

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAMIC ENCOUNTER IN NORTH AFRICA: ITS AMBIVALENCE

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Abstract

My efforts in this research work have been geared towards x-raying Christianity in North Africa, its setbacks and growth. The study revealed the controversies over the person of Christ, which was partly the cause of the scourge or division among Christians in North Africa. In the course of this research work, I observed that the challenges posed a threat to the existence of Christianity in North Africa. Findings also showed the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity in North Africa, the effects of the doctrinal controversies, and the aftermath of the encounter between Christianity and Islam in North Africa. The objective of this research work is to present a way forward against similar issue in future. The work recommended that the doctrine of the church should be harmonized to avoid such scourge in future among Christians. Methods of approach are historical and phenomenological methods coupled with the review of related extant material.

Keywords: *origin, Coptic Church, strength, weakness, lasting heritage, challenges.*

1. Introduction

To Falk (1997), as a result of the doctrinal controversies and Donatists opposition to the church in North Africa, Egypt precisely, was readily accessible to the Muslims. The fertile valley presented a strong temptation to a people (Christians per se) who were attempting to find their substance on the desert regions of Arabia. Egypt which was the centre or heart of Christian activities, was to them (the Muslims) a granary of wheat to be exploited as much as possible. They crossed the Red sea and were quite at home with the Egyptian climate, people, and language, as in all these things Egypt had a close affinity with Arabia. Egypt was, however, not happy with the Byzantine rule. This is because Cyrus had applied a repressive policy since 63 toward the Coptic church.

Therefore they did not resist the Arab invasion when it occurred for they hoped the Arabs would drive the Greeks out of the country. Thinking that the Arab occupation would be temporary, as the Persian occupation had been, they supposed they would be independent after the Arabs withdrew again, but it turned out to be a mirage. The Arabs applied effective conquering policies. The North African Christians were obliged to pay tribute to the conquerors, which was not heavier than the imperial demands had been. The occupation was basically a military style in which the Arab tribes asserted themselves, breaking through the frontiers that their neighbours were either unable or unwilling to defend.

According to Groves (1958), the Christians were soon

treated as second class citizens, lacking equal privileges with the Muslims. They were also to show hospitality to the Muslims, which meant contributing to their sustenance. They were indeed not allowed to erect new churches or monasteries, or to exhibit any Christian faith, such as wearing a cross. Distinctions were made between Christians and Muslims in dress, saddles, the use of weapons, and the height of the houses of Christians reduced.

Therefore, the aim of this research work is to unravel the situation surrounding the encounter between Christians and Muslims in North Africa. To achieve this I shall look at some important causal factors that are involved in the issue.

2. Conceptual Framework

The term 'Copt', the Arabic spelling of “Egypt” is today applied to non-Islamized Egyptians but it has been also adopted for the early non-Hellenized population of Egypt (Baur, 2005). The country side and Upper Egypt was their home area.

As regards the Desert Fathers (monks), to Hunt (2008), there has been no age in the history of the church especially in North Africa in which the idea of imitating Christ has failed to make an appeal to the souls of the faithful. Yet even this desire has had its period of special intensity, its peculiar region where it became for a while the expression of Christianity. In the era of fourth and fifth centuries in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, the craving for perfection was more painful and more narrowly exclusive than ever elsewhere.

Thousands of men and women, in response to a passionate hunger after righteousness, set themselves to become perfect, as the father in heaven is perfect. They were not indeed, careless about sight belief and the holding fast of the faith. Faith to them is to live always in charity and humility, and to do good to your neighbour (Hunt, 2008, p.133). “Oh, Anthony”, said the heavenly voice, “turn your attention to yourself...”

First of all, it is necessary to understand that they were not chiefly theologians, or churchmen, or philanthropists, but imitators of Christ. Their desire was to be good. That they also believed rightly and did good followed-and these things, did follow-from their being good.

The word strength means in this context the power and influence that Christianity has as regards spirituality and to an extent in politics. It is the Christian quality of being brave and determined to thrive in a difficult situation Christianity found itself. On the other hand, weakness depicts setback or the opposite of strength (Turnbull, 2015). That is to say the setbacks experienced by Christians in North Africa during the persecution, Donatists' scourge and doctrinal controversies that nearly ruined the existence of Christianity in that area.

