

## IS CHRISTIANITY A “NEWCOMER” TO AFRICA? Rethinking the Religion-Political Conundrum in African Christianity

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### Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Africa is not alien to Christianity, and neither is Christianity a “Newcomer” religion to Africa. As Africa and Africans contributed immensely and significantly to the entrenchment of the Christian Gospel as well as the formulation of its theology, religion-political conundrum, namely, Western colonization and Prosperity Gospel/Theology engendered the suspicions and the distrusts laced towards Christianity by the post-colonial Africans- hence the need for a robust and wholistic theology that is devoid of the temporal contract of the Prosperity Theology but adequately responds to the religious, political, and socio-economic plights of post-colonial Africa. This article challenges the notion that Christianity is a “newcomer” to Africa by tracing its deep historical roots on the continent and emphasizing the significant contributions of Africans to Christian theology. It also critiques the religion-political conundrum, particularly the harmful influence of Western colonialism and the Prosperity Gospel, which has distorted the true message of Christianity in Africa.

**Keywords:** newcomer; africa; religion-political conundrum; african christianity

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the argument about whether Christianity is a “Newcomer” to Africa from both the scholarly and layperson's point of view has reached its crescendo.<sup>1</sup> While much Western literature has for many centuries portrayed Christianity as a “Western religion” that only finds inroad into Africa in recent centuries; some, including notable Africans and religious commentators and nationalists have aided such a notion, asserting that Christianity is a “borrowed religion” or a “Whiteman religion” and thus unfit for the African people.<sup>2</sup> They view and treat Christianity as just coming to Africa during the eighteen-nineteenth century through Christian missionary enterprise from the West.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Tradition*, (Kaduna, Nig: Gutty, 2001), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Michael, “*Christian Theology and African Traditions*”, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Michael. “*Christian Theology and African Traditions*”, 6.

Unfortunately, this treatment and description of Christianity as a "Western religion" and a "Newcomer" on the African continent has often distorted the theological strides registered by the African continent in defining and shaping Christian thoughts in their earlier times.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the quick association of Christianity as a "Western religion" has provoked the sentiment and the sensibility of many contemporary Africans (especially young Africans who only know this distorted history) to advance the view that Christianity is one of the banes of decades of underdevelopment as well as what they termed, a "Neo-colonization" agenda of post-colonial Africa by the Euro-American West who work in cahoots with African's Christian elites.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in this present study, I argue that Christianity is not a "Newcomer" religion to Africa and the African people; and that Africans are not unfit for Christianity—moreover, Christianity was stronger in North Africa and Asia for its first thousand years, and only after the fourteenth century did Europe and North America decisively become Christian heartland.<sup>6</sup> To this effect, I will briefly explore the beginnings of Christianity in Africa as well as the contributions of the African peoples in defining and shaping the Christian theology and thoughts in the earlier times. Second, I will examine the religion-political conundrum that spawned the assumptions or argument that Christianity is a "Newcomer" religion that is unfit for Africans and is the bane of underdevelopment in the post-colonial African continent. Accordingly, I will establish that the spread of Christianity that coincided with Western imperial expansion and the "self-serving" Prosperity Theology with the "get rich quick syndrome" of many Neo-Pentecostal preachers constituted the menace that has engendered this presupposition.

## DISCUSSION

### Beginnings of Christianity in Africa

When Philip Jenkins released his ground-breaking work, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, his thesis threw the academic world, especially the West

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<sup>4</sup> Michael, "Christian Theology and African Traditions",

<sup>5</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 11. Oden who has consistently argued that Africa is the seedbed of Western Christianity, sees reasons why the story of early Christianity must be told to African children in villages and cities. According to him, "The story deserves to be told in a simple way. Though it will be heard by a global audience, it first must find a way of reaching the African child." 11.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

