

## **In the Shadow of the Elephant: Bishop Crowther and the African Missionary Movement**

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The title I have chosen for this address no doubt invites curious speculation. Just so you know, it is derived from a Ghanaian proverb which states:

If you go through the high grass where the elephant has already gone through, you don't get soaked with the dew.

My reason for choosing it will hopefully become clear by the end of this lecture.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living at a time when global Christianity is experiencing fascinating and epochal developments. As we speak, Western missionary agencies, churches and movements are already gearing up for the centennial commemoration of the landmark world missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. Allow me to use that historic meeting as a starting point for my brief reflections on the historical significance and legacy of Bishop Ajayi Crowther.

The Edinburgh 1910 meeting was convened at the height of Western colonial expansion and its pronouncements bristled with optimistic self-confidence and a sense of urgency. Its organizers were confident (as they put it) that “it is possible today as never before to have a campaign adequate to carry the Gospel to all the non-Christian world so far as the Christian Church is concerned”.<sup>1</sup> Let me remind you that the designation “world” in the conference title referred not to the mission field but to the predominantly Western missionaries deemed to represent the vanguard of world evangelization. Non-Western representation at this meeting was limited to “a symbolic handful of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Christians”.<sup>2</sup> Not a single African was present. The voices that spoke of Africa were European voices.

It is worth adding that European or Western missionary agencies did not (and still do not), as a rule, devote their best resources or send their finest and brightest to Africa.<sup>3</sup> It was Asia,

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<sup>1</sup> *World Missionary Conference, 1910: Report of Commission I—Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World*, (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 10. As we shall see below, this optimism was only slightly tempered by a muted recognition that the spiritual state of the “Home Church” was not fully in keeping with its missionary obligation.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “African Christianity in the History of Religions,” *Studies in World Christianity* 2 (1996): 183-203, 185.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 117.

particularly China, with its teeming masses and civilizational splendors, that had long captured the European imagination. And a preoccupation with statistical calculation in missionary thinking also meant that India and China were identified as “the two great mission fields of the world”. Yet a continent three times the size of Europe could not be ignored; and Africa featured prominently on the agenda and proceedings.

The report on Africa estimated that there were some 150 million souls on the continent “awaiting the arrival of [Christian] messengers”<sup>4</sup>—including about 60 million Muslims. It was recognized that some 4 million African Christians survived from Apostolic times in Egypt and Ethiopia, but participants were convinced that these Christian communities “[had] long ceased to be missionary”.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of Edinburgh 1910, “the bulk of the population of Africa [was] immersed in darkness”. As one report put it, “here, as in no other continent, there was a mass of dark, illiterate, dissevered, and degraded Paganism to be enlightened and uplifted into the Church of Christ”.<sup>6</sup>

The finding at this historic missionary gathering that Africa was in great need of the gospel is understandable and unquestionable. Nevertheless, the meeting’s assessment of Christian engagement with Africa is deeply disconcerting for three related reasons: first, the explicit assumption that the spread of the gospel in Africa (and elsewhere in the non-Western world) depended solely on the actions and resources of the Western Church; second, the absence of any reference to the existence of sizeable Christian communities in West and East Africa; third, and in some ways most disturbing, was the complete lack of acknowledgement of the huge role which African agency and African initiatives had played in the spread of the gospel in the century leading up to Edinburgh 1910.

One could never tell from the proceedings of this historic meeting that “in most of the notable areas of church growth” on the African continent, “the overwhelming majority of missionary faces were black”.<sup>7</sup> Or that, in 1906, for instance, the CMS—at the time the largest British

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<sup>4</sup> *World Missionary Conference, 1910: Report of Commission I—Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World*, 9, 206f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Leicester England: Apollos, 1990), 71-72. See also, Ogbu Kalu, “Colour and Conversion: The White Missionary Factor in the Christianisation of Igboland, 1867-1967,” *Missiology* xviii, no. 1 (1990): 61-74, 61-74.

