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Biography as History in Explication of African Christianity A Reflection in Appreciation of Professor Jonathan Bonk

By Jesse N. K. Mugambi

Introduction

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) received its official Africa launch when Founder Professor Jonathan Bonk made his first DACB-related trip to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in February 1999. The DACB has become a unique initiative that focuses on compiling and publishing biographies of pioneer African Christians throughout this continent. The name emphasizes the primary and fundamental role of Africans in the process of rooting the Christian faith in the African cultural soil. It is an awkward reality that the history of Christianity in Africa is documented in Western scholarship as the initiative of European and American missionaries despite the fact that they owe their success to the work of the African catechists and other African personnel who feature only peripherally or not at all in missionary historiography. As founder and promoter of the DACB, Bonk has devoted much of his time, effort and resources to nurturing this insightful project.

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) is dedicated to Professor Bonk. Having been brought up in Ethiopia, Bonk internalized and resonated with the African religious ethos in ways short-term and part-time missionaries could not. While serving as Research Professor of Mission at Boston University, Director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) and Editor of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Bonk has contributed immensely towards clarifying the role of Christian mission across cultures, in a global context that is increasingly secularized and interconnected.

Africa and Africans in the History of Christianity

Africa features prominently in the history of the first four centuries of Christianity as it does in the twenty-first century. It was in the Roman Province of Africa—*Africa Proconsularis*—that the biblical narrative of the nativity of Jesus began. Simon from Cyrene, in present day Tunisia, would carry the cross on which Jesus was crucified.²² The first African convert into the Christian faith was

²² Luke 23: 26-27

a prominent Ethiopian pilgrim.²³ Moreover, the earliest formulations of Christian doctrine were by African theologians—Augustine of Hippo, Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Felicity, Perpetua, Tertullian, and others.²⁴

The centrality of Africa in the historical documentation of early Christianity has been trivialized in Western historiography, except for a few exceptional scholars, among whom Professor Andrew Walls is exemplary.²⁵ Thomas Oden has lucidly described the pivotal role of Africa in shaping European Christianity, long before it was misappropriated for political and economic leverage throughout Europe. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 endorsed the principle of denominations as markers of ethnocentric identity through which princes wielded power to determine the religion of their subjects. That legacy remains presupposed, even though secularism is nominally normative at least for the present.²⁶

Western missionary endeavors in Africa during the twentieth century have been amply documented.²⁷ In contrast, African contributions toward the establishment and growth of African Christianity remain poorly documented, or not at all. It is this gap that the DACB endeavors to fill. Bonk deserves our appreciation for his devotion to this project. He has encouraged the younger generation of African scholars to compile as much information as can be found on African contributions in order to establish and root Christianity in African soil. His initiative has borne much fruit, the taste of which can be sampled in the *Journal of African Christian Biography*.²⁸ The earliest scholars of the Christian faith were Africans. Both the Coptic Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are much older than the Catholic and Protestant churches of Europe whose offspring denominations and sects in Tropical Africa are integral

²³ Acts 8: 26-40

²⁴ See, for example, Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011).

²⁵ Andrew Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect" in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 86-115; *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, New York: Orbis, 1996.

²⁶ On this point see, for example, Steven Patton, "The Peace of Westphalia and its Effects on International Relations, Diplomacy and Foreign Policy," in *The Histories*, Vol 10, Issue 1, Article 5, 2019. [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol10/iss1/5]

²⁷ Archives of the various missionary societies provide ample documentation on the work of missionaries, but hardly any reference to the work of the Africans who assisted them and provided linkage between the colonizers and the colonized.

