African Christianity and Partnership with North American Churches (111)

(111) AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND PARTNERSHIP WITH NORTH AMERICAN CHURCHES

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Introduction

The wide ecumenical arena in which African and North American Christianity operate has a long history, even preceding the advent of the ecumenical movement itself. Ecumenical relationships between the churches in Africa and North America have been important in the witness of Christianity on both continents. The ecumenical arena is the setting where churches in Africa and North America confront church-dividing issues regarding race, church order and doctrine. The long ecumenical history, broadly defined, captures the exchanges between Christians in Africa and North America as well as partnerships between churches.

Four historical periods basically frame this rich history of ecumenical encounters. The first period is marked by the presence of African-born Christians in North America. Since Egyptian, Nubian, Ethiopian, and Congolese Christianity precede the rise of Christianity in North America, African Christians carried to North America by the forced migration of the transatlantic slave trade shaped the first period of the early relationship between African and North American Christianity. The second period in the relationship begins during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the migration of Afro-American and Afro-Canadian Christians to Sierra Leone. The third period opens with the mass European colonization of Africa that emerged from the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, extending to the 1960s with the demise of colonialism in much of Africa, save Southern Africa. The fourth period commences with the Mission Moratorium as well as the Pentecostal explosion to the present day.

Phase I (Early 1600s to 1790s)

African Christianity's long history of interacting with North American churches reaches back to the formation of the Thirteenth Colonies along the east coast of North America during the 1600s. Congolese Christianity is a discernible religious current during this era, pouring into the streams of early diasporic African Christianity in North America. North Americans of European descent recognized Christianity as a religion that had Congolese and Angolan adherents in both Africa and North America during colonial North America. Congolese Christianity can be interpreted as a contributing factor in the emergence and development of northern Christianity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[1]

Congolese and Angolans navigated Christianity in North America in a particular way because of the history of Congolese Christianity, itself a product of the encounter between traditional Congolese religion and Roman Catholicism during the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, especially Portuguese Roman Catholicism.

Ira Berlin contended:

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[1] Jeroen Dewulf, 'Emulating a Portuguese Model: The Slave Policy of the West India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church in Dutch Brazil (1630-1654) and New Netherlands (1614-1664) in Comparative Perspective', *Journal of Early American History* Vol. 4, (2014): 3-36; David D. Daniels, 'Congolese Christianity in the Americas of the 17th and 18th Centuries', in *Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 215-26.

> In the long history of North American slavery, no other cohort of black people survived as well and rose as fast and as high in mainland society as the Atlantic creoles. The experience of the charter generations contrast markedly with what followed… [They] entered a society not markedly different from those they had left [in Central Africa]. There, in New Netherlands, the Chesapeake, Louisiana, and Florida, they made a place for themselves, demonstrating confidence in their abilities to master a world they knew well. Many secured freedom and a modest prosperity, despite the presumption of racial slavery and the contempt of their captors.[2]

The Congolese and Angolans played a pivotal role in constructing the religious landscape of North America.

Protestantism among Congolese and Angolans in the Americas emerges during the seventeenth century in Dutch North America. The historian Alfloyd Butler noted that the first mass Protestant conversion of Africans in North America occurred in South Carolina during the early eighteenth century. He identified the critical presence of enslaved Angolan and Congolese who brought their Roman Catholicism with them from Africa as a major factor in the mass conversion. A 1739 letter from South Carolina noted:

> Amongst the Negroe Slaves there are a people brought from the Kingdom of Angola in Africa; many of these speak Portugueze (which Language is as near Spanish as Scotch is to English), by reason that the Portugueze have considerable Settlement, and the Jesuits have a Mission and School in the Kingdom and many Thousands of the Negroes there profess the Roman Catholic Religion.[3]

The revivals of the 1740s produced a new era with the first mass conversion of Africans to Christianity in British North America and of African peoples to Protestantism. Many of the congregations among Afro-Americans will identify with Africa in their name: Ethiopian Church of Jesus Christ (renamed First African Baptist), Abyssinia Baptist Church, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, First African Presbyterian, St Thomas African Episcopal, and African Union Church (also called Union Church of Africans).[4]

Phase II (1790s to 1880s)

