

“A MOUTHFUL OF BIBLE AND A PELT OOZING PIETY:”
CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIALISM

BY
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“With my mouth full of Bible and my pelt oozing piety at every pore,” King Leopold II of Mark Twain’s “King Leopold’s Soliloquy” explains how he manipulated “the light of our blessed Redeemer” to fool the world about his intentions in colonizing the “vast and rich and populous Congo Free State.”¹ Though a fictional parody published twenty years after King Leopold II of Belgium was granted sovereign control of the Congo Free State under the Berlin West Conference Act, Twain captured the contradiction between the stated philanthropic, Christian purpose of the king’s personal colony and the dark reality of colonial exploitation that resulted in the death of ten million Congolese from 1885 to 1904.² The symbol of the Congo Free State, which had been built on the promise of free trade and the enlightenment of the savage natives through Christian civilization, became “a basket of severed hands,”³ deriving from the practice of collecting the hands of native Congolese for failing to meet rubber quotas. Christianity was influential as a tool in the colonization of the Congo, manipulated to lend legitimacy to the power struggle and the atrocities committed in its name.

Understanding the evolution of the use of Christianity in the context of the establishment of the Congo Free State is key to explaining the distortion of the religion. Christianity first served as an impetus for colonization by motivating missionaries to explore Central Africa, and

¹ Mark Twain, “King Leopold’s Soliloquy,” 1905, in *Archives of Empire Volume II: The Scramble for Africa*, eds. Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2003), 781.

² Robert Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), xiii.

³ Peter Forbath, *The River Congo: The Discovery, Exploration and Exploitation of the World’s Most Dramatic Rivers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 374.

then was co-opted by Leopold to justify and legitimize the existence of the Congo Free State, while simultaneously obscuring the abuses and exploitation that occurred. Paradoxically, Christian activists and missionaries helped to illuminate the harshness of the Belgian colonial adventure in the Congo, ultimately spurring the Congo Reform Society to break up Leopold's private rule of the Congo in 1908.

Despite the presence of settlements in Africa since the 15th century by first the Portuguese, and then other European powers during the Age of Discovery, the interior of the African continent remained largely unexplored and unknown to European powers until the late 19th century, when missionaries like David Livingstone revealed the great potential of Central Africa's resources.⁴ Exploration of Africa had been mainly limited to the coast due to the dangers and difficulties of venturing further inland posed by disease and geography. It was also unnecessary to search much further than the exterior for the primary export, slaves, while other resources from the interior could be traded for on the coast.⁵ The advent of the steamboat, the discovery of quinine, and the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, however, changed the ability of Europeans to colonize Africa.⁶ Europe then had both the means and a new motivation to explore Africa further. Infused with evangelical zeal, Christian missionaries were among the first Europeans to take advantage of these technological developments to explore Africa. Viewing "the end of the geographical feat as the beginning of the missionary enterprise," David Livingstone, a British missionary and doctor, put Lake Nyasa, the Congo River, and the idea of inner African resources on the map for Europe.⁷ Missionary-explorers were driven by a desire to spread Christianity to the natives and the realization, as noted by Livingstone, that "civilization and Christianity must go together."⁸ Not only did these missionaries open up Central Africa to the awareness of Europe, they also advocated the use of commerce as a vehicle to achieve their ultimate goal of Christian

⁴ Thomas Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), xxi.

⁵ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: First Mariner Books, 1998), 34.

⁶ Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 18-19.

⁷ David Livingstone, quoted in James Macauley, *Livingstone Anecdotes: A Sketch of the Career and Illustrations of the Character of David Livingstone* (Piccadilly: The Religious Tract Society, 1889), 151.

⁸ "Dr. Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures," 1857, in *Archives of Empire Volume II: The Scramble for Africa*, eds. Harlow and Carter, 256.

civilization.⁹ Christianity was thus one of the more significant motivators of the exploration of the interior of Africa during the 19th century, while the missionaries themselves supported the commerce and civilization brought by colonialism.

The Congo was the primary state to emerge out of the exploration of the lengthy Congo River, first by Livingstone, and then by H.M. Stanley, in his quest to complete the work of the missionary-doctor. Meanwhile, as the scramble to divide up the pieces of Africa became cutthroat in Europe, King Leopold II, ruler of the recently independent Belgium, yearned for a colony of his own and for Belgium: “*il faut à la Belgique une colonie.*”¹⁰ Rebuffed in his attempts to buy an existing colony from a European power and derided by his own government at home for his seemingly foolish colony fetish, Leopold’s attention was grabbed by publications in *The Times* in 1876 about Lieutenant Verney Cameron’s travels in the Congo basin that revealed a land of “unspeakable richness” awaiting an “enterprising capitalist.”¹¹ Within six months, he had convened a conference of geographers where he expressed his philanthropic interest in the colony (while feigning commercial disinterest) speaking broadly of the desire to “open to civilization the only part of our globe where it has yet to penetrate,” with Belgium, as a “central and neutral state. . . , happy and satisfied with her lot” as the perfect organizer of this venture.¹² Cloaked in philanthropic goals and seemingly guided by a religious zeal to bring light to the dark continent, Leopold succeeded in deceiving the rest of Europe and the United States that the intentions of his International Association of the Congo (established originally in 1876 as the *Association internationale africaine*) were also motivated by a desire to establish free trade in the region.¹³ This appealed to the French, Portuguese, British, and Germans, who all had various competing claims to the area and wanted to see each other’s power limited.¹⁴ Further, the moral high ground claimed by Leopold was in line with the desire of the general public in Europe to approach this era of new imperialism with

