

Christianity in Africa: a historical appraisal

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ABSTRACT

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In this article, the author challenges the popular public conception that Christianity in Africa is a latecomer introduced only with the advent of colonialism. By tracing the origins of the Christian faith in both North and sub-Saharan Africa (including, North-Central and West Africa), this paper seeks to show that Christianity has been in Africa virtually since its inception and that the continent's own adherents to this faith played an important role in the formation and advance of Christianity elsewhere. Moreover, Christianity in Africa can be found almost everywhere on the continent and indigenous varieties of the tradition developed which allowed it to become as part of Africa as African traditional religions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many people today, both in Africa and elsewhere, tend to believe that the introduction of Christianity to the continent is a relatively recent phenomenon. One of the grounds alleged in favour of this view is the appeal to statistical data that suggest that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, only 3% of the African population were classified as Christians. Another aspect also referred to is the fact that most of the denominations and indigenous churches have a history of existence of no more than two centuries.

This view of the age of Christianity in Africa is problematic as it is based on limited research and backed up by a selection of facts that can be misleading when taken out of context. To expose the errors of this insistence that Christianity is but a recent and therefore alien introduction to the religious traditions on the continent, this paper will attempt to provide a corrective reconstruction of the origins, growth and development of Christianity in Africa.

Observers of the religious scene on the continent generally divide Africa into two territories, i.e. North Africa and sub-Saharan

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Africa. This paper will adhere to this delineation of religious space for practical purposes. Moreover, the inquiry will be divided into four sections: After a brief introduction, the earliest traces of Christianity in Africa will be assessed, particularly with regard to the developments in the first centuries of the common era in North Africa. This is followed by a critical examination of modern attempts to Christianize Africa (especially in sub-Saharan Africa). The article then seeks to appraise the state of Christianity in Africa from its inception to the present and concludes with a synthesis of the abovementioned topics.

2 THE FIRST CHURCHES IN AFRICA: NORTH AFRICA

Many scholars today classify the region north of the Sahara as essentially Islamic in religious orientation. However, Christianity in this region of Africa has a history stretching right back to the earliest days on the faith and because it is as old as Christendom in Asia, in a sense it can also be called a traditional religion in Africa. For when in the first century Christianity started to spread from its origins in Palestine it also took root in North East Africa not long after Pentecost (cf. Acts 2f, 8f.) (Hildebrandt 1981:5).

The first urban centre of Christianity in Africa was Alexandria in Egypt. While the New Testament has no record of missionary activity in Africa as in Asia and Europe, various contacts are implied. As noted by Groves (1948:58), the accessibility of Africa from Palestine is shown by the story of the flight into Egypt by Joseph and Mary with the infant Jesus in Matthew 2:13-15. Another gospel character, Simon of Cyrene who bore the cross of Christ, also came from North Africa. Then in Acts 8:26-40 one also reads of an African on his way home who became a Christian – this time an African called an Ethiopian (though not someone from Abyssinia but rather from a region overlapping with present-day Egypt-Sudan).

Aside from the possibility that some converts on the day of Pentecost also brought the faith to Africa, there is also the popular tradition claiming that the apostle Thomas who allegedly went to India made his way there via an initial stage of the journey during which he stopped over in Alexandria and made his way south along the Nile.

At any rate, according to Coptic Christian tradition, the gospel of Jesus Christ was brought to Egypt and Alexandria by Mark the Evangelist (Parrinder 1969:103), despite its being contradicted by

another tradition witness to in Syrian *Clementine Homilies* which portrays the apostle Barnabas as first preaching the gospel on the streets of Alexandria after his break with Paul. Thus Egyptian Christianity holds on to Mark as Patriarch and even had a tradition of electing Eastern orthodox patriarchs in the region beside a tomb in Alexandria alleged to be the evangelist's.

In this regard there seems to be a consensus that the first Christian converts in Africa would have been Greek speaking Jews and proselytes from Alexandria. However, from the beginning efforts will have been made to bring the gospel to the Copts, i.e. the Egyptian natives of Hamitic origin) (Hildebrandt 1981:7). While apparently the lingua franca in Egypt was Greek, the large peasant population knew only Coptic and so by 300 AD the first translations of the Bible into the latter tongue became a reality. The Coptic tradition and language eventually came to rival the Greek one so that an abundance of local Christian religious literature as well as translations from Greek were produced during the fourth century.

