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NUBIAN CHRISTIANITY: THE NEGLECTED HERITAGE

Paul Bowers

The popular notion that Christianity is only a recent import to Africa is a misperception more widespread and influential on the continent than one might expect. Echoes are not lacking in scholarly literature, even in scholarly Christian literature.¹ 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. John Mbiti was emphasizing just this in his bold statement: "Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion."² And Byang Kato was making the same point when he gave to one of his major addresses the provocative title: "Christianity as an African Traditional Religion."³ In the search for self-identity, which lies so near the heart of the modern African Christian intellectual quest, the long history of Christianity in Africa is a fact needing urgently to be recognized, embraced, and appropriated.

The careful student of African Christian history is well aware that Christianity in North Africa, once so

vibrant and productive, was in due course wiped out by the Arab Islamic conquests beginning in the seventh century. That Christianity began in Ethiopia in the fourth century, and survived continuously into the present, is also familiar. That Christianity in Egypt, planted as early as Pentecost, has also survived into the present, in the Coptic Christian community, is not perhaps as common an awareness as it should be. But that there was another important branch to early African Christianity, a fourth member, is not part of general Christian awareness on the continent. That there was a powerful branch of Christendom in what is now northern Sudan, a Christianity that lasted for more than a thousand years, is till now a fact familiar only to those in Africa who study their church history sources with special care.

We live today amidst the third planting of the Christian faith in this continent. As we seek to grapple with the challenges and dangers presented by the phenomenal growth of Christianity in this third period, we do well to reflect on the fate of the earlier plantings. We are right to inquire why the Portuguese mission along the southwestern coast of Africa, beginning in the fifteenth century, at times took lively root, yet failed to survive, and is today represented only by centuries-old church ruins in the bush south of the Zaire estuary. We do well to ask why the vibrant Christianity of North Africa disappeared, whereas the Egyptian variety survived, albeit as an oppressed minority. And why in contrast did the Ethiopian version manage to sustain an embattled dominance in its remote centres? Curiously enough, the fourth member of early African Christianity followed none of these patterns. Nubian Christianity, as it is called, neither suffered an early eclipse, nor did it become a suppressed minority; it lasted intact from the sixth century well into the fifteenth century, only at last, unlike Ethiopia, to suffer complete extinction. Why this difference?

Until recent times historical scholarship knew very little about this branch of the early church. Oddly enough, we owe today's considerably increased knowledge of Nubian Christianity to a remarkable technological achievement of our own generation, the building of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt not twenty-five years ago. Because the dam would produce an immense lake eventually covering up almost all archaeological remains in the Nile Valley for three hundred miles south of Aswan, an international consortium of archaeological investigations evolved, under UNESCO auspices, to dig out as many hitherto unattended sites as possible before the waters rose. The results of this extraordinary international cooperation included an awesome wealth of fresh information about Nubian Christianity. Fully fifty percent of all sites investigated were from this particular period of Nubian history, and resulted in both spectacular discoveries and a vast accumulation of details.

That African Christianity has been generally unfamiliar in the past with this part of its heritage is not altogether surprising, since what was earlier known about Nubian Christianity was relatively limited. What **is** altogether surprising is that today so little of the remarkable recent increase of knowledge about Nubian Christianity has yet been assimilated into the standard modern treatments of African Christian history in common use.⁴ Incredibly, virtually no standard presentation on African church history currently available includes any data visibly derived from the extraordinary discoveries of the past twenty-five years on Nubian Christianity.

When one begins to explore the matter, this lacuna in current treatments of African church history unexpectedly turns out to be even broader. Until the 1930s Nubian archaeology had largely neglected the Christian period, and the information available on Nubian Christianity tended to be scanty and dispersed. In 1935 the scholar Monneret de Villard, following his

intensive and comprehensive investigations from 1929 to 1934 into both the material and the literary remains of Christian Nubia, published the first two volumes in his monumental **La Nubia Medievale**.⁵ He followed this in 1938 with his **Storia della Nubia Cristiana**.⁶ With these publications Monneret de Villard at a stroke and single-handedly introduced fifty years ago a whole new era in Nubian Christian research. It is a matter for astonishment to discover that not only do no current standard treatments of African Christian history yet utilize the discoveries flowing from the UNESCO project of the past twenty-five years, but that in addition it is difficult to find any which directly utilize even Monneret de Villard's foundational contribution of fifty years ago. All are apparently dependent almost exclusively on secondary studies representing the state of research preceding Monneret de Villard.

