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A Comparative Study of Religions

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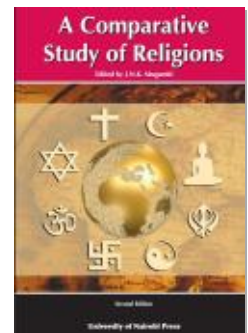
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Growth and Spread of Christianity

G.E.M. Ogutu

Introduction

The story of the growth and spread of Christianity is an amazing story. It is a story that portrays the assurance, command and promise that was made to the disciples by the founder of the church himself. According to Mathew:

..... and Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.¹

In the previous chapter we looked at Christ and the church he founded. We traced the story of the primitive church up to the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem. In this chapter we want to look at the church and the Roman world, medieval Christianity, the crisis of the Reformation and Christianity in the modern world. It is important to note that the ground covered by this chapter is very wide. What you have here will be a summary of the key issues involved. The chapter will look at: -

1. The spread of Christianity into the other parts of the Roman Empire and the relationship between that empire and the Christianity church;

¹ Matthew 28: 18–20.

2. Circumstances that led to Christianity becoming the religion of the Roman Empire;
3. Medieval Christianity and the rise of the crusades;
4. The internal problems of the church that led to Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation;
5. Nineteenth century missionary zeal and the rise of modern Christianity;
6. Christian unity in diversity and the role of ecumenical movements.

Christianity in the Roman World

Following the council of Jerusalem and its decision, that non-Jewish people did not have to obey the laws of Moses in order to be Christians, Paul and his team went back to Antioch eager to preach the gospel even further afield. Just before the Council, he had completed his first missionary journey (AD 45–49), which started at Seleucia (the nearest port to Antioch), on to Salamis, Paphos (both in Cyprus), Perga, Leonium, Derbe, back to Perga and on to Seleucia and Antioch.

After the issues had been cleared, Paul decided to visit the churches he had founded. The second missionary journey (AD 50–53) was ambitious. Taking off from Antioch he visited Tarsus, Derbe, Iconium, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, across the sea to Caesarea, down to Jerusalem and back to Antioch (Acts 15: 36–18:22). The third missionary journey (AD 53–58) Took Paul to most of the places he visited during the second journey. The only difference is that the third journey ended in Jerusalem where he was warmly received by James but arrested, tried and imprisoned. Paul being a Roman citizen appealed to Caesar for a proper trial. It was therefore decided that he be taken to Rome.

On the journey to Rome, Paul, accompanied by Luke, was well treated. Their ship was wrecked off Malta but no life was lost. On

reaching Rome, they found there was already a Christian Church. Paul was warmly welcomed and in spite of being under guard, was given a house where people visited him. He spent time writing to friends (Philemon) and to communities (Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians) whom he had left behind. Paul's appeal was unsuccessful and he was put to death. The persecutions by Emperor Nero, following the fire of Rome, for which the Christians were blamed, led to the martyrdom of St. Peter as well.

From historic records we learn that Apostolic Christianity spread very rapidly through the Roman Empire, reaching places like Judea, Italy, France and North Africa, following the strong roots it had taken in Asia Minor.

The circumstances, which favoured the rapid spread, included the unification brought about by the Roman Empire, the common language and the influence of the Jews and of the Synagogue. But these were just general causes. More specific causes included:

- (a) the force of the Christian truth as opposed to the myth and fables of other religions;
- (b) the high moral standards of the Christians – their integrity and charity attracted many;
- (c) their doctrines, particularly integrity and dignity of all men in the sight of God;
- (d) miracles and wonders which abounded were seen as signs of God's good pleasure and support;
- (e) the examples of the martyrs showed that here there was something which the faithful believed was worth dying for. It also showed a strong belief in the reality of the next life.

The church suffered persecutions under the Roman Emperors Nero, Domitian, the Antonine emperors (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus, Marcus, Aurelius and Commodus) Septimus Severus, Maximian of Thrace, Decius, Valerian and Diocletian. The severity and extent of the persecutions varied from one emperor

to the next. Diocletian died in AD305 and there was a lot of rivalry between his successors. This rivalry ended on October 28, 312 when Constantine defeated Maxentius, his rival, at the battle of Milvian Bridge. While preparing for the battle, Constantine is said to have had a dream in which he saw the sign of the first letters of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet, that is:

With this sign were the words: "With this sign you will conquer".

So Constantine painted the swords and shields of his army with the sign and approached Maxentius whom he met on the Milvian Bridge. Maxentius lost his life and most of his army. Constantine was convinced that it was the dream, the sign and his strong belief in the Christian sign that led to his victory. So when he became the sole Emperor he not only stopped persecution of Christians but later (AD 323) declared Christianity the sole religion of the Empire.

The Threat of Islam

Christianity spread fast in Mediterranean Europe, northern part of Africa, west, northwest Europe. Within a few centuries the whole of Europe was Christian. To the east it spread to India as far as China, Japan and Korea.