into different shades of reaction. He had claimed that there is a shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the global North to South with Africa being the next big thing as far as the future of Christianity is concerned. This claim raises another subject-although, and of course, Jenkins had from the outset argued bluntly that Christianity was stronger in North Africa and Asia for its first thousand years, and only after the fourteenth century did Europe and North America decisively become Christian heartland,<sup>7</sup> one could assume that the thesis suggests that Christianity is shifting location from its global North roots or home to a new location- the global South, when in fact, it was returning to its original roots-Africa. For many centuries, many Western scholars and church historians have treated Christianity as a religion of the West that only got transported to the rest of the world through the missionary enterprise of the West.<sup>8</sup> Bengt Sundkler, the Swedish church historian, and his research assistant, Christopher Steed who both co-authored the blockbuster, *A History of the Church in Africa*, seriously debunked this erroneous claim and the academic scandal by forcefully arguing that “A far-reaching generalization can be made at the outset: this religion of the Messiah, proclaimed by Jewish individuals, families, and groups, came into Egypt and Africa from the East.”<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, they document the origins and beginnings of Christianity in Africa in the first 100 years of the faith. In their study, they draw a connection between the Jewish diaspora and beginnings of Church in Africa. They argued that the first beginnings of the Church’s history in the Nile Delta must be understood as closely related to the life of the Jewish Diaspora on the Mediterranean coastline.<sup>10</sup> We can recall that in all of Egypt there, at the time of Christ, about 1 million Jews, Sundkler and Steed adamantly believe that this Jewish community introduced Christianity to the entire Nile Delta within first 100 years of the faith.<sup>11</sup> Although they attempt to identify the very place in the city of Alexandria

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> James P. Eckman, *Exploring Church History*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Oasis International, 2002). In his book, Eckman in his attempt to give credit to the early church fathers who defended the Christian faith against both the internal and external heresies de-Africanized and divested many of them of their Christian origin and heritage and the then tried to westernize their theologies and contributions to the Christian faith. The only time he directly alludes to Africa and an African was on the case of Arius, who was a heretic priest from North Africa, 20-26. Michael, in describing this kind of academic injustice, laments as follows, “Unfortunately, Athanasius, Augustine, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Cyprian have been de-Africanized and now westernized, thus their contributions in the field of Christian theology are presumed to be the initiatives of Western Christianity.”, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*. (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 9.

where the first Christians congregated for worship, agape, and Eucharist, but that aspect was left for speculation. Similarly, John Parratt who also conceded that Christianity got to Alexandria, Egypt in the first century, argued that there is a strong tradition that St Mark introduced the Christian faith into Egypt in the first century.<sup>12</sup> For Parratt, the reception and treatment that Christianity was accorded by this North African society were remarkably significant; in his remarks, he noted, "Certainly from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD it was the early fathers of the Church in North Africa, such as Tertullian and Augustine, who provided the foundations of Christian theology."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in associating Christianity with Africa in this early period, Africa did not only receive Christianity in its primal years, but also played a significant role in formulating the statements of Christian doctrine in the Nicene Creed.<sup>14</sup> Again, he noted, "It has therefore been said with some justification that Christianity is a 'traditional' African religion."<sup>15</sup>

Regretfully, Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, who although both attest to the intellectual primacy of the city of Alexandria in the Mediterranean world in the first century of the Christian era, claimed that exactly how Christianity came to Alexandria in the middle of the first century remains shrouded in mystery.<sup>16</sup> In their study, they branded Apollos (in Acts 18) as an Alexandrian Jew and accounted him the first Christian convert in Alexandria (with no direct or exact connection to Africa). Furthermore, the efforts of Clement of Alexandria (who regrettably was an African) and Philo, the great Jewish Philosopher were accredited; however, it appeared that there is a deliberate severance of Alexandria, Egypt, from the African continent. In their opinion, the Christian presence in this part of the world during this historic time has no single connection or association to the African continent. Nonetheless, in debunking their prerogative, Everett Ferguson, recognizes that, "In the second century the centers of Roman culture were in

<sup>12</sup> John Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, (Great Britain: SPCK, 1987), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement, Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 2001), 86. In furtherance of this suppression, they surmised that, "Before Christianity arrived, the city's syncretistic atmosphere had proved conducive to wedding Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, even Persian philosophical and religious elements.", 87-88. Eugene I. Ukaoha countered this argument, quoting John Baur, he argued, "Christianity in Africa is not a recent happening, nor a by-product of colonialism-its roots go back to the very time of the Apostles. Christianity came to Africa more than 2000 years ago since the first century AD. On the Day of Pentecost there were people from Africa: Egypt, Libya. There was Apollos from Alexandria and Lucius from Cyrene (Libya), including the Ethiopian Eunuch from Ethiopia (then known as Nubia). See Eugene I. Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa, 1450-1900s*, (Lagos, Nig: Raola Graphics Studios, 2013), i-ii

