

Christianity and Islam and Change in African Society and Religion

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IN many independent African countries the role of Christianity and Islam as instruments of political and social change has been subjected to severe scrutiny by many nationalists who have looked upon them as subversive of African traditions and society during the colonial era. Their prejudices have caused them to regard these religions as liabilities, rather than assets, to Africa. Since Christianity and Islam had been in competition with each other in the pre-independence period, their ability to adapt themselves to the prevalent political changes in the independent states will determine, to a large extent, whether they will continue to be accepted in the society or whether either of them will lose its pre-eminent position to the other.

In several instances, Islam, because of its apparent homogeneity has been more of a unifying factor in some African states than Christianity. For instance, although Gambia is made up of various ethnic groups, yet, until the 1960's, this did not raise any serious political issues mainly because Islam, long established in the country, had given the people a sense of common identity.¹ It has also constituted a major unifying force in such purely Islamic states as Mauritania and Chad. At other times it has been, as in the Sudan, a divisive force between the component parts.²

Christianity and Islam have influenced not only African society and religion but also each other and in places where they exist side by side they have worked out a *Mondus Vivendi*, with each doing all it can to maintain the harmony which exists between them. For instance, in Western Nigeria, Muslims and Christians attend each other's festivals and this tendency has resulted in the relaxation of orthodoxy in the two religions. However there has been little direct conversion on either side. Geoffrey Parrinder has noted that "there is a good deal more tolerance between Christians and Muslims in West Africa than has been seen in other countries and at other periods in the history of the two religions."³

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1. Harry A. Gailey Jr.—*A History of the Gambia*, pp. 201-203.
 2. The revolt of Southern Sudan which began in 1955 was not entirely attributable to religious differences whereby the North and Central Sudan are Arab and Islamic while the South had reposed its trust in the British administrator and, to a large extent, the Christian Missionary. Part of the cause can be found in the ethnic, social and economic differences between the North and the South and in the suspicion which the Southerner has of the Northerner who had come South as ruler, slave trader, merchant, or more recently as missionary. See Colin Legum (Ed)—*Africa*, London 1965 pp. 91—102.
 3. Geoffrey Parrinder—*West African Religion*, London 1961 p. 190.

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In the Twentieth Century, Islam, unlike Christianity, has shed most of its stigma as the conqueror's religion. Some argue that, in the context of present day Africa, Christianity is facing a crisis and that its future is in doubt since it has been very much identified with the European ruling caste.⁴ There are also those who contend that Christianity has so entrenched itself in Africa that the end of colonialism cannot make any difference to its assured place in the society. Moreover a revival in its favour is bound to be experienced in the future after the present retreat in the face of Islamic evangelism which is the order of the day in several African countries.

In several ways the contacts between Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and Africa, on the other, show similar characteristics. Both religions have been associated with Africa for many centuries. Both of them were born in the East where other religions were already in existence. Consequently, they were naturally influenced by these. As new religions they often assailed the traditional religion in vogue in those parts of Africa where they were planted. Since religion was the basis of African culture, law and ethics, any attack on it meant also an attack on the main foundation of African social order. They also introduced new economic, legal and ethical concepts which had made them major agencies of acculturation in Africa. Christianity, as a result of its earlier origin and expansion in the Mediterranean region, eventually became the first of the two main religions to be introduced into Africa. North Africa, as part of the Roman Empire, came under Christian influence at an early date. Towards the end of the fourth Century A.D. St. Augustine, consecrated bishop of Hippo in 395 A.D. was already striving to prop up the Christian faith in this part of the Empire which was in political disarray.⁵ It is also on record that Christianity was planted in Ethiopia by 330⁶ A.D. although it was later swept away in the path of the all-conquering Islam.

