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(57A) CHRISTIANITY IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO[1]

Lubunga W'ehusha

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	62,834,000	95.3%	100,160,000	95.8%	3.2%
Independents	17,814,000	27.0%	27,850,000	26.6%	3.0%
African initiated	14,706,000	22.3%			
Orthodox	12,600	0.0%	16,000	0.0%	1.6%
Protestants	12,315,000	18.7%	19,300,000	18.5%	3.0%
Pentecostal	2,467,000	3.7%			
Reformed, Presbyterian	1,710,000	2.6%			
Baptist	1,533,000	2.3%			
Methodist	1,400,000	2.1%			
Evangelical churches	1,368,000	2.1%			
Disciples	1,034,000	1.6%			
Adventist	796,000	1.2%			
Anglicans	500,000	0.8%			
Mennonite	431,000	0.7%			
Congregational	403,000	0.6%			
Roman Catholics	35,807,000	54.3%	55,500,000	53.1%	3.0%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	20,548,000	31.2%	32,500,000	31.1%	3.1%
Evangelicals	4,480,000	6.8%	7,137,000	6.8%	3.2%
adherents of traditional African religions	1,561,000	2.4%	2,000,000	1.9%	1.7%
Muslims	916,000	1.4%	1,370,000	1.3%	2.7%
Baha'is	267,000	0.4%	420,000	0.4%	3.1%
Hindus	93,300	0.1%	150,000	0.1%	3.2%
adherents of new religious movements	5,300	0.0%	10,000	0.0%	4.3%
Buddhists	3,500	0.0%	6,000	0.0%	3.6%
Jews	370	0.0%	400	0.0%	0.5%
people professing no religion	259,000	0.4%	420,000	0.4%	3.3%
Total population	**65,939,000**	**100.0%**	**104,536,000**	**100.0%**	**3.1%**

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

[1] In this essay I have often used the Democratic Republic of Congo along with the old name "Kongo", which comes from the former Kingdom of Kongo through which Christianity entered the country.

Introduction

The development of Christianity in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter DRC) is closely linked with the history of the country. The ever-changing political landscape of the DRC has played a tremendous role in Christianity as it stands today. From the time of Portuguese explorers to the current global world, each era has put its mark on Christianity in the DRC. This essay aims at surveying the development of Christianity in three major epochs of the history of the country: the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

The Pre-Colonial Era

Portuguese Missionaries

The DRC was first exposed to Christianity by Portuguese missionaries who came to the country following the visit of the Portuguese explorer, Diego Cao, who reached the mouth of the River Kongo in 1482. The Kingdom of Kongo was located along the coastal part of the Atlantic Ocean, extending on both sides of the River Kongo, from Angola to Kabinda and part of Congo Brazzaville. Its population was estimated at two and a half million.[2] Diego Cao found that people of the Kingdom of Kongo were friendly and he strove to establish a relationship between the two monarchies[3] by making several expeditions to the Kingdom of Kongo. His fourth expedition of 1491 is considered as decisive in the Christian history of Kongo because it brought into the Kingdom the Roman Catholic missionaries. The chief of the coastal province of Soyo, Mani Soyo, was the first to be baptised and two months later the King himself, Nzinga Nkuvu, the Mani Kongo, was baptised and renamed Joao I, in honour of the King of Portugal, Joao II.[4]

Christianity flourished during the reign of Mvemba Nzinga, one of the sons of King Nzinga Nkuvu, renamed Afonso after baptism, who converted to Christianity with his mother. The King himself backslid after a short while because he was opposed to burning his fetishes and the preaching against polygamy, but Prince Afonso was a dedicated Catholic. After the death of King Nzinga Nkuvu in 1506, Afonso, assisted by the Portuguese, fought and defeated another son and all his enemies and established a Christian kingdom. During his reign, more missionaries came to Kongo and Alfonso sent many people to be trained as priests, government officials and medical workers. Among people sent by Afonso was his son Henrique who became a priest and eventually the first Catholic bishop from Kongo in 1518.[5] The Christian King Afonso wanted his son to strengthen Christianity in the kingdom but he was not allowed to serve his own people. Since the Portuguese opposed the creation of a diocese in Kongo, Bishop Dom Henrique was sent to work in Tunisia, fell ill, and eventually went to Rome where he died in 1526.[6]