According to Thompson (1968:7-9), the Copts eventually outnumbered the Greeks and the indigenization of the faith led to rapid growths in both the number of converts and the geographical territory occupied by Christians in Egypt. So much so that by the fourth century the region witnessed to no less than eighty 'Sees' or 'church districts', each headed by its own bishop and with the bishop of Alexandria as the overseeing Archbishop.

The importance of the early Egyptian Church in early Christianity cannot be overemphasized. Apart from Alexandria which could claim being the first centre of theological learning and catechetical schools – and without rival in its time – the Egyptian Church can also lay claim to a most influential role in the development of Christian monasticism. A monk named Anthony was alleged to have been the father of monasticism in Egypt (Davies 1965:184).

The second acclaimed centre of Christianity in Africa was central North Africa. Unlike Egypt, this was a Roman colony, popularly referred to as Roman Africa, owing to Roman influences and the capital in Carthage. The region involved comprised quite a large area as it spanned the territories of present-day Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The exact date of the origin of Christianity in this region is not known with precision. Neither are we sure about the place from which the influences initially came, though some

scholars would suggest that this was Rome. However, other consider it more likely that the initial influence on Carthage came from further East as there were many commercial ties and trade routes between the capital and that region (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch and even Byzantium).

Though, as noted above, we do not know the precise date that Christianity penetrated North Africa, the origins of the faith in this region appears to date from before 180 AD, as it was at this time that the Church there became famous as a result of the martyrdom of twelve of its members who refused to compromise their unwavering allegiance to Christ. These believers from Scillium in Numidia – seven men and five women – were tried, condemned and executed in Carthage on July 17th 180 AD (Groves 1948:59)

At this early age, Christianity in Africa developed with much rapidity in North Africa. After the death of Tertullian in 220 AD the Church had seventy to ninety bishoprics. In Cyprian's day (250 AD) this number had virtually doubled with the total rising to around one hundred and fifty. By the beginning of the fourth century (fifty years later) this number had risen yet again to over two hundred and fifty bishoprics (Hildebrandt 1981:10). By the end of the fourth century, the Church in North Africa thus became vigorous, full of intellectual and spiritual life, well organized and well disciplined. It was a major centre of the Christian faith during those years and played home to the widely recognized 'Trio of African Saints' who each in their own way made a number of significant contributions to the history and dogma of subsequent Christianity (Igwe 2000:5).

However, unlike in Egypt where the faith was indigenized, the early Church in North Africa was very Roman. Latin was the official language of both correspondence and liturgy as well as in spiritual literature. Although the local Punic language was occasionally employed in preaching, it was impossible to find enough clergy fluent in this tongue. The mother tongue of the locals – Berber – fared even worse.

Besides Alexandria and Carthage, the third major centre in early Christian North Africa was Ethiopia (Abyssinia). The Church apparently spread through this region when, in the fourth century, two Christians named Frumentius and Edesius arrived there from Tyre. The local church traces its origin to the time when these two disciples of Christ preached the gospel in the Kingdom of Axium.

Many years after the initial contact, Frumentius went to Athanasius (Bishop of Alexandria) from whom he received Episcopal consecration in 350 AD. On his returning there developed a great expansion of the Church in Abyssinia. Tradition has it that after winning over the king of Axium, Christianity became the official religion in the region and a large church was subsequently built there (Hilderbrandt 1981:21).

Apart from Frumentius' labours, Christianity in Ethiopia was further strengthened in the fifth and sixth centuries through the missionary activities of 'nine missionaries from the Syrian Church. Besides establishing monasteries in the north-east, these missionaries aided the translation of the New Testament into Ge'er – the indigenous language (Parrinder 1969:115). These nine missionaries with their monophysite Christology had a considerable influence on the dogmas that were to develop among Abyssinian Christians and from 500 AD onward, the Church there subscribed to the belief of the one divine nature of Christ – a belief which, by then, had become a heresy from the 'orthodox' perspective (Chalcedon, 450 AD) (Hildebrandt 1981:22).

The fourth centre of Christianity in North Africa was in Nubia (Sudan). The Church there had its origins in the sixth century during the reign of the Emperor Justinian (527-565 AD). This came about as the result of two different missions: the first partly under the leadership of Presbyter Julian (a monophysite from Egypt who founded a church there in 543 AD). This church was established in the region of Nabodae in Northern Sudan and was further strengthened through the missionary work of Longinus from Alexandria who was sent there earlier in 508 AD. The latter had also built a church and even ordained clergy and taught the people the order of the divine service and all the ordinances of Christianity (Groves 1948:50).

The second mission came to Sudan in the time shortly after Julian came to power. The Christology of this mission was not monophysite and thus, owing to doctrinal disputes, Julian dissuaded the northern locals from welcoming these missionaries. As a result, the mission went south and settled with some success among the Makorites. Now, with missionary activity in both the northern and southern regions of the country, the Christian faith took strong root and greatly flourished also in this part of North (-Eastern) Africa. Many Churches were built and the region, like its neighbours to the north, became a Christian kingdom for many years to come.

3 THE PLACE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE EARLY NORTH-AFRICAN CHURCH IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

The Church in North Africa occupied a central place in the history of the Christian Church as such owing to the immense contributions it had made to the development of the faith. Included among these are the following:

1 The composition of hymns and regulations for church worship and organization of this region was readily adopted elsewhere.

2 Great leaders, teachers, bishops, apologists and Church Fathers came from North Africa including Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Origin, Clement, and others – all of whom had an influence on the subsequent developments in the Church.

3 The early Church in North Africa also featured greatly in Christian education and both eastern (Alexandria) and western traditions subsequently played a determinative role in the development of both Eastern and Western Christian spirituality and theology.

Sadly, much of what was once vibrant Christian Church in North Africa was dramatically swept away by the Islam invasions during the seventh century. Reasons given for the collapse of the faith in this part of the continent include a lack of pastoral guidance, a refusal to indigenize the faith completely, persecution, charges of heresy and multiple occasions of schism (Groves 1948:81-89).

The Church in Nubia was able to resist the onslaught of Islam to a certain extent and for an extended period of time as indigenization was achieved to a far greater extent in this region. At last, however, Christianity even here began to dwindle and virtually disappeared when the kingdom of Alwa fell to the Muslims in 1504. In modern times, however, missionaries had once again brought the faith to regions in the south (Parrinder 1969:108).

It was however in Egypt and Ethiopia where the Church survived even until today. Though Islam also became a major influence in these regions, indigenization and a host of other positive aspects of the local faith allowed it to hold its own against new influences from outside. Thus today, both Egypt and Ethiopia still harbour Christian Churches, particularly the Coptic and monophysite traditions who still trace their origins back to the early days before the invasions. These Churches are the oldest in Africa and are

headed by the Patriarch of Alexandria (The local Pope and father – the successor of Saint Mark the evangelist) as their supreme head (Parrinder 1969:112). Thus, in spite of the Islamic dominance of the religious scene in Africa north of the Sahara, there remains a Christian presence with ancient roots.

4 MODERN ATTEMPTS TO CHRISTIANIZE AFRICA: SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

As can be ascertained from the above discussion, the first Christian churches in Africa were predominantly present only in the eastern parts of Northern Africa (Africa[Roman province], Egypt, Ethiopia, Nubia[Sudan]). The Europeans unjustifiably labeled Africa the ‘dark continent’ because the interior seemed impenetrable to explorers who had to give up their journeys prematurely for a variety of reasons. Included in these determinants were inconveniences like the hot climate, poisonous insects, a lack of good waterways and harbours, etc. Yet despite all the initial setbacks, it was to be in the region south of the Sahara in which Christianity would ultimately experience the largest amount of growth an expansion on the African continent.

The first recorded attempt to introduce Christianity into West Africa was during the fifteenth century when, under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portuguese began to explore all along the West Coast. Besides the scientific, economical and political motives for the journey, there was also a strong missionary zeal present and the desire to reach the unevangelised Africans with the gospel of Christ (Daudu & Gbule 2000:1). Subsequently, the Portuguese would adopt the policy of Christianizing the entire Atlantic seaboard of the West African Coast from the fifteenth century onwards (Ayandele 1969:23). Through the ‘Padroado’ agreement the Portuguese secured a monopoly over the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops, clergy, and missionaries in West Africa (and the East Indies).

Thus the Crown of Portugal assumed the responsibility of founding and supporting the missionary enterprise in West Africa (Gray 1969:14). The Roman Catholic Church soon began to send out official missionaries to accompany the early trading ships and soon a well-organized infrastructure was in place with the Islands used as springboards for missionary efforts on the mainland. The first church established by the Portuguese in the region was at Elmina (Gold

Coast) in 1482 under the leadership of Don Diogo d' Azambuja. Shortly after holding the first church service (under a mango tree), Don Diogo met with the chief and people of Elmina and introduced them to the Christian faith. The chief of Elmina accepted the faith on behalf of his people, though apparently this choice was motivated primarily by the possibility of commercial gains and acquiring land for the erection of the church building and a castle dedicated to Saint George (Daudu & Gbule 2000:20). Similarly, in 1489 the chief of Wolf (in Senegambia) who went under the name of Behenti accepted Christianity together with his twenty-five companions. Once again, political motives played a big role and baptism was even administered four years later (Oshitelu 2002:19-20).

Sierra-Leone was Christianized in the seventeenth century by a group of Jesuit missionaries led by Father Borgerius who succeeded in baptizing the king and his sons. After baptism the king was renamed King Phillip III of Spain. The Danes and the Dutch also sent missionaries to their forts in West Africa and the settlement at the Cape while the Capuchins (Italian missionaries) also established their mission in the Congo (Gray 1969:14). The Benin, Niger Delta and Warri areas of pre-colonial Nigeria were evangelized by missionaries from Portugal, Spain and Italy between 1480 and 1807. Oba Osagi of Benin and some of his chiefs were among the early converts. Christianity entered Warri in the 1570's through some Augustinian monks operating from the Island of Sao Tome and thrived there for two centuries (Daudu & Gbule 2000:3).

In fact, the crown Prince was converted and with baptism received the name Saint Sebastian whilst his son, Domingo, was sent to Portugal for a period of ten years to get a Western education. There he succeeded in marrying a Portuguese lady of high birth. Interestingly, their son, Don Antonio, who became known as Olu was said to have been educated in Christian theology in Portugal. With this strong Christian background, Don Antonio was able to spread Christianity among his subjects once he returned home from where it also penetrated the Niger Delta (Daudu & Gbule 2000:4).

Although the labour and initial success of the Portuguese did not last long – owing to factors, which included faulty strategy, commercial agendas, unhealthy rivalry with other European nations, tropical diseases, inimical weather, language and communication problems, a lack of missionaries, insufficient theological education, and ethno-centricity, etc. – their influence survived in Cape Verdi

and Sao Tome where bishoprics were created in 1533 and 1534 respectively. In other words, there still exist churches in these regions that can trace back their roots to the missionary activities of the fifteenth century.

On the other hand, a more successful and enduring missionary enterprise began in West Africa with the establishment of Christian Missionary Societies in the Protestant Churches in Europe and America during the eighteenth-century (Neill 1986:214). This development was prompted by the evangelical awakening in Britain and America and the abolition of the slave trade. In England, for instance, Wesley's emphasis on renewed zeal and commitment on the part of the individual Christian, and a deep concern for a personal act of conversion, greatly strengthened the deepest motives for missionary work (Gray 1969:15). Consequently, the nineteenth century witnessed the launching of missionaries, from Europe and America with the sole aim of evangelizing Africa.

The Roman Catholic Church was also motivated by the Protestant Evangelical spirit and fervour to form Catholic Missionary Societies in France and other parts of Europe – this time independent of secular control and political or commercial motives (Gray 1969:18-19). For instance, with the formation of the Associations for the Propagation of the Faith, e.g. the so-called Holy Ghost Fathers and the Society of African Missions, an immense fundraising scheme developed from the initiative of a young French woman from the town of Lyons in 1819. These new Roman Catholic missionaries greatly assisted in the reintroduction of Christianity into West Africa from the nineteenth century onwards.

With the abolition of the slave trade, Sierra-Leone and Liberia became nurseries of modern mission in Africa. The choice of these two centres for the re-settlement of freed-slaves offered a brilliant opportunity for the various Christian missions to propagate the Christian faith. From Sierra-Leone and Liberia, missionaries penetrated into other West African coasts and hinterlands to plant Christianity. The inclusion of women either in religious orders, as single or as the wives of missionaries, really opened a new dimension for missionary activities as the gospel of Christ was carried to African women to a far greater extent than had been the case previously. Consequently, this second missionary enterprise succeeded in planting mission churches on a strong footing in West Africa. Included among these were the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist,

Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Evangelical, United Missionary and Qua Iboe Churches in the region.

The earlier attempts to introduce Christianity into East Africa were made by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Dr Kraft arrived in the year 1844 and founded a number of mission stations there. Other missionary bodies that also laboured in this area included the Universities' Mission to Central Africa, the Society of Holy Ghost Fathers, Scotland Missions, and the United Missionary Church. Amongst other contributions, these missionary bodies assisted in the translation of the Bible into Swahili and also taught the people how to read and write (Oliver 1952).

However, owing to foreign domination in these mission churches, an initiative was taken by some African leaders towards the close of the nineteenth century to indigenize the faith to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case. This was the case particularly with regard to the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches (Dada 1986:58-62). The resulting struggle led to the formation of Ethiopian Churches (cf. an allusion in Ps 68:31), also popularly called 'African Independent Churches'. These include the Native Baptist Church (founded in 1888), the United Native African Church (1891), the African Church (1901), the United African Methodist Church, *Eleja* (1917). In Ghana was founded the National Baptist Church (1898), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Nigritian Fellowship (1907) (cf. Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997:22-23). In their struggle against colonialism, these churches stressed self-expression, native involvement in mission, self-reliance and respect for African cultural heritage. Still, when it came to liturgy and doctrine, the Churches remained largely similar to the parent Churches.

The second attempt at stripping Christianity in Africa of foreign cultural imperialism came about with the establishment of African Indigenous Churches. These, in Nigeria for instance, included churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C & S), the Church of the Lord (Aladura), Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), and so on. A great number of Zionist Churches were also established in South Africa, sometime after 1915. In 1916, in Kenya, there also emerged among the Luo a similar movement, which in 1958 became what is known today as 'the Church of Christ in Africa'.

In their effort to make Christianity meaningful, these churches drew freely on elements from traditional African religions and cultures. Many beliefs and rites were adopted and adapted by giving them a Christian flavour. As a result, the spirituality in these churches is primarily pentecostal, emphasizing as they do, amongst other things, divine healing, violent prayer, corporate participation in worship, free emotional expression, the active role of women, spiritual interpretations of all problems and an emphasis on an African world view (cf. Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997:31). As a result, methods of evangelisation became more appealing and solution oriented. For instance, the role of healing in indigenous African religions has been transposed to the context of Christianity via divine healing crusades. In fact, many of these churches have become centres for healing, much like traditional African shrines. The adaptation of Christian traditions to the African cultural continuum has enabled the faith not only to become more meaningful to the African people, but also became more effective at being relevant to contemporary issues and needs.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans live out their faith in a wide variety of churches that have become unrelated to foreign church traditions, structures, leaders, doctrine, or discipline. These indigenous churches, which developed in response to the needs and understanding of African people have together become an extensive movement characterized by rich creativity and astonishing diversity. Furthermore, with the evangelistic drive of Pentecostalism, the Church in Africa grows daily, penetrating the unevangelized masses at a very fast rate. The Pentecostal Churches in West Africa, especially in Nigeria, has developed such great missionary structures that it has now transformed Africa as a new base from where missionaries go out to evangelize the outside world. Churches like Deeper Life Bible Church, Reformed Christian Church of God and the like have successfully established missionary stations outside Africa whereby Africans, by virtue of the great expansion of the faith in the mother continent, have now become agents of revival in the very countries that first brought the gospel to them.

5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing observations, it would seem that Christianity is not as new or as alien to Africa as many would suggest. Its earliest roots here go at least as far back as its inception in Asia.

With more than two thousand years of Church history behind it, the Christian religion has not only been established in Africa against all odds but has succeeded to a great extent in indigenizing itself. Despite initial set-backs and the continuing challenges of sharing the continent with Islam and African traditional religions, Christianity has shown itself to be a truly protean faith able to handle virtually all the problems that comes with cross-cultural evangelisation. David Barrett's prediction in his review of missions in 1970 that by the year 2000 Africa might well become the main Christian continent and the home of one of the largest Christian communities in the world seems to have been correct. And all this is proof that Christianity has indeed achieved the status of a traditional religion in Africa.

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