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Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed
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INTRODUCTION

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'A bitter pill which the majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa should swallow is that they have not been writing African Church History.'¹ This statement by Professors J. F. Ade Ajayi and E. A. Ayandele must serve as an introductory remark to our Church history of Africa. The two Nigerian scholars developed their point by claiming that hitherto Church history had been written 'as if the Christian Church were in Africa, but not of Africa'.² It stressed the missionary presence while forgetting or neglecting whatever there was of an African initiative, an African dimension of African Church history. The sort of book which my Nigerian colleagues may have had in mind was not least the detailed and lengthy Mission histories, produced in the pre-Independence period and stamped by this fact. Of necessity this implied a view centred in some Western metropolis and in certain mission societies there. This view of Christianization was to treat it as a Western invasion in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent was mapped out according to mission societies and mission fields.

Confronted with the challenge of Professors Ajayi and Ayandele in the 1970s, I was asked to take on the task of writing a Church history of Africa, covering nearly 2,000 years and an entire continent. How could one attempt this? History, I realized is somehow related to the standpoint and experience of the writer. My own Africa background was largely limited to two Lutheran Churches: one in Zululand and the other in north-west Tanzania, with both of which I encountered situations which seemed to open up more comprehensive perspectives. The Zululand missionary in this case, throwing caution and prudence aside, entered into empathetic contact with what was then termed 'the Sects' or 'Native Separatist Churches' and launched out on a research which was published in 1948 as *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* and as *Zulu Zion* in 1976. The Bukoba experience during the Second World War brought me into contact with an 'orphaned' Church or rather a self-governing Church of immense vitality and liveliness, resulting in two books: *Ung kyrka i Tanganyika* (1948, in Swedish) and *Bara Bukoba: Church and Community in Tanzania* (1974 in Swedish, 1980 in English and 1990 in Swahili). The

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opportunity to compare these two Churches was useful, more particularly as in 1953 I was part of an IMC (International Missionary Council) Theological Commission and could take this comparison one step further. Through comparison one discovers the distinctive characteristics of each.

In the meantime, the African scene changed as did the writers on Africa: the historical dimension of African reality came to the fore. A new generation of history scholars appeared inspired by Professors Roland Oliver, Richard Gray, Terence Ranger and others. These British history professors did not neglect the Churches as history professors in other countries are wont to; in fact they pioneered both research and interpretation of African Church history. It began with Professor Roland Oliver's *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (1952). With the 1950s and the 1960s there followed a new period in African history-writing. My work was enriched by relating it to the ongoing international process of African history-writing achieved by this new generation of African and Western scholars. On every point, for every African country and period, I have benefited from these contributions.

My own perspective also changed while serving the Church in Tanzania as a bishop in the early 1960s. I realized the need to re-interpret African religions and church history from a distinct African perspective. At that stage I was encouraged by the advance represented by studies into the history of local African cults, studies inspired by Professor Terence Ranger and others who adopted an historical approach to the study of African religion. A new image of the history of African religion emerges. Instead of the earlier image of a static, immobile religion, to be changed only through the invasion of Western imperialism and its Western faith, we are presented with a dynamic, multifaceted image of local territorial cults undergoing change, sometimes over a period of some 400 years. These cults were exposed to new agencies of change during the nineteenth-century wars and epidemics, which introduced new ecological and economic factors.

However, having recognized the need for a new continent-wide African Church history I had to face a serious question: should such a church history be attempted by a Westerner, an outsider, a European scholar in his shielded study? I see this point almost as clearly as others do. I have tried to place the emerging church, throughout the continent, within African structures such as population movements and resulting refugee groups, within the relentlessly ongoing movement over the savannah, through the forests and along the rivers. As I became aware in Bukoba, the Christian message in the local village was largely transmitted by African initiative, more particularly by groups of young converts looking towards a new fellowship in and beyond

village and ethnic community. With all its limitations this book focuses not on Western partners but on African actors.

