

Christianity is becoming a more globalized religion in the 21st century, and this growth has been awe-inspiring in the last decade. Contrary to some predictions from the 19th century, the religion has not lost its influence, but the characteristics of most Christian adherents have been changing. What was once seen as a Western religion has become a religion primarily practiced among non-Western adherents in Africa, Asia and South America. The diverse forms of non-Western Christianity today have been shaped by colonialism and often express themselves in a syncretic fashion. These forms of Christianity mesh traditional religious elements, rituals and customs with Christian messages, producing forms that differ widely from Western forms of Christianity. As Christianity is changing in the world today and addressing social problems and controversies, understanding the historical and cultural factors that have influenced these changes is vital to understanding the changing nature of global Christianity.

1. Demographics of Global Christianity

Scholars now frequently use the term "*global South*" to refer to nations in Africa, Oceania, Asia, and Latin America. While the definition and usage vary between different scholars, the term is often used to refer to nations in the southern and eastern hemispheres of the modern world (Clarke, 2018). These nations are also sometimes classified as "third-world" or "developing" nations (Clarke, 2018). A common stereotype postulates that most Christians are wealthy, white and North American or European citizens. However, the current trend is shifting the center of Christianity away from Europe and North America and into South America, Asia and Africa (Jenkins, 2008). Christians are now present in the world's 239 countries, most of which reside in the global South. In 1900, less than one-fifth of the world's Christian population lived outside Europe or North America; by 2000, more than 60% of the world's Christian population resided outside Europe or North America (Hanciles, 2015: 4).

The shift in the centre of Christianity is highly significant because it means that a majority of the world's Christian population will be non-white adherents by 2025. This recent shift is substantial because historians and sociologists of religion will have to reevaluate the old and now outdated stereotype of Christianity as "the white man's religion" (Hanciles, 2015, p. 50). While Christianity continues to grow strongly in the global South, a recent PEW research poll has shown that Christianity is decreasing in adherents in North America (PEW 2019). PEW's research found that 65% of adults in the US identified as Christian, which is a 12% decrease from 2009. Additionally, those who identify as "religiously unaffiliated" have grown from 26% from the 17% recorded in 2009 (PEW 2019). In Western Europe, PEW research on religious views in Europe conducted in 2018 found that while many Western Europeans still consider themselves "Christian", very few attend Church regularly, and many believe in a more general spiritual force or deity, but not the God of the Bible (PEW 2018). A Church of England study 2018 found that among 4,000 respondents, only 10% of Christians read the Bible and attend Church at least once a month. Even more controversial, 43% of the respondents did not believe in the literal existence of Jesus, which is a highly radical position about historical scholarship on Jesus (Glover, 2019).

In contrast to the secularization of Europe, it is thus remarkable that the continued expansion of Christianity is happening in the global South because many experts from the past did not foresee this trend. In 1910, ecumenical conferences expected Islam to overtake Christianity in Africa, and Christian influence and expansion would continue to decrease (Sanneh, 2003). In many diverse places, the stories are different yet similar about the unprecedented growth of Christianity. Korea, which contained very few Christians in 1900, is now a significant site for missionary Christianity, with millions of Christians sponsoring more

than 10,000 missions in 2002. In 2004 alone, The United Bible Societies distributed 25 million Bibles to different countries worldwide; 3.3 million went to China, and 2 million each went to Malaysia and South Korea (Jenkins, 2011). Despite having a large Christian population much earlier than in Africa and Asia, South America also plays a part in this trend. Todd Johnson has pointed out that Spanish has been the most used language globally for church services since 1980 (Jenkins, 2008). In Africa, decolonization was supposed to bring back traditional African religions or perhaps secularization with the departure of the Christian colonial forces; instead, Christianity has continued to grow (Hartch, 2014).

1. Postcolonial Christianity

As European nations colonized Africa, missionaries attempted to bring Christianity to the Africans. Initial efforts by missionaries were unsuccessful, but as African communities began to appropriate aspects of the Christian faith which aligned with African culture, Christianity, in Africanized forms, began to grow (Sindima, 1999). In 1906, the Anglican-led *Church Missionary Society* or CMS, launched its first mission in Sudan to attempt to convert the Dinka tribe. The Dinka are the most numerous ethnic group in Sudan (Deng, 1984). However, early efforts to convert the Dinka to Anglicanism largely failed, as the Dinka, while respectful of foreign beliefs, retained their indigenous practices and beliefs (Deng, 1984). A significant unintended consequence of the Second Sudanese Civil War was the rapid growth of Christianity among the Dinka of South Sudan (Zink, 2018).

