CHAPTER THREE

An Overview of the Historical Development of the Churches in Nigeria, from the Pre-Colonial Period to the Present Day

3.0 Introduction

Theologians have come to accept the reality of the shift of the centre of Christianity from the northern hemisphere to nations of the south typically as a non-western religion. Recent development in these regions of the world have revealed the dramatic transformations of the Christian faith and the evolution of different strands of Christianity with their peculiar features as peoples of these lands appropriate Christianity no longer as a white man’s religion, but indeed as their own. The adaptability of Christianity to cultures that hitherto were considered as heathen has widened the frontiers of Christianity and made it to be a more dominant religion of the world than experienced in previous centuries in the history of the world. Africa has had its fair share of this interesting development and the rapid growth of Christianity in this continent has become a major attraction and interest of theologians and anthropologists.

This chapter will focus on the historical development of Christianity in Nigeria from the initial Portuguese expedition in the 16th century to the contemporary times. Consideration shall be given to the missionary enterprise of the Europeans in phases, the evolution of the African Independent churches in the colonial era and their characteristics. Focus will be directed on the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church in Nigeria, the subject of this research and an offshoot of an AIC, the Christ Apostolic Church.

3.1 The Nigerian Religious Terrain

Nigeria is Africa’s most populous nation, with an estimated population of over 150 million and over 450 ethnic groups. It is estimated that one out of every five Africans is a Nigerian. Nigeria runs a federal system of government and constitutionally, a secular state. The dominant religions are Islam with a high percentage of adherents in the North and Christianity which is prominent in the southern areas of the country. African traditional
religions have a significant level of followership scattered over the country, but cannot compare with Christianity and Islam in terms of followership. Christianity which was introduced into Nigeria over 150 years ago has grown over the years to claim an estimate of between 40% to 60% of the population.\footnote{P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk, \textit{Operation World, When We Pray God Works}, Paternoster USA: Paternoster Publishing, 2001, 488. Census figure on religion of the people is a highly contentious issue in Nigeria. This was why the subject of religion was not a respondent question in the last national census in 2001 in Nigeria.} This growth accounts for the much talked about shift in Christianity from the Northern hemisphere to the South. For example, Kenneth L. Woodward notes that, ‘In 1900, the beginning of what American Protestants christened as the ‘Christian century’, 80 percent of Christians was either Europeans or Americans. Today 60 percent are citizens of the “Two—Third World”-Africa, Asia and Latin America.’\footnote{K.L. Woodward, ‘The Changing Face of the Church,’ \textit{Newsweek international}, April 2001.} This observation was corroborated by Andrew Walls who stated that “…the centre of Christianity has shifted southward…’, and that, “The events that are shaping 21\textsuperscript{st} century Christianity are taking place in Africa and Asia.”\footnote{K. L. Woodward, ‘The Changing Face of the Church’, \textit{Newsweek}, April 21, 2001.} The Church in Nigeria has witnessed a vibrant growth over the years and Nigerians are acclaimed to be a very religious people in spite of their economic travails. Christians in Nigeria tend to go about everywhere with their faith as seen in Christian slogans written in their shops, names of their businesses, vehicles etc. This is because, according to Musa Gaiya, ‘Cinema halls, shops, stores, warehouses, disused houses, bars, brothels, restaurants and night clubs are being turned into churches in Nigeria.’\footnote{M. A.B. Gaiya, “The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria‖, Occasional Paper, Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, July 2002.3} It is plausible that economic interests may be factored into the proliferation of these churches as Gaiya noted that ‘...the establishment of churches is one of the most lucrative businesses in Nigeria.’\footnote{M. A.B. Gaiya, “The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria‖,3.} According to recent statistics,\footnote{P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk, \textit{Operation World, When We Pray God Works}, 488.} Protestant denominations account for 15.84\% of the total Christian population, while the independent churches account for 18.25\%. The Anglican Communion (Nigeria) and the Roman Catholic church make up 10.21\% and 13.45\% respectively. There are no available statistics on the population of the Pentecostals and Charismatic denominations, but they are believed to be numerous and enjoy large followership.
Nigeria is rich in both natural resources and human capital, and one of the foremost producers of crude oil in the World. The abundance of resources has however not translated to a high living standard of the people as a large percentage of them still live below the poverty line. There is a high population growth rate that is not proportionate to the development of infrastructures, health care system, and educational opportunities for the teeming populace. The decay in social infrastructures caused by lack of adequate planning and inept and corrupt leadership has created dysfunctions in the socio-economic well being of the people. Unemployment is high with many jobless youths scavenging for low paying jobs. Opportunities for upward social mobility are limited. Social security and good health care are lacking. The churches, especially the AICs and African Pentecostal churches have exploited these negative trends in the polity to their advantage. Kenneth Woodward observed that,

…just as Europe’s northern tribes turned to the church after the decay of the Roman Empire, so Africans are embracing Christianity in face of the massive political, social and economic chaos. Plagued by corrupt regimes, crushing poverty, pandemic AIDS and genocidal wars – as in Rwanda and Sudan – Africans find the church is the one place they can go for healing, hope and material assistance…

The newer churches are acknowledged to speak to diverse situations of the populace in a fast changing globalised world. They seem to have solutions to all problems ranging from the spiritual to the mundane. They sometimes exude the global character and modernity conforming to Rijk Van Dijk’s submission that charismatic Pentecostalism ‘can in a very real sense be considered a religion of modernity itself.’ These newer churches are more in tune with latest developments in the world of communications and technology. They employ modern methods of communications and technology in reaching their audience in different contexts while propagating the gospel.

