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(70) CHRISTIANITY IN LESOTHO

James N. Amanze and Khosi Emmanuel Makubakube

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	1,845,000	91.8%	2,218,000	93.4%	1.2%
Independents	215,000	10.7%	234,000	9.9%	0.6%
African initiated	207,000	10.3%			
Protestants	496,000	24.7%	560,000	23.6%	0.8%
Reformed, Presbyterian	279,000	13.9%			
Anglicans	111,000	5.5%			
Pentecostal	62,400	3.1%			
Baptist	13,700	0.7%			
Methodist	12,600	0.6%			
Roman Catholics	1,060,000	52.7%	1,280,000	53.9%	1.3%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	349,000	17.3%	380,000	16.0%	0.6%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	148,000	7.3%	177,000	7.5%	1.2%
adherents of traditional African religions	141,000	7.0%	120,000	5.1%	-1.1%
Baha'is	17,800	0.9%	26,000	1.1%	2.6%
Hindus	1,200	0.1%	1,600	0.1%	1.9%
Muslims	930	0.0%	1,400	0.1%	2.8%
people professing no religion	4,600	0.2%	6,700	0.3%	2.6%
Total population	2,011,000	100.0%	2,373,000	100.0%	1.1%

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

Introduction

Lesotho with an area of 11,720 square miles and an estimated population of 1.9 million people is a landlocked country surrounded completely by South Africa. It has a vibrant and fast growing Christian population which is estimated at 90% of the entire population in the country. It is dominated by three large Christian churches namely the Roman Catholic Church, the Lesotho Evangelical Church and the Anglican Church. Other Christian Churches operating in Lesotho today include the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Dutch Reformed, Lesotho Methodist Church, and a variety of Pentecostal-charismatic Churches. There is also a strong body of African Independent Churches. The constitution of Lesotho and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and there are no established government requirements for churches to register, therefore, there are no penalties for not registering a church. Those who register, however, are required to produce a constitution and a leadership committee.¹

¹ US Department of State, "Lesotho" <http://www.state.gov.documents> organisation assessed on 29/5/2016.

The History of Christianity in Lesotho

The history of Christianity in Lesotho is traced back to King Moshoeshoe who requested Christian missionaries to come to his country to start missionary work there. As a result of this request, three missionaries in South Africa namely Thomas Arbousset, Eugene Casalis and Constant Gosselin of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society arrived in Lesotho in 1833 and established the first mission station at Moriya twenty five miles south west of Thaba Bosiu. From this humble beginning the church experienced tremendous growth with the arrival in the missionary field of Francois Coillard, Adolphe Mabilie and Eugene Casalis the latter the son of Eugene Casalis.² This marked the beginning of missionary work in Lesotho. Eventually other churches joined this missionary venture. One of these was the Roman Catholic Church whose work is traced back to Bishop Allard and Father Joseph Gerard of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who visited Moshoeshoe in 1862. He gave them permission to set up a mission station at Roma about twenty miles South of Thaba Bosiu.³ From there the church spread throughout the country. The extent of the expansion was such that it led to the establishment of an independent diocese in 1961 with Maseru as its metropolitan.⁴

Apart from the above two churches, the Anglican Church has also made its presence felt in Lesotho. It was introduced at the invitation of King Moshoeshoe. It began its work in 1875 in Maseru and from there spread to other parts of the country.⁵ This marked the beginning of the Anglican Church in Lesotho in a more permanent basis. Despite some difficulties as a result of wars in the country, congregations were established at a number of places such as Matsieng, Mafeteng, Maseru, Masite to name but a few. The Anglican Church in Lesotho is part of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. It received its first African Bishop in 1976 in the person of Desmond Tutu.⁶

One of the main interesting features of Christianity in Lesotho is that many Christians still observe and practice some of their traditional cultural beliefs and rituals alongside Christianity. A number of things such as church music and traditional clerical attire to name a few have been introduced during church services.⁷ This means that Christianity has been inculturated in many aspects of church life. The indigenization of the church is considered as one of the ways of entrenching Christianity in the bosom of mother Africa.

