

# Education and Religion: The Role of Christianity in Ilorin, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Christianity is one of the world's major religions introduced to Nigeria in the 15th and 19th centuries respectively. The city of Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is one of the towns that benefitted from this endeavour much later after its inception in Nigeria. Though, Islam had been well established in the town before the advent of Christianity, since its introduction into the community, Christianity has made tremendous impact on every area of her developments. However, our focus in this paper centres on the immense contributions Christianity has made in the aspects of educational advancement. Other areas of development like religion and politics have been dealt with in other publications of the author. The present study examines the location of Ilorin, introduction of Christianity to the town, and the developments it has brought. Findings revealed that the introduction of Christianity has complemented the socio and economic outlook of the town. It is recommended among others that Christians should develop spirit of tolerance, respect and appreciation for the doctrines and belief system of other religions. This cooperative attitude will assist individual adherents to jointly develop the town socially, economically and educationally.

**Keywords:** Christianity; Development; Education; Ilorin; Religion

## Introduction

The Ilorin of today is not exactly what it was some years back. Ilorin environs then included many villages and hamlets making up what was called Ilorin province until 1967, when the Federal Military Government created additional states, and Ilorin became the capital

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of Kwara State. Today, the metropolis comprises Ilorin West Local Government Area, Ilorin East Local Government Area and Ilorin South Local Government Area. Ilorin East and West were created in 1991 from Ilorin Local Government with their headquarters at Oja-Oba and Oke-Oyi respectively, while Ilorin South Local Government was created in 1996 with its headquarters at Fufu.

These three local government areas formed the gateways between the Northern and Southern states of Nigeria. Udo gave further details on the geographical location of Ilorin when he says that “a substantial part of the city is on the grass plain with undulating landscapes and dissected uplands” (R.K. Udo100). It is located on the Latitude  $8^{\circ} 30'$  North and the Longitude  $4^{\circ} 34'$  East. Its magnitude built up area now is about 9.37 kilometre square (Udo 6). Ilorin also enjoys the privilege of a favourable tropical wet and dry climate for being sited within the middle belt region of Nigeria. A mean annual rainfall which is relatively heavy is experienced in June, July, September and October (Udo 1970). Rainfall, especially in dry years, begins as late as April or early May, and continues until around October. January to March is usually the hottest, while the months of November and December witness harmattan (Sussan 2). The unique geographical and ecological condition of the town has great influence on the existing economic and social activities of the inhabitants. For instance, the Agency on Poverty Situation and Alleviation Strategies in Kwara State says that: “the climate coupled with the large expanse of rich soils make it well-suited for the cultivation of a wide variety of food and cash crops” (Kwara State, Nigeria Poverty Situation and Poverty Alleviation Strategies 6).

Historically, there are diverse opinions about the origin of Ilorin but history has it that Ilorin was founded around 1600–1700AD by a hunter called Ojo Isekuse believed to have hailed from Oyo Ile in the Old Oyo Empire (Ajayi 133–136). He was later joined by his friend, Emilla. Ojo Isekuse, believed to be a hunter by profession, used to sharpen his hunting equipment on a certain rock situated at Bamidele’s compound, Ilorin. The rock is still at the same place till date. Our visit to the site of the rock revealed that its size had drastically reduced from what it

was when Ojo Isekuse sighted it. This is because the rock has become a centre of attraction to the point that most people who visit the rock cut some part of it for liturgical purposes. It is believed to possess some power for victory at any war. Hence, the rock which used to be very big, probably the size of a bungalow, had now been drastically reduced. Therefore, the name Ilorin was derived from Ojo Isekuse's profession of sharpening of Iron "Ilorin" (Sussan 2).

Other sources on the foundation of Ilorin, like the *Ta'lif Akhbar al-qurun min Umara' bilad Ilurin*, had it that Ilorin was founded by a hunter named Ayinla (Ahmad 5) while Johnson recorded that Ilorin was founded by Laderin, the great grandfather of Afonja around the eighteenth century, (Johnson 199). Other sources had it that the name Ilorin was derived from the activities of Laderin in 1807 when he killed an elephant at Oko-Erin where the present Kwara State Stadium is sited. Then Oko-Erin was at the outskirts of the town. The size of the Elephant then made him to call the town "Ilu-Erin" (Johnson 200).

