

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Special Issue in Honor of Director Jonathan Bonk  
on the Occasion of his Retirement

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The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was launched in 2016 to complement and make stories from the online *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* ([www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org)) more readily accessible and immediately useful in African congregations and classrooms.

Now published quarterly, with all issues available on line, the intent of the *JACB* is to promote the research, publication, and use of African Christian biography within Africa by serving as an academically credible but publicly accessible source of information on Christianity across the continent. Content will include biographies already available in the database itself, but original contributions related to African Christian biography or to African church history are also welcome. While the policy of the *DACB* itself has been to restrict biographical content to subjects who are deceased, the *JACB* includes interviews with select living African church leaders and academics.

All editorial correspondence should be directed to: [dacb@bu.edu](mailto:dacb@bu.edu).

Editor: Michèle Sigg

Associate Editors: Jesse Mugambi, Dana Robert, Nimi Wariboko

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Evangelos E. M. Thiani

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*Michèle Miller Sigg, PhD*, is Executive Director of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography and Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission (CGCM) at the Boston University School of Theology.

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<sup>80</sup> Expression borrowed from Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator's book *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Orbis, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> P. 54.

## A Faithful Legacy: Gratitude and Hope

By Michèle Miller Sigg

This special journal issue, a modest *African Christian Biography* “stew,” was brewed with a rich seasoning of gratitude and hope from close friends and collaborators of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB), facilitated by JACB Associate Editor Jesse Mugambi.

In looking back on Jonathan Bonk’s legacy, these friends voiced their gratitude for “Professor Jon’s” friendship, mentoring, and sensitive leadership that influenced their vocation and sometimes shifted the course of their lives in subtle or remarkable ways. As successor to Jonathan Bonk, I also am thankful for all that I have learned from his example, his teaching, and his Christian character ever since I took the position as project assistant in October 2000 at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC). From that day forward, he faithfully provided the necessary resources for the project, soliciting outside grants and harnessing internal funding. The OMSC was a nurturing and protective environment. Without it, the DACB would not have grown into what it is today.

In looking ahead, there is hope for the pioneering vision that he set forth—a vision that was and continues to be a much needed addition to current Western-dominated scholarship regulated by Western paradigms, educational pedagogies, and philosophies. Now boasting a twenty-year track record, the DACB is a respected outsider among digital research projects—one that calls into question the relevance and adequacy of current normative practices for Christian scholarship brewed in an African pot.<sup>80</sup> As Jesse Mugambi points out, the DACB is forging an alternate path forward in the field of African Christian history. Madipoane Masenya suggests that the core mission of the DACB offers insights that can be extrapolated to other fields such as African biblical hermeneutics.

I am thankful for the commitment of the members of the Advisory Council and the Executive Committee who have all, to a person, agreed to continue this work together. They are part of the strong foundation Jon leaves to carry on the task. Edison Kalengyo provides a good closing exhortation that puts things into a larger perspective:

After his retirement, may the present collaborators continue to build upon the solid foundation that he [Jon] has established. To God be the glory, great things He has done!<sup>81</sup>

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Journal of African Christian Biography October 2020  
Transitional Issue

An Introduction by Associate Editor  
Jesse N. K. Mugambi

This October 2020 issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) is in honor of its Founder Professor Jonathan Bonk who also created the online *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. Both these publications are unique, specializing in the collection and preservation of biographies of African Christians—accompanied by scholarly reflection—from the full spectrum of Christianity across the continent of Africa. Contributors are Christian scholars familiar with the dioceses, parishes, and congregations of the people featured. The collection also includes manuscripts authored by the people featured as well as photographs and other digital resources.

Professor Bonk visited Nairobi in October 2019 to chair the Biennial Meeting of the DACB. In addition, he presented well-attended lively lectures at Tangaza University College; University of Nairobi; Kenyatta University College; Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA); St Paul's University; and Kenyatta University. He also attended and spoke during the Funeral Service of Professor John S. Mbiti at the Anglican All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, on November 1, 2019. This was a very busy week for Professor Bonk. We are blessed and grateful for his commitment, readiness, and willingness when it comes to mentoring and promoting African theological scholarship.

**DACB BIENNIAL UPDATE  
2017-2019**

**By Prof. Jonathan Bonk**

**Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

**TIME: 8.30 A.M.--12.30 P.M.**

**Venue: Franciscan Guesthouse**

**Langata**

**HOST? Kenya DACB Board Members**

**TOPIC? Progress Report,**

*Dictionary of African Christian  
Biography*

**MAIN SPEAKER? Prof. Jonathan Bonk**



**Founder and Director, DACB  
Editor, JACB**

matchless beauty and design.<sup>79</sup>

Catholic and Protestant churches both on the African continent and in the Diaspora, the dispersed community of Africans throughout the world, rightfully share the legacy of this rich history of Christianity on African soil. Unfortunately, however, many are oblivious to much of the wealth of Ethiopian Christianity, as the story has traditionally not been told in Western textbooks. And yet, if historians and scholars remain quiet about Ethiopian Christianity, even the stones will cry out!

**Photos:**

P. 51 Celebration of John the Baptist, day after Ethiopian New Year

P. 52 Debre Berhan Selassie Church in Gondar

P. 53 Icon of the Transfiguration

P. 54 Celebration of the Epiphany

P. 56 Bete-Giyorgis Church at Lalibela

Republished with permission – First published as “From Abba Salama to King Lalibela: Christian traditions in Ethiopia are among the oldest in the world” in *Christian History Magazine*. *Christianity in Early Africa: Ancient traditions and profound impact*. Issue # 105: (18-21)

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*Tekletsadik Belachew, Double MA (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, USA), is currently a PhD candidate in the History of Exegesis concentration (patristic) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. His area of research is 6th-century Ethiopian poet-musician and hymnographer, St. Yared. Presently, a researcher at Tibebe Research & Retreat Centre in Ethiopia. His research and teaching interest include patristics, African theology, Ethiopian Christianity and African cinema (esp. Haile Gerima's).*

<sup>79</sup> Jacques Mercier. *Lalibela: Wonder of Ethiopia—The Monolithic Churches and their Treasures* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2012), 13.

Its builder is your Son,  
 his Apostles are your household,  
 the faithful of your First-Born.  
**f. Should we call you an altar?**  
 Your Son is a high priest;  
 His apostles are your deacons,  
 The disciples of your First-Born.  
**g. Should we call you a golden basket?**  
 Your Son is the bread of life;  
 his Apostles are your stewards,  
 the sacrificers of the body of your First-Born.  
**h. Should we call you a chalice?**  
 Your Son is the wine of worship;  
 his Apostles are your priests,  
 the preparers of the blood of your First-Born.<sup>78</sup>

Ethiopian Christianity is rich not only in oral traditions but in visual expressions. One of the most famous came from King Lalibela in the twelfth century.




Revered as a saint, he was the visionary behind the construction of eleven rock-hewn churches which he called a “New Jerusalem.” Each of these churches was carved from a single piece of rock as a symbol of inward spirituality and humility. Although hundreds of other rock-hewn churches are present in Ethiopia and around the world, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are famous for their

<sup>78</sup> Getachew Haile, “Highlighting Ethiopian Traditional Literature,” in *Silence is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, edited by Tadesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 52. The *Book of Hours (Se’atat)* attributed to Abba Giyorgis of Sägla, a fifteenth-century Ethiopian monk and theologian. See also John Anthony McGukin, (Translation and Introduction). *Harp of Glory: Enzira Sebbat: An Alphabetical Hymn Praise for the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (New York: SVS Press, 2010). In this work, each poem opens with Trinitarian invocation.

**CUEA - FACULTY OF  
 THEOLOGY  
 THURSDAY 31<sup>ST</sup> OCTOBER  
 2019  
 OPEN LECTURE  
 By Prof. Jonathan Bonk**

**FOUNDER:** *Dictionary of African  
 Christian Biography*  
**AUTHOR:** *Missions and Money-  
 Affluence as a Western Missionary  
 Problem (1991 & 2006)*



**Founder and Director, [DACB](#)  
 Editor, [JACB](#)**

Professor Bonk, born of Canadian Mennonite missionaries and brought up in Ethiopia, is currently Research Professor of Mission Studies at Boston University, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem*, which remains one of the most challenging books in this field of research.<sup>1</sup> He also served as Executive Director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in New Haven, Connecticut where he mentored visiting scholars in addition to his role as administrator and editor of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research (IBMR)*. A concise summary of his book on *Missions and Money* is featured in Issue No. 171 of the *IBMR*, accessible online.

My acquaintance with Professor Bonk dates from his first exploratory visit to Nairobi in 1999 when he introduced us to the DACB Project. Since then we have learned

much from him – and continue to learn – even during his retirement. He is an exemplary mentor and a visionary leader.

This issue of the *Journal* includes parts of his report on his visit to Nairobi October 26 to November 7, 2019. It was a joy for me to participate in planning this very busy program. The articles in this October 2020 issue of the *JACB* are a symbolic gesture of appreciation in honor of Professor Jonathan Bonk to pay tribute to his pioneering leadership in mission research and publication.

Professor Bonk’s global outlook extends far beyond Europe and Africa to Asia, particularly China and South Korea. Through him I became acquainted with fellow scholars in South Korea concerned, as we are, with contextual responses to Christianity. His visit coincided with funeral arrangements for Professor John S. Mbiti who had died on October 6, 2019. He attended Mbiti’s Funeral Service and spoke briefly at the Anglican All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi. His tribute to Professor Mbiti is here below. For me it has been a joy and a privilege to be mentored by such great scholars as

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem* (New York: Orbis, 1996; Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006).

Professor Mbiti and Professor Bonk. As Jesus would advise his disciples, I urge the readers of this issue of the *JACB*: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10: 30-37).


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*Jesse N. K. Mugambi, PhD, FKNAS, EBS, is Professor at the University of Nairobi in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. He is a member of the Editorial Committee and Co-Chair of the Senior Advisory Council of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB) as well as Associate Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB).*

\* \* \*

Professor Jonathan Bonk’s Tribute to Professor John S. Mbiti  
(November 30, 1931 – October 6, 2019)

**ALL SAINTS ANGLICAN  
CATHEDRAL, NAIROBI**  
Friday, 1<sup>ST</sup> NOVEMBER 2019  
at 10.30 am  
**MEMORIAL SERVICE**  
**PROFESSOR JOHN SAMUEL  
MBITI, PhD**  
30th NOV 1931 – 6<sup>TH</sup> OCT 2019



TRANSLATOR, *Utianiyo wa Mwyai Yesu Kilisto* (2014, New Testament in KiiKamba)  
AUTHOR, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) TRANSLATOR, *Akamba Stories* (1966)

A gentle, profoundly Christian intellectual giant has completed his earthly race and joined the great cloud of witnesses watching we who remain. Dr. Mbiti ran his race with perseverance, avoiding entanglements as he ran and imprinting our minds with a worthy example to follow. His least heralded accomplishment as a world-class theologian was also his most singular, the translation of the New Testament into *KiiKamba, Utianiyo wa Mwyai Yesu Kiliisto*, a work of love and erudition completed and published in 2014. It is this, perhaps, that will tie him forever to the men and women of his ancestral territory in Kitui, Eastern Kenya.

But at the level of global influence, it is his book *Concepts of God in Africa* that exerts a profound influence on the way Christians around the world understand the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The first edition of this book was published by SPCK, London, in 1970. It

manual and in the traditional theological education).<sup>76</sup> The Nine Saints’ works took more than fifty years to complete. They left an inspiring legacy to their followers and prompted the flourishing of indigenous scholarship and writings.

**Follow the Ant**

One writer they inspired was St. Yared (501–576). While growing up, Yared had difficulty grasping the basics of the alphabet. He gave up on his education. But according to a popular story, he was inspired to persevere academically while watching an ant successfully crawl up the bark of a tree after six failed attempts.<sup>77</sup>

He eventually became a prominent scholar best known for his musical compositions, and some attributed his many compositions to supernatural revelation. His later disciples invented a musical notation and a form of liturgical dance (*aguwaquam*) in addition to starting an academy at Bete Qetin. His antiphony books including the main one that is known as *Degguwa* also contributed to the school of Qene poetry in Ge’ez. One example is this poetic and Christological hymn to the Virgin Mary from a *Book of Hours (Se’atat)*:

**a. What should we call you, O full of grace?**

You are the gate of salvation;  
you are the portal of light;  
you are the daughter of the palace.

**b. Should we call you heaven?**

Your Son is the sun of righteousness;  
his Apostles are your starts,  
the lamps of your First-Born.

**c. Should we call you a garden?**

Your Son is the vine tree;  
His Apostles are your vines,  
the branches of your First-Born

**d. Should we call you a ship?**

Your Son is the captain;  
His Apostles are the crew,  
The chosen ones of your First-Born.

**e. Should we call you a castle?**

<sup>76</sup> Ephraim Issac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church*. Chapter 11 and the Appendix on “The Church & Development of Writing & Literature.”

<sup>77</sup> Ephraim Issac. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church*. 103.

God sent as the Apostle for the land of Ethiopia. He was the first [Christian] religious leader.<sup>72</sup>

Another turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia was “the Second Evangelization” in 480. A group of monks known as “the Nine Saints” (*Teseatu Qidusane*), who hailed mainly from Syria led this movement. The Nine Saints improved the training in catechetical schools – which taught the basics of the faith – and in monasteries, which served both the church and the nation as spiritual and educational centers.