The statement requires the support of some specific data. A brief, slightly technical sleuthing through the main literature will serve this purpose. (Admittedly this will not appeal to all tastes, and some may wish to go on to the next paragraph). To begin with, neither of the two established reference tools in the field, the **Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church** nor the **New International Dictionary of the Christian Church**, treats Nubian Christianity, though they allocate separate articles to Coptic, Ethiopian, and North African Christianity.⁷ S Neill, in his standard **A History of Christian Missions** (Harmondsworth, 1964), does not discuss Nubia. J Hildebrandt's very useful **History of the Church in Africa** (Achimota 1981), depends for its account of Nubian Christianity primarily on Groves (1948). P Falk, in **The Growth of the Church in Africa** (Grand Rapids, 1979), principally relies on Groves (1948) and Cornevin (1964). By using Cornevin, Falk inadvertently manages a fleeting third-hand contact with a single reference to Monneret de Villard: the historian Cornevin (R Cornevin, **Histoire de l'Afrique** [Paris, 1964]) made use of the Sudan specialist A J Arkell (**A History of the Sudan** [London,

1955]), and Arkell contains one passing reference to Monneret de Villard's *Storia della Nubia Cristiana*. C P Groves's basic study, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London, 1948), relies on Latourette (1938), E A Wallis Budge (*History of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia* [London, 1928]), and H A MacMichael (*A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* [Cambridge, 1922]). K S Latourette, in his monumental *A History of the Expansion of Christianity (Volume II: The Thousand Years of certainty* [New York, 1938]), employs a wider range of secondary sources, the latest of which included J Kraus (*Die Anfänge des Christentums in Nubien* [Vienna, 1931]), Wallis Budge (1928), and the preliminary reports of discoveries by Monneret de Villard which appeared in the *New York Times* 9 March 1931 and 14, 17 March 1933, prior to full publication of his work.⁸

In short, the standard presentations on Nubian Christianity in current use for African church history are, in the sources used, essentially a half century behind the present state of inquiry, a half century marked by both fundamental and dramatic advances in Nubian Christian studies. This is indeed a neglected heritage.

Ancient Nubia (roughly from Aswan southward to modern-day Khartoum) was a well-known and prosperous land already in Old Testament times. Inhabited by people of dark complexion, it was intimately involved in the history of ancient Egypt. In the Old Testament it is frequently mentioned under the title of "Cush" or "Ethiopia".⁹ The "Ethiopian eunuch" of Acts was in fact not from the land today bearing that name, but from Nubia. (The queenly title given in Acts 5:27, Candace, is peculiar to the ancient Nubian kingdom of Meroe.) In the New Testament period Nubia was in constant intercourse with the Mediterranean world, and maintained diplomatic relations with Rome. While the Apostle Paul was travelling round the Aegean, the emperor Nero dispatched a small expedition to explore the farthest reaches of the Nile, which apparently

penetrated past Meroe all the way to the Sudd region, some six hundred miles south of modern Khartoum, well into the heart of Africa. Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, recounts the report which the two centurions leading the expedition made on their return to Rome.¹⁰ One cannot but wonder what course the spread of the gospel might have taken had Paul heard this report, had his pioneering instincts been aroused by it, and had his life been spared for further missionary effort.¹¹

The Nubian kingdoms officially converted to Christianity about AD 540. The Arab conquest in the next century uncharacteristically floundered when it attempted to extend its sway southward from Egypt along the Nile into Nubia. In the centuries following, the Christian kings of Nubia held their own against the Islamic rulers of Egypt, and at times exerted considerable diplomatic and even military pressure for relief of the oppressed Christian communities of Egypt.