When the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam, died in 632 A.D. his religion was confined to the Arabian desert. By 650 A.D. his followers had overrun Syria and Egypt which had belonged to the Byzantine Empire. By 750 A.D. Muslims had overrun not only the whole of North Africa but also Spain and parts of Asia. In North Africa, Christianity never recovered from this blow until the Nineteenth Century when the French, after the conquest of Algeria, attempted to reintroduce it, at least as the religion of the European

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4. Lord Salisbury in an address to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel declared that it was difficult to persuade other peoples that the Missionary was not an instrument of the secular government. Norman Daniel—*Islam, Europe and Empire*, University of Edinburgh Press 1966. p. 312.
 5. A readable account of the life and activities of St. Augustine in North Africa can be found in Sir Ernest Barker's *Introduction to the City of God*, Vol. 1. Everyman's Library. London 1957.
 6. Confusion about the foundation of the Church in Abyssinia has often been caused by the fact that the term Ethiopia was often used by classical writers to indicate the whole of East Africa, south of Libya, and sometimes in a narrower sense to denote "Nubian Kingdoms with a derived Egyptian culture." Trimmingham mentions the despatch of Frumentius consecrated Bishop between A.D. 341 and 346 to Axum to supervise the Christians gathered there. J. S. Trimmingham—*Islam in Ethiopia*, O. U. P. 1952 pp. 38 & 39 and footnote.

conquerors.⁷ Contact between Islam and Africa continued to be maintained henceforth. Gradually, through the work of Berber merchants, the Maurabitan and Islamic missionaries, Islam found its way into the Sudan. Most of the Sudanese Kingdoms which flourished in the Middle Ages were associated with Islam. By the Eleventh Century it had been introduced into the Negro Kingdom of Kanem while it reached Kano in the early part of the Fourteenth Century. Although it was widespread in several parts of Africa before European colonisation yet there were such areas as Eastern Nigeria, parts of the West Coast, Central and South Africa which were devoid of any Islamic influences at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

As a result of the fact that, before European colonisation, Islam was spread primarily by political or military conquest it became in essence the religion of the ruling caste and often fought a long duel with traditional religion for the possession of men's souls. Its tremendous expansion in Africa since the Nineteenth Century had been due mainly to the rise of more militant Islamic sects and a corresponding string of Jihads, and the impetus given to its spread by the establishment of European rule in various parts of the continent. For instance, in discussing the spread of Islam in Senegal, Paul Marty stated that "through our administration, together with the facilities for communication now open to everyone, we have done more during this last half century for the diffusion of Islam than its marabouts accomplished in three hundred years."⁸

The clash between European powers and African principalities which occurred during this period and which resulted in the defeat of the latter, in the weakening of traditional authority and in the destruction of indigenous cults, by and large, provided the necessary fertile ground for Islamic evangelism. Moreover, the spread of trade connections and freedom of movement enabled Islamic traders, who were at times evangelists, to operate farther afield and to win converts in non-Muslim areas. In Senegal and Gambia many young men who had left their villages to work in the towns have ended up by becoming Muslims through the influence of Muslim teachers.

When African communities were brought face to face with Christianity and Islam there has been the tendency for some of them to choose the latter since they consider that it approximates to their traditions and culture. In parts of Sierra Leone and South-Western Nigeria where the two religions have been in competition the latter has had very striking successes.

European explorers, merchants and missionaries who began visiting the West Coast of Africa in the Fifteenth Century made several attempts to establish Christianity in this region. The visit of John Afonso d'Aveiro to Benin in 1485 brought about extensive contacts with the Portuguese which led eventually to the establishment of a short-lived Christian church in Benin. Similarly, the Portuguese attempts to establish Christianity in the Congo in the Sixteenth Century foundered partly through lack of spiritual support from the indigenous inhabitants. But part of this failure was attributable to the moral weakness of the Portuguese priests themselves who "succumbed to the moral and physical