²⁸ <https://dacb.org/journal/>

to the process of European colonization.²⁹

Ethiopia and Egypt feature significantly in the nativity of Jesus. The first convert into Christianity outside Palestine was an Ethiopian pilgrim.³⁰ The label “Africa” now designating the entire continent bearing this name is derived from the Roman Province of Africa—*Africa Proconsularis*—established by Julius Caesar in 146 BCE, along the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea.³¹ Thus it is impossible to conceptualize the notion “Africa” without reference to the nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile River with tributaries originating in the East African highlands. Recent attempts to detach the continent of Africa from the original Roman Province of Africa are historically erroneous and ideologically misleading. For millennia there has been trade southwards from the Mediterranean Sea and northwards across the Niger River. The Sahara was never a hindrance to prosperous trading between inhabitants of the temperate Mediterranean coastland and those in the tropical lands. Both Christianity and Islam have converts in Africa, but the African cultural and religious heritage remains resilient.

Until the twentieth century the Sahara Desert has not been featured in interactions between peoples of Africa and those in Europe and Asia. One of the oldest universities worldwide was Timbuktu, the Trade Centre where for centuries Islam would interact with the African cultural and religious heritage. In 1526, Leo Africanus described the wealthy lifestyle of Timbuktu, where gold nuggets were the medium of economic exchange. Eastwards, toward the Red Sea, Christianity had been flourishing for centuries in Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia.³²

The imperial history of East Africa is also interesting and inspiring. The Kenya coast in particular, became a zone of cultural and religious interaction between Asia, Africa, and Europe, especially between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. When Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer, arrived at Malindi along the East African coast in March 1498, he found Arabic Islam already established.³³ Nearly a century earlier, the Chinese admiral, Zheng He had made voyages along the East African coast as far south as Malindi.³⁴ Thus,

²⁹ On this point see, for example, Stephen C. Neill, *History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1964).

³⁰ Acts 8:26-39

³¹ On this point see, for example, Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

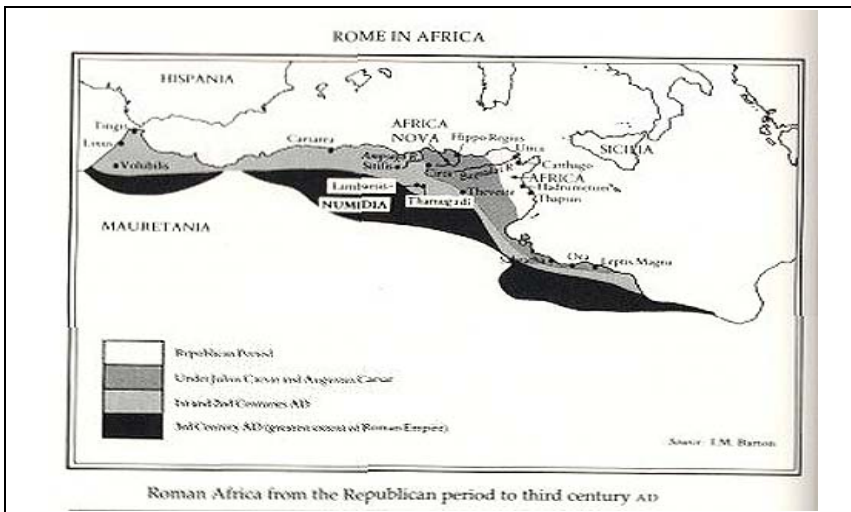
³² On Leo Africanus' description of Timbuktu, see for example, <http://www.swcta.net/teachers/brant/World%20History/AfricaDoc2.pdf>

³³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vasco-da-Gama>

³⁴ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1334/the-seven-voyages-of-zheng-he/>

the exposure of East Africans to foreign cultures and religions began centuries before the nineteenth century European conquest and occupation.

The European (and North American) missionary enterprise in Africa, which came as an appendage of imperial presence in Africa, over-emphasized (and continues emphasizing) the role of missionaries, while downplaying the contribution of African converts to the spread of the Gospel. Yet, in fact, the first and second generations of African catechists and teachers, despite their limited schooling, contributed much more than the missionaries toward the spread of Christianity across Tropical Africa. Catechists, lay leaders, and Sunday school teachers have the closest contact with the youth potential and actual converts. They are the most convincing in outreach.³⁵ The DACB focuses on this aspect of documentation, in appreciation of non-stipendiary and non-enrolled African Christians in the task of spreading the Gospel.



