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Christian Revivals in Africa

DONG SULL CHOI

Professor John Iliffe at the University of Cambridge appropriately observed, “Africans have been the frontiersmen who have colonized an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race. That has been their chief contribution to world history. It is why they deserve admiration, support, and careful study.” One of the world’s most brilliant civilizations—ancient Egypt—arose along the banks of the Nile river more than 5,000 years ago. Later, other powerful and culturally advanced kingdoms and empires developed in Africa. Even so, for many years most Westerners called Africa the “Dark Continent.” They used this name probably because they knew little or almost nothing about Africa’s interior geography, and they believed that the people of the interior had not developed any important cultures, but the darkness was indeed our own ignorance.

No other continent has been more mistreated, misunderstood, and misreported over the years than Africa. For instance, if we ask an ordinary American to mention four things he associates with Africa, the answer is likely to be “pygmies, jungle, heat, and lions.” Yet pygmies have been all but extinct for decades, jungle is now as uncommon as snow in Southern California, the heat is no more intolerable than that in Washington, D.C. on a summer’s day, and lions are so few in number that indeed most Africans have never seen even one.²

Unlike any other continent, Africa has experienced an extremely tragic and humiliating history especially for the last five centuries. Probably one of the most inhuman and ruthless forms of human activity is “slave trade,” which constituted an inseparable part in modern African history. There has been considerable dispute among historians about the numbers involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Recorded statistics show that at least 10 million Africans were landed alive and sold into slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean in the three hundred years that followed 1532, when the first slavery transportation to America
was recorded.³ Allowing for a further 2 million that died on the trans-Atlantic voyage, a total of at least 12 million people were taken captive out of Africa to the Western Hemisphere. Some historians argue that a huge amount of traffic went unrecorded and thus the real scale of the slave trade was double the amount indicated above.⁴ If we include all the African slaves exported to Western Europe and the Middle East, the total number is believed to have reached 50 million, as some historians assert.⁵

Another tragedy is the European scramble for Africa, which is undisputably recorded as one of the most extraordinary and absurd phenomena in human invasive history. In 1880 most of the continent was still ruled by its inhabitants and was barely explored. Yet by 1914, the year when the First World War broke out, seven European powers—Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—had divided almost all, roughly 96 percent, of the African land mass, among themselves, and bewildered more than 110 million innocent people. Only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent. Among African countries Ethiopia is indeed unique in that it has never in its 5,000-year long history been colonized by any foreign power and only occupied by the Italians for five years shortly before and during the Second World War.⁶ During the colonial period, the acquisition of overseas empire among the European nations became identified with national prestige. As the scramble gathered momentum, conquest became a dominant theme. Thus the Maxim machine gun, rather than trade or the Cross, became the symbol of the age. In many colonies atrocities were commonplace and Africans were literally treated no better than animals.⁷

Today’s Africa is entirely different from what it used to be. When the American journalist John Gunther published his book Inside Africa in 1953, not a single African nation had gained its independence from the imperial powers of Europe. Today all 53 nations in that continent have gained independence, and all are official members of the United Nations. Indeed Africa has now nearly one-third the votes in the United Nations, far more than any other continent.⁸ Nelson Mandela’s (1918–) inauguration as President of the Republic of South Africa on May 10, 1994 marked the virtual completion of major transformation of the modern political history of the world. The enfranchisement of
South Africa's black population may be seen as part of the final phase in the liberation from colonialism and its legacy. As the second largest continent, Africa occupies 20.4 percent of the earth's land surface, or 11.7 million square miles, and is four times larger than the continental United States. Demographically, Africa is the youngest continent: more than half the population are no more than fifteen years old. According to the UN Long-range World Population Projections, African population occupied 8.8 percent of the world's total in 1950; 12.1 percent in 1990; and surprisingly it is expected to occupy 22.6 percent in 2050. Today African population growth constitutes the fastest rate the world has ever seen. In sharp contrast to the successful story of China's one-child policy, family planning is an absolutely new idea in many parts of Africa. There are no success stories on birth control in that continent as yet.

