

Research Article

Christian Colonialism, Slavery And The African Diaspora

ABSTRACT

It is critical to argue that harmful missionary practices had a deleterious effect on the spread of Christianity in Africa. Specifically, I analysed the activities of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) of the Church of England, and argue that most of the early Christian missionaries and clergy dispatched to Africa by European mission societies spent more time participating actively in the slave-trade, among other trade activities, rather than propagation of the Gospel. Using mainly ethnographic data collected with interviews among African and Black people in Britain and archival materials at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, I present strong evidence to show how early European Christian missionary activities enhanced the enslavement and the colonisation of Africa. Consequently, in view of the current globalisation and migration across the various cultural frontiers within Africa and the diaspora, it is possible to conclude that this damaging historical missionary enterprise still impacts the religious, social and community life of African and Black people generally in the diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, Bible, Christian Missions, Colonisation, Slave Trade.

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INTRODUCTION

I started the field work for this article at the Elmina and Cape Coast castles. I saw chapels situated on top of slave dungeons leading to the Door of No Return. The tour guides narrated stories of slave atrocities and how colonial hermeneutics inspired the agenda of monarchs and church mission societies that dispatched chaplains and missionaries. I saw portraits of slaves with the inscription “Society” to show that they belonged to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) of the Church of England. I analysed these historic narratives critically and felt strongly that they can inform the current dialogue on the reverse mission and the African diaspora.

The African slave-trade

The existence of domestic slavery prior to the arrival of the Europeans in Africa is well known and documented. The famous African historian Professor Albert Adu Boahen stated that slave-trade within Africa predated European contact.² In effect, there were some forms of exploitation among Africans themselves largely for domestic purposes involving wealthy indigenes such as kings before their encounter with the Europeans.³ This concurs with the view that, during the era before the coming of the Europeans, African kings and some royals were buried with their favourite servants in order for them to continue with their services to them in the ancestral world. As was the custom, people were mostly exchanged locally with items such as gold to become domestic servants without any pay even though their basic needs such as food and shelter were provided. For example, palace attendants were seen as slaves rather than servants in

² A. A. Boahen, *Topics in West African History*. (London: Harlow, 1966).

³ Boahen, *Topics in West African History*.

indigenous primitive African communities. Also, during prehistorical era, “war captives, condemned criminals, debtors, aliens, famine victims, and political dissidents were subject to slavery within African societies”.⁴

Aside the internal African conflicts and complexities, Islamic Berber traders from North Africa started buying slaves in other parts of the African continent and exporting them to North Africa generally as domestic workers and sex slaves during the trans-Saharan or the trans-Mediterranean trade as early as the 8th century. This is also known in diaspora studies as the Eastern Dispersal.

In the light of the above, historical maritime records at the Greenwich Maritime Museum in South East London show that during the age of exploration and expedition, seafarers from Europe navigating their way to the coast of West Africa saw caravans loaded with black Africans heading towards North Africa and the Middle East. This and the experiences of the Europeans regarding slavery in African societies at their arrival on the African soil led them to assume that slavery was intrinsic to the African continent.⁵

In the same vein, the former Connecticut College Professor, Vincent Thompson, argued that “West Africans themselves started the slave trade, encouraged it, and refused to put an end to it when a benevolent and humanitarian Europe decided that it was time to call a halt.”⁶ I however see Thompson’s view essentially as an overstated one. This is because, the findings of the study show that the Europeans provided their own kind of market for the slave trade by enticing the local people with delectable goodies such as sugar, cotton, tobacco, match, gun, and bullet. This eventually led to the unprecedented and full-scale dislodgement of Africans to the Western Diaspora.

Available records at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London archives show that African slaves were already serving in palaces in England before the Reformation. Reddie corroborated this by asserting that England housed a significant community of Africans as early as 1500.⁷ Documentary research reveals that the Portuguese started buying slaves in West Africa and transporting them to Europe for personal and domestic purposes as early as 1400s.⁸ Christopher Columbus for example was believed to have been accompanied by an African slave during his second voyage to the New World in 1493-94 (this will be discussed in more detail soon).

It is therefore important to discuss the multiplicity of factors that led to the African slave-trade at this stage. First, as pointed out in the foregoing, the African slave-trade started with the buying of Africans to be used as household servants in Europe started by the Portuguese towards the end of the 15th century. Secondly, when the English and other European countries started developing colonies and plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean the search for workers on those farms became imminent. And since it was expensive to pay hired labourers coupled with the high death toll among the Native Americans (who were mainly used for labour) due to the prevalence of deadly diseases like chickenpox, influenza and sexually transmitted infections resulting from their contact with the European settlers, the Portuguese (starting with) decided to go to Africa to buy people for free labour.

According to the Britannica Encyclopaedia, even though the Portuguese started sending Africans to the Cape Verde and Madeira Islands to work on sugar plantations in the Eastern Atlantic as early as 1480s, only a few hundred thousand Africans were taken to the Americas before 1600s.⁹ Nevertheless, in the 17th century, there was sharp rise in the need for slave labour due to the expansion of sugar plantations in the Caribbean and tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake Region in North America respectively.¹⁰ So with the dawn of the 18th century, slave activities escalated to its rocket height with a record of the largest slave population seen in the Americas during the 18th century.¹¹ Historians estimated that nearly three-fifths of the total number of slaves taken to the Americas for plantation labour took place in the 18th century. Yet, at a later stage, African slaves were also used predominantly for military, administrative, domestic or sexual purposes.

