Christian Missionaries As The Pathfinder To Nigeria Colonial Domination

*Nwaoha, C.C. & Njoku, C.O.

Department of History/International Studies,
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
Email: nwaohachima@yahoo.com
Phone no; 07035567526

ABSTRACT
Missionary activities were one of the major tools used by the European nation to actualize their colonial motives in Africa in the 19th century. The African territory was then seen and was taken as a dark continent, with strange demonic and satanic influence. Christianity was taken to be a major instrument that can be used to conquer those demonic influences on Africa. Christian religion originated from Judaism into which Jesus was born. The church on its own which was taken to be a community of believers in Christ Jesus became the most visible agent of Christianity. Some parts of Nigeria like few other nations in Africa embraced Christianity as early as the 15th century. The activities of Christian Missionaries in Nigeria started in the South coastal areas and later spread to other parts of the country. At the inception of colonialism, Christianity came handy as tool for the Europeans to actualize desires. This paper therefore intends to ex-ray the activities of the Christian Missionaries as pathfinders of colonialism in Nigeria.

Keywords, Christianity, Africa, Missionaries, Religion, Faith, Colonialism

INTRODUCTION
Christianity is a major world religion. It came from the life, teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed one of God) in the first century AD. Christianity is the world’s largest religion and geographically the most widely diffused Religion Organization. The largest groups among them are the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox and the Protestants. Apart of these afore mentioned ones, there were also several independents church movements of Eastern Christianity as well as numerous sects of such in the whole world. Christianity is indeed the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ. In this context, faith refers both to the believers act of trust and to the content of their fate. As a tradition, Christianity is more than a system of religious belief, it has also generated a culture, a set of ideas and ways of life, practice, and artifacts that have been handed down from generation to generation since Jesus Christ became the object of faith. Christianity is indeed both a living tradition and culture of faith. The agent of Christianity is the church which means the community of people who make up the body of believers. Christianity is monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in canonical gospel and New Testament writings. Christianity originated from Judaism which was rejected by the Jews themselves from whom Jesus Christ has his natural birth. Initially, the religion was restricted to the Jews only, but from there, it spread to other parts of the universe and became a world religion. Jesus Christ from the beginning ordained Christian gospel to be preached all over the world as enunciated in the book of Matthew Chapter 28 and verse 19 that states “GO ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost” It was in the pursuit of this divine mandate that led to the spread of Christianity into Nigeria beginning from Benin and Warri, championed by the early missionaries. Usually, the introduction of Christianity into any community means a change in mental attitude leading to a complete departure and modification of the old ways of life. Contrary to other religions of the world whether minor or major, it is only Christianity that preaches salvation through Jesus Christ offering a hope for humanity of a life eternal hereafter.
In Nigeria, many indigenous leaders welcomed the Christian missionaries that came from Europe and other parts of the world in the belief that they would help them gain influence with their God. The missionaries, however, were more concerned with spreading their religion and ending slavery and slave trade that was booming in Africa then than helping indigenous rulers meet their desired political goals. The Missionaries also believed that the British government would be a more powerful and effective partner in achieving their imperial goals than the indigenous traditional rulers. That was why they missionaries lobbied hard for the British government to protect them and support their efforts in Nigeria territory. They urged the British government repeatedly to intervene against the practice of slavery and the slave trade that was on ground when the arrived. Internal political pressure from the Christian groups as we shall see played a role in the British decision to intervene more heavily in local political disputes and later for the colonization of Nigeria.

The History of Christian Missionaries in Nigeria

The earliest attempt by Europeans to establish Christianity in the territory that was to become modern Nigeria was in the sixteenth century when the Portuguese gained inroads into the kingdoms of Benin and Warri. However, the initial efforts of the missionaries were concentrated on the rulers of these states since their conversion was expected to have a demonstrative effect on their subjects who were generally expected to follow their lead. Consequently, the religion was limited to the royal courts and its fortunes varied with the vagaries of royal patronage.

History has it that the Portuguese missionaries were very active in Benin kingdom between 1485 and 1520 and it was said that on a few occasions, the Oba came to being converted to the new religion. Even when Portuguese traders had abandoned their trading station at Gwato, Portuguese priests continued to visit the kingdom of Benin from Sao Tome in the 16th and 17th centuries. Portuguese missionaries were most successful in the kingdom of Warri where two successive kings were known to have become Christians, but these conversions did not last long because the converts were not sufficiently instructed before baptism. So they lapsed back to their old pagan religion soon after they had accepted the Christian faith. Moreover, the hostile climate and scarcity of priests during that era made it impossible for the Portuguese Missionaries to exert a permanent and strong influence on the mass of the people.

