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AFROCENTRISM AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY AS AN AFRICAN RELIGION

A Positional Paper.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, the world believed that the earth was flat and that if you travelled too far you could fall off from it and be consumed by monsters. When Galileo and Copernicus championed the heliocentric view of the universe, arguing that it is the earth that revolved around the sun and not vice versa, previous astronomical beliefs were put to shame. Similarly, those of us who went to school before 2006 were thrown into total confusion when scientists announced that Pluto was not a real planet, after years of believing that it was the ninth planet as taught in our textbooks! These two scenarios are analogous to what this paper is all about. It presents what Paul Tillich (1948) would call a “shaking of the foundations”, only this time with regard to African scholarship on the history of the continent and especially how the relationship between Africa and the Christian faith has been dispensed.

Indeed, it is true that colonialism exploited the Christian missionary efforts and programs in Africa to foster imperial domination. As Jomo Kenyatta (1938) put it in his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, “When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.” The myth of white supremacy was even used by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa to teach the inferiority of the Africans. However, this Paper argues that that this portrait of Christianity as a tool of colonial domination is overstated and generalized to the point of misapplication. We argue with the Church sage, St. Augustine, that we should never judge a philosophy by its abuse. As a friend of mine, Dr. Reginald Oduor, observed during a discussion on this subject, one needed to distinguish between “European Christianity” and “Biblical Christianity,” the former being the chief culprit for colonization. Biblical Christianity, like that of Bishop Donal Lamont in Zimbabwe was even critical of white settler government. (Moyo, 2015)

Using Afrocentrism as a theoretical paradigm within the broader constructionist discourse, I wish to examine and suggest a possible resolution to a conflict in the debate that persists on the place of biblical Christianity in Africa’s cultures. I argue for its possibility as an African religion. We shall define Afrocentrism the same way (Asante, 1987) defines it: “the placing of African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour.” (Page 6). Within the wider social constructionist theory, we shall read Afrocentric discourse the way Darity Jr. (2003) and Hacking (1999) did, i.e. a social construction and not a racial or genetic distinction.

For many years, students across the African continent and beyond have been treated to the fact that Christianity is a Whiteman's religion brought to the continent by European imperialists in the 19th Century and that it is intrusive to the culture and civilization of the black people. Achebe (1958) in his "Things Fall Apart" and "Arrow of God" (1964) decries the misunderstanding of the Igbo culture and the attitude of the Western colonizers in pronouncing African culture as foolish and pagan. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe, through his character, Okonkwo, argues that everything was in order among the Igbo until the missionaries came, making their society to "fall apart."

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "The River Between" (1965), "Weep Not Child" (1964) and "A Grain of Wheat" (1972) present what seems an irreconcilable tension between African religious traditions and biblical Christianity, arguing that the Church was an intruder in a cohesive Kenyan society. Okot p'Bitek in "Song of Lawino" (1966) and "Song of Ocol" (1970), hails the superiority of African village life to European urban ways and in his book, "African Religions in Western Scholarship" (1979) decries the emptiness of Christianity, seeing it as inferior to traditional African religions.

There is also a peculiar prevailing definition of African traditional religions that assumes that Christianity cannot be counted among traditional religions of the continent. This view places the Christian presence on the African continent from the arrival of the Portuguese to the coastal areas of West, South and East Africa somewhere in the 15th Century. Most place this at the scramble and partition of the continent in the 19th Century, arguing that it is missionaries who set the stage for Africa's colonization. Even veteran scholars like Mbiti (1975, 1969); Parrinder (1954) and Idowu (1973) place a razor between what they call "traditional African religions" and Christianity.

On the other hand, there are a few but compelling voices that challenge the above view of Christianity as a Western religion. They argue that the Judeo-Christian faith has had a long contact with Africa right from the days of Abraham's sojourning in Egypt to the presence of African Christians from Libya, Tunisia and Egypt in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost as documented in the Book of Acts Chapter 2; hence putting the first converts to Christianity in Africa to less than two months after the ascension of Christ.

H. C. Felder (2017), in his article on whether Christianity is a white man's religion, argues that such a belief is based on an unsupported assumption that the Jews in the Bible were white.

James Orr (1915) in his “International Standard Bible Encyclopedia” adds that, for the Hebrews, the southernmost point of Africa was Cush or Ethiopia, which the Assyrians and Babylonians called Kusu and Meluhha, the latter regularly referred to in the Nile Valley documents as Meroe (found in present-day Sudan). Numerous scholars ignore or downplay the fact that Christianity has been on the African soil from as early as about 50 A.D., a fact evidenced through the Pentecost representation and the Old Testament contacts between Israel and countries such as Ethiopia and Egypt. Thomas Oden (2010) indicates that the Christian faith was brought to Alexandria, Egypt, by the Apostle Mark and propagated Northwards and Eastwards by early Church fathers.

A logical reading of the two views demands a closer look at the historical and documentary evidence available to unravel this conflict. Both positions cannot be true. If even a small body of historical evidence were to prove that Christianity has been on the African continent as early as claimed, then there is need to urgently reconstruct the discourse on the view of Christianity as a “white man’s religion”, as advanced in a majority of texts on African literature, history and theology.

This Paper sets out to present historical and theological evidence to the effect that Christianity is much more an African religion than it is Western and that what is viewed as a European, colonizing ideology was incubated, refined and debated in Africa before being exported to Rome, Antioch and the rest of the world. The paper argues for an urgent redefinition and the need for retraction by many scholars on the place of Christianity in African historiography, literature and theology on the matter. With increased interest in the restoration of African religions and traditions, intellectual hostility to the Church and a rising interest in Atheism and Agnosticism by many African students and professionals, the focus of this Paper becomes significant in that it seeks academic and literary restitution for the prevailing view that Christianity is foreign to Africa.

In order to engage the discussion, we will ask a number of questions. First, what is the role of Afrocentrism in shaping the debate on the relationship between Africa and the Christian faith, and how has this discourse been dispensed?

Secondly, what contribution have history and archaeology made in understanding the competing views on Afro-Christianity?

Thirdly, is there any biblical or theological evidence that supports Christianity as an African religion?

Fourthly, is there any evidence that African Christianity influenced the Western mindset? And lastly, what are the implications of a reconstructed view of Christianity as an African religion?

KEY WORDS

- Afrocentrism
- Historiography
- Afro-Christianity
- Western religion

1. AFROCENTRISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The term “Afrocentrism” was coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in the early 1960’s when he stated that his “Encyclopedia Africana” would be “unashamedly afro-centric in focus.” (Gale, 2006). Its emphasis is often the centrality of Africa in the history of people of black descent. Asante (1980, 1987) sees Afrocentricity as the placing of African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour. Asante’s definition does not imply the superiority of African history and culture, but sees these as a conceptual tool for understanding the history of people of African descent through their own lens. (Asante 1987; Gale 2006)

Some of the main concentrations of Afrocentric scholarship and rhetoric oscillate around Africa as the homeland of all blacks, the evils of colonialism, the beauty and endowment of Africa’s past and the aspect of unity among black people.

I wish to propose two ways to view Afrocentrism in African scholarship, judging by the way its proponents have utilized the term. Broadly speaking, we could say that we have “positive” or “objective” Afrocentrism, which promotes African strengths and achievements while at the same time admitting that Africa is an interdependent geo-social construct with clear points of weakness and failures. Usry and Keener (1996), Asante and Wilson Moses (1998) fall in this classification. The other is “negative” or “subjective” Afrocentrism, into which most of the

“Black power” movements with champions like Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Diop, Leonard Jeffries, and Malcolm X fall. A writer like George James (1954) with his “Stolen Legacy” theory promotes this view.

Most post-colonial publications by African writers champion this view mostly in reaction to Eurocentrism. This view holds that Africa is the source of all that is good and the mother of all civilization. As George James, cited above, categorically states at the beginning of his book, “The term Greek Philosophy ... is a misnomer for there is no such philosophy in existence,” and that the “so-called Greek Philosophy was based upon ideas and concepts which were borrowed without acknowledgement ... by a few wayward and dishonest Greeks from the ancient Egyptians.” This extreme is what Wilson Moses (1998) referred to as “Afrotopia.”

