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# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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# Africa: Christian impact? Fate of the unevangelized? Or Problem of evil?

## An AJET Editorial

In spite of early civilization and introduction of Christianity in the African continent, it still remains a land of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, starvation, war, and disease. The articles in this journal discuss, in one way or the other, the impact of Christianity, the fate of the unevangelized and the problem of evil.

The first article, "*The history of Christianity in Somalia and East Coast of Kenya*" by Ben I. Aram is an original work. The author's findings indicate that both Judaism and Christianity preceded Islam to the lowland Horn of Africa. However, it disappeared within few decades because its extra-Biblical claims contradicted a culture well adapted to a harsh environment. He calls on researchers to find out the influence of Judaism and Christianity within Somali history. He cites Bowers who earlier noted that "Christian presence in Africa is almost as old as Christianity itself, that Christianity has been an integral feature of the continent's life for nearly two thousand years." His findings also reveal that "Somalis have more often focused on their more recent history than their pre-Islamic era." Their perception of Christianity is that it is the religion of foreigners, whether Ethiopian or European. The obscuring of the core gospel message with unmanageable feasting and food taboos would have created a deep-seated weakness in early Somali Christianity in the face of competition with the apparently more culturally suitable religion of Islam.

"*The Introduction and Beginnings of Christianity in East Africa*" by Watson A. O. Omulokoli discusses the beginnings of Christianity in East Africa as begun by a trio of missionaries: Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt, all German Lutherans who worked under the Church Missionary Society.

The author notes that the three Missionaries were characterized by indomitable sacrificial courage, persistence, perseverance, and forward-looking vision. In the face of the passing of his wife and daughter, Krapf

wrote “how the deaths only signified that the missionary enterprise had now commenced in East Africa, especially since “the victories of the Church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members.” The three missionaries were “filled with the assurance that others of their calling would follow them and they regarded themselves from the first as the pioneers of a continental system.”

The history of the Church in Africa negates the thought that Christianity is a Western phenomenon. In fact the present day missiologists and church historians say that the centers of Christianity have shifted from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern.

“*A Rejoinder to Ferdinando's Rebuttal*” is Christopher Little’s reaction to Ferdinando’s response of his article published in AJET Vol. 21.1 2002 under the title, “*Toward Solving the Problem of the Unevangelised,*” and responded to in the same volume by Keith Ferdinando. The gist of the discussion was the “possibility” of the unevangelised finding Christ through some “special modalities of special revelation.” The two scholars examined the evidence, both Biblical and extra-Biblical and arrived at their interpretations. Little, however, feels that Ferdinando misunderstood him in some way.

In this article, he notes that God is able to use other modalities to communicate special revelation, including saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He cites cases of people claiming to have known Christ before being contacted by missionaries.

*Analysis of African Reflection on evil* by Joseph B. O. Okello investigates the problem of evil as understood by the African mind on two levels of perception: the ordinary, non-philosophical mind, and the African philosophical with specific reference to Kwame Gyekye’s thought. The African scholars cite the spirits as the origin or agents evil. Okello, however, cites the Judeo-Christian worldview as the most likely worldview in understanding the problem of evil.

# SOMALIA'S JUDEAO-CHRISTIAN HERITAGE: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

Ben I. Aram\*

## INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity in Somalia is considered to be very brief and as such receives only cursory mention in many of the books surveying this subject for Africa. Furthermore, the story is often assumed to have begun just over a century ago, with the advent of modern Western mission activity. However, evidence from three directions sheds light on the pre-Islamic Judeo-Christian influence: written records, archaeological data and vestiges of Judeo-Christian symbolism still extant within both traditional Somali culture and closely related ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. Together such data indicates that both Judaism and Christianity preceded Islam to the lowland Horn of Africa

In the introduction to his article on Nubian Christianity, Bowers (1985:3-4) bemoans the frequently held misconception that Christianity only came recently to Africa, exported from the West. He notes that this mistake is even made by some Christian scholars. He concludes: "The subtle impact of such an assumption within African Christianity must not be underestimated. Indeed it is vital to African Christian self-understanding to recognize that the Christian presence in Africa is almost as old as Christianity itself, that Christianity has been an integral feature of the continent's life for nearly two thousand years."

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\*Ben I. Aram is the author's pen name. The author has been in ministry among Somalis since 1982, in Somalia itself, and in Kenya and Ethiopia.

<sup>1</sup> These are part of both the Lowland and Highland Eastern Cushitic language clusters such as Oromo, Afar, Hadiya, Sidamo, Kambata, Konso and Rendille.

Bowers' comment is particularly relevant within an African Muslim culture such as found in Somalia. For a variety of reasons, Muslims have deep historical consciousness. Also, along with other Cushitic and Semitic peoples of the Horn of Africa, Somalis place a high value on history<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, non-Arab Muslims such as the Somalis tend to view their pre-Islamic history and culture from a perspective inherited from Arab Muslims. Just as Arabs have tended to glorify their post-conversion history while denigrating their "*jaahiliya*" (time of ignorance), traditionally Somalis have more often focused on their more recent history than their pre-Islamic era.

V.S. Naipul (1998: xi) eloquently expressed this dilemma:

"Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense... People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. (Naipul 1998: xi)

At the same time, the overwhelming perception of Christianity by Somalis is that it is the religion of foreigners, whether Ethiopian or European. No doubt, over five hundred years of intermittent conflict with the Monophysite Orthodox highlanders of Ethiopia, as well as the colonial experience over the last century, has greatly reinforced this view (Ali Abdurahman 1977:278-279). To be Somali is to be Muslim (Ali Abdurahman 1977:109).

My purpose in this paper is to record what is currently known about the Judeo-Christian heritage within the boundaries of the Somali-speaking people. While this data is much less detailed than that of northern Sudan or the Maghreb, it nevertheless adds a further dimension to the history of the spread of the Christian faith on the African continent. My hope is that

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<sup>2</sup> See Braukämper (1973:29) for his observation derived from his study of Hadiya, Sidamo and Oromo in southern Ethiopia.

what is presented will stimulate additional research, and more importantly, be an encouragement to the small but growing modern Somali church.

## CURRENT SOCIAL CONTEXT

Recent years have been a particularly dark period for the Somali nation, as yet the unresolved civil war enters its second decade. There has been no effective national government since the end of 1990. Countless peace agreements have been broken and frequent attempts to rebuild a national government have yet to succeed.

Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have fled their country, both to neighbouring lands and to distant locations in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and North America. This traumatic national disintegration of one of Africa's most ethnically homogenous countries has provoked considerable soul-searching from Somali intellectuals. Dozens of books and articles reflecting on the immediate and more remote causes of the current conflict have been authored in the past decade.

### Minority Scholars Seek to "Re-invent Somalia"

Members of various ethnic minorities have authored a significant part of these writings. Apart from describing past discrimination and demanding a fairer share in whatever government finally emerges from the current wreckage, these writers have also attempted to re-write Somali history. The most classic example of this is *The Invention of Somalia* (1995; edited by Ali Jimale Ahmed; hereafter *Invention*), which takes a decidedly revisionist view of Somali history. The authors attempt to **reverse what they feel is a scholarly neglect or distortion of the contributions to the Somali nation of various minority clans found in the southern third of the country (particularly those with a non-nomadic culture).**

In this book Siyaad Barre's popular slogan "One language, one religion, one culture" is strongly critiqued (Besteman 1995:43). In actual fact, the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of Somalia has been over-emphasized. The author of the lead chapter in *Invention* laments what he terms "cultural alienation as a weapon of domination" in the way Somalia's history has been written only from the perspective of the purely nomadic clans of the northern and central regions (Mohamed Haji 1995:1-27). Haji

faults both Somali and foreign scholars in this and calls for more recognition of the history and culture of the primarily southern sedentary societies. While I doubt Mohamed Haji was considering religious diversity, my purpose for this paper resonates with his final plea:

"The time has come to assess Somalia's history and culture in a more serious way. It is time to incorporate all Somalia's cultural heritage in all its diversity in a comprehensive and more meaningful future Somalia." (Mohamed Haji 1995:21)

While more homogeneous than most other African lands, approximately 30% of the Somali population are members of clans with different languages.<sup>3</sup> Not only do these minorities have different languages, but also different cultures than the majority Somali clans (belonging to the Dir, Isxaaq, Hawiye and Daarood clan families (*sensu* Lewis 1980:6).

While the contributors to *Invention* clearly demonstrate a much greater linguistic and cultural diversity, the religious homogeneity of the Somalis seems indisputable. Over 99.9% of the population is Sunni Muslim in the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Only one minority group has gone so far as to express some dissatisfaction with the Islamization process. These are a cluster of low-caste tribes (Yibir, Midgaan, Tumaal, et al.) who have formed a political party called "United Somali Roots". They view themselves as the aboriginal inhabitants of Somalia. While all are professing Muslims, a recent English language publication of this party (Mohamoud 1996:2) made the following radical observation that questions their total allegiance to Islam:

Jomo Kenyatta once said, when the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land, the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed and when we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible. The Minority clans in Somalia experienced similar situations when some Arab Sheikhs with their disciples arrived in their country. The Minority clans have been in Somalia a long time, but other Somali clans have been here a short time and the other Somali men only knows about

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<sup>3</sup> Five are Lowland Eastern Cushitic (Af-Maay, Af-Tunni, Af-Garre, Af-Dabarre, and Af-Jiiddu) and are related to Standard Somali (Af-Maay and Af-Garre being the closest and Af-Jiiddu being the most distant), while the other three are Bantu: Chi-Mbelazi, Ki-Bajuuni (themselves dialects of Ki-Swahili and Ki-Mushunguli (essentially the same as Ki-Zigua in NE Tanzania).



himself (sic) and what he's been told. He came to himself up in the desert of Arabia and he can't get any information that goes beyond the Desert. (Mohamoud 1996:2)

The Somali diaspora in North America, Europe, Africa, and Australasia has made remarkable use of the Internet. Not surprisingly, the main topic of most forums is political debate. However, it is noteworthy that in this modern communication medium, Somalis are also probing into their pre-Islamic past in an effort to come to a deeper understanding of their current dilemma<sup>4</sup>.

Abdi Mohamed's (1992) perceptive article demonstrates his soul-searching in examining the relationship between cultural differences and the root causes of the civil war: "...shared surface identities came to perpetuate nationalistic emotions that worked against presumed external Christian enemies, but failed to create a strong national unity among the people". He concludes his paper by stating: "On top of these cultural and environmental differences, the Somali nation has used history in a very divisive and negative way. Unlike other African nations...the Somali people used history to depreciate each other...Although these leaders have on several occasions tried to unify the Somali people under the banner of Islam, clan differences have prevailed."

There is an anecdotal account about a remark made by the famous Somali Catholic nationalist and diplomat Michael Mariano. Reportedly, Mariano had once told Siyaad Barre at a cabinet meeting in the 1970s that Somalia would never have peace until it returned to its roots. By that remark, he meant Christianity.

With this current cultural and religious soul-searching as a backdrop, let us now consider the three main areas of evidence for the Judeo-Christian heritage of Somalia.

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<sup>4</sup> For example a message posted to the Newsgroups: soc.culture.somalia by M. J. Ciise discussed the metaphysical foundation of Somali traditional law (*Xeer Soomaali*) and, via linguistic analysis, showed some terms related to pre-Islamic religion (Maxamed Jaamac 1996).

## WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Ali Abdirahman (1975: 43-74) begins his comprehensive work by pointing out the earliest record of contacts with coastal Somalia from ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. The first written mention of Somalia as the land of Punt<sup>5</sup> is from the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty, prior to 2000 BC. Later, Somalia was described in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (dated as AD 50), again pointing to contacts by Greek, Egyptian and other Middle Eastern sailors and merchants with the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts of northeast Africa. Ali Abdirahman (117) quotes several Arab sources from the 10<sup>th</sup> (al-Mas'udi), 11<sup>th</sup> (al-Biruni) and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (al-Idrisi) that describe Seylac (Zeila), a port in northwest Somalia, near the border of Djibouti as a Christian city, with only a small minority population of Yemeni Muslim merchants. These Muslims lived peaceably with their co-religionists and paid tribute to the Aksumite monarch<sup>6</sup>. Later, control of coastal towns shifted to Yemeni Arabs. This situation changed by 1415, when the Abyssinian king Negus Yakuno Amlak re-conquered Seylac, killed many Muslims and forcibly converted survivors to Christianity and converted mosques to churches. However, within a few decades, Christianity had disappeared again from the city (Bertin 1983: 9)

How long Christianity lingered elsewhere along the Gulf of Aden coast of northern Somalia is not known, but there is a fascinating account from St. Francis Xavier's visit to the nearby island of Soqotra in 1542 (Freeman-Grenville 1966:135-137). In a letter dated 20 September 1542, he wrote to the Jesuit headquarters in Rome about his encounters with inhabitants of that island. They claimed to be converts of St. Thomas, and seemed to be totally illiterate and without any Scriptures. Their "priests" were also illiterate, but were able to do their daily prayers from memory, despite the fact they were in a language they did not understand.<sup>7</sup> They had totally forgotten the sacrament of baptism, but had Lenten fasts that parallel those of the Monophysite Ethiopian Orthodox Church (hereafter referred to as EOC) in terms of length and severity. St. Xavier remarked several times

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<sup>5</sup> The source of highly sought-after frankincense and myrrh.

<sup>6</sup> See also Trimminghams' quotation of Ibn Hawqal from 978 (1952: p. 51).

<sup>7</sup> St. Xavier speculated it was Chaldean, which is a reasonable hypothesis, since Syriac was used as a liturgical language in the Middle East and among the Mar Toma Christians of Kerala in south India.

how proud the Soqotrans were of being Christian, and of their hostility to Yemeni Muslims. In northeast Somalia, there is one Somali clan, the Carab Maxamed Saalax who trace their genealogy to Soqotra<sup>8</sup>. At present, both the inhabitants of that island and their related clan in Somalia are Muslim.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

### Richard Burton's Observations

In 1854 the first European explorer to visit Somalia described ruins of what the local Warsangeli clan claimed to be a church in what is now Sanaag Region of eastern Somaliland (Burton 1987: 127-129). The Warsangeli nomads told him the ruins were the work of the *Nasraani*<sup>9</sup>. He also mentioned that the related Dhulbahante clan living to the south of the Warsangeli (Sool Region of Somaliland) still used to make stone or plastered wood crosses at the foot and head of their tombs. Other, older graves in the region were also observed to be marked with crosses.

### Modern Archaeological Evidence

On 8 September 1991, two European relief workers informed me of a meeting that they had in the previous week with an amateur Somali archaeologist, Cabdi<sup>10</sup> K. in Muqdisho. Cabdi had received some training either in Italy or the USSR. He mentioned having had some contact with Jewish archaeologists who were searching for ancient Jewish antiquities.

Cabdi showed the relief workers a number of artifacts that he had excavated. He was very careful not to mention the precise location, but showed photographs of various excavation sites. At one site Cabdi located a graveyard and had to pay for permission to excavate. While digging, he found an arrow pointing to a place where he found the engraved stone. This engraved stone was on a stone table 4 m below ground surface. It had crosses engraved on it as well as geometric designs. There was a hole bored

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<sup>8</sup> CQW. 1999. Personal communication. Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>9</sup> An Arabic term for Christians, somewhat derogatory. It can be speculated that these ruins were the work of what Ehret terms the Ahmar-Dharoor people; he postulates that the modern agropastoral Somali clan of Samaroon (Gadabuursi) are their modern descendants (Ehret 1995:242-247)

<sup>10</sup> In the Somali orthography, "c" represents the "ain" sound also found in Arabic and Hebrew.

through one end of this stone. Cabdi also displayed other engraved stones, some in a cursive script that did not appear to be like Arabic or Ethiopic script. In the same location, Cabdi found a stone structure that he believed was a place of worship.

Cabdi also mentioned finding a tomb somewhere in Somalia with a gravestone written in Arabic. The date on the tomb used the Christian calendar even though it dated from within the Muslim era. In 1993 Cabdi approached a European relief agency in Muqdisho with a request for funding in order to do further investigation. He refused to publish his information until he received financial support in order to do further research and publish a book. The relief agency he contacted was not able to assist him and I have not heard any further details about him since then<sup>11</sup>.

## **CULTURAL VESTIGES OF JUDEAO-CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM**

### **Genealogical Issues**

Somali clan structure is based on genealogy, with many people knowing their genealogy beyond their 20<sup>th</sup> paternal ancestor. As with other non-Arab Muslims, Somalis link founders of particular clan families (eg. Isxaaq, Daarood) with famous Arab sheikhs who arrived from Arabia many centuries before, married a local girl, and founded a clan. In particular, clan genealogies were rooted in the Qureysh clan of the prophet Muhammad. Abdalla Omar (1995: 117-134) has provided some intriguing analysis of these claims, along with dating Islamization of many clans to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the fact they spoke their own language, not Arabic, Somalis used to like to emphasize that they were Arabs. This distinction was particularly made vis-à-vis other Africans; however, racial discrimination against Somali migrant workers in Arabia, and disappointment with the lack of Arab relief aid and peacemaking help during the current civil war, have combined to severely erode this claim of Arab origin.

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<sup>11</sup>As a caution, while it seemed these archaeologists had genuine artifacts, the desire for funding may have influenced what the Christian relief workers were told.

There are at least four Somali clans reputed to be of Jewish descent. Throughout various parts of southeast Ethiopia, southern Somalia and northeast Kenya, deep hand-dug wells, ruins and cairns are attributed by modern day Oromo and Somali clans living there as being the work of the extinct Madanle people. Schlee (1989: 96, 226-228) reviews information about their activities in the Wajir area of northeast Kenya. He cites local Somali oral history that refers to the Madanle as "bani-Israel" and that they were wiped out by a confederation of Digil, Reewin and Hawiye clans in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. Schlee presents evidence of their possible incorporation into the Somali Ajuuraan clan which now lives to the west of Wajir. Lewis (1969:47) also mentions that the Madanle occupied much of southern Somalia prior to that time. Cassanelli (1982: 92-96) gives additional data on this mysterious clan, based on original sources in southern Somalia; he considers the Madanle as part of Ajuuraan theocracy that ruled southern Somalia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Brown (1989:29-36) gives extensive attention to oral history of both Somali and Borana clans in northeast Kenya concerning the wells and cairns attributed to this mysterious people. However, he quotes an early British colonial administrator, Lord Delamere, that the Madanle were Muslims.

