

## THE INTERACTION BETWEEN FAITH AND CULTURE IN NORTH AFRICA: LESSONS

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### **Abstract**

*This piece makes an enquiry into the experience of the North African church as regards how she was evangelized, precisely, the interaction between faith and culture in the process of evangelization. From this enquiry, the researcher arrives at the understanding that there was a peripheral interaction between the Christian faith and the culture of the North African people, accounting for the loss of faith during the Islamic invasion. The researcher proposes that the church in Africa must indigenize quickly if she is to survive. The churches in Africa must be truly African, reflecting the people's particular culture. This would make the African Christian see the Christian faith as his own and not a white man's religion. If the African does not worship God in his own way, there would erupt a crisis of faith, a crisis that hinges on the fact that the African does not find satisfaction and meaning in his expression of faith.*

### **Introduction**

The interaction between faith and culture in North Africa calls to mind a passage of scripture from the Gospel of John, which talks about the distinction between the good shepherd and the hired man.

I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for his sheep. When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired man runs away

because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep. (Jn 10:11-13)

This beautifully presents what happened in North Africa. Christianity flourished in North Africa in a gargantuan style, however peripherally, such that it could not be regarded as the religion of the local people. They were like hired men who had the responsibility of preserving the Christian religion. When they saw the wolf coming they ran and left what was kept in their responsibility. The history of Christianity in North Africa is one of those historical occurrences that when recalled, the *dramatis personae* and spectators cannot but wince in regret at the retrospection, and yet therein lies the lesson that the African Church must carry along in her process of evangelization.

### **The Confessions Of The North African Churches**

The great Alexandria, the second most important city of the then Roman empire, is a city that deserves to be called the naval and center of African Christianity. Thoughts of the Alexandrian school of theology and their famous catechetical school, far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century reminds us of how Egypt shared in primitive Christianity. We learn from the Acts of Apostles that pilgrims from Egypt were present during the Pentecost; this could provide data for a discussion on the advent of Christianity into Egypt. There is also the plausible supposition that Christianity was brought into Egypt by St Mark.

Just as Alexandria was the second city of the Roman Empire, Hickey (1987), observes that it also became the second, after Rome, of the Christian Church<sup>1</sup>. It was from Alexandria that Christianity was taken to Cyrene in the West and as far as Thebes (Luxor) in the Nile Valley to the South. The catechetical school relying

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1987, p.2.

on the Platonic ideals, produced great theologians like Origen, Philo the Jewish exegete, St Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, St Dioysus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, they explored Greek philosophical categories and terminologies to formulate Christian mysteries. Thompson (1988) opines that they were distinctive for their allegorical hermeneutical style and refined Christology, which at most times overhauled the Christological and hermeneutic perspectives of the Antiochene School of theology. They were distinguished theologians and pastors who were able to incarnate Christianity among the native Egyptian community and in replacing Greek with the Coptic language in the celebration of the liturgy. Hundreds of miles to the south, in Upper Egypt, the Christian community had introduced monasticism to the church, by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Christian anchoritic life had started in Egypt; and the Desert Fathers by their teaching and austerity of life sought to free the Christian community from compromising the gospel with the old pagan influences<sup>2</sup>. This new form of life contributed greatly to “the history of a phenomenon of the inner life of the church which had far reaching consequences for the Christianity of the succeeding centuries in the East and West, and characterizes it in its various ways down to the present”<sup>3</sup> (Jedin, H. and Dolan, J. 1980).

Outside the monastic tradition rising in Egypt, the Egyptian church also had a missionary character, such that by the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the entire country was completely Christianized. The monastic communities already in progress were very instrumental in this regard.

The second ancient African Church of Alexandrian tradition is that of Ethiopia, often referred to as one of the sister churches of Egypt. The beginning of the church of Ethiopia is shrouded in antiquity. Just as St Mark is credited for the

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<sup>2</sup> L. A. Thompson, *Christianity in Egypt Before the Arab Conquest*, In *Tarikh*, Vol.2, No. 1. Pp.4-15

<sup>3</sup> Jedin, H. and Dolan, J. (eds), *History of the church*; Vol. II, London: Burns and Oats, 1980, p.337

introduction of Christianity into Egypt, St Matthew is said to have first preached the Gospel in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Eunuch who was baptized by Philip in the Acts of the Apostles (8:27-39), must not have been silent about baptism after his return home. Tafla (1988) tells us that the first bishop of Ethiopia was Frumentius, ordained by the great Athanasius (296-373) in Alexandria and revered in his own country as Abba Salama (the father of peace). Hickey (1987) shows that this link established by the ordination was continued in succeeding centuries and the *Abuna* or Archbishop of the Ethiopian Church continued to be an Egyptian Copt until 1950 when the Ethiopian, *Basilos* was elected *Abuna*.

