

Part Two

Missionary Presence and African Agency

Chapter Eight

Back to Africa: White Abolitionists and Black Missionaries

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*Africa, thou ebon country, how we long to see thee free!
E'er shall we, for thy redemption work and pray, till thou shalt be
Free from every degradation, that has cursed thy sunny land...*²⁵⁴

History is replete with bittersweet ironies. But few of these compare, in poignancy or magnitude, to the association between the Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent expansion of Christianity on the African continent. As with so many epochal turning points in history, people movements provided the seedplot. In this case, the massive transatlantic transfers of population (African and European; voluntary and involuntary) enmeshed the fate of three continents and generated unprecedented levels of cultural interaction. It also unleashed powerful ideological movements that drew much of their energy from the “back to Africa” policy originally adopted by the British government and white abolitionists, and also espoused by Americans. This chapter focuses on the “back to Africa” movements from Britain and America and evaluates their significance both for the expansion of Christianity in Africa and the development of an African Christianity.

Accounts of the European-African encounter (from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries) typically depict European initiatives and actions

²⁵⁴ Extract from “A Hymn of Sympathy and Prayer for Africa”, written by Alexander P. CAMPHOR (an African American) in 1894. For reference details, see Walter L. WILLIAMS, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa 1877-1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 179f.

as dominant or decisive and, inevitably, enforce a portrayal of the African or black element as passive, dependent, and exploited. This approach is strongly Eurocentric and has the potential effect of reducing the histories and legacies of the African component to mere episodes in a much wider drama detailing the exploits and accomplishments of Western agents. It is also overly simplistic. As John Thornton has shown in connection with the early period of the encounter, Africans “controlled the nature of their interactions with Europe” in military and political relations, and were “active participants in the Atlantic world, both in African trade with Europe (including the slave trade) and as slaves in the New World.”²⁵⁵

The same could be said of the African encounter with Christianity—even in the New World context of slavery and white domination. To affirm this is not to devalue the hugely significant Western missionary movement, nor to minimize the impact of white dominance. But when the narrative reconstruction of a people’s past is held captive to the imagination of the dominant group the historical record becomes distorted, even if, in Richard Evans’s insightful comment, “we all pull out of the seamless web of past events a tiny selection which we then present in our historical account.”²⁵⁶

I. THE BRITISH DIMENSION

By the eighteenth century England had emerged as the first modern industrial nation. The attendant transformation effected spectacular changes in English society and politics; but the nation’s rising prosperity accentuated egregious class divisions and forcibly exposed a pervasive religious decline.²⁵⁷ Contemporary accounts passionately denounced the prevailing religious malaise, with the strongest criticisms directed at the

²⁵⁵ John THORNTON, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6f., 44. See Basil DAVIDSON, *The African Slave Trade* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1980 [1961]), 27-29, for a similar assessment.

²⁵⁶ Richard J. EVANS, *In Defense of History* (New York: N.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 122.

²⁵⁷ Among other things the Toleration Act of 1689 deprived the Church of England of its power to compel church attendance, with the result that church attendance dwindled considerably. See John WALSH, “‘Methodism’ and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism”, in M. NOLL, D.W. BEBBINGTON & G.A. RAWLYK (eds), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19-37, 25.

Established (Anglican) Church to which the majority of English subjects belonged.²⁵⁸ Wrote William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a member of the Established Church and renowned politician: “Religion also has declined: God is forgotten; his providence is exploded ... Improving in almost every branch of knowledge, we have become less and less acquainted with Christianity.”²⁵⁹ William Carey (1761-1834), a “dissenter” and cobbler by profession was equally forthright: “In respect to those who bear the Christian name, a very great degree of ignorance and immorality abounds amongst them.”²⁶⁰

While the disparateness of their social and religious background arguably strengthens the testimony of these two men, it could be argued that the evangelical convictions they shared accounts for an unflattering view of society. But such saturnine assessments were not restricted to evangelicals. Rev Sydney Smith (1771-1845), no friend of evangelicals and renowned for his acerbic wit, was equally critical of the state of religion. “In England ... (except among ladies in the middle class of life),” he wrote, “there is no religion at all,” and the clergy “have no more influence over the people at large than the Cheesemongers of England.”²⁶¹

It is necessary to point out that what critics deplored was a palpable lack of earnestness in matters of religion or, as Wilberforce would have it, the prevalence of professed (as opposed to real) Christianity. That England or Britain was essentially Christian was not at issue. The prevailing conception of Christian faith and allegiance was denoted by Christendom, a construct in which Christianity was defined in territorial or tribal terms and the church perceived as coterminous with the entire society. The offices and officials of the church were the object of more specific condemnations—anticlericalism was widespread—but charges about the erosion of Christian knowledge and values implicated the whole of society.

²⁵⁸ Cf. L.E. ELLIOT-BINNS, *The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study* (London: Lutherworth Press, 1953), 117.

²⁵⁹ William WILBERFORCE, *A Practical View Of The Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country contrasted with Real Christianity* (London: 1797), 362.

²⁶⁰ William CAREY, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, (London: 1792), 65. He adds, “Papists ... are in general ignorant of divine things, and very vicious. Nor do the bulk of the Church of England much exceed them, either in knowledge or holiness; and many errors, and much looseness of conduct, are to be found amongst dissenters of all denominations.”

²⁶¹ Letter to Mrs Beach, dated 15 July 1798, in S. SMITH, *Letters of Sydney Smith*, vol. I (London: Longmans, 1850), 21. Significantly, Smith maintains that the “Scotch”, in contrast to the English are very much in earnest in their religion.

Specifically for this reason, the prospects for change seemed all the more daunting. Yet the pervasive sense of religious dissatisfaction probably meant that innumerable souls were ripe for a new religious experience. Change came in spectacular fashion, in the form of one of the most celebrated revivals in history: the eighteenth century evangelical revival.

A meaningful consideration of this revival is outside the scope of this chapter, and only the briefest of comments can be made. The eighteenth century evangelical revival generated extensive spiritual fervor and transformed Christian life throughout Britain. In its wake emerged religious ideas and philanthropic movements which “altered the whole course of English history.”²⁶² It was also, it has to be said, an international phenomenon. Simultaneous with the outbreak in Britain, a wave of revivals swept through most of the American colonies in the period 1734-1735 and 1740-1742. Collectively designated “the Great Awakening”, these events marked the beginning of popular evangelicalism in America. These revivals on both sides of the Atlantic are typically presented in scholarly accounts as wholly isolated, geographically contained, movements. More recently, however, an emphasis on their resemblance and remarkable simultaneity has produced arguments in favor of treating them as expressions of one phenomenon, the shared experience of a transatlantic community.²⁶³ The best approach perhaps requires distinguishing between the similarities of expression and the peculiarities of experience they entailed.

