



## Early African Christianity–A Thematic Analysis

Aidan Kwame Ahaligah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

### ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to a thematic analysis of early or ancient African Christianity and its influence on ecclesial practices and thinking in contemporary Africa. Drawing on literature in the history of the church in antiquity this paper re-tells the story of how Africa and Africans in the first millennium developed and shaped World Christianity. Specifically, it discusses the contributions made to the early Church by the African Fathers of the faith, Origen and Augustine. The paper contests sentiments and perceptions that Christianity is a “white mans” religion and to reclaim African Christianity’s identity as a global religious culture which has existed since antiquity. Moreover, it argues that a lot is lost, with its attendant misinterpretations, when Christianity in Africa is only viewed as a result of the fruits of the nineteenth-century missionary activities. The paper contributes to the study of African Church history, the contextualisation/inculturation of the gospel, and African theology.

Correspondence:

Aidan Kwame Ahaligah

Email: akahaligah@yahoo.com

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### INTRODUCTION

By early Africa, this Author is referring, primarily to the Roman province know as Africa Proconsularis, but he secondarily includes the entire region of North Africa west of Aegyptus (Egypt). It is here argued that the early African Christians were not only African in a categorical sense...[B]ut also because the ancient Christians themselves embraced a self-identity as Africans.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of Africa’s contribution to theology and praxis of early or ancient Christianity has too often been subsumed or eclipsed by larger narratives of the West. Even though church history acknowledges Fathers of the faith such as Augustine, Origen and Cyprian among others, few scholars treat them as Africans.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, African Christianity is often related to the nineteenth century missionary enterprise which unwittingly has led to the perception that it is a Western or “white mans” religion. This paper contributes to attempts by scholars such as Lamin Sanneh, Thomas Oden, Kwame Bediako, Benezet Bujo among others to recover the story of Christianity in Africa.<sup>4</sup> This author argues that the study of the proliferation of contemporary African Christianity should be done with recourse to the history and intellectual depth of the African church in antiquity.

Sanneh has expressed the importance of the history of African Christianity in antiquity in enhancing the understanding of contemporary African Christianity. He also conveys the value it necessitates for understanding World Christianity in the following words; “There is the need also to treat African Christianity as a legitimate tributary of the general stream of Christian history. The North African Church of the early centuries, the Coptic Church of Egypt as well as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should all be seen as manifestations of the on-going history of Christianity on the

<sup>2</sup> David E. Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: Maryknoll, 1983); Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); James Tengatenga, “Early African Christianity” in *Anthology of African Christianity*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, Chammah Kaunda and Kennedy Owino (Oxford: Regnum, 2016).

continent”<sup>5</sup>

Understanding the development and nature of Christianity in early North Africa is crucial to understanding of current developments in Christianity, especially in Africa South of the Sahara. Thomas Oden has reiterated this point succinctly, when he argues that recent happenings on the Christian scene in Africa should be grounded in the historical consciousness of African Christianity in antiquity. According to Oden,

[t]he rising charismatic and Pentecostal energies in Africa are stronger emotively than intellectually. They may not sufficiently sustain African Christians through the Islamic challenge unless fortified by rigorous apologetics. The challenge must be met with intellectual integrity grounded in historical consciousness. Christians of Sub-Saharan Africa are being required to learn how to think in response to the religious ideology that overwhelmed by force so much of African Christianity in the seventh century.<sup>6</sup>

As it has been stated elsewhere, studies on contemporary African Christianity, especially the current Pentecostal revival in Sub-Saharan Africa should be done in the context of what prevailed in early African Christianity. Mankind stands to gain a deeper appreciation of these contemporary happenings in African Christianity if it “becomes aware of the stunning intellectual depth of early African Christianity.”<sup>7</sup>

### Christianity in North Africa

The term “North Africa”, in “classical and early medieval times, means essentially Proconsular Africa. In recent times the term has been applied to a vast extension of territory over 1200 miles wide stretching from Tripoli in the east to Casablanca in the west and from the Mediterranean in the north to the Sahara in the south.”<sup>8</sup> Christianity flourished in the Northern part of Africa before its subsequent fall to Islam in Carthage in 697.<sup>9</sup> Theologians and Church Fathers such as Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine and Athanasius, pillars of the early church were all Africans. Prior to this, the Bible is replete with stories of Christ’s encounter with Africa and Africans. The story of the flight to Egypt is one of such scriptural examples of Africa’s connection to Christ and Christianity.

