

Africa (1): of Twelve

The Legacy of Colonialism

This is the first in a series of articles on the subject of Africa: its history, its peoples, its problems, its challenges, its future. Africa, the second largest continent on planet earth, shows up on the radar screen of the Western media when a natural disaster strikes, a new revolution breaks out, or the latest update on the Aids epidemic. But for Christians in the Western world the fascinating news story coming from Africa is the explosive growth of Christianity.

Once called the Dark Continent by Europeans and Americans because they knew so little about Africa, the 20th century saw the rapid spread of the Gospel of Light. Once known among missionaries as "the white man's graveyard," because their life expectancy was only eight years, Africa is now sending missionaries overseas. "Our God bids us first build a cemetery before we build a church or dwelling-house," wrote an early missionary, "showing us that the resurrection ofAfrica must be effected by our own destruction."

Many scholars in the West don't understand the reason for the explosion of the Christian faith in Africa. Many Western journalists don't understand the dynamics of religion. They lack the experience of seeing people from radically different backgrounds turn to Christ. They are trained in postmodern universities/ colleges, where multiculturalism and political correctness are the norms. There is a lot of hand-wringing and breast-beating today about missionaries having imposed Christianity upon pristine African-traditional religions. In their minds Christian missionaries were responsible for disrupting and unsettling Africa. Many associate the advance of missions with the rise of colonialism. And indeed, most 19th and early 20th century missionaries believed that colonialism was a good thing and aided the expansion of their respective homelands. Today a large body of scholarly and popular works argue that mission work was the religious version of Western political and economic imperialism, offering Africans a pious formula of otherworldly distraction while foreign conquests proceeded unchallenged. They believe that both missions and colonialism had damaging consequences of Western interference in African societies, with missionaries being among the most insidious influences. I find it remarkable though that Western scholars, who are so opposed to colonialism and paternalism, act as authoritative voices of what was, or what was not, good for Africa.

COLONIALISM

How should we evaluate colonialism? The colonial era lasted for 50-80 years in most African countries and left a lasting legacy. But many years pass before the definitive balance of its legacy can be properly struck. On the one hand, it is easy to see the destructive forces that were set loose; on the other hand, there was also a record of

high-minded devotion and desire to serve the interest of the people who had come under foreign rule.

Although Western countries had been in contact with Africa since the 16th century, it was not until the late second half of the 19th century that explorers opened its interior. And it was only in the last quarter of that century that land-hungry Western European powers divided among themselves, Africa south of the Sahara. At an international conference in Berlin in 1884-1885, representatives of the colonial powers Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany and Spain convened to iron out their territorial claims. An agreement was reached on boundaries, which sowed the seeds for many bitter tribal conflicts, which continue to this day. Ancient tribal territories were parcelled up in such a way that one tribe was in the domain of one colonial power and the other tribes were under the jurisdiction of another.

The motives for colonization were mixed. The 19th century was the age of Western imperialism, which in some respects can be regarded as a result of nation building and nationalism. For example, German and Italian national aspirations resulted in the unification of the two states and after that it became a national ideal to make their countries just as powerful or even more so than France and Britain, and to build their own colonial empires. Furthermore, Western European colonizers assumed the superiority of their own cultures. As people of their time they looked at African culture from the little they knew and had discovered. They considered it as something backward, uncultured and unattractive. Racism also contributed to the superiority feeling of white European colonizers. Since ideas have consequences, the Darwinian theory of evolution, in which the struggle for survival was extended to the human race, the white race was seen as stronger and more intelligent and had to prove its superiority by subjecting the dark race. Trade, a market for cheap goods, and Africa's riches in ivory, gold, diamonds, rubber, palm oil, and many other commodities also attracted the colonizers. But not every Western power benefited from their colonies. Although it is often said today by scholars influenced by Marxist ideology that the West exploited their colonies solely for their own gain and well being, actually only some had an economic advantage, while others were a financial drain on their treasuries rather than a profitable asset.

ITS CONSEQUENCES

It must be admitted, of course, that the colonial powers' good intentions came with actions detrimental to the Africans. These negative aspects of colonialism are not hard to find. Many point to the intrusion of Western culture in African society and the erosion of the authority of tribal chiefs. The behavior of European traders and businessmen was often a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel. They brought with them many evils and vices and introduced them to Africans. Among them were materialism, tobacco smoking and the consumption of strong liquor. The behaviour of the Western powers was also less than praiseworthy. For example, the German colonial office made efforts to develop Tanzania according to European ideology and methods without considering African cultural patterns and the desires of the Africans. The Germans took for granted that the people would prefer these changes. However, the Africans had their own value system

and did not necessarily prefer the economic changes their new rulers were introducing. Consequently, seeds for discontent and unrest were sown. All in all, colonial rule created an overwhelming native discontent with Western imperialism. And the colonial powers did little to prepare their territories for independence. They regulated every sphere of social and political life which left a legacy of the notion of a strong state with blanket authority. No understanding and appreciation for the democratic process were fostered. Hence, when colonies became independent their people were not prepared to choose their own leaders and parliamentary representation. They suffered more than 30 years of military dictatorships and African elites who legitimized oppression of their fellow Africans. In these newly independent states wealth was developed for a privileged few and not for the use of many people. Products were manufactured for the upper crust of society and the rest were for exports.

But there is also another - but nearly forgotten - side to colonial history. Although it is not politically correct to say it: colonialism was a blessing in disguise. Until 1900 there were still some Arabs practicing slavery in east Africa but colonial laws wiped out this practice. In the interior, slave raids between warring tribes were also ended. The large number of tribal wars, which had weakened Africa for many centuries, were also greatly reduced. Some European powers developed the territories they colonized. They built roads and railways to connect strategic places. Telegraph lines were constructed. The Africans were amazed that these lines going through their valleys and over the hills were able to carry messages to people at various stages along the lines. A line connecting Cape Town with Cairo was completed at the turn of the 20th century. New crops such as coffee and cocoa, were introduced to supply a cash income. Freedom of religion as a basic human right was born and grew during the colonial era. Education made a crucial contribution. Although it was based on the European model, it reached tens of thousands, mainly through schools operated by missionaries. With their minuscule budgets for educational purposes, they were content for the most part to supervise the education which missionaries provided. But the expanding responsibilities of mission schools and colleges could not have been met without the government grants-in-aid made available from 1920s onwards.

It is indeed difficult to claim - as many do today, that these mission schools were a source of cultural and social breakdown of Africa. The modern Zulu scholar, Professor C.L.S. Nimbies, in a public lecture at the *University at Natal*, commented that the missionary cultivation of Zulu language and literature was a significant force behind general Zulu awakening. He said that the missionary interest extended beyond the narrow issue of religious affiliation. It was not simply that "missionaries concerned themselves primarily with grammars, dictionaries and the translation of the Scriptures, [but that] some of them recorded folklore, proverbs and valuable historical material." Hospitals, clinics and other medical services were established mainly by missions. Until the late 1930s mission hospitals were still setting the pace in medical care and leprosy treatment, with the help of government grants. Through the improvement of medical care the life expectancy of people increased and much suffering was prevented or relieved.

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