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## An Assessment of African Christianity in a Transforming Context

Dyron Daughrity

*Pepperdine University*, [dyron.daughrity@pepperdine.edu](mailto:dyron.daughrity@pepperdine.edu)

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Africa is the heartland of early as well as contemporary Christianity. Indeed Africa contains some of the oldest forms of Christianity on earth. From Athanasius and Antony to Augustine, Africa helped to spawn the largest religion in human history.

African Christianity has come full circle. For the first several centuries of Christian faith, Africa was the hub. In the seventh and eighth centuries, however, Islam grew quickly and African Christians became a minority voice. The situation has changed again in recent years, and by 2030 Africa will surpass Latin America as having more Christians than any other continental block.<sup>1</sup> With Africa's fertility rate—the highest in the world—African Christianity is on pace to continue its impressive growth trajectory. From Ras ben Sakka in Tunisia to Cape Agulhas at the southern tip of the continent, half a billion Africans consider Christianity their religion. This is around half the continent's population. Africa today has 59 countries and territories. In 31 of those, Christianity is the largest religion.<sup>2</sup>

This paper analyses the demography, history, and geography of Africa's changing religious context. It argues that Africa is the next Christendom, and this has broad implications for international politics, intercultural relations, and world

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics come from Terence Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), x, but they are based on the *World Christian Database*, produced by Brill in association with the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Beginning in the early 1980s, the *World Christian Database* (known previously as *World Christian Encyclopedia*) was intended for Christian academicians but has evolved into a major resource for scholars. See: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>. A scholarly review of the *World Christian Database* was published by Becky Hsu, Amy Reynolds, James Gibbon, and Conrad Hackett in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47:4 (2008), 678-693. [http://www.conradhackett.com/uploads/2/6/7/2/2672974/evaluating\\_world\\_christian\\_database.pdf](http://www.conradhackett.com/uploads/2/6/7/2/2672974/evaluating_world_christian_database.pdf) (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Dyron Daughrity, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). Statistics for that book come directly from two sources: the *World Christian Database* and the *CIA World Factbook*.

religion. The thesis of this paper is that Christianity, the world's largest religion, is becoming more associated with Africa than with the West, and this development is shaping our understanding of world Christianity.

### ***Christianity in Africa's Transforming Context***

Rarely do entire groups of people switch their religious affiliation. Normally people believe what their parents believe. In Africa, something remarkable happened in the twentieth century. It is one of those rare times in the history of humankind when entire families, ethnicities, and even nations began practicing a different religion. The statistics are breathtaking. Estimates are that in 1900 Africa had around 10 million Christians but by 1945 there were about 30 million Christians in Africa. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, Africans began to convert to Christianity en masse. In 2008, Africa had around 500 million Christians, which was around 47% of the continent's population.<sup>3</sup> The African Christian population is now much larger than the African Islamic population, at around 40%. The remainder, approximately 13%, affiliate primarily with local, indigenous religions.

Put another way, in 1900, only 2% of the world's Christians lived in Africa. In 2005, nearly 20% of the world's Christians lived there.<sup>4</sup>

What triggered this rapid conversion rate? It does not seem to be missionary or colonial driven. Indeed, once the European, Christian governments left Africa, Christianity grew fantastically: "Africa's most dramatic Christian growth ... occurred *after* decolonization."<sup>5</sup> This is especially the case with Protestant/Independent churches, where growth rates are staggering. Harvey Cox writes, "In most areas ... these independent churches are expanding faster than Islam, at about twice the rate of the Roman Catholic Church and at roughly three times that of other non-Catholic groups. There are now over 5000 independent Christian denominations, all born in the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> It is counterintuitive that once Western powers receded from the African continent, Christianity received a new lease on life. However, the evidence seems to illustrate that Christianity's greatest gains in sub-Saharan Africa occurred during and after the independence era—the 1950s and 1960s.

Africa is vast in both geography and people. There are approximately one billion people in Africa today speaking around 2,000 languages.<sup>7</sup> While only one

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<sup>3</sup> See Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, x.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski, ed., *Twentieth Century Global Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 32–33.

