

Christianity in the Philosophy of Edward Wilmot Blyden and J.E Casely Hayford

Ahmed Bouchemal* Dialogue of Religions and Civilizations in the Mediterranean Basin Laboratory,
Tlemcen University (Algeria), bochmal.ahmed@gmail.com,

Faiza Meberbeche Senouci Dialogue of Religions and Civilizations in the Mediterranean Basin
Laboratory, Tlemcen University (Algeria), senoucif@hotmail.fr

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Abstract:

The dichotomy between African indigenous religion and European Christianity introduced in early European contact with Africa generated profound responses on the part of Africans. For Africans, missionaries failed to relate Christianity to indigenous beliefs. The European missionary attempted to “Westernize” rather than “Africanize” religious beliefs and practices. The situation was one of chaos as the African did not understand nor accept God being circumscribed in Western terms. Within this time of great upheaval for Africa, Edward Wilmot Blyden and J.E. Casely Hayford levelled severe criticism at the whole institution of European Christianity. The present study draws on Blyden’s and Hayford’s view of Christianity to unveil the similarities in the thoughts of both men and revealed that Hayford’s vision is deeply rooted in Blyden’s vision where the two tried to shape a correct, uncontaminated African religious world.

Keywords: Blyden; Western; European Christianity; African Christianity; Christian Negro; Hayford

*Corresponding author: Ahmed Bouchemal

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of European contact with Africa and Africans is replete with many forces of change that made the life of Africans in a process of transformation. European presence did not evince through the mere economic exploitation of African riches, but also revealed through the systematic diffusion of European culture and the erosion of African culture. The whole process favoured the alteration of all what was African and the adoption of all what was Western. In this respect, religion was not an exception. Europeans, greatly convinced of the role assigned on them as “civilizers”, embarked on a mission to let people of Africa and West Africa in particular know about Christianity. A flurry of missionary bodies targeted Africa and began a mission to spread the gospel and establish schools to better indoctrinate apprentices and make them an easy prey to Europeans. Alas, for Africans the new religion did nothing but made people live in strict psychological conflicts as they could neither accept a religion that was completely alien to their environment nor forget about their old religious beliefs and practices.

In Liberia, Edward Wilmot Blyden was at odds with the mystifying nature of European Christianity. He alluded to the fact that where the missionary believed he would serve God in Africa, he badly distorted the essence of African religion and made the African an engine to produce Western habits and norms. In the same manner, J.E.Casely Hayford made of the Gold Coast the hub of his activities and a place to voice his rejection to European Christianity. He was convinced that the faults in missionary work stemmed from the fact that they did not try to understand the African system of life. Instead, the missionary set all efforts to erase and supplant old religious beliefs and practices with a much Western ones. The writing of this article emerged as a need to conceptualize both Blyden’s and Hayford’s understanding of Christianity as to unveil the shared themes and similarities in their thoughts. It is further an attempt to provide thorough discussion of the role of religion on African emancipation which was scarcely recognized in scholarly discussions.

2. The Development of African religion

2.1 Traditional Religion

The earliest form of African religions was traditional religion. It was guided by a set of beliefs and practices that showed the relation of God with man. God was believed to reward as well as punish man if that man could not adhere to God’s principles. Under God, there existed a hierarchy of spirits. These spirits were believed to exist everywhere and could bring good or bad fortune to individuals. The first of these spirits was God which was conceived as “the Supreme Spirit Being”. In a second position came “gods” or “abosom” which represented children of God. The last spirit was “the spirit fathers” or ancestors (Dyrness, 1994:97). These spirits constituted the spirit world of the African and much of African rituals, ceremonies and festivals were a reflection of the existence and the great influence of these spirits on African lives. Along traditional religion, there existed the Islamic religion. Islam reached Africa through trade of some

Muslim merchants with African merchants. Though Islam did not have great impact on Africa until the beginning of the nineteenth century, many people adhered to the new religion as its teaching was similar to some African beliefs, especially when it comes to death and after life. However, the operation of the two religions seemed to be interrupted when Europeans embarked on their civilizing mission to disperse the Christian faith.