Nieboer-Domar’s hypothetical theory on which the study was based substantiates the above historical facts. His theory of slavery suggests that slavery is solely a response to economic incentives related to land availability. This means that landowners can own slaves (just as they own landed property) as workers thereby making it easier for them to reduce payment for labour. Even though critique of this theory abound as slaves can also be used for other purposes such as for military and administrative duties, this hypothesis justifies the use of African slaves mainly as farm labourers.

Another factor that escalated the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the call for the use of Africans as farm labourers instead of the Indians on European plantations in the West Indies by the Catholic Dominican Friar, Bartolomé de las Casas, who was the Bishop of the Spanish colonial town of Chiapas following the creation of the Spanish colony of

⁴ <https://www.nps.gov/ethnography/aah/aaheritage/histContextsC.htm> (Accessed 17 June 2019).

⁵ A. Tribbles, *Trans-Atlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

⁶ V. B. Thompson, *The Making of the African Diaspora in the Americas: 1414-1900*. (London: Longman, 1987) 70.

⁷ A. G. Reddie ed., *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010)

⁸ Boahen, *Topics in West African History*.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Accessed 13 June 2019).

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Accessed 13 June 2019).

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Accessed 13 June 2019).

Mexico and the establishment of European plantations. Bartolomé de las Casas was also a lawyer before his appointment by King Charles I (the Emperor Charles V of the Roman Empire) as the first resident bishop and the first officially appointed “Protector” of the Indians or Native Americans in the Spanish colonies of the Americas. By this, Bishop de las Casas was administratively responsible for the welfare of the enslaved native Indians.

La Casa was believed to have left for the Americas in 1520 and owned Indian slaves who worked on his own plantation. He later opposed the use of the Indians as plantation labourers and advocated for the use of African slaves. La Casas thought that the importation of African slaves would make up for the decreasing Indian population in the West Indies due to ill-health and death as discussed earlier. Furthermore, he believed that Africans can best endure the harsh West Indies climatic weather more than the Indians. His proposal was accepted by the European monarchs and governments leading to another face of a full-scale slave-trade involving Africans that lasted well over four hundred years of dispersal in chains and the scattering of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. It is therefore not surprising that Bartolomé de las Casa has been accused as one of the early founders of the Atlantic slave-trade.

According to Dabydeen et. al., twelve million Africans were loaded onto slave ships from Africa and out of this number only ten million and five hundred thousand made it to the Americas.¹² In all, twenty-seven thousand sea voyages were made and about twelve thousand involved British ships with five thousand trips originating in Liverpool (Dabydeen et. al.). It is believed that most of the slaves trekked for weeks or even months on foot from the point of their capture to the castle dungeons where they were held for at least three months before passing through the Door of No Return for embarkment. It is however not clear how many slaves died during the dungeon detention or on their way to the castle’s dungeons. Nevertheless, a clear idea of the mortality rate on the ships suggests that approximately one million and five hundred thousand African slaves died while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It is also recorded that out of every three slaves, two died, and one survived the trip to the new world.¹³

Approximately four hundred to six hundred men and women captives were kept in dungeons of thirty metres square for the men, and twenty-five by thirty metres square for women. The market square for the public sale of slaves such as the Salaga Slave Market and the Assin Manso Slave River Park (which is known to be the largest slave market) in the Gold Coast was about fifty metres square.

In the slave-trade era, a person could be exchanged with items worth approximately £5 and could be sold up to the sum £50 or sometimes given out as a friendly gift.

The trans-Atlantic slave-trade was also known as the triangular trade because of the triangular nature or the 3-way route of the voyages involving the shipment of arms, textiles and wine from Europe to Africa; the transportation of slaves from Africa to the Americas; and the exportation of sugar and coffee from the Americas to Europe in that triangular movement of European merchandised ships. Those benefited mainly from the trans-Atlantic slave-trade were the Portuguese (from 1480s), the Spanish (from 1502), the Dutch (from 1600s) as well as the English and the French (from 1700s) who engaged about 50% of the trans-Atlantic slave trade with most of their human cargo originating from West Africa including the Gold Coast (now Ghana), the Gambia, Senegal, Nigeria and Niger. Other jurisdictions of the Sub-Saharan Africa such the eastern and the southern parts had not been spared of the slave-trade either, especially Angola where the Portuguese operated since 1484 exporting Angolan slaves to plantations in Brazil up to the time Brazil gained independence in the 1820s.

The Presence of Christian missions in Africa

Despite the fact that the gospel had been proclaimed and churches formed in the northern part of Africa soon after the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church could not spread to other African nations primarily due to the difficulty in crossing the Sahara Desert by foot or any other means of transport at that time. However, Christian missions to Sub-Saharan Africa started with the coming of the Portuguese to the Gold Coast in 1471.¹⁴ While some suspicious sources speculate that Catholic missionaries from France founded a church in Elmina in the Gold Coast (Ghana) as early as 1364 and named it the Chapel of the Mother God,¹⁵ others, including Sanneh and Agbeti dismissed that report labelling it as erroneous and misleading and maintained that the Shama habitation in the Gold Coast was the first European settlement and encroachment in the Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that most of the West African coasts including Senegal, Gambia and Guinea were already explored by the Portuguese voyagers by 1415 with an abortive attempt to settle in Sierra Leone upon their arrival on its shores in 1460.¹⁷

¹² D. Dabydeen, et. al., eds. *The Oxford Companion to Black History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹³ D. Dabydeen, et. al., eds. *The Oxford Companion to Black History*.

¹⁴ J. K. Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

¹⁵ T. Joseph, *A Historical Examination of the State of Society in Western Africa, as formed by Paganism and Muhammedanism, Slavery, The Influence of Colonization and Missions* (Charleston: SC, Nabu Press, 2010).