<sup>5</sup> Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, x.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995), 245.

<sup>7</sup> See the UNESCO document "Financing Education in Sub-Saharan Africa," located at [http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/Finance\\_EN\\_web.pdf](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/Finance_EN_web.pdf) (accessed 24 May 2013).

African nation today is in the top ten of the world's most populated countries—Nigeria, with around 150 million people—there are several highly populated countries. Both Ethiopia and Egypt will reach the 100 million mark soon.

Additionally, Africa's fertility rate is higher than anywhere else in the world. The world's average fertility rate is 2.61 children born per woman. However, in Africa, the average woman will have five children during her lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

There are two more conspicuous data when looking at overall trends in Africa: median age and life expectancy. Africa has the highest fertility rate in the world, but it also has the lowest life expectancy. Africans, on average, barely reach the age of 50. Eastern Europeans, who have the second lowest life expectancy in the world, live 20 years longer than Africans.<sup>9</sup> The low life expectancy brings down the median age in Africa to less than 20 years—easily the lowest in the world.

Economically, Africa is in crisis. Of the world's top 20 GDP countries, no African countries are represented.<sup>10</sup> Many African economies seem hopelessly dependent on foreign aid, causing some to ask, "Is there life after debt?"<sup>11</sup> Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye outlines a slew of problems, both historical and contemporary, that have contributed to the difficulties.<sup>12</sup> She discusses low literacy rates<sup>13</sup>; a pervasive fear of witchcraft<sup>14</sup>; and perhaps most of all a colonial legacy with many residual effects of dependency, corruption, and powerlessness. She argues that systemic racism towards Africans has taken a dehumanizing toll on the consciousness of a continent, and the trauma does not abate quickly.

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<sup>8</sup> The fertility rates statistics come from the *CIA World Factbook*, located at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Life expectancy statistics come from the *CIA World Factbook*, located at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See the CIA World Factbook Publications: "Country Comparison: GDP (Purchasing Power Parity)," located at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html?countryName=South%20Africa&countryCode=SF&regionCode=af#SF> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Mercy Oduyoye in Nicholas Otieno with Hugh McCullum, *Journey of Hope: Towards a New Ecumenical Africa* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), xix.

<sup>12</sup> In Nicholas Otieno with Hugh McCullum, xix-xxii. Oduyoye's "A Letter to My Ancestors" (XV-XXII) is essentially a conversation with the ancestors in which she vows to help change Africa's trajectory through renewed spiritual commitment.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the Oxfam publication "From Closed Books to Open Doors—West Africa's Literacy Challenge," April 2009, located at: [http://oxfam.qc.ca/en/policy/2009-04-21\\_closed-books](http://oxfam.qc.ca/en/policy/2009-04-21_closed-books) (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Oduyoye's "A Letter to My Ancestors" xix.

However, African scholars have also been quick to point out frailties that come from within. Distinguished historian Lamin Sanneh writes, “Corruption and despotic rule despoiled countries, divided society, and failed the national cause.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps some Africans would express gratefulness to the Western missionaries who attempted to bring good news, although missionaries are implicated in postcolonial critiques. The Mau Mau fighters of Kenyan independence in the 1950s may have been the first to utter that now-famous invective on imperial missions:

When the white man came, he had the Bible and we had the land. He told us to close our eyes and pray, and when we opened our eyes he had the land and we had the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

This condemnation is not altogether justified, although it is not easily dismissed.

Missionaries came in all shades and sizes. Some were heralded as civilizing what many European writers described as the “Dark Continent”; most however lived meagerly, founding small churches and passing leadership to Africans within a short time. Many gave their truncated lives to an adopted African home, witnessing for Christ in an isolated corner of the world, dying young to malaria, among other diseases. Many did not count the cost; it made perfect sense to give one’s life to a greater commission. Today however, in a context of Western secularization, missionaries become the objects of scorn—pompous brainwashers from a bygone era.