Particularly significant is the fact that in Britain there was an immediate and vital connection between the evangelical revival, the antislavery campaign, and the modern missionary movement. Like all revivals, the eighteenth century phenomenon was spontaneous and unpredictable, and hugely shaped by contextual factors or agents. Even within Britain the revival was not an entirely homogenous movement in all its aspects. The British historian David Bebbington has identified four distinctive strands: namely, Evangelicals within the Church of England, Methodism, Calvinistic Methodism, and Dissenters or Nonconformists.²⁶⁴ Only the first of these groups commands our attention here because its leading members formed the vanguard of the abolition movement.

²⁶² E.M. HOWSE, *Saints in Politics: The ‘Clapham Sect’ and the Growth of Freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971 [1953]), 7.

²⁶³ See WALSH, “Methodism”, pp. 19-37.

²⁶⁴ David BEBBINGTON, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 2000 [1989]), 27-34.

Evangelicals within the Church of England were largely a group of ordained clergy and their associates. They were distinguishable from “Methodists” primarily by their relationship to the Church of England and their acceptance of the traditions of Anglicanism. There was also a social distinction: evangelicals were largely associated with the upper and upper-middle classes while Methodism drew its following mainly from the lower and lower-middle classes. Emerging perhaps by the late 1730s, the former spread through the formation of clerical societies and clubs.²⁶⁵ In a context where the placement and removal of clergy was in the hands of lay aristocrats, who “were rarely sympathetic to the cause of the gospel,”²⁶⁶ sustained evangelical influence within the churches was severely hampered. Effective evangelical clergy could be removed at will by unsympathetic patrons. This difficulty was minimized in two ways. First, leading evangelicals used their wealth to purchase livings to which evangelical clergy were appointed. Second, the movement eventually secured significant following in the universities and thereby exerted a profound influence on the “breeding grounds of the [Anglican] ministry.”²⁶⁷

This (Anglican) evangelical movement became identified with two main centers: Cambridge and Clapham (a suburb of West London). Cambridge was considered its intellectual centre, while Clapham emerged as the movement’s spiritual and executive nucleus and became the focal point of the most prominent and influential evangelicals of the day.²⁶⁸ Under the leadership of William Wilberforce, the “Clapham Sect”, as this group was known,²⁶⁹ came to share a unique identity and exert an influence

²⁶⁵ Tindal A. HART, *Clergy and Society, 1600-1800* (London, 1968), 94-95. It must be noted that expansion through small groups was a peculiar feature of the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival.

²⁶⁶ BEBBINGTON, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 31f.

²⁶⁷ HART, *Clergy*, p. 95.

²⁶⁸ HOWSE, *Saints*, pp. 17f.

²⁶⁹ This designation is misleading since they were hardly a “sect” and some of their members never lived at Clapham. Prominent members of the group included Henry Thornton, a politician and banker; William Wilberforce, a politician; James Stephen, a young Scottish lawyer; Zachary Macaulay, formerly an overseer of a Jamaican estate (later Governor of the newly founded Sierra Leone colony; Edward Elliot, brother-in-law of Pitt; John Shore (later Lord Teignmouth), who became Governor-general of India; Charles Grant, Director of the East Indian Company; John Venn, Rector of Clapham; Granville Sharp, a Government clerk; Hannah More, a philanthropist and writer; Thomas Babington, “a man of high character and evangelical piety”; Isaac Milner, Dean of Carlisle and Provost of Queen’s College, Cambridge; and Charles Simeon, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge.

on the society of their day that was out of all proportion to their numbers.²⁷⁰ Among their numerous undertakings were various educational schemes (including the Sunday School movement), the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Church Missionary Society, the African Institution, the Sierra Leone Trading Society, the Society for Bettering the Condition and Improving the Comforts of the Poor, and a multitude of unorganized personal charities.

Activism was, and remains, a hallmark of evangelicalism. Like other movements associated with the evangelical revival, the energy and zeal exhibited by the Clapham Sect was a function of the movement's doctrinal stress on the salvation of the individual with its attendant focus on the human condition. The fusion of religious fervor and humanitarian endeavor became the driving force behind the Clapham Sect's most outstanding achievement, the abolition of the slave trade.²⁷¹

II. THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN

It somehow seems fitting that Britain, the chief slave-trading nation for more than two centuries (prior to the 1780s) produced the most able abolitionists. At the same time, the fact that the slave trade was by then considered "inseparably associated with the commerce and welfare, and even the national security" of Britain meant that opposition to its abolition was powerful and entrenched. By the 1790s, the trade was estimated to annually employ over 5,500 sailors, more than 160 ships, and (in the West India trade alone) generate over £6, 000,000 in exports and imports.²⁷² Not only had the large accumulation of profits become "a major factor in the accumulation of English and French capital" the trade itself made "a large, and at certain points probably decisive, contribution to the whole process of industrialization."²⁷³ Even the more humanitarian minded reconciled

²⁷⁰ According to HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 173, the Clapham Sect and the people associated with them never numbered more than twenty or thirty.

²⁷¹ For a treatment, see HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 173; also J. WALVIN, "The Rise of British Popular Sentiment for Abolition, 1787-1832", in C. BOLT & S. DRESCHER (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (London: Wm. Dawson & Sons, 1980), 149-162, 149; also, R. ANSTEY, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), 189-192.

²⁷² HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 29.

²⁷³ DAVIDSON, *The African Slave Trade*, p. 83.

themselves to its horrors and inhumanity “on the grounds of its sheer necessity.”²⁷⁴

The members of the Clapham Sect were by no means the first to oppose or tackle the issue of slavery and seek its abolition. Many voices in the eighteenth century had already been raised against this nefarious traffic, noticeably among Quakers. But the Clapham brotherhood embarked on the antislavery campaign with unprecedented militancy. Their determination to tackle the slave trade on a national level and elicit government action was clearly signaled in Wilberforce’s first speech to Parliament on the issue (in 1789):

“When we consider the vastness of the continent of Africa; when we reflect how all other countries have for some centuries past been advancing in happiness and civilization; when we think how in this same period all improvement in Africa has been defeated by her intercourse with Britain; when we reflect that it is we ourselves that have degraded them to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification for our guilt ... What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of our guilt, or to attempt any reparations!

A society has been established for the abolition of this trade, in which dissenters, Quakers, churchmen ... have all united ... Let not parliament be the only body that is insensible to the principles of national justice. Let us make reparation to Africa....”²⁷⁵

The first major victory in the abolitionist cause came with the Somerset Case. James Somerset, a runaway slave boy, was brought up for trial before Lord Chief Justice Mansfield (in February 1772) mainly through the prodigious efforts of Granville Sharpe, the oldest of the Clapham group. Self-taught, eccentric, and tenacious in his commitment to seemingly impossible causes, Sharp has been described as “the father of the Abolitionist movement”.²⁷⁶ He personally conducted two years of exhaustive research to strengthen Somerset’s defense and financed the

²⁷⁴ Eric WILLIAMS, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 39, explains that prior to 1783 “all classes in English society presented a united front with regard to the slave trade. The monarchy, the government, the Church, public opinion in general supported the slave trade. There were few protests, and those were ineffective.”