The remaining three clans still exist today. The low-caste magician clan of Yibir is found mainly in eastern Ethiopia, Somaliland and northern Somalia. Some sources consider Yibir to be a corruption of the Somali word for Hebrew, "*Cibraani*". During the civil war, Yibir refugees in Kenya publicized their supposed links with the Falasha of northern Ethiopia. This was no doubt linked to their desire to find re-settlement in Israel, just as the Falasha had done. Some Yibir claim their early king Bucul<sup>12</sup> Bacayr<sup>13</sup> was Jewish and defeated by the Islamic missionary Aw Barkhadle in a contest of magic that took place in northern Somalia.

Somalis refer to members of the clans inhabiting the ancient Benaadir coast cities of Muqdisho, Merka, and Baraawe of southern Somalia as the *Gibilcad*<sup>14</sup>. Their background is largely Arab and Persian, and they represent the northernmost extent of Swahili culture on the Indian Ocean coast. However Swahili is spoken only in the southernmost city of

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<sup>12</sup> An alternate pronunciation is spelled "Bucur".

<sup>13</sup> Also known by a Muslim name of Maxamed Xaniif.

<sup>14</sup> Literally, "paleskins".

Baraawe. Lewis (1969: 42) refers to possible Yemeni Jewish origins for some of the coastal city dwellers but does not elaborate. I have heard various accounts of the Begedi (inland from Merka) and Xaatim<sup>15</sup> (Baraawe) also being of Jewish descent.

Of lesser significance, but still intriguing, is the use of certain Biblical names among Somalis that are not typically used by Muslim Arabs in the Middle East<sup>16</sup>. These would include Isxaaq (Isaac), Eliyaas, Makahiil (Michael), and Daa'uud. Generally, only Arab Christians or Jews would employ these names. The fact that Isxaaq, Makahiil and Daa'uud are found near the beginning sequence of several clan genealogies may indicate earlier use of the names from pre-Islamic Jewish or Christian influence.

### **Sabbath Observance**

While living in the small town of Homboy, Jilib District, in southern Somalia in 1988, I noticed that a significant portion of the population obeyed the injunction of a local religious leader not to cultivate their fields on Saturdays. These people were disciples of Sheekh Ibraahim from the Garre clan, whose father had founded the town in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They believed that farm work on Saturdays would result in various plagues striking their fields. Those observing this Sabbath rest worshipped normally with other villagers at the mosque on Fridays. I have been told of a family from the Baadacade clan in Buulo Burte in central Somalia that observed a similar taboo on Saturday work<sup>17</sup>. If this issue were to be surveyed, it is likely that more instances would be found.

In terms of Sunday observance, Schlee mentions that the Somali Garre clan of Mandera District in northeast Kenya will not begin a migration on Sundays, nor begin training a young baggage camel on a Sunday (Schlee 1994:55). He himself remarked on finding it unusual to see Muslims more concerned about Sunday than Friday.

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<sup>15</sup> In the Somali orthography, "x" represents an emphatic, aspirated "h".

<sup>16</sup> They are found in the Quran, but are not normally used by Muslims in most Arab lands (contrasting with the common usage of names like Yuusuf, Ibraahim, Ismaaciil, Muuse, and Sulaymaan).

<sup>17</sup> ACX. 1997. Personal communication. Nairobi.

### Uses of the Cross

As noted by Burton over a century and a half ago, the symbol of the cross is still used in Somali culture. Some use the sign of the cross for a variety of superstitious purposes. In times of extreme danger, a cross may be drawn on the soil for its supposed protective power. Or, in cases where an oath is being taken a sign of the cross may be made. This mark of the cross is sometimes termed *falaad*. This could be related to the root word *fal* which means magic, from which other words meaning magic, bewitched, or wizard are derived, viz. *falaanfal*, *falan*, and *falanfallow* (Zorc & Osman 1993: 132). While Somalis use either *iskutallaab* or *saliib*<sup>18</sup> for cross, it is interesting to note that the official name of the Red Cross was translated as *laanqayr* (literally, "branch that is blessed").

Some sections of the Sheekhaal clan in eastern Ethiopia use the cross as a brand on their camels. They also inscribe a cross on stones marking graves. This mark is called *summaddii awliyo*, meaning, "brand of the saints". The Sheekhaal are a small priestly clan<sup>19</sup>, aligned with the Hawiye clan family and are famed for their knowledge of Islam. Certain sections of the Karanle (Murusade) Hawiye clan brand their camels with a cross<sup>20</sup>. The Karanle are located both in central Somalia<sup>21</sup> and in the Shabeelle valley at Iimi within Ethiopia, adjacent to Oromo clans inhabiting the Bale mountains. It is likely that further investigation would reveal that other clans use the cross as a livestock brand.

From several Somali Christians from northwest Somaliland, I learned that pilgrims to the tomb of the pioneer Islamic missionary Aw Barkhadle make a sign of the cross from the white soil from his tomb. They keep this sign on their foreheads until they return to their homes. Three of these pilgrimages are considered to be equal in merit to a pilgrimage to Mecca.

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<sup>18</sup> From the Arabic term.

<sup>19</sup> Their name is derived from the word *sheekh* in Arabic, meaning a religious authority.

<sup>20</sup> ACX. 1997. Personal communication. Nairobi

<sup>21</sup> Ceel Buur district in Galguduud Region and Afgooye District in Lower Shabeelle Region.

The present survival of the cross as a symbol has no inherent spiritual value, yet it does support the archaeological evidence<sup>22</sup>. No Somali recognizes any Christian content within the sign of cross. Traditionally, Somalis knew very little about the Christian religion, other than it was something evil. The pejorative term *gaal* (unbeliever) was applied to all non-Muslims, regardless of whether they were "people of the Book" or pagans.

## DISCUSSION

### The "Greater Ethiopia" cultural region

Vestiges of Judeo-Christian influence persist in Somali culture. However, in order to appreciate the significance of the above data, we need to step back and recognize the larger context of the historical-cultural geographic unit to which the Somali belong. Here the groundbreaking work of Levine (1974:40-84) is essential for understanding both the origins and significance of the evidence presented above. Levine, following on the pioneering research of Enrico Cerulli (1959), demonstrated a great deal of cross-cultural interchange over the past millennia between various ethnic groups speaking related Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic languages<sup>23</sup>. He lists a number of common religious features among peoples of what he terms "Greater Ethiopia"<sup>24</sup>:

- a belief in a supreme deity, a sky-god called *Waaq* (Oromo), *Waakh* (Rendille), *Waaq* (Daasanach), *Waac* (Afar).
- position of priests as intermediaries between *Waaq* and humans
- religious rites often involved sacrifices of livestock, particularly on either hilltops or along riverbanks

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<sup>22</sup> It is similar to the use of the cross as an artistic motif by the Muslim Berber Tamasheq (Tuareg) nomads of the Sahara in Algeria, Mali, and Niger.

<sup>23</sup> Themselves all part of the Afro-Asiatic language family.

<sup>24</sup> Levine is not making a political statement by this regional term, which would include northeast Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and northern Kenya. Rather, he is pointing out that millennia of contact between speakers of three branches of the Afro-Asiatic language family (Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic) have resulted in many unifying religious and cultural features. Ehret (1998) provides insight into the differentiation of this language family.



- use of a calendar to order ritual events; days are viewed as being auspicious or not within the context of the calendar<sup>25</sup>
- use of a bonfire to symbolize beginning the new year; a custom followed by EOC, Muslims<sup>26</sup> and adherents of traditional religions
- belief in spirits, with possession termed *zaar* or *saar*
- importance of snakes as totems of clans
- religious significance of large trees such as sycamore fig, baobab as residence of spirits
- strong food taboos against eating pork, fish, and carrion
- a tendency to re-align the beginning of genealogies to connect with ancient personages held in high esteem within a given religion (eg. Solomon for aristocracy within the EOC) or the Qureysh clan of the prophet Muhammed for Muslims.

Levine (1974:64-66) describes in detail the “creative incorporation” of Semitic religion within this context. First, Judaism, then Christianity, and finally Islam, were all adopted to some degree by various ethnic groups. Levine notes a highly syncretistic element that has been present within the various cultural groups making up “Greater Ethiopia”.

### **Somali Traditional Religion**

Since essentially all Somalis have been Muslims for the last 500 years, is it possible to describe their traditional, pre-Islamic beliefs? Focussing in a bit within Levine’s approach, the most fruitful approach has been to make comparisons with the traditional religion of closely related Lowland Eastern Cushitic ethnic groups who have not been Islamized. Schlee (1994) has given particular attention to the Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye of northern Kenya<sup>27</sup>. He postulates that they are offshoots of the Somali<sup>28</sup> who were in the early stages of Islamization<sup>29</sup> when they were separated from other Somali by the Oromo expansion around 1540. Being separated

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<sup>25</sup> Udessa (1994) provides a detailed view of this from the Guji Oromo context.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, while this custom is usually called by its Somali name *dabshid*, it still is called by a Farsi word *Neyruus* by some Somali, showing its link to pre-Islamic Persia.

<sup>27</sup> Schlee uses the term “Proto-Rendille-Somali” culture to describe these three ethnic units.

<sup>28</sup> Mainly from the Garre clan.

<sup>29</sup> For a Muslim perspective on this issue, see Abdi Ali 1993.

from the rest of the Somalis by the Borana section of the Oromo from 1550 until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these three ethnic groups did not cross the line into full conversion to Islam. Schlee points out that the Rendille (who retained their language, which is fairly close to Somali) were the earliest to separate from the "Proto-Rendille-Somali". They have fewer Islamic elements than the Gabbra and Sakuye (who adopted the Borana dialect of Oromo). The unusual way that Oromo traditional beliefs could supplant Islam is further attested by an account I heard that the Ajuuraan in Kenya, while still maintaining Islamic identity had adopted many elements of the religious rituals of their Borana neighbors<sup>30</sup>.

The veneer of Islam had extended only to usage of some Arabic names for days of the week, some months and some religious terms like "*alal*<sup>31</sup>" and "*dikir*<sup>32</sup>". In particular, the Rendille and Gabbra remain largely non-Islamized, so studies of their religious beliefs are very useful in both reconstructing Somali pre-Islamic religion, as well as discerning external religious influences paralleling those within Somali cultural history<sup>33</sup>. According to Schlee the Gabbra have a self-perception of their religion as non-pagan and on par with Islam (134).

Braukämper has published several detailed papers on the survival of vestiges of Islam among the Highland Eastern Cushitic Hadiya, Kambata and Sidamo people of southern Ethiopia (1973, 1988, 1997) after their conquest by the Oromo. Following the Oromo expansion, the remnants of these ethnic groups inhabit mountains between the Omo River and the Great Rift Valley (in the case of the Sidamo, Gedeo and Burji, they extend to mountains east of the Rift). They are currently separated from the Somali by 300-400 km of mountains and plateaus by the Arsi, Guji and Borana Oromo. In particular, the Arsi Oromo absorbed a large amount of

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<sup>30</sup> Yuusuf Tadiija. Personal communication. Muqdisho, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Derived from the Arabic word *halaal*.

<sup>32</sup> This is an Arabic word for religious chanting; meaning literally "remembering the names of God". The chants used in the *almodo* sacred fire ceremony contain Arabic words, including references to Mekka and Medina.

<sup>33</sup> Schlee poses an interesting example that Gabbra and Rendille, with their common Proto-Rendille-Somali heritage use sheep as a peace offering when ending hostilities between them; however, this does not take place with the neighboring Turkana, who have a much more distant Nilotic culture.

the Hadiya people in the Bale mountain area, so much so that the majority of Arsi are actually of Hadiya background.

Braukämper details how many adherents of both *sagidda* (as those preserving some Islamic traditions were known among those Hadiya assimilated by the Arsi Oromo) and *fandano* (unassimilated Hadiya) Islamized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1988: 772). There are many parallels with the situation 500 km further south among the "Proto-Rendille-Somali", all which shows the tremendous cultural and religious disruption of the Oromo conquests of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. While *fandano* was largely derived from Islam, Braukämper (1997: 321) mentions some incorporation of Christian elements (particularly veneration of Mary and Saint George) borrowed from their closely related Kambata neighbors.

Schlee (1994: 3) terms Rendille and Gabbra religion "traditional monotheism", and modern missionaries have noted some striking parallels in the ritual calendar and sacrificial system with that of the Old Testament (Anderson 1983; Underhill 2001). These practices await comprehensive description and analysis. Again, referring back to Levine, Rendille and Gabbra rituals can be seen within the larger pattern of syncretistic Cushitic religious practice. Schlee (55) notes that Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye (along with the Muslim Garre noted above) observe Sunday as a special day of rest for camels. He also describes the ritual use of blood by the Rendille for the blessing of livestock and people (65). Furthermore, Schlee (92) detects some influence of the Exodus account (although he sees it as coming via Islamic tradition) in the common oral history of Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye of a long, difficult trek their ancestors made 500 or more years ago. He notes that the Gabbra have a legend with parallels to the judgment of Solomon in 1 Kings 3:16-27 (255). In terms of possible Christian elements, Schlee notes that some of the Gabbra use a cross as a brand on their camels (193).

### **Origin of Jewish Elements in Somali Culture**

Elements of Judaism likely entered Somalia first from the north (Ethiopia), and later from the northeast (Yemen) beginning in the pre-Islamic period and continuing on for some centuries thereafter. Considering how widespread the primitive, pre-Talmudic form of Judaism was in northern Ethiopia a millennium or more ago, elements of Judaism could have easily spread southward. It is noteworthy that while the Falasha

speak Amharic, their origins were from the Central Cushitic Agaw people. Gamsts' (1969) study of another Agaw group, the Qemant gives fascinating insights to the syncretism of Judaism with indigenous Cushitic religion. He describes their religion as "Pagan-Hebraic" (29-43); whatever elements of Judaism reached the Somalis and other closely related people was likely similar.

To illustrate how far south Judaism may have spread in Ethiopia, the account of Queen Gudit, the nemesis of the Aksumite Kingdom should be noted. According to Sergew (1972), quoting an ancient Ge'ez manuscript, Queen Gudit was Jewish<sup>34</sup>. Her kingdom of Damot lay to the southwest of the Aksumite Kingdom. It is quite likely she was from one of the Agaw tribes that had embraced Judaism in earlier centuries<sup>35</sup>. Tadesse (1972: 40-43) gives additional details on Gudit's destruction of Aksum in 979; however, he identifies "Damoti" as being further south in the Sidamo region and terms Gudit pagan rather than Jewish. Balisky (1997: 8-9) gives a comprehensive view of all possible locations for Damot; he essentially agrees with Sergew and concludes it was near the Gibe River valley, in the area now inhabited by the Gurage and Oromo people.

Braukämper (1973: 34-35) sketches historical relations between Highland Eastern Cushitic Hadiya and the Central Cushitic Agaw. At the same time, the Hadiya have lived in relatively close proximity to the Somalis in the past (1973: 42-45), in what is now occupied by Arsi Oromo (many of whom are of assimilated Hadiya origin). It is conceivable that the Somali Yibir clan could have Falasha Jewish elements descended from Agaw settlers among the Hadiya. This would most likely have occurred in the Harar area. Braukämper (1973: 35, 47-48) examines evidence that the Hadiya and Sidamo lived as far east as Harar prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Oromo conquests; this would have made them direct neighbors of the

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<sup>34</sup> He does cite some authors who hold that she was pagan.

<sup>35</sup> Trimmingham (1952: 52) discusses the possible geographical and religious origins of "Guedit", as well as citing a contemporary Arab historian, Ibn Hawqal who referred to her war against Aksum. Furthermore, he attributes Judaistic influences unique to the EOC to the conversion of Judaized Agaw in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century (35-36, 53-54). For further details on the unique degree of Judaism persisting within the EOC (particularly with regard to Sabbath observance) see Hammerschmidt (1965: 1-12).

Somalis. Lewis (1969: 54-55) recounts the legend that Bucul Bacayr's (Maxamed Xaniif) wife Xantaale is buried in Harar<sup>36</sup> and that Yibir still make pilgrimages to her tomb.

Actually, it is a rather common phenomenon within "Greater Ethiopia" that small clans of religious specialists claim foreign descent. For example, both the Sheekhaal and Asharaaf among the Somali emphasize their Arab roots. However, it is interesting to note that among the Rendille, the section of ritual specialists known as Iibire (derived from same root as Yibir in Somali) are not a despised minority as are the Yibir among the Somalis, although they share a reputation for having the ability to make powerful curses (Schlee 1994: 10-11, 241-242). This gives a glimpse into what may have been the role of the Yibir among the pre-Islamic Somalis. It provides a background for the "power encounter" between their chief priest and one of the early Muslim missionaries, as well as for lingering resentment against Islam among the Yibir.

Also, some Old Testament traditions like animal sacrifices (such as those noted among the Rendille and Gabbra), and fusion of the Sabbath concept into the pre-existing ritual calendars with their observation of auspicious days could have spread southward throughout various Somali clans.

### **Southward Movement of Christianity**

As with Judaism, Christianity likely entered Somalia from the both highland Ethiopia to the north, as well as from southern Arabia.<sup>37</sup> South Indian merchants may have also been involved, in terms of the Soqotra connection. This process began in the pre-Islamic period and continued on until perhaps as late as 1500 with the ebb and flow of the Christian Abyssinian Empire. Levine (1974: 71) notes that Seylac was part of the Aksumite Empire in the 900's, fell to the Arabs, and then was re-conquered in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Southward expansion of Christianity to both

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<sup>36</sup> Other Somalis believe that Xantaale is buried in Jigjiga.

<sup>37</sup> The history of the Church in southern Arabia is not well documented; the main sources I found were Bell (1968:1-63; 134-161) and Trimmingham (1952:32-55). Both authors stress the close relationship between the Christian Aksumite Kingdom and the Christians of Najran. Bell (1968: 36 indicates that the Arabian Christians were also Monophysite.

Eastern Highland Cushitic peoples (Hadiya, Kambata, Sidamo) and Omotic (Wolaitta, Kafa) began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the work of the famous missionary Takle Haimanot (Balisky 1997: 36-42, 67-79). This southern penetration of Christianity continued in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Levine 1974: 73, Getachew Haile 1984: 113).

Studies of the expansion and contraction of the EOC among four southern highland groups from 1200-1900 show some common patterns. Rønne (1997:133-148) focuses on the *Kitoosa*<sup>38</sup> cult, which preserves remnants of medieval Orthodox Christianity that penetrated the Kambata and Hadiya cultures in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some persisted, mainly among the Kambata, until the conquest of the area by Menelik II in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Certain clans claimed ancestry from northern Semitic roots and maintained some vestiges of Christianity terminology and ritual (Rønne 134-135); some even claimed a link with Takle Haimanot.