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the western provinces- Africa, Spain, and Gaul,"<sup>17</sup> and that, "Latin-speaking Christianity emerged as a literary influence first in North Africa, not in Rome itself."<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, in the same quest to probe Christian interaction with the African continent there have been arguments about the location and geography, particularly how the Nile Valley or Alexandria, Egypt can be acknowledged as Africa during this historic time. To set the record straight, Oden forcefully posits that the most generic name of the entire continent has from time immemorial been simply Africa.<sup>19</sup> He maintained, "While in early times the term Africa first referred to the peninsula we today call Tunisia, it gradually became applied to all the Mediterranean Africa west of Egypt."<sup>20</sup> In his view, Long before the Roman political divisions, as well as the first Christian millennium, Africa was the provincial term designating all the lands from Tripolitania (Now western Libya) all the way to the Atlantic Morocco.<sup>21</sup> He further noted that the persistent obstacle to understanding early African Christianity is the recent idea that North Africa does not really belong to Africa.<sup>22</sup> Ukaoha argued that, "The place called Africa today was formerly called Carthage 150 years before Christ."<sup>23</sup> According to him, it was the Romans who completely captured and defeated it and destroyed the capital city and renamed it 'Africa'.<sup>24</sup> Putting everything together, the geographical location that is now known as Africa has always been Africa even though like every other continent there has been a series of dynamic events like, war, natural disasters and politics that have occasioned many changes, it is still the same continent that is divided by the Sahara Desert into the North and the South.

Although, early African Christianity did not prevail in reaching all the continent, but it did eventually influence the whole known continent. It did not survive the first

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<sup>18</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 126.

<sup>19</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 82. He argued that "From antiquity, Africa has always been viewed as a single continent, a massive whole reaching far into the South.", 83.

<sup>20</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 85. See David Tuesday Adamo, "The Place of Africa and Africans in the Old Testament and its Environs", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 85

<sup>22</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 83. In describing how efforts to detach North Africa from "the real Africa" has failed and ended in futility, Oden noted, "The continental geography itself overcomes all parochial arguments. It is just one now and always has been."

<sup>23</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

millennium in many parts of North Africa, but in those few centuries it was felt on the whole of world Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Underscoring the connection and the interaction between Christianity and the African continent, particularly the significant role the North Africa played in shaping of its theology in the earlier times, Michael noted,

Christian[ity] has a long history of association with the African continent. This association goes back to the second century in the planting of the church at Egypt, and subsequently in founding of churches at Numidia, Nubia, and Abyssinia in third to fourth centuries respectively. The names Numidia, Nubia and Abyssinia may be unknown to some readers because these great African kingdoms, apart from Ethiopia, have now disappeared from the pages of world history and have been replaced by the [Arab] nations of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan. However, despite the obscurity of this heritage, these great Christian kingdoms practiced Christianity and provided theology for the universal church when Europe was still roaming in barbarism and the Western church was merely a footnote in the theological debates of those times.<sup>26</sup>

It is from this close connection between Christianity and the African continent as well as the significant role played by early African church fathers<sup>27</sup> that B.B. Warfield appreciably stressed, "It is from African soil, enriched by intellect, watered by African blood, that the tree of Western Christianity has grown up until it has become a resting-place for the nations of the earth."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, John Mbiti significantly noted, "Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional African religion."<sup>29</sup> This goes to show that the connection between Christianity and the Africa continent has come a long way, to the point where scholars have described Christianity as a "traditional" religion of Africa. Finally, according to Parratt, while it is having been stated of course that before the appearance of Islam North Africa was properly part of the Mediterranean world, rather than of 'Black Africa', it has also been reported that by the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Christian faith had penetrated south-ward as far as Ethiopia.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 83. Scholars speculated that early Christianity failed in some parts of North Africa because being Latin-speaking provinces of Rome, theology and church liturgical businesses were conducted in Latin and not in the language of the locals or the host communities.

<sup>26</sup> Michael, *Christian Theology and African Tradition*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "Africa and Christian Latin Literature," *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Writings*, vol. 2 ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001), 518.

<sup>29</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Heinemann, 1969, 1974), 229.

<sup>30</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 1.