These sources are parallels to one another as they beckon to the need for establishing a virile historical origin judging by the growth and success of the people today. Though the most widely and historically accepted source is the one that traces the origin of Ilorin to Ojo Isekuse. Nevertheless, Johnson supported the opinion that it was Afonja who "made Ilorin into a large city" (Johnson 200).

### **Introduction of Christianity to Ilorin**

We cannot talk about Christianity in Ilorin without a brief mention of its inception in Nigeria. The first attempt at introducing the religion to Nigeria was in the 15th century through the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries. This attempt failed because the missionaries then were more interested in trading activities than preaching of the Gospel which was supposed to be their major assignment. To further buttress this, Farounbi explained that the Portuguese were the first in the fifteenth century to introduce Christianity to Nigeria. They were Catholic missionaries who started their missionary endeavour from Benin. As soon as they arrived to trade, they were using the opportunity to spread the Christian faith to those they came in contact with. All their efforts to propagate the Christian message in Nigeria resulted in failure. Thus, "Christianity failed to take root in Nigeria until about four centuries later" (Farounbi 13). The reason for the failure of this first attempt according to Daudu and Gbule was that:

True Christianity was almost confined to the King and Prince, the rest only called themselves Christians to please the king. They took their children to baptism only with greatest reluctance believing that a baptised child will die immediately. The majority of them took wives without the sacrament of matrimony; they circumcised their children and practiced superstitious rites and sorcery (Daudu and Gbule 47).

The determination to re-introduce Christianity, according to Farounbi was realised in 1842 through the efforts of a Methodist Missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman, and Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican Church) who came to Nigeria on September 24, 1842 and December 17, 1842 respectively. Their first station was Badagry, which eventually served as a base for sustained missionary efforts in Nigeria. Various missionaries of different denominations also began to make efforts to bring Christianity to other parts of Nigeria, using diverse methods like education, health care, to mention a few (Farounbi 13).

Therefore, with the successful planting of Christianity in Nigeria in the 19th century, the religion subsequently expanded to Ilorin metropolis. Christian missionary activities in Ilorin dated back to 1855 when Rev. J. Bowen of the American Baptist Mission made the initial attempt (Omotoye 112). But Bowen's attempt recorded little or no success because long before the advent of Christianity, Islam had been the major religion of the people of Ilorin. The Emirs were already strong Muslims, and as in the words of Danmole; "the Emir prevented a situation in which Christianity would be competing with Islam in Ilorin, where the Muslim population was estimated as only half of the total population" (Danmole 105–106). In addition to this, the Emirs, one after the other, did not want a situation that could lead to a sort of religious confrontation as a result of unnecessary rivalry. Danmole (109) further supported this view, when he said that Emir Sulaiman (1895–1915) refused to entertain the idea of a Christian mission station in Ilorin when he received Bishop Tugwell of the Church Missionary Society in 1894.

Also, in the words of Ling: Islam had been established in Ilorin for more than thirty years before the missionaries came. Therefore, the people had been used to the practice they recognised as the only truth ever brought to them with respect of their religion. Moreover, almost every aspect of their lives was regulated by Islamic injunctions (Ling 12). But the missionaries persisted until a Christian fellowship was held

in a private home in Ilorin. In Hassan's words, "It was not until 1910 that a church really started in Ilorin by some gospel minded groups who came from Ijesha land as traders. They started a fellowship in a house belonging to one man called "Baba Ijesha" along Itakure, Ilorin" (Hassan 4).

It was this fellowship that metamorphosed to St. Barnabas Anglican Church, Sabo-Oke. Subsequently, other missions began to establish their denominations in Ilorin. Among such were: the Roman Catholic Church which started around 1913 with the effort of Rev. Father Aime Simeon, the Baptist in 1939, and the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), now called the Evangelical Church of Winning All (ECWA), which began its missionary activities in Ilorin in 1947, at the invitation of some natives who were members of the Anglican Church and Baptist (Akande 31–32). Appraising the advent of Christianity in the town, the late Pastor H. O. Bolaji, once said that:

The earliest church was outside Ilorin native areas because the Christians were not allowed to mix with the indigenous population. So these early churches were built at Oke-Aasa. With this development, other denominations like the African Church (with membership drawn mostly from the Anglican Church), and the Pentecostal Churches like the CAC, the C&S Movement, etc. came on the scene (Akande 32).