Leonard Jeffries, building on Diop’s minimization of the “white” community on the basis of climate even argued that whites whom he referred to as “iced” people, were biologically inferior to black “sun” people. His so-called “scientific” evidence was that the lack of melanin and their “underdeveloped genes” are as a result of the ice age making white’s cold, callous and selfish people. He said that the abundance of melanin in Africans results in creativity, communalism and love for humanity.

This Paper views this subjective approach to Afrocentrism as cheap and scientifically unsupported. Besides, whether one approached the origin of man from an evolutionary, theological or biological point of view, there is only one conclusion, that is, we are all one human race and the diversities are artificial, or at best environmental and sociological in nature, not substantial.

For our purpose, let us ask another question. What does it mean when we say something or someone is African? In most cases, it means that the person or thing originates or is domesticated on the African continent. It may also mean that someone or a community has a binding cultural loyalty that has its ethos grounded in the African society.

Right here there is a crucial need to distinguish between something being “traditional” in Africa and something being “indigenous” to the continent. Something is traditionally African if it finds home on the African soil. It does not have to have originated there. On the other hand, something is indigenously African if it was born, grown and experienced in Africa. For this reason, Christianity may not actually qualify as an indigenous African religion, because it was brought to

the continent. However, as a faith that had very early roots on the continent, it must be completely viewed as an African traditional religion.

In the Preface of their book titled “Black Man’s Religion” Usry and Keener (1996) entrench the notion of something being traditionally African by observing that members of the African or “black” community can identify themselves with one another on the basis of a common geographical origin (Africa), a common skin color (black), a common heritage of oppression and discrimination and A shared commitment to fight such oppression and discrimination.

From an Afrocentric perspective, the focus remains the quest for identity in the face of discrimination and degradation especially by the West. African identity in this context is not centered on racial distinctions, but it does not exclude discourse on it. African scholarship must be cognizant of this, but it, too, must be defined for proper application in our discussion. Briefly stated, African scholarship could generally mean one of two things; either scholarship engaged in by Africans, or intellectual reflections on the continent of Africa by both Africans and those from outside the continent.

The relationship between Christianity and Afrocentrism has, for the most part, been a volatile one, the common denominator being Afrocentric scholar’s view of Christianity as either unafrican or anti-African. I wish to propose a harmonized view of the two. Given the historical, archaeological and theological evidence we will share below, Africa and Christianity ought to be married into what I wish to call “Afro-Christianity”, by which I mean Christianity as an African faith occupying the same space and, in fact, towering over the many gods of Egypt, the many community gods and the “living dead” as espoused by J.S. Mbiti. Something is Afro-Christian if it is fully African and fully Christian. It is the celebration of the fullness of the Christian faith within an African context and the living of the African experience within the context of Christianity.

There is need for African writers to begin to explore this union that is here to stay. There is need to reconstruct both theology and Afrocentrism to reflect this convergence.

1.1 Four Approaches to African Scholarship

A close look at literature by those who have discoursed on the Continent’s relationship with the West reveals four approaches to the study of the relationship between the continent and Christianity. Let us look at the outworking of the four and how they differ from each other.

1.1.1 Stolen Legacies

This first approach is carried in works such as those by George James and Walter Rodney, who argue that the West is a product of stolen legacies and resources from Africa. James (1950) in his book “Stolen Legacy” argues that there is nothing like Greek philosophy. He says that what we know as Greek philosophy is actually Egyptian philosophy. Rodney (1988) on the other hand, argues in his book “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa” that Africa was robbed of her resources in order to develop Europe and leave her perpetually dependent on Europe.

Writing from a theological perspective, Dr. Thomas C. Oden (2010) supports this view by observing that it is North Africa that shaped the Christian mind of the West and that much of Western learning and civilization was incubated in Alexandria. He says that young Africans have the challenge of rediscovering the “textual riches of ancient African Christianity” and adds that this will necessitate a generation of African scholars that will reevaluate prejudicial assumptions that ignore or demean African intellectual history. (Oden 2010, 9)

1.1.2 Africa’s Past Seen as Non-existent

The second approach assumes that Africa had no history until Western civilization came to the continent. This approach is largely Eurocentric, promoting the view that Europeans are superior to Africans and that African history begins with the discoveries enabled by the exploratory journeys of Vasco Da Gama and established by the scramble and partition of the continent. As B. A. Ogot has observed, Africa’s history was viewed from the history of Europeans in Africa. (Ogot, 2005) (Page 71-78) It was erroneously believed that Africa had no history because history begins with writing and that writing was brought by the West.

This Paper argues that clear facts show the rampancy of writing in Africa as far back as the 4th millennium B.C., therefore implying that the West distorted history in order to present the picture that Africa was a dark continent in need of their civilizing mission. This was backed up by numerous prejudices masquerading as knowledge. This second approach is lethal in that it fueled negative Afrocentrism as well as the accompanying lie that Christianity was a Western religion. This Paper seeks to challenge this approach.

In addition, certain theological positions were developed, positing a hermeneutic founded on theories that presented Africans as cursed into racial inferiority and perpetual servitude to other races, especially that Africans were ordained to be subordinate to the Europeans.

Dan Rogers (2007) has written about several prevailing negative attitudes to the identity of the black person. What is disturbing about Rogers' information is that it uncovers a schematized myth that is given spiritual status. In his expose he identifies five views about the black person, sadly, from a biblical context. The first is **the Pre-Adamite view** whose propagators argue that black people belong to a race created before Adam and from whom Cain found his wife. By marrying one of these pre-Adamic peoples, Cain became the progenitor of all black people. Therefore, it was rationalized, black people, especially "Negroes," are not actually human, because they did not descend from Adam but from some pre-Adamic creation, having entered the human race only by intermarriage, and that with a notorious sinner. As non-humans, therefore, they did not have souls, but were merely beasts like any other beast of the field. And since the Bible says God gave humans dominion over the beasts, it was concluded that these soulless creatures exist to do work for the humans.

The second view is **the Cainite view** which argues that Cain was born white but that subsequent to his unacceptable sacrifice and killing his brother, he was turned black as punishment, and thereby became the progenitor of all black people. Some rabbinic *midrashim* from Babylon and Jerusalem claim that the smoke that came out of the unaccepted sacrifice turned Cain black.

Thirdly, **the Noahite (or old Hamite) view** traced to writings suggested in the Talmud and later adopted by Jewish and Christian interpreters suggests that Ham violated God's supposed prohibition against mating on the ark and was turned black as a consequence. Yet another teaching was that Ham and/or Canaan were turned black as a result of Noah's curse in [Genesis 9:24-27](#). God's curse on Canaan went to all of Canaan's descendants and the curse was, first, that they would all be turned black, and second, that they would be servants to white people.

Fourthly, **the New Hamite view**, a 19th-century view holds that Hamites were all white rather than black with the possible exception of Cush. Scholars, particularly in 19th century Germany, said that even if Cush were black in color, he must be regarded as a *Caucasoid* black because in their view, Negroes were not within the purview of the writers of the Bible. Even some modern biblical scholars hold this view. For example, Martin Noth, considered to be one of the most respected Old Testament scholars of all time, states on page 263 of his book *The Old Testament World* (Fortress, 1966) that the biblical writers knew nothing of any Negro people.

Lastly, **the Adamite view** is the orthodox Jewish, Christian and Islamic view. It is based (for Christians) on Acts 17:26 which states that God made all people from one original bloodline, or one source. I agree with Dan Rogers that this is the *only* view that is consistent with the true message of Scripture. Nevertheless, these other hideously distorted ideas have been promulgated, and some still have a degree of influence even today.

In this paper, I argue that it is not just wrong to systematically demean a group of people through the use of scholarship, it is worse when one employs the Bible or any scripture to undermine a community or social class. Racism, sectarianism, the Caste system and all forms of social abuse do not fit in any scholarship for the reason that the principles that inform such discourse are wrong. Thus, the Caste system in India, the Superman concept espoused by Adolf Hitler, the ideals of groups like the Ku Klux Klan are just as evil as propagations such as those of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa that used the Bible to fashion and promote apartheid.

