Novo. Despite this, the achievement of the settlements cannot be de-emphasized. This was because hundreds of acres of land were cleared and many thousands of coconut trees were

Catholic mission in Lagos in 1877-1878 when the construction of the Holy Cross Cathedral was started, to be completed in 1881. In all, the Catholic mission recorded enormous achievements because the fathers were supported by the local people. They were further assisted by the Catholic nuns, who were workers of the Franciscan Sisters of the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons.

The Holy Ghost Fathers is another Catholic order that came to Nigeria; the order came to Onitsha in 1885 to establish the Roman Catholic Church.²³ By 1889, Onitsha had been accorded as 'the Ecclesiastical Province' to oversee the whole of the eastern part of Nigeria. The Holy Ghost Fathers later established a station at Lokoja in 1884, and also founded the Ecclesiastical Province of Kaduna in 1911.²⁴

The next mission to study is the Sudan Interior Mission. They sent three missionaries, namely, Walter Gowans, Thomas Kent and Rowland Bingham, to the northern region of Nigeria. After their initial efforts had been aborted, a subsequent attempt was fruitful in 1893 when some churches were established. The churches were christened the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) in 1901. To assist the Sudan Interior Mission, the Sudan United Mission was formed. SUM was able to establish six churches.²⁵

All the churches discussed above are referred to as historical, 'mainline', 'established' or 'mission' churches, as they have a line of history and traditions that predates their presence in Nigeria.²⁶ Apart from these was the establishment of the Ethiopian churches.²⁷ These were the Ebenezer Baptist Church, formed March 1888, the United Native African Church, 1891, the African Church Bethel, 1901, and the United African Methodist Church (Eleja) in 1917.

Furthermore, the emergence of independent churches in Nigeria in the late nineteenth century caused Nigeria to experience the contextualization of Christianity. These were the Christ Apostolic Church, The Cherubim and Seraphim Society, The Church of the Lord Aladura and Celestial Church of Christ. These are all referred to as African Indigenous Churches.²⁸ Consequently, they provided a springboard for the emergence of evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal movements which are predominantly indigenous in Nigeria. This is another significant landmark in Nigerian Christianity which emerged in the twentieth century. They are classified into Classical Pentecostals, Charismatic Pentecostals and the Neo-Pentecostal Church.²⁹

cultivated. In addition, herds of cattle and plantations of cassava were put in place and the crops thrived very well. This settlement further helped in establishing orphans and slaves who were previously unsettled. In addition, a convent was established in 1892 for girls. See for more explanation Joseph Parkes, "The Church in Nigeria," *New Catholic World* 226 (1983): 231.

²³ Parkes, "The Church in Nigeria," 231.

²⁴ Patrick Grantley, *Mission to West Africa*.

²⁵ Deji Ayegboyin & F.K.U. Asonzeh, "Taxonomy of Churches in Nigeria; A Historical Perspective," *Orita* 34, No.1-2 (2002).

²⁶ Deji Ayegboyin & F.K.U. Asonzeh, "Taxonomy of Churches in Nigeria."

²⁷ Ethiopianism was used during the colonial era as different forms of struggle against the European influence and most especially their leadership on church issues in Africa. This was coined for Africans from the text biblical: Ps 68:31. The literacy brought by the missions contributed immensely towards this. As the secular was into nationalism, the church before Nigerian independent was into Ethiopianism. For more explanation see Ayegboyin Deji & S. A Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches* (Jos: African Christian Text Books, 2013).

²⁸ They are also referred to as "African instituted churches", or "African Independent Churches" (AICs) established by Africans, for Africans, without the doctrine of the Europeans, unlike the Ethiopian churches that were founded by Africans for Africans but with the doctrines of the mission churches they seceded from.

²⁹ The Classical Pentecostal churches are Pentecostal churches that have their sources from Europe and America before Nigerian independence in 1960, while the Charismatic movement is a spiritual wave that is partly in the earlier wave of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. It historically demarcates Classical Pentecostalism from Neo-Pentecostalism. Neo-Pentecostal churches, however, are very recent Pentecostal churches which their leaders claim authority on through their charismatic qualities. See Ayegboyin Deji & F.K.U. Asonzeh, "Taxonomy of Churches in Nigeria; A Historical Perspective," 78-85 for more explanation.

