

CHAPTER SIX

FREELANCE PROPHETS: FORERUNNERS OF AIC'S PROPHETS

1. WILLIAM WADE HARRIS⁴⁰

1. Introduction

Beginning from 1910 there was a sudden emergence of a crop of African evangelists with special charisma. These African prophets led mass movements towards Christianity without intending to establish Churches of their own.

These mass movements were led by Prophets William Harris (Liberia), Garrick Braid (Nigeria), Walter Matiffa (Lesotho), and Samson Oppong (Ghana) to name just a few. The revivals conducted by these men were always attended by a mammoth crowd. It is important, however, to note that none of these assemblage were themselves independent churches. Thousands of their converts were admonished to join one of the main-line churches at the onset of their peripatetic preaching ministry.

2. Objective

This chapter is intended to discuss the life and ministry of the Prophet William Wade Harris.

3. Content

William Harris has been described as an outstanding Prophet who embarked on one of the greatest evangelistic tours ever recorded in African History. Who is Harris?

(a) His Early Life

Harris was a Kru man of the Grebo tribe in Liberia. At the age of 12, Harris served as a ward to Rev. Jesse Lowrie of the Methodist Episcopal Mission. While staying with the Reverend gentleman, Harris became literate in the local vernacular as well as, to a lesser degree, in English. When Rev. Lowrie was transferred to Cape Palmas, Harris took up an appointment as (Kru-boy) crew boy onboard ships along the coast of West Africa.

It is most likely that it was during some of these journeys that Harris became drawn to the British form of colonial administration in preference to the Americo-Liberian rule in his home country. An opportunity for Harris to demonstrate his disfavour for the Americo-Liberian rule came in 1910 while he was on a visit to Monrovia; the capital of Liberia. This visit coincided with an occasion when one Major Mackay Cadell engaged in an act that caused some sensations. Cadell's conduct was interpreted to mean an attempt to cause disaffection among the Liberians and turn over Liberia into a British controlled country. The presence of a British warship in the harbour just about this time increased a state of excitement as it was misconstrued by many to imply a successful change.

⁴⁰ There are several sources for Prophet Harris. Among them are: G. M. Haliburton, *The Prophet Harris. A Study of an African Prophet and his Mass-Movement in the Ivory Coast and Gold Coast, 1913-1915* (London: Longmans, 1971); S. S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast. The Prophet Harris and the Harrist Church* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); J. C. Wold, *God's Impatience in Liberia* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1968); Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), and Sanneh, *West African Christianity, op. cit.*

Harris was one of those who were over excited, as he proceeded to demonstrate his political stand by publicly destroying the Liberian flag and planting a pole with the British flag - the Union Jack - on the Paduke Beach. Unfortunately, the state of war that Harris had anticipated did not materialise. He was subsequently arrested and charged with treason by a jury. He was jailed and remained in prison for over a year.

(b) *His call*

In 1911, while in prison, Harris claimed he saw a vision of angel Gabriel who commissioned him, saying: "Harris, you are not in prison, God is coming to anoint you, you will be a prophet ... you are like Daniel."

Harris related further that as he heard these words, almost simultaneously "the spirit descended on him with a sound like a jet of water". This experience, according to him, happened three times. Henceforth, he saw himself as a prophet and particularly as one who has been given the responsibility of the watchman referred to in Ezekiel 33.

As soon as he was released from prison, he was set to win souls for Christ. In a symbolic gesture, he took off the European dress on him and clad himself in a long white robe with black bands crossed over his chest and wore a white turban on his head. He carried in his hands a long bamboo cross, a Bible and a gourd of water, which he used for baptism. He also had in his possession a gourd rattle - a musical calabash netted with strings of beads - this he beats to accompany his songs.

(c) *Missionary Ventures*

Harris was an itinerant preacher. In 1913 after his first missionary outing to the city of Monrovia, he traveled eastward down the coast. He took two women with him as missionary assistants. Later in the year he crossed the border and entered the Ivory Coast where he continued his crusades.