Balisky's (1997: 82, 95, 103) study of the Omotic Wolaitta<sup>39</sup> people documents survival of Christian terminology from the medieval period, although this was to a lesser extent than among the Kambata. As with the Kambata, survival of Christian terms is particularly in clans claiming their origins from medieval settlers from northern Ethiopia.

As Braukämper (1997: 319) pointed out, the contraction of the medieval southward expansion of Christianity came about from the disastrous invasion of Ahmed Gagn from the coastal Adal Kingdom between 1530-40<sup>40</sup>. Following this, the multi-directional expansion of the Oromo people from the Liibaan plateau in southern Ethiopia profoundly rewrote the ethnographic and religious map.

Trimingham (1952: 109-110) recounts several anecdotes from early European travelers in southern Ethiopia who encountered survivals of the last vestiges of EOC practice. For example, in Enarya (an area either now

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<sup>38</sup> The Kambata/Hadiya version of Ge'ez *Kristoos*.

<sup>39</sup> The Wolaitta live across the Great Rift Valley, to the west of the Kambata and Hadiya.

<sup>40</sup> Braukämper (1973) provides additional background on the effects of the Muslim-Christian warfare on religious allegiance of the various Highland Eastern Cushitic groups.

part of Gurage country or inhabited by the Jimma Oromo), d'Abbadie wrote in 1843 there was a minority of Christians within that Muslim kingdom who had no priest for over a century. In a more remote location, the remnant of "Christians" were also without priests and made processions around their churches on Sundays, invoking the help of Mary.

In view of the long term presence of Christianity in the highland regions immediately to the northwest of the Somali-inhabited lowlands, it seems likely that some Christian practices (such as use of the cross, Sunday as a day of rest) could then have diffused southward into Somali territory as early as 1300, especially along the Shabeelle River valley. These clans living to the south of the Bale mountains and Liibaan plateau were probably the last to be Islamized. It is noteworthy that the Jiiddu clan of the lower Shabeelle River valley in southern Somalia speaks a language with significant Highland Eastern Cushitic elements. Lamberti postulates that the Jiiddu originated in what is Gama-Gofa province of southern Ethiopia, and then migrated via the Bale mountains to their present location (1986: 3-10). On the Gulf of Aden coast, Christianity may have been more widespread many centuries earlier, as the accounts of a Christian majority in Seylac until at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century indicate. While the above evidence precludes conclusive proof that many, or any, Somali clans were actually converted to Christianity before the coming of Islam, the possibility cannot be totally ruled out.

### **The spread of Islam**

Ali Abdirahman (1975: 109-141) has described the Islamization of Somalia in detail. He presents considerable evidence that the Somalis were entirely Islamized by the beginning of the 16th century (1975:141). This process had taken nearly 800 years, since Seylac had Muslim inhabitants (due to its close proximity to Yemen) in the very first decades of the history of Islam. Ali Abdirahman (1975:135-138) specifically mentions that both Axmed Guray (Ahmed Gagn)<sup>41</sup> and the Ajuuraan theocratic kingdom<sup>42</sup> were instrumental in Islamizing the Somali clans of what is now southeast Ethiopia and southern Somalia during the 15th and 16th centuries. Abdi

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<sup>41</sup> His kingdom of Adal (Awdal) had the most influence in what is now Somaliland and in neighboring Djibouti and eastern Ethiopia

<sup>42</sup> Their sphere of influence began in the Shabeelle River valley of southern Ethiopia and extending through much of central and southern Somalia.

Mohamed (1992: 189) claims that Islam made little progress in the interior until the late 1800's; however, he does not document this position.

Cassanelli (1982:98-99) concurs that these centuries saw the culmination of the Islamization of the Somali clans, along with significant immigration of Muslim religious teachers from Yemen. The arrival of the latter helped to consolidate the gains made among new converts and to further add to the popular concept of Arab origin of most Somali clans or clan families. He postulates that the Ajuuraan theocracy had its origins in the Bale highlands of southern Ethiopia, on the headwaters of the Shabeelle River<sup>43</sup>.

However, some elements of traditional Cushitic religion<sup>44</sup> survive among Somalis to this day, especially as incorporated in various Sufi or folk Islamic rituals. Braukämper (1992: 145-166) discusses common elements of Islam among Somali and Oromo in terms of the major pilgrimage center of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Somali Sufi saint, Sheekh Nuur Xuseen. While this saint cult is most common among Muslim Oromo in both southeast and southwest Ethiopia, Somalis are also involved, illustrating the fact of the way that religious movements transcend linguistic and cultural differences, within the overall "Greater Ethiopia" context.

## CONCLUSION

From a consideration of historical records, archaeological finds, and modern cultural anthropological studies of related groups, there appears to be a greater religious diversity in Somali culture than commonly perceived. The results presented here are only preliminary, and additional research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of both Judaism and Christianity within Somali history.

What is most significant is the evident desire by some Somalis, both Christian and Muslim, to rediscover their past heritage—a heritage that

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<sup>43</sup> This would make it the southernmost of the cluster of eastern Ethiopian Islamic kingdoms that were frequently warring with the Christian Abyssinian kingdoms.

<sup>44</sup> In particular, pilgrimages to tombs of saints and animal sacrifices, both overlain with an Islamic veneer.



may have included a brief, incipient Christian era. At this point it is wise to recall Unseth's (1999: 157-158) caution to Sudanese and Ethiopian Christians against any spiritual pride based on historical heritage.<sup>45</sup> However, consideration of the above evidence demonstrates that Christianity cannot be labeled merely as a recent arrival to Somalia, brought by European colonialists.

We can nevertheless rightly ask: Why did Christianity not take root among the Somali? Tadesse (1972: 43) points out that the lowland nomads had significantly differentiated from the highlanders before the coming of either Christianity or Islam. Braukämper (1988: 772; 1997:323) observes that the EOC emphasis on over 150 fast days per year where animal products could not be consumed made it essentially impossible for pastoral nomads to be members of the Church. Furthermore, the EOC taboo against camels<sup>46</sup> stood in total opposition to survival of a people who depended so heavily on this animal for food, drink, and transport in a harsh environment where other livestock could not survive. On the other hand, some of the nomadic Tigrë in lowland Eritrea were members of the EOC from antiquity until 1820 when they converted to Islam (Trimingham, 1952: 112). How they managed to be practicing Monophysites is not clear. How flexible EOC clergy (especially pioneer missionaries) would have been with pastoralists is a matter for conjecture. Balisky (1997: 79) cites an example of one of Takle Haimanot's associates, Filopos, who evangelized in the Mt. Zuqwala area allowing recent converts there to continue some of their traditional sacrifices.

Bowers' (1985: 16-17) analysis of the decline of the Nubian church (loss of spiritual vitality, overemphasis of clergy over against the laity, and isolation from other Christians) parallels similar features that would have militated against the EOC maintaining itself among the Somalis. The above data shows its decline from 1500-1850 among more culturally receptive Highland Eastern Cushitic farmers of the southern mountains. It would have been even less likely to thrive where its extra-Biblical claims contradicted a culture well-adapted to a harsh environment. The obscuring

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<sup>45</sup> See also the apostle Paul's caution in his letter to the Philippians, 3:4-9.

<sup>46</sup> While this is rooted in Mosaic law (Leviticus 11:4) and is part of the unusual Judaistic element within EOC theology, this anti-camel taboo is also shared by the cattle-herding Oromo within their traditional belief system.

of the core gospel message with unmanageable fasting and food taboos would have created a deep-seated weakness in early Somali Christianity in the face of competition with the apparently more culturally suitable religion of Islam.

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# THE INTRODUCTION AND BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTINANITY IN EAST AFRICA

Watson A. O. Omulokoli

*In this article, Proffessor Omulokoli discusses the beginnings of Christianity in East Africa as begun by a trio of missionaries: Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt, all German Lutherans who worked under the Church Missionary Society. Lay men, Christian workers and scholars in varied fields will benefit from the legacy left behind by this trio of missionary pioneers.*

## Introduction

In May, 1944 Johann Ludwig Krapf and his wife Rosine settled at Mombasa in Kenya and embarked upon Christian work there in what turned out to be the beginnings of Christianity in East Africa. Krapf was a German Lutheran from the Basle Missionary College, but sent out by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which was an Anglican Church missionary agency from Britain.<sup>1</sup> Prior to moving to Kenya, Krapf had served in Ethiopia as a missionary with the CMS in 1837-1843. In later years two other missionaries who survived longer than the others teamed up with Krapf to establish Christianity in East Africa, hence laying the foundation on which subsequent efforts were to be built. Christianity in East Africa owes an immense debt to this trio of German Lutherans: Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt, all working under the CMS.<sup>2</sup>

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### Initial Efforts and Tragedy

Soon after his decision to operate from Mombasa there were a number of activities which Krapf employed in endeavouring to lay a base for his Christian work. Firstly, he visited the people and the leaders of the surrounding area, as a public relations exercise. Secondly, he set out to learn and study the local languages and endeavoured to carry out the translation of the bible in them, with Kiswahili receiving particular attention. Thirdly, he moved around his vicinity, trying to acquaint himself with the geography of his operational territory. This was a pattern, which he was to develop and build on in his overall Christian outreach in later times..

For a time, these efforts were progressing well, but soon, they were severely interrupted in July, when tragedy struck in the family. At this time, a baby daughter had just been born to the Krapfs. Shortly thereafter, the family members were attacked by severe fever, with the result that the mother, Rosine, and the baby died within a few days of each other. When the baby died, after the burial of the mother, she was buried in a grave next to that of the mother. As all this was taking place, Krapf himself was still extremely weak with fever. Even in his frail state, Krapf displayed indomitable fortitude as he articulated his resolve, dedication, and utter commitment to Jesus Christ, and the cause for which he had gone to Africa.<sup>3</sup>

After regaining some measure of strength, he wrote to the CMS headquarters stating his own resolve to continue with the work, and also urging its officials to press ahead with the missionary enterprise. In very poignant words, he wrote "the memorable and often-quoted message,"<sup>4</sup>

Tell our friends at home, that there is now on the East African coast a lonely missionary grave. This is a sign that you have commenced the struggle with this part of the world; and as the victories of the church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members, you may be convinced that the hour is at hand when you are summoned to the conversion of Africa from its eastern shore.<sup>5</sup>

The double ordeal of bereavement and ill health affected the progress of Krapf's work quite adversely. It took several weeks before he could sufficiently recover both emotionally and physically. Once he made some



considerable recovery, however, he seemed to apply himself to the routine of the earlier endeavours with renewed zeal.<sup>6</sup> He added preaching to earlier tasks of meeting the people, language work, and visits to the surrounding areas.

### Two Years of Setting the Pattern

In the two years in which he was alone, Krapf's travelling took him to a continuously widening circle. As he went from village to village, prospecting on the mainland for a future site of the mission's central station, the general response was positive and welcoming. At crucial moments during these visits, he was careful to state the underlying basis of his work. He stressed that his main objective was to preach the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. On one occasion while visiting the elders of Old Rabai, he made this point clear in this manner,

I explained that I was neither a soldier nor a merchant, nor an official employed by the Arabian or English government, not a traveller, nor a Mganga nor Mchawi, physician, exorcist, nor enchanter; but was a teacher, a book-man who wished to show the Wanyika, the Wakamba, the Galla, and even the Watsumba (Muslims) the right way to salvation in the world to come.<sup>7</sup>

During this same period in which he was alone, Krapf thought and came up with a number of very significant ideas. In one direction, his mind was occupied with devising a scheme, which would, in his view, enable the Christian Church "to connect Eastern and Western Africa by a chain of missionary stations."<sup>8</sup> In another direction, he envisaged a time when the church would "establish on the east coast a colony for liberated slaves like Sierra Leone on the west coast, and that they might be employed as aids in the conversion of the Inner-African races."<sup>9</sup> It is clear that apart from the interest in helping rehabilitate these freed slaves, he was confident that once they embraced the Christian faith, their background was such that they were well suited to serve as evangelists who would spread the message of Jesus Christ into the interior.

Furthermore, in a direction in which he was way ahead of his time, from the very beginning of his work, he believed in the indigenization of the Church in Africa. He looked forward to a period in the near future when

there would be “a black bishop and black clergy of the Protestant Church.”<sup>10</sup> It is amazing that he espoused these advanced views even before a single convert was won to Jesus Christ. While dreaming in these ways about the future, Krapf was working very hard for the success of his dreams and the future. Thus, “For two years the solitary missionary toiled at the Swahili language, compiling a grammar and a dictionary, and translating the whole New Testament; occasionally visiting the Wanyika on the mainland; and prosecuting geographical and ethnographical inquiries all directions.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Krapf and Rebmann in Team Work at Rabai**

In 1846 two significant events took place. First, another missionary, Johann Rebmann arrived and joined Krapf at Mombasa on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1846. Like Krapf, Rebmann was a German Lutheran who went out to serve in East Africa under the auspices of the British Anglican Church missionary group, the CMS. Secondly, after all the preliminary steps had been taken by Krapf in the two years in which he was alone, with the concurrence of Rebmann, the mission relocated its central station from the island of Mombasa to Rabai Mpya among the Mijikenda people on the mainland. This final step was taken jointly when Krapf and Rebmann moved there on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 1846. This was a very important event in that it signified the establishment of a crucial pioneer beachhead for Christianity in East Africa.<sup>12</sup>

As the two missionaries settled at Rabai Mpya, they worked hard to develop the place as a viable mission station with the required facilities, including a church for worship. At the same time, they took early steps to introduce some religious and spiritual traditions and practices. In this connection, when the church was ready, they held a service there, with about twelve to fifteen people attending the very first Sunday service. This was a commendable initial stage in the long and arduous task of ensuring that the adherents of the mission were slowly and steadily introduced to Sunday as a day of worship and rest.<sup>13</sup>

The arrival of an additional missionary and the relocation to Rabai Mpya gave the mission increased operational latitude in a number of directions. Building on previous efforts under Krapf, four areas of concern seem to have occupied the attention of the missionaries in this second stage

of the mission's work. Firstly, they continued with learning and studying the various languages, with Krapf and Rebmann at differing level of proficiency. In the second instance, Krapf was able to continue with his efforts in the translation of the bible. Thirdly, introductory attempts to focus on direct evangelism were taken through organized preaching of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Here, Krapf talks of how he would often visit the people in the surrounding villages "to speak to them about the salvation of their souls and to open up to them the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>14</sup> Fourthly, rudimentary steps were taken to lay the foundation for providing education for the community when the missionaries "undertook the introduction of some boys."<sup>15</sup> What would have been the fifth area of concern, that of travelling in prospecting and exploring wider missionary opportunities, took an added dimension due to the extended territory and distances under consideration.

### **Reinforcements and Extensive Travel**

The resilience of Krapf and Rebmann was rewarded when reinforcements were sent out to join them at Rabai Mpya. This was in 1849 when two more German Lutherans under CMS service arrived in Kenya. These were the Rev. Jacob Erhardt as the clergyman, and Mr. Johannes Wagner, a mechanic. After arriving at Mombasa on 10<sup>th</sup> June, they travelled on to Rabai Mpya, reaching there a few days later. Unfortunately, Wagner died on 1<sup>st</sup> August, leaving Erhardt as the only one who now teamed up with Krapf and Rebmann for the missionary endeavours in the years ahead.

While Krapf and Rebmann had undertaken some journeys earlier, the duration of absence from the mission station, the frequency and length of the journeys had been limited. The increase in manpower, however small, meant that there was a higher percentage addition to the missionary force. This, in turn, meant that the missionaries could now do more in certain directions than they had been able to do earlier. Among the areas in which improvement was markedly noticeable was related to visits to places of prospective missionary endeavours. These journeys led the missionaries farther and farther from the coast, and more and more into the interior. In the initial years when Krapf was alone, he would make incursions into the nearby Mijikenda territory, and in the process he would become, as he put it, "acquainted with the condition of the interior where I intended to preach

the Gospel.”<sup>16</sup> Now the scope was much wider. Concerning the genesis of this new development, Krapf explained,

In the course of time it became more evident to us, impressing itself upon us with all the force of a positive command, that it was our duty not to limit our missionary labours to the coast tribes of the Swahili and Wanyika, but to keep in mind as well the spiritual darkness of the tribes and nations of Inner Africa. This consideration induced us to take those important journeys into the interior.<sup>17</sup>

As the missionaries traveled around trying to acquaint themselves with the people, the various leaders, and the territory in the vicinity they ended up, from the perspective of Europe, making some geographical discoveries. It is because of these achievements that, in some quarters, Krapf and Rebmann are recognized more as explorers than missionaries.

In this sphere of findings of geographical interest, three pieces of information were notable. First, Coupland has stated, Rebmann distinguished himself on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1848, in that in him, “European eyes first looked on Kilimanjaro” with its 19,000 feet snow-covered summit.<sup>18</sup> Second, on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1849 Krapf in turn became the first European to see the 17,000 feet high Mt. Kenya, in the form of two peaks covered with snow.<sup>19</sup> The third instance is in 1856 when he was in Europe, that Erhardt published a map which he had worked on together with Rebmann in 1855. It showed the East African region, with a body of water on a location inland.<sup>20</sup>

When the findings of the missionaries were reported in Europe, the initial response was to dismiss them as impossible since they were not in tune with the preconceived geographical knowledge. After the publication of the map showing the presence of a lake in the interior of East Africa, however, new interest was generated in the information from the three-some team of missionaries. Among the group that showed keen interest was the Royal Geographical Society. Through the ensuing journeys of exploration by Baker, Burton, Grant, Speke and Stanley, the missionaries were not only vindicated, but also a much more startling information on East Africa came to light.<sup>21</sup>

### **Pioneer Nucleus of Converts**

In their work on the East Coast of Africa, these early missionaries did not win many converts to Jesus Christ. All the same, over a period of many years, a nucleus of early Christian converts in East Africa emerged. The first convert, Mringe, was baptized on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1850, taking on the name of John. The next occasion of baptism was on Pentecost Sunday, 1860, when Abbe Gunja and his son, Nyondo, were baptized, and assumed the names of Abraham and Isaac respectively. On the third baptismal occasion, four were baptized on Easter Sunday, 1861. These were Joseph dena, David Mua Zuia, Jonathan Lugo, and John Zuia. On this occasion, Rebmann took the unusual and bold step of not limiting these converts to baptism, but also went ahead and “admitted them as communicants.”<sup>22</sup>

With regard to numbers, Rebmann indicated that in June 1862, there was a further increase of about six or seven persons as new inquirers enrolled to learn about the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup> These additions, conversions, and baptisms represented a tremendous accomplishment in the work of the CMS as well as for the cause of Jesus Christ in East Africa. On another level, this development heralded a major breakthrough and the beginning of new process – that of enrolling a community of Christians from the region in God’s external register, while establishing a nucleus of the Christian Church. It was this small, but significant, nucleus which was to serve as the foundation upon which all subsequent efforts in East Africa would be built.