2.2 The Civilizing Mission and Christianity

It was stated that Europeans came to Africa because of the Civilizing Mission. Mainly driven by humanitarian appeals, the Europeans believed in the superiority of Western culture and the inferiority of black culture. The civilizing mission as “a growing feeling that the peculiar style of society, culture, and thought being achieved by Westerners was somehow superior to that of peoples of the Old world of Asia and Africa” (Butt,1973:21). For Europeans, Africans were in need of European civilization and modernity as a means to escape the status of ignorance and low-esteem. Greatly convinced in the superiority of Christian civilization, many philanthropic groups fled to Africa with a mission to supplant “barbaric” and “backward” African systems with much-valued Western modes of life (Boahen, 1975:511).

Indeed, the beginning of the nineteenth century was a time of immense missionary impact. Though many missionary activities operated in Africa right from the fifteenth century, it was the work of Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists which marked a decisive impact on African societies. These bodies, along their evangelization activities, established schools and introduced Africans for the first time to formal education. The intent of the missionary was to distance the African of all aspects of his life. Consequently, attack on native culture was the first objective of the missionary. The missionary considered traditional African arts and music as “evil” and “satanic”. According to the missionary, “all dancing must lead to fornication”(Malinowski,1936:157). The missionary saw these forms of dance as debasing and frightening and could do nothing but enforce African inferiority and subordination. Missionaries further forbade polygamy as it was considered antithetical to Christianity and was “neither a social necessity nor a matter for the individual conscience”. Their impact targeted African languages. English was the medium of instruction while emphasis was to introduce apprentices to European history and literature as the only sources of knowledge. Indeed, the missionary succeeded in bringing a “change of life” to African societies (Kimble,1963:157-160). The new Christian native adopted Western life style and manners as an attempt to attain high social status while discarded the very essence of African indigenous beliefs which constituted the essence of his identity and roots. Times were hard for Africans especially the intellectuals who saw identification with these new systems as a menace to the African wellbeing. Edward Wilmot Blyden and J.E.Casely Hayford were then at the pinnacle of their cultural emancipation scheme to free Africans from the distorting effects of European Christianity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Edward Wilmot Blyden as a Critic of European Christianity

Born on 03 August 1832, Blyden spent most of his childhood years in the island of St. Thomas, the West Indies. Blyden's early mates were all Jewish (Lynch, 1967:04). A thing that developed his intellect and in later years made him admire the Jewish experience, as it resembled that of Africans in matters of displacement and subjugation. His father, Romeo, was a tailor while his mother, Judith Ann, served as a teacher. Like children of his age, he attended school, but showed great talent and skill in different disciplines. A thing that attracted his teacher, the Reverend John Knox, a white priest in the Presbyterian Church in Newton, Long Island. Knox immediately offered Blyden the opportunity to continue studies in the United States. Blyden, with the help of his parents, went to the U.S with the hope to find a place where he could pursue higher education. Alas for Blyden, he was rejected as student in many colleges in the United States because of his race, let alone his color. Much disheartened and ready to get back to St. Thomas, Blyden was fortunate to meet Walter Lowrie, Secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, and John B. Pinny of the New York Colonization Society (Conyers, 1998:39). They suggested for Blyden to move to Liberia where he could continue higher education at Alexander High School (Lynch, 1967:05). Upon his arrival at Liberia in 1851, Blyden attended college and was able to get many positions early in his life. As an editor, theologian, educator and politician, he succeeded in framing among African fellows of West Africa and Africa in general the danger of European Christianity and the results of being absorbed by white man ways of life.