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## Religion-Political Conundrum

As Christianity continued to penetrate the sub-Saharan Africa from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century into the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it began to face many challenges. The most significant one that became more prominent and that persists even till today was that of politics mixed with religion. When Christianity moved Southward, there was a vested interest by the European West to jostle for the soul and the prosperity of Africa. Scholars summarized this incident in two ways: On the one hand, there was an awareness that Christianity had been introduced into Africa during the colonial era and seemed to have prospered largely because it had been supported by the ruling European powers to colonize Africa.<sup>31</sup> On the other, there was the tendency of missionary Christianity to devalue traditional African culture and specially to dismiss traditional religion as heathen or pagan.<sup>32</sup> This was the context that greeted the expansion of Christianity in the sub-Saharan Africa. In the face of this unusual development, Africans themselves stood by helplessly or – when they resisted as they sometimes did – they were easily defeated by the superior weaponry, technology, and political determination they lacked, and by the divide-and-rule strategy of the colonizers.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the concern of this section is to underscore the religion-political conundrum that heralded the spread of Christianity further South of the Sahara as well as the post-colonial Neo-Pentecostal wave of health and wealth or Prosperity Theology or Gospel. Conversely, this section will not consider all the details, or the bodies of the missionary works done in the sub-Sahara in the period under review.

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<sup>31</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 3-4. Describing the situation, he quoted Third World theologians as follows, "In the early phases of Western expansion the Churches were in allies of the colonial process. They spread under the protection of the colonial powers: they benefited from expansion of empire. In return they rendered special service to western imperialism by legitimizing it and accustoming their new adherents to accept compensatory expectations of eternal reward for terrestrial misfortunes, including colonial exploitation." 3.

<sup>33</sup> Allan Anderson, "The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism, (3) Africa's Hands: Pentecostalism and Independency" (Student Lectures for Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, December 1-2, 2008), 1. In describing the situation, Anderson noted, "The political and religious ferment that was taking place in Africa created serious tensions and instability across the continent by the beginning of the twentieth century. This was a stimulus for increasing European involvement and the growth of both European and North American Christian missions. European settlers were seeking to appropriate vast areas of African land for themselves, to exploit Africa's rich natural resources for their expanding industries, and to control cheap African labor for their own advantage." He observed further, "The scramble for Africa resulted in most of Africa being carved up at the conference of Berlin in 1884-5 between France, Britain and Portugal, with Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy also receiving large parcels of land." 1.

## The Western Colonization conundrum

Throughout the Middle Ages the Mediterranean Sea with Rome, Constantinople and Alexandria marked the core and, to some extent, the horizon of the Christian Church. In 1453 this perspective suddenly changed. An incredulous Christian world heard that the Muslims had taken Constantinople and that the Hagia Sophia had been turned into a mosque.<sup>34</sup>

No nations were more deeply shaken by this news than Portugal and Spain, themselves only recently freed from Muslim control.<sup>35</sup> They, therefore, became more involved when the Pope called for a new crusade against the enemies of Christianity. The small Portuguese nation at this time no more than 2 million was looking for a solution and found it in Prince Henry the Navigator, son of King Joao I, who had the vision and the resolve to a new passage over the seas.<sup>36</sup> At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Henry the Navigator, a Portuguese's prince set out to know more about the world, particularly Africa. In addition, he wanted the Roman Catholic missionaries to carry the Gospel to the coast of Africa where trading centers will later be established.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Portuguese Roman Catholics became the first who brought the Christian faith to the South Saharan of Africa, from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup>

However, although it was the Portuguese mission exploration and expedition that led to the establishment of the Gospel in the South of Sahara; the primary motive of the Portuguese maritime expeditions was from the outset commercial.<sup>39</sup> They wanted to secure for themselves the trans-Saharan trade in gold, ivory and slaves which was until then monopolized by the Moors as the Muslims were called then.<sup>40</sup> Second, it was political. Prince Henry wanted to make Portugal a leading European power through colonization of Africa.<sup>41</sup> And thirdly, it was due to religious motives. They ambitiously wanted to rid the North of Islam through Christianizing Africa.<sup>42</sup> To recapitulate the

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<sup>34</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Theology*, 1. He noted further, "While this mission activity founded no lasting Church, it did produce at least one convert who seems to have seen Christianity in Africa terms. This was Kimpa Vita, a young Congolese girl of royal birth, who soon after her baptism began to claim prophetic gifts." Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to History of Christianity in West Africa*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to History of Christianity in West Africa*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to History of Christianity in West Africa*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to History of Christianity in West Africa*, 26.