After the death of King Afonso I in 1543, the kingdom declined, as well as Christianity. Subsequent kings were no longer interested in Christianity and the Portuguese became more interested in settling in Angola than in the Kongo. Slowly, people returned to their traditional beliefs, while the Portuguese invested more of their time in the slave trade than in evangelization.[7] Despite the support and personal involvement of the royal family, this early Christianity started to decline, to disappear altogether by 1790.

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[2] Jonathan Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa: A Survey* (Denver, Co: Academic Books, 1990), 62.

[3] Nimi a Nzima, ruler of Mpemba Kasi (Congo Kingdom), made an alliance with Nsaku Lau, the ruler of the neighbouring Southeastern Mbata Kingdom. These kingdoms made an alliance to co-exist and helped to ensure the succession of their ally's lineage in their territories.

[4] Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 73.

[5] John K. Thornthon, "Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo," *Journal of African History* 54 (2013): 53-77, 62.

[6] Daywel èZiem, "Henrique, Dom, C. 1495 to C.1526 Roman Catholic Kongo (D.R. Congo)." *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. www.dacb.org/stories/demrepcongo/henrique_dom.html (accessed 17/02/2015).

[7] Hildenbrandt, *History of the Church in Africa,* 68.

Early Enculturation of the Gospel

People who received the gospel in the Kingdom of Kongo tried to adapt it to their own culture. This indigenisation was often accompanied with syncretism, as in the case of a young Kongolese woman, Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita (1684-1706). In 1704, when she turned 20, Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vital declared that she met Saint Anthony in a dream and was charged with a message of restoring the Kingdom of Kongo. She moved to the old capital city, Saõ Salvadore, where she preached her message and made a number of converts. There were three major points in her message: first, Saint Anthony was the patron of all saints, and people should pray only to him. Secondly, she announced impending punishment because Jesus was angry with the Kongolese people. They needed to ask for mercy. Thirdly, Saint Anthony was about to deliver good things to his devotees.[8] This last point included having black saints instead of white ones, thereby contradicting the teaching of Capuchin missionaries. She changed the story of the Nativity and declared that Jesus was black as well as Kimpa Vita's mother, and had been born in Kongo. She even modified the prayer of *Ave Maria* and *Salve Regina and*, adding her own words. Her teaching was considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. As many people were being drawn to her in the ruins of the old capital of Kongo, she was arrested and burned as a witch and heretic in 1706.[9]

The Colonial Era

The expedition of Henry Morton Stanley, an American journalist sent to find David Livingstone, who was considered as lost in the heart of Africa, should be mentioned as the most important event that opened the door for the re-evangelization of the Kongo by both Catholics and Protestants. In his endeavour to verify if Lualaba was the source of Nile, Stanley followed the River Kongo from its source in Katanga Province to the Atlantic Ocean to the west, about 2,000 miles, for a trip which lasted from 1874 to 1877 during which as many as 90% of his support team perished. He was the first European to cross the country from east to west and his report indicated that the country was densely populated and rich in resources – if somebody were ready to invest money. The publication of the report of this expedition in Europe caused, on the one hand, the Belgian King Leopold II to fight and obtain the Kongo as his personal domain, the Free State of Kongo, at the Congress of Berlin in 1885. On the other hand, British Baptists, touched by the plight of the unreached people in the interior of Kongo that Stanley met in his expedition along the River Kongo, were prompted to send missionaries to the country. I will show how these two movements contributed to the development of Christianity in the DRC.

