THE BLACK ATLANTIC MISSIONARY MOVEMENT AND AFRICA, 1780s-1920s

BY

DAVID KILLINGRAY
(Goldsmiths College, University of London)

ABSTRACT

Over a period of 150 years African American missionaries sought to spread the Christian Gospel in the ‘Black Atlantic’ region formed by the Americas, Africa and Britain. Relatively few in number, they have been largely ignored by most historians of mission. As blacks in a world dominated by persistent slavery, ideas of scientific racism and also by colonialism, their lot was rarely a comfortable one. Often called, by a belief in ‘divine providence’, to the Caribbean and Africa, when employed by white mission agencies they were invariably treated as second-class colleagues. From the late 1870s new African American mission bodies sent men and women to the mission field. However, by the 1920s, black American missionaries were viewed with alarm by the colonial authorities as challenging prevailing racial ideas and they were effectively excluded from most of Africa.

A recurring theme in Adrian Hastings’s magisterial study of the church in Africa is the central role of Africans in the evangelisation of the Continent. His account also embraces Africans of the diaspora, that ‘black, Protestant, English-speaking world which had grown up in the course of the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the slave trade’. Hastings suggests that by the 1780s the small black elite in London, which included men such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, ‘appear already conscious of constituting something of a cultural, linguistic, and religious bridge’ with Africa. A further group to whom he refers, although fleetingly, is African American missionaries. It is this small group of black men and women from North America and the Caribbean with which this essay principally is concerned.

African American (the term is used here in the widest continental sense) missionaries were exclusively Protestant, English speaking, and their endeavours were directed mainly towards their own people in the Americas and their forebears in Africa. In British America few blacks,
slave or free, were Christians before the latter part of the eighteenth century when a tide of conversions occurred as a result of the ‘Great Awakenings’ in North America, which led in turn to small-scale missionary work in the Caribbean islands. This corresponded with the beginning of the modern missionary movement which was primarily Protestant. There was some evangelisation by Roman Catholics among black people, but the church was a minority denomination in North America and most of the British Caribbean. Its hierarchical structure and claim to be universalist prevented schism and the creation of independent black churches, while a strong notion of a limited priesthood hindered the development of overseas mission work. Another difference between African American Protestants and Catholics was that black Protestants had a strong biblical focus that directed their gaze towards Africa as a mission field. The Bible spoke powerfully of exodus from slavery, and for some blacks this was interpreted as a need to return to Africa. Also there were many who believed that God’s providential design had brought Africans as slaves to America in order that they might return to evangelise Africa, for, according to Psalm 68: 31, ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God’.

African Americans constituted a small but visually significant element in the modern Protestant missionary movement. They are generally ignored in the standard literature and mission histories. This is not surprising as it is only relatively recently that black people, certainly outside the Americas, have begun to be noticed by historians. Nevertheless, black missionaries to Africa have received certain scholarly attention in several doctoral theses, most notably in Campbell’s splendid study of the AMEC in South Africa, published as *Songs of Zion* (1995), and also in a number of biographies. On the African side of the equation is Peel’s recent study of the African agents of the CMS in southern Nigeria.

This essay has three main purposes. First, it places black missionary activity centre stage and draws attention to an aspect of mission work often ignored or marginalised. Second, it places the movement in a wider Black Atlantic context. This draws, in part, on Paul Gilroy’s idea of how the tri-continental experiences of black people helped to shape their ‘intercultural and transnational’ identities. This idea is well represented by the life of Catherine Zimmermann (c. 1825-1891), the second wife of Johannes Zimmermann, the Basel missionary in the Gold Coast. Catherine was born in Angola, enslaved as a child and taken across the Atlantic where she was given a new name (Mulgrave), sub-
sequently freed and then trained as a teacher. She volunteered to return to Africa where she eventually married Zimmerman and ‘she is said to have assisted him in his pastoral and ethnographic work’. The close connections between African Americans and Africa, with Britain as not only a stepping-off point on the trans-Atlantic route but also a place for spiritual encouragement, was well established from the early decades of the nineteenth century following the establishment of the Freetown settlement. An example, one of many that could be given from the middle of the century onwards, is provided by the Rev. Edward Jones, an African American Episcopalian who joined the CMS in Sierra Leone in 1840, in the next year becoming principal of Fourah Bay College. Jones was first married to Hannah Nyländer, daughter of a white German missionary and his Nova Scotian black wife whose sister was married to Jacob Schön. Jones and his second wife retired to England in 1864 and lived with the Schöns in Kent. A further example is in part reflected in the sub-title of the autobiography of the African American missionary Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or the Story of my Life in Three Continents.* Johnson, from Virginia, engaged in evangelistic work in the United States, studied in London and was an evangelist in Britain before going to Africa as a missionary for the BMS. Ill health soon forced his withdrawal from Africa, after which he worked in the United States but spent most of his life as an itinerant preacher in Britain where he died in Bournemouth in 1921.

The trans-Atlantic traffic was in both directions as African proteges of white and African American missionaries were sent to study in America, invariably travelling via Britain. John Chilembwe, who raised a revolt against the British in Nyasaland in 1915, is a notable example. Sponsored by Joseph Booth, a white missionary, in 1897 he went to study in the United States and probably spent a short time in Britain. When he returned home in 1900 to found the Industrial Providence Mission, a close associate was the African American Baptist minister, Landon Cheek, who married Chilembwe’s niece. When Cheek returned to the US with his wife in 1906, he took with him two African boys, Matthew and Frederick Njilima. His missionary associate, Emma Delany, in turn sent back for Daniel Malekebu who was educated in the United States and became a doctor. Malekebu was reluctantly re-admitted back into the colony by the government of Nyasaland in 1926 but found the social climate oppressive for a black missionary. He removed to Liberia where he had a distinguished medical missionary career.