The Church and Socio-economic Development

One of the most important aspects of the Christian Churches in Lesotho is their contribution to the socio-economic development of the country. This contribution has taken place mainly in the field of education, health and income generating projects that can lead to poverty eradication. In this regard, different churches have contributed in different ways. For example, apart from building churches, the Lesotho Evangelical Church opened the Morija Printing Works in 1874. This led to the rapid expansion of the Word of God in Lesotho by enabling people to read the Bible for themselves. Apart from this, the LEC established industrial schools, as well as primary schools. A theological school was founded in 1889. Other institutions intended to boost the socio-economic development of the people include the Scot

² Sundkler, *A History...*, 380.

³ Sales, *The planting...*, 104.

⁴ Gordon Haliburton..., 156.

⁵ Haliburton, *Historical Dictionary*, 6.

⁶ Haliburton, *Historical Dictionary*, 8.

⁷ International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/5179.htm> assessed on 29/5/2016.

Memorial Hospital, Tebeleng Hospital and Lesotho Training College. These institutions have continued to flourish to the present day.⁸

The Roman Catholic has also contributed tremendously to the socio-economic development of the country. In the course of its missionary work it has built teacher training colleges, High Schools, Secondary schools, vocational schools, hospitals, seminaries, convents, printing works and book shops. In 1945 Bishop Bonhomme of the Roman Catholic Church established Pius XII University College at Roma. This was the first institution of higher education in the High Commission Territories that is, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. In 1964 the college became part of the University of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland (UBBS). In 1975 the University was nationalised and renamed the National University of Lesotho (NUL).⁹ UBBS contributed significantly to the establishment of the University of Botswana and the University of Swaziland in 1982.¹⁰

In the same vein, the Anglican Church has also contributed significantly in the socio-economic development of the country, of course, with varying degrees of success. The Anglican Church operates a number of schools and one hospital. In partnership with the Anglican Church in Durham, Great Britain, the church operates a number of projects ranging from tree planting to income generating small businesses. The church has also developed educational programmes that conscientise people of the dangers of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. One such programme is the Ha Mohatlane Community Centre in Berea District which provides vocational training.¹¹

New Forms of Division in the Lesotho Church

The independence of Lesotho as a country in 1966 caused turbulences to the Church. New forms of injustice and inequality emerged. The road from colony to free and prosperous state was full of potholes. The change from mission to church was beset by new forms of dependence and corruption.¹² Eventually even the ecumenical fire was put out by new ways to continue old divisions.

During the 1960s the most significant role played by church leaders in the political arena was still that of the Roman Catholic missionaries and it was this continued involvement that requires attention in the lead up to Independence. The major political factor was the role of the churches and missionaries. From the early 1970s on, numerous Basotho church leaders began to play a larger political role.¹³ The Catholic missionary priests resolved to support the Basotho National Party (BNP) which was founded through their support. They intensified their campaign against the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) and alleged communist threat. The Calvinists (Protestants) were perceived to be supporting the BCP and therefore, the Catholics strengthened their support for the BNP. Although they found ways to support the BNP financially and materially, their primary contribution was the well-developed Catholic infrastructure they allowed, and indeed allowed the party to use.¹⁴ It was a major factor in rise of the BNP, for as Theresa Blanchet-Cohen points out:

⁸ Haliburton, *Historical Dictionary*, 87.

⁹ Scott Rosenberg, Richard F. Weisfelder, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho*, Google Books, 41. <https://books.google.co.bw> assessed on 29/5/2016.

¹⁰ Haliburton, *Historical Dictionary*, 156.

¹¹ Rosenberg, *Historical Dictionary*, 41.

¹² Craig Hincks, *Quest for Peace*, 2009, 581.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 585.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

With possible exception of the chiefs there was then no intermediary structure of government, no organization in Lesotho whose scope equaled that of the churches. The Colonial Administration¹⁵ and later the political parties never developed a network of local ramifications as extensive as the missionaries.