Protestant mission agency on the continent—had 8,850 ‘native agents’ compared to 975 European missionaries—nine Africans for every single European.<sup>8</sup>

Alas, this tendency to overlook or discount the African element in African Christianity has lasted well beyond 1910. There can be no doubt that the vision, sacrificial devotion, and tremendous courage of European missionaries who took the gospel to distant lands (where they had to contend with all manner of dangers and adversity) is one of the most remarkable chapters in Christian history. But much of the missionary record obscures the fact that the spread of Christianity in the non-Western world has largely been the work of non-Western agency. In the African experience, African agents, serving as interpreters, catechists, school teachers, pastors, even bishops formed the main vanguard of the Christian expansion.<sup>9</sup> Modern African Christianity, notes Andrew Walls, “is not only the result of movement among Africans, but it has been principally sustained by Africans and is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives”. Not to put too fine a point on it, the vast majority of African Christians have heard the gospel only from other Africans!

These considerations encourage the view that the inauguration of the Crowther Centre for Mission Education is not only a special event in the ongoing work of CMS but also in special tribute to African Christianity. For, today, we honor and commemorate the life and legacy of a man whose missionary initiatives and enterprise, in the century leading up to Edinburgh 1910, did more for the expansion of Christianity in Africa than any other single individual—African or European. Bishop Ajayi Crowther was not only the premier pioneer missionary of his day, he was also the most celebrated African Christian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the leading architects of the modern African Church.

#### Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c.1806-1891)

The story of this slave boy who became a bishop is well known and need not take too much of our time. The teenage Ajayi was enslaved when his Yoruba town of Oshogun (in south-western Nigeria), some 100 miles inland from Lagos, was over-run by Muslim invaders in 1821. Ajayi landed on a Portuguese ship which was intercepted by British naval vessels; and, as a “receptive”, he was resettled in the British colony of Sierra Leone.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, , 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 86.

<sup>10</sup> The Sierra Leone settlement on the west coast of Africa was established as a Christian experiment in 1787 and became a Crown Colony in 1808.

Like many other “recaptives” Ajayi embraced the Christian faith and was renamed Samuel Crowther after a missionary benefactor.<sup>11</sup> Genuinely humble of disposition, but industrious and intelligent,<sup>12</sup> Crowther made a strong impression on those around him, including European missionaries. He also excelled in educational pursuits. But it was in ministerial and missionary vocation that he was destined to have his greatest and most enduring impact.

Throughout his adult life, Crowther had his full share of many critics and detractors, notably among Europeans who doubted his capability and questioned the advisability of promoting an African to positions of great visibility and responsibility. A longstanding criticism was that he had a timid character and was soft on discipline—a charge that overshadowed the last years of his life. And while he was widely venerated among African Christians (during his life and for long after), some African Christian leaders were concerned that circumstances made him a pawn in a high stakes game governed by European rules and expectations. But Crowther’s long life—he lived for almost all of the nineteenth century—and towering achievements defy straightforward analysis. He remains a complex figure who lived in a time of great transitions and shifting trends. For all his considerable indebtedness to European philanthropy and ideas, Crowther did much to undermine European missionary control mechanisms and lay the foundation for key elements of African Christianity.

I would also argue that Bishop Crowther’s remarkable career—so unwarrantedly ignored by the Edinburgh 1910 missionary conference—not only represented an extraordinary missionary achievement in his day but also anticipates, in significant ways, the new African missionary initiatives gaining global significance in our day (just over a century later).

The rest of this lecture is in two parts. In the first part I will like to briefly highlight 3 major elements in Crowther’s lengthy missionary career that furnish important insights into his missionary thinking and significance. The second part will be devoted to a brief overview of contemporary African missionary initiatives—specifically those that implicate the West as a new site of Christian expansion.

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<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel M. Tobiah Epelle, *The Church in the Niger Delta*

*with an Appendix on Archdeacon Crowther* (Port Harcourt: Niger Delta Diocese, 1955), microform., 119.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891; the Making of a New Elite*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co Ltd, 1969), 26.

### Bishop Crowther's Missionary Significance

Allow me to draw your attention to three key elements pertaining to Bishop Crowther's lengthy missionary career:

- a) his Mission outlook
- b) his encounter with Muslims
- c) the role of Migration in his ministry

#### *A) Mission*

Several qualities made Crowther the model African missionary of the nineteenth century. He lived at a time and in a racial environment where his educational attainments and advanced theological training provided for many the only convincing evidence of African capability; and he Crowther was the best trained.<sup>13</sup> It was the hope that men such as Crowther

with British habits and education grafted upon their African constitutions, would become out pioneers throughout Africa, and raise the emulation of their brethren by showing them that ability, though covered with a black skin, was appreciated and rewarded.<sup>14</sup>

But there were many qualities intrinsic to the man that made Crowther an ideal missionary: despite his outstanding attainments, virtually everyone who met him was struck by his infinite modesty; his gift for languages and lifelong commitment to translation; his exemplary Christian life and a fervent desire to see his people embrace the Christian faith; and the fact that he was as composed and self-assured in his interactions within the brightest and highest circles in England as he was comfortable among his own African peoples and their radically different modes of existence.