Rise of the Missionary Movement

Enduring and successful Christian Missionary enterprise began in Nigeria in the 19th century. This time, the initiative was taken by Protestant churches of Europe and America and later came the Catholic Church. Many factors gave rise to the revival of the Christian Missionary Movement in Europe. This movement started as a result of a new religious and moral awakening which began to sweep through the Protestant churches of Europe and America towards the close of the 18th century. Popularly known as the Evangelical Movement, that was strongest in Britain.

In the moral sphere, this religious awakening produced the anti-slave trade movement. But in the religious sphere, it gave rise to a strong and active desire to spread the gospel to non-Christian peoples in Asia and Africa. The result was the formation of a number of missionary societies in Europe and America in the last decade of 18th century and early 19th century. These societies sent out missionaries to West Africa, especially Nigeria and other parts of the world for evangelizations of the world. In England, various religious was founded to actualize these purpose; the Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1798, the London Missionary Society in 1799, the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1803 and the University Mission to Central Africa in 1857. Many protestant missionary societies were also founded in Scotland, Germany, Switzerland and America. Catholic Missionary Societies was also founded in France, the Holy Ghost Fathers society in 1841, the society for Africa missions in 1858 and the White Fathers Missionary Society in 1869.

On the whole, missionary enterprise at this time proved successful. This was due to several factors. First improvements in transportation resulting from the industrial revolution increased the opportunity of carrying Christianity overseas. Secondly, increased wealth in Europe also resulting from the revolution in industrial techniques provided Europeans with enough resources and spare for other parts of the world. Thirdly, it was realized that the co-operation of Africa was necessary for the total liquidation of slavery and the slave trade, and missionaries wanted to obtain the co-operation. Above all, the high degree of religious feeling generated by the great religious awakening assured the missionaries of support from their homeland.
The Planting of Christianity in Western Nigeria

Christian missionary activities in Nigeria in the 19th century began in Yorubaland. The impetus to that development was because in the 1830s, abolition’s act. Many freed slaves of Yoruba origin who returned as liberated slaves had become Christians in Sierra Leone, so they appealed to the C.M.S. in Sierra Leone for missionaries to work among them. In consequence of this appeal, the C.M.S began to establish mission’s activities in Yorubaland. To heed this call, on September 24, 1842, Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman of the Western Methodist Church arrived at Badagry. Freeman was going to Abeokuta in response to a request made by the liberated slaves who had written to Freeman asking for spiritual guidance. Freeman was accompanied with Mr. and Mrs. De Graft who were to open a Methodist Mission at Badagry. Badagry thus became the first station of the protestant mission in what is now Nigeria9. Freeman stayed in Badagry only long enough to see that Mr. Graft and his wife properly housed, and then moved to Abeokuta, the Egba capital. When he arrived there, he was warmly received not only by the ex-slaves but also by the Alake Sodeke and his Chiefs. Freeman remained in Abeokuta for ten days and on his return to Badagry on Christmas Eve, he met Rev. Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society, who was a British missionary working in Sierra Leone but was transferred to Nigeria.

History has it that Rev. Townsend and his wife, Rev. Gollmer and his wife, and Rev. Crowther and his wife played prominent roles in establishing a missionary station in Badagry for Rev. Gollmer to manage. They also built the mission house, the first story building in Nigeria with mud walls and decked with plants. They also established two schools – one for boys and the other for girls10. The schools were managed by the Rev and Mrs. Crowther who only taught the pupils how to read the bible and sing hymns. In 1843, Rev Crowther published a Grammar and Vocabulary book in Yoruba language.

Townsend and Crowther finally left for Abeokuta on July 27, 1840 arriving there on August 3. Townsend was to spend about thirty-three years in Abeokuta preaching, teaching and occasionally getting into politics. He introduced the first printing press in Abeokuta (and Nigeria) in 1852 and started the first newspaper in Nigeria in Yoruba language, IweIrohim in 185911.

From Abeokuta the C.M.S. spread to Lagos (1852) Ibadan (1853) Oyo (1865) and other parts of Yorubaland. The Methodist and C.M.S. missionaries were joined in Badagry on August 5, 1850 by an American Baptist Missionary; Thomas T. Bowen who established missions at Iyaye and Ogbomosho. On February 17, 1862, an Italian; father Francisco Borghero of the Society of African missions (S.M.A) arrived in Lagos and met over 1000 freed slaves who had emigrated from Sierra-Leone. These people had worked in Cuba and Brazil, where they embraced the Catholic faith. The Society did not record its first confirmation in Lagos until 1877. They began the building of the Holy Cross Cathedral in 1878 which was completed three years later. The mission work of the Catholic Church extended to Abeokuta in 1889, and Ibadan in 189512.