### **Sequence of Tenure of Service**

On account of repeated incidents of ill health, Krapf left Rabai Mpya on 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1853, returning to Europe to see whether a visit there would help rejuvenate his health. At it turned out, this was the end of Krapf’s formal physical association with the CMS in East Africa. Despite his continued links with the CMS elsewhere in the next few years, his health never recovered fully enough to permit him another stint of continued service in East Africa with the CMS. For all practical purposes, his tenure of service in Africa under the auspices of the CMS came to an end in 1855. Under different arrangements, he returned to East Africa in 1861-1862 on a restricted mission of leading a party of missionaries sent by the United Methodist Free Churches, resulting in the establishment of their

mission station at Ribe, near Rabai, 1862.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise, he retired to his home in Kornthal, Germany where he died on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1881.

In the case of Erhardt, the deterioration of his health forced him to return to Europe in 1855. When his health improved, he could not return to service in East Africa because of the interruption of the work at Rabai in the years 1857-1858. Instead, he was transferred to India, where he served the CMS with faithfulness, success and distinction for about thirty-five years.

The third of the missionary trio, Rebmann, had travelled to Egypt in October, 1851, and married an English lady who was involved in the missionary enterprise there. Following the departures of Krapf and Erhard in 1853 and 1855 respectively, he remained the sole missionary in East Africa. His loneliness increased in 1866 when his wife died. Although other missionaries came, and either died or had to go back home because of failing health, Rebmann remained the only constant factor in the work of the CMS in East Africa for about twenty more years following the departure of the last of his earlier colleagues. He too finally left in May 1875, when the Rev. W. Salter Price arrived to replace him in the work. Although Rebmann worked until replacements should arrive, when Price arrived in 1874, he was "totally blind" and unable to work at his optimum due to ill health.<sup>25</sup> Back in Europe, the CMS committee received him with great respect and honour when he appeared before it in July, 1875.<sup>26</sup> He proceeded to his home at Kornthal in Wurtemberg, Germany, where his old friend and colleague, Krapf, also lived. It was here that he died in retirement on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1876, when he was only about fifty-six years old.

### **The Legacy of the Trio of Pioneers**

Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt made invaluable contributions which represent their legacy to various fields of concern in general, and to Christianity in East Africa in particular. Whether viewed singly or together, the different categories of accomplishments present an impressive portrait to serve as a monument to their missionary labours.

#### **Foundational Foothold**

Krapf and his colleagues played a significant role by simply helping Christianity to gain foothold in East Africa. By introducing and establishing

the Christian faith in the region, they opened the door through which the indigenous population could come into contact with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, and consequently embrace the Christian faith for themselves. Indeed, through their combined efforts the three missionaries laid a useful firm foundation upon which others would build in subsequent years and which they would employ as a springboard for later developments.

### **Missionary Station**

In 1846, Krapf and Rebmann opened a missionary station at Rabai, a mainland locality about fifteen miles to the west from the initial centre on the island of Mombasa. This was a very important step in that it gave the missionaries a concrete physical operational centre. In earlier days, 1844-1846, Krapf had worked from a base on the island of Mombasa, and in future years, in 1875, Rev. W. S. Price opened an additional station at Frere Town on the north coast mainland.<sup>27</sup> It was, however, the missionary station at Rabai with its varied infrastructure which proved pivotal in foundational missionary endeavours not only in approximately thirty years duration in which the pioneer trio of missionaries operated from there, but also well beyond these initial years. Apart from its very existence and the purposes which it served, the station also pointed to the future as an example and an encouragement of what could be achieved elsewhere in later times.

### **Nucleus of Converts**

Of all the achievements of the pioneer team of missionaries, the supreme accomplishment was definitely that in which a nucleus of indigenous converts embraced Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Beginning with the conversion of Mringe and his accompanying baptism in 1848-1850 as the first convert, several others espoused the Christian faith in succeeding years. Although the numbers were few and the progress slow, there was a measure of steadiness which resulted in a sizeable Christian community by the mid-1860s. Fulfilling Krapf's yearning, this nucleus has served as the vanguard of millions in East Africa who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ since, including the present generation.

### **Languages Study**

In some spheres of academic endeavours, Krapf and Rebmann are viewed not so much as missionaries, but rather as pioneers in the field of

language and linguistic development in East Africa.<sup>28</sup> While Rebmann was a junior partner in this scheme, his role was definitely pronounced. All the same, it was Krapf who deliberately made language study a major area of concern from the earliest days of his involvement in the missionary enterprise in East Africa. While Krapf's language study included Kiswahili, Kikamba, Kinyika (Ki-Mijikenda), the Pokomo language, and Galla language, his key contributions were in Kiswahili, Kikamba, and Kinyika. With Kiswahili as his priority language, which served as a pattern for the others, he isolated certain tasks upon which he concentrated. These included the establishment of suitable orthography, reducing these languages to writing, developing useful grammar, and creating a working dictionary for each case.

### **Bible Translation**

Together with language study per se, Krapf and Rebmann undertook the translation of the Bible into these different languages. Indeed their efforts at language study provided them with a foundation not only for conversation and preaching in these languages, but for Bible translation as well. While commendable progress was made in this direction in all of these languages, the greatest strides were made in Kiswahili.<sup>29</sup> At every stage in his language and translation career, Krapf was keenly aware of the need to involve indigenous manpower in the attendant exercise. A case in point was that of the Pokomo language where he secured a Pokomo individual to team up with him in the whole undertaking.

### **Literature**

Besides literature relating to language study and Bible Translation, there were other writings, which the trio of missionaries of Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt produced. Much of this writing was in the form of reports and letters to Europe, which were then produced there, especially in the various publications of the CMS. Of the more far-reaching of this literature, one of the most lasting legacies is Krapf's monumental work, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours in East Africa*, published in 1860. Over the years this book has informed, educated, challenged, and inspired many a reader on the situation in East Africa in general, and on the Christian missionary task in particular. The book has had untold influence over the years. However, its immediate results was when the United Methodist Free Churches (UMFC) was moved to approach Krapf to lead a



contingent of their missionaries to East Africa in 1861-1862, resulting in the founding of the station at Ribe near Rabai.

### **Chain of Stations**

The three missionaries recognized their work on the Kenyan coast as but the beginning of a wider and larger enterprise, which would encompass the entire African continent. Krapf, in particular, was a dreamer who believed in a plan through which the Church would be able "to connect Eastern and Western Africa by the a chain of missionary stations."<sup>30</sup> Not content with merely working on the coast, they even made exploratory forays into the interior for the purpose of finding suitable locations for future missionary stations. Although they did not implement their plans, they inspired others who eventually fulfilled this vision.

### **Exploration**

Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt never set out to carry out general journeys of geographical exploration. Since they had no "thought or wish of making geographical discoveries," any gains they made in this sphere were "incidental to their missionary task" in their view.<sup>31</sup> This perception, notwithstanding their exploratory missionary visits, yielded much-treasured geographical knowledge of those interested in information on East Africa. Apart from those with keen interest on the Christian missionary front, there were those Europeans whose interest was primarily in the sphere of geographical expeditions. Following the information provided by the missionaries, there were intense exploratory activities in the years 1856-1876.

All this stemmed from the geographical findings of the missionaries in 1848-1855. First, on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1848, Rebmann distinguished himself as the first European to set his eyes on Mt. Kilimanjaro with its 19,000 feet snow-covered summit.<sup>32</sup> Second, on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1849, Krapf again, became the first European to see, in the form of two peaks covered with snow, the 17,000 feet high Mt. Kenya.<sup>33</sup> In the third instance, following his return to Europe in 1855, Erhardt published a map in 1856 showing a body of inland water in the interior of East Africa as drawn jointly with Rebmann in 1855.

### **Inspiring Examples**

Krapf and Rebmann distinguished themselves as men whose missionary careers were characterized by indomitable sacrificial "courage,"

persistence, “perseverance,” and forward-looking “vision.”<sup>34</sup> These were high ideals, which set a high standard to be emulated by those of posterity who would seek to excel in their missionary vocation.

Krapf displayed unusual determination, sacrifice, and courage, when he elected to go on with the work, following the emotional and experience at the death of his wife and daughter only a few days apart during his second month of residence in Mombasa in July 1844. In the face of this personal tragedy and bitter loss, Krapf wrote of how the deaths only signified that the missionary enterprise had now commenced in East Africa, especially since “the victories of the Church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members.”<sup>35</sup>

With regard to Rebmann, he proved himself over a period of about thirty years as the perfect portrait of persistence and perseverance. Following the departure of Krapf in 1853, and Erhardt in 1855, he remained alone working against great odds. His isolation and loneliness increased when his wife of fifteen years passed away in 1866. Sickly and blind, he refused to abandon his missionary post and the Christian community there until replacement had arrived. It was only when this condition was met that he retired to Europe where he had not been since leaving for East Africa thirty years earlier.

### **Conclusion**

The missionary endeavours of Krapf, Rebmann and Erhardt commenced in May, 1844, when Krapf opened a station at Mombasa. The terminus was May, 1875, when Rebmann departed for Europe after the Rev. W. S. Price had arrived to take over from him. For the duration of their service the three were able to register many accomplishments. Of these, the most significant was obviously that in which a nucleus of converts was won to faith in Jesus Christ.

These pioneer conversions proved to be a signal achievement that had a two-fold dimension. First, the nucleus of converts was a concrete demonstration that an indigenous body of Christians had emerged out of the pioneer missionary enterprise. Second, the very existence of this group of Christians meant that any further future missionary efforts in the area would not begin from scratch or in a vacuum. Rather, this nucleus served as

the foundation on which, and as the roots out of which, successive labours would grow. This was the scenario, which confronted the Rev. W. Salter Price when he arrived in the region to take over from Rebmann. In that context it served as the link between the past and future missionary work within the CMS family in particular, and in Christian endeavours in East Africa on the whole.<sup>36</sup>

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eugen Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, Vol. 1 (Church Missionary Society, 1899), 56. The Church Missionary Society was formed on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1799 by a group of Evangelicals within the Anglican Church. For the first fifty years or so when no missionary personnel were available in Britain, recruits were supplied by the like-minded pietistic seminaries of Berlin and Basle. As a result, most of the pioneer missionaries were German Lutherans.

<sup>2</sup> J[ohn] Lewis Krapf (for Johann Ludwig Krapf), *Travels, Researches, and Missionary During an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition with an introduction by Roy C. Bridges, (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), 89. In the introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Bridges makes the point that, "Most of these foreign recruits were from Germany; the earliest contacts were with Berlin . . ." Regarding Krapf, Bridges continues, "The fact that he was a product of Basle Seminary was taken as sufficient guarantee, for by 1830's it was a principal source of recruits for the CMS."

<sup>3</sup> Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 131-132. At a time when Krapf was beginning to view his work with satisfaction and enjoyment, tragedy struck. He gives a sketch of the details when he, and his "family were subjected to a very severe trial."

<sup>4</sup> Stock, *History of the CMS*, Vol. 1, 461.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 461-462.

<sup>6</sup> Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 133.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Stock, *History of the CMS*, Vol. 1, 462.

<sup>12</sup> Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 154-155. Two points need to be underscored here. One, as the pioneer mission station in East Africa, the opening of Rabai was historic. Two, this was achieved when Krapf and Rebmann were very sick and weak with fever. As Krapf pointed out, "Scarcely ever was a mission begun in such weakness; but so it was to be, that we might neither boast of

our own strength, nor our successors forget that in working out His purposes, God sanctifies even our human infirmities to the fulfillment of His ends.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>18</sup> R. Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Seyyid Said in 1856*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 393.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>20</sup> C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. 2, 1840-1878, (London: Lutherworth Press, 1954), 111-112.

<sup>21</sup> *Church Missionary Gleaner*, 3, No.25 (January 1876): 1-2. When news of these geographical features was first received in Europe, it was met with derision. “The news comes home, and is derided by the geographical world – ‘Who can believe this? It is only a missionary that says so.’ But the missionary proves right.”

<sup>22</sup> *Proceedings of the CMS*, (1861-1862), 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Church Missionary Record*, n.s. 8, no. 10 (October 1863), 346-347.

<sup>24</sup> R. Elliot Kendall, *Charles New and the East Africa Mission*, (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978), 48.

<sup>25</sup> Stock, *History of the CMS*, Vol. 3, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>27</sup> *Church Missionary Gleaner*, 8, No.28 (April 1976), 37.

<sup>28</sup> Carl-Erik Sahlberg, *From Krapf to Rugambwa: A Church History of Tanzania*. (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1986), 40. Sahlberg notes that Krapf (and Rebmann) preceded missionaries of the Universities Mission to Central Africa in endeavouring to “subdue the catastrophe of Babel’s tower among the East African people.”

<sup>29</sup> Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 140-141. Here, Krapf talks of how he devoted himself to “prosecuting with great zeal the study of the Swahili language, into which by degrees I translated the whole of the New Testament, and composing a short grammar and a dictionary, continuing likewise my geographical and ethnographical studies.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>31</sup> Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. 2, 100n. As Rebmann had pointed out, “We came to Africa without a thought or wish of making geographical discoveries. We came here as missionaries, whose grand aim was but the spreading of the kingdom of God.” See *Church Missionary Gleaner*, 8, No.25 (January 1876), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders*, 393.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>34</sup> Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), 6. Oliver states that, "But Krapf and Rebmann, if they were somewhat impractical, had vision, tenacity and boundless courage."

<sup>35</sup> Stock, *History of the CMS*, Vol. 1, 461-462.

<sup>36</sup> Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders*, 419-420. In a penetrating assessment of these pioneer missionaries, Coupland points out that although their evangelistic results were meagre, they left a positive impact on the minds of the indigenous people with whom they interacted. He goes on, "The natives of the interior had never seen a white man at all. They were to see many of them, white men of all sorts, coming to their country with various and mingled motives. But these first 'invaders' – and others of the same kind to follow them – had one motive only. They did not seek to make money from the natives. They did not covet their land or its produce. They did not even want to govern them. They only wanted to give them a new God and thereby make them better men." In his own way Roland Oliver commends Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt for their far-sightedness. Whatever their weaknesses and shortcomings, he notes that, "They were filled with the assurance that others of their calling would follow them, and they regarded themselves from the first as the pioneers of a continental system." See Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, 6.

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# A REJOINDER TO FERDINANDO'S REBUTTAL

Christopher Little

When I wrote "Toward Solving the Problem of the Unevangelized",<sup>1</sup> I had three specific goals in mind: 1) to demonstrate that general revelation was an insufficient means for the unevangelized to obtain salvation; 2) to show that special revelation was the manner in which God has chosen to redeem humanity throughout history; and 3) to delineate the existence and continual operation of the modalities of special revelation which God utilizes to reconcile people to Himself. In his critique of my presentation, Keith Ferdinando, while affirming the first two points, took strong exception to the last. For the sake of clarity, I therefore find it necessary to address his concerns. I will do so by following his outline so that the reader can easily compare our respective arguments.

In his introduction, Ferdinando asserts "I agree with the statement that the unevangelized are 'condemned through no fault of their own.'"<sup>2</sup> Yet nowhere in my article do I endorse such a view. Quite the contrary. I state that humankind is guilty as a result of rejecting the divine truth disclosed through general revelation,<sup>3</sup> there is no salvation apart from allegiance to the name of Jesus revealed through special revelation,<sup>4</sup> and by implication, those who do not fulfill the criteria for receiving special revelation from

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<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in 2002 in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21(1):45-62.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Ferdinando, "'Toward solving the problem of the unevangelized': A Response to Christopher Little," in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21(1):64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

God, are condemned.<sup>5</sup> My intent in quoting this phrase was nothing more than to employ a literary tool to attract the attention of those who have used it in the past.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Ferdinando disputes my interpretation concerning the witness of the Gentile conscience taking place at the final judgment and the significance of the names of Cain and Abel. Yet he provides no evidence to support these statements. In relation to the activity of the Gentile conscience, Paul explicitly says that it will occur “on the day when . . . God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Rom. 2:16).<sup>7</sup> That is, “its ultimate significance will be revealed in the last judgment”.<sup>8</sup> And on the meaning of the names of Cain and Abel, M. G. Easton defines the former as “spear” and the latter as “vanity” which of course is a synonym for “futility”.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequently, Ferdinando makes four assertions, the first of which is “*the starting point of the discussion is seriously flawed.*” Initially Ferdinando maintains, “Little apparently goes along with the view that it would be unjust for men and women to be condemned without having the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel” but then writes, “by definition, the very notion of a holy, just and infinitely wise God condemning people ‘through no fault of their own’ must be rejected, and Little of course does so as would any thoughtful Christian.”<sup>10</sup> To more accurately represent my position, I would agree with Ferdinando that “God’s righteous judgement falls on men and women not because they do not respond to the gospel, but because they are rebels and sinners, and because their sin merits his wrath and condemnation.” However, I would differ with him when he states: “‘the problem of the unevangelized’ is greatly diminished” or “non-existent” when one recognizes that “there is no

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. William Crockett & James Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, (Baker, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible* (1970).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Easton’s Bible Dictionary from the Logos Library System Version 2.1g* on CD-ROM (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995-1999).

<sup>10</sup> See p. 66 of his article.



longer any question of the arbitrary condemnation of the innocent.”<sup>11</sup> This is because the problem of the unevangelized is not simply related to their just condemnation in the sight of a holy God. Rather, their dilemma has to do with the availability of special revelation. That is, the question is not “How can a just God condemn those who are supposedly innocent for not having special revelation?” but “How can a just God condemn sinners who don’t have access to the necessary information to rectify their plight?” As such, I affirm both God’s justice in condemning sinners *and* His mercy in granting access to special revelation in order to furnish them an opportunity for redemption. Ferdinando wants us to hold to the former while denying the latter. For him, God is particular in distributing grace, for me “there is *no* partiality with Him” (Eph. 6:9) since He “has shut up *all* in disobedience in order to show mercy to *all*” (Rom. 11:32) not desiring “for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9, emphasis added).