Due to his natural gifts, Crowther was appointed to head a CMS mission in the territory around the Niger in 1857. This Niger mission was founded, supervised and operated entirely by Africans—the first such venture in the Society's history. When Crowther was made its bishop in 1864 (of the countries in West Africa beyond British dominions), he also became the first African Anglican bishop.<sup>15</sup> Under Crowther's leadership, the Niger mission marked one of the most notable periods of Christian expansion on the African continent. Indeed, as hinted earlier,

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<sup>13</sup> One Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, whose doubts about the mental capacity of the "Negro" were demolished after an encounter with Crowther, wrote of similarly minded colleagues: "If, After hearing that young African's answers, they still contend that he does not possess a logical faculty, they will tempt us to question whether they do not lack certain other faculties of at least equal importance, such as common fairness of judgment and Christian candor"—Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Adjai Crowther*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 71.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jean Herskovits Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The "Sierra Leonians" In Yoruba, 1830-1890*, (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>15</sup> His Episcopal jurisdiction encompassed the Niger and other areas where there were no European missionaries – this included parts of the Yoruba Mission but effectively excluding Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan.

the Christian expansion that took place under his leadership was unmatched in nineteenth century Africa.

We see in Bishop Crowther's missionary approach many of the same shortcomings which bedeviled the Western missionary project: including the link between Christianity and Western civilization and the inordinate emphasis on education as a tool of evangelism. But Crowther transcended these limitations and even went against the grain in important ways:

- he was deeply convinced that African agency was adequate for the job of mission without European involvement or supervision.
- he was a strong advocate of a simple presentation of the Gospel without disputation or controversy.
- he rejected the tendency to describe non-Christians "as ignorant, stupid, and foolish idolaters" and insisted that all classes of hearers were to be dealt with sympathy and love".<sup>16</sup>
- he also counseled that, as far as possible, principles and insights with which the hearers were already familiar were to be used in preaching the Gospel. For instance, he instructed that the widespread practice of animal sacrifice provided a useful basis for teaching about the efficacy of the blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

For all that, Crowther was also adept at denouncing negative elements of African religion without the wholesale rejection common among his European counterparts. He was involved in countless power encounters and often won converts by challenging their practices or calling the bluff of their prophets and their gods. Not surprisingly, his polemic sermons in Yoruba "were felt to be more damaging to traditional religion than those preached by the white man".<sup>18</sup>

But most important of all, Crowther was wholly committed to the vernacular principle in mission: namely, that Christianity has no special sacred language or definitive cultural expression. He himself spent almost all his life involved in the translation of the Bible into Yoruba. After over forty years of labor, he poignantly declared:

The more I think of it the more I feel its importance, that it is the *base* of the spiritual success of all our Missionary operations, for the 'Sword of the Spirit' placed in the hands of the congregations in their own tongue will do more to convince and convert them than all our preachings, teachings, and class meetings of so many years put together. Above this it will be carried into their homes, be a companion in the secret chamber of the faithful, and a comfort to the sick on his bed whenever the most zealous and energetic Missionary fails to be present.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dandeson C. Crowther, *The Establishment of the Niger Delta Pastorate During the Episcopacy of the Rt. Rev. Bishop S. A. Crowther*, (Liverpool: Thomson and Co. Ltd., 1907), 168.

<sup>17</sup> The practice of a yearly human sacrifice at Onitsha for the sin of the nation convinced Crowther that such rites "must have their remote origin from imitation of the Levitical institution of sacrifices, which have degenerated as they were handed down from the tradition of the Fathers"—*Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> P. R. McKenzie, "Samuel Crowther's Attitude to Other Faiths: The Early Period," in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, ed. Ogbu Kalu (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1980), 256.

<sup>19</sup> Crowther, *The Establishment of the Niger Delta Pastorate During the Episcopacy of the Rt. Rev. Bishop S. A. Crowther*, , 31.

It is worth noting that this emphasis on vernacular translation would later become perhaps the most critical defining element in African Christianity and a central feature of the engagement with African Islam.