According to Elizabeth Isichei “[t]he story of the flight into Egypt has never ceased to glow in the Coptic imagination. In the words of the Coptic liturgy, ‘Be glad and rejoice, O Egypt, and her sons and all her brothers, for there hath come to Thee the Lord of Man.’”<sup>10</sup> The flight into Egypt is the first biblical account of Africa’s contact with Christianity. The role and connection of Apostles such as St Mark to the Coptic Church in Egypt will be addressed later. The Bible, specifically the Gospel of Mark, mentions that close to the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, on his way to be crucified, Simon from Cyrenia (Cyrenia was a Roman province in Libya) was asked to carry his cross.<sup>11</sup> The Acts of the Apostles also records several stories of Africa’s encounter with the church. Prominent among such stories is the Pentecost event, which saw Africans from Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene. During the persecution that led to the martyrdom of Stephen and the dispersion of the disciples, Christians from Cyrenia in Libya were part of those who continued to propagate the gospel in the towns and districts of Antioch. In Antioch, where the disciples were first referred to as Christians, mention is made of two Africans: Lucius from Cyrenia and a black man named Simeon.<sup>12</sup>

In the account of the Baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), mention is made of a court official in charge of the entire treasury of Queen Candace who had visited Jerusalem to worship. This court official, Sanneh recounts, was probably from the kingdom of Meroe. The Church historian Eusebius, names this court official as Judich.<sup>13</sup> According to the story in Acts of the Apostles, the Apostle Philip was prompted by an angel of the Lord to go and meet Judich in

<sup>5</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 99; Aidan K. Ahaligah, “The influence of indigenous Akan religious beliefs and practices on Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana: Historical and Theological analyses in the context of world Christianity.” *TREN* (2012). <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/tren/958>. Accessed 2 June 2020; Kenneth R. Ross, Mariz Tadros, Todd M. Johnson, *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); C. J. Speel, “The Disappearance of Christianity from North Africa in the Wake of the Rise of Islam” *Church History*, 29(4), 379-397. doi:10.2307/3161925; Kenneth Latourette *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York, 1938); G. LaPiana “The Roman Church at the End of the Second Century,” *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. XVIII, no. 3 (1925), pp. 201–277; P. L. Shinnie, “Christian Nubia,” in *The Cambridge History of Africa Vol. 2 from c. 500 BC to 1050 AD*, edited by J.D. Fage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 556-564; Salim Faraji, *The Roots of Nubian Christianity Uncovered* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2012)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> C.J. Speel, “The Disappearance of Christianity from North Africa in the wake of the Rise of Islam” Cambridge University Press, 2009. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/church-history/article/disappearance-of-christianity-from-north-africa-in-the-wake-of-the-rise-of-islam/2D4350992DB03EBD60062372D658BF91>. Accessed 15 August 2020, pp. 397.

<sup>9</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 1994), 17; Vince Bantu, “The Decline of Nubian Christianity under Islam (641-1517 CE)” *Africanus journal*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2016), pp. 13-26; William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 5

<sup>11</sup> Sanneh *West African Christianity*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Gaza. He was reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah while riding in his chariot on his way home. Philip, having explained the passage in Isaiah to Judich, ended up baptizing him in a nearby pool. It is probable that Judich played a role in introducing Christianity to his native Meroe, which became, for several centuries, a flourishing Christian kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Priscilla, Acquila and Paul's encounter with Apollos in Ephesus, a Christian who hails from Alexandria, is another example of Africa's contact with Christianity recorded in the scriptures.<sup>15</sup> The mention of Apollos, a Jew born in Alexandria is significant, because it points to the strong presence of aspects of early Christianity in North Africa. Looking at the way Apollos is described in the Acts of the Apostles, as one who burns with enthusiasm and who accurately taught about Christ, make some scholars suggest that he might have been a pioneer of the church in Alexandria.<sup>16</sup> It is certain that Christian missionaries from Palestine had made contact with Alexandria and Cyrene in the first decade of the Christian religion.<sup>17</sup> Along the coast of North Africa, Christianity arrived later – probably from Rome, around the middle of the second century A. D. Cases of martyrdom suggest the presence of Christianity in North Africa circa this period. According to John Ferguson:

“On July 16<sup>th</sup>, 180, seven men and five women were condemned to death at the otherwise unknown Scilli. Their names are important—Sparatus, Nartzalus, Cittinis, Veturius, Felix Aquilinus, Laetantuis, Ianuaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, Secunda. Plainly some of these names are those of local inhabitants, not of Roman colonist, and it seems probable that those which have a Latin air are in fact Latinization of African names...The most famous of them, Vibia Perpetua, was a woman of 22; she came from one of the leading families of Carthage.”<sup>18</sup>

