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The Encounter Of Islam And Christianity In Africa: Pentecost and the Hijrah

Scholars of religion in Africa have tended on the whole to regard Islam as more in tune with the values of the peoples of the continent, usually thinking of the subject of polygamy, than Christianity. Many African scholars have advanced this view of the two religions in Africa, and not a few African Christian scholars have joined in proposing this understanding of the two religions.

I myself spent many years as a Christian promoting the positive image of Islam in Africa, making strong and sweeping statements against Christianity's foreign character. Of course I am absolutely certain there is much truth in both types of statements about the two religions in Africa and elsewhere. Yet I am unclear as to what is particularly useful or enlightening about the situation, and in fact, I find such descriptions extremely unsatisfactory. I cannot see how they can be a helpful basis for any kind of description, analysis or critical reflection, and I shall presently suggest the need to drop that approach and move to different ground altogether. Yet it has occurred to me that if Christianity is intrinsically so hostile and alien to African values why Africans in such large numbers should continue to flock to it, and to flock to it at a time when colonial rule has ended and the old style missions have left, unless, of course, it is a religion that meets their fundamental needs. Similarly if Islam was such a natural

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religion for Africa, why had significant African populations resisted it even after several centuries of exposures, or even intimidation?

I do not propose to answer these questions here, or anywhere else, but I think framing the issue in those terms should help to expose the limitations of that kind of approach to the religions in Africa, and perhaps elsewhere. I fear that its survival in scholarship on religion in Africa has perpetuated an invidious form of Christian-Muslim rivalry, with the continent as its extended cockpit. In that atmosphere, Christians in Africa are offered as the propitiatory toast of Western guilt towards Islam. We have enormous responsibility to abandon the stereotype that feeds such sentiments and place the whole subject on a more sober and mutually enriching approach. I propose then, under the constraints of time and space, to spell out in broad outline what an historical study of the two religions and their impact in Africa might reveal about their distinctive forms and characteristics.

The African Environment: Religious Encounter

The standard pattern for the introduction and dissemination of Islam in Africa has been with the establishment of *Qu'ran* schools where little boys and girls are taught to learn by rote the elementary portions of the sacred book. When children have learned such elementary portions, they are ready to participate in the observance of the *salat* (worship) in the mosque, called *masjid* in Arabic. The absolute necessity of Arabic for the canonical studies of Islam is a demand imposed on all Muslims by the code. Such an approach to the irreducible role of Arabic rests on the notion of right performance as the rule of religious life: it is not so much that the worshipper *understands* as that he or she *does correctly* what is mandated. We should not be overly impatient with such an approach to the religious life among Muslims before we understand better its power and significance personally and historically.

The primacy of the sacred Arabic for Muslims is without parallel in religions with a worldwide appeal. For Arab and non-Arab Muslims alike the sound and tones of the *Qu'ranic* recitations are the vivid oracular transformation of the divine in human range. Muslim families spend extraordinary resources, care, thought and concern for the instruction of their children in Arabic. Copies of the *Qu'ran* are prized possessions, and humble villagers will often reserve a clean, tidy spot in a corner of the house to keep the *Qu'ran*. Scraps of the sacred book are collected and sewn up in a pouch and carried on the person for protection and for a sign and symbol. Wooden slates covered with passages from the *Qu'ran* are washed off and the water collected in a container and carried home where the contents are dispensed as medicine.

The Western world, whose views about religious life have been strongly influenced by Christianity, tends to misconstrue the significance of literacy among practicing Muslims. An entry in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, for August, 1874, for example, held forth on the inadequacies of *Qu'ranic* education, pursuing the subject in terms of certain symbols of Europe's technological and cultural superiority. Speaking of Islam in Africa, the paper tells its readers that "In the waiting room of Euston Square Station, all the Mohammedan Negroes in Africa who have read the Koran, even once, might be most comfortably accommodate. The priest themselves cannot distinguish 'mumpsimus' and 'sumpsimus' when they jabber the Koran, and do not attempt to understand other Arabic books."¹

Speaking for the other side, Dr. Blyden, drawing on personal experience, remarks in a piece first published in 1875, that in the place of the terpsichorean performances so prevalent in non-Muslim Africa, Islam has introduced the sober decorum of mosque attendance, with the *Qu'ran*, or rather, its recitation, as its sedate pulse. He continues:

The Koran is, in its measure, an important educator. It exerts among a primitive people a wonderful influence. It has furnished to the adherents of its teachings in Africa a ground of union

which has contributed vastly to their progress. Hausas, Foulahs, Mandingoes, Soosoos, Akus, can all read the same books and mingle in worship together, and there is to all one common authority and one ultimate umpirage. They are united by a common religious sentiment, by a common antagonism to paganism. Not only the sentiment but the language, the words of the sacred book are held in real reverence and esteem. And even where the ideas are not fully understood, the words seem to possess for them a nameless beauty and music, a subtle and indefinable charm, incomprehensible to those not acquainted with the language in which the Koran was written, and therefore, judging altogether as outsider, to indulge in the depreciation of its merits. Such critics lose sight of the fact that the Koran is a poetical composition, and a poetical composition of the earliest and most primitive kind, and that therefore its ideas and the language in which they are conveyed cannot well be separated. The genuine poet not only creates the conception, but the word which is the vehicle. The word becomes the inseparable drapery of the idea. Hence the highest poetry cannot be translated...Among Mohammedans, written or printed translations of the Koran are discouraged. The Chinese, Hindus, Persians, Turks, Mandingoes, Foulahs, etc., who have embraced Islam, speak in their 'own tongues wherein they were born,' but read the Koran in Arabic.²

As the author of the *Commentary of Zamakhsari*, W. Nassau Lees, puts it: "There can be no doubt that to understand thoroughly this wonderful book, the aid of those learned men, Arabs and others, who have devoted themselves to the careful study of it, is not only desirable, but necessary."³

To return to the charge of the slavish imitation of the Holy Scriptures of Islam, Blyden reports that on a journey to a small town, Gbileh on

the Great Sacries River, just 60 miles northeast of Freetown, he encountered a Fula boy, not more than 14, who had learned by heart the entire Qu'ran and was accorded the respectful title of Hafiz. Above him in station and rank and age was one Fode Tarawally, who possessed in his personal library a great many Arabic books numbering 89 volumes. Blyden had difficulty restraining his admiration, and comments:

The library of this distinguished Sheikh...embraced well-nigh all the branches of human knowledge and research — theology, medicine, history, astronomy, grammar, etc. He entered into an interesting discussion on the respective merits of the different commentaries on the Koran, and seemed to give the preference to Beidhawi.⁴

All this is rather impressive, particularly since in sub-Saharan Africa, Islam was encountering largely illiterate populations without a Scriptural tradition as such. To introduce the idea of Scripture might be a task enough, and to add to that the highly unfamiliar and difficult medium of Arabic was doubly difficult. Yet by all accounts, Islam took root and spread.

This is the kind of background against which we might usefully sketch the rise of Christianity in Africa. If the standard pattern for the dissemination of Islam is the Qu'ran school, then the comparable Christian institution is the translation bureau and the linguistic enterprise that accompanies it. Let me frame sharply the issues concerning the Christian position regarding vernacular languages being fit for the purposes of Scriptural translation, that is to say, why Christians might defend the position that Christianity has no revealed language, no cultural medium that is more highly favored by God than any other.

We may begin by looking more closely at the contrasting positions of Islam and Christianity on this question: Why should Christianity in its missionary career hold so tenaciously to translation as a principle of religious practice? What are the reasons for such contrasting attitudes in the two great religious traditions, and from where did the practice arise?

Pentecost

The Christian attitude to translation and to the admissability of all cultures in the divine 'plan of salvation' is enshrined in that first remarkable outburst of missionary activity when at Pentecost, as Luke tells us in the Book of Acts, the believers heard for themselves God speaking to them in their own native tongues. It is a theme that is repeated three times in the short space of a few verses in the second chapter of Acts. That Christians should understand for themselves became the grand chord of the Christian theme at Jerusalem and after as the Gentile mission swept forward to Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, Rome, Alexandria and beyond. Pentecost was pre-eminently the sealing of the Gentiles with a mark of God's favor, the solemn manifestation of God's plan, devised before the foundation of the world, that all nations (*ethnoi*), should rejoice in the day of the Lord.

Two radical consequences followed that breakthrough, although we still have trouble assimilating them. One was that Jerusalem ceased to be the exclusive center of religious orthodoxy, and Christians consequently appropriated it as one among many other centers of religious practice. This relativized Jerusalem, stripping it of its absolutizing and exclusivist elements. The second was its corollary of destigmatizing Gentile (*ethnoi*) culture, cleansing it of the stigma of uncleanness and untouchability. These two forces, of relativization and destigmatization, uncapped the reservoirs of radical pluralism as the form and pattern of Christian expansion in the world, both the one Rome knew and the others it did not know. That Pentecostal watershed produced an extraordinary series of historical ironies for Christianity.

