

## **Conference on the Social Impact of Christianity in Africa**

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**Sponsored by:** *Department of Sociology and Social Work, Calvin College*  
*Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity, Calvin College*  
*Program for African and African Diaspora Studies, Calvin College*

### **Participant Abstracts:**

#### **The Impact of Traditional Religions on the Spread of Christianity in Africa**

Bernard Ayoola, Calvin Seminary

Early European missionaries to Africa encountered traditional religions in their efforts to establish Christianity on the continent. The missionaries, observing the sharp contrast between local religious practices and western Christian values, concluded that indigenous religions were inimical to the spread of Christianity. They found it necessary to replace “pagan” practices with “civilized” Christian tenets. Today, however, theologians, mostly Africans, are more willing to concede that indigenous religions have significant values and may actually be a major factor in the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa. The presentation will examine the interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religions with the view of identifying how this relationship impacts the spread of Christianity on the continent. While it is true that religion can only find true expression in culture, it is also necessary to define the boundaries within which Christianity must operate in order for it to remain authentic.

#### **The Church and Human Rights in the Midst of Poverty: The Case of Kibera, Kenya**

Christine Bodewes, SOAS

Kibera slum is acknowledged as one of the largest slums in the world and continually receives numerous immigrants daily despite the desolate living conditions of its inhabitants. Without much legal recourse to work with Kibera residents often take the law in their hands as they try to make a living within a national government that only calls upon its residents in times of elections. In the 1990s I embarked on a project in conjunction with the Catholic Church parish in Kibera to set up the first human rights office to serve many of its residents. In this presentation I will share this story by first giving a background on Kibera, the slum situation in Nairobi, and then focus on specific examples of how the Catholic Church has tried to respond to human rights issues through civic education, advocacy and legal aid in Kibera. I will specifically focus on tangible examples - analyze what happened, the impact and the specific challenges both in Kibera and the church and try to propose a way forward on what more can/should be done. Finally I will also talk a bit on what is realistic for the churches to do in a place like Kibera.

#### **The other side of the Ethiopian Revolution: The gospel for Ethiopia by Ethiopians**

Tibebe Eshete, Calvin College

An Ethiopian evangelist once compared Jacob and Esau, the two sons of Isaac, to Marxism and Pentecostalism, radical albeit conflicting movements that emerged within the Ethiopian rising intelligentsias of the 60's, though he has not identified which is which. The two movements have contested bitterly to capture the souls and hearts of the Ethiopian youth in the throes of bewildering socio-political changes. Both left indelible marks in the history of nation differentially. The cry of the Ethiopian Pentecostals encapsulated in the "The Gospel for Ethiopia by Ethiopians" was more than an evangelistic plea for reaching the nation; it was a militant effort aimed at launching a micro revolution from within to serve as a springboard to unleash a national renaissance. The encounter between Marxism and Pentecostalism which started in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia continued all through the period of the military government (1974-1990) turning into a vicious scuffle between the seemingly "powerless" and the "powerful" groups, paradoxically a losing fight for the latter. The paper seeks to situate the rise and development of Pentecostalism within the crucial years of modern Ethiopian history, namely the period of the 1960-1990's, and thereby examine its role in introducing a radical Christian faith that engaged Marxism using the WORD of God as a source of power through literature, aggressive evangelism, and protest songs.

**"Saving" Malawi: FAITHFUL responses to orphans and vulnerable children**  
Andrea Freidus, Michigan State University

Malawi is scrambling to deal with 1 million orphaned children while contending with state rollbacks resulting in economic, political and social breakdowns. As a result, a new space is emerging for faith-based organizations. Their presence is justified through a global discourse of connection rooted in the universal notion of childhood as a state of purity and innocence in need of saving. These organizations function with a myriad ideologies, projects, and resources as they develop intimate linkages with children and communities. Important questions emerge due to this "development" –Why are children such an effective trope for rallying collective action and what does it mean for those who are labeled orphans? *Who* exactly is responding to the needs of children, what is their motivation, and what are their expected outcomes for the lives of the children they seek to help? I will examine these questions using ethnographic data collected in Malawi between 2006 and 2008. I report on three faith-based organizations focusing on orphans including evangelical, Catholic, and interfaith responses. I discuss the livelihoods of children who are institutionalized in the orphanages now ubiquitous in southern Africa as well as those children who remain in communities, but have been drawn out by community members in an effort to secure resources from faith-based donors.