These African martyrs had Latin names because of the influence on North Africa, held by Rome during that period. The “Romanization of North Africa” and the “Latinization of African names”, according to Ferguson, had been in effect, earlier than the third century.<sup>19</sup> The influence of Rome and the Latin language in North Africa finds its parallels under both British and French colonial systems of government. This explains why most of these martyrs mentioned above had Latinized African names. This also shows that Christianity, by the ‘great third century’ and beyond, had taken deep roots in North Africa with many converts, some of them very prominent in the early Church. Ferguson again continues that by the early third century Christianity had spread to communities such as Leptis Magna, Sousse, Lambaesis, Thysdrus and Uthina. By the middle of the third century other Christian communities, along the coast of North Africa were Sabratha, Girba, Hippo Diarrhytus, Hippo Regius, Russicade and Tipasa. There were several other Christian communities in the interior of North Africa; confirming that the Christian religion was widely spread.<sup>20</sup>

In Egypt, Alexandria is on record as one of the strongest centers of Christianity. This is not surprising, as it is believed with certainty that Christian missionaries from Palestine had reached Alexandria during the Apostolic age.<sup>21</sup> Alexandria was known for its schools of philosophy and was the home to great centers of learning such as the Catechetical School of Alexandria. The first teacher of the catechetical school was Pantaenus, a converted Stoic and probably a Sicilian. After Pantaenus' departure to India as a missionary, Clement, another convert to Christianity took over from him (Clement of Alexandria c. 150-215 AD). “Clements writings, the *Stromateis* and *Paedaogus*, reveal much of the method and content of education that became normative in the medieval university.”<sup>22</sup>

In effect, the Catechetical school and Alexandria in general could boast of astute scholars such as Clement of Alexandria and his famous student Origen who took over when Clement fled Alexandria in 202.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on the importance of Alexandria to the early church and the ancient world as a whole, Oden writes:

At its zenith the Afro-Hellenic city of Alexandria was larger than either Rome or Antioch, and of far importance in the world of ideas, literature and learning. Alexandria stood for centuries as one of the three leading cities in the ancient world. It should not be surprising that the Christian leader of Alexandria came to symbolize and represent all Christians on the continent in terms of ecclesiastical organization. It was analogous to Antioch representing Asia, and Rome signifying the voices of the leadership of the north Mediterranean that would later (with Charlemagne in 800 C.E) emerge as a quasi-literate amalgam of emerging cultures gradually forming into medieval Europe.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Bantu, “The Decline of Nubian Christianity “.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> John Ferguson “Aspects of Early Christianity in North Africa” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Tarikh*, Vol.2, no.1 (1967): 16; John H. Taylor, *Egypt and Nubia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); B. T. Alfred Evetts & Joshua Butler, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighboring Countries* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2001),

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; (Acts 2:10) mentions that Cyreneans were present at the day of Pentecost. In Antioch, Cyreneans were also mentioned to be present (Acts 11:20).

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson “Aspects of Early Christianity in North Africa” 16; Robert Francis Brockmann, *The Romanization of North Africa: Its Character and Extent During the First and Second Centuries of the Empire* (Indiana: Indiana University, 1951).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 16; Sanneh *West African Christianity*; Isichei , *A History of Christianity in Africa*.

<sup>22</sup> Oden *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 17.

Alexandria is therefore significant for the context of this research not just because of its place as an important Christian center in the first millennium and afterwards, but also, it was in “Alexandria that a serious attempt was made to interpret Christian teachings in the light of Greek philosophical thought.”<sup>25</sup> Alexandria’s significance for the church lies in the fact that it was the locus for great Christian teachers who shaped, in decisive ways, theology of the ancient and also of the contemporary church. In short, it (Alexandria) can be rightfully considered the cradle of Christian theology. Still on the aspects of early Christianity in Africa, this article turns attention, briefly, to Coptic Christianity and the establishment of the Church in Ethiopia.

