



Evangelical Christianity: Is it Love or Colonisation?

By David Tonghou Ngong



Two recent stories from Africa, both connected to the just ended US presidential elections, have led some observers to remark that Christianity seems to be alienating Africans in ways that prevent them from having a clearer view of their own interests.

The first story was a [BBC report](#) detailing how some African evangelical leaders, mostly from Kenya and Nigeria, were praying for the incumbent Donald Trump to defeat his challenger, Joe Biden. The rationale these leaders gave for supporting Trump was one directly culled from the issues Christians in America have been debating, including abortion and religious freedom. The African evangelical leaders praised Trump for promoting anti-abortion policies and for being a defender of Christians, even though the issues of abortion and religious freedom are not the dominant issues Christians in Nigeria and Kenya are facing.

Shortly following this report, a video of some Christians in Nigeria marching in support of Donald Trump circulated on the Internet, and Donald Trump himself [retweeted](#) the clip with the response, "A parade for me in Nigeria, a great honor!" This support for Trump was jarring given that he had

disparaged African countries and expressed what may be described as [racist sentiments](#) about them. That African Christians would be supporting a person who clearly could care less about them struck many as symptomatic of the ways that Christianity leads Africans to militate against their own interests.

That Christianity has had deracinating and other harmful effects on Africans is not a new insight. The problematic effects have been recognized since at least the 19th century both by those who embrace Christianity and those who do not. In an 1881 essay entitled “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans,” presented at Liberia College (now the University of Liberia), the Caribbean-born Liberian and Presbyterian churchman, Edward Blyden, decried “the treatment which our own race and other so-called inferior races have received from Christian nations.” He noted how the “sword of the conqueror and the cries of the conquered have attended or preceded the introduction” of Western Christianity into non-Western lands. Also, the theme has been central to much of African literature, especially exemplified in works of authors such as Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Mongo Beti, and Chinua Achebe, among others. For many of these writers, Christianity has not only divided Africans but also diminished their being in the world.

In his now classic work called “Song of Lawino,” which pits a Westernized and Christianized husband against his wife who stands for indigenous Africa, the Ugandan scholar Okot p’Bitek critiques Christianity for turning Africans into “parrots,” who unquestioningly adhere to a religion they do not understand, despising their own traditions in the process. Even scholars of African Christianity, such as Jesse Mugambi, Musa Dube, Tinyiko Maluleke and Emmanuel Katongole, among others, have wondered aloud whether Christianity can be trusted to bring healing to some of the ills that the continent faces. Others, such as the South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane, have even wondered whether Africans should continue to be Christians. These are questions that still largely remain unanswered, especially given the checkered history of modern Christianity in the continent.

Yet, it is recognised that Christianity has been gaining significant ground in Africa, so much so that the continent is now home to more Christians than any other continent in the world. Given that Christianity has taken root, many now acknowledge that it is only by Africanising Christianity that the religion may better account for the interests of Africans, rather than placing Africans at the mercy of external machinations. This project of Africanizing Christianity has a long history in the continent but in a recent book, [African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church](#), the historian Elizabeth Foster captures how Africanizing Christianity may enable Africans not only to transform their continent but also to transform Christianity as a whole. Focusing on the Catholic tradition, the book explores how West African Catholics pushed the French colonial Catholic Church in West Africa to see the wisdom of decolonization, thus helping to decolonize not only the continent but also the church. This is still an unfinished business.

At a time when most churches in Africa are led by Africans, there still exist Christian ways of thinking that are anti-African. This is especially seen in churches that demonize African indigenous traditions, turning African deities into devils and ancestors into sources of demonic blockages. It seems that in these churches, the only way to be Christian is to seek to untether oneself from one’s indigenous background.

Because of their connection to churches in Europe and the US, many of these churches continue to see issues raised by churches in Euro-America as issues that should be of central Christian concern. This is how abortion and religious freedom came to be central to some churches in Nigeria and Kenya, whereas they are not the central issues for most Christians in these countries. This anti-African Christian imagination seems to be the source of spectacle, such as those detailed at the beginning of this piece. Challenging this anti-African Christian imagination is one way of checking a

Christianity that appears to alienate Africans from their being in the world.

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