

# HOW AFRICA SHAPED THE CHRISTIAN MIND

Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity



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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press  
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426

World Wide Web: [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)

E-mail: [email@ivpress.com](mailto:email@ivpress.com)

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Design: Cindy Kiple

Images: Joan Blacu/Getty Images

ISBN 978-0-8308-2875-3

Printed in the United States of America ∞

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Oden, Thomas C.

*How Africa shaped the Christian mind: the African seedbed of western Christianity* / Thomas C. Oden.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical reference.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8308-2875-3 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Christianity—Africa. 2. Africa—Church history. I. Title.

BR1360.O34 2007

276—dc22

2007031477

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P	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Y	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07			



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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this book can be stated simply: Africa played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture. Decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood first in Africa before they were recognized in Europe, and a millennium before they found their way to North America.

Christianity has a much longer history than its Western or European expressions. The profound ways African teachers have shaped world Christianity have never been adequately studied or acknowledged, either in the Global North or South.

My question: *How did the African mind shape the Christian mind in the earliest centuries of Christianity?*

The challenge that lies ahead for young Africans is to rediscover the textual riches of ancient African Christianity. This will call for a generation of African scholars to reevaluate prejudicial assumptions that ignore or demean African intellectual history.

Christianity would not have its present vitality in the Two-Thirds World without the intellectual understandings that developed in Africa between 50 and 500 C.E. The pretense of studying church history

while ignoring African church history is implausible. Yet this assumption has been common in the last five centuries in a way that would have seemed odd during the first five centuries, when the African mind was highly honored and emulated.

The evidence is yet to be presented. The search for balance in Western history is warped with ugly distortions until this happens.

My task is to show that the classic Christian mind is significantly shaped by the African imagination spawned on African soil. It bears the stamp of philosophical analyses, moral insight, discipline and scriptural interpretations that bloomed first in Africa before anywhere else. The seeds spread from Africa north.

The term *Christian mind* points to Christian intellectual history. This includes the history of literature, philosophy, physics and psychological analysis. The term *African mind* points to ideas and literary products produced specifically on the continent of Africa during the first millennium of the common era.

## TOWARD A HALF BILLION AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

There soon may be almost a half billion Christians in Africa. Now estimated at over four hundred million (46 percent of the total African population of 890,000, according to the Pew Forum), and rapidly growing, a significant proportion of global Christian believers at this time are residents of the continent of Africa. David Barrett projects the continuing growth rate to 2025 as 633 million Christians in Africa.

The Christian population of Africa is burgeoning. It is to their future that this effort is dedicated. Debates in the West will appear trivial in relation to what lies ahead in the Global South.

The world Christian population is predominantly located in the Southern Hemisphere. That is amply demonstrated already by the careful demographic and sociological writings of David Barrett, Rod-

ney Stark and Philip Jenkins. Europeans and North Americans are cautiously realizing that the future of Christianity lies far more to the south of the equator than to the north.

Yet Christians of the Global South have had far less opportunity to appreciate or even learn of their history than have Western Christians. This is especially so for Africans. The remedy is better historical inquiry, not slipshod history or the ideologically charged tweaking of historical evidence.

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.

Not only Westerners but 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. Even black nationalist advocates who have exalted every other conceivable aspect of the African tradition seem to have consistently ignored this patristic gift lying at their feet.

Ordinary African Christian believers deserve to have a much more accessible way of understanding early African Christianity: its faith, courage, tenacity and remarkable intellectual strength. That is why this story must be told, told now and told accurately.

## AN EPIC STORY

The story of early African Christianity needs to be told to African children in villages and cities. The story deserves to be told in a simple way. Though it will be heard by a global audience, it first must find a way of reaching the African child.



Replete with intrepid characters and surprise endings, this is a story of heroic proportions. Not a myth but a real history—the actual story of African believers faithfully facing life-and-death choices, centuries of demeaning slavery and intractable dehumanization—it is timely today for African mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. Its time has come.

The core plot is not difficult to grasp: out of a continent of suffering has come an understanding of suffering transformed by compassion. A story of death resurrected, life rising from the grave, it is the living story of anyone who has grasped the meaning of history from the point of view of the cross and resurrection.

The story begs to be told in its factual truth, so that the heart of it can be grasped easily by anyone. This story is laden with mystery, full to overflowing with unanticipated providences, heavy with sacrifice and miracle, with unforeseen twists and turns, unrepeatable choices to be confronted, and learnings to be treasured.

The story hopes to find especially that single hearer who has witnessed a good creation that has radically fallen and been radically redeemed, and yet is puzzled over the mystery of the continuing power of evil in that creation. This touches something deep in human wonder. It is powerfully dramatized in narratives of early African saints and martyrs, who demonstrated the capacity to overcome. Their stories illumine personal struggles everywhere.

Hence this is not a story for a Christian audience only. It is not intended to be heard only by those already convinced. Nor is it a story whose audience primarily resides in academic settings. It is for seekers, skeptics, and for those convicted, but especially for the children of African villages.

The story will be informative to open-minded Muslims tracing the footsteps of their own early history. As rich for children as for their

elders, it will not be rightly prized until it is rightly told.

Nor is this story just for a Western audience. I hope it will find ready hearers first on the African continent, and equally in Asia. Global Christian believers are intrigued by modern Africa, but most have not thought of it in the light of its astonishing ancient history. Least of all have Africans had the opportunity to hear their own full story told. Since literacy levels remain low in some parts of the continent, this story must also be recounted on recording devices in indigenous languages. Creative visual formats will also be used as they have been in AIDS awareness and ecological education.

When I speak of "early African Christianity," I am referring to all the early forms of Christianity in the first millennium in the four billions of square miles of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and possibly further south than we now know. The geography of the continent shaped the fact that African Christianity first appeared north of the Sahara in the first millennium, and then its second millennium saw exponential growth in the south. Both north and south have been blessed by an enduring heritage of centuries of classic Christianity. Early African Christians spoke many indigenous languages and were not limited to the major commercial languages along the Mediterranean coast.

## OUT OF AFRICA

African Christianity is no less ecumenical by having grown up on a particular continent. African Christianity has arisen out of distinctly African experience on African soil. Those who have most suffered for its genuine depth and continuity have been born as Africans and have struggled in African cultures nurtured within untold generations of indigenous African experience. They are not imports from outside. They have felt the sweat and known the thirst



of African deserts and mountains.

The global Christian mind has been formed out of a specific history, not out of bare-bones theoretical ideas. Much of that history occurred in Africa. Cut Africa out of the Bible and Christian memory, and you have misplaced many pivotal scenes of salvation history. It is the story of the children of Abraham in Africa; Joseph in Africa; Moses in Africa; Mary, Joseph and Jesus in Africa; and shortly thereafter Mark and Perpetua and Athanasius and Augustine in Africa.

The truth of Christianity has always been told in story form. It is a narrative of God's work in creation and history. Christian truth is shaped by the specific memory of the apostles' story about what happened with Israel and Jesus.

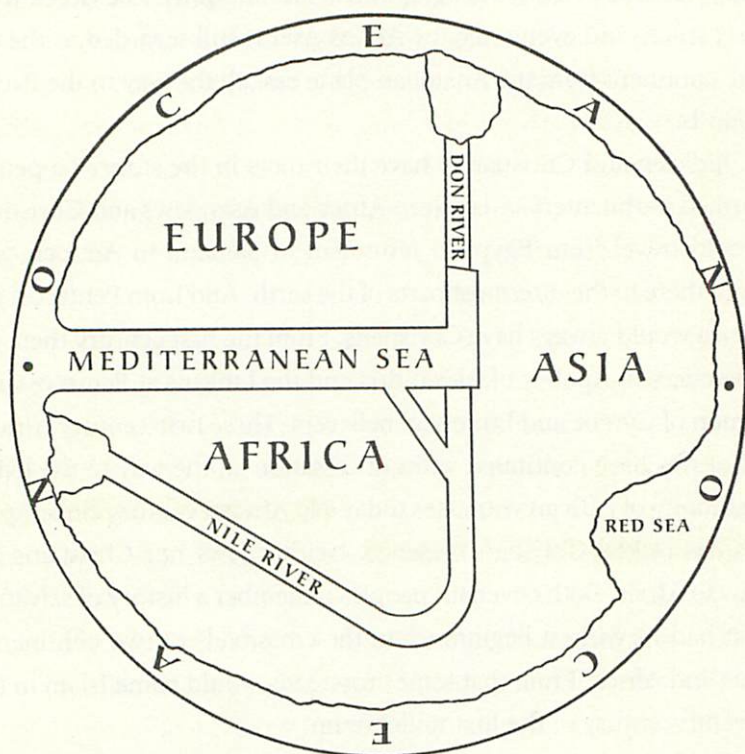
Among the chief patterns for interpreting the apostolic writings were those hewn and refined in Africa before they found a home in Europe or the Near East. This is the sweet kernel of the grain that fed Christian intellectual history before Constantine. Prior to future thorough examination, it has only the status of a curious hypothesis that needs to be investigated, but it promises a vast yield. So investigate it for yourself.

The evidences for this hypothesis will be resisted by much standard Western scholarship. It has been resisted for decades. It will be fought every step along the way. There are persistent reasons why African perspectives on early Christianity have been neglected—even systematically ignored. That evidence must in due time be presented convincingly by African minds to an African audience. When that happens effectively, the world will be listening.

### THE PIVOTAL PLACE OF AFRICA ON THE ANCIENT MAP

The early Christian historical memory was formed on three land masses —Asia, Africa and Europe. In this respect it does not differ

from textually recorded human history, which formed in the conjunction between these three great spaces. Only three, not seven. That came later. They meet at a single physical point, the historic crossroads of Jerusalem. Map 1 is a simplified form of early maps:



Map 1. Africa on early maps

By Asia in the ancient sense we refer to Palestine, Syria, Anatolia and all that lies east. The term *Asia* was used by the Greeks long before the Turks inhabited the western edge of the peninsula we now call Turkey. Gradually the term *Asia* became extended to refer to the great Anatolian plain and as far east as anyone could see or imagine. In Roman times the "Near East" goes up to the Euphrates and the

“Far East” beyond the Euphrates to the Indus Valley and down the Indian subcontinent to Kerala. This is how the term *Asia* was defined in antiquity. By the sixth century the known world would stretch east all the way over the Silk Road to China. That is clear from the crude maps and the primitive geographies of late antiquity. The Greek word *Asia* stuck, and even today by Asians *Asia* is still regarded as the entire continent from the Anatolian plane east all the way to the Pacific Islands.

Judaism and Christianity have their roots in the story of a people formed in the interface between Africa and Asia. Jews and Christians would travel from Egypt to Jerusalem to Samaria to Antioch, and from there to the uttermost parts of the earth. And from Pentecost on, Africa would always have Christians. From the first century there are references to Apollos of Alexandria and the Libyans at Pentecost and Simon of Cyrene and Ethiopian believers. These first-century African witnesses have continued without cessation all the way to the living testimony of African witnesses today. No African century since Apollos has lacked Christian presence. Neither Jews nor Christians are new to Africa. Both covenant peoples remember a history of salvation that had its earliest beginnings in the crossroads of two continents: Asia and Africa. From that same crossroads would come Islam in the seventh century of the first millennium.

By *Africa* in its ancient sense we refer to the massive continent that stretches far to the south of the Mediterranean. Geographically Africa is a continent. Culturally it is a vast medley of diverse cultures and languages. Among historic cultures known in ancient North African times are the Nilotic, Berber, Libyan, Numidian, Nubian, Ghanaian and others dating back to prehistoric times.

Some who today live on the African continent are uncomfortable about being called African. They would prefer to be identified as



Ugandans or Egyptians or Nigerians. But the most fitting way of speaking of all these millennia of ancient and modern cultures remains the term *Africa*, whatever may be its etymology. The majority of Africans and non-Africans call this continent Africa. So I will use it unapologetically as a geographical description, a single continent, aware that there remain many tensions and incongruities within that single designation.

By *Europe* in the ancient sense I refer to the territory north and west of the Straits of Byzantium, still considered the division between East and West. Europe stretches all the way from Thrace to Ireland, from Sicily to Scandinavia.

Each of these three land masses was symbolized by a leading city in the maps of late antiquity. The three great cities that pointed beyond themselves to these three continents were **Rome, Alexandria and Antioch.**

At its zenith the Afro-Hellenic city of Alexandria was larger than either Rome or Antioch, and of far more importance in the world of ideas, literature and learning. Alexandria stood for centuries as one of the three leading cities of 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.

Today there are many cities that have taken the place of Alexandria as symbolic of Africa: **Nairobi, Cairo, Lagos, Johannesburg** among them. In the ancient world there was only one other claimant alongside Alexandria that was internationally recognized on the African

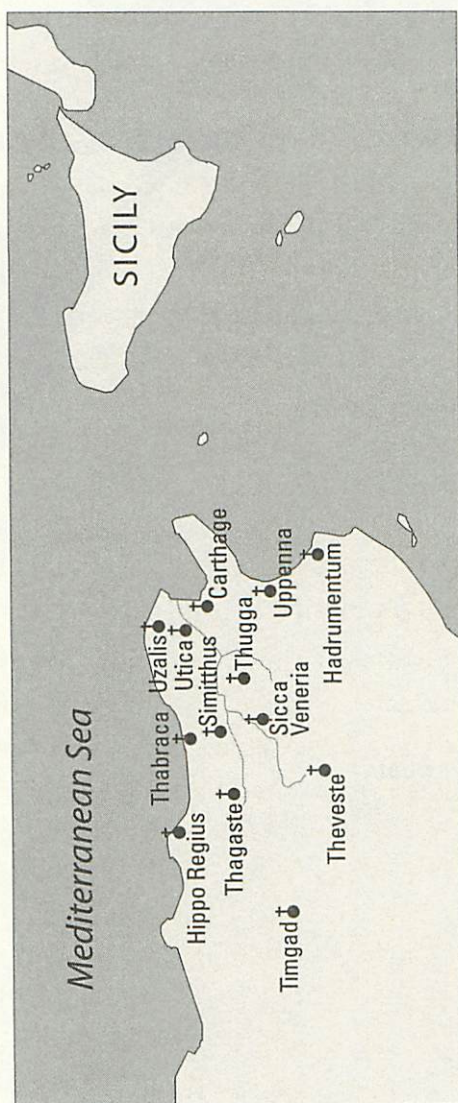
continent as representative of a significant part of Africa, and that was Carthage. For early Western Christianity, Carthage was the key city; for those east and south of Libya it was Alexandria. But even in Carthage the church observed high respect and honor toward Alexandria, due to the fact that the church of Alexandria was founded by an original apostolic eyewitness, Mark. The difference between Carthage and Alexandria was that Carthage had no known first-generation apostle comparable to Mark. Without a known figure from eyewitness New Testament times, Carthage gratefully acknowledged the prior apostolic leadership of Alexandria, which was respected everywhere any African Christian might have lived in the first millennium. In this way the whole of the vast and largely unknown continent of Africa became symbolized by the largest city in the ancient world: Alexandria. This is why Alexandria cannot be detached from Africa.

### **TWO RIVERS: THE NILE AND THE MEDJERDA—SEEDBED OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**

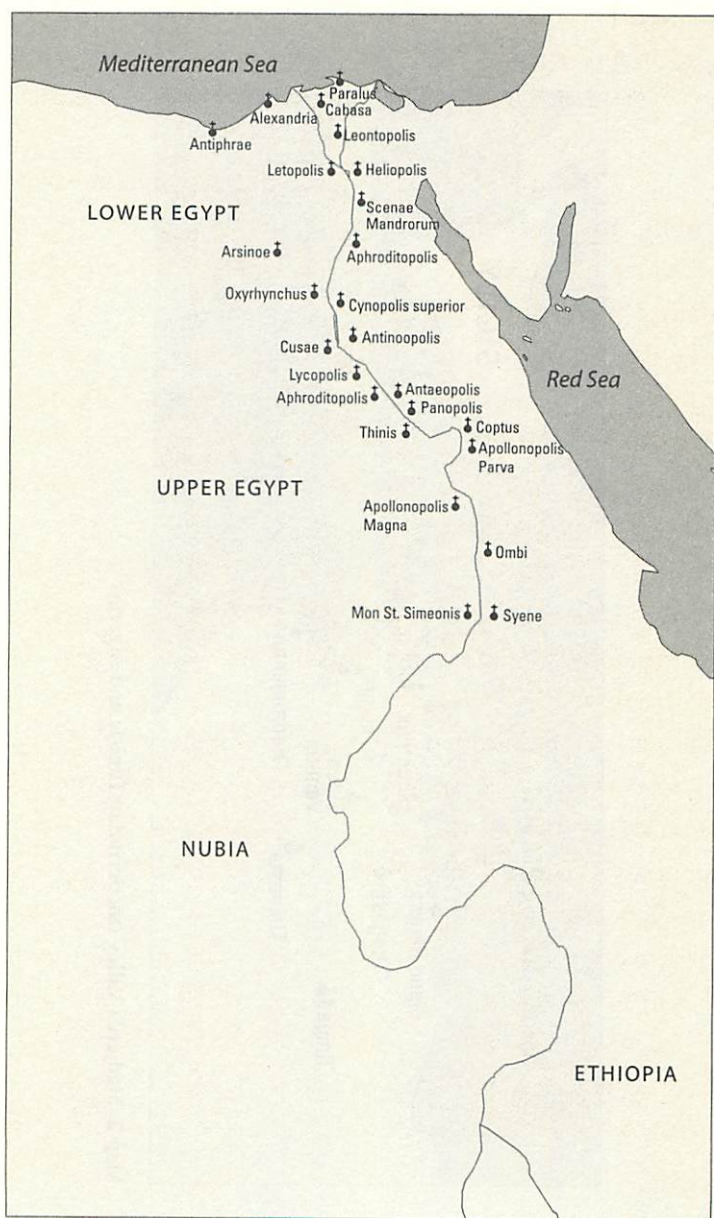
Many Christian ideas and practices traveled north to Europe from the Nile and the Numidian traditions. Nilotic and Numidian cultures are the epicenter for the pre-European history of Christianity.

This is symbolized by two mighty rivers. The great Medjerda (=Bagradas) river stretches west to east from Timgad in the old Roman province of Numidia to Carthage in the Roman province of Africa (modern-day Algeria to Tunisia) for 290 miles (450 km)—see map 2. The Nile stretches south to north 4,160 miles (6,695 km) with cataracts in southern Egypt and the Sudan and its headwaters in Uganda—see map 3. Much Christian intellectual history matured in the valleys and cities around inland river systems up and down the Nile, and throughout the mountains and deserts and valleys of the Maghreb where the Medjerda flowed.





Map 2. Medjerda Valley (modern-day Tunisia and Algeria)



Map 3. Nile Valley c. 4th century

Nilotic is the family of languages that developed along the Nile long before Judaism and Christianity came to Egypt. These were interior African languages largely unaffected by Mediterranean cultures. They became the major linguistic vehicles for grassroots Christianity in the middle Nile Valley. During the first four centuries Christianity emerged with equal vitality in the Maghreb, where the great Carthaginian and Numidian writers were Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Optatus and Augustine.

Early African Christianity centered around the two language and culture configurations on these two great river systems. The relation of African geography and Christian culture has not been sufficiently studied. The river systems are deeply interior, not coastal, so any hint that Christianity was primarily a coastal phenomena in Africa misunderstands this geography. The absence of rigorous inquiry has biased historical judgment toward the commonly held but incorrect opinion that Christianity in Africa's first millennium was primarily to be found on a thin strip of coastline.

Trade and communication occurred all along the whole Medjerda river system and the Nile river system to make commerce possible all across much of inland Africa. The desert routes led to the ports of rivers and seas. Alexandria was clearly the main connecting point between Nilotic Africa and the rest of the known world. The strategic importance of Carthage was its location near Sicily and Italy, and near the mouth of the Medjerda. The Medjerda was an incredibly fertile valley, the heart of wheat and olive growing areas. The valley was served by major ports in Utica and Carthage. Ideas and goods traveled easily from inland Africa through river and coastal waters to Spain, France, Sicily, Italy and Greece.

But where does Africa as a whole find its public voice within early



Christianity? The ancient ecumenical answer is the Alexandrian Patriarchate, symbolically embracing both the Nile and the Maghreb due to the latter's deference to the Marcan apostolate. The bishop of Alexandria, the see established by Mark, embraced not just one city but symbolically a whole continent, even if largely unknown (just as the bishop of Rome following Peter embraced far more than a single city). The see of Alexandria referred primarily to the Eastern churches of the continent that spoke in the inland Nilotic languages and wrote in the international literary and trade language of Greek. The see of Carthage referred to the western African churches where the Berber, Punic and Capsian languages of the Maghreb were spoken, as well as the international political, literary and trade language of Latin. These two African regions of ancient Christianity, east and west, joined together in being symbolically represented among the patriarchates by the earlier Marcan apostolate.

In this way Latin African orthodoxy became chiefly transmitted through the Western Christian tradition, while eastern African orthodoxy became transmitted chiefly through the Eastern Christian traditions (including Coptic, Greek, Syriac and, by the end of the millennium, Arabic). Through the rapid spread of the monastic movement the African ascendancy in ideas would reach quickly northward to saturate the Palestinian, Antiochene, Syriac, Greek and Armenian traditions of the fourth century, and by the fifth century, Gaul and Ireland.

By sea and land, early Africa significantly shaped the basic layers of both Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity. East and West were closely coordinated dogmatically through the mid-fourth century, with only a few exceptions. Tendencies to Montanism and responses to Chalcedon were debated somewhat differently in eastern and western Africa, but the core of ecumenical consent was firmly in

place in Africa, where much of it had formed. This ecumenical consensus on exegesis, doctrine and liturgy is why so much Nilotic Christianity could be treated respectfully in the Maghreb.

The first arrival of Christianity in Africa can be pushed back to dates much earlier than Western historical skepticism has typically allowed. This will require further examination of archaeological and textual evidence. The early Alexandrian tradition may indeed go back to the sixties, fifties or possibly even the forties. The evidences for the history of the transmission of this tradition has been largely ignored by the previous generation of European scholars. "European chauvinism" is a kind way of speaking about this neglect.

Similarly ignored are the earliest hints of Christian presence in the Maghreb, where, with the Martyrs of Scilli, there was firm written evidence of Christian occupation by 180 C.E. It remains an evidentiary puzzle for form-critical scholars to show that those African martyrs in 180 must have been previously active to penetrate as far into the Numidian inland as they did during the middle of the second century. A good case can be made that Christianity of the Medjerda River system goes back even into the first century from Carthage west. For it is implausible that the Madaura and Scilli martyrs would be ready to die for the faith if they had just appeared in North Africa immediately before 180 C.E. The fantasy that Christianity had only recently arrived in 180 requires extreme explaining. The greater probability is for a much earlier Christian presence.

#### AFFIRMING ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITIONS

Scholars and advocates of African traditional religions are justifiably grateful for their oral traditions. They have shaped tribal communities and villages all over Africa for untold generations.

The genre of "African traditional religions" has sometimes been

defined so narrowly as to rule out the great written traditions as if they were not also truly African, and not so profoundly “traditional African.” The sad result is that it is sometimes wrongly assumed that African traditional religion largely lacks written texts. That premise is a huge mistake, but it nonetheless has been wrongly taken by some for fact.

African traditional religions south of the Sahara were largely conveyed by oral means. When viewed from north of the Sahara, the African traditional religions were conveyed historically by both oral and written traditions. The written records of Christians in Egypt and the Maghreb are vast and important. This has weighty bearing on many vexing issues: African Christian identity, Muslim-Christian relations, the mending of the distance and alienation between northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. If we fast-forward from ancient to modern Africa, we find that the interface between oral and written traditions has become a decisive issue. The current dilemma of African Christian theological identity hinges significantly on how it is solved.

The Bantus, as a test case, have migrated from central Africa steadily south to new territories in the far south since the seventeenth century. They relied on oral tradition until the nineteenth century. The Egyptian Christians have steadily resided in the Nile Valley for almost two thousand years. Could it be said that Bantu oral traditions (only arrived in parts of the south within the last few centuries) are more an expression of African traditional religion than Egyptian Christianity? That requires an odd definition of “traditional African religion,” a better definition of which would include both Bantus and Egyptian Christians.

Is Islam more of a traditional religion in Algeria than Christianity? Only if you somehow can forget the distinguished history from the



second through the seventh centuries. A broader perspective on African history requires a broader definition of African traditional religion than is common among many modern anthropologists and some theologians.

The tension rises when the value of the southern oral traditions appear to be challenged and diminished when placed in the intimidating presence of long-esteemed sacred written texts of North Africa. If Jewish and Christian sacred texts and their interpretations are ruled out, the primal native oral religious traditions of Africa today seem vastly at risk and vulnerable, however rich and moving they may be. If they do not have a written history and centuries of texts of commentary, they seem, within the context of modernity, to be comparatively powerless in the presence of the Septuagint (third century B.C.E.), the New Testament (first century C.E.), and the Qur'an (seventh century C.E.). It is a category mistake to rule the interpretation of Jewish and Christian Scriptures out of early African history.

Some scholars of African culture have regrettably acquired a persistent habit of assuming that Christianity began in Africa only a couple of centuries ago, strictly imported from "the West" or "the North." They appear to view Africa as only two or three centuries deep, not two or three millennia. This false start is repeated frequently in some well-intended African theological literature. Even the best of African theologians have been tempted to fall into the stereotype that Christianity came from Europe. This is a narrow, modern view of history, ignoring Christianity's first millennium, when African thought shaped and conditioned virtually every diocese in Christianity worldwide.

African theologians in the last half century have been singularly preoccupied with fighting the dominance of the modern West, especially during the period in which the struggle for political indepen-



dence and national identity was crucial for African consciousness. They have fought in part by asserting the legitimacy of African traditional religious patterns, motifs, rituals and memories. But they have fought without their best and nearest weapon: the ancient texts of African Christianity.

What has happened to classic ecumenical Christianity under these conditions? It has been excluded from the prevailing definitions of "traditional Africa." Christianity cannot be traditionally African, according to this stereotype, because it was supposedly imported from Europe. Wrong on both counts, because the ecumenical consensus was largely defined in Africa! And if twenty centuries of presence do not make a religion traditional, what is to be done with Islam, which is younger than Africa by six centuries? Modern Christianity has been thought to have brought only oppression to Africa according to this misshapen memory. Hence to be truly African is to resent Christianity and the West. But what if the West is more deeply indebted to Africa than has been imagined? To answer this we must go back to the African literary texts of the third and fourth centuries.

What follows is an attempt to rework this misinformed premise on the basis of a series of clearer descriptions of the historic relation of Africa and Europe.

#### SELF-EFFACEMENT AND THE RECOVERY OF DIGNITY

The resulting problem is one that Kwame Bediako calls "a crisis of African identity." It is the subtle but profound self-perception, especially in sub-Saharan African traditional religion, that Africa lacks intellectual subtlety and substance. Having seemingly no firm textual history, it unconsciously treats itself as if standing intrinsically at a hopeless disadvantage.

This has spawned a dilemma of self-esteem. The oral traditions of

African traditional religion have seemed to have less value or authority than written texts. The comparison of orality to textuality always seems tilted and unfair. The cultural and intellectual richness of native African religion is wrongly thought to be largely primal and oral. So it imagines itself as burdened with a desperate disadvantage in relation to written traditions. This is not a fair playing field. Africa has enough experience of real disadvantage that it is hardly useful to add another one unnecessarily.

There can be no doubt that these oral traditions in Africa have suffered deeply from acquisitive colonialism. This makes the oral-written gap seem even more unfair. When victims are tempted to view themselves as entirely victimized by others' domineering wills, then the sense of immobility and despair takes deeper hold. The movements of African national independence have been rightly determined to break through the power of this despair. But lacking the historical wisdom that is rightly its own African achievement and possession (even though ignored), it often seems a despairing struggle against despair.

If all religious truth in pre-Christian, precolonial Africa had in fact been transmitted orally, there might be some more plausible rationale for defensiveness. Africa would then appear to have only (or mostly) an oral tradition to offer to global Christianity and world intellectual history. This muted despair is a prevailing subtext in the popular literature on African traditional religion, despite heroic efforts to overcome it.

While the primal oral traditions are multigenerational and powerful, they vary greatly from locale to locale. Meanwhile they are confronting the awesome lure of religions of the book—Christianity and Islam. Serious attempts have been made to state the general characteristics of African traditional religions, but they tend to fall short of the wide variability and diversity of the local phenomena. This feel-

ing of vulnerability characterizes much of the rhetorical defense of African traditional religious consciousness as it stands in the face of Western modernity with its intimidating technology and long historical written traditions. This defensiveness can be overcome by more accurately reconceiving African traditional religion to include some of its most stable and durable components: Islam and Christianity. Both Islam and Christianity do well to develop more, not less, respect for what is commonly called African traditional religion.

### THE MISSING LINK: THE EARLY AFRICAN WRITTEN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

There is, however, a precolonial African Christianity that does not depend on either Western or European sources. It is a rich and thoroughly African written intellectual tradition of the highest quality.

In the period of its greatest vitality, the first half of the first millennium, the African intellect blossomed so much that it was sought out and widely emulated by Christians of the northern and eastern Mediterranean shores. Origen, an African, was actively sought out by the teachers of Caesarea Palestina. Lactantius was invited by Emperor Diocletian (245-313) to be a teacher of literature in his Asian palace in Bythinia. Augustine was invited to teach in Milan. There are dozens of similar cases of intellectual movement from Africa to Europe—Plotinus, Valentinus, Tertullian, Marius Victorinus and Pachomius among them.

This point must be savored unhurriedly to sink in deeply: The Christians to the south of the Mediterranean were teaching the Christians to the north. Africans were informing and instructing and educating the very best of Syriac, Cappadocian and Greco-Roman teachers. This flow of intellectual leadership in time matured into the ecumenical consensus on how to interpret sacred Scripture and hence into the core of Christian dogma.



The common misperception is directly the opposite—that intellectual leadership typically moved from the north to the south, from Europe to Africa. But in Christian history, contrary to this common assumption, the flow of intellectual leadership demonstrably moved largely from Africa to Europe—south to north. But has this yet been demonstrated? These arguments await explicit unpacking, but the evidence is clearly there. It remains the task of a generation of future scholars, many of them from Africa, to restudy the flow of ideas from Africa to Europe and to better describe their impact.

It took years of working daily in the history of exegesis for those of us editing the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture to realize how profound had been the African influence on every subsequent phase of scriptural interpretation. We were not prepared for the breadth and power of this evidence. Nowhere in the literature could we find this influence explained. Everywhere in the literature it seemed to be either ignored or resisted. It came only from decades of experience with African texts and ideas. Finally we learned to trace the path back from Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Nisibis and Rome to its origins in Africa.

This intellectual leadership moved by land from the Nile Valley to the deserts of the Negev, the hills of Judea, and north through Syria and Cappadocia, and by sea to all points north. The core ideas of the monastic movements moved from the Nitrian desert and from the Pharaonic-speaking central Nile Valley north to the lauras and monastic communities of the Jordan, and all the way to the Tigris and Halys Rivers during the fourth and fifth centuries. All these brilliant centers of mind and spirit from Gaza to Nazianzus (Asia Minor) were constantly being fed by the ideas flowing from Africa in the third and early fourth centuries. The Christian leaders in Africa figured out how best to read the law and prophets meaningfully, to think philo-

sophically, and to teach the ecumenical rule of triune faith cohesively, long before these patterns became normative elsewhere.

Inattention to this south-to-north movement has been unhelpful (even hurtful) to the African sense of intellectual self-worth. It has seemed to leave Africa as if without a sense of distinguished literary and intellectual history. But this is a history that Africa already owns but which has remained buried and ignored.

European intellectual history has gone on to proceed as if the great Christian intellectual and literary textual traditions of the Nile Valley and the Maghreb did not even exist. Its vast effects on Europe have not been grasped. Much of its history has been dismissed as heretical, as argued by German scholars like Adolf von Harnack and Walter Bauer, based on criteria that prevailed centuries later in Europe, interpretations which now are increasingly regarded as unpersuasive. Even today many African-born scholars trained in the West seem all too ready to play the role of European chameleons.

Even for African scholars the ancient African intellects whose ideas were formed on African soil are still regarded as if they were essentially Greek or Roman, and hardly African at all. This is a form of self-deprivation, self-emulation and self-flagellation that African Christianity must at last get beyond. It is absurd for Africans to disown their own illustrious theological roots that came out of African soil and the African struggle. It is ironic to misconceive this denial as if it were a true defense of African identity. It is time for young African scholars to study these defensive dynamics diligently.

#### WHY AFRICA HAS SEEMED TO THE WEST TO LACK INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

These are bold assertions. They remain to many European intellectuals largely ignorable. They are entirely counterintuitive. Why? Is it because



the intelligentsia and refined historians have intuitively assumed the mental superiority of north to south? Did I say it? Can I take it back? It seems like an incredible charge, cheeky even to think, shameful to say out loud. So I'll state it more modestly: Well-meaning European and American historians have a tilted perception of the relation of African and European intellectual history in the third and fourth centuries, and thus at the apex of African influence. This perception is prejudicial. The facts show that the intuition is wrong. These facts must be carefully set forth with convincing evidence.

That is what this book is about: to state the African seedbed hypothesis in a measured way and begin to sort out the facts that support it. If true, this will call for the reframing of an agenda for young African Christian scholars and laity. They may now choose to become more historically aware. The "young Africa" envisioned here is both young in the sense of being newly emergent within the ethos of the collapse of modernity, and young in the second sense of that which has appeared much earlier—indeed in ancient African times. There is an irony in speaking of "young Africa." It is at once a very youthful survivor of wearisome modernity, and a most ancient, early, and, in that sense, young expression of both early Christianity and ancient Africa.