7. C. P. Groves—*The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. III, London 1964 p. 208.

8. P Marty—*Etude Sur L'Islam au Senegal*, 1917 ii 374.

climate of the capital, and found the buying and selling of slaves, in some cases with funds given them by Afonso, more lucrative..... Each set himself up in private quarters, one with an African mistress by whom he had a child. Others complained about the conditions surrounding them and demanded to be sent home, and only a few remained in the Congo where the last member died in 1532.”⁹ Some historians contend that the period between the Fifteenth and Eighteenth Centuries was that of the merchant adventurers who had no incentive to penetrate the interior of Africa since Africans brought the slaves to their coastal “factories”. At the coast the merchants and other Europeans confined themselves to their settlements and endeavoured to spread Christianity among the adjacent indigenous inhabitants but “the accompanying missionary work, tied to the aims of the settlements which sought to attach the convert to an alien milieu, died of the vices of the parent society.”¹⁰

With the resurgence of imperialism in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, European powers carved out colonies for themselves in Africa. The Christian missionary followed closely in the wake of the colonial government and, whether the sword followed the Bible or vice versa, there was no doubt that sometimes these missionaries even donned their martial uniform and fought side by side with the European forces to subjugate the indigenous population.¹¹ From their pulpits the missionaries taught the dangers of disobedience to the established powers and became the “guardians” of the truth. With the assistance, or connivance, of the colonial governments, they carried all before them and sought to eliminate every vestige of traditional culture in order to ensure the supremacy of Christianity. It is doubtful whether these missionaries could have achieved as much as they did if the European powers who had subdued the Africans had not continued, in many places to maintain unpopular missions by force. Consequently the missionaries came to be identified with the colonial governments, and the failings of the latter were attributed to the former.

The European conquest of the Islamic parts of the continent resulted not only in the subjection of Muslim communities to European rule but also in exposing them to Christian culture especially with the introduction of school, of the Western pattern. Shortly after, these communities conditioned themselves to the new order and, in several places, thrived in it. For instance Parrinder argues that the religious neutrality maintained by European (and Christian) powers in their colonies had often operated to the advantage of Islam.¹² In Northern Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim, Islam has welcomed this neutrality which has enabled it to win more converts than Christianity in the non-Muslim areas.

9. James Duffy—*Portuguese Africa*, O.U.P. 1961. pp. 13—14.

10. Trimingham—*A History of Islam in West Africa*, p. 221.

11. Sometimes the military experience of missionaries was also used in the defence of one African kingdom against another. For instance, in the Dahomean invasion of Abeokuta on March 3, 1851, Bowen of the Baptist Mission “employed his military training to direct and encourage the Egba fighters upon the walls.” while the fortification of the town itself was done under the direction of missionary military expertise. S.O. Biobaku—*The Egba and their Neighbours*. O.U.P. 1957 Ch. IV.

12. Geoffrey Parrinder—op cit p. 191.

An analysis of Islam and African religions indicates that they are compatible in certain respects while they hold opposing views in others. For instance Islam retains the tradition of sacrifice and communion evident in African traditional religions. Besides, the belief, that there is no God but Allah, found in Islam, is also echoed in the African belief in a supreme God. John C. Messenger, in his work on religious acculturation among the Ibibio people of South-Eastern Nigeria discovered that "the central theme of Anang religion is the worship of an all-powerful deity (Abasi) who rules over the physical universe, other supernatural entities of lesser stature, and mankind. He is of gigantic proportions, invisible to human eyes, and he lives alone in a compound deep in the sky."¹³ However, while traditional religions retain lesser and more local deities, Islam rejects these and insists on their being swept away in order that a direct awareness of the universal God will be brought home to the unbelievers. Consequently, its monotheistic and anti-idolatrous doctrine finds little place in traditional African religions.

The direct approach of Africans to their local family deities is similar to the insistence of Islam on direct approach to God, although in the traditional worship of the great and powerful gods of Ali (Earth) and Sun, the approach is through priests who are believed to be the only links between these gods and men.