Another factor that makes these churches appealing is the ‘power dimension’ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Church leaders here reiterate the fact that the Holy Spirit is at

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9 In many of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, the phrase ‘Holy Ghost fire’ is used as a weapon to dislodge evil powers during prayer. This compares to incantations in the ATR which is used to undo evil works caused by the enemies. The religions of the Africans are popularly called African Traditional Religions (ATR). It is a
work in the lives of believers in all cultures. The belief in the spirit world in the African traditional religion resonates here. Nigerians like most Africans have a worldview of a realm of spirit world that influences human affairs for good or bad. One must therefore be armed with power to overcome activities of malevolent spirits who are believed to be responsible for evil occurrences. What had been the loss of African traditional religion has been the gain of the churches with their emphasis on deliverance and prosperity theology. Ayuk Ausaji Ayuk noted that prior to the coming of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, ‘The Holy Spirit had been neglected and his power denied. The Spirit’s power has now been restored and it is practically “moving mountains.”’

The Holy Spirit fills and empowers them to overcome the vicissitudes of life, engage in ‘spiritual warfare’, undo the works of darkness and evils that are prevalent in the Nigerian society and equips them for service in the context of the church and society. This belief is shared in the AICs too.

Emphasis on healing is one major attraction to newer churches in Nigeria. Healing, deliverance (exorcism) and miracles are common place experiences in the Pentecostal and AICs in Nigeria largely because of the peoples’ craving for the supernatural, (a practice inherent in African traditional religion) and lack of access to adequate health care system. It is possible to demonize ailments and diseases which ordinarily could be diagnosed in the hospitals. Alan Issacson’s assertion about the religious consciousness of the presence of demons in human affairs is a proof of this. He stated that

To make a gross generalization, many Nigerians may tend to blame a demon for anything—if you haven’t been promoted in the past three years, you must have a demon. The other side of that is an over simple dependence on God—some students who would rather spend an evening praying for success than revising.’

Phillip Jenkins affirms that this development is a common place experience in churches of the global South. He reasons that

As in the early church, much of global South Christianity today is healing religion par excellence, with a strong belief in the objective existence of evil, and (commonly) a willingness to accept the reality of demons and the

nomenclature that is applied to religions in Africa since they are similar in nature and quite distinct from Christianity and Islam, the other dominant religions in Africa.

diabolical. Biblical texts and passages that the South makes central are seen by many Northern churches as marginal, symbolic, or purely historical in nature.\(^{12}\)

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church has grown to become one of the largest indigenous churches in Nigeria within a space of twenty years largely because of its prime emphasis on healing and deliverance, a practice that resonates with the primal religion of the people in this context. Much will be said of this in the latter chapters.

Whatever their doctrinal emphasis may be, it can be stated that churches in Nigeria have witnessed tremendous growth in the past three decades. However, growth has not been limited to Christianity alone. In the last thirty years, there has been a rise in Islamic fundamentalism both in reaction to a widening Christian influence, and also in response to happenings in the global scene. There have been several religious crises in the recent past that have led to destruction of lives and properties, especially in the northern parts of the country. As Rosaline J. Hackett observed that ‘Nigeria’s Christian-Muslim relation has been projected into world spotlight, not just because of its deterioration in the last two decades but also because of its relatedness to radical religion on a global scale.’\(^{13}\) Nigeria is constantly in a state of uneasy tension with sporadic killings in cities in the northern part of the country on account of religious differences.

### 3.2 History of Christianity in Nigeria - First Phase (1515-1841)

Christianity in Nigeria has come of age having metamorphosed through different phases since the early missionaries stepped feet on the Nigerian soil in the 16\(^{th}\) century. The Christian enterprise commenced in Nigeria as far back as 1515 with an early Portuguese missionary expedition to the kingdom of Benin in the Midwest of present day Nigeria.\(^{14}\) It was the Oba (king) who had requested for the missionaries from Portugal as a follow up to earlier trade contacts with Portuguese traders. The missionaries came but were unable to make any impact on the people of the Benin kingdom because at the time of their arrival, the kingdom was enmeshed in perennial intertribal wars that were then a common feature in

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\(^{13}\) R.I. Hackett, ‘Discourses of Demonization in Africa and Beyond’, *Diogenes* 50(3): 61-75

African societies. This was the very first contact that the people of Nigeria had with Christianity, but the political expediency of the time made this mission impossible. The missionaries were forced to return home.

In August 1651, another group of missionaries from Spain and Italy arrived in Benin with the hope of building on the earlier contacts to plant Christianity in Nigeria. They were however given a cold reception by the palace courtiers, and prevented from seeing the king. They were also denied the services of interpreters. They were driven out of Benin later because they tried to interrupt a religious festival involving human sacrifice. Subsequent efforts by the Portuguese to plant the Christian church on the Nigerian soil years later proved abortive because the Benin king lost the initial interest for Christianity, and would not entertain missionaries to his kingdom. Besides, the Binis were renowned for their traditional religion with its different sacrificial system to the numerous gods of the land. It was not possible for the new faith to displace this entrenched system of African traditional form of worship in just a short missionary encounter.

Another attempt was made by Spanish and Italian Capuchins in the middle of the seventeenth century. This attempt was predicated on the belief based on what the Europeans observed in the African culture that the local kings or chiefs had a tremendous grip on their subjects and that these chiefs or kings were venerated by their subjects. It was therefore reasoned that if the kings could be converted, it will have a snowball effect on the subjects. But this method proved to be ineffective as the missionaries were often denied access to the kings. Ajayi also noted that there were ‘...other subsidiary factors hindering the Christian missionaries: difficulties of language, differences in culture, of transport, of health; inadequate numbers of missionaries and opportunities.’