A third purpose of the essay is to examine the reasons for and the
impact of black mission work in Africa from the 1780s to the 1920s, a period of 150 years marked at one end by enduring slavery and at the other by colonialism. Race was a dominating theme in this period and black missionary activity and experiences were hedged about by questions of colour and race. Although relatively small in number and influence, African American missionaries were unique in the United States in being the one ethnic group that had a primary focus on evangelising peoples who were racially similar.

Africa and the idea of ‘Divine providence’

African American interest in African missionary work needs to be seen against the back-cloth of the persistent idea of ‘back to Africa’, that sense among African Americans, especially in the United States, of a close identity with Africa that dates back to the late eighteenth century. Black slaves, many only recently arrived in the Americas, had a strong consciousness of a lost home from which they had been cruelly torn. In a perverse way, some freed Christian African Americans even entertained the idea of the ‘fortunate fall’, that slavery had been part of providential design enduing them with a pressing responsibility to ‘redeem the race’. This led to Black evangelisation among slaves and also to overseas missionary work. In the 1780s George Liele and Moses Baker left Georgia to begin Baptist work in Jamaica; at the same time an unknown ex-slave began evangelistic work in New Providence, in the Bahamas. This was the start of an increasing flow of Baptist preachers going to Jamaica and Trinidad. Liele was firmly in the idiom of the ‘Black Atlantic’, being involved in mission work among black people in Georgia, then in Canada and also in London. The earliest African American mission to West Africa was led by the former slave and Baptist preacher, David George, who went with the expedition to Sierra Leone in January 1792. The role of the missionary-settler, a common feature of African American migration to Liberia, was initiated by Lott Cary, a Baptist who settled in Monrovia in 1815 as an agent for the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society. Race drew him to Africa. He said, ‘I am an African, and in this country [United States], however meritorious my conduct and respectable my character, I cannot receive the credit due to either. I wish to go to a country where I shall be estimated by my merits, not by my complexion, and I feel bound to labor for my race.’ Black-led churches, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), founded in Philadelphia in 1816, and the African Methodist
Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), founded in New York in 1821, sent missionaries into the Southern states and the West, into Canada, and also to the Caribbean. Haiti, as the first Black republic in the Western hemisphere, was of special interest to many African Americans. The first AME church was established there in 1828. At mid-century Bishop James Holly stated that an object of the Episcopal mission in Haiti was to ‘aid in making the Haytian nationality and government strong, powerful and commanding among the civilized nations of the earth’. The focus of the Jamaica Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1842, was evangelisation within the island, to the islands of the Caribbean, including Haiti, and areas of the central American isthmus where there were peoples of African descent, but from the outset also to West Africa.

Africa was the persistent geographical focus of African American missionary thought throughout the nineteenth century. The Second Great Awakening stirred black Christians to a strong belief in the vital purpose of evangelism, and in this Africa had a special significance. The belief in ‘providential design’ and ‘race redemption’ was a recurring theme and had a two-fold meaning. By engaging in mission activity, African Americans would not only fulfil the Christian command to preach the Gospel, but also prove their worth to the doubtful white constituency that largely paid to send them to Africa. The idea that God’s providential hand had been at work in African slavery was also embraced by some whites. William Knibb, the veteran missionary to Jamaica and a fervent anti-slavery campaigner, believed that ‘whatever may have been the designs of Man, whatever he may have contemplated in enslaving Africa, we know that the moral Governor of the Universe had other designs superior to them all’. Many decades later, in 1888, a white missionary told the black student body at Atlanta University that God had not only ordained slavery but in return had given to African Americans the continent of Africa ‘for their work and reward’. An African American delegate to the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions convention, in 1902, spoke of the ‘providential preparation of the American Negro for mission work in Africa’. Similar ideas were echoed by black delegates attending the Baptist World Alliance in London in 1905; one spoke of ‘poor bleeding Africa’, while the Revd Dr C.G. Gordon, from Louisville, argued that ‘the Almighty had sent his own people into slavery that they might learn to love the Bible, and then return to Africa and take the light of the Gospel to the many who remained in darkness there’.

A contrary view nevertheless predominated among African Americans in the United States, who argued that the promised land was not to
be found in Africa but to be struggled for in North America. The ‘exodus’ from slavery to freedom, from serfdom to liberty, from discrimination to equal rights, had to be achieved in the land built and created by the sweat and skill of black men and women. Those who argued thus and opposed the idea of ‘divine providence’ did not disclaim the need for Christian missionary activity. This was a vital work but the first and major claim on the black churches was to evangelise within the United States among black people, and even among whites. Notions of a ‘return to Africa’, and even an emphasis upon the priority of missionary work in Africa, it was argued, were a diversion from the real task which was to achieve the promised land in the place where black people were born, lived and worked.

*The idea and employment of ‘native’ agents*

The idea that African Americans could serve as civilising agents in Africa greatly appealed to many whites, especially to white missionary bodies. As early as the 1770s, Dr Samuel Hopkins, Congregational minister of Newport, Rhode Island, and an opponent of slavery, proposed sending African Americans to Africa as missionaries. A local African fund was created by the Missionary Society of Rhode Island, and two blacks, one a slave, the other free since birth, but both with a knowledge of a ‘Guinea language’, were sent to Princeton to study theology. The outbreak of the revolutionary war interrupted the plan.\(^{25}\) A few years later, in 1779, when the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano volunteered for missionary work in West Africa, his application for ordination was rejected by the Bishop of London ‘from some certain scruples of delicacy’.\(^{26}\) The Anglican Church was not quite ready for black clergy (although an African, the Rev. Philip Quaque, was then serving on the Gold Coast) and had little interest yet in foreign mission. However, in the United States, Hopkins’s influence helped found the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1810, and this essentially Congregational body soon began sending black missionaries to Africa. By 1847 the American Board was arguing that ‘the work of evangelising Western Africa must be mainly upon the colored race’, although it was not yet time to dispense with ‘the agency of the white man’.\(^{27}\)