### Nine for God

The Nine Saints and their disciples also produced Bible translations in Ge’ez (Classic Ethiopic). The long process of translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Ge’ez began right after the Queen of Sheba visited Jerusalem (1 Kings 10).<sup>73</sup> The entire Bible including the New Testament was completed by the end of the fifth century, making the Ge’ez



Bible one of the seven oldest Bible translations in the world.<sup>74</sup>

The translation of the Bible into Ge’ez prompted subsequent generations of Ethiopian scholars to translate sacred works and produce original writings. They translated other works, such as *The Life of St. Paul the Hermit*, *The Life of St. Anthony* (by St. Athanasius), and *The Rule of St.*

*Pachomius* (containing guidelines for community life).<sup>75</sup> Additionally, they translated the *Qerlos* (which includes the major writings of St. Cyril of Alexandria as well as other theologians and is still used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church as a doctrinal

<sup>72</sup>Getachew Haile, “The Homily in Honour of St. Frumentius Bishop of Axum” *Analecta Bollandiana* (1979): 318.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*. The Schweich Lectures (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>74</sup> Ephraim Issac, The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. 59. See also Ephraim Issac, The Bible in Ethiopic,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 2, From 600 to 1450*, Edited by Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110-122. The book of Enock and Jubilees survived only in Ge’ez.

<sup>75</sup> Ephraim Issac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church*, 241.

was of such great significance for African readers that in 2012 Acton Publishers, Nairobi, released a second, revised edition, with a foreword by Prof. Jesse N. K. Mugambi. Mbiti’s “Standard list of African names of God” in Appendix A is a reminder that Christianity is at once the prisoner and the liberator of cultures. It is through language, that most unique yet parochial of all human accomplishments, that we come to know who we are, who God is, and what this means.

Prof. Mbiti’s was a significant contribution to our growing awareness that human languages both clarify and obscure God, and that no language can possibly exhaust our understanding of God. As beings who worship God using languages, metaphors, and concepts that are not universal, but peculiar to a people, in a time, and in a place, Prof. Mbiti helped us to realize that no single language is capable of conveying how long and high and deep is the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, but that every language makes an essential contribution to the Church being “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18-19).

In the words of Afua Kuma,

We have come to this earth  
Only to work and wear ourselves out  
But in Jesus we find our rest....  
When night has caught you on a journey,  
Do not be afraid.  
If you meet with evil men, do not fear.  
Jesus is the cutlass going before you;  
He guards the rear with a mighty carved sword.  
He takes us to the city of the great chief,  
Where large beads and precious stones  
Roll about on the ground.  
(*Jesus of the deep forest. Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*)

### Jonathan Bonk

November 2019

Director, *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*  
Research Professor of Mission, Boston University

## DACB Kenya Report October 26 – November 3, 2019 (Excerpts)

By Jonathan J. Bonk

This trip to Kenya was not entirely unexpected, but it evolved in ways that were unanticipated. When the current DACB Africa Advisory Council was initially formed in 2012, the year that the DACB offices were relocated from the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in New Haven to the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University School of Theology, the intention had been to convene annual meetings of the entire Advisory Council. Unfortunately, after three years, transportation costs rendered this ideal unviable, and the annual meeting had to be deferred in 2018 and again in 2019.

To ensure a degree of momentum on the ground in Africa, it was decided that I should go myself as DACB's emissary to Nairobi. There I would meet with any advisors who were within driving distance, re-visit research centers, universities, and church offices, meet with administrators and faculty, and give a series of lectures at various venues. I was actually repeating an earlier journey that I had made to Nairobi more than twenty years ago. It would be interesting to observe and reflect on changes that might have taken place in the intervening years.

My first DACB-related trip to Kenya was in late January and early February of 1999. At that time, the fledgling enterprise was barely three years old, and I had been at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven for just over one year. One condition of my employment at OMSC had been permission to bring the DACB with me from Winnipeg, and to invest significant personal effort into its development. OMSC's Trustees kindly granted me permission to take an annual "three-week study leave", including a \$3,000 allocation for travel and on-the-road expenses, defined in terms sufficiently broad as to permit me to make a series of annual visits to the continent of Africa in the cause of the Dictionary.

Dr. Zablon Nthamburi was my host in Kenya. He was a personal friend who had contributed a foreword to my book *Missions and Money*<sup>2</sup> when he was Secretary of the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa. In 1999, he was the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Kenya. He booked me into the Methodist Guest House and personally arranged and accompanied me on an itinerary that included meetings with Prof. Dr. Godfrey Nguru (Vice-Chancellor of St. Paul's United

<sup>2</sup> *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis 1991).

Tyre to visit his parents. There he shared his story, and that of his brother, with Rufinus Tyrannius of Aquila (d. 410), a Christian historian.<sup>69</sup>

### Father of Peace

After listening to Frumentius, St. Athanasius, the patriarch of the See of St. Mark, in Alexandria, declared to the priests, "We will find no one [to be bishop] who is better than he."<sup>70</sup> He told Frumentius: "What other man can we find than you, who have already carried out such works?"<sup>71</sup> Athanasius then consecrated Frumentius as the first bishop of the Axumite Empire (much of modern-day Eritrea and Ethiopia). Frumentius took the ordination name Abba Salama I, meaning "Father of Peace." He was also known by the honorary name Kessate Berhan (Revealer of Light, or the Illuminator).



Upon his return to Ethiopia, Abba Salama spread the faith, beginning with the former crown prince he had tutored. King Ezana became the first Christian convert to serve as emperor in Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia became one of the earliest nations to officially adopt Christianity, doing so in the first half of the fourth century.

Frumentius (d. 383) was revered and after his death, celebrated as a saint on the twenty-sixth day of the month of Hamle (July and early August in the West). A homily in his honor is read every year in commemoration. Taken from the *Synaxarium*, the book of the Saints, and declares: "This was the good yeast that came to the land of Ethiopia. He was the first to illuminate the land of Ethiopia. He was the one whom

<sup>69</sup>See Getachew Haile, *Ethiopian Prelates* (c. 300–fl. Second half of the eleventh century). Available at

<http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/ccc/id/842/rec/8>

(See especially the section entitled "Salama I (c. 300–c. 380).")

<sup>70</sup>Getachew Haile, "The Homily in Honour of St. Frumentius Bishop of Axum", (EMML 1763 ff. 84-86), *Analecta Bollandiana* (1979): 318. In his report, Frumentius testified to the work of God and begged Athanasius to send a bishop to Ethiopia.

<sup>71</sup>Ephraim Issac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2012), 18.





chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:27 – 29). Philip interpreted the Scripture and its fulfillment in Christ for the eunuch before baptizing him.

Early church historian Eusebius, describes the impact of this encounter as follows: “Tradition says that he (the eunuch) who was the first of the Gentiles to receive from Philip by revelation the mysteries of the

Divine word and was the first fruits of the faithful throughout the world, was also the first to return to his native land and preached the Gospel of the knowledge of God of the universe and the sojourn of our Savior which gives life to men, so that by him was actually fulfilled the prophecy which says, “Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God” (Ps. 68:31).<sup>66</sup>

### Lost at Sea

But the most significant turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia happened later, almost unintentionally, as the result of a shipwreck near the mouth of the Red Sea around AD 316. Two young brothers aboard the ship were Syrian Christians from Tyre (modern-day Lebanon). Their uncle and mentor, the philosopher Meropius, was killed. But Frumentius (or Fremnatos, ca. 300 – ca. 380) and his younger brother, Aedesius (Edesius), survived. Soldiers brought the boys to the royal palace in the city of Axum in northern Ethiopia. There, the young survivors demonstrated integrity, virtue, and wisdom and won favor with King Ella Mida.<sup>67</sup> While Aedesius served as a cupbearer, Frumentius was put in charge of the royal records. Both apparently spread Christianity among the emperor’s subjects. Shortly before Ella Mida’s death, he set the boys free.<sup>68</sup>

The young brothers then stayed in the city to assist the widowed queen until her son, the prince regent Ezana, was mature enough to rule. Aedesius later returned to

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<sup>66</sup>Quoted from Sergew Hable Sellassie. *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University, 1972), 97.

<sup>67</sup>Ephraim Issac. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawabido Church* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2012), 18.

<sup>68</sup>Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1. 19. He later wrote some of the stories about Frumentius and Christianity in Ethiopia.

Theological College in Limuru); Rev. Canon Clement H. Janda (General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches); Dr. Peter Mumo (then Acting Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi); and Mary Getui (Associate Professor in the faculty of Philosophy and Religion at Kenyatta University).

I had been scheduled to meet with Department Chair Dr. D. Waruta and his entire faculty, but because a city-wide student demonstration<sup>3</sup> turned violent, both the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University were shut down. I touched base at both universities but met with only one junior faculty member at Nairobi University, and with seven female members of the Religious Studies Department at Kenyatta University (including Mary Getui and Philomena Mwaura; Chaplain Watson Omulokoli was to have attended, but was unable to make it). I visited the Pan African Christian College, affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, where I was given a warm reception by the Dean and several of his faculty, and had lunch with Francis Manana. I also recall meeting with the late Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in African and Madagascar.

As Dr. Nthamburi was chauffeuring me to my meetings, we became locked into one of Nairobi’s legendary traffic jams. As I rested my left arm on the sill of the open window on the passenger side of the vehicle, an alert young man spotted his opportunity and yanked the wristwatch off of my wrist. There was nothing that we could do as we watched the young man speed nimbly away through the gridlocked cars. On that itinerary I also visited the Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Daystar University, Tangaza College at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi International School of Theology, and Kenyatta University. At Kenyatta University, Dr. Mary Getui, a senior professor in the Religious Studies Department, introduced me to seven of her colleagues—all women—who did me the courtesy of coming to hear me talk about the DACB. The other twenty members of the faculty were not able to be present, because the university was closed because of the violent student protests a few days earlier. Among those attending the meeting was Dr. Philomena Mwaura, who would become a close friend and colleague in our work together on the IAMS executive.

The goal of my 1999 trip to Kenya<sup>4</sup> was to introduce the DACB, and to invite universities and colleges to become “participating institutions”—thereby signifying that they would encourage or require students in certain departments to research and write original biographies on key African figures in local, regional or national church history,

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<sup>3</sup> Against the government’s controversial sale of 2000 hectares of public watershed forest preserve on the outskirts of the city to developers.

<sup>4</sup> From there I flew to Ethiopia to help launch the Frumentius Lecture series, arranged and sponsored by OMSC for its first two years.

following simple guidelines—now available in much greater detail online—made available to instructors in pamphlet form.<sup>5</sup>

Since that initial DACB-related trip to Kenya, I have made no fewer than sixteen trips to the continent, visiting dozens of universities and colleges scattered across scores of countries, lecturing, conducting seminars and facilitating oral history workshops.<sup>6</sup> Everywhere I have gone, response to the DACB has been generally enthusiastic, although in northern Mozambique I could sense a palpable and understandable suspicion concerning the underlying purpose and motives of yet another white man bearing his burden! It is no exaggeration to say—keeping in mind the relative modesty of the DACB’s accomplishments—that the Dictionary is now reasonably well known and utilized in parts of Africa, including Kenya. But the lesson of the fly sitting on the ear of the elephant is salutary. As the elephant carried his minute passenger across a swinging bridge spanning a deep canyon, the fly remarked to his friend that “we sure did shake that bridge!” The DACB is indeed a small entity *riding* on the back of a mighty elephant, the Christian church on the continent of Africa!

**Monday October 28: 8:30 – 9:30 am – Meeting with the staff of the Jesuit Historical Institute for a review of their library and archives.**

My first appointment was with the senior staff of Jesuit Historical Institute for African History. I was given a warm reception by the librarian, archivist, and staff. The

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<sup>5</sup> *Instructional Manual for Researchers and Writers, and Procedural Manual for Participating Institutions* (DACB, 2004). See <https://dacb.org/resources/introductory/> Many other resources of practical use to history instructors who are interested in helping their students chronicle African local and regional church history figures are also available online. See <https://dacb.org/resources/oral-history/>

<sup>6</sup> On my DACB-related trips, in Africa I have visited Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Egypt. I have also lectured on the subject in various European countries, including Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, the UK, Germany, Finland, and the Ukraine.

## From Abba Salama to King Lalibela: Christian Traditions in Ethiopia are among the oldest in the World

By Tekletsadik Belachew

When Westerners enter a worship service among the Ethiopian Orthodox – as one Westerner has said – they enter an experience of “delighted disorientation... the opulent



vestments, the sumptuous processional “parasols,” the grand elaborate liturgies, the ornate gold crosses, the vivid icons, the drums and sistrums and ritual dance and mesmerizing pentatonic chant.<sup>64</sup> This spellbinding worship experience expresses a very ancient faith, practiced today as it has been for centuries in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. (The word *Tewahido*

refers to “The two natures of God-head and Manhood are perfectly united and Christ is thus one person and one nature from two natures”).<sup>65</sup>

The historical roots of Christianity in Ethiopia can be traced back to the time of the apostles. Prior to the adoption of Christianity, Judaism was practiced in many places in Africa, and Ethiopian Christianity grounded itself firmly on those Jewish roots, valuing creation and celebrating the witnessing community.

The book of Acts tells how an African from Cyrene (modern-day Libya) and Egypt was present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). And Acts 8:26 – 40 recounts the famous story for the God-fearing Ethiopian eunuch: “Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his

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<sup>64</sup>David Bentley Hart. *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith* (London: Quercus, 2007), 64.