¹⁶ J. K. Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919* and L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. Maryknoll (Maryknoll: NY, Orbis Books, 1983).

¹⁷ Bulliet et. al., *The Earth and Its Peoples, Brief Volume II: Since 1500: A Global History*. (Stamford, Cengage Learning, 2015) and L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*.

In the light of the above, it has been historically documented that the exploration activities of the trading company of the Lisbon merchant Fernão Gomes who obtained a charter and privilege from the Crown of Portugal under King John II to explore the coast of Africa in 1469 led to the arrival of the first European sailors at Shama in the Gold Coast which is in the Western Region of the present day Republic of Ghana in 1471.¹⁸ This European exploration of the African coast was necessitated by the earlier mission of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460) of Portugal to explore the African coast in order to first and foremost ascertain rumours about the richness of Africa's lands in gold and ivory so as to engage them in trade activities; Second, to find a southern route to India so as to circumvent Arab traders to establish direct trade link with Asia; and third, to evangelise Africa to make Christian allies in the fight against the spread of Islam in Europe and northern Africa.¹⁹

It came to light during the fieldwork for the project that the first group of the Portuguese seamen and traders who visited Shama left few years after obtaining goods, predominantly gold, ivory, pepper, dyewood and indigo from the local people.²⁰ It is believed that based on the report by the Portuguese voyagers to the Gold Coast about the richness of the African soil in gold and other natural resources upon their return to Portugal, the Crown of Portugal under the newly crowned King Joao II dispatched a fleet of about fifteen sailing ships with soldiers and builders and priests under the captainship of Don Diogo de Azambuja to the Gold Coast.²¹ The contingent left Lisbon on 12 December 1481 and arrived at the present-day Elmina in the Central Region of the Republic of Ghana on the 20th of January 1482.²²

During this second visit, the Portuguese brought building materials that were used to build the Elmina castle within fifty-two days continuous day and night.²³ The Elmina Castle thus became the first trading post and the oldest European colonial infrastructural edifice standing anywhere in Africa today. As a result, the Gold Coast became the headquarters of Portugal's West African trade²⁴ and subsequently the African headquarters of the British slave-trade for nearly one hundred and fifty years.²⁵

It has been considered necessary for the purposes of much uncertainty surrounding the precise identification of the members of the crew that travelled with Azambuja to note that the Italian Christopher Columbus stands out to be the captain of one of the ships that sailed through Elmina on a voyage that led to the discovery of America in 1492.²⁶ This was further corroborated by the 1994 archaeological findings of a group of researchers led by Professor T. Douglas Price of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. According to Fernando Luna Calderon in an article titled 'Africans Came with Columbus to New World', a team of anthropologists led by Professor T. Douglas Price exhumed skeletons believed to be the remains of the crew members of Christopher Columbus' ship during his second voyage and expedition to the New World in 1493-94 in the Dominican Republic which was the first European settlement in the New World.²⁷

Calderon stated that the teeth of the discovered skeletons of over 500 years subjected to isotopic analysis by the research group identified one African among the crew of Columbus with Professor Price saying "I would bet money this person was an African,"²⁸ Calderon argues that it was known that Christopher Columbus had a personal African slave on his voyages of discovery, but it is "unknown whether the individual studied by Price and his colleagues was a slave or a crew member"²⁹

Calderon further opines that the new findings or "analysis by the group could mean that Africans played a much larger role in the first documented explorations of America and if confirmed, that would put Africans in the New World as contemporaries of Columbus and decades before they were thought to have first arrived as slaves".³⁰

The foregoing also gave historical reliability of the collective memory of Mr. A. A. J. Anthony's claim that the Lisbon merchant Fernão Gomes whose seamen discovered Shama came to Elmina personally during the second trip of the Portuguese to the Gold Coast in 1482 accompanied by the Roman Catholic Reverend Fathers Mauro and Moffath and some military attachés during the reign of King Kwamina Ansah, the sixth great uncle of the respondent.³¹ This was so far the earliest recorded presence of any European clergy in Sub-Saharan Africa. This does not however

¹⁸ Bulliet et. al., *The Earth and Its Peoples, Brief Volume II: Since 1500: A Global History*, L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, J. K. Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*.

¹⁹ Bulliet et. al., *The Earth and Its Peoples, Brief Volume II: Since 1500: A Global History*, L. Sanneh, L., *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, J. K. Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*.

²⁰ A. A. J. Anthony, Personal Communication, June 1, 2016.

²¹ Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*.

²² Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*.

²³ A. A. J. Anthony, Personal Communication, June 1, 2016.

²⁴ Bulliet et. al., *The Earth and Its Peoples, Brief Volume II: Since 1500: A Global History*, L. Sanneh, L., *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. Maryknoll.

²⁵ St Clair William, *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (London: Profile Books, 2007).

²⁶ A. A. J. Anthony, Personal Communication, June 1, 2016.

²⁷ <https://www.livescience.com/3423-africans-columbus-world.html> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

²⁸ <https://www.livescience.com/3423-africans-columbus-world.html> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

²⁹ <https://www.livescience.com/3423-africans-columbus-world.html> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

³⁰ <https://www.livescience.com/3423-africans-columbus-world.html> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

³¹ A. A. J. Anthony, Personal Communication, June 1, 2016.

dispel speculations and rumours about some priests accompanying the first voyagers to Shama, even though, there was no available record on them. This is because, as was the practice, priests were generally attached to sailing boats as chaplains to provide religious services to the sailors and merchants.