The schools and teachers were used to reach desired goal. The teachers of which some were the catechists had a tremendous influence on the community. Accordingly, paid time off given to some teachers to campaign on behalf of the party and increasingly the church severely punished the teachers with BCP sympathies. To this effect, a confidential letter from the Catholic Schools Secretary, states:

Teachers who are officially members of the Congress and who are known as such must be given three months' notice in the course of this month of September... If however, the manager wishes to give reasons for his notice he is free to do so. But please do not tell any teacher that he is given notice because he is a Congress member.¹⁶

Some of the missionary attempts were frustrated. Some of the teachers refused to cooperate although that had cost them jobs. The alliance between the BNP and the missionaries was not that satisfying. Even Chief Leabua Jonathan who was the leader of BNP was perceived by the missionaries to be not as loyal as they thought he would be. On his part the BNP leader felt that he was suffocated by the missionary's expectations. The BNP leader wanted to win both Catholics and Protestants. This intention is made clear in his letter to a South African official that his close alliance with the Catholics would be maintained only as long as it remained politically suitable:

You said you did not like the support which the Catholic Church is giving me. I became a Catholic because of circumstances which I explained to you, but at heart I am still a Protestant and I cannot let you down. When I control the Government after the elections we shall find a good way of dealing the Roman Catholic danger which we discussed at length with you. I also told you what its intention is in Basutoland. But at present, it is wise to use them to get the overwhelming support of the Catholics in this country.¹⁷

From an ecumenical point of view, the negative effects of the Catholic missionary involvement in politics would last for many years. The missionaries achieved their goal but in the process of winning, their image and integrity were seriously tarnished.¹⁸ Not only that their reputation was tainted but that caused damage to the relations between the churches. Fr. Jean-Louis Richard lamented that whatever might have been the intentions of the Churches in involving themselves in political matters and especially in party politics, it remains that the relations between Churches were gravely exacerbated and that this involvement pushed back any hope of seeing ecumenism becoming the dominant factor in church relations.¹⁹

The Church in Lesotho was faced with a profound challenge to fight against the injustice committed by the government and against the mistrust within itself. On one hand, they were forced to speak with one voice to condemn the brutalities of the BNP regime and on the other hand, the Protestants were blaming the Catholics that since it was their regime, they were not victimized. To the Lesotho Evangelical Church, this anti-Protestant bias of the government had been clear since near beginning. Already in March, a letter in the Protestant newspaper called *Leselinyana* had identified the strong denominational element in Lesotho political divisions:

¹⁵ Theresa Blanchet-Cohen, 'The Corporate Structure of the Catholic Church in Lesotho: 1930-1956.' 1976, 250.

¹⁶ Letter from the Schools Secretary, Rev. Fr. M. Gareau, to School managers in Maseru District, 19 September 1960, trans. from French.

¹⁷ Letter from Leabua Jonathan to the Commissioner-General for the Sotho of South Africa, 18 November 1964.

¹⁸ Craig Hincks, *Quest for Peace*, 2009, 586.

¹⁹ Jean-Louis Richard, 'Background Information on Lesotho', 19 December 1983, 3.

Clearly the state of emergency was declared because of the rivalry of Lesotho's political parties. But it has developed into a denominational war. Most of the misfortunes have befallen you members of this Church.²⁰

The Ecumenical Movement in Lesotho

Ecumenical relation between Christians in Lesotho has dominated the history of Christianity for a long time. This led to the creation of the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL) in 1965. Its membership consists of the major churches in Lesotho, namely the Lesotho Evangelical Church, Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church as well as some smaller churches. The CCL was formed in order to promote and enhance ecumenical cooperation among the Christian churches operating in the country. Another aim has been to protect human rights and promote peaceful conflict resolution in the country. It has also been engaged in development work particularly in the area of health, education and poverty eradication. The CCL established an agricultural training centre at Thaba-Khupa in order to train Basotho agriculturalists who would then go out into the villages to train others. Other economic projects include vocational schools for girls in Maseru, and a rural water supply project. The CCL has also been concerned with the provision of clean water to remote villages in the country.²¹