Another factor that contributed to the failure of the mission enterprise during this period was the Trans-Atlantic trade that involved European countries from where the missionaries came. The missionaries had the goal of spreading the gospel to the land of these idolatrous heathen, but at the same time, their compatriots were busy shipping out Nigerians as slaves to Europe where they worked as farm hands in plantations. The missionaries could

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not reconcile their faith with the evil practice of slavery. The missionaries attempted overcoming this problem by concentrating on aspects of personal belief and forms of worship and avoided social issues like slavery. This is because of the Enlightenment in Europe where religion was increasingly confined to the private domain. Religion, which hitherto was regarded as a communal affair and commanded the respect of the sovereign, nobles and the peasantry, while the clergy had a dominant say on policy matters affecting the state and the authority, became relegated to the private concern of the individual and was considered no longer fit for the public domain. The Enlightenment era reconfigured Christianity since the eighteenth century in Europe. ‘The main ethos of the enlightenment…’ according to Kehinde Olabimtan, ‘…is that reality is dual: material and immaterial. The material world of the five senses constitutes its objective dimension and can be explored by reason. The immaterial and subjective dimension exists but does not make sense in that it is not accessible to sensible, objective explanation. The epistemology of the Enlightenment therefore places the primacy of knowledge on the objective dimension of reality. For it, that which is unseen is dubious and un-real, but that which is seen is present and real.’

Furthermore, Olabimtan noted that the brand of Christianity that was introduced to Africa and other parts of the world during the missionary advances of the eighteenth century by the Europeans was one ‘that had lost its primal potency earlier nurtured and reinforced by primal Europe; it had become a rational faith. Even the renewal movements, in spite of their revulsion for the arrogance of the enlightenment, could not completely shake themselves from its pervasive effects on the people of Europe.’

The new European contrivance of religion became limited in such a way that it was confined to only a special area of an individual’s life, unlike what obtained in the traditional African society and the advancing Islamic religion where religion is perceived to be communal and a reflection of existing culture. There were bound to be differences as observed by Olabimtan who noted: ‘The basic presuppositions on which African indigenous societies were erected and those on which the missionaries and their evangelistic exploits were based were in near-mutual contradiction and discontinuity; the former drawing inspirations from the super-sensory dimension of reality, the latter from the sensory and material. What therefore came to Africa in the nineteenth century was not just the Gospel, but


the Gospel that had accrued with it European culture and value system.’

It was this type of faith and notion of culture that the Europeans brought into their mission work in Africa. Africans do not create a dichotomy between the sacred and the mundane or personal beliefs as distinguished from the communal. Religion for the African is communal and entails a complex system involving the entire community. Ajayi quoted Bane as saying that religion in the African context was ‘the cement of goodwill and fear that kept the family as a unit and the village as a distinctive community.’

The religions of the Africans that the European missionaries encountered in their quest to implant Christianity can better be appreciated by the comment of Ajayi:

The welfare of the individual, the family, village or larger community was believed to depend on the members severally and collectively maintaining the right relationships with the ancestors, gods and other unseen powers through a complex system of ritual observance. These were beliefs, of course, about the organic philosophy of the community, the proper relationships between the gods, between them and man, man and woman, the living and the dead; beliefs about the mysteries of life, sickness and death, good and ill fortune, and so on.

This form of religion was strongly embedded in the peoples’ way of life, as expressed in their laws and customs and in their culture generally. The thought of distinguishing religion from other aspects of life was considered strange among Nigerians whom the early missionaries encountered. Life was considered holistic and religion as not only an integral part, but the core of it. J. Mbiti observed: ‘Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing his seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony…’

The African is intractably religious and he views everything from the perspective of his religion. His whole existence he considers as a religious phenomenon.

The European missionaries also came with an erroneous view of the African as having no religion. It is this misconception or misunderstanding that dogged the early missionary endeavours and which the mission churches established by the missionaries inherited as a

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form of thought, that has negatively impacted making Christianity an indigenous religion or make it lose its garb of ‘foreignness’ as many Africans would believe. This factor would subsequently account for the quest for a truly African Church with an African thought, form and expression. In the early part of the 20th century African Christians took the initiative to establish churches that incorporated essential elements of their culture and religious outlook. This was the beginning of contextualization or as some will put it, indigenization of Christianity into African form and thought.

33 Second Phase (1841-1914)

As stated earlier, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had its effect on the European missionary enterprise. During this era of slave traffic between the West African coasts and nations in the northern hemisphere, Nigeria was known as the ‘Slave coast.’ However, a renewed interest for missions to the heathen in Africa, stirred in some European Churches who began considering foreign missions as a means of Christianizing the African continent. The anti-slavery movement was spurred by the humanitarian feeling of certain group of people who were sympathetic to the plight and sufferings of the slaves whom they came in contact with. This group of people bonded together and endeavoured to improve the lots of the slaves and freed slaves. However, emphasis at this period turned to the abolition of human trafficking because of the popular belief that ‘Slavery was not just a cruel and inhuman practice that should be improved but a sin that must be abolished.’

