

CHRISTIANITY: AN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN RELIGION

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Abstract: *A closer look at the 1st – 5th centuries demonstrates a crucial period of African influence on early Christian formation. The impact is seen across the emerging faith, from theological contributions to ecclesiastical leadership. The paper provides historical evidence of Africa's contact with Christianity, spanning from the days of Jesus through the Apostles' era to the patristic and modern eras. It, therefore, appraises the backgrounds and contributions of some major African Church Fathers and Mothers from the 2nd – 5th centuries. It further explores the place of African Christianity today particularly because the Edinburgh conference of 1900 predicted that Christianity would be extinct in Africa but today, Africa has become a major Christian centre as part of the global south. The paper affirms that African Christianity has a lot to offer to global Christian expression and must therefore be allowed to interact with the culture in meeting the needs of its adherents.*

Key Words: African Christianity, Desert Mothers, Early African Church Fathers, World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910

Introduction

From Pentecost to the twentieth century, Christian history may be divided into six phases. Each phase represents its embodiment in a major culture area which has meant that in that phase, it has taken an impress from that culture. In each phase, the expression of the Christian faith has developed features which could only have originated in the culture whose impress it has taken within that phase.¹

So true is the dominant expression of Christianity during the second phase of its history; its steady penetration of Hellenistic thought, and the culture of the early Roman Empire give it a European outlook.²

¹ A. F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 16.

² Walls categorizes Christian History into six phases. Each phase represents an embodiment of a major culture area, thus, bearing cultural imprints that could only have developed in that culture whose imprint it bears. The second of the six phases of Christianity was Hellenistic-Roman. The dominant expression of the Christian faith for several centuries resulted from its steady penetration of Hellenistic thought and culture during a period when the culture was also

Invariably, the European cultural imprints on Christianity have erroneously given the impression that Christianity is a European religion and, thus, foreign to Africa.³ However, Jenkins, writing in 2011, posits that “Christianity has in very recent times ceased to be a Euro-American religion and is becoming thoroughly global.”⁴ While Jenkins affirms the global shift of Christianity, we argue against the notion that Christianity is exclusively a European religion. The paper asserts that Africa has had its fair imprints on Christianity, even pre-dating the shift from Europe and America to the global south.

The paper first discusses Africa’s contact with Christianity since the time of Christ and her immense contribution to its development from the period of the Apostles to date. It provides evidence of the backgrounds and contributions of some major African church fathers and mothers from the 2nd – 5th centuries, to early Christian developments. It then examines the place of African Christianity, particularly beginning with the Edinburgh conference of 1900, where it was predicted that Christianity would be extinct in Africa due to the influx of Islam. Conversely, Africa has become a major Christian centre as part of the global south,⁵ offering a rich tapestry of historical figures and contemporary voices that have shaped the global expression of the Christian faith. Indeed, the dynamic growth of Christianity in Africa in contemporary times, has led to a renaissance in Christian theology, with African theologians addressing issues relevant to their context and contributing to the broader theological discourse.

African Personalities

Christianity has, from its inception, been an African religion. It has been since the days of Jesus, through the Apostolic age to the Patristic era till today, and will, without a doubt, continue.⁶ Sanneh draws from Jesus and the early Apostles using biblical and other historical sources

associated with a single political entity, the Roman Empire. See: Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 16-22.

³ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

⁴ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, xi.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 14-16.

⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity. The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 1-4.

to show that Africa did not only have passive contact with Christianity but made active contributions to Christian developments as far back as the time of Jesus and the Apostles. In the first instance, Sanneh observes that during the attempts by Herod the Great to kill Jesus at infancy, Africa played host to the baby Jesus (Matt. 2:13-15). In this episode, an angel directed the earthly parents of Jesus to hide Him in Egypt, making Egypt, an African soil, the safest and most secure place to preserve God's salvation plan for mankind.

Moreover, when Jesus was carrying his cross to Calvary, it was an African, Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry the cross with Him (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). All three Synoptic Gospels acknowledge that Simon was from Cyrene, a town located in the Eastern part of Libya in North Africa. Mark 15:21 further helps to trace the family of Simon of Cyrene as the father of Alexander and Rufus. Paul is believed to have referred to this Rufus in Romans 16:13 as a significant member of the Christian community in Rome, describing him as “*τον εκλεκτον* – chosen, elect, outstanding.” Given Paul's reference to Cyrenians in Acts 11:20, it is suggestive that Simon was a Christian and he trained his sons in his faith. Therefore, Simon and his sons became African Christians who affected their societies in Africa from biblical times, making Christianity an African religion.

It is further observed that among the audience or the congregation of Jews on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, there were people from two African countries: Egypt and Libya near Cyrene (Acts 2:10). The presence of Africans on the day of Pentecost holds significance as it coincides with the birth of the church. This implies that Africans were not absent but rather faithful witnesses to the establishment of the church on earth following Christ's departure. Additionally, Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 is instructive for first-generation Christians from the days of the Apostles, making Africa the home of Christianity from its cradle. Tertullian identifies this Ethiopian eunuch as Simon Bachos the eunuch, who became a preacher in Ethiopia and was referred to as Simon called Black in Acts 13:1.⁷ There are many other examples of the encounter with Africans and African societies by the early Apostles to signify that

⁷ Tertullian, *Against the Heresies*, 3:12:8.

Africa has been very receptive to Christianity from its incipient stage enough to make claims of being indigenous to Christianity.

Consequently, many Africans have contributed immensely to Christian development the world over. The history of Christianity is never complete without the contributions of some major African personalities. Many African men and women have helped to lay the foundations of the faith, classifying Africans among the progenitors of the Christian faith. These personalities have affected the faith in the development of doctrines, structures, and exemplary living for the emulation of others. Many of these Africans wrote in defence of the faith against heretic movements and clearing Christianity of the charges which gave room for the persecution and martyrdom of its followers.