Despite mistrust between the Catholic Church and the Lesotho Evangelical Church, who were both members of the Christian Council of Lesotho, CCL was never deterred from performing its prophetic role for the past 50 years. An article in *Work of Justice* noted that the Heads of Churches have been able to speak prophetically, negotiate confidentially and move quickly in many moments of national crisis.²² The Church in Lesotho has left a profound lesson that Basotho have capacity to solve their own issues without foreign intervention. Therefore, the political instability which Basotho are experiencing nowadays can also be solved this way provided that there is political will.

CCL started to celebrate the 50th Jubilee from 7th August 2015 and ended with the 26th - 27th May 2016 Annual General Meeting. The AGM delegates acknowledged the CCL achievements and challenges over the past 50 years. They emphasized the need for forgiveness, reconciliation, and remembering, not to become the prisoners of the painful past but to ensure that the past challenges do not recur. Moreover, they considered that as a moment to reflect on where CCL comes from and to move forward to building relationships and sustainable peace. However, they also highlighted the problems facing the Basotho nations such as lack of good governance, lack of rule of law, lack of economic justice and lack of respect for the human rights. They resolved that CCL shall continue to exercise its prophetic role as a prophetic voice to address the national issues.

The Role of the Church in Politics and Peace-making

Since independence the churches in Lesotho have played an active role in the political life of the country. For example, the two largest Christians denominations in the country have been in the forefront of political life. The Roman Catholic Church is associated with the Basotho National Party while the Lesotho Evangelical Church has been associated with Basutoland Congress Party and its offshoots. The differences between the two parties have over the years become a source of intense political conflict. This conflict, however, has been managed by the willingness of the churches to work together for the sake of the common good. As a result, the Christian churches have become the most effective players of conflict resolution and mediators in political conflict. For example, during the 2012 general elections the Lesotho

²⁰ 'Seeteetelane' (a nickname), 'Ho Kereke ea Evangeli lesotho', *Leselinyana*, 20 March 1970, 4.

²¹ Rosenberg, *Historical Dictionary*, 41

²² 'Churches and Politics in Lesotho,' *Work of Justice*, no. 30, September 1991, 5.

Council of Churches played a very important role to ensure that conflicts during elections, that characterised the political life of Lesotho in the previous years, should not repeat again. In this regard, as early as August 2011 church leaders assisted the government to come up with strategies that could lead to peaceful elections in 2012. The Christian Council of Lesotho with the political expertise of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in peace-making addressed political leaders on the importance of peaceful elections. In order to seal their deal and ensure commitment by political leaders, an election pledge was signed by all of them during which they committed themselves to accept the election results. This confirmed many peoples' views that relationship build between church leaders and politicians is the best thing that can lead to peaceful co-existence among people.²³

The Role of the Church in the Fight against HIV and AIDS

Since 2002 the Christian Council of Lesotho has been involved in the fight against the HIV and AIDS pandemic. This has been done by developing home-based health care programs and creating scholarship programs for AIDS orphans to attend high school as well as providing nevirapine to pregnant women in order to reduce mother-to-child transmission of the HIV virus. The CCL helped the creation of the Private Health Association of Lesotho in 1973 an organisation that continues to provide health care services to the people of Lesotho to the present day.²⁴

In conclusion, this paper has discussed Christianity tracing its beginning in the first half of the 19th century to the present day. The role of the churches in the socio-economic development of the country has also been discussed.

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²³ "UNDP works with churches to resolve election disputes," <http://www.is.undp.org>; assessed on 1/6/2016.

²⁴ Scott Rosenberg, Richard F. Weisfelder, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho*, Google Books, 89-91.