

The impact of Christianity on sub-Saharan Africa¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe the impact of Christianity on sub-Saharan Africa. I shall start by first examining the key words in the title of this article, and by briefly discussing the phenomenal growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. The article further describes the impact of Christianity on sub-Saharan Africa in terms of education, socio-politics, and health; here I shall base my remarks on the history of Christian missions in the region since the late nineteenth century. As far as education is concerned, this article recognises that education that focuses on holistic human development is a positive force, and a force that was introduced by Christianity. I shall also point out that Christianity initiated medical advances that improved the health of those who live in the region. Regeneration as espoused by Christianity constitutes something of great value. On the downside, Christianity led to the demise of the African customs, which it viewed as pagan and evil; the religion also led to the implementation of apartheid (to which it gave its theological support), and undermined the leadership role of women. Finally, Christianity has bedevilled race relations in Africa generally.

Introduction

Literary data concerning the history of mission in the sub-Saharan African region from the nineteenth to the early twenty first century were studied, assessed and analysed. Given the vastness of this field of research, I focused on few countries: Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana and South Africa. I am convinced that this sample of countries represents, to some extent, the region as a whole. I have also used information from other countries to substantiate certain significant facts. The conviction is that the impact of Christianity on the region is nothing short of massive, and in this article, this impact is presented in terms of both its positive and negative effects.

I shall briefly describe the key words used, after which I shall highlight the phenomenal growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by a description of the impact of Christianity in the areas of education, socio-political life, and health. This limited selection of topics was the result of both time and space constraints. The first key word is *impact*.

Impact

By “impact” is meant: “The *effect* or impression of one thing on another and the power of making a strong, immediate *impression*” (The Free Dictionary.com). The words “effect”, “power”, “impression” and “influence” are the essence of the term “impact”. The encounter between Christianity and African traditional cosmologies produced a new situation, a situation with unique characteristics. Our second key word is *Christianity*.

Christianity

The Oxford University Press Dictionaries (2012) define Christianity as:

The religion based on the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, or its beliefs and practices ... It originated among the Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who believed that he was the promised Messiah (or ‘Christ’) ... In 313 Constantine ended official persecution in the Roman Empire and in 380 Theodosius 1 recognized it as the state religion. Most Christians believe in one God in three Persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and that Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead after being crucified; a Christian hopes to attain eternal life after death through faith in Jesus Christ ...”

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Geering (2002:21) writes: “The word Christianity is derived from the Medieval Latin *Christianitas*. It was originally a synonym for Christendom, meaning the geographical domain where Christ ruled ...” The reference to Christianity as the geographical domain where Christ ruled gave Christendom its more transcendental status. It is therefore not surprising that Christianity was once the primary context for a number of communities (cf. Geering 2002:19). This is how Christianity became a lifestyle, and this is especially true in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa refers to the region of Africa to the south of the Sahara Desert (The Free Dictionary.com). This is the area in which Christianity experienced phenomenal growth, particularly in the twentieth century. With this growth a great influence of Christianity was exerted on African life. The following tells part of the story of this impact.

President Jacob Zuma’s criticism of Christianity

President Jacob Zuma has been cited as saying: “Christianity – introduced by European missionaries mainly in the nineteenth century – had destroyed the safety net for orphans, elderly people and the poor” (Smith 2011). He has also been cited, speaking at the launch of a road safety and crime awareness campaign in the KwaZulu-Natal province, as saying: “As Africans, long before the arrival of religion and [the] gospel, we had our own ways of doing things. Those were times that the religious people refer to as dark days but we know that during those times, there were no orphan[age]s or old-age homes. Christianity has brought along these things” (Smith 2011).

What is so wrong with the orphanages and old-age homes that Christianity has brought to the region? Today, most people work in fulltime employment, and therefore have practically no time to take care of the elderly and orphans, as they did in the past. Are these amenities (orphanages and old-age homes) not something to be thankful for? The South African Council of Churches and opposition political parties castigated the President for his statements, statements which displayed gross disregard for the role of Christian churches in the liberation of South Africa. South Africa is however a democratic country in which freedom of speech is guaranteed. Christianity has indeed made a mark which keeps people talking.