<sup>65</sup> See Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, ed. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*. (Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1970), 95.

place in Busega-Mpiima-erebera with the first three martyrs, but was spared death only because she had a baby.<sup>61</sup>

The twenty-six pages executed at Namugongo suffered the most excruciating death. Pirouet captures the last moments for us in the narrative below:

The Martyrs were then tied up in reed matting, and were given medicated beer to drink which would ensure that their spirits would not return and trouble the country. They were thrown on the pyre so that their heads faced the shrine of Nende whom it was said they had insulted by calling him Satan, and their feet towards Mengo: "... eye-witnesses told how instead of the usual wailing and screaming to be heard at executions, on this occasion there was only the sound of quiet sobbing, prayers, and singing. The only person to wail was Mukajanga the executioner who had killed Mabaga Tuzinde, his own 'son.'"<sup>62</sup>

Louise Pirouet has provided the full list of all those who died on June 3, 1886.<sup>63</sup> The biographies of many of the martyrs of Uganda written by authors such as Louise Pirouet and Aylward Shorter are preserved in the DACB.

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*Rev. Edison Muhindo Kalengyo, PhD, is Associate Professor of New Testament at Uganda Christian University. Formerly on the Advisory Council, he currently serves as member of the Editorial Board of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

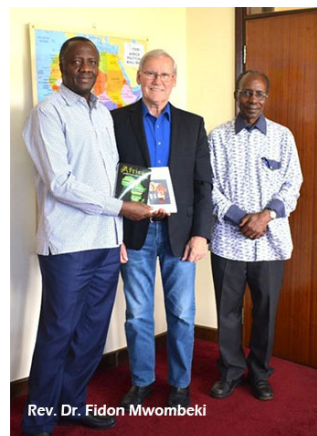
<sup>61</sup> For details with regard to the place and role of women in the story of the Uganda Martyrs see Olivia Nassaka Banja, "Uganda Martyrs: Place and Role of Women," in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Volume XXXIV (2008): 181-189.

<sup>62</sup> Pirouet 1969, 41.

<sup>63</sup> See details in Pirouet 1969, 41-47.



acting director Fr Jean Luc Enyegue is on assignment in the Congo. As I toured the excellent library and archival collections of the Centre, I was reassured by what I observed that that this is a fitting place to bequest my personal library—especially the reference and history volumes, as well as my somewhat extensive collection on ethics and the timeless debates about Christians participating in war. To my great surprise and delight, who should I have met but Dr. Kyama Mugambi—my gracious host on two previous occasions when I was in Nairobi, whose office as Editorial Manager of the African Theological Network Press is located at the Centre.



**10:30 am – 12:30 pm – Meeting with Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Christian Churches**

We said our farewells and rushed off to our next engagement at the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) headquarters complex. Awaiting our arrival was Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki (pictured left), General Secretary of the All Africa Council of Christian Churches. This seemed to be a potentially strategic meeting, as Dr. Mwombeki, Jesse and I engaged in a lengthy conversation about the DACB and AACC. He had cleared his morning calendar to meet with us and is clearly interested in exploring ways to cooperate with and promote the mission of the DACB. On the back of his business card is this introduction to the organization: "The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) 'The Spiritual Pulse of the African Continent' Founded in 1963 is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for 140 million Christians across the continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Indigenous churches in Africa and is a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. AACC is a fellowship of 193 members comprising of

Churches, National Councils of Churches (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions and other Christian organizations in 42 African countries.”

## Tuesday, October 29 – DACB Biennial Update

The DACB Advisors were joined by eight other key leaders who had been invited by Professor Mugambi to come and learn about the DACB! Among those who attended the session was Mr. E. Kibacia Gatu, one of Kenya’s most famous artists and an active member of the National Museums of Kenya Board of Directors.



He expressed interest in the DACB’s initiative to collect the stories of artists and musicians. Members of the Advisory Council who were present included Philomena Mwaura, Fr. Evangelos Thiani, and Jesse Mugambi.

1:00 – 4:00 pm Tangaza

## University

I believe that Tangaza University is poised to become a regular contributor of stories to the DACB. I was told by numerous students and several faculty members that the DACB is already used in the curriculum. Two scholarly journals emanate from the school: The African Journal of Social Transformation and the School of Theology Journal. Both can be accessed online (<http://journals.tangaza.ac.ke/>).



This was my second visit to Tangaza, but my first since its reconstitution as a university. It was here in 1999 that I met Aylward Shorter, bedecked in safari khaki short pants who was then serving as the school’s acting principal. He subsequently spent a semester at OMSC as one of our Senior Scholars in Residence and is still a byword in the African religious academy for his publications on enculturation. But I

digress. Tangaza University College is now a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Enrollment is just above 2,200, with students from approximately 50 countries and a faculty drawn from all over the world. Academic

eastern route did not get to him in time to save his life. Being therefore suspected to be an enemy of Buganda, he was arrested on his arrival in Busoga together with all his traveling companions. On October 29, 1885, on the express orders of King Mwanga, Bishop Hannington together with his porters was brutally killed at Kyando in Busoga. Luck remarks that in spite of the danger of martyrdom, more people came for Christian instruction to prepare for baptism: “The appeal of the Christian teaching seemed to be real, and many of the converts had a great personal devotion to individual missionaries.”<sup>56</sup> True to Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs was, indeed, the seed of the church. The brutal killing of Bishop Hannington and the three pages only led to more conversions to the Christian faith and the church continued to grow. As expected, this infuriated King Mwanga and his henchmen, particularly the chiefs. King Mwanga became more and more autocratic and his hatred for Christianity and the followers of what was widely referred to as the “new religion” was palpable.

King Mwanga became increasingly angry about a religion he did not want and about the fact that his pages knew much more than he did, were growing increasingly independent and refused to join in the sexual perversions widely practiced at the court.<sup>57</sup> Earlier, during the reign of King Mutesa I, sodomy had been introduced into Buganda by the Arabs. It is reported that on May 22, 1886, a newly baptized Anglican Christian, Matiya Gayiya, had defied King Mwanga when he ordered him to accompany a senior court official who wished to abuse him with homosexual practices.<sup>58</sup> This state of affairs worsened when Princess Nalumansi, a baptized Roman Catholic, openly burnt her ancestral relics. Consequently, anger led King Mwanga to proclaim: “The Christians are disobedient, and learn rebellion from the white man. I shall kill them all.”<sup>59</sup>

This friction marked the beginning of the indiscriminate persecution of Christians, Protestants and Roman Catholics, in May 1886.<sup>60</sup> King Mwanga and his chiefs were inflamed with anger. On June 3, 1886, King Mwanga ordered the brutal killing of twenty-six pages at the sacrificial site of Namugongo-Nakiyanja (the present site of the Anglican Martyr Shrine). Thirteen of these were Protestants and twelve were Roman Catholics. All twenty-six were men. Although there are no known women martyrs, Olivia Nassaka Banja has explored candidly the place and role of women in the Ugandan martyrdom story. For example, Sarah Nakima was marched to the slaughter

<sup>56</sup> Luck 1963, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Luck 1963, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Pirouet 1969, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Luck 1963, 38.

<sup>60</sup> Luck 1963, 38.

place.”<sup>53</sup> His son, Prince Mwanga, succeeded him. Unlike his father, King Mwanga is said to have been a “weak and vicious youth who had no strength to control his people.”<sup>54</sup> There was also rivalry and intrigue among King Mwanga’s chiefs who saw Christian teaching as a threat to their power.

These chiefs convinced King Mwanga that the only aim of the Christian missionaries was “to eat up his country.” When rumors were circulated that Germany had captured the East African coast opposite the island of Zanzibar, King Mwanga’s suspicion grew, intensifying the tensions between him and the missionaries. Earlier, the eastern border had been closed in response to unfounded belief that the enemies who would conquer Buganda would come from the east, which was the “backdoor” to the Kingdom of Buganda. Anyone one heard to be using that eastern route as entry into Buganda would be considered an enemy, liable to be fought and eliminated. Additionally, some of the new Christian teachings and doctrines conflicted with Buganda traditional beliefs and customs, and were blamed for sowing the seed of disobedience. This was especially true with regard to the unquestionable authority of King Mwanga who had become increasingly authoritarian in his leadership style. The chiefs took advantage of this uneasiness to fuel the resentment of King Mwanga towards the Christian missionaries and their work. King Mwanga was particularly angered by the influence of the missionaries on the pages and other cadres that served in the court.

### **Martyrdom in Uganda**

At the height of the tensions between King Mwanga and the Christian missionaries, Mackay had a scheduled trip to the south of the Buganda Kingdom. He sought the company of three mission boys to see him off at the shores of Lake Victoria. The three mission boys were Makko Kakumba, Noah Sserwanga and Yusuf Lugalama. In a fit of rage, King Mwanga ordered the arrest of these three mission boys, had them taken to the slaughter place at Busega–Mpiima-erebera, had them dismembered and burnt to death on January 31, 1885. This was but the beginning of what J. F. Faupel has vividly described as the “African Holocaust.”<sup>55</sup>

Not knowing the grave danger of entering Uganda through Busoga, Bishop James Hannington, the first bishop of Eastern Equatorial Province, made the cardinal mistake of taking the forbidden route. Information to warn him against using the

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<sup>53</sup> Pirouet 1969, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Luck 1963, 36.

<sup>55</sup> J. F. Faupel, *African Holocaust: The story of the Ugandan Martyrs*, third ed. (Nairobi, St. Paul Publications, 1984), 191-199.

standards are reputedly very high, and the school presents itself as place from which leaders emerge from its twenty distinctive academic programs.

### **Wednesday 30th October. Nairobi University and Kenyatta University**

**The University of Nairobi** (UoN) is the oldest and the largest university in Kenya, and it is here that Professor Mugambi has invested his academic life. Although its history as an educational institution dates back to 1956, it did not become an independent university until 1970, when the then University of East Africa was divided into three independent universities: Makerere University in Uganda, the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and the University of Nairobi in Kenya. I was a primary school student in Addis Ababa in 1956, and at the time an avid stamp collector. I recall some of my most prized and valuable (for trading) stamps at the time were from “Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika,” so called “Protectorates” of Great Britain. Their subsequent independence required that each have its own educational system and institutions.

**Kenyatta University’s** history is a reminder of how recently Great Britain presumed to rule a large proportion of the world. As Brexit seemingly heralds the death rattle of a small island that was until quite recently the locus of the greatest empire ever known, it is hard for a younger generation to imagine just how vast was the power of the British empire.<sup>9</sup> According to “The Largest Empires in Human History” website, the British Empire at its peak ruled over 23% of the world’s population occupying about 24% of the earth’s land area. Kenyan history, including the history of Kenyatta University, is a reminder of all this. The campus was originally the barracks for two regiments—the British on one side, the Scottish on the other—that was the size of a small, self-contained town.

In 1965, three years after Kenya achieved independence from Britain, the Kenyan Government took ownership of the Templer Barracks and converted the property into a mid-level institution known as Kenyatta College. In 1975, Kenyatta College became a branch of University of Nairobi in 1975, following a parliamentary act where the name was changed from Kenyatta College to become Kenyatta University College. The first of its own students—200 in all—were admitted to the Bachelor of Education Degree program in 1972. In August 23, 1985 the institution was officially declared a full-fledged University.

Several new colleges emerged to become part of the university, including Jomo Kenyatta College of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) which is now a fully-fledged university in its own right. Kenyatta University’s five major colleges are located at its main campus in Kahawa. The university also includes Ruiru Campus, Parkland Campus, Kitui Campus, Mombasa Campus and Pwani University College, as well as

distance learning centers in Mombasa, Nairobi, Embu, Nyeri, Nakuru, Kakamega, Kisumu and Garissa. The beautiful main campus, accommodating some 35,000 students, pulses with life.

Dr. Philomena Mwaura was my host for the public lecture, and what preparations she had made! The large lecture theatre had been set up with projection equipment and featured an elevated stage to one side on which was placed a table covered with a cloth bearing the insignia of the university.

I was seated between Dr. Richard Wafula (Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences) on one side, and Dr. Newton K. Maina (Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies) on the other. The front row of the theatre was reserved for faculty and administrators including Dr. Josephine Gitome; Dr. Ruth Muthei, Mrs. Pauline Otieno and Prof. Michael Katola. Also, Dr. Otiato Wafula from the Department of Sociology, Gender and Development Studies, while Masters and PhD students sat behind them. Once again, an official university photographer was present, and will be providing me with pictures of the occasion. The event itself will be featured in the university's official publications.

#### **Thursday 31 October: CUEA and St. Paul's Limuru**

My "Open Lecture" was hosted, according to the publicity posters, by the "Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) Faculty of Theology (Mary Getui hosting)". Professor Getui, a staunch Seventh Day Adventist, is a highly reputable scholar and community activist in Kenya. She's the chairperson of the National Aids Control Council (NACC), a Moran of the Burning Spear (MBS), the treasurer of the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa (ATIEA), and a published author on matters relating to African culture, gender issues, religion and society. Here at the Catholic University, she is Professor of Religious Studies.

As I mentioned in my reflections on my first visit to Kenyatta at the beginning of this report, Dr. Mary Getui was at that time a professor in the Religious Studies Department at Kenyatta University. She had introduced me to seven of her colleagues—all women—who did me the courtesy of coming to hear me talk about the DACB. The other twenty members of the faculty had not been able to be present, due to violent student protests a few days earlier. Among those attending the meeting was Dr. Philomena Mwaura, with whom I would become a close friend and colleague in our work together on the IAMS executive, and who would spend a four-month sabbatical at OMSC as a Senior Scholar in Residence. Dr. Getui had promoted my lecture very energetically and attendance seemed to be around the forty mark.