Although I had some share in African studies with my *Bantu Prophets* and other works, I would like to draw attention to the relationship between the study of Independent churches and that of the mission-related Churches. The more established Western- or mission-related churches have often been relegated out of sight by a hunt for something 'authentically Africa'! Yet it is to the Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist etc. Churches that the overwhelming majority of African Christians have belonged and still do. The current depreciation of these 'established' churches is as mistaken as was once the neglect of the 'Independent Churches'. The term 'Independent Church' has in fact now lost some of its glamour, when all churches are in some sense independent. Consider those great numbers – 3,000 or 6,000 – which have exercised their fascination for some time. For South Africa one should perhaps refer to them not as some 3,000 different groups but as *one* charismatic movement with local and personal variations. The Independents are not just another world, peripheral to the real thing. They are actively shaping the *milieu* and expectations in city locations, influencing both Catholic and Protestant, to the extent that an African Catholic archbishop exercising his ministry in a Central African capital, serving also as a healer of the sick (to his great surprise he discovered that his hands could mediate a therapeutic power) was removed from his high office and transferred to Rome.

The role of the individual must be seen as part of vast and fundamental movements and tendencies. Nevertheless, the question could at least be put as to whether it is not a special obligation for church history to emphasize also the role of the individual and the extent to which over-arching trends are modified by the peculiarities of the individual. No other movement in Africa allows the individual African personality to stand out as clearly as does the movement of the Church, yet even here the available biographical and archival material is limited and patchy. Not many archives equal those of the Moravian churches. The two-centuries-old Moravian international rule was that each Christian individual should write or relate his/her life story, as it turned out with significant differences between the life stories of men and women. These biographies were later gathered in Moravian archives and are significant for African Church history.

In places the Church history of Africa is a brief affair; elsewhere it is a matter of 1,900 years of history. The first 1,000 years – in Egypt, Nubia, North Africa and Ethiopia – play a special role in our presentation. Attending the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in

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Lund, Sweden, 1982, and the Sixth International Conference for Nubian Studies in Uppsala, Sweden, 1986 provided me with the opportunity to discuss matters with specialists in these fields.

What is specific about the history of the church? Is the church anything more than just another kind of sociological construct, informed by its particular ideology; a religious department fashioned by economic forces and social tensions and struggles? The political, social and economic backgrounds are therefore duly emphasized here, but this is not all. This book is a Church history dealing with religious movements, religious institutions and religious personalities. I quote Professor Lamin Sanneh:

Christianity in Africa has had more than its share of the attention of Western writers, including throngs of social scientists and their disciples, most of whom are interested in everything except the Christian religion. It is as if in our concern to describe the sunlight we concentrate on the shadows, using that derivative relationship as the justification for a reductionist approach.³

While as far as possible integrating this church history into the wider frame of African history, my interpretation is basically not just a secular history with the church somehow thrown in, but a church history in its own right. This claim is vindicated more clearly in some parts of the book than in others – in itself an admission that in a work of this kind, conceived and written over a period of twenty years, it was not always easy to retain the same level and tone of interpretation.

If there is a need for a new, overall look at African church history, this does not only stem from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies. I must at least hint at the new image of the Donatists (W. Frend), the surprisingly rich new material on the church in Nubia and the great contributions to the study of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Congo area (Jadin, Bontinck, Rich and Gray etc.). In the nineteenth-century Catholic Church the two great opponents or competitors, Cardinal Lavignerie and Father Duparquet, both stressed their strategies as a 'reprise', a recapture of Catholic positions lost in the Congo and elsewhere in the eighteenth century.

A synchronic comparison between the regions forces itself on the writer dealing with the nineteenth century. The concept of regions might be disputed, for the primary unit is of course the local congregation and the local diocese or church. However, particularly for the nineteenth century, there is a need for this concept of regions. It is suggested that the evangelistic dynamic in the various parts of Africa was sparked by an African equivalent of F. Jackson Turner's 'frontier' idea. The 'line of advance' stretched from

Sierra Leone to Nigeria, Fernando Po and Cameroon in the west, and from the Cape of Good Hope to Zambezi and beyond – sometimes referred to as the ‘Church’s hinterland’. This ‘frontier’, and the ever-receding ‘regions beyond’ are recognized both by the Independent Churches and the mission-related Churches. At the same time we stress the wide chronological discrepancy between the regions. West and South had a lead of half a century – or two to three generations – over the Congo and the East. There is a similar chronological discrepancy *within* the regions: the obvious example is the difference in West Africa between the Coast with its early international and Christian contacts, and later Christian activity far inland.