### The Egyptian or Coptic Church

Egyptians who adopted Christianity are called Coptic Christians. According to A. J Davis, the process was gradual, but eventually Christianity displaced the old pagan religion and the language as well. <sup>26</sup> The word Copt comes from the Arabic word *Qibt*, a shortened form of the Greek word for Egypt *Aiguptos*. Davis further writes that the term at one point referred to ‘nationality’ rather than to a ‘religion’. It was during the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs in the middle of the seventh century that it ceased to refer to nationality.<sup>27</sup> To distinguish between the Muslim invaders, ‘Coptic’ acquired a new meaning, which specifically referred to the ‘descendants of the old Egyptians’. Today the term Copts does not refer to nationality but to adherents of Egyptian monophysite Christianity.<sup>28</sup> “The expression Coptic Church thus means Egyptian Church and it is applied to the Church which, according to tradition, was founded by St Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria, where on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 63 A.D. he suffered martyrdom.”<sup>29</sup>

The Copts therefore believe that, St Mark the author of the oldest synoptic Gospel, is the founder of the Coptic or Egyptian Church and the first Pope of Alexandria. Irish H. Elmasry narrates how St Mark’s ministry began in Alexandria:

Born in Cyrene (in North Africa), he was attracted to return to his native land and preach the Good News. Accordingly, he first went to the pentapolis where he started the first Christian community. From thence, he came to Alexandria in 61 AD. This great metropolis dazzled him by its splendour and beauty; it filled him with unutterable sadness by its sin and waywardness. Towards the evening of his first day, the strap of his sandal was torn, and he turned to a cobbler he met. As Anianus (the cobbler) was working, the awl pierced his hand... The Apostle healed his wound and, taking his clue from the exclamation, gave Anianus the Good News. That day the seed was sown: the cobbler and his family were the first fruits of the Church founded by St. Mark.<sup>30</sup>

The Copts also believe that St Mark eventually ordained Anianus as the first bishop of the Church (Coptic Church) along with twelve other priests and seven deacons. St Mark also gave them their first liturgy known as the Kyrillian.<sup>31</sup> It must however be stated that historians are not certain of the ancient tradition, which mentions Mark as the first Apostle to Egypt. Eusebius in his *Church history* (324) mentions that St Mark was in Egypt and was martyred in Alexandria. Clement also in an earlier fragment mentions St Mark’s presence in Alexandria. Similar difficulties surround the tradition, which claims that St Thomas was in India.<sup>32</sup> The difficulties in ascertaining St Mark’s presence in Egypt notwithstanding, Christianity gradually grew from a religion of the cultured, educated and urban elite and penetrated Coptic village communities by the middle of the third century. The growth of Christianity, according to Sanneh, “precipitated a crisis within the ranks of the adherents of local religions. Often Coptic Christians, accused of disloyalty and seen as a subversive force, were persecuted by the opponents. But there is a need to use caution in assessing the worth of these reports of persecution.”<sup>33</sup>

In spite of the caution that the accounts of persecution were exaggerated, there is evidence that Coptic Christians were persecuted, especially during the reign of Diocletian and Maximin from late 311 to early 312. Davis also mentions that by 700, the once cordial relationship between the Copts and their Muslim overlords deteriorated when the Amir of Egypt demanded tribute from Coptic Monks. This led to a gradual deterioration of the relationship between the two communities. As a result, Coptic churches were systematically destroyed, their images broken, and their icons (pictures) burned. Moreover, taxes got heavier as oppression increased. Throughout the ages Coptic Christians accepted Islam. In 1345 it is recorded that 600 Christians recanted and accepted Islam in one day. By the seventh century, due to a government decree, Coptic ceased to be the language of everyday and became a liturgical language only.<sup>34</sup> Until it’s

<sup>25</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> A. J. Davis “Coptic Christianity” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Tarikh*, Vol.2, no.1 (1967): 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Oswald Hugh Ewart Burmester *The Egyptian or Coptic Church: A Detailed Description of Her Liturgical Services and The Rites and Ceremonies Observed in the Administration of Her Sacraments* (Cairo: Printing Office of the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, 1967), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Irish H. Elmasry, *Introduction to the Coptic Church* (Place of publication not identified. Printed by Dar El Alam El Arabi, 1977), 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 17. ; Davis “Coptic Christianity” 42..

<sup>33</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Davis “Coptic Christianity”, 49; Isichei in *History of Christianity in Africa*, p. 40-44, gives a detailed account of the near extinction of Coptic Christianity in Egypt.

near complete demise in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity in Egypt has survived to the present day, but as the religion of the minority.

In talking about contextualisation of the gospel today, one often hears about the nineteenth century missionary initiatives and its aftermath but contemporary debates on the contextualisation of the gospel has antecedents in North African Christianity.