Harvey J. Sindima explained that "in African society, identity is given by the community" (Sindima, 1999). This concept of shared identity can go a long way in explaining the growth of Christianity among the Dinka in Sudan. The few who converted to the Anglican faith lived in more urban areas; the displacement caused by the Second Civil War brought urban dwellers into

close contact with the Dinka, who lived in more rural parts of Sudan (Zink, 2018). The identity of the Dinka shifted away from practising Indigenous religions to Christianity. This can also explain the failure of early missionaries, as, in the Dinka culture, it was easier for the new faith to spread via other Dinka than foreign missionaries as the community began to change into a Christian community.

As Christianity grew amongst the Dinka, the new Christians adapted and combined cultural practices with the new faith; the result was a distinctive brand of Christianity. The term *Niahalic* was traditionally used in indigenous Dinka religious thoughts to refer to the creator of the world. However, with the rapid growth of Christianity amongst the Dinka, *Niahlic* was later ascribed to the God of Christianity (Nikkel, 2001). In traditional Dinka, prayers were only offered to the sky-god *Niahalic* in times of need or crisis. These scenarios were often due to *apeth* or ideas surrounding misfortune and witchcraft brought about by different spirits or *jak* (Lienhardt, 1951). *Niahalic* has become a more personal God from the Dinka, offering praise and asking for guidance. Stephen Dit Makok was a Dinka man who was raised in cattle camps and practised the Indigenous Dinka religion as a youth but became a Christian in 1974. He composed a song called "*Salt of the Earth*", in which he describes Christians as "the salt of the Earth" and "children of light". The allusions to Jesus's teachings, calling his apostles the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world", are present in this Dinka composition (Matthew 5:13-17).

As the Dinka continued to shift their allegiance towards Christianity, the songs composed from the traditional music, phrasing and social context of the Dinka have been reimagined with new Christian themes and imagery. One song states, "We offer the sacrifice of the Son of God so our father may give us *wei*; we offer the only sacrifice which God desires" (Nikkel, 2001). In Dinka *wei* connotes life and breath now that God does not require the sacrifice of cattle, the

sacrifice of Jesus was all that is required for the Dinka to receive *wei*. Prior to the spread of Christianity among the Dinka, sacrificial rites were a common way to appease the forces of *jak*, whom the Dinka believed required periodic cattle sacrifice. The similarity between the sacrificial death of Christ and the sacrifice of cattle was another factor that allowed Christianity to spread among the Dinka (Nikkel, 2006). As the community began to shift towards Christianity, the Dinka gathered as a community and destroyed previous material objects associated with rituals related to *jak*. Dinka bishop Nathaniel Garang explains, "One has his own *jak*. He eats things of his *jak*, but when we burn all of these things together, we feel better than before" (Nikkel, 1992). In 2011, Southern Sudan became a nation; today, the nation's population is estimated to be around 60% Christian. Despite some armed conflicts in the country, the Southern Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) continues to work towards promoting peace and understanding in the region. (US Embassy, 2017).

The British colonialization and occupation of Zimbabwe involved aspects similar to Sudan's story. The years 1890-1980 were marked by mass evangelism and the domination of Zimbabwe by British colonialists and missionaries. British missionaries attempted to spread the message of Christianity to the Shona of Zimbabwe but were largely unsuccessful, as many Shona retained ancestral beliefs and did not convert (Segovia, 2020). As the message of Christianity spread among the native Shona, many natives appropriated aspects of Paul of Tarsus's theology into a form of African Christianity that would mesh local native cultures and discarded the preaching of Paul by missionaries, which was deemed Euro-centric (Kamudzandu, 2013). Among the Shona in Zimbabwe, *maiores* or ancestors are examples of wisdom and virtue that present generations should seek to emulate. For the Shona to pray to or invoke an ancestor was a central rite in Shona culture (Kamudzandu, 2013). Ancestors represent an exemplary past; in

much African thought, it is important to follow examples of the past (Sindima, 1999). When Paul spoke of Christ about his ancestral lineage to Abraham, this resonated with the Shona's reverence for ancestors. This relates to the reverence that the Shona people showed to the figure known as Mbuya Nehanda, believed to be the ancestress of all Shona people (Kamudzandu, 2013).

