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CHAPTER  
**16**

***Religion in the Nile Valley Area***

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Nile Valley is a geographical region with considerable influence on the history of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. From its most remote source near Tangayinka (Lake Victoria) down to the Mediterranean (Nile Delta in Egypt), the river covers a distance of about 4,160 miles and passes through a number of countries like Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, the river has two main sources, namely the highland of Ethiopia (the blue Nile) and the lake region of East Africa (the white Nile).

However, the importance of the great river is particularly linked with Egypt and the Sudan hence the opinion that without the Nile the entire northern Sudan and the whole of Egypt would be a desert. Both branches of the Nile are of great importance to Egypt. The White Nile maintains the flow of water down the Nile Valley throughout the year and provides most of the water used for irrigation. The Blue Nile brings down from Ethiopia the rich silt left behind when the floodwaters dry up. This accounts for the great fertility of Egyptian territory. Thus, Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia are linked together geographically and share mutual interests in the use of the Nile water.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the geographical link, the three areas have also enjoyed long standing historical relationship. For instance, the

ancient kingdom of Kush in the Sudan arose under the influence of Egyptian civilization and for a brief period, kings of Kush ruled in Egypt itself.<sup>3</sup> Much later, Kush suffered from the rivalry with the kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia and was consequently destroyed at about A. D 350 by its first Christian ruler, Emperor Ezana.

The three areas also share some religious experiences. Christianity was introduced into the Northern part of modern Sudan from Egypt, and by the 5<sup>th</sup> A.D two Christian kingdoms; Maqurra and Alwa had come into existence. Ethiopia received Christianity through the efforts of Greek traders. But, the Ethiopian church was for a long time under the control of Egyptian Christian leadership in Alexandria.

Islam is also another religion of common importance in the Nile Valley. Islam was introduced by the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 6<sup>th</sup> A.D., spreading up the Nile along the routes of trade which linked Egypt with upper Nile area. Rightly argued, religion remains one of the remarkable historical developments in this area.

According to Mbiti,<sup>4</sup> Africans are generally known to be deeply religious and indeed, very significant part of her present political, social and cultural life has been influenced greatly by religion. Invariably, certain historical trends in African history can and should be explained from religious perspectives or interactions.

Indeed, whether these religious interaction were convulsive or decisively disruptive of existing African traditional religious legacy is a matter of intellectual opinion. However, an interesting but equally intriguing issue is how the "cross" and the "crescent," interacted with existing African traditional beliefs and evolved unique but remarkable civilizations in the Nile Valley. Indeed, it should be interesting to know if this evolution was based on confrontation, compromise, syncretism, annihilation or tolerance<sup>5</sup>.

This chapter examines the origin and spread of two major world religions namely Christianity and Islam in the Nile Valley and how both were influenced by traditional African beliefs. Strictly speaking, it looks at Christianity and Islam in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia from

the earliest times and concludes with a survey of the impact up to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION IN THE NILE VALLEY**

Religion (in whatever form) played and still plays a major role in African society. In this geographical region, polytheism generally preceded monotheism. In fact, present day Christian and Islamic centers in the Nile Valley were once cradles of traditional religion.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, few African nations adopted Christianity or Islam without first enjoying the privileges of traditional African beliefs which in some cases have survived till today.

### **EGYPT**

Traditionally the Egyptians like other Africans were very religious, and worshipped of many traditional gods.<sup>7</sup> Religion was so important that virtually every village, town and district had at least one god. This probably accounted for the numerous deities in Egypt which some estimated at more than two thousand.<sup>8</sup> Of these, the most important were the trinity of the great sun-god, Ra, Osiris, the god of the Nile and the Judge of the dead and Isis, his wife. Ra, was generally regarded as the lord of heaven and earth while Osiris was the King of eternity into whose judgment hall " the soul of every man was brought and weighed in the great balance".<sup>9</sup>

Each god looked after the spiritual and material welfare of a specific town and Egypt in general. The king was the secular chief priest of all gods. Temple worship thrived with prominent rituals employing sacred science of writing, images and architectural forms. These ensured mystical precedents and depicted the after life journey of the dead.

