

COPTIC POPULAR RELIGIOSITY: REREADING RELIGIOUS CONSERVANCY IN HELLENISTIC EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

Christianity in ancient Egypt has been one of the most interesting religions in Hellenistic Egypt and the world entirely. This happened because religious activities were not foreign to the Egyptians because they had the religions of the Pharaohs before the coming of the Christian message in the country. Such expansion and domination of the Christian message among the Copts and their religious activities made them become popular among other Christians regions in the history of the church. Using historical method, this work argues prominent place religious activities have played in Egyptian Christianity. It has also shown how that the Coptic church expanded its frontiers and establish its religious beliefs even in the midst of challenges and persecution. The work also reveals the effort put in place the Alexandrian Christians in the creation of papyri and engaging in scribal practices to preserve the message of the Bible and make it accessible to their natives, and the invention of monastic practices and religious paintings to preserve their Christian religious identity.

Key words: Hellenistic Egypt, Coptic Church, African church, LXX, Alexandria

Introduction

Christianity in ancient Egypt has been one of the most interesting religions in Hellenistic Egypt. It so became popular and pulled weight among the Egyptian people. It so happened that religious activities were not foreign to the Egyptians because they had the religions of the Pharaohs before the coming of the Christian message in the country. Egypt had a good number of Jews who migrated and settled there and also practiced their Jewish religion and were expecting the coming of the Messiah (Kee, 1970:102; Neill, 1975; Wright, 1992; Schweitzer, 1961; Crossan, 1995; Borg, 1984:35-41).

Such expansion and domination of the Christian message among the Copts and their religious activities made them become popular among other Christians regions in the history of the church. The Coptic Church had some strong and popular religious ties coupled with their identity as a people. The Hellenistic Coptic religious activities and the endured challenges, which the

Coptic Church over the years, continued and surfaced in the heart of their religious activities.

This work argues prominent place religious activities have played in Egyptian Christianity. It has also shown how that the Coptic church expanded its frontiers and establish its religious beliefs even in the midst of challenges and persecution. Their magical practices and devotions to the religions of the Pharaohs made them maintain their religious and cultural identity and confronted the introduction and acceptance of alien religions by the Arabs even when Egypt was conquered in AD 641. The work also reveals the effort put in place the Alexandrian Christians in the creation of papyri and engaging in scribal practices to preserve the message of the Bible and make it accessible to their natives, and the invention of monastic practices and religious paintings to preserve their Christian religious identity. Such efforts by the Copts have laid down some sustainable principles, which the church in Africa needs to emulate as it promotes religious activities and scholarship of its current existence.

Religious Activities in Hellenistic Egypt

There were quite a number of Christian religious activities in Hellenistic Egypt. Egypt has been a famous country in Christian history. Historically, the church started in Palestine and expanded to Asia Minor and Africa. The African church has survived in the midst of all kinds of strifes. The first movement started in Ethiopia and Egypt with Matthew and Mark as the chief evangelists respectively (Oden, 2011:17-59). On the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, it is clear that Africans were also part of the movement. Among the first set of deacons appointed in Acts 6 was an African, Niger. Africa has been represented in the dramatic events for the making of the church and the prophetic side-lining of reality. The African church has been in the agenda of God (Tambi, 2014:389-90; Walls, 1998:2).

The early church in Africa lost its strength as Islamic movement invaded North Africa in the sixth and seventh centuries. Many African kingdoms, which were already Christianised, disappeared from the pages of history in Northern Africa (Warfield, 2001:518; Sannch, 2003; Jenkins, 2008; Michael, 2011:5-8; Mbiti, 1974:229). This began the Islamization of the church with enormous threats and struggles for survival. This Islamization in Africa continued until the coming of the Portuguese missionaries in the twentieth century in West Africa. This time in history witnessed the revisiting of the gospel message into the African soil. The word 'revisiting' is used because it was not the first time Africans have heard the gospel message (Tambi, 2017:1-2). African Christianity today is the product of the Christianity preached by the Portuguese and early Christian involvements of the church in Africa. The church in Egypt became a pillar of the global church and set up standards in terms of preservation of the Bible. However, most of the problems of textual

corruption, Gnosticism and continental thoughts, which many church fathers contended with sprang from this intense church in Africa.