If ancient Christianity is not yet indigenous, then the seventeenth-century arrival of many Bantus in Zululand is not yet indigenous. If first-millennium Christianity is not yet traditional in Africa, then the seventh-century arrival of Arabic cultures to Africa is not yet traditional. If fourth-century Ethiopian Christianity is not yet native to African culture, then the ninth-century arrival of the camel is not yet native to African culture.

At stake here is a more consistent definition of the terms like *indigenous*, *traditional* and *native*. If two thousand years of Christian history still fall short of being regarded "at home" in Africa, then what

could qualify as African? What else has lasted two thousand years? Christianity has even outlasted Pharaonic religion, in some ways by incorporating some of its key features. The hundreds of millions of Christians dwelling in Africa provide more than enough testimony that they feel quite at home. Christianity is not alien to Africa or to African traditional religion.

The political and military relation between Islam and Christianity is one of the world's most perplexing dilemmas. Does this early Christian history merely complicate that relation, or does it illuminate it? We will take this exploration step by step, not presuming a quick or easy answer, but with the hope of a truly edifying outcome.

## INTERLUDE

At first glance the subject of early African Christianity seems alien to most Westerners—remote, distant and opaque. The smells and tastes and sounds and music and art of these believers seem unfamiliar. The ruined basilicas of early Africa seem far distant from the space we live in. Or are they? The music of ancient Africa does not sing in our hearts. Or does it? The cadences of the rhythms of the prayers of ancient African believers do not echo in our hearts—or do they? We do not have a ready imagination for seeing the beauty and color and design of early Christian mosaics. But what if we take a look? Go to Old Cairo or Tunis to see the tapestries and mosaics.

Culturally, we seem to be at a great distance from the values that have long survived under harsh conditions on that vast continent. On closer look, however, the achievements of early Christians in Africa are still being sustained unconsciously and unknowingly even by Western attitudes. It may be that just these values freight the wisdom to reunite us as human beings, to guide us as social beings, to enliven us in spiritual freedom.



PART ONE

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The African Seedbed  
of Western Christianity



## A FORGOTTEN STORY



The telling of Africa's ancient Christian heritage has languished for many centuries. Though it needs telling, there is some reticence to think that anyone from the West is adequately equipped to tell it. Yet it is so important to the history of Africa and global Christianity that it needs to be told accurately and without unfounded conjectures.

### WHO CAN TELL IT?

Some Westerners will turn away from even hearing of Africa's ancient Christian heritage because of seated prejudices about the assumed unimportance of Africa to world history. There are other impediments: Political barriers such as those prevailing in Libya, Algeria and Sudan have prevented much of the story to be told earlier. The revolutions, terrorism and repressions following the Algerian struggle of 1956 have shut down borders. I have twice been denied entrance into Libya, even with a government-stamped visa in hand.

The ensuing obstacles to international travel have given the impression that there is no magnificent Christian history in North Africa, or not much. There seems to be little archaeological or textual or art history evidence. But that perception is changing. Now the

story can be retold based both on new evidence and the reexamination of old or neglected evidence.

The story begs not only to be told but to be much further developed by research into its unexamined texts and artifacts, its economic, sociological, political and demographic features. It requires study by those who have expertise in the relevant languages of the historic texts, especially Arabic and Coptic and Ge'ez. Though Coptic and Orthodox Christians in the north of Africa will already have heard episodes of this story, most global Christians have only the sketchiest notion.

The name of the story is early African Christianity. It is not about Coptic Christianity alone or black Africa alone or Byzantine Greek Christianity alone or Latin Christianity alone or Nilotic Christianity alone, but all of these together. The best way of naming these varieties is by the ancient generic term *Africa*.

It especially needs to be retold in Africa by African parents to African children. Non-Africans are deeply moved by this story when it is straightforwardly told. How Africa shaped the Western mind is a story that belongs to the West as well as to Africa. Yet I have remained reticent until now to bear this responsibility, despite years of study of Africa's patristic texts, its archaeological remains, its art history and its current literature. The reticence is due to the withering question, Who are you to speak? Dr. Tite Tienou has advised: "Who are you? You are the one who has spent decades digging into the evidence. Don't hold it back."

So this attempt should be understood only as an early embryonic effort for others to nurture and improve upon. Its purpose is to encourage future generations of African scholarship to tell the story more adequately. But these new voices are still in preparation. The only advantage to hearing it in a Western accent is that it saves Afri-



can accents from the accusation that they are exaggerating.

Even with these ambivalences, there are justifiable reasons to proceed with this preliminary inquiry with the resources available. African Christians cannot further postpone the quest for lost roots. A wider database of information is needed, and needed soon. Primary texts written centuries ago need to be translated and made available. They have been too long buried. The age of digital communication gives new opportunities to make much more of it accessible.

Why not just wait for those generations of scholarship to emerge? The main reason: Africa cannot wait to discover its own rich history. The struggle for identity is urgent and mounting. Every Christian and Muslim believer will be touched by that struggle. It will not permit delay. Both Muslims and Christians need to know much more than they now know about North African Christian and Muslim history in order to enter with realism into these hazardous times.

#### PILGRIMAGE SITES NEGLECTED

Sub-Saharan Africans await the delight of learning what happened long ago in the Nile and the Maghreb. At some point southern Africans are going to be traveling north to learn much more of their own African Christian roots. They need not go to Europe to discover those roots. There are an abundance of ancient Christian sites in Africa, some among the most ancient, the most impressive and beautiful.

The ancient pilgrimage sites of North African Christianity are currently poised for a massive increase of visitors from all over the world. New travelers will be welcomed to places like Hippo, Carthage, Wadi al-Natrun, Axum, Khartoum and Old Cairo—to parts of Africa that have not seemed all that welcoming previously.

Those who lack basic knowledge of early African Christianity will be missing some major pieces of the puzzle in the understanding of

North Africa. They are likely to hear little from guides and government officials about the early centuries of Christian history that lie buried under the sand. They will not learn much about early African Christianity from the travel handbooks or tourist agencies or travel industries that still are heavily accountable to government interests. Church leaders will not learn this history by reading English sources, since most are not in English. Scholars educated in the best Western universities will miss a lot of it because it has already been discounted in these universities or dislodged by dubious preconceptions.

Early African Christianity has been long neglected even in Egypt, where vast sums have been spent on archaeology and where millions of Christians still live. The levels of disregard of some Christian sites in the Maghreb are even more shameful than in Egypt. Many of these ancient locations are unknown even to experienced historians, archaeologists, paleographers, travelers and explorers. We must look toward future generations of African scholarship to correct and improve the information systems and databases we now possess.

Even with these limitations, anyone who might be able to consider taking a pilgrimage to North African Christian sites will be abundantly rewarded spiritually and aesthetically by the mosaics, architecture, monuments and artifacts that can be found with just a little effort. Those interested in reading more in African history will find the available literature intriguing but incomplete. Pilgrims to Africa bring an empty cup to a full spring. Current efforts to reassess and understand these lost sites and texts and narratives are modest and should proceed without making any pretenses of being definitive. The authoritative inquiries will be made not by Europeans or Westerners, but by young Africans over several coming generations.

Scratch the surface of the archaeology of the North African coastal and inland Christianity in Numidia, Mauretania, Byzacena and Libya,



and you will find the remains of ruins of many martyrial oratories and cemeteries and churches that date to the fourth and fifth centuries, and some as early as the third (see map 4 of pre-Constantinian churches). Many are not even properly identified or grasped by map-makers or guides as significant. They are often missed by a tourist industry that, if it understood its own self-interest better, would be identifying these faceless sites and bringing global visitors there to discover for themselves the treasures long buried. But that task is not yet perceived to rank high among the priorities of tourism in Africa, though it some day will. The civil authorities in northern Africa have shown limited interest in archaeological projects that hint at a crucial intellectual history, textual remains and paleographic artifacts of Christians in the centuries before the Arab conquest.

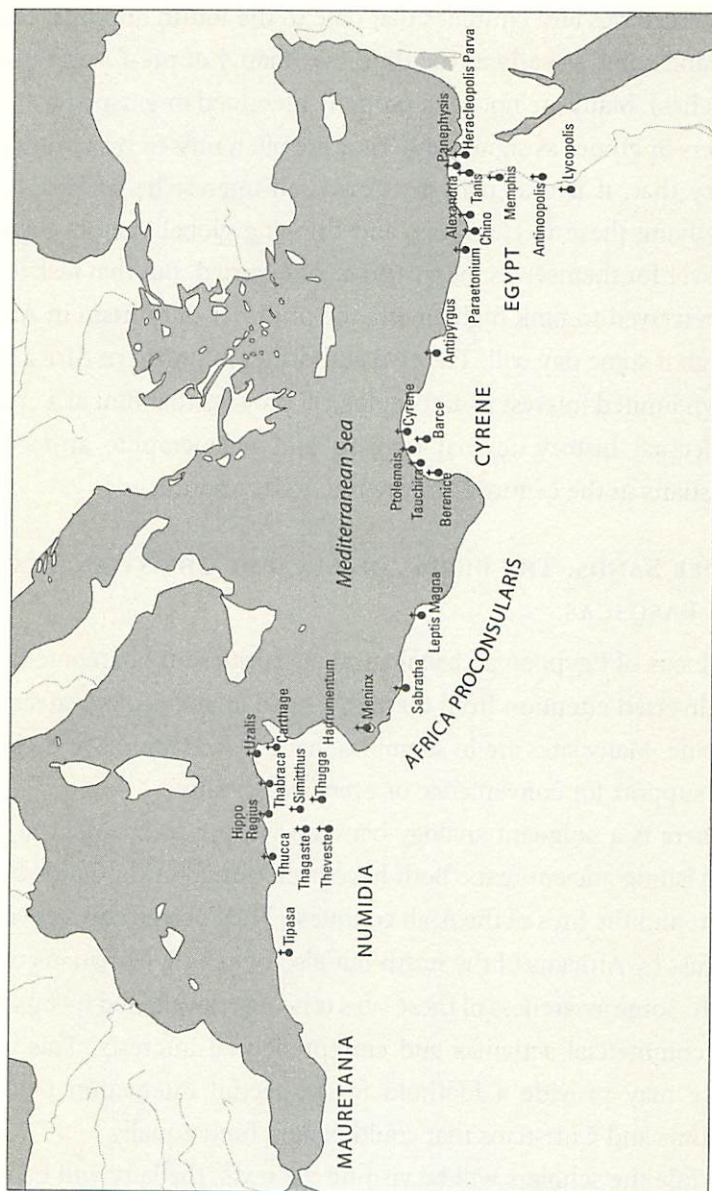
#### UNDER SANDS: THE BURIAL OF ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS AND BASILICAS

The focus of Egyptian archaeological authorities on Pharaonic Egypt has diverted attention from the rich Christian archaeological sites in the Nile. Many sites are in shambles, hard to find and have no logistical support for convenience or even accessibility.

There is a poignant analogy between visiting archaeological sites and visiting ancient texts. Both have been buried in the sands of the desert and the fires of the Arab conquest. They need to be recovered, not just by Africans of the north but also by young Christians of the south. Some awareness of these sites is being reawakened by business and commercial activities and entrepreneurial interests. This commerce may provide a foothold for respectful interaction between Muslims and Christians that could benefit both equally.

While the scholars will be visiting the texts, the laity will be visiting the sites. Both may become priorities for reconstructing mutual





Map 4. Pre-Constantinian churches

interests in the troubled Christian-Muslim relationship. Business interests of the south, east and west of Africa are beginning to discover common interests in Tunisia and Morocco as well as Egypt. Algeria and Libya are poised for massive tourist numbers. Sudan may be the most difficult area to restore trade relations. Christian business people from Nigeria to South Africa are finding common interests in North Africa, and may become the natural peacemakers.

The arenas of archaeology and linguistics need to be thoroughly restudied—archaeology because so many sites are unexcavated, and linguistics because so many of the root words in the sub-Saharan African languages have deep affinities with the Amharic, Semitic, Nilotic and Arabic language systems that have been appropriated by both Muslims and Christians over a millennium. Linguistic affinities may point to greater hidden links between the headwaters of the Nile in Uganda and the lower Nile Delta.

## SEVEN WAYS AFRICA SHAPED THE CHRISTIAN MIND



What providence or sociology has sustained African orthodoxy for two thousand years? There is no doubt that something has sustained it. Questions remain as to what and how.

My purpose is to seek out the core of the African legacy to Christianity. How did Africa shape the Christian mind? The Christian mind of which I speak is not contemporary Christian teaching alone but the deepest layers of the earliest history of the Christian teaching. The Christian Africa of which I speak is the Africa of more than a thousand years ago. What did Africa give to world Christianity and especially to its intellectual formation?

In this chapter I will show

- how the birth of the European *university* was anticipated within African Christianity
- how Christian historical and spiritual *exegesis* of Scripture first matured in Africa



- how African thinkers shaped the very core of the most basic early Christian *dogma*
- how early *ecumenical* decisions followed African conciliar patterns
- how Africa shaped Western forms of *spiritual formation* through monastic discipline
- how Neoplatonic *philosophy* of late antiquity moved from Africa to Europe
- how influential *literary* and *dialectical* skills were refined in Africa

If the core of this legacy had been already well-defined and consensually established, it would be unnecessary to restate it here. There is, however, a kind of amnesia among historians about these matters. For various reasons they have lost track of the African underpinning these legacies. My purpose here is to state the legacy in summary form rather than present a detailed explanation for each arena. All of these lines of argument need further investigation by a new generation of African scholars. Without being fully fleshed-out, these are here only introduced.

In examining these influences it would be equally possible to present a case for the contributions of Asia and Europe to Africa, but that is not our subject. My purpose is to fill a conspicuous vacuum in historical awareness of the intellectual excellences of Africa in the ancient world. The African legacy to Europe, Asia and the rest of world history, though misplaced, can be rediscovered. That is the task at hand.

#### HOW THE WESTERN IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY WAS BORN IN THE CRUCIBLE OF AFRICA

The unrivaled library of Alexandria was the model for university libraries all over Europe. It was unexcelled for five centuries.

The experimental academic model that later became transformed into the Western idea of the university was first an embryo in the community that surrounded that Alexandria library. Is it not proper to say that the European university was born in Africa? If not born, at least conceived. The vast learning community of philosophers, scientists, writers, artists and educators that surrounded the Alexandrian library of the third century provided the essential archetype of the university for all of medieval Europe. The history of the first medieval universities such as Padua (Italy), Paris (France), Salamanca (Spain) and Oxford (England) followed methods of text examination, curricular patterns and philosophical imperatives that were refined in second-century African Christianity as early as Pantaenus and Clement of Alexandria. Clement's writings, the *Stromateis* and *Paedagogus*, reveal much of the method and content of education that became normative in the medieval university.

Cassiodorus founded his scriptorium of scholars in the sixth-century south Italian Vivarium (a monastery) based on models that had been well-tested in Alexandria two centuries before he found them operational in Constantinople. The academic community in Constantinople, still located in the physical residence of the University of Istanbul today, was patterned after academic communities and libraries in Cyrenaica (Libya), Alexandria (Egypt), Carthage (Tunisia), and Hippo (Algeria). African monastic patterns of relating the life of the mind to responsibility in the world became the pattern for study under Alcuin, whose court academy under Charlemagne imprinted the whole of proto-European university education.

Christian scholarship was born in the leading academic center of the ancient world: Alexandria. That vital crucible of learning was itself transformed by Christianity and exported to Rome, the Rhone valley, Byzantium and Antioch. That is only the first step in unpack-



ing the African seedbed hypothesis. The next one follows.

## HOW CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE FIRST MATURED IN AFRICA

Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa (all of the fourth century C.E.) were crucial in defining early Christian thinking on God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit for orthodox Christianity, both East and West. But it is easy to forget that these Cappadocian fathers were decisively shaped by extensive exegesis of Scripture from Africa. Basil and the Gregories introduced Origen's basic teaching and forms of exegesis of Scripture to both Europe and Asia in their early collection called the *Philocalia* (c. 360). The rules and methods for interpreting Scripture were decisively shaped not only by Africa's greatest scientific investigator of sacred texts, Origen, but also by fourth- and fifth-century African exegetes like Didymus the Blind, Tyconius and Augustine of Hippo.

The normative early Greek and Latin Bibles before Jerome (the Septuagint and the Old Latin Bible versions) were both products of Africa. The perplexing relation of the Old and New Testaments was studied with great philological precision by Christians from Africa of the first three Christian centuries. These patterns of interpretation became decisive for later studies in Syriac, Greek and Latin, and much later in German, French and English exegesis.

The editors that produced the twenty-eight volumes of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture at Drew University were astonished to find such a large percentage of texts from Africa or influenced by African writers among the patristic comments on verse after verse of Scripture. Many leading themes of the widely read homilies of John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Ambrose followed Origen, Didymus and Cyril of Alexandria in specific details.



During the fourteen years of investigating patristic texts that were required to edit the commentary, this was one of our most unexpected discoveries.

Virtually all Christian exegetes following Origen and Didymus the Blind actively borrowed from their studies in large portions, even while at times resisting or opposing certain aspects of the checkered tradition later called "Origenism." The heresy of Origenism, a movement that came after Origen's death, was condemned ecumenically for certain obviously skewed misinterpretations (e.g., preexistence of the soul, eternal creation, the stars have souls), yet the misinterpretations were largely fragmented statements of the broken pieces of the careful dialectic found in Origen's own writings. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that the greatest fourth-century Christian exegetes of East and West (Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine) were all profoundly influenced by the writings of Origen. Even when Origen's detractors rejected his excesses, they continued to depend on his philological, linguistic and historical studies.

This recognition breaks directly through the stereotype that lurks in much modern European scholarship—the overstated opposition between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis. For decades these two methods have been viewed as if they were polar opposites instead of complementary tendencies found in virtually all early Christian biblical interpreters.

#### HOW AFRICAN SOURCES SHAPED EARLY CHRISTIAN DOGMA

These African exegetes powerfully affected the dogmatic formulations of the orthodoxy of the East and the West. Dogmatic definitions were working off of textual interpretations hammered out chiefly in Africa, the Maghreb and the Nile Valley. Their definitions of Christol-

ogy and the Trinity were profoundly shaped by definitions and concepts that were defined decades earlier in Africa by Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine and Cyril. The growing theological wisdom of Leo the Great, Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great emerged later on north Mediterranean shores many generations after African Christian teachers had already hammered out their basic terms. Western Christian dogma was formed with precision in Africa before it became ecumenically received worldwide.

The Diaspora Jews residing in the Nile Delta were a very large community. The great Cappadocian writers, upon whom so much depended in post-Constantinian Christianity, could not have done their work without the scriptural expositors of the Nile. They relied especially on the Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities who had for generations been thoroughly indigenized in Africa.

Many Jews had lived multiple generations in Africa, especially in the great international city of Alexandria, for two or three centuries before the coming of Christianity. This is evident from their extraordinarily influential translation into Greek of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. At its apex the brilliant Jewish intellectual tradition of Africa produced Philo with his approach to biblical events and metaphors. This Jewish community became a seedbed of preparation for the gospel that would echo throughout world Christianity.

The major battles with heresy were fought out in Africa before they were received ecumenically. Gnosticism, Arianism, Montanism, Marcionism and Manichaeism were all thoroughly argued as problems of biblical interpretation in Africa before these arguments reached clear definitions in the Rhone and Rhine and Orontes Valleys. What Irenaeus and Hippolytus of Rome learned about Gnosticism was learned largely from African sources (Valentinus, Basilides, the Sethians). The precocious intellectual developments in the Afri-

can river valleys of the Medjerda and the Nile informed subsequent Asian and European Christian orthodoxy. It is a major miscalculation of many historians of dogma (in the tradition of Hegel, Harnack and Bauer) to have so absentmindedly skewed this insight.

It is not difficult to see that from Athanasius came the crucial defense of classical Christianity against Arian readings of the Gospel of John. What is difficult to see is that this controversy is thoroughly African in character, language and spirit. The astute reasoning set forth by Athanasius had already long resided quietly in the apostolic memory and tradition, but was articulated by the leading bishop of Africa in opposition to another influential Libyan claimant, Arius. The Nicene formula was so keenly refined by Athanasius that, though contested, it found its way into the center of ecumenical orthodoxy. Even when strongly resisted at first by the imperial authorities of Constantinople, Athanasian scriptural interpretation in time became normative after the First Council of Constantinople (381) and the Creed of the 150 fathers, and the rest is ecumenical history.

#### HOW EARLY ECUMENICAL DECISION MAKING FOLLOWED AFRICAN CONCILIAR PATTERNS

The early African councils provided a practical model for ecumenical debate and resolution. The conciliar movement, which began in Jerusalem (c. 45 C.E.) as reported by Luke, took on formal characteristics in African debates in Carthage, Alexandria, Hippo and Milevis that would gradually come to define the methods for achieving ecumenical consensus elsewhere.

Major decisions made by ecumenical conciliar processes in North Africa under the leadership of Cyprian and the bishops of Numidia, Byzacena, Carthage and Mauretania were closely followed in the general ecumenical councils. Africa was the region that first set the pat-



tern and method for seeking wider ecumenical consent on contested points of scriptural interpretation.

A century prior to the First Council of Nicaea (325), these African churches were firmly established, courageously led, actively growing and vital worshipping communities, able to stand boldly against a vaunted order of civic religious idolatry that had behind it enormous power—the power of life and death. African churches, especially in the Medjerda Valley under Cyprian, developed highly sophisticated protocols and procedures for drawing together Christian leaders in councils to reach agreement on conflicted questions. They debated disruptive issues through rigorous scriptural inquiry. These were not debates primarily about philosophical language, but about the texts of Scripture. They came to discrete judgments based on mutual consent. The votes were reported and the debates summarized, and they became the beginnings of canon law. These actions became known as the conciliar process, and in time the ecumenical movement. The councils gave clear leadership to the divided faithful and drew them, despite their cultural differences, toward consensual decision making. These councils were widely utilized in African synods before proceeding to the first ecumenical council at Nicaea. The records of the early African councils were carefully observed and maintained in Carthage, Alexandria, Hippo, Rome and later Constantinople.

It is not sheer accident that the methods of the conciliar movement were well-established in Africa before widely employed elsewhere. And it is not difficult to see that it was from African bishops like Agrippinus and Cyprian, and the African-born Pope Victor that the impulse for conciliarity first developed. What is more difficult to see is that this penchant is thoroughly African in character, context and disposition.

Young African scholars are beginning to give special attention to

the conciliar tradition of the African church. All who dig into the earliest history of the conciliar movement find themselves immediately digging into African texts. The most influential ecumenical debates first occurred largely in the great African cities of Carthage, Hippo, Milevis and Alexandria. Arianism, Sabellianism, Gnosticism and Pelagianism were debated and largely decided in Africa before they were debated elsewhere. Young African scholars are discovering that consensual or ecumenical Christianity was essentially molded in Africa before Europe through this highly dialectical, interactive and consultative conciliar process. Though we have records of these regional African synods dating back to 248 C.E., it is likely that they were embryonically functioning even earlier in Carthage and Alexandria. The deliberative processes that led to consensual Christian orthodoxy were worked out largely in North Africa. Yet the literature on the history of ecumenism hardly mentions this. Many of the actual decisions made by the early African councils are still observed as weighty precedents of canon law throughout vast reaches of global Christianity.

Roman Christianity before Nicaea was intensely preoccupied with what was happening in Africa as a result of the serious crisis on the readmission of penitents into communion. The struggle focused on a question still pertinent: who is properly penitent after falling from grace? This was then a thoroughly African question, and remains so today. At Nicaea again the spotlight fell on previous African debates about the plausibility of Arian arguments on the created nature of the Son.

The fact that the seven general ecumenical councils accepted by the East and West occurred in Asia Minor does not mean that the decisions they proclaimed as consensual were originated in Asia Minor. They merely confirmed exegetical studies that were hammered out



previously and indeed largely in Africa at the earliest layers.

To establish this point historically requires rigorous textual evidence that awaits detailed presentation. It has not yet received a fair hearing. The ecumenical councils were making decisions based on regional councils that anteceded them. The earliest of these occurred more in Numidia, the Roman province of Africa and Egypt, than anywhere else. These African formulations have continued to receive general consent from the wider body of Christ worldwide.

Global Christianity has benefited incalculably from these meticulous works of African exegetes and moral theologians (notably Athanasius, Augustine and Cyril). Through their debate the ecumenical councils were prepared to confirm universally patterns of Christological and triune reasoning that were first defined in Africa. Those mostly anonymous African religious leaders who represented the whole laity in the early African regional councils defined dogmatic and exegetical formulas that became accepted in world ecumenical circles as orthodox, and came to define Christianity in both Asia and Europe. In many cases we barely know anything more than their names.

Among conflicts that were first settled in African synods before Nicaea were issues on penitence, diocesan boundaries, episcopal authority and ordination as well as issues on the person of Christ and triune teaching. The main voices in these debates were African. They sorted out the ecumenical acceptability of the views of Sabellius, Tertullian, Arius, Athanasius and Origen—all Africans. Ecclesiology and penitential patterns that became normative for Europe were first tested in Africa with the issues first raised by Demetrius of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, Optatus of Milevis and Augustine of Hippo. The vast African church today still prays that the uniting work of the Spirit may reenergize African Christian unity in both the north and south, and remold them into a new whole.

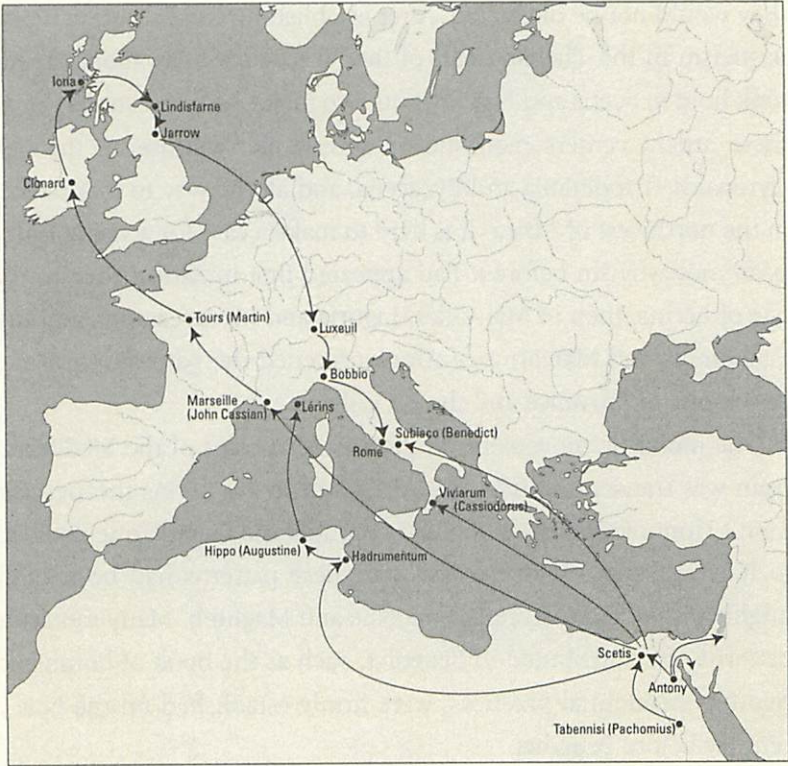


## HOW THE AFRICAN DESERT GAVE BIRTH TO WORLDWIDE MONASTICISM

The suffering of the African martyrs—Mark in Alexandria and Cyprian in the Maghreb—became the pattern for early monasticism in Africa long before it did elsewhere. The African monks' understandings of sacrifice; the daily ordering of the life of prayer, study and work; and radical discipleship were destined to enter into the heart of the whole Christian tradition that would later flower in medieval European Christianity. The matrix in which monasticism was spawned was the Egyptian desert, and soon thereafter Numidia, Libya and Byzacena (see map 5).

The course of the monastic movement in Africa was well-formed long prior to the time of Benedict of Nursia (480-550), the key figure of European monasticism. After Augustine it would flow into Benedictine and other orders to influence the whole of medieval culture. In due time the African monastic fruits begun by Antony, Pachomius and Augustine came to flower in Italy and France, and all the way from Ireland and Northumberland to Dalmatia.

Both Basil in the East and Benedict in the West followed African monastic patterns that were being disseminated from South to North (from Africa to the northern Mediterranean) by Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian, Honorius and others. Prosper of Aquitaine, Fulgentius of Ruspe, Caesarius of Arles and Alcuin helped link Europe with the community life of the Pachomians of Egypt and the Augustinians of the Maghreb. This monastic communal life was all firmly built upon the exegesis and liturgical traditions firmly entrenched in Africa well before Basil or Benedict wrote their monastic Rules or Cassiodorus set up his scholarly community in the arch of the boot of southern Italy.



Map 5. The spread of monasticism

The active practice of monasticism began deep in Africa. It flowered less on the coast of Africa than on the inland deserts and rugged mountains, and in the salt flats of Nitria, and further south in the Theban desert wastes where the required solitude for contemplation could be found.

The monks went far into the desert precisely to find places where they would not be distracted. After establishing communitarian monasticism in the Theban heart of the Nile, Pachomian monastic life took hold in Scetis and Numidia, its two major African centers. From these ardent centers monasticism spread like wildfire all through Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Byzacena, and all the way to Mauretania in the northwest of Africa. It is hard to make a case for a viable European monasticism before it had appeared first in Africa, then to the Isle of Lérins, then to Marseilles, Liguria and Montecassino. Antony, Pachomius and Marcarius of Africa preceded the patterns that later developed in Provence and the Po Valley.

The monastic movement on the northern coast of the Mediterranean was transmitted from the African desert to Lérins through the monk Honorat. Benedict of Nursia brought the Benedictine patterns to Italy and the rest of Europe after these patterns had been thoroughly tested and matured in the Nile and Maghreb. Many monastic patterns often attributed to Benedict, such as the book of hours and rigorous penitential practices, were firmly established on the Nile a century before Benedict.

The maturing Western Christian theology of the fifth century and following did not come to the high level of maturity of Leo and Gregory the Great without the prior monastic vision of Antony, Athanasius and Augustine. Jerome gained his bearings on his monastic vocation by going south first to Syria and then to Bethlehem, and then all the way to the Nile Valley and Scetis to learn from Egyptian mo-



nastics like Didymus. From Origen, Athanasius and Cyril came the mature doctrines of spiritual ascent, *theosis* and a defined canon of Scripture.

Thus far I have set forth some preliminary examples of evidence for crucial African influences in the shaping of the idea of the university; in the rigorous study of Scripture, especially in integrating the two Testaments; the formation of early Christian dogma; the rejection of nonconsensual readings of Christian Scripture; the fostering of a method of ecumenical and conciliar decision making on contested issues; and the intensification of spiritual formation that prevailed among communities of monks and nuns seeking holiness in the desert. To these points I now add some stunning evidences for the gradual integration of classical Christian scriptural interpretation into the language and premises of Neoplatonic philosophy. This first occurred in Africa without any significant diminution of the apostolic witness.

## HOW CHRISTIAN NEOPLATONISM EMERGED IN AFRICA

It is seldom mentioned in the philosophical literature that the earliest advocates of Neoplatonism did not reside either in Greece or Rome, but in Africa. It is surprising to Hellenistic chauvinists to be reminded that Philo, Ammonias Saccas and Plotinus—the central players in Neoplatonism—were all Africans. After taking firm root in the Nile Delta, in due time it would move north to Rome and Athens and Byzantium.

Some African-born philosophers like Marius Victorinus would come to reside in Rome, others like Bishop Synesius would remain in Cyrenaica. Christian teachers like Clement of Alexandria were among the earliest to set forth circumspect connections and distinctions between logos philosophy and the Christian teaching of God.

The Neoplatonic influences on the early Augustine are well known. But what is seldom noted is that these influences appeared earliest in Africa before they migrated north.

Modern intellectual historians have become too accustomed to the easy premise that whatever Africa learned, it learned from Europe. In the case of seminal Neoplatonism, however, its trajectory from Africa to Europe (a south-to-north movement) is textually clear. But why is it so easy to forget or dismiss this trajectory? The tendentious premises of Harnack and Bauer have pervaded several generations of historians with this prejudice. Current corrective African scholarship now has the task of redefining this north-moving trajectory based on textual and factual evidence.

#### HOW RHETORICAL AND DIALECTICAL SKILLS WERE HONED IN AFRICA FOR EUROPE'S USE

Just as Neoplatonism was moving south to north, and Christian exegesis from Alexandria to Caesarea and Antioch, so also was the advanced dialectical study of rhetoric migrating from Madaurus, Sicca and Carthage to Italy, as it did with many leading Christian figures: Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius and Lactantius, all prior to the more famous example of Augustine.

African rhetors were frequently found moving from African locations to Europe. They introduced many rich subtleties of African communication talents, literary passion and dialectical skills to the north Mediterranean. This is a technical point that will require considerable work to demonstrate, but it seems evident that the single case of Augustine should be enough to provide the analysis with a good example. By the time we get to Tyconius and Augustine, we have a dialectical form of rhetoric that is far advanced in subtlety over much that was standard in the northern Latin tradition.



Why was Lactantius found so useful to Diocletian? Why was Marius Victorinus considered the most skilled dialectician of his day? Why was Cyprian able to hold his own in relation to Pope Stephen? From where did Tyconius derive his rules of rhetoric if not mostly from African sources, and why were these rules so influential on such a wide variety of leading Christian exegetes? Why did the major European academic centers value the African rhetorical tradition so much? These questions await fresh investigation by literary critics. Viewed from Rome or Constantinople, it was Madaura, Sicca, Carthage, Cyrene and Alexandria that were regarded as having the most powerful literary traditions and rhetoricians, more pungent, persuasive and subtly dialectical than those which prevailed elsewhere.