During the 1860's, Blyden hailed European Christianity as a means for African progress. Blyden never doubted the role of the missionary in getting Africa out of backwardness and superstition. He believed that the presence of missionary agencies would further African chances to benefit from European civilization and modernity. Consequently, he called upon Africans living in the U.S. to return to Africa and disperse the Christian faith among Africans. However, Blyden changed from being a supporter to European Christianity to being one of its critics. This change of mind was a result of many visits Blyden had to North Africa and Syria by the close of the 1860's.

European Christianity enforced black inferiority. For blyden, there was "dissimilitude" and "disproportion" between principles of the Christian religion and the way they were led by missionaries in Africa. The missionary embarked on a brutal mission to impose rather than teach the Christian faith. According to Blyden, "the sword of the conqueror and the cries of the conquered have attended or preceded the introduction of this faith"(Blyden,1888:224). Blyden emphasized that the missionary was enthusiastic about coming to Africa and teach its sons pure Christianity. Upon his arrival, however, he "unhoes a sensible refrigeration" in making the African but a proper individual (Holden, 1966:197). Furthermore, Blyden stated that because of the great belief in African inferiority, the missionary considered the African mind as a "tabula rasa". Everything African was considered as evil and could do nothing but engrave a practical inferiority. It was thus believed the African was in need of "something new and foreign" to escape the status of subordination and subserviency (Conyers, 1998:150).

European Christianity intended to alienate the African of his environment. For Blyden, the

Christian Negro was not able to see aspects of his history and culture through Christian practices. Rather, he was obliged to be someone else through the inculcation of Western norms and habits. In this regard, Blyden averred that the Christian Negro learned to admire everything Western:

From the lessons he everyday receives, the Negro unconsciously imbibes the conviction that to be great man he must be like the white men. He is not brought up – however he may desire it- to be the companion, the equal, th comrade of the white man, but his imitator, his ape, his parasite (Blyden, 1876:563)

The situation of the new Christian Negro was further aggravated by an intentional separation of the African from the spirit world. African spirituality which constituted the essence of traditional religion was overshadowed by the materialistic nature of European Christianity. While African religions preached for the communistic nature of the African society which led the African to be in close contact with patriotism and morality, the European Christianity made of material progress the essence of all developments and character formation. To this point, Blyden warned the missionary that their lack of understanding of African religions and their manifested efforts to interfere in their nature would only bring “dislocations” and “degeneracy death” (Blyden, 1908:73). The African, on the other hand, should understand the need to keep ties with these systems, as they were the only path for racial and sociocultural emancipation.

The African lost his physical character as part of the evangelization process. European Christianity presented itself as a religion of the oppressor, not the oppressed. The situation prevented the African from any real representation of his peculiarities. Rather, all what he received was alien and strange. Blyden wrote:

No one can deny the great aesthetic and moral advantages which have accrued the Caucasian race from Christian art...but to all these exquisite representations exhibited only the physical characteristics of a foreign race; and while they tended to quicken the tastes and refine the sensibilities of that race, they had only a depressing influence upon the Negro, who felt that he had neither part nor lot, so far as his physical character was concerned... (Blyden,1875:608)

Accordingly, the African perceived God's image merely in white man estate. He obtained a “stifled independence” not based on his character and ways of evolution but rather on the “psychological strait-jacket” of the white man (Akbar, 1979:54). Consequently, Blyden made a cry that God must be African. This found expression through the creation of an independent African Church (Blyden, 1908:122). The church would remedy the syndromes of European influences and yield the African to resurrect the religious world of his ancestors. Through a set of visits to West African colonies, Blyden succeeded in propagating among his fellow Africans and West Africans in general the need to understand European missionary project and set all the means to be financially independent in order to resist European systematic erosion of the African religious and create an independent African Church that was African in taste and character.

Indeed, Blyden's calls became a source of nationalistic uprising in West Africa and the Gold Coast, place of birth of J.E. Casely Hayford, the focus of this study.