As much African thought emphasizes community, some of Paul's words resonated with the Shona because he appeared to preach about one shared community. Paul wrote, "There is no Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Gal 3:28). Postcolonial thought will often speak of an "other", referring to the group of people being colonized and an existing relationship of animosity between the colonizer and colonized (Al-Saidi, 2014). For the Shona, Paul's teachings explain that there is no "other," and Paul's message was adapted to create a community that was not drawn along ethnic or racial markers. Paul to the Shona was the apostle who brought a message of equality despite cultural diversity (Kamudzandu, 2013). Today, the Shona, despite now being free from colonial domination, still widely practice and adhere to a version of Christianity that is mixed with traditional tribal practices in Zimbabwe (Jarus, 2017).

1. Indigenous Christian Movements

Within the varied expressions of Christianity, some cultures have been unable to divorce cultural beliefs from the Christian faith when the new faith began to grow. A prominent Japanese leader who was dissatisfied with the "rigidity" of Western Christianity was Teshima Ikuro. Ikuro believed that the "original gospel" was a message that incorporated speaking in tongues, healings, and baptisms, which he did not see in the mission churches of Japan (Mullins, 1998). He also believed that the Church had become too "Europeanized" and had forgotten its Jewish roots, so he decided to incorporate the usage of a Jewish menorah at church meetings instead of a

cross. Additionally, he believed that the messages of spirit gods mentioned in the *Kojiki*, or the holy text of the Shinto faith, were the same as the angels mentioned in the Bible (Mullins, 1998). Today, the *Original Gospel Movement* has spread to several countries and continues to organize trips to Israel to allow believers to become familiar with Judaism (Makuya, 2019).

Sergei Kan's ethnographic study of the Tlingit of Alaska provides another example of the mixing of indigenous cultures and Christianity. Kan's study of the shamans of Alaska found that many of the Tlingit tribe had converted to Christianity. However, while many of the Tlingit accepted Christianity, many also believed there was no contradiction between customary tribal practices such as shamanism and Christianity (Kan, 2014). Many Tlingit believed the shamans received visions from the Old and New Testaments. The Tlingit continue to combine Christian belief with shamanistic practices to combat *ixt*, the perception of evil and imbalance in the world (Kan, 2014).

In the early 1930s, Guatemala was governed by a dictator named Jorge Ubico. The growing Catholic Church struggled to instruct its members in the growing faith. Charles Wagley, an anthropologist who examined the Catholic Church in Guatemala in 1937, found a high degree of religious syncretism (Goodpasture, 2000). Wagley observed, "Ostensibly Chimaltecos are Catholic, and they are recognized as such by the Roman Catholic church; their religion is, however, a fusion of Maya and European cultures" (Goodpasture, 2000). Later, in the 1970s, Bolivian mine workers created a dynamic vision of syncretism between Christianity and shamanistic beliefs. The miners referred to an evil spirit in the mines as "tio" and believed it could be appeased by offering cocoa and alcohol as sacrifices (Bielo, 2015). Additionally, the miners would consult with shamans to balance spirits and perform Christian rituals to ensure the mines' spirits and forces were kept under control. Bolivian miners today still follow these

practices and are careful not to upset the spirits in the mines. They utilize syncretic rituals to pursue this goal and see no contradiction in practising Christian rituals while using Indigenous shamanistic tribal practices (Stewart, 2017).

1. The Role of Global Christianity

As Christianity has continued to grow in the Global South, it is important to analyze the role of Christianity in dealing with many of the maladies that developing nations of the Global South contend with in the past and present. Many countries in the Global South struggle against poverty, government corruption, disease and famine. As a result of these issues, different Christian churches have emerged to combat these issues and provide hope for the believers in the third world that Christianity can help them combat many of these issues. Many nations in Africa grapple with poverty, disease and famine; Christianity has been adopted as a method for combatting some of these maladies. As is happening among the Dinka and Shona, Christianity has been stripped of its foreign influence to fit into African cultural contexts; these churches are known as "African independent churches" or AICs (Martey, 2009).