²⁷⁵ Cited in HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 35-36.

²⁷⁶ R. COUPLAND, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London: Frank Cass, 1964), 75; for more on Granville Sharp, see Prince HOARE, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (London: Henry Colburn & Co., 1820).

effort. In the end the five lawyers employed in the case were so moved by its merits and Sharp's selfless commitment that they declined to accept compensation for their services.²⁷⁷ In a momentous legal verdict, Lord Mansfield declared (on 22nd June 1772) that slavery was against the law of the land.

This judgment automatically made all slaves within the British Isles free, but it did nothing to stop the slave trade. The abolitionists now focused efforts on getting the British Parliament to pass an anti-slavery bill. To this end they constituted an Abolition Committee in 1787.²⁷⁸ This committee was short lived; but under Wilberforce's dedicated leadership, the parliamentary campaign never faltered—indeed, four more members of the growing Clapham circle won parliamentary seats over the next two decades. But strenuous opposition from powerful vested interests turned this effort into a long and arduous struggle. It quickly became obvious that winning public opinion was imperative. To this end, the abolitionists embarked on a massive propaganda campaign throughout the country that included numerous petitions, extensive pamphleteering, public meetings, and boycotts.²⁷⁹ Increasingly also, they propagated the view that Africa held great potential, both as a source of raw material and new markets, which could only be realized with the abolition of the slave trade.

The argument that legitimate commerce should replace the slave trade was reinforced by the personal researches of the indefatigable Thomas Clarkson²⁸⁰ and became a central plank in the abolition argument. It gained increasing support with the passing of years, winning powerful allies among manufacturers. White abolitionists made much of this economic argument, but among the first to advance it was an ex-African slave, Olandah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa), an Ibo from Nigeria. In 1789, Equiano published his autobiographical *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African in His Own Words*, in which he contended with no little passion:

“[Africa] lays open an endless field of commerce to the British

²⁷⁷ HOARE, *Memoirs*, pp. 83, 91.

²⁷⁸ HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 11.

²⁷⁹ Lady KNUTSFORD, *The Life and Letters of Zachary Macaulay* (London: Edward Arnold, 1900), 17-18. cf. HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 40-41.

²⁸⁰ For more on Clarkson's monumental contribution to the abolitionist cause see J. POPE-HENNESSY, *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Traders 1441-1807* (London: Weiden & Nicholson, 1967), ch. 14; R. COUPLAND, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1964).

manufactures and merchant adventurer. The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous. The abolition of slavery would be in reality an universal good.

Tortures, murder, and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity, are practiced upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers, uniting in the cause, will considerably facilitate and expedite it; and, as I have already stated, it is most substantially their interest and advantage, and as such the nation's at large ... In a short time one sentiment alone will prevail, from motives of interest as well as justice and humanity. Europe contains one hundred and twenty millions of inhabitants. Query—How many millions doth Africa contain? Supposing the Africans, collectively and individually, to expend 51. a head in raiment and furniture yearly when civilized, &c. an immensity beyond the reach of imagination!

This I conceive to be a theory founded upon facts, and therefore an infallible one. If the blacks were permitted to remain in their own country, they would double themselves every fifteen years. In proportion to such increase will be the demand for manufactures. Cotton and indigo grow spontaneously in most parts of Africa; a consideration this of no small consequence to the manufacturing towns of Great Britain. It opens a most immense, glorious, and happy prospect—the clothing, &c. of a continent ten thousand miles in circumference, and immensely rich in productions of every denomination in return for manufactures.”²⁸¹

Equiano's intimate knowledge of the slavery experience and passionate belief in Africa's potential made him a powerful antislavery figure. Unfortunately, despite the immense interest which his book attracted, this irrepressible African abolitionist remained a marginalized figure in the anti-slavery movement.²⁸² But the economic argument was strong; so strong, in fact, that some have argued that the abolition of slavery occurred when it did, not so much because the nation's conscience

²⁸¹ Olaudah EQUIANO, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, vol. II (London, 1789), 249-254. For a more recent edition of this book, see O. EQUIANO, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (New York: Dove Publications, 1999), 178-179.

²⁸² Cf. Lamin SANNEH, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of the Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24-31.

had been aroused by moral arguments, but because the trade itself had become economically expedient.²⁸³

But, ultimately, neither economic expediency nor the much celebrated humanitarian effort is in and of itself sufficient to explain the abolition of the slave trade—the trade, after all, persisted for decades after legal proscription and in the face of military blockades. A variety of complex impulses all contributed to the ultimate outcome. Among other things, opportune changes in Britain’s political leadership, a growing acceptance among plantation owners that “breeding” was just as effective as “buying”, the spread of enlightenment values, and the religious transformations associated with the evangelical revival, all played a role. For their part the abolitionists were convinced that their cause would only succeed if it first of all triumphed in the court of public opinion. Declared Wilberforce, “I rely on the religion of the people of this country—because the people of England are religious and moral, loving justice and hating iniquity.”²⁸⁴

Overstated perhaps, but such convictions mattered. As already mentioned, the abolitionists’ chief weapon was propaganda. They perfected the art of soft protest and pioneered mass media techniques: they “pamphleteered, lobbied, pressured, stumped the country in speaking campaigns ... They engineered debates, promoted commissions of inquiry, drew up ‘bodies of evidence’ ... [and] tapped the gathering tide of humanitarian liberalism that flowed through those years.”²⁸⁵ Not for the first (or last) time an entire nation was aroused by the actions of a few men and women of ability and uncommon fervor, championing a cause whose time had come.

The British parliament faced increasing pressure from the public to take action. In March 1807, with the passing of a bill entitled “The Slave Trade Abolition Act” in the House of Lords, the abolitionist cause gained a landmark victory. It had taken nineteen years of parliamentary struggle. America and Denmark also abolished the slave trade. But the battle was far

²⁸³ See WILLIAMS, *Capitalism and Slavery*; also, DAVIDSON, *The African Slave Trade*, pp. 76-92. For counter-arguments, see H. TEMPERLEY, “Anti-Slavery as a Form of Cultural Imperialism”, in C. BOLT & S. DRESCHER (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (London: Wm. Dawson & Sons, 1980), 335-350; Seymour DRESCHER, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1977).

²⁸⁴ Cited in HOWSE, *Saints*, p. 153.