It is interesting and of great importance to note that the advent of Christianity to Ilorin made most towns and villages in the environs to also welcome the extension of Christianity to their areas. And today the religion is flourishing tremendously in these towns and villages. The number of churches and Christians in these towns and villages is interesting. Ilorin had enjoyed and still enjoys the benefits Christianity offers. These include: establishment of schools, health care centres, socio-economic, religious and political advancements. Our interest in this paper centres on educational development.

### **Christianity and Educational Development in Ilorin**

Christianity and western education are two sides of the same coin. In the past, it was impossible to separate one from the other. As such, for Christianity to survive, it had to incorporate the introduction of western education into its system. Of course, the religion witnessed series of failures in Ilorin initially. Not much progress was recorded in the field

of western education at the early stage of its advent for the fear that Muslim children might be converted to Christianity. To correct this notion, Jimoh stated that “it was Oba Abdulkadir (1919–1959) who really embarked on a vigorous enlightenment campaign to encourage his subjects to acquire western education. The Emir worked strenuously to correct this mis-conception and to get people to send their children to school (Lasiele 150).

The first mission school in Ilorin, Saint Barnabas Primary School, Sabo-Oke, was established by the Anglican in 1917 (Lasiele 150). Today, with the untiring efforts of the various Christian missionaries, Ilorin has recorded a reasonable number of public and private secondary and tertiary institutions which, in turn, have improved the educational standard of her people. These schools have produced many prominent indigenes, non-indigenes, Muslims and Christian elites in various fields of human endeavour. Traditional and Islamic education pre-dated the western system of education in Ilorin. Therefore, the people were literate to certain extent before the advent of western education. The traditional system of education, although not formal, was pragmatic and mainly taught by the elders in the town. Stressing further the importance of traditional education system, Fafunwa says:

Every society whether simple or complex, has its own system of training and educating its youth and education for the good life has been one of the most persistent concerns of man throughout history. He admitted, however, that the goals, method, or approach may differ from place to place, nation to nation and people to people (Fafunwa 75).

Also, in the traditional system of education, interactions at social level are encouraged. These include proper greetings at various times of the day, and at different occasions. It pays attention to seniority and respect to elders. Hence, training of the child began from cradle. On the other hand, apart from traditional education, Qur’anic education had been in vogue in the town before the introduction of Christianity and the western system of education. Qur’anic education provided basic teachings in Arabic, which was also aimed at promoting the spread of Islam. This type of education is more formal than the traditional system because it provided opportunities for learners to sit under a Mallam who serves as the teacher. According to Abioye (23), “memorisation is the

method of learning” in this system of education. “The Mallam leads the learners in committing long verses of the Qur’an into memory.” Thus, in Ilorin, several elementary schools (*Ile-Kewu*) were established. It was with the objective of complementing the above system of education that Christianity also ushered in western education which brought socio-economic changes that made life better and meaningful to individuals. Of course, this view has widespread acceptance and is supported by Fafunwa: “The missionaries without exception used the school as a means of conversion and each found that children were more valuable for this purpose than adults – though adults were not ignored in their evangelical programme” (Abioye 20).

It will also interest us to note that most individuals who attended these mission schools are, today, occupying prominent positions in government. For instance, the late Emir of Ilorin, Oba Sulu Gambari, Mr Gani Olododo, former Commissioner for Land and Rural Development, in Kwara State are alumni of St. Barnabas Primary School, Sabo Oke. Others were Dr Nurudeen Ajao, former Principal, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Oke Ode, and Mr Saidu Olaosebikan, a Lecturer at Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, who are alumni of Baptist Primary School, Surulere, Ilorin. These are just a few out of many products of these mission-based institutions. This trend, in the opinion of this writer, spurred the Muslims to start establishing primary and secondary schools in the town. Notable among these schools are: Ansarul-Deen Primary School, Ansarul Islam Primary Schools, IQRA Nursery and Primary School, Adewole, An-Nur Nursery and Primary School, Oloje, Taoheed Nursery and Primary School, Basin Road, and Al-Alim Nursery and Primary School and The Light Nursery and Primary School, to mention just a few. All of these schools have Secondary Schools too. Fafunwa (92) also opined that:

Since the turn of the century, the number of Muslim primary and secondary schools and teacher-training colleges has been on the increase. Muslim organisations and Jamats such as the Ansar-ud-Deen Society, Ahmadiyya Movement, Zumratul Islamiyya and Jamaatul Islamiyya have been very active in an attempt to bridge the gap between Muslim and Christian education.

