

Conference on the Social Impact of Christianity in Africa

August 13-15, 2009

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

Conference Theme:

Recent trends and events across sub-Saharan Africa, including, dramatically and tragically, the eruption of violent conflicts and massacres, increased HIV/AIDS infection rates, increased reports of corruption and misuse of public resources, and irregularities in national and civic elections, have once again brought forth questions of social change, democracy, political and economic change, and Africa's place in a globalizing world. In the same period, however, the world has witnessed a relentless growth and expansion of Christianity in Africa with new converts increasing daily. Renowned religious studies professor Philip Jenkins states that, "the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America."¹ No doubt Africa constitutes quite a large part of this shift and there is a growing body of literature to support it. Adrian Hastings says "Black Africa today is totally inconceivable apart from the presence of Christianity."² Indeed, a recent survey of Pentecostals in ten countries shows that in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, for instance, Pentecostals and Charismatics constitute 56%, 26%, and 34% of Christians and that 83%, 75%, and 63% of them respectively state that there is a role for religion in politics and public life.³ Given this reality a number of scholars have attempted to explain the challenges and realities facing African Christianity today.

David Kasali, a Congolese scholar and former president of Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology questions the rootedness of Christianity in Africa arguing that Africa's Christianity is "a mile wide and an inch wide" and wonders how else we can explain the fact that in 1994 Rwanda was 84% Christian and the worst genocide in the continent occurred in Rwanda in that same year.⁴ From a different position Paul Gifford, John Lonsdale, and David Gitari state that the church played a prominent role in what has come to be referred to as the "second political liberation" in such countries as Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, and Zambia.⁵ Taking a political economy approach Jeff Hayne argues that mainstream religious leaders collaborate with the state to achieve a hegemonic ideology that defuses or reduces any serious political challenges to the status quo.⁶ Paul Gifford's analysis of the church in Liberia during the reign of Sergeant Samuel Doe supports Hayne's argument,⁷ as does a recent analysis of the role of the Church in Kenya's political life especially following the post-election violence of early 2008 that made the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) apologize for "... sins of among others taking partisan positions on national issues [and] elevating our ethnic identities above our Christian identity..."⁸

Clearly there are mixed assessments and critiques of Christianity in Africa today. The number of scholarly assessments of Christianity's social impact in African may not,

however, match the rate at which Christianity is growing. Many of the critiques cited here follow research conducted in the 80s and 90s and often ignore individual activities and experiences of local Christians. Where do we place, for instance, research from Uganda that shows families that have converted to Christianity increasingly make positive steps out of poverty compared to their non-Christian neighbors even within a shared socio-economic and political context?⁹ Where do we place Charles Banda of Malawi who when preaching to his community in 1995 saw two people carried in a stretcher dying of cholera and decided they also needed physical nourishment and started what became the Freshwater Project?¹⁰ And where do we place a recent widely circulated opinion piece titled “As an Atheist, I Believe Africa needs God” that appeared in The Times at the end of 2008 by Michael Parris claiming that “Missionaries, not aid money, will solve Africa’s major problems.”¹¹ In view of these and other positions, it seems clear that there is not only a need for a more recent look at Christianity and its social impact, but also one that is multi-disciplinary and informed by various perspectives. Such a look should also incorporate perspectives from different regions and historical moments and those by multiple scholars looking at the way Christianity has influenced their own work and the lives of those they study and/or live within specific denominations, communities, or nations. This is where our conference comes in.

Conference Sub-Themes

To expand our understanding of Christianity in Africa, participants at this conference will not only give a more recent assessment of the dynamic of Christianity in various parts of Africa but also scrutinize works that give a historical trajectory to the growth and expansion of Christianity including its indigenous roots and manifestations. Among the themes that the conference participants will address include, but not limited to:

1. The extent to which the social, economic, and political realities present in Africa today are reflected in or reflective of the dynamic expansion of African Christianity
2. The ways in which African churches as well as individual Christians are contributing or might contribute to Africa’s current social realities including politics, economics, ethnic identities, HIV/AIDS, etc.
3. The relationship between Christianity and African cultural practices; Between numeric growth and spiritual growth; Between mainline denominations and evangelicals; Between Christianity and community economic development, public health, and education and, Between good governance and democratization
4. The emergence of faith-based development and the role of religion as both a motivation to participate and an outcome (conversion) to be achieved
5. A historical look at the social role and impact of Christianity in Africa and its relationship to Islam and African Traditional Religions
6. Student experiences of Christianity and community in African societies