The concept of a one-volume work may be criticized. But all history is selective, and in this case distinct pedagogical needs determine this selection. In the process of Christianization we can discern a selectivity relating to both communicating parties, Selective Giving and Selective Appropriation.

This book is an unashamedly ecumenical study highlighting Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Independent work. Here the book appears at a propitious time. For centuries the two competing confessions, Catholic and Protestant, treated one another with damning silence – plodding along on different sides of the same hill or river, relying on the same vernacular related to the same traditional African religion, dealing with similar daily experiences in the district in hot season and rainy season – yet never meeting. The other party did not or should not exist.

I know of one exception to this rule (see p. 298), a meeting between a Belgian Catholic missionary just arrived in Zaïre, and a British Baptist missionary with long experience from the villages along the River. To their surprise they found themselves as fellow travellers for a day in the same train compartment on the new railway from Boma to Kinshasa (Léopoldville). Fortunately overcoming an initial embarrassment they soon were engaged in a lively and constructive debate on mission evangelistic methods, one of the fundamental problems of Congo missionary policy at the time.

I have had the ambition to attempt an ecumenical history of the Church in Africa. This can mean different things to different people. I take it to mean a book where both Catholics and non-Catholics might find an interpretation of the essential intentions and achievements of their respective churches. An attempt of this nature could only be made now, after Vatican II, the great event of twentieth-century church history. Vatican II gave rise to the possibility of a new order of things, also in Africa. This Church history of mine would love to be a contribution towards a saner order of things. During all these years of work I have been amazed at the persistent generosity which I have met from the Catholic side, from archivists and

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other scholars in Rome, Paris and Louvain, and from other Catholic scholars in the West as well as in Africa.

The generous opening of Catholic mission archives, after Vatican II, meant a new opportunity. It was an eye-opener to discover that these Catholic archives were in the care of men and women elected at an early age by their respective societies, thus acquiring an excellent command of their task as life-long caretakers of their epistolary treasures. My correspondence over many years with them and their colleagues can now be found in the University Library, Uppsala, Sweden, and can hopefully serve new generations of Church history scholars.

My early International Missionary Council contacts with non-Roman archives and libraries served as an introduction to these rich treasures and I thank them all. Protestant mission archives form the basis of certain parts of this book and it goes without saying, as with the Catholic archival treasures, that only a minor percentage has been consulted, but none the less significant in the interpretation of developments.

The strength of the Protestants was reduced by the fact of their divisiveness. The influence of the International Missionary Council, with its incomparable leader J. H. Oldham and his American counterpart in Zaïre, Dr Emory Ross, held the Protestant forces together. In many African countries Protestants were for decades excluded from whatever there was of the benefits of colonial rule: their share of land for church and school purposes was infinitesimal; administration assistance to their school personnel was imperceptible. Despite this, Protestants developed their own school system, inspiring new generations of youngsters for a new world.

The heart of the matter

Reception of the Gospel is, on the deepest level, an expression of African peoples' 'conscientization', by which they rise to a new awareness, a new conscientiousness kindled by faith in Jesus Christ and his message: 'I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly' (John 10:10). They could affirm a saving relationship to the Cross, to the Life and Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, creating in the hearts of men and women something gloriously new to be claimed and reclaimed in every new generation. Where this did not happen, there was stagnation and a stifling tradition. Where this did happen there was kindled a resolve, through the Church to serve and inspire individuals, groups, nations, and the continent. In the Church, in Christ, was 'a new creation, old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new' (2. Cor. 5:17).