The contextualisation of Christianity in Africa is not a recent event as the indigenous populations in Egypt and Ethiopia, for example, adapted Christianity to their cultural contexts.<sup>35</sup> In Egypt, Coptic Christianity gradually developed out of the ancient Egyptian religion. The development of religion was also closely related to the development of language in Egypt. The weakening of religious beliefs and practices of the Egyptian God *Amon Re*, due to difficulties associated with understanding hieroglyphics, helped in the acceptance of Christianity. Furthermore, similarities between the old Egyptian religion and Christianity catalyzed the adaptation of the new religion. Some similarities to note include: the shared concept of monotheism; the Egyptian religious concept of a 'god who is eternal'; the concept of divine judgment, and the Christian concept of the second coming.

The Christian concepts of heaven and hell, good and evil and the Egyptian concepts of judgment, good and evil, and of immortality of the soul are also similar. Additionally, three important gods in the old Egyptian religion: *Isis*, *Horus*, and *Osiris* mirrored the Christian concept of the Trinity, making easier the transition from the old religion to Christianity.<sup>36</sup> "There were also Old Egyptian 'popular traditions' that helped the new religion. Thus, Old Egyptian ideas that sins had to be atoned for and that sin was hereditary, as well as ideas about the fall from original purity, easily found themselves expressed in the new religion."<sup>37</sup> The circumstances or process around the growth/adaptation of Christianity in North Africa provides information on the adaptation that is currently taking place in Sub-Saharan Africa. Another example of how Christianity adapted or was contextualised to specific cultural conditions can be found in the Abyssinian or Ethiopian Church.

### The Abyssinian or Ethiopian Church

The Christian Church in Abyssinia/Ethiopia points to thriving Christian communities in Africa as early as the fourth century.<sup>38</sup> It is also an example of how Christianity was contextualized by Africans on African soil.

The history of Ethiopia begins with the rise of the kingdom of Aksum/Axum, a kingdom founded by Semitic invaders. Harry Middleton Hyatt writes that:

little is known of pre-Christian Abyssinia. Ethiopia was a vague and indefinite geographical expression for the ancients, designating any land to the south and east of Egypt, but technically it was the name of a kingdom whose kingdom of power continually shifted between Napata and the Island Meroe; a kingdom which came into existence about B. C. 750, ruled Egypt during the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty, and was practically destroyed by the Romans in the first century A. D.; though it lingered until about 275 A. D.<sup>39</sup>

What is of significance to this article's context is that by the middle of the fourth century, Christianity was present in Ethiopia and by this time it had displaced a very developed pagan religious culture. Before it became the official religion in the fifth decade of the fourth century, Christianity had long been introduced to the royal court before its introduction to the rest of the kingdom.<sup>40</sup> There are several legends or traditions that point to the origins of Christianity in Ethiopia. One of such legends attributes the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia to St. Matthew, and another to the eunuch who was mentioned in (Acts of the Apostles 8: 26 - 40).

Even though some scholars believe that this eunuch was an official to another queen by the name Candace of Meroe, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church holds the view that the eunuch was the first to preach the gospel in Ethiopia. However, the Axumite court remained "pagan" until the middle of the fourth century even though there is evidence that foreign Christian traders were allowed to practice their religion.<sup>41</sup> Officially the establishment of the Church is attributed to two young men from Tyre, Frumentius and his brother Aedisius (also spelt Aedesius or Edesius).

According to the Latin historian, Rufinus, these two young men were on a journey with the philosopher Meropius when they encountered difficulties and berthed on the coast of Audulis, Ethiopia. The locals killed Meropius in an attack on the ship's crew but Frumentius and Aedisius were spared and taken to the court of King Ela-Alada

<sup>35</sup> See Ibid; Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian Mind*; Ferguson "Aspects of Early Christianity"; Sanneh, *West African Christianity*; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*.

<sup>36</sup> Davis "Coptic Christianity" 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 45-46.

<sup>38</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church: A Translation of the Ethiopian Synaxarium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928); "History of Ethiopia" *History Net*. <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=2110&HistoryID=ab92&gtrack=pthc>. Accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London: Luzac & Co, 1928), 29.

<sup>40</sup> Bairu Tafla "The Establishment of the Ethiopian Church" in *Tarikh*, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 30.