The Nubian church was predominantly Monophysite in theology, in alignment with Coptic Christianity of Egypt, though there is also evidence of strong Byzantine influence as well. The bishops were consecrated by the Patriarch of Alexandria, and apparently many were trained there, and some originated there. At least parts of the Bible were translated into Nubian, as any student of NT Greek can verify (by reference to the apparatus of his **UBS Greek New Testament**, with its indications of ancient manuscripts in a Nubian version).¹² Nubians were familiar pilgrims in the Holy Land in early medieval times, and maintained contacts with the Ethiopian church. Until recently the conventional wisdom was that Nubian Christianity finally succumbed to Islamic encroachment early in the fourteenth century. The latest discoveries and research have established that in fact Christianity was still officially functioning in Nubia late in the fifteenth century (in the very year of Martin Luther's birth) and suggest that tiny remnants of the Christian community may have existed even as

late as the middle of the eighteenth century. Eventually the population was entirely absorbed into the Islamic ethos. Catholic missionaries passing up the Nile in the last century could still find a memory among the tribes that their forebearers had been Christian.¹³

Did Nubian Christianity exert any influence beyond its borders southward and westward in Africa? It is a tantalizing question, with only tantalizing scraps of data, but data begging for further scholarly inquiry. Passage southward along the Nile was always severely limited by the impenetrable swamps of the Sudd, but westward the trade caravans were a normal fact of life. Archaeologists have identified remains of a Nubian monastery in western Sudan near the Chadian border. Nubian artifacts have also been uncovered north of Lake Chad.¹⁴ Franciscan missionaries based in Tripoli early in the 1700s reported rumours, brought across the Sahara by the caravans, of a Christian kingdom south of the Hausa and Bornu states. A Franciscan team was eventually sent on the hazardous errand to try to find out the truth of this. They got all the way to Katsina, but succumbed to disease there before they could complete their mission. Christian symbols were reported in the last century among the royal regalia of a tribal kingdom on the Benue, south of Hausaland, though the religious meaning of the symbols had been forgotten.¹⁵ A missionary trekking from Lake Chad to the Nile at the beginning of this century was told of a tribe nearby which yearly congregated at an ancestral site, held up an ancient sword on which was engraved the sign of the cross, and prayed that God would restore to them the knowledge of the true way to Him of their forefathers, long since lost through conquest by followers of the Prophet.¹⁶

If Monneret de Villard introduced the second era of modern Nubian Christian research, the UNESCO project clearly inaugurated the third era, in a vast outpouring of discoveries and research, begun in the 1960s and

only now starting to ebb. While the results have yet to be exploited by historians of African Christianity, they are altogether familiar to the specialized worlds of archaeology, classical studies, and Egyptology (indeed Egyptologists have long treated Nubian studies as an annex of their own discipline). The UNESCO appeal for international cooperation, issued in 1959-60, received immediate enthusiastic response, with some forty separate expeditions organized from university and research circles, mainly from the developed world, east and west, but including one from India and one from the University of Ghana.¹⁷ Termed the greatest archaeological salvage operation of all time, it captured the imagination of the world especially with the successful removal to higher ground of the temples of Rameses II at Abu Simbel. The cooperative project had largely run its course by 1970, as the new lake reached its full height, though important diggings continued well into the 1970s at Qasr Ibrim, a fortress remaining above water. (At the same time, it should be noted that this vast archaeological endeavour covered only the area to be inundated, and has left numerous important sites south as far as Khartoum still uninvestigated. For that section of Nubia little more is known today than was known before the UNESCO project. There is considerable room for more archaeological work, with the prospect of significant finds.)

A brief sampling of some of the more important results of the UNESCO effort would need to begin with the spectacular discoveries of the Polish expedition, led by Michalowski, which uncovered among desert sands along the Nile the great cathedral at Faras, almost entirely intact. The walls had three layers of plaster, each covered with frescoes. In all there were more than 160 frescoes, of which about half were recovered in a condition permitting display. (Just over fifty of these are now on display in the National Museum in Warsaw, and the remainder may be seen in the National Museum in Khartoum.) In addition, the

Cathedral walls yielded over 400 inscriptions or graffiti, in Greek, Coptic, and Old Nubian, including a list of the bishops of Faras from AD 707 to 1169.¹⁸ At Kasr Ibrim, archaeologists led by Plumley of Cambridge found manuscript fragments scattered over the floor of the cathedral, apparently the remains of the cathedral library, including fragments in Nubian of the Gospel of John, I Corinthians, and Revelation. Nearby were fragments of Isaiah and Jeremiah in Coptic, and of the Gospel of Mark in Greek.¹⁹ Among other interesting discoveries were the ecclesiastical parchments found buried with one of the bishops, Timotheos, which proved to be his ordination documents from the Coptic Patriarch of Egypt, dated in the 1370s.²⁰ A copy of a letter from the Muslim ruler of Egypt to the Nubian government, dated 758, appears to be the oldest extended document in Arabic in existence anywhere.²¹ From Christian Nubian remains at the village of Meinarti, Adams was able to establish a pottery chronology covering 800 years of Nubian Christian history, now a standard index for archaeological dating in the period.²²