I



THE BEGINNINGS

EGYPT

The Holy Refugees

It was as refugees, according to St Matthew, that the Holy Family came from Bethlehem to Egypt. In later Coptic tradition the pious story has followed the pilgrimage of the Holy Family from the Nile Delta all along the river to Asyut and back again, altogether a period of some three and a half years. Great miracles occurred during the passage. At place after place in a dry land, as the Divine Child stretched out his hand, fresh water wells would spring up and the trees would bow their heads; yes, the very palm tree to which the Mother held her hand during her birth-pangs gave the family shadow from the heat of the sun. (This has a Mediterranean background – *Leto*.) The sick were healed and the dead were raised again. South of Asyut – later to be one of the great centres of the Coptic Church – the Holy Family, having passed ruins of rock-temples and other holy buildings, found refuge in large rock-tombs from the early dynasties of Egyptian history.

This vivid tradition has more to say about the local Church – which has loved to narrate it – than about historical fact. It has been retold by generations and helped to make Egypt a ‘holy land’, *because* Jesus the Child and Mary, the Mother of God, by their holy presence, had made it so.¹

The first chapter and the rest of the book

Twentieth-century literature devoted to the first thousand years of Church history of Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia and North Africa is immense. Finds of sources have added to our understanding of the forces which shaped the spirituality in the Church in those centuries. Archaeological excavations have brought to light invaluable documents and a fascinating world of

Christian art. The UNESCO campaign in the 1960s to save the culture hidden in the sands of Nubia has produced sensational results, and even now, innocent-looking mounds in the sands of the desert may hide buildings, ruins and documents which could change our entire outlook on certain periods of this history.

Scholarly congresses on Coptic Studies, Nubian Studies and Ethiopian Studies gather together scholars from around the world in order to report on and discuss new discoveries of material and perspectives. In view of all this truly impressive richness, the following brief pages attempt a rapid survey based on the volumes published by scholars and experts in this field.

This chapter on the first 1,500 years has a function of its own, related to the book as a whole. This part was written towards the end of the total enterprise. Here as elsewhere, but more so, selection was necessary, and we found *our* selective principle for this first chapter in the great themes which have been worked out for the following centuries. The survey of the first 1,000 years will be related to the general Church history of Africa, with its great themes such as Church and State, Church and indigenous culture, the city and rural population movements, theology and spirituality. Some of these themes, writ large for more recent centuries, will be found as it were, anticipated in those early centuries.

The Jewish Diaspora and the Beginnings of the Church

The first beginnings of the Church's history in the Nile Delta must be understood as closely related to the life of the Jewish Diaspora on the Mediterranean coastline. About the first 100 years of Christian beginnings in the Nile Delta, the fundamental fact of the relationship to, and dependence on, the Jewish community in the city stands out as of primary importance. The Jews represented a highly significant minority in Alexandria with a population of hundreds of thousands. In all of Egypt there were, at the time of Christ, about 1 million Jews, thus representing the largest Jewish community outside Palestine. Two of the five sections of the city into which Alexandria was divided were dominated by the Jews, their synagogues and their culture.

A leading spokesman for the Jewish Diaspora in Alexandria was Philo, philosopher and Bible expositor, international and cosmopolitan Jewish scholar, deeply influenced by Hellenistic culture and concerned with establishing areas of contact and understanding between Hellenism and Judaism. Alongside Philo and his assimilationist teaching there also appeared the more conservative schools of Jewish thought, less given to allegorical

interpretation of the Scripture. It was here in Jewish Alexandria, that the Septuaginta translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was created.

