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Transformations of Christianity in Kenya: A Historical Survey

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Abstract:

Christianity in Africa came through five main trajectories. The first main trajectory was the initial evangelization of North Africa in the first seven centuries of Christ Era. The second main trajectory from Europe was through the West African coast (1420-1780). The third trajectory of missionary activity was through the East Coast of Africa (1560-1700). The fourth trajectory was through the Southern Coast of Africa (1652-1840) and the final trajectory of missionary work was during colonialism (1880-1914). This paper is a survey of transformations of Christianity in this final trajectory to date. Thus, Christianity was introduced to Kenya by European and later American missionaries in 19th and 20th centuries. Christianity was indigenized after the 1960s after most of the African states gained independence from their colonial masters. Since indigenization, Christianity has gone through various transformations. These transformations are a result of the various factors that have influenced growth of Christianity in Kenya. The main drivers of transformation of Christianity in Kenya besides conversions could be better understood by analyzing colonial and post-colonial theological framework that has influenced or been influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political agenda. This paper attempts to assess Christianity in Kenya in the following areas: (1) Growth of Christianity and its Impact during the Colonial Era, (2) Growth of Christianity and its Impact in the Post-Colonial Era, (3) Christianity's influence on social, political and cultural dimensions, and (4) Missiological implications of Christianity's growth in Kenya.

Keywords: African Christianity, missionary trajectories, colonialism, social-political, cultural

1. Introduction

Christianity in Kenya has had no permanent center. Each center today is essentially tomorrow's periphery. This is however not unique to Kenya. In the time of Jesus and early centuries of Christ Era, Palestine and the surrounding nations, were the center of Christianity. After persecution of Christians by the state, the center predominantly moved northwards to Europe and in a few centuries, Europe became the Christendom. Southern movement of Christianity to North Africa in the early centuries of Christ Era was the first trajectory of evangelization of Africa. Though it did not last long, (only the first seven centuries CE) it produced some of the best apologist of the church to date. Some of the great leaders of the Christian church (the early church fathers) include Origen of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, and St. Augustine of Hippo. All these leaders contributed immensely to biblical doctrines (Dowley, 2002, Woodbridge, 1988). This is a clear indication that in antiquity, African Christianity was vibrant and productive though its locale was North Africa. However, all these gains were curtailed after the Islamic conquest and expansion in North Africa. The only remnants of ancient African Christianity existing today are the Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. In that time therefore, North Africa was the center of Christianity in Africa. Today North Africa is not just a periphery by a region predominantly subscribing to Sharia law. The second main trajectory of evangelizing Africa came from Europe through the West African coast (1420-1780). The third trajectory of missionary activity in Africa moved further downwards the East Coast of Africa (1560-1700). The fourth trajectory was through the southern coast of Africa (1652-1840). The final trajectory that missionary work during colonialism (1880-1914). We are looking at Christianity from this period onward.

Europe was the center of Christianity for several centuries and now the center has moved from Europe to the southern hemisphere. Certainly, the center of Christianity is going to move from Africa to somewhere else. What we do not know is where that center will gravitate to. It may move to China and the regions surrounding it or to any other part of the world. When this happens, the center today will become the periphery.

Christianity was introduced in Africa in the 19th century by missionaries from Europe. Since then Christianity has experienced explosive numerical growth transforming communities with its Gospel message. Christians in Africa as whole have increased from about 9% of the population in 1900 to about 48% by 1970 and to 57% in 2010 (Pew Research Center April, 2010). In 2010, 24% of global Christians lived in Sub-Sahara Africa while it was less than 2% in 1910. As the number of practicing Christians dwindle in the West, the center of Christianity has shifted towards the Southern hemisphere. A research conducted in 2010 sharply shows the decline in global Christians in Europe from 66% in 1910 to about 26% in 2010 (Pew

Research Center April 7, 2015). The shift of Christianity to the Southern hemisphere will continue for while since the population is growing but this center will certainly move in a couple of centuries.

Today, African Christianity is mainly found in the Sub-Sahara Africa after it was spread by the missionaries. The mainline churches are Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical confessions, and African Independent Churches.

2. Growth of Christianity and its Impact during the Colonial Era

The rate of growth of Christianity in Kenya has been impressive. Christianity grew from insignificant numbers in the early 1900's to about 53% of the population (8.6 million) in 1962 (Barrett, 1973). After independence, the indigenization of the church leadership had a significant impact on Christianity's growth where the current number of Christians is above 80% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2010).