Early reports on the Nubian Christian discoveries began to appear in scholarly journals in the 1960s. The 1970s saw publication of major comprehensive reports. Evaluation of the discoveries so far tends to predominate in the literature of the 1980s, though final reports on the various archaeological efforts have not all yet been published. Scholarly interest has been sustained and channeled not least through a series of international conferences, each followed by publication of the papers there given, and through the International Society for Nubian Studies, which grew out of these conferences and is now the principal focal point of ongoing scholarly cooperation in the field. These conferences and their resulting publications have come to mark out the course of scholarly discussion in the past fifteen years. The first conference took place in Essen, Germany, in 1969. The second meeting, in Warsaw in 1972, saw organization of the

International Society for Nubian Studies. The conferences since have been at: Chantilly, France, in 1975; Cambridge, England, in 1978; and Heidelberg, Germany, in 1982.²³ The next conference is scheduled for Uppsala, Sweden, in August, 1986.²⁴

Those looking for up-to-date authoritative material on Christian Nubia in English will find that the most complete and readable treatment remains the three chapters devoted to Christian Nubia in the massive volume **Nubia: Corridor to Africa**, by William Y Adams.²⁵ Another basic treatment appears in the second volume of the **Cambridge history of Africa**, contributed by P L Shinnie.²⁶ A third valuable study in English will be found in the second volume of the UNESCO series **General History of Africa**, contributed by K Michalowski.²⁷ (Apparently additional authoritative articles on Christian Nubia may be expected in succeeding volumes of the UNESCO series.) Researchers will find solid guidance to further literature on the subject in the extensive notes provided by Adams and Michalowski, and in the selected bibliography on Christian Nubia at the end of the Cambridge volume.²⁸ Beyond this the serious inquirer will want to explore the numerous articles (in various languages) in the volumes accompanying the international scholarly conferences mentioned above.²⁹ One would also want to keep an eye on the new journal (till now only one issue, in 1982) **Nubia Christiana** (Warsaw).³⁰ A standard review of current research and publication on ancient Nubia was included in successive surveys by J Leclant, "Fouilles et travaux en Egypte et au Soudan", published in **Orientalia** from 1971 onward, and continued from 1978 by P van Moorsel and J Debergh. Professor van Moorsel informs me that he hopes to continue these surveys in the new journal **Nubian Letters** (Leiden).³¹ Those needing to find their own way into the more remote data will find ready access through these principal sources.

Most of the literature so far mentioned would prove too technical for the acquisition interests of theological

libraries in Africa. Not so the recent popular contribution of G Vantini, **Christianity in the Sudan** (Bologna, 1981). Fully familiar with earlier research on Nubian Christianity, and building on a thorough review of ancient and often obscure oriental written sources, Vantini is also abreast of the latest archaeological findings.³² He includes 35 well-selected photographs from the archaeological discoveries, 7 maps, and a useful chronological table. The book is also valuable for a section on the Christian church in modern Sudan, Catholic and Protestant, which has suffered so much under Islamic harassment since independence up to the immediate present--though Vantini, resident in Khartoum, allows himself to touch on these matters only briefly and cautiously. While the book maintains a relatively popular style throughout, one must acknowledge a tendency to throw together odds and ends of data in long unintegrated sections, which are consequently not very readable. All the same, Vantini's work certainly deserves to be in every serious theological library in Africa. The publishers generously inform me that they will make copies available to the libraries of theological colleges in Africa at a discount.³³

The most serious deficiency of Vantini's study is that it is not an adequate guide to the modern scholarly resources. No bibliography is provided, and the specific references to sources scattered through the notes prove an incomplete index to the relevant literature. As a result, the book cannot serve the serious student as an entrance to more detailed inquiry. Indeed there is no popular survey to which one could be referred for this purpose. For this particular deficiency I have attempted to provide partial compensation in this paper.

