

# **Christianity in Northern Nigeria:**

## **Origins and Problems**

**A Talk Given to the Nigeria Staff of the**

**Mennonite Central Committee**

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To understand how Christianity was introduced to Northern Nigeria (NN), one must go back first of all to 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain (GB) and look at the relationship between laissez-faire capitalism and Evangelicals. GB had become the leading industrial nation of the world under the guidance of laissez-faire capitalism. In brief, this type of capitalism was very individualistic – everyone was urged to do his own economic thing. It was profit-oriented – the purpose of any business was first of all to make a profit. It was competition-oriented--it was believed that as long as everyone does his best, seek his profit and compete in an open market without any restrictions, eventually there will be created a harmonious equilibrium in which every person and company will be happy and receive his fair due. It was believed that history tends towards progress – evolutionary optimism. Even labour had to compete for the very low-paid jobs. Though it was realized that some individuals might suffer along the way, the long-range result would be a harmony. This process was assured by some “invisible hand” that would restrain the effect of negative factors.

Evangelicals were very much part of it all. They believed the above doctrines as God-inspired. Even though they rejected the evolutionist interpretation of the origin of creation and man, they did adhere to an evolutionistic interpretation of history, without recognizing the common source behind the two. They participated wholeheartedly in the capitalist economy and subscribed to its basic philosophy. And though there were contemporary critics of Christian thinking, quite apart from Karl Marx, they were not listened to. If someone was not

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<sup>1</sup> For my relations to MCC staff see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 210-211.

successful, it was probably because he was either lazy or immoral – probably both.

As the whole economic and social structure of GB changed under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, it became clear that GB had to strike out beyond itself to find new sources of raw materials and new markets for its finished products. That was the basic impulse of colonialism. It was to procure these two – raw materials and market – that GB entered what is now Nigeria as a whole and NN in particular. British economic interests were represented by a number of companies, especially by the Royal Niger Company that was later taken over by Lever Brothers. These companies were capitalistic firms with no basic interest beyond that of profit. Their sordid history bears this out. From the beginning it was a matter of might makes right. Nigerians were used and abused. Indigenous commercial organizations suffered greatly. When the companies needed Nigerians, they would train them. When it was in their favour to eliminate them, they would freely do so.

Though the British government was in principle opposed to monopolies and favoured, in true laissez-faire style, unfettered commerce for all parties, in fact the stronger companies kept eliminating the smaller ones. By the end of colonialism in 1960, the Nigerian economy was almost totally in foreign hands. It was not a free economy. The end of colonialism meant merely a change of window dressing: the basic economic structures were as colonial as ever. You will notice that I have given an almost exclusive economic description of colonialism.

As Evangelicals in GB were wholly in favour of their domestic capitalist economy, because they themselves had done well under it, they also expected great things from its extension in the form of colonialism. And since they had failed to place the basic assumptions of laissez-faire capitalism under the light of Scripture—it never occurred to them to do so--, they were largely blind to the discrepancy between the two.

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Livingstone had wandered through much of the African interior and had drawn the attention of Western Christians to the horrors of the internal slave trade. He felt that the only way to undermine this terrible

curse was to replace that illegitimate trade by “legitimate trade,” that is, by capitalist trade. He felt that GB was particularly in a position to undermine it by introducing her own trade in its place. It was felt that by harnessing Africa’s economy to that of GB, both would profit greatly and produce a harmonious equilibrium.

Livingstone inspired many Evangelicals. At the very time the attention of British business was drawn to NN, that of Evangelicals was also. And that, I submit, was no mere accident. It occurred because at home the Evangelicals were very much part of that commercial and industrial establishment. It began slowly with the Southern Baptists leading the pack in 1855 to be followed by Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Wesleyans around the 1880s. I wrote in my history of this movement, “Little of permanence came of these attempts; the time was not yet.” But towards the end of the century, new attempts were made that were eventually to morph into the churches that are now blossoming in NN—Anglicans, Sudan Interior Mission/ECWA, Sudan United Mission/TEKAN, and Southern Baptists. The Sudan United Mission (SUM) was a conglomeration or umbrella of different mission societies whose missionaries came from all the Caucasian-dominated nations of the Commonwealth as well as the USA. It included my own mission, the Christian Reformed Church (SUM/CRC) that eventually partnered with three different denominations.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of all these missions was to beat Islam to the draw. Whereas Islam had been a threat to Pagans before colonialism, now that peace had been forced upon them, they became peaceful traders. People soon developed a respect for them as representatives of a larger faith community that fit the new colonial situation better than Paganism with its emphasis on the local village. The government used the literate Muslims for their administration. The new prestige attached to that religion soon became the reason for thousands of Africans becoming Muslims. The missions wanted to avoid that from happening. Hence the basic purpose of all these missions was to beat Muslims to the draw.

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<sup>2</sup> Boer, 1979, pp. 85-86; 1984, p p. 32-33.

However, being representatives of capitalistic Christians at home, these missions expected great things from colonialism. They regarded themselves, especially the British, as partners. The government was to create the conditions for missions and commerce. The colonial firms were to engage in their work and develop the country in such a way that both GB and Nigeria would profit. Missions were busy with the spiritual aspect of it. Altogether they would build a new society and totally liberate Africa from the demons to which she was enslaved: poverty, Paganism, Islam, slavery, total immorality – and all other negatives they could think of. Whereas Africa was total darkness, the West was almost totally light, especially GB. The aim of the empire was to bring light and liberty, in the fullest sense of the word to this dark place. In this context advancing the Kingdom of God required and was equal to bringing in the United Kingdom. Since all this sounds so hopelessly foreign and primitive to our generation, I emphasize here that I do not base these claims on biased rumour but on researched facts published in my 1979 dissertation.

