

INTRODUCTION

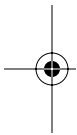
The thesis of this book can be stated simply: Africa played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture. Decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood first in Africa before they were recognized in Europe, and a millennium before they found their way to North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



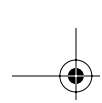
TOWARD A HALF BILLION AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

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.

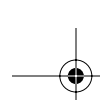
Not only Westerners but tragically many African scholars and church leaders also have ignored their earliest African Christian ancestors. Some have been so intent on condemning nineteenth-century colonialist missionary history that they have hardly glimpsed their own momentous premodern patristic African 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.

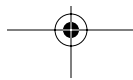
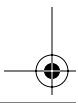
The core plot is not difficult to grasp: out of a continent of suffering has come an understanding of suffering transformed by compassion. A story of death resurrected, life rising from the grave, it is the living story of anyone who has grasped the meaning of history from the point of view of the cross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

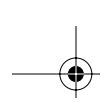
The story begs to be told in its factual truth, so that the heart of it can be grasped easily by anyone. This story is laden with mystery, full to overflowing with unanticipated providences, heavy with sacrifice and miracle, with unforeseen twists and turns, unrepeatable choices to be confronted, and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





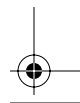
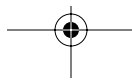
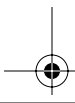
elders, it will not be rightly prized until it is rightly told.

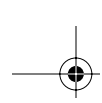
Nor is this story just for a Western audience. I hope it will find ready hearers first on the African continent, and equally in Asia. Global Christian believers are intrigued by modern Africa, but most have not thought of it in the light of its astonishing ancient history. Least of all have Africans 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.

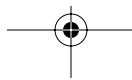
The truth of Christianity has always been told in story form. It is a narrative of God's work in creation and history. Christian truth is shaped by the specific memory of the apostles' story about what happened with Israel and Jesus.

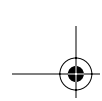
Among the chief patterns for interpreting the apostolic writings were those hewn and refined in Africa before they found a home in Europe or the Near East. This is the sweet kernel of the grain that fed Christian intellectual history before Constantine. Prior to future thorough examination, it has only 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.

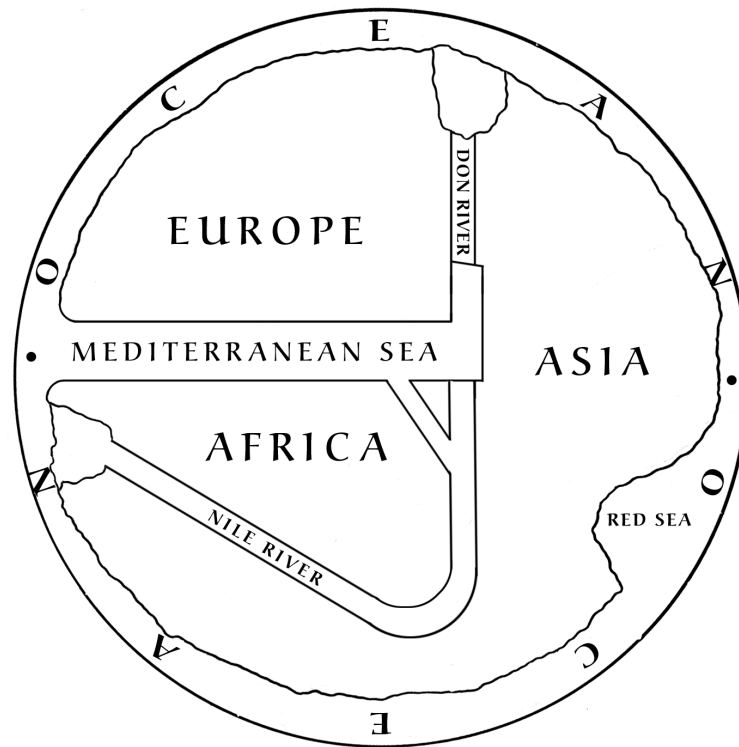
THE PIVOTAL PLACE OF AFRICA ON THE ANCIENT MAP

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





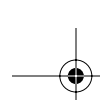
from textually recorded human history, which formed in the conjunction between these three great spaces. Only three, not seven. That came later. They meet at a single physical point, the historic crossroads of Jerusalem. Map 1 is a simplified form of early maps:



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





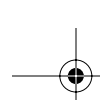
“Far East” beyond the Euphrates to the Indus Valley and down the Indian subcontinent to Kerala. This is how the term *Asia* was defined in antiquity. By the sixth century the known world would stretch east all the way over the Silk Road to China. That is clear from the crude maps and the primitive geographies 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





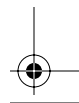
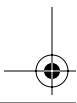
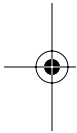
Ugandans or Egyptians or Nigerians. But the most fitting way of speaking of all these millennia of ancient and modern cultures remains the term *Africa*, whatever may be its etymology. The majority of Africans and non-Africans call this continent Africa. So I will use it unapologetically as a geographical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

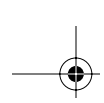
By *Europe* in the ancient sense I refer to the territory north and west of the Straits of Byzantium, still considered the division between East and West. Europe stretches all the way from Thrace to Ireland, from Sicily to Scandinavia.