Along with this transformation, one of the most startling phenomena in today's world has been taking place in Christianity, particularly in Africa. During the twentieth century, from 1900 to 1980, Christianity all over the world gradually lost its ground to secularism, materialism, agnosticism, and atheism. But this decade, the 1990s, has witnessed a dramatic change in fortune for all branches of Christianity. The years 1980 to 1995 saw a radical reversal in three major geographical areas hostile to Christianity. From 1987 to 1990 the final collapse of all Eastern Europe's communist regimes took place. From 1988 to 1991 a similar swan song of the U.S.S.R. was heard, which saw some 30 million atheists profess allegiance to Christian faith. As one illustration, in these three years the two-hour-and-five-minute movie Jesus, based on the Gospel of Luke, was seen by 85 percent of all Russians. And although mainland China remained rigidly Communist, its Christian churches grew from 2 million members in 1970 to 80 million by 1985, showing as much as 40 times increase in a space of only 15 years.

According to Professor David B. Barrett, editor of World Christian Encyclopedia (1982), from 1995 to 2025, the Christian population is likely to increase 52 percent to 3,061 million, during the period the world population will show a 36 percent increase. Nearly 80 percent of them will be non-whites in Third World countries. By 2025, the continent with the largest number
of Christians is likely to be Africa, with 760 million, which means one in every four Christians would be African. Professor Elizabeth Isichei at Otago University, New Zealand, begins her recent book, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (1995), with a quotation, “While every day in the West, roughly 7,500 people in effect stop being Christians, every day in Africa roughly double that number become Christians.” The revival of Christianity in today’s Africa has been so dramatic and conspicuous that I like to call it “a marvel of the second millennium.”

According to much quoted statistics, there were 10 million African Christians in 1900, 143 million in 1970, and there will be 393 million in the year 2000, which means one out of five Christians would live in Africa. The missionary and anthropologist Jon P. Kirby in Ghana also give a similar estimation, “In the brief span of eighty-five years Africa’s Christian population has risen from about 10 million, or 9.2 percent of the total population, to 237 million, and by the turn of the century, it is expected to reach 350 million, or about 50 percent of all African population, making it the missionary success story of all time.” Indeed Kenya, just one of 20 former English colonial states in Africa, has now the largest annual meeting of Quakers in the world, outside the United States, and more Anglicans attend church in Uganda than in England. At the 1974 Roman Synod, Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula of Zaire said, “In the past, foreign missionaries Christianized Africa. Today the Christians of Africa are invited to Africanize Christianity.”

Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, or traditional African religion. Modern African Christians cherish the proud tradition: “When Jesus was persecuted by the European king, Herod the Great, God sent him into Africa; by this we know that Africans have naturally a true spirit of Christianity.” The African Coptic Christians have never ceased to believe an ancient tradition that St. Mark planted the seed of Christianity in Egypt in A. D. 42 and was later martyred in Alexandria. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340), in his *Ecclesiastical History* (324), clearly mentions this, and a much earlier fragment from Clement of Alexandria (150-215) also refers to Mark’s presence in Egypt. From the very beginning, Christianity spread far and wide like...
wildfire, and in the first centuries, was well established all over north Africa, including the far west, and parts of modern Sudan and Ethiopia. Innately Africans are so notoriously religious that it is virtually impossible for them to isolate religion. In A.D. 70, only one generation after Christ, Christians occupied 0.1 percent of the world's population, of which more than 85 percent were non-Whites, and less than 15 percent, Whites.

North African Christianity was an extremely dynamic form of Christianity, because it produced some of the keenest and most brilliant scholars like Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, and probably the most influential theologian in the entire history of Christianity, Augustine of Hippo (354-430). At the end of the third Christian century, the eastern Maghrib, modern Tunisia, was one of three places in the world, where the Christians were in a majority; the other two were Armenia and modern Turkey. By A.D. 400 perhaps 90 percent of Egyptians were Christians. The most distinctive contribution of the Egyptian or Coptic Church to world Christianity lay in its virtual invention of both the eremitical and the monastic way of religious life. It was said later, with some pardonable exaggeration, that there were more Egyptians in the desert than in the cities. The desert people emphasized hard work and self-sufficiency, weaving palm fronds into mats and baskets, and working as harvesters. Thus it is also said that with their earnings, they fed not only the local poor people, but sent shiploads of grain to the prisoners and poor citizens of Alexandria. However, there came soon a radical change in the life and destiny of the African Christianity.