From President Zuma’s critical utterances and the defence offered in favour of Christianity, it is clear that the influence of Christianity on Africans’ lives is extremely significant. This influence is undoubtedly the result of the phenomenal growth of Christianity experienced in sub-Saharan Africa.

The phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa

Optimism about the success of the missionary endeavour emerged from the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference report, which affirmed “the possibility of completing the evangelization of the non-Christian world within a generation” (Barret 1970:39). In the same vein, many Christian scholars have predicted that by the twentieth century, Christianity’s centre of gravity shall shift southwards. Christianity has indeed spread like wild fires in sub-Saharan Africa in the corresponding period in spite of the pessimism that followed as a result of the threat of rapid Islam advances (Barret 1970:39). This, also in spite of the harsh treatment meted out by the authorities. Gifford, for example, writes: “... Guinea (Conakry) under Sékou Touré (1961-1984) took a very harsh line towards Christian missions; at the time of Sékou Touré’s death in 1984, only the Catholic and Anglican churches were tolerated” (Gifford 1994:517). Explaining how Christianity prevailed, despite such treatment, Gifford (1994:517) states: “By 1991, however, while there was one Anglican missionary, there were over 100 evangelical Protestants.” Walls, a former missionary in Sierra Leone and Professor Emeritus of the study of Christianity in the non-western world at the University of Edinburgh, views the twentieth century as “the most remarkable of the Christian centuries since the first” (Walls 2000:17).

The missionary enterprise in Africa during the twentieth century was indeed a resounding success. Katongole (2001:179) affirms this fact of remarkable expansion, an expansion which occurred despite many obstacles. He (2001:179) cites Kwame Bidiako thus: “In our time there has been much allusion to the marginalization of Africa, following the end of the cold war era ... However ... in one particular aspect, Africa will not be marginalized. That one area is the field of Christian theology and Christian religious scholarship generally.” This massive Christian expansion defied even the most gruesome African decline and marginalisation as eloquently noted by (Gifford 1994:515). According to Katongole, the achieved growth of Christianity in Africa is massive. He cites the following statistics:

According to 1990 estimates, 41 percent of Africa’s 550 million people were Christians ... The percentage is much higher in countries south of the Sahara: Over 60 percent of Ghana’s 19 million people are Christian; 65 percent of Cameroonians are Christians...; 75 percent of Zambians are Christians, and 78 percent of Uganda’s 20 million people are Christians, ... (Gifford 1998:61,

133, 183, 251). Whatever else these statistics suggest, they confirm that Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is a predominantly Christian continent (Katongole 2001:180).

The growth of African Christianity as a surprising reality, deserves the many varying descriptions it has been given. In his review article, Maxwell (1997:141) asserts:

The expansion of Christianity in twentieth-century Africa has been so dramatic that it has been called 'the fourth great age of Christian expansion'. According to much-quoted, if somewhat unreliable, statistics, there were 10 million African Christians in 1900, 143 million in 1970, and there will be 393 million in the year 2000, which would mean that 1 in 5 of all Christians would be an African.

These statistical data were indeed a positive forecast of great things to come following the indicative occurrences during Pentecost.

Impact of Christianity in respect of education in sub-Saharan Africa

Christianity, as a book religion and as an institution concerned with moral life of the black people has made a significant contribution in the genesis and continued development of formal western education in sub-Saharan Africa. In his research article, Daun (2000:37) writes: "It is shown that religious factors count as much as (and sometimes more than) economic factors, first in the quantitative expansion of education and then in the decline." In order for Christianity to make significant progress in its evangelisation activities, African people's literacy and numeracy had to improve drastically. This requirement necessitated serious education initiatives on the part of Christian missionaries. The Protestant churches, in particular, were advocates of mass education, because of their emphasis on the need for all believers to read the Bible in his or her own language. Woodberry & Shah (2004:53) note: "Lutheran Pietists first promulgated the ideal of universal literacy, and literacy campaigns spread rapidly through the Protestant world."

