

CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Introduction

Education plays a paramount role in the development of any country of the world. Through it, knowledge and skills are passed from generation to generation. History of education shows a division into three different stages: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The tertiary education has been commonly referred to as higher education. This level of education has been presented in different forms: classical and academic; technical and vocational. The practice of Christian higher education in Africa has respected these different forms. Three types of Christian higher education exist on the African continent: church-controlled higher learning of theological institutions; church-funded colleges and universities of higher learning; and finally Christian-perspective liberal Arts colleges. This third category is a challenge to Christian educators. The history of Christian higher education in Africa shows a predominance of the first category. Baptist missionaries contributed in each of these categories.

A careful look at the history of Baptist missionary work in Africa fully establishes the fact that creating schools, both Bible and secular schools, for educational purposes was intrinsically part of the philosophy of ministry. These educational institutions enrolled indigenous people from primary to high school level. The creation and managing of educational institutions slowed down towards the end of the last century and almost stopped at the beginning of the new. Factors explaining this situation are both external and internal. Within the environment of churches and theological education institutions, there is a vast demand for highly educated nationals to take up leadership positions at the denominational level and also staff an ever-growing number of post secondary schools of theology. What is the future of Christian higher education in Africa?

Christian Higher Education in Africa: Historical Facts

The first contact of Baptists with the African continent was in 1821. Lott Carey and Collin Teague pioneering Baptist Work in Africa carried out their missionary work in Liberia. Africa became the focal point of the Foreign Mission Board at the first

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annual meeting of the newly organized Convention, in June 1846. A significant statement was made: "Another important position which the Board consider themselves as specially invited to occupy is Africa. They are only waiting to secure men of suitable qualifications to enter the field. Africa is doubtless to be evangelized" (Cauthen 1970, 136). An analysis of the report reveals that right from the beginning, Baptist missionaries integrated education in their philosophy of ministry. The Foreign Mission Board sent both ministers and teachers. These teachers labored both in "secular" and religious education.

1. In the Area of Secular Education

Baptist Convention annual reports¹ steadily show that qualified human resource and money investments were directed towards opening schools as evangelism and church planting work was carried on. The primary reason for this enterprise was to meet both educational and developmental needs of the indigenous people. Missionaries were invited either by local kings or indigenous churches to start general education schools. Their solicitude caused them to sometimes take this initiative in order to participate in the development of their countries of mission. Undoubtedly Baptist schools served as venues for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. This enterprise was characterized by the fact that the school levels ranged from primary to high school; that equal chances of education were given to boys and girls; and finally that the program of education covered areas like agriculture, health, professional schools, domestic science, and handicrafts. All these three aspects of Baptist contribution to education in Africa need a close look.

From Primary to High School

The first primary school was opened in 1850 in Liberia. The encouraging results both for educational and evangelistic purposes pushed missionaries for more exploration and investment in that area. Secondary and high school needs were naturally met in order to continue the process of education. At the start, teachers at these different levels were sent from the United States of America. Some distinguished and gifted students who finished these levels were recruited into the teaching task. They were given training in schools created in order to prepare them to teach their fellow country people. The curriculum taught in these educational institutions at the beginning, were, to a high percentage, American-oriented. However, an effort of adjusting the curriculum to integrate some local realities was successfully carried on. This trend continued until the time the program drew extensively its component from the local context. Most of these educational

¹ Consult Southern Baptist Convention, Annual, 1846 p. 24; 1876 p. 35; 1939 pp. 204 ff, etc.

institutions are still in use today. Educational institutions created by Baptist missionaries were among the first schools to generate the very first educated people for these countries.

Language limitation did not allow missionaries to develop "secular" educational institutions in French speaking countries of Africa.² Documentation consulted in the course of writing this paper corroborates that reality. Sending missionaries to African speaking countries demanded much more investment. It is obvious that learning French in order to teach, even in primary school, was and still is a challenging undertaking.

Equal Chances of Education for Boys and Girls

It is remarkable that girls were taken into account for educational purposes right at the beginning of this formal education venture. This enterprise was a major breakthrough in the African cultural setting as women had no other role in the society but bearing children and taking care of the home. The following citation from Goerner's article in *Advance: A History of Southern Baptist Foreign Missions* is more eloquent in showing how daring this was:

In the face of opposition of some who did not think that African girls should be educated, Mrs. Carrie G. Lumbley opened a girls' school at Abeokuta in 1910, after a similar effort at Oyo had ended in failure. The school at Abeokuta, latter called 'Idi Aba,' eventually attained secondary level and then developed into a teacher training-college. (Cauthen 1970:147)

Nothing is said about women attending Bible schools. The cultural setting in those days could not allow any woman to become an ordained minister. Religious/theological education prepared people mostly for pastoral ministries. The needs of the ever-growing church imposed that orientation in religious/theological education. There is a need to address this issue even today in churches in Africa.

