


# Mistakes of Western Christian missions in Africa and related response, mid-19th to 20th Century

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Attempts to Christianise Africa could be divided into three epochs. The first was 1st to 7th centuries in North Africa by the imperial Rome. The second was 15th to 16th centuries in West and East Africa by the Portuguese. During this epoch, I also included Central Africa during the 16th to 18th centuries. All these waves did not enjoy great success because of internal frictions in church during the first epoch and the wrangle between Calvinistic expansion against the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) during the second epoch. The focus of this article is located within the third epoch which is mid-19th and 20th centuries by Western churches and mission societies in Africa.

Therefore, the author identified negative elements of colonial mission praxis in Africa and the African response. This article therefore seeks to critically assess the identified mission praxis and related responses. The identified responses will be divided into strategic and theological. With the understanding that the context has changed over the years, the author will thus conclude that the identified negative elements and responses could possibly be repeated if the church could be ignorant in her mission praxis today and going into the future.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** As a challenge to current and future missions, this article unearths the wrongs committed by Western Christian missions in Africa and the responses from Africa. It has intra-disciplinary implications for ecumenism, mission studies and the history of the church in Africa.

**Keywords:** Africa; negative elements; Western churches; Christian missions; colonialism.

## Background

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian missionaries from Europe and North America expanded into Africa and Asia in tandem with Western imperialism. They founded schools, hospitals, printing presses and factories, which they regarded as vehicles for propagating Christianity. Because missionaries went forth with the idea of changing others, their interaction entailed bids for influence and power and were therefore intrinsically political (Sharkey 2013:1).

It is true as Hanson (in Grosz-Ngate & Hanson 2014) stated that:

Christianity has a long history in Africa. It began in the early centuries in towns such as Alexandria and Hippo, was sustained in contexts such as Ethiopia, and expanded during the last two hundred years as foreign missionaries and African converts spread the faith and translated the Bible into African languages. (p. 114)

The first wave of the Christianisation of Africa happened during the epoch 1st to 7th centuries in North Africa by the imperial Rome. The 15th to 16th centuries saw the second wave in West and East Africa driven by the Portuguese. In this article, I linked this epoch with Central Africa during the 16th to 18th centuries. The focus of this article is thus within the third epoch, mid-19th and 20th centuries. This is a period especially the 19th century described by Grosz-Ngate and Hanson (2014:2) as Africa's economic potential that attracted 'European powers that conquered most of the continent and exported its resources until the end of the colonial rule in the second half of the twentieth century'. It is further described by Thomas et al. (2016:2) as 'the scramble for Africa'. In the process of good intentions, these agents also committed mistakes as Hanson (in Grosz-Ngate & Hanson 2014:104) indicated that European colonialism disrupted and sometimes prohibited African religious activities in the early 20th century Africa. This applied to other spheres of life. What were those mistakes and the response they triggered from Africa towards them? The call

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against colonialism is a trending phenomenon today especially after the fees must fall protests and the call for a decolonised education in South Africa (SA). The Western Christian missions were not immune to this colonisation project in Africa.

The Western churches through their mission activities brought both good and bad to Africa. They brought Western education, medicines, compiled historical records, etc., but in the process committed mistakes. Abraham (2015:163) is therefore correct that while Africa had to be grateful for the positive contribution on education, scientific medicines, missionaries, etc., this does not mean that 'Europe was in Africa for Africa's health'. It was responsible for some of the problems of this continent. This article attempts to unearth and critically evaluate those mistakes, some of which were associated with colonialism as noted by Abraham (2015:155) who said: 'Essentially, colonialism is aggression'.

This article looks at the approaches adopted by Western church missions since the mid-19th century and the mistakes they committed in the process. It will also identify and evaluate the response by Africa. The responses are divided between those that are strategic and theological. This article is therefore a call to mission practitioners and those still holding a romantic view of mission as Kritzing (2003:543) puts it, 'confined to projects involving (overseas) travel or directed exclusively at "saving souls" or "planting churches"' to ensure that the identified mistakes are not repeated.