**Charismatic Renewal: Lessons in Missions from the Kenyan Church**  
Josh Kuipers, Calvin College

A historical survey of church in Kenya over the last hundred years gives great insight into the driving forces of such wide growth. In the wake of charismatic renewals in Eastern Africa and Kenya's political independence there arose a continually contextualized gospel that felt more like home to many Kenyan's. As a result the Kenyan church has

become one of the fastest growing churches in the world, and Kenya can boast that approx 79% of its total population are Christians. Given such tremendous success there are many lessons to be learned from the Kenyan church especially in the areas of holistic ministry and brotherly love while also promoting a different type of missions, where the goal has shifted to the promotion of a self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing, and self-theologizing church. The resulting challenge to this process will be the relation the Kenyan church will have with the Western church regarding the strengthening of partnerships for mutual growth. This presentation will assess current modes and experiences of partnerships, exploring strong as well as weak points in order to propose future strategies for other churches to consider.

### **Social Impact of Christianity on Sub-Saharan Africans: Case study of the Kikuyu of Kenya**

Njeri Mbugua, Lincoln Christian College and Seminary

In this paper I use the Kikuyu of Kenya to illustrate both the negative and positive impact missionaries have had, and continue to have, on two significant non-material elements of sub-African traditional culture. These two elements are traditional a) rituals and b) Music and Dance. In regard to rituals, I show how the early Christians discouraged three specific interconnected rituals, namely: 1) Female Circumcision which today is popularly referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); 2) Traditional “dating” ceremonies, and, 3) Traditional wedding ceremonies. The paper shows how the banning, discouraging and in some cases altering of these traditional rituals tore the fabric of the African culture, thereby resulting in the deterioration of the youth’s moral/sexual behavior that is evident today. In regard to traditional music and dance I show how both early and some current missionaries condemned African music, deeming it either backward or demonic (and in most cases both). Similarly, they condemned African dance by deeming it demonic and sexually provocative. The net result of the denunciations was a disdain of traditional African music and dance by not only the foreign missionaries, but by the African converts too. Thereafter, a hitherto vibrant group of people now became as physically and emotionally restrained (rigid) as the Victorian missionaries who they were trying to imitate. What is interesting is that these African Christians took great pride in their newfound stiffness – as evidenced by the derogative terms (such as “Kariko”), which they used to describe their non-Christian tribesmen. I conclude by showing that the mistakes made by early foreign missionaries in regard to traditional rituals, music and dance are continuing to be made by current foreign and indigenous missionaries. This notwithstanding, a new crop of African Christians is arising – a group determined to revive their traditional rituals, music and dance. Will the changes this crop initiate bring the positive cultural changes needed to change our youth’s sexual behaviors?

### **East African Christianity and Modernity in Tough Socio-Economic Contexts**

Mwenda Ntarangwi, Calvin College

Social science research on African Christianity places it within a context of colonialism and civilization, in which Christian pioneers such as Livingstone and Krapf were both agents of civilization and colonial administration. Yet instead of dwindling with the

demise of colonialism, Christianity in Africa has continued to grow at very high rates, surpassing those of Europe and North America combined. In the same expanded growth of Christianity in Africa, however, there exists a worrisome trend—one where civil strife, economic mismanagement, and political upheavals continue to be recorded in high numbers in and especially among communities with the highest rates of Christian conversion. Using East Africa as my point of reference I analyze this seemingly contradictory reality, examining the place of Christianity in shaping individual and collective responses to socio-economic challenges. In the process I ask whether Christianity equips its converts with the necessary social and political tools needed to respond to the socio-economic and political challenges facing their respective communities and countries? Is conversion to Christianity a pragmatic activity through which the convert seeks access to material prosperity or is it a personal conversion that leads to a personal transformation, which in turn allows one to operate outside the prevailing socio-economic and political pressures to conform to the status quo?

### **“Church Advocacy on HIV/AIDS: A Comparison of Ghana and Zambia”**

Amy Patterson, Calvin College

In 2009, HIV prevalence levels differed greatly between Zambia (~14%) and Ghana (~2%). Yet, in both countries churches have been involved on AIDS. Churches have developed programs, sought to raise public awareness, and shaped policies on treatment and prevention efforts. Focusing on the activities of Protestant churches (primarily the “mission” churches), this paper first outlines the different and similar ways that churches have approached AIDS in each country. It then investigates why these differences and similarities may exist. How do church strategies such as coalition building differ between the two countries? What is the role of stigma in shaping church AIDS efforts in each context? What does each country’s political history mean for church influence on AIDS resource allocation and policy priorities? The paper is based primarily on interviews conducted among Zambian and Ghanaian Christian organizations during 2007 and 2008.

### **“Christianity as Conforming and Transforming in the Diversity of African Societies”**

David Wiley, Michigan State University

Differing streams of theory in sociology of religion emphasize the "adaptive," "transforming, or "prophetic" function of religion in society. Evidences of all these are found in African and other societies. I will consider a number of cases, especially in Christianity of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where these multiple roles in society and the linkage with social stratification are found. Cases will include the conserving and activist impulses found in both African independent churches and those in the mainstream tradition of major protestant and Roman Catholic denominations.