Belgian and Roman Catholic missionary work

As argued earlier, early Portuguese Christianity had died out towards the end of the eighteenth century in the DRC, moving to Angola where it continued its mission. Catholic missionaries from the neighbouring French colony of Brazzaville were the first to establish some mission work in the River Kongo region in 1866.

After what has been termed the 'Scramble for Africa',[10] King Leopold II of Belgium inherited the Kongo as his own domain, the Free State of Kongo, in 1885, but he had been funding Stanley to explore and develop the country since 1877. Since King Leopold II was a Roman Catholic, at first he wanted only Belgian Roman Catholic missionaries to work in his territory. Therefore, the work started by French Roman Catholics was to be taken over by Belgian Roman Catholics. Moreover, King Leopold II 'distrusted

[8] For more details see, John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998).
[9] Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950,* 107.
[10] Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991). This book describes how Europeans rushed to divide up the African continent into pieces for their colonisation and enrichment.

French and Portuguese missionaries as being likely to further their respective countries' colonial aspirations'.[11] King Leopold II soon realised that the DRC was such a big territory that Belgian Roman Catholics alone could not reach the whole country. He therefore allowed other Europeans, even Protestant missionaries, to establish their mission work in the country, as I discuss below. But because King Leopold II was a Catholic, he especially encouraged the Catholic Church to expand in the Congo.

After the cession of the Congo Free State to the Belgian government in 1908, the Roman Catholic Church remained the prominent religion of the Belgian colony. As a favoured religion, the Roman Catholic Church occupied urban cities and was given free lands by the government to pursue their mission in the Congo. In 1914, more different Roman Catholic bodies were at work in the Belgian Congo than in any other political entity in Africa south of the Sahara. These included Jesuits, priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Trappists, Premonstratensians, Redemptionists, the Mill Hill Fathers, Benedictines and Capuchins, Dominicans and Salesians, Brothers of Christian Schools, Brothers of Charity of Gand, the Marists Brothers, the Sisters of Charity of Gand, the Sisters of Our Lady of Namur, the White Sisters and Franciscan Missionaries.[12]

The colonial government favoured Roman Catholic missionaries by giving them financial assistance and making laws which helped the work of the Catholic Church. As a result, the Catholic Church was quite strong by 1960 and its membership very large.

It should be noted that, when King Leopold II took possession of the country, he was not interested in building schools. The whole of the education system and all health facilities came from Catholic and, to a lesser part, Protestant mission work.

Protestant Missionaries

After the publication of Stanley's report on the Kongo, a group of British Baptists decided to create what they called the Livingstone Inland Mission (LIM), because Stanley gave the name of Livingstone to the Kongo River. Its objective was to establish mission stations from the coast to Stanley Pool. The first missionaries of the LIM began working in the DRC in 1878. They progressed up the river, building small mission posts which later on would be transformed into full mission stations with schools and health facilities. After seven years of hard work and multiple challenges caused by sicknesses, the lack of roads and ignorance of local languages, LIM decided in 1884 to hand over its pioneer work of seven active mission stations (actually, ten in total, some having been abandoned before) to the American Baptist Mission Union (ABMU). Together with LIM, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) of England was also pioneering some work in the same area. Later, in 1884, the society got a ship which allowed them to reach their target of Stanley Pool while creating more stations along the Kongo River.

After a successful beginning by the Baptists from England and America, more American missions joined the work in the DRC. The main reasons for attracting more Americans was that King Leopold II was confident that Americans would not try to take his Kongo Free State away from him as some Europeans (France, Germany and Portugal) had attempted. It is said that King Leopold II 'formed a marriage of convenience with the British Baptists, to whom he gave tax concessions and land grants in return for their support'.[13]

During the colonial period (1908-1960), more Protestant mission work was started in the Congo. In 1910, the Africa Inland Mission (AIM) became the first Christian organisation to start work in Congo from the east. At an early stage, other missionary organisations used the permission given to AIM to enter the east under the aegis of the AIM. But during the colonial period, more churches entered the country through