The third ancient African church of the Alexandrian tradition is that of Nubia. Nubia was made up of the remnants of the ruins of the Kush kingdom. It was located between Egypt in the North and the Axumite kingdom in the South, and this today corresponds to the present republic of Sudan. Historians have divergent views about the entrance of Christianity into Nubia, however, many agree that it came in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Nubia was made up of a confederation of independent states, namely, Nobatia, Alodia and Makuria. The Nubian Church was a divided church, from the account of John of Ephesus who was a Monophysite, he said that Makuria fell into the hands of the Melchites (these were those who accepted the conclusions of the council of Ephesus), while the Monophysites captured Alodia.

To the ancient Romans, modern Tunisia, located at the western side of Egypt, was the province of Africa, and was then referred to as Carthage. This was where the great St Augustine lived between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and fought against the heresies that threatened the church. After Carthage there was the great city of Numidia which is today's Algeria. Towards the end of the block was Mauritania which is today's Morocco. For the Arabs who conquered this region, it was referred to as the *Maghrib*, meaning "the West". About the year 160, Christians who came from Rome preached the Gospel here and a local church took root. It was from among this Christian community that the earliest church martyrs emerged: St Perpetual, a noble lady of Carthage, and the slave girl Felicity. "The

Roman section of the Population, an administrative elite, preferred to use Latin and this was in fact the first part of the church to use Latin in the liturgy. The great fathers of the North African Church, Tertullian, Cyprian and later St Augustine of Hippo, all wrote in Latin and tended to despise those who used Greek, Punic and especially the Berber language"<sup>4</sup> (Hickey, 1987).

Like the Egyptian church, ascetical life also achieved a noteworthy expansion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Several monasteries existed in Carthage in 400 AD. With regard to monastic formation in North Africa, St Augustine's contribution cannot be undermined. Although he cannot be called the father of monasticism, to him belongs the credit of instituting a monasticism which bore the stamp of his spirit and its quality was called to become highly significant element of the inner life of the church, first in North Africa, then through it, continued operation in all of Western Christianity<sup>5</sup>. Like the Egyptian church, the other churches in the North also tried to assume missionary responsibilities. This is seen in Tertullian's proud appeal in 197 AD to the general Christian penetration of all ranks of society<sup>6</sup>.

### **The Decline And Eventual Disappearance Of Some North African Churches**

Before the Arab invasion of Egypt, there was already a conflict between the Melchites and the Unionites (Copts), that is, the Duosites and the Monophysites. This conflict and division provided a fertile ground for Islamic penetration. The ruling Christian elite in Egypt- the Melchites- followed the Greek rather than the Coptic tradition, and many of the latter viewed the Arab invasion and overthrow of Byzantine rule as a lesser evil. It was this division between the Melchites and the Copts that accelerated the undermining of Christianity in Egypt. The Monophysite churches of Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia survived nearly 900 years

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.10

<sup>5</sup> Jedin, H. and Dolan, J. (eds), *History of the church*; Vol.II, p.387

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, 197 AD, Ad. Scap. 56

after the Arab invasion of North Africa. The pressure to conform to Islamic principles was enormous, and over the centuries there was a constant erosion of Christian communities. The Melchites became increasingly identified with the expatriate Greek community around Alexandria while the much more numerous Coptic Church withdrew into a ghetto which isolated itself more and more from external influences. While Egypt gradually became an Arab nation, the Coptic community clung to its identity and continued to use the Coptic language in their liturgy<sup>7</sup>.

The strength of the Coptic Church that has kept it surviving to this is her background. Dagin (2006) believes that they accepted the Gospel within the categories of what they already believed and knew. They were already having some quasi belief in the trinity, based on the Egyptian Osiris, Isis and Horus, so believing in the trinity was not something outside what they used to know. They maintained their originality and were only converted to Christianity using the Coptic language since they had no knowledge of the classical languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Thus, their resistance of the Islamic invasion was based on the fact that they had their faith interwoven in their language and tradition, giving it a nationalistic identity<sup>8</sup>.

Christianity in the Nubian church was completely wiped out. It is only through the effort of the world archeological community under the supervision of UNESCO from 1959-1969, that they discovered the long history of the Nubian Church. The archeological expeditions were carried out in no less than 59 sites. Extraordinary Christian cultures were found in ruins. They uncovered a church of unbaked bricks dating to a period of 543 AD. Along with this were found

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.4

<sup>8</sup> Sylvester Dagin, Lecture note on *African Church History*, St Augustine's Major Seminary, Unpublished material, 2006. pp.10-12

some pots, oil lamps with Christian cross and symbols showing the influence of early Christianity among the local poor<sup>9</sup>.

