INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JS-15
Have Missions Succeeded?

P.O. Box 162,
Mwanza, Tanganyika
30 June 64

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

For more than 80 years, missionaries in the Lake Victoria region of Tanganyika have provided educational and medical facilities the poorly-financed administrators of Germany, of England, and now of Tanganyika itself, could not afford. But, considering the time they have been there, the number of converts in the area is small. All the churches claim that their membership is rapidly growing, yet I question how deep the Christian commitment of the converted Africans really is.

In 1882, 31 years after Johannes Rebmann baptised the first Protestant convert in East Africa, a party of Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries, led by the famous martyr-bishop Hannington, founded a mission station at Buzilima, 50 miles away from Mwanza. Subsequently the CMS chose to concentrate its efforts across Lake Victoria in Uganda and, in 1909, the African Inland Mission (AIM) took over its one remaining station on the Tanganyika shore. Some 25 years later, in the early 1930s, the Church of England returned, this time to the Lake towns; Bukoba, Mwanza, and Musoma, to serve as a chaplaincy for the British administrators there. Since then, aided by the Australian branch of the CMS, the Anglicans have slowly seeped out into the rural areas and the Bishop for the Victoria Nyanza diocese estimates that his Church now has 18,000 members in the Lake area.*

The next group of missionaries to settle in this part of Tanganyika were the White Fathers, who, in the early days, were mostly Frenchmen (their order, the Societe de Notre Dame d'Afrique was founded in France in 1868), but who are now a mixture of continental Europeans and French-speaking Canadians. Led by a Father Livinhac, a small number of them had reached Bukumbi, 22 miles from Mwanza, in 1878, but the order did not build a station there until 1883. In the following years, the White Fathers established missions at Bukoba in 1892, on Ukerewe Island in 1895, and, at the beginning of the century, at Musoma near the Kenya border.

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* When I say, "Lake area," "Lake region," or "Lakeside," I mean the part of the Lake Victoria shore which is in Tanganyika.


UGANDA
KENYA
LAKE VICTORIA
3720' Above M.S.L.
BUKOBA
MUSOMA
UKEREWE
TANGANYIKA
Land of the Wasukuma

Just after World War II, the American Maryknoll Mission replaced the White Fathers in Musoma and in Shinyanga, 100 miles south of Mwanza, near the renowned Williamson Diamond Mines. There are now an estimated 400,000 Catholics in all the Lakeside dioceses.

Next of today's missions to arrive was the AIM which, as we have seen, succeeded the CMS. With the exception of a few Australians, Canadians, and Englishmen, the AIM missionaries are American, predominantly mid-westerns; spare, Grant Wood sort of people who belong to churches on the right-wing of Christianity -- as they describe them, the "conservative" churches. The AIM has focused on the rural areas within 200 miles of Mwanza and claims 25,000 members for its African-staffed African Inland Church (AIC) which has now assumed much of the Mission's work

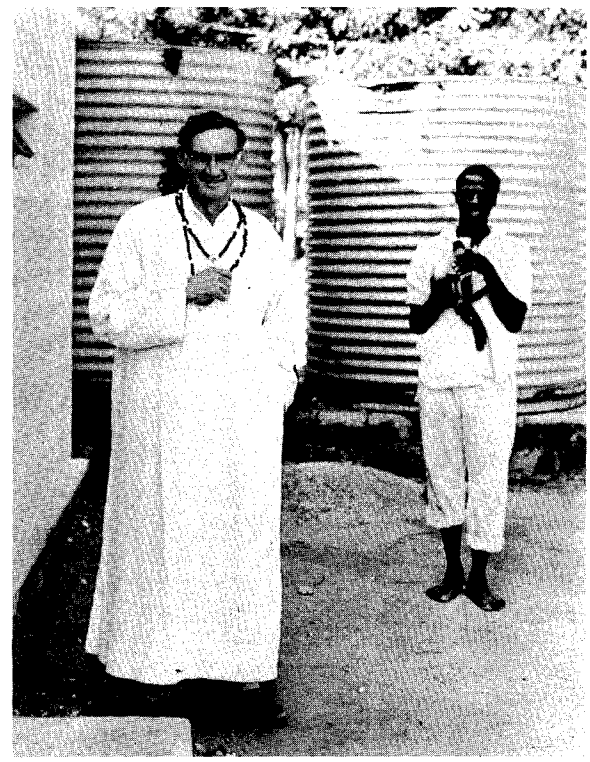
Another group of American missionaries, the Mennonites, came to Musoma in 1934. They share the abstemious, low-church austerity of the AIM and, like it, have started an African church, the Tanganyika Mennonite Church, which has 4000 members and became autonomous in 1960.