For better or for worse, Africa would not be half Christian today without that massive era of European missions. It was inconceivable in 1900 to predict that Africa would be the heartland of Christianity in a mere 100 years.

### ***Background: Christianity in Africa***

African Christianity has deep roots in Ethiopian Judaism. There was significant Ethiopian-Jewish contact many centuries before Jesus, documented in the King Solomon-Queen of Sheba relationship from 1 Kings 10. Presumably, the Ethiopian-Jewish relationship continued and expanded since Africa plays a key role in several New Testament passages. For example, Jesus spent time living as a refugee in Egypt according to Matthew 2:13-14. Simon of Cyrene—modern-day Libya—was forced by the Romans to carry Jesus’ cross for him when he became too weak to do it himself according to Matthew 27:32. Thus, it was an African who first took up a cross and followed Jesus, up the hill to Golgotha. In

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<sup>15</sup> Lamin Sanneh, quoted in Terence Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, 11–12.

<sup>16</sup> This statement has been attributed to many African sources. See Nicholas Otieno with Hugh McCullum, *Journey of Hope*, 7.

Acts chapter two, on Pentecost Sunday, we read of Libyans and Egyptians at the birth of Christianity. In Acts 8, an Ethiopian eunuch, "... an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians" had gone to Jerusalem to worship.<sup>17</sup> Africans were among the first to preach the gospel to non-Jews. For example, Acts 11:19 discusses evangelists from Cyrene preaching to Greeks in Antioch, and the Bible states, "the Lord's hand was with them." The apostle Paul was probably ordained for ministry by a group that included Africans (Acts 13:1–4). One of the great evangelists of the New Testament was Apollos, a native of Alexandria (Acts 18:24). Church tradition states that Mark evangelized Egypt in the 40s and became the first Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Africa's extra-canonical pedigree is equally impressive. Saint Anthony the Great, the father of monasticism, was Egyptian. Several African church fathers defined the Christian faith for us as we understand it today: Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, and Tertullian. Indeed Athanasius was the leading theologian in the trinitarian controversies as well as in the determination of the biblical canon. Athanasius's home city, Alexandria, was well known as "the leading academic center of the ancient world."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Alexandria and Carthage (Tunisia) were pivotal in shaping the earliest medieval Western Universities. And perhaps the most important theologian in Christian history, Augustine (lived 354–430), was an African Berber from Algeria.

One of the earliest Christian states on earth was Axum, in Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> Still today Ethiopia is a proudly Christian country that remained isolated from Christendom for centuries. When contact with Ethiopia was restored in the 1400s, Portuguese Jesuit missionaries were appalled at their arrogance, saying, "They are possessed with a strange notion that they are the only true Christians in the world; as for us, they shunned us as heretics."<sup>20</sup>

The Christianization of sub-Sahara Africa was complex. European missionaries are often associated with this era, but for every missionary there were dozens of African leaders. One indigenous movement in the Kongo was led by Kimpa Vita, also known as Dona Beatriz.<sup>21</sup> She lived from 1684 to 1706 and became an important precedent for African Christianity. Baptized by Italian Capuchin missionaries, she forged an indigenous Christianity that became a fountainhead for the African indigenous churches. Burned at the stake as a witch

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<sup>17</sup> See Acts 8:27.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 43–44.

<sup>19</sup> See Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 217–218.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harperone, 2008), 146–147.

<sup>21</sup> See John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

when she was only 22 years old, Vita inspired scores of people who were sent as slaves to Brazil and South Carolina. Her legacy lived on and her rejection of colonial Christianity was ahead of its time.<sup>22</sup> Philip Jenkins writes, “If the rising independent churches ever decide to identify a patron saint, they could do no better than to choose ... Kimpa Vita.”<sup>23</sup>