Summary Data of Religious Demography

Nigerian churches officially came together under five main blocks of a national umbrella known as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1976. The five blocks are the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, the Christian Council of Nigeria, the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria/Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, the Organisation of African Independent Churches and Tarrayar Ekelesioyoyin Kristi, a Nigeria/Evangelical Church Winning All. Nigeria is seen to be home to the region's largest Christian population. Nigeria's large Christian community is diverse. Nearly sixty million are Protestants, about twenty million are Catholics, and more than 750,000 are 'other' Christians. All of Christianity's major groups have grown in Nigeria since the 1970s, but the growth of Pentecostal churches has been especially dramatic in recent decades.³⁰ Lagos is acknowledged as the most Pentecostal city in the world.³¹

Recent Major Trends and Developments

The first phase of Christianity introduced in the nineteenth century are the mainline churches, while the second phase came up in the early twentieth century through the African Indigenous Churches. The third and most recent phase is the Pentecostal or Charismatic Churches in the 1970s. This phase brought about preaching on spiritual manifestation, holiness and deliverance and, more recently, brought the theology of prosperity into the Nigerian Christian circle. In fact, this has drastically changed the face of Christian faith and has indeed affected the major beliefs and doctrines of the church as it began to lay more emphasis on materialism as against spirituality. Nevertheless, the mainline churches still mostly maintain the precepts of their foreign missions. However, this has made them to lose some members, especially youth, to the Pentecostals who seem livelier and profess to give solutions to every type of problems. With this in mind, the mainline churches started including things like praise and worship, speaking in tongues, special prayer programmes and vigils.

Islam has given a kind of unrest to Christianity in Nigeria.³² It has faced several religious crises and in recent time combating with 'Boko Haram' has claimed thousands of lives.³³ This has called for inter-faith dialogue and special prayer meetings but not so far any reported physical combats between the two as a form of retaliation from Christians.

The General Contribution of Christianity to National Development

There is no doubt that Christianity has made significant contributions to Nigerian society in several ways. These are:

³⁰ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 159-161.

³¹ Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*.

³² This also includes the registration of Nigeria as a member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's military administration. The national census has not asked questions about religion since 1963 because the proportion of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is a sensitive political issue. In 1953, 21.4% of Nigeria's population was Christian, 45.3% was Muslim and 33.3% belonged to other religions, including African Traditional Religions. By 1963, the percentage of the population that belonged to other religions had declined by 15 points, nearly matching the 13.1-point increase for Christians. During this same period, the percentage of Muslims increased by less than 2 points. Christians have since increased in number and share to become about half of the population. For details see Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals," 2006, www.pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Spirit-and-Power.aspx.

³³ The *Boko Haram* movement, as it's commonly known, means in Hausa: "Western education is a sin." It also calls itself *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-jihad* meaning; People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad. The terrorist group was generally said to have emerged in the year 2009.

Education and literacy

Foreign Christian missions pioneered western education in Nigeria. Their programmes include literacy development, classes for religious instruction, Sunday school and catechism, elementary and primary education, teacher training and secondary education, and theological education and training. Other branches of Christianity in Nigeria followed suit and have even gone to the extent of founding private universities which some mainline churches are already geared up for. Education was the most potent tool for the transformation of Nigerian society and also the most effective tool of evangelism.³⁴ Concomitantly, Christian missions pioneered Christian literature ministry and translation in Nigeria. They reduced African languages to writing, with grammar and syntax.

The health sector

By the end of the nineteenth century, hospitals were as effective as schools. By 1914, various missions had established hospitals like the CMS Iyi Enu Hospital near Onitsha, the Wesley Guide Hospital in Ilesha, the Baptist Hospital in Ogbomosho, and the Sacred Heart Hospital of the Society for African Missions in Abeokuta. Missionary involvement had, as its aim, the eradication of superstitious beliefs about different diseases. Other branches of Christianity in Nigeria started earlier have not hesitated to follow suit.

Economic development

Churches in Nigeria have contributed immensely to the economic development of the country through investment in different sectors of the economy such as agriculture, real estate, the capital market, shopping complexes and schools.³⁵ Their roles are also important for job creation.

Social formation and transformation

Christian missions in Nigeria had given transforming powers that inculcate morality, honesty, integrity, obedience and trust. This does not mean that we do not have wolves among sheep that have tarnished the image of Christianity and been bad examples. Nevertheless, a good number of churches still speak against them and in general against social vices.

Conclusion

The 170 years of the church in Nigeria have delivered a measure of spiritual, physical, educational, medical and social growth, especially the worldwide global applause of the indigenous Pentecostal and charismatic revival and renewal movements and missionary initiatives.

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³⁴ Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 67.

³⁵ S.C. Nwite and A. Wilson, *Churches in Nigeria and Investment Strategies: Problems and Prospect. Book of Abstracts* (Second World Congress on Research and Development, Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 2010).

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