However, the responsibility for the educational task also resided with commercial bodies. According to Nomazana (1998:45), Livingstone believed that "Christianity would provide principles for moral guidance, while legitimate commerce and education would encourage Africans to produce their own goods from their fertile soil to trade with Europeans." The role of traders who collaborated with western missionaries can therefore be neither ignored nor denied. Referring to this collaboration in Kenya during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Urch (1971:251) writes: "The traders and missionaries believed an educated population to be a precondition for the spread of commerce and Christianity; the first European educational ventures were a direct product of their activities." Although Daun (2000:37) sees a possible parity in the role of the two partners in the establishment and development of western formal education in sub-Saharan Africa, the role of missionaries seemed to be motivated by a deeper commitment and sense of true loyalty to the Almighty God; their commitment to mass education therefore exceeded that of the traders (see Frankema 2012:2). Unsurprisingly, therefore, literacy rates were higher in those areas where Christianity was stronger (cf. Daun 2000:49).

This is probably why the colonial authorities neither disregarded nor ignored the role of missionaries in structuring the education machinery. Urch (1971:254) writes: "The governor appointed an advisory board composed of government officials, commercial men, representatives of the missions, and members of the settlers' associations to assist the director." Missionaries were therefore deeply involved in the formal education of Africans. Urch reports that Mr Orr organised African education into three categories, the first of which was called "General Education". Other categories were "Industrial Education" and "Education of Sons of Chiefs and Headmen" (Urch 1971:254). General Education was the responsibility of missionary societies and "was to be primarily concerned with reading and writing with a view to proselytise and to train African teachers" (Urch 1971:254).

However, not all went well for the missionary societies as far as education was concerned: by 1918, it was found that these societies were not complying with the education mandate put forward by the colonial authorities. This information was not favourably received by the colonial and education authorities, especially after the census showed that many of those educated in mission schools were primarily being taught to read and write. This forced the authorities to appoint a commission of enquiry into African education, and this commission found that many people – newly arrived settlers as well as Africans – were not satisfied with mission education. This, in turn, resulted in demands for government schools that did not offer religious training. The missionaries themselves, however, insisted that education had to be coordinated with religion, given the moral value of Christian education. Missionaries also saw themselves as protectors of Africans' human rights, and suspected that the proposed arrangement to side line mission education was simply a way of ensuring that the settlers could more efficiently exploit the people of Africa (Urch 1971:255).

However, attempts at marginalising the church in matters of education were doomed to fail, simply because the significance and impact of the church's contribution to education in sub-Saharan African countries were by no means insignificant. Referring to the contribution of mainline churches to education, Gifford writes: "[they] have a long and important history in Africa, and their contribution to health and education is well known. This continues, even intensifies. One estimate gives 64 percent of all Kenya's education institutions as church-based. Some governments like Zambia's have even made efforts to reverse the nationalisation of education which occurred after independence" (Gifford 2008:276).

Faced with the education crisis of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, some people made the point of remembering the good education provided by the churches before the promulgation of the 1953 Bantu Education Act. This was the Act that enabled the apartheid government to take over schools from the churches, only to provide blacks with an inferior education that was simply designed to turn them into members of a compliant working class (Pieterse 2001:47). Pieterse echoes the words of the Most Reverend Trevor Huddleston in the foreword to Desmond Tutu's book *Crying in the wilderness: the struggle for justice in South Africa*, with reference to Dr Verwoerd's words: "Education for the native exists to equip him for certain forms of labour. There are green pastures in which he has no right to graze" (Tutu 1990: v). It is clear that those who had tasted good and equal church education would be nostalgic for that education in a country dominated by hostile, apartheid ideology. Tom Manthata, an outspoken apartheid critic and community leader, strongly denounced the despicable way in which the apartheid government took over the church school system in the 1950s (Nolan 2000:26-27).

Christian involvement in African education also spread to higher education. Gifford (2008:276) states: "In Kenya at the time of writing there are seven public universities, but they are now outnumbered by private ones, nearly all Christian (mostly, but not exclusively mainline). In Uganda, there are now four public universities and 18 recognised private universities. Of these 18, eleven are Christian institutions." In South Africa, one of the first influential institutions of higher learning was, according to Hinchliff, Lovedale. By 1863, Lovedale was already training blacksmiths, carpenters, printers, bookbinders, teachers and missionaries (Hinchliff 1968:87). According to Hinchliff (1968:87), Lovedale provided general education for black and white pupils, education that was aimed at ensuring that the pupils better understood one another. In other words, this institution also promoted one of the most important of all values: good human relations.