### *B) Encounter with Muslims*

By Crowther's day European Christianity was long defined by "Christendom": the experience of Christianity as a territorial faith, binding on the whole of society. Since Christendom, by definition, precluded religious plurality, the modern missionary movement had no preparation for engagement with Islam in the non-Western contexts. Indeed, as late as the early nineteenth century, only a very small number of European missionaries were involved with Muslims on a regular basis.<sup>20</sup> The first sustained encounter with Islam came with the establishment of a Christian settlement in Sierra Leone, when a commission of a mission to the King of Timbo (in Futa Jallon). But that mission collapsed even before it began when vigorous condemnation of Islam by one of its members alarmed the governor. Subsequently the Sierra Leone colony became home to a large receptive population that included a large number of Muslims—whose presence meant that Christianity was forced to compete with the attraction of Islam. (By then, however, Western missionary interest had turned elsewhere, to Russia and India).<sup>21</sup>

All this is to say that the Niger Mission over which Crowther presided represented "the first sustained missionary engagement with African Islam in modern times";<sup>22</sup> a development rendered inevitable by the fact that the region encompassed predominantly Muslim territory.

Crowther was no stranger to Muslims or Islam. Muslims had burnt his village, scattered his family and sold him into slavery; and a good proportion of Sierra Leone population, as I have pointed out, were strict Muslims. Furthermore, the woman Crowther married (in 1829) was the daughter of a Muslim—her given name was Asano, she was baptized Susan Thompson.

Within the Western missionary movement the encounter with Islam involved an approach that typically focused on confrontational debate, polemical defense of Christian doctrine, and denunciations of Islam as a false religion. Crowther's approach to Christian-Muslim engagement was strikingly different. He had learnt from painful experience among Muslims in

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "In Quest of the Father of Mission Studies," *IBMR* 23, no. 3 (1999): 98-102, 157.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 159. Unfortunately, the efforts of Henry Martyn in India, the first major missionary response to the encounter with Muslims, were short lived and were not followed up.

<sup>22</sup> A F Walls, 'The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1992), 15-21, 19.

the Sierra Leone that confrontational debate simply did not work; that the noble effort to win arguments by promoting or defending Christian doctrine only succeeded in arousing hostility, bewilderment, and rejection. Over time, he developed what might be termed a uniquely African Christian approach to Islam that incorporated three elements

First, it was non-confrontational. Crowther was careful not to attack Islam and he determined (in his own words) that “our missionary operations under Mohammedan government should not be disputes about the truth or falsehood of one religion or another, but...aim at toleration”.<sup>23</sup> Second, it was almost exclusively Bible-based, which is to say that in his interactions with Muslims, Crowther insisted on using actual words from Scripture (quoting specific passages) in response to the all queries rather than take a stance on “traditional formulations of Christian doctrine”. He was convinced that the Bible should be allowed to speak for itself. As he put it, “after many years of experience, I have found that the Bible, the sword of the Spirit, must fight its own battle, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit”.

This outlook was probably influenced in some measure by the knowledge that the average African Christian (in his day) knew his Bible more than the average Africa Muslim knew the Koran. Moreover, Crowther “found a great demand from Muslim circles and others for Arabic Bibles”.<sup>24</sup> But his resolve to let the Bible speak for itself also represented a very African understanding of Scripture that is even more evident today: one that emphasizes in the spiritual efficacy of the Word and considers effective knowledge of the Bible a hallmark of spirituality.

Third, Bishop Crowther’s approach to Islam emphasized vernacular translation. As already mentioned, Crowther was wholly committed to the principle of vernacular translation. He spent almost all his life involved in the translation of the Bible into Yoruba. While in Yorubaland, he made full use of the Yoruba Bible in areas and preached daily in the Yoruba language. He made the translation of Scriptures into African languages a centerpiece of his mission strategy. In the Niger, where the local languages were unknown to him and his agents, he emphasized the need to collect words and sentences in the local dialects “so as to be able in the course of time to make a primer and a vocabulary of the language”.<sup>25</sup> He also made full use of Arabic Bibles.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Walls, "In Quest of the Father of Mission Studies," 161.

<sup>25</sup> Crowther, *The Establishment of the Niger Delta Pastorate During the Episcopacy of the Rt. Rev. Bishop S. A. Crowther*, 146.

