

What happened in Africa after the pandemic of 1918

Something as big as a plague always remakes the religious landscape.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



Redeemed Christian Church of God, Lagos, Nigeria (Photo by Kaizenify via Creative Commons license)

During the long agony of the present pandemic, we cannot fail to ask what the long-term consequences might be for religion and faith. History shows how often past pandemics have reshaped religious structures, undermining older religious establishments and sparking new healing movements and sects. To take one vital example, the epochal growth of Christianity in Africa owes a great deal to one precedent that is much in our minds today: the great influenza pandemic of 1918.

When the Great War broke out in 1914, African Christianity was very weak numerically and was still dominated by European mission churches. That changed rapidly with the withdrawal of so many missionaries—and an upsurge of African-oriented movements demanding adaptations to local customs and traditions. But the real revolution occurred in 1918, when influenza struck the continent. The second

and much deadlier phase of the disease began in August 1918, appearing initially in ports used for transporting military personnel and supplies. One was the British base at Freetown in Sierra Leone, giving the virus a foothold in West Africa. Influenza raged across the continent, from Nigeria in the west to Ethiopia and Somalia in the east. As many as five million Africans perished.

Disastrously for the prestige of the colonial empires, even the most advanced European medicine and science could make little headway against the disease: Africans died the same way Europeans and Americans were dying. Administrators were alarmed to find Africans blaming white people for the spread of the disease and rejecting their medicines—reasonably enough, as the quinine and aspirin freely handed out by white doctors were useless in the circumstances. Coming at a time when Africans were angry about the demands of war, the disaster boosted anti-imperial sentiment and discredited theories of white supremacy.

Influenza detonated a religious revolution. Across the continent, independent and prophetic Christian movements boomed. This was an era of mass movements, healings, religious risings, nationalist Christian restructuring, Marian visions. A few of the emerging prophets also made messianic claims that discomfited Europeans. And these outbreaks occurred across vast swaths of the continent, with strikingly similar manifestations thousands of miles apart, in utterly different cultural and ethnic settings. It is tempting to speak of an outpouring of the Spirit across Africa, an African Pentecost or Great Awakening.

Although this tale could be recounted from many nations, some of the most intense activity occurred in Nigeria, which produced the very influential Aladura movement. In 1918, a dream revelation inspired an Anglican mission in southwestern Nigeria to begin a movement that became known as *Egbe Aladura*: Prayer Band. This flamboyant new movement spread across the colony, buoyed by stories of healings and resurrections.

The founding group evolved into Christ Apostolic Church, which in turn spawned many offshoots, usually after some member had claimed a prophetic revelation. New spiritual churches continued to emerge within this tradition into the 1950s and beyond. Today, the term *Aladura* refers to what has become a very diverse group of independent churches—the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Church of the Lord (Aladura), the Celestial Church of Christ—all united by their belief in healing and living prophecy, and all flourishing wherever Nigerian migrants have spread around

the world

Although these churches appeal to very different social groups and cultural traditions, some groups are well on the way to becoming new global denominations. Today they use the latest technology to spread their messages, and some churches regularly list members in dozens of countries. Among the most successful is the Redeemed Christian Church of God, founded in 1952, which has congregations in a dozen African nations and across much of Western Europe and North America. The RCCG and other Aladura groups are also the driving force in various European megachurches that may not explicitly bear the denominational titles. This globalization represents just a new phase in the organic evolution of a movement that has never fully lost its origins in a period of trauma and catastrophe. They are heirs of 1918.

By 2050, Africa will likely be home to more Christians than any other continent. Obviously the 1918 pandemic was only one factor in this awe-inspiring trajectory, but it is one we should never neglect.

It would take a very rash prophet indeed to forecast the impact of our present crisis on religious affairs. It may be decades before anyone is able to form a sober assessment. But history does teach us that past crises have marked key transitions, for good or ill, to the point of actually forming the religious landscapes we know.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Plagues remake religious landscapes."