

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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City Hotel
Box 24
Freetown, Sierra Leone
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Dwindling Christianity

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

On Sunday, November 23, a crowd variously estimated at ten to twenty thousand people sat through a four-hour ceremony in Siaka Stevens Stadium to see the installation of the first native Sierra Leonean Catholic archbishop. Speakers at the ceremony said the occasion showed the great strides the Catholic Church has made in this country over the past century.

While the Catholic Church and a few other Christian denominations, notably pentecostal sects, are making advances in Sierra Leone, the spread of Christianity as a whole has faltered. One authority, Dr. Edward W. Fashole-Luke, an Anglican priest and head of the theology department at Fourah Bay College, believes that Muslims outnumber Christians in Freetown. Figures are unavailable because the government considered religion too sensitive a topic to be included on the last census questionnaire. Based on his own inquiries, Fashole-Luke thinks that slightly more than half of the city's population would admit to being Muslim. Almost everyone else professes Christianity; few people in the city stick exclusively to traditional beliefs, although many, probably most, of them continue to practice such customs as initiation rites and veneration of ancestors.

That Christians should now be in the minority in this self-consciously Christian city, whose settlers' first public act was a prayer meeting, illustrates the obstacles facing Christianity on this continent. Freetown's British patrons considered the settlement a foothold for proselytizing efforts that would bring the light of Christ to the dark continent. While missionaries did go out from Freetown to establish Christian communities along the coast and in the interior, Freetown remains an island of Christian faith eroding in a sea of infidels.

Fashole-Luke offers several reasons for the retardation of Christianity in Sierra Leone. Some of the causes are peculiar to Freetown, others are applicable to all of black Africa.

The Creoles, those Sierra Leoneans who trace their ancestry to former slaves from other parts of Africa, look upon their Christianity as a mark of superiority over the indigenous people of Sierra Leone. They have made little effort to attract the local tribes to their churches. The oldest churches retain Western forms of worship. Their services are in English, although

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the congregation and the clergy will speak Krio the rest of the week.

Christians attribute the slow growth of their faith to their commitment to it. A tribesman can become a Muslim simply by claiming faith in Allah and acceptance of Mohammed as his final spokesman. He need not give up his tribal beliefs and practices. Conversion to Christianity requires a greater change in one's life, but churches have turned a blind eye to the continuation of many tribal customs. Secret societies have been active within the Creole community since the early days of the colony. The societies are most valued for the services they perform at the death of a member, but they offer a sense of security at all times that many Creoles do not find in church.

The biggest stumbling block to the spread of Christianity in Africa is the religion's insistence on monogamy. In a continent where children are the major source of prosperity, security and happiness, limiting a man to the reproductive powers of one woman is considered foolish. Here again Islam, which allows a man to have four wives, benefits by comparison. Orthodox Christian churches have also suffered from the attraction of various heretical Christian movements that permit polygamy on the basis of Old Testament examples. Again, churches have countered by ignoring unpleasant facts of life. Fashole-Luke says adulterous relationships are so common among Freetown Christians that even church officers bring their illegitimate children to be baptised. They do not get off scot-free, however. Most churches charge more for baptisms of children born out of wedlock. The standard fees as of a decade ago were fifty cents for a legitimate child and seventy-five cents for a bastard.

In 1968, the latest year for which I have statistics, Freetown had sixty-five churches and Christian meeting places, representing fifteen denominations, and seventeen mosques from three branches of Islam. **The sects with the most churches are Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic, the three major denominations that have tended to Sierra Leone's sacred and secular needs since the founding of the colony.** The Baptists have also had a church in Freetown throughout its history, but its members have never been numerous.

From the beginning, the colony has had an odd assortment of spin-offs and subjects to these churches. Some, like the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, which branched out of the Anglican Church, are no longer extant here. Others are still going strong, such as the West African Methodist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Several revivalist and pentecostal churches are also represented, including the Apostolic Church, Assembly of God, Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Two local variants are the Church of Our Lord (Aladura) and God is Our Light Church.

The Church of Our Lord (Aladura) is an example of the prophet-inspired churches that are prevalent throughout coastal West Africa. Aladura is a Nigerian word meaning "owners of prayer" used by several faith-healing churches. The Church of Our Lord was founded in 1930 by a Nigerian evangelist who had spent many years traveling around West Africa preaching. The church observes many of the articles of orthodox Christianity, apparently including monogamy, but its main attraction is faith-healing. This is done in a "faith-room" where the suf-

ferer or supplicant lives until his object is obtained or his patience runs out. Services are held several times a day. According to one description, the supplicant participates in these services by "rolling or rubbing one's face on the ground, beating oneself, sobbing or crying with lamentations, whirling around till one falls down with dizziness, etc." Services include interpretations of members' dreams, spiritual messages concerning the personal affairs of members of the congregation, prophecies and trances.