With the use of African languages in Scripture, prayer, worship, and study, argues Lamin Sanneh, Crowther “formulated terms for Christianity as an African religion”.<sup>26</sup>

### *C) Migration*

In the past week or so (since I have been here) I have tried to explain to anyone who would listen (or looked at me the wrong way!) that migration has always played a critical role in global Christian expansion. It is impossible to get away from the fact that that human migration—the experience of uprootedness, displacement, and other forms of mobility—is among the most fundamental features of Christian missionary enterprise. The vast sweep of the biblical narrative is suffused with the incidences of migration and dislocation: even the name “Christian” emerged out of a context of migration and refugee movement.

In any case, Western missionaries not only benefited from the projection of Western political power they also formed a segment of the massive tide of European movement which characterized the second phase of international migrations. The great century of Western missionary expansion (1814-1925) involved the overseas migration of an estimated 40-60 million Europeans: *one-in-five Europeans*—the majority of whom were economic migrants! It is no coincidence that the most extensive missionary movement in history corresponded with the largest migration movement in history.

Crowther’s missionary career was also shaped by migration and displacement. His conversion to the Christian faith was marked by the experience of uprootedness which saw the transfer of thousands of liberated African slaves (an estimated 67,000 by 1840) to the British colony of Sierra Leone. There can be little doubt that the trauma of displacement and involuntary migration contributed to mass conversions to Christianity among this “receptive” population. This is one reason perhaps why, in 1820, Freetown boasted more African Christians than the rest of tropical Africa.<sup>27</sup>

It is also noteworthy that in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, the Sierra Leone colony (in West Africa), “probably produced more missionaries, ministerial and lay, per head of population than any other country in the world”.<sup>28</sup> Among other

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<sup>26</sup> Lamin Sanneh, "The C.M.S. And the African Transformation: Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Opening of Nigeria," in *The Church Missionary Society and World Christianity, 1799-1999*, ed. Kevin Ward and Brian Stanley (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), 184f.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. P. E. H. Hair, "Archdeacon Crowther and the Delta Pastorate 1892-99," *Pamphlet, n.d.* , 16.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History," *Journal of African*

things, the massive repatriation movement among these African Christians in Sierra Leone back to their homelands in Nigeria—a movement partly inspired by their desire to take the message of the gospel back to the lands from which they had been enslaved<sup>29</sup>—helped to launch the Niger Mission and proved vital to the growth of Nigerian Christianity. Migration by large numbers of African Christians, of whom Crowther was one, would play a hugely significant role in the spread of Christianity throughout West Africa and beyond.<sup>30</sup>

### The Contemporary African Experience

As I noted earlier, the Edinburgh 1910 event occurred at the high water mark of European missionary expansion. Its outlook mirrored the age of empire and its ideals reflected the overheated self-confidence of a movement at full tide. The structure, focus, and core proposals of the conference were clearly premised on the resolute assurance that Europe and North America constituted the centers of the faith and the fulcrum of its expansion. But the grand surge of Western missionary movements on which Edinburgh 1910 placed all its bets never happened. Within a matter of decades, two devastating world wars had forced European overseas missions into major eclipse, from which it would take long to recover. North American missionary initiatives helped to fill much of the gap; but the “closing of China” (after 1949) dealt a further blow to Western missionary confidence, while decolonization from the late 1950s stimulated a widespread backlash against all forms of Western (including missionary) domination.

In the event, the global Christian landscape was already undergoing a radical reshaping of its demographic and cultural contours, a process that has ushered in a whole new chapter in the history of world Christianity. It is now a commonplace that by the start of the twenty-first century, global Christianity had experienced an epochal shift which has seen the emergence of Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia as the new heartlands of the faith. This southward shift in global Christianity’s center of gravity is extraordinary by any reckoning; and represents perhaps the most remarkable religious transformation of the twentieth century.

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*Christian Thought* 5, no. 2 (2002): 3-11, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Economic motives were paramount, but religious/missionary motives were also strongly evident. Wrote the first emigrants to the governor: “thanks be to God of all mercy who has sent his servants to declare unto us poor Creatures the way of Salvation which illuminates our understanding, so we were brought to know that we have a soul to save, and when your humble petitioners look back upon their poor Country people who [are] no living in darkness, with out the light of the Gospel, se we have [sic] taken upon ourselves to direct this our humble petition to your Excellency”—Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The "Sierra Leonians" In Yoruba, 1830-1890*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, .