The so-called non-state supported churches needed to equip its lay members with a variety of skills. According to Woodberry & Shah (2004:52): "The laypeople who ran religious organizations affiliated with these churches learned leadership skills, built wide geographical networks, and accumulated other resources helpful in organizing non-governmental organizations and social movements." Education was viewed by these churches as of primary importance in the achievement of these goals. It is interesting to note that, even in those early days of mission history, non-state sponsored churches crossed the "gender barrier" in their quest to educate Africans. Woodberry & Shah (2004:52) rightly note: "Nonstate churches were especially prominent in training women, then commonly excluded from much of life outside the home." This was certainly prompted by the missionaries' belief in the equal value of all human beings (see Woodberry & Shah 2004:53). Indeed, it meant that church education opened people's minds to democratic ideals. Woodberry & Shah (2004:53) therefore state: "Research also shows a consistent association of education with democracy. Mass education fosters democracy by increasing exposure to democratic ideals, promoting economic growth and the rise of a middle class, and dispersing influence beyond a small elite."

The impact of Christianity on the socio-political life of sub-Saharan peoples

Christianity definitely had an impact, both positive and negative, on the socio-political life of the people of sub-Saharan Africa. While some missionary enterprises focused exclusively on evangelisation, missionaries such as Livingstone displayed a holistic approach to the missionary enterprise. Nkomazana (1998:44), for instance, writes: "Livingstone's concept of missionary enterprise differed from most of his older colleagues among London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries. He saw mission centres not only for strictly evangelization purposes, but encompassing the whole spectrum of human activity. He divided this into three categories: commerce, Christianity, and civilization (meaning good government, education etc)."

John Newton's words to Wilberforce, encouraging him to remain in Parliament, are particularly interesting in that they point to and affirm Newton's concern for both religious and civil matters. According to Sarfati (2007:122), Newton said to Wilberforce: "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation." Wilberforce was totally against the horrors of slavery and every cruelty, to the extent that he was even called the "Conscience of Parliament". The task of fighting against or opposing the slave trade was indeed the work of those filled with the Holy Spirit. Newton himself, a former slave trader, came to see (after his conversion to Christ) "that since the slaves were also created in the image of God, the slave trade was wrong in itself, and could not be humanized. He left the trade, became friend with the great evangelists George Whitfield (1714-1770 and John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles (1707-

1788), became a minister and testified to King George III (1738-1820) about the atrocities of the slave trade” (Sarfati 2007:122). The commitment of Christian men and women to root out slavery was akin to Christ’s commitment and resolves to save the world. Regarding Malawi, Mkandawire (2009:63) states that, by the time Dr Law left Livingstonia in 1927 after 52 years of missionary service, several evil social practices had been abolished in Malawi “for instance, slave trading had been stopped and the trial by poison ordeal was no longer practiced”. In short, the gospel message brought about real transformation, transformation that instilled divine principles and humaneness in the socio-political lives of African people.

According to Nkomazana (1998:45), the question of Christian justice featured prominently in Livingstone’s view of missionary activities. As far as Livingstone was concerned, the slave trade constituted an injustice that he wanted to eliminate. Woodberry & Shah (2004:55) make the following remarks: “Missionaries and their supporters were the main lobbyists for the immediate abolition of slavery and other forms of forced labor in the colonies, and were also often in the front rank of opposition to the officially sanctioned opium trade, the violent excesses of some colonial officials, and the tendency of European settlers to expropriate native land.” In other words, Christian missionaries were aggressively vocal against the injustices meted out to, and oppression of, the native inhabitants.

The missionaries’ fight for justice helped to introduce certain humane considerations and actions into the activities carried out by the colonial authorities. Woodberry & Shah (2004:56) state:

The British Empire banned slavery and forced labor earlier, punished abusive colonial officials more regularly, and on the whole managed to arrange more peaceful decolonization process than did other European colonial powers – even when these were relatively democratic states such as France and Belgium. Historical evidence suggests that Protestant missionaries and their backers initiated these British reforms, which were not only generally humane but aided prosperity.

In this respect at least, therefore, Christianity can be regarded as being in the forefront of social and political reform. Conversion to Christ and the advancement of his kingdom necessitates transformation and this, in turn, is not only related to certain democratic values but, importantly, is based on true love for God and for one’s fellow human beings.

