

Faces of Unbelief in Africa

There are many reasons why people on the African continent have resisted the Gospel. Whilst many have appreciated the idea of needing salvation, they have found it difficult to break away from their traditional African worldview which values the role of intermediaries between God and man. This has resulted in syncretism where many have happily mixed Christianity with traditional African religion and ancestral worship. Others have resisted the Gospel because they perceive it to be from the West. They see Christianity as the religion of the colonialists and essentially the White man's religion. **The truth is that all men everywhere need a saviour because all men everywhere have sinned. The Gospel is not just for the West because the depravity of man cannot be compartmentalised into certain regions of the world.** Sin is a human problem. In this message I would like to answer the question; **Is Christianity the White Man's Religion?**

I will build a strong case to demonstrate how Christianity is very relevant for Africa and is not the so-called White man's religion that many claim it is. I believe this is one of the reasons many have embraced Islam, seeing it as more African than Christianity. This is an important topic to discuss because we need to make apologetics relevant for the African continent. The reality is that Africa has a history of slavery, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation that have deeply scarred many communities. Some Africans may resist the Gospel because they perceive it to be an extension of the historical injustices perpetrated against their ancestors by Western powers. Is this a valid reason for resisting the Gospel? I will start by showing you what's happening in non-West countries today, then I will illustrate how Africa shows up in significant parts of scripture. From there I will outline elements of the history of the Church in Africa. From there I will also demonstrate how not all people from the West came as Colonialists.

The horse has bolted: Christianity in Africa and non-West countries today

In 1910 about 1.8% of Christians were from the African continent. Today it is about 25%. There are 2.4 billion Christians around the world, 718 million Christians are on this continent. This is more than South America where there are 422 million according to a 2018 study.

When you talk about being born again, 34% of Kenyans say they are born again. The East African revival has been going on since the 1930s. Central African Republic is 25% Evangelical Christians whilst DR Congo is on 22%.

In 1990 at his inauguration, President Chiluba declared Zambia to be a Christian nation. According to their 1996 constitution it is.

South Korea sent out 27 436 missionaries in 2017, second only to USA. These missionaries are in 170 countries all over the world. They have 30 000 commissioned missionaries.

Today there are about 35 million people in India who are Christian. Although this is just 2.5% of their population it is a potent force for the Kingdom. There are 44 million Christians in registered organisations in China. Sadly, only about 2.8% of Europe claims to be born again, although we still see Christianity as a religion of the West. According to Gallup, 63% of Black Americans claim to be born again compared to 39% of Whites in America, yet we still see it as the religion of White folk.

A. Africa in the Bible

1. **Genesis 12:10** - *"Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe."*
 - This verse marks the first mention of Egypt, an African country, in the context of the Biblical narrative.
2. **Genesis 41:41-43** - *"So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, 'Make way!' Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt."*
 - This passage highlights Joseph's rise to power in Egypt and his influence in an African context.
3. **Exodus 12:40-41** - *"Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt."*
 - The Israelites' long stay in Egypt and their subsequent exodus mark significant interactions between the Hebrews and Africa.
4. **1 Kings 10:1-2** - *"When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind."*
 - The visit of the Queen of Sheba, often associated with the region of modern-day Ethiopia/Yemen, demonstrates early connections between Africa and the Israelite kingdom.
5. **Isaiah 19:19-21** - *"In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a saviour and defender, and he will rescue them. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them."*
 - This prophecy speaks of the future recognition and worship of YHWH in Egypt.
6. **Matthew 2:13-15** - *"When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"*
 - The flight of Jesus' family to Egypt shows that even our Lord Jesus spent time in Africa.
7. **Acts 8:26-27** - *"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship."*

- This passage tells the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, one of the earliest recorded conversions to Christianity in Africa. Many believe that this Ethiopian high official was the first missionary to Ethiopia.

B. Early Church Fathers from Africa

I was inspired by an article I read by Andrew Butterworth who leads the eldership team of [Godfirst Church East Rand](#), in Johannesburg. This inspired me to delve deeper into this concept as I believe it will help us to be effective in apologetics on this continent. I will summarize some of my findings in order to give some background and context.