What is even more perturbing is the apparent coincidence of colonization efforts from the mid 19th Century with the publication of Darwin's "Origin Of Species" which proposed a strong evolutionary process that implied the dominance of certain races through his principle of "natural selection" and especially his defense of "survival of the fittest", which Adolf Hitler adopted as a "scientific proof" for his "superman" idea.

It must be noted here that the West used social Darwinism to not only colonize but also plunder the rest of the world, chiefly Africa through the scramble for and partition of the continent. It was really about the superiority of Eurocentrism over Afrocentrism. Poets such as Rudyard Kipling (1899) advanced such superiority through the creation of slogans such as the "white man's burden" by which he meant the mandate white people had to colonize other nations in order to civilize them through industrialization. The poem in part reads:

“Take up the White Man's burden —

Send forth the best ye breed —

Go bind your sons to exile

To serve your captives' need;

To wait in heavy harness,

On fluttered folk and wild —

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child

Take up the White Man's burden —
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden —
The savage wars of peace —
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought. ...”

This superiority complex that advanced European imperial capitalism saw Africans and other non-Europeans as savages who needed the industrial revolution, the medicine and merchandise of the European traders. The view had been advanced in 1741 by Johann Heinrich Zedler. He wrote, “Even though Europe is the smallest of the world’s four continents, it has for various reasons a position that places it before all others. ... Its inhabitants have excellent customs, they are courteous and erudite in both sciences and crafts”.

In 1981, Eric Jones, viewing the developments in Europe from the 1500s onwards even coined another term, “European miracle.” This miracle, he said, included the European Renaissance, the age of discovery, the formation of empires the age of reason, the rise of capitalism and the growth of technology and industrialization which made Europe a world power by the 19th century. However, as Walter Rodney would argue, this only happened as a result of exploiting other kingdoms and populations around the world.

Space does not permit us here to discuss how this approach uses language to perpetuate hegemony. Rhetoric such as “civilized and uncivilized”, “advanced and backward”, “developed, developing and undeveloped”, “first world, second world and third world”, “dark”, “savage”, etc. Whether one is dealing with history, philosophy, literature, development studies, sociology or media studies, the packaging of this discourse ends up being hegemonic and is subject to debate. I argue for a rethinking of this misleading hermeneutic as well as challenge extreme Eurocentrism as well as Afrocentrism in their promotion of one group or geographical locus over another.

1.1.3 A Rejection of Westernism

This approach is that taken by most of the post-colonial writers from the African continent. They reject everything Western including the Christian faith espoused through missionary activities. These scholars view Christianity as an ideological tool intended to foster subjugation. Yet, these writers seem incapable of shaking off Christianity from their narratives. In his early writings, Ngugi wa Thiong’o does not seem capable of running away from biblical symbols, images and insinuations in the titles he gives his books, e.g. “Devil on the Cross”, “Weep Not Child”, “A Grain of Wheat”, etc. He does not even seem completely capable of disowning the Western civilization he sets out to castigate. For instance, in “The River Between”, he makes his main character, Waiyaki, advise the people to go to the white man’s schools but not to embrace his mannerisms and religion.

In his latter writings such as “Petals of Blood” (1977) and “I Will Marry When I Want” (1982) he reveals his strong Marxist view of society which includes a great hostility towards the Christian religion. He makes his main character, Gicaamba, in the latter book to convey his anti-religion stand by saying, “The white man wanted us to be drunk with religion while he in the meantime was mapping and grubbing our land. ... and he has the audacity to tell us earthly things are useless!” (Page 56-57).

This same wedge between Africa and Christianity is further developed in “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe who puts words in the mouths of the Umuofia village elders to say, “The white man does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his.”(Page 191)Achebe gives the reasons for rejecting Christianity as including missionary resistance to polygamy, the killing of twins at birth, the isolation of the Osu (outcasts) and, worst of all, opposition to the gods of the Igbo. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, says the missionaries viewed the Igbo gods as “false gods, gods of wood and stone.” (Page 145)

In order to exercise their tradition of hospitality to all, in order to remain kind to the missionaries, they give them land for their work in the “evil forest”, but it is clear Christianity was not accepted among the Igbo, according to Achebe. The elders of Mbanta make it clear in their proverbs that the white man was not welcome. Achebe says this through his character, Amenyonou, “A stranger who turns unbearably presumptuous and arrogantly insulting automatically forfeits his welcome.” (Page 148). The book argues that, as more and more Africans become Christians, things fall apart. Achebe’s character, Obierika, says, “The white man has won over our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (Page 176)

Muga (1975) in his book *African Response to Western Christian Religion* observes that the blanket condemnation of African customs and values such as polygamy and initiation ceremonies such as female circumcision, created a negative attitude to missionary work and to Christianity at large, leading to the formation of movements to resist Westernism.(page 100-101)This resistance came through violent resistance Kenya as seen in Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s books as well as publications by East African historians.

Achebe has another book titled *No Longer at Ease*. The title lends itself to the same conclusion in *Things Fall Apart*, i.e. that missionary entry into Africa destabilized the life of the people. Although missionary work and colonization of the people are two different things, they became inseparable because in the 19th Century they were done by the same person, the white man. Achebe symbolizes the ultimate rejection of the white man in Nigeria by the burning of the church that Mr. Brown, the missionary, had constructed. It is obvious that Achebe uses the name “Brown” for the missionary to symbolize efforts to accommodate some aspects of the local culture in order to establish the Christian faith in Nigeria, but the burning of the Church is

Achebe's literary means of saying that Christianity was a white man's religion no matter how much compromised. Burning symbolizes both destruction and rejection.

One however, cannot miss Achebe's point as a writer. He wants his readers to believe Christianity is a white man's religion through and through. Unfortunately, he also mentions that members of the Igbo society such as the OSU received the faith. He, however, adds the comment that the OSU, in this case, is considered weak. This is how the narrative of Christianity as a Western religion spreads in a continent where several Africans willingly received the faith and even died for it. Achebe's presentation of Christianity and colonialism as bedfellows has remained catastrophic to the proper view of missionary efforts to show that the teaching of Christ was not violent and that the love of God was accommodating to all, unlike many of the practices of traditional African societies.

Just like William Shakespeare would kill characters at the end of his plays to bring about the finale, Achebe introduces colonialism as a means to balance his rejection of Christianity and cover up for the human rights abuses practiced in Africa e.g. the killing of twins at birth and the exclusion of members such as the Osu from the society, things which Christianity was critical of. Missionarism, therefore, is not the automatic cause of things falling apart. The Umuofia society was already dissatisfied within itself.

In his book "African Religions in Western Scholarship", Okot P. bitek argues that the African view of religion is quite different from the Western and hence the rejection of Christianity because, as he saw it, the Western person did not understand this difference. Okot argued that religion among African people was not separated from their everyday living and, for that reason, there is no word for "religion" in many African languages. He said that to understand African religions you needed to just look at daily living involving work, rituals of birth, marriage and death, as well as interaction with the dead.

He rejected Christianity because the Westerners that brought it were blind to this and, therefore, concluded that Africans had no religion. This was the ground for their missionary and civilizing projects. Okot equated African religion to the "invisible man" whom Westerners could not see because they were so preoccupied with spreading their own. This same explanation is advanced by John S. Mbiti (1975) in his book on the African traditional religion. Again, these views have no room for Christianity as an African religion.

1.1.4 Christianity as an African Faith

The fourth view is what is proposed in this Paper as the ultimate answer to the fiendish relationship between Africa and Christianity. It is the view advanced by Thomas Oden, H.C. Felder, Glen Usry and Craig Keener and myself. We argue that Christianity is as much an African religion as it is Middle-Eastern, Asian, European or American. One point is singled out, though, that its theological development, doctrinal unity and its defense by hermitic lifestyles and even martyrdom are a preserve of its towering uniqueness as an African religion.