whole intent of the European 'missionary' expedition to Africa, Ogbu U. Kalu posited succinctly, "It must be pointed out that the upsurge of missionary activity in this period arose from many factors which are usually captioned with the slogan, FOR GLORY, GOLD, AND GOD."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he revealed that,

The quest for political and military glory touched off the scramble for colonies and the need for stablishing the presence of each Christian European power. The scramble was for Gold and markets- a quest intensified by industrial revolution and supported by the mixed mercantilist and free-trade theories.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, European missionary work in sub-Saharan Africa led by the Portuguese was intimately and decidedly dependent on colonial or commercial expansion.<sup>45</sup> This European influence on the spread of Christianity in the sub-Saharan Africa has for many decades symbolized a negative connotation as it misrepresents the true nature of the Gospel and gave many Africans the impressions that Christianity is a religion of the slave masters. Also, it has led to myriads of theological engagements and inquiries- as it was felt that the form in which the Gospel has been presented has failed to penetrate to the heart and the core of the Africans.<sup>46</sup> In light of this, referring to John Mbiti and Beetham, Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, concedes that, "Christian missionaries from Europe and America penetrated into the interior of Africa either shortly before or simultaneously with colonial occupation."<sup>47</sup> The important thing to bear in mind here is that the planting of Christianity in the sub-Sahara occurred simultaneously with colonization. Consequently, there is a thin line between the missionary intensions and the intention of the colonizers.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, Kwesi A. Dickson believed that the colonial past is a confluence of foreign political and Christian missionaries' influences with many consequences.<sup>49</sup> The European occupation of Africa in many ways triggered many problems in the socio-

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<sup>43</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, (London and New York: Longman Group, 1980), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Kalu, *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Kalu, *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, 14. As a matter of fact, Richard Gary explained that "Exploration, steam-power, medical advances and the maxim-gun all contributed to the astonishing extension of Christian missionary activity in the nineteen-century Africa." See Richard Gary, "The Origins and Organization of the nineteenth-century Missionary Movement" in *History of Christianity in West Africa* edited by Kalu U. Ogbu.

<sup>46</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 75.

economic and the political life of African peoples.<sup>50</sup> As issues of the slave trade and divesting Africa of her commonwealth increased, the political situation in many parts of Africa became unstable. The European traders bought slaves from African chiefs, who in turn fought to get slaves by attacking other tribes.<sup>51</sup> This made the missionary work very difficult and tedious. However, in 18<sup>th</sup> century, in England, a group of Christian professionals, politicians, and businessmen took up the challenge to abolish the slave trade. So, in 1807, the English parliament through William Wilberforce succeeded in passing a bill stopping British ships from participating in buying slaves.<sup>52</sup> According to Ukaoha, the success of this anti-slavery movement was not only an achievement of Christian men; it was an indispensable prerequisite for the success of church planting in Africa.<sup>53</sup>

Scholars have noted that around 1800, there was a great revival among the Protestants that led to the total abolition of slave trade in many parts of the world. This great Protestant revival also spawned widespread Protestant missionary activities around the globe particularly Africa, which led to a concern to reach other people of the world with the message of salvation.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, between 1792 and 1835, new missionary societies sprang up to take up the challenge in England, Scotland, North America and across Europe.<sup>55</sup> This development coupled with the movements towards independence and decolonization in many colonial territories in the 1900s signaled a new trend of Christianity in Africa.<sup>56</sup> Parratt precisely carved it, "It seemed incongruous to African Christians that while African nations were becoming independent politically, the Church in Africa should remain essentially controlled by European's missionaries."<sup>57</sup> The call for independence of Africa, was equally as for decolonization of the African Church and Christianity as well as doing theology in Africa the African way.

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<sup>50</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 75.

<sup>51</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa*, 44. Ukaoha documents that by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese and Spanish had begun to develop sugar plantations in Brazil. These plantations needed a large amount of unskilled labor. Slaves from Africa seemed to meet this manpower need. Thus, the number of slaves that began to leave Africa increased. Furthermore, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century European traders began to shift their interest in gold and ivory to slaves in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Ukaoha, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa*, 44-45

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in West Africa*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Theology*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Parratt, *A Reader in African Theology*, 2.