Second, Ferdinando believes “*the whole notion of becoming a candidate for God’s special revelatory truth is problematic.*” This is because he concludes that I maintain “the necessity of some worthiness on the part of the ‘candidate’ [is essential] before God acts.”<sup>12</sup> As such, he accuses me of semi-Pelagianism. But in doing so, Ferdinando has overlooked several crucial issues. First, the candidates to which I refer are not those who consider themselves worthy—just the opposite. In footnote 22, I state the candidates for special revelation are those who have a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). That is, they are candidates precisely because they see themselves as unworthy! And God promises to not despise them (Ps. 51:17). In fact, He “saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18). The point is not that the candidates are worthy but *needy*. And what is God’s response when such people acknowledge their need? Fortunately, Jesus gives us the answer. When the prodigal son was returning home, “his father saw him, and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him” (Lk. 15:20). Second, Ferdinando essentially denies any human involvement in salvation. But if this is the case, then why does God give special revelation at all to any one at any time? If God acts completely independent of the human condition and will, then, what is the purpose of Him revealing Himself to us? Why doesn’t He

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

just fulfill His own eternal decrees without going to the trouble of interacting with mere humans? And if in Ferdinando's mind humans are actually incapable of being "self-selecting," then, how can they be held responsible for their actions? What Ferdinando is apparently advocating is extreme Calvinism. However, according to Norman Geisler, extreme Calvinism is logically untenable because:

First of all, it involves a denial of human free choice (that is, the power of contrary choice), which is supported by both Scripture and good reason . . . . As even Augustine himself earlier stated, "he that is willing is free from compulsion . . . ." In the final analysis, a person who is coerced, either externally or internally, has no choice in his own salvation . . . .

Second, "irresistible grace" on the unwilling is a violation of free choice. For God is love (1 John 4:16), and true love is persuasive but never coercive. There can be no shotgun weddings in heaven. God is not a cosmic B. F. Skinner who behaviorally modifies men against their will . . . . Said Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell." . . .

Third, the extreme Calvinist's view leads logically to a denial of God's omnibenevolence (all-lovingness) . . . . If God is one indivisible being without any parts, as classical Calvinists believe, then His love extends to all of His essence, not just part of it. Hence, God cannot be partly loving. But if God is all-loving, then how can He love only some so as to give them and only them the desire to be saved? If He really loves all men, then why does He not give to all men the desire to be saved? It only follows then that, in the final analysis, the reason why some go to hell is that God does not love them and give them the desire to be saved. But if the real reason they go to hell is that God does not love them, irresistibly regenerate them, and give them the faith to believe, then their failure to believe truly would result from God's lack of love for them . . . .

Certainly this is not the picture of the God of the Bible who "so loved the world" (John 3:16) and sent His Son to be a sacrifice

not only for the sins of some "but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2); whose Son "died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6) and not just for the elect.<sup>13</sup>

And last, Ferdinando rejects my hypothesis that God chose Abraham as a result of his positive response to special revelatory truth contained in the Noahic covenant. This is no doubt due to the fact that he allows no room for Abraham's active role in his own destiny. In fact, according to him, "Abraham's call was the result of free and unmerited grace."<sup>14</sup> Yet in view of the textual clues in the narrative of Genesis regarding the information contained in the Noahic covenant transmitted through oral tradition, I see Abraham responding to what he knew to be true about God's will. Consequently, he was called by Him to be a candidate for further special revelation. Hence, it is not an either/or situation but a both/and one.

Third, Ferdinando states "*Little affirms God's ability to reveal himself apart from human messengers.*" Even though he essentially agrees with my point of view by confessing "God can act as he wills . . . [and] is indeed free in all that he does, totally unrestrained by his creation,"<sup>15</sup> he takes issue with my supposedly reductionistic interpretation of Paul's statement in Romans 10:15. According to him, "In answer to his question, 'how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' Paul certainly seems to expect the response, 'in such a case they cannot hear.'"<sup>16</sup> But by making such an inference, Ferdinando overlooks the context of Jewish evangelism in this passage. In relation to Romans 10:14-15, C. E. B. Cranfield writes,

We have here four questions which are parallel in structure and together form a logical chain . . . The third person plural verbs of the first three questions are sometimes understood as indefinite ('How then shall men call . . .'); but in view of the argument of the section 9.30-10.21 as a whole, it is more natural to assume that the subject of these verbs is the same as that of the third person plural verbs in 9.32; 10.2, 3—namely, the Jews. At this point Paul is

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Bethany House, 1999), pp. 47-50.

<sup>14</sup> See his article, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

concerned to show that the Jews have really had full opportunity to call upon the name of the Lord in the sense of vv. 12 and 13, and are therefore without excuse. That all along the law which was constantly on their lips was pointing to Christ, that all along He had been its innermost meaning, did not by itself constitute this full opportunity. The fullness of opportunity was not present for them until the message that the promises have indeed now been fulfilled had actually been declared to them by messengers truly commissioned for the purpose by God Himself. Paul makes his point by asking the question whether this fullness of opportunity has really been present for the Jews by means of this chain of related questions, and then answering in the affirmative in v. 15b.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Paul's comments here have specific reference to the Jews and their interaction with special revelation either by way of the law (v. 5) or human messengers (v. 18). As such, it cannot rightly be used to reach a conclusion about God's salvific activity among those who do not have a similar history. The truth is, no where in this passage does Paul explicitly state that people cannot hear from God apart from human messengers. If he did, then there would be a contradiction to what I am affirming with regard to the use of the other modalities of special revelation available to God. But since he didn't, there is no contradiction even though Ferdinando attempts to invent one. In the end, Ferdinando tries to force the passage to teach what it doesn't—that God calls and uses human messengers and only human messengers in communicating special revelation to people. Therefore, his interpretation is ultimately reductionistic because he is unwilling to accept God's prerogative to employ the other modalities to fulfill His redemptive agenda.

Furthermore, Ferdinando assumes that what I am advancing will lead to "a reduced sense of the urgency about the task of bringing the gospel to the lost."<sup>18</sup> This is only true of course if one links the Great Commission to human need rather than God's command. I choose to view mission in relation to the latter and therefore, as I said in my article,<sup>19</sup> "no Christian

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<sup>17</sup> *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, Volume II, (T. & T. Clark Limited, 1979), p. 533.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> See p. 60.

has the right to repudiate his or her duty to take the gospel to the unevangelized regardless of what God decides to do through the other modalities." Thus, we are not sent on a fool's errand but divinely commissioned in concert with the other modalities. This brings up another important point. Ferdinando evidently wants Christians to feel the entire weight of the world on their shoulders. He is content in assuming that if redeemed individuals don't share the gospel with the unredeemed then they will be lost. But I must confess that I find it very difficult to imagine that God would place the complete fulfillment of His redemptive program in the world upon human beings or the Church as a whole. To do so would mean that He is dependent upon us and that we are in fact indispensable. Of course, Ferdinando is free to take this anthropocentric posture, but I believe it is more sound to interpret salvation history from a more theocentric perspective.

And last, Ferdinando addresses "*the fundamental stage of [my] argument.*" He rightly articulates my thesis in the words: "God uses 'the modalities of special revelation' to bring saving truth to those to whom the gospel has not been preached and who do not have access to the Bible."<sup>20</sup> Thereafter however, he rejects the evidence. For example, in relation to my discussion of Job, he concludes that it is doubtful whether his life "has any clear-cut soteriological implications for the unevangelized at all."<sup>21</sup> But Ferdinando has ignored several key facts. First, most scholars agree that Job and his friends, lived during the patriarchal period—a period of time before the Old Testament was written. Hence, they had no Bible to consult. Second, we encounter Job as a faithful worshipper of the true God. But how did he arrive at such a place? Was he born that way or did he hear of special revelation and embrace it? If the latter, then at some point he was just like the unevangelized person today who may have no knowledge of special revelation. Furthermore, how did he know that a Redeemer lives and that there will be a resurrection from the dead? Ferdinando offers no explanation. After considering other possibilities, I maintain that he learned of these things through the modalities referred to by Elihu in Job 33:13-33. Third, Ferdinando wants to limit Elihu's words to Job and his friends alone and thereby denies their salvific application among the unevangelized. On

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<sup>20</sup> See his article, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

this, he writes: “The dreams, visions, angels and mediators of which the passage speaks are . . . to be understood in the context of belief.”<sup>22</sup> But no such delimitation is given by Elihu. Rather, he says these things happen to “men” in general (Job 33:15ff). Thus, since some “men” are unevangelized, these things apply to them. And last, Ferdinando challenges my contention that Job was not surprised by the medium of God’s message but by the content of it when he states: “the text certainly does suggest that Job found the subsequent divine theophany unusual: ‘My ears had heard of you but now mine eyes have seen you’ (Job 42:5).”<sup>23</sup> To comprehend what is happening to Job here it is necessary to take a closer look at this verse. When Job says his “eyes have seen” God, he uses the Hebrew verb *r’h* (“to see”). In this phrase it occurs in the Qal form. According to William White: “The extended and metaphorical senses in the Qal include to regard, perceive, feel, understand, learn, enjoy.”<sup>24</sup> It is this sense that Isaiah proclaims “all flesh shall see that God hath spoken” (40:5) and Elihu pleads, “Teach Thou me what I do not see” (34:32). Taking this into account, the Amplified Bible translates Job 42:5b as: “now my [spiritual] eye sees You.” Moreover, Jackie Naudé points out: “The [verb] is also used in the sense of becoming psychologically visionary conscious, seeing in a vision, receiving a revelation.”<sup>25</sup> As such, Charles Ryrie is on the mark when he notes: “No form of God appeared in the whirlwind, but what God revealed about Himself enabled Job to see Him.”<sup>26</sup> Or in the words of Roy Zuck:

Job had only heard of God’s doings. The complainer was not an eyewitness of the act of Creation, a fact God called to his attention near the beginning of His first speech (38:4-11). Nor could Job even view firsthand many aspects of natural Creation (38:16-24; 39:1-4). His perspective of God’s total workings was therefore limited and secondhand.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Jr., & Bruce Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Moody Press, 1980), p. 823.

<sup>25</sup> Willem Van Gemeren, gen. ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Volume 5, (Zondervan, 1997), p. 1007.

<sup>26</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible Expanded Edition* (Moody Press, 1995), p. 828.

But now that Job was addressed directly by God, this experience exceeded his previous knowledge, like seeing (**now my eyes have seen You**) compared with hearing. This thrilling view of God, probably spiritual insight, not physical vision, deepened his perspective and appreciation of God. What Job now knew of God was incomparable to his former ideas, which were really ignorant. This personal confrontation with God silenced his arguing and deepened his awe.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, there is no reason to contemplate a theophany here. Instead, what happened was that God rebuffed Job's attempt at finding fault with Him due to his suffering (40:2). That is, He added to Job's knowledge of Himself through this supernatural encounter. As such, I find no justification for rejecting my interpretation that what is accented in Job's case is not the medium but the content delivered through the medium.

But Ferdinando's rejection of the evidence does not stop with Job. In relation to the manner in which Rahab received special revelation, he asserts: "It is questionable whether [my] first category, 'oral tradition' is in fact a 'modality of special revelation' at all . . . . She did not benefit from a 'modality of special revelation' but simply from the oral transmission of special revelation itself, the news of what God had done in Egypt and at the Red Sea."<sup>28</sup> In stating this, Ferdinando shows he has not grasped the meaning of the term modality. In my book, I demonstrate by citing the definitions of others that a modality is any vehicle through which specific information about God is conveyed.<sup>29</sup> Oral tradition thus qualifies as a modality because it is a channel through which revelation passes from one generation to another. And of course this does not prove my thesis, as Ferdinando observes, but then my thesis doesn't rise or fall on the operation of oral tradition alone.

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<sup>27</sup> John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament*, (Victor Books, 1985), p. 774.

<sup>28</sup> See his article, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized: An Evangelical Appraisal and Missiological Contribution to the Debate* (William Carey Library, 2000), pp. 50-52.

In relation to the conversion of Paul, Ferdinando admits it “does indeed prove that ‘God is not limited to human agency’” but then in an interesting twist of logic maintains that “the whole incident offers scant support for Little’s thesis.”<sup>30</sup> For the sake of clarity, it is imperative to listen to Paul’s own testimony of what happened to him on the Damascus road: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it* through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12; cf., Acts 26:14-18). This is hardly “scant support” as Ferdinando suggests. Yet he seeks to undermine it by setting forth three objections. First, since Ananias comes to Paul immediately after his miraculous event, this supposedly detracts from my thesis. But Ananias’ visit cannot be used to disprove my thesis since he didn’t deliver the gospel to Paul; he simply was used by God to fill Paul with the Holy Spirit and heal him (Acts 9:17-18). Second, Ferdinando assumes that having a visible encounter with Christ is unique to an apostle. But Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ and she is never referred to as one (Jo. 20:11-18). Also, Christ appeared to more than five hundred brethren and they were not considered apostles (1 Cor. 15:6). Additionally, listen to the following true story of Sadhu Sundar Singh, which is amazingly similar to the conversion of Paul:

At 4:30 A.M. I saw something of which I had no idea at all previously. In the room where I was praying I saw a great light. I thought the place was on fire. I looked round, but could find nothing. Then the thought came to me that this might be an answer that God had sent me. Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. If it had been some Hindu incarnation I would have prostrated myself before it. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before. I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, ‘How long will you persecute me? I have come to **save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it ?**’ The thought then came to me, ‘Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself.’ So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else. This is the joy I was wishing to get. This was heaven itself. When I got up, the vision had all disappeared; but although the vision dis-

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<sup>30</sup> See his article, pp. 71-72.



appeared the Peace and Joy have remained with me ever since. I went off and told my father that I had become a Christian. He told me, 'Go and lie down and sleep; why, only the day before yesterday you burnt the Bible; and you say you are a Christian now.' I said, 'Well, I have discovered now that Jesus Christ is alive and have determined to be His follower. To-day I am His disciple and I am going to serve Him.'<sup>31</sup>

And third, even though Paul was familiar with Old Testament revelation, he still did not have a redemptive relationship with God up to the time of his Damascus road experience, which thereby places him on the same footing with the unevangelized. Hence, there is in reality nothing here which discredits my thesis.

Ferdinando also doubts the conversion of the Emperor Constantine through a miraculous event. But Richard Todd argues that there is really no excuse for doing so:

Constantine's account of his conversion, told by the Emperor himself to the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, towards the end of his life, is well known. Constantine, alarmed by reports of Maxentius' mastery of magical arts, prayed to the 'Supreme God' for help. The response was a sign, a cross in the noonday sky 'above the sun', and with it the words, 'Conquer by this.' That night Christ appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to use the sign—apparently Chi-Rho, the initial letters of the name of Christ—'as a safe guard in all engagements with his enemies'. According to the historian Lactantius, Constantine placed the sign on the shields of his soldiers. He then marched on Rome, confronted Maxentius, who was miraculously induced to fight outside the city fortifications, and conquered.

The story has been doubted. But Constantine's attitude towards the Christian church after he became emperor, and his new laws, show that his allegiance to Christianity was genuine, though his understanding of the Christian faith was at first no doubt imperfect. Constantine did, indeed, retain the pagan high priest's title of *Pontifex Maximus*, and for a decade his coins continued to

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<sup>31</sup> B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion*, (MacMillan and Co., 1922), pp. 6-7.

feature some of the pagan gods, notably his own favourite deity, the Unconquered Sun. He also delays Christian baptism until the end of his life. But delayed baptism was the custom of the age, a device for avoiding mortal sin, and retaining the pagan symbols was a necessary compromise with his pagan subjects, still very much in the majority.

Constantine treated Christianity as the favoured, though not yet the official, religion of the Empire. He granted immunities to the clergy and lavished gifts on the church; in his letters and edicts he spoke as if the Christian God were his own.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, I understand God's response to Constantine's plea for deliverance to be the pivotal point from which he traced his conversion.

With regard to dreams, Ferdinando writes: "There is no evidence of the two biblical dreams that Little refers to (Abimelech, Gen 20:3; the magi, Matt 2:12) was instrumental in the conversion of the recipients."<sup>33</sup> In this, he is of course correct. However, I cited those examples as proof of the existence of this modality<sup>34</sup> not to substantiate my thesis. To demonstrate from the Bible that God uses dreams to initiate a redemptive relationship with Himself, all one has to do is read the account of Jacob's dream at Bethel on his way to Haran (Gen. 28:10-22). And in relation the story of Adiri of Dutch Guiana, Ferdinando presumes: "The incident may indeed be significant, not so much because it supports Little's case, but because . . . Adiri was told 'to go to the missionaries for instruction'."<sup>35</sup> But the reference specifically states: "He was convicted of sin and apparently converted through dreams." Hence, his experience confirms my thesis. That Adiri was told to go to those more mature in the faith to be discipled

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<sup>32</sup> Tim Dowley, org. ed., *A Lion Handbook The History of Christianity*, (Lion Publishing, 1990), pp.139-140.

<sup>33</sup> On p. 72 of his article.

<sup>34</sup> As was done with the modalities of human messengers and the Bible which Ferdinando refers to on pp. 74-75.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

simply shows, as I point out in my book,<sup>36</sup> that God is not interested in promoting isolationist Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

Next, Ferdinando postulates that the information communicated through the various modalities, in this case, visions, are not self-explanatory and therefore human messengers are necessary. Yet if Abraham's vision was not self-explanatory, then how did he know to believe in the Lord and make sacrifice to Him? (Gen. 15:6-10); if Cornelius' vision was not self-explanatory, then how did he know that his prayers had been heard and he must send for Peter? (Acts 10:5); and if Adiri's visions were not self-explanatory, how was it that he was converted through them? I don't think that Ferdinando would have stumbled here if he had read my book which provides other instances of how God has used visions to convert people.<sup>38</sup> To add to that list, the respected Missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, in his autobiography says,

As I lay awake a vision came to my mind . . . It was a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost.<sup>39</sup>

Then Ferdinando addresses the modality of angels. He rightly contends that the "shepherds of the birth of Christ were bringing special revelation itself at the central moment of redemption history."<sup>40</sup> However, this is not in question. Rather, the evidence being sought to establish my thesis is

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<sup>36</sup> *The Revelation of God*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> This is the same answer I would offer to Ferdinando regarding his comments on p. 75 about church history not being full of reports of communities which were Christian before missionaries encountered them.