(also Ella Amida) whose capital was Aksum. It is recorded that after the death of king Ela-Alada, the responsibility of running the kingdom fell on Frumentius and Aedisius until Ezana the heir to the throne came of age. Ezana, it is believed converted to Christianity when he eventually became king. However, Ezana's conversion may have been for the purposes of courting the favor of 'Roman Christian power'.<sup>42</sup> There is however a level of certainty around an account, which states that around 350, Christianity had become the religion of the court in Aksum. In substantiating this point Bairu Taflla writes:

He [Ezana] waged many wars and recorded his achievements on five slabs of stone. In the first four inscriptions, it is clearly shown that there was a strong adherent to the traditional Pagan belief of his fathers, while in the last inscription a significant change in religion can be seen. In this inscription, he no longer attributes his success to Ares or any other pagan god, but opens up with the phrase: 'By the power of the Lord of heaven, who in heaven and upon earth is mightier than everything that exists.' Furthermore he shifts his earlier claim of descent from the god Ares to his human father, Ella Amida. 'The Lord of heaven,' 'The Mighty,' 'to all eternity, the perfect One'...Some of his coins are marked with the cross, a sign which confirms the theory that he accepted Christianity in the latter part of his reign.<sup>43</sup>

Athanasius, the newly elected Patriarch of Alexandria, consecrated Frumentius as the first bishop of the Ethiopian Church. This is believed to have happened sometime after 346. The title *Abuna Salama* or *Abba Salama*, meaning father of peace was posthumously bestowed on Frumentius by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>44</sup> Just like Christianity in Egypt, a process of adaptation took place in which several of the old religious practices were Christianized. According to Bairu Taflla:

to begin with, the Church concentrated its activities at Pagan centres possessing magnificent temples. Once it succeeded in converting the communities it chose to Christianize their temples and customs rather than offend the newly converted communities by introducing major changes and restrictions. The holy waters which one finds all over Ethiopia and which people use to heal their physical and mental diseases were undoubtedly of Pagan origin. The Pagans worshipped in them certain spirits, and the Church Christianized them, probably with justifying facts from the Holy Bible.<sup>45</sup>

The concept of 'new gods' encountering 'old gods' is not new to Africa. The contextualization or adaptation of the gospel in early North Africa and Ethiopian Christianity, for example, finds it parallel in the contextualization of the gospel in contemporary Africa. The challenges and successes of African Christianity in antiquity in relating the gospel to their cultural and pre-Christian religious context serve as resources in similar attempts in our own day.

Also, contemporary studies of African Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, are "not simply about the privately emotive, charismatic or the here-and-now work of the Holy Spirit. It also embraces the history of the Holy Spirit at work over the millennia in Africa. African Christianity is grounded in this concrete and palpable sense of redemptive suffering in history."<sup>46</sup>

In sum, Scriptural and historical materials as well as traditions support the claim of Christian presence in Africa as far as the first century. John Mbiti is therefore correct when he claimed, "Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion."<sup>47</sup> The perception that Christianity is the 'Whiteman's' religion and therefore 'culturally alien' to Africa falls short in view of the evidence available. As Vince Bantu has poignantly stated, "[t]he sentiment that Christianity is the 'white man's' religion is a perception that does not find resonance in biblical or historical reality."<sup>48</sup> This author argues that it negates the nature of Christianity as a world religion and the church as a global church. African Christianity is not becoming a world or global religion, it has always been. "At every point, the Christian faith has found Afrocentric expression and it is God's heart that the Gospel take firm root among every nation, tribe and tongue."<sup>49</sup> Paul Bowers aptly sums up the importance of duly recognizing this African 'Christian' past in our quest to understand contemporary Christian phenomena. "In the search for self-identity, which

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 30-31; Sanneh, *West African Christianity*; Middleton Hyatt *The Church of Abyssinia*.

<sup>43</sup> Davis "Coptic Christianity", 31; Middleton Hyatt in *The Church of Abyssinia*, states that Christianity became the official religion of Ethiopia around 450.

<sup>44</sup> For detailed accounts of the history of the early church in North Africa and Africa in general see Elizabeth Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa* (Grand Rapids: 1995), Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: 1983). C. P Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* London, (1948). K. S Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity Vol 2* (New York: 1938). H. A MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* (Cambridge: 1922). E. A Wallis Budge *History of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia* (London: 1928). *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria Tarikh*, Vol. 2, no.1, (1967); Hugh McLeod, ed. *Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities c. 1914-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Adrian Hastings *African Christianity* (Seabury Press, 1977); Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

<sup>45</sup> Bairu Taflla in *Tarikh*, 36. Michael Geddes, *The Church History of Ethiopia* (London, 1696). A detailed bibliography can be found in the works cited and bibliography section at the end of this paper.

<sup>46</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind*, 120.

<sup>47</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 229.