The expansion of Arab power and the Islamic religion following the death of its founder Muhammad in 632 C.E. was the central process in world history for the next 400 years. During that time Islam became the predominant faith throughout north Africa and established strong footholds in both west and east Africa. Some 4,000 Muslim horsemen commanded by Amr ibn al-As invaded Egypt, the Byzantine Empire's richest province, in 639. The invading army, far inferior in number and in equipment, had not a single ship, no siege machines and no immediate source of supply for their man power. Alexandria, then Egyptian capital, boasted a garrison of 50,000 soldiers, and behind it lay the whole strength of the Byzantine navy, of which the city was the
base. Within less than three years the Muslim invaders had con-
quered Egypt. The glad tidings of victory were sent by ibn al-As
to Umar (d.644), then caliph in Medina, in the following words:
“I have captured a city from the destruction of which I shall
refrain. Suffice it to say that I have seized therein 4,000 villas
with 4,000 baths, 40,000 poll-tax paying Jews and 400 places of
entertainment for the royalty.”

The Muslim victory was partly
responsible for deep antagonism between Byzantine rulers and
Monophysite Christians, who confined their resistance to defend-
ing their villages only.

But indeed the Muslims’ chief strength
was the disciplined conviction that characterizes the zealots of a
new faith. A later historian appropriately explained, “We have
seen a people who prefer death to life and humility to pride. They
sit in the dust, and they take their meals on horseback. Their
commander is one of themselves: there is no distinction of rank
among them. They have fixed hours of prayer at which all pray,
first washing their hands and feet, and they pray with rever-
ence.”

Consequently, the African Christianity of antiquity was large-
ly, but not wholly, lost. The flourishing churches of north Africa,
at different points of time, gave way to Islam. Christianity in
Africa, in the centuries between the great church of Clement and
Augustine, and that of the nineteenth century, has three main
themes: the continuing life of the Coptic and Ethiopian churches,
some strikingly unsuccessful attempts to convert Muslim north
Africa, and the history of the Catholic churches founded in black
Africa, initially by the Portuguese.

It is noteworthy that the
Reformation churches showed curiously little interest in the mis-
sonary enterprise. The majority of African Christians in the
meantime had remained in the older churches, gradually creating
their own maps of reality, interpreting their religion in terms of
their own Old Testament of inherited culture. Professor Isichei
observes, “the true encounter between Christianity and tradition-
al religion takes place in the heart of African Christians.”

In discussing the modern revivals of African Christianity, it
will be logical and informative to mention the Christian move-
ment in two countries, Egypt and Ethiopia, first and separately,
because these are the only two African nations where Christianity
not only has survived without interruption for the last two mil-
lennia but also has kept its identity both as a universal faith and as an indigenous religion. As Egypt occupies only 3.3 percent of Africa's land mass, but with its 63 million population, it is the second most populous nation today. As the first country to accept Christianity in the world, outside Palestine, Egypt occupies a unique position in Christian history. The bulk of Egyptian Christians split from the rest of Christianity and accepted Monophysism in A.D. 451. The Roman Catholic Church declared their doctrine “Monophysitism” a heresy in the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon and unrepentant Monophysites were expelled from the official Christian Church. According to Monophysitism, Christ had only a “divine nature” after the Incarnation, and didn't possess a human nature. This controversial doctrine about the relation of Christ's divine-human nature agitated the Eastern churches from the fourth through sixth centuries and prompted formation of the Coptic, Abyssinian, Jacobite, and Armenian churches.

After the Muslim conquest in the mid-seventh century, massive conversions to Islam took place during the following five centuries, and the Christian Church went through periods of calm and peace as well as persecution and pressure from Islam and Islamic government which reduced the number of Christians to 17.5 percent of the population in 1987, compared to 59 percent in Ethiopia. Although the Egyptian constitution (promulgated September 11, 1971) declares that “All citizens are equal before the law... without distinction of race, origin, language, religion or belief: in Article 40, it is the case that Egyptian Christians are victims of non-official discrimination in numerous sectors of social and political life. Hardly any high government functionaries are Christians; in the army, for instance, Coptic officers never go beyond the grade of captain and are often retired prematurely. This situation is not so much due to government policy as to the Muslim mentality, which without being hostile to non-Muslims is unable to place them on the same level of equality with Muslims.