The main reason for the fall of the Nubian Church was because, when Julian the first missionary to Nubia arrived, he preached the Gospel to the king and aristocrats who became converted and were baptized. It was a bourgeoisie kind of religion, a court religion that concerned itself with the privileged class. The poor who constituted the majority, were merely carried along; they only had a superficial knowledge of the faith. This is contrary to the experience in the Egyptian church, which was founded on the commons. The church in Nubia was very superficial; it was a church with huge cathedral and impressive structures but with no people. The liturgical language that was used was a mixture of Greek and Coptic languages, owing to that fact that there was an imperial and Coptic influence on the Nubian church. Although excavated portraits show the existence of some Nubian clergy, they were very insignificant, almost all bishops and priests were foreigners. It was this superficiality in the Nubian church, coupled with other reasons that paved the way in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century for Islamic invasion.

Christian Ethiopia was also under intense pressure at the same time as Christianity was eclipsed in Nubia. By gaining control of the red Sea, the Arab colonists were able to direct commerce in and outs of the Axum, and this caused a Southward move of the Ethiopian power to the Amhara Plateau. Two world powers entered the scene and changed the picture dramatically. The Turkish Ottoman Empire extended its power down the Red Sea Coast and came into conflict with the Portuguese who had secured the East African Coast. The horn of Africa was the area of confrontation and Ethiopia was the prize. In 1542, a Portuguese expeditionary force intervened decisively in a war between Ethiopia and a Turkish backed Somali state and thereafter guaranteed the former's independence. Had the Portuguese arrived forty years later it would have been

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<sup>9</sup> Sylvester Dagin, Lecture note on *African Church History*, p.12

too late to save Ethiopia. Had they arrived forty years earlier they very probably would have saved christen Nubia. Such are the quirks of fate and history<sup>10</sup>.

The North African church was more of a foreign and Roman institution. Donatism was able to bring the local people, the Berber peasant, the lower classes and even some bishops together. Unfortunately, the Roman bishops condemned it as a dangerous innovation, a heresy. If it had survived, it would have turned out to be a rooted indigenous church like that of the Copts. With the invasion of the Arabs, the indigenous Berber actually resisted the Arabs, but they did it as nationalists than as Christians. They were largely successful in preserving their culture and language, but they embraced Islam quickly and were instrumental in extending the frontiers of Islam much further west and south<sup>11</sup>.

### **Lessons For The Churches In Africa**

The history of the Churches in North Africa reveals that the members of the clergy were living in urban centers with their bishops; the country side was visited sparingly. Their relationship with the lay faithful lacked the cordiality that should guide every relationship let alone to that which should guide the mystical body of Christ. There was a class distinction, stressed more than was required. The high level of materialism found among many priest in Africa could be paralleled to the experience in North Africa; there are also many priest who detest working in rural areas. There is also a high level of clericalism: a monopoly of the mission by the clergy which does not adequately integrate or promote the mission of the lay faithful. The churches in Africa need to work on this. Collaborative ministry between the clergy and the lay faithful must be emphasized, and the zeal to save souls where ever they may be found also need to be instilled in the minds of priests in the making.

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.6

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.10-16

The churches in North Africa were the first place that Latin was used in the Liturgy and also where the Holy Scriptures was translated in popular Latin of a remarkable kind. The North African church failed also to translate the scriptures into the local languages of the people, the Berber or the Phoenician languages. There was also no attempt to make use of elements of the native culture to create a North African national church which would then have survived the dominance of Islam. We know that most early missionaries were ignorant of African cultural values, which affected the sowing of the seed of the Gospel in Africa. As indigenous men and women of faith, we have a responsibility to make Christianity our own by inserting it into the categories our people can understand, and using what they already know from African culture to elucidate the Gospel. Of course, inculturation is widely practiced today in many African churches, it is even taught as a discipline in universities and seminaries. However, there is still much to be done. So many African languages are still waiting anxiously to embrace the scriptures.

We also know that part of the reasons for the decline and eventual fall of the North African church was the Donatist tragedy that stroke the flourishing church. It dissipated the internal energy of the church and weakened her evangelizing mission. The obstinacy of the Donatists kept, kept the schism active for more than a century. St Augustine wrote so much confronting the Donatism, which would have been more profitable had this energy been turned into other things that would bring new souls to God. This is not to say that St Augustine did not evangelize in his writings. In Africa, besides the Orthodox Churches, there are many Christian communities emanating from the division which occurred in Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is competition in initial proclamation, rivalry over schools, sitting of churches, and the presenting of candidates for public office. The Church in Africa needs to check this and bring it under control. The church today talks out ecumenism, and much progress has been done. There is need to put more effort, because some groups reject ecumenism for theological reasons of their own.

## **Conclusion**

The message of the North African experience for the future missionary work in Africa is as clear as a beacon. It must indigenize quickly if the church is to survive. The churches in Africa must be truly African, reflecting the people's particular culture. This is not in any way a suggestion of divergence from what is universally accepted in the Church. If the African does not worship God in his own way, there would erupt a crisis of faith, a crisis that hinges on the fact that the African does not find satisfaction and meaning in his expression of faith. This crisis is the result of a vacuum experienced in the African's worship of God, coming from the fact that there is something of himself or herself missing in what he or she should do with his or her whole being.

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