Kimpa Vita was only one of many. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who lived from 1806 to 1891 and was a native from Nigeria, was the first African bishop in the Anglican Church. William Wade Harris (lived c. 1865 to 1929) from Liberia, is considered to be “... the most successful missionary in West Africa.”<sup>24</sup> Garrick Braide (late 1800s and early 1900s) was a well-known healer in Nigeria—people flocked to him as the second Elijah. John Chilembwe preached armed resistance to the British in Malawi (Nyasaland)—in the name of Christ. Simon Kimbangu invoked the ancestors in his preaching, claiming that “God was changing the baton from whites to blacks.”<sup>25</sup> His church numbers in the millions. Zulu prophet Isaiah Shembe (1869-1935) was a messianic figure who led a Nazarite movement. He purportedly resurrected from the dead and appeared to his followers.<sup>26</sup> Engenas Barnabas Lekganyane established the Zion Christian Church in 1910. Each Easter it holds a huge gathering of members, at Moria in South Africa; the ZCC’s Easter gathering is attended by over a million people and in 1992 featured Nelson Mandela as a speaker.<sup>27</sup>

The African Independent Church tradition continues to proliferate. John Mbiti once described the AIC movements as being,

[A]n African opportunity to mess up Christianity in our own way. For the past two thousand years, other continents, countries, nations and generations have had their chances to do with Christianity as they wished. And we know that they have not been idle! Now Africa has got its chance at last.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> AIC originally meant “African Independent Churches,” although the “I” in the acronym has taken on many variations: Indigenous, Initiated, Instituted, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (2002), 47.

<sup>24</sup> See Graham Duncan and Ogbu Kalu, “Bakuzufu: Revival Movements and Indigenous Appropriation in African Christianity,” in Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 250–253.

<sup>25</sup> Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story*, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> See Isabel Mukonyora, “The Dramatization of Life and Death by Johane Masowe,” *Zambezia* XXV, no. ii (1998): 205. See also G.C. Oosthuizen, “Isaiah Shembe and the Zulu World View,” *History of Religions* 8.1 (August 1968), 1–30.

<sup>27</sup> For a transcript of Mandela’s 1992 lecture, see: [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/special%20projects/mandela/speeches/1990s/1992/1992\\_zcc\\_conference.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/special%20projects/mandela/speeches/1990s/1992/1992_zcc_conference.htm) (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>28</sup> John Mbiti, quoted in Noel Davies and Martin Conway, *World Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 118.

Mbiti is part of a growing body of African scholars who claim Christianity as their own, and resent colonial charges which imply African Christianity may be less than authentic.

So convinced of this message, many Africans now missionize the West, former Christendom. In 2009 an intriguing, lengthy article in the *New York Times* proclaimed:

Pastor Daniel Ajayi-Adeniran is coming for your soul. ... He is on a mission to save you from eternal damnation. He realizes you may be skeptical, put off by his exotic name—he's from Nigeria ... but he's not deterred. He believes the Holy Spirit is working through him.<sup>29</sup>

The article goes on to discuss how the Lagos-based Redeemed Christian Church of God already has millions of members and continues to expand globally. It is a far cry from the declining memberships in mainline Protestant denominations in North America or stale, empty churches in Europe.

### ***African Christianity Today***

Africa currently has 59 countries and territories. In 31 of those, Christianity is the largest religion. In 21 of them, Islam ranks first. In six of them, indigenous religions form the largest group. Mauritius is unique in that Hinduism ranks first there.<sup>30</sup>

The majority of Africa's Christians are Protestant/Independent. The Roman Catholic Church claims almost exactly a third of the continent's Christian population. The ancient Orthodox Christians of Africa—based mainly in the Nile Valley—account for one-tenth of the Christian population on the continent.

No longer just a passive recipient of Western missionaries, Africa is today a major player in world Christianity. Two of the six General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches (established in 1948) were African: Samuel Kobia of Kenya, and Philip Potter—of African descent but from the West Indies. Another important African ecumenist was Akanu Ibiam, a medical missionary from Nigeria who became a political leader and one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches. Additionally, two of the nine General Assemblies of the World Council of Churches were held in Africa: in Kenya (1975) and in Zimbabwe (1998).

