

First Draft!

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The Rhetoric of Reverse Mission: African Christianity and the changing dynamics of religious expansion in Europe

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Historical backdrop

The conscious missionary strategy by mother churches in Africa of evangelizing the diaspora is a relatively recent one. Diaspora has been a key aspect to their response to European mission. The enterprise was aimed at re-evangelizing Europe and North America in particular, the former heartlands of Christianity and vanguards of missionary movements from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The ‘reverse mission process’ is of significant religious, social, political and missiological import as the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia, and Latin America, were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields till the late twentieth century. In concrete terms, the traditional ‘missions fields’ have now become the mission bases of renewed efforts to re-evangelize the fast secularizing societies of Europe and North America.

The emergence of indigenous Christian movements in the non-Western world in the late nineteenth century provides the background to the reverse direction of missions. The “reverse flow” initiative which entails sending African missionaries abroad came partly as a backdrop of the moratorium by the Lutheran World Foundation. The moratorium call was designed among other things to awaken the Third World peoples to their responsibility, creating new goals and of formulating a viable evangelical strategy towards Europe¹. In 1971, the Western missions circle was stunned when Rev. John Gatu, a leader of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, called for a

¹ See Ogbu Kalu, “Church, mission and moratorium”, in Ogbu Kalu (ed.) *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, London and New York: Longman, 1980. pp. 365-374.

moratorium on Christian missions from the Western world to the Third World. Other Third World Christian leaders supported this suggestion because they believed that it would break the circle of dependency on the Western Church and create room for self-development. This process of empowerment of the Third World Church brought changes in mission practices as issues of co-operation and partnership were promoted as new mission strategies at the International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland in July 1974 and in subsequent congresses. Third World Christians participated in these congresses and further held continental and regional conferences, which provided those challenges and global opportunities.

In the early 1980s, Tanzanian Lutheran pastors were sponsored to serve in various parishes in Germany. The reverse-mission agenda is becoming a very popular feature among African churches, with pastors and missionaries commissioned to head already existing branches or establish new ones in diaspora. The growth of missionary endeavours from Africa and other parts of the non-Western world has gained momentum in the 1990s, in a way that challenges Christianity in the West but also World Christianity. The religious mosaic of the African diaspora is now further characterised by African groups, clergy and laity existing within host, foreign churches. Examples include the African Christian Church, Hamburg under the *Nordelbian Kirche* in Germany, African groups within the American and European mainstream churches such as the Episcopal, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Catholic. There are growing numbers of Nigerian Roman Catholic and Anglican priests in the USA, Tanzanian Lutheran and Ghanaian Methodist priests in Germany, South African Presbyterians in Scotland. African priests and ministers in these churches are sometimes employed by the host churches but have the African congregations as their primary constituency. This exportation of clergy and missionaries on “reverse-mission” from Africa to the diaspora demonstrates the stature of Africa as an emerging global theatre of Christianity. Another growing feature within the African religious diaspora is the proliferation of para-churches, supportive or inter-denominational ministries. Freelance evangelists and short-term missionaries from Africa embark on frequent visits to a network of churches overseas. Such Ministries associated with Abubakar Bako, Omo Okpai are characterized by somewhat loose, flexible and non-formalized organizational hierarchies and administrative structures. Such freelancing is carried out within and between African and other Pentecostal/Charismatic church circles under the rubric of evangelism and intra-religious networks.

By the 1990s, many churches had progressed to define their missions as witnessing communities to the Western Church and societies, which were waning numerically and spiritually. In the closing decade of the twentieth century, reverse missions became more recognized and gradually gained ascendancy due to economic decline and political conflicts, which intensified migration of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans to the West. Confronted by the secularization of the Western society and the decline of church attendance and public piety, these migrants took up a revivalist agenda. At the same time, these immigrant Christians looked at the Western Church as being in a state of apostasy, and in a spiritual wilderness that needed re-evangelisation.