They also hold similar views with regard to death and after life. African traditional religions believe in life after death which, they hold, goes on in much the same way as on earth. Therefore, death becomes, not a complete break with the past, but a transition which both follows and precedes birth. Consequently, Africans pay much respect to their ancestors and their influence on the living, and also believe in reincarnation. However, while Islam believes in life after death, it has introduced new teachings about heaven and hell and the terrible day of judgement which have cut a vital link in the chain of the relationship between Africans and their ancestors and have thereby contributed to the weakening of family life in traditional African society.

Apart from its dislike of idols, Islam has also been antagonistic to secret societies which in traditional societies have been not only the upholders of traditional law and morality but also the means of holding the group together. In his study of the "Ogboni" secret society in Yorubaland, Peter Norton—Williams stated that apart from their judicial functions and their worship and control of the sanctions of the Earth as a spirit, the members of this society were also, in parts of Yorubaland, kingmakers who could compel an Oba (King) to commit suicide if he embarked on a course of action of which they disapproved.¹⁴

Islam disapproves of secret societies because it regards them as a threat to its own existence, and appears to be in competition with them in the ordering of the legal, ecclesiastical and political life of the society. But in some areas Muslims have maintained an ambivalent attitude towards secret societies,

13. William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits (ED)—*Continuity and change in African Cultures*, University of Chicago Press 1959 p. 280.

14. *Africa (Journal of the International African Institute)*, Vol. XXX 1960 pp. 362—374.

divination and witchcraft. For instance, some tend to tolerate the functions of secret societies if they ensure protection against witchcraft. Traditional religions and Islam also have recourse to charms which they regard as protection for warriors, and as insurance against thieves, sickness and other evils. Amulets which contain Qur'anic verses and are worn extensively by Muslims have become interwoven with the whole fabric of West African Islam.

Islam has introduced innovations alien to African religions. Muhammed has no corresponding figure in traditional religions while pilgrimage, fasting and almsgiving are also foreign to these religions. There has also been the introduction of Islamic laws and systems of justice and Islamic culture which have affected profoundly traditional religions and society in areas of Islamic influence. Moreover one should not overlook the fact that orthodox Islamic sects and reformers have been very intolerant of certain aspects of traditional religion and social organisation.

It is misleading to imagine that Islam always had its way whenever it was confronted with traditional religions or that it was not affected in any way by African culture and religions themselves. For instance Blyden was quoted as saying that "the Oriental aspect of Islam has become largely modified in Negroland not as is too generally supposed by a degrading compromise with the pagan superstitions but by shaping many of its traditional customs to suit the milder and more conciliatory disposition of the Negro".¹⁵ In discussing the interaction of Islam and traditional religion in Hausaland, Joseph Greenberg stated that "amalgamation of Mohammedan and aboriginal belief has thus occurred as the end product of a process in which the native learned men known as Malams have adapted what they found in sacred texts to the native situation retaining much of the pagan culture the same time by fitting into a Moslem framework"¹⁶ In assessing the effect of Islam on African societies one is apt to look upon the West and Central Sudanese kingdoms and states of the Medieval and early Modern periods as thoroughly Islamised states. This was not strictly accurate for although these states had a veneer of Islamic civilization and Islam was the religion of the ruling class yet they were founded on the basis of indigenous civilization. Islamic institutions were incorporated into the fabric of their indigenous culture and were modified by the latter.¹⁷

In the Nineteenth Century one of the revolutionary ideas introduced by Islam into the African scene was the concept of theocratic states in which all the members of the state adhered to one common religion.¹⁸ The rulers in such states based their claim to govern upon a mandate from God and consequently endeavoured to rule according to the laws of God as contained in the Qur'an. But some of these attempts collapsed not primarily because of European conquest but because of certain centrifugal forces brought about by the failure of the rulers to anchor their states on indigenous institutions.

15. Norman Daniel—*Islam, Europe and Empire*. p. 313.

16. Simon and Phoebe Ottenberg (Ed)—*Cultures and Societies of Africa*, N. Y. 1960 p. 478.

17. For a description of the pageantry and religion of the Ghana Empire see quotation from Al-Bakri in Trimingham — *History of Islam in West Africa*, pp. 52—54.