Already in 1910, two-thirds of all Christian missions were Europeans going to the Global South. Although the number of European missionaries going out has declined since 1970 due to the fading of colonialism, they are however still in existence (Ueffing 2018:68). This article is also a call to the churches in Africa to ensure that they do not commit the same mistakes when they practice what Reimer (2007:8) coined 'Gospel in return'. Ueffing (2018:68) is therefore correct to point out that 'the great missionary movement is not over'.

I elected to focus on the whole African continent although I had options to take one part of it. By adopting this approach, I am drinking from the same well as Thomas et al. (2016) who looked at the challenge of the management of education focusing on the whole continent; Grosz-Ngate and Hanson (2014) who entitled their book *Africa*; Finnegan (2012) who authored *Oral Literature in Africa* and many others who adopted this approach.

## Colonialism and mission

The relationship between mission and colonialism in Africa has always occupied those who have busied themselves with the mission in Africa. Irrespective of the differences in the evaluation of this relationship, it did exist and it brought both advantages and disadvantages for the mission in Africa and in general. Christianity in Africa today has not only

profited, but also suffered and, in some way, still suffers under the influence of such a relationship (Udeani 2007:85).

The connection between mission and colonialism was like a chicken and egg. To a great extent, missionaries even paved the way for colonial powers. Their presence made the colonial occupation of places in Africa simple. For instance, Hill-Fletcher (2017) indicated that the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) which believed in 'no salvation outside the church' blessed the imperial project of Spain and Portugal into the so-called New World. Furthermore, the missionaries' encouragement of peaceful submission and absolute obedience to authorities and recognition of white people's domination contributed immensely to the colonial occupation. Hanson (in Grosz-Ngate & Hanson 2014) is therefore correct that:

[T]he relationship between Christianity and European colonial rule in Africa are complex. The colonial 'civilization mission' was closed to the Christian vision for Africa, and some European missionaries encouraged African elites to sign treaties and ally with European powers during the nineteenth century. (p. 110)

This connection was observed as early as during the 15th and 16th centuries. This was clearly seen when Popes Nicholas V and Alexander VI (in Verkuyl 1978:168) gave instructions, first to Spain and later to Portugal to extend their political influence first to Asia, Africa and America and not to forget to be zealous in extending the domain of the RCC. Saayman (1991:24) also observed the entanglement between mission and colonialism when he echoed, 'it can even be argued that the missionaries bear greater responsibility for the consequences (of entanglement) than the colonists'.

A noteworthy fact is that Africa was not colonised in a unified way, but each nation applied their own colonial systems that defined the development of Christianity in Africa and elsewhere. Missionary policies reflected the policies of their respective nations. For instance, France and Portugal adopted assimilation policies that aimed at making African populations into French and Portuguese men and women. The English adopted the association policy which went for 'indirect rule'. The Germans went for the patriarchal socio-conservative policy which maintained the existing traditional orders to execute their administration with ease. These were enforced through schools and colonial laws (Udeani 2007:87). In this way, missionaries acted as the agents of both the Christian West and the colonial administration.

When some of the countries in Africa gained independence, the level of entanglement between mission and colonialism declined though it did not completely vanish as some continued to promote this attitude. It should be noted that it is not all missionaries during this period who accepted instructions for colonialism and imperialism. Bartholome de las Casas (in Verkuyl 1978:169) went against the wishes of the Spanish imperialists when he defended the rights of the

Indians. In the same breath, missionaries such as Van der Kemp and Philip promoted equality among different races in their ministries (Saayman 1991:27). Kingsley (2009:10–11) also indicated how the Missionary Societies in 1893 criticised the trade and labour scenarios as well as liquor traffic in West Africa. She further indicated that this moral practice by missions was also carried out by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission to the Gold Coast and the Baptism Mission to the Congo.