The Christians consciences had been stung about the morality of this traffic and were increasingly becoming vocal in condemning the trade and calling for its abolition altogether. The churches became a platform for the abolitionists who demanded government legislation outlawing the practice of slave trade. Christians in the United Kingdom were at the forefront of this ‘war’ against slavery. The quest for abolition of slave trade also served as a reason to establish missionary societies to evangelize the heathen. An account of the establishment of the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England, one of the foremost missionary movement in Nigeria, stated that the founders of the society, ‘…commiserated the condition

24 The era of the slave trade coincided with years of inter-tribal wars amongst Nigerian ethnic groups. Villages and towns were raided and the captured were sold into slavery. European slave traders provided arms for tribal kings in the coastal areas who raided the upland areas and captured slaves who were shipped to Europe and the Americas.

of the people, and more particularly of the Negro race, on account of the cruel wrongs which
the slave-trade had inflicted upon them, selected Africa as their first field of missionary
enterprise.'

Another factor that impelled Christian missionaries to consider Africa as a continent
of special interest was the perception of Africans by the European missionaries as the most
heathen of the World. Traders, explorers who had had encounter with Africa came home with
reports containing vivid but often exaggerated accounts of primitive savagery and barbarism.
Compared to other parts of the world that the Europeans have explored, there was a persistent
notion or belief that the peoples of Africa were a different breed, and therefore were ‘in far
greater need of Christian salvation than other peoples, but also that, compared with other
areas of the non-Christian world, Africa offered far greater opportunities for Christian
evangelical activity.' Moreover, the missionaries had encountered some levels of resistance
to the Christian message from other lands in Asia where they had ventured into. These
nations have their rooted traditions of ancient civilizations, with developed religious systems
and written texts of several centuries predating the birth of Jesus Christ. For example, the
European missionaries encountered a well developed religion in Hinduism in India,
Confucianism in China, and Buddhism in Burma, Sri-Lanka and modern Japan. In the great
Ottoman empire of the Middle East, the Arabs were predominantly Muslims who were averse
to the Christian message. In comparison to these nations with ancient civilizations and
religion, Europeans erroneously believed that sub-Saharan African societies had no ancient
civilization, religion nor texts. They were considered to be people of primitive culture.
European scholars who undertook studies of the African continent at various times concluded
severally that Africans were animists, ancestor worshipers, who had religion of magic,
totems, fetishism etc. They were therefore considered as savages, heathen and irreligious
people that had to be evangelized. Thus, Africa naturally became a target for Christian
missions.

However, missionaries who came with such perceptions were disappointed with what
they met on ground. Africans have their beliefs and religion, though they may not be
developed into texts like religions of the East and West. For example John Mbiti noted:

26 J.S. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism, Benin City: Broberg & Wistrom, 1986, 93.
27 J.S. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism, 92.
A great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not, however, formulated into a systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices are held or observed by their families and communities. These traditions have been handed down from forebears, and each generation takes them up with modifications suitable to its’ own historical situation and needs… In traditional religions there are no creeds to be recited; instead, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each one is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being.\textsuperscript{28}

The misconception and misrepresentation of the African and his religion had some negative effect on Christian missions in Africa which still reverberates in the contemporary times.

It is significant here to consider briefly some beliefs that are associated with African Traditional Religion (ATR), which are prevalent in many sub-Saharan societies in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria. This is because the subject of African Traditional Religion particularly as it relates to Christianity in Nigeria will be constant issue in this research.

3.4 The Missionary Enterprise of the 19th Century in Nigeria

The second phase of the missionary thrust into Nigeria began in earnest in 1841. This marked the beginning of the quest by European missionaries to re-establish Christianity in Nigeria after the initial thrust to Benin and Warri in the mid-west of Nigeria failed to make any appreciable impact. According to the Nigerian historian, Ajayi, in the period of 1841-91, an era preceding the establishment of British rule in Nigeria, five principal missionary societies worked in Nigeria. These included the Church of England, Church Missionary Societies (CMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, a committee of the English Methodist Conference; the foreign Mission Committee of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland; the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States; and the Catholic Society of African Missions (Societe des Missions Africaines, S.M.A) of France.\textsuperscript{29}

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\textsuperscript{28} J. S Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 3.
\textsuperscript{29} JFA Ajayi, Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite, p.xiv.
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The period 1841 to 1891 was considered by Ajayi as the ‘seedling’ time in which the seeds of the burgeoning Christian faith were sown in preparation for the great Christian work and expansion that will follow in the era of British colonial rule. This was the era that the work of missionaries had its greatest impact as they traversed the country bearing the gospel, planting churches, establishing schools and vocational centres, building dispensaries and hospitals etc. One factor that aided the missionary enterprise in the 19th century was that among the first agents (catechists, priests, lay readers and interpreters) of the mission thrusts into Nigeria were freed slaves who returned to Nigeria from Sierra Leone, the land of freed slaves. It is on record that as early as 1851, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (one of the Yoruba ex-slaves) to England for studies. While in England, he compiled a Yoruba grammar and a Yoruba-English dictionary, and translated many books of the Bible into Yoruba.\(^{30}\) This clearly was the first effort of indigenizing the Christian faith by way of Bible translation. In later years, the availability of the Bible in vernacular would be instrumental to the emergence of African Independent Churches in Nigeria.

The various missionary agencies from the churches were spread all over Nigeria. This is clearly seen in the missionary activities of these churches and denominations that subsist in regions of Nigeria till date. A careful observation shows that the Anglicans and the Baptists are concentrated in the South-West of Nigeria, the Methodists in the East and the West, the Roman Catholics in the East and the evangelicals, who were late in arrival, are spread in the Northern region. The Reformed Church, which came into the country with the help of Sudan United Mission, worked among the Jukun, Kuteb, and Tiv peoples of the Middle belt\(^{31}\). The Presbyterians are found mostly among the Igbos and Efik people of the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Of recent however, new Church movements seem to have made major inroads to various parts of the country, thus obliterating the old traditional pattern of Christian spread in Nigeria.