[11] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa; From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B Eerdmans, 1995), 188.
[12] Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa,* 167.
[13] Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa,* 188.

the east, such as the Swedish Evangelical Free Church, Assemblies of God, Norway's Free Evangelical Mission, the British Pentecostal Union Mission, and the African Mission and Evangelization Society.[14]

One major achievement of the Protestant church in Congo was that Protestant missionaries (especially Americans and Swedish) working there saw and reported to the world the atrocities being committed by King Leopold II to those citizens who did not meet the quota of red rubber and ivory. The news spread and more confirmation was brought to the public so that world opinion forced the Belgian government to take the Congo Free State away from King Leopold II.[15]

Although Protestant churches were active in building schools, hospitals and clinics, most of them struggled financially to run their institutions because, until 1948, only Roman Catholics were given subsidies for education. In order to address their problems with the government, they organised what was called the Congo Protestant Council (CPC), though not all Protestant missions joined it. Its first meeting was held in Kinshasa in 1902. First, it was decided to meet after two years, but after 1940 the Council had annual meetings.[16] Many Congolese agree that the CPC was more a gathering for missionaries, while deep divisions were maintained between different denominations. The United Church of Christ in Congo had yet to come onto the scene (after independence). But it is important to think of independent churches that emerged during the colonial regime.

African Independent Churches

In the DRC, the Kimbanguists remain the most popular and best organised independent church. Simon Kimbangu, the church's founder, was born in 1989 in the village of Nkamba, in the province of Lower Kongo, where he was baptised with his wife and became a member of the Baptist Church in July 1915.[17] In 1921, he professed to have had a divine commission for the people of the DRC. He healed a critically ill woman called Nkiantondo, followed by several miracles. This attracted great crowds to Nkamba, which is now the Holy Jerusalem of the Kimbanguists. Besides this crowd of followers, Kimbangu's colleagues, *Bangunza* or prophets, taught that one day the black people would overthrow the colonial regime. But his followers maintain that Kimbangu had always advocated obedience to the civil authorities. Kimbangu insisted on monogamy and abstinence from alcohol and narcotics. He became a threat to the Belgian administration.[18]

The Belgian government persecuted and arrested Kimbangu in September 1921 and he was kept in prison until his death in 1951. His movement was forsaken by both Catholics and Protestants and the church went underground for many years, during which the wife of Kimbangu, Mary Muilu, was considered as the spiritual leader. The church was recognised on the eve of Independence in 1959 as *Eglise de Jésus Christ sur la Terre par le prophète* Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK). It would become a strong community after Independence.

The Post-colonial Era

Christianity in the DRC changed tremendously after Independence. The Catholic Church could no longer remain dominant, though many leaders who led the country after Independence had graduated from Catholic schools. The religious landscape began to change rapidly as Protestant churches and Kimbanguists were allowed to expand. Independence broke all the boundaries of missionary fields and

[14] Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa,* 167.
[15] Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa,* 435.
[16] Viola L. Smith, *Bâtir Sur le Roc* (Kinshasa: MediaSPaul, 1966), 265.
[17] Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, 508.
[18] Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa,*199-200.

privileges given to the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Catholic Church continued to increase and reform under the leadership of Cardinal Malula, it was no longer as prominent as it had been.

When President Mobutu Sese Seko introduced his policy of 'authenticity' in the early 1970s as a recovery or return to traditional African values, Christianity in Zaire was deeply affected. In 1972, he made it obligatory that all Christian names be replaced with African ones. He put a ban on religious broadcasting, church youth groups and religious publications. He also nationalised the Catholic university, the Lovanium and Protestant University of Kisangani. After 1972, only three Christian churches were allowed to operate, namely, the Protestants (who became *Eglise du Christ au Zaire,* ECZ, or the United Church of Christ in Zaire), the Roman Catholics and the Kimbanguists. Churches that were not affiliated to ECZ continued to operate illegally in the country.[19] Cardinal Malula, despite leading the enculturation and modifying Catholic rituals and attires to reflect African values, became very critical of the despotism of Mobutu's regime, which led him to have frequent trouble from the government.