<sup>48</sup> Vince Bantu, "Early African Christianity: Nubia" *Jude 3 Project*, 29 September 2016. <https://jude3project.org/blog/2016/earlychristianitynubia>. Accessed 17 August 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

lies so near the heart of the modern African Christian intellectual quest, the long history of Christianity in Africa is a fact needing urgently to be recognized, embraced, and appropriated<sup>50</sup>

### African Christian Ancestors: Origen and Augustine

At this stage, it is important to mention Augustine, the African patristic theologian and scriptural exegete, one whose theological writings greatly influenced the West. Before this is done, brief attention must be attended to Origen, one who has been described as “the most formidable theologian in the Church before Augustine of Hippo”<sup>51</sup> Frederic W. Farrar is more gracious in his description of Origen. According to Farrar, “[i]n the history of the early Church there is no name nobler or more remarkable than that of Origen. Few men have rendered to the cause of Christianity such splendid services, or lived from childhood to old age a life so laborious and so blameless.”<sup>52</sup>

Origenes Adamantius or Origen of Alexandria is described further as the ‘first scientific theologian’ and “incomparably the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern Church in the early centuries as well as a prolific writer.”<sup>53</sup> Born in Alexandria in 185 A.D., he was only eighteen years old when his bishop, Demetrius, appointed him to head the Catechetical School in Alexandria, which had been left vacant by Clement’s departure.<sup>54</sup> Bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem also ordained Origen in A. D 230. It must also be mentioned that it was the same Bishop Demetrius who banished Origen from Alexandria when his orthodoxy was questioned. In 231, after he was banished, Origen opened another school in Caesarea, a school whose reputation exceeded the one in Alexandria.

Origen held the view that Christ was created by God, and is therefore inferior/subordinate (not of the same substance) with the Father. This view was contrary to orthodox belief that Christ was co-eternal and equal to the Father. Origen’s view was to cause lots of controversy in the church, climaxing in 381 (long after Origen’s death), when Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria who held similar views was condemned and deposed. Though it happened long after his death and in a different form, Origen had set in motion controversies and events which led to the Council of Nicea and subsequently to disagreement between the Coptic Church and the rest of the Church.

Origen’s contribution to the development and growth of the Church were significant as he wrote immensely on topics such as the resurrection, martyrdom, prayers and exhortation.<sup>55</sup> Sanneh sums up Origen’s contributions to Christianity as follows:

he laid the foundations for a scholarly analysis of Scripture, working with both the original Hebrew texts and the Greek of the New Testament documents. But he also developed a coherent theology of the nature of God, revelation and salvation. Origen carried on his shoulders the immense task of bearing witness to the church throughout the world of learning...By such endeavors Origen was forging links to extend the chain of Apostolic teaching and example which first brought the church to Africa.<sup>56</sup>

In Origen’s last days, Eusebius writes: “...[t]he Evil Spirit...aimed at him his deadliest violence...he was laden with heavy chains, and thrust into the depths of a dark prison...No record has been preserved of his last hours, but he died at Tyre A. D. 253, at the age of sixty nine.”<sup>57</sup> By his martyrdom, Origen can rightly be seen as an African ancestor who bore the cross of the Christian faith just like the Scillitan martyrs: Vibia Perpetua, and Felicitas; the martyrs of Uganda, and all other such Christian martyrs. Oden is right when he writes that, “[t]he rapid spread of early African Christianity was due in part to the heart breaking African history of martyrdom. This is a history of African blood on African soil”<sup>58</sup> The contemporary appreciation of Christianity in Africa is therefore inextricably linked to the struggles and successes of African Christianity in antiquity.

### Augustine

Unlike Origen, who was the son of a martyr and a Christian from birth, Augustine’s father Patricius was pagan and for many years Augustine himself was a Manichean. The Manichees were followers of Mani, a Persian Prophet (206-277).<sup>59</sup> According to J. Patout Burns Jr. & Robin M. Jensen [t]heir radical dualism held that two principles—one light and good, the other dark and evil—were locked in everlasting combat for the light-bearing sparks of good within select

<sup>50</sup> Paul Bowers “Nubian Christianity: The Neglected Heritage” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* iv.1 (1985): 3

<sup>51</sup> Davis “Coptic Christianity” 47.

<sup>52</sup> Frederic W. Farrar *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography* (New York: Macmillan and Co, 1889), 291.

<sup>53</sup> G. A Oshitelu, “Dictionary of African Christian Biography”, [http://www.dacb.org/stories/egypt/origen\\_.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/egypt/origen_.html) assessed December 7 2011

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Davis “Coptic Christianity” 46-47.

<sup>56</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> Eusebius H. E. vii. 1, quoted in Frederick W. Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers*, 314-15.

<sup>58</sup> Oden, *How Christianity Shaped the Christian Mind*, 117.