Religious Practice, Paganism and Magical Acts

Before the coming of Christianity in Egypt, the Copts were the descendants of Pharaohs who practiced the ancient religions of the Pharaohs. This is the old primitive religion full of mysticism and myths in search of the sun god and other forms of gods. Egypt had been a Christian centre with a lot of religious involvements. The Greco-Jewish life in Egypt led to the practice of major religious affairs including magical acts and practices, which many Christians had to fight to reject in Egypt. Even Jesus has been argued by some scholars to have borrowed from the Egyptian magical practices, which he exhibited in his life and ministry when the Holy Family visited Egypt in Acts 2. Affirming this assertion, Koschorke (2003:13) states that “Jesus, one of many children from a simple craftsmen’s family, found a kind of itinerant sect, preaches, teaches, heals, exorcises evil spirits, and performs magical cures – deeds that meet with disapproval from his family and former neighbours.”

In the post-biblical period, both pagans and Jews were interested in the story of the flight of the Holy Family. Celsus accused Jesus of being hired to work while in Egypt on account of his poverty, and the Egyptians considered Jesus a great man of miracles and magical powers. These were all efforts to discredit the messiahship and sonship of Jesus. This made Origen (AD 185-254) to have refuted these views with a concrete re-evaluation of the miraculous circumstance governing the journey of the Holy Family to Egypt. Davis (2001:136) suggests that miraculous circumstance is a reference to Joseph’s angelic visions and the significance of the event in biblical prophecy. It is obvious that Origen wanted to defend the teaching of Christianity about Jesus and to refute the claims that Jesus used magical powers learned from Egypt and the flight into Egypt was a proof of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. This shows that in the second or third century, the tradition of the Holy Family was a familiar story in Christian and non-Christian circles, predominantly among the Egyptian Christians.

The Babylonian Talmud (sixth or seventh century) attested to Jesus coming to Egypt but with a negative motif, which was linked with engaging in magical practices and that he used magical powers gotten from Egypt against his people, the Jews. It claimed Jesus brought forth “witchcraft from Egypt by means of scratches in the form of charms upon his flesh” and he practiced magic and led Israel astray (Davies, 2001:135). Such religious traditions have made Egypt popular.

Preserving Coptic Religious Cultures

The Egyptians are known to be religious people with religious practices deeply rooted in their culture. Gabra (2001:ix) captures it that “Egyptians were known to be a deeply religious people in ancient and medieval times. They continue to be religious, and many of their practices can be traced to the ancient Egyptian culture.” One of the preserved religious tradition is the religious sense as seen in the rich religious tradition of the flight of the Holy Family to Africa. Ibrahim (2002:10) writes concerning the flight of the Holy Family and how it has shaped the Egyptian culture that “The Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt is both a significant and a living tradition for the people of the Land of the Pharaohs.” He considers the story of the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt to be “the spark that spread the flames of Christianity to all regions throughout Egypt. It spread throughout Egypt faster than any other country so all Egyptians became Christian in a very short period of time.”

These are the eras of manuscript discovery and studies in the West since the twentieth century. These documents survived because the climatic weather of Egypt is suitable for preserving documents compared to other countries. Manuscripts were discovered in Oxyrhynchus, Dishna, Aphroditopolis and Nag Hammadi (Tambiyi, 2017b). But such discovered manuscripts today have lost their africaness and have become Western manuscripts.

