



GTU

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 8, Issue 1

ISSN 2380-7458

Article

Interfaith Engagement as a Threat to Colonialism: Recovered Narratives of the Last Days and Legacy of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807-1891)

Author(s): Pamela J. Stevens

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 8, no. 1 (2023): 70-87.

Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2023

Online article published on: March 5, 2023

Copyright Notice:

This file and its contents are copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2023. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding the use of its resources, as discussed below:

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions pertaining to further use of this article, please email the Managing Editor at bjrt@ses.gtu.edu.

The *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's mission.

Interfaith Engagement as a Threat to Colonialism: *Recovered Narratives of the Last Days and Legacy of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807–1891)*

Pamela J. Stevens

*Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

ABSTRACT: This essay describes an example of how scholars in postmodernity undertake the liberative work of contesting narratives that privilege colonial orientations. It explains the imposition of a British missional failure on the life story of the first African Anglican Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807–1891). In his later years, Bishop Crowther endured a strategic re-direction in the Church Missionary Society away from the policies that had formed, educated, and promoted him. After British colonialism eclipsed earlier missionary goals of developing indigenous leaders for autonomous churches, successive colonial missionary leaders reduced the authority and territory that their predecessors had granted to Crowther. Historians have interpreted these actions as evidence of brokenness and failure at the end of Crowther's life. Such a historical perspective, however, faces interrogation in postmodernity because it is incongruent with the complex realities of Crowther's final years and legacy. A review exposes how Crowther's indigenous orientation, multiculturalism, and more nuanced interfaith approach threatened colonial narratives and how historians employed a narrative of failure to diminish his legacy. Reassessing the history of Crowther's life and work from within colonial narratives reveals with greater clarity the vulnerability of his position in his historical context.

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 8, No. 1
© 2023 by the Graduate Theological Union

This essay describes an example of how historians in postmodernity undertake the liberative work of contesting narratives that privilege colonial orientations. It explains the imposition of a failed missionary

movement on the life story of the first African Anglican Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807–1891), and the efforts of postmodern scholars to recover the narrative history of the end of Crowther’s life. When Crowther was barely a teenager, a rival tribe invaded his village of Oshogun, separated him from his family, and sold him into slavery. Crowther was on a Portuguese slaving ship bound for the Americas when the British Royal Navy intercepted the ship, boarded it, and brought it to Freetown in Sierra Leone.¹ There, Anglican missionaries received, baptized, and educated the boy called Ajayi, who upon his baptism adopted the name of an English missionary, Samuel Crowther.² Samuel Ajayi Crowther grew to become a bicultural, bilingual Christian. He proved to be a brilliant student and pursued educational opportunities.³ In his adult years, Crowther served as a translator with an Anglican missionary expedition on the Niger River, maintained an extensive correspondence with leaders in the Church Missionary Society about its projects in western Africa, was ordained to the Anglican priesthood, and then became the first Black African in the Anglican episcopacy.⁴ In his lifetime, Crowther was an accomplished author, translator, teacher, missionary, community organizer, and public figure.⁵ At the end of his remarkable life story, however, historians documented tragic brokenness, desolation, and failure.⁶ Such descriptions conclude that “the sad dissensions which split the Church Missionary Society’s Niger mission after 1870” had served to undermine or undo Crowther’s lifetime of accomplishments.⁷

For most of Crowther’s life the Society had advocated the planting of Christian missions to nurture and empower strong local, indigenous

¹ Andrew F. Walls, “Crowther, Samuel Ajayi,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998), 160–1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* vol. 16, no. 1 (January 1992): 18.

⁶ J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891* (London: Longmans, 1965), 250–251; Stephen Ney, “Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Age of Literature,” *Research in African Literatures*, 46, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 40.