#### INTERLUDE: HARNACK'S FOLLY

Where was this prejudice against Africa manufactured? How could these distortions have happened? How could such widespread developments be overlooked?

The most distracting voice was that of **Adolf von Harnack**, the leading liberal German historian in the 1890s and early 1900s. He argued that the decisive failure of ancient Christianity was its accommodation to Greek philosophical language and assumptions. Along with Harnack the core of the nineteenth-century German liberal tradition—Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Ernst Troeltsch—did battle with what they regarded as the regression of Christianity into Hellenistic abstractions and dualisms.

This is a prejudicial argument that both Catholics and evangelicals regrettably have continued to buy into for several decades since it became obsolete. Major participants in Euro-American theology seem to have thus missed entirely the literary richness of the distinctive Af-



rican Christian imprint on proto-Europe and the formation of the Christian mind. These mistakes have been passed on through the graduate studies programs that have formed scholars of all continents subliminally. Sadly this dubious legacy still lives on in Africa.

This misperception caused European historicism to fail to analyze adequately the close engagement of early African Christian teaching with indigenous, traditional and primitive African religions in North Africa (Berber, Pharaonic, early Coptic and Nilotic cultures) throughout the first millennium. Inland African cultures (especially in the Medjerda and Nile basins) were the main testing ground for early Christian dialectical models of the relation of Christianity and culture. These models were hammered out on the ground in Africa before they were transmitted into Sicily, Palestine, Syria, Anatolia and finally inland Europe. The liberal bias wrongly assumed that Africa was inexperienced in understanding cultural conflict resolution and only needed larger doses of European enlightenment to solve its maladies.

It has become a very deep *distinctly modern European prejudice* to miss this simple point. It is more accurately described as a specific prejudice of Hegelian idealism to assume that everything of intellectual importance that happened near the Mediterranean is really at heart European and therefore hardly could be imagined to have had an African origin. African origins are *prima facie* ruled out. Here is where Alexandria gets its unjustified reputation as being simply a non-African extension of the European intellect.

This prejudice can be readily confirmed by reading Hegel's lectures on universal history or Troeltsch's analysis of the Alexandrian teachers or Harnack's *History of Dogma*, or more ominously Nietzsche on the *Übermensch*. The generalization took hold that wherever there might have been any modest African influences, they are likely to be viewed as inferior and backward in relation to the unfolding

positive developments of reason in history that flowed from Europe. The companion premise is that if good ideas appeared in Africa, they must be attributed to Europeans. This bizarre habit consistently viewed the Alexandrian and Egyptian Christians as entirely disconnected from African ways. To deprive Africa of Alexandria is to say that a blossom is unrelated to its climate.

Similar generalizations were made about the marginal contributions of Carthage and Hippo. Yet it is indisputable that from Tertullian first came the formal Latin language of *trinitas*, and from Cyprian came the advancement of conciliar method, and from Augustine the most brilliant forms of interior psychological analyses in late antiquity. These are common knowledge. What is not seen is that these achievements were made in Africa by Christians whose lives had been formed in the indigenous worshiping communities of Africa.

## OVERVIEW

I have just cited seven instances in which significant transfer of intellectual strength and creativity is evidenced from Africa to Europe: academia, exegesis, dogmatics, ecumenics, monastic communities, philosophy and dialectics. All await further explication by a generation of balanced scholarship, but the direction of the argument is clear.

The list could go on, and it should. It could show in more detail how Western penitential practice was profoundly shaped by Optatus of Milevis, and the teaching of justification by Marius Victorinus. It could track the influences of Africans like Minucius Felix on apologetics, of Lactantius on universal history, of Primasius on apocalyptic interpretation, of Athanasius on civil disobedience, of Cyprian on ecclesiology, of Tertullian on theological method, of African women saints like Perpetua and Felicitas on eschatological courage, and of

Augustine on practically everything that would later be considered quintessentially European. The biographies of Evagrius, Cassian, Athanasius, Augustine, Origen, Pachomius and Benedict are part of this story of south-to-north transmission of tradition. African Christian biography is a field in itself that is only partially explored. It will take dozens of expertly trained scholars and linguists to accomplish the tasks.

It was in Africa (in the *Festal Letter* of Athanasius and the Council of Hippo) that the scriptural canon was clearly defined in a consensual way in the East and West that became normative for most of Christianity. The first great Christian psychology was written in Africa. And Africa is where Christianity entered into its most decisive debates on Gnostic and Zoroastrian religion that would echo throughout the pages of all subsequent Christian history. None of the above hypotheses has been fully argued or exhaustively defended; all await full investigation.

Africa had a major hand in crafting the basic Latin and Greek views of sin and grace, creation and providence, atonement, eschatology, baptism and the life of prayer. Further pursuit of these issues remains on the agenda for emerging African scholarship.

I do not expect that all will agree with the terms I am using to define early African Christianity. But I do look toward a fair hearing of the evidence. These views may be challenged, though they are not intended to be stated in a contentious way, but as observations based on facts and texts that can be examined.

The apex of African influence on Roman civil authority was around 193-211, when African-born Septimius Severus was emperor of Rome. He was born in Leptis Magna of Libyan Tripolitania. During Severus's reign, the pope was also an African (Victor I, 186-197), at a time when diocesan policy was being crystallized in the person of its



bishop with regard to matters of ecumenical discipline, especially on such matters as the celebration of Easter, excommunication and adoptionist Christology.

These things happened a hundred years before Diocletian and Constantine. During this time African Christianity was serving as an intellectual powerhouse for early Christian thinking. During the formation of early ecumenical Christianity, Africa was more like a creative intellectual dynamo than a submissive sycophant.

## DEFINING AFRICA



It is an odd but understandable question to ask: Just how African was Athanasius, who grew up in Egypt? How African was Augustine, who grew up in Numidia? Is it descriptively correct to say that Cyprian was an African? However valuable their contributions to Western thought may be, their status as genuine Africans has for odd reasons remained under a cloud, and will until this question is candidly faced.

The argument for the recovery of early African Christianity cannot easily proceed unless it can be shown that these great intellects were truly Africans, not just in a geographical sense but in spirit and temperament, not just temporary day-trippers but born and bred in Africa, indigenized in families living through generations of African life. I believe that there is nothing phony in their African Christian identity. Many were willing to die for that identity.

### ESTABLISHING THE INDIGENOUS DEPTH OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

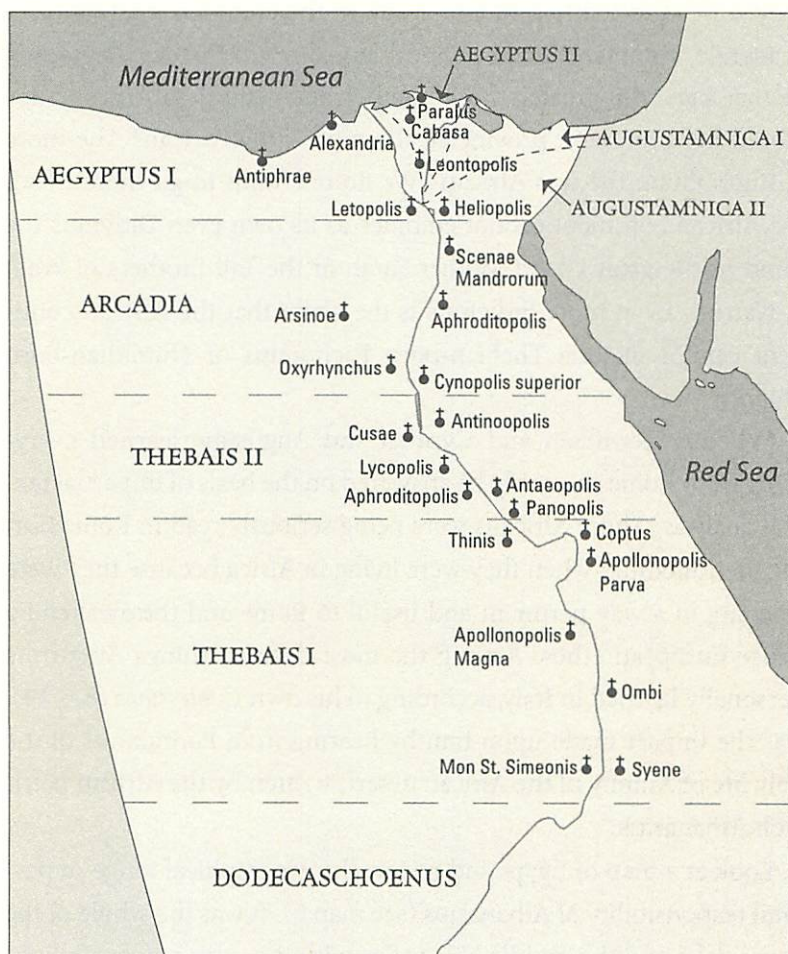
A demeaning prejudice has crept into historical lore that these great figures were not Africans at all—merely Europeans in disguise.

This is a fairly recent Western intellectual prejudice. It suggests that the African intellectual tradition cannot even claim its own sons and daughters, especially if they happened to have been articulate, or if they were sufficiently astute to speak in the common international, academic, commercial and political languages of the day. According to that bias, the greater those competencies, the less African they would be. The more provincial, the more truly African? The more cosmopolitan, the less African? We do not want to go there. If so, the African continent cannot embrace as its own even Didymus the Blind or the great Desert Mother Sarah or the Tall Brothers of Wadi al-Natrun. Even more ludicrous is the claim that the African continent cannot include Thebian-born Pachomius or Numidian-born Optatus.

Whether Tertullian and Cyprian and Augustine learned everything from Rome can easily be answered on the basis of impartial textual analysis. These Africans were being seriously read in Rome during their lifetimes when they were living in Africa because they were teaching in a way pertinent and useful to Rome and the awakening wider European ethos. Among the most decisive things Augustine personally learned in Italy, according to his own *Confessions* (8.6.14), was the impact made upon him by hearing from Pontitianus of the holy life of Antony of the African desert, written by the African patriarch Athanasius.

Look at a map of Egypt and review the geographical range of pastoral responsibility of Athanasius (see map 6). It was the whole of the lower delta and the middle Nile valley with diocesan responsibilities reaching beyond the first cataracts, with their widely varied subcultures and languages. His responsibility was not just with the Alexandrians who spoke Greek. In any case the ethnographic evidence shows that a large proportion of Alexandrians were themselves Eryp-





Map 6. Geographical range of Athanasius's pastoral responsibility

tian ethnics, many of whom doubtless spoke several languages (Syriac, proto-Arabic, Aramaic, Nilotic variants, etc.) in order to deal with commercial realities in that **greatest of international port cities**.

Antony of the desert lived most of his hundred-plus years (c. 251-c. 356!) in a very remote part of the far eastern desert of Egypt, many days journey from any Greek-speaking city. It is inexact to simply identify Antony as an Alexandrian without remembering the mountain cave where he founded anchorite monasticism. **Athanasius spent long periods of time in the Egyptian desert**, in hiding or in forced exile. Only seated prejudices can blithely charge that these great leaders were not genuinely African.

Almost every turn in African Christian history is misjudged if it lives by the premise that Europeans have a natural advantage built into their intellectual DNA. This bungled premise misreads the significance of the inland African struggles of Coptic Christianity for centuries following the Arab conquest. The stereotype also misjudges the depth of the encounter of early African Christianity with indigenous Punic and Berber cultures. It misreads the relation of Christianity to the Nilotic-speaking traditional African religions in the southern part of the Nile, which extends all the way to present day Sudan and Uganda. It considers as negligible the subtle dialectical forms of cultural interaction between Christianity and African cultures that occurred gradually over centuries of **shared hazards and mutual learning**.

There is an enduring pre-Christian traditional African religious past in the north of Africa during the entire first Christian millennium: Pharaonic, proto-Nubian, Libyan, Capsian and Ghanian, reaching far back into African prehistory. It remains indigenously African even while being militarily forced to adapt to multiple colonial coercions. Early Christianity had to deal with these deeply engrained

traditional African cultures in the isolated villages of the Maghreb and Nile, not only with Greco-Roman civic religion. It was the strength of that traditional African religion transformed by Christianity that stood up to idolatrous Roman civic religion. The study of comparative metaphors makes clear how the motifs of ancient Pharaonic religion (such as spiritual ascent and eternal life) were echoed and included in the works of Origen, Athanasius and Pachomius.

### THE STEREOTYPING OF AFRICAN HELLENISM AS NON-AFRICAN

The stereotype of Alexandria as a small olive patch of Greece planted on the coast of Africa by aliens became less and less true with each century after Bishop Demetrius (d. 231). This stereotype of Alexandria as a totally Greek city forgets just how international the huge African metropolis had become as early as the time of Philo. The multiethnic trading interests, which had established wide routes of commerce to and from Alexandria, incorporated and prized the cultures of the Nile far south of the delta and the cultures of the Maghreb far to the west. The fact that some Africans were Greek-speaking did not make them any less African. Similarly to speak Latin in a Libyan port city did not make the ethnically Berber speaker of Sabratha any less African.

To define Theban and Pachomian monasticism essentially as Greek is to misunderstand its language, its worldview and its social location. Even if its leaders wrote publicly in Greek, they continued to speak to a Nilotic culture in Nilotic metaphors. Even the leaders in Alexandria had the Nile Delta and Valley to deal with commercially, and it had a culture dating more than a thousand years older than Alexandria. So by what magic could Alexandria be cut adrift from its continental context and reality?



If modern African Christianity had been better grounded in ancient African ecumenical teachings, it would never have felt compelled to be defensive about the Hellenistic voices in its own African tradition. For Hellenism in Africa had become profoundly Africanized over the very long period of time of some twenty generations before Origen. Modern African Christians need to get this straight in order to recover their actual historic identity as African. Otherwise Africa needlessly deprives itself of his own heritage.

### SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY INTO THE ETHNICITY OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Whenever these matters are discussed, the speculative question soon arises as to the ethnic identity and even the skin color of writers like Tertullian, Cyprian, Optatus, Verecundus and Augustine. In this arena, the recent paleographic inquiry into funerary inscriptions and family names bears interesting details pertinent to this question. The evidence shows that there was a gradual transition of Berber, Libyan and Punic family names into their Latin or Greek equivalents during the centuries prior to and during the growth of Christianity. That did not affect their ethnicity or skin color, only their names. Thus it would not be extraordinary if a person with tribal and family ties reaching thousands of years back into indigenous African history might have a Latin-sounding name.

It is likely that Augustine had a mother with Berber background from a family that converted to Christianity at least a generation before his birth in 354. Monnica would not have become any less ethnically African just because she married a military officer with a Roman-sounding name. Augustine was born and raised in a remote inland Numidian town (Thagaste) with mixed racial stock. The rock carvings from Neolithic times in Numidia show occupation dating

back ten thousand years. Among Augustine's known family and friends were people who had Berber, Punic, Numidian, Roman and even Libyan names.

Christians living before Athanasius were long settled in the middle Nile as far south as Oxyrhynchus and the Fayyum. Athanasius, according to his own statement, came from an environment of very modest means, not from a foreign elite. As a child he was noticed playing on the beach by Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and virtually adopted as if an orphan, according to an early tradition. This leaves entirely mute the genetics of the great leader, but there are many indications that he kept close and active ties with middle Nile ethnics of many varieties who spoke proto-Coptic or cognate Nilotic-based languages. When he was forced into exile, he sought refuge in the desert areas far away from the cosmopolitan, Greek-speaking urban ethos of Alexandria.

There can be no doubt that Origen grew up in Africa, wrote much of his work in Africa and then transmitted his extensive African library and teaching to Caesarea Palestina. It is a strange and demeaning criterion to apply to Origen the odd assumption that because he was adept at many languages he was not very African. By his metaphors, the greatest biblical interpreter of early Christianity shows many indications of being indigenously African, whatever his specific ethnicity.

Scholars are thus challenged with the puzzling complication of delving into the mutation of family names and place names associated with the most important contributors to early African Christianity. Further paleographical, archaeological and linguistic evidences may gradually yield more light on these speculations. Scientific studies of DNA, mitochondrial genes and migration patterns are being refined and may in due time provide more discernment.



If the writings of Philo, Synesius, Victor of Vita and Shenute of Atripe had all been written in France, they would be called European. But they were not. They were written in Africa. So why shouldn't they be called African? There is a prejudice at work here: suspect anything of intellectual value that comes from the African continent as having some sort of secret European origin.

What convincing argument can be set forth to deny their African-ness? How black were the Christians of North Africa? Black enough, if blackness is understood in terms of intergenerational suffering and oppression. If black is defined by color, a trip to Numidia or Nubia or Ethiopia settles the chromatological argument.

But orthodox Christians do not admit skin color as a criterion for judging Christian truth. Never have. Never will. African Christianity is not primarily a racial story but a confessional story of martyrs and lives lived by faith active in love. To judge truth by race is itself heretical, and that truth was first clearly formulated in ecumenical Christianity, from the Jerusalem Council and the early baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and following, and that truth itself became a standard assumption of early African Christianity.

Hence for the purposes of this discussion, if a text was written in Africa it will be treated as African. That is a simple, straightforward criterion, much clearer than speculations about ethnicity or pigment as decisive criterion for Africanness. If to be an African Christian requires that one be a particular skin color, that would rule out all orthodox Christians of all hues who would quickly disavow such unorthodox and counterbiblical requirements.

### THE PURVEYORS OF MYOPIA

Why has such a simple point been resisted? There is a dismal and ironic reason: Many modern interpreters of Africa have been ten-



dentiously shaped by Euro-American academic conjectures. In seeking the anticipated legitimacy that comes from higher education, African scholars during the period in which independence was being fought for fell all too easily into the trap of the idealizing, romanticizing and liberalizing motifs so familiar to Western modern traditions. They are not to be criticized for seeking the best education available to them. But the best education available to them was still highly imperfect, with all the limitations of the chief failures of modernity: autonomous individualism, hedonic narcissism, moral relativism and reductive naturalism. None are characteristic of the African spirit.

We can hardly find these prejudices against Africa voiced anywhere in Christian history until we get to the nineteenth century, especially to the writings of the French Enlightenment, German idealism and British empiricism. It was not until Hegel, Troeltsch, Harnack and Bauer that these prejudices became so standardized that they were accepted without question by educated Westerners—and by Western educated Africans.

These were the main catalysts followed not only by the Western liberals but oddly also by the Catholic and evangelical traditions of historical scholarship. The main distortions prevailing in modern African theology have their roots in the Eurocentric tradition from Hegel to Harnack that penetrated deeply into the assumptions of Bauer, Bultmann and Tillich. The extensive historical studies of these German theologians were not corrected by British or American historical theologians. They have regrettably stood as normative for many liberals, evangelicals and Catholics. Along the way modern theology has lost track of the revered early African assessment of the saints and martyrs and confessors. The African ancestors were viewed as myths to be demythologized, not as val-

ued social and communitarian realities.

Why have these dynamics not been better understood? The historical answer is that Euro-American intellectuals have transmitted these ideas to Africa, where they have been camouflaged as if to assume that these prejudices were themselves genuinely African.

Here is the crucial test question: Compare these two lists: (1) Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and (2) Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine. Now ask which list is more African. Now ask which list has more deeply affected the past generation of the African intelligentsia and of scholarship in and about Africa, and even of much African theology. A review of references in their books will show that the African list is quoted with far less frequency by a huge factor than the European list. It is thus evident how far African interpreters have gone in accommodating to European thinkers with minimal empathy for African sensibilities, metaphors and premises.

When we read modern works purporting to be African theology, this is why we find Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud quoted far more frequently than Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius or Augustine. The former list contains key names that gained increasing clout during the "peace and justice movement" of the 1960s that fueled the anger and resentment of the nationalistic critics against Christianity in Africa. Regrettably, the ecumenical leaders who should have been grounded in ancient ecumenical teaching offered the pretense that the modern ecumenical movement was now to be grounded in post-Enlightenment modernism, not the consensus of the apostolic witnesses. These pseudo-ecumenists undermined the weakened liberalizing mainstream Protestant missions of the churches in the villages of Africa. Some then became compulsively ashamed of the apostolic witness and actively accommodative to modern Euro-American faddism. Had they been more classically African (Christianly speaking) and less narrowly

European in their advocacy, they would have served the ecumenical cause in Africa better than they did.

### THE AFRICAN SEEDBED HYPOTHESIS REQUIRES TEXTUAL DEMONSTRATION

A new task is now incumbent upon emerging African Christianity: to embrace its own brilliant intellectual heritage, to reclaim what is rightfully its own. This can only be done properly by showing through critical analysis how this forgetfulness has occurred, and through hard evidence **how the facts confirm the extraordinary intellectual generativity of early African believers.**

There need be no apologies, only factual clarity leading toward verification. Let the data speak louder than the prejudices. But this evidence has not yet been persuasively stated to a global audience in a convincing way.

My core hypothesis is that much intellectual history flowed south to north: from Numidia to Sicily to France and Italy. It flowed from the Nile to the Euphrates and the Danube. It flowed from Pelusium to Gaza to Cappadocia. An unfinished task of the coming era of African scholarship is to set forth this intermediary evidence textually, archaeologically and paleographically.

There is ample evidence available that the seeds of African orthodoxy have been lifted by high winds to distant northern climes. **Only much later have they returned to Africa in a Western guise.** These channels must be tracked textually.

While there are centuries of research that have been devoted to European influence on Africa, there remains a dearth of research on the impact of intellectual movements from Africa to Europe. This is a question that has been lying fallow for a very long time. This problem may await some future decade to be undertaken, but it will be undertaken



eventually. The evidence is already there and consistently understated. Much more will be uncovered by diligent inquiry. The crisis of African theological identity may be just the catalyst to cue off this recovery.

This evidence will be more convincing if presented by African scholars. Insofar as it has the appearance of being an instrument of Western power, it will be easily and rightly dismissed. The evidence can be dug out by anyone, but its public presentation needs an African voice. The evidence belongs to global Christianity. Its messengers must protect it from being distorted or prematurely snubbed.

#### A CASE IN POINT: THE CIRCUITOUS PATH FROM AFRICA TO IRELAND TO EUROPE AND THEN BACK TO AFRICA

The Christianity that was once indigenously present throughout North Africa was forced to flee from Vandal and Arab invasions. These refugees were exiled and became implanted in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries in Spain, Gaul, Sardinia, Sicily, Italy and Britain. Their influence spread largely through quiet, inconspicuous, scholarly monastic communities formed under Pachomian (and Augustinian) rules out of Egypt and Numidia.

The best example is the unexpected trajectory of monasticism from Africa to Ireland to Europe and then back to Africa in a thousand-year cycle. This is the next surprising step of our investigation: how Africa influenced Ireland and how the Irish monks then shaped the formation of medieval Europe.

The history of the planting of African monasticism in Ireland is one of the most astonishing of all the stories of the preservation of civilization. The trajectory was from Africa to Sicily to the Isle of Lérins to Ireland. This transit happened before the Arab conquest, but its consequences became critical only after the Arab conquest.

The tiny island of Lérins, just off the southern French coast,

played a decisive role. There, as early as the Council of Ephesus (431), the African-influenced monastics were spreading the Pachomian pattern of monasticism from Africa to Europe. These monastics were Honoratus, Caesarius of Arles, Salvian of Marseilles and Vincent of Lérins. They set the stage for the coming of Irish monks to Europe. It may be that Patrick of Ireland was among these monks who studied at Lérins, as the ancient tradition suggests—a hypothesis that invites thorough revisiting.

How the Irish would take the lead in this movement is itself a longer story than I can tell here, but it has been told winsomely by Thomas Cahill in *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. The threads of evidence of African liturgical and exegetical influences in Ireland need to be carefully unpacked by astute historians who know the pertinent languages (Coptic, Gaelic, Latin and French) and have sufficient access to the archival collections scattered throughout the Mediterranean, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the universities and monasteries of Europe. This is a daunting task of historical investigation into primary source documentation.

If undertaken by young African scholars, it will take on deeper plausibility for Africans. If undertaken exclusively by Northern Hemisphere investigators, it is more likely to be tainted with the marks of post-Enlightenment historiography. Ideally it should be an international consortium of scholars, which is what the website on early African Christianity ([earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://earlyafricanchristianity.com)) seeks to encourage and supply with a steady flow of active research information.

The period of the fifth through tenth centuries, though very lively, is still dubbed the Dark Ages. This says more about *our* darkness than about the events occurring at the time. A shroud of obscurity hangs over Western culture during these times. These centuries are least studied, with less empathy and less textual information, than any



others of Western history. For decades since Edmund Gibbon they have been stereotyped as a period of vast cultural deterioration.

The heart of the evidentiary task is to show the path of monastic piety and African scholarship from the Nile and Medjerda Valleys in flight north to Sardinia, Sicily, Europe and especially Ireland. Who besides the Irish will take up this astonishing investigation? Why not Africans?

By the time of Colombo and Finnian, the centers of monastic learning had shifted from Africa to Ireland, and from there they migrated to the Rhine Valley to Bobbio Abbey (Italy) and the Abbey of St. Gall (Switzerland), and finally to the Po and Rhone Valleys of northern Italy and southern France in a great clockwise circular movement.

The most surprising chapter of the story, however, is the return to Africa of classic Christianity—that same early ecumenical Christianity that was so well formed so early in Africa. By this time the mutations that occurred in Europe made it unrecognizable as African. So the exegesis and theology and liturgy that were first refined in Africa finally returned to Africa in the prayerbooks and penitential practices of both Catholics and Protestants, but in forms that seemed unrecognizable as African. Indeed, by the time it returned, it seemed alien to Africa, like Odysseus reclaiming his bed.

It is easy to establish this path textually from Ireland on. What is harder to establish is the path from Medjerda monasticism fleeing from Vandal Africa to the havens of nearby Sicily, Sardinia, Provence and Navarre, and in due course arriving, along with Patrick, on Irish shores. This is the hazardous path traveled mainly by those monks fleeing first the Arian Vandals who brought them misery, and then from the Arabs who brought them the choice of exile, death or slavery.

This unexpected trajectory proved to be the seeding of medieval



Christianity, Western law and ultimately of Western democracies and their teachings of human dignity. All the marks of special providence appear to classic Christian theologians to be embedded in this strange and surprising trajectory.

There is little doubt that Irish Christianity sustained strong African and monastic motifs in its piety, hagiography and temperament. This can be seen visually in its crosses, funerary objects, décor, calendars and art forms, as well as literarily in poetry, song and preaching. But to establish this textually requires a thorough reassessment of received texts that are known but not yet adequately assessed critically as to their stemma and provenance.

All this waits. Much of it must be done in Ireland, a good place for emerging African scholars to consider for advanced studies in history. This is why a bold generation of dedicated scholarship is needed to join the dots together. If the links can be persuasively shown, the south-to-north hypothesis will spring more plausibly to life. If so, many related issues of African identity and African influence on Europe will be need to be reevaluated.

African intellectual history has no need to be defensive or self-effacing. We are learning that Africa taught Europe before Europe was prepared to teach Africa. Europe has slept for many centuries without being fully aware of its vital intellectual sources in Africa.

### A CAVEAT AGAINST AFROCENTRIC EXAGGERATION

It would be a vast exaggeration to claim that African theology became normative for all aspects of ancient ecumenical Christianity. But it is not an exaggeration to say that African exegetical skills and competencies in interpreting the Old Testament provided the pattern by which Africans, especially Origen, Augustine and Cyril, supplied the scriptural basis for the dogmatic work of the oikumene, from the

Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) to Gregory the Great. This exegetical achievement was such that few aspects of early ecumenical theology will be found untouched by African exegesis.

So if you ask, From what continent did the great fathers of ecumenical orthodoxy get the core of their scriptural interpretation? the answer has to be: More of it comes from African texts than European (assuming that the far southeastern reaches of Europe are Thrace and the Bosphorus). From where did John of Damascus get his vision of orthodoxy? More from Athanasius and Cyril than any European. From where did Leo the Great get the Chalcedonian formulation? The roots are mostly African, from the exegetes of the Nile and Medjerda.

The temptation to exaggerate is intrinsic to all scholarship. Rare is the scholar who does not think that his or her own subject matter is of the utmost importance. Historical influences are far easier to allege than to demonstrate. The study of history begs for a humble and contrite heart. The Afro-centric exaggeration that has tainted this inquiry must be overcome by evidence. The challenge for young African scholars is to dig into these areas and examine the hypotheses suggested above to see indeed if they are defensible in terms of the evidence.

## ONE FAITH, TWO AFRICAS



Christians from every quarter of the African continent today have the privilege of laying legitimate claim to their early African Christian heritage. This is an unusually rich storehouse of wisdom that comes from the earliest layers of Christian history in Africa.

There has not been sufficient recognition of the contributions of early African Christianity to the culture and history of all of Africa and indeed to global Christianity. This heritage continues to provide significant spiritual resources for the future of believers everywhere.

### THE HAZARDS OF BRIDGE BUILDING

Central to the project of early African Christian research is the attempt to encourage fruitful communication between the two Africas, north and south, Coptic and sub-Saharan.

Their dialogue is politically important yet still unnecessarily clouded by ideological predispositions and confusions. Here are some specific goals or theses to be debated and hopefully to be established through reasoned argument in due time:

- All African Christians are legitimate heirs of the tradition of early African Christianity. No region or historic ecclesial memory can feign absolute supremacy.



- North Africa is no less African than sub-Saharan Africa.
- Central to the recovery of early African Christianity is the attempt to show Africans of the south how valuable their own early African roots from North Africa really are.
- The cross-racial, ecumenical, catholic and international character of Christianity overrides attempts to define authentic Christianity racially or regionally. It is unworthy of the international and trans-racial character of Christianity to view northern African Christianity as intrinsically alien from southern African Christianity.
- The orthodox and the charismatic traditions need each other. Each one complements what tends to be partially unobserved in the other. Neither can be regarded as inferior. Both find a deeper unity in Christ when the other's voice is heard.
- Christians of northern Africa—of Coptic, Berber, Ethiopic, Arabic and Moorish descent—are a treasured part of the whole multicultural matrix of African Christianity. Pan-African hopes are yearning for this recognition, but it is slow in coming.
- The emerging task of African Christian studies is to acquaint modern Christians from all parts of Africa with much more of their own early African history. The five centuries of Christian presence in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria have been especially ignored.

I will not be reviewing each of these challenges sequentially, but I hope to touch on them sufficiently in what follows.

## THE CHALLENGE OF RECONCILIATION OF BLACK AFRICA AND NORTH AFRICA

*Sub-Saharan Africa* is a term that belongs to geography. *Black Africa* is a color designation grounded in the tragic fact of racism. *North Africa*

is a location. *Africa* is a continent. None of these designations is more or less African. All are in Africa. All are African.

Is it not fitting for Christians of the African south to appreciate and express gratitude for the many generations of sacrifice that Christians of the African north have made to the preservation of Christian Scriptures, ancestral traditions and liturgical practices for all of Africa?

This is a fitting time to encourage black Africans to understand the inestimable value of their own larger African history. Their active empathy can now reach out for those courageous and forbearing Christians from the north.

The larger aim of pan-African Christian reconciliation is to enhance the contribution of Africa to global Christianity, viewed as both past and present. Reconciliation within Africa will increase the gifts of Africa to the world exponentially.

This requires making more empathic connections between black Africa and North Africa, and between all modern Africans and the entire span of world Christian believers. Though this relation is volatile and clouded by uncertainties, most would agree that it is urgent and necessary. Some countries like Nigeria, Chad, the Sudan and Ethiopia are in a crucial geographical position to provide leadership in this good work of reconciliation.

I am not positing two Christianities here. Christ's living body is one. I am talking about a single ecumenical Christianity that seeks to express the uniting grace of embracing the multiple worldviews and multiple languages and cultures of Africa. But that classic centeredness has not been adequately factored into much recent African theology, especially its deepest patristic strata.

## THE ROOTS OF THE TERM AFRICA

The most generic name of the entire continent has from time imme-



morial been simply *Africa*. There is no substitute term. The proposed substitutes all fall short. Africa encompasses the variety of cultures of the whole continent. But from where do we derive the term *Africa*? The answer is provocative and illuminating:

It is a tiny and humble part from which the name of the whole continent is derived. The globally recognized modern name of Africa derives from a small, specific location and tribe of coastal Mediterranean Africa. In ancient times the term *Africa* referred to the indigenous people of coastal Mediterranean Africa in modern northeastern Tunisia.

While in early times the term *Africa* first referred to the peninsula we today call Tunisia, it gradually became applied to all of Mediterranean Africa west of Egypt. During the first Christian millennium *Africa* was the provincial term designating all the lands from Tripolitania (now western Libya) all the way to the Atlantic (Morocco)—from Tripoli (Oea) to Tangiers (Tangis). In due course the whole continent of Africa would derive its name from a location and tribe of peninsular Tunisia. For centuries Africa was distinguished from Egypt on maps, but in due course it was applied to the whole continent, as the larger continent became more fully explored. Any map-maker today who would exclude the Nile Valley from Africa would be thought insane.

Long before the Roman political divisions, the indigenous Berber, Capsian, Libyan and Moorish people gave many names to these lands north of the Sahara. During the first millennium the geographical, political and provincial definitions and boundaries proved to have remarkable durability. These Roman boundaries were largely followed in the periods of Christian influence by diocesan ecclesiastical divisions.

No part of the continent is less African than any other. The geographical definition of Africa brings into a single continent huge va-



rieties of cultures. This is precisely the challenge of the pan-African spirit.

### OVERCOMING THE INGRAINED LACK OF AWARENESS

The obstacle: With the exception of Coptic and Ethiopian Christianity, the vast majority of the near half-billion Christians in emerging Africa have not yet found their way into a serious engagement or study of the early African patristic intellectual heritage. Their case deserves a fresh hearing all over Africa.