Why was Africa so attractive to the colonial powers that were blessed by mission agencies? Abraham (2015) captured the reasons well as follows:

The slave trade provided the cheapest imaginable labour; gold was obtained either from African mines or from absurdly inequitable trade with Africa. The formation of capital which made the industrial revolution possible was guaranteed by Africa. In this twentieth century, Europe has continued to depend directly on mineral substances that it has taken from Africa, including gold, manganese, uranium, bauxite, tin, oil, iron. Diamonds are almost limitless. (p. 133)

## Negative aspects of Western Christian mission praxis in Africa

Western Christian mission praxis, though they did good, also committed a number of mistakes in Africa. They were committed because of the religious culture created by missionaries as identified by Abraham (2015:139) that 'Church-going has sometimes been an exercise not for devout worship, but of social occasion, though, of course, there are also large numbers of deeply committed and devout Christians'.

The labelling of indigenous religions as barbaric formed part of the wrongs they committed as an onslaught on indigenous religions. African Traditional religions were viewed as inferior, barbaric and unnecessary. Hanson (in Grosz-Ngate & Hanson 2014:107) was therefore correct in concluding that Europeans actively discouraged or outlawed certain religious practices deemed controversial or a challenge to their rule and drove them out of public sight. In the words of Udeani (2007:79), 'Non-Christian religions were not seen as social units meriting theological considerations; they were just seen as heathen and/or idol worship'. Masuku (1996:444) indicated that they never applied their minds in thinking of the usefulness of these religions in facilitating the understanding of the Christian faith among the indigenous people. That is why Bediako (1995:60ff.) reasoned that Christianity is not a foreign religion to Africans because it is a religion that can be translatable culturally. Udeani (2007:81) echoed the same sentiments when he pointed out that 'African Traditional Religions were consequently non-Christian and a priori anti-Christendom. African religiosity and cultural standards were judged then by Western theological standards'. According to Hanson in Grosz-Ngate and Hanson (2014), that is why:

[C]olonial rule created fertile ground for conversion to Christianity. European conquests raised questions about the efficacy of religions with African roots, and colonial consolidation encouraged Africans to seize the opportunities associated with Christianity. (p. 110)

It is apparent from this debate that Western missions focused only on the negative aspects of the traditional religions. This negative view set the tone for both the missionary and colonial onslaught towards the indigenous people, their religions and culture. In this one-sidedness, the principle of substitution was applied instead of the complementary practice. There was no dialogue between African Traditional religions and Christianity because, in the light of what was seen here, there was only monologue.

Arrogance over African indigenous cultures constituted another negative element as could be deduced from Arowolo (2010):

With Africa subjugated and dominated, the Western culture and European mode of civilisation began to thrive and outgrow African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things as Africans became fully 'westernised'. Western culture now is regarded as frontline civilisation. African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain. (p. 2)

The attitude of Western missions towards these cultures became an instrument by which they were judged by Africans. Abraham (2015:28) defined the attack on African culture as 'a period of cultural dislocation and lack of purpose, because the new visible source of power, and the springs of decision, had no reference to the local culture'. Udeani (2007) emerged sharply on this point when he stated that:

[T]he principal missionary attitude towards African cultures and religions has been one of negation. All in all, many missionaries acted on a 'tabula rasa' principle, demolishing everything that appeared as magic according to Western understanding, an obstacle to Christianity. (p. 82)

The missionary, David Livingstone (2000:45) indicated how a Catholic bishop interfered with the marriage customs of people of what he called Loanda during his exploration of Africa. He left Loanda on 20 September 1854 (2000:49). Generally, those who have not been married by the priest were regarded as 'living without marriage tie' (2000:52).

The superiority element that was dominant among some Westerners made them to judge African cultures as inferior. At some stage, speaking African languages and the wearing of African clothes were discouraged (Abraham 2015:29). Schleiermacher (in Verkuyl 1978:171) believed that missionaries should only go to those areas where Western culture is infiltrating to transmit and transfer the 'deeper values' of this culture. In his view, mission work was a cultural programme that went along with the cultural transfer. A philosopher of religion, Ernst Troeltsch (Verkuyl 1978:171)

also supported this view. He echoed that missionaries have to work among primitive societies whose religions will not be able to 'withstand the tide of world civilization'. The arrogance of some of these missionaries was well captured by an Asian Christian convert in his prayer: 'Oh God, break their pride and palaces' (Clark 1971:40).