⁷ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Leicester, UK: Apollos Press, 1990), 163.

leadership of indigenous communities so that the British missionary presence might eventually become unnecessary. This perspective was based on abolitionist notions of heroic British rescue of Africans victimized by the slave trade. It envisioned an Anglicized Africa for Blacks. In this way Christianization and Anglicization offered the means of idealized self-sufficiency. These early Anglican missions promoted the self-governance of formerly enslaved people who could be missionaries and leaders themselves to convert Africans from Muslim and indigenous traditions to Christianity.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the Anglican missionary vision changed. It gave way to a more centralized structure based in Britain, under strictly white leaders in the Niger who accompanied and supported British colonialism dependent on oppression of indigenous people.⁸ Proponents of the newer colonial model of mission effectively eradicated the missionary world in which Samuel Ajayi Crowther had discerned and lived out his vocation. According to the postmodern historian Brian Stanley, dissensions in the Niger mission were “fomented by young and zealous [European] missionaries skeptical of the intrinsic capacity of the negro to rule.”⁹ Stanley’s description captures the drastic shift within the Church Missionary Society that resulted in the loss of territory and authority in Crowther’s later years. The events surrounding this shift in missional vision and leadership fed a historical narrative in which Crowther’s identity and authority were, like the home he had once lost in a fire, “gone like a dream.”¹⁰

This narrative of loss overwhelms the complications of Crowther’s biculturality and his commitment to Anglican missionary in his context. This perspective also served some African historical accounts which sought to de-emphasize British colonial influence. According to the scholar Jehu J.

⁸ Laura Murphy, “Obstacles in the Way of Love: the Enslavement of Intimacy in Samuel Crowther and Ama Ata Aidoo,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 50.

⁹ Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 163.

¹⁰ Samuel Ajayi Crowther, “Letter to Henry Venn, December 1862,” in F.J. Ajayi Ade, *Language in the Yoruba Mission*, (Henry Martyn Lectures at Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK: Henry Martyn Centre, 2013), Cambridge University, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.cccw.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ajayi-Prof-Jacob-F.-Ade-252628-Oct.lect-2.pdf>.

Hanciles, even twentieth-century Nigerian historians like G.O.M. Tasié and E.A. Ayandele did not consider Crowther beyond his Anglican missionary identity.¹¹ They portrayed him as a saintly but fallible bishop who was “hounded to his death” by a new breed of young and zealous white European missionaries.¹²

The repetitive historical theme of brokenness at the end of Crowther’s life among historians, however, faces interrogation in postmodernity because it is incongruent with the attested realities of Crowther’s final years and legacy. While the missionary vision that had promoted Crowther’s episcopacy experienced such brokenness, and while Crowther struggled under British colonialism along with other indigenous people across Africa, there is little to support the conclusion of a final failure or brokenness. In fact, the documentary evidence supports Crowther’s resilience. He enjoyed a full life of ministry, community and family, published his translations widely, and engaged in extensive correspondence to leave for future generations of Nigerians and Anglicans a vibrant and complex legacy.¹³

An Early Missionary Vision

The child Ajayi was born in circa 1807 in the village of Oshogun in Yorubaland, in what is now Western Nigeria.¹⁴ In 1821 Fulani from the north invaded Oshogun during the Owu wars (the Yoruba Civil Wars) of 1821–1829.¹⁵ The invaders separated Ajayi from his family and eventually sold him to Portuguese slave traders.¹⁶ Ajayi was aboard a slave ship bound for the Americas when a British naval patrol intercepted it and brought it to

¹¹ J.J. Hanciles, “Dandeson Coates Crowther and the Niger Delta Pastorate: Blazing Torch or Flickering Flame?” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1994): 166–72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 166–7.

¹³ Adélékè Adéèkó, “Writing Africa Under the Shadow of Slavery: Quaake, Wheatley, and Crowther,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, no. 4, (Winter, 2009), 1–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468159>.

¹⁴ Walls, “Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” 15.

¹⁵ Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola, “Yorubaland in the Nineteenth Century: the Height of Trouble,” in *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 161–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587656>.

¹⁶ Walls, “Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” 17.

Freetown in Sierra Leone.¹⁷ After Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807, it established the West Africa Squadron, a group of Royal Navy ships that patrolled the waters around Africa, hoping to reduce the appeal and market size of the slave trade and to liberate as many enslaved people as possible.¹⁸ Between its founding in 1808 and 1860, the West Africa Squadron captured approximately 1,600 slave ships carrying 150,000 people who had been sold to slave traders.¹⁹ Delivery to Freetown was complex, however. It represented both an escape from slavery and, simultaneously, a form of imposed colonialism. The Sierra Leone Company, organized by the British abolitionist William Wilberforce, established Freetown in an effort to offer opportunities for marginalized Black people in London and formerly enslaved people in North America.²⁰ Despite these idealized intentions, the effort suffered from embedded racism, “untested metropolitan assumptions,” and complex relationships.²¹