One thing must be clarified here, though. When I talk about Christianity as a religion, I anchor it in the Bible where it is presented as a relationship between God and man on God's terms. It is monotheistic, without numerous intermediaries as the case is in most African religions. There is only one God and one mediator between this God and man, Jesus Christ. (1Timothy 2:5-6) Since an apologetic for the uniqueness of Christianity is not our interest in this Paper, suffice it to reiterate the purpose of the discussion as correcting the common error that Christianity is non-African. I shall now proceed to prove my position by tabling several lines of evidence as a justification for my call for a reconstruction of the discourse. I want every skeptic to consider these arguments before dismissing my position.

2 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

We now turn to a body of indisputable evidence that confirms Christianity as an African religion. It is this evidence that demands urgent retraction by scholars who have insisted that Christianity is a white man's religion. It is this evidence that requires restitution for all the unwarranted hostility towards Afro-Christianity. In other words, if there is screaming historical and archaeological evidence that the Christian faith was deeply grounded on the African soil before the Islamic invasion of North Africa, why would anyone insist that the faith is Western? Again, when African scholars talk about "traditional African religions", how is it possible to ignore African Christianity which was more entrenched and widespread than the other regional religions of the continent? These are easy questions to answer, but I anticipate some hard decisions in view of the needed restitution. Let us outline this evidence beginning with one of the oldest civilizations in the world, i.e. Egypt.

2.1 Christian Egypt

Although there was a time the African status of Egypt was disputed, this was more a demonstration of anti-African sentiments than a geographical or historical reality.

Beginning with Archaeological evidence, the Salt Lake Tribune (Maffly,2010), published some revolutionary information which solidified a 1st Century Christian presence in Egypt. Although the research needs to be corroborated and tested, it points to some significant historical placement of Christianity in Africa as early as the 1st Century. By the edge of the Fayum Oasis, South of Cairo, at Fag El-Gamous (Way of the Water Buffalo), Brigham Young University researchers found a necropolis in which the dead were buried in layers alongside essential artifacts. The graves were layered on top of each other. The researchers identified a unique burial pattern for the period between 350 B.C. and 500 A.D. Archaeologist C. Wilfred Griggs, Professor of Ancient Scripture who had led excavations in Egypt since 1981, noticed that there was a drastic shift in burial patterns.

“All the burials we encountered were ‘head east’ burials”, observed Griggs, “But, when we got to the bottom of the shaft, we found them ‘head west.’” Having assessed the prevailing historical changes during this period, Professor Griggs concluded that the only major revolution that could explain this change was the entry of the Christian religion onto the Egyptian scene. He said:

“Right around the end of the first century, the burial started changing. Was there a mass migration or revolution? It probably resulted from a change of religion, and the only change of religion was the arrival of Christianity.”

Professor David Whitchurch, another Brigham Young University scholar involved in the excavations, has explained that according to early Christian beliefs, burial with the head facing west signified the belief that such a person would then rise facing east, believed to be the direction from which Jesus would appear on judgment day. On the other hand, someone buried with the head facing East would rise facing west, the direction Ancient Egyptians associated with death.

The research expeditions located 1700 graves which, besides the variation in burial positions, contained numerous artifacts positively identifying Christian iconography. This included crosses, fish symbols and figurines, commonly used to identify Early Church Christians. Unlike the common Egyptian mummification and embalming of the dead, the teams discovered a shift in

burial practices for the bodies facing west being wrapped in extensive linen, a pattern used to bury Jesus. They found terra cotta figurines depicting a maternal figure, probably Mary the mother of Jesus as well as amulets with crosses and wooden fish on necklaces. They also found wine amphorae and drinking cups, only with the burials with heads facing west, probably pointing to the celebration of the Eucharist by the gravesides, perhaps as a last rite.

Early Christianity in Egypt and the wider North Africa would be incomplete without a mention of the strong Christian presence and civilization out of Alexandria. From here, famous teachers like Athanasius debated Church doctrine and fought heretics such as Arius. It can be strongly argued that the purity of Christianity as we know it today was established and defended in North Africa from the Alexandrian school.

Being about 100 miles south of Alexandria, the Fayum digs are a strong piece of evidence for a strong and widespread practice of Christianity in the 1st century, given that Mark is credited with establishing a Church at Alexandria as early as 50 A.D. While the Coptic Church gained prominence during the rule of Constantine in the 4th century A.D., no one can dispute the elaborateness of the faith in Egypt. Tired of the Byzantine repression of the Monophysites, Egypt welcomed the Arab invaders in 641 A.D. The Arabs initially left the Christians alone to their religion, provided they paid a poll tax. Later, however, persecution of Christians broke out and the Arab invaders destroyed a lot of Coptic art especially in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Usry and Keener (1996)(Page 27) observe that Christianity spread in Egypt so strongly that it remained majorly Christian into the 10th century, and to the present, at least 10 percent of its population remains Christian.

Yet the strongest witness of Early African Christianity is the Alexandria patriarchate which influenced the spread of the faith, not just northwards into Europe but also Southwards into Nubia, Westwards into the Maghreb and South-Eastwards into Ethiopia.

2.2.Christian Ethiopia

One of the clearest sources of Ethiopian Christianity is the biblical record of “the Ethiopian Eunuch”, led to Christianity by the Apostle Philip as recorded in Acts chapter 8. Philip baptized him. When Philip met him, he was reading the fifty-third chapter of Prophet Isaiah and requested Philip to explain it to him. The implication is that his Christian belief came directly from the

Apostles and he carried it with him to Ethiopia where he served under Candace, the Queen. Usry and Keener (1996)

The same biblical tradition points to the link between Ethiopia and Israel as going back to the reign of King Solomon when the queen of Sheba visited and inquired many things of him.(1 Kings 10)The queen is said to have gone with a huge entourage and gifts to the King and confessed that she had heard of him in her country. Sheba is sometimes known as Saba or Seba and corresponds with modern-day Tigre and Eritrea, in the region of the old Kingdom of Meroe.

Ancient Abyssinia, (now Ethiopia) was a kingdom of mixed African and Arabian heritage and foreign invasions of Greek, Roman and Arab troops could not subdue it. (Usry and Keener 1996 Page 22)

Ethiopian Christianity first emerged in the Kingdom of Axum in the Northern corner of the Ethiopian highlands, introduced by Fermatas (known as Frumenties in Europe), who was described as a trader, philosopher and theologian. (The Story of Africa: BBC World Service) Fremantos made a big impression in Axum and became the tutor to King Ezana of Abyssinia. Fremnatos was then consecrated as Bishop of Axum in Alexandria. When the Kingdom of Axum collapsed, the centre of power moved eastwards.

Ezana converted to Christianity about 335 A.D. This period of Ezana's conversion is significant because it coincides roughly with the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. (Approximately twenty-three years before Ezana's conversion). Ezana also made Christianity the official religion of Ethiopia as an early East African state. The Ethiopian Church believed and practiced the same faith that was developed in Alexandria and Constantinople, hence held to the same doctrine elucidated by Tertullian and Athanasius among other Church fathers from upper North, Augustine of Hippo and the tenets of the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., Constantinople in 383 and the Council of Ephesus.

Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria in the *UNESCO General History of Africa Volume III* observes that Christian influence on Ethiopia also stemmed from the friendship between the court of Axum and the city of Constantinople and that there were significant commercial and cultural exchanges between the two. Eusebius in *Vita Constantin* mentioned that there were Ethiopians in Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Constantine. Apparently, King Zoskales as well as King Ezana spoke and wrote in Greek, indicating that the Greek language was used in the court at Axum.