²⁸⁵ DAVIDSON, *The African Slave Trade*, p. 87.

from finished. Further actions were required to secure full international agreement—Spain, France, Holland and Portugal had yet to be won over.²⁸⁶

Over the next thirty years Britain induced other European nations to cooperate with her in the prohibition of the trade; but there was an even greater battle yet to be won: the elimination of slavery itself. Knowledge of the brutality and dehumanization that characterized slavery was now widespread; but the degradation of the African and the deep contempt for African humanity that this “monster iniquity” fostered in European minds presented innumerable mental and psychological impediments in the way of emancipation. By now, however, the antislavery movement boosted a broad front. Evangelical churchmen, Methodists, Quakers, and regular dissenters, all brought their influence to bear on the campaign, and the government was inundated with petitions.²⁸⁷

In the early 1820s, leadership of the parliamentary campaign passed from Wilberforce to the youthful Thomas Fowell Buxton.²⁸⁸ Progress was slow and fitful; but the extraordinary assiduousness of the abolitionists eventually paid off. On July 25, 1833, the Emancipation Act guaranteed the emancipation of all slaves in British dominions. Four days later, Wilberforce, the Agamemnon of the abolitionist cause, breathed his last. Slavery was not immediately abolished (in America emancipation came much later), but the death knell of the institution had been sounded.

III. BACK TO AFRICA:

THE SIERRA LEONE SETTLEMENT

Lord Mansfield’s ruling in the Somerset case signaled the freedom of thousands of African slaves living in Britain at the time. Added to this number were former American slaves, the so-called “black loyalists”, who had served under the British flag in the American War of Independence and made their way to England after the peace of 1783. Many more had

²⁸⁶ In particular, Portuguese involvement in the trade was as extensive as ever.

²⁸⁷ In June 1814, reports HOWSE, *Saints*, 144, “nearly eight hundred petitions bearing nearly one million signatures”—almost one-tenth of the entire population of the country—was sent to the House of Commons.

²⁸⁸ HOWSE, *Saints*, 152f. T.F. BUXTON’S, *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* (London: Dawson’s of Pall Mall, 1968 [1839]), became one of the most influential abolitionist treatises. Ill-fated, but ultimately historically significant, the 1841 Niger Expedition was inspired by Buxton’s conviction that the British government, commercial companies and missionary societies (using African agency) must work together if the slave trade was to be terminated and Africa regenerated.

escaped from their masters in the West Indies and elsewhere to seek a haven of freedom in England. Estimates put the overall number of blacks in England between ten and twenty thousand by the end of the eighteenth century.²⁸⁹

The influx of such a large number of blacks in and around the streets of London created a grave social problem. Unemployed, homeless and destitute, they caused an alarming increase in the number of beggars and vagabonds and were dubbed “the Black Poor” by the press. Their presence unnerved the white population unaccustomed to such huge numbers of blacks; and deep racial prejudices fueled exaggerated fears. Echoing popular sentiment, *The London Chronicle* (in March, 1773, a year after the Somerset Case) expressed the hope that:

“Parliament will provide such remedies as may be adequate to the occasion, by expelling Blacks now here ... prohibiting the introduction of them in this kingdom for the future, and save the natural beauty of Britons from the Morisco tint.”²⁹⁰

In keeping with such sentiments the predominant response was to explore every avenue of evacuation. In 1786, a group of philanthropists and other concerned citizens, including Granville Sharpe, formed the “Committee for Relieving the Black Poor” to spearhead relief efforts. When Henry Smeathman, an “amateur botanist”, presented a plan for the repatriation of these blacks to Sierra Leone on the West African coast, the committee immediately seized the idea.²⁹¹ The British government, alive to the possibility of ridding itself of an awkward problem, also agreed to finance the scheme. The new settlement was billed as a “Province of Freedom”. Smeathman died, in July 1786, before it became clear that his knowledge of Africa was as defective as his motives were suspect. On April 8, 1787, after two abortive attempts, 411 passengers sailed from Plymouth. The blacks on board were mainly ex-soldiers adventurous

²⁸⁹ Estimates of the slaves manumitted in England as a result of the Mansfield judgment vary from 14,000 to 30,000.

²⁹⁰ Cited in Mavis C. CAMPBELL, *Back to Africa, George Ross & the Maroons: From Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993), iii.

²⁹¹ Smeathman extolled the commercial advantages of such a venture to the committee and painted a picture of “a land of immense fertility, where the soil need only be scratched with a hoe to yield grain in abundance, where livestock propagated themselves with a rapidity unknown in a cold climate, where a hut provided adequate shelter at all seasons”—cf. C. FYFE, *A Short History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 15.

enough to make the journey. Along with them were a handful of Europeans (officials or craftsmen and their families) and seventy London prostitutes.²⁹² The scheme ended in disaster. Within three months, disease and death had taken the lives of a third of the group. By March 1788, only 130 of the original number were left. In 1789, King Jimmy, a neighboring Temne chief, attacked the settlement (which had been named “Granville Town”) and completely destroyed it.

Sharpe and the other philanthropists remained undaunted. They were convinced that with the right type of colonialists or settlers and the establishment of legitimate commerce a settlement could be successfully established in Sierra Leone. To this end they formed the Sierra Leone Company (in 1791) which was empowered by an act of parliament to govern the settlement. The directors of the Company included Sharpe, Wilberforce, and Henry Thornton (a London Banker). There was only one problem: the settlement the Company was set up to govern was populated only by a tiny remnant. Rendered cautious by previous failure, the directors of the Company were reluctant to send out more blacks, while the high mortality rate among white colonists made them an impractical alternative.

This predicament ended when Thomas Peters, a freed slave, arrived in London, in 1791, to plead the cause of black settlers in Nova Scotia. Lured by promises of freedom and economic opportunities, these “black loyalists” had fought on the British side in the Revolutionary War.²⁹³ Shipped off to Nova Scotia after the war their lot had become desperate. Peters was in London to express their grievances and present a petition for emigration. The timing could not have been more propitious. Plans were soon under way to transport the Nova Scotian blacks to Sierra Leone. Eventually, in January 1792, 1190 blacks set sail from Nova Scotia in five vessels. The new settlers renamed the settlement “Freetown”.

The entire community of Nova Scotian blacks were baptized Christians and they landed in Sierra Leone complete with their own churches and preachers. Their religious fervor and bibliocentric lifestyle was palpably manifest. Their arrival was of epochal significance. It marked the establishment of the first black church in modern Africa²⁹⁴ and arguably

²⁹² Fyfe, *A Short History of Sierra Leone*, p. 17.

²⁹³ Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, pp. 50-53.

²⁹⁴ A.F. WALLS, “A Christian Experiment: The Early Sierra Leone Colony”, in C.J. COMING, *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, Studies in Church History 6 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 107-129, 107f. Also, SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, p. 62. P.E.H. Hair also affirms that “Freetown is by far the oldest

signified the beginning of the “modern” missionary movement.²⁹⁵ In effect, the story of modern African Christianity began not with white missionary agency but as the initiative of ex-African slaves. As the rest of this chapter will show, this black missionary element grew stronger and exerted a profound influence on the nature and spread of Christianity in nineteenth century Africa.