In this context of Freetown, Anglican missionaries received the newly arrived Ajayi, young and alone, and effectively adopted him. They saw to his baptism in the bicultural name Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The missionaries encouraged Crowther’s education, in which he excelled.²² As one of the earliest graduates of the Fourah Bay Missionary College in Freetown, Crowther traveled to England, and later participated in missionary expeditions on the Niger and in projects to provide translations of the Bible and the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* into African languages, including his native Yoruba.²³ Anglican evangelicals attached themselves to Crowther’s achievements and story, in which they were his heroic white saviors and champions who had liberated him from not only slavery but

¹⁷ Murphy, “Obstacles in the Way of Love,” 50.

¹⁸ Anthony Sullivan, *Britain’s War Against the Slave Trade: the Operations of the Royal Navy’s West Africa Squadron 1807–1867* (Yorkshire, UK and Philadelphia: Frontline/Pen & Sword Books, 2020), 21; Mary Wills, *Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade in West Africa*, Liverpool Studies in International Slavery (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 17.

¹⁹ Sullivan, *Britain’s War Against the Slave Trade*, 21; Wills, *Envoys of Abolition*, 17–18.

²⁰ Isaac Land and Andrew M. Schocket, “New Approaches to the Founding of the Sierra Leone Colony, 1786–1808,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 9, no. 3 (Dec. 2008), [doi:10.1353/cch.0.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.0.0021).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Walls, “Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” 19.

²³ Ibid., 15.

also heathenism and savagery. The missionary system credited itself with Crowther's significant intellectual accomplishments and devout Anglican devotion. In this way Crowther's life experiences became entangled with the success of a particular missionary vision, one that sought to empower indigenous leaders for an indigenous frontier church that existed only outside the British political structure.

This vision was prominent under the leadership of Henry Venn, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 until his death in January of 1873.²⁴ Crowther's sharp intellect, biculturality, missional gifts, and his embrace of the Anglican tradition in which he had been raised captivated Venn, who promoted Crowther to the Church Missionary Society and Church of England leaders.²⁵ Crowther's status as the product of Anglican abolitionist efforts and as an educational and cultural success story matched Venn's view of foreign mission as a temporary condition that should give way to "self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating local churches" led by local leaders.²⁶ As Venn envisioned them, these self-governing churches were contextualized expressions of the evangelical arm of the Church of England.²⁷ The theme of triumphal Anglican rescue from slavery and heathenism that characterized early nineteenth-century missional efforts in Africa, and Venn's vision in particular, claimed Crowther's story as one of its own success.²⁸ Effectively, as the scholar of literary theory Adéléké Adéèkó concludes, "the hero of Samuel Ajayi Crowther's short emancipation autobiography is told...as the fulfillment of the truth of the Christian gospel."²⁹

At the heart of the appropriation of Crowther's story is the Church Missionary Society, founded by London evangelical Christians as part of a movement of voluntary societies and Sunday schools seeking to create a

²⁴ Ney, "Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Age of Literature," 40; Steven Maughan, "Imperial Christianity?" Bishop Montgomery and the Foreign Missions of the Church of England, 1895–1915," in *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914*, ed. Andrew Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–39.

²⁵ Rebecca Catto, "The Church Mission Society and Reverse Mission," in *Religion on the Move! New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World*, ed. Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 83.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Maughan, "Imperial Christianity?" 38.

²⁸ Ibid., 38–39.

²⁹ Adéèkó, "Writing Africa," 25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468159>.

public awareness of the imperial duty of British Christians to share the gift of the Christian gospel and along with it the gift of white European civilization.³⁰ This vision equated indigenous religion, dress, and lifestyle with poverty in need of address. In this missional context, with Venn's support and encouragement Crowther embraced his biculturality and his adopted Christian faith. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1843 and later to the episcopacy as the first African bishop in the Church of England. Crowther's episcopal territory was "the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of the Queen's dominions," a title reflecting constraints on Crowther's leadership imposed by British leaders to avoid any circumstance in which Crowther would have authority over white Anglicans.³¹ With these words, Crowther became a bishop of the uncolonized frontier, so that his was strictly a missionary episcopacy. Over time, as Venn's vision gave way to one in which Anglican mission merged with British imperialism in Africa under the hierarchical leadership of church and state, the idea of indigenous leadership came to be at odds with colonial rule in Africa. Consequently, white missionaries in the hierarchy of the Church of England took measures in Crowther's episcopacy to avoid their having to submit to Black African authority.³²