3.2 Edward Wilmot Blyden, European Christianity and West African Grievances

Due to the high amount of abuses West Africans encountered with the Methodists Churches, many disdained the present situation especially when the European Church banned African arts and music as part of Church ceremonies. A flurry of intellectuals responded vigorously to the attempts to Europeanize African worldview and were ready to help create purely African churches. Many of these intellectuals owed their ideas to Blyden's philosophy. In Sierra Leone, Orishatukeh Faduma, Western educated elite, led many attempts to disperse Blydenic thoughts and was convinced that Africans could rid themselves out of European Christianity only if they build their own Christianity. Like Blyden, Faduma opined that missionary presence was debasing and that it was a force to "make men content to be made tools for the destruction of others...parasites, incapable of ameliorating their own unfavorable environments and those of their neighbors, incapable of working out the salvation of their race, and resigned to an invisible and invincible fate" (Meberbeche,2010:139). In 1888, Faduma became an active member in both A.M.E Church in Sierra Leone and the African Methodist Episcopal Church Review. Abayomi Cole was another Sierra Leonean who sought Blyden's ideas as a solution to the distorted manhood of the African. He established the Muslim-Christian Association in 1889. The main aim of the association was to create a place where Africans and Muslims could meet to discuss current issues and produce correct images about African traditional religions and Islam. In one of the Association's meetings, many praised the work done by Blyden in giving a correct picture of European Christianity and letting people know about its defects.

In Nigeria, the United Native African Church seceded from the Anglican Church in 1891. Its adherents called for equality with the whites and their right to be treated as humans. In one of its meetings, its adherents called on behalf of all Africans of the need to create purely African churches. In the same manner as Blyden, one told members that:

this meeting in humble dependence upon the Almighty God, is of the opinion that Africa is to be evangelized; and that the foreign agencies at work at the present moment, taking into consideration climatic and other influences cannot grasp the situation, resolved that a purely Native African Church be founded for the Evangelization and Amelioration of the African race to be governed by Africans (Oke, 1936:71)

As a result, the cry of the time remained for the creation of an African God whose role was to join Africans around a religious world that did not interject with their socio-cultural evolution and be as a medium for intellectual and cultural enrichment. Indeed, West African revolution against white supremacy in the Churches did not only cover Sierra Leone and Nigeria, but also expanded to the Gold Coast, now Ghana, where J.E.Casely Hayford became a staunch critic of the whole system of European Christianity.

3.3 J.E.Casely Hayford: the Nature and Scope of European Christianity

While Edward Wilmot Blyden was considered the father of African nationalism, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford was believed to form “the Golden age of criticism” to white domination of the physical and mental capacities of the African (Killey, 1959:22). He was born on September 29th, 1866 in Cape Coast, Ghana. He was apprenticed at Wesleyan Boys' High School and later became a teacher then a principal at Accra Wesleyan Boys' High School. Between 1885 and 1896, he took the position of an editor to the newspapers the Western Echo and the Gold Coast Chronicle respectively. He left to London where he attended the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple at Peterhouse, Cambridge. Upon his return to the Gold Coast, he presided the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society, a nationalistic body, and helped establish the Mfantsipim School in 1904 (Darko, 1985:132).

For Hayford , European Christianity was contradictory to the teaching of God. Hayford tried to point out many failures of Christianity which caused people to distance themselves from the new religion. Hayford directly Questioned “A religion which taught one thing, and practised another, was it worth following?” (Hayford, 1911:21). It was not the Christianity of God that set “oppressive hierarchy” where the African was a slave though he served God the same way as the white man. For Hayford, this placed many limitations and prejudices in the way Africans understand and be involved in Church activities. Furthermore, the new Christian Negro was alienated from old beliefs and practices. Hayford never doubted the role of Christianity in distancing people from their own systems and “its injurious meddling in the harmless customs of alien peoples” (Hayford, 1911:189-190). Europeans did not think for a while about the strict psychological effects of making people pass from their own ways to those of the white man. Hayford melancholy expressed the view that all what interested European missionaries was to come to Africa. In the meantime, introduce their Christianity and make Africans fully, “body and soul”, the property of the white man (Hayford, 1911:157).