J. L. Kraft, the pioneer missionary, introduced Christianity at the coast province in Kenya in 1844. The missionaries expanded inland in 1897. Most of the missionaries arrived between this period and early 1900's. Kraft believed "Africans to be (sic) 'fallen men' who had to be civilized as well as converted" (Oliver, 1952: 9). Kraft did not distinguish conversion to Christianity from civilization to adopt European culture. He thought Africans should first conform, then convert, a notion adopted later by missionaries of all persuasions.

During the colonial era, Christian communities in the mission stations provided Christian teaching, basic education, and healthcare among others (Sabar-Friedman, 2002).

Robert Strayer observes that:

It is in fact difficult to think of any important aspect of the modern history of Kenya which did not in some way involve these mission communities. In terms of institutional development, they gave rise to schools and churches.... They participated in most of the political crises of the colony and reflected within themselves many of the tensions and conflicts of our colonial society. They were in a position to channel and direct, if not control, those multiple processes of social and cultural transformation that everywhere accompanied a mission of economic structures. (Strayer, 1978: 2).

The mainline denomination missionaries zoned Kenya into spheres of influence (Shaw, 1996: 191). These churches concentrated most of their resources in specific parts of the country where they had influence. For example, the Church Province of Kenya (CPK) and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), have most of their schools and activities in Central Province (Sabar-Friendman, 2002). Due to church zoning, some of the mainline churches were perceived as belonging to particular ethnic groups, thus strengthening ethnic division.

The impact of missionaries in Kenya is still being experienced in the African Christian communities. The missionaries' abhorred the African's belief system, culture and customs without putting much effort to understand African's worldview. The missionaries' primary focus was to civilize and convert Africans, which created tension (Oliver, 1952; Temu, 1972). Some of the Africans formed indigenous churches such as "Akorino and Anaabii, which were formed to resist perceived missionaries' oppression, while others are splinters churches from the mainstream churches. For instance, Nomiya Luo Church split from Anglicanism in 1914, and Maria Legio of Africa from Roman Catholicism in 1962 (Barrett, 1973). The missionaries proclaimed the gospel, but in the process, they gradually destroyed many of the African cultures (Temu, 1972; Shaw, 1996). The missionaries did not develop a theological foundation that could connect with African culture. Tite Tienou attests this when he says that "Christianity came to the continent in the garments of Western cultures. This Western imprint on Christianity has had a negative effect on the development of African theology" (Tienou, 1990: 24). Due to lack of appreciation of the African culture, the missionaries lost a great opportunity to ground African Christianity theologically.

3. Growth of Christianity and its Impact in the Post-Colonial Era

Kenya got independence in 1963. Political independence brought with it "self-awareness, self-confidence and the hope of revival of traditional African values, beliefs, and culture (Barrett, 1973: 121). It was a time not only to liberate the country politically from the yoke of oppression and manipulation by the colonialists, but also a time for the mainstream churches to purposefully open leadership doors to African Christians. Meanwhile, the African Independent Churches led by Africans got the freedom to worship without government interference.

After independence, there was a focused process of indigenization of the church leadership. By early 1970s, most of the mainstream churches had African leaders. Some of the Africans who took over the church leadership were determined to break away from the colonialist legacy, a main barrier, which had hindered church growth. Some of the African church leaders established church and mission structures that gave people freedom of worship, rebuilt a sense of community, and met people's needs. Africans got an opportunity to practice Christianity with limited imperial baggage.

However, the mainstream churches retained established church patterns which unfortunately mirrored the sending Western church culture. This is progressively changing as the charismatic movement permeate the mainstream churches giving them a new twist of noticeable evangelicalism. Though many Westerners had thought Christianity will die after they left, Jenkins observes that "church growth in Africa has been phenomenal after independence (Jenkins, 2002: 57). The church's exponential growth seems to suggest that African church leaders frame the Gospel message in language and communication forms that are appropriate and meaningful to the local culture. They focus the message on crucial issues in the lives of the people, a link missing with Western missionaries. The post-colonial Gospel message has brought back a growing shift from

personal and community values. Christianity has become meaningful since it meets specific needs of the people within their cultural context.

In addition, the removal of regional boundaries enabled churches to plant others churches across the country. This has helped develop extensive social network structures that permeate all social strata of the societies (Putnam, 1995). This is truly a kind of deliverance from a domineering Westernized Christianity. Adapting a phrase coined by theologian Marcus Borg, it is as "if we are seeing Christianity again for the first time" (Jenkins, 2002: 215). Many church leaders and lay-Christians have fine-tuned the art of evangelization in open air crusades, door to door campaigns, witnessing in office buildings, and in all other areas of their lives. "The explosive growth of new churches since independence in the twentieth century is enough of a hint that colonialism had inhibited the gospel in many parts (Sanneh, 1989: 112).