Indeed, it was white agencies that sent and supported African American missionaries for most of the nineteenth century. Although membership of black denominations in the United States was steadily increasing, their constituents were predominantly rural, economically weak and lacking the institutional structures to support overseas work. The churches
in the West Indies were considerably poorer and the economic depression that hit the islands in mid-century greatly reduced their ability to support foreign mission work. Among white sending agencies there was the belief that African American missionaries had greater resistance to tropical diseases than white people. The death, mainly from disease, of one-third of the white members of the Niger expedition of 1841 helped to reinforce this idea although Jakob Schön argued that ‘it must never be thought that a black skin is a sufficient safeguard against diseases incident to the climate of Africa’. Nevertheless, there were plenty of voices in the Americas claiming climatic advantage for blacks over whites in the tropics.

The pleas by Thomas Fowell Buxton, Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society, and Rufus Anderson of the American Board for native agency, strengthened the argument for employing African Americans as missionaries in West Africa. The geography of race took hold: black Christians, as long as they were of the right moral and social sort, were appropriate for employment in the ‘white man’s grave’, whereas Europeans were best suited to work in temperate regions such as southern Africa. While Africans were being schooled to become native agents—‘the deliverance of Africa by calling forth her own resources’, as Buxton put it—West Indians and American blacks could temporarily fill the gap. Native agents offered obvious economies. Europeans were expensive as missionaries in terms of training, conditions of service and life expectancy; African Americans cost considerably less, while Africans came at knock-down prices. At times, and in places, black men might be more appropriate in the field but the widely accepted view at mid-century, in both the Americas and Britain, was that African American missionaries were best suited as a civilising leaven, as artisans, teachers and itinerant evangelists. On each side of the Atlantic, missionary bureaucrats propounded the idea of self-supporting, self-governing and self-regulating indigenous churches in which native agents would play a prominent role. It was a view that continued to appeal even late in the century when crude ideas of ‘scientific racism’ tainted white missionary thinking. For example, in the 1890s the well-meaning Christian doctor James Johnston, who had worked for many years in Jamaica, advocated the use of West Indians ‘as aids in mission work’ and to relieve Europeans of ‘manual toil’.

A small but steady stream of African American missionaries had gone to Sierra Leone and Liberia since the second decade of the nineteenth century. Many were indistinguishable from their fellow black settlers and few attempted to evangelise the African peoples of the coast. The
addition of freed African slaves to those communities, particularly in Sierra Leone, led to rivalry with African Americans, including West Indian missionaries. Relations between the two groups of black Christians, with their different cultures and world-views, were rarely smooth or comfortable. Class, status, competition and privilege, the very differences that dogged the work of the Liberian church and the American Colonisation Society, and that later drove a wedge between European and African American missionaries, similarly beset the relationship of the two groups of native agents. Of course, there was graciousness and goodwill, but all too often tension and misunderstanding hindered the work that both were supposed to be engaged in.

Britain’s abolition of slavery was followed by a brief burst of missionary activity by the West Indian churches directed towards West Africa. The loss of European missionary lives in West Africa during the 1830s spurred Baptists, Moravians, Scottish Presbyterians and ultimately the Anglicans to think in terms of using West Indian agents. For example, Hope Waddell of the Scottish Mission wrote: ‘From the day the sun of negro freedom arose in 1834, it was hoped by all friends of Africa that among the emancipated Christians of the West Indies, valuable agents would be found for propagating the gospel in the land of their progenitors. The subject engaged the attention of our Presbytery in 1839.’

In Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, West Indians established new fields or worked alongside the small handful of African American missionaries who had arrived during previous decades. Among these black Christians was Thomas Birch Freeman, a British missionary employed by the Wesleyan Methodists, who began work in the southern Gold Coast in 1838. He spent a long and active life in West Africa, evangelising, farming, being involved in politics, and travelling to Asante, southern Nigeria and Dahomey, about which he wrote a notable account. Unlike his fellow European missionaries, Freeman never returned to Britain after 1845, choosing to remain in West Africa. Despite his colour, he recorded only one occasion when he experienced racial discrimination, although unknown to him, in 1880, the white Chairman of the Gold Coast and Yoruba Missions could pose the question as to whether Freeman should receive grants as a ‘European’ or a ‘Native’ pastor.

By 1838 one or two Jamaicans had worked their way to West Africa to spread the Gospel but nothing further is known of them. In 1843, the Basel Mission recruited several Jamaican families for service in the Gold Coast where it was hoped they would provide ‘correct examples’ of Christian living. The same year in Jamaica, William Knibb founded
the Baptist Calabar Theological Institute to train men for service in Africa. And somewhat prematurely an ill-assorted party of 36 Jamaicans set sail on the Chilmark to establish a Baptist mission station in Fernando Po. Three years later Hope Waddell arrived in southern Nigeria accompanied by Samuel Edgerley and his black wife, both from Jamaica. These early attempts to use West Indians in West Africa had mixed results. There was social and racial tension on the ships that carried West Indians and whites across the Atlantic; the long voyage with poor food and confined conditions raised tempers; whites accused blacks of being ‘puffed up’ while Jamaicans were highly sensitive to real and imagined slights. Many of the members in the Chilmark party had little sense of calling. Nevertheless, among these early black pioneers there were men and women robust in health and faith. Henry Wharton, enlisted from Grenada by Freeman in 1843, served for 28 years in the Gold Coast. Joseph Merrick, in a short life before he fell victim to disease in 1849, translated portions of Genesis and Matthew into Isubu and was at work on a dictionary. His fellow Jamaican, Joseph Jackson Fuller, who arrived in West Africa as a very young man with little sense of purpose, went on to spend three fruitful decades in Cameroon, his latter years being marked by his gracious forbearance of certain white colleagues.