A Wide Range of Educational Programs

The educational program consisted of general and professional education. In the area of professional education, schools such as industrial schools, teacher training

² Dr. Victor B. Cole notices that "Educational development in general were comparatively slower in Francophone West Africa" (Cole p.46). Mounouni reports that only two secondary level schools were available for Francophone speakers in 1958 (Mounouni 1968:80).

schools, medical schools (training of nurses), domestic science for women, handicrafts schools, and agriculture projects were established.

2. In the Area of Religious Education

The need to train ministers for the growing church in Africa led The Baptist Foreign Mission Board to establish theological education institutions. Here again some levels of training facilities were provided for. Missionaries started by creating classes for ministerial students. In these classes the core of Christian message and beliefs were taught. As the levels of understanding of the student increased they were sent to pastors' training schools and then into much more structured institutions such as Bible seminaries where they could study for a diploma in theology.

The Nigeria Baptist Theological Seminary started in 1897 was adequately staffed and equipped to become the "high place" of theological education in Africa. Indeed, students from other English speaking countries were sent there to further their education. Plans were even made for sending carefully selected young men to the U.S. for advanced training. Besides this, there was a partnership between the Nigeria Baptist Theological Seminary and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Goerner describes this partnership in the following lines:

In order to strengthen the academic standing of the seminary at Ogbomoso, an affiliation was established with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, effective in 1948. Under this arrangement, full graduates of the Nigerian Baptist Seminary received the bachelor degree from the Louisville institution so long as certain standards were met and the quality of instruction was maintained (Cauthen 1970:152)

The Nigeria Theological Seminary (NTS) is still a reference in Africa in the consortium of theological seminaries. It is now offering a Master Degree in various tracks, and recently embarked on a thorough work towards starting a Doctoral program. This is the only higher educational institute available for Baptists in Africa. French students are admitted as long as their level of English meets the requirements. NTS faces the common problems of any higher educational institute in Africa. The major ones are: 1) Lack of finance; 2) Declining standards; 3) Lack of qualified teaching staff; 4) Lack of appropriate text books; 5) Lack of adequate infrastructure.

Resume

This section on historical facts shows that formal education was at the heart of missionary work since its inception. The contribution of these learning institutions both for churches and nations is enormous. These church leaders and educated people were

valuable resources for their countries in matters of development. The following report was given at the centennial celebration in 1950:

Nearly every church sponsored a primary school, with a total of 23,000 pupils enrolled and over a thousand Baptist teachers, all under Convention administration. The mission concentrated upon secondary schools, teachers training colleges, and theological education. The medical program included one hospital, three one-doctor clinics, three dispensaries attended by trained nurses, and eleven leper colonies. Baptists faced the future with confidence. (Cauthen 1970: 153)

This future was curtailed because missionaries did not promote tertiary education. There was a need for further education that was not met. This was true for all the missionary groups working in Africa. Walt explains this lack of promotion by the "anti-intellectualism" of the missionaries.³ This explanation is not fully satisfactory. There are other reasons such as financial crisis, and strategic reasons. He rightly notices that African governments took control of the primary and secondary schools created by Christian missionaries after independence. Universities flourished during this time. The need for higher education was picked up by African governments.

Christian Higher Education in Africa: Threats and Opportunities

1. The Present State of Higher Education in the Secular World

The situation of higher education in Africa is alarming. Specialists in education send signals of hopelessness and urge African governments to take quick action. In his paper "Destruction of Higher Education in Sub-Sahara Africa," Adonis Hoffman criticizes African governments for the "shift in fiscal priorities" from higher education to other needs. This shift in the context of the government having the monopoly of higher education is disastrous. Until recently private universities were allowed, in some African countries, to operate. There is a long list of signs of illness characterizing higher education in Africa. The following adjusted list is borrowed from Walt:

- Academic mediocrity
- Declining standards

³ He writes "Their primary and secondary education was mostly narrowed down to the popular three r's (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) and Bible College. Because of their anti-intellectual stance, anything beyond that was labeled as "worldly."" (Van Der Walt 2002: 198)

- Lack of finance
- Frustration among lecturers and students because of chronic lack of textbooks and other teaching materials, journals, equipment, and infrastructure in general
- Lack of job opportunities after completion of studies
- Lack of properly qualified teaching staff
- Overpopulation because of explosion in student's numbers
- Strikes leading to close-down of universities or suspension of academic activities
- Poverty among students
- Malpractice in the admission of students, plagiarism, dishonesty, corruption, and immorality
- Curriculum more or less relevant to the African situation
- Politicization of universities, poor planning, and arbitrary changes in academic programs and politics

Africa is not the only continent facing major challenges and crises in higher education. Proposals have been made by specialists in education to address these severe shortcomings. The most appealing, to me, are those suggested by Hoffmans: 1) privatize African universities; 2) decrease enrollments; 3) involve multilateral and bilateral donors in higher education; 4) allow complete state authority and responsibility for higher education. The increase of financial resources to the sector of higher education is the first step to be taken. As governments seek to implement this, there must be a clear answer to 1) the aim of higher education; 2) the practical values of higher education; and 3) how to lower the cost of higher education.