\(^{31}\) The Christian Reformed Church which worked in the middle belt of Nigeria had suffered multiple schisms as a result of the rivalry between the ethnic groups. The Tiv people moved out to initiate their ethnic church, *Nongo Kristi A Tiv* (NKST), Church of Christ among Tiv people; Kuteb people moved out to establish the *Ekklsiyar Kristi A Nigeria* (EKAN), Church of Christ in Nigeria. Jukun people remain custodians of the depleted denomination. (See J. Barret, *Operation World.*)
The missionaries were however not only concerned with the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria. They were also concerned with transforming local cultures of the heathen to bear a resemblance of their culture in Europe. It was a combination of the Christian religion and a superior European civilization that would make conversion effective. The Roman Catholics for example had always maintained that membership of the Church in any part of the World was a civilizing process both in the sense that the Church was the fountain-head of European civilization in art, music and literature, and in the old Greek sense that it was only by such membership that man could fully justify the whole of his being. Civilization was considered as that which is best and seeming in the culture and way of life of the Europeans. A converted heathen was therefore not only to receive the Christian faith but was expected to conform to the habits and mannerisms of the Europeans. They were expected to pattern their lifestyle after the social manners and customs of the Europeans.

The European missionaries insisted on even minor observances as necessary outward and visible signs of an inward ‘civilized’ state. In the same vein, the converts were encouraged to do away with their customs and habits of their local cultures, which in most cases were considered to be sinful. For example in the Yoruba culture, boys are expected to prostrate before his elders as a sign of respect in social custom. The missionaries considered this as uncivilized and an element of worshipping a human being. E. C. Ilogu reported a similar event in the Eastern part of Nigeria where the CMS missionaries served. The missionaries opposed through their teaching, especially to school children ordinary attitude of deference to seniors. One of the early missionaries in this part, J.C Taylor seems to have taken delight in children disobeying long held customary courtesies in deference to elders, chiefs and kings in the community. He did not see it as part of socializing process of the Africans, but described the custom of falling down and bowing their heads before the king as a ‘source of deep mortification’ and ‘a humiliating posture’ which he hoped would very soon wane and be forever eclipsed. The goal of the missionaries seem to have been to change the values and ethos of host communities which are considered to be idolatrous, and replacing them with European proper way of socialization. In addition, new converts, agents, and children who attended many schools founded by the mission agencies, were expected to dress

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in the way and manner the Europeans do, not minding the differences in climatic condition between temperate Europe and the humid tropical African weather conditions. The missionary hardly saw any difference in many of the customs and habits which were regarded not just as unimportant matters of social convenience, to the missionary; each is believed to have had its religious significance. It was difficult then to differentiate that which is Christianity from what is essentially European culture.

There were however some positive elements in the interaction between Christianity and local cultures in this era. There were some beliefs, values and practices of the traditional religions that impacted on the people negatively that the missionaries ‘fought’ to put an end to. In the Eastern part of Nigeria for example, it was the people’s custom to kill twin babies because of the religious belief that the birth of twins was a bad omen for the people. Prior to the coming of the missionaries, it was an old Ibo custom to destroy twins because it was considered unnatural for human beings to be born more than one at a time since such a phenomenon is common among lower animals like dogs, pigs, goats. When a woman therefore gave birth to twins, they were immediately destroyed because it was considered as an abominable act which could incur the wrath of the ancestral spirits that may in turn plague the community with dreaded diseases or drought. The missionaries encouraged converts to discontinue such an evil practice of destroying twins, and often provided safe haven for mothers and children who risked been killed by traditional religionists that consider defying age long customs as unacceptable. To the traditionalists what constituted sin is the flagrant abuse of what the community holds dear and regard as a custom or religious belief.

In African Traditional Religion, the concept of taboo or something forbidden in the community compares with the Christian concept of sin. Any offence against tradition is sin or a taboo which desecrates the land and requires appropriate expiation. For instance, the Christian missionary regarded sin as the responsibility of the individual, a violation of the laws of God that were absolute and independent of the traditions of the community or even the beliefs of the individual.36 The differences in opinion between the missionaries and traditional religion hindered the progress of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria.

Ilogu also mentions another contentious issue that the missionaries preached against, that of elaborate burial ceremonies. Converts were taught to refrain from paying the extended family and village collections levied for various activities which were often considered by the missionaries as idolatry in disguise. The converts were also forbidden to participate or perform second burial ceremonies of their parents. The usual practice or custom then among the Ibos was to bury an elderly person immediately after death, with initial burial rites. There was a second burial which takes place a year or two later, which was more elaborate than the first. The Ibos believed that the second burial which is considered as the proper burial itself helped the spirit of the departed elderly persons to rest peacefully with the spirits of the ancestors who had gone before into the nether world of the spirits from where they make intercessions with the gods for the well being of their children on earth. This is an initial step of ancestral veneration. Failure to perform burial rites by surviving children or relations of the deceased may incur the wrath of the dead and that of the ancestors who may visit the living with diseases and failures in ordinary undertakings of life. Besides, the spirits of the dead in such cases is believed to be hovering around the domain of the extended family, a phenomenon that portends ominous sign for the members of the family, until a proper second burial was done. The Christian converts were at difficulty here between adhering to the teachings of the missionaries and following age long customs of performing a second burial which was considered as a mark of respect for the dead. Those who failed to perform the second burial were prevented from inheriting the property of the dead, which was rightly theirs by the native laws of inheritance. The missionaries often had to seek the intervention of the British colonial authorities to prevail on families to accord Christians their rights in this respect.