**St. Paul's Limuru.** When I visited this school on February 1, 1999, it was known as St.

from France through the port of Entebbe. They began to vigorously teach and promote Catholicism in Buganda.

The Anglican and Catholic mission centers operated separately and sometimes as rivals. Though not specifically mentioned in his letter to the Queen of England, Kabaka Mutesa I of Buganda had hoped that the missionaries, besides teaching the Christian faith, would help to supply him with guns and technical expertise to help fight his enemies in the neighboring Kingdom of Bunyoro. Moreover, the *kabaka* (king) was increasingly concerned about Egypt's expansion from the North and expected the missionaries to influence the British government for assistance against the Egyptian threat.

The *kabaka* was disappointed when the missionaries clarified that their mission was to teach and promote the Christian faith, not to supply guns.<sup>50</sup> Efforts by the missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, to explain the Christian faith bore fruit mainly among the pages and other residents in the *kabaka's* court. According to Pirouet, the pages were "intelligent and enterprising youngsters sent by their parents to be trained for future posts of responsibility."<sup>51</sup> Mackay is quoted describing the rapid rate of evangelization and conversion in the court:

A great number, I may say about all, of the pages and storekeepers, etc., about the court are pupils, either of ours or the Papists. Again, and again I have seen the various store and other houses of the court literally converted into reading rooms ... lads sitting in groups, or sprawling on the hay-covered floor, all reading; some the books of the commandments and other texts; some the church prayers, and others the Kiswahili New Testament. They are, besides, very eager to learn to write, and at all times are scribbling on boards, or any scraps of paper they can pick up ... On Sunday the numbers that come far exceed our space, but outside is enough for all, and when the inside of our chapel is filled with classes, others find a shady corner here and there out of doors.<sup>52</sup>

#### **Tensions Mount**

King Mutesa I died in 1884, uncommitted to the Christian faith. But by then "a number of young men and boys had become Christians, and the first baptism had taken

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<sup>50</sup> Pirouet 1969, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Pirouet 1969, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Anne Luck, *African Saint: The Story of Apolo Kivebulaya* (London, SCM Press, 1963), 35.

and death of these beloved ones have greatly contributed to the growth of the church of Christ in time and space.

Tertullian, the great theologian of Carthage, North Africa, coined the phrase “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The authorities in Rome had hoped that the execution of Christians would deter others from converting to Christianity. However, Roman persecution in the first four centuries produced the opposite effect. Instead, the number of Christians increased exponentially. Similarly, in early Ugandan Christian history, it could be said that “‘the blood of those that died for Christ gave birth to even more Christians.’ Martyrdom in Uganda took place in 1885 to 1887.”<sup>48</sup>

The faith and witness of the Uganda Martyrs follows in the long history dating from the martyrdom during the Early Church, reminiscent of the “servants, brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed” of Revelation 6:11. Martyrdom in Uganda was not in vain as evidenced by the growth of the church throughout East Africa. Every year on June 3, thousands of Christians from all over the world throng to Namugongo, the site of the execution of the Uganda martyrs to commemorate the heroic faith of those who died for their faith in Jesus Christ. The shrines of martyrs at Namugongo greatly inspire during the pilgrimage.<sup>49</sup>

### **Advent and Growth of Christianity in Buganda**

The long and courageous journey of faith of the Uganda Martyrs dates back to the advent of Christianity in Uganda. The King of Buganda, Kabaka Mutesa I, having been influenced by Henry Morton Stanley, a Christian explorer and journalist, became interested in the Christian faith. He then wrote to the Queen of England, asking for Christian teachers to come and teach Christianity to the Baganda. The letter appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* in November 1875. The response was positive, resulting in the arrival of Anglican missionaries in Buganda in 1877 and of Roman Catholics in 1879. The two Anglican missionaries, Lt. S. Smith and Rev. C.T. Wilson, were from the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Both arrived in Buganda on June 30, 1877 and were later joined by A. Mackay in 1878. Nearly two years later on February 17, 1879, two Roman Catholic missionaries, Fr Lourdel and Brother Amans, arrived in Buganda

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<sup>48</sup> Louise Pirouet, *Strong in the Faith: The Witness of the Uganda Martyrs* (Kisubi: Marianum, 1969), 5.

<sup>49</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, believers were unable to gather at Namugongo on June 3, 2020 as the government of Uganda (like many governments in the world) had banned gatherings as a measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Paul’s United Theological College. Located in Limuru some 20 kms outside of Nairobi. Its history goes back to 1903, when it was founded in Free Town, Sierra Leone as an evangelical Anglican (CMS) theological college, St. Paul’s Divinity School. In 1930 it was relocated to Kenya. In 1950, its name was changed to St. Paul’s United Theological College, reflecting its newfound identity as the premier pastoral training institution of the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. These three denominations were joined by The Reformed Churches of East Africa in 1973, and by the National Council of Churches of Kenya in 1995. Today more than 7,000 students are enrolled in the university’s programs, which it offers on five Kenyan campuses: Limuru, Nairobi, Nakuru, Machakos, and Butere. The main campus is Limuru, and it is a small jewel, situated on fifty acres of prime, hillside property.

My lecture was well attended, and as on earlier occasions already alluded to in this report, enjoyed the full engagement of the students and faculty who attended. The DACB is already familiar to several of the faculty, who make use of it in their history and religion courses.

### **Friday 1st November – Memorial Service for John Mbiti at All Saints National Cathedral.**

(described in the introduction)

### **Conclusion**

My time in Nairobi was a tiring but worthwhile week of networking and promotion of the DACB. The DACB is gradually assuming a place in academic African curricula, and I found to my embarrassment that there is now considerable name recognition. I am treated very respectfully. I’m not sure when I will see Jesse again, but his contribution to the reputation and establishment of the DACB in Kenya cannot be exaggerated.

**November 5, 2019**

## Honoring Jonathan Bonk

Founder and Director

*Dictionary of African Christian Biography*  
(DACB.org)

From 1995 to 2020

## The Faith and Witness of the Uganda Martyrs

By Edison Muhindo Kalengyo

This article was written for the October 2020 special issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* in honor of Professor Jonathan Bonk, editor and director of the online *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB.org). Bonk's vocation is evident in this pioneering and unique project that documents the faith, testimony, work, and ministry of African Christians, and is preserved in these two online publications. These invaluable resources have brought to the fore the inspiring memory of many African Christians who have been "faithful until death."<sup>45</sup> Bonk has set before us an enduring example to emulate by affirming and confirming that with meager resources it is possible to achieve a great deal, through unwavering involvement and consultation. He has bequeathed to Christ's church a precious pearl in this work. After his retirement, may the present collaborators continue to build upon the solid foundation that he has established. To God be the glory, great things He has done!

Martyrdom is as old as Christendom. Consider the following biblical passages from the book of Revelation:

When he opened the sixth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given.<sup>46</sup>

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.<sup>47</sup>

The above two quotations bear testimony to our ancestors in the faith who, in the face of severe trial and death, stood firm in their confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has chronicled for us in chapter eleven such men and women who demonstrated exceptional faith in the face of trials and death. These departed ancestors are aptly referred to as the "cloud of witnesses" who surround the living to encourage and inspire them on the same journey of faith. The suffering

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<sup>45</sup> Revelation 2:10 NRSV.

<sup>46</sup> Revelation 6:9 NRSV.

<sup>47</sup> Revelation 12:11 NRSV



violence, the suffering caused by the pandemic of COVID-19 as well as the epidemic of HIV and AIDS, the bitter fruits of patriarchy, the displacements witnessed in the continent's war-torn areas, and the socio-economic inequities which continue to reveal the feminine face of poverty, among other causes. The Bible is also particularly at home in the spiritual warfare, nurture and empowerment of many a female victim of the preceding inequities. It is precisely on account of the pivotal role played by the Bible in African women's lives that efforts to read it ethically should be prioritized by the teachers and preachers of the Word.

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*Rev. Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), Ph.D, is Professor of Old Testament Studies in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at the University of South Africa. Formerly on the Advisory Council, she currently serves as member of the Editorial Board of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University School of Theology.*

## The Impact of Jonathan J. Bonk on my Perception of Missions and Money and Lessons for Life

By Mary Getui

My first encounter with Professor Jonathan J. Bonk was some time in the late 1990s when he visited the Department of Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Nairobi. His main mission was to introduce the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB). Needless to say, since that day, the DACB has grown in leaps and bounds. During that visit, Bonk also distributed copies of his book *Missions and Money* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). The DACB project and the publication had a very positive impact on me because I had personal interaction with the person behind those great ideas. Bonk came across as humble, visionary, focused, and Christ centered. This positive encounter proved the truth of the adage that states that there is never a second chance to create a first impression. I would like to share a few insights from and on the book *Missions and Money*, which has influenced my teaching and indeed has also challenged my approach to issues surrounding mission and money, and life in general.

Some paragraphs in the book that captured my attention are in Bonk's words in the introduction -

The book has not been an easy one to write. As the son of (Mennonite) missionaries who spent the best part of their lives in the service of the people of Ethiopia; as one whose closest friends include numerous missionaries; and as one devoted to the task of sharing with the world the good news of Jesus as Savior and Lord; it is with deep sense of personal humility and unworthiness that I write, for I am aware of the deep and often sacrificial commitment to service characterizing many missionaries.... It is my intention to speak the truth, insofar as I am able to discern it. This book is an attempt to explore, however inadequately, one aspect of Western missionary life and ministry which has for a variety of reasons, been virtually ignored in the writing and teaching of most contemporary missiologists. The conscience, someone once said, is like a sundial. The person who shines his flashlight on it in the middle of the night can get it to tell him any time he wants. But when the sun shines on the dial, it can only tell the truth. That our consciences have been infected by the highly contagious hedonism characterizing Western societies cannot be denied. It remains to be seen whether the infection is lethal.... In this book I speak as an evangelical, primarily to evangelicals. Others of the household of faith are welcome to listen and are invited to

contribute, of course. But if the language and agenda of this book seem sometimes strange and unfamiliar, I beg you to bear with a fellow disciple.

The content of these paragraphs is Bonk's self-introduction. He writes from experience, intending to highlight the truth and to obey his conscience. He recognizes those of the household of faith, as he also seeks forbearance for any lack of clarity. These are virtues worth emulating, not just for mission but for life in general.

Broadly speaking, the book describes the nature, scale, and consequences of missionary affluence, examines some of the relational, communicatory, and theological challenges facing the rich missionary, and attempts to point to the narrow way out of the mire of personal affluence, which is a difficult path certainly, but also a hopeful one. There are a myriad of lessons in this content not just for the western missionary, but also for the leaders and followers of the burgeoning ministries in Africa today and in the everyday life of every individual, especially the Christian.

The book has two forewords, one by Walbert Buhlmann, O.F.M. Cap., and another by Zablon Nthamburi, the former a Western Catholic priest and the latter an African Christian priest. This is a balanced choice on Bonk's part, to have input from two diverse and relevant sources. Each of the two has raised critical issues that highlight some of the major concerns that Bonk raises.

Buhlmann addresses the following issues. Even though money and spirit are quite different realities, no one will claim that they have no relation to each other. This is a reawakening reality that leads to the question of what this relationship should look like. Mission churches founded and supported by Northern churches in the South cannot exist without money but neither do they necessarily thrive if money is available in abundance.

Again there is a reawakening reality on the core place of money. What is quite disturbing, however, is that the availability of money in abundance does not necessarily translate into thriving mission. Why not? What else is necessary for the church, and thus the individual and the community to thrive? An imbalance between the relative wealth of evangelizer-missionaries and those among whom they work distorts the transmission and inculturation of the Gospel. This is quite deep, an indication that inculturation is more than just culture, and that culture incorporates money and issues with money. While the book discusses missions and money in its Protestant dimensions, it also has Roman Catholic dimensions. As noted above, Bonk has indicated that the issues he addresses touch and apply to those of the larger household of faith. The following questions are important:

African students in Western-oriented studies of the Bible, an insider as one does research. If the research conducted is not played according to the rules inside the game, it will not earn this "insider/outsider" accreditation to the Western academic status quo, which itself remains basically an outsider to the African status quo.<sup>42</sup>

Yet in my view, Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics in Africa cannot afford the luxury of being disinterested. Practitioners of African Biblical hermeneutics must thus refuse the claims to objectivity which we have received through traditional American- and Eurocentric biblical studies. We must insist that our African experiences and contexts serve as lenses through which we, both student and lecturer, interact with the subject matter of Old Testament studies.<sup>43</sup> One would thus agree with Andrew Mbuvi when he argues that African biblical hermeneutics does not only focus on the biblical text and its past. Instead it "refuses to deal with the Bible simply as an ancient text and demands that it be engaged to deal with present concerns, addressing issues that resonate with African (and world) realities."<sup>44</sup>

Such a deliberate effort to Africanize the contents and methods of various disciplines on the continent, including Old Testament studies will not only enable the positive transformation of our contexts, but may go a long way in decolonizing our knowledge systems and epistemological frameworks.

## Conclusion

As Old Testament scholars embark on the contextualization of Biblical studies offerings, they could take another cue from the mission statement of the DACB in the preservation and magnifying of the hitherto marginalized voices of African female voices. Why so?

The Bible is at the center of African Christianity. It enjoys a warm hospitality in the African church and the broader African society, especially within African female society. The Bible is at home amidst the gendered suffering related to gender-based

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<sup>42</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Teaching Western-Oriented Old Testament Studies to African Students: An Exercise in Wisdom or in Folly?" *Old Testament Essays* 17(3) (2004): 460.