Africa has half a billion Christians and, within a generation or two, it will have more Christians than any other cultural block, surpassing Latin America and

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Rice, "Mission From Africa," *New York Times*, April 8, 2009, located at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/12/magazine/12churches-t.html> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Statistics are from the *World Christian Database* (see footnote 1 above).

the Caribbean because of high fertility rates. The African diaspora is huge, and is changing world Christian demographics. Examples of these impacts are plentiful. For example, John Sentamu (Archbishop of York)—the Anglican Church's second highest official—is from Uganda. Sunday Adelaja, pastor of Kiev's megachurch Embassy of God, is Nigerian. That church holds 40 services weekly and has planted congregations in 45 countries.<sup>31</sup>

The Anglican Communion is witnessing a shift in leverage as Africans are clearly taking the reins of leadership in that denomination. Unmistakably, the future of the Anglican Church is African. There are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in England.<sup>32</sup> And there are over 40 million Anglicans in the African continent. Africa claims approximately 55% of the global Anglican Communion, and that percentage is certain to rise.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of African Christianity is that it represents the turning over of a new leaf in world Christianity. While Christianity in the West declines, in Africa it grows in numbers, in strength, and in energy. While Western societies deepen the divide between Christianity and culture, sub-Saharan Africa seems poised to become the new Christendom. While Western youth in the twentieth century broke faith with Christianity, African youth turned *to* Christianity.

And what does this mean? It means Christianity is at a pivotal point in its history. Christianity is still the largest religion in the world, yet it will not be Western dominated, as it has been for centuries. It is likely that Christianity will be more identified with Africa than with any other place in the world. And the reverberations are already being felt. For centuries the Christian narrative has been mainly told from a European perspective. But an African narrator is now settling in, and an African narrator has several important implications for telling the story of Christianity.

Scholars of Christianity are taking note of these changes, even if they are not widely known. In my own travels and research, it is clear that not only is African Christianity rising, but the African diaspora is making great gains in the West as well, impacting what has up to now been considered a Western religion. A few examples will illustrate. Recently I worshiped in a church in Dundee, Scotland. While the congregants were mainly white, the music was led by young men from Africa. They danced and held up their hands, with an unrestrained

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<sup>31</sup> See the church's website: <http://www.godembassy.com/> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>32</sup> See the BBC article "Anglican Church around the World," 15 July 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3226753.stm> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>33</sup> See "Global Anglicanism at a Crossroads," an article by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 19 June 2008, located at: <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Anglicanism-at-a-Crossroads.aspx> (accessed 24 May 2013).

approach to worship. That is very different from the conservative approach to worship that dominated the Church of Scotland for centuries.

Gone are the days when Westerners “bring the gospel” to Africa. Christians now go to Africa for revival. Many of my American students go to Africa thinking they are on a “mission” trip but when they get there they realize that Christianity is far more robust in this context of “mission” than in their North American homeland. Indeed, Africans now regularly bring the gospel to places in the West where Christianity has disappeared or at least has been muted.<sup>34</sup>

Africans are impacting the way Christians read the Bible. Many Westerners studied F. C. Bauer, Bultman, Althizer, and Tillich. The future of biblical interpretation will not necessarily include those names. Africans offer a different set of biblical interpreters, who come to very different conclusions than the commentators of the last 200 years in the West, since the so-called “Enlightenment.”

Furthermore, African Christians bring confidence, and come at Christianity from a very different cultural perspective. Christ represents victory and success in Africa, whereas in the West many churches are now residential flats, or carpet warehouses, or pubs. I once saw a church in England that had been converted into a tire shop. In Europe, preachers of the gospel seem sheepish in their presentation of faith. Africans seem not to share that reticence. Africans bring momentum to Christianity. Western Europeans can hardly speak of momentum and Christianity in the same sentence. Christianity is in recession, even crisis in many places in the West.<sup>35</sup>

### ***African Christian Leadership***

Indeed, if the new Christian narrator is an African one, then this will inevitably open up opportunities. It is a bit like having a new president. The people are in anticipation, not knowing how the new president will go about his task. No one knows if he will be able to achieve what he sets out to do. They do not know exactly what his priorities will be. What is known is that there is a new president, and most will cheer him on, hoping he can improve the condition of the country with his policies and decisions.