The position now, as justified in this work, is that since the introduction of Christianity in Ilorin, it has been able to make

tremendous and positive impact on manpower and structural development of the metropolis. Speaking further on Christianity and education in Ilorin, Omotoye (105) also opined that the Anglican had brought tremendous contributions and benefits to Ilorin. Notable among educational institutions established by this mission as pointed out by him are:

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| i. St. Barnabas Anglican Primary School, Sabo-Oke-       | 1917 |
| ii. Bishop Smith Memorial College, Offa Garage Road-     | 1957 |
| iii. Bishop Smith Primary School , Offa Garage Road-     | 1962 |
| iv. St. Barnabas Nursery/Primary School, Sabo -Oke -     | 1988 |
| v. Mount Olives Nursery/Primary School, Pipe Line Road - | 1991 |
| vi. Anglican Women's Guild N/P School -                  | 1993 |
| vii. Anglican Grammar School, Agba Dam Road, Ilorin-     | 1994 |
| viii. Women's Guild Vocational Centre (Day Care) -       | 1994 |
| ix. Bishop Smith Memorial N/P School -                   | 1995 |

Apart from the above, other missions in Ilorin also established one form of institution or the other as illustrated in the table below.

It is however worthy of note that the number of schools established by these missions is numerous. But regardless of the numerical strength of the schools they established, what is paramount is that they have all made significant achievements in the town, especially in the area of academic pursuit and excellence. In this regard, the activities of the Christian missions, especially in the field of education, are highly commendable.

Records also have it that “between 1914 and 1960, there were nine government-established primary schools, one community primary school, and one Islamic missionary schools” (Lasiele 150). As mission schools emphasised the teaching and learning of Christian religious knowledge so also the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies were compulsorily taught at the Islamic schools established (Jawondo 29–34). However, government takeover of many schools in 1976 facilitated the teaching of the two religions which became part and parcel of the curriculum, giving the Muslim and Christian parents the opportunity to send their children to schools of their choices (Jawondo, Interview).



*Table 1: Schools Established by the Christian Missions in Ilorin*

S/N	Names of Christian Mission	Schools Established/Location	Year of Establishment
1.	Baptist	(i) Baptist LGEA Sch, Surulere, Ilorin East LGA. (ii) Emm. N/P School Sabo-Oke, Ilorin West LGA. (iii) Union Baptist Grammar School, Ilorin South.	1942 --- 1990
2.	Anglican	(i) St. Barnabas LGEA Sch. A & B S/Oke, Ilorin West LGA. (ii) Bishop Smith LGEA Sch. A, Offa Garage Road, Ilorin East LGA. (iii) Anglican Grammar Sch. Agba Dam, (iv) St Barnabas Junior Sec Schl, Sabo Oke	1917 1962 1994 ---
3.	Cherubim and Seraphim	(i) C & S, College, Sabo-Oke, Ilorin West LGA. (ii) C & S N/P Sch Sabo-Oke Ilorin West. (iii) C & S College Laduba, Asa LGA.	1962 1991 1991
4.	Roman Catholic	(i) St. James RCM, LGEA School, Sabo-Oke, Ilorin West. (ii) St. Anthony Secondary School, Behind State Ministry of Education, Ilorin. (iii) St. Joseph N/P School, Offa Road, Ilorin West LGEA. (iv) St. Williams LGEA Sch. Taiwo Road, Ilorin. (v) Mt. Carmel LGEA, Oloje Ilorin LGEA. (vi) Mt. Carmel College, Oloje, Ilorin LGEA. (vii) Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Model College Asa-Dam Road, Ilorin.	1940 1968 1969 1957 1958 1962 2003
5.	Christ Apostolic Church.	(i) St. James CAC School, New Yidi Road, Adanimole, Ilorin LGEA. (ii) CAC Grammar School, Pipeline Ilorin South LGEA.	1963 1991