It should be noted that despite the fact that the coming of the Fathers Mauro and Moffath to the Gold Coast was not a deliberate missionary endeavour, they performed Christian activities including the mass for the migrant traders and the seamen on their arrival at Elmina on the 20th of January 1482.³² This date is therefore documented officially as the birthday of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Subsequently, European Christian mission societies dispatched missionaries purposely to evangelise Sub-Saharan Africa with the Gospel at different times.

Slavery, colonialism and the Church of England

The attempt by the British to create Christian colonies and enclaves within the political setup of Africa to influence the religious life of the people of the newly found and established territory cannot be underestimated in colonial and church history. This led to the sending of chaplains to the castles (which served as operational headquarters of the colonial administration) to provide moral and spiritual support to the colonial administrators and their families. It came to light during the field work for the research project that in 1751 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) appointed the Reverend Thomas Thompson as the first clergy and missionary chaplain to the Gold Coast under the auspices of the Church of England on an annual salary of £170.00. SPG was established in 1701 for recruiting and sending Anglican missionaries and religious literature to Britain's colonies.

This is not to suggest that British chaplains were the first to have been dispatched to Africa. It was ascertained during the field work that the Portuguese and the Dutch earlier sent chaplains to the Gold Coast as early as the 15th century. These priest chaplains attended to the religious and spiritual needs of the colonialists. Those designated "Boat Chaplains" were believed to have offered prayers for the slaves before they were made to embark on the trans-Atlantic journey. They also accompanied the slave ships to perform requiem rites for the captives who died during the trans-Atlantic voyage before their bodies were thrown into the sea.

It is true that the Church of England owned Plantations in Barbados. As a result, through its mission agents and chaplains, they became deeply involved in the Atlantic slave-trade. They bought and transported slaves from Africa to the Caribbean to work on their Codrington sugar cane producing farms. The Codrington Plantations were established in the 17th Century by Christopher Codrington (c. 1640-1698). However, the farms were donated to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) as a charitable gift in 1710.

By this development, it cannot be denied that the Church of England depended heavily on financial resources obtained from the slave-trade for its operations both home and abroad. As a result, the Church of England as an institution refused to support the movement for the abolition of the slave-trade. Consequently, Bishops of the House of Lords voted against the Slave-Trade Act 1807 which led to the abolition of the slave-trade in the British Empire. To clarify issues, slavery was made illegal in Britain in 1772; the colonial slave-trade was ended in 1807; and slavery in the colonies was abolished in 1833.

It needed to be pointed out that the Church of England did not only object to the abolition of the slave-trade, they also received a compensation claim of £8,823 8s 9d which is about £500,000 in today's estimation for the loss of slave labour when parliament passed the Compensation Act 1833 to compensate former slave owners.³³ Besides, individual church members including the Bishop of Exeter who operated businesses with the use of slave labour were equally compensated to the tune of £13,000.³⁴ That necessitated cities such as Bristol to toll the church bells whenever William Wilberforce's Anti-Slave Trade Bills were defeated in Parliament.³⁵ This nonetheless ascertains the fact that the legacy of slavery was deeply embedded in Anglicanism.³⁶

Robert Beckford, the first established black professor of theology and culture in the African diaspora of the United Kingdom and Europe at Canterbury Christ Church University in an interview corroborated the foregoing that the Church of England owned plantation farms in the British newfound colonies in the Caribbean. As a result, they bought and transported slaves from Africa to the agricultural colonies.³⁷ Dr. Joe Aldred, Bishop of the Church of God of Prophecy and Board member of the Churches Together in England in an interview at the Royal Geographical Society Hall in London concurred entirely with Professor Beckford that the Church of England played damaging role in the African slavery and colonial story.³⁸

Howbeit, in 2006, about two hundred years after the abolition of the colonial slave-trade, the Archbishop of

³² Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*

³³ A. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

³⁴ *The Guardian*, February 10, 2006.

³⁵ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*.

³⁶ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

³⁷ Personal conversation, December 1, 2016.

³⁸ Personal conversation, December 1, 2016.

Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams openly apologised on behalf of the Church of England for its role in the African slavery saga.

Even though, this is a bit outside the scope and focus of the work, it is worth highlighting it for future references. It came to light during the field work for the project that great Christian revivalists including John Wesley and George Whitfield owned personal slaves.³⁹ Likewise, renowned Quaker-Christian figures such as the Barclay Brothers' (David and Alexander) links with slave trading resulted in the establishment of the Barclays Bank.⁴⁰ It was also established that Robert King, a Quaker merchant was the last slave master of the former slave turned abolitionist Olaudah Equiano.⁴¹

The Anglican deacon Thomas Clarkson, for example, was “celebrated” for torturing and abusing Africans on the plantations.⁴² And even though this can be seen gravely as a moral issue, Clarkson’s barbaric behaviour towards black slaves as a Christian had contributed to the tagging of Christianity as a dangerous religion during the slavery and colonial era. By so doing, the cliché of “more Christians, more slaves”, became associated with mission work leading to scepticism about the genuineness of Western Christian missions in Africa and elsewhere. As a result, I concur with Isichel that Western missionaries and clergy did more harm than good to the progress of Christianity in Africa.⁴³

The fact of the matter is that missionary operational orders retrieved from the missionary archives at the School of Oriental and African Studies Archives revealed that missionaries were tasked to facilitate the work of the colonial administration. However, despite the involvement of mission workers in the colonial politics, it is almost a consensus among scholars that the sending of missionaries to Africa was a genuine and deliberate attempt to honour the Great Commission to convert the “heathens” and “pagans”. This was evident in the overwhelmingly massive Christian presence in Africa today.