Nuanced Interfaith Encounters

The postmodern historian Alison Climenhaga conducts a close reading of Crowther's published letters, journals, and treatises, along with his papers preserved in the Church Missionary Society archives.³³ She finds in them a contextually located but surprisingly nuanced approach to interfaith encounter. She argues convincingly that despite the unflattering language Crowther often deployed, the documents reveal his views of both Islam and indigenous traditional religion as complex and balanced. Crowther was bilingual, Black, African, and an Anglican convert. He worked as a translator

³⁰ Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 35.

³¹ Walls, "Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther," 19.

³² Stanley, *Bible and the Flag*, 163.

³³ Alison Fitchett Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance: Samuel Crowther's Approach to Islam and Traditional Religion" *Anglican Theological Review* 96, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 661–81.

and cultural bridge in nearly constant interreligious encounters throughout his life.³⁴ Climenhaga finds that Crowther's extensive observations and detailed descriptions of the practices of the people he encountered indicate his interest in understanding other religions.³⁵ While the language of Crowther's references to Islam, traditional religion, and their adherents is often pejorative, Climenhaga identifies trends indicating curiosity and understanding. For example, Crowther reserved the terms heathenism and fetishism to apply to expressions of indigenous traditional religions, but he never applied these terms to Islam.³⁶ He differentiated Islam, a monotheistic tradition, based on his perception of its proximity to Christianity. Crowther referred to all non-Christian religions as superstitious, as did other contemporary Christian missionaries. Crowther's use of this language in its context, however, reveals nuance. The German missionary Frederick Schön, who was with Crowther on the first Niger Expedition of 1841, referred to superstition so frequently that it served as his primary descriptor for African religious beliefs and practices of all types. For Crowther, however, superstition was merely one among several differentiating terms, all of which he used less frequently.³⁷

Moreover, Crowther's missional dialogue was logical rather than strictly corrective or dismissive. Responding to Islamic respect for the archangel Jibreel, a counterpart of the Biblical Gabriel who acts as an intermediary between God and humans, Crowther noted that Gabriel's naming of Jesus as God's son in Luke 1:28-35 occurred long before the time of the prophet Muhammad.³⁸ Crowther allowed the fact to speak for itself without further judgment. He also addressed the value of education and literacy among African Muslims and noted his concerns that Muslim religious leaders were not well read. When he presented a copy of an Arabic Grammar to a Muslim mallam (religious scholar), he noted that the man could pronounce but not interpret the text. Crowther claimed to have used an English translation to provide the meaning of the words in the local

³⁴ Ibid., 664.

³⁵ Ibid., 665.

³⁶ Ibid., 666.

³⁷ Ibid., 668.

³⁸ Ibid., 669–71.

Nupe language, which fascinated the mallam.³⁹ In these examples, Crowther did not strictly correct people from other faith traditions, but he sought connection and employed logic and invitation in his interactions.⁴⁰ Crowther acknowledged Islam's sophistication and global reach, claiming that its superiority over traditional religion explained why so many indigenous people had embraced it. He reflected a notion from his Christian missionary context, claiming that in a hierarchy of religions, Islam was indeed superior to indigenous traditional religion due to its "monotheism, its literacy, and the long history of its bureaucratic and administrative capabilities."⁴¹ Crowther recounted visiting the Islamic celebration at the end of Ramadan, remarking that despite being the only Christian, he received a warm welcome.⁴² Considering his contextual biases, Crowther listened to and studied people from other traditions to invite engagement in a manner seldom evident among his British missionary counterparts. His actions indicate recognition of the people he met as not merely non-Christian, but as fellow Africans.

In his dialogue with African traditional religion, its similarities with his understanding of the ancient Israelite religion, including in its practice of sacrifice and polygamy, struck Crowther. The resemblances led him to hypothesize that the African traditions had descended by "imitation" from the "Levitical institution."⁴³ Other Christian missionaries, African and European alike, also speculated about the possible connections between traditional African religion and the religious practices of the Israelites.⁴⁴ For example, parallels between Biblical and African rituals encouraged Samuel Johnson (1846–1901), a Yoruba Anglican priest and historian, to postulate

³⁹ Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Christopher Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger: Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-1859* (London: Church Missionary House, 1859), 166, in Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 669.