The first Anglican proposal to use West Indians as missionaries in Africa came from Archdeacon J.B. Trew of Barbados. In a letter to the Bishop of London in 1843, he suggested that an ‘Africa wasted by Britain’ might be restored by Native Agents. He proposed Codrington College as a training institute. This was agreed in 1850 and was followed by the formation of the West Indian Church Association, separate from but closely linked to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The Association resolved ‘that a Mission to Western Africa would be a work particularly suitable to the Church in the West Indies, where the population consists so largely of persons deriving from that country’. Like the Baptists, the Anglicans determined that West Indians should go to West Africa as missionaries and not as colonists. By 1855 work had begun on the Rio Pongas in Sierra Leone. The leadership was white but within a short time the white superintendent had died and the mission was effectively in the hands of J.H.A. Duport, a graduate from Codrington, recently ordained a deacon and active in both evangelism and translation work. Funds for the work came from the limited resources of the West Indian church but also from the ‘poor slaves of Tennessee... and the free Negroes of Canada’. Although white superintendents were appointed, and appear prominently in the
official reports of the Mission, it was ‘under Mr. Duport’s care [that] the Mission prospered’. By 1861 a black schoolmaster had arrived on the Rio Pongas to be followed by a family who were ‘imbued with a thoroughly Missionary spirit’ and were intent on being ‘industrial missionaries’ involved in training and teaching. The ideas persisted that West Indians were resistant to tropical disease and that there was a continued need for white supervision. ‘It is hoped’, wrote Henry Caswall in the Report of that year, ‘that with an increased number of Missionaries of African descent, and with a single white superintendent, there will hereafter be fewer causes of illness and death, and more ability to endure the African climate’. Disease and ill health continued to take their toll of whites and for most of the 1860s ‘the Missionaries and all others in the employ of the Mission, were now, without exception, African by origin’.

As in other mission situations, West Indian and African American agents did not always enjoy good relations with local Christians. In the Rio Pongas, argues Vassady, the West Indians feared competition from and replacement by African agents and they ‘used their powers to prevent the emergence of African “native agency” in the Mission’. Duport’s relations with local people deteriorated and there followed a period during which he was re-assigned, his deacon’s licence was revoked, and then he was restored; he died in Liverpool in 1873. The Rio Pongas mission, although directed by whites, was actually run by blacks. By the 1880s the weakened Barbadian economy led to the Mission being transferred into English hands although it continued to be staffed by West Indians.

The Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society had run into similar economic problems in the 1850s. By then the BMS had determined that the experiment with West Indians had not been a success, although part of the blame can be put down to European authoritarianism and mismanagement, as well as lack of purpose and endeavour on the part of the Jamaicans. By 1879, J.J. Fuller was the lone black BMS agent in Cameroon. The decision was taken to press on with developing African agents and dispensing with West Indians, although this did not prevent selected African Americans being employed by the BMS in Congo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Baptist ‘failure’ in the late 1840s influenced the thinking of Waddell and the ABCFM as to the value of African American agents. As the American Board stated in 1847: ‘The idea, therefore, of dispensing with the agency of Europeans and Americans in evangelizing Africa ought not at the present time be entertained’. To Waddell’s way of thinking, Jamaicans
in the Calabar mission exercised a degree of independence that seriously challenged his ideas of what was appropriate to their class and status. Most African American missionary activity from the United States until the late 1870s had been sponsored mainly by white mission agencies and focused mainly on West Africa, principally to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and to a lesser extent on the Caribbean. In Liberia the two most prominent African American missionaries were Edward Wilmot Blyden and Alexander Crummell. Blyden, born in the Danish West Indies, studied in the United States and went to Liberia in 1851 sponsored by the New York Colonisation Society and with the support of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission. He became involved in the political and social affairs of the newly created black republic. Later, his sympathetic views on Islam and his insistence that only ‘pure Negroes’ should be sent to Africa as missionaries ruptured his relations with his church. By 1890, Blyden was advocating African church independence free of European control. Crummell, a free black from New York and a graduate from Cambridge University, was ordained by the Episcopalians who sent him to Monrovia in 1853 where he acted mainly as a pastor toAmerico-Liberian settlers; he also became entangled in local politics.

African American missionary societies

The formal end to Reconstruction, and the rolling back of much of its achievements after 1876, stimulated a renewed interest among many African Americans for a return to Africa and also for missionary activity in the Continent. Black churches, predominantly in the rural South, often served as a focus for black communities, providing prime ground for stimulating interest in African mission. Black churches, such as the AMEC, the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, set up their own mission boards in the 1880s-90s, although white agencies continued to send black missionaries to Africa. There were African Americans who contended strongly for a ‘civilising’ mission in Africa. Alexander Crummell argued that ‘The hand of God is on the black man, in all the lands of his distant sojourn, for the good of Africa. This continent is to be reclaimed for Christ. The faith of Jesus is to supersede all the abounding desolations of heathenism.’ His view, expressed in a sermon ‘How shall Africa be redeemed?’, was that ‘the sons of Africa themselves must be the agents of Christianity’ in what he saw as the vital work of ‘regeneration’ in the continent. But there were also voices that persistently opposed emigration to Africa or an untoward African American focus on the continent. For example, Daniel Payne, the senior bishop in the
AMEC until his death in 1893, argued that it was his duty to work for the salvation of his people in the United States and that attempts to plant missions in Africa was a form of ‘African Methodist imperialism’.  