In 1800, the Nova Scotian settlers were joined by another group of ex-African slaves. These Maroons, as they were called, numbered some five hundred and fifty and hailed from Jamaica. Fiercely warlike, they had been granted their freedom by the colonial government only to resume fighting much later.²⁹⁶ Briefly deported to Nova Scotia, where they found conditions harshly inhospitable, their clamor for redress led to repatriation to the Sierra Leone settlement.

By now, the Sierra Leone Company and other evangelical promoters were fired by a vision of the settlement as a Christian centre, a strategic foothold for commercial undertakings (to counter the slave trade) as well as a springboard for the spread of Western civilization and Christianity in Africa. But visions of a “Christian nation”—a veritable Christendom—proved illusory, even after 1808 (the year in which the Sierra Leone Company, under threat of insolvency, ceded its administration to the British Crown). The Nova Scotian settlers, dissenters all, were revivalistic in their practice of religion and thus more attentive to the designs of heavenly powers than earthly authority. Indeed, they were conditioned by long experience to be deeply suspicious of white authority; and their penchant for rebelliousness and political agitation squelched any hope of a politically directed religious structure.²⁹⁷

As a Crown colony, Sierra Leone became the focus of yet another abolition scheme which saw the blockade of the West African coast by the British squadron and the recapture of thousands of African slaves, who were now relocated in Freetown and villages established around it for the purpose. Included among these “recaptives” (or Liberated Africans) were many Muslims who resisted conversion to the Christian faith while

Christian community” in tropical Africa—cf. P.E.H. HAIR, “Freetown Christianity and Africa”, in *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, 6 (December 1964), 13-21, 14 & 16f.

²⁹⁵ Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, p. 62. It certainly predates the founding of the missionary societies associated with the evangelical revival.

²⁹⁶ Cf. CAMPBELL, *Back to Africa*, p. 1; FYFE, *A Short History of Sierra Leone*, pp. 79-81.

²⁹⁷ P.E.H. Hair, describes their agitation as “the beginning of African political nationalism”—see P.E.H. HAIR, “Africanism: the Freetown Contribution”, in *The Journal of African Studies*, 5, (December 1967), 521-539, 526.

enjoying the full benefits of colonial rule and the same protection accorded to British citizens.²⁹⁸ Additionally, the earliest European missionaries sent to Sierra Leone insisted on individual confession and conversion (a corollary of their evangelical convictions), and resolutely resisted an approach whereby baptism was a mere formality that signified civil status and ecclesiastical identity.²⁹⁹ In short, the reproduction of Christendom was subverted by its chief representatives (the missionaries) and the dynamics of colonial expansion.³⁰⁰

Sierra Leone was destined to be a Christian experiment of a different sort. The recaptives, who numbered 18,000 by 1825 (an estimated 67,000 by 1840), became the dominant element in the life and future of the colony. Freed from the clutches of villainous traffickers they became captive audiences for Nova Scotian evangelists and European agents of missionary societies (predominantly the Church Missionary Society [CMS], formed in 1799 by members of the Clapham Sect). Their conversion to Christianity in vast numbers represents one of the most spectacular achievements in modern mission history and “the first mass movement to Christianity in modern Africa.” These developments augured well for an experiment aimed at making the settlement “the beacon of light to Africa [and] the springboard of missionary enterprise.”

The ill-fated 1841 Niger Expedition (inspired by the ideas of T. Fowell Buxton) emphatically underlined the notion that African agency was indispensable for the Christianization of Africa.³⁰¹ No other missionary society was more resolute in translating this belief into policy than the CMS. Under the leadership of Henry Venn (from 1841 to 1872), whose father (John Venn) had been a leading member of the Clapham group, the Society strengthened its commitment to training African clergy and adopted the “three-selves” strategy aimed at the development of self-

²⁹⁸ Andrew Walls’ observation that “by the end of the nineteenth century...Queen Victoria had become the world’s leading Islamic ruler” is telling—cf. A. WALLS, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 219.

²⁹⁹ On this issue, SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, 113-122, provides a superb treatment of the early confrontation between Governor Charles MacCarthy (whose loyalty to the Crown belied his Roman Catholic heritage) and the enterprising Rev. William A. B. Johnson, a German missionary.

³⁰⁰ For more on this thesis, see WALLS, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, pp. 194-214.

³⁰¹ See BUXTON, *The African Slave Trade*, and James Frederick SCHÖN & Samuel CROWTHER, *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schön and Mr. Samuel Crowther: who, with the sanction of Her Majesty’s Government, accompanied the expedition up the Niger in 1841 on behalf of the Church Missionary Society* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1970 [1842]).

supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing churches. First implemented in the colonial context of Sierra Leone and later in the CMS Yoruba Mission, Venn's vision for African church autonomy had profound implications for the development of the African Church.³⁰²

In Sierra Leone, colonial domination and European control of the churches created significant roadblocks to Venn's strategy; but the opening of the Niger mission allowed a motivated African missionary force to test-drive Venn's ideas. Most significantly, Venn's revolutionary ideas launched the career of Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther (1807-1891), arguably the most celebrated African Christian of the nineteenth century. Headed by Crowther and staffed almost entirely by Sierra Leonean Christians (recaptives evangelized in earlier decades), the Niger Mission was a bold experiment in African leadership and initiative that witnessed one of the most remarkable periods of Christian expansion on the African continent in nineteenth century.³⁰³

If the stratagems championed by white abolitionists and missionary thinkers like Henry Venn provided the framework for an emerging African Christianity, African agents, particularly ex-slaves remained a driving force. In the first half of the nineteenth century, black Christians from the West Indies joined Christianized recaptives, Nova Scotians, and the small group of African American missionaries in the missionary effort. The West Indian presence in Sierra Leone dated back to the establishment of a West Indian regiment in 1819; but immigration and a brief burst of missionary activity significantly increased the number of West Indians in West Africa. The most well known among them was Thomas Birch Freeman (1809-1890), the son of a West Indian father and an English mother, who arrived in Ghana (in 1838) as a missionary of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. Freeman's long and distinguished career as a pioneer missionary has earned him historical recognition as the "father of Ghanaian Methodism".³⁰⁴

Like their African American counterparts, West Indian Christians brought with them strong race consciousness and a propensity for political

³⁰² For a detailed treatment, see J.J. HANCILES, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial context* (Connecticut, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002).

³⁰³ For more on this see J.F.A. AJAYI, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969); A.F. WALLS, "The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther", in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1992), 15-21, 19; J.J. HANCILES, "Bishop and Archdeacon Crowther: Inter-Generational Challenge and Opportunity in the Building of an African Church", in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 28, 2 (December 2002), 170-196.