The churches in Kenya are keenly building educational centers, constructing hospitals, engaging in agriculture, vocational training, and setting up theological education centers. The churches use these institutions in addition to the ministry of preaching, teaching, and praying to engage and influence society. The Anglican Church of Kenya, formerly, the Church Province of Kenya (CPK) report, affirmed that, "the church is charged with the commission to make the truth entrusted to it available to each generation.... the spread of education is not therefore a secondary consideration of the church, but stands at the very core and center of the Christian message (Sabar-Friedman 2002, 89). The African Inland Church (AIC) headquarters at Kijabe in Kenya has one of the best church-managed hospitals in Kenya, publishing operations, radio programs, and a reputable mixed school—Rift Valley Academy for missionary kids. The AIC built the Scott Theological College in Kenya to train African church leaders. The National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCK) established St. Pauls Theological University, The PCEA church owns and runs Presbyterian University, The Anglican Church owns and runs Anglican University and Kigari Teachers College, the Methodist Churches of Kenya owns and runs Kenya Methodist University (KEMU) and Maua Methodist Hospital. Not least, the SDA church owns and runs Baraton University. The Catholic Church in Kenya has established many schools, hospitals and owns Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). In short, the church has been at the forefront in transforming society through formal education and provision of healthcare.

4. Christianity's Influence on Social, Political and Cultural Dimensions

Many scholars have noted the impressive numerical growth of Christianity in Africa (Cantrell, 2005; Bediako, 2000; Jenkins, 2002). Despite this numerical growth, many countries in Africa with a large proportion of Christians have been plagued with ethnic violence, massive corruption, pandemic AIDS, poverty, etc. Kenya with over 80% of its population being Christians is not an exceptional. The impressive Christians numerical growth in Kenya seems to have minimal effect in the social-political and social-cultural transformation of the Kenya society. Many reasons have been considered as to why Christianity in Kenya and Africa as a whole has minimal transformation on societies. Some of the reasons are lack of adequate discipleship (Tienou, 2001; Cantrell, 2005), lack of sound biblical doctrine and theology (Mbiti, 1981; Tienou, 2001; Kisau, 1998), weak leadership (Shaw, 1996; Snook, 1993; Cantrell, 2005), and limited incarnation of the gospel message into African culture (Gehman, 1987; Snook, 1993). Van der Walt's observation is quite informative:

The average African convert did not experience the gospel as adequate for his whole life, and especially not when it came to the most complex issues of life. For that reason, we discover all over Africa today that Christians, in times of existential needs and crisis, as in danger, illness and death, revert to their traditional faith and view of life. The gospel has no impact in those areas where it really matters (Van der Walt 2002, 16).

Though Christianity in Africa has weakness in many areas, it also has resilience of strength that has enabled many Christians to significantly influence society. Some of the church leaders, such as Bishop Gitari, Bishop Mwana wa Nzeki, Bishop Okullu, and Bishop Munge played a major role in the second liberation movement in Kenya.

The churches in Kenya have been involved in education, hospitals, agriculture, vocational training, theological education, and so forth. The churches use these institutions in addition to the ministry of preaching, teaching, and praying to engage and influence society. However, this has its own limitation because some of the pastor's lack formal theological training which has obvious theological implications such as having congregations not deeply rooted biblically or theologically since such church leaders are limited in their ability to incarnate the gospel message culturally (Juma & Akumu, 2003).

Unless the gospel message is incarnated in African culture, Christianity may not adequately meet the social and cultural needs of society. According to Kwesi A. Dickson, "faith can be meaningful only when Christ is encountered as speaking and acting authentically, when he is heard in the African languages, when culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ" (Kwesi, 1984). Many of the trained pastors are able to meaningfully communicate the gospel message in a way that transforms the social and cultural life in Africa.

Some of the churches in Kenya have intentionally started theologically structured discipleship programs. Christ Is the Answer Ministry (CITAM) has developed the SAFARI discipleship lessons which have been taught in all the CITAM assemblies for a couple of years now. The discipleship training is helping to anchor Christians in the word of God. However, the growth of Christianity in Kenya will realize its full potential of transforming social and cultural spheres of Kenyan lives when churches have enough trained pastors, consistently make disciples who are biblically anchored and empowered, and the church leadership and the congregation are able to resist negative ethnicity, better known as tribalism.

