

Christian Kingdoms

For one thousand years Christianity predominated in Northern Sudan. From the sixth century to the fifteenth century Christianity was the official religion of the three Sudanese kingdoms of Nubia, Alwa, and Makuria (later Dotawo). For nine hundred years the Christians of Sudan successfully resisted the southward expansion of Islam.

Destruction

Yet by the late fifteenth century the weakened Christian kingdoms reeled from waves of Arab attacks. Towns were burned and confusion spread. Nubia fell. The fall of the Christian kingdom of Dotawo in 1484 and the fall of the southern most kingdom of Alwa in 1530 heralded the demise of Christian faith in Northern Sudan. Today Sudan is an officially Islamic state. The National Islamic Front (NIF) regime declared Jihad (holy war) against the Christian South and against the Arabic speaking Nuba Christians in central Sudan.

Shairia

Article 1 of Sudan's Constitutional Decree (October 16, 1993) states: *"Islam is the guiding religion . . . it is a binding code that directs the laws, regulations and policies of the State"* . The government of Sudan's leaders regularly proclaim their goal of transforming Sudan into an Islamic state with one language, Arabic, and one religion, Islam. Nearly two million people mostly Christians died (most from a man-made famine) in the scorched earth and bombing campaign launched by the Muslim North.

While most of the Black South of Sudan claim to be Christians and steadfastly resist the Islamisation and Arabisation policies of the North, the question still remains:

Meroe and Nubia Turn to Christ

The first Sudanese to be converted to Christ was the treasurer of Queen Candace of the kingdom of Meroe in AD37 (Acts 8:26-40). From this time on Christianity came to be increasingly embraced by the intellectuals and royal households. In Nubia and Alwa the kings seem to have accepted the Gospel first. The churches in the Nubian kingdom were always closely associated with the king. In fact the king himself was often also a priest and it was a common practice for bishops and priests to hold leadership positions in the government.

Centralisation

There is little historical evidence that the common people were effectively evangelised. As a result when the kingdoms began to break up politically, the church collapsed at the same time. The church in Northern Sudan was heavily centralised with ecclesiastical hierarchy and a separation between the clergy and the laity.

Dependence on Foreign Ministers

Even more seriously the churches in Northern Sudan relied heavily upon the services of foreign bishops and priests. Most of the leaders of the church were Egyptian, Greek or Coptic. These languages were understood by the king and the educated people in his court - but not by the common people. Hence, Christianity in Northern Sudan was a religion of the educated elite and not of the common man. The churches were also strong in the towns and cities but had far less of an impact amongst the rural farming communities.

Starved of Biblical Teaching

The over-dependence of Northern Sudan on foreign bishops and priests later starved the church of leadership as the Muslim armies cut off all contact between Egypt and Nubia in the thirteenth century. As the bishops had been appointed by the Greek and Coptic patriarchs in Egypt the Islamic stranglehold made it very difficult for the church in Nubia to continue to grow.

Islamic Infiltration

Simultaneously the continuous migration of Arab traders and nomads into Sudan eroded the Christian dominance and spread the influence of Islam. The last years of the Christian kingdoms were years of confusion.

Intermarriage and Treachery

Intermarriage with Muslims brought dissent. The treacherous compromise of the Nubian kings to sell slaves to the Muslims as part of a peace treaty undermined the Christian civilisation which had thrived for nearly a millennium.

Dissension

There was much quarrelling and conflict within the royal families. The Mamluk rulers in Egypt eagerly interfered, and exploited the divisions in Nubia. The churches were so closely connected with the kings and to the patriarchs of Alexandria (in Egypt) that they rose and fell with them.

Isolated

Another contributing factor to the demise of Christianity in Northern Sudan is that the Christians in Ethiopia refused to send help when asked to. In 1450 six men from Alwa came as Ambassadors to the king of neighbouring Ethiopia. They begged him to send them priests and monks to teach them. Yet this desperate cry for help was ignored.

Decay from Within

Christianity did not die out in Northern Sudan because of external persecution by Muslims. The churches were empty and abandoned long before Islam filled the vacuum and became well established. The fact that few Nubians were literate and that services were in Greek and Coptic meant that the Word of God was not well known amongst the common people. The over-dependance upon foreign bishops and priests made the churches vulnerable when communication links to the outside world were cut.

Compromise

The churches were too closely allied to the political power structures and fell with the kings. By compromising with Islam and allowing a quota of their own people to be enslaved in order to buy assurances of peace the Nubian kingdom condemned itself to be judged by God.

Essential Foundations

The lessons to us today are clear: It is essential that we give priority to literacy training, Bible teaching and leadership training. We need to build healthy self supporting, self governing and self propogating churches.

In the World But Not of it

We need to teach and practice decentralisation and the priesthood of all believers. We need to be very careful not to be co-opted by secular politicians, only to be used to advance their humanist agendas. Nor may we ever compromise our Faith in order to buy some temporary illusion of peace. May God be merciful to us and keep us from repeating the errors of the past. Let us be faithful to His Word and to His work. May we not fail those who are being persecuted for their faith and who are looking to us for help today.

"Cush will submit herself to God." Psalm 68:31