What if Coptic Christians became more engaged in service ministries in the south? What if Protestant Christians became more engaged in service ministries in the north? A service ministry seeks to render a service to the existing culture rather than transform it into its own cultural perspectives.

This early African Christian heritage has had huge subliminal impact on all Christian history, and indeed world history. But this has not been consciously recognized, even if it is already embedded. The evidence for the impact will take decades to uncover properly and make it understandable to the children of Africa. Young African scholars are called to engage in this labor of love for all of global Christianity.

The most available gateway into patristic sources is through their profound understandings of Scripture texts. Verse by verse the early African sources can now be traced in scriptural interpretation. Most of the twenty-nine volumes of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* are now available just for this purpose (all by 2008). Any pastor in any African village preparing a sermon on a scriptural passage can now look up that passage to find out what ancient African and other writers had to say about it, and make his own judgments as to its applicability.

Any reader of Scripture can take this journey into history. All will benefit from it, but African Christian young people will most of all. The first decision is to decide to take the journey. Others may accompany, but each one must take the first steps for him- or herself.

### EXCOMMUNICATING THE NORTH

From antiquity, Africa has always been viewed as a single continent, a massive whole reaching far into the south. How far, no one knew.

The fact that the south of Africa was not known to the north is hardly an anomaly. Remember that the Scandinavians were hardly known to southern Europe before the eighth-century Vikings. The relative separateness of the peoples of the far north and the far south was as characteristic of Europe and Asia as of Africa. Exploration and trade took time—over many centuries. To interpret it as an injustice that the south was not known to the north is to despair unnecessarily over ordinary human finitude. Such despair does not contribute to either self-esteem or realism. There are many things that people in this century do not know that people in later centuries will understand. Such limitations belong to finite historic human existence.

Futile efforts to detach North Africa from “the real Africa” have failed. The continental geography itself overcomes all parochial arguments. It is just one continent now and always has been. Yet a persistent obstacle to understanding early African Christianity is the recent idea that North Africa does not really belong to Africa.

Early African Christianity did not prevail in all of the reaches of the continent, but it did eventually influence the whole known continent. It did not survive the first millennium in many parts of North Africa, but in those few centuries its impact was felt on the whole of world Christianity.

### ARGUING FOR AFRICAN UNITY

There is no good reason why sub-Saharan Africa today should dismiss or disavow its relation with an honorable and distinguished history that greatly influenced the foundations of Europe and of the whole of Western civilization. This gift to human history was secured long before modern missions and colonialism brought much later forms of Christianity into the rest of Africa. Important as sub-Saharan Africa is to world Christianity, it is not the whole of Africa. However powerful its voices, it is not the only claimant to that which is genuinely African.

Early African Christian orthodoxy cannot reasonably be excluded or excommunicated from the rest of African history or disconnected from the definition of authentic Africa. It is insensitive to attempt to demote North African Christians to some sort of quasi-African limbo. It is equally unfair to denigrate sub-Saharan Christians as if not really true heirs of ancient ecumenical Christianity. Both north and south have paid too high a price to be disregarded by the other.

Centuries of active trading occurred over the entire length of the Nile. This means well into the borders of Uganda and Kenya, and certainly throughout Ethiopia and the Sudan. These lands had very early Christian histories, more than is generally acknowledged. Christianity was present all up and down the Nile in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, and continued there in unbreached continuity following the Arab conquest.

It is hardly sensible for some sub-Saharan Africans to ignore the fact that the founder of **psychological biography** (Augustine) was African no less than they, or that the most influential early Christian interpreter of Scripture the world over (Origen) was African. That would amount to self-deprivation. It is equally irrational for some North African Christians to ignore the great vitality of sub-Saharan Christian belief.



## DEFINING "EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY" AS A DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY OF A PERIOD OF HISTORY

Admittedly there are some Egyptians who are sensitive about being viewed as Africans. On the other hand many black Africans understandably have deep resentments against the centuries of slave trade they view as stemming perennially from the north, though not from the Copts.

The Egyptian concern stems out of a long and proud history of independent identification as an inestimably great five-thousand-year-old culture. Yet the growth of Christian witness in southern Africa in recent decades has far exceeded that in the north.

The pan-African spirit has attempted to bridge these differences by affirming the basic unity and shared interests of all people on the one continent. The attempt to recover early African Christianity has incidental, but not essential, affinities with modern pan-African political aspirations.

In attempting to clarify the category of "early African Christianity" as a description of a historic period, I have consulted with many African scholars to see if there might be some adequate substitute for this nomenclature. The drafts of this manuscript have passed through three dozen hands of scholars from all parts of Africa (including the Coptic north, Catholic critics and Protestants of many varieties from southern, western and eastern Africa). In consequence the manuscript has undergone elaborate, complicated, at times tortuous and convoluted revisions as a result of these nomenclature sensitivities. Yet no term better than "early African Christianity" has appeared to briefly describe the subject area. I am aware that no revision will satisfy all of the concerns I have heard voiced, but I have seriously tried to ameliorate them and respond to each

of them with empathy and gratitude.

For these reasons this research effort as conceived will continue to use the simple geographical definition of Africa as a continent. The website [earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://earlyafricanchristianity.com) will be continued until persuasive reasons are set forth for concluding it.

For example, if I changed the subject area to "How Egypt Shaped the Christian Mind," that would be an unbearable category mistake, ignoring the stunning contributions of the Maghreb, which no one views as a part of Egypt. My purpose is not to damage the reputation of Egyptians but to convince modern Africans to take more seriously the ancient African traditions. My objective is not just to make Western Christians aware of their indebtedness to Egyptian Christians but also to make Egyptian Christians aware of their indebtedness to the Maghreb and the Upper Nile.

Similarly, if the defining problem was changed to "How Sub-Saharan Africa Shaped the Ancient Christian Mind," that would deprive the inquiry of all its key first millennium texts, which indeed show the extraordinary influence of Africa on world intellectual history. My purpose is not to demean or ignore sub-Saharans but to convince Christians worldwide to read the early African writers in whose heritage the whole of Africa and global Christianity can rightfully rejoice.

The churlish resistance to the term *Africa* by some Christians of the north and others of the south is an unconvincing nonstarter. Unless it is carefully stated, it sounds to one or the other as if it had an offensive ring of superiority and even to some extent racism.

#### HOW AFRICAN IS THE NILE VALLEY?

The Nilotic, Amharic and Ge'ez-speaking cultures were Christian for many centuries of the first millennium. From 451 C.E. on they relied



increasingly less on Greek and ever more on Nilotic languages for the transmission of their tradition into inland Africa.

Early Christianity cannot be ruled out from the genre of "traditional African religions." If the Nile is African, then Nilotic language is African, and grassroots Nilotic cultures are African. If it seems bizarre to ask whether the Nile is "truly African," it also seems bizarre to ignore that this is not a negligible question for some in the southern part of Africa. If necessary, let it be examined fairly and objectively as a question of accurate geographical description and definition.

The more serious hypothesis is that the teaching and culture of Christianity was accessible even in the first millennium to the Upper Nile all the way to its equatorial headwaters. The Nile is a single ecological system stretching the exceedingly long distance from Uganda and the Congo to the Egyptian delta—the world's longest river.

Many trading cultures have found ways of traversing from the equatorial headwaters of the Nile to the delta with a core of trade languages that they were able to understand intertribally. These people were thoroughly inland-African in their culture. This is the environment in which inland Nilotic Christianity developed and continued over many centuries. Its varieties make it more accurate to identify it linguistically as Nilotic rather than Coptic. Its strength comes just as much from the center of the Nile as it did from its northern terminus.

The fact that the patriarchate represented it symbolically to the governing powers of the ancient world does not imply that the patriarch could afford to ignore what was happening in the heartland of the central Nile. The sad fact that many texts from the middle to upper Nile have been destroyed by centuries of warfare is no evidence of textual emptiness, only an argument from silence.

In Ethiopia the apostolic tradition is about 1,650 years old. It harks back to the tradition that narrates how the king traveled to the



Nile Delta, sat under Athanasius and became himself the first bishop of Ethiopia. This Ethiopian traditional oral history needs to be understood and studied by Africans far more than it has been by Euro-Americans.

Much more needs to be known of how far early Christianity penetrated into Nubia and Sudan. We know that it was well-established in north Sudan, but how far south was it established in the first millennium? These issues await investigation on rigorously empirical and textual grounds by an open-minded generation of young African scholars. Some of them will come from Amharic speaking areas, some from Arabic speaking areas and many from sub-Saharan regions.

These are areas that will require the greater efforts in archaeological and textual research, and research into the transmission of oral tradition. Such labors will be richly rewarded. Early Egyptian Christianity has left many archaeological sites uninvestigated, but by comparison the Maghreb is far more neglected. There are at least six million Coptic Christians as well as a larger number in Ethiopia to continue to recall and practice the tradition of early Christianity, but many fewer in the Maghreb, due to the fury of the Arab conquest.

## TEMPTATIONS



### TILTED HISTORICAL PREDISPOSITIONS

European historical scholarship gave us form criticism, which intends to show how oral traditions shaped the history of the transmission of written texts. It has been applied with intense imagination in the narratives of the transition of the faith from Asia to Europe. But that same form criticism was used to dismiss almost entirely the viability of oral traditions in Africa. This is why the political uses and prejudices of form criticism need now to be carefully analyzed.

The Marcan and Ethiopic oral traditions have been almost totally ignored by historians. But the same historians do not require texts when they apply form-critical criteria to the study of the New Testament. There they are intensely interested in oral tradition. In Africa suddenly the rules of the game change and oral tradition is ruled out. The irony is that while digging into every conceivable speculative aspect of oral tradition in the Greco-Roman world, European form-critical scholarship has become systematically blinded to the oral traditions of Africa. The hermeneutics of suspicion have not yet been applied to the hermeneutics themselves.

The embarrassing fact is that some of these deep African oral

memories, still lacking texts, are benefiting from the discovery of valid archaeological, textual and paleographic correlates. These traditions are not simply Hellenistic. They are Coptic, a distinctly different language and culture. They are orthodox, ecumenical and consensual Christianity taking root on the African soil into the full reaches of the middle and upper Nile.

Similar communities took root in the valleys and sands of Libya, and the mountains of the Maghreb, of Numidia and the great stretches of Mauretania all the way to Tangiers. The spread of Christianity straight across North Africa appears to have been very rapid. From the start of the third century Tertullian was aware that Christians were being persecuted in Mauretania. The bishops of Mauretania took active part in general African councils at Carthage. Bishop Quintas is explicitly called a Mauretanian. By the third century Caesarea Mauretania (Cherchel) had a Christian community whose cemetery goes back to the persecution of Septimius Severus. Tipasa, on the coast of western Algeria, has necropolis evidences and third-century votive inscriptions showing a Christian presence there in pre-Constantinian times.

The African oral traditions of the Upper Nile Valley, with the exception of the heterodox Gnostic texts, have not been seriously investigated in either Europe or the Americas. The door is open to African scholarship to reexamine these challenges. These studies must not proceed in a chauvinistic Afrocentric way but on the basis of the best evidences of historical and paleographic inquiry.

The time is over for fawning subservience to European historical skepticism that is unwilling to grant validity to corroborating evidences of early Christian African oral traditions while giving them great weight in early Christian Europe. If the flow of intellectual history in early Christianity was from south to north, then many ques-



tions of Western history need to be reexamined.

The early African texts and exegetical traditions, with their philosophical, catechetical and liturgical wisdom, entered into the standard assumptions of medieval European teaching. If Africans forget that these ideas were first refined and developed out of Africa, they put themselves at an unnecessary disadvantage.

It is incorrect to portray Africa to the world as if Africa has always been a bit lacking in intellectual toughness and slow to awaken to Western achievements. The irony is that these Western achievements themselves have often been profoundly indebted to Africa before they became accepted in Europe. A cruel trick has been played in tilted reporting of Africa's contributions to world history: ancient Christian texts and exegesis have been left entirely out of it.

#### THE CATHOLIC LIMITS OF AFROCENTRISM

Whenever Protestants use the term *catholic*, they brace a little—less so now than a few decades ago. So it is prudent to note that *catholic* is not necessarily being capitalized. It refers to that universally shared faith held by all believers of all times and places.

To focus on Africa might at first seem to convey a certain indirect offense to ecumenism, to the universal scope of the truth, to the catholicity of the church and to the wholeness of global Christianity.

It would be an offense against catholicity to treat Africa as the one and only source of all Christian consensual teaching of all periods and languages. That could end in a narrow Afrocentrism that has had unhappy and pretentious results. Afrocentrism must be rejected as an ideological bias contrary to the catholicity of the faith. But if important contributions have been missed precisely out of ignorance or biased assumptions, then they are due some proportional correction. So if the distinctly African fruits of Christian teaching have been

missed, then they must be replanted and cultivated anew from the original seed—the early African Christian writers, born and immersed in African cultures.

Admittedly this line of argument can easily deteriorate into an exuberant Afrocentrism, as if the assertion is being made that all Christian truth essentially emerges out of Africa and is reflected thereafter from African roots. The careful presentation of evidence needs to protect the argument against those temptations and exaggerations. That can be done by constantly recalling that the achievements of African exegesis are interpretations of apostolic teaching, that their early presence in Africa does not point to their moral purity and that all depends on grace—just what we have learned from the great African theologians.

The aim of catholicity in Christian teaching is to reflect the wholeness of apostolic truth to the whole world. The criterion is the accurate attestation of the truth, not the egalitarian goal of making all voices equal. Inclusiveness is essential to catholicity if what is meant by it is the proclamation of Christian truth in languages accessible to all cultures. Inclusiveness is imprudent to the extent that it embraces false claims or blesses foolishness. The commitment to use early African sources does not misplace or deny the full use of ecumenical sources.

It is not unusual in classic Christian thinking to utilize texts from one nation or culture without any substantive loss of catholicity. It is not necessary to cover the whole as long as the part selected reasonably reflects and respects the ecumenical whole—the common confession of Christians worldwide of all times and places. Classical African Christianity represented ecumenical Christianity better than it was represented anywhere else in the fourth century, and the proof of that is historical: its judgments were widely received by ecumenical consent, and still are. That remains as telling historical evidence.



Many African Christians today have a deep conviction that they must think in terms that are indigenously African because this is what has been most neglected. That is a valid concern. Christianity meets the criterion of indigenous or traditional African religion, since it has twenty centuries of sustained presence in Africa. But length of tenure is not at the heart of what motivates the recovery of African Christian orthodoxy. In fact orthodoxy knows that it is a false teaching to become fixated on a part of the wholeness of the faith so as to ignore the whole history of revelation; this is precisely the definition of heresy.

If the brilliance of the Cappadocian teachers had been only cursorily investigated, or had their great influence not yet been recognized, they too would need the kind of massive restudy of evidence that is now called for in Africa. But Cappadocian teaching has indeed been well studied. Now it is Africa's turn.

The hunger to reunite the ancient and modern visions of Christianity is growing in Africa. This comes from the heart of orthodoxy itself, which yearns for the current reappropriation of ancient apostolic truth. The recovery of African Christianity seeks both its own unique identity and to be at the same time a full participant in the whole of world Christianity. The new yearning to recover ancient African texts seeks to correct a prevailing imbalance that has contributed to the African Christian crisis of identity. It seeks now to provide the sources and arguments through which Africans can affirm their distinct Africanness without denying their historic participation in the ecumenical whole.

If Africans were saying that they want their sources to come from Africa alone and not from anywhere else, then that would be deficient in the catholic spirit. But this is not the direction of African expectations. They seek a fair hearing for valid arguments based on evidence.



African intellectual history represents the first major blossoming of the Christian mind. The blossom would not occur without the plant. It occurs in its own time and place—Africa. If a slow-growing plant has a spectacular blossom, at that moment it displays the beauty of the whole organism, which is ecumenical Christianity. The blossom is African intellectual brilliance. The blossom cannot be detached from its roots, for then it dies. Its roots are the apostolic witnesses in Africa. Without the previous stages of preparation of the nations and the covenant people, there would be no blossom. The timing of plant growth within its ecosystem must be respected. It would be absurd to curse a beautiful blossom merely because it was slow in growing. That would say more about the dismissive party than about the plant. To detach Egyptian and Numidian Christianity from Africa is to detach the blossoming of the early Christian mind from its context.

### IGNORING AFRICAN SOURCES

The prevailing habit of mind is to dismiss these early African writings on the grounds that they are not really African. They're Greek. They're Roman. They're imports. Africans have colluded in this forgetfulness, to their own harm. Two major problems accompany this habit. One is that it tends over time to become well-nigh racist by systematically neglecting African sources. The second is that it deprives Africa of its most authentic voices that express the best of its true intellectual history.

A few would say that you cannot have an African voice unless you have a particular skin color. Most African Christians, whether from the Coptic north or the sub-Saharan south, do not want to go in that direction. To assess truth by skin color is hazardous and has a long history of abuse.

Stop and reflect: What is the reasonable answer to those who hint

that Christianity is not very African and never has been? Before prematurely dismissing this charge, it is wise to remember that there is a whole body of literature from Edward Blyden (1832-1912), the father of pan-Africanism, on down that would argue that what is commonly called "African traditional religion" is just not compatible with Christianity.

Yet the sweeping flow of African Christian missions is evidence enough of the fact that vital scriptural Christianity has in fact found a true home deep in Africa for a much longer period of time than has modern capitalism or Marxism or secularism. The evidence overwhelms all ambiguity. The assumption that there is a fundamental incompatibility between African traditional religion and Christianity has been proved wrong by literally millions of living African Christians. What may be more needed is a redefinition of "African traditional religion" that includes both Christianity and Islam, assuming that religions that have sustained over a millennium of continuity surely must be called traditional.

### THE COST OF FORGETFULNESS

From its first century, Christianity has found Africa receptive to the good news. For two millennia it has been welcomed enthusiastically in Africa. The exuberance of this welcome is uniquely characteristic of African community life and of African Christianity.

The pre-Constantinian Christian intellect apparently found a richer thought environment in Africa than elsewhere. It discovered itself in the intellectual centers of Africa before Europe had produced such centers. Eventually it offered its rich wisdom to the cultures of the northern side of the Mediterranean, but not until it had been cradled and nurtured and schooled in Africa.

Lacking adequate historical research and grounding, the study of

modern African Christianity has been crippled. It has suffered from the absence of key texts in good translation and from remote-controlled intellectual imperialism. If the literature on traditional African religion had been more firmly grounded historically in ancient African orthodox reflection, it would not have been so vulnerable to the temptations and derailments of modernity.

African church leaders do well to focus on those precise points where contemporary African theology is most lacking. These limitations are due to tendencies that have arisen far beyond the African continent, especially in European historical predispositions. They could have been avoided, but that would have required establishing different standards of textual and oral history assessment than have prevailed in Europe for the last century. The focus of the early African Christianity initiative is on what has been neglected.

The almost frenetic quest for a new African Christian identity would have been far less turbulent if it had been less forgetful of African patristic exegesis. Instead it rerooted itself in nineteenth-century European forms of philosophy, historicism, psychology and sociology. The price paid for this historic identity loss is that modern African Christianity has had to look desperately for some other way to relate to African traditional religions, when it already possessed viable traditions of ecumenical teaching all along. It could have been already instructed through its own historical experience concerning the Spirit's work of the preparation for the gospel through African traditional religions. It could have also recognized that despite this diversity there is a unified center for Christian teaching: the primitive African baptismal confession, which in time gained ecumenical confirmation.

#### OVERLOOKING AFRICAN VOICES IN SCRIPTURE

Early Christianity tells an historical narrative that deeply involved Af-



rica from the very beginning, from Joseph to Moses to the exodus to the flight of the holy family to Egypt to the Ethiopian eunuch. These are African events that define the whole subsequent narrative of salvation history in the Christian view.

The first Gospel narrative was written by Mark, who personally brought the first apostolic voice to the African continent, according to African tradition.

In much African theology since 1960 it seems as if all the old standards compulsively had to be reviled and rejected in order for something truly African to be newly invented. That sort of revolutionary conceit was derived not from indigenous African sources. It came from modern Enlightenment ideas far more at home in eighteenth-century France than twenty-first-century Africa. It taught some Africans to bitterly oppose their own heritage, and thus to ignore the early African influences on European Christianity. These influences were wrongly imagined to be alien to Africa.

Unaware of the fact that much of the substructure of European Christianity came out of Africa, much of the ancient ecumenical memory was demythologized to death. Precisely how this happened is one of the ironies that needs to be further explored by young African scholars.

#### **HOW PROTESTANTS CAN CELEBRATE THE APOSTOLIC CHARISMA OF THE COPTS**

Historically viewed, there remains one core tradition of African Christianity that has sustained a continuous witness for two millennia: the Coptic Orthodox Churches of Egypt and the Upper Nile. For two thousand years they have been teaching that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God is the Creator, that the Holy Spirit works to reveal the purpose of God through the written Word. Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals

can all join them in these great confessions. They are not substantively different from what is being taught by sub-Saharan evangelicals and Catholics, but the south has remained emotively and linguistically distant from the north. It has benefited far less from the Coptic sense of history, its stability and continuity than it could have.

There is inadequate recognition in Africa that the Coptic tradition has maintained this cohesion for two thousand years. The working cooperation of Coptic Christianity with the rest of African Christianity has hardly begun. Charity, patience and empathy are required to overcome the distance. There is a will to overcome the distance. It can be overcome, and in a few places is already being overcome. But it has largely gone unnoticed.

It has started to mend. The central confessions and liturgies and prayers and Scriptures of the Coptic tradition were once closely shared with both the Byzantine and Latin traditions of Africa, by both the ancient sees of Alexandria and Carthage. This ecumenical core has never been entirely absent in Africa during the last twenty centuries. This core is largely identical with early consensual African Christianity. It has remained intact in global Christianity and now is gradually reawakening in Africa with full vitality.

Aside from the Copts, classic Christian testimony has reappeared in different forms in the Counter-Reformation Portuguese and French missionaries of the sixteenth century and following, and then in different apparel in the Protestant missions of the nineteenth century and following. In neither case did this reappearance imply that something entirely new was being introduced for the first time to Africa. For it was already profoundly African in its scriptural and patristic substructure. That premise is what needs to be thoroughly unpacked. Reconnecting black Africa to the historic center of Coptic Christianity is crucial to the recentering of African Christianity.

## THE CHRISTIAN ANCESTRY OF AFRICA

These early Christian ancestors are as African as the mighty Nile. Since their metaphors are often very much akin to Old Testament patterns, the study of the Old Testament puts sub-Saharan Africans directly in touch with the spirit world and ritual behaviors that were directly at hand in Old Testament times.

The 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. This is a "must learn" challenge.

No one is asking for a Christian reconquest of North Africa—only for religious liberty to witness to the truth on a fair playing field. This requires a defense of religious conscience if nothing else, and an intellectual defense of human dignity. These values have been honed within the whole history of Christianity, and not only in Africa. Both Islam and Christianity will benefit from the study of them.

The early African vision of world history was shaped by brilliant writers—Lactantius, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril, Augustine and the post-Vandal monastic diaspora. These are the historians who have been neglected by European and American scholars. Only by probing their wide view of universal history does one become aware of the stunning intellectual depth of early African Christianity.



## PART TWO

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# African Orthodox Recovery



There may be a short-term window of opportunity for African Christians to recover their classical African past. Why now? Because all the conditions have finally appeared for such a major initiative: (1) rapid numerical expansion of Christianity, (2) a new hunger for intellectual depth, and (3) the perceived might of the Muslim world, coupled with the exhaustion of modern Western intellectual alternatives.

Why short-term? Because the conditions of history could change dramatically if this opportunity is not seized. For how long? That depends on human responses. Whether it will remain fully open for our children's generation will depend on this generation. But it is now entirely possible for these stories to be told, these texts and ideas to be restudied after centuries of neglect. The time to do this is now. There may not be another opportunity for a long time.

## THE OPPORTUNITY FOR RETRIEVAL



The seeds of the orthodox African faith have too long remained buried in the soil of Africa. They are not limited to the vestiges of postcolonial missionary Christianity. They are veiled in early African history.

We do not yet know how to receive this potential gift, but we do know that the window is now open in this unique historical moment. It is precisely from the ancient African sources that global Christianity can relearn that the church guided by the Spirit is never irretrievably fallen away from the truth.

This is so because the revealed Word made known in Scripture has been preserved by the Holy Spirit, who remains actively present to awaken faith in the one God revealed in universal history. This history is recalled in the texts of Scripture. Wherever the written Word is studied under the guidance of the Spirit, the Word promises not to return empty.

Even as prevailing political ideologies and particular church structures remain vulnerable, the Spirit is sure to be present to guide the faithful into all truth.

The future of the church is in the hands of grace, not finally in hu-

man cleverness or strategy. The pathway toward African orthodox and catholic and evangelical recovery has been abundantly hedged by grace through the Spirit's providential guidance.

The unreceived gift is this: that African Christianity is free to rediscover its own historic genius. The gift is offered with a caveat: the unique opportunity may be taken away if delayed, diluted or avoided. It is a true gift that has been actually given in our time. Whether it will be received is still in question.

Though we do not know the time frame of opportunity, we do know the promise, as confirmed in 2 Timothy 2:19: "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'the Lord knows those who are his.' " Whatever may have happened in the long history of Christians in Africa, and however the Arab conquest may have affected the labored growth of early African Christianity, God has not abandoned Africa—not a single valley of it. The foundation offered in the apostolic tradition is still sure. Whatever may have happened in the seventh or seventeenth centuries, still the foundation, Jesus Christ, stands assured, and the Lord knows who are his. His are the millions of new believers recently raised up in Africa, awaiting the truth to be more fully received. His are the faithful survivors of Islamic conquest.

#### SURVIVING MODERNITY ·

Christian teaching, reflection, worship and service are not merely surviving in Africa, they are thriving beyond all expectation. To imagine that the African churches are coming to nothing is the least plausible of all hypotheses. Classical African orthodox teaching and spiritual formation has in fact outlived the pretensions and hazards of modern ideologies, which are already fallen into the process of rapid disintegration.



No one whose eyes are open to what God is doing in African history can reasonably argue that the future century points to a post-Christian era of darkness hanging over Africa. What is required for young Africans today is to dwell by grace in Africa, to inhabit it confidently, to live within the earliest Africa traditions of scriptural wisdom for a long period of time. Then God will give them the grace once again to grasp the unique divine purpose in African history, just as those Africans of the first centuries dwelled in it, lived in Christ the hope of glory and passed it along to Europe and the world.

If African Christians are going to entrust their children to Christianity, they must have confidence that Christianity is trustworthy, that Christianity is true and truly African, and not fundamentally alien to the African spirit. They need not be intimidated by either an exhausted modernity or Wahhabist Islam. They have survived too many crises to be intimidated.

The believing Christian community in the Sudan has learned through hard experience to live under the authority of the Word, just as has the living body of Christ in Nigeria, Uganda and Angola. The church in these places has already survived the worst hazards of contemporary life and still flourishes quietly by grace.

This has happened completely against the predictions of those who had once assumed that modern secularization would overcome all residues of classic Christian spirituality. Those predictions are now revealed as implausible. The revelation is made obvious in actual history.

Young Africans are discovering the power of classic Christian faith. Some are only recently discovering its classical literature of the first millennium. They are astonished that so much of it was hammered out on the anvil of inland African cultures.

### THE STEADINESS OF AFRICAN ORTHODOXY

African orthodoxy is not recently conceived or born. It is as long-lived as any Christian tradition of any continent. It stands equally in continuity with the apostolic testimony of Jerusalem and Antioch and Rome. This fact has been ecumenically recognized since the earliest ecumenical councils. The leading status of the bishop of Alexandria in ancient ecumenical Christianity was the church's way of honoring the whole African lay apostolate.

African Christianity is entering into a maturing stage. It hungers for the strong meat of ancient African Christianity at this decisive stage. Just as a young person needs to be challenged through risk toward independence, so the church needs both healthy nutrition and wise guidance. The nutrition is the gospel of grace; the guidance is the law of love.

This treasured growth needs protection from war, from HIV-AIDS, from apostasy. This protected development is what is now occurring among young Africans who understand the calling of God for the future of their African families, villages and schools. They grasp the need for a just political order, for social cohesion, for economic justice and for physical well-being. All these challenges can be better met by standing firmly within the historical community of faith that has been repeatedly tested by the experienced ancient African apostolate on African soil.

Political ideologies read history as an opportunity for empowerment. Classic Christianity reads history as an opportunity for living out the truth revealed in history. The truth transcending time is revealed in time through the incarnation and resurrection. Christian truth is embodied in human lives hidden in Christ.

This is not a question of manipulating power or of discovering

cunning new strategies. It is about persons who are being shaped and empowered by the Holy Spirit to hear the living word of God speaking through the written Word within actual emerging human contexts. This we are relearning from our ancient patristic and evangelical African ancestors, even if we dwell at a distance from them in time and space. That distance has not prevented some of us in the modern West to sit at the feet of the very best early African Christian teachers: Athanasius and Augustine.

### THE NEW AFRICAN ECUMENISM

African Christians are once again struggling with major potential divisions that threaten the unity of the body of Christ. They now have the benefit of learning about conflict resolution from their ancient African mentors. From that history they learn that not every difference of opinion is demonic and not every union is of God. They learn that God is more patient than we are.

There have been massive conflicts and ruptures that have taken place throughout the length and breadth of African Christian history. This is witnessed by the lengthy struggle of orthodoxy with Arianism, Sabellianism, Donatism and Pelagianism. All had their formative periods on African soil before they became doctrinally defined in Africa even while being debated elsewhere. All were basically resolved in Africa before the formulas for their resolutions were received almost universally. Facing these conflicts candidly helped early African Christianity to grow stronger and wiser.

Hence, there is no need for African orthodox Christians to be afraid of seriously held differences of opinion. There is a need for them to listen empathically to the dialectical unity that the Holy Spirit is actively creating through those differences. The Spirit-filled life is the basis for the recovery of the unity that the body of Christ



already enjoys and possesses in the risen Lord. Whether from Catholic, Protestant, Coptic or charismatic perceptions, believers are growing ready to listen to the uniting voices of classical consensual African Christianity. It is amazing to see the new energies that are emerging out of this uniting work of the Spirit—the vital communities of prayer, scholarship, preaching, teaching and discipleship.

While this is already occurring, it is not yet being reported. Thank God the press has hardly heard about it—to spin it into cynicism. The Spirit is far ahead of its reportage. Part of the task now is to set forth some of the layers of evidence within the community of faith that this orthodox recovery is already taking firm shape. The evidence is gathered broadly from a wide harvest of personal conversions, in addition to sociological evidence, textual studies, archaeological excavations, linguistic studies, demographics and public-opinion assessments. It will take a generation to impart it convincingly.

That this reversal is already happening is a historical fact. It is an ecumenical occurrence of potentially massive consequence for world Christianity. Lives are being claimed by it. Families are living it out. Harmful compulsive behaviors are being reversed. Social processes are being transformed.

Orthodox Africans are finding that the older (twentieth-century) forms of ecumenical organizations with their self-assured bureaucracies do not have an exclusive possession of the heartbeat of ecumenical reality. Many recent ventures in ecumenism have been tainted with unbiblical and ignoble illusions. The ideological momentum of late twentieth-century ecumenism is already experiencing a steep decline in support, confidence and buoyancy. It is too long detached from its ancient ecumenical wellsprings.

The deeper biblical wellsprings are now being recovered by a new

African ecumenism of the Spirit. The actual living, organic unity of the body of believers in Christ is greater than the pretended unity of bureaucratic ecumenism.

### PRUNING UNDISCIPLINED EXCESSES

God has a proven history of removing every branch that does not produce fruit (Jn 15:2). They are pruned to allow the vine to bear more fruit. This pruning process is occurring in Africa. Where the cuts are deep and well-timed, the growth is astonishing.

Western denominational institutions warped by the theological tradition of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, Tillich and Bultmann seem to have had some forms of vitality through some decades of the twentieth century, but that vitality is largely spent. They are now being trimmed in order that they may become more productive for God's reconciling action in the world.

This pruning and renewing is occurring in African Catholic, Coptic and Protestant orthodoxy. It is eliciting fresh expressions of communities that unite Scripture study, spiritual formation, evangelization and prayer with practical ministries of compassion, healing and feeding. African orthodoxy is not abandoning its historic communions but regrounding them in the earliest apostolate. The brilliant instruction and guidance of early African Christian texts and witnesses stand ready to nourish this regrounding.

Consensual African orthodoxy has always been quite clear about the unique saving significance of Jesus Christ through his personal work as the crucified Lord of glory. Only on the nonconsensual (docetic, Gnostic, Arian, Marcionite, agnostic) edges has that clarity been blurred. The future of African society needs the united voices of faithful Christian confessors to one Lord. The divisive Western diseases of consumerism, materialism, hedonism and individualism

have tried to fill the void that has been left by the muting of this confession amid the failures of modern utopias.

African Christians have learned by hard suffering through modern experimentation that they must not confuse narrow political manipulations with the revealed Word of God to humanity. The gospel cannot be collapsed into an apology for a particular political party or ideology. It is the story of a once-for-all saving event. Orthodox African believers have learned from Scripture that though persecutions will come, by grace they may count it all joy when they meet trials, confident that they are sharing in God's faithfulness.

What the Holy Spirit is manifestly doing in Africa today is very different from engineering institutional mergers through negotiation or strategic planning. Rather, through grace the Spirit is quietly awakening faith. That faith is surely manifesting itself in the works of love, for love is what faith does. Those whose faith is active in love are living out true religion as defined by the epistle of James, whether they call themselves Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostals or charismatics. They embody the one family of God in different family memories and genetic variations.