The basic statistical facts are now fairly well known, including the fact that at least two out of every three Christians now reside in the non-Western world. Quite simply, we find ourselves in a new epoch of global Christianity: one which Bishop Crowther would never have dreamed of; indeed, one which the good folk who convened the Edinburgh 1910 meeting could not have anticipated. Less widely acknowledged is the fact that this shift has also been accompanied by the rise of a massive non-Western missionary movement linked to global migration flows and trends.

Few areas of the world demonstrate the recent dramatic shift within global Christianity more forcibly than Africa. The African experience epitomizes the shift not only in terms of its sheer demographic scale but also in its unexpectedness and missionary significance. By 2000 over 40 percent of the African population was estimated to be Christian.<sup>31</sup> While the Church in Europe and North America is reportedly losing an estimated 6,000 church members a day, African Christians are increasing at a rate of 23,000 new Christians a day (or 8.5 million a year).<sup>32</sup> Even when defections from the faith are accounted for, the net increase—i.e., or number of new converts—still averages 1.5 million a year. Africa is held to be “experiencing the fastest church growth of any region” in the world.<sup>33</sup> And if current trends continue, the number of African Christians will double by 2025, in some estimates, by which time there will be more Christians in Africa than on any other continent in the world.<sup>34</sup> The Pentecostal-Charismatic movement has been the main engine of growth in recent decades, but the overwhelming majority of Christians are to be found in the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic churches.

Admittedly, such statistical evaluations obscure complex realities on the ground which involve massive dislocations, multiple allegiances, and endless sectarian divisions. But the significance of African Christianity extends far beyond numerical growth and rate of expansion: evident in Andrew Walls’ assertion that it must be seen as “a major component of contemporary *representative* Christianity”.<sup>35</sup> African Christianity must also be recognized as a significant

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<sup>31</sup> David B. Barrett *et al.*, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)5; see also, Michael Jaffarian, “The Statistical State of the Missionary Enterprise,” *Missiology* 30, no. 1 (2002): 15-32.

<sup>32</sup> Barrett *et al.*, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Siewert and E. G. Valdez, eds., *Mission Handbook* (California: MARC Publications, 1997), 34.

<sup>34</sup> David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, “Status of Global Mission, A.D. 2006, in the Context of 20th and 21st Centuries,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 1 (2006): 28. One-in-every-two Anglicans worldwide is African (a total of 44 million).

<sup>35</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, 119.

model of the new age of non-Western missionary initiatives on which the future of global Christianity may largely depend.

Take the case of Apostle Michael Ntumu, the current chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Ghana's largest Protestant body. In 1988, Ntumu was sent as a missionary to Liberia (Buchanan city) where he planted four vibrant churches in his first year. In December 1989, when the bloody Liberian civil war broke out, Ntumu made the fateful decision to stay along with his wife, Martha, and their four young children. Over the next year and a half, he experienced the horrific carnage of the war including the summary execution of other Ghanaian nationals at the hands of rebel groups incensed by the military intervention of the Ghanaian-led ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Held hostage with thousands of refugees in a camp where starvation and disease took hundreds of lives (an average of six a day), Ntumu secured the permission of the camp commander to hold regular church services and prayer meetings.<sup>36</sup>

By any reckoning, having a captive audience surrounded by death and destruction must be seen as a winning evangelistic formula. Ntumu himself confesses that "the more people died the more receptive to the Gospel the survivors became".<sup>37</sup> Still, many instances of miraculous provision and deliverance, after seasons of prayer and fasting, did much to underscore the "power of the gospel". Ntumu's ministry made so many converts, even among the rebel soldiers, that he organized a Bible class for their instruction. In the end, even the rebel captors attributed their hostages' survival and eventual evacuation to "the hand of God". Ntumu continued pastoral ministry among the refugee converts until he escaped the country in March 1991. Six months later, he was reassigned to the Ivory Coast where he learnt to speak French fluently and planted 278 churches in five years.

Apostle Ntumu, like many other contemporary African missionaries on the continent walk in the footsteps of Bishop Crowther, who also conducted his mission at a time of political upheaval and social unrest. But this is also true of the millions of African Christians who form the vanguard of a new non-Western missionary movement that engages the post-Christian West on many fronts.