It was in the context of such expectations that the missions did their evangelism. In the context also of a very wide sense of the Kingdom of God. It was a partnership of all the three parties that would do God's thing. They had a very wide view or perspective.

Unfortunately, as the Social Gospel became more influential until it was the dominant theology at the 1928 Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council, Evangelicals began to retreat from their wide view. Under the influence of Roland Allen, they began to lose their earlier social interest and turned to the three-selves philosophy and an almost exclusive interest on the church and so-called spiritual affairs. As you trace, e.g. the *Lightbearer* of the SUM, you will see a real change in the nature of the magazine. A reduction took place in the scope of materials covered. From long economic, political and other socially-oriented discussions it began to concentrate more and more upon evangelism in the narrow sense of the word and upon the ecclesiastical aspect of the Kingdom of God. Political topics that came up were only those that related directly to problems related to political restraints placed upon the missions, but

politics and economics as a whole lost their charm for evangelical missions, except in so far as they impinged upon the progress of mission or church.

A church or churches were born and we may gratefully recognize that God has used these missions to establish rather strong and virile churches. There is COCIN/TEKAN conglomeration with its eight branches. There is ECWA and then there are the churches imported from the south, dominated by Yoruba especially and some by Ibos – Anglican, Methodist, Cherubim and Seraphim, Christ Apostolic, Presbyterian, etc. Especially the northern-based churches cooperate with each other in many areas such as the Christian Council of Nigeria, the first of all of them, the Christian Association of Nigeria, Christian Health Association of Nigeria, New Life for All, theological education, evangelism, literature, etc.

These churches are well established and run their own affairs, though missionary influence varies from one to another. It can in general be said that they make their own decisions in most cases, though the enticement of mission money can influence these decisions in certain cases. However, they are the ones to decide even *how* to respond to financial carrots that may be dangled in front of them occasionally even today.

These churches also suffer from some fatal weaknesses. They have developed a tradition of politico-phobia and of secularism in economics. Since missions since the 1920's have emphasized evangelism and the church (narrowly conceived), they have discouraged Nigerian Christians from going into politics. They had no Gospel for that most important aspect of human life. Result: few Christians went into this area. And when they did, they usually became engulfed by the worldly spirit and its ambitions. They often lost their faith. This, in turn, made the churches even more afraid of politics. Since the church offered no help to these politicians, they became a sordid group of "Christians."

It is only during the last few years that Christians are becoming more aware of their political imperative. This did not arise from a new reading of the Bible, but from the Muslim attempt to have the shari'a enshrined in the national constitution. Then Christians began to realize that they must become interested and active in politics if they are to survive. The question now is no longer whether

they *should* be involved in politics, but in the *how*. And they have opted for what I call a soft-secular approach. Since Muslims wanted to apply their religious insights to politics, the Christians responded by saying that religion must be kept out of politics. We must guide ourselves by common sense, not by religion. I submit that unless the church frees itself from this view and becomes prepared to submit her political thinking to the Scriptures, she will become a further agent of secularization and this will spell her own doom.<sup>3</sup>

Economically, there is a similar problem. Evangelicals have a tradition of accepting capitalism and have failed to scrutinize it from a Biblical perspective. That is why they could support laissez-faire capitalism and colonialism. Because they were heirs to an unofficial but real dualism that splits reality into two (spirit/matter; Bible/philosophy; church/world) they have had no spiritual tools to analyze their own economic thinking. They were so busy with spiritual things such as evangelism, that they had no time to think seriously about things of the world such as economics. Hence, they did not bother to carefully monitor the direction of colonial economics, and, as a result, were totally blind as to this direction. Throughout this period, they expected colonial economics to lead Nigeria into the direction of liberty.

This attitude prevented missionaries from providing guidance to Nigerian Christians in economics. Result: the very idea that the Bible has perspectives that need to be applied to one's business raises eyebrows and surprise. There is *aikin Ubangiji* (God's work) and there is *aikin neman kudi* (work one does just to make money) and these two are different from each other. Hence one sees Christians participating – here as at home – in very secular and worldly business practices without giving much thought to what it might mean to serve God in their work.

The same holds true for other areas of life – education, medicine, but I believe the point is clear.

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<sup>3</sup> I have extensively discussed these issues in my series *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*. See Bibliography on the Islamica page of this website.

God has used missions to create churches that are very virile in some ways, but very weak in others. The message of the Bible has not been presented in its full width. The Muslims have seen it. They say that their religion is a total way of life, whereas Christianity is evidently just a spiritual and largely private affair.

It is my conviction that if the Nigerian Christian community is going to be viable in the future and make a contribution to Nigeria's history and development, it must break out of its soft secularism and seek to apply the Gospel to all the areas of life. It must become wholistic if it truly wishes to meet the challenge of competing with other wholistic religions: Islam, Paganism and secularism. It must not ignore the questions and problems these other philosophies have, but it must provide Christian alternatives across the board. The Christian religion is, I submit, meant to be a total way of life and only as such can it hope to gain the ears of businessmen, politicians, and the educated and be considered by them as a viable option for culture, including the market place.

And we as missionaries? We had better know what we are doing. We had better learn, practice and teach the integration of faith and life in our work or field of teaching. Continued failure at this front will only contribute to the further Islamization and secularization of Nigeria.