<sup>38</sup> *The Revelation of God*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>39</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda An Autobiography*, (Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> See his article, p. 73.

whether an angel communicated the gospel apart from human messengers. And the angel's words demonstrate that this is precisely what occurred: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:10-11). Thereafter, Ferdinando attempts to repudiate my discussion concerning the angel preaching the "eternal gospel" (Rev. 14:6), on three grounds: "First, in view of the apocalyptic genre of the whole book, it is legitimate to enquire whether in this and the following verses John is referring to the intervention of a literal, visible angel . . . Second, the emphasis in these verses is on judgement. Third, the announcements contained in the verses apparently refer to unique events of world-wide significance that are to take place at the end of history, and not to the way in which the gospel advances normally. Again, Little seeks to generalise from what appears to be an exceptional and unique situation." However, there are those who would disagree with Ferdinando. For example, Alan Johnson comments:

The first angel announces that there is still hope, for even at this crucial moment in history God is seeking to reclaim the beast followers by issuing a message appealing to the people of the world to "fear God ... and worship him." That this appeal is called a "gospel" (*euangelion*) has raised a question. How can it be good news? Yet is not the intent of the gospel message that men should fear God and worship him? Is it not the "eternal" gospel because it announces eternal life (John 3:16)? Could this be John's way of showing the final fulfillment of Mark 13:10? Let us not fail to see how in the NT the announcement of divine judgment is never separated from the proclamation of God's mercy.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, since God will utilize an angel to preach the gospel at the end of the age, is one at liberty to infer that He has decided to refrain from doing so until that time? Evidently not, since the writer of Hebrews teaches that angels are "sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14).

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<sup>41</sup> *Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 12*, Frank Gaebelin, gen. ed. (Zondervan, 1981), p. 541. Along the same lines, Ryrie maintains that this is "God's last call of grace to the world before the return of Christ" (*Ryrie Study Bible*), p. 2032.

Furthermore, one wonders how many biblical examples are "exceptional and unique" which as such cannot properly be used as evidence to support my thesis? Apparently, in Ferdinando's eyes, all of them. Not only this, but he goes on to surmise that where the Bible is present the other modalities are unnecessary.<sup>42</sup> But what if a person doesn't know how to read or doesn't know anyone who knows how to read? Or what if a person has been nurtured in a setting which is intrinsically antagonistic toward Christianity so that even if the Bible were in one's mother tongue, he or she would be severely ostracized or perhaps punished for reading it? Or what if a person derives from a culture with a worldview that values knowledge gained more through supernatural phenomena than literary sources? As I discuss in my book,<sup>43</sup> I see no reason for why God would not use all the modalities at His disposal in order to reach those who fulfill the necessary criteria.

By way of summary, Ferdinando concludes: "none of the examples Little quotes substantiates his thesis. In every case what the text refers to is either the use of a 'modality of special revelation' precisely to communicate special revelation, or the intervention of a dream or vision to direct the recipient to those human messengers called by God to communicate his unique Word."<sup>44</sup> The truth of the matter is that the evidence indicates otherwise. Rahab was converted through oral tradition; Paul, Constantine and Sadhu Sundar Singh through miraculous events; Jacob, Adiri, and Lesslie Newbigin through dreams and visions; and the shepherds through an angel and an untold amount through an angel at the end of the age. Moreover, God didn't send Jacob, Paul<sup>45</sup> or Constantine to a human messenger to explain what happened to them. He didn't need to because they grasped exactly what He was conveying to them. And in relation to his comments concerning God using dreams and visions in the process of leading Muslims to faith in Christ, there is no argument. My thesis

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<sup>42</sup> On p. 74 of his article.

<sup>43</sup> *The Revelation of God*, p. 126.

<sup>44</sup> See his article, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> The phrase "it shall be told you what you must do" (Acts 9:6; cf., 22:10), refers to Christ's subsequent communicate to Paul as indicted in the context by what was related to Ananias: "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16).

stipulates this but also goes beyond it to include God employing them to actually convert Muslims. As proof of the fact that He is doing this in our day, I offer the recent testimony of Ravi Zacharias:

I pray for God to open the eyes and the hearts of people in all cultures. Among former Muslims who are now Christians, more than 90 percent of those with whom I have talked have come to know Christ through a dream or a vision. God used their own worldview through which to reveal Christ. We must be men and women of prayer, to pray for the salvation of people all over the world.<sup>46</sup>

Hence, it certainly does *not* appear, at least in the case of Muslims, “that in God’s economy human messengers are an essential element in bringing the gospel to the unevangelized.”<sup>47</sup> Besides that, what happens if human messengers are not available to the unevangelized for having not heeded the missionary call as has been the case throughout church history? Ferdinando does not address that issue, but I would say that in such circumstances God’s redemptive purposes are not thwarted since they are not ultimately dependent upon human obedience.

In the end, Ferdinando rejects my thesis because he finds no evidence for it in the missionary record. According to him, if my thesis were true, “would it not be reasonable to suppose that as missionaries have gradually penetrated the unreached areas of the globe, they would have come across individuals . . . who had indeed found God in this way . . .? Do the annals of mission history suggest that this has happened and, if so, why does Little not refer to such cases to reinforce his position?”<sup>48</sup> Thus, he postulates that the idea “that some, even significant numbers, of the unevangelized, have found Christ through these ‘special modalities’”<sup>49</sup> is unfounded. But several things need to be clarified at this point. First, my thesis only argues for the “possibility” of this happening without attempting to comment on the frequency. I will leave the numbers game up to God. All I am claiming is

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<sup>46</sup> “A Conversation with Ravi Zacharias”, from the Internet address: [www.gospelcom.net/rzim/publications/jttran.php?jtcode=JT02SRZ](http://www.gospelcom.net/rzim/publications/jttran.php?jtcode=JT02SRZ)

<sup>47</sup> As Ferdinando asserts on p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

that the unevangelized who may be caught off from access to evangelists and/or the Bible are not without hope since God is able to use the other modalities to communicate special revelation, including saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Second, there *are* cases of people knowing Christ before being contacted by missionaries. For instance, there is the amazing account of Gyalsang Tamang, a Nepalese boy who along with his family knew of the name Yesu and worshipped Him as the Son of God before being contacted by missionaries.<sup>50</sup> And last, there is a crucial issue that Ferdinando does not address. If in heaven people are present from every tribe who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 5:9), then what are we to say about those tribes which vanished before they had an opportunity to interact with human ambassadors of Christ? If they are to be included in those who will be "priests to our God" (Rev. 5:10), then there must have been other ways in which God approached and redeemed them even though we may have no earthly evidence of it. This must also hold true for unreached people groups in our day which may go out of existence before the gospel is proclaimed among them by those committed to the Great Commission.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is no doubt obvious to the reader by now that while Ferdinando and I examine the same evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, we interpret it differently. Since I espouse a different viewpoint, Ferdinando implies my "Theology [does not correspond] to reality" and judges my "theory [to be] a dangerous one."<sup>51</sup> However, I would simply respond, when the evidence is interpreted properly, then my theory is both a biblical and theologically sound one, even if it may not be a prevalent or popular one. Accordingly, I commend it to the Church in the hope that it will enable Christians everywhere to gain a greater appreciation of the mysterious workings of God to procure "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . . saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). Amen!

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<sup>50</sup> This story "The Name Above All" was first published by Gospel Recordings. It now appears on the Internet site:  
<http://members.aol.com/tailenders/npnmaa.htm>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

## CONTRIBUTORS INVITED FOR AJET

The Editorial Committee for *AJET* (a journal that facilitates theological reflection and research by evangelicals on theological issues throughout the continent of Africa) welcomes articles by evangelical scholars for publication. Such articles will be screened based on the following criteria:

**Theology:** Since *AJET* publishes theological reflection based on the authority of Scripture, articles submitted for publication should reflect an evangelical perspective.

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**Scholarship:** Articles should reflect serious scholarship based on library or field research. Bibliographical references should preferably be no less than ten. The English composition should be accurate and readable, without the need of extensive editing.

**Format:** Articles should be typewritten, double-spaced with bibliographic information (of every book used) at the end of the paper. Footnotes, or End Notes should be properly given, following guidelines of scholarly publications.

**Bibliographical Information Requested:** Authors should include a brief biographical sketch of their present vocational work, together with the last degree obtained and name of the institution from which the degree was obtained.



# Analysis of an African Reflections on Evil

Joseph B. O. Okello

## INTRODUCTION

This article will attempt to investigate the problem of evil as perceived by the African mind. This investigation will revolve around two levels of perception. The first level will involve the ordinary, non-philosophically-minded Africa's understanding of evil. In other words, I will seek to analyze how a non-intellectual African would articulate his or her perception of the problem of evil. At this level, I will show how African Traditional Religion seems to have played a role in shaping this **understanding**.

The second level of perception will focus on how African philosophy has attempted to deal with this problem. By this I refer to the manner in which selected African philosophers have reflected over the philosophical problem that the existence of evil has posed. Thus, the works of a prominent African philosopher, namely, Kwame Gyekye, will get some attention. After each investigation, both levels of perception, together with their implications, will be tested for validity.

But first, it is necessary to establish whether or not evil exists in Africa, and whether or not it poses intellectual challenges to the African mind. Is the existence of evil only a Western occurrence, or does it also extend its cruelty to Africa and other parts of the world? In other words, is evil a universal problem? Initially, these questions can, and do sound rather absurd. For who can doubt the universality of evil? But I raise these questions for the following reason. If evil is universal, it follows that it has

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raised as many philosophical questions in other parts of the world as it has in the Western world. This means that philosophers who come from these different parts of the world have their reflections to share, and therefore deserve a hearing. Upon reading their works, one will realize that the struggles are essentially the same, but the philosophical approaches differ in some areas. Observe the following instance of evil as witnessed and documented in an African setting, paying close attention to the question raised toward the end of the article.

It was a night Emmanuel Murangira will never, can never forget. Huddled into the Eto Technical school, in Rwanda's Murambi Province, Murangira, his wife, children, brothers, sistens and 40,000 fellow Tutsis awaited their fate, numb with shock and helplessness. Hutu militia who had surrounded the school told them, "We want to kill you and we want our children to ask, 'What did a Tutsi look like?'" Then the killing began. Murangira is now a caretaker at the school, which has been turned into the Gokongoro Genocide Site, in memory of those massacred in 1994. "We stood there holding hands and we could not do anything but pray before they started to kill us," he told PANA. "They started killing with machetes, then they used their guns and when they were tired they threw in grenades, a mission that took them two days to complete. My wife, my children, brothers and sisters are among these people." Rwandan authorities have so far managed to locate 27,000 decayed bodies around the school, which are on display at the school . . . Murangira narrated his story as he showed the PANA correspondent the bodies of children and mothers frozen in death with screams on their faces. Some of the deceased mothers are still clutching on to their babies, as if they can still protect them. In the next room, hundreds of skulls and bones are neatly arranged. *To the question, "What did the Tutsis do to God to deserve this?" A guide, Jean-Marie Jabo, could only reply, "I don't know . . ."* What is even more horrifying are the tales from survivors that victims had a choice to be killed with a machete or pay a fee to be shot - - a quicker way to the inevitable end. A number paid for their own executions.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The event described above it punctuated with indescribable horror and pain. It is almost impossible to read this excerpt without posing a pertinent philosophical horror and pain. If God exists, why does he allow such things to happen? It is my contention that the philosophical, as well as the non-

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<sup>1</sup> Newton Kahema, "The Pain of Visiting a Rwandan Genocide Site," <http://www.africanews.org/pana/news>

philosophically oriented African, have both struggled with finding possible answers to this and many other related questions. I am not attempting to answer the question at this point. I am simply suggesting that evil is as real in Africa as it is in other parts of the world. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that African minds have reflected over the problem of evil just as much as every other philosopher has. Some of these reflections deserve some attention for the simple reason that they raise profound philosophical implications that deserve to be answered by serious Christian philosophers. It is therefore, my intention to start this investigation by surveying the first level of Africa's answer to the problem of evil.

### **Understanding Evil in a Non-Philosophical African Context**

Perhaps no other African theologian and philosopher has done more extensive research on African Tradition and Philosophy than John S. Mbiti. Mbiti's research reveals that several views exist concerning the origin and nature of evil.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, these African views still contend categorically that God is neither the creator nor the author of evil.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, many African societies hesitate to attribute to God any occurrences of evil, be it moral or natural. Evil is usually seen as having its origin, not from God, but from other beings that can and do exercise free will.<sup>4</sup> These lie in the category of spiritual beings and human beings.<sup>5</sup> Referring to spiritual beings Mbiti says, "In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil."<sup>6</sup> He also writes,

There are people in every community who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours, through the use of magic, sorcery and witchcraft . . . this is the centre of evil, as people experience it. Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself. But when used maliciously by some individuals, it experienced as evil. This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1994), 204.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

What Mbiti seems to be saying here is that according to some African societies, beings with free will function only as agents of evil without necessarily being the origins of evil. He also observes that this might not be the case with other African societies where evil is viewed as an independent external object.<sup>8</sup> In such an instance, it has to be employed by an agent for its effects to be seen. This, of course, leaves no room for natural evil as understood by Western thought. For, according to Mbiti's findings, what is considered natural evil can ultimately be traced back to a free will agent.<sup>9</sup> He writes,

We have emphasized the corporate nature of African communities which are knit together by a web of kinship relationships and other social structures. Within this situation, almost every form of evil that a person suffers, whether it is moral or natural evil, it is believed to be caused by members of his community. Similarly, any moral offense that he commits is directly or indirectly against members of his society.<sup>10</sup>

Thus whereas in Western thought, natural evil may be viewed as occurring independently of agents, in an African perspective it is seen as occurring with the help of an agent. For example, a tornado would be considered, in the West, an occurrence independent of human or spiritual agency, whereas in Africa, the same would have human (or spiritual) agency as its origin. Whether or not the African view is an authentic representation of truth about evil is not the point here, I am only attempting to outline what a large majority of Africans believe to be the origin of evil. Consider, for instance, the following observation made by Deuseddit Nkurunziza, another African theologian, on the Bantu People's understanding of evil:

The Bantu experience of life is not always characterized by joy and happiness. They also experience the tragedy of life, and most especially death. Every tragic even is believed to have a reason and a personal cause. The traditional Bantu are not satisfied with secondary explanations and have no appreciation for the concept of coincidence. The question "why" is fundamental for them. When illness occurs, merely listing the cause of the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

disease, which would probably satisfy a Westerner, is only of relative interest. They want to know why that particular person contracted the disease in question. In case of death, they seek to find out why the death occurred, and specifically who was responsible.<sup>11</sup>

My intention in this section has been to show three major facets of the problem of evil as understood by the non-philosophically oriented African. The first facet we saw, albeit briefly, is the fact that most African societies exonerate God from the accusation of bringing disaster on humanity. Secondly, we have seen that some of these societies maintain that evil is an independent, external object that needs an agent in order for its occurrence to be perceived. Thirdly, we have also observed that, in many African cultures, what is understood as natural evil in the West is really moral evil in Africa. In other words, any kind of evil befalling the African originated, not from unknown causes, but from creatures with free will. These creatures can either be human beings or spiritual beings. What is left for us is to determine whether these views do obtain when analyzed philosophically.

It is worth noting that when Africans maintain that God is not the author of evil, they are consistent with the Biblical theology of God. Many African societies view God as all-powerful, all knowing and good. For instance, the Akan people see God as the Creator, the Dependable One, the Eternal One, the Omnipotent One and so forth.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that V. Y. Mudimbe, an African philosopher, observes that God is not only the origin and meaning of our essence. He is a causal and eternal being who must not simply be understood as a Supreme Being, but as the Pre-existing One.<sup>13</sup> With this view of God in mind, it is easy to see why Africans would never think of God as a possible source of evil. Thus, the first facet of African's perspective on the problem of evil is quite successful.

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<sup>11</sup> Deusdedit R. K. Nkurunziza, *Bantu Philosophy of Life in the Light of the Christian Message: A Basis for an African Vitalistic Theology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 118.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 70.

<sup>13</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 149.

Africans could also be partially right when they see evil as an "independent object." But they also maintain that it can only be perceived when an agent with free will chooses to use it on an individual. Just the same, I suggest that his view is inadequate at one crucial area. One wonders why, with a belief system that upholds the omnipotence and goodness of God, only a few African thinkers have attempted to give an explanation why a good and powerful God allows evil to occur. This is especially so in light of the fact that the all too apparent tension between God's goodness and evil's existence emerges when one posits the existence of both. Secondly, very few explanations, which are also inadequate, have been given as to the possible origin of this evil. Consider the notion of "independent evil" postulated by Mbiti. This position about independent evil warrants three possibilities. First, it leaves open the possibility that evil is as eternal as God and that the two will remain in conflict eternally, without either one of them ever realizing the complete victory of one and the utter defeat of another. For when a subject is understood to have eternal characteristics, it is assumed that its cessation is impossible. But if this is the case, then God, as understood by the African, ceases to be omnipotent. An omnipotent being should be able to resoundingly defeat all evil rather than remain in an eternal conflict. Perhaps this is not what the Africa implies when he or she poses the existence of independent evil.

If the above is not what is implied by independent evil, a secondly possibility arises; namely, it leaves open the possibility that evil, wherever it came from, took God by surprise. In other words, in spite of God's goodness and power exhibited in creation, evil managed to force its way into the system that God created without God every intending to include it in his plans. The discrepancies of such a claim are rather obvious. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, he would have known long beforehand that evil intended to interfere with his plans, and would have prevented it from doing so. If, indeed, evil successfully interfered with God's plan, much to God's surprise, we once again have to ask the African what he means by the assertion that God is both omniscient and omnipresent.

Perhaps it is here that the African would suggest a third implication, namely, that evil did indeed interfere with God's plan but only because God allowed it. Whereas this is the most plausible implication of all the three positions, it still raises some questions. Did God allow evil as a necessary interference of his divine purpose and plan, without which these plans

would fail? Or did God simply allow evil to 'fit' into his plans even when he knew that his plans would still succeed without the presence of evil? I once again suggest that the first question, given our understanding of God as omnipotent and omniscient in the African context, self-destructs. For if we maintain that God is omnipotent and omniscient, he would not need anyone's assistance, much less, the assistance of evil, in order to accomplish his plans. Thus, the only plausible question worth pursuing could be the second one. Perhaps God did allow evil to fit in his plans even when he knew that his plans would still succeed without the assistance of evil. But this still raises another pertinent question worth pursuing; namely, why would God allow evil to exist in the universe if its existence was not necessary for the accomplishment of his plans? The answer to this question could be a good starting point in dealing with this issue.

Meanwhile, let us analyze the third facet of the Africans' view on the problem of evil, namely, that natural evil is ultimately moral evil. To do this, let us recall an assertion made earlier that evil is an external and independent object that cannot act on its own; rather, it must be employed by human or spiritual agents.<sup>14</sup> I contend that this statement risks philosophical decimation. For if evil is indeed an independent object, it should, and will act on its own without depending on human or spiritual agents. Otherwise, it ceases to be independent. Could this, after all, be the reason why, rather than classify all evil as moral evil, Western philosophers maintain the notion of the existence of natural evil, one devoid of manipulation from free will agents? On the other hand, if it needs human or spiritual agents in order to act, it has to be dependent, thereby being appropriately termed moral evil.