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) work had begun in West Africa in 1849 when Thomas J. Bowen and two African Americans, Robert F. Hill and Harvey Goodall, were sent to Nigeria. Racial tension was ever present and by the late 1870s William Colley, a black Virginian, with the SBC in Nigeria, decided that blacks should work alone as ‘this is their field of labor’. The outcome was that Southern Black Baptists organised the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1880, although the body represented regional rather than denominational interests. Fifteen years later a degree of black denominational unity was achieved with the creation of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). Between 1895 and 1915 most NBC missionaries went to Africa, the first being sent in 1883, although there was also work in the Caribbean, South America and even in Russia. The view in the NBC, and also among many other African American Baptists, was that all humanity needed salvation, so a small part of NBC funds was regularly allocated for general mission work. But the NBC was also insistent that it should be an exclusively black funded and directed organisation. These, and other differences within the NBC, led to the formation of the Lott Cary Baptist Foreign Mission Convention in 1897. The first Lott Cary Convention missionary, Clinton C. Boone, went to Congo in 1901, with financial support from the American Baptist Missionary Union.

The AMEC had formed a Home and Foreign Missionary Society as early as 1844. The church was small until the 1860s and its foreign focus was limited to Liberia. By 1865 the AMEC had grown to over 200,000 members and had in James Townsend a mission secretary with organising skills and a passion for African mission, although not for emigration schemes. Mission funds grew and work was extended to Sierra Leone. By 1893 the AME had appointed Henry Turner as Bishop of Africa. Turner, also an emigrationist, founded and edited the Voice of Missions from 1893-1900, the first periodical from an African American denomination, in which he fanned enthusiasm for mission work. The AMEZ church followed suit and in 1896 also appointed a Bishop for Africa, John Bryan Small, a West Indian who had worked in British Honduras and the Gold Coast. By the end of the century, AMEZ work was established in Liberia and the Gold Coast. An independent ‘Ethiopian’ Methodist church was formed in South Africa in 1892. Four years later it affiliated with the AMEC, the first time that an African American
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In 1898, Bishop Turner arrived in Cape Town for a six weeks tour to organise the new work. The institutions were hastily put into place but all was not easy with the merger. As Campbell says: ‘For all the talk of racial affinity and providential reunion, African and African Americans had come together in distinctly self-referential terms’. And the political climate in South Africa, and in the newly emerging settler colonies to the north, was to prove distinctly unwelcoming to African American missionaries.

**Education and professionalism**

Both the white-led and the African American churches placed considerable emphasis on training men and women for African mission. A later vision of the African American missions was to bring Africans to the United States for education in their new schools and colleges. The first known institution was the Foreign Mission School for blacks at Cornwall, Connecticut, founded in 1825, which closed within two years without seeing a single student. As we have seen, the Calabar Theological Institute and Codrington College led the way in initial missionary training in the 1840s-50s. In the United States the American Missionary Association, founded in 1846 and combining abolitionism with missionary zeal, opened schools and universities for blacks. Wilberforce University was bought by the AMEC in 1863 and trained black missionaries. White agencies also sponsored schools to train blacks for work in Africa, for example Lincoln University in Pennsylvania founded in 1854 by the Northern Presbyterians, and the Stewart Missionary Foundation, established in 1894, which later became part of the Northern Methodists sponsored Gammon Seminary at Atlanta. Other major black colleges with mission training programmes were Spelman, Hampton and Tuskegee. Many of these institutions also began to train Africans sent by white agencies or by the AMEC. For example, John Chilembwe trained at Lynchburg, a college opened by the Virginia State Baptist Convention ‘to prepare Christian preachers, teachers and workers for work among Negroes’; James Aggrey, from the Gold Coast, studied at the AMEZ Livingstone College, Salisbury NC; John Dube, later to become the first president-general of the South African Native National Congress in 1912, studied at Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

There were also British institutions that trained people of African origin and descent for missionary and Christian service. The oldest, St Augustine’s College, Canterbury, was established to train missionary
clergy for the Anglican Church overseas. Students included men from the West Indies, for example Lambert MacKenzie from British Guiana, the first black from that region to become an ordained Anglican, who subsequently served in West Africa, and several men sent from southern and central Africa by the CMS and the Universities Mission to Central Africa. Pastors’ College, founded by C.H. Spurgeon to train Baptist preachers, took in several African Americans between 1875 and 1903, as did the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Mission, where James Newby, another African American, was trained before going to work in West Africa. Thomas L. Johnson, a former slave, briefly served in West Africa with the BMS before becoming an evangelist in Britain, Calvin Richardson, also from the United States, served with the Baptist Missionary Society in Cameroon and then in Congo, as did Simeon C. Gordon from Jamaica; William Forde, from Barbados, worked for more than 50 years in Costa Rica for the Jamaican BMS. Less well known was the Congo Training Institute at Colwyn Bay, North Wales, founded in 1887 by a former Baptist missionary to Congo, William Hughes. Hughes’s idea was to ‘train African young men in this country, in the hope that many of them will return to their native land either as missionaries, schoolmasters, or useful handicraftsmen’. The first two students were from Congo and they were followed by more than 150 others, mainly from Nigeria but also from the Caribbean. The result was few effective missionaries although some Africans returned home fluent in Welsh! Closure came in 1911 with scandal over a local girl made pregnant by a West Indian who was loosely attached to the Institute, all richly aired in the local press—‘Black Baptists Brown Baby!’—and nationally in the pages of John Bull.