According to the Edinburgh 2010 World Missionary Conference, demographically, Africa is inhabited by a total of five hundred and sixty million four hundred and seventy thousand (516, 470000) Christians, representing 24% of the world’s Christian population. These statistics necessitate the objection of the obnoxious view that transporting African slaves in chains to Europe and the Americas made it possible for them to hear the Christian gospel. My view is that the enslavement of Africans was exclusively for industrial labour and commerce and in the process were forced to accept and embrace Christianity, the religion of the captors. This arguably led to increased hostility towards Christianity by many Africans both on the continent of Africa and the diaspora. However, from an African church historical perspective, arguably, irrespective of the shortcomings, the activities of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts paved the way for the spread of Christianity, and the proliferation of churches across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein

The debate over whether slavery was or was not contrary to Christian freedom featured prominently in colonial hermeneutics. Thus, the notion that Africans automatically became ‘free’ if they converted to Christianity became a hotly debated one due to the belief that conversion equalled freedom. This necessitated the ruling of Sir Philip York and Charles Talbot in 1729 that even though English law overwhelmingly forbade the continuous enslavement of slaves who converted to Christianity, enslaved Africans would remain the property of their masters even if they became Christians in Britain.⁴⁴

On March 10, 1742, an African slave student at Leiden University defended his dissertation on the topic “De Servitute Libertati Christianiae Non Contraria”. Even though, it is not clear the exact degree he pursued, it is almost certain that he earned a licentiate. In defending his thesis in Latin, Jacobus Capitein (as his Dutch slave name was; because his native Ghanaian name is unknown) was believed to have been persuaded by his supervisor to propound a theory that slavery was not contrary to Christian freedom. According to this theory, a slave must remain a slave even after converting to Christianity, hence, slave masters should permit their slaves to be baptised. Capitein’s theory was an anti-thesis to a theory formulated earlier by Godefridus Conerliszoon Udemans, a Dutch Reformed minister that every slave that had undergone baptism ought to be set free seven years after their baptism in conformity to the biblical Levitical Law (Leviticus 25:8-10, 12-14, 39-43).

According to the Dictionary of African Biography, Jacobus Capitein was bought as a slave by a Dutch sea captain Arnold Steenhart. In that same year, Steenhart gave out Jacobus to his friend named Jacobus Van Goch as a gift. He was subsequently ferried to The Hague in The Netherlands by his new slave master at the age of 11 in 1728, where he became the first African to have been educated in theology at the prestigious Leiden University. He was later baptised by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1735 and ordained in Amsterdam on 17th May 1742.

³⁹ Personal conversation with Reverend Israel Olofinjana, December 1, 2016. See also, Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

⁴⁰ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

⁴¹ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

⁴² Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

⁴³ E. Isichel, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present* First Printing Edition. (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1995).

⁴⁴ D. Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity*.

Following his ordination, Jacobus Capitein was posted to the Elmina castle in the Gold Coast as a chaplain and in his attempt to improve his relationship with his fellow Africans, Capitein proposed to marry a Ghanaian lady. However, the Dutch Reformed Church refused him the right to marry an “unbeliever” or a “heathen”. Nevertheless, they found him a Dutch woman called Antonia Ginderdros and they got wedded in 1745 in Elmina. This was believed to be the first wedding that took place among the Europeans in the Gold Coast.

Throughout Capitein’s stay at Leiden, he did not disagree with the general European attitude towards slavery and the slave-trade. This was probably first, because he left Ghana as a little boy and could not recollect the experience of the people back home. Second, he may have been overwhelmed by the treatment of his slave master by sending him to school. Third, he was believed to have been hugely influenced by his supervisor at the University. However, upon his arrival in the Gold Coast and experiencing first-hand the devastated nature of the slave trade and the atrocities including torture, rape and other inhuman treatments against the local people by the colonisers, Capitein became embittered and felt that the findings of his thesis was a betrayal of his people. As a result, he committed suicide by drinking a poisonous dose on 1st of February 1747 at the age of 30 and was buried at the Dutch Cemetery of the Mission Hill in Elmina.

It can be argued therefore that Jacobus Capitein (ca. 1717-1747) was the first African to have been educated in any European University studying Protestant theology; and that just as Philip Quaque was the first African to be ordained as a priest by the Church of England, Jacobus Capitein was the first African to be ordained as a minister of Word and Sacraments by the Dutch Reformed Church.⁴⁵

The abolishing of the slave trade

Conversely, even though the contribution of Christian missions to slavery in Africa is convincingly overwhelming in this study, the role of Christian religious groups and individual Christians in the abolishment of the legal slave-trade in 1807 can also not be underestimated. The Committee for the Abolition of Slave-Trade, a British abolitionist group set up by twelve devout Christians on the 22nd of May 1787 undoubtedly led to the abolition of the slave trade across the Western world and the emancipation of slaves in the European colonies. The leaders of the society comprised Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson who were both Anglicans and former slavery-campaigners. Other members of the society were mainly Quakers. Nevertheless, influential figures and evangelical revivalists such as John Wesley and Henry Thornton gave their support to the free slave campaign movement as time went by.