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<sup>34</sup> The work of Afe Adogame comes to mind here. For several years now he has been researching the concept of reverse mission and how it is impacting societies, religions, and Christian discourse. A good place to start researching his ideas is a chapter he wrote in a book he co-edited: “Who do they think they are? Mental Images and the Unfolding of an African Diaspora in Germany,” in Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff, and Klaus Hock, eds., *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> When I refer to Christianity’s decline in the West, particularly in Western Europe, I have in mind the important work of Steve Bruce and those who have built upon his ideas. See for example Bruce’s *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

Similarly, an African-infused Christianity holds many possibilities. World Christianity waits in expectation for what new things will be revealed. No one knows precisely how African leadership will shape world Christianity, but what is known is that changes are coming. And since Christians in the Western world still have a disproportionate amount of the world's wealth, they will likely find themselves further partnering with African Christians and African institutions, a partnership that has existed for some time but will likely increase. This may come from contributing to denominational coffers in the case of international fellowships; it may mean theological institutions offering full fellowships that enable Africans to study at Western schools. A rising cross-pollination process is taking place that will benefit both Africa and the West. And this is needed, because while African Christianity may be growing considerably, and making inroads through mission work, there is still a dearth of secular and theological education within Africa. New initiatives are needed to truly invest capital and resources into Africa, separate and apart from Western approaches to learning. And there is a good argument to be made that Westerner Christians should consider taking their tuition money to African institutions, and place themselves under the tutelage of African theologians and scholars. Otherwise, the relationship will continue to be one-way, perpetuating the paternalism of the past.

In other words, the answer will not always be to bring Africans to the West. Perhaps a better alternative is to encourage Westerners to adapt to the African educational context. This interplay would be dynamic and certainly more authentic for Westerners wanting to know more about how and why African Christianity is growing. It is somewhat common these days for Western seminarians to encounter African Christianity from an African professor who has relocated to the Western world. It would be far more lively and impactful, however, for the Western seminarian to take a degree in Africa. It would also open up countless avenues of contact that would enrich both sides.

There are several towering African scholars who have shaped or are shaping the discourse of African Christianity, and we would be remiss to neglect them here.<sup>36</sup> Kwame Bediako, Ogbu Kalu, Mercy Oduyoye (cited above), John Mbiti (cited above), Jesse Mugambi, and Lamin Sanneh are atop a long list of competent scholars who are alerting the wider scholarly community to the changes, and helping academicians to understand better their implications.

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<sup>36</sup> A major research project funded by the World Council of Churches has recently culminated and will certainly add to the growing corpus of scholarship of African Christianity: Isabel Phiri and Dietrich Werner, eds., *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2013). This 1200-page work features many leading African scholars and is breathtaking in its scope.

Bediako, a Ghanaian theologian who died in 2008, was considered by Andrew Walls as “the outstanding African theologian of his generation.”<sup>37</sup> In his masterful work *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* he asked whether Christianity is suitable to Africans?<sup>38</sup> His ideas were sophisticated, but were predicated upon a renewed understanding of Jesus Christ—assimilated to an African context. This plea for a reconceived Christology is providing rich fodder for scholars of African Christianity. Enyi Ben Udoh, for example, argues that an African Christology brings Christ into its culture as a guest. And in Nigerian society as well as other African societies, a guest is “considered sacred ... treated with respect and care.” Another model is contextualizing Christ as a chief ancestor, “a proto-ancestor.” This understanding may offer “the best theological meeting point for Christianity and African indigenous religions.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps Bediako’s most potent expression of how Christ relates to African society was in his image of Africa being confronted by Christ. He asked, “What is it that, in Christ, confronts us?” He answered by referencing Mark 15:39, when the centurion was confronted by a dying Jesus and declared, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, Bediako and other African theologians have created new categories of thought when it comes to understanding the figure of Jesus Christ, without abandoning the traditional conceptions of him. While Christ gets reinterpreted through African metaphors (a guest, a proto-ancestor), his impact as Son of God continues to resonate in more recently Christianized cultures, as it always has, through his suffering, his authority, and his divine power.