Christianity is not the so-called white man's religion. 685 million people on the African continent are associated with Christianity. The challenge has been that many people in Africa have been trying to form an identity outside of their colonial past. It's important to note that Christianity was present in Africa 1000 years before the first European colonialists. It's important to also note that the Gospel was preached on the African continent by African heralds before the colonialists came. There was a strong base for Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1st Century. Eusebius wrote of Mark the Gospel writer coming to Alexandria as early as 43AD. As early as 330AD, King Ezana of Ethiopia declared Christianity its national religion. A large portion of Europe was not aware of the influence and heritage of Christianity in Africa. When the Portuguese landed in Ethiopia in 1493 they were shocked to find it full of churches. A significant number of church fathers were from Africa. Tertullian and Cyprian wrote from Carthage which is modern day Tunisia. Origen was from Alexandria, Egypt. Augustine was from Hippo Regis, which is now Annaba in Algeria. These men fought off heresies such as Gnosticism, Arianism, Marcionism, Pelagianism etc. Theologians like Athanasius, Clement, Ambrose, Pachomius were all African based. These individuals shaped the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. Augustine was a Berber, indigenous people of North Africa. He wrote 113 books, over 500 sermons, 218 letters. Two of his books, Confessions and City of God are classics which shaped theology for centuries. It's therefore inaccurate to call Christianity the white man's religion since it's been active on the African continent since the 1st Century. The Gospel spread to Africa and Europe at the same time from the Near East. With the coming of colonialism, it spread deeper into Africa and unfortunately came with some baggage. For example, Western art was very misleading. Jesus was often portrayed with blue eyes and pale skin. Christianity is a religion of the world and Africans were actually some of its first worshippers and theologians. I would also like to note that not all missionaries were colonialists despite coming from the same country.

C. The History of the Church in Pre-colonial Africa

Christianity's spread in West Africa before colonialism was limited geographically and demographically. It was often confined to coastal areas and influenced by trade relationships with European powers. There was also syncretism and resistance. Where Christianity did take root, it often blended with local beliefs and practices, leading to unique syncretic forms of Christianity. There was also resistance to conversion, particularly inland where traditional religions remained dominant.

1. **Introduction through Nubia and Ethiopia (4th-6th centuries):** Christianity reached Nubia and Ethiopia in the early centuries of the Common Era. The Kingdom of Aksum (modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea) adopted Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century under King Ezana, influenced by missionaries like Frumentius. Ethiopia's unique Christian tradition evolved, creating a distinct Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

2. **Nubian Christian Kingdoms:** By the 6th century, Christianity had spread to the Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alodia (in modern-day Sudan). These kingdoms maintained a Christian identity for several centuries, with Makuria resisting Islamic expansion until the 14th century.
3. **Spread to the East African Coast:** Christian influences reached parts of the Swahili Coast, facilitated by traders and travellers. However, Islam became more dominant in these areas over time.
4. **Kongo Kingdom (15th century):** In the late 15th century, Portuguese explorers introduced Christianity to the Kingdom of Kongo (in present-day Angola and Congo). King Nzinga a Nkuwu converted to Christianity in 1491, taking the name João I. His successor, Afonso I, was a devout Christian who fostered strong ties with Portugal and encouraged the spread of Christianity. **This was all before colonialism.** The DRC was colonised much later in two phases: by King Leopold II from 1885 to 1908 and by the Belgium state from 1908 to 30 June 1960. The reign of Leopold II and the reign of the Belgian colonial administration were characterised by the looting of precious resources and human rights abuses.
5. **Senegal and Gambia:** In the 15th and 16th centuries, Portuguese explorers and traders introduced Christianity to the coastal areas of Senegal and Gambia. Early Christian communities were established, primarily among the coastal populations and facilitated by the presence of Portuguese trading posts.
6. **Sierra Leone:** In the late 15th century, Portuguese navigators also brought Christianity to Sierra Leone. However, sustained Christian communities did not develop significantly until later periods.

D. The Good that Missionaries from Europe did for Africa

Just because someone comes from the same country as someone else who oppresses, does not make them a racist oppressor. Just because I come from Zimbabwe, a land that has been riddled with dictatorship, genocides etc, does not make me one too.