⁹ M.B. Synge, “Preparing the Empire: Livingstone and Stanley in Central Africa,” 1859, in *Archives of Empire Volume II: The Scramble for Africa*, eds. Harlow and Carter, 300.

¹⁰ “It is necessary that Belgium have a colony.” Quoted in Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

purser motives (especially in Britain, where the slave trade had recently been abolished).¹⁵

King Leopold's desire for a colony for Belgium fit within the context of Europe's 'Scramble for Africa' of the late 1800s. The carving up of Africa was seen as an outlet for growing internal pressures as a result of economic turbulence and inequality within European countries, while it provided heathen populations for proselytizing Christian missionaries to save, a chance to access hitherto inaccessible resources, and an opportunity to assert dominance in Europe without directly fighting on the European continent.¹⁶ This competition led Otto von Bismarck of the recently emerged German Empire to call together a conference in 1884 to resolve the issues of free trade and ownership spawning from this struggle.¹⁷ Leopold, in the meantime, had taken advantage of the lack of claim to the Congo (considered not worth the effort of colonizing) to use the International Association of the Congo to establish control in the region for eventual resource exploitation.¹⁸ Though Leopold was not an official delegate at the conference, his aforementioned manipulations allowed him to benefit from the Berlin Act, which followed the Conference in 1885. In it, he was named ruler of the newly designated Congo Free State, among other trade agreements.¹⁹ The primary European powers had determined that granting the "king of weak little Belgium" sovereignty over the new state of the Congo was the best guarantee for free trade in the region.²⁰ Meanwhile, Leopold's "noble aspirations" and philanthropic, Christian motives, according to Bismarck, assuaged the lofty ideals of commerce, Christianity, and civilization – the "3 C's" espoused by Livingstone and embraced by a European public keen to "take up the White Man's Burden."²¹

Under the guise of Christianity and the promise of free trade, Leopold had guaranteed for himself a state to exploit for economic purposes. The Free State of the Congo was under his sovereignty, not Belgium's. To explore, cultivate, and colonize the Congo, Leopold relied upon the effort of missionaries, both foreign and Belgian, Protestant and

¹⁵ Hoshchild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 34.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Wawro, *War and Society in Europe, 1792-1914* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 150.

¹⁷ Hoshchild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 97.

¹⁸ Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁰ Hoshchild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 97.

²¹ Though published in response to American imperialism in the Philippines, Kipling identified this prevailing feeling of responsibility vis-à-vis colonization within the age of new imperialism. Quoted in Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 254; Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," *McClure's Magazine* 12 (1899).

Catholic.²² Protestant missionaries, who were primarily from foreign countries, had been extremely important in establishing structure in the Congo with their early missions, but as Belgian presence became more assured, Leopold turned to Belgian Catholic missionary orders, “whose loyalty and control would be more assured.”²³ This pitting of Protestants against Catholics further served to relieve internal tensions in Belgium, where warring peoples (the Flemish and Walloons) and sects (the Liberals and Catholics) threatened stability.²⁴ Leopold flagrantly manipulated the goodwill inspired by the use of Christianity: using first the Protestant missions “to validate his claim against other bidders [to the Congo],” and then the Catholic missions “in solidifying and ‘nationalizing’ his winnings.”²⁵ Christianity was thus for Leopold little more than a tool to demonstrate his pure intentions to Europe, and to consolidate his regime within the Congo.

Though the International Association of the Congo extracted ivory and mineral resources, the cost of colonizing the Congo – the roads, the excavation, the buildings, the steamboats, and the cost of manpower – at first threatened to bankrupt the king from 1885-1890.²⁶ The worldwide rubber boom of the 1890s, in response to the development of pneumatic tires for automobiles, however, transformed the Free Congo State from a pet project of Leopold into a vastly profitable economic venture that irrevocably changed the nature of the treatment of native Africans in the colony.²⁷ The wild rubber vines, covering half of Leopold’s Congo, were now the source of profit in the colony – and capitalizing upon the rubber harvests consumed Leopold.²⁸ In order to beat the price drop in rubber that would follow once Latin American and Asian plantations entered the market in several years, Leopold rewarded companies based on the amount of rubber they turned in.²⁹ Consequently, private companies resorted to crueler and crueler methods to ensure their rubber quotas were met. In an investigation initiated by the revelations from accounts of E.D. Morel and individual missionaries of the colonial practices of the Congo, conducted by the British pro-consul stationed there in 1903, Roger Casement detailed the “widespread proofs of the great energy displayed by Belgian officials

²² Marvin D. Markowitz, “The Missions and Political Development in the Congo,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 40 (1970), 234.