Ogbu Kalu’s legacy is prolific, with many books and articles to his credit. His specialized studies on West African Christianity are a great gift to the scholarly community.<sup>41</sup> However, his greatest legacies are found in two major works he published before his death in 2009: *African Pentecostalism* and *African*

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Walls, “Kwame Bediako,” in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, published in several languages online at: <http://www.dacb.org/index.html> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>39</sup> The citations here are from Victor Ezigbo in his excellent book *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 64-65, 71. Ezigbo draws freely from Bediako, Udoh, and Olikenyi. See Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretive View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) and Gregory Ikechukwu Olikenyi, *African Hospitality: A Model for the Communication of the Gospel in the African Cultural Context* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 41-42.

<sup>41</sup> Kalu’s literary legacy can be found on his entry in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, located at: [http://www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/kalu\\_ogbu-oke.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/kalu_ogbu-oke.html) (accessed 24 May 2013).

*Christianity: An African Story*.<sup>42</sup> There exists no better place for newcomers to the field to enter than with these two impressive works. Kalu's work is important not only for its scope but also for its depth. For example, he draws a line of distinction between American Pentecostalism and African Pentecostalism:

Some scholars write about African Pentecostalism as if they were recounting the saga of nineteenth-century missionaries. The Pentecostal experience broke out without missionaries or any foreigners and often to the consternation of missionaries who deployed the colonial government's clout to contain the flares. In many cases, the indigenes invited the foreigners. This means that we should pay attention to periodization because the patterns of relationship changed through time. African Pentecostalism did not originate from Azusa Street and is not an extension of the American electronic church.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, Kalu is pressing for complexity, historical nuance, and the cross-pollination manifested in studies of world Christianity.

Kalu's studies on Ethiopianism are equally discerning. He discusses how the notion of "white man's burden" is countered in Ethiopianism with the "black man's burden"—that Africa will be redeemed through Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Rooted in an appropriation of Psalm 68:31 ("Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.") by African Americans between 1870 and 1920, Ethiopianism became a clarion call for generations of Africans and diaspora Africans to take pride in their Christian roots and confront the stereotypes that had held them back. These thinkers challenged the idea that Africa was somehow a latecomer to the Christian table. Frequently citing the Old Testament as a nod to their Judeo-Christian pedigree, their revisionist history could have a confrontational edge to it, even fuelling black nationalism.<sup>45</sup>

For decades, Jesse Mugambi has written widely on comparative religion, theology and culture, environmental ethics, and much more. However, his recent effort might become the most important in his illustrious career: to overcome the challenges of publishing high quality scholarship in Africa.<sup>46</sup> To this end Mugambi founded Acton Publishers in 1992. The focus of the press is "academic

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<sup>42</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, vii-viii.

<sup>44</sup> Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, viii. See also Chapter Ten, "Ethiopianism in African Christianity," in Kalu's book *African Christianity*.

<sup>45</sup> Kalu, "Ethiopianism in African Christianity," 232-233.

<sup>46</sup> See J.N.K. Mugambi, "Challenges for Theological Publishing and Scholarly Books in Africa," in the *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa* (cited above).

and specialized publishing with a particular concern for African scholarship.”<sup>47</sup> Dozens of good theological books have already come out of this initiative with many more in line.<sup>48</sup> Mugambi’s decision to found a press that keeps costs down and generates pioneering information on African Christianity is admirable indeed. But there is a dilemma in scholarship today. Unless one is a recognized author, it is difficult to get a book published by the established presses. African scholars have few opportunities to catch the attention of editors, especially when dealing with topics that are little known or understood in the West. Compounding the problem is the cost of books in the West, where many scholars publish with companies like Ashgate, Palgrave, Brill, and Peter Lang, to the tune of \$75 (USD) per book, if not more.<sup>49</sup> Mugambi has opened up major opportunities for African scholars who want to publish, but there remains the problem of getting African-produced books into the hands of Westerners.