African Church Fathers

African Church Fathers have made in-depth contributions to the Christian faith. Many of them were respected persons of the Roman politico-social system who gave everything up to defend and build the Christian faith. These include Tertullian, Cyril, Minucius Felix, Pachomius, Origen, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Optatus, Augustine and Clement etc. Clement of Alexandria in Egypt is much noted for his contributions to Christian unity and leadership.⁸ He had several writings that helped in Christian interpretations and education in general while contributing to Christian doctrines.

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, usually known as Tertullian from Carthage Tunisia, is known as the Father of Latin Christianity of the early church.⁹ On his part, he is survived by about thirty-one texts over his sixteen years of becoming a Christian.¹⁰ Tertullian is seen as a Christian apologist, anti-heretic, and a teacher of catechumen as well as baptismal candidates.¹¹ He is credited for the introduction of some

⁸ Darly Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians who Shaped What We Believe Today* (Benin City: Beulahland Publication, 2014), 51-55.

⁹ Niels Willert, "Tertullian," in *In Defence of Christianity. Early Christian Apologists*, ed. Jakob Engberg, Anders-Christian Jacobsen and Jorg Ulrich (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 164; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 43-49.

¹⁰ Willert, "Tertullian," 159; Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55.

¹¹ Willert, "Tertullian," 164.

major terms used in Christianity, such as the Trinity, Sacrament, Resurrection, Penitence, and Testament, among others.

Origen from Egypt was regarded as a Christian intellectual genius and an enigma who wrote several works.¹² Altogether, about eight hundred texts are attributed to him on various areas of the Christian faith, such as anti-heretics, apology, Christian doctrines, and, other aspects of Christian developments during his time that are still relevant today. Origen's works were very helpful. He was one of the main reasons why it is claimed that Christian exegesis first matured in Africa.

The paper focuses attention on Athanasius, Anorbius, Lactancius, and Cyprian who are not very well known as compared to some of those identified above.

Athanasius

Athanasius was born near Alexandria in Egypt in 298 AD and was an assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria.¹³ Litfin describes him to be short, dark-skinned with a fiery and stubborn personality. Although Athanasius attended a secular school and not a theological one, it did not hinder him from excelling in the field of theology. He rose to become a bishop after the death of Alexander in AD 328 at almost thirty years and served for about forty-five years.¹⁴ However, as Bishop, due to political instability and religious rivalry, he was exiled five times which, together, mark about seventeen years of staying away from his diocese. In spite of all these, his diocese supported him greatly, as he administered the diocese even from where he was hiding. Athanasius eventually died in AD 373 at the age of seventy-five.¹⁵

Athanasius contributed to Christianity in Africa and the world over by largely continuing the fight commenced by Alexander, his predecessor, against Arius.¹⁶ He was vehemently against the position of Arius

¹² Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 57-64.

¹³ G. A. Oshitelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church. The Contributions of the African Church Fathers to the Development of Christian Thought in the Early Church* (Ibadan: Sefer, 2002), 71; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 73.

¹⁴ David Brakke, "Athanasius of Alexandria, Life of St. Antony of Egypt," in *Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland Publisher, 2000), 1; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 73-74; Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 71.

¹⁵ Brakke, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 2; Joseph Lynch, *Early Christianity. A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 74.

¹⁶ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 73.

regarding the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity.¹⁷ As Alexander's assistant, he attended the Council of Nicaea as an observer, giving him a better appreciation of the theological discourse at the time. This experience informed his continuation of Alexander's work on the doctrine of the Trinity when he later assumed the role of bishop.

Athanasius' contribution to the theology of the Trinity was rather unique because he took his inspiration from a scriptural perspective rather than philosophy to which many were accustomed. He emphasized that the idea of the unity between the Godhead was a communal unity because that was how scripture exhibited the relationship.¹⁸ Concerning Jesus being a 'begotten' Son, Athanasius argued that it did not imply He was created at a point, suggestive that He did not exist at a point (as Aruis holds) and as expressed in the Nicene Creed as 'begotten not made.' Athanasius uses the Greek *homoousios* (of one substance) in support of Tertullian's Latin idea of *une substantia* (one substance) to emphasize the divine and human nature of Christ.¹⁹ This was important because with Jesus being God on equal terms with the Father and man at the same time, He was best suited to save mankind.²⁰ He also vehemently defended the Nicene creed.²¹

Athanasius is very well-noted for his contributions to the writing of the life and activities of St. Antony in his bid to bring to attention the place of monasticism and asceticism in Christian development.²² His writing on the activities of St. Antony could be a result of the help he received from some monks. In AD 356, when the Emperor sought to arrest him, they facilitated his escape into the desert, where he spent about six years.²³ Additionally, Athanasius introduced the forty days of lent fasting in preparation for Easter in Alexandria upon his return from one of his exiles.²⁴ Thus, Athanasius contributed to Christian development as an apologist, polemist, and theologian who sought to

¹⁷ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 71-73.

¹⁸ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 74.

¹⁹ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 74-80; Brakke, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 2.

²⁰ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 75.

²¹ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 156, 165.

²² Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 196; Brakke, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 1; Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 72.

²³ Brakke, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 2.

²⁴ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 184.

unite the church. Oshitelu argues that at age twenty-one, Athanasius had already published two apologetic works in defence of Christianity against the pagan religion.²⁵ He was a very important African Church Father who helped to navigate the way in dealing with a great heretic of Christian History, Aruis, on the question of the relationship between the Father and the Son, thereby establishing the firm foundations of Christianity even today.