The recognition of emerging unity is itself what the Holy Spirit is enabling in the new African ecumenism: enabling persons to identify their deeper unity in Jesus Christ—north and south, doctrinal and practical, liturgical and dogmatic. It is not a matter of negotiating or dialoguing in order to produce institutional unity. Rather, it is sharing in the unity the Spirit is enabling. The challenge is to elicit behavior transformed in personal faith in Jesus Christ that finds ways of loving the next one we meet (the neighbor) as Christ loved us.

## **BURNING AWAY THE ACIDS OF MORAL RELATIVISM**

Classic African orthodox belief remains unconvinced of modernity's



defiant claims of absolute moral relativism. The fantasy of moral equivalence means this: anybody's assertion of any truth claim is already granted the honor of equal legitimacy. The historic wisdom of a multigenerational community is thereby granted no more moral legitimacy than the myriad untested frauds and fakes. The fantasy says that every assertion of truth has intrinsically equal integrity and plausibility. This takes on the unauthorized function of dismissing eighty generations of hard-won apostolic and catholic experience.

In ultramodernity each assertion is viewed relatively, but relatively in relation to what? Only silence answers if nothing is enduring, if all being pretends to live as if there were no Giver of being, if nothing is incomparable in mercy or justice. According to relativism there is no standard for assessing relativism. On this unsteady sea there are no ships left after the postmodern storm. Everything becomes submerged in the muck.

The premise of absolute moral equivalence of all assertions of truth is an attitude that has corrupted the modern ideologies that have claimed to be substitutes for classical African Christian teaching. This has led to a coarse assumption that nonfaith has the same authority as faith, falsehood as truth, apostasy as apostolicity. In this way the quest for truth is surrendered before the quest begins. The search for truth in the classic African Christian sense is all about a critical examination of reasons for asserting the truth revealed in universal history, not the total leveling of all alleged truth into an amalgam of relative equally legitimate claims.

When a liar is gratuitously offered the same status before the court as the truth teller, truth is put in intolerable peril. That does not happen either in a just courtroom or a fair marketplace. It happens only in a sick and convictionless moral ethos where the search for truth has been abandoned, where absolute relativism prevails, where all as-

sertions start from the assumption that they are credible however deceptive they may be. Where falsehood is valued equally with truth, the question of truth is not even seriously acknowledged as pertinent to the human future.

This is sometimes generously called postmodern, but it is actually more accurately described as desperately ultramodern. It is despairing because it can never arrive at any hint of any conclusive truth. It is *ultra* because it exaggerates the worse habits of modern consciousness.

Orthodox African believers understand that their unity in Christ is based on truth. Preserving the integrity of truth is of higher value than the false pretenses of absolutely uncritical tolerance. Orthodox Africans are seeking unity in the truth, not a unity that avoids or evades the truth.

Africa has had enough of postmodern evasions. When dialogue descends to the level of an evasion of the truth question, then orthodox Christian believers no longer have a moral duty to pretend to honor it. An attempt at absolute relativism is constantly trying to legitimize this sickly pretense.

Orthodox African Christians have a serious doctrine of sin that is keenly aware of the temptation of claims of political justice to be purely altruistic. Even with the best intentions, ambiguous political decisions are made within a history of sin. Sin is seen in the subtle differences between ideal intent and actuality. If unrepented, sin grows in power and self-deception.

#### ORTHODOXY: GLOBAL AND AFRICAN

Global Christian orthodoxy is intrinsically crosscultural because it is global. African orthodoxy is intrinsically crosscultural because Africa itself is teeming with cultural diversity. When Africa is described



homogeneously as a single culture, as if there were only one cohesive African culture, a foggy haze descends upon descriptive clarity. On the huge African continent we are dealing with vastly different cultures and not with a monolithic or static cultural reality.

We are witnessing today the recovery of a realistic and prudent African orthodoxy that transforms cultures. It is becoming aware historically of both the diversity of African cultural values and the human unity given in creation and redeemed from fallen creation. From within the story of divine creation—fallen voluntarily into sin—the ethical concern for fairness and proportional tolerance of cultural diversity emerges.

What happens when the cohesion of orthodoxy meets the multicultural character of African reality? Both benefit. Multiculturalism is strengthened by multigenerationalism. Truth is applied to circumstance. It is freed to live deeply out of rich and long historical experience.

### HISTORIC CHRISTIAN MULTICULTURALISM

Classic African orthodoxy offers greater energies for social transformation and distributive justice than what is available within diluted secular humanistic forms of multiculturalism. Secularized multiculturalism has a more limited historical memory than the vast intergenerational social experiences of twenty centuries of classic Christianity. Modern conceptions of diversity are less aware of the varieties of human culture in history than classic Christianity, blessed with a wide memory of human experience.

The recent secular models of diversity and multiculturalism tend to despise historical experience. They do not care about past experience of variety. Their limited focus is on the varieties of *contemporary* constituencies. Christianity understands and values not only con-



temporary but also *historical* experience with its much wider array of diverse expressions. Modernity functions with a perception of distributive justice that is weak, arithmetic, simplistic, egalitarian. Christianity functions with an organic understanding of justice mediated through historic communities. Hence, it is more fitting to the political reality of Africa than the recent secular models of hypertolerance. The classical orthodox models of multicultural diversity that were hewn in ancient Africa are celebrated within the unity of the body of Christ.

As contemporary Africa rediscovers classical Christian Africa, a more prudent basis is being recognized on which to seek justice and love mercy. In drug rehabilitation, for example, it is evident that personalized communities of faith are more effective than depersonalized government programs. Those who can rely on the cohesion of a loving primary community, a neighborhood, a place, a personal face, an embodiment of the mission of the servant Messiah, demonstrably have a much higher rate of reliable therapeutic change than those who have only the dispensing of drugs bureaucratically according to a government plan to provide a pharmaceutical fix. To fight drugs with drugs is quite different from offering community to restore community.

What happens in faith-nurtured charitable networks is the offer of human concern that cannot be delivered through any impersonal network. When egalitarian government programs begin to seek ways of personalizing their services, they are likely to be found borrowing from moral and religious traditions in order to reach that higher plateau of empathic care. Such groups are more effective at implementing behavioral transformation than are coercive bureaucratic governmental structures that operate out of a million sentences of administrative law fashioned by defensive lawyers and administered

by politicians and bureaucrats whose skills are dedicated to the accumulation of power. Early African Christian acts of charity based in caring communities grasped this simple biblical point: There is a world of difference between gospel and law.

The entrenched modern habit of turning all questions into class-identity politics has proven to be a poverty producer. While pretending to fight poverty, it tends to elicit dependency conditions that reinforce poverty. Class-identity politics says that if you happen to be a person of a particular class or culture or economic status, then it is already predictable what you are going to believe. But what people believe comes finally from their hearts, not from their social location or class status, however much the heart may be distorted by social location or class status.

#### REFRAMING MODERN ECUMENICS WITHIN CLASSIC ECUMENICS

Modern ecumenism was begun in 1948. It was already morose by 1998, the last time the World Council met in Africa. It has spun through a rise-and-fall cycle of fifty years—a gradual rise to 1966 and a sharp decline following 1966. Then ideological ecumenism turned into one of the most divisive counter-ecumenical movements in recent church history.

The modern form of ecumenism began and grew out of an earlier, less well-known evangelical form of ecumenism. By 1966 the evangelical motives for ecumenism were sadly disavowed and disowned by modern social activism. The World Council of Churches grew directly out of the evangelical mission movements, which found its earliest expression of unity in the World Evangelical Alliance in 1846, long before modern liberal ecumenism. This earlier evangelical ecumenism is closer to ancient ecumenism.

Only after the 1960s did liberalizing ecumenism lapse into a bureaucratic merger mentality. Then it tended to become diluted into superficial pseudo-dialogues between defensive bureaucracies. Finally, it broke out into unrepresentative forms of extreme politicization intensified by bizarre forms of absolute moral relativism.

When moral relativism puts on the face of being absolutely true, then ironically it proves itself to be neither true nor absolute. The incarnation is dismissed as a myth. The atoning work of God on the cross becomes lost in situational ethics. Tolerance of evil becomes a virtue.

African orthodoxy is now returning to its wellsprings of classical exegesis. This is happening equally among wide varieties of traditions of Christian memory: Coptic and charismatic, progressive and conservative. They taste the kindness engendered by classic orthodox understandings of Scripture and apostolic truth. As they do, they are discovering that they have at times been betrayed by modern church bureaucracies long accustomed to ideological biases and fixations on political power, and willing to conform to passing cultural whims. Hence permissive ecumenism no longer can pretend to be the exclusive bearer of ancient ecumenical teaching. It lacks penitence and humility.



## HOW THE BLOOD OF AFRICAN MARTYRS BECAME THE SEED OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY



The rapid spread of early African Christianity was due in part to the heartbreaking African history of martyrdom. This is a history of African blood on African soil.

For African believers the martyrs pointed to the continuity of the communion of the saints. They bore their cross in Africa. They evoked a luminous awareness of their relation with esteemed ancestors. That is very intuitively African. Note that this social value—the honoring of ancestors—is evident not just in central or southern Africa. It clings to the very African cultures that had indigenous roots at the time that Christianity emerged as a persecuted religion on the African continent: the first four centuries.

Persecuted by whom? In the third century it was the Romans, in the seventh century the Arabs, in the nineteenth century the colonial powers. Now it is the jihadis in Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia, and throughout the equatorial band of mid-African conflict. Christians first emerged as public witnesses, not as advocates of the Roman and Arab conquests but as sufferers from the Roman and Arab conquests. Even then they were living out of deeply embedded traditions from

their earlier Hebrew-Christian past of sacrifice, martyrdom and persecution. These profoundly proto-Christian and African motifs had great power within the pre-Christian history that prepared Africa for Christian confessors.

#### WHETHER CLASSIC CHRISTIAN TEACHING IS DEFINED BY POWER

Is *orthodoxy* just a label that we give to winners of bare-knuckled, truthless ideological battles? Is *heretic* or *false teacher* merely a label we give losers? Is worldly power determinative of orthodoxy? Is orthodoxy the result of political and economic coercion?

Some argue that orthodoxy is nothing more than a manipulated history of the winners—a popular idea in Euro-American circles. If so, then orthodoxy has nothing to do with truth but only with power. Then the history of orthodoxy is not a history of truth but of a cynically powerful majority that has manipulated its way into durable power. That explanation must be examined and answered.

The most common form of this argument (that orthodoxy means winners, the last oppressor standing) is found today chiefly in its tired Marxist form, which argues that what any society calls “truth” is merely an expression of economic power. Accordingly, whoever has the economic power has the power to assign definitions of the truth.

The best counter to this unexamined and uncritical argument is to recall the history of African martyrdom. It was not for earthly power that the martyrs stood up. Nor did they offer their lives for worldly power, but for the power of the truth that transcended all political and economic power. They witnessed to the power of the truth of God’s revelation, which was not defined by human winning and least of all by unjust human winning.

Meekness is gently strong, unafraid to be vulnerable. The ultimate

form of meekness is martyrdom—if there is no other way to attest the truth. The Marxist reduction of truth to power is rejected by the Christian understanding of the truth of meekness, the cross, the Lamb of God.

The proof for this argument is the simple fact that the martyrs died. They were not trying to kill anyone. Instead, they were willing to be killed for the truth. This is entirely different from those who voluntarily elect to kill others or to be suicide slaughterers. They are not martyrs but killers who want to die as a benefit and as a political testimony.

There are court records of African witnesses to the truth of Christianity in the third century. Their witness shows their disdain for worldly power. There is no conceivable sense in which Felicitas or Perpetua or Cyprian would be reasonably viewed as political winners or as economic victors in worldly terms. They were not. They were naive losers under strict power-defined criteria. They were winners only in the ironic sense of being willing to die for truth, precisely while lacking worldly power. Christian martyrdom will not be ready to wisely confront jihadist claims until this sharp distinction is understood. The struggle between Christianity and Islamist power will finally be a struggle of truth and not of military power (though military self-defense may be required as a necessary forced-choice expression of moral truth).

The readiness to die for the sake of the truth is intrinsic to baptismal faith. In fact, it is the core meaning of baptism as a participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord of glory.

There is a kind of temporary vindication that comes from winning a short-term historical battle. But that does not account for the faith of multiple generations of witnesses following Jesus and Mark. African orthodoxy displays and values the sustaining power of durable



truth confirmed through an extended living history. This history has been lived out in Africa among the Copts and Ethiopians. It is not by human power alone that faith in Jesus Christ has been sustained over so many centuries on the Africa continent.

The orthodox mind sets forth reasons to believe that this continuity has been sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit over exceedingly great obstacles. Orthodox history calls this providence.

### HOW THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN MARTYRDOM SHAPED CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY

The meaning of the struggle of the early African martyrs begs to be understood in modern Africa. It was a countercultural, risk-laden, sacrificial, pre-Constantinian struggle for integrity in the face of overwhelming political power. It is a history of hagiography and martyrdom that would later turn into a history of exegesis and rigorous discipline.

It was amid that period of martyrdom that the teachings of African orthodoxy were decisively refined. It was in that context that Africa gave birth to the enduring ecumenical doctrines of creation, providence, sin, atonement, resurrection and the church—its liturgy, eucharistic life, teaching, and discipleship, refined by the fires of African experience.

Living toward eternal life through death became the experiential basis for translating the Christian gospel into African terms. They were formulated with much greater nuance and defended against early distortions in pre-Constantinian Africa more than elsewhere.

Early Christian views of universal history arose more directly out of this African Christian history than from Europe. This is documented in the Western literature on the meaning of human history. Africa produced the greatest texts in early Christianity on the inter-

pretation of universal history. The African writers were very early in addressing it systematically and thoroughly. Major African reflections on the whole course of human history are seen in the early African writings of Minucius Felix, Arnobius, Lactantius, Tertullian and Origen. All these preceded the synthesizing historical work of Eusebius, who took their sources and made them available to the churches of the East and North in Asia and Europe. Without Africa, Eusebius's library would be very thin.

This pre-Eusebian tradition of African historical observers became the predecessors of the even more influential Augustinian understanding of universal history. Augustine drew together these African and Mediterranean sources in the most sophisticated and complete way in his magnificent work on *The City of God*. Through Orosius, Prosper and Salvian the Augustinian interpretation of universal history would be disseminated throughout early medieval Europe.

The growing vitality of African independent Christianity today is 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. As in the incarnation of the Son, the Spirit works in and through the flesh.

The story of this history found hearers and believers throughout the great Nile Valley and the Maghreb. It did not end with the Arab conquest, and it continues even to this day. The full range of African Christianity is hardly glimpsed when viewed strictly as a modern event. Being an extensive historical movement shaped by the Spirit, it is not adequately defined strictly by its present forms. In this respect modern African historical consciousness falls far short of an-

cient African historical consciousness. The discipline of beginning-to-end historical reflection is as much an African achievement as a Hebraic or Greek achievement.

### RECALLING THE EXODUS AS AN AFRICAN EVENT

The exodus event happened in Africa. The memory of the exodus would return to instruct Africa about the one God who dwells with and guides the suffering people. Africa would then transmute the memory of the resurrected Lord into a way of looking at the whole of history that proved to be well-fitted for Africa in times of persecution.

It is not an accident that the suffering ministry of Jesus Christ on the cross is the model for African exegesis on those passages of Scripture dealing with both exodus and baptism. The analogies between exodus and baptism pervaded African iconography and theology. Exodus is the narrative of the rebirth of the people of God, originally experienced in Africa, then by analogy experienced again in the redemptive suffering of Jesus. Exodus is central to the narrative of the people of God coming out of bondage by God's grace into new life.

The slave history of Joseph points beyond itself toward the redemption from slavery to sin that occurred on the cross. As the exodus points toward baptism, so does Sinai point toward the Sermon on the Mount. The meaning of the Holy Land is not grasped until seen in relationship to what first occurred in Africa. The transition out of Africa was an act of God's mighty passing over of the sacrificial lamb. The interpretation of that event that ran all through Scripture was first grasped in Africa.

### AMASSING THE EVIDENCE

The Coptic calendar commences with "The Era of the Martyrs," which according to Coptic calculation is August 29, 284, the begin-



ning of the Diocletian era of persecution in Africa. That is day one in the Egyptian Christianity.

In the train of the martyrs followed the desert fathers and mothers who shaped monasticism first in Africa and then offered it to Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia, France and as far as Ireland. Long before Diocletian came the deep imprint of the martyrdom deaths of Mark in Alexandria, the seven men and five women of Scilli, and then Perpetua, Felicitas and Cyprian in Carthage.

From that actual history of suffering comes the core death-to-life experience of early African Christianity. Its recollections are still seen in the oratories and martyria set aside as places of prayer and Eucharist where the martyrs were remembered as ready to die for their witness. This is how African Christianity took root. It was not easy.

Testimony was given amid frightening and unpredictable persecutions. The faithful remembered the martyrs as resurrected by grace through faith to eternal life. They venerated them in humble prayer as they came to their places of martyrdom to remember them with prayer celebrating the Eucharist.

Archaeological evidence of martyria all over North Africa presents a challenge for a generation of scholars to digest and understand. The Eucharist was received in the catacombs of Africa still visible in the underground burial sites of Hadrumetum and Alexandria. These metaphors—Eucharist, faithfulness to death, martyrdom and ascetic discipline—were constantly interwoven in early African exegesis of Scripture.

These historical labors have not yet been thoroughly undertaken by many Africans. The requisite ancient languages (Coptic, Ge'ez, Greek, Latin and early Arabic) have seldom been widely studied in modern Africa. But they invite and await African participation. These issues are only faintly recognized by those African theologians who have re-

mained most heavily indebted to the European Enlightenment.

Convincing arguments are based on evidence. This evidence has not yet been thoroughly unpacked or accounted for. Early African believers gave a lasting gift to world Christianity. The gift was not given without blood and torture. When the evidence is rightly digested, which has not yet occurred, it will again reshape modern African Christian identity and motivation. It all hinges on God's purpose in the history of suffering, how it was dealt with in Africa and how others benefited from Africa's experience.

The Holy Spirit is awakening an enormous body of believers in Africa who have found their way into Scripture, but not yet found their way into the stories of early African saints and martyrs and leaders. They no longer need to keep their light under a bushel. They will soon be able to let it shine before the nations.

Africa is now poised to rediscover its own history, its deeper identity and its renewed vocation within world history. The literary and empirical data must be mined once again out of the early African voices and texts that produced that wisdom.

### THE CHALLENGE OF YOUNG AFRICA

We are talking about the youthful period of early African Christianity and how it is being reappropriated. Africa suffered wider and heavier persecutions, tortures, beheadings and martyrdoms than elsewhere. The linguistic frame of that ancient tradition was delivered within a multicultural array of Nilotic, Berber, Greek and Latin languages.

To speak of "young Africa" in this sense requires pointing simultaneously to (1) the early period of African Christian history and then immediately to (2) its relevance to young modern Africans, who have had a sufficient dose of ultramodernity. Young Africans point to the past with one hand and the future with the other. The early African



Christians were young at heart. The young Africans of today are made wiser by sitting at the feet of the young Africa of their ancestors.

African traditional religions before Christianity had already developed a strong sense of the presence of the ancestors and heightened eschatological expectations. These features stamped African Christianity from its earliest times.

Christian believers experienced African life on African soil with African cultures for many generations before they reached their zenith in Augustine and Cyril. This tradition emerges and matures broadly speaking between 42 and 692 C.E. That is 660 years of African Christianity before the Arab conquest.

Christianity went immediately to Africa as soon as it was proclaimed in Pentecost. Recall where the Ethiopian eunuch was headed. It spread quickly, like a prairie fire, into the known nations of the world in the 40s, 50s and 60s. In those early decades Africa was a prime target for Christian witness, since a large number of Diaspora Jews had been long settled there. We have the letters of Paul to show how quickly this movement went north, but we do not have a corresponding established literary tradition to show how quickly it went south, until we look more closely at the traditions of Mark and Apollos and Simon of Cyrene and Ethiopia and the history of martyrdom. What remains clear is that the archaeological and textual evidence related to the Marcan tradition has been largely ignored by modern European historicism, except as it served European form-critical interests and speculations.

Augustine of Hippo and Cyril of Alexandria are the two colossal figures of African theology that best bring to flower all that had been maturing up until the early fifth century. They brought to fruition the maturing processes that had been early planted in Africa, according to the Marcan tradition, from the first century.



## RIGHT REMEMBERING



African orthodoxy has a proven history of demonstrating itself to be intellectually *critical*, in the sense that it is constantly critiquing the ever new conception of pieces of truth that do not cohere with the whole unified substance of the truth of the early apostolic witness. Ancient African orthodoxy may be rightly understood as profoundly critical in the sense that it applies rigorous standards to assessing and comparing sacred texts—not by modern empirical standards alone but by critical truths attested by the texts themselves..

Ancient exegesis is not burdened by the debilitating limitations of modern biblical historicist critics who have indebted themselves too slavishly to narrow Enlightenment reductionist views of history. Orthodox historical reading seeks a balanced view of the whole of history rather than the restricted view of modern historicism, which limits knowledge of historical events to ordinary observational assumptions, prematurely eliminating any whisper of transcendence. Orthodox historical inquiry would never begin by ruling out miracles and the supernatural, purpose and meaning in creation and history.

More so, African orthodoxy is *morally critical*, in the sense that

with few exceptions it takes with eschatological seriousness the consequences of every here-and-now moral decision. Much of the moral rigor that Asian and European Christianity inherited from Africa came from the experience of concrete decisions about idolatry in the context of persecution. This gave a strong flavor of moral seriousness to the lives of reborn persons living daily out of grace and forgiveness.

#### REMEMBERING THE SCRIPTURE RIGHTLY THROUGH THE SPIRIT

Orthodoxy in the classic Christian sense is right remembering in accord with the apostles' teaching. Orthodoxy understands itself as enlivened by that ongoing work of the Spirit that helps believers remember the New Testament witness reliably in the light of ecumenical consensual exegesis. God's own Spirit is working within our limitations, our consciousness and within our memory to correct and sustain the right recollection of the truth and unity of apostolic teaching.

The simple process of transmitting the religious tradition to our children is itself considered in orthodox Christianity as a work of the Holy Spirit, a gift of grace, not a good human work alone without grace. The writing of the apostles, the apostles' right remembering and our remembering of the apostles rightly—these are truly human acts into which the Spirit enters and participates to inspire, encourage and guarantee the truth of the reliable transmission of the revealed Word. The mystery of the true humanity and true divinity of the incarnate Lord is analogous to the mystery of the truth of the Spirit transmitted through history by means of written documents.

Serious readers of sacred Scripture are constantly praying that they might reason appropriately by analogy from clear passages to those that are less clear. The light of obvious Scripture texts illumines those

less obvious. This is how the Spirit works to enable readers to hear sufficiently what is clearly the revealed Word of God addressing us through the written texts of Scripture. This is what has often been called in early Africa *the analogy of faith*: reasoning by analogy from clear Scriptures to unclear Scriptures. The church guards the Scriptures; the Spirit guards the truth attested in Scripture.

The contemporary community of faith is the keeper of Holy Writ. The earliest examples of African martyrdom were actual cases where ordinary believers were unwilling to release their Scriptures to governing authorities who might debase them.

The Holy Spirit is incrementally teaching the faithful, to the extent that they voluntarily become able to read Scripture closely with their hearts shaped by the rule of faith and charity. The *rule of faith* is the baptismal confession that the faithful learn when they become baptized, the key reasoning of triune teaching: God the Father reveals himself in his Son through the Holy Spirit. The *rule of charity* is the consequent life of the believer that communicates the love of God through the love of the neighbor by acts of mercy, generosity and gentleness.

One who pits tradition against Scripture or faith against charity has already lost touch with the orthodox sense of balance that the Holy Spirit is encouraging by helping the believer remember Scripture rightly and read its message faithfully within ever new historical contexts.

### THE HEART OF AFRICAN ORTHODOXY

At the core of early African Christianity is a way of remembering the Scriptures that would come to be consensually received by the worldwide community of faith. Its achievement is both exegetical and dogmatic. This faith is the same baptismal faith that is taught all over the Christian world. It sings the same psalms, reads the



same Scripture and confesses the same Lord as all other global Christian believers. Its catholicity serves as validating proof of its persuasiveness and usefulness.

This evidence, the fruits of faith active in love, sustains free lay consent to ecumenical truth. The faithful know it to be true because they hear the virtual unanimity of the church's historic testimony to those central affirmations of Christian truth.

The Spirit guards the truth, but this does not imply that finite witnesses to the truth are foolproof. The Spirit glorifies God the Son, according to African orthodoxy, but is not preferential toward the skin color of those who attest that sonship. Whether they are Numidians or Byzacaeneans or Cyrenaicans or Copts or Nubians is less crucial than that they are accurately attesting the apostolic witness.

African orthodoxy is not nostalgia, not sentimentalizing, not an idealized view of humanity or social process, but the faith, hope and love that has been rightly remembered and empowered by grace throughout the centuries. It is not modern political ideology, whether of the left or right.

Nor is classic African orthodoxy to be rashly identified with American fundamentalism. The rationalistic spirit of American fundamentalism has never had a close affinity with the spirit of Africa. Fundamentalism was a response to the failure of the European Enlightenment, which was never fully at home in Africa. Fundamentalism is a defensive reaction against modernity and hence dependent on modernity. Orthodoxy does not compete with modernity. It precedes and transcends modern consciousness and all claimants to postmodern consciousness. There is no need to compete when there is a confident awareness that each claimed new version of modernity soon passes into memory, one after another.

Orthodoxy comes in many forms, of which the early African forms

are exemplary. If asked to confess what is that sort of theology I most confidently name as my own, I could just as confidently turn to the generic term *African orthodoxy* as to *Antiochene*, *Roman*, *Byzantine* or *evangelical*. It is sad that *African orthodoxy* is not a term that has entered the modern vocabulary. It might seem to have been recently invented if it were not for the fact that African expressions of classical Christian orthodoxy are older than the Western, Latin forms and at least contemporary with if not earlier than Eastern Greek forms.

In refining a definition of early African orthodoxy it is well to clarify that it has little to do with what Americans sometimes call neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy is seen in the views of Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr, who were all strongly shaped by Western Reformation assumptions that still are seeking a voice in Africa. (These were my teachers prior to studying orthodoxy: H. Richard Niebuhr directed my Yale dissertation on Bultmann and Barth.) The neo-orthodox were largely unaware (as was I) of the great minds of African orthodoxy. Excepting Augustine, they were seldom quoted. References to Cyprian, Athanasius, Optatus, Cyril and Victor of Vita are miniscule. Only Augustine is recognizable, while the Alexandrians were almost totally neglected.

African orthodoxy deplores the idolatry of novelty. Since its load-star is the canon of apostolic teaching, African orthodoxy is not intentionally seeking to be innovative beyond that canon but is constantly offering a renewably true understanding of humanity and history to each emergent expression of modernity. Sheer innovation cannot be a criterion for those who seek to be accountable to apostolic truth. Yet while resisting pretenses of human creativity, The Spirit is forever showing forth the creativity of God in fashioning new hearts in believers.

Africa needs, but does not yet have, a public voice corresponding



to that of Rome or the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. That voice must include Copts, Catholics, Anglicans, charismatics, evangelicals, Pentecostals and mainline Protestant believers. If a time came when the Coptic pope were trusted by all these parties, the united voice of African Christianity might eventually be heard. We have not yet arrived at that time. The World Council of Churches would require a complete house cleaning before it would be ready to speak in that traditional ecumenical consensual voice. The evangelical expressions of ecumenism, such as the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement, could play a major role in the next phase, but only by moderating sixteenth-century polemics. The new African forms of ecumenism must find a way of embracing the whole range of real believers in Africa without forgetting its apostolic center.

#### TRANSCENDING MATERIAL WORLDLINESS

The European Christianity that tracked the illusions of the Enlightenment was continually tempted to be overly awed by the vitality of the fallen world. That world, in the view of African orthodoxy, has, in the mercy of God, already been brought low.

Those who become trapped in the passing hour of the fallen world are tempted to lose sight of the incomparable One from whom all things come, into whom all things return, in whom there is no shadow of change or turning. Early African Christianity encounters that fallen world with the real world of God's new gift, God's new creation, God's redemption of the world in the cross and resurrection, God's consummation of the world in eternity. Orthodox Christianity has always had better things to do than simply echo the gifts that the despairing world wants to give to the church, or to borrow hungrily from the world's constantly changing aspirations.

Many still want to legitimize the fantasy that the future does not



belong to God. Christians know better. Africa is not a non-Christian continent today, nor was it in the nineteenth or fifteenth centuries, nor in the fifth century. For no time in the last two thousand years has the Christian witness been absent from the African matrix of cultures. God has not left himself without witness.

Early African Christians prayed that they would not be overwhelmed by the despairing fantasy of the permanence of sin or the feared absolute durability of idolatry. They prayed that they would not be captive to the unredeemed imagination. So does the community of faith today. African Christians today live in much the same sort of human environment that early African Christians lived in—a hazardous world tempted by idolatry but upheld by both common and redeeming grace. Since Adam the world has been attempting to live without God. Meanwhile God has come to dwell bodily in the very world where humans pretend to live without God.

#### AVOIDING RACIAL DEFINITIONS OF APOSTOLIC TRUTH

The orthodox African tradition was transmitted to Europe under conditions of forced flight. It was forced by the threat of slavery, exile or death, first by the Roman authorities, then by Vandals and then by the Arab conquest.

The ironic providences of history were well understood by the major early African historians: Lactantius, Minucius Felix, Tertullian and Origen, prior to Eusebius, and Augustine and Victor of Vita afterward. The history of revelation teaches that the Spirit works in universal history, breaking through cultural and linguistic boundaries, and bursting beyond continental barriers.

Isn't it just like divine grace to find an unexpected way to transmute the African experience of suffering into something good for the rest of humanity? The racism from which Africa so deeply suffered

would be in due time transmuted by grace to a European conscience against slavery that would return to Africa with strong motivation to end slavery's blight on humanity. It is amazing how quietly grace works.

The resistance of orthodox African Christianity to racism and racial definitions of the truth has not been adequately studied. Eurocentrism has tended to make even Africa forget the deep African roots of European Christianity. The ecumenical consensus resisted racism everywhere, not in Africa alone. Arguably, however, this consensus congealed first in the great multicultural cities of Alexandria and Carthage before it manifested itself in written texts elsewhere. If so, the critique of Afrocentrism is itself grounded in the African Christian experience of racial injustice. The new international cosmopolitan culture created by Christianity was fashioned in multicultural Africa as much as anywhere.

## SEEKING THE RECONCILIATION OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM THROUGH HISTORICAL INSIGHT



Those who have already taken some years to absorb African orthodox wisdom can read the modern newspaper with new courage and determination. Believers do not see history from the premises of despair. Among the benefits of reading early African Christian teaching are the courage to face complex tasks, reduced anxiety and the consolation of knowing that suffering can be transcended by hope. Seemingly impossible obstacles do not intimidate.

This wisdom of early Africa points the way toward setting more realistic parameters of the tests that Christians face with Islam. Africa today has had a lot of experience that many world Christians have not yet had and can benefit by. These spiritual resources have enabled Christians for centuries to stand up gently and peaceably to the challenge of Islam.

We see the pattern of meekness commended by Jesus in the case of the meekness and patience of the Coptic, Ge'ez and the Sudanese Christians. Their witness is no negligible episode in Christian history. It is comparable to the great courage of Chinese Christians during the Maoist period, when the underground church had exponential growth.



The Islamic challenge cannot be faced down simply by emotions or by diluted sentiments that lack an understanding of the actual history of Christian-Muslim relationships. Here African Christians have had thirteen hundred years of experience. The history of providence was studied avidly by the African historians we have already mentioned, especially Augustine, who faced the collapse of the Roman era, and Victor of Vita, who faced the Vandals.

Much scholarly work awaits the discovery and recognition of cognates and correlates of pre-Islamic African Christian exegesis with the earliest forms of classic Islamic exegesis. These traditions of interpreting sacred texts are profoundly analogous, even if different.

Islamic study of sacred texts does not often directly echo patristic Christian interpreters, but it follows patterns of interpretation of Holy Writ well-established in early African Christianity. North Africa did not simply receive Islam without reference to the previous work of providence in history. Islam was already deeply affected by the Christian world, Byzantine culture, rabbinic exegesis, Greek philosophy, Roman law, Semitic languages and Syriac metaphors before it spread west across North Africa and the Maghreb.

The neglected point is that early African Christianity had already penetrated and affected many layers of these Roman-Syriac-Byzantine traditions many generations before the Arab conquest. That has not been adequately analyzed. A new generation of courageous scholars will be needed to make these investigations into analogies between Christian and Islamic views of history, law and exegesis.

#### THE RISKS SCHOLARS TAKE

Conscience requires that the next point be stated clearly. The study of early African Christianity could become a risky business for historical scholars in the light of volatile temperaments when incited. Sad

to say, there may be some scholars, both Muslim and Christian, who may face death as martyrs for what they say and write about Judeo-Christian and Islamic roots.

These arguments will be regarded not only as heretical from some Islamic points of view but as worthy of death. These writers need civil protection and guarantees of freedom of conscience. These studies will need to be protected not only by a host of angels but also by law, in so far as possible, and in some cases by the wise and proportional exercise of power in protection of a just and law-abiding society.

It is better to face than to avoid this. It would be foolhardy to assume that the conveyors of the historical truth of early African Christianity can speak of some aspects of Islam without risk. They deserve legal and physical protections. They are not going to be adequately defended by pacifists with conciliatory words or by nonviolent utopians who will remain silent when the barricades are up. They must also be protected by law, by police security and if necessary by proportional means of guaranteeing freedom of religion. It would be folly to imagine that telling the truth will cost nothing.