⁴⁰ Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 668.

⁴¹ P.R. McKenzie, "Inter-Religious Encounters in West Africa," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 151 (1988): 51.

⁴² Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 168-170, in Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 676.

⁴³ John David Yeader Peel, "The Pastor and the Babalawo: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland," *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 362; John David Yeader Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2000), 184; in Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 670.

⁴⁴ Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 676.

that Yoruba customs descended from those of Israel by way of the Copts in Upper Egypt.⁴⁵ Driving this tendency was a desire to make Christianity a precedent in Yoruba history, so that conversion was not a break, but a recovery.⁴⁶ Crowther was, contextually, a progressive Christian who believed in the perfectibility of his fellow Africans, which John Loiello, a twentieth-century scholar of African history, identifies as a balance to Crowther's less tolerant remarks.⁴⁷

Crowther's papers also indicate that he cautioned against Christian missionaries correcting local traditions too hastily, implying that while the culture that shaped the identity of the people to whom he ministered was different from British culture, it merited respect and preservation. Climenhaga identifies a letter Crowther wrote to Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society advocating the engagement of liberated African Christian converts and their children from Sierra Leone to evangelize the Africans living along the Niger. Crowther perceived these as retaining a shared culture with other indigenous people that would help to bridge differences in ways not possible for Europeans or Africans from other regions.⁴⁸ Crowther's less rigid response to other religions and his sense of cultural affinity, however, did not coincide with the increasingly colonial British agenda in Africa that overwhelmed Venn's missional vision of indigenous missionary leadership.

A Narrative of Brokenness

The postmodern scholar of Christian mission Andrew Walls claims that "by degrees, Crowther's mission was dismantled by centralized financial controls, as young Europeans took over, dismissing, suspending, or

⁴⁵ Ibid., 672, 676.

⁴⁶ Fami J. Kolapo, "'Making Favorable Impressions': Bishop Crowther's C.M.S. Niger Mission in Jihadist Nupe Emirate, 1859–1879, in Chima J. Korie and G. Ugo Nwokeji, ed., *Religion, History, and Politics in Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Ogbu U. Kalu* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005), 38; in Climenhaga, *Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance*, 673.

⁴⁷ Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 675; John P. Loiello, "Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Founding of the C.M.S. Niger Mission, 1857–1862," *African Ephemera Collection*, accessed March 10, 2022, <http://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/africancollections/items/show/5055>.

⁴⁸ Climenhaga, "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance," 680.

transferring the African missionary staff” that Venn had assembled.⁴⁹ Walls identifies the tendency among historians to identify the end of Crowther's life in terms of brokenness, contesting it. Such a narrative imposes failure on Crowther's later years primarily through his association with the undoing of Venn's missionary project. It reduces Crowther at the end of his life to a tragic last relic of Venn's vision of an indigenous church. In this perspective, Crowther's illness, death, and succession by a European bishop were not merely developments in the final undoing of the evangelical vision in which the first Black Anglican bishop had been ordained but depicted a sad end for Crowther as well. Walls describes this depiction in staccato prose; “Crowther, desolate, died of a stroke. A European bishop succeeded him.”⁵⁰ Eugene Stock (1836–1928), who served as Editorial Secretary of the Church Missionary Society and knew Crowther, wrote a preface to a 1908 biography of Crowther by Jesse Page titled *The Black Bishop*. Stock recalls “the times of difficulty and controversy that caused [Crowther's] later years to be somewhat shadowed.”⁵¹ Before lauding Crowther's character, Stock notes that toward the end of his life Crowther lived “in an atmosphere of suspicion and scandal.”⁵²

Stock alludes to the fact that Crowther faced accusations later in his life of poor discipline and unauthorized local trade among the missionary agents who served under him. The perception among Venn's successors at the Church Missionary Society was that Crowther's missions were corrupt, adopted unauthorized methods, and were not successful in converting many Muslim people to Christianity.⁵³ These descriptions, however, have more to do with competing missionary visions and cultural context than with Crowther's skills or achievements. While his evangelical methods with Muslim people were focused on thoughtful listening and reconciliation toward conversion,⁵⁴ the new European missionaries in the 1880's aspired to an idealized result of mass conversions, in a colonizing vision of Christian

⁴⁹ Walls, “Crowther, Samuel Ajayi,” 160-161.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Eugene Stock, preface, in Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Ajayi Crowther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), v.