Perhaps no other African scholar has captured the attention of Western scholars as much as Lamin Sanneh, co-founder with Andrew Walls of the Yale-Edinburgh Group on the Study of World Christianity. Sanneh has risen to the heights of Western scholarship during his many years as a professor at Aberdeen, Harvard, and Yale. His scholarship has helped to set the agenda for how we must come to understand Christianity in the future: as a global faith. Sanneh’s pioneering work on how Christianity translates into new cultures has impacted the field of world Christianity like no others.<sup>50</sup> His thesis is that Christianity is owned by no people group, thus it is incorrect to consider it a Western faith. While the West has been linked to Christianity for centuries, by no means was this always the case. Christianity is adaptive by its very nature. Unlike the *Quran*, which focuses upon a text in a particular language, at the heart of Christianity is a person, Jesus, and language is no barrier in the translating of that message. When the message of Christianity gets conveyed, it is as much about the receiving culture as the sending culture. A good example of this is the determination of Christian missionaries throughout the ages to get the message of Christ, and the text, into the vernacular as soon as possible. The impacts upon the message are immediate and significant from the moment a person agrees to become a receptacle of the gospel. In other words, the gospel changes significantly,

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<sup>47</sup> See the Acton Publishers website at: <http://www.acton.co.ke/aboutacton.html> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>48</sup> See for example Samuel Kibicho, *God and Revelation in an African Context* (Nairobi: Acton, 2006) and J.N.K. Mugambi *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Ironically, a book written by Julius Gathogo, *Liberation and Reconstruction in Africa: A Critical Analysis in the Works of J.N.K. Mugambi* (Lambert Academic Publishing) retails for \$106.00 on Amazon. That price is prohibitive for most academics, especially African scholars. It will be very difficult for a book retailing at such a price to reach the academic mainstream.

<sup>50</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

depending upon the receiving culture. Receiving cultures are empowered by Christ's teachings as they make them their own; indeed, they become owners of his message without any watering down that might take place such as when Islamic ideals are translated into non-Arabic societies. In Islam, there always persists the idea that Arabic identity and language is somehow primary and privileged. This preference for a particular language does not, or at least should not, happen in Christianity. As Leonardo Boff has written, "Christianity is a syncretism par excellence."<sup>51</sup> The aforementioned scholars have set the agenda for an ambitious task moving forward in scholarly understandings of African Christianity.

### ***Conclusion***

This article is an assessment of African Christianity in a context of *change*, and perhaps no word better summarizes Africa in recent memory. Likewise, there is no better word to understand Christianity's context at the outset of the twenty-first century.<sup>52</sup> Figuring out what these changes might be signaling, and interpreting them for a new generation of scholars and students, are tasks that are already being handled. In many ways the work has only begun, but what is already clear at this early stage is that the work must be transcontinental, intercultural, and panoramic.

African Christianity presents a series of contrasts. Christianity is ancient in the continent yet its explosion is recent. In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, Africa was the place for missionaries. Since the independence movements that situation has changed. In the last two decades it has become a land that sends out missionaries of its own. In the colonial period it was labeled the Dark Continent, but in recent decades has become brightly aglow with Christian fervor and hope for dramatic increase. Christianity is, for most Africans, a "new religious movement," but unlike most religious movements it has suddenly morphed from being a marginal sect to being the dominant form of faith in a very short time. The reverberations of that transformation are just now being felt. It will be fascinating to observe how Christianity continues to shape Africa, but perhaps more importantly, how global Christianity is shaped by Africa.

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<sup>51</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (London: SCM, 1985), 92ff. Cited in John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, gifts, and diversities of indigenous African churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), xi.

<sup>52</sup> See Dyron Daugherty, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion*.