Persecution, averred Macquarrie (1981), is a discrimination which amounts to a measure of persecution, inflicts disabilities upon those who differ from ideas or practices strongly held. Although the power to persecute exists in the general community,

the act and the term are usually associated with public authority which treats differences as public offences. Religious differences serve as objects of persecution and with religious beliefs, sentiments or pretexts, as motivating or justifying persecution, even though public authority is usually the force at work to compel. Intolerance is the attitude that impels towards persecution, a will to demand conformity either to an existing or to an ideal pattern of thought and behaviour.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study include:

- To carefully examine the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity in North Africa.
- To investigate the causal factors involved in the encounter between Christianity and Islam.
- To create the consciousness of the effects of the encounter.
- To x-ray the factors responsible for the survival of Coptic Christianity and other Christian groups in North Africa.
- To examine also the implications of the contemporary Islamic challenges towards the development and sustenance of the church in North Africa.

4. Significance of the study

The significance of this research work basically stems from the fact that it addresses the issues that threatened the collective existence of Christian community in North Africa, and offers a valid

and insightful resource related extant material those future scholars especially church historians and anthropologists can consult to gain useful information on the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity in North Africa. It deals also with the lasting heritage of Christian missionary activities in north Africa in spite of Donatus scourge and doctrinal controversies.

5. Literature review and hypotheses

5.1 Origin of Christianity in North Africa

To Falk (1997), the dramatic conversion of Ethiopian, “minister of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians” (Acts 8:26-29); figures in the planting of Christianity in North Africa. This Ethiopian probably did not come from the Abyssinia, the present Ethiopia of today, but rather from area of its capital. The story of the Ethiopian leads us to believe that he was a literate proselyte who went to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. His reading in the Septuagint implied that the teaching of the Old Testament had reached the southern kingdom by means of the Jews who had migrated along the Nile.

Christianity spread into the north from Egypt before the reign of Constantinople, through Christians who escaped south into Nubia in the face of religious persecution and through merchants who traded between Egypt and Nubia (EI-Mahdi, 1965). After Constantine, the propagation of Christianity in Nubia and other

parts of North Africa continued through traders and travellers from Egypt. Parts of the Bible were translated into Nubian language. The Greek, Coptic, and Nubian languages were used side by side in religious services.

To Falk (1997), North Africa played a prominent role in the early civilizations of the world. The records of Narmer-Menes indicate the Egyptian civilization at the time of the Sumerians in Babylon and their contribution to the civilization of their day. The Israelites lived in the land of Goshen in Egypt for nearly four centuries. During Alexander the Great's reign the city of Alexandria gained importance, becoming a significant centre of commerce. Many Jews made it their home, building synagogues in it and introducing the worship of Jehovah and the instruction of the Torah to the people. The prominence of the Jewish faith and teaching in Alexandria led to the translation of the Septuagint (LXX) in that city. The Septuagint greatly promoted the diffusion of the teachings of the Old Testament among the Greek speaking peoples, including those of North Africa. The teaching of the Old Testament in the Greek in synagogues of the cities of Egypt, especially Alexandria, prepared the people for the coming of Christianity. According to Boer (1983), it is not known when the gospel reached Egypt. The preacher Apollos, whom we meet in Acts 18 and whom Paul mentions in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, was an Alexandrian Jew. A later report states that it was Mark who first preached the gospel in Egypt and established the church in Alexandria. What we

do know is that in the course of the second century Alexandria became a leading centre in the Christian church.

Again as in Egypt, the origin of the church in Ethiopia (Abyssinia) is also unknown Tradition says that a captive youth from Tyre (in present day Lebanon) founded it. What seems fairly certain is that, some time in the fourth century, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, appointed Frumentius to be the bishop of Axum in what was then northern Abyssinia. In traditional accounts Frumentius is identified as the young man mentioned above.

The constant contact with Palestine, the flight of Joseph and Mary with the young child (Matt. 2:13-15), and the journey of the Ethiopian to Jerusalem by way of Egypt would tend to indicate that the gospel came to Egypt during early years of the church. Eusebius accepted a tradition of his day that John Mark was an active missionary in Egypt and established churches in the city of Alexandria. Historians have, however, not been able to verify this report. Reliable records concerning the existence of Christianity in Egypt date to the episcopate of Demetrius of Alexandria (AD 189-232).