Arnobius

Although not much is known about Arnobius, he contributed immensely to the development of Christianity not just in Africa, but in other parts of the Christian world. He was from Sicca, the modern-day El Kef in Tunisia. During the reign of Emperor Diocletian, he was a teacher of rhetoric.²⁶ He was a pagan who converted to Christianity through a dream he claimed to have had. However, the bishop at the time was suspicious of his conversion since he was a fierce critic of Christianity. Lactancius, an early Christian author who was an advisor to Constantine, was one of the rhetoric students whom Arnobius influenced. Arnobius influenced many of Lactancius' opinions, especially on the idea of God being the 'highest.'²⁷

Arnobius after his conversion defended the Christian faith especially from the charge of disturbing the peace of the empire (*Pax Romana*) due to the Christians' unpreparedness to pray with the *genius* (image) of the emperor, thereby breaking the peace between the people and the gods (*Pax Deorum*).²⁸ He argued that if the pagans accused the Christians of hunger because they refused to worship the gods, which supposedly angered the gods and led to the gods not blessing their crops, how is it that the Christians, in the same context, have become wealthy and even sent food to the pagans? He sarcastically suggested that the gods were not happy with the people for not venerating them any longer. Further, he accused the gods of not being able to prevent calamities and so if the Supreme God the Christians worshipped could

²⁵ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 71.

²⁶ David E. Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity. An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2017), 176.

²⁷ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 178.

²⁸ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 176.

bless the Christians despite the drought as in the case of the Israelites in Egypt, then Christ was best to be worshipped.²⁹

Although Arnobius' apology, *Against the Nations*, deals with some other Christian doctrinal issues, it also defends many of the charges against the Christians.³⁰ He helped in the development of Christian theologies. He developed a strong theology of how Christ is superior to the gods and philosophy. His theology of God is usually in a subtle comparison to the gods by negating the characteristics of the gods and showing its opposite in his description of God; thus, the idols were not God. God was not material, visible, or tangible. Rather, he was the greatest, highest, and most perfect among other comparative and superlative descriptions.³¹ Arnobius even dismissed the idea of a false god because to him there was nothing like that – you were either God or not, which meant that the wood, stones, bones, and other things that were worshipped, were never gods in the first place.³²

Arnobius' polemics against the Romans were sometimes very strong, even insulting.³³ He mocked the history of the Trojans, Romulus, Aeneas, Venus and many other Roman heroes and gods. He sometimes went as far as depicting the Romans as animals for worshiping animals. For example, he portrayed Romulus with the face of an ass and Pompilius with that of a dog while associating Cato or Marcus Cicero with a pig.³⁴ In his defense of Christianity, Arnobius also attacked the Roman political and philosophical systems. He was against the Roman imperialist tactics - he described the Roman authorities as tyrants, godless, murderous, inhuman, licentious, and violent, as well as other negative characterizations.³⁵ He attacked philosophers like Propyhy whom he called the new philosophers.³⁶ He further developed the theology of human sinfulness which was an antedate of Augustine's view that evil in humans is not due to freewill but part of human nature.³⁷ This position was novel because the Christian philosophers, in most

²⁹ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 177.

³⁰ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 177

³¹ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 176.

³² Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 178.

³³ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 179-180.

³⁴ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 180.

³⁵ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 179-180.

³⁶ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 180.

³⁷ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 177.

cases, blamed sin on the free will that God gave to men, but Arnobius differed in that it was rather natural to human beings.

An important aspect of Arnobius's theology was the influence of the African context from which he came. He usually used the arguments of things around him and the things in the surroundings to build on what could benefit Christians.³⁸ Arnobius was indeed a great early African Christian who contributed as a writer, apologist, polemist, and contributor to many Christian theologies. Although he was sometimes very aggressive in his writings and sometimes even unorthodox in his teachings, he still made a great mark on Christian developments as an African Christian.

Lactantius

Lactantius studied under Arnobius in Sicca, modern-day Tunisia, but later moved to Nicomedia to teach rhetoric around AD 300.³⁹ He is believed to have lived around AD 260 to about AD 337.⁴⁰ He is said to have resigned his post as a teacher during the Diocletian persecution, but Constantine hired him to teach his firstborn son, Crispus, privately.⁴¹ Lactantius is believed to have influenced Constantine in many ways.⁴²

He was a prolific writer who is survived by six texts and other fragments cited in some other letters.⁴³ His writings show his experience and interest in classical literature. Most of his texts were apologetic of the Christian faith from attacks of the pagans. Theologically, he differed from his teacher, Arnobius, in his presentation of humans in positive terms and again on the question of God living far away from His creation. To Lactantius, although God was in heaven, He was still interested in human affairs. In his opinion, the problems of the earth were perpetuated by the gods; thus, God's intention for human beings was to correct these disruptions politically.⁴⁴ Like his teacher Arnobius, he directed a number of his texts against pagan worship and

³⁸ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 178-781.

³⁹ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 181.

⁴⁰ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 123.

⁴¹ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 181.

⁴² Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 127-128; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 181.

⁴³ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182.

⁴⁴ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182.

was very much uncomplimentary to the Romans. Lactantius suggested that the mother of Romulus and Remi was a prostitute, and that was why Romans were adulterous by nature.⁴⁵ He further mocked the Roman god Saturn because it was initially from Phoenicia as a god of the skies which was brought to Rome.

Cyprian

Cyprian was born Thascius Cyprianus to rich pagan parents in the 3rd century in Carthage now known as Tunisia.⁴⁶ He was a wealthy barrister, well-versed in constitutional and political ideas.⁴⁷ Although it is unsure how he became Christian, it is believed that he was influenced by Caecilianus the presbyter; the reason he added Caecilius to his name and so is sometimes referred to as Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus.⁴⁸ He became a priest soon after he converted to Christianity in AD 246 and in no time rose to become the Bishop of Carthage.⁴⁹ At his conversion, Cyprian was noted to have given away his riches to the poor. He is known to have died a martyr with a couple of Christians during the Valerian persecutions in AD 258.⁵⁰

Cyprian suffered targeted persecution and martyrdom by Emperor Decius which began in AD 249.⁵¹ Cyprian fled due to the Decius' hostilities and administered his diocese from exile. He wrote about eighty letters in exile.⁵² Although many of these letters were administrative, they were also very much theological to correct things that were going on in his diocese.