Religious Activities and Practices in Alexandria and Beyond

Egypt has been known to be one of the influential countries of Christianity. A lot of people at that time engaged themselves in moving the boundaries of the gospels and making sure that the Gospels and Christianity generally got to the heart of the native people. This section would consider the effort put in place by Alexandria, the engaging the papyri and scribal practices, and religious strides in monastic activities and their paintings.

The Influence of Alexandria

Alexandria is known to have been the best centre, which produced the best manuscripts in the early Christian era of the church. Critical scholars today have all recognized the influence of the centre for the study of ancient manuscripts in Alexandria. Ibrahim (2002:8) states that “Alexandria also had the largest Jewish population outside Palestine.... Traditional accounts indicate that the Holy Family never visited Alexandria. Instead, they spent three and a half years travelling among the Copts, the descendants of the ancient Egyptians.” Alexandria witnessed the translation of the Bible translated by seventy scholars, the Septuagint (LXX) around 250-200 B.C., the first translated version of the Bible (see Tambiyi, 2014:10; Machedem, 1976:31; Henshaw, 1963:32; Tov, 1999; Tov, 2017; de Vries, 2013:3-20). The Septuagint, translated by 70 scholars, is

the Greek version of the Old Testament, which was translated to enhance the religion of the Jews (Judaism); hence, the Diaspora Jews could not speak their original language (Hebrew) as a result of Hellenism. It was used during worship in the synagogues and later became the Bible of the young Church in the first century before the composition of the New Testament.

Throughout history, besides the Septuagint, there have been various versions of Bible manuscripts. These are the Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Aleppo, Codex Alexandrinus, the Vulgate Latin version, the Mesoretic Hebrew Scrolls of the Old Testament, Syriac Peshitta, the Targums, Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion and Juxta Hebraica of Jerome for the Psalms. Alexandria possessed its own churches, as well as the most famous Christian School of Alexandria was founded to instruct converts in the tenets of the faith (Lyster, 2001:9). el-Masri (2015:29) adds that "...the School of Alexandria became the Lighthouse of Christianity, and throughout its life of five centuries, it maintained the same reputation of erudition and scholarliness."

It can be stated that with the evidence provided above on Egypt being the ancient home of textual studies and that evidence can be known by the church fathers such as Origen and Augustine, it can be stated that the ancient African Christian community was known for the reputation of being the earliest copyists and transmitters of the text of the New Testament. To me, with the level of Biblical knowledge and exposures on the continent, which, to some extent, is growing and preparing to compete with the Western understanding of the Bible, the African Christian community can be able to meet up with the challenges involved in this area of study.

Thoughts and expertise are developed in the course of time within the confine of Western scholarship. The same can be said of the state of African scholars today. Despite such Western attempts, Africans are trying to regain their ancient reputation in terms of transmission of the text, which the early church fathers started in Egypt, ancient Carthage, Ethiopia and other African countries in the second century and beyond.

Papyri and Scribal Activities in Egypt

Copying of parchments in the form of bi-folio was very common because the format was small for private use, easy reading and memorization that the promises and blessings would be upon the reciter. This understanding proved that Africans particularly the Egyptians were probably the first Christians to encourage the corruption of the text of the New Testament through copying as observed by Origen in the Alexandrian and Oxyrhynchus centres for studying manuscripts. Many of the scribes engaged in the emendation of the text, although they achieved their aim, but ended up interpolating on the text of the New Testament. Comfort (2012:190) believes that "Each of the books of the New Testament has had its own textual history and has been preserved with

varying degrees of accuracy. Nonetheless, all the books were altered from the original state due to the process of manual copying decade after decade and century after century. And the text of each books needs to be recovered.”