Among the major questions which continue to exercise Nubian Christian research are when and how Christianity began there, and even more puzzling when and why it became extinct. According to a report contemporary

with the events, by the Greek ecclesiastical writer John of Ephesus, the most northern Nubian kingdom was successfully evangelized by Byzantine missionaries under the emperor Justinian about AD 540, followed by the conversion of the other two Nubian kingdoms further south within the next few years. This has long been given by standard works as the date when Nubian Christianity began. But archaeologists have now uncovered evidence of Christianity in Nubia predating 540, including a humble church of unbaked bricks at Faras perhaps from as early as the middle of the preceding century, and Christian correspondence at Qasr Ibrim which seems to be from the same period.³⁴ Apparently Christianity had already penetrated the lower classes some generations before the official national conversion reported by John of Ephesus. This is not surprising, since intercourse with Egypt was constant, and a Christian bishopric had existed at Philae, on Egypt's border with Nubia, from early in the fourth century. In any case changes in burial customs indicate a rapid adoption of Christianity not only by the ruling classes but also by the common people of Nubia in the latter half of the sixth century.

The question when Christianity ended in Nubia is more perplexing. Conventional wisdom has used the date of 1317, when a church at Dongola, capital of the middle Nubian kingdom, was reputedly turned into a mosque, suggesting the collapse of Christian Nubia early in the fourteenth century. A Muslim ruler did ascend the throne at Dongola for the first time in the 1320s. But recent research has shown that the building in which the mosque in question was set up was not a church but a palace, and that churches continued in Dongola after this mosque had been established in the king's quarters--which suggests a Muslim ruler not intending to alienate his Christian subjects (a situation similar to that in Egypt for some centuries following the Islamic conquest). The formal ordination documents for Bishop Timotheos from the 1370s suggests continuing organized church life well after the first

Muslim assumed the throne.

A more recent theory appearing in standard histories is that Christianity ended with the overthrow in 1504 of Alwa, the southern Nubian kingdom centered at Soba near modern Khartoum. But modern opinion now tends to concur with the argument that we do not know when the Christian kingdom of Alwa fell, but that it happened some time before 1504, a date actually applying not to the fall of Soba but to the founding of a successor Islamic state.³⁵ Archaeologists have now come up with solid material evidence that a Nubian Christian sub-kingdom in one part of Nubia was still functioning officially, with king and bishop, as late as 1484.³⁶ Perhaps then, Christian Nubia as a political entity ended sometime close to 1500. How much longer small communities of Christians may have survived in Islamic Nubia is another question. A sixteenth century Portuguese missionary in Ethiopia, Alvarez, reports a Nubian delegation arriving there in the 1520s to beg the Ethiopians to supply them with trained religious leaders--which the Ethiopians felt unable to do. Another report of the period mentions a group of Nubians who were "neither Christians, Muslims, nor Jews, but they live in the desire of being Christians." As late as 1742 the Nubian servant of a Franciscan in Cairo reported a single isolated Christian community still existing in his homeland, in the region of the Third Cataract, despite persecution.³⁷

Why, then, did Nubian Christianity finally collapse, after more than a thousand years of sometimes vigorous existence? On close inspection the scholars have concluded that there are no simple answers. Though external pressures played a key role, it did not fall to direct military conquest. Archaeologists find very few Nubian churches that had been converted into mosques or destroyed by violence; rather the churches fell into disuse and were abandoned.³⁸ It is a complex story. The Muslim rulers of Egypt had made a treaty

with the Nubians in 650, which kept relations more or less manageable for six hundred years. But when the militant Mameluke rulers seized power in Egypt about 1260, they adopted a hostile stance towards Nubia. This coincided with a period of dynastic struggles within Nubia, which the Mamelukes exploited, inducing persisting instability in Nubia, and leading eventually to erosion of the military prowess and political coherence which had so long protected the country.

At about the same time the nomadic tribes of the desert to the east, infiltrated and Islamized by unprecedented waves of immigration from Arabia, began to press upon and threaten Nubia as well. Competing Nubian factions sought advantage by alliance with the leadership of some of these tribes, and relations were confirmed by strategic marriages, so that in due course offspring raised as Muslims assumed key roles in Nubian society by natural legal and social processes, and eventually the throne itself. Meanwhile the restless Islamized tribes of the desert began to crowd against and spill over the Nubian defenses, defenses for centuries effectively organized to control immigration pressures southward along the Nile from Arab Egypt, but unable to prevent overwhelming nomadic infiltration from the desert. The indigenous populations eventually found themselves reduced to isolated enclaves in the midst of a sea of Arabized nomadic tribes, which the Nubian military and political structures, already destabilized by external interference and compromised by internal dynastic struggles and alliances, could not contain. It seems that, under such pressures, what was left of Nubian society became demoralized, fell apart, and eventually disappeared into the populations that had overrun it. Nubian Christianity simply followed in the course of this social disintegration.