<sup>43</sup> Masenya, 469.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew M. Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline." *Currents in Biblical Research* 15/2 (2017): 154. See also, T. Okure, "First was the Life, Not the Book." T. Okure (ed.), *To cast fire upon the earth: bible and mission collaborating in today's multicultural global context* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2000): 194-227.

produced are intended to be used in the classroom and in the church in order to foster a deeper understanding of the history of African Christianity at a local, regional, and continental level. It thus provides tools that undergird the development of contextual African theologies.

How might the contents of the core mission of the DACB impact the theory and praxis of a discipline such as Biblical Studies/ Old Testament Studies in a country like South Africa? The response to the preceding question will be discussed in the following reflection on contextualizing Biblical Studies (Old Testament Studies) in an African-South African context.

### Contextualizing Biblical Studies (OT) in an African-South African Context

In essence, decolonization rejects the importation of theory from the Western academy and its wholesome application in Africa, but encourages theorizing from the African reality and observing the right balance between the local and the global. In this case, the local production of knowledge takes note of the society's needs but demands also its capacities and aspirations.<sup>41</sup>

That Africa and all that she has, including her epistemologies, philosophies, knowledges and languages among others, have been either marginalized or erased historically up to today, is a fact that cuts across many an academic discipline both locally and continentally. That Bible and Theology teaching as well as research offerings consumed and taught by African academics in Africa and the diaspora are Euro- and American-centric in orientation and perspective is also an indisputable fact. Yet, in the context of African Christianity, the Christian Bible remains one of the major cultural and spiritual resources in the lives of many local Christian believers on the African continent.

In our contexts, what is offered and researched on knowledge production, remains basically foreign to Africa. Does it then cause any surprise that elsewhere one could lament:

...ours is a theological education characterized by one assuming the role of an insider in one context and that of an outsider in another context. One becomes an insider as one is being trained as a student, an insider to the theologies which are foreign to oneself, an insider as one trains

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<sup>41</sup> Busani Mpfu and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Dynamics of Changing Higher Education in the Global South* (New Castle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020): 25.

- Is the flow of large amounts of money from North to South still needed? Should the status of the younger church remain humble and its growth proceed only as local economies grow?
- Would such a step lead local Christians to exert greater efforts toward socio-political and economic development and liberation than when, for example, they seek all the funds for a new pastoral ministry training center from foreign sources rather than raise half or an even larger proportion locally?

These questions are also relevant for the dependency syndrome and the begging culture of some individuals and even of governments. Mission efforts in education and health should not create the impression of transnational religious corporations at the expense of spiritual life.

- How does the missionary and the Christian strike a balance between being mindful of temporal things, so to speak, and also mindful of the spiritual? Which comes first?
- The extremes of poverty and wealth in today's world are a real scandal. Should this apply just to the secular arm of society?

That this applies to the spiritual realm is a matter of grave concern. Christians are called upon to work toward a climate where reasonable contentment with a more modest living standard must become the norm. The church does not exist for itself but is founded as a sign of hope for the world. And we know that Christians did not receive the command to construct buildings but to invite peoples to discover their fellowship as forgiven, Spirit-enlivened believers under God in Jesus who is the Christ. This is the task of God's people—that they may live more worthily in the sight of God and their fellow human beings. How challenging and true. These statements are timely and relevant, especially for Christians.

Nthamburi also raises similar critical questions. The missionaries in a mission station near his home portrayed a picture of affluence and material privilege. Many of the villagers would have embraced Christianity had they been assured that such immense affluence and wealth was part of the package. But the missionaries did not seem to want to share. Nthamburi echoes John Mbiti's sentiments that African converts to Christianity were beggars of Christian spirituality, ideas, cash, and personnel. The three key issues related to the above concerns are, first that affluence can draw resentment from the less privileged; second, that what we possess greatly influences those around us; and third, that life is a package that combines the spiritual, the theoretical, and the material. Nthamburi further echoes Jean-Marc Ela's sentiments that the church cannot evangelize without sharing the life of the people. This calls all those who intend to serve others to make efforts to understand and appreciate human

situations of influence: parent and child, teacher and student, employer and employee, buyer and seller.

When conflict arises, one can attribute it to the lack of understanding and appreciation of one another's context and to the implications for relationships. Without self-denial, there is the possibility of spiritual neuroticism. Self-denial calls for endurance in the face of pain and discomfort, and brings forth social and spiritual health. Insensitive affluence is embarrassing and contradicts the biblical message. The missionary is called to be discerning in order to avoid being egocentric. These are key lessons for everyday life. Mission efforts will be futile if not linked to the cutting edge, which means that missionaries have to be part of the wheel, not isolated from the people and their realities. For a Christian, focus on the Bible is essential. Yes, Scripture is the tap root of Christianity. The believer—missionary or convert—needs to read the Bible, comprehend it, and be guided by its precepts.

Other critical questions raised in the book include the following: if we are surrounded by things that are beyond the reach of those we expect to reach, they cannot follow us. What are these things and what should be the approach and attitude towards material things? In mission, two issues that require attention are numerical growth and the spiritual health of the converts. Numerical growth may be easy to determine because it is based on ticking off numbers—hopefully there will be no impersonation or ghosts.

But what is the measure of spiritual health? What is the thermometer that determines spiritual health? What doctor determines spiritual health? Can the lowly in society engage in mission to the highly placed? Does that make mission a class and status issue? Create more desire and thou shall consume. How can more desire be created, by whom, and why? What is the way out of consumerism?

Bonk argues that there definitely is a problem regarding missions and money. One way out is to consider this matter as part and parcel of everyday life. Each Christian has a responsibility to play their part within Biblical parameters regarding the teachings on mission and money. The preaching and the practice ought to go hand in hand. Bonk's book offers a myriad of life lessons. Buhlmann has commended the book to anyone interested in the spread of the whole Gospel in the whole world. Nthamburi has indicated that this book is a must for people interested in doing Christian mission in a Christian way.

I salute Bonk for the courage and humility to tackle a pertinent subject in an open and practical manner. He has provided timely guidelines that are applicable in various life situations. Through the book *Missions and Money*, Bonk has enriched my life. The book never ceases to provide new insights, regardless of how many times I read it. Directly or indirectly, through this book, Bonk qualifies as a DACB subject, both as

## Context in African Biblical Studies: Some Reflections

By Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)

### Encountering Professor J. J. Bonk

My first encounter with Professor Jonathan J. Bonk, the Honoree, happened at my very first meeting as a member of the Advisory Committee of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB). The meeting took place in Karen, Kenya during the first week of December 2016. I then met him again when the DACB held its meeting in October 2017. In my interactions with him, Bonk has been a model of industry and humility, someone with a love for nature and—especially in view of what I will discuss later in this essay—someone with a zeal to reach out, especially to those on the margins of our communities. He is indeed a missionary, with a missionary's heart.

One example of this trait remains vividly etched in my memory. Bonk described to me a course he was designing that would enable his students to be effective in prison ministry—a course in which the curriculum was informed by the views of those who were incarcerated. The incarcerated individuals were asked questions regarding what needed to feature in the course. I marveled at the humility that a scholar of Bonk's caliber displayed in this approach. I figured that such qualities, especially for scholars operating in higher education institutions on this continent, could go a long way not only in addressing contextual concerns in various higher education contexts, but also in demonstrating that the education process (cf. teaching and research) should be geared to the holistic formation of the students as they take their cue from their tutors and lecturers. It is thus an honor to dedicate the present piece to him.

### The Mission of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB)

For over two decades, Bonk has been the Director of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) whose mission is “to collect, preserve and make freely accessible the biographical accounts and church histories—from oral and written sources—integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity (2020)” (DACB homepage). The following key terms embedded in the DACB's mission statement are noteworthy: first, collection and preservation, second, biographical and church histories, and third, African Christianity.

Central to the DACB's mission appears to be a commitment to the contextualization of Christianity on the African continent. Hence, the resources

religiosity cannot be a substitute for scientifically researched and also technologically approved measures to minimize infection and ensure effective treatment against pandemics. The median age in Africa during 2020 is 19.7 years, contrasted with that of Europe (42.5). Secularism is normative in Europe and North America while sacral religiosity is normative in Africa – blending various brands of Christianity and Islam with traditional African religious beliefs and practices.

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) is a timely initiative, documenting African Christianity at the crossroads between the western missionary enterprise and authentic African religious initiatives and innovations. The future of Christianity in Africa, in the long term, will depend largely on the capacity and strategy of Africans to withstand the pressures of secularization as a process, and secularism as an ideology. The tendency to posit “westernization” as the panacea for African challenges is erroneous, because cultures are not analogous to the grafting of scions to mother plants or to crossbreeding livestock. History teaches that humans have great capacity for cultural resilience.<sup>40</sup>

*Jesse N. K. Mugambi, PhD, FKNAS, EBS, is Professor at the University of Nairobi in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. He is a member of the Editorial Committee and Co-Chair of the Senior Advisory Council of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB) as well as Associate Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University School of Theology.*

a contributor to Christianity in Africa—the stories of “missionary kids” are hardly ever told—and because he has covered key aspects that incarnate successful mission.

*Mary Getui, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the Catholic University of East Africa (Kenya). She is a member of the Editorial Board of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the North American headquarters at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

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<sup>40</sup> On this point see, for example, John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

## Jonathan Bonk and the DACB: A Treasured Contribution to African Christian History

By Isaac Deji Ayegboyin and Michael A. Ogunewu

### Introduction

That Europeans suffered in Africa, made sacrifices, and showed dedication and heroism is a fact apart from all exaggerations of their own accounts and the hagiographies of their admirers. But so did the rarely named African collaborators who carried the missionaries on their backs and in hammocks and who interpreted for them. What comes through to the African who reads the missionary efforts of Europeans in Africa is the ethnocentricity of the account<sup>7</sup>

It is now well known that during the missionary era, white proselytizers did not work alone on the African mission field because they enjoyed the able assistance of their African counterparts. Although this sounds very much like it is repeating the obvious, it is interesting to recall that this *datum*, for a long time, was hardly accessible. Indeed, African Church History was presented as a solely western enterprise. The ostensible truth of the prejudiced historians' hypotheses is that Africans or native agents were apathetic to the promotion of Christianity on the continent. Consequently, while stories of western missionaries enjoyed continuous replication even in the work of African scholars, less attention was paid to the exploits of the many native agents who were often pioneers, scouting and preparing the advance, carrying the missionaries and their belongings, and serving as formidable links between the missionaries and the local potentates. Michael Ogunewu explains that one strong factor responsible for this anomaly is that while European and American missionaries regularly preserved diaries of events, wrote journals, and regularly sent letters to their relatives, mission boards, and financial supporters back home, African Christians rarely recorded their own stories or had their contributions documented.<sup>8</sup> For these deliberate omissions, Deji Ayegboyin

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<sup>7</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Accra: Sam Woode, 1996), 33

<sup>8</sup> Michael Adeleke Ogunewu, "Writing African Christian History through Biographies: African Christian Biographical Project (DACB)," in Samson A. Fatokun, Jacob K Ayantayo, Solomon M. Mepaiyeda, Olusesan O. Familusi, and Samuel O. Okanlawon (eds.) *African Christianity in*

One of the consequences of this missionary condescendence has been the rise of independent churches across Africa. David B. Barrett in his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa* reported as many as fifteen thousand African independent churches in Africa by 1968. The precedent having been set, the proliferation of church independency seems unstoppable in Africa.<sup>38</sup>

### Future of Christianity and Churches of the Future in Africa

Global demographic statistics indicate that adherence to Christianity has been shifting from Europe and North America to Africa and South America, while secularism has been increasing in countries that used to be famous for sending missionaries to Africa and Asia. If evangelization had been rationally justified, Europe and North America would by now have become mission fields, receiving missionaries especially from Africa. It turns out, however, that the missionary enterprise was, and remains, much more than a campaign for converting human souls for heavenly salvation. In cultural terms, Christian mission cannot be abstracted from cultural influence. Missionaries take their language and culture with them and hardly ever internalize the culture and language of the peoples they go to convert. Consequently, the missionary enterprise becomes more cultural indoctrination than religious conversion.<sup>39</sup>

The rising secularism in Europe and North America inevitably filters into the rest of the world, influencing the people in countries that for centuries had remained predominantly rural and resonant with nature. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 infected twenty-six million people within six months, resulting in nearly 860,000 deaths. The virus spared no category of people—by age, status, class, gender, race, nationality or religion. Advancements in both science and technology have had relatively little or no significant safeguard against infection by COVID-19. This pandemic is reminiscent of the ten plagues in the Old Testament narratives, except that COVID-19 was technologically explained rather than religiously interpreted. Neither the advancement in technology nor the emphasis on piety seems to have been significantly advantageous. The regulation of social distancing was made mandatory for all persons to minimize infection. Prayer did not prove to be effective as an antidote against infection. Churches and other places of worship had to observe the mandatory regulations to prevent contagious infections.

One of the lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that

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<sup>38</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> On this point see, for example, J. N. K. Mugambi, *Future of the Church and Church of the Future in Africa* (Nairobi: AACC, 1991).

for preservation.