According to Reddie, religious denominations such as the Quakers, the Moravians, and the Methodists saw the slave-trade as both a moral and religious issue and have shown concern for social justice and the freedom of Africans.⁴⁶ They thus denounced slavery as inhuman and incompatible with Christian doctrine of creation of human beings that all humans are created in the image of God. Whitfield and Wesley for example, whose evangelical preaching and writings later had massive impact on the abolition of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic was a turnabout in favour of the fight against slavery. This however seems both as an effort of regret and redeeming of guilty conscience since both Whitfield and Wesley once owned slaves with Whitfield owning approximately 50 African slaves when he relocated to Georgia in the United States of America.⁴⁷

As time went by, the contributions of Christian political liberators like William Wilberforce, Thomas Buxton and John Newton to the abolition movement gradually led to the ending of slavery. For example, John Newton, the former slave ship captain turned Minister had composed the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ to support the abolition movement. Similarly, during the long campaign for the abolition of slavery, Wilberforce brought bills before parliament for twenty successive years before the 1807 legislation abolishing the slave-trade was passed.⁴⁸

Another towering Christian figure whose overwhelming tenacity hastened the abolishing of slavery is Samuel Sharpe. In a great deal of the struggle for slave freedom, there was the tendency to embrace the “Free the Slaves” movement by the slaves themselves. So when the slaves in Jamaica heard the news that the British Parliament was discussing the Abolition of Slavery Bill in 1831, they followed developments closely in the news.⁴⁹ And with the wrong notion that the Bill had been passed, Samuel Sharpe, an enslaved Baptist deacon and preacher decided to organise a peaceful demonstration to protest against the deplorable working conditions of slaves in Jamaica.⁵⁰ In the context of this paper, I believe strongly that Sharpe drawn his inspiration and courage from the introduction of the Anti-Slavery Bill in the British Parliament with the erroneous belief that the Bill was passed.

According to Turner, the Sharpe led revolt started on the 25th of December 1831 and lasted for ten days spreading across the entire island with approximately sixty thousand slaves taking part. The colonial government

⁴⁵ Kpobi D. N. A. *Mission in Chains. The Life, Theology and Ministry of the Ex-Slave Jacobus E. J. Capitein (1717-1747) with a Translation of his Major Publications.* (Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer, 1993).

⁴⁶ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity.*

⁴⁷ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity.*

⁴⁸ Reddie, *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity.*

⁴⁹ M. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834.* (University of Illinois Press 1982).

⁵⁰ M. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834.*

deployed forces to curb the demonstration, and in the process many casualties occurred including the killing of about fourteen whites and more than two hundred slaves by the troops.⁵¹ Turner also estimated that between three hundred and ten and three hundred and forty slaves were executed by hanging by the colonial government after the revolt through a court ruling which found them guilty of various crimes including stealing of livestock in 1832, and Sharpe was executed too. The significance of this revolt lies in how it affected harvest leading to loss for plantation owners since it was harvest season when slave workforce normally increased their labour. Also, there were burning of crops by the slave rebels.⁵²

In the grand scheme of things, I believe that substantively, the Sharpe led revolt and the brute reprisal of the colonial government of the day sparked the parliamentary inquiries that led to the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act by the British Parliament in 1833 with the subsequent abolition of slavery in all of Britain's Empire in 1838.

It is important to also highlight how some missionaries worked hard to enhance the livelihood of Africans. Sanneh for example underscores the fact that the men who provided the necessary support and on whose enterprise missionary activities depended were independent kings, princes, professionals, church men and industrious merchants and bankers.⁵³

For example, Robert Moffat was a Bible translator and Scottish missionary. He was known for his efforts to improve upon the living conditions of Africans. He was the father-in-law of the Scottish Congregationalist Christian medical missionary and seaman Dr. David (1813–73) who was believed to have helped the European colonialists to cease lands from Africans and pressurising them to work for a living so that they would pay taxes to the colonial government administrators for things that they never benefited from. Dr Livingstone was nevertheless one of the well-known anti-slavery crusaders who helped to end the East African-Arab-Swahili slave-trade even though he remained an advocate of colonial expansion in Africa.

As I have been saying all this while, there is no denying of the fact that the Christian missions have played a part in justifying colonial slavery. It is right to suggest therefore that although Christian missionary activities exacerbated the slave-trade and the colonial scramble for Africa, the timely intervention of the Christian abolitionists no doubt brought obvious victory to the slave freedom movement and the anti-slavery campaign in Britain and the colonies.

It is a common knowledge that the abolition of the colonial slave-trade in 1807 paved the way for Christianity to flourish in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Data analysis

There is a paucity of literature with reference to Africa and black people in the British diaspora on Christian missions and slavery and the study is novel in this regard. This is largely because how blacks of the British diaspora contextualise the mission and slavery stories from different heritages affects how Africanity and spirituality are constructed out from the diversities of religious persuasions represented in the survey.

The religious background of the survey population mainly is Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Quaker, Reformed-Presbyterian, Charismatic-Pentecostal, Islam and the African Traditional Religion. Similarly, the nationality of the respondents included Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Liberia, Britain, Togo, Malawi, South Africa, Gambia, Jamaica and other minority West Indies nationals. Among the sampling were historians, theologians, cultural anthropologists, political and social movement activists, politicians, students, ministers of the gospel, religious affiliates, atheists, agnostics and business owners selected purposively based on their knowledge of the subject. The participants were mainly descendants of Africa either born in Britain or migrated there as children or adults.

The ethnographic interviews were conducted purposively during the field work. The questions administered were qualitatively open-ended with the aim of comparing responses of the participants who cut across all age boundaries as well as varied nationalities involving women and men respectively. Each interview session with an individual interviewee lasted approximately between 20 and 30 minutes with 39 interviewees participating in the survey. The transcripts from the interviews had been carefully transcribed followed by a careful reading of the qualitative interview data. I then made notes from the raw data labelling relevant pieces such as opinions and differences in the transcripts by paying attention to perspectives and contexts of the participants. I now discuss the results of the structured qualitative data analysis thematically as follow:

Knowledge of European Christian missions in Africa

The feedback from the respondents on the subject of the knowledge of European Christian missions in Africa suggest that even though the primary goal of the missionaries was to convert the “heathens” of Africa to Christianity, they were also concerned about the welfare of the people by providing them with modern and scientific healthcare and Western

⁵¹ M. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834*.