In recent past, some African theologians sought dialogue between Christianity and culture on such issues as ancestor veneration, paying tribute to the dead and the likes, with the hope that this will promote the understanding and propagation of the Christian faith. However, there are others particularly the newer indigenous churches who will readily disassociate themselves from anything that has to do with ancestral veneration describing it as ‘demonic’. The latter position was adopted by the evangelicals and Pentecostals. This will be discussed in later chapters.

There was also the vexing issue of polygamy which was a common cultural practice among the people. It was expected that the missionaries will be opposed to the practice of
polygamy. Polygamy is a common feature in virtually all cultures of Nigerian societies. It was a mark of wealth and status for a man to have many wives and offspring. The typical Nigeria nuclear family is housed in a large fenced compound of a main hut (belonging to the husband and head of the family) located at the entrance, and several other huts belonging to the wives, all built around the main hut. This was an expression of communal way of life. Polygamy is much more than plurality of wives but a way of life of the people. It is embedded in their culture.

The missionaries from the Western world found the practice of polygamy hard to comprehend. Ajayi noted the difference in culture of the Europeans when he said that ‘Christian missionaries from an individualistic society, where whatever folk-culture survived the Reformation and seventeenth-century Puritanism had been virtually destroyed by the industrial revolution and the new Puritanism of the evangelical revival, found life in the family compounds at best incomprehensible, at worst the devil’s own institution. Concerned as they were not only to destroy paganism but also to reform existing social structure, they were bound, sooner or later, to attack polygamy.’

Added to the cultural difference was the theological argument. The missionaries forbade the baptism of converts who were polygamists because it was not permissible according to the ethical teaching of the church. The African agents of the local mission churches were favourably disposed towards baptizing wives of polygamist husbands, since they did not have any say in their husband’s preferences. This was a contentious issue among the missionaries, with some favouring such policy while others were against it. For example, the Anglican bishop of Sierra Leone, Bishop Weeks on his maiden visit to Nigeria in 1856 repudiated the practice of baptizing wives of polygamists saying that it was a bad precedence showing a dangerous tolerance of polygamy. But Bishop Crowther, the first African Anglican Bishop was of a different opinion. He was of the view that since the wife of a polygamist was an involuntary victim of a social institution within the African cultural context, they should not be denied baptism on the account of this. Others were concerned about the long time effect that polygamy will have on the Church. Archbishop Venn believed that whatever be the prevalent custom of a nation, the ordinance of God could not be lowered to it; there must be one standard for the Church everywhere, “as God could not condemn

polygamy in an old-established Church and tolerate it in a newly established one.”

The insistence of mission churches on monogamy for African converts while condemning polygamy would later account for separatists in the mission churches. These were indigenous churches comprising of Christians who left the mission churches on account of unacceptable cultural practices or were excommunicated by the foreign missionaries “...who could not stand the alleged ‘aberrations’ or ‘strange’ theological or doctrinal expressions.”

3.5 Third Phase 1914-1960: The emergence of African Indigenous Churches

This period covered the era of the British colonial rule and saw the emergence of a plethora of African Independent Churches (AICs). Some of the factors which gave rise to these churches were mentioned earlier on. The differences in theological orientation and deference to African culture by the European missionaries and the belief that the church is ripe for indigenous leadership made some indigenous Christians to clamour for churches that are self governing and in which indigenes occupy leadership positions.

However it is on record that the very Reverend Henry Venn, vicar of St. Paul’s and honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society (1841-1872) became the first advocate of an indigenous expression of Christianity in Nigeria. Venn was a believer in the abilities of Africans to provide leadership in the church. He had written in quest for an indigenization of Christianity: “The breath of life in a native church depended on self government, self support, and self extension.”

According to Ajayi, this was the lesson learnt from study of the history of earlier Roman Catholic missions that the missionary who did not prepare for the day when he would no longer be in the mission by raising indigenous clergy and episcopacy was building on sand. He said also it was necessary that the arrangements which may be made in “…the missions from the first have reference to the ultimate settlement of the native Church upon the ecclesiastical basis of an indigenous episcopate, independent of foreign aid or superintendence.” The hallmark of Venn’s advocacy for a truly indigenous church was

42 Venn had previously studied in 1862 The Missionary Life and Labours of St. Francis Xavier in which he discovered the reason for the apparent failure of Xavier mission in the Far East was the over dependence on European political power and failure to raise a local clergy.
43 J F A Ajayi, Christian Missions in Nigeria, 175.
when he worked out and had an African consecrated bishop in 1864, the Right Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Crowther was the first African clergyman to be ordained a Bishop in the Anglican Church in Africa. However, Venn’s dream of an indigenized church was short lived. Venn’s successors thought differently about Africans and his indigenization efforts. There was a deliberate reversal of some of Venn’s indigenization policy, and the climax of it was when Bishop Crowther of the Niger Delta Anglican diocese was removed. Some of these anti-indigenization actions precipitated the leadership crisis that engulfed many of the mission churches in the late 19th century. African Christians seized the initiative to form parallel churches that in some cases had similar church structure and doctrines with the churches they separated from and in other instances, the breakaway was total as they did not have anything in common.