### **Empathetic Mission and Missiology in Africa**

In his book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem* (New York: Orbis, 2006), Bonk makes a sharp distinction between *patronage* and *partnership* in missionary outreach. The Western missionary enterprise, especially in Africa, is premised upon the imperial paradigm, with the main objective to indoctrinate the potential and actual converts to emulate the values, virtues, norms, conduct, and outlook of the missionaries and their respective dominant imperial cultures. In this imperial approach, the Gospel is made a tool of empire, rather than a liberating incentive. As a result, successful “conversion” is evaluated on the basis of the level to which the convert has imbibed the language, values, norms, and attitudes of the missionary and his imperial cultural assumptions. Before long, the descendants of the first generation of converts reject missionary tutelage and interpret the Gospel on the basis of contextual relevance and applicability. Such rejection is not unique. It is typical throughout the history of Christian missions across cultures.

Roland Oliver in his book *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longman, 1970) documents the role of European missionary initiatives in the inculcation of Western cultural values among African converts. Western critique of the African cultural and religious heritage is exemplified in the book by Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, MA: C. Stark, 1974).<sup>36</sup> From an African perspective, Arnold Temu’s critique of this approach is self-explanatory in his work *The British Protestant Missions in Kenya 1873-1929*. Over a much longer period, and across Africa, Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed have described the missionary encounter between the West and Africa in *A History of the Christian Church in Africa*.<sup>37</sup>

Missionaries appreciative of the African cultural and religious heritage have been few and far between. The cultural superiority syndrome has prevented most missionaries from appreciating and appraising African cultural and religious heritage, on the assumption that might is right and West is best. Self-critique among missionaries has been rare and when expressed has yielded conflict in missionary policy and practice.

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<sup>36</sup> Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod & Hartford: Claude Starke, 1974).

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Temu, *The British Protestant Missions in Kenya 1873-1929*, thesis (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1967); Bengt Sundkler and C. Steed, *A History of the Christian Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

indicted the ethnocentric writers for writing “bad” history because they allowed their prejudice, ignorance, and personal feelings to get the better side of them.<sup>9</sup>

### **Enter Jonathan Bonk**

During his university studies, Jonathan James Bonk of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in the United States had noticed this discrepancy. He describes the situation thus:

While these pioneers (missionaries) planted the seeds of Christianity on African soil, they had little impact on the growth of the church. And yet they are well known because reference books document the work of the Western missionaries in Africa. In contrast, many of these same reference works do not mention pioneer African church leaders and founders such as those whose ministries yielded astounding fruit in the birth and growth of the African church.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this observation, Bonk decided to champion the cause of filling the lacuna in African Christian historiography. This, *inter alia*, gave birth to the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB), in 1995 with Jonathan Bonk as its visionary and founding Director.

Bonk’s love for Africa stemmed from the fact that he was raised in Ethiopia by missionary parents. Even after his retirement as executive director of OMSC in July 2012, he has continued to be actively involved in the furtherance of the cause of Christianity globally. He is an innovator in the field and has made a significant contribution to the progressive changes in the global understanding of Africa’s role in world Christianity. Bonk is a seasoned, articulate academic conference speaker and writer. He has authored many books, chapters in books, articles in learned journals, and many edited works.

### **His Academic Legacy**

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*Local and Global Contexts: A Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Prof. Isaac Deji Ayegeboyin FNAL* (Ibadan: Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2019), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Deji Ayegeboyin, “Prejudice of Traditional Missions’ History against the Third World: Reflections on Andrew Walls and Jeffrey Kloeber’s Renunciation,” *Nigerian Journal of Church History and Missiological Studies* (NJOCHAMS) 1-2

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bonk and Michele Sigg, *An Introduction to the Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, PowerPoint Presentation created by Michele Sigg, DACB, Project Manager, 7, 8.

Jonathan Bonk is a dedicated scholar, having served in academia in various capacities since 1972. Early on, he embarked on a diligent search and open-minded study of African history. Refusing to be an armchair philosopher, he has sought to better understand the African story. His academic work necessitated networking trips to universities, research centers and seminaries in China, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, and various European and Eastern European countries.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, with the DACB project, he has confirmed the importance of the use of biography to tell the story of African Christianity. He has organized regional workshops on biography and oral history in Africa. All these accomplishments have earned Bonk a place of honor in the African academy.

### **Prioritizing African History**

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of this great scholar and mentor is his uncompromising commitment to the development of human capacities and potential for the overall betterment of humanity. Bonk founded the DACB database which has championed the documentation of the activities of African church leaders and some of the unsung heroes—across the entire African continent—whose contributions to Christianity would have otherwise remained unknown. Since the founding of the DACB, the study of African Christian history has become easier. It has afforded African scholars in the field, belonging to any Christian tradition, the privilege of researching the history of their own people and documenting it for posterity.

In the same vein, the OMSC trained and mentored African scholars in the art of biographical writing through the Project Luke Fellowship. From 1999 to 2012, this specially funded residential program allowed African scholars to spend a period of time at the OMSC where they could dedicate themselves to writing biographies of African church leaders. Many [African scholars](#) benefited immensely from this program. In this way, Bonk who, though not an African by birth, ensured that African Christian History was brought into the limelight, through the DACB project. For this, African scholars in the field of Church History will forever be grateful. In this way, Bonk has succeeded in shielding generations from the perils of continental amnesia, by encouraging the writing of biographies of leading personalities of African churches since the beginning of Christian history.

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<sup>11</sup> CV, p. 4: <https://bu.academia.edu/JonathanBonk/CurriculumVitae> - accessed on 01-06-2020.

identify, and sympathize with the persons to whom the texts refer. Thus those religions and sects with founders tend to appeal more to non-academic believers than those that focus on theoretical and hypothetical propositions. Biographies of founders of religions, denominations, and sects are essential for the orientation of converts. Predominantly oral cultures risk losing indispensable knowledge and wisdom from non-literate or semi-literate leaders and also from literate ones who have little or no interest in recording their own knowledge, experience, and expertise.

In lieu of autobiographies and written (or recorded) sermons and teachings, the DACB will hopefully serve as a resource to document some aspects of African Christianity that would otherwise be forgotten. From an African perspective, Paul's epistles are most appealing because of their autobiographical sketches. Likewise, the sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels authenticate his teachings. Accurate factual documentation of African Christianity is problematic partly owing to the scarcity of biographies and autobiographies. Sometimes in compiling eulogies, arguments arise regarding the personality profile of a particular priest, lay leader or ordinary member. Yet in predominantly oral cultures there tends to be little or no concern for rigidity, because the multiplicity of opinions is normative. Consensus ultimately prevails.

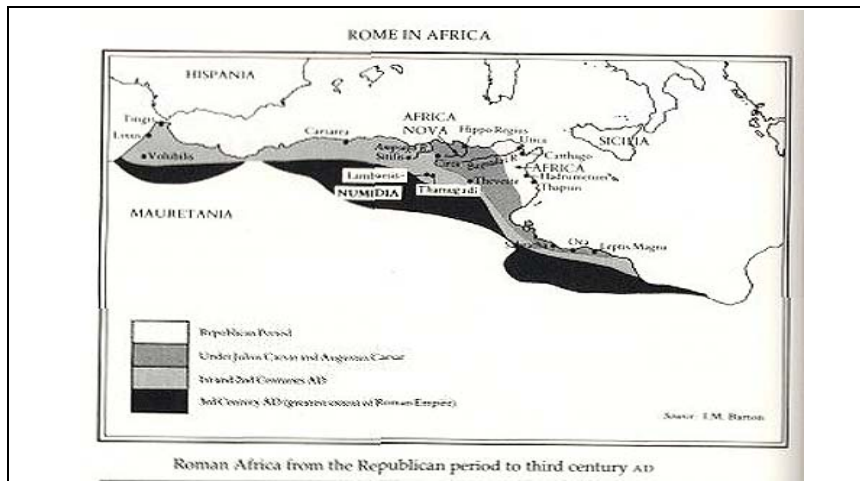
African churches lack reliable documentation on the basic teachings of their founders, teachers and preachers. Many African preachers do not write or record their sermons and, as a result, their wise counsel cannot be passed on to people other than those who were present and attentive. Audio and video recording equipment, although a useful asset, is rarely used in most rural areas owing to such constraints as electricity, recording and playback equipment, cultural orientation, and so on. Interestingly, members of a congregation who attentively listen to a sermon absorb whatever they hear and process it depending on many factors— including exposure, literacy level, and earlier preparation.

The obsolescence of electronic equipment is another constraint through which audio and video recording has become unreliable as means to preserve orally delivered lectures, lessons, sermons and speeches. Orally delivered lectures and sermons, unless transcribed into literary format, fade into oblivion after only a short while. Each listener during a sermon hears and interprets a message differently, and the speaker can hardly ever repeat the same speech or sermon though oral delivery. Thus there remains a great challenge in African Christianity on how to preserve the insights, teaching, and wisdom of leaders who communicate orally without written versions of their sermons and addresses. The documentation of autobiographies and biographies can best be preserved in the long term by saving transcribed versions to an online resource like the DACB. Bonk has repeatedly urged African scholars to collect and record the biographies of as many African Christians as possible, then to forward those transcriptions to the DACB



began centuries before the nineteenth century European conquest and occupation.

The European (and North American) missionary enterprise in Africa, which came as an appendage of imperial presence in Africa, over-emphasized (and continues emphasizing) the role of missionaries, while downplaying the contribution of African converts to the spread of the Gospel. Yet, in fact, the first and second generations of African catechists and teachers, despite their limited schooling, contributed much more than the missionaries toward the spread of Christianity across Tropical Africa. Catechists, lay leaders, and Sunday school teachers have the closest contact with the youth potential and actual converts. They are the most convincing in outreach.<sup>35</sup> The DACB focuses on this aspect of documentation, in appreciation of non-stipendiary and non-enrolled African Christians in the task of spreading the Gospel.



### Significance of Biography in the Documentation of African Christianity

Biographical and autobiographical sketches take substantial proportions of Christian Scripture. Some, such as those of St. Paul, are the predominant genre, while others include occasional biographical sketches. Religious texts without biographical and autobiographical passages are too detached from the lives of actual and potential believers, whereas biographies and autobiographies appeal to readers who empathize,

<sup>35</sup> On this point see, for example, Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The DACB is an award-winning project that was conceived in 1995 and first went online in 1998. Now, the DACB website is in its twenty-second year. Its mission continues to be “to collect, preserve, and make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories – from oral and written sources – integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> One of the most distinguishing features of the DACB, in recent years is the inauguration of the bi-annual scholarly *Journal of African Christian Biography* which features some of the outstanding biographies that have appeared in the online database.

The DACB documents a crucial phase in African history referred to as Ethiopianism. The Ethiopian leaders opposed the domination of the church by the missionaries and were resentful of their unscriptural and racist policies as well as their intolerance of African culture and practices even when they did not contradict the teachings of the Bible. Using the promise in the Psalms that “Ethiopia shall raise its hands to God,” Ethiopianism became a movement of cultural and religious protest.

Among radical leaders whose stories are highlighted in the DACB are Simon Kimbangu (1887-1951), the founder of Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through Prophet Kimbangu, who is reputed to have initiated one of the largest religious movements in modern Africa; William Wade Harris (1865-1929), whose movement spread across the three West African countries of Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire and attracted over 100,000 followers; Garrick Sokari Braide (1882-1918), whose movement is acclaimed as the first Pentecostal movement in Nigeria; and Joseph Ayodele Babalola (1904-1959), the arrowhead of the *Aladura* Revival of the 1930s, in southwest Nigeria, whose ministry snowballed into the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Endowed with a patient and pleasant demeanor, Jon hardly ever complained during the course of our meetings over the years. At meetings, he appreciates all contributions and he has a talent for delegating authority. Remarkably, age and the passage of time have not hampered his attributes of commitment, attractiveness, accessibility, dedication, humility, and open-mindedness. If anything at all, age seems to have deepened them. For, even at age 75, this exemplary leader has remained courteous, gentle, warm, cultured, respectful and always accommodating. The fact that he continues to be in great demand for speaking engagements at his age bears testimony to an exemplary life that deserves to be celebrated now, and always.

<sup>12</sup> See DACB Database - accessed on 01-06-2020

<sup>13</sup> See DACB Database – accessed on 01-06-2020

Jon, your great legacy is further revealed in the way you have passed on the baton to the indefatigable Michele. It has been a great blessing knowing and working with both of you. With all these attestations and even more that are not captured here, we join our voices to recognize Professor Jonathan Bonk who deserves to be celebrated for his accomplished life and his contribution to African History.

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**Rev. Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, PhD**, Professor and Head, Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria). Formerly on the Advisory Council, he currently serves as member of the Senior Advisory Council of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.

**Michael Leke Ogunewu, PhD**, is former Senior Lecturer in Church History and Director of Museum and Archives at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS) in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. He has authored or co-authored over thirty original biographies of West African Christian figures for the DACB. In addition, he has supervised the work of many students who have written biographies for the DACB especially from NBTS.

of European colonization.<sup>29</sup>

Ethiopia and Egypt feature significantly in the nativity of Jesus. The first convert into Christianity outside Palestine was an Ethiopian pilgrim.<sup>30</sup> The label “Africa” now designating the entire continent bearing this name is derived from the Roman Province of Africa—*Africa Proconsularis*—established by Julius Caesar in 146 BCE, along the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is impossible to conceptualize the notion “Africa” without reference to the nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile River with tributaries originating in the East African highlands. Recent attempts to detach the continent of Africa from the original Roman Province of Africa are historically erroneous and ideologically misleading. For millennia there has been trade southwards from the Mediterranean Sea and northwards across the Niger River. The Sahara was never a hindrance to prosperous trading between inhabitants of the temperate Mediterranean coastland and those in the tropical lands. Both Christianity and Islam have converts in Africa, but the African cultural and religious heritage remains resilient.