As mentioned before, the Coptic Church is characterized by a strong monastic trait. All its bishops are former monks, and its laity are also influenced by monasticism. Cases of Coptic university students losing their faith are extremely rare. In spite of
all sorts of pressure and persecution, the church has experienced a marked revival over the past few decades, due principally to lay initiatives. Evidences of revival are: first, numerous church schools have arisen offering courses in the catechism on Fridays (the Egyptian day of rest) to pre-school children and those frequenting government schools deficient in religious instruction; secondly, large numbers of new monastic vocations to the desert monasteries have occurred among young people. Monastic life has also been re-established for the first time in 1,300 years in Wadi El-Bayyan, some 25 miles from Fayyum; thirdly, there has been a marked flowering of religious literature, dealing especially with spirituality.40

Another traditional Christian country, Ethiopia, is sometimes regarded by historians as the oldest independent nation in the world. As the tenth largest in area, and third most populous nation in Africa, Ethiopia’s first entry into world history was the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon around 1000 B.C., which is documented in the Christian Bible and Yemeni folklore. Both traditions regard the Queen’s son Menelik I, as the first emperor of Ethiopia, ruling from 982 to 957 B.C. And the 237th and last emperor of the dynasty was Haile Selassie, who ruled from 1930 to 1974. Article 2 of the revised Ethiopian constitution of 1955 also claimed that the ruling line descended from Menelik I, the son of Makeda, queen of Ethiopia, and King Solomon of Israel.41 Based on this “restored” Solomonic royal dynasty, most Ethiopians regard them as the chosen people within Judeo-Christian tradition.42

According to a reliable tradition, a shipwrecked young man from Tyre, north of Palestine, Frumentius, brought Christianity to Ethiopia in the early part of the fourth century. Athanasius (295-373), patriarch of Alexandria, later appointed Frumentius the first bishop of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church dates its foundation to A.D. 332. It is the largest non-Chalcedonian Orthodox church in the world.43 In spite of constant threat and pressure from Islam after the seventh century, Ethiopian Christianity has remained officially Orthodox to this day. Also for many centuries the Church in Ethiopia was cut off from constant contact with the rest of Christendom, which partly helped it acquire a uniquely African expression, but which also left it with
a conservatism extremely difficult to overcome in adjusting itself to modern times. The Church’s year was full of festivals and fast days. Probably no Christian church has fasted with the resolution of the Ethiopians: there are now 180 fast days in the year for the laity, and 250 for the clergy, with every Wednesday and Friday being fast days. There is total abstention from meat, fat, egg, and all dairy products.\(^{44}\)

Round churches, many saints, a big place given to the Blessed Virgin Mary, observance of many Jewish practices, order of deacons, priests and bishops, seven sacraments, a rich liturgy, a powerful but rarely well-educated clergy, and a Monophysite theology are the main characteristics of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.\(^{45}\) It is truly “African” in the sense of that these features have evolved over many centuries and reflect a background that has not been imposed from outside. One element which illustrates this point is the fact that the Christians there “believe in a whole host of evil spirits.” “For protection against these and other spirits, everybody carries amulets, which are magical prayers and formulae written by priests on scrolls or in little booklets and carried in leather cases around the neck and arms.”\(^{46}\) Thus exorcism is a major function of the clergy.

The ancient and traditional Church in these two countries, Egypt and Ethiopia, however, lacked a conscious missionary expansion, though there is ample evidence that Christianity extended further than the present-day in these two countries. The Roman Catholic Church through its priests from Portugal established Christian work along the west and east coasts of Africa starting in the fifteenth century. Most of this work was aimed primarily at European traders, and only in a few places did it penetrate into the interior and reach a sizeable number of Africans.\(^{47}\) Indeed, until 1800 this Catholic missionary work in Africa achieved very little measurable success. Climate, a high mortality rate, few missionaries, the lack of indigenous clerics, the slave trade, and too close an association with European politics, commerce, and culture all played a part. Probably one of the chief reasons for this was “malaria.” If ten Europeans landed in West Africa, almost certainly six of them would be dead—nearly all of malaria—before a year was out. And inland, mortality was even higher and fiercer. It is no wonder that West Africa was known as
Thus this presence of European Christianity hardly touched African people, though a few communities, especially at the Congo estuary, seem to have been converted.