The story of the minority Berber Christians in inland Algeria is a story of heroic struggle in the midst of relentless government intimidation. Much the same can be said of Copts and Ethiopian Christians under thirteen centuries of Arab hegemony. But it is not likely that Islam will leave forever unattended the Byzantine layers of its past history. Islam grew up in a Byzantine world. Of what Islam learned from Byzantium, much was good, but unfortunately not a little was unworthy of the Christian tradition.

The Christians of southern Africa have much to learn about tenacity from the Christians of northern Africa who have centuries of experience of *dhimmi* status. This includes the Sudanese, the inhabitants of the Niger Valley and many in northern Nigeria. This appears



to be an enormous ongoing clash of civilizations. It is not merely a struggle for Africa but a struggle in which global Christianity and global Islam are implicated. Europe and America might seem untouched, but both have a great stake in the outcome.

### CONJOINTLY STUDYING THE HISTORY OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

The detailed defense of these hypotheses remains an extended task for a whole generation of African scholars who must now learn the languages relevant to this historic challenge. Modern Africans, both Muslims and Christians, are invited to learn more of pre-Islamic African wisdom. This historical perspective will help Islamic thinkers and apologists to see the analogies between many of their own patterns of exegesis and the Christian sources. This has not been well understood, but it is a rich area for investigation. It requires unpacking the implicit philosophical, historical and moral roots of Islam. It calls for Christians to read early Islamic commentaries on the Qur'an and study them in conjunction with patristic commentaries on Christian Scripture.

Ironically Western scholarship has understood the Islamic roots of Europe better than the Christian roots of Africa. More is known of Averroës than Didymus. Medieval Arab mathematics, medicine, philosophy and poetry are better known by Euro-American historians than are the early Christian writers of Africa.

The Arab conquest itself must be restudied. Young African Christians and Muslims need jointly to investigate the early archaeology of both Islam and Christianity. They need to dig into these sites and reassess together all the evidences hidden there. Far too little is known of the archaeological remains of Christian communities of the third through sixth centuries, and also of the Islamic communities that



often built mosques on the sites of Christian basilicas.

Of the millions of Christians in Egypt, virtually all speak Arabic. But compare that with a figure that is probably ten times that number of persons who have been baptized as Christians and who at least nominally share in the Christian faith in Ethiopic, Eritrean and Sudanese lands, and in the upper Niger Valley. Though they historically have spoken Ge'ez, Amharic, Nubian and other languages, most speak Arabic today. Arabic-speaking Christians in these lands can do a great service to the rest of world Christianity by helping translate early African Arabic texts into accessible modern languages. When will young African Christians hear the call to learn Arabic as a divine vocation?

#### THE RIGOROUS LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS OF AFRICAN RESEARCH

A number of pace-setting universities will lead the way in establishing programs where the pertinent language studies will be pursued. Internet and digital technologies provide a new arena and huge databases for getting in touch with the texts of the early African tradition in a way not even imaginable before. The search is on for ancient African texts, including both paleographic and funerary inscriptions and literary works. A new generation of Christians will be looking for the remnants of the hidden texts that have survived the Arab conquest. There may be many yet unfound. Few in the West have read any of these texts because of the obscurity of their original languages—Amharic, Ge'ez, Coptic and Arabic—and because those that have been translated are not always reliable.

These are the languages that must be learned well in order to function optimally in the environment that is emerging with Islam. This is where the academic work must be done, and it has to be done by

people who understand that the linguistic requirements are rigorous. Translators are needed from the four major source languages of Christianity in the first millennium of African history—Arabic, Coptic, Greek and Latin—into the major international languages spoken in contemporary Africa—French, English and Portuguese—but also into the major regional trade languages—Housa, Amharic, Swahili and Zulu. Much is yet to be learned about how the root languages of the Bantu are related to the Nilotic languages, and to what extent Housa is cognate with first millennium Arabic. These are linguistic issues that need intensive study. Since few Euro-American universities have these kinds of competencies, much of the work must be done in Africa.

Bishop Michael Nasr-Ali has advised that if Christians really want young Africa to contribute to needed scholarship, they would do well to encourage young African scholars to study Arabic. There is a significant textual tradition untranslated from the Arabic sources of the Sudanese, Eritrean, Egyptian, Nubian, Tunisian and Algerian cultures. This will require competencies in Coptic, Ge'ez and Amharic, but most of all Arabic. The literature of these languages awaits study by a whole generation of African scholars. These classical Christian centers of the Upper Nile need to be studied on the continent of Africa, and not only in Tübingen, Oxford, Rome or Leuven.

There is a growing need for a strong international digital network of young scholars, who can communicate regularly on the World Wide Web. Such a network would best be centered in Africa with spokes extending in all directions. It should include those who can read not only Greek and Latin sources so important in North African intellectual history, but also the Coptic and Arabic texts. These are the core literatures that will establish that African Christianity as not simply an oral tradition or a modern tradition but an ancient and rich

textual tradition, and fruitful area of scholarly specialization.

### LEARNING FROM PRIMARY SOURCES

What do Western scholars know about these matters? Little in terms of suffering, but enough in terms of historical attentiveness to see that many have been deeply moved by classic African theology.

How did Africa come into my consciousness as a powerfully converting force? I did not learn this from Euro-American mentors. I did not learn it from the contemporary historians. Those traditions steered me consistently *away from* classical African Christianity toward modern European intellectual history. I learned it only from reading the ancient African sources directly.

So I come personally to this subject through a unique experiential route—by reading for three decades in early African exegetical sources at a time when they were being grossly neglected. It was a slow growth of appreciation and awareness. The transformation was slow but sure.

I became fully converted to African orthodoxy while residing on the other side of the earth from Africa. This is the painstaking discipline I have been going through since the early 1970s. It has occurred at the time when modern ecumenism was rotting with ideological self-justifications and getting more and more postmodern, and hence ultramodern, and therefore less African.

### A PERSONAL CHALLENGE

I am reminding myself of my own Ph.D. students over the last thirty-five years, especially those who have ventured forth and probed vast, almost endless, research projects. They have often told me how they went through the following steps: (1) they were motivated to take on a major project; (2) they found they could not do it well enough; (3) later they realized that they could do some aspect of it; (4) then they



felt that they *must* do it, (5) and then they discovered that the task is so immense that it will take the rest of their life. This is how I feel now. What is left of my life may be shortened by congestive heart disease.

When I first became intrigued with this subject during the early years of researching the texts of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, I thought it would be possible for me to write a simple, short historical summary of early African Christianity. But the preparation for that small book buried me in so many drafts, so many thousands of cards and notes, so much new reading, that I gasped for air.

I was forced to admit that I could only deal with some small segment of its very complex history. During the entire year of 2005 I narrowed my focus strictly to early Libyan Christianity, which I thought might be a manageable piece of the picture. But even that piece of the history and archaeology was so complex that a lengthy volume would be needed even to do modest justice to Cyrenaica and Tripolitania alone.

So in these pages I have had to trim my scope even further to deal only with stating the key thesis, inviting others to offer their own skills in solving its problems. What has been a challenge for me, I now put as a *challenge for the reader*: Even those who live thousands of miles away can pray for the plight of Africa—for HIV-AIDS sufferers, for the child soldiers of war-torn areas, for displaced families, for the hungry. They can thank God for the tenacity and witness of faithful African Christians.

What is more, anyone who can read, if motivated, can read some of the documents of early African Christianity, the biographies of African Christians, the thoughts of its wisest theologians. Many are on the Web. Ponder the saints of Africa, the epic history of African

Christianity, the archaeological sites remaining. It is not even beyond imagination that some who read this will want to actually go to Africa to see its art and architecture and fabrics and frescos. Some will want to give a period of service to its people in dire need of clothing, food and health care. Many short-term ministries are in need of volunteers. Those who have economic resources can contribute to the renewal of African Christianity (see the website: [earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://earlyafricanchristianity.com)). People want to help. It is not far-fetched to think that people who become motivated will want to do what they can to give a cup of cold water to the African neighbor, even an ocean away.

Those who cannot engage in the scholarship needed can pray for the support and enabling of the task of scholarship. There is a stirring of the tender and compassionate awareness of our Christian brothers and sisters in Africa. It is important to remember it is not just a question of historical scholarship but also of moral commitment as some of our Christian family will indeed be out there on the firing line risking life and limb. Others will remain in a safe place yet with a lively conscience attuned closely to those who are sacrificing.

Simple awareness of the condition of Africa is the first step to turning the heart to Africa. Finding a heart for Africa is the precondition of taking any other step.

## Appendix

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### THE CHALLENGES OF EARLY AFRICAN RESEARCH

What have I attempted to do in this small book? Set forth the basic vision for a renewed initiative in the theological and historical reassessment of early African Christianity. I have done this in response to a request by the Early African Christianity Project that might draw the project toward a consensus on this vision.

My remaining purpose in this appendix is to describe the specific plan for that research. An international consortium of schools and scholars is being gathered for the purpose of enabling and encouraging this research. It welcomes cooperation among world partners. It will seek to deepen the biblical and early African historical roots of contemporary African theology.

#### THREE AIMS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The Early African Christianity consortium of schools and scholars has three aims.

- First, to translate and distribute key texts of early African Christian teaching in a cost-effective way both digitally and through printed publications to global Christians interested in early African Christianity.
- Second, to accomplish this first goal, we need to enlist an international team of translators, linguists, historians and information technology spe-



cialists. We are working to engender a network of leaders in African universities and seminaries who wish to pursue these texts and tasks.

- Third, by these means we hope to bring contemporary African theological reasoning to a deeper level of awareness of its own rich tradition of patristic sources written on African soil, shaped by and shaping many African cultures for more than a millennium, and whose influence continues on today.

### THE PRECEDENT

These are our purposes. The nonprofit sponsor of this consortium is the Center for Early African Christianity, whose editorial offices are in Madison, New Jersey. It is a continuation of the work of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. This work already has an active worldwide team of over four hundred translators, theologians, historians and scholars who have been laboring for over a decade to translate and edit patristic texts that appear in the twenty-nine volumes of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. This patristic commentary on the whole of canonical Scripture is being translated from its original languages (Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic) into Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian and Spanish.

A large percentage of these comments on Scripture are extracted from African sources. Thus there is already available a massive amount of material from early African exegesis. To these we will add other Christian texts and sources from Africa in the first millennium.

The theological commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in September 2006 has warmly approved this proposal as an officially sanctioned project of the WEA. This gives the consortium a splendid built-in network of links with all of the fifty-two national evangelical alliances in all parts of Africa. The regional and local African Evangelical Alliances connected with the WEA will be our natural partners for developing this network.

The works of early African Christian writers will be made available in dig-

ital form, giving scholars the ability to make digital searches of key words and texts, subjects and authors. Scholars who have requisite historical and language competencies will be invited to participate in this project of translation, dissemination, publication and study of the texts and wisdom of early African Christianity.

The consortium hopes to bring together several essential international networks of scholars and leaders to encourage increasing portions of the work to be accomplished on the African continent. One of these is the InterVarsity international network of ministries, especially as it appears throughout Africa. The second is the Lausanne International network of ministries. The third is the World Evangelical Alliance and its regional expression in the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. These are overlapping but very important and extensive networks of faith and friendship.

From this core of associations, the consortium will work to build an international scholarly study and teaching initiative, supported by a Web network. It will serve as a clearing house for a single common focus of interest: the study and distribution of texts and multimedia narratives of early African Christianity and their significance for Africa today. This group will include not only evangelical scholars but also Catholic, Coptic, Orthodox, Pentecostal and charismatic scholars and leaders. The intent is to publish texts and tell stories of African Christian classics in a low-cost, reader-friendly format, many of them for small group use by both lay and clerical readers in the villages and cities of Africa.

We will select texts that have historical significance or that pertain to or illuminate contemporary African cultural issues. Some will be made available in digital form for free Web-printable access, while others will be on printed pages.

The core of this network will be centered in the editorial offices of the Early African Christianity Project. It will correlate digital and print publishing efforts among scholars, translators, reviewers and publishers to accomplish the three purposes identified earlier. The antecedent research

organizations (Institute of Classical Christian Studies and Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture) have been studying African theology for many years and are aware of the range of problems awaiting attention in Africa.

### THE SCOPE

The Early African Christianity Project will limit its publications to African sources, focusing on texts written on the African continent before 1000 C.E. It will include studies that demonstrate the influence of these texts and ideas on the early formation of Europe and world Christianity. It is a firm conviction of many in this project (though yet to be fully argued and established) that many ideas moved from Africa to Europe in their earliest centuries of the formation of Christianity. This is seen in the monastic movement and the conciliar movement, in exegesis, in triune teaching, in penitential practice, in universal history and in liturgy, law, literature and ethics.

The central hypothesis yet to be fully explored and defended: African Christianity has an intellectual history equal to or unexcelled by either Europe or Asia before the mid-fourth century. By the time of Basil and Jerome, the East and West had already learned its most important lessons from Africa.

This is not to deny the worldwide frame of reference or catholicity of early African Christianity. Its greatest texts and exponents were strongly informed by the ecumenical rule of faith, which Tertullian and Origen found embedded in the apostolic tradition itself, which is shared with all believers worldwide and to which the fathers at Nicaea appealed.

Early African doctrinal definition sought to reflect not just a faith held by Africans but by all Christians the world over. African leaders such as Athanasius and Cyprian argued it with such exceptional clarity and intellectual power that their formulas were recalled and replicated by many centuries of ecumenical formulations and gained consensus in Asia and Europe. This is evident in the development of triune language, Christological definitions,



penitential teaching, social thought and especially scriptural exegesis. This the consortium will demonstrate in due course on the basis of historical, textual and archaeological evidence and argument.

## THE AFRICAN CENTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONSORTIUM

Young African scholars are proving well-fitted to make plausible these points of historical argumentation and evidentiary presentation. African communities of faith have sustained persuasive forms of reasoning for more than two millennia of Christianity community life and long before the inception of modern Western ideologies. These are distinctly African contributions that are awaiting recognition by African and world scholars, though lying largely buried now in the second through seventh centuries of African history, archaeology and literary texts.

These texts require not only African scholarly examination but also African intellectual critique in the light of recent centuries of African historical experience. Even the best early African writers have limitations that can be further illumined by attentiveness to currently developing African history.

This is a scholarly project seeking to resource global Christian scholars about African Christianity, and African scholars about early African Christianity. Africa has a story to tell to the world church. Africa has been touched by the Hebrew-Christian history of salvation since the times of Isaiah and Jeremiah. This is a story to which the whole of global Christianity may rightly claim ownership. Many are ready to hear it rightly told.

This consortium has no hidden purposes other than to make African Christianity strong in intellectual leadership. The consortium has no Western advocacy interests, exactly the opposite: African advocacy within global Christianity. The underlying conviction is that ancient African Christians had more realistic and promising ideas for global Christianity than many modern Westerners. For these reasons it is evident that the active center of the international consortium must ultimately reside in the continent of Africa, even if startup initiatives may be proportionally borne by others.

## THE CONSORTIUM OF SCHOLARS

This consortium emerges out of and stands in continuity with preceding projects of the Institute for Classical Christian Studies (ICCS), whose editorial team has produced the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS) and its three succeeding projects: the five-volume Ancient Christian Doctrine series (ACD, scheduled for 2009), the Ancient Christian Text series (ACT, currently twelve volumes being prepared) and the series of volumes titled Ancient Christian Devotional, all published by InterVarsity Press.

In all these preceding projects the editors, translators and a vast number of international cooperators have worked steadily over a decade with the key African exegetical sources. They include major African figures such as Origen, Athanasius, Clement, Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian, Optatus, Lactantius, Marius Victorinus and Primasius. There are already myriad references in the ACCS to these African writers as a textual base already in place and already being digitalized. There will be a select group of academic centers in Africa that will serve as host locations for the Early African Christianity consortium. Resources for this project will flow into and out of these centers.

The consortium will then become the seedbed of a worldwide network of scholars and educational programs focused on early African Christianity, linked together through a website without the constant need for extensive travel and conference planning.

The primary African audience for this project will be the evangelical, orthodox and catholic faith communities of Africa. The term we are coming to use to describe all of these communities and traditions is *orthodox African Christianity*. This project focuses on particular texts, however, rather than particular institutions. It features the texts of classical Christian teaching in Africa.

## ASSEMBLING THE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

In a poignant moment of admonition, the consortium planners have been urged that they need not take upon themselves the entire burden of pro-



ducing a core of literature on early African Christianity as they had once imagined. Rather they could conceive of it in a more modest way: to invite others to pursue a constellation of problems that need to be carefully conceived, researched, answered and made available both through digital and print media.

Even this chastened vision is a formidable project. Its requirements will be strenuous. The need for rigorous historical study, accurate communication of findings, scholarly integrity and exegetical thoroughness will be very demanding. The standards must be set high for candor, empathy, diplomacy and sensitive crosscultural communication between Christian scholars in Africa and their international counterparts.

It will call African scholars to take seriously the African texts of the early Christian tradition, and it will require our already intact global team of patristic translators and experts to take seriously the special challenge of Africa today. No aspect of this endeavor will be an easy task. It will require a consortium made up of not only qualified scholars and linguists, but also a coordinated and balanced team of ecumenical traditions and diverse academic institutions.

The consortium is working to fit together these four essential pieces of the feasibility puzzle: academic leadership, website technology, print publishing interests and resource development.

### **ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP**

The first task is to draw together academic leadership from the best current scholarship of Protestant, Coptic, Orthodox and Catholic theologians of Christianity on the continent of Africa and the best worldwide expertise from patristic experts familiar with the texts, archaeology, theology and history of the church of Africa from the first to the tenth centuries wherever they may reside.

This research effort seeks to engender indigenous theological leadership in Africa. Its goal is to make young African Christians aware of their



own early African sources. It is likely to stumble if it presents a public face of being essentially another form of colonial imposition of Euro-American ideas intruding on Africans without their consent or respect for their dignity.

This effort will involve international consultations on key themes, figures, ideas and events of early African Christianity. This project must mature from good seed and good soil. The soil is Africa. The seed is the early African theologians: the brilliant writers, thinkers, homilists and leaders of the first millennium of Christianity in Africa.

This does not rule out the importance of Euro-American patristic and theological scholars having an active role, but it places the focus where it must be in this case: on African voices, ancient and modern. We seek to hear African voices from the earliest Christian times in Africa that have the capacity to awaken present-day African hearts and minds to the texts. We seek to translate in terms that can be heard in the current languages of both African academic and popular cultures: English, French, Arabic, and major vernacular and regional languages.

The task is not to convince international patristic scholars to awaken motivations among African theologians. Rather we hope for grace to be modest servants of the wisest texts of early African Christianity. The aim is that the authenticity of those texts and sources will become completely evident to an emerging generation of young scholars on the African continent.

## MAXIMIZING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

The second piece of the puzzle is to ask how the consortium may use digital technologies in a cost-effective way so as to avoid some of the high costs and economic obstacles of print publishing. The more we contemplated this project, the more we were convinced that the larger proportion of it must be devoted to accessible and inexpensive digital technology. This means a well-tended website driven by links to many other digital sites. Our website and networking media will prompt links through multiple sources, such as pro-

fessors, booksellers, academic societies, service ministries and international conferences.

To this end, we have created and reserved a simple and descriptive domain name: [earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://earlyafricanchristianity.com).

This cyber location will be the digital home of the consortium. We hope to build up a highly effective website aimed at an international network of scholars and nonprofessionals who happen to be interested in early African Christianity. The website will aim to have a hundred thousand hits the first year of operation. When anyone on the Web wants to know about African Christianity, their attention will be called to this website.

The website is not just an ancillary addition to the project. It will be at the very core of the project and the initiator of numerous subsidiary efforts: projects, groups, meetings, consultations, seminars and forms of information distribution. The website will feature a running online commentary for anyone worldwide who wants to be involved in examining vital issues of classic orthodox African Christian teachings and their personal and societal implications.

This will require the nuanced integration of diverse digital resources coordinated with sophisticated ways of presenting the project's ideas and texts on the Web, which will include correlated projects in Africa, African Christianity and patristic studies, and comments from distant correspondents. There has been a vacuum in the virtual world of Web communication that this project fills. The first level of energy and support will be dedicated to this digital project rather than to costly and complicated face-to-face international consultations.

## **PUBLISHING OUTCOMES**

The print publishing that will emerge out of this project over the course of time will be engendered through the dialogue and the resources and ideas and approaches that are stimulated through the ongoing research and the visitors to this website. We will develop out of these efforts a low-cost print

publication program designed primarily for Africa. It will be relatively smaller than the digital program because it will be far more cost-effective to make information available on the Web at miniscule costs. From the website we will select the ideas, articles and essays that peer-reviewers agree need to be edited, printed, distributed and placed in libraries and in the hands of teachers, laity, and scholars all over Africa, as well as for the use of global Christians interested in Africa.

The publications wing of this research is charged with gathering the gleanings, the most viable contributions and efforts of the interactions, conferences, consultations and seminars that emerge out of the consortium. The most promising manuscripts will be considered for the more expensive and labor-intensive tasks of popular print publishing for primarily an African nonprofessional audience. This will require seeking, nurturing and distributing to a culturally diverse African audience. It will require the supplementation of African publishing costs, printing and distribution. It will reach out to the millions of Copts in Egypt and those in Ethiopia and the huge numbers of Roman Catholics on the continent, along with the millions of hard-to-classify participants in African Independent Churches as well as the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations over all of Africa, plus various charismatic and healing movements.

All of these worshipping communities have one thing in common yet insufficiently unrecognized: the patrimony and wisdom of ancient African Christianity. They have friends and ancestors and antecedents in the first millennium of African intellectual history and exegesis. This ecumenical audience has not yet been adequately reached by present publishing and distribution systems.

The international network of the InterVarsity community worldwide has shown imaginative genius in developing and distributing the international translations of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. This same energy will be applied to early African Christianity. The needed effort is not to get everything published on the Web into print but rather to get very wide distribution to a worldwide and especially an African audience first through



the Web, and then to select carefully the studies, texts, and projects that deserve and require print publication. The focus will be on short books in inexpensive print format that can be purchased by village and urban Africans who cannot easily pay Euro-American pricing.

The prevailing premise here is that the younger African ecumenical audiences are soon going to have much more access to the digital Web sources, but in addition to these they will need well-selected printed texts for purposes of background reading, class discussion materials, lay devotionals, study groups and homiletic and theological teaching purposes. Distribution systems will need to be modestly subsidized to help drive down costs for hard-pressed African laity and students who cannot travel extensively but increasingly will be exercising computer skills in an international environment.

Readability in local and traditional languages is a long-range goal of the publication effort. The products must be edited and presented in a way that is engaging for lay Christians in Africa. They must be understandable to young persons within wide varieties of Christian communions. We hope to keep a list of classic titles available in early African Christianity for a global Christian audience.

The project is not intended primarily for a small elite group of university scholars or sociological experts. It is unapologetically for the well-being of global Christianity. The resulting publications will be aimed for use by Coptic, Catholic and Protestant lay readers all over Africa, as well as worldwide readers interested in early African Christianity.

The African audience alone is enormous—potentially nearing a half billion souls. To define the target audience as university scholars would limit it to a few thousand. Instead, our purpose is to become a modest instrument of the Spirit in engendering, edifying and nurturing African Christian communities who are reading not only in French or English or Portuguese but also in Arabic and in some of the vernacular languages such as Swahili and Zulu. They have a right to encounter the dazzling intellectual wellsprings and courageous history of early African Christianity in their own mother tongue.

There is good reason to constrain the temptation to turn this scholarly ecumenical effort into a political or ideological program, or to let it become captive to any form of narrow nationalism or political or economic ideology, whether of the left or right. We leave it to the Spirit to inspire laypeople to find ways of making applicable to their vocations and political orders what the early African Christian texts and sources have to say to the contemporary crises and hopes of Africa.

There are no plans for bureaucracy maintenance. Most of the work will be done by part-time contracted, fee-based or incentive models, or productivity-based agreements. There is no expenditure proposed on bricks and mortar. It will largely be accomplished by voluntary commitment of time by scholars and cooperators who truly believe in the importance of the project. None are likely to be deeply engaged in this project if they do not feel inwardly called and guided to it by a strong sense of vocation.

The successful accomplishment of the Early African Christianity Project ultimately looks toward the completion of nine feasible objectives: (1) a multivolume encyclopedia of early African Christianity topically organized, (2) a multivolume history of early African Christianity chronologically organized, (3) an interdisciplinary *Journal of African Christianity* for both historical and contemporary questions, (4) this would be correlated with a study section in early African Christianity at major scholarly societies, (5) a working daily-maintained website on early African Christianity, (6) a multidisciplinary program of studies at some appropriate academic institution on African Christianity: ancient and modern, (7) an intentional and determined proactive effort to inculcate the values of classical Christian teaching grounded in early African texts, (8) an attempt to correlate this scholarly effort with corresponding parachurch ministries, and (9) special attention to the needs of Christians and Muslims in reconciling dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

There are many urgent themes interwoven here: the relation between Christianity and Islam, between Europe and Africa, between global and regional

Christianity, between religion and life, between sacred texts and contemporary dilemmas.

All of these flow in and out of a single lucid prism: early African Christianity.

The ancient Christians who wrote the pertinent texts to allow us to understand this story were wise and gentle, and some were true saints who had an unexcelled grasp of the Christian life and of human history.

Early African Christianity has added incalculable value to the Western intellectual tradition. The study of early African Christianity does not resolve all the problems of modern African Christian identity, but it goes a long way toward overcoming the vague sense that African Christianity has to depend largely on oral tradition alone for what is truly African in its Christian identity. It adds value to African religious communities by helping to restore the confidence of Africans in their own early African intellectual tradition.



## LITERARY CHRONOLOGY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

The purpose of this modest chronology is to point to the most noteworthy events, persons and texts affecting the pre-Islamic history of African Christianity, and the resilience of Christianity after the Arab conquest. More so, I hope it will serve as a practical guide and stimulator toward future research in early African Christianity. This exercise would be unnecessary if a satisfactory chronology of this vast subject already existed, but none exists today. The need for such basic information is an indication of just how much the field has been neglected. It is late in the day for a beginning, but begin we must.

This is only a preliminary attempt to map a colossal intellectual history to be further explored by a future generation. Like any condensed chronology, it does not pretend to explain the ideas or events pointed to, but only to set forth their sequence and encourage their further study. Just by glancing over the flow of events, it is easy to see the breadth and importance of issues considered. This is primarily a literary, not political, military or cultural, chronology. It focuses especially on Christian texts of early Africa. Its main purpose is to reveal the scope of the intellectual, exegetical, liturgical, doctrinal and social teachings of early African Christians. Many of these texts and manuscripts languish untranslated into the func-

tional languages of Africa or in poor translation.

The reader is forewarned that many of the following dates continue to be under debate, with conflicting opinions at play. This rendering of the chronology seeks consistency based on evidence, synthesizing leading scholarly opinions. Dating and provenance decisions here reflect strong dependence on recent research by Birger A. Pearson and Stephen J. Davis.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 1-99

c. 1-7 Birth of Jesus of Nazareth (by Tertullian's reckoning, 3 B.C.E.). The Lucan tradition reports the immediate flight of the Holy Family to Egypt.

c. 29-33 Simon of Cyrene (Libya) carries Jesus' cross in Jerusalem. Jesus is crucified at Passover in Jerusalem, Friday, Nisan 14, resurrected on "third day" and ascended. "God-fearing Jews" from "Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene" observe Pentecost in Jerusalem, receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Oral traditions place birth of Mark in Libya.

c. 33-65 Period of earliest oral tradition of transmission of Christian teaching to Africa, before the earliest Gospel (Mark) is written. Eyewitnesses dispersed throughout Judea, Samaria and Africa. The Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer to Candace (legendary queen of Ethiopia), was converted to Christianity as he returned to Africa, as reported by Luke.

37-38 Pogrom of Greeks against Jews of Alexandria under Flaccus reverberates among all Jews of North Africa.

40 Philo Judaeus of Alexandria goes in deputation to emperor after pogrom. The Stoic-Platonist Jewish exegete describes the *Therapeutae* near Mareotic lake, whom some view as proto-Christian Jews. Some Alexandrian Christians would later look upon Philo as a model in exegesis of sacred texts.

43 Eusebius places Mark early in Alexandria in the "third year of Claudius."

45-55 Apollos of Alexandria (perhaps a pupil of Philo's) converts to a truncated form of Christianity and later accepts apostolic teaching, being "instructed in the word in his home country." This presupposes an early Jewish Christian community in Alexandria, before Apollos goes to Ephesus.

c. 46-74 Egyptian tradition of mission of Mark in Alexandria and martyrdom. Though unproven, it should not be ruled out. Severus (Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa) places Mark in Alexandria fifteenth year after Christ's ascension.

c. 45-49 The Council of Jerusalem, the first Christian council, settles questions regarding circumcision and dietary law to enable world mission of apostles, decisively effecting kerygma to indigenous Africans.

c. 55-95 The Gospels are written. Mark was first, written in Rome as a recollection of Peter's eyewitness and viewed in Africa as setting forth the apostolic mission in Africa (especially Cyrenaica and Alexandria). Mark, a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10), accompanies Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 12:25) and back to Cyprus (Acts 15:39), all cities accessible to seafaring Jewish merchants from ports of Africa: Berenice, Pelusium, Alexandria, Carthage.

64/66 Martyrdom of Peter.

64/67 Martyrdom of Paul.

66 Massacre of Jews under Tiberius Julius Alexander in the Iudaea Province.

66-68 Libyan tradition teaches Mark founded Christian community in Cyrenaica.

68 Martyrdom of Mark in Alexandria (May 8). He was dragged by a rope. His martyrdom may be connected with Roman pogrom in Alexandria where 50,000 Jews were killed. Eusebius places Annianus as successor to Mark in Alexandria.

70 The siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. The collapse of Jewish self-government in Judea, destruction of the second temple, suppression of traditional national institutions of the high priesthood and Sanhedrin. Many Jews were sold into slavery; others scattered to Egypt and Africa.

70-72 Imperial cult is introduced.

70-135 Increasing numbers of Jews arrive in Africa, especially in Alexandria, Cyrene, Helipolis, Berenice, Carthage and Caesarea Mauretania.

75-100 *Second Enoch* and the *Testament of Abraham* are composed in Greek in the Jewish community of Alexandria.

83 Death of Annianus, bishop of Alexandria, succeeded by Milius (Abilius).

92 Domitian executes Christians for refusing to sacrifice before his image.



98-117 Emperor Trajan refortifies the Old Cairo fort named Babylon, a site that is reported as existing as early as 24 B.C.E. by Strabo.

90-130 Source texts of later *Teachings of Silvanus* incorporate Logos Christology similar to 1 Corinthians 1—4, anticipating Clement of Alexandria.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 100-199

100s Second-century non-Gnostic Christian literature of Egyptian provenance: *Gospel of the Hebrews*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Secret Gospel of Mark*, *Teaching of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Traditions of Matthias*, *Jannes and Jambres*, *Sentences of Sextus*, *Second Epistle of Clement*, *Writings of Athenagoras*.

100s Second-century non-Gnostic Christian literature of probable Egyptian provenance, and clearly circulated in Egypt but debated as to origin: *Gospel of Thomas*, *Sibylline Oracles*, *Protoevangelium of James*, *Acts of John*, *Acts of Andrew*, *Epistula Apostolorum*; in addition some scholars argue an Egyptian provenance for the *Epistle of Jude*, *Second Epistle of Peter*, and *Testament of the Twelve patriarchs*, *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of James*, *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

100s Second-century manuscript fragments preserved in Egypt: Egerton Gospel (earliest); *Sibylline Oracles* from Antinoopolis; *Gospel of Thomas* from Oxyrhynchus, *Shepherd of Hermas* from the Fayyum.

100s *Secret Gospel of Mark*, known by Clement of Alexandria; *Gospel of the Hebrews* compiled for Jewish Christians of Alexandria; *Gospel of the Egyptians* for “Egyptians” predominating in Rhakotis district of Alexandria.

c. 107 Martyrdom of Simeon, son of Clopas, cousin of the Lord, may have had Jewish family links in Egypt.

115-117 Jewish revolts in Cyrenaica and Alexandria are harshly suppressed, almost wiping out huge numbers of Jews (a million of whom lived in Egypt, according to Philo).

115-117 Epistle of Barnabas addresses Alexandrian Jewish-Christian messianic community near the time of Jewish revolt under Trajan, citing Abraham as “the father of the Gentiles.” A later Ps.-Clementine homily (1.8-9) would also place Barnabas in Alexandria. From there “Clement” would follow him to Judea.

c. 117-138 Valentinus preaching in upper and lower Egypt (Thebais, Arsinoitis, Alexandria). Valentinian renderings of the gospel meld with Gnostic teachings: *Gospel of Truth*, *Treatise on the Resurrection*, *Prayer of the Apostle Paul*, *Epistle to Rheginos on the Resurrection*.

c. 125-135 Gnostic teachers in Egypt: Basilides in Prosopitis, Saïtes and Alexandria; Heracleon, Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes, Apelles, Julius Cassianus.

125-161 The *Epistle to Diognetus* is written.

132-135 The Bar Kochba revolt in Palestine has ominous consequences for Jews in Africa.

135-165 The Valentinian school produces *Gospel of Philip*, *Interpretation of Knowledge* and *A Valentinian Exposition*.

139 Ptolemy is born in Egypt. He invents measurement by minutes and seconds, and parallels and meridians in Alexandria (d. after 161).