⁵² M. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834*.

⁵³ Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*.

type of education. This concurs with existing scholarly observations of Agbeti⁵⁴ and Kpobi⁵⁵ that the primary aim for establishing schools by European missionaries was to make Christian converts out of the people and to proselytise Christianity in Ghana.

In the light of the above analysis, most of the respondents expressed strong suspicion about the European social intervention programmes in Africa, arguing that they mainly form part of a grand scheme to exploit and influence Africans to abandon their socio-cultural and religious practices especially as expressed in their traditional health care system. For example, they were convinced that the system of education that the missionaries brought to Africans was basically meant to influence them to accept the Christian faith.

On the whole, the participants identified Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Basel (Presbyterians) missions as the major organisations whose missionaries operated in Africa. Only one out of the thirty-eight people interviewed identified the Bremen mission as part of the European missionary groups that operated in Africa. The reason for this is partly because the missionaries tend to be concentrated communities with seemingly clear demarcations of areas of jurisdictions and the Bremen missionaries tend to have operated mainly in the trans-Volta Togoland.

Christianity and Slavery in Africa

The respondents sharply divided over the role of Christianity in the slave-trade. Whiles some of them draw a direct connection between activities of European missionaries in Africa and the slave-trade, others argue that the missionaries may not have engaged in the slave-trade considering the legacy of Christian moral teaching they left behind. In all, three main categories of respondents could be identified, namely those who saw no relation between Christianity and slavery; those who were unable to reconcile the activities of the European missions with the slave-trade; and those who saw the Christian missionaries as flagbearers of colonialism and slavery. For the purpose of this analysis, these respondents are categorised into groups of A, B, and C. For those in group A, their arguments were centred on the following themes; the distinction between the activities of the colonial masters and the missionaries; the nature of the Christian way of life; and the social actions of the Christian missionaries—i.e. the building of churches, schools, factories and hospitals. One of the respondents stated that:

I do not think there is a relationship between Christianity and slavery, because the Christian way of life and understanding are very different from the efforts and activities that gave rise to the slave-trade. It is the case that it is the same ‘white men’ who introduced churches, schools and hospitals that also undertook the abominable slave-trade. It may, thus, have been difficult for the natives to distinguish and isolate the ‘Christians’ from the ‘slave-traders’.

The recurring trend in group B is the repeated allusion to the metaphor of ‘the early Europeans missions coming to Africa with the Bible in one hand and a gun in another.’ In fact, views from this group suggest that they were unable to reconcile the ‘goodness’ of the missionaries with their alleged involvement in the slavery-trade.

Those in group C draw direct connections (either overtly or covertly) between the activities of the missionaries and slavery in Africa, and nearly all of them alluded to ‘the Bible and gun in hand’ metaphor. For these respondents, there was no convincing evidence that the Christian missionaries condemned colonialism and the slave-trade in any form, as in fact, they believed strongly that the Bible was primarily used to justify slavery. In this regard, the interviewees were of the opinion that colonial hermeneutics labelled the black race as cursed by God and naturally slaves. This belief emanated from Aristotle’s theories of “natural slaves” and “natural social hierarchies” which led many prominent Christian theologians to defend the slave-trade by providing the legal and moral justification for it.

According Aristotle, master and slave relationship was natural and that some are destined for subjection and others for rule. Aquinas developed Aristotle’s theory of natural order further to argue that slaves were the physical instrument of their owners. By this, Aquinas maintains that slave owners have the inherent right to claim everything their slaves possessed including children. He however attributed the plight of slavery to sin and the inevitable conditions of a sinful world. This view became popular among Western theologians before and during the Renaissance thereby leading to the alluding of the cursing of Ham into slavery by his father Noah to Africans because they believed they were the descendants of Ham (Gen. 9: 20-27).

Before the invading of Africa, European Christians considered non-Christians as “natural slaves” and so could enslave them. For example, fifteenth century popes and Catholic priests owned slaves and allowed the enslavement of non-Christians as “an instrument for Christian conversion.” Thus, church laws and papal bulls protected Christians from enslavement but permitted the enslavement of non-Christian “pagans” and Muslims who were largely considered as “infidels”.

As times went by, Africans became the subject of the institution of slavery based on the foregoing Judeo-

⁵⁴ Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations: 1482-1919*.

⁵⁵ Kpobi D. N. A. *Mission in Chains. The Life, Theology and Ministry of the Ex-Slave Jacobus E. J. Capitein (1717-1747) with a Translation of his Major Publications*.

Christian assertions. And even though the Bible does not mention race or skin colour in the Genesis 9 narrative, sixteenth and seventeenth century Western theologians hermeneutically maintained that Africans inherited Ham and Canaan's curse of slavery. As a result, some early European Christian missionaries and clergy and pro-slavery advocates used this misleading biblical exegesis and justification, together with Aristotle's theory of natural order and European racial prejudices to defend the enslavement of black people. This racial shift of superiority and dominance influenced Europeans' decision to colonise Africa.

The interviewees in this category concluded that it was possible that the missionaries supported the slave-trade directly or indirectly. There was therefore the suspicion among this group that the many social interventions undertaken by the missionaries and clergy in Africa only formed part of a larger grand scheme to gain control, manipulate, and dehumanise Africans, as was later evident in the colonial enterprise.