Scriptural distortions formulated another mistake as seen from William (1990):

The Gospel that first came to our shores with Dutch and the British colonialism was a Gospel that justified and legitimized colonialism, imperialism and European superiority. Despite their barbaric methods and attitudes, the colonizers firmly believed that what they were bringing to this part of the world was civilization and the basis of this civilization was the message of Jesus. (p. 25)

The one-sided interpretation of scriptures to suit their own ends was common in Western missions. The narrative of the misuse of scriptures is also well documented from the understanding of Africans. This is seen from their belief that missionaries requested them to close their eyes and pray. After the prayer, they had the Bible and the land taken away from them (Mofokeng 1988:34). The distortions of scriptures were well calculated efforts. Udeani (2007) confirmed it thus:

[E]fforts were made since the 18th century to find a biblical support for the inequality of the races in order to justify the oppression unleashed on the Africans. An anchor for this view was found in the book of Genesis, chapters 9 and 10 where Africans were depicted as the accursed progeny of Ham. (p. 82)

Hovland (2013:6) indicated how the Norwegian missionaries during the 1880s distorted the scriptures by theologically justifying British military invasion of Zululand. On the other side, the Dutch settlers at the Cape taught that they were God's newly chosen people and that Africans were children of Ham who stood on the way to the promised land (Beck 2000:38).

At some instances, there was a division among agents of the same mission society on some Christian principles. For instance, Abraham (2015) indicated that:

At the Synod in Pennsylvania, when Presbyterians discussed the possibility of invoking the curse of Heaven on recalcitrant owners of slaves, the bid to do this was duly defeated by a democratic majority of one. (p. 122)

This action demonstrates the challenge that at times exists among Christians in mission.

A closer look at the attitudes of the so-called Afrikaans and English-speaking churches in SA will give one a picture of the way in which they interpreted the scriptures. Both of these denominations have their origins in the West. The link of the English churches is well captured by De Gruchy (1986):

The English speaking churches all came to SA during the upsurge of British imperialism, and they took sides by and large with the British government in the ensuing struggle for power in SA. (p. 86)

The attitude of both the English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking churches carried tremendous influence in their interpretation of scriptures. For instance, the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) interpretation of scripture resulted in them being declared heretical by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at Ottawa (Ngcokovane 1989:162).

Imperialism constituted another negative element. In the activities of the missionaries, it was difficult to put a line of difference between imperialism and colonialism. That is what led Verkuyl (1978:168) to conclude that for centuries, imperialism came in the form of colonialism. Kohn (1962:44) also confirmed that imperialism and colonialism were used interchangeably for years. Missional connection with imperialism was also identified by Saayman (1991:24) who said: 'it can even be argued that the missionaries bear greater responsibility for the consequences of entanglement than the colonists'.

When some of the countries gained independence, the entanglement between the two declined although it continued to be promoted by some. It should also be noted that not all missionaries accepted the instructions for imperialism. For instance, Bartholome de las Casa (in Verkuyl 1978:169) went against the wishes of the Spanish imperialists by defending the rights of the Indians. Another exception was identified by Saayman (1991:27) who named Van der Kemp and Philip as those who strove for equality among people of different races.

Another negative aspect could be located in the dressing of Christianity in Western culture in Africa as was observed by Udeani (2007):

European culture was taken to be identical with Christianity and what was not European was seen as not Christian. African religiosity and cultural standards were judged then by Western theological standards. As a result, Africans were seen as godless heathens. The African, in this sense represented the antithesis of humanity, for the standard of participation in humanity was determined by how near they stood to the European culture. (p. 82)

Western missions dressed Christ in their own cultures before taking him to Africa. Hill-Fletcher (2017) was on point when she indicated that 'conversion to Christianity made people appear to be more White'. This meant that they were 'more White' in terms of being forced to embrace white Western Christian culture.