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

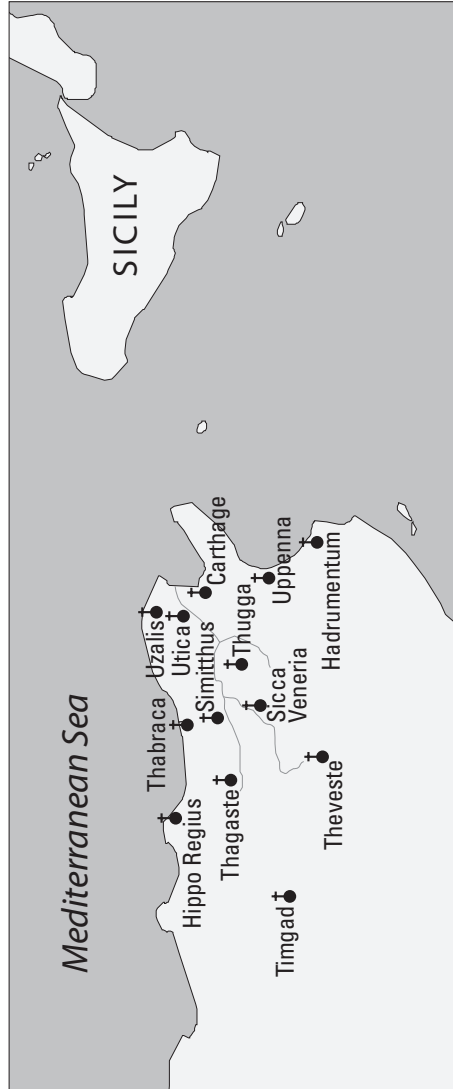
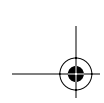
Many Christian ideas and practices traveled north to Europe from the Nile and the Numidian traditions. Nilotic and Numidian cultures are the epicenter for the pre-European history of Christianity.

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.



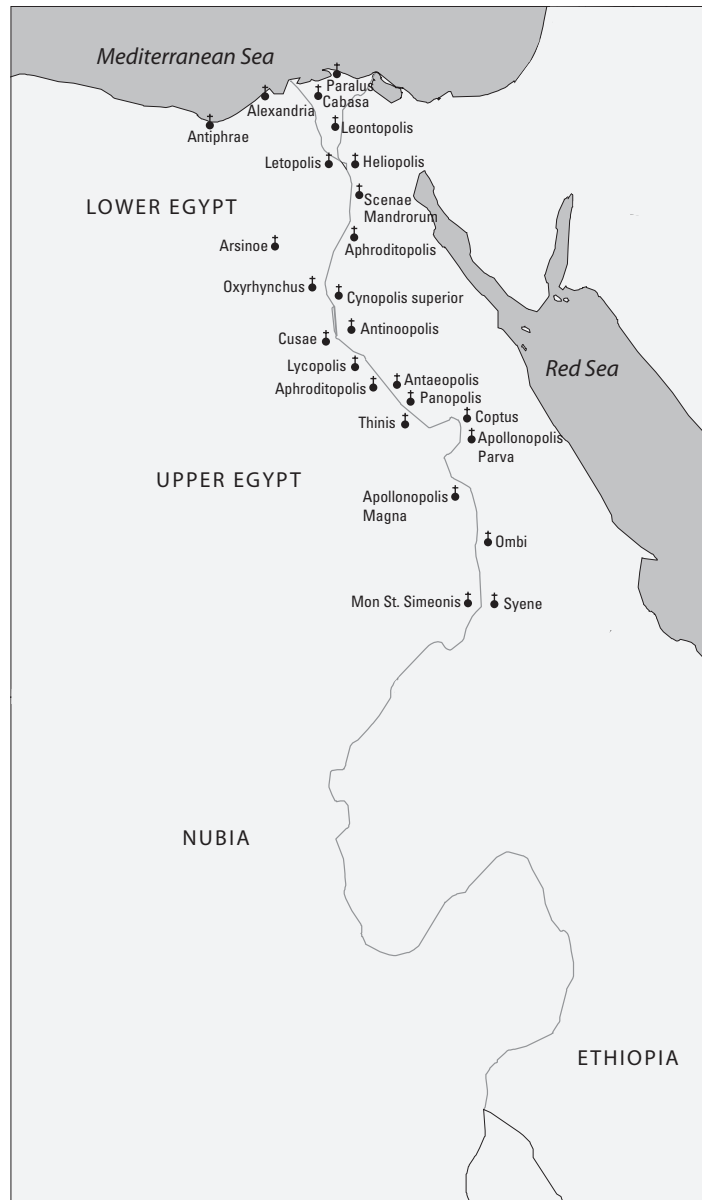
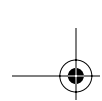