Another major problem Cyprian dealt with in his diocese was the case of Christians who, due to the persecutions, recanted but later wished to come back to the church. These were known as the *lapsi* (meaning lapsed or fallen).⁵³ These 'fallen' members were admitted into the church by some Christians who did not recant but were not killed.

⁴⁵ Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 184.

⁴⁶ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 49; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 65.

⁴⁷ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 49.

⁴⁸ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 49.

⁴⁹ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 49.

⁵⁰ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 195; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 65; Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 52.

⁵¹ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 50-51; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 65.

⁵² Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 66.

⁵³ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 66.

Cyprian sought to regulate such members by giving them the right of admission through the Bishops.⁵⁴

Cyprian further contributed to Christian development through his text, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*.⁵⁵ He sought to see to it that the church stood as a united entity and not in fragments in dealing with heretics and external forces. Cyprian was very keen on promoting the development of a structure for Christian discipline and practices. He wrote to affirm the authority of the bishop as the symbol of unity and authority of the church.⁵⁶ He affirmed the position of Clement and Ignatius on the idea of ‘apostolic succession’, which rests with the bishops and must hence be identified with the authority and unity of the church. He, therefore, ensured that sacraments, like baptism and the Holy Communion, must only be administered by the Bishops and those ordained by the Bishops.⁵⁷ It was in this light that Cyprian held that salvation was only found in the church.⁵⁸ He affirmed the practice of infant baptism, saying it was a step against the doctrine of ‘original sin’. Cyprian was the first theologian to talk about “baptismal regeneration;” he maintained that baptism also led to being “born again.”⁵⁹

Another challenge the church battled with during the time of Cyprian was the Galen plague.⁶⁰ It was estimated that the plague killed about five thousand people a day.⁶¹ This threatened the faith of many Christians, and Cyprian had to write from exile to encourage the Christians.⁶² His writing, *On Mortality*, pointed his fellow Christians to the place of God in difficult times, such as the Galen plague, and

⁵⁴ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 52-55.

⁵⁵ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 144; Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 56-58.

⁵⁶ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 67.

⁵⁷ Oshitelu, *The African Fathers*, 58-59; Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 68.

⁵⁸ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 69.

⁵⁹ Aaron, *The 40 Most Influential Christians*, 66.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Manley, “Measles and Ancient Plagues: A Note on New Scientific Evidence,” *The Classical World* 107, no. 3 (2014): 395; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73; R. J. Littman and M. L. Littman, “Galen and the Antonine Plague,” *The American Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 3 (1973): 243.

⁶¹ Iris M. Smith, “The Contributions of St. Cyprian: Perspectives on Epidemiology and Early Christianity,” *Young Historian Conference* (2014), 2; Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 73-77.

⁶² Smith, “The Contributions of St. Cyprian,” 2.

admonished them on what they had to do as Christians, especially to not live in fear but in hope.

Cyprian was an African leader who helped to establish the foundations of the church by largely fighting some internal structures. It was important that, even though the church faced external opposition, attention was given to the internal structures to make them immune to collapse from within. The roles Cyprian played in Carthage, then, were essential in strengthening the Christian faith from within to withstand the terrors of eternal opposition.

African Church Mothers (Desert Mothers)

Many early African women, also referred to as Desert Mothers, have played significant roles in the development of Christianity. They lived during the 4th and 5th centuries in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Some of these Mothers were Perpetua, Felicity, Eupraxia, Mary of Egypt, and Syncritia. Not much is known about the African Church Mothers, particularly in terms of their backgrounds and contributions. Unlike the men who were mostly apologists and held formal positions in the hierarchy of church, the contributions of the Mothers were largely understood in terms of devotion and spiritual giftings.

In the first place, the roles of the Mothers demonstrate that God could use women as well as men in His service. These women lived in abject poverty (austerity) although in most cases, they came from wealthy families. Their lives in the monasteries and nunneries, in devotion to God, made it evident that like their male counterparts, the monks, God could use women—God was no respecter of persons as the Apostle Paul observed (Rom. 2:11). Secondly, the Mothers, due to their devotion to God, were in most cases endowed with some spiritual capacities, such as the working of miracles (including divine healing), discernment of the Spirit, and others. They also gave pieces of advice to people on several issues. For this reason, they were often given the revered title of “Amma,” translated as “wise mother.”⁶³

⁶³ Lucretia Vasilescu, "Desert Spirituality: Amma, a Spiritual Directress." *Text și discurs religios* 5 (2013): 359-370.

In the section that follows, a few of the Mothers of the African Church who affected Christian expression in particular, and Christianity generally from its earliest times to the present are discussed.

Amma Eupraxia

Eupraxia was a fifth-century Christian nun who contributed to Christian development in terms of her devotion and gifts. She is not very well known but is celebrated on the Catholic and Orthodox church's calendar on either July 24 or 25, as a saint.⁶⁴ As a child, she came from a wealthy and noble home but rejected luxurious living to become a nun and so lived a strict ascetic life. Her father, Antigonos, was of a senatorial rank and her mother was a wealthy and devoted woman who used her wealth to maintain and fund monasteries at Thebes. After the death of her father, while Eupraxia was an infant, Emperor Theodosios and his wife arranged her marriage, but she rejected it. At age six, she travelled with her mother to Egypt to inspect her mother's estate at Theban. It was at this visit, while they stayed in a nunnery, that Eupraxia desired to be a nun and her mother left her there to be trained.⁶⁵ Mark Ellinsen suggests that her decision was influenced by the response to a question she posed to the nuns they lodged with during the visit. She is said to have asked them why they chose to be nuns and they responded that they did it for Christ's sake. Soon after this, her mother also died and the Emperor tried the second time to marry Eupraxia to a wealthy and noble man but she still did not accept the offer. The emperor had to allow her to follow her desire to be at the nunnery.