2. The Present State of Higher Education in the Religious World

Crises facing higher education in general raise some threats and provide opportunities as well. Christian higher education has an important role to play. It is a historical fact that Christian missionaries started this venture of formal training. Redeeming higher education in Africa is the primary task the church of God is called to accomplish. In order to do so, there is a need to assess the real threat and make the best use of the existing opportunities.

Threats

The first major threat facing Christian higher education is the "anti-intellectualism" in the churches today. Most of the leaders in African churches do not see the need for higher education. A common misunderstanding circulates among church members that to carry on pastoral duties, there is no need for further studies. There is even a saying in my country that "Higher theological learning does not produce a good pastor; it is rather the Holy Spirit on the field!" This view not only reveals an inappropriate reading of the Bible, but also the limited understanding of pastoral ministry/church ministry. Churches and

denominational budgets reflect this anti-intellectualism. Most of the churches and Christian denominational leaders would not see the need for dedicating a part of the income to higher education. Vikner puts it better: "Rather than seeing Christian colleges and universities as partners and settings where the Christian faith can be nurtured, these colleges and universities are considered to be uninvolved in proclaiming the faith and are often more likely considered to be antithetical to the faith" (Vikner 2003: 4-5).

The second main threat in higher education is the declining influence of the church. African governments became suspicious of educational activities of missionaries after the years of independence. Most of them saw in the schools tools for Western imperialism. They took over schools created by Christian missionaries. Regulation for creating and running a private school were so tightened, in some countries, that it became almost impossible for the very few daring churches to invest in that area. The principle of separation between Church and State has been interpreted by some careless politicians to exclude churches in the task of education. The saying goes: "The Church is for worshipping God and the Government for educating citizens!"

The third chief threat is financial. Running a credible academic institution is extremely expensive. The existing schools on the continent have always been crying out for financial help from churches. Christian organizations and institutions in the West. These institutions are operating in a context of poverty. The following grim statistics, borrowed from Walt, tells a lot about the situation:

- Thirty-three (of approximately 50) African countries are described by the recent United Nations Annual Human Development Index as the poorest of the world's poor: They lack basic social services, such as health and educational facilities.
- Of the about 543 million people in Africa, as many as 184 million have no access to safe water, 436 million lack the most basic health services, and 510 million are without sanitation.
- While in developed Western countries like the United States and Switzerland there are more than 600 telephone lines per 1,000 people, sub-Saharan Africa has an average of 12 lines per 1,000 people – in some countries only 1 telephone per 1,000 people!
- While industrial nations have an average of 405 cars per 1,000 people, in sub-

Saharan Africa the statistics are one car per 1,000 people!

- Add to this bleak picture the deadly AIDS disease. Its impact is calculated to be even more devastating than incessant warfare on the continent.

It is very common in Africa to graduate students who still owe money to the school. They are given a chance to work and pay back. This, unfortunately, does not happen. Institutions run with unpaid debts threatening to exterminate them.

The "brain drain" is another major threat for higher education in Africa. According to World Bank figures, 23,000 academics emigrate from Africa annually; more than 30 percent of Africa's skilled professionals live abroad; about 70,000 Africans trained in Europe remain. My fear is that this trend which has become normal and accepted is here to last for God knows until when. Very little is practically done by African governments to stop it. Secular schools as well as seminaries face the same problem.

The final major threat is the very few advocates for the cause of higher education in Africa. Whether in church or society at large, there are very few articulate and well-placed advocates. Their voices are usually not heard. They are even ridiculed in convention meetings or other gatherings. Praise God that there are still some bold enough to speak. There are observable opportunities for higher education in Africa.

Opportunities

The first and foremost need for higher education in Africa is the great demand for highly educated nationals to take up key leadership roles in churches, and staff the ever growing number of post secondary schools. Anti-intellectualism is losing its standing in Africa as church leaders are dealing with more and more "sophisticated" societies and peoples. Even though the decisive step is yet to be made, there is an observable openness to the idea of higher education. Students coming from these Bible schools demand for more education after some years of ministry. Their number is growing larger and larger each year, and yet there are very limited institutions of higher education where they can go. Most of the Bible schools and secular schools created by missionaries are unable to meet these needs. We hear suggestions for multiplying the number of schools, upgrading them to institutions of higher education coming more and more. Something more stimulating is happening in the societies at large: search for moral values in educational institutions.