6.	UMCA	(i) Chapel Sec. Sch. Tanke, Ilorin, Ilorin LGEA. (iii) UMCATC, Ilorin South	2004 1981
7.	ECWA	(i) ECWA LGEA, Oja-Iya Street, Ilorin. (ii) ECWA	1962 ---
8.	Anglican	(i) St. Michael Methodist LGEA New Yidi Road, Ilorin.	1983
9.	The Apostolic Church	The Apostolic Grammar Sch. Odota, Ilorin.	1996
10.	African Church	African Grammar School, Sango, Ilorin.	1997
11.	Christ for Rural Areas Ministry.	Christian Nursery/Primary School.	1990
12.	The Word Assembly	The Word Assembly Nursery/Primary School, Ilorin	2002
13.	Rhema Chapel	Rhema Nursery and Primary School Tanke	---
14.	Living Faith	Kingdom Heritage Model School, Ilorin	2002
15.	Cannan Ministry	Champion Nursery and Primary School, Zango Area Ilorin	2009

Other by-products of education could be observed in the aspects of political, economic and social awareness. For instance, politically, western education, has afforded many the opportunity to participate in the politics of their immediate environment as such increasing their political awareness and bringing to them political gains and benefits. Academically and socially, western education has enabled many to have the opportunity of travelling abroad to acquire more education and to be exposed to the western world. There were cases in which missionaries sponsored some of their converts to travel abroad in order to acquire additional qualifications. For instance, people like the late. Dr. S.A. Oladele, the Proprietor of Omega College, Shao, and a onetime

lecturer in the Department of Christian Religious Studies, College of Education, Ilorin, Rev. J. A. Akanbi, former Head of Department of Christian Religious Studies, College of Education, Ilorin, Dr. F. O. Ige from Afon, Rev. J. Y. Bello from Jebba and Arch. J. O. Goke from Oloru are all beneficiaries of the scholarship provided by the missionaries. These people came back, more qualified and better exposed, thereby improving and contributing their quota to the development of the metropolis.

Similarly, we have reliably gathered that these schools provided in the table above have produced in various fields of human endeavours professionals like bankers, lawyers, medical doctors, teachers in primary and secondary schools, administrators, politicians, pastors, business men and women. These people are all performing excellently well in their various fields.

Economically, the primary education received by many who could not go further enhanced their economic status today. For instance, there is a case of one “Baba Ibeji” at Ago Market in Ilorin. He was a product of Standard Six Certificate from Saint Williams Roman Catholic Mission School, Taiwo Road, Ilorin. He speaks very good English to attract customers to buy his products at the expense of other traders around him who are illiterates, many of whom even employ his service to interpret for them as the needs arise. Similarly, acquisition of western education by many has helped to reduce the number of the unemployed.

## **Conclusion**

Christian Missions, through the provision of western education in Ilorin metropolis, have brought tremendous impacts on the political, socio-economic and educational developments of the community. It is equally interesting to note that the establishment of schools by Christian missions, dated as far back as 1917, still continues till date. The New Religious movements or Pentecostal churches such as Rhema Chapel, Winners Chapel, Canaan Ministry and a host of others are equally establishing schools in the town, thereby contributing their own quota to her educational development.

It is however observed that the schools were established from members' tithes and offerings. Unfortunately, most of the members could not afford to send their children or wards to these schools, especially the tertiary institutions, because of the high rate of school fees charged. However, this is done with a view to providing quality

education to their products. It is also observed that the number of schools established by these missions varies. While almost all of them have Nursery/Primary Schools, a good number of them have secondary schools. The UMCA, for instance, has a tertiary institution, which is United Missionary Theological College, affiliated to the University of Ibadan.

Among the problems encountered by most of these missions, especially at the initial stage of the schools' establishment, were in the areas of funding, infrastructural facilities and low enrolment of pupils. Though these were not raised in the body of the work, they are important reference points. As time went on and with financial and material support received from various bodies and organisations, they were able to overcome the teething problems. Today, many of their staff enjoys better welfare packages compared to their counterparts in public schools. Their infrastructural facilities and equipment are also of high standard.

Similarly, many parents who could not send their children or wards to these schools for fear of indoctrination, high rate of fees or low quality of learning now clamour for the schools having seen the calibre of students produced. On how to improve the existing academic standard of these schools, it is suggested among others that since education is the bedrock of a successful living, the missions should endeavour to continue to improve the academic standard of their schools, take adequate care of the welfare of staff, as well as encourage parents to support the authority of the schools in uplifting their standard. Also, the idea of charging the mission schools annual registration fees by the government should be stopped.

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