Eupraxia was believed to have served her senior sisters at the nunnery where she is noted to have worked for forty days without rest.⁶⁶ In the monastery, she faced a lot of challenges, including some created by her sisters. Yet, she kept her focus to be a pious nun and stood strong. On one occasion, she had two bleeding wounds but still carried out her duties in the monastery as expected.⁶⁷ Eupraxia was sometimes made to

⁶⁴ S. A. Ivanov and A. Pičhadze, "Eupraxia of Olympus: An Unknown Transvestite Saint," *Analecta Bollandiana* 126 (2008), 32; Gilles Quisbel and Jan Zandee, "A Coptic Fragment from the Life of Eupraxia," *Vigiliae Christianae* 13, no. 4 (1959): 193–203.

⁶⁵ Mark Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers. Why they Matter for the Church Today* (Eugene, CA: Cascade Books, 2015), 25.

⁶⁶ Quisbel and Zandee, "A Coptic Fragment," 195; Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26.

⁶⁷ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26.

carry stones in the bid to humiliate her and get her to be exhausted, which at a point nearly killed her. There was a time she was made to stand outside in the cold for forty-five days and nights; she collapsed as a result of this ordeal but still did not give up her confessions.⁶⁸ Eupraxia developed her spirituality very sternly and fasted every eighth day.⁶⁹ Owing to her devotion and commitment, she was gifted with the grace of healing and miracles.⁷⁰ She died at the early age of thirty.⁷¹

Another very important lesson of Eupraxia to Christian development, was her age. She decided to join the nunnery at age six. She stayed back from then and never relented on her decision even in the face of hostilities, both within and outside the monastery. As a child, she was dedicated to God, and this early commitment became a testament to the idea that God can use anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, or social standing. Again, her example of devotion, resilience and focus even in times of opposition and challenge is a great lesson to people in ministry. Eupraxia faced several challenges intended to break her and render her unfit for the work of ministry, but she kept her focus. The situation was even compounded when her fellow sisters at the nunnery tried to make life uncomfortable for her, but she stood her grounds and fulfilled all her responsibilities to her elders and the institution. Notwithstanding these challenges, it is significant that Eupraxia's spiritual abilities to work miracles and healings drew a lot of people to her, some of whom also sought her counsel in dire situations.

The life of Eupraxia is an example of a mother who gave up all her entitlements to serve God. It was a great devotion for her to forsake marriage, the wealth of her parents, as well as her connections with the emperor for service to God. Eupraxia's exemplary life, indeed, encourages other Christians to serve God without counting the cost, and even more importantly, to store up treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

⁶⁸ G. Lucchesi, "Euprasia," *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* V (1964), 233.

⁶⁹ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26.

⁷⁰ Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (eds.), *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2005), 58; Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26.

⁷¹ Lucchesi, "Euprasia," 235.

Amma Mary the Egyptian

Mary was born to Christian parents in Alexandria, Egypt, around AD 344 and was a prostitute.⁷² She is noted to have abandoned her parents at the age of twelve and travelled to other parts of Alexandria where she lived by begging, spinning flax, and engaging in platonic sex (although at this point not for money but to satisfy her lust).⁷³ Coon describes her as a “former whore into a female Saul, for like Saul, Mary receives loaves of bread before beginning her spiritual journey (I Samuel 10:3-4)”.⁷⁴ She is further likened to Elijah and Christ for two reasons. Firstly, her lonely ascetic monastic practices in the desert.⁷⁵ Mary did not belong to any monastic order but followed her own system as a lonesome ascetic. Secondly, because she walked on the Jordan River as if she was walking on dry land after she made the sign of the cross.⁷⁶

Mary’s conversion happened when she met some sailors in Alexandria, heading to Jerusalem for the festival of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.⁷⁷ She joined them because they looked well-built, and hoped to satisfy them sexually on the voyage as payment for the trip. When she got to Jerusalem, she gave her body to the pilgrims for free and on some occasions, took little money to be able to cater for herself. She later attempted to enter the church but was miraculously prevented by the power of the cross. It was in Jerusalem that she saw an image of the *Theotokos* (title of Mary as the Mother of God), which pressed her to confess her sins to the Virgin Mary.⁷⁸ She is later said to have heard the voice of God, directing her to go to the desert of Jordan as part of her penance to receive salvation for her soul.⁷⁹

Mary of Alexandria lived in the Jordanian wilderness where she baptized herself and revered the Holy Eucharist with a high sense of awe.⁸⁰ She took her first Holy Communion at the St. John the Baptist Church before she entered the desert and the second towards her death

⁷² Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26.

⁷³ Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions. Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 86.

⁷⁴ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 84.

⁷⁵ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 85.

⁷⁶ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 85.

⁷⁷ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 87.

⁷⁸ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 85.

⁷⁹ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 26; Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 87.

⁸⁰ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 89.

around AD 421 by Zosimas the priest.⁸¹ Apart from the working of miracles, Mary travelled at a supernatural speed and had the gift of prophecy and healing.⁸²

Mary's influence in Christianity in Africa is the assurance that irrespective of how far a person may seem to be from the cross; a sinner can be turned into a saint. This is assuring, considering the depravity of the predicament of her moral life. God used Mary greatly, although an old woman and former prostitute. Additionally, her account gives hope to Christians that it does not matter what a person is engaged in; wrong actions can be abandoned. Furthermore, her devotion and charisma upon her conversion are reminiscent of the Samaritan woman.⁸³ When she repented and gave up her old life, she quickly became a disciple, affecting other people positively (John 4:39-42). Mary the Egyptian affected the early African Church and Christianity in general by her respect for the institutions of the church, such as the sacraments and priesthood. She exhibited confidence and reverence for the things of the church and constantly evoked confidence rather than rebellion or mistrust. Thus, Mary, in her special way, affected the church through her life, contributions, and the impact of her spiritual gifts.