Ethiopia maintained a close affiliation with Egyptian and Syrian Christianity, more as part of what was known as the Eastern Church. While most of the North African Church was heavily persecuted, the Ethiopian Church flourished and grew, uninterrupted to the present. In fact, between 335 and 370 A.D., the Ethiopian Church was so strong that it expanded and spread the faith right into Arabia. So strong was the Ethiopian Christian Empire that it was feared by the Muslim North. At one time Ethiopia threatened the North African Arab rulers that if they continued to persecute Christians they would divert the course of the Nile and turn Egypt into a desert. (Usry and Keener 1996 page 34)

Rodney in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* writes that the Ethiopian, Tigrean and Amharic ruling class was a proud one, tracing its descent to King Solomon and that the Ethiopian Emperor was addressed as “The conquering lion of the tribe of Judah, elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia, King of kings.” (Rodney 1988, Page 78)

The Zagwe dynasty which invaded and ruled Ethiopia from the 12th century A.D. claimed their descent from Moses. The Zagwe kings built several Churches cut out of solid rock. (Rodney 1988)(Page 79)

Ethiopia is one of the strongest African evidences that Christianity is not a Western religion. While the faith kept growing and dwindling in Europe, Ethiopia in East Africa remained Christian uninterrupted for many centuries. In fact, the solidness of Christianity should rather be measured against Ethiopia than Europe.

One major criticism can be levied against the Nubian and Ethiopian Churches, though. They were not missionary-minded when it came to spreading the faith southwards. They concentrated northwards and eastwards. Had they pushed Southwards, Africa would have been a Christian continent long before the coming of the Portuguese.

2.3 Christian Nubia

Nubia was located in what is now Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan, about two hundred years after the collapse of Meroe. (The Story of Africa: BBC World Service).K. Michalowski (1979) observes in the 2nd Volume of the *UNESCO General History of Africa* that the social structures and historical events of Nubia's early Christian period were shaped by two main factors, first, the decline of the kingdom of Meroe, which occupied Nubia from the third century B.C. to the third Century A.D., and secondly, the Romanization and then the Christianization of Egypt.

Michalowski adds that Nubia emerged after a long series of struggles between two groups, the Blemmyes, and the Nobades. The Nobades pushed the Blemmyes (sometimes referred to as the Bega or Buga) into the Eastern desert. The Polish excavations which were part of UNESCO's efforts to save the ancient monuments of Nubia confirmed when they got to the city of Faras that Pachoras was the capital of the Kingdom of the Nobades towards its last days. Pachoras housed the Nobades palace, which ended up being transformed into the first Nubian cathedral. In Arabic, Nobades is rendered as Nuba, from which we get the name Nubia.

Little is written about the presence of Christianity in Nubia. Even sadder is the fact that archaeological excavations in Africa have tended to favour the South, with Leakey laying their interest in early man in East Africa, thereby neglecting clear archaeological evidence for Christianity along the Nile Valley. Yet, it is the Christianity of Ethiopia and Nubia that remained the strongest force against the spread of Islam into Sub-Saharan Africa.

Christianity spread to Nubia downwards from Egypt. It was a difficult spread but once it was received, it became one of the long-lasting centres of the faith in Africa, besides Ethiopia. The Ballana rulers who practiced human sacrifice tolerated Christianity but did not fully accept it at first. In the 6th century, however, even the Ballana kings embraced the faith. (Usry and Keener 1996 page 29). One of the earliest monks in Nubian Christianity was a tall, black Christian called Father Moses.

Rodney (1988) tells us that Christianity was introduced onto the Middle Nile in the districts once ruled by the famous Kingdom of Cush which was also known as Meroe. He adds that, before the birth of Christ, Cush was a rival of Egypt and even managed to rule Egypt for a number of years. It is vital to note that there was no Roman influence in the spread of Christianity to Nubia. The Nubian kingdom was so powerful that it resisted Arab invasion and in 652 A.D. the Arabs who were bent on Islamizing the region gave up and signed a peace pact, Nubia being the only state in the region to do this. The only obligation the Arab Muslim conquerors gave the Nubians was an annual tribute of 360 slaves and the maintenance of a mosque in Nubia. This agreement remained in force for about 600 years with the Arabs giving Nubia wheat, barley and wine in exchange to make it look like a barter arrangement. (Usry and Keener, 1996) (Page 30)

It is recorded that in 715 A.D. when the Omani Arabs under Omar put out a full Jihad against Egypt, imprisoning the Patriarch and destroying churches or turning them into mosques, the Nubian kingdom of Makuria marched northwards with one hundred thousand troops to protect

Egypt. Since the Patriarchate of Egypt was considered the centre of Christianity on the continent, the attack was considered as an insult and a breach of the pact signed before with Nubia. The governor of Lower Egypt freed the patriarch and promised to leave the Christians and the churches alone. (Ibid page 32). Although the Arabs fought hard to conquer Nubia, they were repulsed because of the archery of the Nubian armies. One Islamic scholar, Al Baladhuri, said of the Nubian army:

"One day they arrayed themselves against us and were desirous to carry on the conflict with the sword. But they were too quick for us and shot their arrows, putting out our eyes. The eyes they put out numbered 150. We at last thought the best thing to do with such a people was to make peace."(The Story of Africa: BBC World Service)

It is helpful to realize that the conquering Arabs recognized Christianity, not only as a force to reckon with, but as an African religion associated with the black community of the South. Following the peace treaty, Nubia continued to flourish as a Christian state for nearly seven centuries. The two northern kingdoms of Nobadia and Makuria merged into one kingdom called Dongola, which then entered a golden age; even the Bible was translated from Greek into Nubian and beautiful churches were built throughout the Nile Valley.

Christianity continued to dominate Nubian culture for many years until the entry of Islam around the 14th century. The greatest evidence of Christian Nubia is the presence of large, red-bricked Churches and monasteries "which had murals and frescoes of fine quality." (Rodney 1988). The UNESCO excavations by the Polish scholars cited earlier led to the discovery under the Nobadean Palace a Christian Church made out of unbaked bricks that must have predated the end of the 5th century A.D. They also discovered Christian graveoil lamps as well as pottery decorated with the sign of the cross especially on Meinarti Island. Given the paintings on pottery and some of the walls of monasteries, it is clear that Nubia, as a descendant of Cush which was famous for her iron-smelting, was one of the greatest civilizations of Africa. The point is that, by about 500 A.D., there were people attending the large churches of brick and there were also devoted Christians who spent deep, reflective moments in African monasteries, perhaps growing and spreading the faith along the patristic traditions of Alexandria and Carthage.

The UNESCO expeditions determined that a Bishop called Paulos rebuilt the Faras Cathedral and decorated it with splendid murals. The Faras discoveries of 1961 to 1964 unearthed more

than 120 paintings in perfect condition, which included portraits of bishops whose dates of office are imprinted. The paintings resemble those found in several Churches discovered in other parts of Nubia. Most of these paintings followed Coptic art upper North in Egypt. Even today, the painting of Bishop Kyros of Faras can be found in the Khartoum Museum. Michalowski observes that in Faras, the Aristocracy and their Administrative officials spoke Greek as did the dignitaries of the Church and that the Christian clergy also understood Coptic, which was the language of many refugees. The Nubian language in writing appears after the middle of the 9th century A.D.

2.4 The Latter African Christian Age

This is characterized by the coming of the Portuguese to West, south and East Africa on their way to India for trade, the establishment of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the coming of European missionaries to the continent. Since this wave of Christian influence is not debated, suffice it to simply mention here that the Portuguese, British and German missionary efforts in bringing Christianity South of the Sahara finally completed the geographical spread of the faith to the continent. Africa is, thus, numerically more Christian than Europe and, given the increased tendency towards secularism and outright Atheism by many in Europe, Africa is probably the biggest host to the Christian faith.

3. AFRICA IN THE BIBLE

Our first premise in defending Christianity as an African religion is that there is an overwhelming reference to the continent and its people in the Bible. Again, a lot of the key events of the biblical account take place on the African continent. In fact, it could be argued that, throughout Scripture, God has his redemption story centred in Africa. Any African who rejects Christianity is not African enough. He is not patriotic and is, certainly, antithetic to history. God loves Africa just as He does other continents and people.

3.1 Africa and the Garden of Eden

Genesis, the book of beginnings, has Africa included in the description of the location of the Garden of Eden.

We read in chapter 2:10-14 as follows:

“Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. ¹¹The name of the first *is* Pishon; it *is* the one which skirts the whole land of Havilah, where *there is* gold. ¹²And the gold of that land *is* good. Bdellium and the onyx stone *are* there. ¹³The name of the second river *is* Gihon; it *is* the one which goes around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river *is* Hiddekel; it *is* the one which goes toward the east of Assyria. The fourth river *is* the Euphrates.”