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<sup>36</sup> Ntumu confirmed the details of his experiences in a personal interview. He also published a detailed account—cf. Michael k. Ntumu, *"Flamingo" The Camp of No Return: A Missionary's Account of God's Liberation During the Liberia War*, (Accra: Pentecostal Press, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

### *African Migrations*

With perhaps the most mobile population in the world, the highest population growth of any region, and the largest number of countries ranked lowest in the human development index (2005),<sup>38</sup> Africa has disgorged unprecedented numbers of its inhabitants in the last four decades. The U.S. boasts the largest African migrant population (roughly 1.3 million), but African migrants constitute a more visible presence in the United Kingdom: due to its higher percentage of the total African migrants (17 percentage U.K.; 3.3 percentage U.S.) and the fact that African foreign-born constitute a higher percentage of the overall population (1.4 percentage U.K.; 0.4 percentage U.S.). In truth, Africans form a significant proportion of the new immigrants within Western nations; and a good many are Christian. Already in 2001, the number of African Christians throughout Europe was estimated to be in excess of three million;<sup>39</sup> and thousands of African immigrant congregations can be found all over the continent.<sup>40</sup>

We are left with a profound historical fact. In the same way that unprecedented European migrations from Christianity's old heartland provided the impetus for European missionary movement, phenomenal migrations from Christianity's new heartlands (in Africa, Latin America, and Asia) have galvanized a massive non-Western missionary movement. The missionary nature of non-Western migration is ultimately a function of the fundamental notion that *every Christian migrant is a de facto missionary*. It is also evident in the proliferation of immigrant congregations in Europe and North America. A few examples must suffice:

- A century ago, Charles Spurgeon's 5000-seater Metropolitan Tabernacle at Elephant and Castle (south London) was the largest Baptist church with thousands of white English worshippers; today the largest Baptist church in Britain is composed of African immigrants.<sup>41</sup>
- It is well known that the Nigerian-led Kingsway International Christian Center has the largest congregation (over 10,000) in the entire United Kingdom.
- The Redeemed Christian Church of God (a Nigeria-based movement) established its first church in Britain in 1989; by 2005, it had grown to 141 churches with a total of 18,000 members by 2005.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 30 of the 32 countries ranked "low human development" are in Africa—cf. Human Development Report, (United Nations, 2005) The other two are Yemen and Haiti.

<sup>39</sup> Report of the Council of African Christian Communities in Europe (CACCE) at the 1999 meeting in Belgium, quoted in Roswith Gerloff, "Religion, Culture and Resistance: The Significance of African Christian Communities in Europe," *Exchange* 30, no. 3 (2001): 276-289, 277.

<sup>40</sup> Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe*, (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 92.

<sup>41</sup> Lindsay Bergstrom, "Worldwide Baptists Survive, Reflect Century of Cultural Change", (*Associated Baptist Press*), January 6, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord Has Done!: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain*, (Bletchley, England: Scripture Union, 2005), 93.

- But perhaps the greatest testimony to the then there is the Embassy for the Blessed Kingdom of God to All Nations (in Kiev, Ukraine). Founded in 1993 by Sunday Adelaja, a young Nigerian convert, the Embassy began as a bible study group of seven people meeting in Adelaja's apartment. After 3 months, the new group registered as a church with only 49 members.<sup>43</sup> By 2002, after adopting an outreach strategy which focused on the marginalized groups and outcasts in Ukrainian society, the church had grown to 20,000. Over one million Ukrainians have reportedly been converted to Christianity as a result of its ministry.<sup>44</sup>

### *The Missionary Significance*

For now, assessment of the full potential and possible impact of this relatively inchoate non-Western missionary movement must remain tentative and provisional. In particular, while its function as an instrument of (intercultural) evangelism within immigrant populations is robust and well attested, its capacity to transcend or penetrate formidable racial and socio-cultural barriers within Western societies remains less certain—though there are no lack of promising indications.<sup>45</sup> African immigrant churches or congregations also come in varying stripes and structure. But they boast a number of fairly common features: including dynamic worship, a strong spiritual orientation in which prayer and fasting are prominent,<sup>46</sup> emphasis on the authority of Scriptures, a preoccupation with supernatural intervention in daily life (in the form of healing, deliverance, and miracles), all-night prayer meetings, purposeful evangelism and a commitment to church planting.