Until the twentieth century the Sahara Desert has not been featured in interactions between peoples of Africa and those in Europe and Asia. One of the oldest universities worldwide was Timbuktu, the Trade Centre where for centuries Islam would interact with the African cultural and religious heritage. In 1526, Leo Africanus described the wealthy lifestyle of Timbuktu, where gold nuggets were the medium of economic exchange. Eastwards, toward the Red Sea, Christianity had been flourishing for centuries in Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup>

The imperial history of East Africa is also interesting and inspiring. The Kenya coast in particular, became a zone of cultural and religious interaction between Asia, Africa, and Europe, especially between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. When Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer, arrived at Malindi along the East African coast in March 1498, he found Arabic Islam already established.<sup>33</sup> Nearly a century earlier, the Chinese admiral, Zheng He had made voyages along the East African coast as far south as Malindi.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the exposure of East Africans to foreign cultures and religions

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<sup>29</sup> On this point see, for example, Stephen C. Neill, *History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>30</sup> Acts 8:26-39

<sup>31</sup> On this point see, for example, Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> On Leo Africanus’ description of Timbuktu, see for example, <http://www.swcra.net/teachers/brant/World%20History/AfricaDoc2.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vasco-da-Gama>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1334/the-seven-voyages-of-zheng-he/>

pilgrim.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the earliest formulations of Christian doctrine were by African theologians—Augustine of Hippo Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Felicity, Perpetua, Tertullian, and others.<sup>24</sup>

The centrality of Africa in the historical documentation of early Christianity has been trivialized in Western historiography, except for a few exceptional scholars, among whom Professor Andrew Walls is exemplary.<sup>25</sup> Thomas Oden has lucidly described the pivotal role of Africa in shaping European Christianity, long before it was misappropriated for political and economic leverage throughout Europe. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 endorsed the principle of denominations as markers of ethnocentric identity through which princes wielded power to determine the religion of their subjects. That legacy remains presupposed, even though secularism is nominally normative at least for the present.<sup>26</sup>

Western missionary endeavors in Africa during the twentieth century have been amply documented.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, African contributions toward the establishment and growth of African Christianity remain poorly documented, or not at all. It is this gap that the DACB endeavors to fill. Bonk deserves our appreciation for his devotion to this project. He has encouraged the younger generation of African scholars to compile as much information as can be found on African contributions in order to establish and root Christianity in African soil. His initiative has borne much fruit, the taste of which can be sampled in the *Journal of African Christian Biography*.<sup>28</sup> The earliest scholars of the Christian faith were Africans. Both the Coptic Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are much older than the Catholic and Protestant churches of Europe whose offspring denominations and sects in Tropical Africa are integral to the process

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<sup>23</sup> Acts 8: 26-40

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect" in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 86-115; *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, New York: Orbis, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> On this point see, for example, Steven Patton, "The Peace of Westphalia and its Effects on International Relations, Diplomacy and Foreign Policy," in *The Histories*, Vol 10, Issue 1, Article 5, 2019. [[https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories/vol10/iss1/5](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol10/iss1/5)]

<sup>27</sup> Archives of the various missionary societies provide ample documentation on the work of missionaries, but hardly any reference to the work of the Africans who assisted them and provided linkage between the colonizers and the colonized.

<sup>28</sup> <https://dacb.org/journal/>

## Jonathan Bonk: His Mission and Its Impact on Africa

By Olusegun Obasanjo

"Africa remains 'the dark continent,' not due to an absence of light, but because the lenses through which the Christian religious academy peers are opaque, rendering Africa invisible."<sup>14</sup>

I have never met Jonathan Bonk in person but I am well acquainted with him through his work as an eminent teacher, a thorough researcher, a seasoned biographer, a dedicated missionary and above all, a devoted servant of God. It is this non-person interaction with Jonathan Bonk which has shaped my impression of him. In this article, I wish to share my impression of Jonathan Bonk, the importance of his contribution to African Christianity, as well as the impact his work has had on my academic journey in the life-changing field of theology.

My earliest encounter with Jonathan Bonk, the founding director of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biographies* (DACB), was in 2014 when my doctoral degree supervisor, Prof. Deji Ayegboyan, introduced the DACB to me.<sup>15</sup> I instantly found the DACB to be not only a relevant contribution to the documentation of the history of Christianity in Africa but also a worthy attempt to correct generations of neglect of Africans who either supported the work of the early American and European missionaries in Africa or who were themselves pioneers and frontrunners in the spread of the Gospel and the firm establishment of Christianity in Africa.

Coming in contact with the DACB was an eye-opener because it exposed me to many stories of great African missionaries—stories which were hitherto unknown and missionaries who were hitherto unrecognized and uncelebrated. Even as an African, I was amazed by the sheer scale of the contributions that those African missionaries who have so far been captured in the DACB made to the growth of the Church with little or no record of their activities documented by scholars. Bonk, in his essay outlining the

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Bonk, "Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent: The Dictionary of African Christian Biography"

URL: <https://dacb.org/about/bonk-article/>.

<sup>15</sup> Chief Olusegun Obasanjo has researched and written on three African Christians Leaders from Nigeria for the DACB. The subjects of his research were (i) Cardinal Dominic Ekandem, a Catholic priest from the Niger Delta – the south-eastern part of Nigeria; (ii) Archbishop David Windibiziri, the first archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria from northern Nigeria; and (iii) Major Babatunde Lawrence, prophet and founder of the Holy Flock of Christ from the south-western part of Nigeria.

vision and work of the DACB, rightly summarized the situation of African missionaries and what it portends for the Church below:

Since the greatest surge in the history of Christianity occurred in Africa over the past one hundred years, and continues its breath-taking trajectory into the twenty-first century, it is both disappointing and alarming that yet another generation of Christian leaders, scholars and their protégés, relying upon existing, “up-to-date” reference sources, will learn virtually nothing of this remarkable phenomenon, or of the men and women who served and who serve as the movement’s catalysts.<sup>16</sup>

It is much to Jonathan Bonk’s credit that the DACB has successfully turned the tide and reversed the trend of obscurantism in the area of African missionaries and their work. The DACB has made it easier for this generation to learn about African evangelists, catechists, apostles, and prophets.

Bonk’s contribution to the documentation of these great African Christian leaders is all the more important when viewed against the backdrop of his cultural background. Although he has deep roots in Africa having spent his childhood years in Ethiopia as the son of a Canadian missionary, it is nonetheless inspiring that he has dedicated some twenty five years of his life to a project that aims to “collect, preserve, and make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories – from oral and written sources – integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity.” His is the story of a non-African leading a project that preserves the memories of African Christian leaders not because it is fashionable to do so but because it is necessary, important, and even divine to do so.

It should not be lost on scholars of African Christianity that Bonk had taken concrete action to document the stories of African Christian leaders long before Thomas Oden published his much acclaimed work *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (2007) in which he echoed the call for the stories of African Christian champions to be documented arguing that “Ordinary African Christian believers deserve to have much a much more accessible way of understanding early African Christianity: its faith, courage, tenacity, and remarkable intellectual strength. That is why this story must be told, told now, and told accurately.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> URL: <https://dacb.org/about/bonk-article/>

<sup>17</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 11.

## Biography as History in Explication of African Christianity A Reflection in Appreciation of Professor Jonathan Bonk

By Jesse N. K. Mugambi

### Introduction

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) received its official Africa launch when Founder Professor Jonathan Bonk made his first DACB-related trip to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in February 1999. The DACB has become a unique initiative that focuses on compiling and publishing biographies of pioneer African Christians throughout this continent. The name emphasizes the primary and fundamental role of Africans in the process of rooting the Christian faith in the African cultural soil. It is an awkward reality that the history of Christianity in Africa is documented in Western scholarship as the initiative of European and American missionaries despite the fact that they owe their success to the work of the African catechists and other African personnel who feature only peripherally or not at all in missionary historiography. As founder and promoter of the DACB, Bonk has devoted much of his time, effort and resources to nurturing this insightful project.

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) is dedicated to Professor Bonk. Having been brought up in Ethiopia, Bonk internalized and resonated with the African religious ethos in ways short-term and part-time missionaries could not. While serving as Research Professor of Mission at Boston University, Director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) and Editor of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Bonk has contributed immensely towards clarifying the role of Christian mission across cultures, in a global context that is increasingly secularized and interconnected.

### Africa and Africans in the History of Christianity

Africa features prominently in the history of the first four centuries of Christianity as it does in the twenty-first century. It was in the Roman Province of Africa—*Africa Proconsularis*—that the biblical narrative of the nativity of Jesus began. Simon from Cyrene, in present day Tunisia, would carry the cross on which Jesus was crucified.<sup>22</sup> The first African convert into the Christian faith was a prominent Ethiopian

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 23: 26-27

## The Dictionary of African Christian Biography: Effecting Change in African and Global Scholarship

Telling the story of African Christianity in the way Oden has described it is what the DACB has done for over twenty years now. With over 2000 biographies of African Christian leaders already documented, one would therefore be forgiven to expect that writers like Oden would acknowledge the role already played by the DACB in collating, documenting, and promoting the stories of African Christian leaders.

For many of us in Africa, the DACB has become the authentic reference material for stories of African Christian leaders. It is, in many respects, an African project and there is a sense in which Africans have come to trust its content as free from the shackles of western biases and agendas. This is not to say it does not have its limitations. In his foreword to a collection of some biographies I wrote, Bonk admits that:

*The Dictionary of African Christian Biography* makes no pretense to being a definitive history of anyone. It is a growing smattering of biographical stories, recalled and recounted by men and women with their own limiting perspectives, biases, insights, and opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

However, Bonk goes on to argue that “Without such biographies... coming generations of African church historians and their readers will be hard pressed to locate authentically African voices in the uniquely *African* story of Christianity across the continent.”<sup>19</sup>

The policy of the DACB to seek authentic African voices to tell the stories of African Christian leaders offers African scholars a great platform to Africanize *Christianity*. At the risk of exaggerating, I dare say that were it not for the DACB, many of the African church leaders whose stories have now come to light would have remained unknown or, at least, they would not have become known at this time in our history.

To buttress this point, let me share my own experience researching one of the African Christian leaders whose biography I wrote for the DACB. Abiodun Babatunde Lawrence (1893 – 1943) was the founder of the Holy Flock of Christ. He founded the Church in 1932 and today it is believed to have over seventy branches in Nigeria, the United States, Canada, and Israel. Yet, in my research on Lawrence there was little material to work with even at the headquarters of the Church in Lagos, Nigeria. I was given one old copy of his photograph by the current head of the Church and I was told it was the only existing photo of him and the copy was not clear enough for use in a publication. We had to take the photo to a studio in London for enhancement. The

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Bonk, Foreword, in Olusegun Obasanjo, *African Christianity in Perspective: Biographies of Some Nigerian Christian Leaders* (Abeokuta: OOPL Publishing, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Bonk, Foreword.

inclusion of Babatunde Lawrence in the DACB has not only placed him among his peers but also placed him on a platform that has become a reference tool for many around the world.

Bonk's stewardship at the DACB has been most impactful on African Christianity. And it is impressive that he carried out his self-given assignment with the greatest humility and professionalism. As he retires from his position as Project Director of the DACB after over twenty years, Bonk has raised the bar in uplifting African Christian leaders and will leave big shoes to fill. Many of us in Africa are praying that the new leadership of DACB will not drop the bar. As God was with Jonathan Bonk in his DACB assignment, God will be with his successor, Dr. Michele Sigg. I wish Jonathan Bonk extensive rest after he has handed over the baton and I also remind him that there is still plenty of harvesting in the vineyard of God for him.

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*Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, PhD, is a former military head of state (1976-1979) and president of Nigeria (1999-2007). He holds a PhD in Christian Religious Studies from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) where he is currently a Course Facilitator and Project Supervisor. He is also a speaker, writer, researcher and statesman with decades of experience in international conflict resolution, mediation, and peace keeping. In 2017, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed him a member of the High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation, a body of 18 current and former global leaders, senior officials and renowned experts. He is the author of three DACB biographies of Nigerian figures: [Cardinal Dominic Ekandem](#), [Archbishop David Windibiziri](#), and [Major Babatunde Lawrence](#).*

6. Compassion. Jonathan relates to people with great compassion. I remember him taking some of us to lunch. He would even buy lunch for the hungry. This is permanently etched in my memory and I do the same when I can.
7. Jonathan is the epitome of humility, integrity, and confidence. These are values and virtues that I have learned from him.

I am grateful that God allowed me to meet Professor Jonathan Bonk. I have learned valuable life lessons from him and leadership skills. He has also been a mentor to me in the academy. I pray that God gives him long life and that he continues to touch the lives of many through his ministry and presence.

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*Philomena Njeri Mwaura, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Kenyatta University (Kenya). Formerly on the Advisory Council, she currently serves as member of the Senior Advisory Council of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

opportunity for study, reflection, prayer, transformation, healing, writing, research, and, later, publication. I took the fellowship when I was broken, sad, and hopeless, in despair, and wondering if God would ever relieve me of the pain of loss I was experiencing. I spent all my time at the Day Mission Library.

During my stay at the OMSC, I came to see another side of Jonathan. The OMSC is a small “United Nations” where people of different nationalities, cultures, religions, and Christian denominations meet, pray, interact, and blend. Jonathan knew all of us by name. He demonstrated a great love and appreciation for all the people from these diverse backgrounds. His office was open to all of us at any time. I popped in several times to talk to him when I felt sad and lonely, and he would make time for me.