While there are Bible translations that use the name “Ethiopia” in the place of Cush, all the geographical pointers of the land of Cush places it on the Eastern side of Africa. While Hiddekel is commonly associated with the Tigris, the Ethiopian reference places Africa right in the geography of Genesis 2. Geological studies may help us determine for sure where Eden was in view of the fact that the ice age and the drifting theories seem to point to a common land mass at one time. In any case, before the construction of the Suez Canal in 1859, Africa was connected to the Middle east and people travelled freely across from Egypt to Palestine. Besides, the biblical text indicates that the Lord “planted a garden in Eden”, thereby implying that Eden was larger and vaster than the garden.

3.2 Abraham in Egypt

As early as Genesis 12:10, we learn that when there was famine in the Middle East, it was natural for the Middle Eastern populations to travel south to Egypt for food and general sustenance. Even in Joseph’s days, the bible indicates that the Agriculture of Egypt was not just unique but well-organized with national policies in place for food storage even for as many as seven to ten years ahead of time. It is no secret that the reason for this abundance was the Nile River, whose source is Lake Victoria in East Africa. When the rains failed and it was all dry, the Nile still provided nurture for millions. It is no accident that god created the Nile to sustain not just the people of Africa but foreigners who were in need.

From the history of the Near Eastern peoples and from the biblical record in Genesis 14 which presents Abraham as a wealthy and influential community leader who even travelled with hundreds of soldiers and conquered other communities, it is quite unlikely to imagine only Abraham and Sarah journeying through the harsh desert toward Egypt. He must have arrived in Egypt with several men and women, and certainly with livestock as Genesis 13 records he had so

many that a disagreement ensued between him and his nephew, Lot, over grazing rights. In a nutshell, Egypt took care of Abraham's team and prevented them from extinction. It is calculated that Abraham got to Egypt between the 11th and 13th dynasties.) Speaker's Commentary, vol. i. p. 447, col. D).

It is also noteworthy that Abraham had children with Hagar and Keturah who were Hamitic. The Hamitic stock is African.

3.3 Joseph, the African Ruler

Although it is clear that Joseph was the eleventh child of Jacob, born to Rachel alongside Benjamin, the bulk of Joseph's life was spent in Egypt. Having been sold as a slave there by his brothers born of Leah, his step mother, Joseph served at Potiphar's house and when the time came to marry, he loved and betrothed an Egyptian woman known as Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara, priest of a place called On in Egypt (about ten miles north of modern Cairo). Potiphara is said to have been a Seer, and it is no accident that Joseph was given Asenath as a gift for interpreting a dream, something reserved for Seers. (See Genesis 41:45). This implies that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were African by blood.

Moses married Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, priest of Midian. The Midianites were descended from the line of Keturah, Abraham's concubine who was a Cushite. We know that both Aaron, Moses' brother and Miriam, sister of Moses were not happy about this marriage and Miriam disputed with Moses over it. Strangely, according to this narrative found in Numbers 12, God punishes Miriam with leprosy, a skin disease, as judgment against her discrimination of others on the basis of skin colour.

3.4 The Queen of Sheba Visits Solomon

Because of the significance of this passage in our study, we shall cite it here at length. Note that in the early days it was possible to travel from Africa to Israel without any water body restrictions. We read in 1 Kings 10:1-14:

“When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.² Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious

stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind.³ Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.

⁴ When the queen of Sheba saw all the Wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, ⁵ the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed.” She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true.⁷ But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard.⁸ How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!⁹ Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.”

¹⁰ And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.¹¹ (Hiram’s ships brought gold from Ophir; and from there they brought great cargoes of almugwood and precious stones.¹² The king used the almugwood to make supports for the temple of the LORD and for the royal palace, and to make harps and lyres for the musicians. So much almugwood has never been imported or seen since that day.¹³ King Solomon gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country.”

3.5 The Rescue of Jeremiah

There is an interesting incident in Jeremiah Chapter 38 where some people in Israel do not like the prophecy Jeremiah was giving and so incite him before King Zedekiah. Jeremiah was thrown into the Cistern of Malkijah as punishment. Verses 7 to 13 of the chapter narrate how a Cushite official known as Ebed-Melek went before the king to plead Jeremiah’s case and organized ropes to pull him out with the help of about thirty men.

3.6 Jesus in Egypt

In the New Testament, there is also a lot documented about Africa. In Matthew chapter 2 we read of the birth of Jesus and Herod's anger against any possible competition and challenge to his throne, real or imagined. When he plotted the death of Jesus by instigating the massacre of all baby boys two years and under, the Bible says that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, Mary's husband, and told him to take the baby and his mother and flee to Egypt for safety. (Matthew 2:13). Verses 14 and 15 state, "*So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."* (A prophecy given in Hosea 4:11). There is no indication as to how long Joseph, Mary and their child, Jesus, stayed in Egypt. Evidently it was not a few days. They stayed in Africa until Herod died. In a nutshell, Egypt was not just a place of refuge for Abraham's family and his grandson Jacob, his family and descendants,

But for the founder of Christianity, Jesus Himself, one could argue that the biblical story is incomplete if you take Africa out of the narrative.

3.7 Simon of Cyrene

Simon, who helped Jesus to carry the cross on His way to crucifixion when it became so heavy, was from Cyrene which is located in North Africa, modern-day Libya. Cyrene was settled by Greeks in 630 B.C. but was also settled by a significant number of Jews. Many of them returned to Israel and became part of what is termed in Acts 6 as "the synagogue of the freedmen." (Acts 6:9). Dr. John MacArthur gives us a detailed account of Simon and the city of Cyrene in his book "The Murder of Jesus" (MacArthur 2004). He had children called Alexander and Rufus. According to Acts 13, he went to Antioch to help with the Church there and was nicknamed "Niger" which means "black" in Greek.

3.8 The Day of Pentecost

We conclude our survey of the biblical presentation of Africa by citing two important accounts in the book of Acts, the population that was in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the crowd gathered heard the disciples speaking in their own mother tongues, and the conversion of

the Ethiopian Eunuch. First, let's look at Pentecost. Note that those gathered at Pentecost included people from Africa. We read in Acts 2:

“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

3.9 The Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch

Lastly, in Acts 8 we read of Philip's encounter of a man described to have been in the service of Candace, another African queen:

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandace (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ As

they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”³⁷ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.”

Note that the Eunuch was an important official who managed the treasury of the Ethiopian kingdom. He was going up to Jerusalem to worship. It is vital to note that as early as this period Ethiopia and Israel were connected in religion. This is before the Suez Canal was dug and so one could drive chariots easily between Africa and Israel.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Africa’s Christianity heavily influenced Europe, the Middle East and Asia. While the Arab invasion of North Africa brought a new religion and civilization to the continent, it is the early Christians of North Africa as well as the towering civilization of Egypt and the Nile Valley that shaped the ideas and consequent practices of the then world.

4.1 The Influence of The Early Fathers

Any reader of Early Church history often comes across various names of Church fathers who preached, wrote, debated or even died for the faith. The interesting thing about these names is that most of them lived in or operated from North Africa. These include but are not limited to Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Anthony and Augustine. Even the greatest of those the fathers debated came from North Africa. A good example is Arius who came from Libya. Arius is the one whose doctrines led the fathers to call the council of Nicea in 325 to discuss doctrine.

It is interesting to note that these fathers of the Church, coming from Africa, were sought after as teachers of rhetoric and faith in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean areas of Asia Minor as far

as modern day Turkey, in Church settings and in palaces. Origen was sought after to teach in Caesarea. Augustine was called to teach Rhetoric in Milan, Italy, because he was a master at it. Lactantius was called by Emperor Diocletian (245-313 A.D) to teach literature in his palace in Bythinia, Asia. The same can be said of Plotinus, Marius, Tertullian, Valentinus, Pachomius and Victorinus. Africans, this early, were instructing the best of Northern teachers and leaders in Syriac, Latin, Greek, etc. It is no wonder that soon, even the very interpretation of scripture and doctrine was shaped in North Africa.