Freetown apparently does not have any followers of the most famous West African prophet, William Wade Harris. He was born in Liberia around 1865 and received the call about 1912 while in jail accused of conspiring with the British to overthrow the Liberian government. Harris was a prophet of the Old Testament style with African trappings, as seen by this description from a newspaper account of his visit to Freetown in 1917.

"He preached of death and destruction to the world because of sin. He carried a staff with a cross at the top end and a 'shake-shake' (a calabash with beads strung loosely over it). This he said was a 'bell' calling people to assemble to hear him and a 'harp' to captivate the multitude. He also denounced the priest of every church. He led people into fits of ecstasy with songs and many a time the vast throng would fall unconscious."

At the time of his Freetown visit, Harris was a renowned figure with a massive following in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. French authorities so feared his influence that they had banished him from the Ivory Coast although he preached that white men were superior to blacks. He was accused of endorsing polygamy but for the most part his teachings seem typical of revivalist Christianity. He had a reputation as a faith healer, he told people to throw away their fetishes and baptised those who confessed their sins. He built up quite a following in that part of Freetown inhabited by his tribesmen, the Krus, but he lost the people's esteem when he disappeared with two young women whom he had recruited to help him with his services.

A contemporary and countryman of Harris was Edward W. Blyden, perhaps the most eloquent critic of the Christian missionary in Africa. Although himself a Christian and thoroughly Europeanized, Blyden compared the effect of Christianity unfavorably with that of Islam on the African. Muslims came to Sierra Leone as traders who fitted into the community. The local tribes accepted Islam from a position of authority, adapting it to their beliefs and practices.

"Christianity, on the other hand," Blyden wrote, "came to the Negro as a slave or at least as a subject race in a foreign land. Along with the Christian teaching, he and his children received lessons of their utter and permanent inferiority and subordination to their instructors, to who they stood in the relation of chattels."

The domination of Christianity by Westerners is probably the major reason for the weakness of its appeal in Africa. Even where Islam was forced upon a people by the sword, the conquerors were most often a neighboring tribe who shared many of the same beliefs and customs. The religion was not hard to accept when it was wearing familiar dress. Christian missionaries not only came in strange clothes, they forced their adherents to adopt the foreign garb along with many other alien practices.

Recognizing the impediment that the Western missionary's pervasive influence presents to the spread of Christianity in Africa, Fashole-Luke and other African church leaders are calling for an end to all Western aid to African churches. The time has come, Fashole-Luke says, for African Christians to stand by themselves, a point that Blyden made more than a hundred years ago:

"In Sierra Leone, the Mohammedans, without any aid from government—Imperial or local—or any contributions from Mecca or Constantinople, erect their mosques, keep up their religious services, conduct their schools, and contribute to the support of missionaries from Arabia, Morocco or Fudah when they visit them. The same compliment cannot be paid to the Negro Christians of that settlement."

The demand for autonomy has been received with surprise and dismay by white missionaries, who accuse its proponents of being ungrateful.

Some such drastic step must be taken if Christianity is to remain a force in this country. Attendance in orthodox churches is down. Most of the growth in Christianity is in pentecostal churches. At first glance the success of American pentecostal churches appears to contradict the indictment against foreign missionaries, for these churches are more dominated by whites than the established Anglican and Methodist churches. The pentecostal movement has been more willing to incorporate native customs and to use native languages in their services than the older churches. Fashole-Luke attributes some of the growth of these sects to the political uncertainty in this country over the past fifteen years.

The Roman Catholic Church has also shown strength in Sierra Leone. In the former diocese of the new archbishop, the number of Catholics grew from about 10,000 to almost 80,000 during his tenure as bishop. Although the promotion of Sierra Leoneans in the church hierarchy has been slow, according to Blyden the church has historically shown less racial prejudice than most Protestant sects. He saw a consequent improvement in the status of the Negro in Catholic countries.

"The only Christian Negroes who have had the power successfully to throw off oppression, and maintain their position as freemen, were Catholic Negroes—the Haitians; and the greatest Negro the Christian world has yet produced was a Roman Catholic—Toussaint Louverture."

Blyden's example is extreme, but revealing. Africans seek to throw off the chains of Western domination in religion as well as in politics and economics. If Western churches don't recognize and accept this, Christianity in Africa may wither or undergo a revolution that will make it almost unrecognizable to Western Christians.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn