

African Christianity

When I was a seminary student during the late fifties and early sixties, I had the opportunity to attend mission conferences in the Toronto area. Interestingly, the representatives of mission societies working in Africa usually gave the impression that the European and North American missionaries were the first ones who had arrived to proclaim the Gospel. According to J. Herbert Kane in *Understanding Christian Missions* (1986): "Christianity has made more converts in Black Africa than all the rest of the Third World combined. In spite of the fact that we got off to a late start in Africa as compared with Asia, we have made converts much faster. No doubt Kane's "we" refers to "foreign missionaries" and not African Christians inclusive. And these early missionaries tended to regard traditional African religions as evil, primitive, and superstitious. They extended this negative attitude toward African culture as a whole.

The urgent predicament of the Church in Africa today is that of the apparent foreignness of Christianity. Many believe that Christianity cannot be traditionally African because it is supposed to be imported from Europe. In other words, if good ideas appeared in Africa, they must have come from the Western world. Thomas C. Oden, in his fascinating book, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, notes that by a miscarriage of purpose the Church has succeeded in preaching and in teaching Africans about a strange God whom they somehow came to identify as the God of the white man. African Christians were thus often put in the intolerable position of being obliged to turn their back on their own culture and heritage, and rely on imported European ideas. This served to reinforce the perception that Christianity was culturally alien to Africa. This led many Africans to resent Christianity and the West. They claim that "modern" Christianity brought only oppression. But interestingly, Islam does not get the same attention as Christianity. Yet Islam is younger than Christianity by six centuries.

Before the 1960s, very few efforts were made to relate theology to the African context. Many Africans found that the presentation of Western issues in theology did not answer their inmost questions or solve some of the spiritual problems related to their African culture. Western methods of thinking and learning were often unsuited to African ways. As a result, Christian theology was thought by many Christians to be something Western, rather than for the global Church.

Thomas C. Oden's Critique

Oden chastises contemporary African church leaders and theologians. He points out that African intellectual history has no need to be defensive or self-effacing. He notes that Africa taught Europe before Europe was prepared to teach Africa. Europe slept for many centuries without being fully aware of its vital intellectual sources in Africa. Without discrediting the sacrificial contribution of Western missionary efforts in spreading the Gospel in Africa, Oden's book, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, is a clarion call for a robust historical and theological reassessment of early African Christianity. His central argument is that intellectual developments within early African Christianity shaped world Christianity in decisive ways. Contrary to entrenched views among Western scholars, the flow of intellectual leadership in the first five centuries of Christianity moved largely from Africa to Europe – south to north.

Oden's well-documented research shows that basic strands of both Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity – including spiritual formation through monastic discipline, the European university, Christian dogma, and exegetical rules and methods – had therefore their roots in ancient African Christian life.

Early African Christianity

Regrettably, some scholars of African culture and religion have acquired a persistent habit of assuming that Christianity began in Africa only a couple of centuries ago. But Christianity is not a recent arrival in Africa. The historical fact is that Christianity came to Africa before it came to Europe and North America. It is a dynamic world-wide faith that has been part of Africa for nearly twenty centuries. All the early forms of Christianity were present in the four billions of square miles of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and possibly further south than we know now. Even early written literature shows the presence of Christianity in North Africa. The oldest surviving document of North African Christianity records the trial of Christians which dates back to July 17, 180. It states that the accused have a box which they say contains *The Books* (the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets), and the letters of Paul, a righteous man.

The book of *Acts* tells us that the Gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and then to Samaria. This can be seen in the story of Philip who was told to witness to an African, an important Ethiopian government official (Acts 8:27-39). The gospel captured the hearts and minds of many Ethiopians. Today's Ethiopian Coptic Church claims that its apostolic tradition is about 1,650 years old. It goes back to the tradition that narrates how the Ethiopian king travelled to the Nile delta, sat under the teachings of the patriarch Athanasius, and became himself the first bishop of Ethiopia.

Christianity was present all up and down the Nile in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries, and continued to spread. Christians living in these areas recorded and told their history. But European historians have gone on to proceed as if the great intellectual and literary textual traditions of the Nile Valley and the Maghreb did not even exist. Even if written records are not always available, traditional oral history still offers a fairly reliable history of events. It needs to be understood and studied by Africans far more than it has been by Euro-Americans.

What happened to ancient African Christianity? The Muslim invasions wiped out much of what the early Christians had achieved. But remnants did survive. Despite the seventh-century Muslim conquest of Egypt, the slow but eventually total Islamicization of Nubia (ancient region of S Egypt and N Sudan) and the thousand year isolation of Ethiopia, today the Coptic Church of Egypt together with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Eastern Orthodox patriarchate of Alexandria still are living representatives of ancient African Christianity .

Christianity in Egypt

Usually we don't think of Egypt as an African nation. But it is. Admittedly, Oden remarks, on the one hand there are some Egyptians who are sensitive about being viewed as Africans. On the other hand many black Africans understandably have deep resentments against the

centuries of slave trade they view as stemming perennially from the North.

Egyptian Christianity traces its roots to the evangelist Mark. According to the church historian, Eusebius, reflecting the traditions of his day (early fourth century), Mark first preached the gospel in Alexandria, and the Coptic Church claims an unbroken succession of patriarchs from that time to the present. It is generally believed that the first converts in Egypt were of Greek origin who lived mainly in the city of Alexandria. Later the Gospel spread to the "Copts" or Egyptians of Hamitic origin.

The active practice of monasticism began deep in Africa. It flowered less on the coast of Africa than on the inland deserts and rugged mountains. The monks went far into the desert precisely to find places where they would not be distracted. From at least the early fourth century, the monastic movement became an important feature of the life of the Egyptian church and has remained so throughout its history. While in Rome, the church father, Jerome (347-420), praised the ascetic life of monasticism. Wanting to learn more about it, he went first to Syria and then to Bethlehem, and then all the way to the Nile Valley to learn from Egyptian monastics.

Christian scholarship was born in the leading academic centre of the ancient world: Alexandria. It stood for centuries as one of the three leading cities. At its zenith, Alexandria was larger than either Rome or Antioch, and of far more importance in the world of ideas and learning. The great library of Alexandria was the model for university libraries all over Europe. It was unexcelled for five centuries. The bishop of Alexandria and brilliant theologian, Athanasius (326-73), became the champion of the orthodox faith of Nicea against the Arian heresy. Between 328 and 334, he also engaged in pastoral visits over a wide area of North Africa.

The once thriving Egyptian Coptic is now only a shadow of what it was in the past. It is estimated that at the time of the Arab-Muslim invasion at least two-thirds of the Egyptian population was Christian, but the pressure exerted to convert to Islam in the subsequent centuries resulted in the church being reduced to a minority status. And today it is still subjected to persecution.

Two African Church Fathers

In North Africa the church continued to expand from 200 to 300. According to historical records, there were 70 bishops in the Church in the North African provinces around 220. By about 250 there were almost 150 bishops, and by the end of the century (around 300) there were more than 250. These numbers show that the Church must have tripled its size during the third century.

North Africa became famous for its brilliant theologians. Two of the better known church fathers Tertullian and Augustine were natives of North Africa. The church father Tertullian lived in Carthage. He was a brilliant lawyer who was converted in AD 192. After becoming a Christian he became a fervent defender of the Christian faith. He was the first Christian apologist to use the term "Trinity". So we can trace the use of this word in our Church today to this early Christian in the African Church. From Tertullian we learn that the Gospel had spread

beyond Carthage. From the start of the third century he was aware that Christians were persecuted in Mauritania. In fact, the bishops of Mauritania took active part in a general council at Carthage.

The North African Augustine (354-430) was elected Bishop of Hippo in 395. He was a great preacher and theologian. He sought to restore the schism-torn African Church and became a brilliant defender of the faith against heresy. No other Christian leader had such a wide, deep and prolonged influence upon the Christianity of Western Europe as had Augustine. And in our own troubled times, his writings are once again consulted and studied.

African Theology

The neglect of Africa's earliest Christian ancestors not only by Westerners but also by many African scholars and church leaders has hindered the development of an indigenous African theology. Some African scholars have been so intent on condemning nineteenth-century colonialist missionary history that they have hardly glimpsed at their own momentous patristic intellectual heritage. This long-standing neglect of historic African heritage appears due to deep-seated prejudice within Western scholarship. Western Protestant missionaries were often influenced by the Enlightenment's rationalist worldview, which held that "demons" and "spirits" were "primitive" superstitions.

For the African the visible world of nature is not alone; it is enveloped in the invisible spirit world. In the African worldview there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular, between spiritual and material. It has a holistic approach to reality. In fact, African Christian converts find, a world of victory over sickness and death, mastery over evil spirits in the Bible. And the old Testament in particular, shows us a good deal about primal worldviews in action, instantly recognizable in Africa and many other parts of the world. It puts Africans directly in touch with the spirit world and ritual behaviours. Andrew F. Walls notes in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* that the things which concern African theologians may seem to us at best peripheral. He points out that we should note how African independent churches sometimes seem to focus on seemingly unusual rituals which strike us by their oddity or irrelevance. But this is usually because the topic, or the sort of topic, is a major one for certain African Christians, and it needs an answer related to Christ. Walls observes that there often turns out to be a sort of coherence in the way in which these churches deal with these rituals, linking Scripture, old traditions, and the Church as the new Levitical community – and giving an answer to something that had been worrying people.

But thankfully, in recent years there has been a greater awareness among both Western and African scholars for the need to deal with the indigenous issues. Furthermore, the recently published *African Bible Commentary* (2006) reflects the growing consciousness that Africa has much to offer the world of Christian scholarship. It is a 1,600-page commentary on the entire text of the Bible, with the African horizon in mind. Western academic questions are set aside in order to allow the text to address and engage in life issues in Africa, here and now – such as HIV/AIDS, demons and exorcisms, funeral and burial rites, the care of widows and orphans, and responses to persecution. There are also African ground-breaking theologians who work hard to remain true to the Gospel while being sensitive to their culture. For example, Manasseh Kwame Dakwa Bediako (1945-2008), who studied at European

universities, the late rector of Akrofi-Christaller Institute for Theology, Mission, and Culture, in Akropong, Ghana, pointed for many years to Africa's proper place in contemporary world-wide Christian discourse. He realized that vast numbers of African Christians were continually facing situations that demanded theological decisions for which Western intellectual models were no help. He spent his time and energy to realize his dream for generations of scholars, equally confident of their Christian and African identity, who would make a vital contribution to the Church. To that end he created a new type of institution where devotion to scholarship and understanding of cultures of Africa would be pursued in a setting of Christian worship, discipleship, and mission.

Conclusion

The history of the African Church is powerfully dramatized in the stories of early martyrs. They exemplify for us, faithfulness to Christ in the midst of untold and even unimaginable suffering. These African believers faithfully faced life-and-death choices, centuries of demeaning slavery and were often treated less than human. As I have shown, African Christianity seeks its own unique identity, while at the same time, be a full participant in global Christianity. African and Western Christians need each other in the face of the ever-increasing encroachment of Islam. Together, as believers in Christ from many cultures, we may build each other up in the faith, and advance His kingdom and glorify His name. Despite the rapid growth of Christianity, Africa is still a continent with great needs. Therefore, Thomas Oden presents us with this challenge: "Even those who live thousands of miles away can pray for the plight of Africa – for HIV-AIDS sufferers, for the child soldiers of war-torn areas, for displaced families, for the hungry. They can thank God for the tenacity and witness of faithful African Christians."

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January, 2009