The real modern expansion of Christianity in Africa started with freed Christian slaves who began to return to western Africa towards the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Christianity had increasingly large followers along the coast from Sierra Leone to Nigeria. This was a spontaneous expansion, sometimes without even the constant help of the clergy. It also began to penetrate into the interior. As of 1800, Christians occupied 23.1 percent of the world’s population, of which still the great majority, 86.5 percent, were Whites, while only 13.5 percent were non-Whites.

The next phase is represented by full-scale missionary activities, starting in the nineteenth century, either shortly before or simultaneously with colonial enterprise. This time, all Western Europe and the United States increased their interest in Africa, as evidenced by the arrival of empire builders, philanthropists, explorers, missionaries, hunters, traders, journalists, and others from these countries. Consequently, the image that most Africans received, and to a great extent still hold, of Christianity, is very much colored by colonial rule and all that was involved in it. Indeed we are still too close to that period to dissociate one from the other. A Kikuyu proverb summarizes this fact very appropriately: “There is no difference between Roman Catholic missionary priest and a European—both are the same!”

Indeed missionaries saw themselves as chaplains to the forts, small trading communities, or military compounds, and were more interested in commerce and governance than in making conversions in the hinterland.

Probably three interrelated forces dominated Africa history in the second half of the twentieth century. One was unprecedented population growth, from something over 200 million in 1950 to 600 million in 1990, owing to medical progress supplemented by increased fertility. The second, drawing upon this, was a liberation movement that ended the rule of European imperialism, and fostered individual mobility and opportunity. The third was a quest for political independence, economic progress, and sheer
survival amidst the resulting turmoil.\textsuperscript{52} But along with these great transformations, we should not forget a solemn and conspicuous fact: Christian revivals in that continent. Unlike the Western world, where the congregations of many churches have been dwindling for years, Christianity in Africa is growing so fast that by the year 2000 the continent may have the greatest concentration of Christians in the world.

Professor David B. Barrett, a currently Nairobi-based Anglican researcher, estimates that each year about 6 million Africans—or more than 16,000 a day—are added to the Christian rolls. About two-fifths, he says, are converts; the rest are the result of population increase.\textsuperscript{53} That Christianity should be undergoing such a numerical expansion in Africa is something of a miracle in itself, for in few places in the modern world have the church and its leaders been subjected to such humiliation and perils. Indeed many African presidents have managed to cripple the spirit and dreams of their own people, but none has ever succeeded in breaking the Christian church. In Uganda, for instance, Kabaka Mwanga, a Muslim king of the 1880s, murdered scores of young Christian converts and an Anglican missionary, Bishop James Hannington, for what he saw as an attempt to establish Christian hegemony. Under Idi Amin (r. 1971-1979), an extremely controversial Muslim dictator, most Christians had to live in a precarious condition. During his eight-year harsh rule, an estimated 300,000 Ugandans lost their lives, often in horrifying ways: bludgeoned to death with sledgehammers and iron bars or tortured to death in prisons and police stations all over the country.\textsuperscript{54} Amin also called for the “extinction of Israel,” praised Adolf Hitler for murdering Jews, and kept lists of all clergy, ordered the murder of the Anglican archbishop and often had Ugandans tortured for the simple reason that they had attended church. But the Christian church has survived and prospered, and now almost three-quarters of Uganda’s 21 million people are Christians, approximately 16 percent claim to be Muslim, and the remaining 9 percent are indigenous religious people.\textsuperscript{55}

Statistically Sao Tome and Principe, in proportion to its population, is the most Christian country in Africa, with 100 percent being Christian, followed by Seychelles (99%), Cape Verde (98%), Gabon (96%), Lesotho (93%), Equatorial Guinea (89%),
Namibia (83%), South Africa (81%), Swaziland (77%), Malawi (75%) and so on. Out of 53 countries in Africa today, more than half—27—are classified as Christian nations, where over 50 percent are recorded as Christian. Historically and traditionally, Egypt and Ethiopia come first, where Christian population occupies 17.5 percent and 59 percent respectively, as mentioned before. Geographically seen, Christianity has exploded in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, making the southern two-thirds of the continent and Madagascar predominantly Christian, while the northern one-third is predominantly Muslim.