For Falk (1997), although the records of the entrance of Christianity in Africa are not complete, it is evident that the gospel came very early to northern West Africa. Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus Christ; it is thought that he became a believer, for his sons Alexander and Rufus are among the people known to those to whom the gospel according to Mark was written (Mark 15:21;

Rom. 16:13). Cyrenians are listed among the people present at Jerusalem when God's revelation on the Day of Pentecost took place (Acts 2:10). Cyrenians and Cyprians brought the gospel to Antioch; so it appears that the gospel had been planted in Cyrene (Acts 11:20).

The Berber tribes were the earliest inhabitants of the provinces of North Africa. Later, during the hey-days of their trade and expansion, Phoenicians settled at strategic places especially at Carthage. There has been speculation concerning the extent of the contact Carthage maintained with the people of the West African coast. Carthage was a prominent city of the early civilizations. The Punic Wars (264-146BC) revealed the stage of development and the strength of Carthage.

5.2 Coptic Church

According to Willis (2007), the Coptic Church traces its roots to Saint Mark, who is said to have brought Christianity to Egypt twelve years after Jesus' ascension. The Copts believe they are the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 19:19: "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border". When Alexandria became a major presence in early Christianity as a result of its fertile soil, the Coptic Church was recognized as a centre for learning. Much of currently accepted theology was hammered out there in the writings of major

foundation-building church theologians such as Origen and Augustine, the favorite of the Protestant Reformers.

Copts pride themselves as the ones who hosted the holy Family when they were forced to flee Palestine after the birth of Jesus. The Nicene Creed, a statement of faith used in many churches to this day, was created under its tutelage. The Catechetical school of Alexandria, probably the oldest such school in the world, was founded there in 190 CE. Monasticism was born in Egypt when the Desert Fathers retreated there to pray, meditate, and contemplate. Saint Anthony, the world's first Christian monk, was a Coptic priest from Upper Egypt. The prophet Muhammad was said to have had such respect for the Coptic church that he warned his warriors to tread lightly in Egypt, “for they are your protégés and Kith and Kin” (Willis, 2007 p.145).

Because of this, Muslim scholars saved much of what otherwise might have been lost when European Christianity quite literally fanned the flames that led to the burning of the Alexandrian library. Ever since the council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Copts have been independent of European Christianity. At that council like any other ecumenical council, church bishops met to settle matters of doctrine and practice vis-à-vis to address the heretical notion that Christ had only one nature rather than two. Here there is great disagreement. Church historians tend to argue, as did the fifth century council, that Copts are monophysites, that is, believing that

Christ had only one divine nature rather than, as the council determined, two natures, divine and human.

The Coptic Church insists they were miss understood at that council. Their position is that Christ had two perfect natures, but that those natures were joined in one called “the nature of the incarnate word.” They believe their expulsion was due to European bigotry as they claim that the Europeans wanted to isolate and finally abolish the Egyptians, who had their own Pope and who were insisting that church and state should be separate.

Although centred in Egypt, the Coptic Church has congregations scattered around the world. Some nine million Copts live in Egypt, almost one fifth of the population. Though they practice many of the same sacraments and feast days of Roman Catholicism, they no doubt hold the record for serious fasting. Out of 365 days in the year, Copts fast for 210 of them, allowing no food or drink to be consumed between sunrise and sunset.

5.2.1 Strengths of Christianity in North America

One of the strengths of Christianity in the North Africa is the Tertullian presentation of the Christian faith, with a call to a rigorous moral application, and his defence of the faith greatly contributed to the establishment of Christianity in North Africa despite the persecution by Septimius Severus (Falk, 1997). He wrote to encourage the Christians and to uphold Christianity in the face of its opponents. Pleading for it against the cruelties of the proconsul, he

indicated that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church and that the Christians were in every town. He created the trinity formula. Tertullian's writings are divided into three:

- a) Defence of Christianity against Jews, pagans, Gnostics, Marcionites, and the Roman government.
- b) Teaching of Christian doctrinal and ecclesiastical subjects such as baptism, the person of Christ, penitence, and resurrection.
- c) Practice of Christianity viz moral subjects such as virginity, proper dress, monogamy, chastity, fasting and public shows.