Why? Scholarship has suggested several reasons.³⁹ For one thing, it seems that Nubian Christianity had lost much of its spiritual vitality. Archaeologists note how the churches of Nubia in the later centuries become

progressively smaller and unassuming, as the residences of the ruling class become more elaborate. In addition the laity became increasingly distanced from the central religious events, as the mediating role of the clergy came to occupy the entire church experience--literally in fact, for, in the evolution of Nubian church architecture, in the end there was no space for the laity left in the church sanctuary; they were relegated to the outside, with the church proper reserved for the functions of the clergy. Sacerdotalism had got out of hand. Also church and state were always deeply intermingled in Nubia. Kings held priestly status, and bishops exercised political functions. Given such arrangements, when the political structures collapsed, the church was inevitably entangled in the ruin. Furthermore, like so many churches of the period, the Nubian church through the centuries had, under pressure of social conformity, largely lost touch with its spiritual roots. The models of its life were not constantly placed under the judgment of an apostolic standard. When the final crisis came, a deep overlay of traditions had rendered the resources of a vital biblical Christianity inaccessible.

The gradual disintegration of Nubian Christianity must also be attributed to the persisting isolation from the larger Christian family which it suffered. The Muslim conquests of the earlier centuries had made contact with international Christianity difficult. Relations with the Coptic community in Egypt were close, but the Copts were not in theological fellowship with the larger body of Christendom. When the Mamelukes savagely suppressed the Coptic Church in the thirteenth century, and at the same time turned hostile towards Nubia, Nubian Christianity was left stranded, largely forgotten by its sister churches. It is noteworthy that, though both the Coptic and Ethiopian churches were represented at the great ecumenical Council of Florence (1439-45), no one at the Council seems to have noticed the absence of representatives from Nubia.

Finally, it appears the Nubian church could not survive because through the centuries it had depended for leadership on outside sources, and had failed to develop the means for generating trained leadership locally. When it therefore lost contact with the Coptic Patriarchate, it suffered a fatal blow. Its dependency on external arrangements for leadership preparation proved fatal. When the voice of Nubian Christianity is last heard in history, it is requesting priests from Ethiopia. These were not forthcoming--and Nubian Christianity was never heard from again.

But perhaps on reflection it is amazing that Nubian Christianity lasted as long as it did, surrounded as it was for so many centuries by hostile forces, afflicted by internal crises, and cut off from easy contact with fellow believers. Granted the failings, granted the erosions, is it not something that, even with a limited understanding of and response to the demands of the Christian message, they nevertheless managed to stand faithful generation after generation? Taking due warning from their experiences, must we not also with all empathy and humility "hold such in honour"? Is not here indeed a true and noble heritage for African Christianity, to be rejoiced in, to be learned from, a heritage worthy of much closer acquaintance than has hitherto been its lot? This paper has barely touched the surface of what is now known about Nubian Christianity thanks to the recent remarkable advances in research. And much more may yet come to light--archaeology has only begun the systematic exploitation of potential Christian Nubian sites. Here are rich opportunities for dedicated field research, for learned dissertations and theses, and for thoughtful presentations and popularizations, not least in the handling of African church history in our theological colleges. Will African Christianity take up the quest? Will the day soon come when Nubian Christianity can no longer be called a neglected heritage?

Notes

1 Note how the notion has slipped inadvertently into an analysis by the noted African church historian Ogbu Kalu of Nigeria, when he writes: "Certainly some parts of Africa, the Maghrib for example, were touched by the medieval Christianization process and other parts experienced the Christian incursion in the Renaissance period, but the major part of Africa witnessed the incursion only in the recent past" ("Doing Church History in Africa Today" *Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective*, ed L. Vischer [Bern, 1982] 86).