We have seen three facets of the non-philosophical African's understanding of the problem of evil. We have seen that the first facet is consistent. That is, given their understanding of God, Africans are unwilling to view God as the origin of evil. However, we have examined the implications of the second and third facets and found them unsatisfactory at best. Be that as it may, I wish to pursue one implication that emerged as I analyzed the third facet; namely, why does God allow evil to fit in his plans even when he knows that those plans will succeed without evil? Some African philosophers have attempted to answer this question,

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<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 205.

and it is to them that I now turn. Here we shall examine some of their underlying presuppositions and observe how these presuppositions have influenced their understanding of evil.

### **Evil as Understood by a Selected African Philosophical Mind**

In a chapter entitled, "Destiny, Free Will and Responsibility," African Philosopher, Kwambe Gyekye, makes a thorough philosophical analysis of the Akan People's concept of evil.<sup>15</sup> It would be impossible to understand this concept of evil in the Akan context unless we understand some of their basic assumptions only destiny, free will and responsibility. Thus, Gyekye begins this chapter by asserting that, "Akan thinkers hold that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand."<sup>16</sup> He observes that this belief in destiny is not peculiar only to the Akan people, but is also probably found in all cultures.<sup>17</sup> Outlined below is how Gyekye develops his argument.

Firstly, Gyekye articulates what he thinks are two solid reasons for universal belief in destiny. In presenting his first reason, he contends that a number of Akan thinkers find a link between language and metaphysics. The claim here is that there is some kind of reality antecedent to language - - a reality that language is developed to express or depict. Further, it is held that linguistic structure reflects a deep-lying structure of reality or being.<sup>18</sup> For example, one thinker argued that if there were no accident, the word for accident, namely *asiane*, would never exist in the Akan language. Thus he deduced that the situation or matter that is not real has no name. Therefore, whatever is named must be presumed to be real.<sup>19</sup>

A second reason for this universal belief in destiny derives from another belief that humans are the product of a Creator. If this is true, it is possible to assume that humans were fashioned, indeed, designed in a way that determined their dispositions, talents, inclinations and so forth. In other words, the Creator can determine a number of things in much the same way

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<sup>15</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.



the maker of a car can determine its speed, size and shape. This reflection leads Gyekye to conclude that the notion of pre-appointed destiny may have developed in this way.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, Gyekye shifts his focus from the universal belief to Akan belief in destiny. It is here that he begins to outline the basis for Akan belief in this concept. He sees the first basis as essentially experiential. In other words, human life itself provides the setting conducive for their thought on destiny.<sup>21</sup> Thus, thinkers have commented that, "It is in life itself that we see that there is a destiny," and also that, "Destiny reveals itself clearly in life." By "Life," in both instances, they meant "human experiences."<sup>22</sup> Gyekye then writes,

Patterns of individual lives, habitual or persistent traits of persons, fortunes and misfortunes, successes and failures, the traumas and enigmas of life; the ways in which propensities, inclinations, capacities, and talents show themselves in individuals; the observed uniqueness of the individual - - all these suggest to the Akan that there is and must be some basis or reason for this individuality. That basis is destiny.<sup>23</sup>

Just how destiny is connected to all these features of life is an issue that Gyekye does not take trouble to explain. But he does give us a hint, when he cites examples, of how the striking features of these phenomena do much to clinch the idea of destiny. For instance, one can easily observe that some particular actions of an individual can be repetitive and persistent throughout the individual's life. This repetition and persistence can point one to where one is heading for later in life.<sup>24</sup> Second, apparent inalterability and inexplicability of elements in one's character is another factor that helps to clinch this idea about destiny. In other words, it can be held, for example, that if a person commits an accidental act, the individual will not commit that action again, for the simple reason that the action itself is not influenced by destiny.<sup>25</sup> Thus:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 107.

If one day the cocoa bags of a farmer who has become wealthy through buying and selling cocoa catch fire, the occurrence would be considered an accident. On the other hand, if every time he buys cocoa it catches fire, then this repeated event will be ascribed to this destiny: selling and buying cocoa is just not his destined occupation. He ought to give it up and look elsewhere for his "real" occupation. In other words, it is the persistence of an action or behaviour pattern or the inexplicability of an event that induces a belief in destiny.<sup>26</sup>

More examples could be included in this list to further enable us grasp the Akan concept of destiny. This list includes the inexplicability of events in the life of the individual, the apparent irremediability of particular failures in the life of the individual, the constancy of one's good fortunes, and so on.<sup>27</sup> After reflecting on all these, Gyekye concludes that the suggestion of the reality of the concept of destiny arises from the existence of such features of experience in the Akan mind. Thus destiny is that which determines the uniqueness and individuality of a person.<sup>28</sup>

How does Gyekye himself, as distinct from the Akan premise, view this philosophy of destiny? His first reaction is that it is inductive reasoning because it is based on experience. In other words, it is after observing and reflecting upon the constituents of an individual's experience that one draws conclusions based on such an observation.<sup>29</sup> Here, Gyekye is quick to postulate that such reasoning is valid because it "supports the view that the philosophical enterprise proceeds from experience."<sup>30</sup> His second reaction is that this is a conclusion reached "through a profound analysis of human life."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is inductive reasoning as opposed to deductive reasoning.<sup>32</sup>

After moving from the universal belief to the Akan belief in destiny, Gyekye turns the focus to his own view. He begins by explaining why he believes that an individual's destiny is given by God. His first reason is that

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

the language of some proverbs suggests or supports the divinely imposed theory of destiny.<sup>33</sup> One may not understand why a rigorous philosopher like Gyekye would construct his system of belief on a proverb. However, bear in mind that he believes, to a large extent, on the Akan premise that "anything named must be presumed to be real."<sup>34</sup> Secondly, it would seem that he believes that proverbs are inductive conclusions based upon reflections on various real life experiences. Therefore, since proverbs that comment on the reality of an individual's destiny exist, they must be accurate in their depiction of the "divinely imposed theory of destiny."<sup>35</sup>

His second reason for belief in destiny, closely related to the first, maintains that an Akan myth that expresses the idea of God determining an individual's destiny, exists. The myth suggests that there is no choice of destiny for individuals.<sup>36</sup> This is due to the simple reason that "the Supreme Being has already decided where each of the children would be settled."<sup>37</sup> Once again, we observe a philosopher believing in a myth, and the temptation to accuse him of abandoning his philosophical sense is almost irresistible. At any rate, we have to go back to his reasons for believing in such myths, namely, "anything named must be presumed to be real."<sup>38</sup> Thus, even a myth would not mention that which is unreal. Since the myth talks of God determining the individual's destiny, it has to be real.

Gyekye's third and final reason for belief in destiny is articulated as follows. He asserts that the "soul setting foot into the world" should be presumed as completely devoid of knowledge of this world's conditions.<sup>39</sup> Owing to this ignorance, it is impossible for the soul to determine its own destiny. Therefore, only the omniscient God, who knows of such conditions, is able to determine for the individual his or her own destiny. For this reason, the ignorance of the soul concerning the world renders implausible the self-determined theory of destiny, and plausible the divinely imposed theory of destiny.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 113-4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 114.

But just what is the nature of this destiny that Gyekye is talking about? Is it a future earthly settlement, or is it an immaterial destiny - - one beyond this world? In answering this question, Gyekye suggests that it is a general destiny.<sup>41</sup> By this, he means that the message encapsulated within the souls is comprehensive by the very fact that it determines only the broad outlines of an individual's mundane life. In other words, it does not include the specific details.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, "not *every* action that a person performs or *every* event that occurs in one's life comes within the ambit of his destiny."<sup>43</sup>

Gyekye here quickly notes that this concept carries with it two major difficulties. The first problem it raises is as follows: how can one determine the exact level of generality of one's destiny? Secondly, what attributes or elements constitute the message of destiny? If the nature of the content of the message could be determined, an idea of the level of generality could be obtained.<sup>44</sup> Here, Gyekye admits that in his research, his discussants were generally unsure about the elements that were included in one's destiny.<sup>45</sup> But the same were "unanimous in claiming that the time of a person's death and possibly also the manner and place of death are stipulated in his destiny."<sup>46</sup> This left Gyekye to conclude that the level of the generality of destiny remained vague.<sup>47</sup> Despite this conclusion, he still noted that "the inexplicable events in one's life, the unalterable and persistently habitual traits of character, the persistent actions and the behavior patterns of an individual are all traceable to destiny. If this is the case, one might arrive at the conclusion that only certain 'key' events and actions are embodied in destiny; or "that the destiny of an individual comprises certain basic attributes."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, this implies that "not everything that a person does or that happens to him or her represents a page from the 'book of destiny.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 114-5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 115.

In light of the above, Gyekye postulates that destiny cannot be changed owing to the fact that it is conceived in terms of basic attributes.<sup>50</sup> According to him, "basic attributes do not change."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, if an omnipotent God determines destiny, it obviously cannot be changed.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, Gyekye argues that the insistence of the proverbs that God's destiny cannot be changed or avoided is logical.<sup>53</sup> Also, he maintains that changing one's destiny is not only an impossible idea, "but it is also one that should, strictly speaking, not arise in a system in which destiny is divinely determined."<sup>54</sup> This is especially so when one considers the Akan belief that God is good. If God is thought of as good, then, "the destiny fixed by God must be good." Thus "bad things are not included in the message of destiny."<sup>55</sup>

How is it then, that in Akan thought there lies a necessity to change one's destiny, or to put it differently, to change what is good? Gyekye proceeds to give us a clue here. He suggests that such a necessity really does not exist, the reason being that the talk of changing one's destiny really refers to the attempt to improve one's life condition.<sup>56</sup> He writes,

For instance, a person's path may be strewn with failures, either because of his or her own actions, desires, decisions, and intentions, or because of the activities of some supposed evil forces. A person in such a situation may try to do something about the situation by, say, consulting priests and diviners. But in so doing, he or she would certainly not be changing destiny as such; rather, he or she would in fact be trying to better the conditions of life . . . by some means. Therefore, one should speak of improving one's circumstances in life rather than of "changing" one's destiny.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 116.

Besides, it seems a widely held view that the individual, in Akan thought, has no knowledge of his or her own destiny.<sup>58</sup> Also, divine knowledge of an individual's destiny does not seem to be fatal to the individual's exercise of free will. This is so, owing to the fact that one does not presume to have access to the knowledge that God has about anyone's destiny.<sup>59</sup> Suffice it to say, however, that the Akan view seems to hold a very strong deterministic conception of the world.<sup>60</sup> Gyekye himself asserts that every event seems to have a cause in Akan thought, and that nothing is attributed to chance.<sup>61</sup> All of the above now enables us to understand how Gyekye's perception of destiny has influenced his philosophy of freedom, and the implications this has for his understanding of evil.

After reading Gyekye's arguments on destiny, one might ask whether, in Akan thought, human beings are free, and in what sense would they be free. His response to this question begins by a recapitulation of the argument that Western philosophy offers pertaining to human free will. He writes, "If every event is caused, as determinism holds, then human action and behaviour too are caused, and hence cannot be held to be free, and therefore cannot be held morally responsible for those actions. There is a suppressed premise in the argument, which is that human actions are (a species of) events."<sup>62</sup> This premise, argues Gyekye, is only partially correct. He counters that there is a sense in which human actions are not events. Events, according to him, are mere happenings or occurrences that do not originate from human design and motivation. These include occurrences like the flooding of a river, the erosion of the sea, a tremor of the earth, and so on.<sup>63</sup> By making this assertion, he draws a distinction between an *event* and an *action* - - the latter being a "result of human deliberation, intention, decision, and desire."<sup>64</sup> However, he concedes that there is and has been a sense in which human actions have been termed events. For instance, "The French Revolution was a momentous *event* in the history of France,' 'The bond of 1844 was a significant *event* in the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 120.

history of Ghana,' 'The intertribal wars in Africa were tragic events,' 'Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in December 1977 was a historic event.'<sup>65</sup> In these statements, the sense of events is plainly different from the sense they have in the occurrences mentioned earlier.<sup>66</sup>

This leads Gyekye to conclude that in Akan thought, the doctrine of determinism is irrelevant as far as human actions are concerned. The implication here is that this doctrine is not fatal to the freedom a person has in actions or behaviour. Thus, the notion that every event has a cause does not subvert, or even eliminate the individual's role in human actions.<sup>67</sup> He writes,

Now Akan thinkers conceive of a cause in terms of spirit or power . . . and humans also have a spirit, even if of a lower potency, that is the basis of thought, deliberation, will and so on. It follows that man is a causal agent. Determinism therefore does not negate the effectiveness of human beings as causal and therefore moral agents.<sup>68</sup>

How, then, does this affect Gyekye's understanding of the problem of evil? First, he begins by asserting that the problem that evil poses is more complex in Akan thought than in Western philosophy.<sup>69</sup> According to him, in Western philosophy the problem centres around God. But in Akan thought the problem revolves around both God and the lesser spirits.<sup>70</sup> By this he means that in Western thought the problem is brought about by the seeming conflicts between the attributes of God and the existence of evil. But in Akan thought, the problem of evil is conceived in terms of both the attributes of God and also of the lesser spirits. Nevertheless, Gyekye admits that when pushed to its logical extremes, the philosophical nature of the problem of evil is quite similar to that of Western philosophy and theology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 123.

Take, for instance, the Akan conception of God. In Akan philosophy, God is conceived as omnipotent and wholly good. In spite of this conception, the Akan thinkers do not appear to find these attributes of God incompatible with the fact of the existence of moral evil.<sup>72</sup> According to Gyekye, Akan though locates the source of the problem of evil elsewhere than in the relationships between the attributes of God and the fact of the existence of evil. This is so solely out of the contention by Akan thinkers that evil is not a creation of God.<sup>73</sup> According to them, the lesser spirits and humanity's free will provide the sources for evil. Thus, although God created all these, they are considered in Akan theology and cosmology to have independent existence of some sort.<sup>74</sup>

However, one would immediately be tempted to ask, as Gyekye does, why a wholly good God would create a being that has the capacity to do evil. A possible answer he offers is that their capacity to do evil stems from the operations of the independent will of the beings themselves, be they spiritual or human<sup>75</sup>. But this, according to him, is not altogether a satisfactory answer. For if God is omnipotent, does it not follow that he has the power to eliminate or control the evil wills and actions of the lesser spirits and human beings so as to eliminate evil from the world?<sup>76</sup> Moreover, even if it were granted that he endowed the lesser spirits and human beings with independent wills, one would expect the wholly good God to be "willing to intervene when he sees them using their wills to choose to act wrongly and so to cause evil."<sup>77</sup> Or, to push Gyekye's question to a deeper level; given that God is omnipotent, he certainly could have made human beings in such a way that they always chose to do good, thereby avoiding evil. Besides, he could also intervene in the event of human freedom of the will leading to evil, and that he could thus control human will.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 125.



To these questions Gyekye has an answer. He argues that if God were to do all these, humans could act in a wholly determined way without any choice at all. This, according to him, would contract the general nature of the concept of destiny and free will as understood by Akan thinkers. Also, it would have resulted in subverting human rationality - - a factor that not only distinguishes human beings from beasts, but also enables them to make general judgements before acting.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, when it is insisted that God should have made human beings such that they always chose the good implies, in effect, that God should have made non-rational creatures and less than human, and therefore wholly without the ability to choose. Even if God were to create humans such that they always chose the good, they would still not be regarded as free inasmuch as the choice of the good would have been predetermined.<sup>80</sup>

Thus Gyekye concludes by asserting that the problem of evil does indeed arise in Akan philosophy and theology. The Akan people maintain that although moral evil exists in the world, this fact is not inconsistent with the assertion that God is omnipotent and wholly good. According to them, evil is ultimately the result of the exercise by humans of their freedom of the will, an attribute endowed upon them by their Creator.<sup>81</sup> Thus we have, in summary, the basic contention of Akan philosophy of destiny, and how it influences their understanding of evil. In the next section, I wish to make a critical analysis of this contention in order to determine whether it obtains.

### **Evaluation of Kwame Gyekye's Thought**

In our investigation of Gyekye's thought, several motifs seemed to govern his thought process. The first of this is his contention that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand. This, according to him, is observable from the fact that particular actions of an individual can be repetitive and persistent, thereby pointing the observer to where an individual is heading for later in life. Secondly, he contends that this destiny is fixed and cannot be changed, and that only God has the power to determine this destiny. Thirdly, he maintains that since God is good, the

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

destiny fixed by God must be good. It would therefore be pointless for anyone to attempt to “re-fix” this destiny.

Whereas this view does seem to have credibility in some areas, inconsistencies occur in Gyekye’s argument, some of which will be addressed below. But before I attempt to do this, we probably need to start from a common ground. I am referring to what Gyekye, and other African theologians and philosophers mean by the term “God.” Should we take their understanding of God to be similar to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God, or should we have a completely different view? As noted earlier, most African thinkers maintain that the African concept of God, with a few exceptions, is identical to the God of the Bible. For instance, one sage philosopher is known to have declared that he believed in the existence of one God “both for the Whites and the Blacks.”<sup>82</sup> **Along with many other pieces of evidence not cited here, it would be safe to assume that when we talk of God in African philosophy, the reference is identical to God as described in Christianity and Judaism. We are now ready to evaluate Gyekye’s philosophy.**

Gyekye’s philosophical contribution to the problem of evil deserves to be read. His reflections introduce an interesting vantage point worth considering. He attempts to provide an explanation why a good, omnipotent God would allow the existence of evil. He provides some thought provoking reading when he talks of the sense in which humanity is determined and the sense in which humanity is not. He also takes considerable trouble to argue that human actions are the result of the exercise of free will. But in some areas, the structure of Gyekye’s argument begins to crumble, and I intend to point them out.

First, Gyekye maintains that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand, a destiny that cannot be changed. According to Gyekye, this destiny has to be a good one by virtue of the fact that it is a destiny fixed by a good God.<sup>83</sup> At a glance, this position sounds rather attractive. It implies that all people will, in the long run, have a good, final destiny. However, I think it raises serious problems when one begins to apply its

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<sup>82</sup> Henry Odera Orika, “Sagacity in African Philosophy,” *African Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 61.