From this understanding, the Western missionaries seem to have been influenced by their cultures when judged from the approaches they employed in Africa. For instance, the practice of monogamy is a predominantly custom of the Global North, but it was wrapped in the gospel in their mission in Africa.

This Western wrapping of Christ was well captured by Udeani (2007):

Western Christianity with its fully developed systems of doctrines and institution based on Eurocentric historical



circumstances was imposed on these races. Though the mandate for mission: 'Go to make disciples of all nations...' came from Christ, injunction was understood to mean effectively 'go make Europeans of all nations. (p. 78)

In this way, the substitution of indigenous norms and values systems by Western Christian culture was obvious.

Racism also featured in the thinking and lifestyles of most Western missions. A more acceptable definition of racism was coined by Gorman, Childers and Hamilton (2019) thus: 'Racism exists when one self-identified racial group excludes or oppresses another group it deems biologically inferior'. An example of this could be seen from the crisis that Norwegian missionaries had in Zululand between 1850 and 1890 in handling converted Zulu Christians. Hovland (2013:6) points out that these missionaries 'supported unequal relationship and structures that were racially marked, culminating in their theological support for the violent implementation of colonial, white, male authority over the Zulus',

My concept of racism is the same as Frostin (1998:108ff.) who identified two types of racism viz. 'attitudinal' and 'structural'. Along the lines of structural racism, this was seen as a racist institution and as part of the problem rather than the solution. For instance, slavery which cost Africa more than 11 million lives was supported by Western churches.

For this reason, Western Christians perused scriptures for answers to justified racism. This was demonstrated by Udeani (2007:86) who indicated that the RCC theologically and socially justified slavery until the second half of the 19th century. He further pointed out that churches and monasteries owned a large number of slaves in Africa and Asia by whom they also managed their vast lands. Christianity was thus equated with whiteness as if it was an exclusive right for white people. Goetz (2012:118) picked this up when he even entitled one of his chapters as 'Becoming Christian, Becoming White'.

In Kritzinger's (1988:117) view, the church is seen by black theologians as racist as the rest of the society. When the pioneer missionary, Rev. J.T. van der Kemp, entered the mixed but volatile congregation in Graaff-Reinet on 01 June 1801, the black members greeted him by singing Psalm 134, 'Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord...' The white members were angered by this as if the black members were claiming the church as their own and replied by singing Psalm 74 verses 4-10, 'Your foes... defiled the dwelling place of your name... How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Will the foe revile your name forever?' (Elphick 2008:112). This demonstrates the level of racism in the church. In SA, the DRC became a leader in structural racism (Strassberger 1971:21ff.).

Some Westerners during the period under review joined overseas crews to try their luck. Some missionaries failed to get work in their own countries because of a lack of proper

education. Proper educational background enabled competency. It was along these lines that Wakatama (1976:86ff.), when speaking at Urbana '73, emphasised, 'the need for missionaries to acquire higher educational qualifications in order to be more effective in their work'. The danger of incompetency by untrained missionaries was also noted by some Western countries when they wanted to send out missionaries. That is why Taylor (1991:24) advised that 'missionaries needed training not only in biblical understanding but also in the understanding of people among whom they were working'.

Though mission stations had positive sides, there were however also those which had negative sides. For instance, during the colonial military conquests, some missionaries availed the mission stations as bases to facilitate victory for their colonial nations (Udeani 2007:89). It was in the Norwegian mission station at Umphumulo in Zululand where during the 1880s, the missionaries 'developed a theological justification for the British military invasion of Zululand' (Hovland 2013:6).

Mission stations also encouraged laziness among missionaries as they settled in them and stopped from making expeditions into other parts of the Southern Africa. This trend was not only observed in the Norwegian mission station in Zululand but with other mission societies such as the Europeans and Americans (Hovland 2013:6-7).