⁵² Ibid., vii.

⁵³ Maughan, “Imperial Christianity?” 39.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 40.

conquest.⁵⁵ The younger missionaries enforced centralized systems under white leadership in a structure that privileged British culture and economic practices.⁵⁶ Venn's successors discounted Crowther and his indigenous aides' use of trade as a means of evangelizing through relationships, conversation, and diversifying local economies.⁵⁷

However independently the localized Church Missionary Society operations functioned in Africa under Venn's leadership, and however progressive Venn's agenda may have been, the Church of England remained an established British institution. Ordained roles, particularly the episcopacy, had political implications as part of a strict church hierarchy. Within this structure, Anglican leaders chafed at Crowther's episcopacy as one with any authority over white English subjects, insisting that Crowther could hold authority only in a foreign missional context.⁵⁸ The idea was to ensure Crowther's leadership was separate, and limited to indigenous people outside of British political structures.

By the late 1880's as the Church of England regularized its missionary presence in the Niger as one that accompanied a colonial presence, "mission policy, racial attitudes, and evangelical spirituality" took new directions.⁵⁹ A detailed analysis of these structural changes in the Church Missionary Society is outside the scope of this essay except to confirm the importance of ecclesiastical and missional transitions in the narrative of Crowther's life story. Venn's strategy of localized leadership of missions and church communities in Africa, with its idealized goal of achieving eventual kinship and equality across races but within British culture, lost support and feasibility as missions grew closer to British colonial government. The idea of Anglican mission in western Africa as a transitional estate toward an autonomous indigenous local church came to an end. That this transition had a significant effect on Bishop Crowther's ministry is well attested.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Walls, "Crowther," 160-161.

Eugene Stock recalled that the “newer” Church Missionary Society leaders who visited Crowther and observed his activities cited faulty skills and processes as their justification to send English agents to relieve Bishop Crowther of some of the geographic areas for which he had been granted ecclesiastical responsibility in the 1880’s.⁶⁰ Stock notes that Crowther was surrounded by “predatory suspicion” arising out of his cultural difference, and that “malicious tongues” were at work criticizing “his administration.”⁶¹ The newer Church Missionary Society agents focused their criticism on Crowther’s practices of both hiring and trading with indigenous agents and local tribes rather than with white British missionaries and traders. To the colonial missionary agents, such a practice represented not only a violation of protocol, but indigenous empowerment, which posed a threat to white British supremacy.⁶² The imposition of a colonial system in Africa involved the constant fear of an uprising and sustained the necessity of oppression as a means of securing colonial authority. The criticisms of Crowther’s methods and the diminution of his episcopal territory influenced the way generations of historians described Crowther at the end of his life, as an elderly, dying, broken man, in a narrative of failure. In fact, these accounts merely describe Venn’s British missionary vision from the perspective of colonial ideas of authority. Historians were, as a result, complicit in holding Crowther’s life story captive to colonizing plot lines.

A Narrative of Triumph

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as a centralized English-led church in association with British rule in its African colonies drove changes in Anglican mission, Crowther’s life was deemed to have been broken along with the missionary vision that had promoted him.⁶³ Indeed, after Crowther’s death, there would be no indigenous Nigerian Anglican bishop for nearly a century. Postmodern authors from around the world, however, have begun to contest this perspective and to recognize the extent to

⁶⁰ Stock, *Black Bishop*, vii.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Maughan, “Imperial Christianity?” 39-40.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

which Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther lived a life of navigation, inter-religious listening, and translation to create the foundations of an African Anglican church not for a British colony but for an autonomous nation. Throughout his life, Crowther maintained the integrity of his faith and mission. Olakunle George, a postmodern Nigerian scholar of Black diasporic literature and history, observes that Crowther died knowing that he had succeeded in acquiring “the original agency” for what later became the “discourse of cultural and political decolonization in Black Africa.”⁶⁴ While a narrative of desolation and brokenness at the end of Crowther’s life threatened to obfuscate the vital role that he played in fulfilling the story of his homeland, George and other scholars recover the story of Crowther as a complex late-nineteenth-century Christianized African. By exposing the historical realities of the missionary experience, they limit its ability “to perpetuate racist and colonialist ideology.”⁶⁵