During the second period, Afro-Canadian and Afro-American Christianity related to Africa through missions, emigration, colonization and Ethiopianism. During the 1790s, Afro-American Christians who had migrated to Canada, specifically Nova Scotia, relocated to Sierra Leone and joined in the formation of Freetown Colony. According to scholars such as Ogbu Kalu and Lamin Sanneh, these Nova Scotian Christians inaugurated the modern missionary enterprise in Africa. They are followed by Afro-American missionaries such as Lott Carey and a group of twenty-eight others who emigrated to Sierra Leone as well as Afro-American missionaries and émigrés who would later settle in Liberia. These Nova Scotian and Afro-American Christians initiated the earliest western non-white missionary activity in Africa.[5]

White western missionaries from the USA and Canada arrived in Southern Africa during the early nineteenth century. Other white North American missionaries including Lydia Ann Beers and William H.

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[2] Ira Berlin, 'From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America', in *The William and Mary Quarterly,* Third Series 53:2 (April 1996), 282.

[3] 'Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina', in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, ed. Michael Mark Smith, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2005), 14.

[4] Alfloyd Butler, *Africanization of Christianity* (New York: Carlton Press, 1980); Henry H. Mitchell, *Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 83.

[5] Ogbu Kalu, *Clio in a Sacred Garb: Essays on Christian Presence and African Responses, 1900-2000* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 164; Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999); Leroy Fitts, *Lott Carey: First Black Missionary to Africa* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978); Sylvia M. Jacobs (ed.), *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

Clarke would serve in places such as Liberia and Lagos Colony, respectively. Before the modern missionary enterprise, Thomas Thompson served on the Gold Coast from 1752, sponsored by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; he had previously served as a missionary in New Jersey Colony.[6]

Studies of the nineteenth century demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between the North American Christianity and Africa. While a few Afro-American and white North American Christians viewed Africans in Africa favourably, Africans were regularly described as 'heathenish' and Africa as the 'dark continent'. The relationship between Afro-American émigrés and their descendants – Nova Scotians in Sierra Leone and Americo-Liberians in Liberia – with the local peoples was often marked by discrimination, condescension and prejudice. Along with white North Americans, Scotians were accused of participating in the Europeanizing of the African.[7]

Phase III (1880s to 1960s)

The negative thinking about Africa and Africans helped Europeans in their legitimising of the partitioning of Africa. This process ushered in a new era in the history of Christianity in Africa and complicated the relationship between African and North American Christianity. Many white-led North American denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention with African missions became seen as allies of European colonialism in Africa. Only a small number were perceived as disruptive of the colonial system.[8]

During the early phase of this third period, a small group of African-led congregations entered alliances with Afro-American denominations; their congregations broke away from white western missionary control. These congregations initiated the transition from mission churches to autonomous churches in Africa. In their protest against 'European cultural domination and control of decision-making in the church', these African Christians were identified as 'Ethiopianists' because of their advocacy of African pastoral leadership and religious self-determination.[9]

While most African independent congregations remained autonomous or formed African-led denominations, some congregations joined Afro-American denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, and the National Baptist Convention, Inc. Later, others would join Afro-American denominations such as the African Orthodox Church and the Church of God in Christ. In some cases, these denominations would be accused by the European missionaries and colonial authorities of being anti-colonial as well as advocates of an 'Africa for the Africans' ideology.[10]

A new phase emerges from the increasing presence of educated Afro-Americans missionaries who were the 'equals' of the white colonists within the structures of the early to mid-twentieth-century colonial Africa as well as those missionaries who served as critics of colonialism such as William Henry Sheppard. Others who challenged colonialism included Afro-American Christians such as C.C. Boone who called for political freedom for the Congo, for instance, in 1909, as well as African Christian leaders such as John Chilembwe who sought political freedom for his people in East Africa.[11]

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[6] Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: OUP, 1994, 2004 rpt.), 178; Baker J. Cauthen (ed.), *Advance: A History of Southern Baptist Foreign Missions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970).
[7] Sandy Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions: The Origins of a Movement, 1880-1915* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989).
[8] Jonathan S. Barnes, *Power and Partnership: A History of the Protestant Mission Movement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 46-88.
[9] Kalu, *Clio in a Sacred Garb,* 165-69.
[10] Kalu, *Clio in a Sacred Garb*, 168-72.
[11] William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard, Congo's African American Livingstone* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002); Martin, 189.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was especially perceived by some European colonial leaders as a subversive group in Southern Africa. Additionally, African Methodist Episcopal Church leaders outlined a religious agenda that called for the uniting of 'the oppressed peoples' of the West such as Afro-Americans, Amerindians, Jews and the Irish, as well as 'people of colour' in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Philippines within the imperial grip of the USA, along with those under European domination in Africa, India and China.[12]