Mission stations were divisive to the local populations. Kgatla (1988:134) outlines a picture of a mission station: 'A group of missionaries settled somewhere on a mission station, from which they make trips to the local people and return to their base afterwards'. The Norwegian mission station in Zululand during the 1880s stands out as an example of this where some converts were accommodated in the station grounds 'which were set apart from the local society' (Hovland 2013:7). Udeani (2007:85) indicated that 'non-Christians were seen by the majority of the missionaries and believers not only as idolaters deceived about God but also as possessed by the devil'. This also separated the converts into what Masuku (1996:446) refers to as 'amajakani' meaning the converted and the unconverted. This picture suggests that mission stations were built separately from villagers. This created an atmosphere of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. They divided the local communities into 'heathens' and Christian camps, converted and the 'pagans' (Stubbs 1978:70).

It could be concluded that mission stations did not only separate missionaries from other people but also their converts from their fellow country people. This is because the converted settled in or around mission stations. They thus separated themselves from many social and cultural responsibilities. They withdrew themselves from the authority of chiefs and looked down upon those who were deemed to be unconverted. A situation of dichotomy was thus created between the converted and the unconverted and this built a friction between them.

## African response to Global North Christian missions

Response of Africa to Western missions could be categorised into two namely: strategic and theological responses:

### Strategic responses

#### Missionary go home!

The moratorium and calls such as 'missionary go home' formed part of the response by Africans and others in Asia and Latin America to the Western missions (Masuku 1998:47). This call was propelled by Western domination in the Global South where church leaders felt suffocated. It was called by John Gatu in October 1971 at a mission festival in Milwaukee, WI, USA. Makofane (2018) correctly captured his reason behind this call:

Gatu wished the Christian church to go forward in Africa, but in his opinion; it could not do so because the missionaries acted as an obstacle to its development, and their withdrawal was the means by which the Church in Africa could regain her self-identity. (p. 129)

Pederson (1980) had his book entitled *Missionary go home?* in which he recorded the experiences and testimonies of people from 'mission fields' with regards to missionaries.

#### Black Consciousness

A sense of consciousness was also seen being embraced by Christians from Africa. Therefore, Black Consciousness (BC) movement emerged. The name of Steve Biko (1989) is associated with BC as the father of this movement and his attitude to Western missions could be deduced from his writings:

More than anyone else, the missionaries knew that not all they did was essential to the spread of the message. But the basic intention went further than merely spreading the Word. Their arrogance and their monopoly on truth, beauty and moral judgment taught them to despise native customs and traditions and to seek to infuse their own values into these societies. (p. 212)

Biko identified impure motives among missionaries which were political, commercial or imperial. He blamed them for claiming a monopoly on truth, beauty and moral judgment. He blamed Western missions for bringing a new religion that caused frequent strife between the converts and the 'pagans' (1989:211). He emphasised what he called 'spiritual poverty of black people' and blamed that on missionary Christianity. Biko 'discerned the causes to be the loss of black manhood, the denigration of black identity through a distorted, European-centred history and an inflexible and repressive application of Christianity' (Macqueen 2018:44). He regarded BC as an antidote that affirms the black people to their rightful human position. He rejected the missionary Christianity that allowed black people to suffer under the immoral system and argued that the Bible needs to be reinterpreted to show Jesus as a fighting God for the oppressed (Macqueen 2018:44). Blacks rejected the negative

references to them as 'non-whites and non-Europeans' (Motlhabi 1984:112). This has been well captured by Boesak (1984:4) thus: 'We refuse any longer to be defined and limited by whites. With glowing pride in our Blackness, we oppose this "colonizing" of our humanity'.

### Resistance and rejection

The negative approaches applied by the Western missions to Africa conceived feelings of resistance and rejection of their initiatives. The culture of domination as was practiced by some Western missions stirred some resistance. A picture of rejection was captured by Mbiti (1971:1) when he indicated that the time for foreign mission is over. By this, Mbiti meant that activities related to mission should be carried out by Africans. Having said this, he does acknowledge positive contributions by Western missions in the area of services.

The character of renaissance, rebirth or reawakening also emerged as a general reaction. Macqueen (2018:33) indicated how students at a Catholic St. Francis College at the Mariannahill mission, Pinetown resisted to the subjugation of African culture and the Catholic doctrine. They argued that the curriculum was based on what they called 'the rotten foundation', which the bulk of the missionaries had 'created when they came'. Oduyoye (1986:31–32) indicated that a negative attitude already existed within the hearts of Africans towards foreign missions.