Christian Missionaries in Igboland

The Christian missionary activities in Igboland started with the 1857 Day-spring expedition of the Niger. Samuel Crowther led the C.M.S team to the Niger area. The expedition arrived at Onitsha on July 26, 1857. The following day, Obi Akazua of Onitsha and his Chiefs approved Crowther’s request of setting up a mission station in the area. Crowther continued with the expedition northwards leaving the mission in the hands of Rev. John, Christopher Taylor and Simon Jones. From Onitsha, they went on preaching tours to some places like Obosi, Oko, Nsugbe and Abob.

The Roman Catholic Church arrived at Onitsha on December 5, 1885. They were led by a French Priest; Father Lutz and were received by the whole society. Missionary activities advancement into the Igbo heartland is however, a late event beginning only in the early part of the 20th century. It was after the Aro expedition of 1901-2 that the missionaries often invited by the government, moved in establishing missions stations among the Igbo.

Rev. Hope Waddell the founder of the Church of Scotland Mission (the Presbyterian) came to Calabar from Jamaica where they had been a worker for the mission. Hope Waddell’s stay in the Calabar mission lasted twelve years. During the period, he and his colleagues established a sphere of influence for the Presbyterian Church in the Calabar area and their missionary activities spread to Arochukwu, Ohaifa, Abiriba and Afikpo. Through this mission, a great woman missionary; Mary Slessor who was highly respected worked in the area
for many years. She persistently condemned the primitive practices such as killing of baby twins, attendants to be put to death and buried with their deceased chief in order to serve him in his future life and others. In 1903, Archdeacon T.J Dennis, a missionary, arrived at Owerri for a mission work and was well received by the people. In 1906 he finally settled at Egbu community which is very close to Owerri which eventually became the Headquarters of the Church Missionary Society (C M S). missions in Owerri area from where they expanded further.

It must be pointed out that Rev.Fr. Joseph Shanahan who arrived Onitsha in 1902 strengthened the efforts and activities of the Catholic missions in evangelism. The efforts of Shanahan, who later became a Bishop gave the Roman Catholic Church missionaries wide establishment of missions schools and hospitals in different parts of the Igboland outnumbering the protestant missions works in eastern region.

Missionary Activity in the North

Christian missionary work was not confined to the Southern part of the country alone. In 1857, after dropping Taylor and Jonas at Onitsha, Samuel Crowther continued up the Niger. From the Atta of Igalu, Crowther secured permission to open a station at Gbebe, opposite the present day Lokoja District. It was at Gbebe in 1862 that the first baptisms in northern Nigeria took place; eight adults and one child were baptized. At K abba, Crowther met Rev. M. Clark a Baptist missionary who had come from Abeokuta for a missionary work in the area. The then Emir of Bida, Usman Zaki did not pose any obstacle on Crowther’s missionary activities, however, after the death of Zaki in 1859, Christian missionaries were no longer welcome at Kabba. Crowther was only able to persuade the Emir of Ilonrin, Gwandu and the Caliph of Sokoto to receive Arabic Bibles. Attempts to spread Christian missions in the north were relatively unsuccessful. The only successful missionary work in the area was that of Walter Miller, who was able to establish a Church Missionary Society (C M S) mission at Zaria in 1889. In 1890, the eleven men C.S.M Sudan party under Bishop Tugwell which had as its goal the conversion of the Muslim North to Christianity was ordered out of Kano by the Emir of Kano.

How Christian Missionaries Aided Colonialism in Nigeria

As a social force, Christianity cannot be isolated from political developments in the society. In any case, the initial attempt to seek the patronage of civil rulers drew the church into the political process. The Christian missionaries in Nigeria one way or the other contributed immensely in watering the ground for eventual British colonialism in Nigeria. In Abeokuta for example it was the Pro-British Protestant Christians, most notably, the missionary who forestalled attempts by the French man; Viard and the Pro-French Roman Catholic Missionary Society in Abeokuta. Moreover, Rev. Townsend was not only a member of the Ogboni the “Egba senate” but was also the secretary to the Alake for over ten years after 1850. In the case of Ijebuland, Missionary propaganda which painted the people as anti-British and anti-western civilization because they refused to welcome Christian missionaries in their land provided additional justification for the Ijebu expedition of 1892.

The C.M.S in order to get the attention of the British government in London through their representative, Townsend began to build up a picture of Abeokuta as a land and a gateway to an overland route to the north with as much potential economic value as the Niger water way. He further produced a very clearly expressed document, setting out aims and objectives of the missionaries at Abeokuta and their immense success. On the basis of Townsend’s paper, the C.M.S drew up a memorandum setting out a new policy to urge the government to send them a Consul.