Politically, Christian leaders lost credibility during the 2007/2008 post-election violence. The reason for this the many among the clergy took sides in the political divide, that left them divided having anointed various presidential candidates for

the top seat. The tide seems to be receding since we can see the society is still looking up to the church where there is consensus politicians and their parties are not able to give desired ethical leadership especially in key appointments. For instance, the clergy were part of the team tasked to lead the process of recruiting the current Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commissioners (IEBC), the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) is headed by Bishop Wabukhala, the Central Bank of Kenya is headed by a catholic priest. All these indicate that the state is recognizing the contribution of Christian professionals in managing contested spaces because of their high morality and integrity.

5. Missiological Implications of Christianity Growth

In Kenya, the numerical church growth is worth rejoicing about (Phil 1:18), but in the same vein comes grief as many Christians remain spiritual babies (Heb 5: 12-14) because of lack of adequate discipleship. It is disheartening to see that Kenya with over 80% Christians still experience devastating ethnic violence, AIDS pandemic, bad governance, massive corruption, and increasing poverty. The big question is: What kind of Christians are we making? This is an important question because “numerical growth far outpaces spiritual depth and maturity in African Christianity” (Tienou, 1998: 6). The church is a living organism, and it has both quantitative and qualitative growth (Costas, 1983). The church in Kenya has done well in quantitative growth but poorly in qualitative growth. Christianity in Kenya ought to have qualitative growth that is biblically and theologically rooted so that the Christians can strive to observe all that Jesus commanded. The church should have indicators to measure or gauge its qualitative growth. To this end, research on indicators that may be considered critical for church health, quality and effectiveness could be of much help to church quality growth in Kenya. The qualitative growth should be viewed holistically with the intentional aim to fulfill God’s intended purpose as revealed in Scripture with the guidance from and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Some of the missiological issues of rapid church growth in Kenya are:

- 1.1 The rapid numerical growth of Christians has exposed weaknesses of numerical growth without appropriate spiritual growth. The church growth in Kenya is impressive but many Christians are faced with the lack of good discipleship (Cantrell, 2005). Observers have noted that the disproportionate ratio of the trained pastors to the planted churches makes it very difficult to adequately disciple Christians in the church.
- 1.2 Rapid numerical growth of Christians does not necessarily translate into transformed lives. The ethnic violence or massive corruption in Kenya, demonstrates the need for both quantity and quality dimensions in church growth. The rapidly growing churches should have on their radar what a healthy church entails. The early church model of church growth described in the Book of Acts (2:40-47) could help the church remain focused on making disciples of all the nations and teaching the disciples to obey everything that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19-20).
- 1.3 The gospel message should be incarnated in the culture to enable Christianity permeate all levels of life and adequately meet the social and cultural needs of the people. For example, prayers should be a way of life for Christians in Kenya but it is not so with many Christians. This is a great challenge to Christians. Norman E. Thomas ably argues that the deep sense of prayer in non-Christian religions constitutes a challenge to the Christians. The church must present herself, not only as an organization interested in works of charity and cultural and social development, but also, and above all as a praying community. Prayer must not only be a companion of evangelization, it is essentially an act of evangelization (Thomas, 1987: 169).
- 1.4 Churches should seek to grow in a balanced manner. Numbers do not present the whole reality of church growth. A growing church ought to have sound biblical doctrine and theological framework that ensure balanced church growth. The “gospel must make a qualitative difference in the lives of people who profess to adhere to it” (Tienou, 2001: 156).

6. Conclusion

The rapid numerical growth of Christians in Kenya has had mixed influence in Christian life and society. The quantitative growth of Christians without matching qualitative growth has had limited impact on society. The church should provide adequate discipleship training based on a well-developed theological framework. In addition, the church should have enough trained pastors to shepherd the congregation. However, the role of the Holy Spirit is very important in holistic growth of Christians because without the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Christians will not meet God’s intended purpose for their lives.

The quality dimension of church growth should be emphasized so that people coming to church will have an opportunity to hear the gospel message of salvation and be given a chance to respond to the message. It is important that the gospel message is incarnated in the culture in context, so that people are transformed in all areas of life.

The churches have many possibilities to influence the social and cultural dimensions of society. The church involvement in development of religious curriculum in schools, for example in Kenya, should help the church to be more proactive agent of transformation. The church should never site that it is an agent of transforming to the society to be godly.

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