Amma Syncletica

Syncletica, a native of Egypt Alexandria, was born around AD 270 to rich parents, but right from childhood decided to live a life of devotion to God.⁸⁴ She was born in Macedonia (modern-day Turkey) but moved to Alexandria with her two brothers (who died at infancy) and a sister who was blind.⁸⁵ Her parents wanted her to marry but she rejected all such attempts. Upon the demise of her parents, she donated all the wealth they bequeathed to her and her younger sister to the poor and joined the monastery. She maintained that the Christian life is full of struggles and so Christians must avoid temptation.⁸⁶ In her understanding, prayer, together with fasting, helps to dislodge evil thoughts. She subscribed to poverty as a practical action to avoid evil. In most cases,

⁸¹ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 89.

⁸² Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 85.

⁸³ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 93.

⁸⁴ William R. Veder, "Saint Syncletica and the Sea. A Text Come to Life," *Russian History* 33 (2006): 157.

⁸⁵ Veder, "Saint Syncletica," 158.

⁸⁶ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 28.

the Desert Mothers are referred to as ‘blessed.’ However, Syncletica is often referred to as ‘holy’ which according to Veder, ranked her at the status of Antony the Great and Athanasius.⁸⁷

Syncletica stayed in a poor crypt in constant meditation and prayer but was sometimes interrupted by people who wanted advice and guidance from her. She was endowed with a discerning spirit to decipher between good and evil. She found that many of the women who came to her were ready to serve God but were not ready to live in poverty although a few joined her in devotion to God and in service of God. Twenty-seven of her sayings were collected and recorded in the *Apothegmata Patrum* (sayings of the Desert Fathers) along with some from her contemporary male monks.⁸⁸ Some of these sayings and life of devotion to God, in general, were used as a manual to train people in the monasteries. She taught her students to avoid the praise of men since worldly honour impeded fruit-bearing Christian expression.⁸⁹ One of her major values of life was humility. She suggested that since a ship could not be made without nails, in like manner a person could not be saved without humility. Syncletica died at the age of eighty-four around AD 350 after many illnesses, including consumption, infections, and cancer.⁹⁰

The life and work of Syncletica are celebrated because she impacted her contemporaries in the monasteries with her example and future generations through the recordings of her sayings. She is seen as a notable vessel of God, signifying that God could use all manner of persons who avail themselves irrespective of gender. She had the gift of giving godly counsel. The impact of her counsel was very much felt from her ability to discern between spirits which helped to relate the truth behind situations. Even more significantly, Syncletica is equated to men in the history of African Christianity and Christianity in general. The level of her impact on Christianity was so great that, her sayings found a place in a collection of Desert ‘Fathers.’ This is significant because it shows how deep her impact was felt in her days and beyond to the point that her collections, apart from being used to teach monks, were also resources for all other manner of persons, especially Christians.

⁸⁷ Veder, “Saint Syncletica,” 157.

⁸⁸ William S. J. Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 441; Veder, “Saint Syncletica,” 156.

⁸⁹ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 28.

⁹⁰ Veder, “Saint Syncletica,” 158.

Finally, Syncletica's life of denouncing wealth for poverty in devotion to God is a worthy example to the church. She talked and exemplified, in many ways, the place of wealth and poverty in Christian expression. In most cases, she exulted poverty over wealth, thereby giving all her wealth to the poor. To her, Christians were to eschew material things and focus on pleasing God in all their dealings. Syncletica, a woman of sanctity, left a profound impact on Christianity that transcended her African community, influencing Christian growth globally. This underscores the significant role of African Christianity in shaping various aspects of the broader Christian narrative, emphasizing that Christianity is, in essence, an African religion as well.

Amma Theodora of Alexandria

Theodora from Alexandria was the wife of a Roman tribunal official who refused all the wealth associated with her family background to live in the desert.⁹¹ She was very well noted for the extent of the life of poverty she lived that it impacted other desert fathers and mothers. So great was her impact that some Desert Fathers including Bishop Theophilouus came to her for advice.⁹² It is to this end that some of Theodora's sayings are recorded in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.⁹³

Theodora strongly maintained that the world was full of evil which affected the souls of men, where everything seemed possible. Men had to, therefore, avoid the pleasure of this evil world.⁹⁴ She held a level of the principle of non-response because the commandments prevented her from speaking even when she was insulted; she valued patience and humility highly.⁹⁵ Theodora did not believe in commendation as a teacher because it could be borne out of flattery intended to make a person proud. She maintained that the reward was from God and not men.

Theodora's impact on African Christianity is felt in her example of a strong desire to be a nun. She was strong-willed to the extent that knowing she would be prevented, she disguised herself as a man to escape into the desert to perform her devotion. Her readiness to give

⁹¹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 219; Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 24.

⁹² Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 24.

⁹³ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 440.

⁹⁴ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 24.

⁹⁵ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 24.

up everything she had and even change her gender to be in the desert to serve her maker showed her resilience. Theodora is further noted for her virtues of humility, no response, and moderation in all situations. She taught her listeners a lot of these virtues because she believed that mankind should only live for God and not for themselves. Her impact is felt in the church in several other ways, making African Christianity important to Christian development in general.