The impact of Slavery and Colonialism on African Christian Migrants in the British Diaspora

To this effect, the respondents expressed mainly positive views about their experiences as migrants. One respondent noted, 'I was used to their language, which is the English language; I was used to their Christian worldview, I was used to the way they dressed and to a large extent what they eat.' Another respondent indicated,

African migrants in the diaspora are a direct result of the colonial incursion and the economic enslavement by European masters who controlled the economics and politics of the nations they dominated. Whether directly or indirectly, Africans are affected by our colonial past. The educational system of most African countries was designed and delivered by the white masters.

Nevertheless, the theme of 'master-servant relationship' also surfaced. For example, one of the respondents said,

I think that the prior introduction of education and Christianity by the missions and the fact of their co-existence in Africa created the condition or environment where the migrants on arrival in Britain felt somewhat comfortable and welcomed in their new surroundings. It must, however, be said that the relationship was one of a master/servant relationship.

I think that since generally, the relationship between colonialists and the Africans was one of a 'master/servant' relationship, the reception of migrants in the West was still characterised by the same 'master/servant' relationship.

The impact of Post-Colonial and Pentecostal Christianity on Mission and Ministry among African Migrants in the British Diaspora

Again, the respondents were divided over this issue, mainly over the positive and negative impacts. Some of the respondents believed that one of the 'positive impacts' of postcolonial and Pentecostal Christianity in Britain is 'the gradual demise of orthodox Christianity and the phenomenal growth and expansion of Pentecostalism.' Indeed, some respondents believed that 'Pentecostalism has changed the face of Christianity in Britain especially among migrants and more so among the youth.' Thus, according to many of the respondents, Pentecostal Christianity 'creates a bond of unity and togetherness among African migrants and black people generally in Britain'. They also believed that Pentecostal stream of Christianity 'creates a forum where black people can relate well with one another and to a larger extent, be of assistance to each other socially and economically.' Still yet, there is a general feeling among the respondents that the advent of Pentecostalism made the reverse mission agenda possible. The reverse mission is an emerging subject in theology (around late 1990s) that explores the perceived flow of missionaries from the Global South, mainly Africa to the Global North, mainly Britain and North America for the purposes of evangelism. One interviewee noted, 'I always say that God used the white man to bring the Gospel to us in Africa but in these last days God is using the black race to open the eyes of the white man to the gospel.'

Many of the respondents also believed that the advent of Pentecostal Christianity had no impact on them as African migrants in Britain. The views from this group of people suggest that Pentecostal churches as compared to the mainline churches are 'unreliable, unstable, less organised, often under-resourced, and perhaps patronised by less matured worshippers.' In this regard, one respondent said he finds 'orthodox Christianity more amenable and palatable than the current excesses of Pentecostalism.'

I have observed that the aforementioned responses followed a particular denominational pattern, whereby the respondents from the Pentecostal constituency hold views of positive impacts of Pentecostalism on blacks in Britain, while the respondents from orthodox background tend to hold negative views about Pentecostalism.

The future of Christianity among black people in Britain

The respondents unanimously agreed that Christianity's prospects in Britain are weaker than other religions especially

Islam. It seems to me that the respondents were concerned about the assertiveness of Muslims, and how this might affect the future growth and spread of Christianity in the Britain. This was captured in more detail in one of the responses:

If the present aggressive and assertive nature of Islam coupled with its radicalisation and antagonistic demeanour is left to continue, then the future of Christianity will witness its demise.

If the Christian faith does not sit-up to ensure that Islam does not encroach upon its territory, then over time Christianity will be overtaken by Islam.

Majority of the respondents also believed that the future of Christianity amongst African migrants in Britain is 'bleak' due to disunity and unhealthy competition among Black Majority Churches. This is a recurring persuasion in nearly all the responses gathered. Yet still, there is a strong sense of belief among the respondents that Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity will continue to thrive even though orthodox or mainline diasporic churches are likely to decline. They believed that the continuous growth of Pentecostal churches will depend on their vibrant worship style and prosperity preaching that are attractive mainly to young people of African descent.

Approximately, 70% of the participants strongly objected to their attendance at the indigenous historic mainline churches of the host nation because of the experience of racism against them and other new age practices such as same-sex marriage and gay ordination. More importantly, most of the participants believed that attending Catholic and Anglican churches for example is a betrayal of the African race because of their role in the whole African slave saga. Also, they believed this damaging missionary enterprise still impacts the socio-political and community life of African migrants, as they are often seen as second-class citizens whose voices do not count in political decision making of the local community. This therefore badly affects the peace and development of predominantly African communities and neighborhoods such as Peckham, Woolwich, and Brixton within the city of London. It is therefore fair to state that this manoeuvrability of the political role of Christian missions in Africa had far-reaching implications for mission and community development in the African diaspora. This is also a challenge for Christians and especially church leaders to show more sensitivity to the impact of mission history on the advancement of *missio Dei* in the world today.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning of this article, this has been a systemic analysis to prove that inappropriate "Christian" activities carried out by early European missionaries led to a sceptical attitude by many Africans towards Christianity. I guess one reason for sending missionaries to Africa was to spread the Gospel. However, for various reasons they could not remain focus on this task. Thus, their involvement with slavery and colonial administration became deeper than that of mission. This spiritualisation of the politics of slavery and colonialism is constructed diversely in the underlying historical narratives of the African story today.

This article acknowledged scholarly views that object to any link between slavery and missionary work but I need to say that there was no sense of presumption by which I arrived at the conclusion that the quest for Pan-African dialogue is an imperative in the present epoch, as we continue to confront racism and discrimination.

56 Maiko S., "John Wesley: Church Mission Struggle in the fight against Slave Trade". *Missionalia* 45 (12: 2017).

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