### Ecumenical initiatives

The ecumenical forums stood out as another form of response. Uka (1989:209) captured the objectives of ecumenism: 'To foster unity and cooperation among Christian churches throughout the inhabited world. They also pressed for greater understanding and cooperation between Christians and persons of other religions'.

The project of ecumenism was also found in the West but was more dominant in Africa. Mugambi (1982:11) was aware of this but added that it was also dominant in East Africa. He held that ecumenism is needed in countries that suffered oppression. It becomes a tool for empowerment and unity against a common enemy. Frostin (1988:4) added that ecumenism is constituted by a common experience of commonality, which is the bitter fruit of oppression. Some of the good examples of ecumenical projects in SA that condemned apartheid were the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute (Kritzinger 1988:72). The Organisation of African Independent Church (OAIC) also served the same purpose, to fight for the interests of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Africa and beyond more especially as churches that were born from the rejection of Western mission praxis (Molobi 2011).

### Theological responses

The Western mission praxis conceived various forms of theologies. They were collectively called 'Theology of

Liberation' in contrast to the 'liberation theology'. Mosala (1986:3) while differentiating these two argues that liberation theology refers to the Latin American form of Theology of Liberation that is linked with names such as Gutierrez, Assmann, Bonino, etc.

In this article, it is used generally to include theologies such as: liberation theology of Latin America, black theology, African theology and feminist theology.

### **Liberation theology**

Liberation theology originated in Latin America during 1968 from a paper by Gustavo Gutierrez. It became important for countries such as SA as it tried to be sensitive to a specific historic context. According to Gutierrez (in Petrella [2004:4]), this theology centres on the preferential option of the poor. It was against the Western theology that preferred the rich. Maimela (1987:75) described its origin by indicating that it arose from a particular historical experience that conditioned the Christian message.

### **Black theology**

Black theology is one of the theologies that emerged among the oppressed in SA and the USA. It drew its origin from the Black Power movement in the USA. In SA, it first made an appearance during 1970 through a paper written by Basil Moore entitled, 'Towards a Black Theology' (Masuku 1998:53). Maimela (1987:64ff.) reasoned that White Power produced Black Power as a reactionary force and the latter in turn brought to birth black theology. Motlhabi (1986:47) is therefore correct when he demonstrated that black theology opposed the interpretation of the Bible by white theology. It emerged as a corrective tool for re-interpretation of the Bible to show that God is on the side of the oppressed (Macqueen 2018:44).

### **African theology**

African theology marked another response to the Western mission. It argued that white theology was irrelevant and foreign to the needs of African Christians. Elements of African theology were seen in African belief systems long before the arrival of Western missions. African theology reveals that God has been known in Africa long before the arrival of White missions. This means that African religiosity paved the way for the acceptability of Christianity in Africa. Setiloane (1986:29) was therefore correct in saying that when Western missions brought the gospel, they did not find a 'tabula rasa' in Africa. He contends that the African concept of God dominated the African minds to an extent that they kept on honouring it even after accepting Christianity. Taylor (in Chipenda 1981:67) echoed the same point: 'Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel'.

### **Feminist theology**

Western Christian missions also conceived feminist theology. Bonita Bennett (1986:170) reasons that women are

oppressed as women because their worth is linked to their roles as girlfriends, wives or mothers. The majority of the churches that they established were influenced by their worldview. Rose Zoe-Obianga (1981:145) laments the fact that these male-dominated churches accuse assertive women as revolutionaries and provocative. Thetele (1981:154) commented about the activities of the Women's Association of African Independent Churches by indicating that they are an expression of a people who have not accepted the dictates of their oppressors as 'God given'. Similar to this, Landman (2007) introduces a body called 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' which was founded by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in 1987 as an academic dialogue platform for African women to express their views. This body became what Landman (1995:145) called 'The most powerful driving force for theoretic feminist theology in SA'.