Amma Sarah

Sarah was a literate woman who lived in the 5th century from AD 370 for about eighty years. She is noted to have waged war against the desires of fornication for thirteen years. She was however, full of the grace of seeing visions.⁹⁶ Interestingly, she said of the thirteen years that she had to battle fornication, she never prayed for the urge to cease but knew that she would have the strength to overcome it.⁹⁷ It is recorded that whenever the desire to fornicate came, she went up to her room to pray for grace and when she had overcome, gave the credit to Christ. She is further portrayed as a strong woman who stands her ground even in debates with monks. It is noted that at one point, two monks attempted to humiliate her that she was only a woman, but she responded, “According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts.”⁹⁸ It is important to stress that there are nine sayings in the *Apothegmata Patrum* attributed to Sarah.⁹⁹

Amma Sarah is much respected in the church for her example of being able to control her passions to fulfil her divine assignment. She is seen as an example of a strong woman who did not allow her carnal desire to have the better part of her but resorted to prayer to deal with it. It is rather interesting that in her times of evil desire, she did not pray for it to stop but rather for the strength to be able to overcome it. In most cases, Christians would pray against such thoughts, but Sarah shows the way that such desires are human and natural. Therefore, the best approach is to seek the power to overcome them rather than being fixated on stopping them. It is also worth stressing that she did not take the credit when she overcame those thoughts but attributed the

⁹⁶ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 27.

⁹⁷ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 441

⁹⁸ Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers*, 29.

⁹⁹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 441.

success to God. Finally, her education gave her some leverage to be able to engage in useful debates even with the monks, and usually her arguments eventually became the exonerated position. She is venerated by the Roman Catholic Church because of her strength to overcome temptations, her knowledge, her devotion, and her ability to argue her case without attacking the opposing party.

The Story of Arica Beyond Edinburgh 1910

This section focuses on the penetration of Christianity into varying cultures of Africa centuries after the foundational work of the early Church Fathers and Mothers. In 2010, the global Christian fraternity marked the centenary anniversary of the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh from June 14-23, 1910. This conference has been described as the “formal beginning of the modern Protestant ecumenical movement,” possibly the most significant missionary event of the twentieth century and the “First World Missionary Conference.”¹⁰⁰

The working conference titled, “The World Missionary Conference to Consider Problems concerning the Non-Christian World,” sought “to promote cooperative study of the common outstanding problems in the... missionary enterprise, with a view of helping the represented societies and boards to solve them, and achieve together the evangelization of the world.”¹⁰¹ Gideon Goosen notes that within the framework of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, “Mission was not so much about mission to the world as mission from Christendom to ‘heathendom.’”¹⁰² By this conceptual understanding, mission was restricted to certain geographically demarcated portions of humanity, and European Christendom was assumed to be the norm for expressing Christianity.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Gideon Goosen, “The World Missionary Conference Edinburgh 1910-2010: A Time for Reflection,” *Compass* 44, no. 3 (2010): 26; R. Rouse, *The World’s Student Christian Federation: A History of the First Thirty Years* (London : S.C.M. Press, 1948), 128; B. M Thomas, “Edinburgh 1910 and the International Missionary Council (IMC), with special Reference to the IMC as Means of Involving Asians and African Christians in Ecumenical Movement up till 1961,” https://www.academia.edu/19351072/Edinburgh_1910_and_the_IMC (Accessed: November 22, 2021).

¹⁰¹ World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910. *The History and Records of the Conference: Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 7.

¹⁰² Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 27.

¹⁰³ Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 27.

Phan, in his literature review on the discourse concerning Edinburgh 1910 identified the contributions of Brian Stanley as pivotal.¹⁰⁴ Phan, quoting Stanley, makes the following submission: “The conference participants come alive, brimming with boundless optimism, infectious enthusiasm, and deep spirituality, confident that they were making history as they laid the foundations for the imminent conversion of the heathen world through Christian mission.”¹⁰⁵ It was therefore, not surprising that the 1,215 delegates who congregated at the Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, were official delegates of more than 170 missionary societies and church boards; largely from Europe and North America and “a few token representations from the global south.”¹⁰⁶ According to Stanley, twenty of such have been identified as follows:

- Nine Indians (including one Eurasian Methodist Woman from Madras, Grace Stephens)
- Four Japanese
- Three Chinese
- One Korean
- One Burmese
- One Anatolian
- ...and solitary and heavily Europeanized black African -Mark Christian Hayford from the Gold Coast (Ghana).¹⁰⁷

The titles and reports of Eight Commissions that worked assiduously from 1908 towards the success of the Edinburgh 1910 conference provide some more insight into their resolution and optimism of evangelizing the non-Christian world within a generation. These included:

- 1) The spread of the Gospel to all the non-Christian world (June 15, 1910).
- 2) The Church in the Mission Field (June 16, 1910).

¹⁰⁴ Peter C. Phan, “The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: Challenges for Church and Theology in the Twenty-first Century,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 2 (2010): 105-108; Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹¹³ Phan, “The World Missionary Conference, 1910,” 105.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, “Edinburgh 1910;” Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 26.

¹⁰⁷ Brian Stanley, “The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910: Sifting History from Myth,” *The Expository Times* 121, no. 7 (2010): 326.

- 3) Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life (June 17, 1910).
- 4) Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian World (June 18, 1910).
- 5) The Preparation of Missionaries (June 22, 1910).
- 6) The Home Base of Missions (June 23, 1910).
- 7) Missions and Governments (June 20, 1910).
- 8) Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity (June 21, 1910).¹⁰⁸

Certainly, the Evangelical awakening missionary conference and the spiritual development of the 18th and 19th centuries provided the impetus and favourable atmosphere for Edinburgh 1910.¹⁰⁹ Needless to say, mission was intertwined with the global realities of the time: “colonialism, acquisitiveness, expansion, aggrandizement, and feelings of superiority and racism.”¹¹⁰ Goosen, therefore, notes that “the historical context of the conference was still very much colonial and imperial” expressed in concepts and language such as ‘conquest,’ ‘soldiers for Christ,’ ‘subdue,’ etc. Furthermore, he makes the following submission:

This underscores the combative ambience and language in which missionaries saw mission to non-Christians. It was said at the conference that the statement that ‘the only faith which will conquer Europe and America is the faith heroic and vigorous enough to subdue the peoples of the non-Christian world!’ Note the language of ‘subduing’. The tone and language used was often reminiscent of the crusades.¹¹¹

Because of the positionality of the missionary on the one hand, and the non-Christian world on the other, it is not surprising that people continue to visualize Christianity as a foreign religion in the African context.¹¹² This was exemplified in the statement of Jacob Zumah of South Africa: “As Africans, long before the arrival of religion and [the] gospel, we had our own ways of doing things. Those were times

¹⁰⁸ Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 29.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, “Edinburgh 1910.”