There is an increasing preference for Christian learning institutions because of moral values upheld in them. Parents are disappointed by the negative influence the public

schools are having on their children. This age of scientific materialism, technological destructiveness, religious nihilism, and spiritual impoverishment has rendered life meaningless. This leads to an unbalanced life which expresses itself in naughtiness, sadness and madness observed in the world today. Religious courses are taught in secular universities. This desire to better understand religions presents an exceptional opportunity for Christian colleges and universities. The third opportunity is the response of some Christian organization to the cry of help from Africa.

Overseas Council does outstanding work in helping Christian theological higher learning. Overseas Council offers scholarships for leaders and theologians for advanced studies and provides limited assistance for them as a stipend of encouragement to continue working in their context. Overseas Council is sponsoring 59 candidates from 27 partner schools in 21 nations. They are undertaking masters and doctoral theological training. The focus of Overseas Council is theological education. More and more Christian institutions are considering helping Africa for higher education.

Modes of Higher Education in Africa

Higher Education is the urgent need in Africa today. This is true for secular education as well as religious education. Across Africa we see different modes of meeting the need for higher education. So far we can identify: partnership mode; virtual universities mode; and correspondence learning mode.

Partnership Mode

The partnership mode consists of educational institutions agreeing to work together on the basis of established clauses. This partnership could be guaranteeing the credibility of a degree: exchanging lecturers and students; providing materials and funds etc. Some theological higher learning institutions become secular universities. This has been possible because of the Religion Departments most of the universities are operating.⁴ These universities admit students coming from Christian institutions and give them further training in religious studies. There are partnerships developed between Christian institutions.

⁴ Very few Universities in Francophone Africa have this department. Some Universities offer a quick look at religion in Social Sciences Departments. The Lutheran Church in Togo has an ongoing discussion with the University of Lome to that effect. Nothing tangible has yet been achieved.

In 1948 Nigeria Theological Seminary (NTS) was "affiliated" to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SET). The agreement was that NTS students received the bachelor degree guaranteed by SET. There is another kind of partnership developed between Spurgeon College and Kumasi Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS) which is appealing. Spurgeon College is actually running an M.Th in applied theology together with Kumasi Baptist Theological Seminary. The M.Th program is normally not offered by KBTS because of the many limitations characterizing theological seminaries in Africa. An effort is made to keep the curriculum relevant to African realities. The expenses are affordable to African students. An African qualified staff is hired to manage the program. African as well as European lecturers are carefully selected to teach in this program. To make this program possible, SC invested in upgrading the library and by so doing made relevant textbooks available for the different courses offered in that M.Th in applied theology. There are many advantages in this type of partnership. This might be the best way to help in higher education in Africa. Another mode developing today is the distance learning or virtual universities.

Virtual Mode

With the advent of the new communications revolution, some educational institutions offer their programs through the use of new information technologies such as telecommunications, computers, satellites, and fiber optic technologies. The delivery platform in Africa has, up until now, been text and correspondences based, supported by printed material. The use of Internet, video conferencing, and other forms of multimedia is barely coming in. There are some challenges in implementing this distance learning mode: 1) technological constraints (telephone density and supply inadequate); 2) lack of trained cadre of professional; 3) the absence of clearly defined national distance education policies; 4) lack of access to connectivity (computers, web browsers, easy internet services); 5) lack of recognition of distance learning by public services.

Correspondence Mode

Higher learning is also achieved today through correspondence means. In this mode, the student is sent all the materials needed for given course. This material includes all the reading matter required and the exams. The student works on his own and sends his exams to the institution. He is marked and given a feedback on the score and improvements to be made. The interaction with his lecturers and the institution's administration is made only by correspondences. He graduates *in absentia* and his degree is sent to him. This mode has many disadvantages and is not the best.

CONCLUSION

The history of Christian missions testifies of the institution of formal education in Africa. This education covered the three classical divisions of education - primary, secondary, and tertiary. This third level is at stake today. African governments inheriting the schools created by Christian missionaries are faced with many challenges. The least that could be said is that there is a great need for redeeming this level of education so that the process of development continues. Christian higher education is the hope for Africa. A virile Christian higher education should integrate faith and learning in every aspect.

George N. Nguru, expressing a very optimistic view on the future of Christian higher education in Africa, wrote, "The future of both theological institutions and Christian universities in East Africa is promising" (1983: 63). There are, however, urgent issues to address: 1) contextualized curriculum; 2) accredited programs; 3) Christian distinctive-oriented programs; and 4) governance of higher learning institutions.

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