Africa: A Troubled Continent (3)

The Rise of Nationalism in Africa

"The Hopeless Continent" screamed the cover story of *The Economist*. An armed guerrilla leered menacingly from an outline of Africa. Few places on earth have spawned so many powerful and contradictory images as Africa, whether one is thinking politically, economically, socially, or spiritually. Its history is characterized by conflicts, which were almost always wholly or partially caused by aspiration of colonial powers, slave-traders, tribal chiefs, and nationalism.

THE ROOTS OF NATIONALISM

What is nationalism? Hans Kohn defines it as " a state of mind, in which supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state." Where did it originate? It has often been said that nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. It was then that nationalism became a generally recognized sentiment leading to the development of the nation-state. Its spiritual roots can be traced to one of Europe's last great heresies, the belief of 18th century French philosophers in man's ability to achieve an ideal society. In 1789, the dawn of the French Revolution was the turning point in modern history. It was the first manifestation of nationalism in the Western world, giving birth to the French nation in a sudden burst of enthusiasm. In 1790 all the communities of France erected an altar to the fatherland with the inscription: "The citizen is born, lives and dies for the fatherland." Nationalism was characterized by an ambition to expand, either at the expense of neighbors or in the building of a colonial empire overseas, and to grow in wealth, material power and prestige. It gave rise to wars. To fight for the nation became a patriotic sacred duty. In the 19th century this spirit of nationalism took hold throughout Europe.

THE RISE OF AFRICAN NATIONALISM

The rise of African nationalism came partly in response to European imperialism. It was a drive toward political independence, economic viability, cultural emancipation, and the desire to establish personal and national dignity. The retreat of Western colonial powers began slowly in the 1920s and 1930s and accelerated dramatically in the aftermath of World War II. And with the process from decolonization to independence in full swing, Christianity in Africa faced an entirely new context. The road to independence was rocky. The policies of some colonial powers promoted orderly transition in some places, but open sores in others. In 1956 in Sudan, the British left the Islamic north to govern the traditionalist and Christian south. It was a foolish decision. It eventually resulted in a civil war which is still continuing today. In 1957 Britain granted independence to its colony, "the Gold Coast" (now Ghana). A few years later more than 20 former colonies achieved independence as nation-states. In 1961 Portugal refused to grant independence to Angola, leading to an armed struggle. And Angola was followed by Mozambique and Guinea (Bissau). A revolution in Portugal persuaded the Portugese to

free Angola and Mozambique in 1975, which, like many countries, erupted into civil war after the Europeans departed. The Belgians were so angry at losing the Congo that they literally tore the phones off the walls, leaving the colonial infrastructure in ruins. The abrupt departure of the Belgians left the Congo in political chaos. During the 1960s anarchy led to widespread violence against believers and clergy. In parts of Africa anti-colonialism was sometimes blatantly anti- Christian. For example, in Kenya nationalist leaders accused missionaries of telling Africans to pray and then stealing their land while their heads were bowed. Although Jomo Kenyatta, leader of the anti-Christian, pro-independence Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya during the 1950s, had been a resident mission school pupil in childhood, he accused missionaries of destroying African culture. Mau Mau rebels targeted the Anglican Church as an arm of the imperial regime. African traditional religion was mobilized against Christianity. The rebels killed African Christians who refused to drink the blood of goats and of other sacrifices of the pro-independence cult. But many first generation independent political leaders in Africa were Christian, commonly products of mission schools. Even though Christianity was a minority religion, its adherents played a much larger role than their numbers warranted. For example, Hasting Banda, first president of Malawi, received his early education in a mission school and attended college in the United States.

AFRICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Christian missionaries were not the only ones who went to Africa. During the post-colonial era the non-Christian world sent missionaries in the form of ideas - secularism, Marxism, traditional religions, and postmodernism. They are working hard to "re-evangelize" Africa through schools and governments. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on Marxism only. During the Cold War, Africa became a victim of the struggle for power between Western capitalism and Soviet Communism. Marxist ideology as well as funding from the Soviet Union and China began playing a role in African conflicts. Angola and Mozambique virtually became communist countries. Marxist-Leninists argued that the massive poverty of the Third World was rooted in politico-economic structures, jointly created and dominated by the metropolitan capitalist countries and their collaborators in the Third World. They convinced themselves that their ideology contributed more than anything else to the contemporary struggle for justice. Following the Cuban example, Communist-funded movements dismantled mission schools and attacked churches as supposed organs of capitalism and European religion. As in Cuba, these two countries experienced loss of liberty, and also a "liquidation" of large numbers of people. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, developed a peculiar African version of communism. He advocated revolution as the only way to bring about a better society. He considered capitalism contrary to the socialistic traditions of Africa, and wanted to create a socialist order. He was greatly influenced by Marxism. He believed that as long as Western companies still had influence in Africa his people would be exploited. He referred to this continued exploitation as neocolonialism and called it the last phase of capitalism. This idea of neocolonialism was taken over by many leaders of the Third World and also by Western philosophers. Nkrumah developed a messianic complex. He adopted the title "Osagyefor," meaning "savior" or "redeemer." He even approved of being accorded supernatural status. He urged his