18. Thomas Hodgkin and Ruth Schachter 'French-speaking West Africa in Transition' *International Conciliation*, May, 1960 p. 380.

In spite of the many changes brought about by Islam in African society and religions these seem insignificant when compared with the revolutionary changes brought by Christianity in every facet of African life not only as a result of what Christianity itself stands for but also because of the manner in which it was introduced into Africa. It set out to destroy completely African culture and to replace it with its own values and ethics. It was intolerant of everything supposedly unchristian — even names, costume, songs, music, dance and art were specifically condemned.¹⁹ If it had succeeded in eliminating African culture its future would have been quite different from what it is today. It failed and consequently its position has shifted from aggressive assertiveness to that of defence under the assault of African nationalism and the rediscovery of African culture. From its inception, Christianity arrogated to itself the task of saving the African's soul through saving his body. It claimed to be the upholder of all truth. It taught men what to believe and dictated how the Africans would live their lives in order to conform to Christian principles. Most of the missionaries themselves dished out their do's and dont's with all traces of paternalism.

There was really no reason according to some thinkers why Christianity should not have succeeded in the task which it set itself. It was the religion of the European ruling class. It was dynamic and was tied to Western Culture. Moreover it was backed by the authority of the colonial government²⁰ and it controlled the schools where the younger generations of Africans were taught. It taught belief in one God and the Trinity to the exclusion of everything else, and consequently exercised enormous influence in the overthrow of indigenous local deities. In the early days of Christianity in Africa a true test of the converts' devotion to the new religion was the burning in public of their idols and relics which formed the paraphernalia of their traditional religions.

Christianity has condemned human sacrifice and other practices abhorrent to it. It has assailed ancestor cult and had, in Christian homes, ended one of the pillars of African society and philosophy. It has also assailed the position of the chiefs in traditional society. Thus the chief, if he is a Christian, must surrender his traditional authority as a religious head. In order to conform to Christian teachings the chief has sometimes found it necessary to change his traditional religious staff and symbols for those that either have no images at all or have the image of the cross.²¹

19. Otonti Nduka has reviewed the Christian missionary impact on Nigerian culture in his book—*Western Education and the Nigerian Cultural Background*, O. U. P. 1964 Ch. II pp 10—20.

20. In discussing the support which the colonial government gave to the missionaries Lugard declared that "the difficulty, lies in the fact that if the advent of missions is authorized by the Government, it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion in the minds of the people that they are under the special aegis of Government. The Missions would not withdraw at the request of the paramount chief, as they would have been compelled to do before the advent of British administration, and would look to the Government for protection. In a country where it is of vital importance to maintain the prestige of Europeans, insults to missionaries must of necessity be resented by the Government." Cmd 468. Lugard Report on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria, and Administration, 1912—1919. para 187 p. 67.

21. Geoffrey Parrinder—op. cit. p. 189.

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It has assailed polygamy and African systems of marriage. Among the rising middle class monogamy is becoming popular. It is however disputable whether this new trend is due entirely to Christian teachings or to changes in the economic and social pattern, in the past few decades. It has also weakened the religious and social stand of traditional priests even though it has not succeeded in eliminating their influence altogether. Nor has it succeeded in destroying the magical side of traditional religion, since even professing Christians have been known to consult diviners and to wear charms for protection against certain evils.