¹¹⁰ Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 27.

¹¹¹ Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 27.

¹¹² See, Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christianity and the African Cultural Heritage*. In *Christianity and African Culture*, ed. Jesse N. K. Mugambi (Nairobi: Acton Publications, 2002), 516–42; Thomas Oduro, Hennie Pretorius, Stan Nussbaum, and Bryan Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and Their Sense of Mission* (Wellington: Christian Literature Fund and Bible Media Publication, 2008).

that the religious people refer to as dark days, but we know that during those times there were no orphans or old-age homes. Christianity has brought along these things.”¹¹³

Without a doubt, the world has witnessed the exponential growth of Christianity in the global south, particularly Africa, over the century.¹¹⁴ Johnson and Ross propose that the world “has undergone an unprecedented demographic shift that has resulted in its strength increasingly being found in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia — often in areas where it was little known a century ago.”¹¹⁵ Gooson offers further clarification that although “the percentage of Christians in the world is roughly the same as in 1910 most Christians are now from the southern hemisphere”¹¹⁶ in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and with these areas redefining what is definitive Christianity.

Indeed, the central Christian belief expressed in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us” is an incarnational message for every generation and cultural context. In the case of Africa, this incarnational aspiration realised in the early centuries of Christianity continues to challenge people of African descent to reflect on creative ways by which the ‘Living Word’ incarnates in mortals to shape and construct individual and community Christian identity in the 21st century Africa. We argue, therefore, that Christianity is not foreign to Africa. We agree with Van der Merwe Dirk that “during the past few decades, Africa has not only endeavoured to regain its political and cultural identity but also to claim and own Christian identity by Africanising Christianity.”¹¹⁷ As never before, Christianity continues to find expression within the African cultural context:

Undeniably, the shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity from the Northern to the Southern continents is evidenced not only in the massive presence of Christians on these continents but also by the contributions of indigenous Christians who seek to understand the Judeo-

¹¹³ David Smith, “Jacob Zuma blames Christianity for breakdown of South African traditions,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011-dec/21/Jacob-zuma-blames-Christianity> (Accessed: November 23, 2021).

¹¹⁴ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 1-6.

¹¹⁵ Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, “The Making of the Atlas of Global Christianity,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 1 (2010):12-16.

¹¹⁶ Goosen, “Edinburgh 1910-2010,” 29.

¹¹⁷ Dirk van der Merwe, “From Christianising Africa to Africanising Christianity: Some Hermeneutical Principles,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016): 559–587.

Christian God from an African perspective. Thus, Africans, inspired by the Gospel of Christ have employed varying resources available in the indigenous culture to re-conceptualise the Christian faith and to create knowledge through African thought-forms and idioms in response to the demands of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.¹¹⁸

The works of indigenous African Christians, often described as ‘oral,’ ‘implicit,’ ‘grassroots’ or ‘spontaneous’ theology, emanate from where the faith dwells and reflects faith in the living Lord as a present reality in daily life.¹¹⁹ These emergent theologies, encapsulated in sermons, songs, poetry, etc., express the religious understanding and reflections of a people within the context of African indigenous knowledge systems, cosmology, and philosophy.¹²⁰ Commendable strides are continually being made towards Gospel and culture engagement as expressed in the liturgy, the use of mother tongue, self-theologizing, and the modulation of African semiotics into the Christian landscape, among others.¹²¹

That notwithstanding, the future of African Christianity demands much more: the need to bridge “the gap between ‘Christianity preached’ and ‘Christianity lived,’” especially as it manifests in the quality of Christian life and the impact on contemporary African societies.¹²² Gospel engagement with African cultural values would be one of the goals.

Conclusion

Africa has indeed been home to Christianity since its inception, therefore the idea that ‘Christianity is a Whiteman’s religion’ is not just erroneous but a lack of understanding of Christian development. Christianity has been rooted in Africa since the birth of Christ. Africa was the

¹¹⁸ Felicity Apaah, “Lyrics of Songs and Poetry in Contemporary Indigenous Mission Theology: An Analysis of the Works of Six Ghanaians” (PhD diss. University of Ghana, 2018), 2.

¹¹⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong-Akwapim: Regnum Africa, 2013), 9-10.

¹²⁰ Apaah, “Lyrics of Songs,” 1.

¹²¹ See, A. Ahaligah, “Mother-Tongue Theology: Akan Christian Christological Re-Interpretations,” *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal* 1, no. 2 (2020): 10-18.

¹²² John Pobee, “Understanding Origins of African Christologies,” in *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 41. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 9.

place of refuge for the holy family when they escaped the treachery of Herod the Great; an African helped Christ carry the cross towards the redemption of mankind. Furthermore, Africans were present to witness the inception of the church at Pentecost.

One cannot be oblivious to the enormous role played by African sons and daughters during the Patristic era. This period marked the establishment of the foundations of the Church in terms of ethos and pathos. In light of history's trajectories, Africa cannot be described as aliens to the faith after all the impacts it has made. However, Africa lost some presence during the Dark Ages and some world developments as evidenced in Edinburgh 1910. Yet, the African Christian story takes a different turn a century after the Edinburgh conference in 1910.

Trends in worldwide Christianity have shown a shift of the Christian centre from Europe to the Global South which includes Africa. The church in Africa should therefore know its history and impact on Christianity and provide effective ways of continuing the evangelisation of Africa.

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