Colleges in the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain were training black missionaries from both sides of the Atlantic. The traffic was two-way with Africans coming to Britain and America, and African Americans going to Africa, often via Britain where they might speak in churches and attempt to raise funds. But there was also the movement of models of education from black institutions to Africa, especially the industrial schools of Tuskegee and Hampton that found fertile imitation in Liberia and at the hands of John Dube at Ohlange in South Africa.

Congresses and conventions

Besides education and training, the enthusiasts for African American missionary work also organised congresses and conventions. The American
Missionary Association sponsored The World’s Congress on Africa in conjunction with the Chicago World’s Fair in August 1893. A further Congress on Africa was held in Atlanta in late 1895 with ‘discussions centred around the industrial, intellectual, moral and spiritual “progress” of Africa’. At the Negro Young People’s Christian and Educational Congress in Atlanta, 1902, listeners were told that:

> African natives can best be reached by the American Negro. First because he is identified with him; this identification gives him a true knowledge of those who he would help. This is one of the essentials to the success of all missionary effort. The Negro, in the second place, is in sympathy with his race. It is his own and not another’s. The American Negro is the bone and sinew of the African Negro. . . .

The expectation was that young men and women would respond to Ethiopia’s open arms and take heed of the Continent’s call to ‘come over and help us’. However, when Booker T. Washington called together the International Conference on the Negro at Tuskegee in April 1912, most of those who attended were white. Together with the few African Americans present, they looked at how missionaries and educators could work within the new colonial systems of Africa. And the colonial order had become increasingly hostile to the presence of African American missionaries.

**The central question of race**

Ironically, the increase in African American missionary activity in Africa coincided with European imperial expansion across the Continent. White colonialism with its overt racial agenda steadily determined that African Americans were unsuitable for missionary work in Africa. Indeed, by the first decade of the twentieth century their presence was increasingly seen as being a destabilising one. The issues of race and colour had always been central to the African American missionary venture in Africa. White agencies such as the ABCFM and the SBC deemed black missionaries to be inferior to white, while many African Americans, and certainly the black agencies, assumed their racial appropriateness for evangelising Africa. At the same time most African American missionaries viewed African peoples and institutions through a Western prism of prejudice. There were a few rare exceptions to this, for example Alexander Camphor and William Sheppard, who did not demean African culture but made great efforts to understand and explain it.

African Americans employed by white agencies invariably functioned within structures that were discriminatory at home and in the field. It was assumed that whites would be in positions of leadership and in
control of field operations. Archdeacon Holkerton of Antigua, discussing the employment of black people in West Africa in 1839, stated: ‘When you forward them from England, send as their superintendent, one of ourselves, a minister who shall direct their energies, bear with their weaknesses’. Four years later he totally opposed sending black men.67 Most black missionaries soon became all too aware of their place in the racial order. It was most obvious to the Rev. Harrison W. Ellis, who, along with his wife and two children, had been freed from slavery with the help of churches in Mississippi and Alabama in order that he could be sent by the Presbyterians from New Orleans to Liberia.68 It was made palpably clear to most black missionaries that they were not the equals of their white colleagues. The appointment of Dr Archibald Hewan, a Jamaican graduate of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, to the Scottish mission in Calabar took many months to process while a fellow white missionary was accepted within days. Nevertheless, in West Africa, Hewan’s skills and his ‘amiable industriousness’ as doctor and preacher ensured that he was treated as an equal. In 1865 he successfully brought charges against his senior white missionary who had been vindictive and unreasonable.69 Clinton C. Boone, sent by the ABFMU to Congo, received patronising treatment from his white colleagues; he returned to the United States, trained as a doctor and then went to Liberia but with the Lott Cary Baptists.70 James Hemans and his wife, the first West Indian missionaries to serve with the LMS in central Africa, were shamefully ‘ostracized and deprived of ordinary spiritual fellowship’ by white colleagues. At the end of their second tour, after nearly 20 years service, the Hemans resigned and returned to Jamaica.71 William Sheppard, employed by the Southern Presbyterians in Congo, was similarly treated by his sending agency.72

Most black missionaries were subjected to different terms of service from whites. They received lower pay, were expected to serve for longer periods in the field, had shorter and less frequent furloughs, climbed more slowly up the promotion ladder and rarely achieved seniority over whites, and their children were unlikely to be offered the educational benefits available to white missionaries. As white notions of racial superiority increased in the late nineteenth century, so also did the ambiguous position of black missionaries in Africa. According to a white missionary with the Scottish mission in Calabar, writing in 1880: ‘The natives there are natives, the Europeans are Europeans; but those from Jamaica are neither, and yet would wish to be on equal footing with the Europeans’.73 Occasionally black missionaries complained at discriminatory treatment, as did the Jamaicans Clerk and Jarrett in a joint
letter to the Scottish Presbyterian home board, written in October 1882, stating that they had been under the impression that ‘their status as ordained missionaries were [sic] in every respect equal to other missionaries’. In 1901 one white missionary with the Southern Baptist Convention argued that black missionaries should be sent only if ‘they are willing to come out and stay with no hope of returning home’. Segregated mission stations were not unknown, the American Board admitting that their station at Galangue in Angola had been so at various times.

Besides the structural differences accorded to black missionaries by white agencies, there were also personal distinctions. Rarely were black missionaries addressed formally with ‘Rev’, ‘Mr’, ‘Mrs’, although the Southern Presbyterians in Congo did so. Higher standards of personal behaviour appear to have been expected from black missionaries than from whites. Blacks were often regarded as being less stable in personality than whites, and certainly it was thought that they were more likely to fall prey to lust when confronted with the sight of scantily clad African women. Although inter-racial marriage by and among missionaries had not been uncommon in the early and mid-nineteenth century, by the latter part of the century it was increasingly frowned upon, particularly black missionaries marrying white women. Christian missionaries and their supporters were no more immune than other sections of the white population from the then current ideas of scientific racism. Predictably, the more rigid racial lines drawn by American white agencies reflected the discriminatory social divisions of the United States.