140 Appian, historian of Alexandria, flourishes.

c. 140 Aristo of Pella portrays dialogue between Papiscus, an Alexandrian Jew, and a Jewish Christian named Jason.

c. 150 Marcion's truncated New Testament arrives in Egypt. Sethian Gnostic tractate *Trimorphic Protennoia* is written.

c.150 *Dialogue of the Savior* is written (from Nag Hammadi); *Gospel of the Ebionites* known to Irenaeus (c. 135-c. 202).

c. 150-215 Clement of Alexandria.

157 Montanism from Phrygia reaches Africa by 180s.

c. 160 The birth of Tertullian (d. 225), a Carthaginian lay theologian.

160-240 Julius Africanus (of either Libya or Jerusalem) studies at Alexandria with Origen and Heraclas in the catechetical school. He organizes the library in the Pantheon in Rome for Emperor Alexander Severus, and writes *Chronicles*, a universal history correlated with Scripture.

178 Death of Agrippinus, bishop of Alexandria. He was succeeded by Julian (178-188).

c. 178 Celsus attacks Christianity; *True Discourses* probably written in Alexandria.

180 Martyrs of Madaura in Numidia: Namphano, Miggin, Lucitas and Samae (likely of Berber extraction), as recorded by Maximus of Madaura.

180 Martyrs of Scilli (Scillium may be near Carthage or in Numidia): Speratus, Narzales, Cythinus (Cittinus), Veturius, Felix, Acyllinus (Aquilinis), Laetantius, Januarina, Generosa, Vestina, Donata and Secunda. This is the first public record of Christian martyrdom in the Maghreb, a fortnight after the martyrs of Madaura.

c. 180 Founding of the catechetical school at Alexandria by Pantaeus, a leading Christian teacher, missionary to "India" (Eusebius), teacher of Clement and a presbyter. (Note that Philip of Side places Athenagoras before Pantaeus in the school at Alexandria.)

180-213 *Testimony of Truth* is written (probably Alexandrian).

180-220 Minucius Felix, an African lawyer in Rome, writes his dialogue *Octavius*.

180s *Apocryphon of John* is written (before 185).

185 Birth of Origen.

188 Death of Julian, bishop of Alexandria.

189-198 Pope Victor is the first bishop of Rome to come from Africa, likely from Latin west.

c. 190 Bible is translated into Latin in Africa before Europe (likely used by Christian communities in Carthage).

c. 190 Birth of Dionysius of Alexandria.

190s Clement of Alexandria, a convert to Christianity, writes *Address to the Greeks* (*Protreptikos*).

190s Scriptoria exist in both Oxyrhynchus and Antinoopolis.

Second century Alexandrian Gnostic writings: *Eugnostos the Blessed*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Perfect Mind*, *Second Treatise on the Great Seth*.

193 Septimius Severus from Leptis Magna becomes the first emperor of Rome from Africa. He reigns until 211, and his dynasty lasts until 235.

c. 193 Tertullian, rhetor and lawyer, converts to Christianity. He is the first African Christian to produce an extensive Latin literary corpus, writes *Apology* (*Apologeticum*).



195-215 Clement of Alexandria flourishes. He writes *Christ the Educator*, *Excerpts from Theodotus* (a student of Valentinus) and *Miscellanies*.

195-197 African-born Pope Victor intervenes in the Quartodeciman controversy on date of Easter. Irenaeus mediates.

196 Tertullian writes *To the Martyrs*.

197 Edict of Severus forbidding Jewish and Christian proselytism.

c. 197 Growth of Sabellianism in Cyrenaica. Monarchian controversies on relation of the Father and the Son.

197-200 Tertullian writes *To the Heathens* (*Ad nationes*), *The Testimony of the Soul* (*De Testimonio animae*), *On the Shows* (*De spectaculis*), *On the Prescription of Heretics* (*De praescriptione*) and *Against Marcion* (*Adversus Marcionem*).

199-200 Septimius Severus visits Egypt, relieves tax burdens.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 200-299

200s Third-century non-Gnostic literature of Egyptian provenance: *Apocalypse of Elijah* (Upper Egypt), *Gospel of Bartholomew*, *Gospel of the Savior*, *Exhortation to the Greeks*.

200s Third-century Sethian Gnostic writings: *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, *Melchizedek*, *Thought of Norea*, *Allogenes* (these either from Alexandria or Syria).

200s Third-century Alexandrian Gnostic writings: *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Letter of Peter to Philip*, *Gospel of Mary*. Bala'izah Gnostic fragments at monastic library at Bala'izah.

200 Tertullian writes *The Demurrer Against the Heretics* (*De Praescriptione haereticorum*).

c. 200 Birth of Cyprian in Carthage.

c. 200 Mishnah is compiled and redacted.

200-206 Tertullian writes *On Prayer*, *On Patience* (*De patientia*), *On Baptism* (*De baptismo*), *On the Apparel of Women* (*De cultu feminarum*), *To My Wife* (*Ad uxorem*), *Against the Jews* (*Adversus Iudaeos*), *Against Hermogenes* (*Adversus Hermogenem*).

202-203 Persecution of burgeoning Christianity in Africa and Egypt under

Septimius Severus. Eusebius reports "countless numbers" wreathed with crowns of martyrdom, escorted to the arena "from Egypt and the whole Thebais" (from Nile Delta as far south as Souan, Syene). Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas at Carthage, and Victorius of Tabarka.

202 Origen's father, Leonidas, is martyred in Alexandria during the persecution of Septimius Severus. Origen survives as teenage orphan, head of family, continues his father's work of literary teaching and catechesis.

202 Clement leaves Alexandria for Palestine during Severan persecutions.

202 Upon Clement's leaving, eighteen-year-old Origen is called by Bishop Demetrius to direct the catechetical school of Alexandria, assisted by Heraclas.

202 Record of *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* written, possibly by Tertullian.

202-203 African-born Emperor Septimius Severus pays a state visit to Carthage and initiates vast building program at Lepcis Magna, in Libya, as fortified city.

202-231 Origen, trained in Greek literature and philosophy under Ammonius Saccas, continues as head of the Alexandrian catechetical school.

203-204 Tertullian writes *Repentance* (*De paenitentia*).

204 Tertullian writes *On Ecstasy* (*De ecstasi*), *On the Hope of the Faithful* (*De spe fidelium*), *On Paradise* (*De paradiso*).

205 Birth of Plotinus, Egyptian philosopher.

c. 206 Tertullian writes *The Veiling of Virgins* (*De virginibus velandis*).

206-212 The "semi-Montanist period" of Tertullian's writing.

207-208 Tertullian writes the second edition of *Adversus Marcionem*, containing books 1-3.

208-212 Tertullian writes *The Soul* (*De anima*), *The Flesh of Christ* (*De carne Christi*), *The Resurrection of the Dead* (*De resurrectione mortuorum*), *An Exhortation to Chastity*, *Against Marcion* (*Adversus Marcionem*), books 4-5 (3rd ed.), *De pallio*, *Adversus Valentinianos*, *De censu animae adversus Hermogenem*, *De fato*, *Against Apelles* (*Adversus Apelleiacos*).

211 Death of Septimius Severus and accession of his son Caracalla (emperor 211-217), continuing the African-based Severian dynasty; first long peace.

- 211 Tertullian writes *The Crown* (*De corona*), *Idolatry* (*De idololatria*).
- 211-213 Tertullian writes *Antidote Against the Scorpion* (*Scorpiace*).
- 212 Caracalla grants Roman citizenship to all free residents of the empire. Legal recognition is nominally granted to Jews and Christians for the first time.
- 212 Solar eclipse of August 14. Tertullian writes *Ad Scapulam*.
- c. 212 Origen visits Rome.
- 213 After the breakdown of relations with the "carnally minded," Tertullian writes *On Flight* (*De fuga*), *Against Praxeas* (*Adversus Praxean*), *Monogamy* (*De monogamia*) and *On Fasting* (*De ieiunio*).
- 215 Caracalla, fearing revolt in Egypt, orders the massacre of Alexandria.
- 215 Birth of Mani (215-276), founder of Manichaeism.
- 216 Origen visits Palestine.
- 217 Murder of Caracalla. Macrinus, a Moor (Mauretania in North Africa), becomes emperor.
- 217 Tertullian, Hippolytus and Roman bishops are involved in a controversy on church discipline.
- 217-222 Callistus I is bishop of Rome.
- 217-222 Death of Clement of Alexandria.
- 218 Tertullian embraces some aspects of Montanism.
- 220 Tertullian writes *On Modesty* (*De pudicitia*).
- 220 Sabellius condemned by Callistus.
- c. 220 Tertullian coins terms *Trinity* and *New Testament*. He cites the African Latin Bible translation, earliest in Latin.
- 220-229 Flourishing of Alexandrian school under Origen, Heraclas and Demetrius. Origen's first period of literary activity in Alexandria: *Commentary on John*.
- 222-235 Reign of Roman emperor Alexander Severus, who halted Christian persecutions and offered religious tolerance.
- 225-300 Neoplatonism develops in Alexandria.
- c. 230 Origen writes *Hexapla* and *First Principles* (*De Principiis*).
- 231 Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria deposes Origen from the priesthood and brings the catechetical school more under episcopal supervision.



231 Origen moves from Alexandria to Caesarea in Palestine, where he completes his work *Hexapla* as well as homilies and biblical commentaries, which make frequent use of typological and spiritual exegesis.

231 Origen is invited to Greece, where he teaches, writes and preaches in church as a presbyter.

231 Origen is succeeded by Heraclas as head of the catechetical school at Alexandria.

c. 231 Plotinus begins his studies for eleven years in Alexandria with Ammonius Saccas, founder of Neoplatonism.

232 Origen writes *Commentaries on Genesis*.

232 Origen visits Julia Mamaea at Antioch.

232 Bishop Demetrius dies. Heraclas is consecrated bishop of Alexandria and is succeeded in the catechetical school by Dionysius.

233-238 Gregory the Wonder Worker studies under Origen.

235 Origen writes *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.

c. 243 Neoplatonist Plotinus moves his school of philosophical reflection (Cronius, Numenius Atticus) from Alexandria to Rome.

247 Death of Heraclas.

247 In Hermopolis Magna in Egypt, a Greek temple was converted into a church. There bishop Conon received letter from Bishop Dionysius allowing lapsed to be readmitted.

247-264 Dionysius, new bishop of Alexandria, brings theological teaching to village level in Arsinoite villages.

248 Cyprian becomes bishop of his native city, Carthage.

249 Beginning of Christian persecutions under Emperor Decius (249-51), who issued a general edict ordering Roman citizens to participate in a formal confession of civic religion. Many Christians lapse into idolatry.

249 Persecution increases. The problem of administering penitence grows acute. Cyprian's practice: before receiving laying on of hands and being readmitted to the Eucharist, those who have lapsed must make public confession of their fault and submit to a suitable act of penitence.

249-251 3,600 Martyrs in Isna, Upper Egypt.

250 Growing controversy between Carthage and Rome over the treatment of returning lapsed Christians. Rigorist dissident deacon Felicissimus of Carthage opposes Cyprian.

250 Origen is arrested and tortured.

250 Letters of Porphyry. Gnostic *Gospel of Pistis Sophia*.

c. 250 Origen writes *Contra Celsum*.

250s Rome steps up persecution of Christians. Martyrs are revered as saints who share Christ's sufferings.

250s Modalist doctrine in Cyrenaica.

251 Birth of Antony.

251 Persecution of Valerian.

251 Council of Carthage called by Cyprian on question of the lapsed, Cyprian writes *On the Lapsed (de Lapsis)*.

251-252 Cyprian writes *The Unity of the Catholic Church: Against the Novationists (De Unitate Ecclesiae Catholicae)*, *The Lord's Prayer* and *To Demetrian*.

251-253 Cornelius I writes his *Letters*.

253 Cyprian writes *Works and Almsgiving*

c. 254 Imprisoned, Origen is tortured and dies (at Tyre?). Gregory Thaumaturgus writes *Panegyric*.

254-257 Baptismal controversy, Carthage (Cyprian) and Rome (Stephen I).

255-256 Fermilian of Caesarea writes *Letter to Cyprian of Carthage*.

255-256 Councils of Carthage on the rebaptism of heretics.

256 Acts of the Seventh Council of Carthage, Cyprian presiding.

256-258 Cyprian writes *The Advantage of Patience; To Donatus; The Dress of Virgins; That Idols Are Not Gods; Jealousy and Envy; Exhortation to Martyrdom, to Fortunatus, Letters*.

256-258 Anonymous *Treatise on Re-Baptism* is written.

257-260 Persecutions under Valerian.

258 Martyrdom of Cyprian at Carthage.

258 *Acts of Cyprian* describes his martyrdom, written by his deacon Pontius.

260s Paul the Theban is born. Later he would settle in eastern Egyptian desert, the first hermit.

260 Upon Valerian's death, Gallienus becomes sole emperor. He decrees the Edict of Toleration, bringing the second long peace. Sabellianism condemned.

c. 260 Birth of Lactantius in Proconsular Africa. He becomes a disciple of Arnobius of Sicca and the author of a major work on philosophy of history. Birth of Arius in Cyrenaica.

262 Earthquake in Cyrenaica.

264 Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, dies. He had written a number of *Letters*.

264-282 Maximus is patriarch of Alexandria.

265-282 Theognostus heads the school of Alexandria after Dionysius, followed by Prierus, Achillas and Peter of Alexandria before Theognostus is elected patriarch (c. 300). The curriculum of Theognostus is described later by Photius as moving from Father to Son to Spirit.

270s Antony begins his ascetic life.

270 Death of Plotinus.

270-300 Steady increase of Christianity in central Egypt and North Africa. Intellectual attacks are made against Christian teaching by Porphyry, disciple of Plotinus.

276 Death of Mani, whose disciples came to Africa before his death, requiring a Christian response.

c. 280 Birth of Marius Victorinus.

282 Death of Maximus, patriarch of Alexandria.

282-300 Theonas is patriarch of Alexandria.

284 Year one of the Coptic calendar, dating from beginning of Diocletian's reign, the era of the Martyrs.

285 Antony retreats into the Egyptian desert, the beginnings of eremitic monasticism. Among the ascetic hermits are Paul of Thebes.

285 Hieracas of Leontopolis guides an ascetic community, writing expositions on Scripture.

285 Roman Empire is partitioned by Diocletian into Western and Eastern empires.



**290s** Conversion of Arnobius of Sicca.

**c. 295-298** Birth of Athanasius, either in Alexandria or, according to Dair Anba Maqar document, his parents came from al-Balyyana in Upper Egypt (see Bebawi). He was brought up in area of Oratory Theometor, built near the shore of Alexandria's Eunostos harbor by Bishop Theonas (282-300), which served as the episcopal residence (now Franciscan fathers at Rue Karam). Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria (328-373).

**297-299** Revolt in Alexandria against Diocletian's taxation policies and repressive measures against the Christians. The reinforcement of the fort at Babylon in Old Cairo.

**298** Marcellus, martyr centurion of Tingis in Mauretania.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 300-399

**300s** Earliest known church locations in Alexandria: Pharos (restored under Theophilis), martyrium of St. Mark, Boukolou (pasture near northeastern cliffs beside the sea, Eunostos Harbor), Bendidiou (Mendideion, Church of St. Athanasius), Angeloi (Serapeum), St. Theonas church near eastern gate; Caesareum on Great Harbor; Church of the Archangel Michael; Cosmos and Damian (founded 282 near the stadium west of the colonnade).

**300s** Writings: fourth-century Gnostic manuscripts in Nag Hammadi Library; Dair el Bala'iza fragments; Askew Codex; Bohairic Coptic Bible translations begin; *Teachings of Silvanus* compiles earlier second-century Alexandrian Christian moral wisdom; Alexandrian Gnostic text *On the Origin of the World*.

**300s** Early fourth-century martyrs and saints of Africa: Fortunatus, bishop of Constantine in Numidia; Gratus, bishop of Carthage; Optatus, bishop of Milevis; Primian, Donatist bishop of Carthage; Rogatus, Donatist bishop of Cartenna in Mauretania; Romulus, bishop of Tebessa in Algeria; Sextus, bishop of Timgad in Numidia; Gaudentius, Donatist bishop of Timgad; Genethlius, bishop of Carthage; Macrobius, Donatist bishop of Hippos; Pro-futurus, Catholic bishop of Constantine in Numidia; Valentinus, bishop of Baiana in Numidia; Romanianus of Thagaste; Secundus of Tigisis in Numidia; Theonas of Libya.

300s Small oratory of St. Menas is built at Maryut, southwest of Alexandria. Athanasius builds a basilica there, which is enlarged by Arcadius. Menas becomes the national desert saint of Egypt, portrayed in his martyrion wearing a tunic and chlamys of a soldier with camels seated at his feet. Widespread *ampullae* from this era have been found from the Upper Nile to Gaul.

300 Death of Theonas, patriarch of Alexandria, who was succeeded by Theognostus.

c. 300 Conversion of Lactantius, a rhetor, and of philosopher Alexander of Lycopolis, who became a bishop.

c. 300 *Acts of Mark* draws together previous centuries of Marcan tradition in Egypt and Libya.

c. 300 Christians are becoming numerous throughout the empire, and notably in Africa.

302-310 Peter, patriarch of Alexandria, issued fourteen penitential canons on discipline during time of persecution. The *Homily on Riches* and the *Epiphany Homily on the Baptism of Christ* are attributed to Peter. Ammonius is consecrated bishop of Isna.

303 Boundaries of Proconsular Africa are rearranged. The province of Tripolitania is created; Lepcis is the capital.

303 Felix, bishop of Thibiuca, a Tunisian martyr.

303 Beginning of the Great Persecution, February 23. Imperial decrees issued under Diocletian (emperor 284-305) to destroy churches, burn books, confiscate property and dissolve congregations. At Nicomedia, soldiers burn down the cathedral; rioters set fire to Diocletian's palace. In Egypt Hesy-chius, Pachomius, Theodorus and Philea are forcibly removed and jailed.

303 Apa Hor, prepared for martyrdom, makes public confession of faith in Pelusium. He is tortured and beheaded. Later the martyrrium of Apa Hor south of Minya was cut into the rock, entered through a tunnel to the nave. Seven monastic centers would form on east bank of Nile south of Minya. St. Apatér is tortured and beheaded near Asyut.

303-306 Edicts issued against Christians, with severe persecution under emperor Diocletian and his successors. Among the numerous martyrs are



Barbara of Heliopolis, Sebastian, Cosmas, Damian, Maurice and Genesius. The problem arises concerning "traditores" (those who surrendered the Scriptures to idolatrous authorities).

c. 303-310 Lactantius writes *Divine Institutes* (*Divinae institutiones*), *On the Workmanship of God* (*De opificio Dei*).

304-306 Four Egyptian bishops under arrest rebuke Melitius for presuming to appoint a successor to exiled patriarch Peter. The Melitian Schism begins between Melitius of Lycopolis and Peter of Alexandria.

304 Porphyry, Neoplatonic philosopher, writes *Against the Christians* (*Adversus Christianos*).

304 Dativus and Saturninus, Donatist martyrs of Abitina, North Africa.

304 Grave illness of Diocletian.

305 Diocletian and Maximian abdicate, May 1.

c. 305 Antony emerges as a monk with disciples. The first Christian monastic community forms around him in the eastern Egyptian desert. The colony of hermits gives evidence of the beginnings of semi-eremitic monasticism. Antony authors seven letters.

c. 305 Arnobius of Sicca writes *Adversus Nationes*, a refutation of the rites of pagan religion.

306 Lactantius writes *The Wrath of God* (*de Ire Dei*).

306 Constantine is proclaimed emperor at York.

310 Antony goes to Alexandria to encourage the martyrs.

311 Peter, bishop of Alexandria, is imprisoned and taken to Boukolous, where he prayed at the tomb of St. Mark before being beheaded. The *Martyrdom of Peter* (*Passio S. Petri*), an anonymous fourth-century text, is written.

311 Galerius issues the Edict of Toleration to Christians, but some persecutions continue.

311 The Donatist schism begins in Numidia and Proconsular Africa.

311 Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, dies. Constantine, upon seeing a vision in the sun of a cross with the words "By This Sign Conquer," adopts a Christian symbol for his standards and defeats Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge



outside Rome and becomes sole emperor of the West.

c. 311-325 Ammonius (Ammoun), a notable Alexandrian, takes up monastic life in Nitria. He forms loosely connected semi-eremitic monastic retreats whose numbers grew to 5,000 monks by 400 C.E.

312 Cyrus and John are martyred in Canopus. Lucian of Antioch is martyred. Arius of Libya, a follower of Lucian, is promoted to leadership in Alexandria after the martyrdom of Peter I.

313 Licinius defeats Maximinus Daia and is sole emperor of the East.

313 Emperor Constantine the Great declares the Edict of Milan. Licinius ends religious persecutions, providing freedom of worship and restitution of the goods confiscated from the Christian communities. These are the first steps toward the establishment of Christianity's growing influence in the Roman Empire.

313 Donatus is excommunicated for requiring rebaptism of apostates.

c. 313 Birth of Didymus the Blind, leading Alexandrian exegete after Origen (d. 398).

314 Council of Arles: the Donatist question in Africa is considered by bishops from Italy, Gaul and North Africa.

c. 314 Lactantius goes to Trier to educate Constantine's son Crispus.

315 Condemnation and persecution of the Donatists.

315 Majorinus, bishop of Carthage, dies.

316 Vindication of Caecilian of Carthage on charges brought by Donatus.

316-320 Lactantius writes *Letters* and *On the Death of the Persecutors* (*De mortibus persecutorum*) to testify to future generations of the judgment of the persecutors.

318 Athanasius writes *Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word* (*De Incarnatione*).

318 Pachomius (c. 292-347), born in Sne, a converted Egyptian soldier (312), founds first communal monastery, initiating coenobitic monasticism. He sets forth monastic rule for communities.

318-323 Arian controversy begins. Alexander deposes Arius from his presbyterium.

319 Period of toleration for Donatists.

320-329 Pachomius founds the monasteries of Tabennisi, Phbow, Shenaset and Thmoushons.

c. 320-c. 385 Optatus, bishop of Milevis, becomes the leading critic of Donatists.

321 Synod at Alexandria condemns Arius.

323-346 *Letters of Pachomius, Instructions of Pachomius* are written.

324 Eusebius (c. 265-339; bishop from 314) of Caesarea completes *Ecclesiastical History*.

324-337 Constantine the Great is sole ruler of united empire.

325 First ecumenical council of Nicaea is called by Constantine. Arianism is condemned by the 318 bishops in the Nicene Creed. Arius is exiled to Illyricum.

325-350 Bruce Codex, probably Egyptian. The first bishop of Phyle (1st cataract, Sudan) is appointed.

327 The kingdom of Ethiopia adopts Christianity. Ethiopian missionaries are sent to convert the Himyarites. Church historian Philostorgios (386-433) later offered the first evidence of a Jewish presence in the region.

c. 327 Death of Arnobius of Sicca.

328 Death of Alexander I. Athanasius succeeds Alexander as bishop of Alexandria in a disputed election. Athanasius becomes the chief defender of Nicene orthodoxy. His early episcopacy spent among monastic circles and remote rural Christian communities along the Nile and in the desert as far south as the frontier of modern Sudan. Athanasius shows strong sympathies toward Upper Egypt, the desert and Cyrenaica rather than Alexandrian upper class, which identified with Arius.

328 Founding of Church of the Holy Virgin at Gabal al-Tayr (Convent of the Pulley, on a cliff above the Nile).

328 Melitians oppose Athanasius.

329 Hilarion of Gaza (b. 291) founds Palestinian monasticism as a disciple of Antony, whom he sought out at Qalala mountain. Hilarion then founds a hermitage in Libya and later at Gaza.

329 Amid beginnings of Pachomian monasticism, Athanasius forms close bonds with the monastic communities of Upper Egypt. He does not succeed in ordaining Pachomius, as requested by Bishop Serapion.

330s Evidences of Christianity at necropolis of Kharga at al-Bagawat, a place of banishment for both Arius and Athanasius at different times.

330 Constantine moves the capital of the empire to Constantinople, formerly Byzantium.

c. 330 Death of Lactantius.

c. 330 Macarius of Egypt founds desert monastery at Wadi-el-Natrun.

c. 330 Constantine's mother, Helena, dies after encouraging pilgrimages to martyrial sites. Many churches in Egypt are thought by tradition to have been built by Helena, such as the basilica of St. John and the monastery of Abu al-Nana near Antinoe.

335 Ecclesiastical trial of Athanasius at Tyre. The council (Latrocinium) condemns Athanasius, who is exiled by Constantine to Trier in Gaul. Athanasius would spend twenty-three of his next thirty-two years in five periods of exile or banishment, each time using his exile as a new frontier of witness. While in Gaul he writes *Against the Heathens*.

336 Death of Arius in exile in Upper Egypt.

336 In Carthage, Donatist council, with more than 270 bishops taking part.

337 Constantine is baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia on his deathbed. Athanasius returns to Alexandria. Christians are the majority in many parts of North Africa. After the death of Constantine, the western empire (Africa, Italy and Illyricum), is ruled by Constantine II (337-340). Egypt ruled to Constantius II (337-361) along with Asia and Syria; Spain and Britain by Constans I (337-350).

337-339 Athanasius writes the *Letter to Virgins*; Eusebius writes *The Life of Constantine*.

338 Kellia monasteries are founded.

338 Antony visits Alexandria in support of Athanasius.

339 Anti-Athanasian synod at Antioch names Gregory of Cappadocia bishop of Alexandria.



**339-346** Second exile of Athanasius, received by Pope Julius in Rome.

**340** Founding of Dair al-Baramus, monastery of the Romans at Wadi al-Natrun (sacked and rebuilt in 407, 410, 444, 507 and 817).

**345** Caecilian, bishop of Carthage, dies.

**345** Synod of Latopolis tries Pachomius on charges of clairvoyance.

**346** The Rule of Pachomius.

**346** Return of Athanasius to Alexandria.

**346** Cyril is bishop of Jerusalem. Hilary is bishop of Poitiers.

**346** Pachomius dies during a plague, succeeded by Theodore, then Petronius, then Horsisius (Horsiesi) and then by Theodore again, who held together Pachomian and Athanasian visions.

**Mid-300s** Fourth-century ecclesial architecture in North African Maghreb: Tipasa in Mauretania Caesariensis; basilica of St. Salsa; catacombs of Hadrumetum (Sousse), near the sea; Cuicul (Djemila) in Numidia. Basilica and monastery at Theveste (Tebessa) in Numidia, martyrion of St. Crispina (304); basilica and baptistery of Sabratha in Tripolitana; baptistery of the Great Church at Hippo Regius; reliquary from 'Ain Zirara in Numidia.

**350** Fall of island of Meroe on the Nile to the Aksumite king Ezana. The ancient capital of Meroe is abandoned to Noba, pastoralists from south.

**350** Athanasius writes a letter to Ammoun. Paphnutius is active in Upper Egypt. Horsisius resigns to Seneset. In Phbow, Theodore takes control of monasteries.

**350s** Pachomian writings under Theodore and Horsisius: *Vitae Paralipomena*, *Letter of Ammon*, *Pachomian Rule*, *Letter of Theodore*, *Instructions of Theodore*, *Letters of Horsisius*, *Instructions of Horsisius*, and later anonymous *Pachomian Apocalypse of Kjarur*.

**353** Serapion of Thumis leads the Athanasian delegation to appeal to Emperor Constantius. The councils of Arles (353) and of Milan (355) condemn Athanasius.

**354** Birth of Augustine.

**356** Death of Antony. The church of Theonas in Alexandria is stormed in attempt to capture Athanasius, who escapes with the assistance of monks.

Church buildings are taken over by anti-Athanasians.

356-362 Third exile of Athanasius (356-362), incognito among monks of Egypt. He writes a defense of his flight, *Discourses Against the Arians*, anti-Arian letters to monks, *Life of Anthony* and *Four Letters to Serapion*.

356-359 During Athanasius's exile, George of Cappadocia is installed as bishop, then forced to flee Alexandria. George returns and is lynched by anti-Chalcedonian mob.

c. 356 Frumentius is shipwrecked and enslaved by king of "India ulterior." He becomes prime minister, goes to Alexandria to inform Athanasius, who ordains him bishop of Aksum—traditionally identified with Abba Salama, first apostle of Ethiopia. Aksumite inscriptions identify King Ezana and his brother Sazana, who convert to Christianity. Monks migrate to Aksum.

360 Martin of Tours founds the Ligugé monastery after the Egyptian model.

c. 360 Birth of John Cassian (d. 435).

361 Monastery of St. Antony founded below the mountain cave of St. Antony.

361-363 Death of Constantius begins reign of Julian, nephew of Constantine and apostate emperor of East, who attempts to revive paganism. Donatist triumph in Africa. Arian hegemony in East. Low point for Nicene orthodoxy.

362 Upon openly returning to Alexandria, Athanasius calls a council to decree the triune faith. Fourth exile of Athanasius.

362 Emperor Julian forces Athanasius from Alexandria (October).

363 Julian dies. Athanasius returns to Alexandria, then leaves to meet new emperor Jovian in Syria.

363 Marius Victorinus, Commentaries on Letters of Paul.

365-366 Fifth exile of Athanasius under duress from Emperor Valens. Athanasius again visits Pachomian monasteries seeking reconciliation between Theodore and Horsisius.

365-403 Egyptian-born and educated Epiphanius would later become bishop of Salamis. He visits the Egyptian desert fathers and returns to Eleutheropolis in Judea to found monastery following Egyptian rule. He

writes *Panarion Against Heretics*.

367 Athanasius writes *Festal Letter* 39, the first reference to complete ecumenically received canon of Scripture, citing twenty-seven New Testament apostolic books that by tradition have been long-before received for reading in churches.

c. 367 Optatus of Milevis writes *The Schism of the Donatists*.

368 Athanasius writes *Synodal Letter to the Bishops of Africa*, *Festal Letter* 40. Isidore replaces Bishop Dracontius of Hermopolis Parva. Theodore dies. Horsisius leads Pachomian monasteries.

368 The Great Church (Megale Ecclesia, Kyriakon) of Alexandria is reconstructed under Athanasius. A basilica is built at St. Menas near Maryut for international pilgrims.

370 Athanasius's *Life of Antony* begins circulating in Gaul.

370 Young Augustine returns to Thagaste from Madaura.

371 Augustine goes to Carthage for first time. Patricius, Augustine's father, dies. Augustine takes a concubine.

372 Birth of Adeodatus, Augustine's son (d. 390).

373 Death of Athanasius. He is succeeded by Peter II, who is immediately forced into exile. Many monks are sent away to hard labor in mines or exile.

375 Augustine returns from Carthage to Thagaste to teach.

373-380 Rufinus of Aquileia (c. 345-410) resides in Egypt studying under Didymus; translates Origen into Latin (397ff).

378-384 Timothy I, brother of Peter I, becomes bishop of Alexandria.

379 Theodosius I, emperor of the united empire, begins the Age of Theodosius the Great and his sons (379-395).

380 Theodosian Code makes Catholic Christianity the official religion of the empire. Those in communion with Peter of Alexandria and Damasus of Rome are considered orthodox. The bishops are enumerated.

380s Pilgrimage of Egeria of Gallaecia to Egypt and Palestine.

381 Proscriptions against pagan cults. The assemblies of heretics are interdicted and sacrifices are prohibited.

381 Didymus the Blind writes *On the Holy Spirit*.



**381** First Council of Constantinople (second ecumenical council) defines the deity of the Holy Spirit. Constantinople is declared to have second place after Rome, against Alexandrian wishes.

**383** Augustine at Rome.

**384** Jerome's *Vulgate*, a new Latin version of the Bible, is complete (begun 382).

**384-412** Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, vests all teaching functions, formerly held in catechetical school, in the episcopal office. Anba Hadra consecrated bishop of Aswan on the Upper Nile.

**385** Shenute of Atripe becomes hegumen of the White Monastery near Suhag. He writes *Letters*, *Sermons Against the Origenists*, *Melitans*, *Manicheans* and, later, *On the Preexistence of Christ*. Shenute (d. 466), would be succeeded by Besa, then by Zenobius.

**385** Jerome (c. 347-420) sails from Ostia to seek monastic life. Monnica, Augustine's mother, arrives in Milan (late spring).

**385** Jerome visits Scetis (Wadi al-Natrun) monastics and returns to Bethlehem to found four monasteries with Paula and Eustochium.

**c. 385** Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) settles in Egypt, first in Nitria, then in Kellia.

**c. 385-390** Passion narratives of the martyr monks after Julian unite hagiography and monasticism in epic genre: Epimachus, Menas, James the Persian, Leontius of Tripolis, Mercurius, Pantoleon, Cyrus and John.

**386** Conversion of Augustine, who seeks monastic life at Cassiciacum.

**386** Purge of Manichees at Carthage.

**386** Augustine writes *Against the Skeptics* (*Contra Academicos*).

**387** Augustine returns to Milan (early March) and is baptized by Ambrose (April 24). Monnica dies at Ostia.

**387** Augustine writes *On the Happy Life* (*De Beata Vita*), *On Order* (*De Ordine*), *The Soliloquies* (*Soliloquia*), *On the Immortality of the Soul* (*De immortalitate animae*), *On Dialectic* (*De dialectica*) and *De Musica*.

**388** Augustine writes *On the Greatness of the Soul* (*De animae quantitate*), *On Free Will*, bk. 1 (*De libero arbitrio*), *The Morality of the Catholic Church* and *On*

the Catholic and the Manichean Ways of Life (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*).

388-396 Augustine writes *On Various Questions* (*De diversis quaestionibus*).

389 Augustine writes *Genesis Defended Against the Manicheans* (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*) and *On the Teacher* (*De Magistro*).

389-391 Augustine returns to Carthage, then to Thagaste in Numidia. He writes *On True Religion* (*De vera religione*).