Jonathan affirmed those of us from the Majority World and demonstrated love for the “other.” As Caleb O. Oladipo says, Jon showed that “our baptism into the Christian Faith is a Sacrament of radical equality. It does not matter whether we are from the North or from the South; we belong to God and to one another in a global Community.” The entire staff of the OMSC also exuded Jonathan’s values and supported all of us. I am also grateful to Mrs. Jean Bonk who was loving and supportive during this time.

In subsequent years, I have continued to interact with Jonathan especially when he invited me to join the Advisory Council of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. I am very grateful to him for the mentorship he has given me; for exposure to the resources of the DACB—the process of writing biographies, seminars and conferences. I have now been able to encourage our undergraduate and graduate students to venture into the discipline of biography. I have two graduate students who are writing their theses on biographies of prominent Christian personalities.

### Lessons learned from Jonathan

I have learned many lessons from my relationship with Jonathan. They include:

1. Being sensitive, respectful, and open to people from diverse cultures, religions, nationalities and Christian denominations.
2. Servant leadership. Jonathan’s leadership inspired me and I learned to value the dignity of people and to have faith in them.
3. I learned what it means to be a Christian: forgiving, loving, generous, and kind.
4. I learned the importance of listening to and not judging people.
5. Pastoral care. Jonathan, for me, exudes profound pastoral care, always attentive to other people’s needs.

## Professor Jonathan J. Bonk: The African Dimension

By Gabriel Leonard Allen

Professor Jonathan J. Bonk founded the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) in 1995 and its sister publication, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) in July 2016. Together, the DACB and JACB represent a program to obtain and preserve an “electronic, open-access (online) resource to document the 2000 year history of Christianity in Africa.”<sup>20</sup>

For the past quarter of a century (1995-2020), the DACB-JACB have stamped their imprint in the sands of time as examples of an international collaborative effort, not restricted to the confines of academia, inviting anyone with capacity, memory, and conviction to contribute authentic biographical and historical accounts. The combined missionary focus of these two endeavors is to bring quality research that testifies to the significant interventions of African Christian men and women of God in history. They are novel in that they both provide free accessible resources to anyone in the comfort of their homes, churches, and institutions of learning.

On the occasion of his retirement from the work of the DACB-JACB, colleagues in the project have been invited to write a tribute in honor of Professor Jonathan J. Bonk. I will start mine by developing a context from the Holy Bible.

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures inform us that, by God Almighty’s divine plan and will, a host of its iconic subjects sojourned and settled in Africa: Abraham, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, and the Apostle Apollos. The reasons they made Africa their home were varied, interesting, and wholly relevant for today’s biblical interpreters and theologians who are challenged to bring the contextualization of the Holy Scriptures to twenty-first century audiences and beyond. Three biblical icons will be considered here.

The first Old Testament icon under consideration is Joseph. The land route from the Canaan to Egypt and vice-versa, via the Sinai Peninsula, is a well-trodden path to the peoples of the Ancient Near East. The great-grandchildren of Abraham, meaning the children of Jacob-Israel, were well acquainted with this route as they made their third journey to purchase grain in Egypt. When, on this occasion, the Governor of All-Egypt noticed Benjamin, his own blood brother in their midst, he organized and hosted a forgiveness and reconciliation banquet in their honor. The very next morning, after falsely accusing them of stealing his “cup of divination” and subjecting them to house arrest, Joseph eventually revealed his identity to them, alone, with the words: “I am

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<sup>20</sup> [www.dacb.org](http://www.dacb.org).

Joseph! Is my father alive?” [Genesis 45:3a; ESV]. The day before, they had bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before him, not knowing that it was their own brother Joseph. They thus fulfilled the first dream of Joseph, a prelude to the second fulfillment, which was due to happen with their parents [Genesis 37:5-11]. Governor Joseph, having obtained the pleasure and endorsement of Pharaoh, extended a generous “Letter of Invitation” to his father Jacob-Israel and his entire household of seventy persons [Exodus 1:5] along with the authorization to migrate from Canaan and settle in Goshen in the land of Egypt. Three lessons can be gained from this Joseph story: First, Africa remains a land of unimagined transformation and opportunities. Second, it is still not uncommon to find exceptional slaves being anointed kings. Third, the enduring traditions of forgiveness, reconciliation, and a hearty welcome to strangers, displaced persons and refugees, remain the moral DNA in African societies!

The story of Moses is our second lesson. As years went by, the favor of God was on the Hebrew immigrants in Egypt. They became “fruitful and increased greatly, they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them” [Exodus 1:7; ESV]. While Hebrew prolificacy and prosperity became an emergent reality, there also “arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” [Exodus 1:8; ESV].

Soon, the Hebrew community in Egypt came under attack and matters took a sharp turn for the worse. By a series of “executive directives,” Pharaoh systematically degraded and decreed the enslavement of the children of Israel [Exodus 1:9-14]. The earliest “executive directive” demanded that the two appointed state midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, murder Hebrew boys at birth. However, these traditional birth attendants “feared God” rather than man [Exodus 1:17]. Shrewdly, they permitted the Hebrew male children to live. Another Pharaonic directive instructed all his subjects saying, every “son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile” [Exodus 1:22b; ESV].

At three months of age, a Hebrew Levite couple could no longer hide the cries of their male child at home. The Hebrew mother resolutely decided to comply with Pharaoh’s decree. Literally and metaphorically, she “cast” her new-born son into the Nile, but provided him shelter in a floating “basket made of bulrushes and dubbed ... with bitumen and pitch” [Exodus 2:3b; ESV]. In the plan of God Almighty, a princess in the palace of Pharaoh assumed direct responsibility to preserve, protect, educate, and provide royal training to the called and appointed Moses, the vulnerable Hebrew child of God. He grew up in wisdom and stature as a prince of the palace, in readiness for his divine tasks of being deliverer and law-giver of the Hebrew people. Human history, in particularly African history, is replete with many typologies of Moses. Out of Africa, the same land of horror, spring liberators and divine salvation, at God’s appointed time.

## Professor Jonathan Bonk: A Humble Servant of God

By Philomena Njeri Mwaura

I first met Prof. Jonathan Bonk some time in 1999, when he visited the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University to introduce the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. I did not know then that our encounter would be the beginning of further encounters and that the collaboration that would span the next two decades.

The following year, in late January 2000, we met in Pretoria, South Africa at the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) General Assembly. We met again in late July 2004 at the General Assembly of the IAMS. Little did both of us know at the time that I would become the president of IAMS and Jonathan would be the vice president! Working closely with Jonathan led to a long steady relationship that I treasure to this day and that I am grateful to God for. The next four years we met every year for the IAMS Executive Committee meetings and, although I was president of the association, I relied very much on Jonathan’s guidance.

As I got to know him, he made a profound impression on me because of his humility, sensitivity, amiable nature, leadership, great communication skills, humor, gentleness, and great devotion to God. I learned from him the importance and power of forgiveness, of love, and of having faith in people. I can say that during this time, I literally “sat at his feet,” learning valuable lessons about leadership and people skills.

In January 2006, the IAMS Executive Committee meeting was held at the Overseas Mission Study Center, in New Haven, Connecticut, USA, where Jonathan was the executive director. He took us on a tour of the Yale Divinity School and the Day Mission Library. I was fascinated by the diverse collections of resources in the library and in my heart, I wished that one day I could sit in that library and “feast” on the books and other resources—archival materials, electronic resources, etc. I received a very pleasant surprise when, in October 2009, I received an invitation from Jonathan to be a Senior Scholar in Residence at the OMSC for the Winter Semester January – May 2010. Jonathan is a very perceptive person with great emotional intelligence. I believe he knew that deep down, I desired to study in the Day Mission Library.

Unfortunately, in January 2010, I lost my son following a short illness. Jonathan who, at this time was IAMS president, along with the IAMS executive committee, supported my family with prayers and financial assistance. I am forever grateful for their great support.

So, when I received the invitation, I also felt that he understood that I needed some time to heal, as well as to study. My four months at the OMSC became an



*and Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

Our final icon under consideration is Jesus Christ. Soon after the “Wise men from the East” visited the Jerusalem palace and demanded: “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” [Matthew 2:2a; ESV], the Idumean builder of cities and temples and destroyer of persons, King Herod the Great (37-4BC), promptly issued a decree to kill “all the male children of Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years and under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men” [Matthew 2:16b; ESV].

By such a dreadful edict, now referred to as the “Massacre of the Innocents” (c. 6 BC–AD 2), King Herod presumed that he would have eliminated all existential threats to his kingdom and kingship. Before the arrival of the soldiers in the Bethlehem region to enforce the blockage of villages and cities, Joseph of Nazareth received a dream and direction to “rise” from Bethlehem, where the holy family were staying, and to “take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you” [Matthew 2:13b; ESV]. Joseph responded with prompt obedience. The holy family instantly became refugees who sought protection in the foreign land of Egypt, in Africa, in the same area where the Prophet Jeremiah had been forced to take up residence, almost 600 years earlier. When Jesus Christ arrived in Africa, he was a toddler. Growing up from infancy to boyhood, Jesus Christ and the holy family were together exposed to unique African experiences, influences, education, and morality.

From the 1950s to 1970s, the family of Jonathan Bonk benefitted from similar exposure to the cultures of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia where he received “all his primary education and part of his high school.”<sup>21</sup> His introduction to Africa began in Ethiopia, the heartland of ancient African Christianity. Growing up in that context exposed him to the mystery of the divine presence, to the majesty of worship in diversity in the heart of African Christianity in those ancient Orthodox churches carved out of living stone. I believe that the cyclic reflection of the awesome, the mysterious, the absurd, and the amazingly beautiful never dies in the mind of someone who was initiated in Africa.

My first contact with Professor Jonathan came through a letter of invitation in February 2016 to join the Africa Advisory Council of the DACB. In this letter, Bonk stated that I had been nominated by Professor *Karamokhoba* Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019), now of blessed memory. I was stunned. In this global sea of more endowed academics, theologians, and clergy, I never anticipated a modicum of literary recognition from the Boston–Yale citadels of learning, let alone being chosen to join the DACB-JACB mission—a task that I soon understood entailed the reconstruction of a modest but essential faithful testimony to the “great cloud of witnesses.” I mused and

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<sup>21</sup> <https://dacb.org/about/editorial-committee/>

theologized that this opportunity must be truly some Christological-Pauline-Augustinian *gratias*, an undeserved, sanctifying grace which is to be gratefully received, but matched with an alert obligation of bringing about liberation and healing to many. I promptly accepted.

Within the first six months of our introduction, we interacted in relation to my first submission to the DACB-JACB of October 2016 on the subject “William Wade Harris Prophet-Evangelist of West Africa: His Life, Message, Praxis, Heritage, and Legacy” (DACB-JACB, Vol.1-5, October 2016). Ever since, our engagement has been measured and mature at a deeper level. I soon grew to appreciate Professor Jon as a man of wisdom, full of knowledge, a meticulous person, a ruthless time-manager, and a visionary Christian. I experienced his spirit of compassion for humanity and his many other qualities that are the fruit of a personal knowledge of an awesome, mysterious God who forever remains generous, merciful, and kind.

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*Rev. Engr. Gabriel Leonard Allen is a theologian and interfaith activist of the Methodist Church in The Gambia. Formerly on the Advisory Council, he currently serves as a member of the Editorial Board of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org) and a Contributing Editor of the Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

## Professor Jonathan Bonk: A Strategic Mentor

By Thomas Oduro

I got to know Professor Bonk closely when I spent a Sabbatical leave at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC), New Haven, Connecticut, USA from August 2012 to May 2013. I stayed in an OMSC residence.

Jon showed special interest in me that baffled me. At the welcome event on the grounds of the OMSC in August 2012, he introduced me to the other residents and staff of the OMSC as a scholar he had known for some time. He mentioned my ministry with African Independent Churches and the Good News Theological Seminary. His high-profile introduction and testimonies about me gave me a new perspective of myself. In fact, his testimony boosted my scholarly image at a time when I was having a serious crisis of low self-image as a result of being disdained as an AIC scholar. In addition, he regularly called me to his office to discuss issues related to the DACB project and asked my views about it. On such occasions, I mused, “What has this man seen in me that he seeks my perspective?”

One day, he asked me to join him for a lunch meeting with the late Professor Lamin Sanneh at a restaurant not far from OMSC. Sitting with the two scholars and hearing them discuss the DACB was a privilege. At several points in the conversation, Professor Bonk asked, “Thomas, what do you think about this?” He did not downplay my views. Instead he cherished them, thus, making me think that my views were also important. He invited me to travel with him from New Haven to Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts, where I met Professor Dana Robert. Bonk counseled me on administration, study, and service to the Lord during the drive to and from Boston. On several occasions, he invited me to pray and dine together with him and his wife in their home. All these interactions were therapeutic to me.

Lastly, my appointment as a Regional Advisor and my participation in the DACB Advisory Council meetings in Kenya were all encouragements for my academic life. Professor Bonk has made an everlasting impact on my life. I am grateful to God for leading me to know him and his wife. I am grateful to him for seeing the potential in me and giving me opportunities to develop it.

I pray that God continues to guide and bless him and his family.

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*Rev. Thomas Oduro, PhD, is President and Associate Professor, Good News Theological Seminary (Ghana). Formerly on the Advisory Council, he currently serves as member of the Senior Advisory Council of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org)*