The last missionary arrivals of significance were the Swedish Lutherans who, during World War II, took the place of the German missions which had been in Bukoba since the time of German colonization. The well-known theologian, Bishop Sundkler, leads this section of Tanganyika's largest Protestant church and has given it a reputation for clear-thinking liberalism. There are 60,000 Lutherans in Bukoba.

The early missionary, Catholic or Protestant, fortified with an unshakeable Victorian belief in the rightness of his cause, aimed, in the words of one scholar, "to reproduce overseas what he had grown up in and learned to value for himself at home". One fancies that he was like the evangelistic Henry Spence in Colin Turnbull's "Lonely African", who saw the Devil in every bush and who believed without a quaver of doubt that his way of life was good and that the African's was utterly evil. Bishop Steere, the early Anglican missionary and Swahili scholar, explicitly described how he thought missions should function: "One method of mission work is to take the natives into tutelage, to make them live by order and work when and as they are bidden. This produces fine plantations, good cultivation, well-kept houses, and a most respectful demeanour." The "natives" were also sent to school because, as Herskovits points out, "... it was essential to teach Africans to read the Bible and the catechisms, thus extending Christian influences by using them to guide their fellow Africans." Similarly, the object of mission hospitals was first to cure the African's physical and then his spiritual ills.

If, generally, the methods of the early missionaries were similar, the goals of the various churches they represented were quite different. The Catholics wanted to establish an African branch of their world-wide church, the Anglicans and Lutherans aimed to set up independent members of their respective communions, while the AIM and, later, the Mennonites, intended to create autonomous African churches; in their words, "The result of the Gospel working in Africa."

The bitter, bloody religious conflicts of Uganda never spread to the Lake area, despite all the different churches there, primarily because Tanganyika is much larger and has enough souls to go around. This is not to say, however, that there is no competition. An Anglican told me that, "If we build a school, the Romans are sure to put one up right to it," adding, unaware of any inconsistency, "But of course, we can't afford to pass up any chances; if the AIM aren't covering an area well, we have to get in there before someone else does."



Father Clement and friend

There is also friction between the AIM and the Catholics because of the AIM's anti-Catholic attitudes. Catholics tell the story of one AIM missionary who displayed a picture of the late Pope John smoking, captioned, "The Leader of All Sinners," and the White Fathers cite instances of teachers in schools staffed by the AIM refusing to let Catholic students attend Mass on Sundays.

The British civil servants, it seems, likewise took part in the religious squabbles by helping Anglicans in their attempts to establish missions and, according to both the AIM and the White Fathers, by impeding their own efforts to build schools.

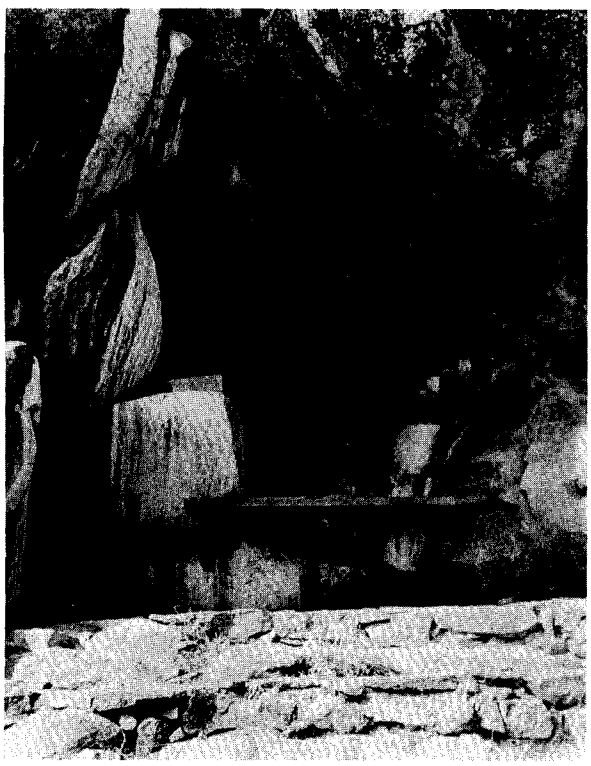
Recently, two factors have reduced these tensions, First, the official attitude towards "foreign" missions has softened since the civil servants began to appreciate how much missions helped the Government in educating the people. Second, Pope John's Ecumenical Conference created an atmosphere of cordiality between Catholics and Protestants that simply did not exist before. The Anglican Bisnop in Mwanza, for example, told me in a state of happy disbelief that a Catholic Bishop had actually asked him to choose several books for a new Catholic library. Further south, in Shinyanga, Maryknoll priests are holding "Bible Vigils" which are remarkably similar to some Protestant services, with readings from the Bible and psalm-singing. Yet, despite this new harmony, both Catholics and Protestants sadly acknowledge that the AIM has not changed.