The most significant work in the first group is the Apology, or defence of Christianity against the persecution of the Roman state. Other factors that enhanced Christian faith in North Africa include the translation of the scriptures into Coptic and Ethiopian languages; the Nicene creed, a statement of faith used in many churches to this day, and the Catechetical school of Alexandria, probably the oldest such school in the world, was founded there in 190 CE. Monasticism was also born in North Africa (precisely Egypt) when the Desert Fathers retreated there to pray, meditate, and contemplate. Saint Anthony, the world's first Christian monk, was a Coptic priest from Upper Egypt (Willis, 2007). After the Decian persecution, Novatian led a group in the church who placed strict conditions on readmitting the church members who had denied their faith. Cyprian led the party that maintained that these people, the lapsi (“lapsed”) as they were called, should be admitted

to penance. The agitation of the Novatians caused some tension in the church, but Cyprian's party won the day. Cyprian contributed, like Tertullian, immensely in the establishment of the church-the communion of the saints, as the body of Christ (Organic Unification) in which God's grace is offered to people through the proclamation of the Word. Thus the church becomes the medium for salvation. Through his presentation of the ministry of the church, Cyprian strengthened both the role of the church and the role of the bishops, who gave guidance to the church. Cyprian's policy had been supported by the North African bishops and by Rome.

5.2.2 Weaknesses of Christianity in North Africa

The church was proclaimed to the people of the interior of Egypt, and the church became established throughout the country. The scriptures were translated into the Coptic language and services were held in the Coptic language. The church became a national church united under a patriarch. These factors helped the church withstand the Muslim invasion and suppression.

The Muslims did not permit the Coptic Church to offer Christian education to its members, especially to church leaders under pain of persecution. This was one of the main reasons for the decline of the Coptic Church. The Christians did not find the spiritual nurture to sustain them in the difficult situations and encourage them to witness to their faith. Therefore, only a remnant

of genuine Christians retained their faith through centuries of pressure (Falk, 1997). The Christian agencies failed to consider adequately the Arabic culture and adopt their methods to it. They denounced the Muslim religion, and so created opposition instead of providing bridges of communication.

The Latin language was the vehicle for preaching, and the scriptures were not translated into the language of the people. As a result, the Punic and Berber populations became Christians only to the degree that they became Latinized. The fact that Christianity did not become thoroughly rooted in the indigenous population may in part be the reason why Christianity suffered a greater loss in North Africa than in Egypt when the Muslim invaders came to conquer.

Later weaknesses were experienced through doctrinal controversies. The movement called Montanism arose in Phrygia (central Asia Minor) in AD 156. Phrygia was a region known for its wild, prophetic, pagan type of religion. It emphasized “spirit” which was expressed in a condition called ecstasy. The word “ecstasy” literally means to stand outside, that is, a person's acting as though he were not himself. In this condition the pagan priest could fast, suffer pain, dance, see visions, and prophesy. Montanus, after whom the movement is named, had been such a pagan Phrygian priest.

On becoming a Christian, he gave up paganism but expressed his new religion in the old religious manner. It was thus natural for him to emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit. The manner in which he made this emphasis set Montanus apart from the

Catholic Church. He was joined by two women namely Maximilla and Priscilla, who had left their husbands to help him.

At first they worked within the Catholic Church, but soon their teachings forced them to establish a separate church organization. Montanus taught that through him the age of the Paraclete had come, and that the latter spoke through the prophet Montanus and the two women who helped him. Soon the New Jerusalem would descend from heaven and become established in a nearby town named Pepuza. As Montanism grew, other doctrines and practices were added. One was to marry only once, but abandoning marriage for spiritual reasons was allowed. The three leading prophets namely Montanus and the two women could forgive sins, as could others of high spirituality. Women could hold office in the church. The movement influenced Tertullian, the great North African theologian. Like Gnosticism and Marcionism, Montanism had an effect on the Catholic Church. The church subsequently discouraged prophecy and unusual spiritual powers within it.

Montanism gave birth to two very unlike groups namely Dynamic Monarchians and Modalistic Monarchians. The first group maintained that Jesus was the son of God by adoption while the second group maintained that Christ was but a temporary form of manifestation of the one God, who revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy spirit at different periods in his divine self-revelation to man. The Modalistic Monarchians were more numerous than the

Dynamic Monarchians in North Africa, for the people were concerned to confess the unity of God.

The Manichaeism founded by Mani of Persia between 242 and 277 and was based on the Old Persian dualism of light and darkness, which they thought were eternally at war. They viewed the human body as basically a prison house of the realm of evil. Donatist controversy weakened the church more. This is because in 304 all Christians were required to offer sacrifices. The severity of the persecution varied with the attitude of the magistrates. It was rigorously applied in North Africa, and many Christians sacrificed or purchased certificates attesting that they had sacrificed.