Another contemporary African Christian scholar, Kwame Bediako of Ghana, has written, "Islam can also, with greater weight than Christianity, claim deeper historical roots in Africa" ("Gospel and Contemporary Culture", *The Gospel and Contemporary Ideologies and Cultures* [Lagos, 1979] 30). If "deeper historical roots" means older roots, the statement is of course in error. African Christianity is much older than Islam. If the statement means that historically the roots of Islam have penetrated deeper into the African soil, it is difficult to see how roots could be put deeper than Christianity has done historically in Egypt and Ethiopia. Probably the thought behind the statement is not that Islam is older or has been more deeply rooted in Africa, but that historically such in-depth rooting has been more widespread for Islam than for Christianity in Africa. That is not what the statement says. But if that is what was meant, a case could certainly be made for it, and one that African Christianity needs to ponder. And yet even here one must express himself cautiously, for south of the Sahara the in-depth rooting of Islam, beyond the governing circles out among the common people, is in many places only a matter of the last few centuries (e.g. for most of northern Nigeria only since dan Fodio's jihad at the beginning of the 1800s), and in not a few places it is a development of this century. In most cases only from the Sahara northward and along the East African coast are deep Islamic roots more than half a millennium old.

2 *African Religions and Philosophy* (NY, 1969) 229.

3 *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota, 1985).

4 For the texts on Africa church history in common use among theological colleges on the continent, see "A Survey of Textbooks Used in Theological Colleges in Africa" *ACTEA Tools and Studies No. 4* (Nairobi, 1983) 6.

5 (Vol I, II: Cairo, 1935; Vol III, IV: Cairo, 1957).

6 (*Orientalia Cristiana Analecta* 118; Rome, 1938).

7 In contrast, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* includes an article on "Nubia", by B. G. Trigger (Volume X [Washington, DC, 1967] 548-49), which makes reference both to Monneret de Villard and to the UNESCO PROJECT.

8 J. A. Ilevbare's "Christianity in Nubia" (Early African Christianity, *Tarikh* ii.1 [London, 1967])--which first introduced me to this fascinating topic--shows no awareness of the UNESCO discoveries, depending on Arkell, Groves, and Wallis Budge. But the publishers included with the article tantalizing photographs of the Faras cathedral discoveries.

9 OT Hebrew uses "Cush", which the LXX, except in the ethnographic lists of Genesis and I Chronicles, mostly translates by the Greek "Aithiopia". The AV and RSV follow the LXX, translating the Hebrew "Cush" by the English "Ethiopia" in most cases. But since "Ethiopia" denotes a different geographical region today, some current English versions now translate "Cush" as "Nubia", which for modern usage is the technically correct designation for the area intended.

10 *Natur Quaest* vi.8.

11 Cf. P. Bowers "Paul and Religious Propaganda in the First Century", *Novum Testamentum* xxii (1980) 316-323.

12 See B. M. Metzger, "The Christianization of Nubia and the Old Nubian Version of the New Testament", *Historical and Literary Studies* (Grand Rapids, 1968) 111-122; *ibid*, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1977) 268-74.

- 13 Groves, II.82-83.
- 14 A. J. Arkell, "A Christian Church and Monastery at Ain Farah, Darfur" *Kush* vii (1959) 115-19; "The Mediaeval History of Darfur" *SNR* x1 (1959) 44-47; "The Influence of Christian Nubia in the Chad Area between AD 800 - 1200", *Kush* xi (1963) 315-19.
- 15 R. Gray, "Christian Traces and a Franciscan Mission in the Central Sudan, 1700-1711", *Journal of African History* viii (1967) 383-93; cf. A. B. Mathews, "The Kisra Legend", *African Studies* ix (1950) 144-47.
- 16 M. Nissen, *An African Church is Born* (Copenhagen, 1968) 17.
- 17 The standard popular account is in R. Keating, *Nubian Rescue*, London, 1975; cf. M. S. Drower, *Nubia: A Drowning Land* (Harlow, 1970); W. B. Emery, *Lost Land Emerging* (New York, 1967). For the Ghana expedition see P. L. Shinnie, "The University of Ghana Excavations at Debeira West", *Kush* xii (1964) 212-14.
- 18 K. Michalowski, *Faras, Centre Artistique de la Nubie Chretienne* (Leiden, 1966); *ibid.*, *Faras, die Kathedrale aus dem Mustensand* (Zurich/Cologne, 1967).
- 19 J. M. Plumley and C. H. Roberts, "An Uncial Text of St Mark in Greek from Nubia" *JTS* xxvii (1976) 34-45.
- 20 J. M. Plumley, *The Scrolls of Bishop Timotheos* (London, 1975).
- 21 J. M. Plumley, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 1xi (1975) 241-5
- 22 W. Y. Adams, "An Introductory Classification of Christian Nubian Pottery", *Kush* x (1962) 245-88; *ibid.* "The Evolution of Christian Nubian Pottery", *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in Christlicher Zeit*, ed. E. Dinkler (Recklinghausen, 1970) 111-28.
- 23 The publications related to these meetings, from Essen to Cambridge, are respectively: E. Dinkler, ed. *Kunst and*