Its Field Director states flatly, "I have noticed no new spirit since the Council."

The increasing accord between missionary groups is important, but a religious change of even greater significance has taken place within the past few years: missionaries are questioning the validity of their old methods. The more progressive among them believe that Christianity must now be presented on African terms.

The man who done most to put this idea into practice is a French-Canadian White Father named Clement; called Crementi by the Wasukuma with whom he works, who cannot distinguish the difference between l and r and who, like most Bantus, are unhappy with a name that ends in a consonant. He has built a church in the shape of a round Sukuma house, decorated with the traditional Sukuma triangular patterns, with an altar that is a board supported by a replica of a Sukuma stool. A leopard skin cloth covers the chalice and the altar boys wear cloaks of the same material over their shirts and shorts. Father Clement believes that, "you shouldn't try to make Africans the same sort of Catholics as Europeans," and he has tried accordingly to give the Catholic liturgy an African quality and to have the Wasukuma participate in it. For instance, on the feast of Corpus Christi he says Mass on top of a small hill behind his mission and then leads a procession downwards, accompanied by the Blessed Sacrament carried on a leopard skin-covered table which is surrounded by men dressed as "protecting" Sukuma warriors. As they move along, the marchers sing Biblical passages which Father Clement has had translated into Kisukuma and put to Sukuma music. When they reach the bottom, he tells the people to bring forward for his blessing the articles of their everyday life; beer, cattle, chickens, (which are used for sacrifices as well as food), cotton and tobacco.

The Easter Grotto



During Good Friday, Africans act out the Stations of the Cross and, on Easter, Father Clement says Mass in a grotto on the hillside where a cardboard "rock" has been placed to one side to give the idea of Christ's tomb and the Resurrection.

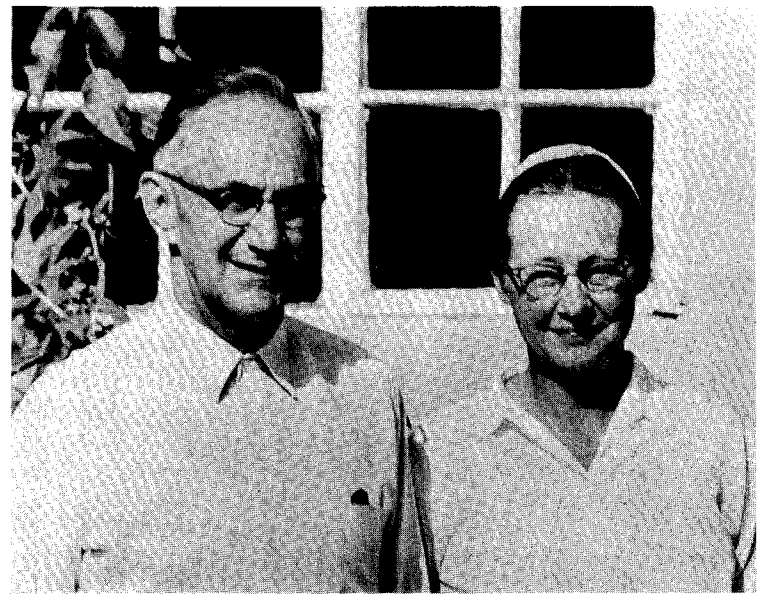
But most shocking of all - to the African priests, old African Christians, and conservative Protestants who oppose

his methods - Father Clement organizes dance competitions, attracting participants by giving cash prizes. "Dancing is the Wasukuma's favourite recreation and, if you forbid it, you leave them with nothing at all. The daytime dances are good, it's only the ones at night that lead to trouble. When I ask the dancers to come I tell them each to bring three or four pagans. Who knows, perhaps we make some Christians this way."

Father Clement is not the only Catholic who believes in mixing Christianity with African customs, one of the most controversial of which is female circumcision. At a mission close to the Kenya border, Maryknoll Fathers, aware that prohibition of circumcision would only drive people away, hold a retreat for the initiate girls, complete with recitations of the rosary and religious talks, during which a competent local woman performs the operation. Afterwards, the girls receive medical attention and go home.