<sup>83</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 116.

principles to its logical conclusion. For if by “all people” he means the good people as well as the bad, this will not only include moralists and kind people; it will also include thieves, criminals, murderers and the like. Moreover, consider the case of Rwanda that I cited at the introduction of the article. Suppose I tell the relatives of those massacred that God has fixed a good destiny for all people, including the murderers of their brothers, sisters, wives, sons and daughters. I suspect that I will not be much of a comfort to them for the following reasons. It makes no sense for God to finally give a good destiny to merciless killers - - and especially so, if he does not hold them responsible for their actions. If those responsible for the genocide could do it at this stage of life without restraint or some form of retribution, what assurance does Gyekye’s philosophy give that the same people will not carry out similar offenses at the next point of destiny? This position implies that, without restriction, one can kill as many people as one wants, and will still end up at a good point of destiny, perhaps together with those he killed! My contention is that this view of determinism as presented by Gyekye needs some serious revision. However, lest I be accused of passing quick judgments on Gyekye philosophy, perhaps, a critical analysis of his basis for belief in this version of destiny would be appropriate.

For instance, observe Gyekye’s first two reasons for believing in his version of destiny. The first reason he gave for this belief was that many Akan proverbs referred to this concept. The second reason is that Akan myths on destiny existed. One will recall that I gave reasons why I thought Gyekye believed in this concept; namely, the premise that only that which is named is real. Whereas this does have some credibility, I would still maintain that it is shaky. A proverb or a myth does not necessarily depict objective truth all the time. Some considerations have to be given as the context from which they evolved. For instance, just because I believe in the Swahili proverb, “Too many cooks spoil the broth,” does not mean that this is always the case. I may have to employ the proverb, “Many hands make light work,” in some instances. What I am attempting to suggest is that care must always be taken when we attempt to use proverbs as a basis for belief or expression of truth. They do not always reflect truth in every situation. Also, just because something has been mentioned does not guarantee its authenticity. It might be totally fictitious. For instance, the existence of science fiction movies like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fit Gyekye’s description of what has been named. But this does not guarantee the

occurrence in real life, of star wars, or the existence of beings inhabiting other planets. Thus Gyekye's belief in proverbs as a basis for making truth claims is rather shaky.

As to who exactly determines what is good and what is evil, Gyekye has a very definite answer. According to him good or evil is not that which is commanded by God or, for that matter, any spiritual being. Neither is it that which is pleasing to a spiritual being. Rather it is the community that ascribes "goodness" and "badness." In fact, the sole criterion of "goodness" is the welfare or the well being of the community. This, says Gyekye, enables the community to avoid blaming God when he does not deliver what is expected of him. Besides, a thing is not good because God approves it; rather, God approves of the good because it is good in and of itself.<sup>84</sup>

The danger posed by this argument is that it takes a relative standard and makes it absolute. How, for instance, do they arrive at what they believe is good if God is not involved as the giver of the standard? Take, as an example, the old idea of two cultures. Suppose one of the cultures believes that loving their neighbour is a good thing, how would they survive next to another culture that believes that eating their neighbour is a good thing? I will therefore argue here, as I have done so elsewhere, that in order to come up with absolute standards, we need an absolute lawgiver. Also, if we maintain (as Gyekye does) that God is all-powerful, would it not follow that his power has the element of absolute authority in it? Further, would it not be logical to suppose that he desires that we submit to that authority? If this is true, and I think it is, are cultures not making a dangerous error when they arbitrarily set a standard they believe God would conform to? I contend that it is inconsistent to maintain that God is all-powerful while at the same time autonomously decide what is good and what is evil.

Thirdly, I would have appreciated from Gyekye a further exposition of his distinction between an *action* and an *event*. He maintains that an action is the result of human deliberation. He also postulates that events are mere happenings and occurrences that do not originate from human design and motivation.<sup>85</sup> By his argument therefore, natural evil, as understood by

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 124.

Western philosophy, would fall under the category of events. These would include natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and so on. One will also recall Gyekye's assertion that in Akan thought, every event seems to have a cause, and that nothing is attributed to chance.<sup>86</sup> He does not clarify what the cause is. Perhaps it is a spirit. If this is so, it would contradict his later claim that all the events are determined. Perhaps the cause of these events is God. But this would still contradict his claim that God is not the author of evil, for included among the events he lists, are natural evils like earthquakes, tornadoes, the flooding of rivers and the like. At any rate, what I am suggesting here is that I would have appreciated a deeper exposition of *events* versus *actions* from Gyekye.

The fourth aspect of Gyekye's argument that I wish to expose is another possible instance of inconsistency that he probably did not detect. One will recall that he strongly argued that human beings exercise free will. According to him, *events* are determined, but *actions* are the result of human free will.<sup>87</sup> In light of this, consider, once again, his statement. He writes, "Nevertheless, it is clear that the Akan notion of destiny is a general one, which implies that not everything that a person does or happens to him or her represents a page from the 'book of destiny.'"<sup>88</sup> A closer look at this statement will expose a contradiction. According to this statement, some things a person does do not represent a page from the 'book of destiny.' One would, by implication, deduce that the same statement suggests that there are other things a person does which could represent a page from the book of destiny. If this is what the sentence implies, and there is no reason to believe that it does not, is Gyekye not suggesting that some human actions and choices are determined? My conclusion is that Gyekye's philosophical system needs thorough revision if it has to be taken as a valid truth claim.

## Conclusion

My intention in this article was to investigate the problem of evil as understood by the African mind. The investigation revolved around two levels of thought: the non-philosophical response to evil in Africa, and the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 115.

philosophical response to the same, with specific reference to Kwame Gyekye's thought. We have investigated both levels and have seen that they echo, in Africa as in the Western countries, the same intellectual problems posed by the problem of evil. But we have also seen that they contain serious flaws as belief systems, and therefore, need to be revised. In other words, the inconsistencies they portray do not render them sound as systems of belief. I suggest we articulate a world-view that offers the best possible solution to dealing with the problem of evil. It would seem to me that the Judeo-Christian system of belief is just such a world-view. However, articulating it would require another article altogether.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Philip Jenkins

*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global  
Christianity*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, US\$28

The message of Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* will come as no surprise to the readers of *AJET*: the emerging Christian communities in the "southern" parts of the world—Latin America, Africa, and Asia—are larger, more dynamic, and making more of an impact on the world than the older Christian communities of the West, primarily in Europe and North America. Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University in the United States. One of the most significant contributions of his book is that he provides the historical and sociological data to document what church leaders, theologians and missionaries in Africa, Latin America and Asia have long known about the size and impact of the churches of the Two Thirds world.

Jenkins is not primarily writing to a theological or even a religious audience. He is writing to anyone who is interested in the direction in which our world is moving. Most people in our world, especially the political and religious policy makers in the West, still think of Christianity as primarily a Western phenomena. If the Christian Church has any impact on the world at large, they assume, it is the Western church that is making the impact. Jenkins writes to awaken them. By far the majority of the world's Christians now live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and their numbers are growing far faster than the numbers of Christians in Europe and North America. Using demographic data, Jenkins demonstrates that by 2050 seven of the ten largest Christian nations in the world will be in the "South" (Jenkins term to describe Africa, Latin America, and Asia). He thus agrees with John Mbiti's assessment that "The centers of the church's universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Manila" (2).

After initially demonstrating that the center of gravity of world Christianity has shifted to the South, Jenkins disproves the idea that through history Christianity has primarily been a Western religion. In a brief but excellent survey of early and medieval church history in Africa and Asia, Jenkins demonstrates that Christianity did not become a primarily European phenomenon until well into medieval times. "At the time of the Magna Carta or the Crusades, if we imagine a typical Christian, we should still be thinking not of a French artisan, but of a Syrian peasant or Mesopotamian towns-dweller, an Asian not a European" (24). Christianity's profile as a non-Western religion is a return to a condition that lasted for well over a thousand years.

But the primary focus of Jenkins' book is an exploration of the *significance* of the growth and impact of "southern" Christianity. Jenkins points out that the **younger churches of the Two-Thirds world by and large** put a stronger emphasis on the Bible, conservative ethics, and issues of spiritual power and charismatic gifts than churches in North America or Europe. The church of the South is also primarily poor and either persecuted or living in a situation in which they are in conflict with other great world religions. "Millions of Christians around the world do in fact live in constant danger of persecution or forced conversion, from either governments or local vigilantes" (218), or have become refugees, both in Islamic & Hindu contexts. Jenkins particularly explores the potential for a coming clash between the emerging Christendom of the South and Islam. "The future centers of global population are chiefly in countries which are already divided between the two great religions, and where divisions are likely to intensify" (161). Jenkins feels that the possibility of a future clash between Islam and Third World Christianity is strong.

Jenkins is primarily writing to a Western audience, and he projects that the distinctives of the church in the Two Thirds World will be increasingly misunderstood by Westerners. "Western policy makers have never excelled in understanding Islam, but perhaps the great political unknown of the new century, the powerful international wild card, will be that mysterious non-Western ideology called Christianity . . . The Christian faith of the rising states, we will probably hear, is fanatical, superstitious, [and] demagogic: it is politically reactionary and sexually repressive (162). While he may have overstated the case for a vastly distinctive brand of Christianity that will not be understood or accepted by Western Christians, Jenkins is clearly on to



something here. As Western Christianity becomes more “Western” and less biblically “Christian,” one is tempted to wonder whether Western Christians will find themselves more comfortable with the values and company of non-Western pagans than with their brothers and sisters in the Two Thirds World Church.

Jenkins’ book is not without flaws. He overemphasizes the religious movements in the South that are theologically and structurally different from those in the West (such as the house church movement in China and the African Initiated Churches) and gives scant attention to the many large, influential churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America which, while being thoroughly indigenous and contextual, are closely linked to the wider world Christian movement. Jenkins’ projections for the growth of Christianity are strictly based on demographic data, such as birth rates, and take little account of the spiritual dynamic of revival and people movements. For example, he projects little or no church growth in China because the birth rate in China is projected to be level over the next half century. Finally, because he is studying “Christendom,” evangelicals will note that he makes no distinction between Christianity as a movement born from a relationship with the living Lord Jesus and Christianity as a sociological phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Jenkins has carefully documented the large and significant role non-Western Christianity will play in the coming decades. His book is a “must read” for evangelical theological educators in Africa and a “must buy” for theological libraries across the continent.

**Steve Strauss**

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Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube (eds)

***The Bible in Africa: Transactions,  
Trajectories, and Trends***

Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill.

2000 [ISBN:90-04-10627-8

xvii + 828 pp, hb. \$143.00

This large, diverse, and informative volume of essays is introduced and edited by two highly competent African scholars, Prof. Gerald West of the University of Natal and Prof. Musa Dube of the University of Botswana. The stated aim of their collaborative, interdisciplinary effort is “to present . . . as wide a sense of the presence of the Bible in Africa as possible . . . [and] to give a sense of the breadth and richness of what African biblical scholars are up to (1-2). Although the book offers a far-ranging set of essays on a variety of topics written in depth from many different perspectives, it is not offered as the last word on the subject. Rather, the present text is viewed as merely a first step in what will hopefully be an ongoing interactive process that “will provoke and encourage African scholars to take the task of documenting and analyzing African biblical scholarship further” (2). Thanks to some fine editorial work (it must have been a monumental task!), the Bible in Africa has accomplished its major objectives in admirable form. The standard has now been set for some serious follow-up research and responsive writing, which will undoubtedly include a significant amount of critical “inter-textual conversation”(2) as a positive or negative reaction to different aspects of the impressive array of material that has been assembled in this volume.

Since a review of each of the 38 individual essays (plus an introductory overview) that comprise this monumental work is impossible in the present context, the best I can do is provide some sort of survey of its contents. Rather than to attempt my own inadequate summary of this rich diversity, it may be more precise and informative as well as fairer to the original authors to list their actual assigned titles. Readers can then see all of the topics and evaluate for themselves what may be of interest to them among the many different subjects that have been incorporated within this

extensive compilation. The following listing of titles and authors (in parentheses) is arranged according to the four major topical sections (two having subdivisions) into which the book has been divided. There is quite a bit of overlapping and indeterminacy that is manifested in this categorization, which the editors also recognize (8), but one hesitates to propose an alternative suggestion to the broad topical method that has been chosen (perhaps a geographically-based regional arrangement):

**Part One – HISTORICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES:** “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” (J. Ukpong); “Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch” (G. West); “Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River” (K. Holter); “New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa” (G. LeMarquand); “How Al-Mokattam Mountain was Moved: The Coptic Imagination and the Christian Bible” (J. Loubser); “The bible in the Black Diaspora: Links with African Christianity” (G. Yorke); “Batswakwa: Which Traveller Are You (John 1:1-18)” (M. Dube); “The Limits of Difference: Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Redeployment of Biblical Signifiers in *A Grain of Wheat* and *I Will Marry When I Want*” (P. Mwikisa); “(South) Africa, Bible, Criticism: Rhetorics of a Visit” (R. Carrol).

**Part Two – PARTICULAR ENCOUNTERS WITH PARTICULAR TEXTS: (Early Encounters)** “A Late Seventeenth Century Translation of the Psalms at the Cape” (P. Denis); “Earliest Southern African Biblical Interpretation: The Case of the Bakwena, Bakolo and Bangwato” (F. Nkomazana); “The Role of the Bible in the Rise of African Instituted Churches: The case of the Akurinu Churches in Kenya” (N. Ndung’u); **(North East Africa)** “Cain and Abel in Africa: An Ethiopian Case Study in Competing Hermeneutics” (M. McEntire); **(West Africa)** “The Mother of the Ewe and Firstborn Daughter as the “Good Shepherd” in the Cultural context of the Ewe Peoples: A Liberating Approach” (D. Akoto); “Pouring Libation to Spirit Powers among the Ewe-Dome of Ghana: An Indigenous Religious and Biblical Perspective” (R. Ganusah); “Contextual Balancing of Scripture with Scripture: Scripture Union in Nigeria and Ghana” (A. Igenzo); “The Vernacularization of Scripture and African Beliefs: The Story of the Gerasene Demoniac among the Ewe of West Africa” (S. Avotri); “The Role of the Bible in the Igbo Christianity of Nigeria” (D. Adamo); **(East and Central Africa)** “Cursed Be Everyone Who Hangs on

a Tree: Pastoral Implications of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13 in an African Context” (E. Wabukala & G. LeMarquand); “Nyimbo Za Vijana: Biblical Interpretation in Contemporary Hymns from Tanzania” (F. King); “The Bible in Malawi: A Brief Survey of Its Impact on Society” (H. Mijoga); (Southern Africa) “A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1-10” (M. Dibeela); “The Impact of the Bible on Traditional Rain-making Institutions in Western Zimbabwe” (H. Mafu); “The Bishop and the Bricoleur: Bishop John William Colenso’s Commentary on Romans and Magema kaMagwaza Fuze’s The balck People and Whence They Came” (J. Draper).

**Part Three – COMPARISON AND TRANSLATION AS TRANSACTION: (Comparative Studies)** “Comparative Readings of the Bible in Africa: Some Concerns” (E. Anum); “Corporate Personality in Botswana and Ancient Israel: A Religio-Cultural Comparison” (B. Letlhare); “The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors” (T. Mafico); “African Perspectives on P9verty in the Hebrew Law Codes” (R. Wafawanaka); “Ngaka and Jesus as Liberators: A comparative Reading” (G. Ntloedibe); (Translation Studies) “The Swahili Bible in East Africa from 1844 to 1996: A Brief Survey with Special Reference to Tanzania” (A. Mojola); “100 Years of the Luganda Bible (1896-1996): A General Survey” (A. Mojola); “Do You Understand What You Are Reading [Hearing] ?” (Acts 8:30): The Translation and Contextualization of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in Chitonga” (E. Wendland & S. Hachibamba); “The Kiswahili Mwana Wa Mtu and the Greek Ho Huios Tou Anthropou” (J. Loba-Mkole).

**Part Four – REWARDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA:** “Africa in the Old Testament” (K. Holter); “Popular Reading of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic readings: Report on the Field Research Carried out on Oral Interpretation of the Bible in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Nigeria under the Auspices of the Bible in Africa Project, 1991-94” (J. Ukpong); “Contextual Bible Study in south Africa: A Resource for Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity” (G. West); “To Pray the Lord’s Prayer in the Global Economic Era (Matt. 6:9-13)” (M. Dube).

The book includes an important **Part Five**, “A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa” (G. LeMarquand), which at 160+ pages “is the most comprehensive . . . ever published” (8). There are also three helpful indices

to help readers find their way around this vast volume to particular topics and issues – namely, one for Biblical References, for Names and for Subjects.

Generally speaking, the essays that have been selected for publication in this collect are well written; some are rather more complex and technical than others, but on the whole, they should all be accessible to most African senior seminarians and upper class students in Bible colleges or universities. As indicated in the previous listing of titles, there is a good coverage of different subjects of current interest to African scholars today. Salient topics that might call for somewhat greater consideration, perhaps in a future volume of this nature, include the following: a description, analysis, and critical assessment of various local (vernacular) theologies; a study of certain creative presentations and interpretations of the Scriptures via the non-print media (song, drama, painted art, sculpture, audio rendition, radio, video production); an investigation of the crucial linguistic, dialectal, sociolectal, translational, and ecclesiastical variations that occur during the transmission of setting-specific messages; and research conducted from the bottom-up, that is, surveying popular grass-roots opinion with regard to what the “Bible in Africa” is all about and how effectively people feel the Scriptures are being communicated to them, along with their candid comments concerning the relative success of this ideally interactive hermeneutical process. As far as “ordinary readers” are concerned, to whom this book is dedicated (8), one will also need to find a way of communicating its relevant contents at a level and in a form of language that they can understand and readily dialogue with. At any rate, the editors have implicitly suggested one way of initiating such a program of interaction, at least among scholars and those who will be reading this book, that is, by including e-mail addresses as part of their initial listing of all contributors (xiii -xviii).

This collection of essays is an immensely valuable resources that not only acts as a good entry point for those who wish to survey the vast expanse of biblically-related studies in Africa, but it also provides an excellent model (actually many models) that illustrates how such research may be carried out and related to other work being done in the field. Readers will surely not agree with everything that has been written here, whether in terms of content, method, interpretation or conclusion, but certainly they will all be informed in one way or another, and thus

stimulated to undertake their own investigation in response. Of course, the book should be required reading in theological, missiological, biblical, and hermeneutical departments all over the world, but especially in Africa. This is where we face a significant limiting factor however—namely, the high price of this volume, which may be well beyond the means of many institutions (and even universities!) on the continent. But in this respect too the editors have stated their willingness to try to help out by donating copies of the book to “ecumenical and accessible libraries in Africa” (2; for further information, contact Prof. West at [west@nu.ac.za](mailto:west@nu.ac.za)). They are to be congratulated for persevering in their efforts to produce, publish, and promote this extremely useful multi-purpose study text in and for Africa.

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