Geschichte Nubiens in Christlicher Zeit (Recklinghausen, 1970); K. Michalowski, ed. **Nubia: Recentes Recherches** (Warsaw, 1975); [J. Leclant and J. Vercoutter, eds.] **Etudes Nubiennes** (Cairo, 1978); J. M. Plumley, **Nubian Studies**, (Warminster, 1982). Not part of the same series of conferences and publications, but nevertheless of equal importance were the "Colloquium on Nubian Studies" at the Hague in 1979, and its attendant volume: P. van Moorsel, ed. **New Discoveries in Nubia** (Leiden, 1982).

24 Information on the International Society for Nubian Studies, may be secured from its secretary, Prof. Dr. Paul van Moorsel, Groenoord 136, 2401 AH--Alphen a/d Rijn, Netherlands. Information on the Uppsala conference in 1986 may be obtained from the secretary of the organizing committee, Prof. Tomas Hagg, University of Bergen, Dept of Classics, PO Box 23, 5014 Bergen, Norway.

25 (Princeton, 1977) 433-546.

26 "Christian Nubia", **Cambridge History of Africa, Vol 2: From C. 500 BC to AD 1050**, ed J. D. Fage (Cambridge, 1978) 556-588; (see also the discussion in Vol 3: 69-80.

27 "The Spreading of Christianity in Nubia", **General History of Africa, Vol II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa**, ed. G. Mokhtar (Paris, 1981) 326-38.

28 764-66.

29 See note 23 above.

30 Published by the Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, U1. Dewajtis 3, 01-653 Warsaw, Poland.

31 Subscription information may be obtained from: Karel Innemee, Doelensteeg 16, Leiden, Netherlands. One may also want to consult the bibliographic survey of literature arising from the UNESCO project in: L-A Christophe, **Campagne Internationale de l'Unesco pur la sauvegarde des sites et monuments de Nubie** (Paris, 1977).

32 Among Vantini's earlier publications were **The Excavations at Faras** (Bologna, 1970), **Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia** (Heidelberg and Warsaw, 1975), and an account of Nubian Christianity in Arabic, **Tar'ikh al-Masihiya** (Khartoum, 1978)-- upon which the 1981 book in English is substantially but not entirely based.

33 Copies may be ordered from Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Via Roncati 32, 40134 Bologna, Italy. The price is \$13, but the publishers inform me that theological libraries in Africa will be allowed a 30% discount. They also state that the supply of copies is now limited.

34 J. M. Plumley, "The Christian Period in Nubia as represented on the Site of Qasr Ibrim", **Nubia, Recentes Recherches**, ed K. Michalowski (Warsaw, 1975), 101-110.

35 Based on reevaluation of the evidence by P. M. Holt, "A Sudanese Historical Legend: the Funj Conquest of Suba" **BSOAS** xxiii (1960) 1-17.

36 N. B. Millet, "Gebel Adda Preliminary Report, 1965-66", **Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt**, vi (1967) 53-62; W. Y. Adams, **Nubia** (Princeton, 1977) 533; J. M. Plumley, "New Light on the Kingdom of Dotawo", **Etudes Nubiennes** (Paris 1978) 231-41.

37 W. Y. Adams, "The Twilight of Nubian Christianity", **Nubia: Recentes Recherches**, ed. K. Michalowski (Warsaw, 1975) 11-17.

38 Of some 150 Nubian churches so far identified, less than a half dozen had been converted at some time into mosques.

39 In addition to the important article by Adams referred to in note 37 above, see, e.g., W. H. C. Frend, "Nomads and Christianity in the Middle Ages", **Journal of Eccl. Hist** xxvi (1975) 209-21; J. S. Trimingham, **Islam in the Sudan** (London, 1949) 75-80; G. Vantini, **Christianity in the Sudan** (Bologna, 1981) 206-07; Y. F. Hasan, **Sudan in Africa** (Khartoum, 1971) 124-28.