African religion is still very present, even if this is not so evident from the statistics, since it permeates the whole world-view of many Christians and Muslims. In 1900, out of a total population of 107.9 million, there were 10 million Christians, or 9.2 percent of the population, compared to 34.5 million Muslims, or 32 percent, and 63 million adherents of African indigenous religion, or 58 percent, and about one million followers of other religions such as Judaism and Hinduism. It is now reckoned, that in the year 2000, there will be a population of 814 million of whom 394 million, or 48.4 percent, will be Christians; 339 million, or 41.4 percent, Muslims; 72.4 million, or 8.9 percent, adherents of African indigenous religion; and 8.5 million, or 1 percent, followers of other religions.

Let me finish this paper by providing four significant reasons why African Christianity has shown such a remarkable renaissance or revival, along with some characteristics unique to African culture. In the first place, the enthusiastic religious mentality unique to Africans had made African Christianity what it is today. As observed already, Africans are notoriously religious, and indeed each people or tribe has its own religious system developed from the very beginning. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully and thoroughly that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. In traditional life Africans do not know how to exist without religion. Western or imported Christianity has come to mean for many Africans simply a set of rules to be observed, promises to be expected in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be sung, rituals to be followed and a few other outward things. It is a Christianity which is locked up six days a week, meeting only for two hours on Sundays and perhaps
once during the week. It is a Christianity which is active in a church building. The rest of the week is empty. Africans who traditionally do not know religious vacuum, feel that they don’t get enough religion from this type of Christianity, since it does not fill up their whole life and their understanding of the universe. Thus African Christians often feel completely foreign in imported or Western churches. For instance, much of imported Christianity is based on books but there are older African Christians who do not read; the hymns are translated from European, English and American versions and are sung to foreign tunes which have little rhythm and without bodily movements like clapping the hands or twisting the loins as a religious expression. Worship in Western churches is simply dull for most Africans. African churches are the gathering places to find "a place to feel at home," not only in worship but in the whole profession and expression of Christian faith.

Because traditionally religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carried it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death.

Secondly, denominationalism in Africa is responsible for the Christian expansion and revivals as shown in that continent today. One of the feature characteristics of Western Christianity and its missionary activities is that virtually every sect and denomination in Western Europe and America has started its work in Africa. The result is that Africa does not have a single image of Christianity but extremely numerous images. Different church structures and traditions have been imported from overseas, and African Christians have inherited them without even understanding their meaning or background. These denominations endeavor far more to produce “perfect” Anglicans, Roman Catholics,
Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Seventh-day Adventists and so on than to make their converts good followers of Jesus Christ. Indeed, denominationalism is one of the worst divisive elements in modern Africa; and some of the denominations have engaged in physical fighting, while today they compete for converts and in homiletical propaganda.61

To make matters more complicated, African religious mentality has made Christian converts found their independent or separatist churches. Just over nine thousand of such independent churches were reported in 1995 all over Africa. Nearly all of them originate from Anglican, Lutheran and other Protestant Church backgrounds, with only a few from the Roman Catholic Church and probably none from the Orthodox Church. At least thirteen percent of the Christians in Africa belong to these independent or separatist churches.62

Thirdly, Africa was tremendously blessed with a number of heroic missionaries, such as Robert Moffat, David Livingstone, Henry M. Stanley, George Grenfell, Alexander Mackay, Mary Slessor and many others. Black Africa, known for centuries as the “White Man’s Graveyard,” has claimed the lives of more Christian missionaries than any other area of the world. In spite of the tremendous sacrifice, African missions have been harshly criticized, particularly in regard to the missionaries’ ties to colonialism and their exporting of European civilization. Moffat’s philosophy of the “Bible and plough” was expanded by Livingstone’s philosophy of “Commerce and Christianity,” and even Mary Slessor insisted on the necessity of trade to raise the African standard of living and make the people more suited to Christian ethical standards.63