The first is that the religion became increasingly marginal in the place of its birth, and acquired strength and vigor in areas once considered peripheral to the Law and Prophets. Christianity became a religion of the dynamic periphery as Christians turned their backs on Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Pentecost dissolved once and for all the notion of Promised

Land as an earthly destiny for Christians. Thus today Christianity continues to be unique among the great world religions for marginalizing the birthplace of the founder of the religion.

Second, Christians became highly distinguished among religious people for abandoning completely the language of Jesus Christ and instead adopting Gentile languages, with all their inherited stigma, as instruments of Kingdom power. Behind this language question lies a momentous and profound conviction that God's eternal counsels are compatible with the language of the workaday world, and that it is legitimate and necessary to entrust the Gospel to the speech of ordinary men and women. Christians believed at Pentecost, that the plain meaning was the true meaning, although for nearly two millennia theologians have been trying to tell them otherwise.

Christianity appears unique, that is to say, different, among the other world religions for taking the plain path toward religious language. In many traditional societies religious language is seen as the special preserve of the initiated few, of a professional class of seers, votaries and adepts, and, of course, Christians have throughout history been tempted to make religion a matter of gnostic right.

Such a secretive attitude to religious language may reach an extreme form when religious agents induce a special trance and in ecstatic outburst pronounce the efficacious formula. By contrast, the natural impulse of Pentecost was to strip language of its obscurantist hocus pocus and to liberate people with the familiar force of mother tongue. When Christians have defended their own form of the gospel as the final and absolute path to God, they have hovering over them the figure of Christ whose own language has found no favor among them. Consistency thus demands that we do not promote our own language to the exclusive, normative position we have denied to that of Christ, for even in this matter the disciples cannot be greater than their master.

One classical Islamic scholar, reflecting on what Christians have done, or have not done to the language of Christ (using that as an excuse to elevate their own vernaculars), suggests that we owe Christ more than an apology. I would rather say that better than an apology, we owe Christ an unqualified obligation to continue to treat all languages as fit for the highest form of religious life, and to insist that no one language is the absolute, normative way to participation in God's plan of salvation. The fact that no Christian group (at least not since the Ebionite movement) has made Hebrew or Aramaic the prerequisites of faithfulness to God is warrant enough to suggest that we have no right to arrogate such a status to languages that Christ never spoke.

A third consequence is the proliferation of denominational names in Christianity. It is a practice from which there is no explicit authority either in the Bible or in the teaching and practice of the Apostles. The names we take for ourselves such as Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Dutch Reformed, Evangelical, Mennonite, Methodist, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Zionist, and so on and so forth, have no explicit basis in the ordinances of scripture.

This matter of names is enormously significant for Christian identity and practice, yet we need to restrain any extremist tendencies with a comparable qualification: just as all languages are in principle acceptable before God, so are all our denominational names legitimate, provided they do not become exclusive and absolute in the supreme task of mediating God's grace. The canal may be indispensable for transmitting the water for irrigation, but it is not itself that precious liquid.

It is clear the Pentecost unleashed a mighty force of liberation and empowerment, bringing the Gentiles right into the center of God's sovereign plan for creation. We should take care, very good care, not to disallow this Gentile principle for Africa and its diverse peoples. For even in Africa we are witnesses to the momentous consequences of believers hearing for themselves in their mother tongues the mighty acts of God.

Hijrah as the Muslim 'Pentecost'

We should now proceed to examine the situation in Islam. If Pentecost was the warrant for the admission of the vernacular in Christianity, then from Islam *Hijrah*, emigration, was the decisive historical counterpart. At the *hijrah*, dated to 622 A.D., the Prophet Mohammed and his companions (*ashab*), helpers (*ansar*), together called the community of the emigrating party (*Muhajirun*), went from Mecca to Medina, a move that marked the birth of Islam. At Medina, the Prophet became his own Paul and Constantine: the Prophet was both statesman and his own chief missionary in that city. At Medina, Islam ceased to be a religion of the catacombs to become a religion of the state, the *Din* and the *Dawlah* merged into one.

It is this triumphant version of the religion that emerged from the dust of the desert to conquer the world, and conquer it with the aid of non-translatable Qu'ran. The triumph of the religion was concomitantly the triumph of the sacred Arabic, and, correspondingly, the demise of the vernacular in the crucible of encounter with divine law. As Islam arrived among non-Arab speaking Africans, its double blade gleamed with the towering pointedness of One God, its monotheist creed, and the inflexible force of a non-translatable Qu'ran. Which of the two blades cut first or deeper is sometimes hard to say, but less in dispute is the fact that converts are brought within its double range eventually. The fundamental attitude of Muslims toward the vernacular languages in the obligatory practices of the religion was determined for them at the *hijrah*.