European missionaries did not understand Africans system of life. Europeans were deeply convinced that all what was African was “evil”. This placed the eradication and suppression of African ways in favor of ways of the white man a priority. Hayford described missionary work as “ignorance” and their mission as a failure. This failure was because the missionary did not set any efforts to understand Africans system of life. According to Hayford , “yet what a different state of things would prevail if the missionary had first studied the Religious system of the Native before trying to impose it, or, which is worse, before introducing new one”(Hayford,1903:105). Hayford concluded that this obstructive and oppressive attitude of the missionary created an African dissatisfied with his status and always longing to find the God of his fathers in the teachings of the Church.

The Christian Negro saw God in Western terms. The fact that the missionary was unable to identify with African systems heralded that the Church beliefs and practices were all Western. The new Christian Negro saw God in Western dress, attitudes and manners. He was curtailed from practicing or, at least using some of his own ways of worshiping God. This status of great misery and supremacy of Western attitudes led Hayford to question why the white man was determined that African systems were antithetical to the Gospel:

Why, for example, should not the native convert sing his own native songs, and play his native airs in church? Why should he not attune his horns, his adziwa, his gomey, or for that matter, his adankum, to the praise of God, much as the Israelites of old praised Jehovah upon the cymbal and the harp? Why, in the name of reason and common sense, should the native bear his own name and wear his own native garments? Why, indeed, except that the simple missionary has, from the beginning, ruled that all these things are against the letter, if not the spirit, of the Gospel? (Hayford, 1903:105)

For Hayford, though the Christian Negro seemed to be amazed by the westernization of the Church, he at heart was never able to forget his old practices and, remained “a true to the faith of his fathers” (Hayford, 1903:101). In this respect, missionary work was never able to give the African what he expected to find. Instead, the missionary shook the very foundations of the African religious world and placed a much burden on the African as he disgusted the very foundation of European Christianity.

Because of present situation, the creation of purely African Church became the cry of the time. Hayford affirmed that if the missionary continued his “westernization process”, this would denationalize and precipitate a racial and national death. The safety of the African rested on reviving connections with a “virile religion” that strengthened the roots of his identity and existence and not through the new religion which vehemently forced the African to identify scandalously and shamelessly with an alien God. A religion that dictated to all new converts that true Christianity was a matter of attachment to origins and not mere mimic of foreign institutions. The creation of purely African Church thus was seen as “the mine of truth and inspiration” where the Christian Negro, unspoiled by European Christianity and closely attached to national atmosphere, became the guiding force to African development and progress (Hayford, 1903:122).

4. CONCLUSION

The study examined the notion of Christianity in the philosophy of Edward Wilmot Blyden and J.E.Casely Hayford. The study exposed Blyden’s and Hayford’s views of Christianity and tried to address how the two gave through understanding of the religious world of the African. Through discussing the introduction of Christianity and Christian missions into the Gold Coast, the study provided an insight into missionary groups and their attempts to create a “Westernized world” for the African through supplanting and if possible erasing all forms African indigenous beliefs. The

findings revealed that Blyden's religious philosophy had great impact on people of West Africa at the time. West Africans in general fashioned a culture of protest against the systematic attempts by Christian missions to "de-nationalize" African life. Like Blyden, they contended that God must be African and all religious practices should be African too. The findings further showed how Hayford was an avid follower to Blyden's philosophy. He disdained the apparent repulsive and dehumanizing nature of European Christianity. Similar to Blyden, he propounded that missionaries' lack of understanding of the African world led them to introduce a religion different to their environment. A religion that alienated Africans and made them struggle to identify with a strange world that only reinforced their disillusionment. To remedy the delinquencies of European Christianity, Hayford appeared to call for the creation of purely African Church. As revealed by Blyden, he saw these Churches as mediums to teach their fellow Africans purely African Christianity. Indeed, these Churches became an outlet to address religious and socio-cultural issues pertaining to the African world, produced by Africans, and addressed to Africans.

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