David Livingstone (1813-1873) was Scottish missionary and explorer. He advocated against the slave trade and sought to promote legitimate commerce and Christianity as means of improving African societies. His exploration of Africa brought attention to the continent's resources and the injustices of the slave trade. His legacy includes influencing future missionaries and colonial policies towards more humane treatment of Africans. **Mary Slessor (1848-1915)** was a Scottish missionary in Nigeria. She advocated against the killing of twins, a common practice in some Nigerian cultures due to superstitious beliefs. Slessor's efforts led to significant social change, saving countless lives and contributing to the eventual outlawing of the practice. She is also remembered for her work in promoting education and women's rights. Although most of her work was in Nigeria, she influenced how missionaries operated in South Africa, particularly to do with her approach to cultural sensitivities. **Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)** was a German-French theologian, organist, writer, and missionary doctor. He established a hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon, where he provided medical care and promoted the dignity of African peoples. Schweitzer's philosophy of "Reverence for Life" and his humanitarian work won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. He challenged colonial attitudes by emphasizing the intrinsic worth of African lives. **Trevor Huddleston (1913-1998)** was British Anglican bishop and anti-apartheid activist. He opposed apartheid in South Africa and worked to improve the lives of black South Africans through education and advocacy. Huddleston's efforts were instrumental in the global movement against apartheid. He was a mentor to prominent leaders such as Desmond Tutu and influenced many to fight for racial justice. **Alexander Mackay (1849-1890)** was a Scottish missionary and engineer who

worked in Uganda, promoting Christianity, education, and technical skills. Mackay's holistic approach to mission work, which included technical education and infrastructure development, contributed to the modernization and self-reliance of Ugandan communities.

There are many more we can discuss who had a direct impact on South Africa. For example, **John Philip**, a Scottish missionary who advocated for the rights of indigenous people and criticized the colonial government for its treatment of local populations. Another well-known Scottish missionary was **Robert Moffat**, who worked extensively among the Tswana people, translating the Bible into Setswana and establishing mission stations. It's important to note that some of the significant missionaries to Africa have been African Americans. There were people like **Alexander Crummell (1819-1898)**, an Episcopal priest and missionary in Liberia. He founded schools, promoted education, and worked to build a strong Episcopal Church presence in Liberia. He also advocated for the intellectual and cultural development of African Americans and Africans. **Daniel Coker (1780-1846)** was a Methodist missionary to Sierra Leone. He was one of the first African American missionaries to Africa. Coker helped establish the AME Church in Sierra Leone and supported education and religious instruction among the newly freed African American settlers and local Africans. **Lott Cary (1780-1828)** was a Baptist minister and missionary in Liberia. He established schools and churches in Liberia and worked to promote agriculture and self-sufficiency among the settlers. Cary also played a key role in the early governance of the Liberian colony. **Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915)** was Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and missionary in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He advocated for the emigration of African Americans to Africa and strengthened the AME Church's missions, promoting education and spiritual growth. **William Sheppard (1865-1927)** Presbyterian missionary to the Congo Free State. He exposed atrocities committed by King Leopold II's regime, documented local cultures, and established churches and schools. Sheppard's work brought international attention to the plight of the Congolese people. **Amanda Berry Smith (1837-1915)** was a Holiness evangelist and missionary in Liberia and Sierra Leone. She worked with orphans, established schools, and spread the Holiness movement in West Africa. Smith was also known for her powerful preaching and advocacy for women's roles in the church. **James L. Amos (1869-1953)** was an AME Church missionary in South Africa. He worked to establish and strengthen AME congregations, promote education, and support social and economic development initiatives in South Africa. **Lucius Holsey (1842-1920)**. He was the Bishop of the Coloured Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church and missionary to Liberia. He promoted education and religious instruction, established schools and churches, and worked to support the development of Liberia. **Anna E. Hall (1859-1928)** was an AME Church missionary in Liberia. She focused on education and healthcare, established schools, and worked to improve the living conditions of the Liberian people. **Alonzo H. P. Jones (1849-1914)** was a Baptist missionary in South Africa. He played a significant role in establishing Baptist churches and promoting education and social upliftment among the African communities in South Africa.