However, when peace was again restored and the Christian faith was recognized by the Edict of Milan in 313, the church in North Africa more than ever before had to deal with the problem of restoring to fellowship those who had denied the faith during the persecution. Some Christians felt they should be readmitted upon the confession of repentance, whereas others thought they should be re-baptized. The difficulty became acute because some church leaders had purchased security from persecution, while many lay Christians had remained faithful and some had suffered martyrdom.

The faithful Christians did not want to receive the sacraments at the hands of ministers who had denied their faith during the persecution by purchasing certificates attesting that they had worshipped the Roman gods, and did also not wish to acknowledge the ordination of another person by such a minister. In

311 a new bishop called Caecilian had been ordained in Carthage. One of the bishops who participated in the ordination was Felix of Aptunga, who was accused of surrendering the scriptures in the recent persecution. Consequently, the accusers of Felix considered the ordination of Caecilian invalid. The church officially supported Caecilian while many bishops opposed him. The North African church became a divided kingdom. The opponents of Caecilian elected their own bishop named Marjorinus. Each side excommunicated the other. Both sides appealed to Constantine in 313 to settle the dispute, which made him to called a synod in Rome. The synod declared Felix innocent of the charges made against him and decided in favour of the election of Caecilian. The matter was complicated by the fact that Constantine had given financial assistance to the church in Carthage (the Caecilian party), but not to the new church of Marjorinus.

The schism in North Africa only increased in extent and bitterness. In 316, Constantine intervened forcibly. He took away the churches of the dissidents and exiled all their bishops. Among these was Donatus, who had succeeded Marjorinus and who incidentally gave the separatist movement its name.

The tragedy of the divided church and of the government's intervention, forcing the Donatists to conform to imperial order, can only be seen in the light of history. The Donatist church might have played a significant role in the establishment of Christianity in Africa. Christianity was established in Egypt because the Coptic

Church became the national church. The Donatists appeared as the African national party and won many people from the rank and file of the Berber society. One of the factors that engendered them to win the Berbers may have been their opposition to the Roman authority and the expression of racial and national independence. This stand may be observed in part in their close relations with the Circumcellions. One may equally ask what the future of the church might have been if the church had remained united.

5.3 Christianity Encounters Islam

Islamization and Arabization of North Africa started by the encounter between Christians and Muslims along the Nile River, which is located in northern Sudan and Southern Egypt. There were a number of small Nubian kingdoms throughout the middle ages, the last of which collapsed in 1504, when Nubia became divided between Egypt and the Sennar sultanate result in the Arabization of much of the Nubian population.

EI-Mahdi (1965) observes that the trade relation between Egypt and Nubia used four main routes into the interior of the Nubia. The first route started from Asyut and passed the Kharja Oasis, Salima and into Darfur in Western Sudan. This route was known as the Arabian road. The second route branched out of the first to reach Dongola, Korti, and crossed the Bayuda desert and the River Nile to Shendi, it then followed the river south to enter Blue Nile region in the east. The third route started at Daraw, crossed the

Nubian desert to Abu Hamad, and then followed the river south along the eastern bank until it joined the second route. There was the fourth route, the Nile but this was of less importance because of its cataracts and meanderings which slowed down traffic on it, and also because some of the trading centres were far away from the Nile.

These routes were not only used for trade purposes, but they later became ways used by Egyptian and Arab armies for conquering Suddan, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and the like. It should also be remembered that both Christianity and Islam entered this region through these routes. On the other hand, the commercial relations between Egypt and Sudan gradually led to the occupation of the northern part of the Sudan by Egypt. In 2000 BC, military expeditions were continually sent against the Sudan by the Pharaohs of the twelfth dynasty. These expeditions succeeded in occupying the entire Sudan alongside other parts of North African region between the first cataract and Kerma. Fortresses were built which were inhabited by soldiers, merchants, miners and other Egyptians who were engaged in exploring the resources of the Sudan and their neighbours.

To Falk (1997), consequent upon the doctrinal controversies and Donatus scourge in North Africa, Egypt was readily accessible to the Muslims. The fertile valley presented a strong temptation to a people who were attempting to find their substance on the desert regions of Arabia. Egypt was to them a granary of wheat to be

exploited as much as possible. They crossed the Red Sea and were quite at home with the Egyptian climate, people, and language, as in all these things Egypt had a close affinity with Arabia.