Mobutu's decision to have one Protestant Church, ECZ, had a positive effect among Protestants. The strong unity of the Protestant Church was due first to political pressure from Mobutu's regime which wanted just a few unified bodies as religious interlocutors with the government. On the other hand, the momentum generated by the synergy of working together as one body has consolidated the unity of Christianity in a way that had never before been experienced, not even during the missionary era.

As for the Kimbanguist movement, the post-colonial era marks the end of its clandestine operation and the start of its blossoming. After official recognition by the government on the eve of Independence in 1959, the leadership was given to Joseph Diangienda Kuntima, the youngest son of the prophet Kimbangu who had died in 1951. His senior brother, Solomon Dialungana Kiangani, succeeded him until his death in 2001. His son, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, succeeded him and was the current spiritual leader at the time of writing. The church has spread to other African countries as well as overseas, and has earned esteem and recognition all over the world. The Kimbanguist Church is the first independent church to be given full affiliation in the World Council of Churches since 1969.

Alongside their father, the two former spiritual leaders have, after their death, been connected in a surprising and highly problematic way with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in recent Kimbanguist belief and preaching. It is not surprising that the former name of 'Church of Christ' by the prophet Kimbangu is no longer used. This anti-Christian development of Kimbanguist doctrine, considering Simon Kimbangu and his sons to be forming the divine Trinity, has weakened ecumenical co-operation between the Kimbanguists and other Christian churches (ECC and Catholics). Some scholars hold this belief to be only 'symbolic', while the current leadership of the church seems to uphold this teaching as fundamental to Kimbanguism. It is an ongoing debate which has been followed up by the WCC and its members.

Current Trends in Christianity and Conclusion

While Christianity in the DRC is still dominated by the three major bodies, Catholics, Protestants and Kimbanguists, the current trend is towards diversification and division. The charismatic movement, which started in the form of small prayer groups, developed rapidly into a full charismatic flow that drew members from major established churches. There seems to be no brake on its diversification since new forms and congregations are steadily being born without restriction. The terrain is favourable to the proliferation of these prophetic and miracle-driven movements since the country experiences a weakened political leadership after years of wars and tribal conflicts. There is no authority controlling this new form of Christianity, and people are being attracted and galvanized by unconventional forms of worship, the performance of miraculous signs, and the promise of instantaneous healing, wealth and well-being without

[19] Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa,* 344.

any effort. Curiously, adherents of the new movements are recruited from all social strata of society, especially among urban citizens where these Christian stars have a receptive audience.

The movement provides an opportunity for those marginalised by the mainline churches (women and people without theological training) to assert their charisma and occupy leadership positions in the 'body of Christ'. The architects of this new trend are to be found among Nigeria's bishops and prophets as well as some TBN broadcasters. Every preacher of this movement is doing their best to imitate Christian stars and present the message of a quick fix for all the problems of poverty and sickness. In a country that has been torn apart by years of war and in which the rate of unemployment is estimated at over 60% of its population; it is therefore understandable that hungry and desperate people accept this 'new form of liberation'. It is hard to gauge the future of this movement. Sexual orientation was not a big issue among Christians a few years ago but now, with exposure to global media, the voices of those who feel discriminated against because of their sex orientation are being raised. They will likely find a more receptive ear in the new pluralistic religious landscape than in the mainline churches.

The major result of this trend is that the three major Christian organisations, Catholics, Protestants and Kimbanguists, live under threat and are showing real signs of working together and of ecumenical co-operation for survival. Can this lead to a more religiously tolerant society? Further diversification is predictable; so the future of Christianity in the DRC lies in the capacity to be flexible and accommodating without compromising one's faith.

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