The monks became scribes and correctors in the early church and have produced many manuscripts and translated a lot of biblical and liturgical document for the rooting of Christianity in the hearts of the natives in Egypt. Such an effort should be known with the early African involvement on the text of the New Testament predominantly in Alexandria starting from the second century as a lot of manuscripts were attempted to be emended and it resulted to interpolated textual corruption of the New Testament (Blomberg, 2014:13-42; Ankerberg and Burroughs, 2009:129-139). Comfort (2014:191-2; 2001:1179) states that “The Alexandrian Christians were probably the first ones to attempt a recovery of the wording of the Greek New Testament. From the second century to the fourth century, the Alexandrian scribes worked to purify the text from textual corruption.” Comfort (2014:205) also states that the manuscripts, which have been and are being discovered in Egypt, are viable sources for the reconstruction of the text of the New Testament. These can be said to have put the Egyptian Christians and scribes at the forefront of textual engagements and reconstructions.

Monastic and Painting Activities

There was special attention into monastic and painting activities in Egyptian culture and identity. Monastic activities developed with Pachomius and expanded to the Church of the Holy Virgin, which has succeeded in preserving the Egyptian traditions. The Copts devoted attention into the monastic developments and the effort put to configure the movement, which has become a practice for global Christianity particularly among the Catholics. These sacred sites in turn found further material expressions in architecture as churches or monastic settlements marked most sites associated with, for example, the Holy Family in Egypt and other significant Egyptian traditions. Lyster (2001:1) states that “The rich heritage of Coptic painting, in particular the production of icons and murals, is also an integral part of the network of belief and ritual practice shaped by the Coptic tradition of the Holy Family’s journey in Egypt.” Lyster (2001:1) also adds, “The Coptic pictorial tradition, however, was conservative in nature. The iconographic image of the Flight has remained largely unchanged for the last fifteen hundred years.” The Coptic churches, the monasteries, the wall paintings and the icons they contained have indicated the faith and tenacity of the Coptic community. The sacred geography of Christians in Egypt reflects not just the passing of the Holy Family, but the historical experience of the Copts (Lyster, 2001:8). The Copts had a long monastic and painting cultures in relating Christian religious activities in their culture and identity.

Like the Coptic Church, the church in Nigeria has taken shape in the midst of the African church. West African Christianity became strong as the Catholics, Protestants and the modern wind of Pentecostalism gain footings. Nigeria is predicted to be the epicentre of Christian global movement (“Notes to the 400 Years King James”, 2014:390). It means that the Nigerian church would decide the fate of the global church as it was with Egypt in the early centuries. It becomes a must that the church in Nigeria be sanctified and safeguarded from external challenges, which would attempt to corrupt its interior. The church should shake off the false teachings, which are raising within its frontiers in the socio-economic and religio-political dimensions. If the church in Nigeria will accomplish all these anticipated claims then the Church needs to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of the Coptic Church; hence, these two churches are faced with the same external forces, the rise and domination of Islam.

Conclusion

The Coptic church has become a successful church during the Hellenistic period because the Copts devoted themselves to developing their religious frontiers and elevating their religio-cultural activities through the eye of expanding the Christian message. Egypt has been a fertile ground for Christianity at the early state despite the influence of religious practice enthroned by the Pharaohs, paganism and magical acts and the preserving Coptic religious cultures in the country. Such early lifestyle made the country to become religious and it was able to embrace a super-religion like Christianity. Alexandria became one of the major centre of attractions, particularly the School of Alexander which developed Christian religious activities and taught the people basic Christian doctrines and belief systems. The Coptic Church has maintained its legacy in preserving the Christian faith over the centuries through engaging in the preservation of the various texts of the Bible by the Alexandrian scribes with the development of the papyri. There were also high involvements in the development of monastic lifestyles and many of the monks engaged in paintings of religious objects and faces, which helped expanded the religious life of the Egyptian people. These are aspects of the Christian faith, which the modern church should focus on in order to develop the faith and prepare the platforms for the next generations. The African church should encourage the development of various lasting religious frontiers and values as the Coptic church did in order to preserve the cultures and identities of African Christians. Such religious various would make the church in Africa to be rooted in belief systems and practices and would make scholarship more meaningful among the people.

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