Global analytical scholarship in postmodernity has revealed the narratives imposed on the end of Crowther’s life to celebrate his legacy. Stephen Ney, a Canadian scholar and a Christian missionary in Freetown, Sierra Leone, explores social and literary contexts to highlight the complexities of Crowther’s writing as a project that transcends conceptualization as “a progression from precolonial orality to literacy and literature.”⁶⁶ Ney focuses on Crowther’s correspondence as deeply historical and literary. From a similar perspective, the postmodern British historian Laura Murphy draws from Crowther’s personal enslavement accounts to illuminate his storytelling in relation to the effects of the slave trade on African lives and on West African history.⁶⁷ Her work helps to recover Crowther’s life story from its fate as one of heroic Anglican rescue. Climenhaga, working from Australia, explores Crowther’s missionary engagement with his fellow Africans as a means of better understanding West African cultural traditions “to preserve and perfect” them.⁶⁸ Her work identifies the sensitivity of Crowther’s mission and of his methods of

⁶⁴ Olakunle George, “The ‘Native’ Missionary, The African Novel, and In-Between,” *Novel: A forum on Fiction* 36, no. 1 (2002): 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ney, “Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Age of Literature,” 37.

⁶⁷ Murphy, “Obstacles in the Way of Love,” 47.

⁶⁸ Climenhaga, “Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance,” 661.

evangelism. Adélékè Adéèkò, the postmodern Nigerian scholar, likewise extracts Crowther from the British missionary narrative and finds him in literary company with fellow epistolary artist Philip Quaque (1741-1816), the first African Anglican priest in Freetown nearly a generation before Crowther, along with the eighteenth-century American poet and former slave Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784). Adéèkò finds Crowther among resilient and heroic Christian figures an intersection with white Anglophone culture, toward reclaiming white narratives of Christian embodiment. Jehu J. Hanciles, originally from Freetown in Sierra Leone, is a postmodern scholar of World Christianities. He wrote a history focused on Crowther's eldest son Dandeson Coates Crowther (1844–1938), who served as the Anglican Archdeacon of the Niger from 1876 until 1926.⁶⁹ Hanciles assesses transitions in the Church Missionary Society in the late nineteenth century, pointing out the contributions of Bishop Crowther as an inspiring leader and turning away from a narrative of brokenness in the later part of Crowther's life.⁷⁰ In another study of nineteenth-century indigenous missionaries, the postmodern Nigerian scholars Solomon M. Mepaiyeda and Timothy Popoola analyze how a Eurocentric historiographical record of Nigerian Christianity has overlooked the contributions of African missionaries and Christians; their account recovers and empowering narratives within indigenous African missional historiography.⁷¹ These postmodern studies highlight the importance of narrative reclamation in church history as a liberative scholarly exercise.

Conclusion

As postmodern scholars recover it, the history of the final years of Samuel Ajayi Crowther is not one of brokenness and desolation but of resilience and inspiration. In Crowther's work and legacy, a narrative of biculturality, indigenous power, and fortitude triumphs. The work of exposing colonial entanglements as the source of a narrative of despair reveals Crowther's

⁶⁹ Hanciles, "Dandeson Coates Crowther," 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Solomon M. Mepaiyeda and Timothy Popoola, "The roles of indigenous missionaries and Christians in the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria, 1860-1969," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1, (Jan. 2019), <https://go.gale.com/apps/doc/A607426948/PPRP?u=gradtul&sid=bookmark-PPRP&xid=6cbdec12>.

deep complexities, vast accomplishments, and enduring legacy from within a fraught colonial context. As a result, the British colonialism behind the narrative that dominated themes of brokenness gives way to liberative interpretive possibilities. Crowther emerges as the resilient inspiration of a strong Anglican province within an autonomous Nigerian nation⁷² In this example, global postmodern scholarship plays a vital role in detangling colonialist narratives from the histories of people and events.