Different names were used to describe the burgeoning indigenous church movements. In the late nineteenth and early twenty centuries, the term used to describe emerging African Churches was *Separatist*. Indigenous churches were often characterized negatively as separatist because of the context which birthed them. Churches and movements that began this way left the mission churches because they were aggrieved with the leadership style of the missionaries. For example in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in 1910, there arose a prophetic movement, the first of its kind in the country led by one Garrick Sokary Braide. This Church movement gained acceptance amongst the local leadership of the Church Missionary Society (CMS of the Anglican Communion), and due to the impact it made on ordinary people of the area, it spread to other parts of this region and beyond. While the missionaries taught African converts doctrines (creed, dogmas and catechism), Braide, according to Ayegboiyin and Ishola adopted a non-intellectual and practical approach that resonated with the people. He denounced magic, idols, fetishism, alcoholism and recommended a regular spiritual exercise of solitary prayers and fasting which he said, coupled with absolute dependence on God, aid Christian growth, provide spiritual and physical healing. He also advocated for a liturgical system which will enable Nigerians to worship God in their own dialects, in songs, prayers and use of paraphernalia of worship which they are accustomed to. His method and approach of presentation of the gospel enabled the Christian faith to spread much beyond the expectations of the missionaries. However, in 1914, due to disputation over his method of evangelistic crusades and demands by his followers to recognize him and create the church office of a prophet for him resulting from outstanding miracles and healings performed under his ministry, the Anglican
authorities became overtly suspicious of him and critical of him. Besides, the British traders disliked him because of his condemnation of alcohol which was a ready source of income for them. Braide was arrested in March, 1916 on charges bothering on treason, and was incarcerated until 1918, an experience similar to Simon Kimbangu of the Belgian Congo in the first quarter of the last century. He died upon his release from prisons. Shortly after his death, his numerous followers grieved by the events that precipitated the untimely death of their leader, left the Anglican Church and founded a separatist movement, ‘The Christ Army.’ This was a watershed for African indigenous churches.

Another term used to describe indigenous churches of this era is Ethiopian. Churches ascribed this term are wholly indigenous, self-supporting and self-governing. They are so called because of their rejection of European leadership, who in many cases were assertive and inconsiderate of the expectations of the Africans. Their departure from the mission churches was therefore labelled as political, as they would not want the European missionaries to dominate church leadership. According to Ayegboyin and Ishola, Ethiopianism therefore stood for indigenous initiatives with no support from any foreign church in terms of monetary or otherwise. The term Ethiopian is a reference to the biblical passage Psalm 68:31 that includes people of the Black race in God’s redemption plan of the world; ‘Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch her hands to God.’ Africans therefore, are loved by God and should not be neglected in the leadership of the church. An example is the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Lagos, which was founded by the Yoruba laity in 1888, seceding from the First Baptist Church, in sympathy with Reverend Ladejo Stone (a fellow Yoruba clergyman) who was said to have been ill-treated by the white missionary pastor. A similar incidence happened in the Methodist Church, Lagos, where the insistence on monogamy as a prerequisite for baptism and Lord’s Supper led to the exit of many indigenes who formed a parallel church, United African Methodist Church. Their goal was therefore to eliminate foreign elements in Christianity, incorporate local cultural elements into liturgy, and elevate Nigerians to positions of leadership in the church.

3.5.1 Praying and Healing Churches (Aladura)

Another fundamental development in Christianity in Nigeria in the colonial era is the establishment of prayer movements popularly called ijo Aladura. The factor that led to the formation of this movement were purely circumstantial and had no bearing with the quest for
indigenization and the desire for African self-expression and freedom from missionary control. Aftermath World War I, there was a deadly influenza epidemic that affected regions of the world including West Africa in 1918. Native Christians gathered to pray to stem the effects of the epidemic. The efficacy of their prayer made this movement to become popular among the people and caused the phenomenon to spread to other parts of the country. These numerous prayer groups that emerged culminated in the establishment of churches that had emphasis on faith, healing and the prophetic. This strand of Christianity is popularly called *ijo Aladura* (Praying churches). This praying movement soon spread to the eastern flank of the nation, but metamorphosed into what is now known as *Sabbath churches*. Much will be said later on this in a subsequent chapter.

From the foregoing, it easy to see that religion plays a significant role in the Nigerian society. Olabimtan noted that, ‘…religion in traditional African societies is a dominant belief in transcendental powers, irrespective of whether they are benevolent or malevolent. The issue is not primarily ethics but function. Neither is it basically piety but survival.

44) He further stated that ‘…African religiosity is essentially utilitarian. And the utility value varies from personal needs to corporate need for survival.’45 What obtained in the African traditional religion became a benchmark for what indigenous Christians wanted the faith to be for them, a religion that will be responsive to their existential needs.

### 3.5.2 Advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism made its appearance on the religious landscape of Nigeria from the shores of America. America had witnessed a spate of spiritual awakening that culminated into a new wave of Pentecostalism that began with the Azusa Street experience in California. This phenomenon soon spread across the world as Pentecostal missionaries left the shores of America into other regions of the world with the message of Pentecostalism. Earlier contact with the Pentecostal movement of America by Nigerians was through literature. Some Nigerians who had come across some literature wrote to ask for support and later to become affiliates of these American Pentecostal churches. The Precious Stone Society which started as a prayer group in the Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode


was one of the early groups that sought affiliation with an American church, the Faith Tabernacle Congregation in 1921.⁴⁶ What appealed to this Nigeria sect were similarities in beliefs in divine healing, consecration, fullness of the Holy Spirit and Premillennialism among other doctrines of this American church. They were later ostracized from the Anglican Church of Nigeria, and for reason of political expediency, many of their leaders suffered persecution under the British colonial administration and they formally inaugurated a new church which became the Apostolic Church in Nigeria. This was sequel to the arrival of the British Apostolic Church in Nigeria. A similar event took place in 1939, in eastern Nigeria, where in the city of Umuahia some tongue-speaking group, the Church of Jesus Christ, invited the Assemblies of God into Nigeria. These events became a watershed for the planting of many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, some of which have come to dominate the Nigerian religious scene today.