In this Jewish world, marked by the Torah and the Prophets, the Sabbath and the feasts, the first Christian groups from Judaea appeared as missionaries, refugees and traders. While at first possibly seeking refuge in the synagogue they were soon prepared to proclaim their astounding and necessarily divisive message, that the Messiah, the Saviour and the Lord had indeed come, in Jesus of Nazareth. Scholars are at present attempting to identify the very place in the city of Alexandria where the first Christians congregated for worship, agape and eucharist, in an area of the Jewish neighbourhood, later known, from the fourth century on, as Boukolou.²

A far-reaching generalization can be made at the outset: this religion of the Messiah, proclaimed by Jewish individuals, families and groups, came into Egypt and Africa from the East. It was an Eastern religion, and whatever changes it has since undergone because of its missionary outreach and consequent identification with many cultures, it retains its fundamental consanguinity with its Eastern origins, with Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, and with those 'homeless wandering Charismatics' who, in the Holy Land, as the disciples of Jesus had been the first to preach the Christian message. 'It was a coincidence for Christianity that it became Westernized' according to Cardinal Jean Daniélou,³ and the West African scholar E. J. Penoukou adds: 'Likewise it remains a coincidence for the Church in Africa that it received Christianity in a Western form'.⁴ Ancient tradition referred to by the learned Eusebius of Caesarea (?265–?340) – 'the Father of Church history writing' – suggests that the see of Alexandria was founded by St Mark the Evangelist, martyred AD 68.

Modern scholarship moves carefully with regard to this Marcan tradition. 'The historicity of this tradition, though unprovable, should not be ruled out . . . Indeed the tradition of the preaching of Mark in Alexandria may predate the acceptance of the canonical Gospel of Mark in the Alexandrian Church.'⁵ This St Mark tradition has had a resounding echo in modern times. In 1968 the new St Mark's Cathedral was consecrated by Patriarch Cyrillos VI, in the presence of President Nasser, Vice-President Sadat and Haile Selassie I, the Emperor of Ethiopia. On the same occasion the relics of St Mark, seized in 828 by the Venetians, were returned to Egypt by Pope Paul VI in Rome. The relics were thus brought from one cathedral of St Mark to another. (It should be added, perhaps, that another Mediterranean city church – Venice – also counts St Mark as its founder.)

The coastal city and rural inland

For an understanding of the fundamental tensions in Egyptian Church history one has to distinguish between the city of Alexandria and the rest of the country. On the one hand, there was the international Greek-speaking city on the coast with its cosmopolitan culture and Greek Church, turned to the North and to the Mediterranean world – *Alexandria ad Aegyptum* ('Alexandria beside Egypt') – although the city of Alexandria (Rakote in Coptic) also had a Coptic population. On the other, Upper Egypt, the rural region with its emerging Coptic language and culture, monasticism and church, turned away as much as possible from the cosmopolitan world of the bustling city on the coast. Here one was 'Coptic'-speaking, the word being an Arabic form for Egypt. The idea of 'the Egyptian' is a 'fundamental element in this religious community' and emphasizes its heritage from the ancient Egyptians of Pharaonic times.⁶ The Coptic language emerged from the second century. The first translations of Bible text were probably made in the third century, or possibly earlier.

From the vantage-point on the coast at Alexandria the spectator could survey the drama of ancient world politics enacted by succeeding regimes and affecting the fate of Egypt and of all Egyptians: the rise and fall of the Pharaohs, to whose political forms and cultural visions the pyramids, temples and ruins bore witness. The Greek era of the Ptolemies followed with its Hellenistic culture, Greek language and Greek pantheon and the intermixture of Egyptian and Greek gods, (particularly the role of the fertility-saviour goddess, Isis).

In the first century before Christ, the Ptolemies were followed by Roman emperors who began to exert their influence with Latin language and culture and with an insatiable demand for and ever-rising taxation of the wheatlands of Egypt – the granary of Rome. This economic exploitation had been so harsh and sweeping that the narrow strip of arable land along the River Nile could no longer keep up with the demands. The burden of taxation of corn had from then onwards to be carried by North Africa (the present Maghreb). After the fall of Carthage in 146 BC, North Africa was a vanquished country and now had to keep the conqueror supplied by way of annual tribute, while in Egypt, a Roman colony under Mark Antony since 42 BC, impoverished peasants unable to pay their dues fled from their fields into the deserts.

Economic pressure and consequent local rebellions in the Delta led to mounting tensions between Rome and Egypt. In order to ensure obedience the Roman emperors demanded signs – sacrifice at first of a few grains of