The Comparative Issue

The contrast with Christianity should now be clear. If Pentecost enshrined the vernacular rule, the *hijrah* secured its disenfranchisement. It is not just that the Qur'an, as Blyden insisted, is the superlative poetry

that cannot be translated because God has decreed it so. The Qur'an is copy-protected by the immutable, non-rescindable rule of self-exclusion. And with the absoluteness of the Qur'anic revelation has gone the sacralization of Mecca and Medina. Islam's strength is concentrated in a fixed geographical center, whereas the strength of Christianity is distributed at the peripheries and in the provinces, so to speak. Similarly, Islam comes upon a universal adherence to uniform practice and obedience without a bureaucratic structure to enforce that, whereas Christianity is marked by enormous diversity and pluralism in spite of relentless attempts at bureaucratization. Most African Muslims have never visited Mecca and Medina, and probably never will. Yet for all Muslims, in Africa and elsewhere, Mecca and Medina are the irreplaceable points of orientation in the multiple daily cycle of worship, so that spiritually and psychologically Mecca and Medina, called the *Haramayn*, predominate in religious awareness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a few remarks on the application of these ideas to Africa may be in order. The first is that almost everywhere that Christianity has struck root in Africa, there is also a vernacular theme that surfaces into prominence. By the vernacular theme I include (with Bible translating) the great enterprise of vernacular documentation in grammars, dictionaries, primers, vocabularies, and the vast collections of maxims, proverbs, sayings, ethnographic details, traditional religion, customary practice, law and so on. When I reflect on the situation in Muslim Africa, I am struck by the nearly total absence of any serious vernacular work in the forms of grammars, dictionaries and similar linguistic resources. I know of no example of Muslim scholarly effort in the research and documentation of non-Muslim vernacular languages and cultures.

The second observation is the fact that a direct consequence of vernacular

research and documentation in Christianity has been to stir the springs of cultural and political nationalism, whatever the intentions or resolve of the missionary translators. I reckon that such translation efforts did more than any other single factor to launch Africa into the modern world of national awakening. So infectious was this force that it spread even to Muslim areas where Christian missionaries cultivated vernacular pride among the people. For example, it was Dr. William Miller, the Church Missionary Society pioneer missionary, who helped found a mass political party in Nigeria, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), to challenge British rule, thus inspiring local leaders like Aminu Kano to come forward to galvanize Muslim opinion.

The third is the emancipation of the ethno-linguistic groups for a role in society and history. Such an impact is an extension of the vast process of destigmatization that erupted first at Antioch and which in Africa acquired an unprecedented scale of over 1000 ethno-linguistic groups stirred into life with the audible accents of the vernacular scriptures. It is an awesome legacy in scale and magnitude.

The fourth is the pluralism that vernacular translation ushered in so many places, with innumerable languages employed for the single purpose of expressing faith in God through Christ. In other words, pluralism became a part of the ethos of Christianity.

The fifth is the contrasting attitudes of Islam and Christianity to the questions of reform and renewal. Reform in Islam is the requisite step that is taken to remove impediments and accretions that have inhibited or distorted the practice of faith. Renewal is by the same token the step taken to return Muslim practice more or less to the conditions, (or what are believed to be the conditions) prevailing at the time of *hijrah*. In reform and renewal, then, Muslims seek a preponderant role for the primacy of the Qur'an and the criterion of Mecca and Medina in local practice. For African Christians (on the other hand) reform and renewal consist primarily in

gaining a central place for the vernacular, and thus obtaining the Pentecostal manifestation in which mother tongue speakers find the Spirit's consolation for themselves. That has been the ground for repudiating the demand of cultural circumcision that the Western Church in its various forms has tried to force on Africans. Reform and renewal help to apply the logic of the Gentile breakthrough to the particular conditions of Africa and its struggle for legitimacy. Finally, this note: If in Islam the current of reform and renewal flows downwards and out of Africa, in Christianity it flows upwards towards esteem for the vernacular. In real and enduring ways the heritage and destiny of the emerging Africa have come to be tied to the progress of Christianity in the continent. I can make the same confident assertions about Islam only by assuming a fundamentally different premise from the one that has guided its impressive course through history.

Notes

¹Blyden, Edward W., *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, (London: 1887, reprinted in Edinburgh, 1971), 61.

²*Ibid.*, 6-7.

³*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, 62.