The gender differences within mission work were also firmly drawn, in principle if not in practice. Black women missionaries, in particular, were patronised by white colleagues more than were men. Their role, as indeed that of white women as well, was seen principally as teachers and evangelists of women and as models of Christian home-making. However, some forceful black women missionaries were involved in translation work, for example Althea Edmiston in the Congo. Mrs Samuel ‘Mammy’ Fuller worked in Duke Town, Nigeria, from 1858 to 1921, and by hard work, linguistic skill, and through personal contacts acquired over many years became a presence to be reckoned with. Another Jamaican, Mrs Samuel Edgerley, with the Scottish Calabar mission, was ‘headstrong and self-willed and knew how to use the Mission’s weak spots to her own advantage’ thus securing advantages given to whites but rarely extended to blacks.
Black missionaries and European imperialism

African American responses to European colonial rule in Africa were divided. Most black missionaries, predictably, viewed Africa through Western eyes and saw the imposition of European rule as helpful in extending Christianity in the Continent. But there were also black missionary critics of colonialism and particularly of specific colonial rulers. The atrocities carried out by the Congo Free State were publicised by William Sheppard and Henry P. Hawkins, and their white colleague Samuel Lapsley, all of whom worked for the Southern Presbyterians. This led to Sheppard being prosecuted by the Free State authorities.\textsuperscript{78}

One black missionary gave up Christian evangelism to become a persistent critic of empire. Dr Theophilus Scholes, from Jamaica, and a graduate of Edinburgh and Brussels universities, had worked for the American Baptists as a medical missionary in both Congo and West Africa during the 1880s. By the late 1890s he appears to have abandoned his Christian faith; he turned to writing political works that criticised European racism and imperial rule.\textsuperscript{79} Scholes had spent some time at Hughes’s Congo Institute; he had been an evangelist in Britain, and was known to a good number of black British and African Americans. He is an enigmatic figure and little is known of his life and activities after 1912, not even the place and date of his death, which probably occurred in the late 1930s.

In the early years of colonial rule there was increasing opposition to African American missionaries, although Harry Johnston held a contrary view. He argued that ‘Some of the best, hardest-working and most satisfactory sensible missionaries I have ever known have been West Indians—in colour as dark as the African they go to teach, but in excellence of mind, heart and brain capacity, fully equal to their European colleagues.’\textsuperscript{80} By the first decade of the twentieth century in South Africa and in the white settler colonies, black missionaries were viewed with increasing suspicion and the ‘honorary white’ status accorded to African Americans was ended. The role of the AMEC in South Africa after 1896 and the northward spread of its work into central Africa, aroused fears of Ethiopianism and anxiety that African Americans were likely to stir up racial unrest. The Bambatha rebellion in Natal in 1906 reinforced official and popular fears. These were graphically presented in John Buchan’s novel, \textit{Prester John}, published in 1910, where the menacing Zulu minister, John Laputa, is the product of an African American college. John Chilembwe’s revolt in Nyasaland five years later seemed to confirm for many whites Buchan’s prescience. The ‘sea of
charismatic fire’ which swept across central Africa after the First World War, Kimbanguism in the Belgian Congo, and the strident demands of racial rights from Garvey and his followers that penetrated Africa, further increased white colonial apprehensions about the presence and the activities of black missionaries.

South Africa and white settler colonies made entry increasingly difficult for black missionaries. The Southern Rhodesia government, it was reported, ‘does not view the introduction of these people for mission purposes, whether independently or under control, with favour’. In Kenya, African Americans were clearly unwelcome although Max Yergan and several black colleagues served there with the YMCA, 1916-18, and then later in South Africa. South Africa’s Immigration Act, 1913, was used to restrict the entry of black missionaries into the country: the Rev. Herbert A. Payne and his wife, sponsored by the NBC, a body outspoken in its condemnation of Ethiopianism, were detained at Cape Town as ‘undesirable aliens’ in early 1917; Bishop Vernon, of the AMEC, was similarly detained for three days in January 1921. The official view in British and French colonies by 1921 was that the presence of black missionaries was inappropriate. A few remained or continued to enter colonies, those entering French colonies requiring the governor’s permission to do so; the least race conscious colonial administration was the Portuguese in Angola. As the Lott Cary Mission reported in 1922: ‘We have scarcely begun to redeem Africa. We are shut out from large areas by the strong arm of human laws. We find little welcome in our Fatherland save in the Republic of Liberia.’

Colonial discrimination against black missionaries was discussed at the Le Zoute International Conference in September 1926. As Edwin Smith reported: ‘There are no legislative restrictions specifically directed against the American Negro, but most African Governments are opposed to, or place difficulties in the way of, the sending of American Negroes to Africa’. A guarded and cautious recommendation by the conference offered to support African American missionaries that were sent to Africa provided they went under the auspices of ‘responsible societies of recognized and well-established standing’. It was hardly the ringing endorsement that African American delegates had hoped for. However, it was the most that white international mission agencies were prepared to offer. They too had deep suspicions about certain African American activities in colonial Africa. The result was that in the inter-war years the number of African American missionaries in Africa steadily declined. Only after 1945 did they begin to pick up again.
Conclusion

In the period 1780-1920, relatively few African American missionaries went to Africa. By 1900 just over 115 African American missionaries were working in sub-Saharan Africa: 68 in Liberia, 20 in the Belgian Congo, 13 in Sierra Leone, six in South Africa, three each in Nigeria and Mozambique, and one each to Cameroon, Angola and Southern Rhodesia. Between 1877 and 1900, the black U.S. agencies, the AMEC, AMEZ and the NBC, sponsored nearly 80 missionaries in Africa and supported 30 Africans in training in the United States. However, in the period under discussion, and beyond, the number of African Americans in Africa as missionaries relative to the total black population of the U.S. was exceedingly small. In the years 1820-1980, some c. 30,000 Americans served as missionaries in Africa. African Americans from the United States, who represented 11.6 percent of the total population in 1900 and a slightly larger percentage in 1970, provided only c. 600 missionaries for sub-Saharan Africa in that same period. (The figure for the West Indies is not available.) Of that number, half were women, two thirds being unmarried and the other third ‘missionary wives’. Most African Americans served in English-speaking West African countries, the largest number going to Liberia.