³⁰⁴ Cf. HASTINGS, *The Church in Africa*, p. 179.

activism. It is noteworthy that Freeman had a brief stint in government service on the Gold Coast. In Sierra Leone, West Indian agitation and outspokenness on white dominance contributed to an incipient nationalism that drew much inspiration from Venn's experiment in ecclesiastical self-government to stimulate the emergence of movements like "Ethiopianism" that extolled African instincts and initiatives.

Over the next three-quarters of a century, Sierra Leone would play a pivotal role in the expansion of Christianity in the region. Between 1840 and 1900, it provided over 60% of Anglican "native clergy" in West Africa. By mid nineteenth century, Sierra Leone Christians already formed the vanguard of a huge missionary movement, carrying back the message of the Gospel and the attendant benefits of education to the various lands throughout West Africa (and beyond) from which they or their ancestors had been uprooted as slaves.³⁰⁵

Clearly then, the African (or black) element played a central role in the establishment of Christianity in Africa in the modern period. But transatlantic connections are critical to the story; and for that an assessment of the American dimension is necessary.

IV. THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The first batch of African slaves arrived in the North American colonies in 1619. By the time of the Great Awakenings (in the 1730s), the system of slavery was solidly entrenched in American society, and the church was an active agent in enforcing it. Protest against the institution came only from a small band of Quakers and German Mennonites. The American Revolution of the 1770s heightened hopes for freedom; hopes which for many thousands of blacks were linked to British victory. For these the outcome was not as expected, but the "fever of liberty" was abroad.³⁰⁶

Rev. Dr. Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), one of Jonathan Edwards' closest friends and most influential disciples, led calls for the abolition of

³⁰⁵ For a treatment, see J.H. KOPYTOFF, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The Sierra Leoneans in the Yoruba, 1830-1890* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965). The Freetown contribution was not confined to missionary activity either: for most of the nineteenth century, from the 1840s, it "provided most of the African clerks, teachers..., merchants, and professional men in Western Africa from the Senegal to the Congo". Cf. HAIR, "Africanism", p. 531.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Gayraud WILMORE, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998 [1973]), 104.

slavery and propagated a scheme whereby Christian blacks could be repatriated to Africa to build new lives and lead in the evangelization of the continent. Little came of this idea at the time, but it would be revived by blacks themselves several decades later. In 1775, the Quakers—the most prominent and persistent antislavery group—organized the first abolition society in Philadelphia. Two years later slavery was abolished in Vermont (albeit a state with a negligible slave population). From a variety of motives other states, north and south, enacted legislation which curtailed the trade or fostered emancipation.³⁰⁷ But the antislavery movement fell far short of its ideals; by 1790, more than nine-tenths of the black population remained in bondage.

Meanwhile, the Great Awakenings provided the first systematic attempts at evangelizing blacks³⁰⁸—though it is noteworthy that Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and George Whitfield (1714-1770), the revivals' towering figures, kept slaves. The system was so well established, in fact, that the widespread conversion of slaves and their incorporation into the church left the system itself intact—though new voices would be raised condemning it.³⁰⁹ But with some 700,000 slaves and 59,000 free blacks (by 1790), America had one of the largest communities of Africans anywhere in the world outside Africa. Christianization of such a large group was bound to have enduring consequences.

In the New World, the emergent black Christianity was limited to four main forms:³¹⁰ segregated worship within white churches, separate worship supervised by a white pastor, secret meetings, and, much later, independent churches. By most accounts, blacks understood the evangelical message very differently from whites.³¹¹ Conditioned by the experience of slavery and oppression, their response to the gospel message fused religion and

³⁰⁷ Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, pp. 31-41.

³⁰⁸ Cf. THORNTON, *Africa and Africans*, ch. 9. The fact that many African slaves had some knowledge of Christianity before embarkation, “as a result of missionary endeavours and the proselytization of Christian merchants and other settlers”, arguably augmented this process—cf. THORNTON, *Africa and Africans*, 254. See also, WILMORE, *Black Religion*, ch. 2.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Mark NOLL, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 109.

³¹⁰ See Emmanuel L. MCCALL, “Black Christianity in America”, in R. Pierce BEAVER (ed.), *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977), 249-274; also, WILMORE, *Black Religion*, ch. 2.

³¹¹ Cf. Milton SERNETT, “Black Religion and the Question of Evangelical Identity”, in D.W. DAYTON & R.K. JOHNSTON (eds), *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 135-147, 139.

freedom in a manner that was patently subversive.³¹² Gayraud Wilmore argues that they “used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them by racist white churches, but ... to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare.”³¹³ In the final analysis, black Christianity served African ends while satisfying European requirements. Noll describes it as “a singular blend of African, European, and American elements, which made for both continuity and discontinuity with the white churches.”³¹⁴ What mattered was that the emergent faith was shaped by African concerns and spirituality.

For blacks, neither conversion to Christianity nor emancipation from slavery (in 1865) delivered legal equality, economic progress, or educational opportunity. Systemic oppression and the indignity of segregation remained corollaries of blackness. Still, the admixture of biblical faith and black religiosity fostered a new identity consciousness and stimulated religious protest that triggered the emergence of independent African denominations in the north. Perhaps the most significant of these was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), established in 1814 under the leadership of Richard Allen (1760-1831), its first bishop.³¹⁵ From origins in Philadelphia the independent black church movement gathered pace in what Wilmore terms “a widening circle of rebelliousness”.³¹⁶ Numerous black congregations of Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians emerged and merged to form denominations or associations. By 1890, over thirty percent of blacks was enrolled in one or the other of the three largest African denominations—the National Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion.³¹⁷

Among black Christians, the struggle for freedom and the longing for racial dignity drew on a deep-seated African spirituality as well as the new biblical faith. In particular, Psalm 68:31—which declares, “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopian [symbolic of Africa] shall stretch forth her hands unto God”—exerted a profound influence on the black Christian

³¹² Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, pp. 59-63.

³¹³ WILMORE, *Black Religion*, p. 25. For a similar evaluation, see SERNETT, “Black Religion”.

³¹⁴ NOLL, *A History of Christianity*, p. 199.

³¹⁵ For details of this story, see WILMORE, *Black Religion*, pp. 103-117; also, J. Mutero CHIRENJE, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa, 1883-1916* (London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 3.

³¹⁶ WILMORE, *Black Religion*, p. 108.

³¹⁷ WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, p. 32.

consciousness. Widely interpreted throughout the nineteenth century as epitomizing the divine will for black redemption and elevation, this verse became the focus of the deepest spiritual aspirations and self-understanding of black Christians. Most important, it spawned “Ethiopianism”,³¹⁸ an ideology (and movement) which denoted strong affirmation of the African heritage (cultural, spiritual, and historical—including a glorification of the ancient African churches), a rejection of white domination, and a conviction that Africans must take the lead in the Christianization of the African continent. Put another way, Ethiopianism embodied race consciousness, religious protest, and a redemptive vision.³¹⁹ In America as well as Africa it came to signify “black nationalism”.