390 Death of Macarius, closely linked with Dair Abu Maqar monastery in Wadi al-Natrun. Macarius is succeeded by Paphnutius.

390 Death of African rhetor Tyconius, who wrote *Rules* and *Letters*.

391 Palladius visits monks of Nitria. Over a thousand monks reside at the Monastery of the Cross (Abu Fanah) on the edge of the western Egyptian desert near Qasr Hor. Remains of three naves, pillars, apses and wall painting are still visible.

391 Riots in Alexandria destroy the Serapeum; new churches built under Theophilus.

391 Death of Parmenian, Donatist bishop of Carthage, and his Catholic rival Genethlius. Augustine is ordained as a priest. Aurelius becomes bishop of Carthage. Augustine arrives in Hippo to found a monastery.

391-392 Augustine writes *On the Advantage of Believing* (*De utilitate credendi*) and *Against the Manicheans* (*De duabus animabus contra Manichaeos*).

391-395 Augustine writes *On Free Will* (*De libero arbitrio*) bks. 2-3.

391-430 Augustine writes his *Sermons*.

392 Augustine writes *Acta contra Fortunatum Manichaeum* (*Debate with Fortunatus the Manichee*).

392-416 Augustine writes *Explanations of the Psalms* (*Ennarrationes in Psalmo*). Augustine had already commented on the first thirty-two psalms before 392.

393 Donatist council at Cebarsussa.

393 Augustine preaches opening address at plenary council of the African provinces at Hippo, which became *On Faith and the Creed* (*De fide et symbolo*).

c. 393-394 Augustine writes *Unfinished Book on the Literal Interpretation of*

*Genesis (De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber).*

394 Arsenius, tutor to Arcadius and Honorius at court of Byzantium, leaves Rome for the desert of Scetis to become disciple of John the Short. In a desert raid in 408, he flees for Gabal Tura (Dair al-Qusayr) for twelve years. Ten thousand monks reside in fourth-century Oxyrhynchus and thirty thousand monks and nuns at the basilica at Kom al-Namrud.

394 Ordination of Paulinus. The Donatist council at Bagai. Augustine attends first council of Carthage.

394 Augustine writes *Psalm against the Donatists (Psalmus contra partem Donati)*, *On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount (De sermone Domini in monte)*, *Epistle to the Romans (Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata exposition)*, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians (Expositio epistolae ad Galatas)*, *On Lying (De Mendacio)* and *Against Adimantus, a Disciple of Mani (Contra Adimantum Manichei discipulum)*.

394-395 Augustine writes *Expositio 84 propositionum epistolae ad Romanos*.

395 Augustine becomes bishop of Hippo, succeeding Valerius.

396 Augustine writes to Simplician (*Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus*), *On the Christian Struggle (De agone Christiano)* and *On Christian Teaching (De doctrina Christiana)* (finished 426).

397 At the Council of Carthage the Hippo Summary is approved with thirty-nine disciplinary canons composed by the bishops of Byzacena in 397 and approved by the Council of Carthage in the same year. It cites twenty-seven canonical New Testament books.

397-398 Augustine writes *Against Faustus the Manichee (Contra Faustum Manichaeum)* and *Gospel Questions (Quaestiones evangeliorum)*.

397-401 Augustine writes his *Confessions (Confessiones)*.

398 Augustine writes *Against Felix the Manichee (Contra Felicem Manichaeum)* and *On Christian Discipline (De disciplina Christiana)*.

399 Augustine writes *De natura boni contra Manichaeos* and *Against Secundinus the Manichee (Contra Secundinum Manichaeum)*.

399-400 Augustine writes *On the Instruction of Beginners (De catechizandis rudibus)* and *On Agreement Among the Evangelists (De consensus Evangelistarum)*.



## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 400-499

400 African monasticism spreads to Gaul. Honoratus begins the monastery at Lérins, following Egyptian Rule.

400 Augustine writes *Against the Letter of Parmenian* (*Contra epistolam Parmeniani*), *Responses to Januarius* (*Ad inquisitiones Januarii*) and *On the Work of Monks* (*De opere monachorum*).

c. 400 Augustine writes *Against Faustus the Manichean*.

c. 400 *Apostolic Constitutions* are gathered from previous sources indicating African influence on shaping of early canon law.

c. 400 Codex Bobiensis provides evidence showing that the first Latin translation of the Gospels came out of Africa (Carthage) and contains the shorter ending of Mark.

c. 400 Palestinian Talmud (Mishnah [oral law] + Gemara [Mishnah commentary]). Formation of matured rabbinic Judaism.

c. 400 African saints and martyrs include Antonius Honoratus, bishop of Constantina in Numidia; Faustinianus, bishop of Timgad in Numidia; Palladius, bishop of Tebessa in Algeria; Perseverantius, Donatist bishop of Tebessa, Algeria; Pomerius Julianus of Mauretania; Potentius and Renatus, bishops of Tipasa in Mauretania; Secundus, bishop of Timgad; Urbanus, bishop of Sicca Veneria; Urbicus, bishop of Tebessa; Victor, bishop of Constantine in Numidia; and Victor of Cartenna in Mauretania.

400-401 Augustine writes *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* (*De baptismo contra Donatistas*).

400-412 Theophilus pursues anti-Origenist policies in monasteries.

400-419 Augustine writes *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*).

400-500 Collections emerge of sayings of previous desert fathers, *Apophthegms of the Desert Fathers*.

401 Augustine writes *On the Good of Marriage* (*De bono conjugali*) and *On Holy Virginity* (*De sancta virginitate*).

401-404 Rufinus writes *Explanation of the Apostles' Creed* and *History of the Church*.

401-405 Augustine writes *Against the Letters of Petilian the Donatist* (*Contra litteras Petiliani*). Augustine's polemical writings against Manichees, Donatists and Pelagians dominate subsequent Western Christian thought.

402-405 Augustine writes *To Catholic Members of the Church* (*Ad catholicos fraters*).

403 Augustine preaches in Carthage at intervals.

403 Ecclesiastical trial of Chrysostom, Synod of the Oak, a victory for Theophilis.

405-406 Augustine writes *On the Unity of the Church* (*De unitate ecclesiae*), *To Cresconius, a Donatist Grammarian* (*Ad Cresconium grammaticum partis Donati*).

406-411 Augustine writes *On the Divination of Demons* (*De divinatione daemonum*).

407-417 Augustine begins *On John's Gospel* (*Tractatus in Joh. Ev.*).

408-409 Augustine writes *Six Questions against Pagans* (*Quaestiones expositae contra paganos*).

408-412 Augustine writes *On the Advantage of Fasting* (*De utilitate jejunii*).

410 Rome is sacked by Alaric; Roman refugees flee to Africa. Pelagius passes through Hippo. The arrival of Marcellinus. In ill health, Augustine retires to a villa outside Hippo for the winter.

410 Neoplatonic philosopher Synesius of Cyrene (370-414) becomes bishop of Ptolemais in Libya, wrote *Hymns and Prayers*.

410 Augustine attends the Council of Carthage XV, which withdraws toleration for Donatists. It is a huge conference (*Collatio*) with 285 Donatist and 286 Catholic bishops taking part. Judgment is rendered against the Donatists by the imperial tribune, Marcellinus.

411 Augustine preaches regularly at Carthage, then to Cirta and back to Carthage; Marcellinus reports that Pelagian views are spreading in Carthage.

411-412 Augustine writes *A Summary of the Meeting with the Donatists* (*Breviculus collationis contra Donatistas*), *De gratia Testamenti Novi* and *On Merit and the Remission of Sins* (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione*).

412 Augustine writes *On the Spirit and the Letter* (*De spiritu et littera*).



412 Staggered by the vulnerability of Rome under siege, Augustine begins his *City of God*.

412 Caelestius the Pelagian is condemned at Carthage.

412 Rise of Pelagianism. Pelagius writes *In Favor of Free Will*, against inherited sin, arguing that Adam harmed only himself.

412 Timothy, Archdeacon of Alexandria, writes *The History of Monks in Egypt*.

412 Death of Theophilus of Alexandria.

412-444 Cyril (b. 375) bishop of Alexandria writes *Festal Letters*; commentaries on Pentateuch, Isaiah, Minor Prophets, Songs, Proverbs, John, Luke, Pauline Epistles; *Against Julian*, *Against Nestorius*; *Anathemas*; *Life of Athanasius* and *Catecheses* (attributed to Cyril).

413 Augustine writes *On Faith and Works* (*De fide et operibus*) and *To Paulinus on the Living God* (*De videndo Deo ad Paulinam*).

413 Pelagius writes *Letter to Demetrias*.

413-415 Augustine writes *On Nature and Grace* (*De natura et gratia*), *On the Good of Widowhood* (*De bono viduitatis*) and begins *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*).

415 Augustine writes *To Orosius* (*Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas*), *On the Origin of the Soul* (*De origine animae et de sententia Jacobi ad Hieronymum*), *Tractatus in peistolam Joannis ad Parthos* and *On the Perfection of Human Righteousness* (*De perfectione justitiae hominis*).

415 Platonist philosopher Hypatia is murdered by mob at Alexandria. Cyril resists the Alexandrian civil government of Orestes, as well as the Isis cult at Menouthis.

416 Paulus Orosius arrives in Africa and brings St. Stephen's relics with him.

416 Visigoths in Spain.

416, 418, 419 Pelagius condemned in councils of Carthage.

417 Orosius writes *Historiae*, which attempts a Christian universal history from the flood to 417.

417 Augustine writes *On the Correction of the Donatists* (*De correctione Donatistarum*), Letter 185.

418-420 Augustine writes *On Continence* (*De continentia*).



418-452 Marius Mercator (390-452), African born geographer and theological writer.

418 Case of Apiarius, excommunicated bishop of Sicca, who appeals to Rome on basis of Nicene canons.

419 Council of Carthage assembles to discuss the claim of Rome to have jurisdiction over North Africa.

419-420 Augustine writes *Against Adversaries of the Law and the Prophets* (*Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum*), *On Adulterous Marriages* (*De adulterinis conjugiiis*), *On the Soul and Its Origin* (*De anima et eius origine*), *Questions on the Heptateuch* and *Sayings in the Heptateuch*.

420-428 Monk John Cassian (c. 360-c. 432) reports conversations with leading African desert fathers in his *Conferences*, which encourages the spread of the monastic movement to Gaul, following Egyptian Rule.

420 Augustine writes *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* and finishes *On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*), his principal dogmatic work on the trinitarian mystery in the life of grace.

421 Augustine writes *The Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Love* (*Enchiridion ad Laurentium*).

421 Augustine attends eighteenth council of Carthage and writes *Against Julian* (*Contra Julianum*).

421-424 Augustine writes *On the Care of the Dead* (*De cura pro mortuis gerenda*), *On Eight Questions from Dulcitius* (*De octo Dulcitii quaestionibus*) and *Against Gaudentius* (*Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum episcopum*).

424 Eraclius builds *memoria* to St. Stephen at Hippo.

426 Augustine completes *City of God* (*De civitate Dei*), setting forth the Christian understanding of universal history and human destiny, his apologetic and dogmatic masterpiece.

426 Augustine visits Milevis to regulate the succession of Bishop Severus by Eraclius.

426-427 Augustine writes *On Grace and Free Will* (*De gratia et liberto arbitrio*), *On Admonition and Grace* (*De correptione et gratia*), *Reconsiderations* (*Retractationes*), *Against Maximus* (*Contra Maximinum Arianorum episcopum*)

and *On Heresies, to Quodvultdeum (De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum)*.

427 Nestorian controversy. Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, condemns (against long liturgical tradition) those who call Mary "Theotokos" (God-bearer). Cyril's *Letter to the Monks of Egypt* emphasizes the unity of Christ as divine and human as the justification for Theotokos.

427 Rebellion of Boniface, governor in Africa.

427-437 Capreolus bishop of Carthage.

428-429 Augustine writes *The Predestination of the Saints*; *The Gift of Perseverance*. Prosper of Aquitaine writes *Letter to Augustine*.

429 Death of Aurelius, bishop of Carthage.

429 Vandals invade Africa from Spain, approaching along the coast of Mauritania. Darius comes to Africa to reconcile Boniface and the empress.

429-444 Cyril of Alexandria writes *Commentary on the Psalms, Isaiah, Minor Prophets, Songs, Proverbs, John, Luke; Treasure on the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity; Epistles; Against Diodore and Against Theodore*.

429-430 Augustine writes *Tractatus adversus Judaeos* and *Contra secundam Juliani responsionem opus imperfectum*.

430 Cyril of Alexandria writes *The Twelve Anathemas* against Nestorian bifurcation of the unity of Christ.

430 Defeat of Boniface in Africa. Siege of Hippo by the Vandals, while St. Augustine is still living. Vandals ravage Numidia.

430 Death of Augustine at Hippo (August 28), during siege.

c. 430 Death of Nilus, abbot of monastery of Sinai.

431 Christological controversy between Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria leads to third ecumenical council (Ephesus), convened by Theodosius II, ascribing Theotokos to the Virgin Mary. Nestorius is deposed.

431 Palladius of Helenopolis (363-431) transplants monastic disciplines of the desert fathers to Ireland, as evidenced by oldest missal of the Irish Church (Stowe).

432 Patrick arrives in northern Ireland (allegedly from monastery of Lérins) with Pachomian monastic ideals.

433 Formulary of Reunion between churches of Egypt and Syria.

434 Vincent of Lérins writes *Right Remembering* (*Commonitorium*), which articulates a method for ecumenical teaching.

435 The Theodosian Code prohibits the construction of new synagogues and sacrifices.

439 Vandals under Genseric (Gaeseric) capture Carthage.

444 Death of Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria, succeeded by Dioscorus (444-454).

450 Silko becomes the first Christian king of Ibrim (Nubia).

c. 450 Arnobius the Younger, African monk living in Rome, reports debate within Serapion, a non-Chalcedonian; authorship of commentaries on Psalms and Gospel also attributed to him.

451 Council of Chalcedon, the fourth ecumenical council, approves the Formulary of Renuinon, Leo's Tome and Cyril's *Second Letter to Nestorius*; confesses Christ as one person in two natures, a teaching rejected by so-called monophysite Christians in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, who would come to constitute "Oriental" Orthodox Churches, separating Coptic Christianity from pro-Chalcedonian (Melkite) minority in Egypt.

451ff. Greek viewed by Copts as an alien language after Chalcedon. Coptic preferred in Egyptian hinterland. A genre of literature arises in praise of holy men: Lives of Apa Longinus, John of Lykopolis, Abraham, Moses, Zenobii, and Dioscorus, *A Panegyric on Macarius Bishop of Tkow* (killed defending non-Chalcedonian teaching); Stephen, bishop of Heracleopolis Magna (Hnes), *Panegyric on Apollo of Monastery of Isaac*.

451-454 Dioscorus remains active, despite his deposition as leader of non-Chalcedonian Coptic Church, until his death in 454. Melkites (Chalcedonians) are led by Proterius.

451-642 Long struggle between Coptic (non-Chalcedonian, "Monophysite") and Byzantine (Melkite, Chalcedonian, Catholic) episcopal authorities for church property and prestige, especially in Alexandria. Coptic hegemony prevails in most of Egypt.

453 Death of Quodvultdeus (fl. 430), bishop of Carthage.

c. 454 All of North Africa and Gaul now are occupied by the Franks, Visi-



goths and Vandals (ethnically Gothic, religiously Arian), who persecute the Catholics of Africa.

455 Sack of Rome by the Vandals, who soon occupy all the African provinces and the islands of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica.

455-476 Disintegration of Western Roman Empire.

456 Deogratias is bishop of Carthage.

457-477 Timothy II Aelurus (the Cat) is patriarch of Alexandria.

459-475 Timothy II banished by Leo I to Gangra, where Dioscorus had languished. He writes seventeen *Responsa Canonica* on questions of marriage and sacraments, and *Against Chalcedon*.

460-481 Timothy the Wobble Hat as ambivalent Melkite patriarch of Alexandria.

466 Death of Shenute of Atripe. His successor Besa (Visa, bishop of Athribis) writes *Life of Shenute* in Sahidic, as well as *Letters* and *Sermons*.

468 Vandals defeat the imperial fleet.

477 Death of Genseric (Gaiseric).

477-489 Peter III (Mongas, the Stammerer) is patriarch of Alexandria (non-Chalcedonian), but forced underground.

483-484 Another outbreak of Vandal persecutions of Orthodox Christians in North Africa.

484 Catholic bishop Vigilius of Thapsus called before Huneric, writes *Dialogue* (*Dialogus contra arrianos*) and *Against Eutyches* (*Contra Eutychetem*), defending Chalcedon against Arian and Monophysite arguments.

484 Death of Huneric, king of the Vandals, who is succeeded by Thrasmund.

484 Acacian Schism. Failure of talks between Catholics and Vandals, flight of Catholic leadership.

484-489 Victor of Vita, priest of the church of Carthage, writes his *Historica persecutionis Africanae provinciae* (*History of the Persecution in the Province of Africa*).

488 Death of John, monk of Maiuma larva near Gaza, author of *Plerophoriai*.

c. 490 Date of the oldest Christian icons that survive from Egypt.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 500-599

**500s** Monasteries in Alexandria identified by milestones on the way from the city: Pempton (fifth mile), Ennaton (ninth mile), Dekaton (tenth), Oktokaidekaton (eighteenth mile), Eikoston (twentieth); Monastery of St. Jeremiah at Saqqara. *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*) compiled at Wadi al-Natrun. Ghanaian empire most important power in West Africa.

**c. 500** Definitive redaction and canon closure of the Babylonian Talmud, commenting on the Mishnah and Gamara as minutes of rabbinic disputes, revealing typological similarities between Jewish and Christian exegesis of sacred texts.

**505** Death of Eugenius, bishop of Carthage.

**512** Severus (b. 465) consecrated bishop of Antioch (512-538), author of numerous *Homilies* and *Letters*. He was the exegetical and theological leader of non-Chalcedonians of Egypt.

**512-532** Fulgentius (Fulgence), bishop of Ruspe (467-532), writes his *Letters*, *The Rule of Faith*, *Synodal Letter of Fulgence of Ruspe and Other African Bishops*, to John and Venerius, answers semi-Pelagian views.

**516** Dioscorus II becomes Coptic patriarch of Alexandria.

**517-535** Timothy III appointed Coptic patriarch of Alexandria.

**518** Anti-Chalcedonian Julian of Halicarnassus is exiled to Egypt.

**518-538** Bishop Severus of Antioch has lengthy exile to Sakha, Egypt. He teaches in non-Chalcedonian monasteries in Egypt.

**519** End of Acacian Schism and acceptance of Chalcedon in the East, excepting "Monophysites," who are still persecuted in Egypt and throughout North Africa. The official shunning of Coptic language and intellectual tradition by Byzantines.

**520-547** Ferrandus, disciple of Fulgentius, is deacon of the church of Carthage.

**522** Ethiopian Christian forces attack the capital Zatar but are driven back by the Himyarite army. Dhu Nuwas conducts a campaign against the Christians of Najran. He is killed in battle in 525.



523 Vandal king Thrasamund dies.

525 King Kaleb of Aksum conquers Yemen in southern Arabia. He builds many churches.

527-565 Era of Justinian the Great, Byzantine emperor. Code of Justinian is written. Imperial laws constrain heretics, Jews and pagans.

529 Benedict of Nursia (480-547) founds monasteries at Montecassino and Subiaco in the Italian Aniene Valley on Pachomian lines of discipline, continuing many patterns of African monasticism through the Benedictine Rule.

530 Death of Vandal king Hilderic.

532 Death of Fulgentius of Ruspe.

533 Byzantine General Belisarius uproots Vandals from North Africa and reconquers Egypt, restoring the empire almost to its former dimensions, from Mauretania to Armenia, building many fortresses and basilicas in Africa. Now Byzantine forms of Christian architecture appear throughout North Africa.

534 Death of Vandal king Gelimer.

536-566 Anti-Chalcedonian Theodosius I, patriarch of Alexandria, author of *Homilies*.

536-567 Justinian establishes Chalcedonian episcopal hierarchy in Alexandria (until rise of Islam). He built Angelion Church in Serapium area (destroyed in tenth century), but the patriarch Theodosius remained largely physically removed from Alexandria in perpetual exile.

538-540 Chalcedonian patriarch Paul Tabennesiota, succeeded by Zoilus in 540, Apollinaris in 551, John in 570.

540 Three Christian kingdoms now lie south of Egypt: Nobatae (Faras), Makuria (Dongola), Alwa (Soba).

541 Julian becomes evangelist of Nubia. Theodore becomes bishop of Nile island of Philae in Nobatae.

542 King of Nobatae baptized.

543 Edict against Origenism.

544 Three Chapters controversy enflames conflicts between Copts and other Orthodox Christians.



546 Justinian condemns the Three Chapters; the first move to reconciliation with Monophysites.

547-565 Construction of St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai.

c. 550 Cassiodorus founds the monastery Vivarium in Calabria in southern Italy, with scriptorium out of which many texts originally written in Africa and Asia became first known to Europeans and accessible to premedieval monastic libraries, conveying much of the fourth-century African intellectual tradition to sixth century Europe for the first time.

552 Death of Verecundus of Iunca in Byzacena.

553 Fifth ecumenical council, Second Council of Constantinople, condemns Three Chapters.

560-570 Primasius, bishop of Hadrumetum, author of *Commentary on the Apocalypse* and *Letters*.

c. 563 Columba's (c. 521-597) mission to Iona begins, bringing African forms of penitential discipline to Scots.

564-577 Non-Chalcedonian Paul of Antioch is patriarch of Alexandria.

567 Philosopher John Philoponos attempts an Aristotelian interpretation of the Trinity, resisted by most Copts.

567-576 Peter IV is patriarch of Alexandria. Over six hundred Coptic monasteries flourish in Egypt.

570s Chalcedonians send mission to the kingdom of Makurrah.

576-605 Damian, patriarch of Alexandria, author of *Synodicon*, defending counter-Chalcedonian Christology.

578-615 Peripatetic ascetic John Moschus, accompanied by Sophronius (550-638) in Alexandria and Sinai, writes *Pratum spirituale*, *Life of John the Almsgiver* and *Christmas Sermon*. Sophronius is elected patriarch of Jerusalem (634-638). His *Synodical Letter* explains monophysite teaching in Egypt and Palestine.

580 Longinus evangelizes Soba in Alwa (Alodia), near the confluence of Blue and White Nile.

585 Columbanus (545-615) moves from Ireland to Gaul and founds the monastery of Luxeuil, bringing African penitential tradition in a great circle

back to Europe from Ireland to serve Europe's early medieval formation.

595 Heraclius the elder, leading general of the Emperor Maurice, becomes ex-arch of Carthage. He is the father of Byzantine emperor Heraclius the younger.

598 Birth of Samuel, who headed Monastery Dair Anba Samuel at al-Qalamun in the western Egyptian desert.

590-604 Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) brings Augustinian theology to normative status in the West. He inaugurates mission to England.

### AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 600-699

600s Ethiopic kingdom remains linked with Coptic patriarchate. The metropolitan is chosen by the patriarch of Alexandria and builds monolithic churches of Lalibela.

600s Coptic writings of Bishop Damianus of Alexandria (578-605)—*Synodical Letter* and *Homily on the Incarnation*—stimulated school of Coptic exegetes: Constantine of Assiut (Siout), *Encomia of Athanasius*; Rufus of Shotep, Gospel commentaries; John of Shmun on Mark and Antony; John, Bishop of Paralos, countering apocryphal literature similar to Nag Hammadi.

605-616 Anastasius is patriarch of Alexandria.

610-641 Lengthy reign of Heraclius the younger, emperor of the Christian orient, who asserts Byzantine interests in Egypt.

614 Irish monk Columbanus resides at Bobbio in Italy.

616-623 Andronicus is patriarch of Alexandria.

619-629 Persian occupation of Egypt ends Byzantine rule.

622 The Hejira, Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina, begins the Islamic era. The first year in Muslim calendar, 1 A.H. = Anno Hegirae.

622-624 Muhammad attempts to convert the ten thousand Jews of Medina. Disappointed, he changes direction of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca. He deports or annihilates the Jewish tribes of Arabia.

622-680 Monothelite controversy.

623-662 Benjamin I, patriarch of Alexandria, author of *Easter Epistles* and *Homily on Cana Wedding*, spends ten years in exile under Heraclius and three under the Muslims.

- 625 Muhammad begins dictating Qur'an to a scribe.
- 629 Muhammad captures Mecca.
- 629-642 Byzantine recovery of Egypt.
- 630 Death of Stephen of Alexandria, philosopher-alchemist-astronomer, commentator on Aristotle.
- 631-635 Maximus the Confessor, residing in Carthage as refugee from Palestine due to Persian invasion, writes on monothelitism.
- 631-642 Emperor Heraclius sends Cyrus as pro-Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria and governor of Egypt, attempting to bring Copts into Melkite church.
- 632 Death of Muhammad at Medina; Caliph Abu Bakr begins conquest of Palestine.
- 634 *Teachings of Jacob* (anonymous) written in Carthage.
- 634 Church of Saints Cyrus and John first built in Babylon, Old Cairo (now St. Barbara).
- 634-642 Expansion of Islam in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. The majority populations of Jews and Christians come under Arab rule.
- 636 Nestorian form of Christianity spreads from Near East to China, attested in inscription at Sianfu, China.
- 638 Ps.-Shenute's *Vision* prophesies calamities; falsely attributed to Shenute of Atripe.
- 639 Arab conquest of Egypt begins with the fall of Pelusium.
- 639-649 John Climacus (b. 570) abbot of Sinai, author of *The Ladder*.
- c. 640 Coptic *Homily on the Child Saints of Babylon* (anonymous).
- 641 Fall of Fort Babylon, Old Cairo, to Arabs.
- 642 Fall of Alexandria. The destruction of the library of Alexandria is witnessed by John of Nikiu, author of the universal history, *Chronicle*, which survived only in Ethiopic, a key source for the Arab conquest and end of Byzantine rule in Egypt.
- 643-656 Arab conquest of Cyrenaica during the Caliphate of Uthman. Arabs besiege Tripoli, lay waste to Sabratha and invade eastern Fezzan. The canonical compilation of the Qur'an takes place.



646 African Exarch Gregory declares himself Roman Emperor, although he remains in Africa. He moves his capital to Sufetula (Sbeitla).

646 Victor becomes bishop of Carthage.

646 Arabs burn the cathedral of St. Mark in Alexandria.

647 Arab conquest of portions of the Maghreb. Gregory dies when defeated outside Sufetula.

c. 650 Thalassius of Libya, abbot of monastery in the Libyan desert and author of *Maxims*, befriends Maximus the Confessor.

650s Irish ornamentation characterized by interlacing motif found frequently in Coptic art. Coptic influence spreads through monks who copied manuscripts in the scriptoria.

652 Christian Nubians and Arabs in Egypt agree that Aswan on Nile should mark the southern limit of Arab expansion.

c. 660 Martyrdom of Sham' Allah, a Christian Arab of Sinai.

661-750 Umayyad Caliphate; Muslims divide into Sunni (orthodox) and Shia, followers of the caliph Ali.

662 Maximus the Confessor tried, tortured and died in exile after the mutilation of his tongue and his right hand, the parts of his body with which he had opposed non-Chalcedonian Christology in his testimony in Africa.

662-680 Agathon, patriarch of Alexandria during Arab conquest, ransomed captive slaves. He is the author of *Panegyric on Benjamin*.

669 Campaign of Okba, capture of Tripolitania and Byzacena by the Arabs. The foundation of Arab city of Kairouan in Tunisia, a leading intellectual center for early Islamic law.

680-681 Third Council of Constantinople, sixth ecumenical council, begun under Constantine IV, completed by the synod in Trullo (692) under Justinian II, condemns monothelism and monoenergism, confirming that in Christ are two inseparable wills and two inseparable energies, reemphasizing Chalcedonian Christology.

680-689 John III (John of Samanud), patriarch of Alexandria, answers *Questions of Theodore*.

680-700 Monks of Africa flee to Gaul and Ireland amid Arab conquest of Africa.

689-692 Coptic *Life of Isaac of Rakoti*, patriarch of Alexandria.

690 Anastasius of Sinai (d. c. 700) flees Cyprus for Sinai (under John Climacus), writes *Guide (Viae dux)*, *Questions to Antiochus Dux*, *Narratives*, *Dialogue Against the Jews* and martyrdom narratives.

690-692 Isaac is patriarch of Alexandria. Menas, bishop of Nikiu, writes *Life of Patriarch Isaac*.

690-715 Coptic eschatology amid Arab rule: Ps.-Athanasius, *Apocalypse*.

692-700 Simon I is patriarch of Alexandria.

695-698 Hassan captures Carthage. The Arabs are defeated by Al-Kahena, queen of the Aures. Carthage is recaptured by the Byzantines. Hassan retreats to Cyrenaica. Carthage is reconquered by Arabs who rule Ifriqiya.

late 600s Menas, monk of Akhmim, remained at Ashmunayn monastery until captured by Arabs, martyred.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 700-799

700 Adamnan, abbot of Iona, writes that Mark's body was buried in the east part of altar of church of St. Mark in Alexandria with identifying marble monument.

708 Byzantium's last outpost in Africa falls to the Arabs. The conquest of Spain lies ahead. By 711 the Arabs are approaching central Gaul.

c. 713-724 Berlin Papyrus 10677 originates from Egypt, on Arab rule.

714 Use of Coptic language made illegal. Arabic is imposed. Taxation is increased on Dhimmis (non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state).

720 Death of Zacharias, bishop of Shkow (Sakha), author of *Homilies* on the Holy Family in Egypt and on penitence, *Lives* of John Colobos and his teachers at Scetis, Abraham and George.

730-742 Theodore is patriarch of Alexandria.

731 Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* echoes themes of many earlier African voices (Origen, Pachomius, Augustine, Cyril) long buried in medieval European texts.

735 Death of Bede, birth of Alcuin.

743 John of Damascus (c. 645-c. 749) writes orthodox systematic theology catenae relying on numerous Egyptian and African sources, *The Source of Knowledge; John of Damascus on Islam (Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani)*; *On the Divine Images*.

743 Church of Saint Shenute of Old Cairo is first mentioned as the place where Kha'il I, patriarch of Alexandria (743-767), was elected.

743-767 Mikhail, Coptic patriarch; conversion of 24,000 Christians to Islam.

745 Cyriacus (or Kyriakos), king of Dongola, marches to Cairo to free the Copt Patriarch Mikhail.

767-776 Menas is patriarch of Alexandria.

780s Arabic is the only recognized language in Egypt. This results in the Arabization of Coptic.

789-808 Coptic martyrdom narratives abound, some for allegedly "insulting the Prophet."

787 Second Council of Nicaea confirms the veneration of icons.

798 Aengus (Oengus) the anchorite writes *On Feasts (Festilogium de Sancti Aengus)*, recording the saints of Ireland, some having genealogical traces of Egyptian names; evidence of links between Egyptian Bawit monastery and Irish Jouarre monastery, Coptic and Irish illuminations of manuscripts.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 800-899

800s Christian empire in Ethiopia continues after the decline of Aksum. Arab and Persian merchants explore East African coast with trading stations at Malindi, Mombasa, Kilwa and Mogadishu.

800-1000 Sahadic Lives of Samuel of Qalamun, Fayyum, and Pisentius of Qift, near Thebes, (both lived during Arab conquest), seeking to halt Christian assimilation; demonstrates survival of Coptic Christian identity.

800-1000 Ethiopic *Synaxary*.

813 Theophanes writes *Chronicle* (covers years 602-813).

819-830 James is patriarch of Alexandria.



859 Shenute I, elected patriarch of Alexandria (859-880) at Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Old Cairo.

863-867 Photian Schism between patriarch Photius of Constantinople and Pope Nicolas I.

868-905 Tulunid caliphs rule.

869 Venetian Bernard the Wise reports concerning monastery of St. Mark, outside the eastern gate of Alexandria, where Mark's body formerly reposed, stolen in 828 by Venetians (a bone returned 1968).

880-907 Kha'il III is patriarch of Alexandria.

c. 885 Stephen the Theban writes *Logos Asketikos* (*Ascetic Sermon*), *Entolai* and *Diataxis*; Arabic texts survive at St. Saba.

## AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY 900-999

900s Coptic Synaxarial system orders calendar of Egyptian saints.

900s Sawirus (Severus) Ibn al-Muqaffa, bishop of al-Ashmuayn (Ushmanain), writes twenty-six books of history and theology in Arabic, especially, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. Kasar Hausa (Hausaland), in the lower Niger river in West Africa, prospers, as does Igbo-Ukwu culture in eastern Nigeria.

910-920 Gabriel I is patriarch of Alexandria.

912 Great Church of Alexandria is burned.

920-932 Cosmas III is patriarch of Alexandria.

932-952 Macarius I is patriarch of Alexandria.

935-960 Ikhshidid caliphs rule.

956-974 Menas II is patriarch of Alexandria.

969 Al-Azhar mosque built in Cairo, new capital of Fatimid caliph al-Moizz.

969-1171 Fatimid caliphs rule.

975-978 Abraham is patriarch of Alexandria.

979-1003 Philotheus is patriarch of Alexandria.

982-1002 Bishop Solomon of Mount Sinai flourishes.

996-1021 Persecution of Coptic Church of Egypt continues under Caliph

el-Hakim.

997 Abu al-Fadl Isa ibn Nasturus, (Christian vizier of Caliph a-Aziz) executed.

1000 Ps.-Daniel, Coptic Daniel, Apocalypse on Daniel 7.

1000 First millennium C.E. ends under Fatimid rule of al-Hakim; Philotheos is patriarch of Alexandria (979-1003).

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