Another important area that was of much interest to the Christian missionaries was the area of trade. In the first place, the discovery by Europeans, especially Britain, of the extent of the River Niger, led to the attempts to spread British missionary and trading influence into the interior. The possibility that, British firms could bypass the coastal middlemen who had dominated trade for centuries threatened to ruin the local economies of place of sound economy such as Bonny, Brass, Opobo and Calabar. The instability brought about by such tensions led directly to calls on the part of both British traders and coastal middlemen for the British to aid them in restoring equilibrium to the system which in turn laid the foundation for British colonization of the region. The local circumstances encountered by the more direct British interference in the politics of the Nigerian area.
Missionaries saw the need to protect their interest in Nigeria, and chose to write to officers of the British squadron for aid if ever they felt endangered. But there was situation for which the occasional appearances of warship on patrol were unsuitable and for which missionaries were beginning to demand the full time services of a resident British official. Already, in emergencies, they had been turning to the Governor of the Spanish Island, Fernando Po John Beecroft, who happened to be an Englishman, as well as British Consul. The English missionaries in Calabar asked John Beecroft to send for a British warship to plant the English flag and Hope Waddell further persuaded the Foreign Mission Committee in Edinburg to approach the government to set up a protectorate in Calabar. He declared that “this country is almost equivalent to an English Colony”.

A British warship accompanied by Beecroft was sent to Calabar. With Hope Waddell’s evidence and argument on the prevention of selling of slaves upon the coast, he proposed that the naval squadron should go further to undertake the abolition of slave trade and human sacrifice. The missionaries wished to see British influence penetrate inland to protect and support their efforts in seeking economic development as well as social reforms in the areas of their operations.

Direct British interference in Lagos politics began in 1851 when missionaries in Abeokuta convinced John-Beecroft; the British consul for the Bight of Biafra to use his military power to unseat Kosoko; the reigning king of Lagos in favour of rival claimant; an Egba man named Akitoye. Beecroft hoped that replacing Kosoko would bring an end to the slave trade, stabilize the region for the spread of legitimate commerce and open Lagos as a part of Abeokuta for British missionary and trading enterprise. Indeed Christian missionaries played a crucial role in the British annexation of Lagos by misleading Akitoye in signing the petitions for British intervention and other treaties.

Missionary bodies in spite of their occasional differences, acted together to influence government actions in Nigeria during the colonial era. They had country-wide organizations in British and all the influence in humanitarian works. Their agents in West Africa lived among the people, wrote letters frequently and sent extracts from their daily journals which were widely circulated in the missionaries’ magazines, notices and records, which, recent research has shown, formed the bulk of the reading materials of the Victorians. It was their press intervention that led to the development of the power of the Consul in Nigeria.

Finally, it was at this time Samuel Crowther’s eldest son visited London, to meet with the Lords, Ministers and was later interviewed by the then Queen and Prince Albert on how to use British aid to support and suppress the interior traffic in slaves in Egba land and also how Lagos would be thrown open to commerce, extending from the coast to the River Niger. Mr. Crowther’s visit moved British government to action. The Christian missionaries co-operated with the colonial power in the extension of the latter’s authority and influence in various parts of Nigeria. Their objective for supporting European colonialism was to ensure protection for themselves by getting the colonial government to apply force where necessary, to impose law and order and to suppress the slave trade. The missionaries led traders in calling for British intervention not only in Lagos but also in other parts of Nigeria thereby watering the ground for eventual colonialism.

CONCLUSION

From the beginning, the Christian missionaries had a three-pronged mission of spreading the three C’s – Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. It could have hardly been otherwise given that the evangelical revival coincided with the abolition of the infamous Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Hence “legitimate trade” in agricultural produce would now replace the former while European civilization was expected to supplant the “barbarism” that was supposed to prevail in Africa. These ideals were epitomized by John Wesley, Rev. Townsend, Rev. Freeman, Hope Waddell and other leading missionaries who played crucial roles in the propagation of Christianity in Nigeria and who rationalized opposition to slavery from religious and commercial points of view.

But one point was so obvious, the Christian missionaries romanced with the colonial authorities for championing their cause. By implication, this suggested political motives to control the affairs of the people through Christian religion. Christian missionaries who were equally traders in certain commodities also needed political protection from their European traders to call for British protection from their counterparts in civil governance. Hence they joined hands with European traders to call for British protection and intervention in territories like Lagos, Warri, Benin, Calabar and Lokoja. These and other ulterior motives watered the ground for the British colonization of Nigeria.
End Notes
3. The Holy Bible, Book of Matthew. Chapter 28:19
6. Elizabeth Isichei, p. 313
11. Onwubiko, p.212
14. Solomon Onuekwisi, & et al, p.54
17. Akinjide, p.146.
20. Ajayi, 60.