Significance of Biography in the Documentation of African Christianity

Biographical and autobiographical sketches take substantial proportions of Christian Scripture. Some, such as those of St. Paul, are the predominant genre, while others include occasional biographical sketches. Religious texts without biographical and autobiographical passages are too detached from the

³⁵ On this point see, for example, Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

lives of actual and potential believers, whereas biographies and autobiographies appeal to readers who empathize, identify, and sympathize with the persons to whom the texts refer. Thus those religions and sects with founders tend to appeal more to non-academic believers than those that focus on theoretical and hypothetical propositions. Biographies of founders of religions, denominations, and sects are essential for the orientation of converts. Predominantly oral cultures risk losing indispensable knowledge and wisdom from non-literate or semi-literate leaders and also from literate ones who have little or no interest in recording their own knowledge, experience, and expertise.

In lieu of autobiographies and written (or recorded) sermons and teachings, the DACB will hopefully serve as a resource to document some aspects of African Christianity that would otherwise be forgotten. From an African perspective, Paul's epistles are most appealing because of their autobiographical sketches. Likewise, the sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels authenticate his teachings. Accurate factual documentation of African Christianity is problematic partly owing to the scarcity of biographies and autobiographies. Sometimes in compiling eulogies, arguments arise regarding the personality profile of a particular priest, lay leader or ordinary member. Yet in predominantly oral cultures there tends to be little or no concern for rigidity, because the multiplicity of opinions is normative. Consensus ultimately prevails.

African churches lack reliable documentation on the basic teachings of their founders, teachers and preachers. Many African preachers do not write or record their sermons and, as a result, their wise counsel cannot be passed on to people other than those who were present and attentive. Audio and video recording equipment, although a useful asset, is rarely used in most rural areas owing to such constraints as electricity, recording and playback equipment, cultural orientation, and so on. Interestingly, members of a congregation who attentively listen to a sermon absorb whatever they hear and process it depending on many factors— including exposure, literacy level, and earlier preparation.

The obsolescence of electronic equipment is another constraint through which audio and video recording has become unreliable as means to preserve orally delivered lectures, lessons, sermons and speeches. Orally delivered lectures and sermons, unless transcribed into literary format, fade into oblivion after only a short while. Each listener during a sermon hears and interprets a message differently, and the speaker can hardly ever repeat the same speech or sermon through oral delivery. Thus there remains a great challenge in African Christianity on how to preserve the insights, teaching, and wisdom of leaders who communicate orally without written versions of their sermons and addresses. The documentation of autobiographies and biographies can best be preserved in the

long term by saving transcribed versions to an online resource like the DACB. Bonk has repeatedly urged African scholars to collect and record the biographies of as many African Christians as possible, then to forward those transcriptions to the DACB for preservation.

Empathetic Mission and Missiology in Africa

In his book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem* (New York: Orbis, 2006), Bonk makes a sharp distinction between *patronage* and *partnership* in missionary outreach. The Western missionary enterprise, especially in Africa, is premised upon the imperial paradigm, with the main objective to indoctrinate the potential and actual converts to emulate the values, virtues, norms, conduct, and outlook of the missionaries and their respective dominant imperial cultures. In this imperial approach, the Gospel is made a tool of empire, rather than a liberating incentive. As a result, successful “conversion” is evaluated on the basis of the level to which the convert has imbibed the language, values, norms, and attitudes of the missionary and his imperial cultural assumptions. Before long, the descendants of the first generation of converts reject missionary tutelage and interpret the Gospel on the basis of contextual relevance and applicability. Such rejection is not unique. It is typical throughout the history of Christian missions across cultures.