Egypt was, however, unhappy with the Byzantine rule. Since 631, Cyrus had applied a repressive policy toward the Coptic Church. Therefore, they did not resist the Arabs invasion, for they hoped the Arabs would drive the Greeks out of the country. Thinking that the Arab occupation would be temporary, as the Persian occupation had been, they supposed they would be independent after the Arabs withdrew again. Consequently, the Arab army under Amr ibn al Ac invaded Egypt in 640 without encountering strong resistance. They took Alexandria and rapidly conquered Egypt to the first cataract. However, the Egyptians were badly deceived, for the Arab occupation became permanent (Oliver, 1962).

The Arabs applied effective conquering policies. The people were obliged to pay tribute to the conquerors, but this was not heavier than the imperial demands had been. At first they granted religious toleration. The Coptic patriarch was restored to office, and the church was permitted to retain its property. They did not exert pressure to produce converts. It was basically a military occupation in which the Arab tribes asserted themselves, breaking through the frontiers that their neighbours were either unable or unwilling to defend.

The Christians were soon treated as second class citizens, lacking equal privileges with the Muslims. They were also to show hospitality to the Muslims, which meant contributing to their sustenance. They were also not allowed to erect new churches or monasteries, or to exhibit any Christian practice that would present the Christian faith, such as wearing a cross. Distinctions were made between Christians and Muslims in dress, saddles, the use of weapons, and the height of the houses (Groves, 1958).

By the end of the first century of Muslim occupation, a poll tax, a land tax and various requisitions for the army and for other purposes were imposed on the Christians, whereas there is no evidence that a tax was imposed on Muslims. The poll tax amounted to three or four dinars per adult male. In order to escaped from this financial pressure, so many people claimed to have accepted Islam that a policy, making converts pay was introduced to support the revenue. In 744 the governor of Egypt again offered tax exemption to converts. It is estimated that in response twenty four thousand Christians became Muslims (Falk, 1997). The Coptic Christian community existed under very trying circumstances and became sadly reduced.

The pressure and persecution inflicted on the Christians by the Muslims also to a large extent stopped the training of the believers. There were not enough pastors to continue the ministry of the church. Some of the leaders retired to monastic life. As a result, the Christians did not find the bond of fellowship to sustain them in

the persecution and difficult situations. There was a significant reduction in the number of Christians. Only a remnant of genuine Christians remained true to their faith through centuries of pressure.

In its noble struggle for existence, the Coptic Church failed to train leaders adequately for the church and to instruct the laity in the Christian faith. This situation, in addition to the restrictions on evangelism imposed by the civil authorities caused the church to lose its vitality. The service became more ritualistic and the vibrant testimony of a relationship with Christ became less evident.

In 697, the Arabs took Carthage, the chief city of Roman North African territory (Foster, 1979). The main body of Christians in Egypt is the church which is called Coptic. The name Coptic is an abbreviation of the Greek name for Egypt, Aiguotos (that is, Gupt, which became Copt). Its liturgy and Bible are in Coptic (that is Egyptian), which is otherwise now a dead language. Arabic, the language of the invader, long ago became the spoken language of the whole land. Through the centuries the disadvantages of being a Christian have caused a steady 'leak' to Islam. The disadvantages have been a heavy poll tax on non-Muslims, periods of persecution, marriage difficulties (example in order to marry a Muslim one must become a Muslim), and not least, the annoyance of being treated in one's own land as if one belonged to a foreign minority.

In the other part of North Africa, to talk about a 'leak' is to think of a bucket with a hole in it. But to think of Christianity in North Africa is to think of a bucket from which the bottom dropped

out. The Christian population declined in the destructive Vandal period, and declined still further when Justinian's army fought to destroy the Vandals. Here is a description written at that time,

Men were massacred, women and children enslaved; wealth was plundered; the whole country was full of refugees ... Libyans who survived fled to the cities, or Sicily, or other islands, most people of note to Byzantine (Foster, 1979, p.16) .

Notice that in these disorders, it was people of colonial stock, Roman or Greek, who had somewhere to flee to, and who fled. The Berbers, that is the people of indigenous African descent, remained. All evidence points to the fact that the Christian church had only a slight hold upon these, who were the vast majority. And in the later Arab invasion it was this African population remaining who were won over to Islam.

Christians who saw the rise of this Arab religion recognized its close relation to their own-the same God, the Patriarchs, the prophets, with Jesus among them; similar practices of prayers, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage. They wondered if these two streams might not flow together. Yet from the start there were Christian customs which caused offence. Christians claimed that Jesus was more than a prophet, was son of God. This title was, and is, blasphemous in Muslim ears. Christian prayers to God the father,

through the son, along with high reverence for the Virgin Mary, reminded Muslims of the myths of the heathen rather than the pure monotheism of the prophets and Jesus himself.