E. The Good that Missionaries from the East did for Africa.

Christianity reached India centuries before Europe. The Apostle Thomas even converted one of the Kings Gundaphoras. Indian Christians long to see the rest of their country following Jesus. **Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)** was an Indian Christian mystic and evangelist. Though primarily known for his work in India and Tibet, Singh travelled extensively, including to East Africa, where he shared his Christian faith and mystical experiences. Bridging Gaps: His approach helped to bridge cultural and religious gaps, making Christianity more approachable for many who might have otherwise dismissed it as a foreign religion. Singh embraced his Indian cultural heritage, wearing traditional saffron robes and adopting the lifestyle of a

sadhu (Hindu holy man), which made his message more accessible to Indians. He inspired many with his life of devotion and his unique approach to evangelism, blending Eastern and Western Christian traditions. **V.S. Azariah (1874-1945)** was the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Church in India. Azariah was instrumental in promoting indigenous leadership in the church and encouraging missions, including supporting Indian missionaries to Africa. His efforts led to the growth of Indian-led missionary movements, some of which extended their work to Africa. **Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922)** was an Indian social reformer, educator, and Christian missionary. Although primarily active in India, her influence extended globally through her writings and advocacy for women's education and rights, inspiring missionary work, including efforts in Africa. Her work laid the groundwork for later Indian missionaries who were inspired by her example of combining social reform with evangelism. **Brother Bakht Singh (1903-2000)** was an Indian Christian evangelist and church planter. He founded indigenous churches in India that later supported missions to Africa, including sending missionaries and providing resources for church planting and evangelism. His model of self-sustaining indigenous churches influenced African Christian communities to adopt similar approaches to ministry and evangelism. **Narayan Waman Tilak (1861-1919)** was an Indian poet and Christian missionary. He converted to Christianity and used his literary talents to spread the Gospel, influencing Indian Christian missions that reached Africa. His work helped bridge cultural gaps and encouraged Indian Christians to participate in global missions, including Africa. **Bishop Azariah Sivalingam (1944-)** is an Indian bishop and missionary. He served as a missionary in East Africa, focusing on evangelism, church planting, and community development. He strengthened the local church and contributed to social and educational initiatives in African communities. **D. T. Niles (1908-1970)** was a Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) Methodist minister and missionary. He Engaged in ecumenical work and missions, including efforts in Africa to promote Christian unity and social justice. He Influenced ecumenical movements and supported African churches in their mission and development work. **Chacko Chacko (1940-)** is an Indian missionary and educator. He has worked extensively in Africa, focusing on education, healthcare, and church development. He has established schools and healthcare facilities, significantly improving the quality of life in the communities he served and strengthening the local church.

Assignments

Assignment 1: Research Paper on Early African Christianity

Write a 5-7 page research paper on the history of Christianity in Africa before European colonialism. Your paper should cover:

- The introduction of Christianity to Nubia and Ethiopia in the early centuries.
- The role of early African Christian kingdoms, such as the Kingdom of Aksum and the Nubian kingdoms.
- Key African church fathers and their contributions to Christian theology and the resistance of heresies.
- The impact of Christianity on African societies before the arrival of European colonialists.

Assignment 2: Comparative Analysis of Religious Syncretism

Prepare a 4-6 page comparative analysis of religious syncretism in Africa. Your analysis should include:

- Definitions and examples of syncretism in African religious practices.

- The blending of traditional African religions with Christianity and ancestral worship.
- A comparison with other regions where Christianity has mixed with local religions.
- An examination of the impact of syncretism on the perception of Christianity in Africa.

Assignment 3: Presentation on the Contributions of Missionaries

Create a 15-minute presentation on the contributions of missionaries from both the West and the East to African Christianity. Your presentation should highlight:

- Notable Western missionaries like David Livingstone, Mary Slessor, and Trevor Huddleston, and their specific contributions.
- Contributions from Eastern missionaries such as Sadhu Sundar Singh and V.S. Azariah.
- The positive impacts these missionaries had on education, healthcare, and social reforms in Africa.
- The distinction between missionary work and colonialism, with examples of missionaries who opposed colonial practices.

Reflection Questions

1. How did the traditional African worldview influence the reception and adaptation of Christianity on the continent?
2. In what ways did early African Christian leaders contribute to the global Christian theological discourse?
3. How does the presence of Christianity in Africa long before European colonialism challenge the perception of Christianity as a "white man's religion"?
4. What role did African church fathers play in resisting early Christian heresies?
5. How does the history of Christianity in Africa demonstrate the universality of the Gospel message?
6. What are some examples of syncretism in African religious practices, and how have they affected the practice of Christianity?
7. How did early interactions between African and European Christians shape the development of the church in Africa?
8. What impact did missionaries like David Livingstone and Mary Slessor have on African societies, and how did they approach the issues of their time?
9. How have modern African theologians and scholars contributed to the understanding of Christianity's relevance in Africa?
10. What lessons can contemporary African churches learn from the historical experiences of early African Christians and missionaries?