Founded in Arabia, Islam quickly spread to those parts of the Middle East and Mediterranean lands where Christianity had found roots. This affected Palestine, Asia Minor, North Africa, Spain and Portugal. While the Muslims organized Jihads (Holy Wars) to fight and convert the areas which had taken to Christianity, the Christians, under the guidance of the Popes, organized the Crusades to recover those Christian lands, which were rapidly falling to Islam. The first crusade (1099) captured Jerusalem. The second crusade (1144) was a complete failure; the third crusade (1189) was not very successful either. The fourth crusade (1261) was directed to Constantinople. The crusades did not achieve much, but they exposed the Christian west to the cultural treasures of the East.

The Medieval Church was riddled with problems, some of which centered on the office of the Pope. There was general decline in the papal power because of corruption and immorality. There was also the problem of rivalry between the church and state as to who had the final say, the Pope represented by the Bishops, or the Emperor of a given area. In spite of these problems the rise of ascetic living and monasticism, that is, living in monasteries, consolidated the power of the church.

The monasteries, as centers of learning, produced the great scholars and theologians of the middle ages. It also produced the wealth and expensive material culture of the church of the time.

The Crisis of the Reformation

Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was only one Christian church although there were doctrinal differences between the mainstream Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Orthodox Xhuyrexh in the East. However, these differences only centred on what theologians of these churches had to say about Jesus, particularly, his being both God and man.

The main crisis in the church came when money was being raised for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and people were called upon to pay indulgences (money paid for the remission of sins). Some of the monks and friars objected to this. One of them, Martin Luther, a German, went a step further and posted 95 propositions on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. The propositions led to a crisis, which Luther never anticipated.

Luther was followed by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. There was a total rift between those people who demanded reforms in the church and mainstream church. Because these people protested against what they thought was going wrong in the church, they are popularly known as protestant reformers and the churches they founded, like the Lutheran church, are referred to as Protestant churches.

But there was indeed something wrong in the church. Those like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, who did not run away continued to insist on the need for reform within the church. This movement calling for internal reformation is also known as the Catholic Reformation or Counter Reformation.

The crisis of the reformation led to the emergence of Protestant churches as we know them today and also to the emergence of missionary orders among the Catholics, the first of which was the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), which did a lot of missionary work in the Far East.

In spite of the differences, the Catholic and Protestant Christians saw their mission as making disciples of all nations and teaching them to observe what their Lord and master had taught them.

Modern Christianity

The fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were centuries of exploration and discovery. This is the time we find the Portuguese and Spaniards in the Americas and the Far East. These places were not only discovered but also conquered and settled by the European Christian nations. As a result we find Christianity eventually spreading to the Americas, Canada, Australia, the Far West and Africa.

The nineteenth century brought in a new impetus to the general spread of Christianity. This was the century of colonization, when the Christian countries of Europe sent their men out to found colonies. It was also the period when there was serious demand for raw materials to keep the European industries running. It was the period when the philanthropic explorers sympathetic with Africans who were being sold and exploited as slaves, decided that there was need to bring the slave trade to an end. It was the age when the Europeans thought it wise to introduce their form of civilization to their colonies. It was the century that saw the partition of Africa.

On the Christian scene, this is a century marked by what one would call nineteenth century missionary zeal, because of the speed with which the Catholic Church founded missionary societies and the Protestants also founded missionary societies in Africa. For the Catholic we can mention the Holy Ghost Mission, White Fathers Mission, Mill Hill Fathers, Verona Fathers and the like. For the Protestants one could mention Baptist Missionary Society, London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Church of Scotland Mission, Seventh Day Adventists, American Society for Foreign Mission, and the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, among others.

In the mission fields these societies had their respective spheres of influence. They built colonies or settlements for freed slaves. Their evangelistic approach included literacy education, production of literature, running hospitals and introducing industrial activities. There was a genuine imperial race for Christ.

There are many different brands of Christianity. There are hundreds of denominations and societies. All of them have one thing in common: that Jesus Christ was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament and that he is the Saviour of mankind. This therefore marks their unity in spite of their diversity. To enhance that unity, there have been organizations within the church aimed at bringing the differing groups together. Collectively, these efforts are referred to as Ecumenical Movement. Examples of such are World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches and the National Council of Churches.

We need to stress that Christianity is a missionary religion, propagated by those who have received the faith. They have strong belief in life in the next world where they are led by the Savior Jesus Christ. They believe Jesus is alive and that he will come again to judge the living and the dead. Their mission is to reach all corners of the earth before the Saviour comes at the end of this “age”.

Activity

1. Explain why Christianity spread rapidly in the Roman world.
2. What is the Reformation? Explain why some Christian denominations are called Protestant.
3. Why was Christianity brought to Africa?