Pamela J. Stevens is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Theological Union in the Historical and Cultural Studies of Religion department, with a concentration in the History of Christianity. Her work focuses on the relationships of people with Anglican and Catholic institutional narratives in the areas of sixteenth-century Spain, Mexico, and England, with interest in a variety of colonial contexts.

Bibliography

- Ade Ajayi, J.F. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891*. London: Longmans, 1965.
- . “From Mission to Church: The Heritage of the Church Mission Society.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 23, no. 2 (1999), 5055, 53.
- Adéèkó, Adélékè. “Writing Africa Under the Shadow of Slavery: Quaque, Wheatley, and Crowther,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, no. 4, (Winter, 2009): 1-24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468159>.
- Catto, Rebecca. “The Church Mission Society and Reverse Mission.” In *Religion on the Move! New Dynamics of Religious Expansion in a Globalizing World*, edited by Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar, 81–5. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.
- Climenhaga, Alison Fitchett. “Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance: Samuel Crowther’s Approach to Islam and Traditional Religion.” *Anglican Theological Review* 96, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 661–81.
- Crowther, Samuel Ajayi. “Letter to Henry Venn, December 1862.” In F.J. Ajayi Ade, “Language in the Yoruba Mission.” Henry Marty Lecture at Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK, Henry Martyn Centre, 2013. Cambridge University, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.cccw.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ajayi-Prof-Jacob-F.-Ade-252628-Oct.lect-2.pdf>.
- Crowther, Samuel Ajayi and Christopher Taylor. *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger: Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-1859*. London: Church Missionary House, 1859.

⁷² J.F. Ade Ajayi, “From Mission to Church: The Heritage of the Church Mission Society,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23, no. 2 (1999): 50, 55, 53.

- George, Olakunle. "The 'Native' Missionary, The African Novel, and In-Between," *Novel: A forum on Fiction*, 36, no. 1 (2002): 5–25.
- Hanciles, J.J. "Dandeson Coates Crowther and the Niger Delta Pastorate: Blazing Torch or Flickering Flame?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1994): 166–72.
- Kolapo, Fami J. "'Making Favorable Impressions': Bishop Crowther's C.M.S. Niger Mission in Jihadist Nupe Emirate, 1859–1879." In *Religion, History, and Politics in Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Ogbu U. Kalu*, edited by Chima J. Korieh and G. Ugo Nwokeji, 29–51. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005.
- Loiello, John P. "Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Founding of the C.M.S. Niger Mission, 1857–1862." *African Ephemera Collection*, accessed March 10, 2022, <http://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/africancollections/items/show/5055>.
- Maughan, Steven. "Imperial Christianity? Bishop Montgomery and the Foreign Missions of the Church of England, 1895–1915." In *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914*, edited by Andrew Porter, 32–57. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.
- McKenzie, P.R. "Inter-Religious Encounters in West Africa." *Religious Studies* 14, no. 151 (1988): 107–8.
- Mepaiyeda, Solomon M. and Timothy Popoola. "The roles of indigenous missionaries and Christians in the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria, 1860–1969." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (Jan. 2019): <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=PPRP&u=gradtul&id=GALE|A607426948&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-PPRP&asid=6cbdec12>.
- Murphy, Laura. "Obstacles in the Way of Love: the Enslavement of Intimacy in Samuel Crowther and Ama Ata Aidoo," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 47–64.
- Ney, Stephen. "Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Age of Literature." *Research in African Literatures* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 37–52.
- Page, Jesse. *The Black Bishop: Samuel Ajayi Crowther*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Stanley, Brian. *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Leicester, UK: Apollon Press, 1990.
- Sullivan, Anthony. *Britain's War Against the Slave Trade: the Operations of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron 1807–1867*. Yorkshire, UK and Philadelphia: Frontline/Pen & Sword Books, 2020.
- Usman, Aribidesi and Toyin Falola. "Yorubaland in the Nineteenth Century: the Height of Trouble." In *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, 161–76. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587656>.
- Van der Veer, Peter. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

- Walls, Andrew F. "Crowther, Samuel Ajayi." In *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson, 160–1. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998).
- . "The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 1 (January 1992): 15–21.
- Wills, Mary. *Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade in West Africa*, Liverpool Studies in International Slavery. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2019.
- Yeader Peel, John David. "The Pastor and the Babalawo: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland." *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 338–69.
- . *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2000.