Many African high school and college students are regularly bombarded with a history that shows the superiority of the Northern brains to the Southern. Even archaeological texts unashamedly float the racist and demeaning conclusion that the more North you dig, the bigger the brain. The fossils found in Europe are supposedly of more developed early man than those dug from, say, the Olduvai Gorge or Turkana. It is no wonder that Darwin's *Origin of Species* (by means of natural selection) in 1859 was shortly followed by aggressive imperialism. Despite the absurdity of macro-evolution, all the textbooks teach it as fact. No wonder Hitler used the theory to teach that the Germans were superior to other races and that they should not intermarry with the "inferior" races.

4.2 Africa's Influence on Greece

It is a pity to watch and listen to scholars from the African continent call North African ideas and concepts "Graeco-Roman" or "Judeo-Christian", completely shying away from or openly neglecting their Africanness. Even African scholars trained in the West continue to undermine this early influence and talk of Africa as devoid of intellectuals. My explanation for this is that once we say Christianity is Western, we rob ourselves of an entire intellectual tradition that was sought after and which shaped the world as we know it today.

In his *Stolen Legacy*, George James laments this distortion and boldly argues for a rethinking of what we know as Western today. For instance, in his first chapter, he argues that, not only is Greek philosophy stolen Egyptian philosophy, but that the teaching of Egyptian mysteries "reached other lands centuries before it reached Athens." (page 5). He further argues that; the authorship of the individual doctrines is extremely doubtful; the chronology of Greek philosophers is mere speculation and the compilation of the history of Greek philosophy was the plan of Aristotle executed by his school.

He adds in chapter 2 that the period of Greek philosophy (640 to 322 B.C.) was a period of internal and external wars and hence quite unsuitable for the production of philosophers and their lofty philosophies.

It is interesting to note that in his Chapter 3, dealing with pre-Socratic philosophers and the teachings ascribed to them, George James records that the doctrines of the early Ionic, the Eleatic and the later Ionic philosophers and Pythagoras are traceable to their Egyptian origin. Similarly, the doctrine of the Four Qualities and Four Elements are to be traced back to Egypt. In Part (c) of the chapter he shows Plagiarism as a common practice among the Greek philosophers who borrowed from one another but chiefly from Pythagoras who obtained his ideas from the Egyptians. Lastly, he addresses the doctrine of the Atom by Democritus and traces it to its Egyptian origin, citing also Democritus' large number of books as containing nothing new.

4.3 Africa's Shaping of the Western Mind

Thomas C. Oden (2010) in *How Africa Shaped the Western Mind* to a great extent agrees with *George James*. He discusses key ways in which Africa influenced not just the West, but the world at large. First, he argues that the African desert gave rise to worldwide monasticism (see page 52). Secondly, that Neoplatonism emerged and developed in Africa. (see page 55). Thirdly, he says that rhetorical and dialectic skills were sharpened in Africa and then exported to Europe for Western use. (see page 56).

Oden identifies seven key areas in which Africa shaped the Western mind. First, he says that the birth of the European university was anticipated and developed in Africa. Secondly, the Christian historical and spiritual exegesis of Scripture first matured in Africa. Thirdly, African thinkers shaped the very core of early Christian dogma. Fourthly, early ecumenical decisions followed African conciliar patterns. Fifthly, Africa shaped Western spiritual formation through monastic discipline. Sixthly, Neo-platonic philosophy of late antiquity moved from Africa to Europe. Lastly, influential literary and dialectical skills were developed in Africa.

We must reiterate here that this paper does not assume lack of contribution to Africa by other civilizations from Asia or even Europe. Instead, it argues that Africa's contribution has been undervalued, distorted and largely ignored by both African and Western scholars. Just like *Oden*, I call for a revitalized interest by African scholars in particular in the above issues. The issues must be further investigated and elucidated. Conclusions must be made on the basis of objective

scholarship that will allow the contribution of Africa, and especially the early African Church, to be seen for what it is and given due credit as well as its place in academic research.

5. WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I wish to bring my arguments in this Paper to a close by appealing for the reconstruction of discourse by various disciplines on the question of what I will call the “Africanness” of Christianity. I propose that this commences with Africa’s post-colonial literature, then history, then religion, then philosophy and finally the media- especially investigative journalism, the film industry as well as media research. Both African and Western scholars who have written about the social culture of Africa have missed and, in turn, misled generations on the status of Christianity as an African religion. What can be done to restore both the dignity of African scholarship on the matter and to rescue generations before us who have lived under the opium of viewing Christianity as a Western religion?

5.1 Dissociating Christianity from Colonialism

Beginning with post-colonial literature, Seyed Marandi and Reyhaneh Shadpour (2011) correctly observe that the colonial situation in Africa had a profound influence on the life and education of most post-colonial writers, and it became the preoccupation of their novels. (page 48). Sadly, this zeal seemed to serve political expediency while neglecting crucial intellectual concerns. This political role of mobilizing a wholesale rejection of anything Western because of the pain of the colonial past was detrimental to African scholarship in that it “threw out the baby and the birth water.”

Christianity was judged by post-colonial African literature as being guilty and then sentenced to foreign status. African university students began to throw away European names considering them Christian and some refused to go to Church anymore, preferring to be irreligious or at best “traditional” in orientation. Authors like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Okot P.Bitek began to write their works in their native tongues, Ngugi in his Gikuyu language and Okot P.Bitek in some of his poems wrote in Acholi.

After reading the works of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, Chinua Achebe was deeply perturbed by how they represented Africa and Africans in their writings. He thus began to develop counter positions in his novels. He tried to reconstruct an Africa that was real to the

African. This is where his zeal and that of many post-colonial writers redefined Afrocentrism to mean that Africa was at the centre of every interpretation of reality and that anything associated with colonialism had to be dropped. This is what made Christianity become unafrikan through association with colonialism.

Having demonstrated the early presence of Christianity on the continent, eighteen centuries before the arrival of Africa's colonial masters, it is fitting to propose a dissociation of the two. Besides, not all non-Africans supported the imperial madness and exploitation of Africa and its people. A good example is British politician William Wilberforce who fought for the abolition of slave trade and slavery until his death. In his essay titled *The Novelist as Teacher*, Chinua Achebe (2007) says that the novelist must play the duty of educating his readers. He says that the novelist must teach his readers about his society and what is needed to avoid or resist colonial power. This, for many, meant that if the novelist demonstrated that Christianity was responsible for the collapse of the African society, then it should be avoided.

This is the same view held by Ngugi especially in his latter publications like *Petals of Blood* in which he completely swung towards Marxism. But Marxism was not African either. This is the same challenge Julius Nyerere encountered in his advancement of the "Ujamaa" African socialist philosophy. Decolonization meant being free from Western colonialism. Any other philosophy was accommodated and, because of this gap in defining ideology by the African writers, neocolonialism came in easily because colonialism was associated with colour, not reality per se.

5.2 The Need for a Proper African Historiography

Secondly, there is the problem of good versus bad historiography concerning Africa. Many historians have tended to reduce the sources of African history to one, i.e. oral. This is bad historiography or, at best, inconclusive. It neglects the multitude of documentary sources across the continent as well as the vast array of material culture present both in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. There are cave paintings, murals, pottery, frescoes, clothing, stone tools, pyramids and other evidences of solid historical references.

Instead of writing Africa's history from antiquity, most historians are content with narratives that go back only as far as the Bantu migrations from Central Africa and the movement of the Nilotes from Egypt. They do not probe beyond the sources of these migrations and hence limit Africa's history to about five centuries. This is how Christianity, which was prevalent in Africa right from the 1st Century, gets expunged from African history.

The archaeology of Africa must not only look for the origin of man, but engage critical gaps in Africa's history, e.g. the early occurrences of the Nile Valley. It took UNESCO to come up with a comprehensive general history of Africa, complete with expeditions to preserve the dying cultures of Africa. Again, scholars like Cheikh Diop, J. Kizerbo and Bethuel Ogot, deserve more honour than has been given them, for the amount of work they have done in this area. Without the UNESCO project which these and many other scholars contributed to, we would be in the dark regarding aspects such as the early Nile Valley history, or else we would still be reading it from a distorted Western perspective. Their efforts have made me conclude that a good chunk of Afrocentric scholarship has missed the mark in its zeal to be African without Christianity as a religion that dominated Early Africa and continues to do so to this day.