Introduction



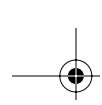
Map 2. Medjerda Valley (modern-day Tunisia and Algeria)





Map 3. Nile Valley c. 4th century





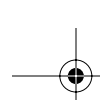
Nilotic is the family of languages that developed along the Nile long before Judaism and Christianity came to Egypt. These were interior African languages largely unaffected by Mediterranean cultures. They became the major linguistic vehicles for grassroots Christianity in the middle Nile Valley. During 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



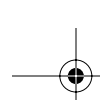


Christianity? The ancient ecumenical answer is the Alexandrian Patriarchate, symbolically embracing both the Nile and the Maghreb due to the latter's deference to the Marcan apostolate. The bishop of Alexandria, the see established by Mark, embraced not just one city but symbolically a whole continent, 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.

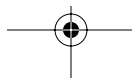
The first arrival of Christianity in Africa can be pushed back to dates much earlier than Western historical skepticism has typically allowed. This will require further examination of archaeological and textual evidence. The early Alexandrian tradition may indeed go back to the sixties, fifties or possibly 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.

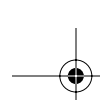
Similarly ignored are the earliest hints of Christian presence in the Maghreb, where, with the Martyrs of Scilli, there was firm written evidence of Christian occupation by 180 C.E. It remains an evidentiary puzzle for form-critical scholars to show that those African martyrs in 180 must have been previously 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





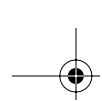
defined so narrowly as to rule out the great written traditions as if they were not also truly African, and not so profoundly “traditional African.” The sad result is that it is sometimes wrongly assumed that African traditional religion largely lacks written texts. That premise is a huge mistake, but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





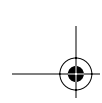
second through the seventh centuries. A broader perspective on African history requires a broader definition of African traditional religion than is common among many modern anthropologists and some theologians.

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.

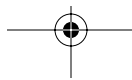
What has happened to classic ecumenical Christianity under these conditions? It has been excluded from the prevailing definitions of “traditional Africa.” Christianity cannot be traditionally African, according to this stereotype, because it was supposedly imported from Europe. Wrong on both counts, 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.

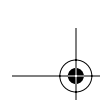
What follows is an attempt to rework this misinformed premise on the basis of a series of clearer descriptions of the historic relation of Africa and Europe.

SELF-EFFACEMENT AND THE RECOVERY OF DIGNITY

The resulting problem is one that Kwami 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



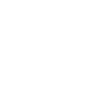
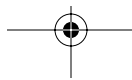


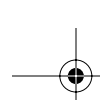
African traditional religion have seemed to have less value or authority than written texts. The comparison of orality to textuality always seems tilted and unfair. The cultural and intellectual richness of native African religion is wrongly thought to be largely primal and oral. So it imagines itself 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-





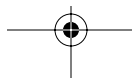
ing of vulnerability characterizes much of the rhetorical defense of African traditional religious consciousness as it stands in the face of Western modernity with its intimidating technology and long historical written traditions. This defensiveness can be overcome by more accurately reconceiving African 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.

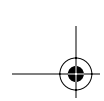
THE MISSING LINK: THE EARLY AFRICAN WRITTEN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

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 Bythina. 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.



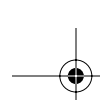


The common misperception is directly the opposite—that intellectual leadership typically moved from the north to the south, from Europe to Africa. But in Christian history, contrary to this common assumption, the flow of intellectual leadership demonstrably moved largely from Africa to Europe—south to 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.

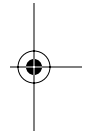
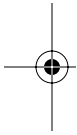
Inattention to this south-to-north movement has been unhelpful (even hurtful) to the African sense of intellectual self-worth. It has seemed to leave Africa as if without a sense of distinguished literary and intellectual history. But this is a history that Africa already owns but which has remained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

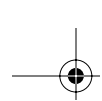
European intellectual history has gone on to proceed as if the great Christian intellectual and literary textual traditions of the Nile Valley and the Maghreb did not even exist. Its vast effects on Europe have not been grasped. Much of its history has been dismissed as heretical, as argued by German 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





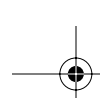
the intelligentsia and refined historians have intuitively assumed the mental superiority of north to south? Did I say it? Can I take it back? It seems like an incredible charge, cheeky even to think, shameful to say out loud. So I'll state it more modestly: Well-meaning European and American historians 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.