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## The Prosperity Gospel Conundrum

Starting in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pentecostalism or Classical Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit with direct evidence through speaking in tongues (glossolalia) of Spirit-filled believers. Pentecostalism, at its core, teaches that the direct experience with God is experienced through speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing. Furthermore, it is characterized by spontaneous worship, intense spiritual ecstasy, pre-millennial eschatology, and a flat power structure that allows a significant amount of participation by people comprising all social and economic hierarchies.

Historically, many scholars believe that although its foundation is taken to be The Azusa Street Revival (an event that was led by William J. Seymour and lasted three years), its roots go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan Holiness tradition and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness movement and the later Keswick Higher Life. However, both in outlook and its core expression, Pentecostalism imbibes the Wesleyan holiness tradition (which believed and experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit) and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness movement. Pointing back to the origin of the Azusa Street mission, Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, in his book, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival; The Birth of Global Pentecostal Movement* asserts that from the beginning, Pastor Seymour envisioned it becoming a multiracial, multiethnic congregation. In keeping with that vision, the mission quickly attracted- a membership broadly representative of various racial and ethnic groups: blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans.<sup>58</sup> Within a short time, it became the most racially inclusive and culturally diverse group, breaking down social barriers and averting organizational structure. Accordingly, it held the attention of the highly educated and illiterate- it included people from all classes.

However, there is another trend to Pentecostalism that scholars have branded the third wave or “third force” or to put it simply, Neo-Pentecostalism. This brand of Pentecostalism movement is a progeny of Classical Pentecostalism. Like Pentecostalism, it emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues as an outward expression.<sup>59</sup> In particular, it is the face of Christianity in most African religious space.

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<sup>58</sup> Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of Global Pentecostal Movement*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2006), 88. See Alan Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

<sup>59</sup> This is adapted from my previous assignments for Dr. Eric Newberg’s class entitled, “Azusa Street Revival” and “Diffusion of Pentecostalism.”

Commenting on the movement in Africa, Nelson Kalombo Ngoy posits, "Neo-Pentecostalism is a product of new Pentecostal trends developed in Africa through renewal and charismatic churches."<sup>60</sup> Generally, scholars hold divergent opinions on the origin of Pentecostalism in Africa, but there is a consensus that the Prosperity theology or gospel of the Neo-Pentecostal preachers in Africa is American-exported expression of the prosperity gospel by the North American missionaries to post-colonial Africa. For example, Jimi Zacka opines that, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Thomas D. Jakes and Yonggi Cho (A South Korean preacher) are perhaps the most influential people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who propagate this second form of prosperity teaching.<sup>61</sup>

Although these names have their precursors in Oral G. Roberts, Kenneth E. Haggin, Lester Sumrall, T.L. Osborn (all American preachers) to name a few, but the African version of health and wealth gospel or prosperity gospel is powered by poverty that has plagued and ravaged the post-colonial Africa from decades of colonial subjugations, such as apartheid in South Africa. According to Ngoy, "The prosperity gospel introduced by North American missionaries was reinterpreted to reflect opportunities for a vast accumulation of wealth by those with education, capital and political connections, and wishful aspirations of those without."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, early missionaries preached the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ as the way to heaven, but the prosperity gospel tended to be individualistic and other-worldly.<sup>63</sup> Prosperity, or the abundant life gospel preached by Neo-Pentecostals, has been regarded as an attempt to appropriate the biblical message of salvation to suit the contemporary socio-economic and religious state of the Africans.<sup>64</sup>

Quoting Paul Gifford, Zacka, summarizes the content and the philosophy of health and wealth message in Africa as follows,

The popular Christianity we encountered [in Africa] . . . was not concerned with a renewed order or any 'new Jerusalem', but with a job, a husband, a child, a car, an education, a visa to the West. It was about succeeding in this realm." He says that the missionaries taught hardship in this life in exchange for happiness hereafter.

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<sup>60</sup> Nelson Kalombo Ngoy, "Neo-Pentecostalism: A Post-Colonial Critique of Prosperity Gospel in the Democratic Republic of Congo (1960-2018), Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Jimi Zacka, "Prosperity Theology: Is It a Challenge or a Contribution to Africa Theology" Unpublished Paper, 3.

<sup>62</sup>Ngoy, *Neo-Pentecostalism*, 94.

<sup>63</sup> Zacka, *Prosperity Gospel*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ngoy, *Neo-Pentecostal*, 95.