Secondly, as Matthews Ojo highlights, the founding of the Third World Missions Association (TWMA), in Portland, Oregon, USA, in May 1989 as a forum for mission-sending agencies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to enhance their

capacities to undertake extensive missionary endeavours brought in an institutional perspective and transformed non-Western world missions into a global force in world Christianity. In fact, the closure of some Arab countries to western missionaries and the acceptance and success of African and Asian missionaries working among Arabs also proved quite significant in this process of reverse missions. Likewise, the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement, a global effort of world evangelisation, directed by Third World Christian leaders provided additional involvement and networking for evangelization and cross-cultural missions.

By the mid-1990s, non-Western churches are beginning to achieve some degree of success in their missionary efforts, though they are largely using non-professional missionaries. Many African churches are now evangelizing among whites and migrants since mid-1980s. While migrations continued to provide missionary mobilization, African churches were able to realize their strength within world Christianity, and achieved global perspectives to their missionary activities. In this way, they moved from the periphery to the centre once dominated by Western missions. For the Western Church, reverse missions brought a major shift in mission understanding, and provided better sensibilities to, and appreciation of the multi-cultural nature of Christianity in the twentieth century. Furthermore, missions changed to become multi-lateral rather than unilateral, itinerant missionaries grew, while missions moved from cultural transplantation to contextualization. Lastly, this reverse trend in missions offered the old heartlands of Christianity a model for renewal, and called for a structural reform of the Church to grapple with the challenges of migration.

Rationale for reverse mission

- Perceived secularization of the West
- Abysmal fall in church attendance and dwindling membership
- Desecralization of sacred (church) spaces
- Liberalization
- Issues around moral decadence (i.e. war to protect children, gayism, pornography)
- Divine commission

Implications of reverse mission

- New definition of mission - traditional 'missions fields' now mission bases of renewed efforts to re-evangelize the secularized societies of Europe and North America
- multidimensional mission - missions changed to become multi-lateral rather than unilateral
- as Western churches were declining in number and in missionary significance by the late twentieth century, the impact of non-Western missions to Europe and North America became significant
- migrations as impetus for missionary mobilization - call for a structural reform of the Church to grapple with the challenges of migration
- reverse missions brought a major shift in mission understanding, and provided better sensibilities to, and appreciation of the multi-cultural nature of Christianity in the twentieth century
- missions moved from cultural transplantation to contextualization

- reverse trend in missions offer the ‘old heartlands’ of Christianity a model for renewal
- Revivification of Christianity in Europe
- Religious diversification and transformation in the context of growing pluralistic societies
- Deconstruction and demystification of ecclesiastical paternalism
- Importation of priests - fills a spiritual and administrative vacuum occasioned by dearth of European clergy
- Attitude of European churches and public

Narratives of representation – the Illusion of a ‘Christian’ Europe

- The dark continent of Europe
- Dead Europe
- Secularized Europe
- Prodigal Continent
- Devil’s stronghold
- Possessing our possession

Mapping new African religious diaspora

- Remapping global religious landscapes (P. Jenkins 2002)
#Shifting contours of Christianity – North to South
- Neglect of new immigrant African religiosity
- The Politics of migration: ignorance of religious ferment
- Scant media and scholarly attention partly owing to social marginality of most African immigrants
- Phases of Historical Emergence – ACM, AICS, PM
- Different genres of African churches in Europe
- African missionaries to the ‘dark’ continent of Europe

Factors responsible for emergence and growth

- Rejection by host churches
- Spiritual lukewarmness and drab liturgical orientations
- Sharing of common sentiments
- Quest for Identity
- Xenophobia
- Socio-economic
- Mission / Evangelism (remissionization)

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

- A typical example of an African pentecostal church in diaspora
- Founded in Nigeria in 1952
- Geographical Spread – branches in 60 countries worldwide
- N. America (120), Europe (150) as at 2003
- RCCG “Mission Statement” and conscious evangelistic strategy

Conclusion

- African Christian communities in diaspora –
- Redefining social relevance, public and extra-religious roles (registered UK charities)

- Socio-economic and religious implications for members and host society
- Public attention and mental images should go beyond media sensationalism
- New dimensions enrich the complex religious pluriformity of diasporic, host contexts.