<sup>59</sup> J. Patout Burns Jr. & Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

individuals.”<sup>60</sup> Since Manicheans believed that the “evil principle of the cosmos was responsible for the production of the material realm, members of the religion reputedly disdained that world in which good and evil were mixed together; they participated in a variety of ascetic practices designated to separate the two forces.”<sup>61</sup>

However, Augustine’s mother, Monica, was a Christian. Warren Thomas Smith observes that “Monica was born into a Christian home with parents of—supposedly—godly faithful backgrounds. Her name was Berber, possibly derived from the Libyan goddess Mon [Monday] worshipped in the nearby town of Thibilis”<sup>62</sup> Born in North Africa, in 354-430, Augustine’s writings were highly influenced by his African background. Ferguson indicates that

Thagaste, his [Augustine’s] birthplace, was a centre of Berber culture...his own name is a typical Berber one: and his son’s name Adeodatus, ‘God-given’, is quite un-Latin, but represents some such name as Iatanbaal. Like the Berbers he considers a brother closer than a son (Serm. 46, 12, 29). Much of his thinking is centred on Africa, as shown by his sympathy for the Carthaginian Dido...his rebuke of his compatriot Maurus for failing to understand his native country, and the whole approach of his greatest work *The City of God*, which is curiously, and seems to view the Roman Empire from the outside... It is no wonder that Julian of Eclanum called him *philosophaster Poenorum*, the ‘African sophist’.<sup>63</sup>

Augustine’s conversion occurred in Milan in 386, after which he ‘reverted to orthodox Catholicism’ and soon became the Bishop of the Church in Hippo. As a Bishop, Augustine strongly opposed Donatism. Augustine is said to have “attacked the Donatists in public debates and learned treatise, placed posters on the walls of their basilicas and wrote popular songs, like ‘The ABC against Donatists’”.<sup>64</sup>

The African background of Augustine highly influenced how he wrote. There are elements of Augustine’s thoughts, which are in continuity with what pertains in the contemporary church in Africa. Augustine’s comment, “God orders man to love him, and threatens deep miseries if he does not do so” is obviously influenced by the North African cult of Ba’al or Saturn.<sup>65</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Many contemporary African scholars need to add their voices to those scholars who have and still are spearheading the call for “a robust historical and theological reassessment of early African Christianity.”<sup>66</sup> The omission of this very important part of World Christianity is a great disservice to the attempts made to understand Christian history and theology in its totality.

This relatively ignored or lost part of the history of African Christianity has contributed to the erroneous assertion that Christianity is a Western or the ‘Whiteman’s religion. Johan Tangelder’s observation is very helpful in clarifying this point:

Regrettably, some scholars of African culture and religion have acquired a persistent habit of assuming that Christianity began in African only a couple of centuries ago. But Christianity is not a recent arrival in Africa. The historical fact is that Christianity came to Africa before it came to Europe and North America. It is a dynamic world-wide faith that has been part of Africa for nearly twenty centuries. All the early forms of Christianity were present in the four billions of square miles of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and possibly further south than we know now. Even early written literature shows the presence of Christianity in North Africa. The oldest surviving document of North African Christianity records the trial of Christians which dates back to July 17, 180.<sup>67</sup>

Knowledge of the ancient church in Africa, and the labors of the African Church fathers such as Augustine, holds several treasures for understanding of the Church in contemporary attempts to make the gospel relevant to the African religious and cultural contexts. The contributions of African Church Fathers such as Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Cyprian and others to theological development and the growth of the early church finds its parallel in the modern day African Prophets/Phrophetesses and evangelist such as Wade Harris, Ajayi Crowther, and Beatriz Kimpa Vita.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Steven Paas, *A Conflict on Authority in the Early Church: Augustine of Hippo and the Donatists* (Kachere Series, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid; Darmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Warren Thomas Smith, *Augustine: His Life and Thought* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 11.

<sup>63</sup> John Ferguson “Aspects of Early Christianity in North Africa”, 18.

<sup>64</sup> Isichei *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, *Aspects of Early Christianity in North Africa* 25.

<sup>66</sup> Johan D. Tangelder “African Christianity” (Bibliographical details unknown), 1. This is a summary of Thomas C. Oden’s book *How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Bowers “Nubian Christianity”, 2.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

Aidan Kwame Ahaligah is a Teaching Fellow, University of Leeds where he completed his PhD in Religious and Theological Studies with a focus on Pentecostal-Charismatic political interventions in contemporary African Public spheres. Aidan is an ordained pastor of the E.P Church Ghana and domiciled in the UK.