Many African nationalists accuse Christianity of being itself tainted with magical practices. They give as an example the celebration of the Mass with candles, incense etc, and the belief in transubstantiation. Similarly they argue, as in the words of Parrinder, that the "so-called magical sixth and seventh books of Moses — vast frauds invented by European charlatans, set at exorbitant prices" have vied with the Ifa magical system in popular esteem.²²

There have been Christian teachings, such as those about original sin and the forgiving nature of Almighty God, which have been disruptive of African society in an entirely negative way. In traditional society anyone who contravened the laws of the society, or the gods, was certain to be punished. This certainly minimised crimes in African society. An offender could easily be located by a threat of giving him an oath which was believed capable of killing him if he lied. Christianity taught that all men are sinners and that God is willing to forgive all those who truly repent. On certain days the priests hear confessions and pronounce absolution even where they hardly understand the language spoken. Many young men and women have capitalised on God's forgiveness and have become immoral in their daily lives. Quite often one hears the heartrending reproach of elders in traditional society who contend that crime is on the increase, that the society is disintegrating and that children no longer respect their elders or carry out their responsibility to their family and community.

In Eastern Nigeria, for instance, the success of Christianity has been so spectacular that in many respects the traditional culture has become so blurred as to be beyond recognition. This success is partly because Christianity has not been in competition with Islam or any other major religion in this area and partly because the people have shown themselves most receptive to change.²³ In their all-out drive to acquire the secrets of the power of the white man, many Eastern Nigerians have discarded most of their traditional beliefs and rituals especially where these could be demonstrated to be "inferior" to Western culture.

An examination of the impact of Christianity on African society and religions will not be complete without taking into account the reaction of Africans themselves to this new religion. Christianity and European military superiority were a combination of forces which Africans could not

22. Geoffrey Parrinder—*op. cit.* p. 191.

23. Simon Ottenberg—*Ibo Receptivity to Change, in W. R. Bascom and M. J. Herskovits (Ed)—op. cit.* ch. 7.

resist. With their villages destroyed, their relations dead or wounded, their shrines and oracles blown to bits and the secret societies banned, the Africans were completely bewildered and demoralised during the early days of the establishment of European rule on the continent. Africans were impressed. If Europeans were so powerful, some of them argued, then it must be because they had powerful gods. The Christian teachings of "equality of all men before God", of love for thy neighbour, and emphasis on justice, appealed especially to slaves, outcasts and the less fortunate elements in the society who became staunch adherents of the new religion. The young men, women and children trained in the mission schools have shown themselves willing to accept the new faith while the older generation, as the guardians of the people's traditions and morality, have been most vehement in their opposition.

But one of the major obstacles to the spread of Christianity in this century has been the inability of some Christian missionaries to carry out what they preach. For several years these teachings were not questioned but soon many Africans realised that missionaries taught one thing and did the exact opposite. For instance, they could not understand why these Europeans indulged in racial discrimination, in the overthrow of the rights of man and in the denial of equal opportunity for Africans, not only in the civil service but also in the established churches. This latter factor was one of the major reasons for the rise of "African" churches in which Christian teachings and practice were tempered by traditional religions.²⁴

With the rise of African nationalism, Christianity was assailed from many sides for its refusal to speak up against injustices in various parts of the world, for the conservatism of the churches and for the part it played in the near extinction of African culture. The nationalists argued that the idea that God is white and the devil black should not be entertained for a moment. They pointed out the gross injustices within the church and attacked the missions for their dependence on, and support for, the colonial government. Those of them who had travelled to Europe or read European history were quick to point out that European societies had unsavoury aspects comparable to those of African societies.

As people compared African and European culture in favour of the former so did Christianity begin to lose some of its glamour. There are those Africans who, while recognising the fact that the introduction of Christianity has brought about immense changes for the better in African societies, nonetheless contend that unless Christianity as an institution is completely divorced from the apron strings of the white man then its future in Africa cannot be assured. Fortunately, for Christianity, many African Christians in various parts of the continent are now taking steps not only to "Africanise" the churches but also to "nationalise" them and to weld the adherents into a cohesive whole.

24. Baeta has indicated that in addition to the above factors, the success of these "separatist" churches was "due in no small measure to their adoption of less formal, more lively forms of worship with the use of native music and instruments—They approach nearer the African ethos whereas the churches of European origin are often so distressingly European and dull." . . . C. G. Baeta—*Prophetism in Ghana*. London 1962 p. 2.