We may well linger over those words of Muhammad about Christians, You will find, nearest in love to you, those who say “we are Christians” (Foster, 1979, p.19).

That is what they had found in Ethiopia. History would have been different, if, instead of enmity, this sense of kinship had remained and grown. History might have been different if in their own land and language they had been able, from the start, to know the Jesus of the New Testament.

5.4 Lasting Heritage

The Nicene Creed, a statement of faith used in many churches of this day emanated from North Africa. The Catechetical school of Alexandria, perhaps the oldest of such school in the world was founded in Alexandria about 190 CE. Monasticism was born in Egypt when the Desert Fathers retreated there to pray, meditate, and contemplate. Saint Anthony, the world's first Christian monk, was a Coptic priest from Upper Egypt. No wonder some denominations have monasteries and also organize retreats or set apart for prayer, meditation and to contemplate.

The writings of Tertullian which include the Apologetic (or Apologeticum) works against heathens and Jews, his polemic works which deals with the refutation of the Gnostics, the Testimony of the soul, his numerous practical or ascetic treatises which throw much light on the moral life of the early church also sustained the church growth. Among these belong the books “on prayer”, “on Penance,” and “on patience” (Hunt, 2008).

Tertullian in his Apologeticum (p.197) appeals for toleration of Christianity, attacking pagan superstition, rebutting charges against Christian morality, and claiming that Christians are no danger to the state, but useful citizens (Livingstone, 1980). Other early North African theologians did contribute their own legacies. These include Cyprian's 'The Unity of the church’, Clement of Alexandria (his writing on the Ante-Nicene Fathers’), Polycarp's “The Martyrdom of Polycarpi”, “The Epistle of Barnabas”, “The Shepherd of Hermas”, Justin Martyr's “The Resurrection”, Irenaeus' “The Treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ” and Origen's “Commentary on the Gospel of John” and so on.

5.5 Contemporary effects of the Islamic challenges

As of today, we have the Roman Catholic Mission, the Anglican Church (through church missionary society-CMS), the Presbyterian mission, African Inland Mission (AIM), the Coptic mission, the Pentecostal mission, Seventh-day Adventist church,

and other new religious movements. In the course of Islamization and Arabization of North Africa, preaching, teaching or baptizing children under 18 years could be considered an offence, and in any case required an annual licence (Aruma, 2013). In North Africa, there have been much conflicts till date consequent upon Islamizing and Arabizing Christians in that region. The occupation of the North Africa by the Arab-Muslims affected the lives of the people in three ways namely their culture, religion and language. This transformed their culture from African culture into Arab-Islamic culture, their religion from African traditional religion/Christian religion into Islamic religion and their various African languages into one common language, the Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. In North Africa especially in Sudan, the nationalization of missionary schools in 1957 in the south and the establishment of the Missionary Society Act in 1962 were meant for quicker advancement of Islam and to harass the activities of the Sudanese church respectively. It involves also the confiscation of and destruction of church property. Christians were denied to occupy public offices. There are also cruel punishments and inequality being meted against the Christians daily.

To Karl Marx, religion is the “sigh of the oppressed,” the “opium of the people” which abolishment can only occur by emancipation from the estranged world of human objectification” (Tucker, 1978). To Okwueze (2012), the import of the statement is therefore far beyond the mere 'blindfold opium' which Marx argued

it to be. Religion is life. Some others in this group of thought further insist that religion being only about the spiritual, secular mortals are ill-equipped to speak about it even if that mortal is called a professor.

Religion no doubt influences the thought processes of an individual. Religious views and beliefs could control an individual in many different ways. Irrespective of the ambiguity that characterized the definition of terrorism, persecution, and religious extremism and their concomitant killings and damages especially the way they have become prevalent globally today more over in North Africa hurt to no small measure in individuals' and states' protection and, therefore, portends dangerous consequences to the existence of Christianity in North Africa and to global security.

There are different Islamic sects in North Africa among which are the Derika, the Izala, the Kaulu (Kablu), the Muslim brothers, the Tijjianiya, the Quaddiriya, the Shite, the Sunni, the Islamic State (ISIS), the Muslim Brotherhood, the A1-Qaeda, the Taliban, the A1 Shabab and several other splinter groups (Nmah, 2012). The high rate these groups carried out their religious fanaticism in North Africa has caused severe calamity and disaster on the lives and property of Christians in that region. Churches are destroyed on daily basis, and Christians' survival threatened very often. Christianity is the target of the sects especially the Muslim

Brotherhood. This experience has caused untold hardships and setbacks for Christian expansion in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, Somalia, Morocco, Mauritania and the like.