Some Protestants also see the need for a new approach to Christianity in Africa. Last year, the All-African Conference of Churches meeting in Kampala declared that, "The Christian Church in Africa is facing a major crisis .... The Church has failed to keep pace with the social revolution it helped to create." The delegates decried the under-paid, under-educated state of the Ministry which, they thought, could no longer speak to intelligent Africans, and called for a sweeping reorganization of pastor recruitment and deployment.

And yet, the conservative Protestant missions in the Lake area, the AIM, and, to a lesser extent, the Mennonites, will hear nothing of accepting African customs or changing their missionary emphasis. To them, a man is reborn and begins a new life when he is "saved". African customs, dancing and the like, belong to his past existence and have no meaning: "Those who revert must leave our Fellowship," declares the AIM Field Director.



Mennonite Bishop and Wife

The Mennonites are slightly less strict. "We bear with the man until he comes out of his former life," the Mennonite Bishop said, but he too rejected any contact with local traditions. "We are 100% with AIM on this. Clean sports should take the place of dances."

So far, I have discussed the missions and their attitudes towards the African. What, now, of the African's view of missions? In the Lake area, particularly among the Wasukuma, the missionaries made remarkably little progress compared to the streams of converts who came forward in Uganda. There, according to Oliver, as far back as 1911, "282,000 Baganda out of a population of 660,000 declared themselves to be Christians." With the exception of the Wahaya in the west, the Lakeside tribes of Tanganyika were too conservative to be much ruffled by the new arrivals. They simply continued picking over the barren land and grazing their bony cattle. Initially, it appears, the few Africans who did come to the missions were drawn by the white man's knowledge and power. They thought that they could learn what he knew by becoming Christians. Then, too, the new religion had something vaguely familiar about it. Herskovits notes that, "The notion of a Supreme Being lay in the dim background of most of the tribal religions of Africa." In these early days, the question of which among the various forms of the foreign belief was the right one did not occur and, as far as I could gather, is at present only a problem for the educated, who have been taught to appreciate religious differences. Nor, contrary to what Tom Mboya says in his book, "Freedom and After," about the attitudes of Kenyans towards missionaries, does the average Tanganvikan think they have a "colonial and white settler mentality." There just have not been enough settlers in the country for the problem to arise.

Even those, like Mboya, who criticize the missionaries agree that they have helped the Africans. He says, "Every African politician will recognize that missionaries have done a lot in Africa, and have left an impact all over the countryside with churches ... hospitals and schools ...." In my opinion, it is in their schools that the missions have benefited East Africa most. Practically without exception, educated Africans have all, at one time or another, been to mission schools. It is interesting then, that a great number of them are no longer practicing Christians.

Most stumble over the question of sex -- the churchs' prohibition of polygamy. "Marriage is the hub of the whole problem here in East Africa," Bishop Sundkler thinks, "for the educated and uneducated alike." In the villages, he says, people "fall away all the time," mainly because no social stigma is attached to polygamy, which has, after all, been the traditional way of marriage among just about all the tribes in East Africa. Father Clement, who has battled the problem for the last 15 years, says that infidelity also is not condemned, with the result that, "Very, very few Wasukuma are faithful to their wives."

The educated Africans in the towns are often no better. Some have risen rapidly and, finding that their wives have not kept up up with them, acquire a "city wife" who can cope with the social demands of their new positions. In towns too, the educated African can see clearly that Europeans and his high-ranking countrymen do not need religion to be successful and thinks, understandably, that he can do without his, the restrictions of which were beginning to be uncomfortable anyway.

Possibly, as the All-African Church Conference pointed out, if there were enough educated African clergymen in the towns to communicate with the new elite, more people would keep up their religion. But, unfortunately, mainly because of low salaries, African pastors of education and keen intellect are few and they cannot possibly give their personal attention to all those who would benefit from it.

But what may well be the fundamental reason that so many Africans do not keep up their religion is that their commitment to it was never very deep in the first place. Guy Hunter has said, "In both groups (African Christians and Muslims) outward conformity is common and means little ..." and one of Father Clement's colleagues admitted that, "It is very difficult to know if the Africans have assimilated Christianity. I don't, even after all these years." Most telling of all is the comment of Carey Francis, the legendary headmaster of Kenya's Alliance High School, who when asked, "How many of your boys became true Christians?" replied, after a long, dour Scots silence. "You know, I can't think of one."

Perhaps it was asking too much of the African that he accept overnight an individualistic system based on self-discipline after centuries in a tradition where all his responsibilities were to a communal society in which discipline came from outside himself.

Sincerely,

John Spencer

John Spencer

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