The conviction that black Christians (the descendants of ex-African slaves) were God’s chosen instruments for the redemption of Africans generated a new missionary impulse. Black Christians were inspired “to win Africa not only for Africans, but for Christ, by mass emigrations from the West and by forging bonds of friendship and collaboration between Africans and African-Americans”.³²⁰ Missionary emigration was greatly bolstered, in the short term, by the establishment of a Christian settlement in Sierra Leone using ex-African slaves. Further impetus was provided by the publicity surrounding on-going explorations of the African interior and the fever of interest in the evangelization of Africa among white missionary societies. Incidentally, the latter also spotlighted the promise of Psalm 68:31 as part of their mobilization campaign.

Thus, “back to Africa” movements emerged in Britain and America, independent of each other but with common stimuli and objectives. Both blended colonization, abolition and commercial opportunism with the central aim of Christianization. As in Britain, white support for black emigration was motivated by tacit rejection of racial equality and forebodings about the emergence of a “mongrel” nation.³²¹ The steady

³¹⁸ The term “Ethiopianism” signified black Africa (or Africa south of Egypt, the sense in which it was first used by the Greeks).

³¹⁹ For more on “Ethiopianism”, see G. SHEPPERSON, “Ethiopianism: Past and Present”, in C.G. BAËTA (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 249-264; Albert J. RABOTEAU, “‘Ethiopian shall soon Stretch out her Hands’: Black Destiny in Nineteenth Century America”, lecture at Arizona State University (January 27, 1983); WILMORE, *Black Religion*, chs 5 & 6; HANCILES, *Euthanasia of a Mission*, ch. 8; Ogbu KALU, “Ethiopianism and the Roots of Modern African Christianity”, in Brian STANLEY, *et. al.* (eds), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 8 (London: Cambridge University Press), forthcoming.

³²⁰ WILMORE, *Black Religion*, p. 126.

³²¹ Cf. CAMPBELL, *Back to Africa*.

escalation in the numbers of free blacks also triggered fears, accentuated by various “uprisings”, about the safety of their former oppressors. Here, even more than in Britain, freed African slaves were considered an acute social problem solvable by repatriation to Africa. The American colonization movement was the fruit of such sentiments. For its proponents, the mass repatriation of blacks to Africa must accompany emancipation as a necessary safety-valve. Furthermore, it was in Africa’s best interest. Thus, their widely propagated colonization scheme called for the “civilizing and Christianizing Africa through the instrumentality of emigrants from the United States.”³²² This movement culminated in the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816 and the founding of Liberia (in 1821) as a home for free blacks.

The colonization scheme was strongly condemned by abolitionists (in America and Britain) who feared that it detracted from both the antislavery struggle and the reform of American society.³²³ Noting the enthusiastic support which southern slaveholders gave to the movement, most black leaders publicly opposed emigration, even when it was linked to missionary enterprise. They pointed to the contributions that blacks had made to American prosperity and insisted that blacks had every right to stay and work for a better future. Others ventured that evangelizing blacks, even whites, in America was a priority and even more pressing task for black churches.³²⁴ Not until the late 1870s, when disillusionment about the creation of a racially equal society had set in, did black emigration grow substantially.³²⁵ Even then, many who had motivation did not have the means.

V. BACK TO AFRICA:

AMERICAN IDEALS

The ideal of missionary emigration never lived up to even modest expectations. But in the long run a vital avenue of interaction was opened between American blacks and African Christians that would have important consequences for the development of Christianity on the

³²² Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, pp. 192-203; also Joseph R. COAN, “Redemption of Africa: The Vital Impulse of Black American Overseas Missionaries”, in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 1, 2 (Spring, 1974), 27-37, 28.

³²³ Cf. SANNEH, *Abolitionists*, pp. 194, 219f.

³²⁴ Cf. David KILLINGRAY, “The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement and Africa, 1780s-1920s”, in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33, 1 (February 2003), 3-31, 8.

³²⁵ Cf. WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, pp. 126f.

continent. Among the first to act on this new missionary impulse was Paul Cuffee, an ex-slave, Quaker, and wealthy ship-owner. In 1815, Cuffee financed the emigration of nine families and thirty-eight other persons whom he brought over on one of his ships to Sierra Leone. Cuffee's example was conspicuous in its singularity. Blacks of independent means with genuine interest in missions were thin on the ground. Ultimately, the black missionary movement was severely curtailed in the first half of the nineteenth century by a number of factors: among these were opposition from blacks critical of emigration, a preoccupation among newly formed black churches with expansion into the South (or home missions), and lack of financial resources.³²⁶

Blacks with a strong sense of missionary calling had perforce to work through white institutions, which by happy coincidence were strongly predisposed to sending black missionaries. Reasons for this included the high mortality among white missionaries in tropical Africa, the paucity of white volunteers, and the relatively lower costs of supporting blacks.³²⁷ Walter Williams reports that "before 1880 almost all black evangelists working among indigenous Africans were supported by white churches."³²⁸ The majority labored in either Sierra Leone or Liberia. Among the most successful were Joseph and Mary Gomer, who, under the auspices of the United Brethren, served among the Mende people on the Island of Sherbro (south of the Sierra Leone peninsular) from 1871 to 1892.³²⁹ Both Alexander Crummell and Edward W. Blyden, two of the most influential black leaders of the period, were also sponsored by white denominations. Outside West Africa, the name of William Sheppard stands out. Sheppard labored in the Congo among the Kuba people as a missionary of the Southern Presbyterian Society for two decades. His pioneering spirit, evangelistic efforts, campaign on behalf of the Africans against colonial atrocities, and somewhat colorful life has prompted fascinating

³²⁶ Cf. WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, pp. 35-40; also, RABOTEAU "Ethiopian shall soon Stretch out her Hands", p. 10.

³²⁷ WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, ch. 1.

³²⁸ WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, p. 9.

³²⁹ On the success and significance of the Gomers' missionary endeavors, see WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, p. 16; also Ogbu KALU, "Black Missionaries and White Abolitionists: The Careers of Joseph and Mary Gomer in the Good Hope Mission, Sherbro, Sierra Leone, 1871-1894", in *Neue Zeitschrift Für Missionwissenschaft* (June, 2003), 161-174.

comparisons with the famed Scottish missionary-explorer, David Livingstone.³³⁰

Amidst strong criticisms of the colonization movement, notwithstanding, a few notable blacks also availed themselves of the resources of the ACS to finance individual missionary efforts. Included among these were Lott Cary, a black Baptist minister, who inspired a strong missionary interest among Baptists and briefly became acting governor of the Liberia colony (1828), and Daniel Coker, a founding member of the AME Church, who emigrated to Liberia (1820) and extended his ministry to Sierra Leone.