Roland Oliver in his book *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longman, 1970) documents the role of European missionary initiatives in the inculcation of Western cultural values among African converts. Western critique of the African cultural and religious heritage is exemplified in the book by Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, MA: C. Stark, 1974).³⁶ From an African perspective, Arnold Temu’s critique of this approach is self-explanatory in his work *The British Protestant Missions in Kenya 1873-1929*. Over a much longer period, and across Africa, Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed have described the missionary encounter between the West and Africa in *A History of the Christian Church in Africa*.³⁷

Missionaries appreciative of the African cultural and religious heritage have been few and far between. The cultural superiority syndrome has prevented

³⁶ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod & Hartford: Claude Starke, 1974).

³⁷ Arnold Temu, *The British Protestant Missions in Kenya 1873-1929*, thesis (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1967); Bengt Sundkler and C. Steed, *A History of the Christian Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

most missionaries from appreciating and appraising African cultural and religious heritage, on the assumption that might is right and West is best. Self-critique among missionaries has been rare and when expressed has yielded conflict in missionary policy and practice. One of the consequences of this missionary condescendence has been the rise of independent churches across Africa. David B. Barrett in his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa* reported as many as fifteen thousand African independent churches in Africa by 1968. The precedent having been set, the proliferation of church independency seems unstoppable in Africa.³⁸

Future of Christianity and Churches of the Future in Africa

Global demographic statistics indicate that adherence to Christianity has been shifting from Europe and North America to Africa and South America, while secularism has been increasing in countries that used to be famous for sending missionaries to Africa and Asia. If evangelization had been rationally justified, Europe and North America would by now have become mission fields, receiving missionaries especially from Africa. It turns out, however, that the missionary enterprise was, and remains, much more than a campaign for converting human souls for heavenly salvation. In cultural terms, Christian mission cannot be abstracted from cultural influence. Missionaries take their language and culture with them and hardly ever internalize the culture and language of the peoples they go to convert. Consequently, the missionary enterprise becomes more cultural indoctrination than religious conversion.³⁹

The rising secularism in Europe and North America inevitably filters into the rest of the world, influencing the people in countries that for centuries had remained predominantly rural and resonant with nature. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 infected twenty-six million people within six months, resulting in nearly 860,000 deaths. The virus spared no category of people—by age, status, class, gender, race, nationality or religion. Advancements in both science and technology have had relatively little or no significant safeguard against infection by COVID-19. This pandemic is reminiscent of the ten plagues in the Old Testament narratives, except that COVID-19 was technologically explained rather than religiously interpreted. Neither the advancement in technology nor the emphasis on piety seems to have been significantly advantageous. The regulation of social distancing was made mandatory for all persons to minimize

³⁸ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

³⁹ On this point see, for example, J. N. K. Mugambi, *Future of the Church and Church of the Future in Africa* (Nairobi: AACC, 1991).

infection. Prayer did not prove to be effective as an antidote against infection. Churches and other places of worship had to observe the mandatory regulations to prevent contagious infections.

One of the lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that religiosity cannot be a substitute for scientifically researched and also technologically approved measures to minimize infection and ensure effective treatment against pandemics. The median age in Africa during 2020 is 19.7 years, contrasted with that of Europe (42.5). Secularism is normative in Europe and North America while sacral religiosity is normative in Africa – blending various brands of Christianity and Islam with traditional African religious beliefs and practices.

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) is a timely initiative, documenting African Christianity at the crossroads between the western missionary enterprise and authentic African religious initiatives and innovations. The future of Christianity in Africa, in the long term, will depend largely on the capacity and strategy of Africans to withstand the pressures of secularization as a process, and secularism as an ideology. The tendency to posit “westernization” as the panacea for African challenges is erroneous, because cultures are not analogous to the grafting of scions to mother plants or to crossbreeding livestock. History teaches that humans have great capacity for cultural resilience.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ On this point see, for example, John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).