Examples of such churches include the *St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission* churches in South Africa. The group was founded in 1938 by Christina Nku, who claimed to have received a vision from God (Paris, 2009). The membership of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission's churches' grew rapidly; as of 2009, there were an estimated 2 million members in South Africa. These churches focus on community building and assisting the poor to combat poverty (Paris, 2009). One method these churches use to combat poverty is the notion of "prophecy". If a church member is struggling with poverty or someone in the community has fallen sick, members may seek the consolation of a prophet who will explain why this has happened and how they can improve this situation (Paris, 2009). These prophets are known as "diviners", and they combine

ancestor worship, ritual and the Bible to provide healing and seek guidance from their ancestors to address maladies. Diviners are people who are seen to have been blessed with a spiritual gift they believe they should use to help their communities (Masondo, 2013).

Charismatic leaders can be a source of inspiration and healing for communities facing poverty, AIDS and disease. These leaders are a component of what is called "Afro-Pentecostalism". These churches combine traditional African belief with Christian belief in healing from the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and the discernment of delivering prophecy to address contemporary needs in Africa. (Wafula, Mombo & Wandera, 2006). An example of such a leader is Joseph Mukungubila Mutombo of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mutombo was involved with several political and military groups during his rebellion against the government in Congo but has now switched from being a military leader to a prophetic Christian speaker. He is the leader of the *Ministry of Restoration from Black Africa* or MORBA. Mutombo believes in prophecy that can be utilized to pragmatically address contemporary social issues such as poverty or the political and military disputes in Congo (Wafula et al., 2006).

On the other side of the world, many Latin American countries have also dealt with poverty, disease and unfair treatment by oppressive governments. By the turn of the late 1960s, Latin America comprised different governments that oppressed their citizens. General Jorge Videla led a war against his government's enemies. He killed over 20,000 people in Argentina, whereas in Chile, General Augusto Pinochet gained power and used similar tactics against his opponents (Gonzales, 2008). In response to oppressive governments and injustice, the CELAM or the *Latin American Conference of Bishops*, convened the Medellin Conference to address many of the issues facing Latin America. The Medellin Conference statement included statements committing "to defend the rights of the poor and oppressed according to our Gospel

commandants" (Medellin, 1968). The conference gave power to small grass-roots groups of believers fighting for social change, community improvement and the study of the Bible. These small groups became known as *communities ecclesial de base* or CEB's and began to spread all over Latin America. (Hartch, 2014). CEBs also provided lessons in adult literacy, child care, and personal development alongside their primary purpose of bible study and group solidarity in dealing with the poverty present in their communities.

Despite rivalry among Protestant and Catholic churches, Latin Americans emerged as fighters for social justice and human rights. They continued such actions even after the dictatorships they opposed had faded away. Troy Beretta, a minister from Canada, embarked on a missionary and humanitarian relief effort in Lima in 1978. He volunteered with the poor in the economically depressed towns of Lima. He wrote, "The Gospel sounds completely different when you read it with the poor; for them, the good news is not just the promise of a better life in the next world, it is the achievement of certain minimal rights and opportunities" (Goodpasture, 2000). The 2007 meeting of CELAM reinforced the Church's decision to align itself with the poor (Hartch, 2014). In 2013, PEW research found that among 30,000 survey respondents, 50% of Catholics and 37% of protestants believed that performing charity work is the best option to help the poor (PEW 2013). The remaining respondents believed that bringing the gospel to the poor and needy is the better option for treating the poor.

The *Waldensian* or "Poor Ones" churches of Uruguay and Argentina also play a vital role in assisting those suffering from poverty. These churches take their name from Peter Waldo, a 12th-century reformer whom the Church persecuted for his ascetic lifestyle and refusal to obey a papal order to cease preaching (Gonzales, 2008). After migrating to Uruguay and Argentina in the 19th century, the Waldensian community of South America became highly devoted to social

programs and humanitarian assistance in light of the oppression launched in the 1970s.

Waldensian churches host several assistance homes for the elderly and people with intellectual impairments (American Waldesian Society, 2020). Additionally, the American Waldensian Society accepts and promotes volunteer work for members of the Waldensian churches and donates money and assistance to the poor of South America.

As Christianity grows in the developing world, it will continue to play an important role in combating social problems. Christian groups have and will continue to work towards combating poverty. Many of the new Christians in the global South will never completely discard tribal practices and customs within their distinct form of Christianity. These factors are vital for realizing the importance of faith in the lives of millions of believers today.

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