The people with whom he came into contact were sunk into base superstition and fetish worship. There were only a handful of Catholic converts and Muslims. The majority of the indigenous people were "traditionalists". It is reported that within three days of his arrival his preaching inflamed a revival. People who had fetishes in their custody surrendered them to Harris for burning. It was even reported that those who tried to hide their fetishes in the bush had them consumed by miraculous fire. This experience instilled great awe in the hearts of the people. Harris was given the free hand to burn down all the great fetishes including Todjo Soko - the chief goddess of the people. Through this Harris turned several villages which were steeped in superstition to become at least nominally Christian towns.

It is estimated that over 100,000 people were converted. After two years of ministry in the Ivory Coast, the French authorities saw in this movement a possible menace to government as well as the "centralised administration of the Catholic Church." Harris was arrested and sent back to Liberia.

After resting awhile Harris proceeded to the Gold Coast and stayed most of the time in the Axim and Appollonia Districts. As he did in Ivory Coast, here too, in Axim, he demanded that people should surrender their fetishes for destruction. His adherents obeyed, surrendered their fetishes for destruction and received his baptism. Within some months over 50 villages were reported to have been evangelised and close to 10,000 people were converted.

Because Harris did not intend establishing his Church, he appointed "teachers" who made 'follow-ups' to guide the people to follow the tenets taught by Harris.

(d) *His Teachings*

Harris' style of teaching and leading people to Christ was unique.

(i) He hardly read from the Bible; this is essentially because the majority of his early adherents were illiterates. He quoted from memory passages dealing with salvation and then challenged the people to burn their fetishes and follow God.

(ii) Next, he invited those who signified their intention to give their lives to God to come forward and kneel before his bamboo cross. He would then ask them to confess their sins. Thereafter he would touch their heads with his Bible and most of them would tremble while he tried to expel the demons from those who were possessed.

(iii) He ordered his converts to join a Church and obey its rules. It was reported that as a result of this the Mission churches were full to the brim during his evangelistic campaigns.

(iv) He commanded strict observance of the Sabbath. He declared that no work must be done, it is God's Holy day. He warned the people against the usual practice of loading ships on Sundays.

(v) He acknowledged the reality of spirits but warned that they are agents of the devil. He objected to pouring libations and making of sacrifices to ancestral spirits. His mission was primarily to exorcise these spirits. Consequently, he discouraged elaborate burial ceremonies and vehemently opposed Christian wake keeping.

(vi) Concerning marriage, Harris recommended monogamy as the ideal, but he also emphasised the special virtues of polygamy saying that it is good for Africans. He admonished men to respect their wives and not to treat them as slaves. He was clearly opposed to any act of adultery and fornication.

(vii) He also showed great respect for womanhood. First, by prohibiting the custom of keeping menstruating female segregated, and secondly, by condemning certain funeral customs and setting free newly widowed women from taboos that set them apart.

(viii) Unlike the missionaries who demanded that candidates for baptism should attend baptismal classes, receive and memorise some teachings, Harris baptised his followers as soon as they forsook their fetishes. Even though he seems to have been opposed to the "academic" strings attached to Christianity, he encouraged his followers to cultivate a greater interest in the education of their children.

(ix) Also, unlike the missionaries, Harris had an intuitive understanding of the people. His worldview was purely African. He was not of the view that germs and viruses caused sickness. He believed rather that a spiritual force is behind every misfortune or ill health and should therefore be dealt with spiritually through prayers.

(x) A close examination of his teachings on healing, however, reveals that he was not strongly opposed to the use of medicine. He did not even criticise people for using traditional herbs. He was of the opinion that the traditional rites which herbalists performed when they collected herbs were meaningless and must therefore be stopped. He advised that they should Christianise this practice by saying prayers to God while collecting the herbs and preparing the concoction. It is noteworthy, however, that Harris did not use medicine for his own healing. He only prayed for people and they recovered.