Although African Americans constituted over ten percent of the United States population, and as a community were noticeably religious and with some specific motivation towards Africa, this essay has indicated some of the reasons why so few black missionaries went to Africa and why there was a marked decline in their number after c. 1900. Despite the growth of black churches after the Civil War, most were rural and poorly endowed with little sense of overseas mission purpose, and where that did exist they were often reliant on the benevolence and the patronage of richer white mission boards and agencies. Although a good number of African Americans did go to West Africa, their purpose was to settle and not to evangelise indigenous peoples. The Student Volunteer Movement, so influential in mission growth during the late nineteenth century, recruited most of its mission volunteers from the universities, the places where African Americans were least likely to be found. Black missionaries who made it to the field were subject to white paternalism that discouraged long-term service. And, by the first two decades of the twentieth century, black missionaries were increasingly unwelcome in colonial Africa. An additional reason why so few African American Christians volunteered for mission work may be that, born and raised in relative poverty, they sought material advancement at home rather than sacrificial service overseas.
Although there were stories of success, generally African American missionaries gained few converts. Nevertheless, black missionary activity helped to stimulate an interest in Africa among ordinary African Americans in the United States, and to a lesser extent in the Caribbean. This was conveyed to church congregations by returning missionaries, by mission literature, and by denominational conferences that promoted an awareness of the Continent. African American Christian mission activity in Africa thus needs to be seen as a significant contribution to a growing awareness of pan-Africanism among ordinary black people in the United States well before the rise of Garveyism and the Harlem Renaissance.  

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was read to the Imperial History seminar, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, in late November 2002. I am grateful to members of the seminar, and particularly to Professor Andrew Porter, for various helpful comments.


3. Raboteau, *Fire in Their Bones*, chs. 2 and 3, looks at ideas of black exodus and also black destiny in nineteenth-century America.


22. Quoted by Williams, Black Americans, pp. 7-8.


34. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years*, pp. 211 & 229.


41. Ibid.


44. Ibid., p. 14.


46. Vassady, ‘Role of the West Indian Missionary’, ch. V.
47. Quoted by Vassady, ‘Role of the West Indian Missionary’, p. 77.
49. Quoted by Williams, Black Americans, p. 11.
52. T.J. Bowen, Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856 (Charleston, 1857).
53. Quoted by Martin, Black Baptists and African Missions, p. 49; this is primarily a study of the home organisation of Black Baptist missionary activity. See also Roth, ‘Grace not Race’, ch. 3.
54. Fitts, Lott Carey, chs. 4 and 5.
59. Occasional Papers from St. Augustine’s College, Canterbury, from 1861; R.J.E. Boggis, A History of St. Augustine’s College Canterbury (St. Augustine’s College, Canterbury, 1907).
60. Spurgeon’s College, London. Student Records. James Newby worked first with the CMS and then the Baptists in the late 1870s; see E. McHardie & Andrew Allan, The Prodigal Continent and Her Prodigal Son & Missionary; Or, the Adventures, Conversion and African Labours of Rev. James Newby (London, 2nd edn., 1885). The Institute, also known as Harley College, was founded in the early 1870s by Henry and Fanny Guinness who were both active in promoting mission work in the Congo.
65. Jacobs, African Nexus, p. 46; see also pp. 41, 46-7 & 77.
71. Robert I. Rotberg, *Christian Missionaries and the Creation of Northern Rhodesia 1880-1924* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1965), pp. 159-60. Also ‘James Hemans’, in Gerald Anderson, *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids WI, 1998), p. 287. During his furlough, Hemans spoke at North Street Congregational Church in Kingston. A young Jamaican, Harold Moody, undoubtedly heard his fellow countryman’s account of mission endeavour, although it is doubtful if Hemans spoke of the racial slights he had experienced. Later Moody confided to a friend that he wished to do something for ‘the race’ and this, and an entry in his Bible, indicates his hope of going to Africa as a missionary. As a student in London he continued to entertain this idea. Although his subsequent medical career kept him in Britain, Moody nevertheless remained an active supporter of missionary societies, particularly the LMS whose chairman he became in 1943. This is drawn from a biography of Moody that I am writing.


79. Theophilus Scholes, *British Empire and Alliances: Britain’s Duty to her Colonies and Subject Races* (London, 1899), and *Glimpses of the Ages, or, the ‘Superior’ and ‘Inferior’ Races, so-called, Discussed in the Light of Science and History* (John Long, London, 2 vols, 1905 and 1908).


86. Ibid., pp. 123-4.


89. African American clergy also played a prominent role in the first Pan-African Congress held in London in 1900. By 1910, former missionaries in the Congo such as William Sheppard and Dr Clinton C. Boone, were regarded by African American opinion as experts on Africa. This eminence was further endorsed by W.E.B. Du Bois, who had no natural sympathy for Christian mission work, when he invited Sheppard to be principal speaker at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples symposium on Africa in 1919. See Williams, *Black Americans*, pp. 161 ff.
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