5.3 The Reconstruction of Christianity as an African Religion

Thirdly, we turn to some religious considerations. Although certain western writers have missed the mark by equally putting a wedge between Christianity and traditional African religions which they see as pagan, Afrocentric scholars have ended up doing exactly the same thing. While Western scholars create this dichotomy in order to elevate Christianity, Afrocentric scholars do it to elevate African religions above Christianity. The end result is the same. Despite the zeal of Christian missionaries to proselytize the populations of Africa, they, too, missed the fact of Africa as the seedbed of Western Christianity and championed the notion that they were bringing the faith to Africa for the first time.

These Western missionaries not only viewed Africans as pagan and in need of conversion, but tended to equate Western civilization and culture with Christianity. They saw Africa as a "dark" continent in need of salvation and enlightenment. The difference between these missionaries and the African scholars who view Christianity as non-African is that while the latter argued for the superiority of non-Christian African religions, the former viewed the West as being superior in both social culture as well as mental capacity. This must be reconstructed.

Another important consideration is for the African Church itself. It is evident that the numerical growth of the Church worldwide tends to lean South of the Equator. Philip Jenkins (2002) in his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, has some important discussions pointing to the fact that the world is moving towards Africa, Asia and Latin America becoming the combined mass centre of world Christianity.

Jenkins is intrigued by the possible results of the many poor populations in these regions embracing the faith and especially how they naturally respond to prosperity preaching. This spread is interesting in view of the South having previously been neglected in the spread of early Christianity. David Barrett, the author of *World Christian Encyclopedia*, presented a similar picture but even went ahead to estimate that the global South was having approximately 3000 converts to Christianity daily. The implication is that Christianity is not just an African religion but a global faith to reckon with, spanning nearly two millennia. More importantly, however, is the need for the church in Africa to re-embrace the patristic fire of articulating Christianity especially in a world that has perfected both indifference and outright opposition to the Gospel message and Christian foundations in general. The Church owes posterity the fervor and clarity of doctrine developed by the fathers of the Church who lived and taught in Alexandria and Carthage.

Thomas C. Oden (2010) has made some moving observations that the Church in Africa needs to pay attention to. He says that Christians of the Global South have had far less opportunity to appreciate or even learn about their history than have Western Christians. He says that this is particularly the case for Africa. Oden concludes that “*the remedy is better historical inquiry, not slipshod history or the ideologically charged tweaking of historical evidence.*” He adds:

“All Christians on the continent of Africa have a birthright that awaits their discovery. But in subtle ways they seem to have been barred access to it as a result of longstanding preconceived notions and biases. So their heritage has remained sadly unnoticed, even in Africa. ... tragically many African scholars and church leaders also have ignored their earliest African Christian ancestors. Some have been so intent on condemning nineteenth-century colonialist missionary history that they have hardly glimpsed their own momentous premodern patristic African intellectual heritage.”

Once the African Church arises to this opportunity, it will take up its position in articulating a faith that is indigenous to the continent and research is bound to vindicate this forgotten heritage.

One more question needs attention with regard to the religious response to our inquiry. Most African scholars who discuss traditional African religions concentrate on Sub-Saharan Africa and completely black out the religions of Egypt, the Maghreb and the Nile Valley in ancient Nubia. Besides, it is stated again and again that these religious traditions are transmitted orally. Once the religions north of the Sahara are factored in, though, one realizes a strong written

tradition. Time has come for African scholars to take the North a little more seriously than the case has been. This would automatically lead to the conclusion that Christianity is one of the best documented of Africa's religions which does not rely on oral passage but on numerous written records. This must be revisited in African scholarship.

5.4 Towards a Proper Philosophy of Afro-Christian Thinking

Fourthly, a new philosophy of history is needed to save African scholarship from the fallacies of hasty generalization and the building of a "straw man". Having articulated an anti-Christian philosophy that reduces a faith to a political ideology, scholars have been beating a non-existent entity. Not only does history vindicate Afro-Christianity, but if religion has got to do with man's quest for the supernatural, then the Yoruba religions and the faith of Mount Kenya are not any nobler than Christianity in Africanness and in this kind of quest.

If Christianity was viewed colonial from pure hegemonic considerations, then what would one say of Islam which, unlike Christianity, converts through the sword? Then again, something is African if it is of Africa. Such is Christianity. Engaging in counter-discourse must include coherent and non-contradictory grounds. The African writers must exonerate themselves from incoherence and the myopia of writing in one African language to prove the universality of their message. They cannot challenge hegemony by condemning Eurocentrism and then replacing it with Afrocentrism or even Marxism.

5.5 The Role of the Media in Retelling the Story of Early African Christianity

Fifthly, Africa's media needs to do more to enable and facilitate the retelling of early African Christianity. The Nile Valley is full of great untold stories and inquiries that can form part of great investigative journalism. Early Egypt, Ethiopia, Cush, Nubia, Meroe, Axum, Carthage, etc can keep documentary journalists busy for many years. Besides, Africa's media needs to complement African writers in expanding the repertoire as well as the genres of story-telling from Africa's past by going beyond the animal and ogre stories of four hundred years or so in African folklore and give our children something new and fresh from the continent.

Indeed, Early Christianity in Africa is full of towering figures such as monks, martyrs, craftsmen, kings, travelers, warlords, love stories and inventions that can transform our folklore radically and refresh posterity with real history. Whole films could be made on Axumite kings like Ezana and his interactions with Frumentius, the Nubian resistance of Arab invasions as well as the visit

to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. In an African media environment saturated by Hollywood, Nollywood and Bollywood, the reigniting of passion about Africa's past will encourage reality movies that will retell the migration of the bantu, Nilotes and Cushites into their current settlements as well as how the pyramids or the Great Zimbabwe stone monuments were made.

We would move from reading the historical narrations by William Ochieng, aliMazrui and Bethuel Ogot and enter a media age dominated by a retelling of these histories for our children and posterity, by our own African media practitioners. Even Muslim children would benefit from accounts and dramatizations of occurrences and personalities that the media knows little or nothing about and such media efforts are bound to benefit even Western audiences. Entire research projects by communication and media scholars can be launched on communication and language themes in Early Africa. The impact of the Coptic language on populations especially as a common man's language, pitted against Greek and Latin which dominated monasteries and palaces, complete with studies in early hegemonic manifestations would make interesting media research.

6. CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing discussion, we must make some tough but important decisions. In the name of objectivity and good conscience, I appeal for their admission of Christianity into the pantheon of Africa's religions by virtue of historical, archaeological theological and logical evidence. It may look hard to do, but I beseech for a chain of retractions by a good number of African writers who got us into this mess by elevating political expediency over intellectual honesty.

Failure to publish such retractions will leave these writers exactly where the European writers were many years ago when they told us that South Africa's history began with the arrival of Jan van Riebeck and that a couple of Europeans were the first to determine the source of the Nile. While some books may have to be allowed to go out of print or serve as relics of such mistakes, those that cover these distortions only in part may need a revision leading to the issuance of new editions.

Time has come for a new crop of scholars who will rewrite the history of Africa and expand the archaeological mission to include the preservation of dying cultures of early Africa. More funds must be committed to research in the area of Africa's past. The African Union in particular must commit more funds and engage deliberation on the preservation of Africa's history and drive the UNESCO project to its ultimate conclusion.

Lastly, both Christian as well as liberal arts colleges must of necessity take a keener look at this discussion and craft college courses that elucidate this matter. Symposia as well as seminars on Early Christianity in Africa must be held urgently to correct prevailing scholarship on Afro-Christianity. An interdisciplinary approach to the discussion pulling together departments of history, geography, archaeology, geology, literature, theology and religious studies must collaborate in a more concerted research effort to fill in missing gaps in African scholarship.

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