²³ Markowitz, “The Missions and Political Development in the Congo,” 234.

²⁴ Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 12.

²⁵ Markowitz, “The Missions and Political Development in the Congo,” 235.

²⁶ Hoshchild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

in introducing their methods of rule over one of the most savage regions of Africa.”³⁰ Interviewing an Old Congolese Chief, he discovered that when the Africans failed to bring enough rubber, “the white men would put some of us in lines, one behind the other and would shoot through all our bodies.”³¹ Soldiers would take the women from villages that failed to meet quotas, and eventually resorted to killing Africans for sub-par rubber collection.³² The Force Publique (the armed forces of the Congo Free State) were required to chop off the hands of the people they killed to confirm their numbers.³³ As noted by Congo commissioner Charles Lemaire, “As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, ‘To gather rubber in the district... one must cut off hands, noses and ears,’ to send the appropriate message.”³⁴ As these atrocities escalated, missionaries in the areas “could only blush with shame and say they were unjust,” in the words of Reverend Whitehead of the Baptist Missionary Society.³⁵ Individually, the accounts of these missionaries were easily dismissed, leading to Reverend Whitehead’s sense of frustration.

Though Leopold continued to use Christianity as a façade for the practices to exploit rubber, Christianity played one more significant role in Leopold’s Free State of the Congo. It was ultimately the *cumulative* accounts of Christian missionaries, brought to international attention by reformers such as Roger Casement and E. D. Morel, that exposed the true nature of Leopold’s colony and resulted in its annexation to Belgium in 1908. In 1896, Leopold had used the missionaries to defend his colonial practices. He established “the Native Protection Commission” of three Belgian Catholic priests, two British Baptist missionaries, and one American Baptist to investigate the alleged acts of violence committed against the natives.³⁶ The members were intentionally scattered and distanced from any of the atrocities, and thus reported positively about the administration of the Congo. Yet missionary opposition mounted as the true nature of the cruel colonization became clear to those within the system. William H. Sheppard, a black missionary from America, was the

³⁰ Roger Casement, “The Congo Report,” 1903, in *The Eyes of Another Race*, eds. Séamas Ó Síocháin and Michael O’Sullivan (Cliath: Universtiy College Dublin Press, 2003), 49.

³¹ Roger Casement, “The Congo Report,” 70.

³² Hoschchild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 185.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁵ The Reverend J. Whitehead to Governor-General of Congo State, September 7, 1903, “The Congo Report Inclosure 2,” in *The Eyes of Another Race*, eds. Ó Síocháin and O’Sullivan, 137.

³⁶ Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 586.

first to prominently write about the mutilations and murders in the 1890s, however, he and other critics failed to capture the public's attention in the face of Leopold's skillful diplomacy.³⁷ It was not until investigations from the outside were commissioned that the truth of the Congo Free State became prominently known. The aforementioned investigation by Roger Casement, and the reports by E. D. Morel successfully integrated, validated, and found an audience for the missionaries' accounts of the atrocities. Morel and the rest of the Congo Reform movement revealed the extent to which Leopold had manipulated his philanthropic and Christian pretense to personally benefit from the Congo Free State, and finally gave an international voice to the Christian missionaries appalled by the carnage and the distortion of their religion.³⁸

During the age of new imperialism in the latter half of the 19th century, a clever, calculating king was able to carve out a piece of over two million square kilometers filled with valuable resources and people for his own personal benefit – and justify his actions with claims of philanthropy, the promotion of free trade, and Christianity. King Leopold II of Belgium brutally exploited the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1904, and caused the deaths of over ten million Congolese. Christianity played a significant and dynamic role initially in the colonization of the Congo, and then as a cover for imperialism due to the importance of public perception concerning the legitimacy of the imperial effort. Originally the motivation for much of the early interest in exploring the interior of Africa, Christianity became inextricably linked with commerce and civilization as a part of the work of missionaries as they sought to illuminate the 'Dark Continent.' It was then twisted by Leopold first as a means of justifying his claim to the Congo, and then as a cover for the murderous actions carried out for his profit.

Ultimately, though, Christianity served to unravel Leopold's private reign when the missionaries found a collective voice for their individual testimonies in the work of Morel and the Congo Reform Society.

³⁷ Hoshchild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 194.

³⁸ Edmund Dene Morel, *Red Rubber* (Bradford: Riley Brothers, Ltd., 1907),