

Africa: A Troubled Continent (7)

The Cross and the Crescent in Africa

Long before Islam came on the scene, Africa had a Christian presence. Apart from Egypt, much of early Christian history focuses on the Roman province known as Africa which is now roughly modern Tunisia. Besides being strong in numbers, it was the home of the greatest leaders and theologians of the early church: Tertullian, the brilliant defender of the faith in the second century; Cyprian, the builder of the church in the third century; and Augustine, the great theologian in the fourth century. Under this great intellectual and spiritual giant, the church in North Africa, comprising some 500 dioceses, had a better educated clergy and greater ecclesiastical influence than the churches of Alexandria or Rome.

When the Arab Muslims invaded North Africa in the seventh century, the Christian church suffered great losses. Unfortunately, it had neither the will nor the power to resist. When the Arab conquest had been completed, Christianity had been reduced to a small part of its former state. There were no more than thirty or forty bishoprics at the end of the seventh century, and only a few remained at the end of the eleventh century. Thankfully, in modern times there has been a massive shift to the Christian faith. When so much of the West is in post-Christian mode, Africa may have more professing Christians than any other continent. The sheer size of this rapid church growth is a valid reason for taking seriously the significance of African Christianity.

The Roman Catholic Church made phenomenal gains. Thirty-seven percent of all baptisms are adults. Observers consider this figure an important gauge of the RC church's evangelistic efforts because it means that people are making a deliberate decision to convert from some other faith traditions.

In 1960 the College of Cardinals acquired its first African member, Tanzanian Laurian Rugambwa. In 2001 Pope John Paul II elevated two new cardinals from Africa. The Anglican Church is a real force. There are more Anglicans in Africa than anywhere else in the world. But the Christianity proclaimed in Africa is not welcomed by the Western media and mainline liberal churches. Modern African Christianity is evangelical. Some of the fastest growth has been in newer denominations, mainly Pentecostal. The infallible Scripture and the recognition of immediacy in personal spiritual experience are prominent features in African Christianity. The expansion of Christianity is not primarily the fruit of missionary endeavor; it has been sustained also by Africans and is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives. What made Christianity succeed was the networking effect as the Gospel was passed from individual to individual, family to family, village to village. Some scholars noted: "The new convert did not keep the discovery for individual consumption but took the message to others... Thus it was that the message could spread as rings on the water."

In his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Philip Jenkins predicts that the growth of Black spirituality will have powerful implications for the wider picture of world Christianity. He believes that not only will Africa itself be Christianity's spiritual center within a few decades, but hundreds of millions of other Christians in the Americas and the Caribbean will experience its impact.

The Spread of Islam

Although the Christian faith made rapid gains in Africa, Islam remains its greatest rival. Of the 45 countries that belong to the Organization of Islamic Conference, 23 are located in Africa. The massive spread of Islam can be attributed to three different factors: conquest by colonial powers, movement through conversion of non-Muslim population to Islam, and Muslim emigration to low Muslim density areas. The German, British and French colonial expansion tended to encourage the expansion of Islam. For example, the German colonial government did not allow missionaries to start work in strong Muslim areas. It believed that this might make Muslims angry and start a rebellion. France's colonial policies favored Islam. Some say that Islam made more progress in the 75 years of French dominion than in the nine previous centuries. The French colonial administration contributed to the strengthening of Islam in West Africa by organizing pilgrimages to Mecca, building mosques down to the village level, and depending on the aristocratic Muslim minorities in the towns and villages among whom they found competent administrators. The British often hindered Christian work. In Nigeria for example, the British enlisted the support of the Muslim chieftains; and in cooperation with the latter, the Muslims gained more following.

Islam is a political religion. It does not separate church and state. It divides the world into two realms: the Dar-al-Islam, and the remainder of the world defined as the Dar-al-Harb or abode of war. A general and lasting, universal peace is impossible until the Dar-al-Harb is no more, when the whole world has become the Dar al-Islam, a place within which submission (Islam) to God is the law of the land.