By the 1880s, however, the number of black missionaries sent by white denominations or mission boards had begun to decline sharply. Medical advances enabling whites to survive in a tropical climate, increasing racial conflicts between blacks and white missionaries or colonialists, and the presence of a large pool of trained African converts were among the factors which contributed to this development. As it happened, the final decades of the nineteenth century also witnessed heightened missionary interest among black churches, which by now had a huge membership base to draw on. Moreover, emancipation in the wake of the Civil War ended slavery for thousands of blacks and revived the emigration movement. By the end of the century the three largest black denominations had overtaken white institutions in their support of missionary work in Africa.³³¹

But blacks who went out as “missionaries” from black denominations were heavily concentrated in the “Europeanized areas of the continent”: primarily Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa.³³² In Liberia, where well over half were located, these “missionaries” (with few exceptions like John Seys)³³³ labored mainly among other black American settlers and made little effort to convert the surrounding indigenous tribes. Mission by migration (or long term settlement) no doubt engendered complacency.

³³⁰ See William E. PHIPPS, *William Sheppard: Congo's African American Livingstone* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing, 2002).

³³¹ WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, 44. Between 1880 and 1900 the A.M.E. alone had at least sixty missionaries in Africa—WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, 58.

³³² WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, p. 89.

³³³ John Seys, a clergyman of West Indian origin, took over the AME mission in 1834 and promoted evangelization of the indigenous peoples. By his enforced return to American in 1841, he and his fellow workers succeeded in converting several chiefs and church membership had increased to an estimated 1,000 members (from 204 when he arrived)—cf. Peter B. CLARKE, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 39.

Williams also suggests that for black churches an African mission “replicated their expansion into the American south”—an effort aimed at “attracting previously converted blacks who were dissatisfied with racism in white churches.”³³⁴ But the fact remains that, with few exceptions like William Sheppard, black emigrants and missionaries invariably saw themselves as representatives of Western civilization and shared the extremely negative views of African cultures prevalent among their white counterparts. In their thinking, Africans needed to be rescued from the deep darkness of heathenism by the imposition of Western civilization as much as their souls needed to be redeemed by conversion to Christianity. Racial identification did not translate into cultural affinity or produce an alternate missionary vision.³³⁵

Everywhere on the continent, such attitudes of condescension and disparagement weakened the desire for sustained interaction with indigenous Africans and undermined effective evangelistic efforts. In the case of Liberia, the myriad internal problems besetting the colony, not to mention the hostility of the indigenes who felt cheated of their land, further reduced the possibility of effective mission. And, unlike Sierra Leone where the black settlers were quickly outnumbered by African recaptives, the Liberian settler community outnumbered recaptives and were able to perpetuate a separate society modeled on American ideals. In time, however, strong voices were raised in defense of indigenous Africans and African culture; none stronger than that of Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912), the most accomplished African nationalist of his day and a masterful advocate of Ethiopianism.³³⁶

Wilmore argues, not unreasonably, that unqualified comparisons between black and white missionary attitudes can produce distorted conclusions.³³⁷ Black Christians, he insists, tried, with meager resources and inadequate training, to accomplish abroad “what they could scarcely do for themselves at home.” Moreover, motivated by racial pride and respect,

³³⁴ WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, pp. 63, 175.

³³⁵ CLARKE, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 40, suggests, in fact, that viewing Christianity as a badge of their higher status, many settlers were opposed to the idea of incorporating the indigenous population into their communities.

³³⁶ On Blyden see, among others, H.R. LYNCH, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); M.Y. FRENKEL, *Edward Blyden and African Nationalism* (Moscow: Institute of Academy and Science, 1978); E. HOLDEN, *Blyden of Liberia* (New York: Vantage Press, 1966). On Blyden’s influence on Americo-Liberian attitudes, see WILLIAMS, *Black Americans*, pp. 167-169.

³³⁷ Gayraud WILMORE, “Black Americans in Mission: Setting the Record Straight”, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, (July 1986), 98-102.

they were committed to the advancement of Africans in a way unmatched by their white counterparts for whom Africa was one field among many and often not a primary focus. This argument points to a significant paradox at the heart of the black missionary movement: namely that while it did exhibit the negative attitudes and ethnocentrism typically associated with white missionary enterprise, it also presented African Christians in the colonial context with a potent ideological framework for religious protest and resistance to white domination, notably with the spread of Ethiopianism from the New World to Africa.

Ethiopianism is covered in greater detail in the next chapters; so only the briefest comment is necessary here. With the earliest manifestation occurring in the Sierra Leone colony (by the 1860s),³³⁸ Ethiopian movements emerged in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the late nineteenth century, invariably deriving impetus from, and taking the form of rebellion against white missionary control. As a movement of protest, Ethiopianism evoked responses that ranged from the quiescent to the radical; and it did not always translate into ecclesiastical independency, at least in so far as some of its most articulate proponents remained within the mission established denominations. Ultimately, the varieties of Ethiopianism mediated a focus on racial equality, cultural identity and religious independence, and provided an outlet for the frustrated aspirations of African Christians in a colonial context.

The fact remains that, in so far as abolitionism paved the way for colonialism, Africans were freed from one form of slavery, only to be shackled by another more subtle and enduring form in which the structures of dominance were equally reinforced by racial and cultural ideologies. Western missionaries, to a large extent, were conscious or unconscious agents of this latter process. But the variety of responses subordinated under Ethiopianism surely exposes any attempt to depict the black element as a useful but ultimately expendable element in the solvency of Western imperial domination. As the most potent African Christian reaction, Ethiopianism epitomized anti-slavery, sowed the seeds of African nationalism, and enshrined alternative visions of African Christianity that found full expression in African independent church movements.

In the divine providence the abolition movement stimulated one of the most compelling missionary movements in history. Critical to that story is the black element, so much overlooked or marginalized in popular accounts. The European dimension was hugely significant, but black

³³⁸ Cf. Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission*, pp.147-195.

missionaries, predominantly ex-African slaves, were key agents in the establishment and spread of Christianity in the African context. In truth, the “back to Africa” movements rested in mixed motives and never quite fulfilled expectations—the number of African Americans who went to Africa as missionaries, estimated at just over 115 in 1900, was exceedingly small.³³⁹ But numerical evaluation is an inadequate tool for measuring intangibles like ideological influence and transfer of consciousness. Due in no small measure to the transatlantic connection and interlocking histories forged in the African slave trade, the emergent African Christianity incorporated elements of religious protest which subverted European missionary control mechanisms and allowed distinctive expressions of the faith to flourish in time. Crucially, white abolitionists were among the first to recognize that African initiatives and African empowerment were indispensable for the fulfillment of the Scriptural promise that “Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God.”

³³⁹ Cf. Killingray, “The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement”, p. 22.

6. The gospel into the Heart of Africa (1790-1890)