followers: "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all other things will be added unto you." It was not always stated in the same words, but it became a widely shared sentiment in post-colonial Africa. Nkrumah's dictatorial and self- indulgent style of government led to his removal. In 1966, for instance, he expanded his personal guard into a regiment.

THE IDOLS OF POWER

When the colonies achieved their independence, the populations of the new nation-states bubbled over with enthusiasm and hope. But for many hope turned into despair. There was a deliberate move away from pluralism toward a single party state. By the early 1970s few countries retained multiparty systems of government. They argued that multiparty politics was a luxury which Africa could not afford. A large number of African countries experienced military coup d'etats, some of which have succeeded and others which have failed. By 1981 Ghana had experienced five military coups. Each time, the military told the population that they would bring improvement, democracy and stability to the nation. But once the military tasted power, the promises of quick return to the barracks were not followed. By 1988, 29 African nations were ruled by the military. The new rulers played the role of father to their people. They claimed that their dictatorial powers were not for personal gain. They declared that their people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. But the paternalism of a dictator is like a bad parent who wants his children to depend on him forever. Dictators used force, believing that misery and economic disorder can be overcome by compulsion. Most of them became a law unto themselves and brought misery by their decrees (Cf. Ps. 94:20). They used international aid to pay hefty salaries to their cronies, and for their privileged-lavish lifestyle. Virtually none had more than a passing concern for the poor in their own country. For example, the late President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, the ruler of a Kleptocratic regime, owned 51 Mercedes-Benz automobiles and 11 castles in Belgium and France. When the Berlin Wall came tumbling down in November 1989 and Russia abandoned Marxism-Leninism, the African countries which had adopted communism followed suit. In most African nations strong demands for democratic change were made by opposition groups. Kenya adopted multiparty democracy in 1991. In May 1991, Jerry Rawlings, the dictator of Ghana, announced his acceptance of a multiparty system. The various nationalist ideologies of the new African leaders were failures. They did not improve the fate of their people as was promised. On the whole, Africa is economically in a worse position than at the time of independence. Africa remains economically dependent on the West and lacks the capital, knowledge, and skill for economic development. And the tribal and regional differences have not disappeared. To date, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Uganda, and Rwanda have all become directly involved in the Congo (formerly Zaire) in what has been described as Africa's equivalent of World War.

THE CHURCH AND NATIONALISM

The roles of the mainline and evangelical churches in the post-colonial era are complex. The impressive numbers of Christians may cause researchers to overestimate the

strength of the Christian faith. But numbers are only a partial indication of the state of the Gospel in any situation and age. In Angola and Mozambique the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a privileged position. The local Catholic hierarchy closely identified the interests of the Church with those of the Portugese state, thereby sanctioning the colonial status quo. We see, therefore, that wherever a majority of the people remained socially, economically and politically underprivileged and the Church did not exercise its prophetic role, the communist doctrine of economic equality and state ownership of property appealed to the masses. If the Roman Catholic Church had been true to its calling during the colonials days, then the histories of Angola and Mozambique would have taken a different course. Since the 1960s the World Council of Churches (WCC) often supported radical and left-wing political causes. In the 1970s resentment toward it became highly public when its Special Fund regularly gave money to guerilla fighters opposing the White Rhodesian regime. For critics, this funding contradicted the mission of the Church. Instead of preaching the Gospel of Reconciliation, it actively promoted a liberation theology which had gone militaristic. Recently, evangelicals began to realize their lack of discipleship training. "I need to repent," a Christian patriarch from Tchad confessed, "because I've been evangelizing - but the Great Commission also says to make disciples." In these troubled times in Africa, the Church's most important task is not only "to rescue the perishing" but also to help Christians and the public in general to be aware of the meaning of citizenship. Furthermore Christian leaders have the responsibility to help develop strong and stable democratic nations. They should encourage people to form an intelligent Christian opinion on issues that may affect their daily lives. Christians have a double responsibility in terms of their calling in the world: as citizen, to be "the salt of the earth," and as witnesses, to be "the light of the world" (Matthew 5: 13-16).

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