Islam from the start has been a religion of the sword. It spread through military force. The Koran and other statements of Muslims beliefs contain few prohibitions on violence, and the concept of nonviolence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice. Militant Islam has its roots in the teaching of the Koran on Jihad. Jihad is an Arabic term meaning "to strive and persevere in implementing God's law." The Koran, the Sunna and the Hadith all permit the use of force to implement God's law. It leaves scant toleration for Christians. It even treats the simple presence of Christians and Jews in dominantly Muslim societies as acts of aggression. Sheikh Abdullah Ghoshah, supreme judge of the Kingdom of Jordan, made this statement which was published by Islamic Research Academy following its conference in 1968: "Jihad is legislated in order to be the means of propagating Islam. Consequently non-Muslims ought to embrace Islam either willingly or through wisdom and good advice, or unwillingly through fight and jihad."

Militant Muslims are at war against all forms of government that do not claim allegiance to their understanding of Islam. Jihad appeared in North Africa as an ideology for resistance against colonialism, but in 1960 it was being used as a justification for terrorist attacks against Israel. Jihad does not only act against infidels, but also against Muslims who don't conform to Islamic precepts, such as the assassinated Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat.

Muslims are jostling for political power to help achieve religious supremacy in Africa. During the 1970s and 1980s oil rich Saudi Arabia spent billions of dollars supporting Muslim causes throughout the world, from building mosques, providing textbooks, to political parties, Islamist organizations, and terrorist movements, and was relatively indiscriminate in doing so. Some branches of Islam are now extensively engaged in social and humanitarian services, taking a leaf from the Christian missionary's book. For example, Nairobi, Kenya, boasts 50 mosques and 10 Islamic schools offering cheap education to Muslim converts. The schools also provide medical facilities, cultural centers and bookshops. Some observers claim that the churches have lost thousands to Islam. Islamist movements gained strength in Muslim dominated African states. Population growth in these states, and in particularly the expansion of the fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age category, provides recruits for fundamentalism, terrorism insurgency, and migration. The effects of these developments on the Christian community are brutal. Consequently, I believe the underlying problem for Africa is Islam. Muslims are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. Therefore, it is certainly correct to say that of all the non-Christians in Africa, the Muslims are the most difficult to win for Christ.

Crescent vs. the Cross

Islam creates great fear among African Christians when it is in control. Its resurgence has affected most aspects of society and politics in Muslim countries. It embraces efforts to institute Islamic law, Islamization of the curricula in regular state schools, and increased adherence to Islamic codes of behaviour, e.g. female covering and abstinence from alcohol. And for a Muslim to convert to Christianity is to become an apostate from the faith, a traitor to one's country, and a blasphemer.

Islam is anti-Christian by nature. It ridicules the doctrine of the Trinity, claiming it has no basis in the Koran, denies the deity of Jesus Christ, sees no need for a Savior, and teaches salvation through keeping the law. Muslims do regard themselves as enlightened because they claim to possess God's final revelation of His law. They look at the followers of other religions as living in stark ignorance. The gulf between Christianity and Islam is wide and deep.

Muslims fiercely oppose the growth of Christianity in Africa. Wherever there is a Muslim majority, Christians are suffering persecution in some form or another. The church in the Sudan, for example, is the victim of perhaps the most savage religious repression anywhere in the world. Her oppressors are Muslims. The Sudanese Christians have even integrated their suffering into their church's liturgy and daily practice, and produced

some moving literature in the process. ("Death has come to reveal the faith/It has begun with us and it will end with us.")

In Nigeria, 69-year-old Bitrus Manjang, vice-president of the Church of Christ, was murdered by Muslims on December 12, 2002, in his hometown about 30 miles from Jos. Also killed were his daughter-in law and six- year-old grandson. Pastor Manjang had retired as a senior pastor of his three-million-member denomination five years ago and was involved in translating the Bible into several Nigerian languages. In northern Cameroon Islam is strong and some officials have acted as though Islam is the state religion. They have opposed the work of the church in every way, closing many Christian schools and prohibiting worship in some areas. They have made life uncomfortable, if not difficult, for anyone who is not a Muslim.

No wonder that in Africa ordinary Christians are forced to ask why there is so much suffering and persecution. They repeatedly do so in the language of the Bible, following the example of the early church.

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