Another prominent London Missionary Society member for whom justice was non-negotiable was John Philip, who worked as a missionary in South Africa in 1820 and as superintendent of the London Missionary Society in South Africa until 1850 (Nkomazana 1998:47). Nkomazana (1998:47) notes: “Philip blamed the corrupt colonial system of law in the Cape for the unjust treatment of Africans. He also argued that the source of the problem in Eastern Cape was not the wickedness of the Xhosa, but that both the Boers and British farmers had taken their land.” This fact is also mentioned by Mtuzi (2003:9), decrying the severity of the hurt caused to the Xhosas: “The expulsion and displacement of the amaXhosa from their original ancestral land was a wound that went deeper than the struggle for agricultural land, as land was associated with the burial places of revered ancestors, and kraals served as temples for sacrifices and other rituals.” The pain of having one’s land expropriated is a wound that is not easily healed. The land question in South Africa still remains a seriously contested issue. John Philip believed that Christianity could not be propagated “without developing the autonomy of all individuals – or without political, social and economic freedom and civil rights for all” (Nkomazana 1998:47). This brave stance stemmed from a genuine Christian conviction that Africans, like all human beings, were created in the image of God and therefore deserved both just and dignified treatment. Philip could not reconcile the inhumane treatment of Africans with the Christian ethical demands of justice and respect for the human rights of all of God’s people.

African nationalism in South Africa emerged as a force to be reckoned with during the 1950s, and was inspired by the influence of certain Christian missionary institutions (e.g. Lovedale and Fort Hare University, institutions at which many black people received higher education). Indeed, in the 1950s, the Christian church and missionary institutions of higher learning served as a catalyst for heightened political awareness among Africans, African nationalism, and the African realisation that there was a need for true liberation. This was the time of the Defiance Campaign, launched in 1952; the Campaign made its mark on 26 June of the same year in Port Elizabeth, when the harbours, the city and everything came to a total halt. The Campaign culminated in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 (Walshe 1991:27).

Walshe (1991:27) makes an important statement about the nature of the socio-political struggle in South Africa: “The struggle against discrimination in South Africa, as many have argued, is theological as well as political. This is so, in the words of Ben Marais, because ‘Apartheid erodes the very basis of humanity’.” Christianity and its values, as well as the active participation by church ministers and church members, provided the liberation struggle with an enormous “boost”. The church literally became, in the words of Walshe (1991:28), “a site of the struggle”. Walshe (1991:28) notes that prophetic Christianity was thus “able to interact, and even to mesh, with the liberation struggle”. By the mid-1980s, then, prophetic Christians were playing a

significant role in exposing the illegitimacy of the South African government and in empowering the liberation movement.

Regarding the socio-political impact of the Christian churches in South Africa, Garner (2000:313) writes as follows:

As a force of social change, the mainline churches have experienced two peaks. First, in the colonial era, they undoubtedly played a role as a channel of westernisation through education and co-optation of indigenous peoples into the market economy. Much more recently, these churches made a significant contribution to the overthrow of apartheid and the transition to democratic rule in 1994.

Walshe (1991:30) ably shows how ANC leaders drew on Christian values in the struggle for equality and justice in general. He points out that the movement, led by committed Christian ministers and church members, was greatly influenced by Christian principles and values. He also shows how founding leaders of the ANC – such as John Dube – were all committed Christians. Dube himself was a minister of the Congregational Church, and the first ANC President, Zacheus Mahabane, was a Methodist minister and the President of the Cape Congress and the ANC (in the 1930s). A decade later, in the 1940s, Dr Xuma, a Christian medical practitioner, was the ANC President. Albert Luthuli, who was ANC President during the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s, was a devout member of the Congregational Church. All these people inspired their followers by referring to Christianity's message of hope to the oppressed, and by conducting themselves as true followers of Christ. The singing of Nkosi sikelel'i Afrika 'God bless Africa' during the struggle against apartheid was, in itself, inspirational (Walshe 1991:30).