6. Recommendations

The research work has unveiled the bases for the strengths and weaknesses of Christianity in North Africa which almost extinct Christianity in North Africa. The present challenges seem to be tearing the unity and existence of the church in North Africa. Hence this research work recommends the following.

The need for the church's survival and growth is to maintain a balanced biblical interpretation of the person of Christ.

Cordial Christian relationship with Muslim communities in the North Africa through religious dialogue should be strongly established. This is to avoid any kind of enmity between the two sides, but to create the spirit of tolerance, harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Governments of North African countries should established diplomatic relations especially with Israel who the Islamic governments regarded as an enemy. This is to enable pilgrims to be able to travel to the Holy Land for pilgrimage, a thing which has been denied Christians.

The education system should be revived and both English and Arabic languages should be used as lingua franca of instruction

in North African schools.

To Nmah (2016), there is the need for the ecclesiastical leadership to embrace the doctrine of sola scriptura as the pivot of Christian faith which is necessary in respect of the doctrine of the Apostolic faith in order to counter the issues of doctrinal controversies.

There is also the need for the various strands in the Christian communion to understand that in the spirit of one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ or in the spirit of ecumenism, that extreme of any kind is not allowed so as to enable the church to grow in unity and purpose.

According to Nmah (2016), no Christian group should have a particular theological statement of its own that will fence it off from other Christian churches.

There is also the need for the churches in North Africa to be united more than ever in the face of global Islamic terrorists' attacks on the churches.

To Nmah (2015), the Trinity, the Apostles' creed or Nicene creed, the Eucharist, the baptism, the Christmas, the good Friday, the Easter, the Epiphany of our Lord, Lent, the Pentecost and prayer, all christo-centric, can serve as a meeting point among the Christians irrespective of their coat of many doctrinal colours.

7. Methodology

This research work employed the use of primary and

secondary sources to obtain data. The primary sources involved oral interviews while secondary sources entail books, journals, artifacts, diaries, private and public brochures, homilies, archives, archaeological data and so on. The work is also based on historical and phenomenological approaches.

8. Conclusion

Right from the time of Christian encounter with Muslim incursion in North Africa, all policies of successive governments in this region were geared towards the Islamization and Arabization of the region.

Persecution, occupation and religious extremism as encountered by Christians in North Africa was nothing new, but it was part of their Jewish heritage (Douglas, 1980). The association of witness and suffering, punishment, cruelty, worry allow no peace to and the like began as early as the second part of Isaiah, was crystallized in the Seleucid struggle. In the time of Nero, there was fire out break and Nero used Christians as scapegoats for the fire of Rome in 64 AD and condemning them also for the name of Christ (Livingstone, 1980).

In persecution literature, many of the New Testament writings reflect the tension and potential conflict between Christianity and the state. The author of Luke-Acts, for example, was in part motivated by a desire to defend the church against charges of disloyalty to Rome or treasonable activity (Kee and

Young, 1981). Mark, with its strong emphasis on Jesus victory through suffering and death, may have been written in part to encourage Christians who had grown fearful under Nero's persecution. But three writings in particular reflect either actual conflict or a threat of conflict; these are Revelation, IPeter, and Hebrews.

In conclusion, Christians who saw the rise of this Arab religion recognized its close relation to their own-the same God, the Patriarchs, the prophets, with Jesus among them, similar practices of prayers, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage. They wondered if these two streams might not flow together. Yet from the start there were Christian customs which caused offence. Christians claimed that Jesus was more than a prophet, and he was son of God. This title was, and is blasphemous in Muslim ears. Christian prayers to God the father, through the son, along with high reverence for the Virgin Mary, reminded Muslims of the myths of the heathen rather than the pure monotheism of the prophets and of Jesus himself.

As Christians we may well linger over those words of Muhammad about us,

You will find, nearest in love to you, those who say "we are Christians" (Foster, 1979,p.19).

That is what they had found in Ethiopia. History would have been different, if instead of enmity, this sense of kinship had remained and grown. History might have been different if in their

own land and language they had been able, from the start, to know the Jesus of the new Testament.

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