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various conferences convened African and Afro-American Christians around issues related to their relationship and strategies to address the African situation. These ranged from the 1893 Chicago Conference on Africa where delegates included Yakub Pasha, an Egyptian, Monolu Massaquoi, a Vrai prince, and Henry McNeal Turner, an Afro-American bishop within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to the First Pan-African Conference in 1900, which was held in London, UK. These became venues for race-based organizations.[13]

The education of Africans like John Chilembwe in Afro-American colleges would foster transatlantic relationships between African and Afro-American Christians. Chilembwe would return to East Africa and open an industrial mission modelled after Afro-American institutes; the mission received support from the National Baptist Convention, Inc., a denomination founded and governed by Afro-Americans. The Phelps Stokes Fund, a major funder of Afro-American education during the early twentieth century, would also fund the education of Africans in Africa, using the Christian industrial education model inaugurated at the Hampton Institute and made famous through the success of the Tuskegee Institute.[14]

Mark Christian Hayford of the Gold Coast (later part of Ghana) and Mojola Agbebi of Lagos Colony (later of Nigeria), were African Christians who travelled from Africa to the USA, introducing American audiences to the African situation during the early 1900s. In this case, Hayford delivered the lecture, 'West Africa and Christianity', at Rochester Theological Seminary, predominantly a white Baptist institution.. After organizing the African Baptist Union of West Africa in 1898, Agbebi toured the USA in 1903, presenting the West African church to a North American audience. This Baptist Union would include congregations in what would become present-day Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Cameroon. Both Agbebi and Hayford would raise funds in North America to support the operation of their African-led Baptist denominations.[15]

Other African-born Christians such as Charles Manuel Grace of the Cape Verde Islands and Laura Kofi of the Gold Coast would establish religious movements in the USA during the 1910s and 1920s, respectively. Kofi and her successors would establish a transatlantic religious relationship between USA and West Africa, creating a context for religious exchanges.[16]

In 1942, the Federal Council of Churches in the USA, an ecumenical body which was the precursor of the National Council of Churches in the USA, sponsored a major conference where the platform included

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[12] Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884-1916* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 64.

[13] Christopher Robert Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century,* Vol. 1: 1833-1900 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 372-78.

[14] George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African*: *John Chilembwe and the Origins*, *Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1958).

[15] Mark C. Hayford, 'West Africa and Christianity: A Lecture Delivered at the Rochester Theological Seminary, New York, USA, September 28th, 1900' (Baptist Tract and Book Society, 1903); Mojola Agbebi, 'The West African Problem,' in *Papers on the First Interracial Problems (1911),* ed. Gustav Spiller, paper contributed to the first International Race Congress.

[16] Marie W. Dallam, *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Richard Newman, 'Warrior Mother of Africa's Warriors of the Most High God: Laura Adorkor Kofey and the African Universal Church', in *This Far By Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography*, eds. Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 110-23).

the call to end western colonialism and imperialism. This was adopted by the Federal Council, which included approximately thirty predominately white mainline denominations. By this act, these white American denominations joined some of the Afro-American denominations in advancing the role of the church as a protest organization, advocating for the end of European Africa.17

Phase IV (1970s to the Present)

In 1971, John G. Gatu, an East African clergyman who served as the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, called upon North American churches to comply with a five-year moratorium on North American and other western Christian missionaries to Africa. As colonialism ended in most of Africa, save Southern Africa, Gatu called for an end to western hegemony in African denominations. He sought an opportunity for African Christians to rethink and reformulate the church and her mission in Africa without western interference or its agenda in the revisioning. This Mission Moratorium would give the African Church an opportunity to become a fully self-governing, self-propagating, self-funding and self-theologizing Christian community. The Mission Moratorium demanded that North American churches relate to African churches as peers, switching a relationship of dependency and western domination to one of interdependency and mutuality. In 1974, at the Third Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches, which had been founded in 1963 and was deemed to become the pre-eminent ecumenical body of churches in Africa, endorsed the Mission Moratorium. Since North American mainline denominations, ranging from Reformed Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist to the United Church of Canada, were the primary audience, they became the key North American agents in this changing of ecclesial postures.[18]