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But “the missionary legacy has vanished with scarcely a trace, for it is terrestrial rewards that feature so prominently in African Christianity today.”<sup>65</sup>

Howbeit, the early Pentecostal or classical Pentecostalism was a Holiness movement, with emphasis on Christian ‘perfection’ where a need for a personal and individual experience of conversion and moral perfection is required, but the doctrine of the health and wealth theology of the neo-Pentecostal movement appears to be a perverted and distorted gospel. One that pushed aside the Scriptural teaching on salvation and holiness and replaced it with undue emphasis on earthly and material possession.<sup>66</sup> The effect is nominalism and syncretism, as some believe that with enough faith and consistent prayers, regardless of how they live they can have their desire.

Moreover, despite the proliferation of this theology, Africa is still the ‘poor’, ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘developing’ economy of the Global South according to global index and world economic statistics. This shows a disconnect between the theology of prosperity gospel and the socio-economic reality of the African peoples. This socio-economic reality has often led to the assumption that some of the proponents of this gospel who themselves live very flamboyantly are in cahoots with either the unsympathetic governments and politicians of many of these African nations or the West who still go through the back doors to interfere in the political processes and the economic activities of the post-colonial Africa. Kwame Bediako presented a curious case in the whole subject and scenario of the richer nations of the North and the poorer nations of the South as follows,

The important thing to note in relation to this whole subject is, however, that whilst the economic gap between the richer nations of the North and the poorer nations of the South has progressively widened, the same Christian churches of the South have generally continued to register growth, whilst those of the North particularly in the older heartlands of the Faith in Western Europe, have declined, with the result that the majority of Christians in the world now are now found in the contexts of poverty, even if all of them do not share personal poverty. Curiously, therefore, the poorer, underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’ nations of the South, which in an earlier missionary age were lands of the ‘non-Christian religions’ have become the lands of the Christians, which are marked by economic poverty, political powerlessness, but also religious pluralism.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Zacka, *Prosperity Gospel*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ukaoha, *Introduction to Christianity in West Africa*, 142.

<sup>67</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press and New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 128.

The point is, as far as Christianity and church business is concerned, Africa has come a long way. However, average Africans especially the adherents of Pentecostalism/Neo-Pentecostalism tend to judge their personal and socio-economic thrives and successes in the purview of the Christian Gospel. This has almost become the expected norm. However, as the political and socio-economic realities of the post-colonial African society stand in contrast to the reality of this modern-day 'gospel', they assume it is the 'failure' of either the religious leaders or the Church in particular. In fact, one can recall that African theology, Black theology, as well as Liberation theology are all but reactions or responses to the political and/or socio-economic milieu of post-colonial African and the Latin American peoples.

## **CONCLUSION**

Africa is not alien to Christianity and Church business. In fact, the contact and the connections between Christianity, Christian theology and Africa go back to the first century (with some arguing that Africans were represented on the Day of Pentecost) when Africa and Africans played significant role in the entrenchment of the Gospel as well as Christian theology. However, as Christianity began to move southward, there were different nuances and shades of challenges that almost tainted the image and the intentions of the classical Christianity of the Apostles and early Church fathers. The roles and the activities of the Western missionaries in the spread of Christianity in the sub-Saharan Africa were suspected to be clandestine and surreptitious as they coincided with Western imperial and colonial expansion. Moreover, it will be a mistake to assume that all the activities of the Christian missionaries of the colonial era were in shamble. No! They recorded successes in many areas like health, education, and infrastructure and set the sail for indigenous missionary exploits- however, colonialism and imperialism overshadowed these scenic aspects of the pre-colonial and colonial missionary endeavors of the European West in Africa.

As Africa moved towards both political and religious decolonization, there appeared another big elephant- the Prosperity Gospel. Prosperity theology which promises both political and socio-economic emancipations of the poverty-ridden African society has been noted not to be in tandem with the daily realities of the African society, hence, the suspicions and distrusts of the average Africans towards Christianity and the

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recurrence of the activities of the colonial era in the subconscious minds and thoughts of the post-colonial Africans. No doubt, as has been speculated, vis-à-vis the current trend in African Christianity, Africa is the next big thing in Christianity, however, she needs a theological engagement that positively and adequately responds to her teeming political and socio-economic challenges. As there is already an abject failure on the parts of the post-colonial African leaders, it is commonplace that Africans look up to the church for solutions- thus, our tasks of theology must be robust and wholistic bereft of the temporal contract of the Prosperity Gospel.

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