Impact of Christianity on health in sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is known for being a "home" to a myriad of diseases and epidemics, diseases and epidemics that plagued the people of this region for centuries before the introduction of medical science. In African thought, good health is regarded as equal to life itself (Moila 2002:21; Osei 2003:168), which is why health is among the highest aspirations of black Africans. Medical advances in the region have made this aspiration a reality. Ross (1955:164) refers to the importance of Christianity in the introduction of health care and medical science: "... Christian missions have been almost everywhere the introducer of western medical, surgical, and public health methods, and the pioneer trainer of Africans in these skills." Missionaries made a point of ensuring that hospitals and other health facilities were erected in their area of missionary activity (see Mkandawire 2009:63). As a result, it is true to say that the African health landscape changed for the better: there was a decline in child and maternal mortality rates, and an increase in the life expectancy of all Africans. In South Africa as well, mission work would not be complete without serious attention to health care. Regarding the Scottish Mission's commendable work in South Africa, Hinchliff (1968:88) states: "A hospital was eventually added to the activities of the institution and became the first place in the country at which Africans could be fully trained as nurses." This is an example of Christian missionary work in sub-Saharan Africa giving many of the people living in the region an opportunity to lead a meaningful life.

As mission establishments increased, so did the need for medical services. Mkandawire (2009:62) points out with regard to the need for medical services:

Concomitant with spiritual conversion, and increase of adherents; the need for medical services appeared to be a *sine-qua-non* for the conversion of souls to Christianity. Medical services served as a necessary ingredient in bringing the people to medical treatment for their ailments and for relief of their physical suffering; whereas soul healing and salvation were left to the Priest who was endowed with powers of providing spiritual cleansing.

The dichotomy implied in the above quotation notwithstanding, the goal in introducing medical services in sub-Saharan Africa was to provide Africans with a more holistic service, given that, as far as the African is concerned, there is no separation between the physical and the spiritual dimension of human life (Manala 2005:64). Good expresses this even more strongly by saying:

The idea that medical care for Africans should be subordinate and instrumental to the goal of spiritual salvation – especially strong among Protestant missions gradually tempered to accommodate the practical view that the treatment of disease, relief of suffering, and training of Africans as medical auxiliaries constituted worthy ideals of Christian service in their own right (Good 1991:1).

Good (1991) clearly shows that the motivation for the introduction of health care was primarily to create an environment that was conducive to the spread of the gospel. The introduction of medical services in Christian mission stations contributed a great deal to the good health enjoyed by African converts to Christianity, particularly because this integrated approach to health care also eliminated the many epidemics which, historically, had ravaged the African population (Mkandawire 2009:63). The missionary and the medical practitioner were therefore equally significant as far as the spread of Christianity was concerned. As Mkandawire points out, the two were complementary.

As a result of all this, increasing numbers of people, especially those who lived south of the Sahara, came to believe in the efficacy of church-based health facilities compared with government facilities. Church-based facilities were known to be humane and “people friendly”, which obviously made them popular. Indeed, according to Good (1991:2): “African populations everywhere almost invariably seem to believe that health workers employed in the church-related health services provide care that is superior to their Ministry of Health counterparts because they are trained to understand the connection between body and soul and show greater compassion for human suffering.”

Today, HIV infection and AIDS are particularly prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. Van Klinken (2010:446) rightly says: “In present day sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV epidemic is one of the most disruptive social experiences on the continent.” Nonetheless, there are people who trust the church’s ability to help, especially as a result of the church’s teaching influence, which specifically warns against indulging in risky sex behaviour. Research by Agadjanian and Sen (2007:362) found that mainline church members were more knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS than those who belonged to Pentecostal/healing churches. That said, members of Pentecostal/healing churches were less likely to get infected because of their churches’ strict teaching against premarital and extra-marital sex. However, it is clear from this research that, as far as HIV and AIDS are concerned, that the church’s assistance is limited to psychological, limited financial assistance, and house care – cooking, cleaning, occasional child care and so forth. More importantly, the church also provides people living with HIV with a community.

Van Klinken (2010:447) describes the Church, in the footsteps of African theologians, as the body of Christ, and claims: “As a metaphor for the church, the body of Christ suggests an interconnectedness of churches and Christians globally. Even further, in its Trinitarian dimension the body of Christ counts for an interrelatedness of humanity and creation.” The body of Christ represents the essence of unity. The use of this metaphor to elicit solidarity in the fight against HIV and AIDS is a powerful tool. African theologians, by depicting the global Church as the body of Christ that has AIDS heightened the sense of urgency in respect of the need for a united front to deal with the epidemic.