As regards practice, Meyer observes that the emphases in African Pentecostal churches are quite similar to AICs. According to her, ‘… the Pentecostal churches stress the importance of the Holy Spirit above biblical doctrines and provide room for prophesying, dreams and visions, speaking in tongues, prayer healing, and deliverance from evil spirits.’⁴⁷ She also noted that Pentecostalism in Africa is not the exclusive preserve of the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups alone. This phenomenon, according to her ‘…also materializes in prayer groups in the confines of established Protestant churches, the Charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, and nondenominational fellowships that born again Christians attend without leaving their churches.’⁴⁸

Asonzeh Ukah identifies three distinct strands of Pentecostalism in Africa. These are the:

(i) Classical/Mission Pentecostal Churches;
(ii) Indigenous/Independent Pentecostal Churches and,
(iii) New Pentecostals/Charismatic churches/Ministries.⁴⁹ He observed however a significant overlap in these categories. The first category refers to Pentecostal

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⁴⁸B. Meyer, ‘Christianity in Africa’, p.452
churches from America and Europe that were birthed after Azusa street revival of 1908. Agents of this church movement planted similar churches in Nigeria.

The second category comprise of churches that separated from mission churches in quest for spiritual power as experienced in the Bible to meet needs in their cultural contexts. The Christ Army inaugurated by followers of Garrick Braide and the Aladura churches fall into this category. The Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and The Redeemed Church of God (RCCG) that metamorphosed from the Aladura churches are also examples. The third category is churches that emerged in the post-civil war era and are largely responding to globalization of Christianity. These latter categories are largely influenced by American Pentecostalism and are reputed for prosperity gospel otherwise known as the health and wealth gospel. They are often referred to as new generation churches in Nigeria.

In summary, three strands of Christianity emerged during the first three phases which are the mission churches, the AICs and the Pentecostal churches. The first category represents churches that were established by European and American missionaries in the 18th and 19th century and are patterned after the cultures of the sending agencies. Theology and liturgy in this context is highly formalized and emphasis is given to civilizing of converts through education, provision of hospitals, skill acquisition centres etc. There is no deference to African culture as it is considered to be that which has to be done away with to be a Christian. The AICs are churches that either broke away from the mission churches or emerged due to circumstantial factors and are self-governing, self-financing and self-supporting. They give emphasis to visions, dreams, prayers, faith-healing, and prophecies. ‘They also stress believer’s baptism by immersion, holiness, and above all the presence of the Holy Spirit made evident in charismatic gifts and visible signs and results. These spiritual gifts include faith healing and ecstatic phenomena (trances, speaking in tongues and various possession of the Spirit.’

They also give attention to the worldview of Africans in their liturgy and doctrines. African Pentecostalism had its origins in the quest by some Nigerian Christians in the early last century to bring the power in their faith to bear upon the

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exigencies of their times, but would later reach out to Pentecostals in America and Europe for mutual assistance and fellowship.

3.6 Fourth Phase: 1960 to Present day

Nigeria gained independence in 1960. After independence, there arose the quest for indigenization of leadership both in government bureaus and the private sector. The quest for indigenous leadership spiralled into the churches, as there was also the clamour for indigenization not only of the leadership, but also the Christian faith in order to meet the expectations of people in the new dispensation. There were those who were indignant of the roles of the missionaries in the colonial period as having sided with the colonial authorities in subjugating the culture of the people in preference of the European culture. Christianity was therefore regarded as an extension of colonialism, even as the indigenous Christians tried to prove otherwise. This was a factor that fuelled African Christians to demand for a truly indigenous church that is self governing, self financing and self propagating.

The post-independence era saw the emergence of indigenous theologians in the universities, seminaries, and colleges of theologies across the nation, all making their contributions to the post independence discourse on what the future of Christianity would be. Nigerian theologians of this era included Bolaji Idowu, Byang Kato amongst several others. In trying to locate the role of the church in the post-independent Nigeria, there were theologians who favoured, as part of the indigenization process, continuity between Christianity and African traditional religion in order to make the Christian faith gain a wider acceptance amongst the people. Some of these theologians belonged to the mission churches and were concerned about the assimilation of the local culture of the people into Christianity as a way of making the faith which is considered by some as a foreign religion, relevant in the people’s context. The other school of thought however advocated for a radical discontinuity between the Christian faith and African traditional religion, seeing the inculturation process entirely from the negative perspective. These were mainly the Evangelicals and the Pentecostals who feared that the inculturation process is a guise for introducing syncretistic practices in the church. The MFM Church is one of such churches that favour radical discontinuity between Christianity and the African culture.
3.7 Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is easy to discern how a typically Western religion (Christianity) that came into Africa through missionary efforts in the colonial era, transformed into an ardently non-Western religion with its own peculiar features. Once it was a drive of the missionaries to Christianize Africa, but now it is the indigenous Christians who seek to Africanize Christianity in a way that best fits their cultural environment. The burgeoning growth of Christianity in Africa has been widely acknowledged in theological circles second only to Latin America. This phenomenon has made some theologians suggest a shift in the pedestal of Christianity from the northern hemisphere to the global South, referring to nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America where Christianity is rapidly expanding.

One factor that has promoted this much talked about growth in Africa is the emphasis on home grown or indigenized Christianity as experienced in African Independent Churches. But what role has Afro-Christology played in the growth of Christianity over the years in Africa? Is the quest for an African face of Jesus Christ been helpful in the development of an Africanized Christianity, or has growth been promoted by other factors such as the economy, politics or culture of the people? This will be probed further in subsequent chapters.