Although never fully implemented, the call for a mission moratorium in the early 1970s was a watershed moment in African Christianity when the Protestant leadership shifted from European missionaries to African clergy, and when the last vestiges of European colonialism were dislodged from African Christianity, which was thrust into the newly emerging post-colonial reality. Initially, in the post-colonial era, western missionaries held some remaining control. The Moratorium raised expectations that African Christianity would be totally liberated from western control. During the 1970s, African Christianity accelerates the decolonization of Christianity in Africa and mounted an African Christianity that in significant ways was a break from the missionary-founded Christianity of the colonial era.

The African Pentecostal explosion during the post-1960s era fostered transnational linkages between the congregations of African Christian immigrants in North America with African-founded denominations such as the Church of Pentecost, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, as well as the Cherubim and Seraphim. For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God is the largest among the African immigrant denominations in North America with over 500 congregations in the USA and eighty in Canada.[19]

Between the 1960s and early 1990s, Southern African Christians found sectors within North American Christianity, including Martin Luther King, Jr., which supported the freedom struggle in Southern Africa,

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[17] David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 67-69; Mark Hulsether, 'Shifting Perspectives on Africa in Mainline Protestant Social Thought: The Case of Christianity and Crisis Magazine', in *Freedom's Distant Shores: American Protestants and Post-colonial Alliances with Africa*, ed. R. Drew Smith, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 11-36.
[18] Morrell F. Swart, *The Call of Africa*: *The Reformed Church in America Mission in the Sub-Sahara, 1948-1998* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 208-18.
[19] Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 276-302; David D. Daniels, 'African Immigrant Churches in the United States and the Study of Black Church History', in *African Immigrant Religions in America*, eds. Jacob Olupona and Regina Gemignani (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 47-60.

ranging from Angola and Mozambique to Southern Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. Leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak would tour North America offering a theological critique of apartheid. Campaigns were mounted to divest from South African corporations; signs were displayed stating: 'Free South Africa.'[20]

New theological voices emerged in Africa during this period that found interlocutors within North America; these African theologians ranged from John Mbiti to Allan Boesak to Mercy Oduyoye. Within North America, theologians of the stature of James Cone, Letty Russell and John Douglas Hall engaged these African theologians.[21]

During the early part of the 21st century, the partnership between African Christianity and North American Christianity again became strained. The relationship had been strained by debates over gender, and specifically the ordination of women clergy, and over sexual orientation, especially the ordination of gays and lesbians, the consecration of gay clergy as bishops, and same-sex marriage. From these tensions have emerged new ecclesial formations where some congregations in North America, especially within the Anglican communion, have assigned themselves to Anglican dioceses in Africa.[22]

In this period, contemporary relationships are also marked by renewed alliances that focus on justice, peace and the sustaining of creation. Partnerships were forged to address the HIV/AIDs crisis theologically as well as through the initiatives of health care ministries. Campaigns to end poverty in Africa were mounted with micro-enterprise ministries, and other economic ventures were launched.

Conclusion

Changes in ecumenical posture define how African Christianity has related to North American churches since the rise of colonialism on the North American continent until the early 21st century. The role of Congolese Christianity, as a feature in the rise of North American Christianity, began the relationship between Christianity on both continents in a way that shows the influence flowing from African Christianity to North American Christianity. The role of the Nova Scotian and Afro-American Protestant missionaries and immigrants to West Africa during the late 1700s and early 1800s illustrate the pivotal role of 'New World Africans' upon the emerging modern Protestant missionary enterprise. White North American dominance in African missions is clearly a later development in the relationship between African and North American Christianity; it must be situated within its proper historical context in order to be appropriately classified. The shift in relationship prompted by the Mission Moratorium as well as African Pentecostalism created a new era in the African and North American ecumenical reality.

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[21] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

[22] Willis Jenkins, 'Episcopalians, Homosexuality, and World Mission', *Anglican Theological Review* Vol. 86, No. 2, (2004): 293-316.

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