Reflection

Although Christianity, couched as it was in western civilisation, brought some relief to Africa in freeing it from some of its woes (albeit, in some cases, only partially – e.g. Africa’s belief in witchcraft), there are certain areas in which the religion did serious harm to the African way of life. Notwithstanding missionaries’ claims that they were concerned to protect indigenous peoples and their interests, the fact remains that some missionaries at least sought to advance the interests and culture of their colonial masters. Mtuzze (2003:2) rightly asserts: “The study shows very clearly that the missionaries, consciously or unconsciously, had a double agenda in that they were also *de facto* agents of the colonial powers who subjugated the propagation of the Word to cultural and political imperialism.” For this reason, much of Africa’s ways of life were frowned upon, if not totally demonised. Pityana (1999:137) attests to this: “Christianity declared some African practices pagan and the church was a pervasive influence on family practices.” This caused led to a serious identity crisis for many Africans, a crisis that resulted in African self-hatred and self-denigration. The nineteenth century was therefore noted for the emergence and gradual increase of conflict between the two cultures (Mtuzze 2003:8).

In later years, black Africans managed to salvage, at massive cost (including death), their self-respect, self-love and pride in their blackness, largely thanks to the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. Partially as a result of this, Africans in South Africa consciously chose and used African, rather than Christian, names (Pityana 1999:138).

Another level at which the impact of Christianity proved to be detrimental was its undermining of women’s roles in religious leadership (Miles 2009:1). This happened when Christian assemblies were shifted by Constantine from homes to the basilica, buildings modelled on Roman courthouse (Miles 2009:5). Gaitskell (1983) notes that the missionaries’ preferred a model of the family that was as follows: “male breadwinner, dependent housekeeping wife and mother, dependent school-going children”. As a result, “this was the family model which female missionaries considered the Christian ideal in the early twentieth century and which they tried to inculcate among the women and girls of the urban black churches ...” (Gaitskell 1983:241). Women were socialised to accept that “a woman who took on the masculine role of participation in public life was considered to have renounced the feminine virtues of silence, reticence, modesty and most significantly,

chastity” (Miles 2009:6). Such socialisation drove women to passivity and quiescence in congregational worship, thus perpetuating discrimination against women in the Christian church. It is true to say that, today, women’s place in the church remains a contentious issue.

In South Africa, racial discrimination started – appallingly – in the church itself. In the nineteenth century, certain white Dutch Reformed members’ discriminatory behaviour and the Dutch Reformed Church’s decision, in 1857, to introduce separate Eucharist services severely compromised African human dignity (Cilliers 2013:1). This decision was founded on the demeaning misconception, held by some white missionaries and their masters, that Africans were either sub-human or less than human. Mtuzi (2003:1) confirms: “The blatant denial of African religion was coupled with an attitude evinced by some of the colonizers and missionaries that the people they found in Africa and in South Africa in particular were not actually people. They were either subhuman or animals.”

The act of separating the body of Christ in such manner violated one most important principles of the Eucharist: unity and equality in Christ. Cilliers (2013:1) refers to three principles, and takes human dignity as his point of departure: “first, human dignity hinges on the embracing of the ‘other,’ while human indignity results from the exclusion of the ‘other’; second: human dignity is given in the reversal of traditional relationships; and third, human dignity has sacramental dimensions, while human indignity is anti-sacramental”.

Apartheid, as a church-supported and legislated reality, brought not only separation between the South African people but also serious and sustained oppression and suffering of the black masses in their country of birth. The indignity of this oppression and inequality, as well as the expressed desire for their total demise, were expressed clearly in the famous words of Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech as South Africa’s first democratically elected president on 10 May 1994: “Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world” (Johnson 2009:498). Mandela’s words are an expression of his and many South Africans’ vision of a new democratic South Africa, a country in which liberty, individual rights, equality, and human dignity are guaranteed.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the impressive growth of Christianity in Africa – especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The article showed how Christianity shaped the sub-Saharan African landscape – for both better and worse. For logistical reasons, in this article I focused on the impact of Christianity on the three spheres of life specifically: education, socio-political life and health. Christianity has been found to have been significant in all the three spheres of life.

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