Assessment of their missionary significant must include the following considerations:

- 1) The most significant counterforce to Islam in Europe is likely to come less from secularism or from Europe's homegrown, fairly moribund, Christianity than from the steady influx of Christian immigrants (from Africa, Latin America, and Asia). Not least because, in Europe at least, the most vital forms of Christianity many Muslims will encounter will be products of non-Western immigrant influx.
- 2) The new Christian immigrants and their descendants come from centers of vibrant Christian growth and embody a brand of Christianity that is strongly evangelistic or conversionist. And, since they also encounter societies in which Christianity is experiencing marked decline in numbers and influence, many come to see themselves as "missionaries"
- 3) The experiences and dynamics tied to migration naturally stimulate missionary function. In truth, migrant movement can cause or contribute to erosion of faith,<sup>47</sup> but it is a well attested

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<sup>43</sup> Sunday Adelaja, "Go to a Land That I Will Show You," in *Out of Africa*, ed. C. Peter Wagner and Joseph Thompson (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004), 37-55, 37-55.

<sup>44</sup> See the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations website, [www.godembassy.org](http://www.godembassy.org)

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (New York: Orbis Books), forthcoming (Summer 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Jenkins (2002:123) notes that the "single key area of faith and practice that divides Northern and Southern Christians" is the matter of spiritual forces and their effects on the everyday human world.

<sup>47</sup> Among other things, long term isolation can weaken religious allegiance; alternative religious systems may become more attractive; marrying someone of a different faith can lead to abandonment of old belief systems; the

fact that the experience of migration (even planned movement) tends to intensify religious consciousness, foster religious commitment, and increase the possibilities of religious conversion.<sup>48</sup> The large numbers of converts won by immigrant churches, primarily from within the immigrant population, testifies to their missionary function. Importantly, *they are Christianizing people groups whom American missionary agencies expend enormous amounts of resources and effort to reach in distant lands, often with indifferent or short-lived results.*

- 4) Like other Christian immigrant communities, AICs represent the face of Christianity to a goodly proportion of the nation's disadvantaged and marginalized population. Throughout the western world, immigrant communities proliferate in the poorer urban settings, least exposed to the dominant culture. Predominantly located in urban neighborhoods, and often forced to occupy the most unlikely places—crammed living rooms, hotel ballrooms, thousands of storefronts, rented halls or office buildings, even ornate churches whose members have declined—AICs serve constituencies (both immigrant and native) long abandoned by more established and affluent white/native congregations.
- 5) The new immigrant congregations are more attuned to religious plurality than Western Christians are. Massive post-1960s immigration has radically transformed the face of Western societies and instigated unprecedented cultural/religious diversity. Religious plurality is a new experience for the vast majority of Western Christians and the challenges it represents to the witness of the church are often not well understood or acknowledged. The vast proportion the new Christian immigrants, on the other hand, hail from countries where the life of faith is forged in settings marked by daily interaction with other major faiths. In the long run, the capacity of these growing and dynamic Christian immigrant groups to maintain effective Christian witness in the face of religious pluralism enhances their missionary capacity.
- 6) The forces of globalization (notably transnationalism) greatly enhance the capacity of immigrant congregations for sustained missionary engagement not only with Western society but also within the wider global context. In so far as the new immigrant churches remain urban-based, they will continue to inhabit the most strategic intersections of mobility, dynamism and change within Western societies. As veritable centers of transmigration or transnationalism, immigrant congregations have great potential to play a critical role within global Christian missions. Many African immigrant pastors, for instance, find that living in America produces avenues and resources for global outreach unavailable to them before they moved.

To conclude. For complex reasons, Bishop Crowther's achievements and legacy has received scant attention in the annals of missionary historiography and the World Missionary Conference, meeting less than 20 years after his death, made absolutely no reference to his ministry. Western missionary thinking still ignores the critical missionary function of non-Western Christians; in much the same way that the traditional theological curriculum (including mission studies) reflects a world that no longer exists. It is my fervent hope that the establishment of the Crowther Center of Mission Education will go some way to changing this: by helping to provide

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sheer busyness and pressures of life in a Western society can interfere with regular Sunday worship.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Helen R. Ebaugh and Janet S. Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2000), 401.

critical resources for new missiological research and analysis; by fostering Christian reflection on the issues that confront the global Church as it seeks to bear witness to the claims of the gospel; and also providing a place for community where Western and non-Western scholars might engage and learn from each other (fully attentive to the lessons of the past and the potential of new trends). Most important of all, I pray that, as Christian missionaries, we all, like Bishop Crowther before us, will walk in the shadow of the elephant—who is Christ!

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