### **The emergence of African Initiated Churches**

Some Africans split from mission churches and founded new congregations, usually called African Independent Churches. Led by African clergy, these churches went by different names but shared many features, such as more vibrant ritual life and belief in the role of the Holy Spirit acting through living prophets (Hanson in Grosz-Ngate & Hanson 2014:111).

African Initiated Churches formed another response to Western missions. Masuku (2019:196) confirmed it thus: 'The birth of the AICs was a reaction as a means of decolonising Christianity in Africa'. Thetele (1981:150) adds that AICs comprise people who got tired of being regarded as objects by Western churches. The question of cultural onslaught in all spheres of African church life appears to be at the centre of the exodus from Western-oriented churches. Turner, Oosthuisen and Hastings, among others, worked out causal factors (Daneel 1987:73). Claassen (1995) summarised their argument well:

African believers questioned the condemnation by missionaries of the ancestor cult, circumcision and polygamy. European skepticism with the respect to spirit possession, alienated black church members who found Biblical evidence for their view of world and life. Their accommodation of African life made AICs very attractive. (p. 15)

Masuku (1996:445/6) contends that these churches were not regarded as Christians but as 'bridges back to paganism'. Grumbley (2008:6) summarises the struggle of the AICs from the OAICs perspective thus: 'These churches provide the comforting continuity of affirmed "cultural heritage" and the liberating expression of "our own liturgy, hymnology... and doctrinal emphasis'.'

### **The emergence of missions from Africa**

The growth of Christianity in the Global South has also brought with it the reversal of the Christian missionary enterprise: while missionary projects continue 'from the West to the rest', there are also an increasing number of missionary movements reaching back 'from the rest to the West' (Ueffing 2018:68).



Responses to Western missions could also be seen from the emergence of missions from Africa which Ueffing (2018:67) referred to as 'areas of missionary activity'. This has been demonstrated by the AICs and other churches from Africa. For instance, AICs established themselves in Amsterdam, London and Birmingham, Hamburg, Geneva and Zurich. About 20 congregations are located in the Netherlands (Masuku 2019; Pobe & Ositelo 1998:52). Saayman (2013:137) termed this as 'Christian mission coming full circle'. Mulemfo (1997:52) coined it as 'An African missionary in return' while Reimer (2007:4) termed it as 'Mission in reverse'.

Saayman (2013) mentioned black pioneers of missions namely Ntshikana (c.1780–c.1821), Tiyo Soga (1829–1871) and Nehemiah Tile (died 1891). Pate (1991:27) revealed the general statistics of missionaries from the Global South. He indicated that by the end of 1988, there were 35924 non-Western missionaries in 118 countries among 2450 people groups.

## Conclusion

The negative sides of Western mission praxis were successfully identified. The responses that were triggered by these mistakes have also been identified. Among them, it was also seen how the churches from Africa developed their own missionaries who did mission in reverse. It is still yet to be seen if the mission praxis of African churches cannot commit the similar mistakes as those committed by their counterparts from the Global North.

A lesson learned from this is that all who are or still aiming to be agents of mission are to look at these negative elements and ensure that they do not commit them. Others may argue that the Christian missions from Africa do not have the capability of committing these types of mistakes as did by their counterparts from the West. A possibility is far-fetched that they can commit most of these types of mistakes, for instance, that of colonialism, imperialism, etc. One could further ask: Can they be tempted to be arrogant over indigenous Western cultures, dress Christ in African cultures, label indigenous religions as barbaric, apply racism, have scriptural distortions, etc.? These are some of the rhetorical questions that may be difficult to answer.

It is possible that we may have those who still understand and practice mission in romantic sense of going to far-off places. This article provided enough grounds and warnings with regard to the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of Christian mission praxis. It highlighted areas of concern that need to be taken note of and avoided. It is important to note that the contexts differ. For instance, the centuries covered during the time frame of this article differ from the current 21st century. The current situation may bring new challenges to Christian mission globally and Africa in particular.

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## Author's contributions

M.T.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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