Although we grant that missionaries were an integral part of colonialism, unashamedly identifying European civilization with the Christian message, they, more than any other outside influence, fought against the evils colonialism and imperialism brought. They waged long and bitter battles, sometimes physically, against the heinous traffic in human cargo. The vast majority of missionaries were pro-African, and their stand for racial justice often made them despised by their European brothers. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that without the conscience of Christian missions, many of the crimes of colonialism would have...
Perhaps the greatest criticism of African missions has come from social scientists and anthropologists who have charged that Christian missions have wreaked havoc on African culture. It is true that missionaries of the nineteenth century often failed to appreciate the distinctive qualities of unfamiliar cultures and failed to make Christianity compatible with the customs of primitive societies. But it must also be remembered that much of African culture was unhealthy and in desperate need of major surgery. The Africans were destroying themselves at an alarming rate through intertribal warfare, and in some instances through time-honored traditions of headhunting, twin-murder, human sacrifice, cannibalism, and witchcraft. The missionaries’ efforts to eradicate these practices helped preserve Africa’s most valuable cultural asset—the people themselves—and only through the preservation of its people could Africa become the great Christian stronghold it is today.

Africa produced one of the world’s best-known missionaries, David Livingstone (1813-1873). Never in the annals of missionary legend has a man been more lionized than Livingstone. He was the hero that Victorian England so desperately needed, and his magnificent accomplishments as a missionary, explorer, geographer, and ethnographer displayed a heretofore unseen Africa, and opened up the heart of the continent to mission work. Some of Livingstone’s works inscribed in Westminster Abbey summarize his achievements: “For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets, to abolish the desolating slave trade of Central Africa.” Even today historians would still acknowledge him as the greatest missionary of all time.

Fourthly and lastly, Africa has had a number of devout, sincere and dedicated native Christian leaders, who began as helpers of Western missionaries and later developed their own African-type Christian churches. As mentioned before, Africans are traditionally extremely religious and also mystical in nature. They are not theologians; indeed most of African Christian leaders are either illiterate or have only little formal learning. These leaders are more concerned with practical evangelism, basic education and medical care, than with any academic or theological issues that might arise from the presence of Christianity in Africa.
Revelation and healing play important roles in the African churches. Some of them forbid their followers to use European medicines, teaching their members to depend entirely on God's power through prayer and healing services. Revelation comes though dreams and visions, and through meditation when leaders withdraw to solitary places for varying lengths of time.69

Along with the globalizing international trend, Africa has also changed in the second half of the twentieth century after the independence from Western imperialism. Since the 1960s, the development of African theology has become very evident and has gained great momentum in recent years. This theology attempts, among other things, to understand and interpret the Christian faith according to the Bible, within the total African context, taking into consideration both the cultural heritage and the contemporary situation. Also headed by South Africa, the so-called Liberation Theology has been established in many parts of Africa today.70 Originating in Latin America in the middle of the twentieth century, Liberation theology focuses on the poor and seeks to free them from all forms of oppression. The movement was made official in Medellin, Colombia, at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1968; participants issued a document proclaiming the rights of the poor and stating that industrialized nations unfairly enrich themselves by exploiting Third World countries. Liberation theologians claim that the Bible can only be understood from the perspective of the poor, and that the God of the biblical faith is on their side.71

Although I have provided four significant reasons for Christian revivals in Africa — Africans' unique religious mentality, mushrooming of denominational and independent churches, the works of many heroic missionaries such as David Livingstone, and a great number of devout, sincere and dedicated native Christian leaders we should not forget one fundamental factor for the revival of African Christianity. The real strength of Christianity is indeed Jesus Christ himself. It is He, therefore, and only He, who deserves to be the prime source for all the successes and revivals of Christian movement in today's Africa.

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NOTES:

10. David Lamb, p. 16.
13. Ibid., p. 100.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 17.
26. Elizabeth Isichei, p. 2
31. John Iliffe, p. 43.
33. Elizabeth Isichei, p. 45.
41. Harold G. Marcus, p 17.
43. David B. Barrett, p. 284.
44. Elizabeth Isichei, p. 49.
49. David B Barrett, p. 28.
52. John Iliffe, p. 143.
53. David Lamb, p. 143.
55. John W. Wright, p. 519.
64. *Ibid.*
70. Elizabeth Isichei, pp. 311, 331.