(xi) Concerning social relationship, Harris emphasised some aspects of the 10 commandments that encouraged good neighbourliness. He warned against stealing and covetousness, and he also stressed the need for brotherly love. He even encouraged his followers to pity those who commit suicide and to give them a decent burial.

(xii) Finally, he taught and preached against the smoking of cigars or cigarettes, which was in vogue among the youths and elite at that time. He is reported to have, on a number of occasions, snatched cigars or cigarettes from men's mouths and tossed them on the ground.

(e) *Reaction to his Ministry*

As would be expected, there were mixed reactions to Harris' ministry. In most places where he went, the initial reaction of the populace as well as that of some clergy seemed to have been positive, except, as would naturally be expected, vehement opposition from medicine men, herbalists and witch doctors.

Among the clergy, while some were friendly a few were very hostile to him. Rev. Buller of the Methodist Church in Axim referred to Harris as a false prophet and warned the members of his congregation not to have anything to do with him. A Roman Catholic, Father Stauffer, was also antagonistic to Harris ministry. He referred to Harris as the "offspring of evil" and wondered why some clergy befriended him. Rev. Earnest Bruce of the Methodist Church, who succeeded Buller, was not only friendly but also invited Harris to his parsonage and had intimate discussions with him.

Some Ministers seemed to have been hypocritical in their dealings with him. They showed open support as long as Harris directed his new converts to their Churches. Some of them turned round later to criticize Harris' doctrine and warned his former converts not to have fellowship with him. The Ivory Coast administration, on its part, seemed to have been pleased with Harris' outreach initially. However, soon afterwards, because of the so-called insubordination of some of Harris converts, imitators and followers, the French authorities began to maintain a hostile stand against the new movement. It was alleged that a number of Harris followers were lazy, they kept everyday of the week as a holy day, evaded communal duties such as the clearance of the road and refused to pay taxes.

Harris was arrested, beaten, had his calabashes and crosses broken, and afterwards imprisoned before he was expelled along with his female assistants from the Ivory Coast. The French authorities went further to burn all the village chapels and ordered the converts to join the Catholic Church.

It must be borne in mind that Harris' ministry in the Ivory Coast coincided with the dawn of the First World War. The French administration's action was therefore politically motivated. They were fearful that Protestant missionaries from enemy nations might use Harris' crusades as a ploy to enter the Ivory Coast. In fact, it was well after the end of the World War that the French allowed Protestant missionaries to come into the Ivory Coast.

(g) Harris Church Movement

While Harris was away from his mission fields in the Ivory Coast and Appolonia districts in Ghana, some of his followers used his name as the beginning of the Harris Church Movement in the Ivory Coast. David Barrett comments that Harrism is still very strong in rural areas, especially among the Ebire and Attie residing in the Southeast of the Ivory Coast (Barrett, 1982). Barrett observed, however, that schism from Harrism in the Ivory Coast has been especially numerous. The polygamous *Église Harriste* is still however a very strong congregation in Ivory Coast (Barrett, 1968).

In Ghana, one of the female attendants of Harris, Grace Thannie (Tani) found her way from Liberia back to Nzima and continued her husband's work. She joined forces with John Nackabah, one of the earliest converts of Harris and they established "The Church of William Harris and his Twelve Apostles" with their headquarters at Essuawen.

4. Summary

In summation, one cannot but agree with Haliburton that "Whatever else Harris may have been, he was sincere ... and his efforts followed a recognisable and same pattern."⁴¹ Harris demonstrated special charisma and was able to win the confidence of the people far above the general run of the missionaries. The tragedy of the entire Harris movement stemmed from the French government's disruptive role to stop his ministry ruthlessly.

5. Post-Test

Attempt the following questions:

1. Describe the evangelical campaign of Prophet Harris in the Ivory Coast, and the Gold Coast. Assess the method and success of his work.
2. Describe the characteristic features of Prophet Harris' ministry.
3. Evaluate Harris' approach in presenting the Gospel of Christ.

⁴¹ Haliburton, *The Prophet Harris*, p. 213.