Owing to their religious responsibility, Egyptian priests held high social ranks in the society. In fact, thousands of acres of land were set-aside for them for the maintenance of temple services. These lands were regarded as the property of the gods and were exempted from taxation.<sup>10</sup> Both the temples and the numerous slaves attached to them were controlled by the priests.

Evidently, Egyptians believed in life after death. This probably influenced to a considerable extent the practice of "mummification", that is, a system of embalming and preserving the bodies of the dead as "mummies" to prevent decay and corruption and to make the soul of the deceased enjoy "an after life at least as active and happy as life in this world."<sup>11</sup> A direct outcome of the religious beliefs of ancient Egypt was the construction of pyramids and concealed tombs. An ancient Egyptian tomb was largely a super structure open to the surviving relations and a vault where the deceased lay accompanied by magical or domestic objects.<sup>12</sup>

Based on this belief of life after death, it was therefore customary for kings and nobles to prepare their burial places during their lifetime. In fact, between 3000 and 2000B.C, kings known as "pyramid kings" ruled Egypt and were reputed to have built gigantic pyramids in readiness for their burial. Zoser, who ruled at about 3000BC was the first Pharaoh to become a famous pyramid builder.<sup>13</sup> At Sakkara, to the south of Nemphis, he built the first large pyramid known in history.

Many pyramids were built after the reign of Zoser, prominent among which were those located at the edge of the desert near Cairo about five miles from the left bank of the Nile. The largest of these was known as " great pyramid" which is reported to be the greatest structure ever erected.<sup>14</sup> The magnificent nature of the great Pyramid was even acknowledged by the Greek writer, Herodotus who reported that it took "100,000 men twenty years to build the pyramid for king Khutu or Cheops".<sup>15</sup> The pyramid form of tomb, originally meant for the flat topography around Nempis changed to stone tombs when the capital was moved to Thebes which was located in a rocky topography. Here, tomb chambers were hewn out of solid rock. At about 2000 BC, the wild and desolate valley known as the valley of tombs of the kings became the cemetery of the pharaohs.

Religion can therefore be considered as one of the philosophical contributions of the Egyptians. This opinion is largely based on a number of theories they developed concerning the creation of life, the role of the natural power and the responses of the human

community towards them. These contributions were vividly illustrated by the beliefs about influences of the gods on human thoughts, divine aspects of kingship, the role of priesthood in the community and the belief in life and eternity in the after world.<sup>16</sup>

## **SUDAN**

Egypt influenced Sudan significantly in matters of religion. The ancient Meroitic peoples were known to have derived much of their religious ideas from Egypt. This could be attested to by the simple fact that majority of the gods worshipped in Meroitic temples corresponded with those of Egypt. Indeed, the rights to the throne were said to have been derived from Amun, the highest god with an Egyptian affiliation. Pharaohic divinities such as Isis, Horus, Thoth, Arensnuphis, Satis were worshipped along with purely Meroitic gods like the Lion god Apedemak or the god Sebewyemeker.<sup>17</sup> It is believed that the official cult of these gods began as late as the 3<sup>rd</sup> BC. They were probably local gods of the southern parts of the empire which came to prominence when Egyptian influence began to wane and was being replaced by Meroitic cultural traits.

Apedemak, one of the indigenous gods was a warrior god and divinity of great importance to the Meroites. His official insignia was the lion head and lions were reported to have played some parts in the rituals at the temple especially in Mucawnavat es-Sufra. Similarly another Meroitic local god which was relatively unknown to the Egyptians was Sebewyemekan. This was perhaps the chief god since he was considered as creator. There were some goddesses but their names and places in the Meroitic pantheon remains relatively unknown.<sup>18</sup>

## **TRADITIONAL PRE-CHRISTIAN CULTS IN AXUM (ETHIOPIA).**

In ancient Ethiopia, the Kushtic groups, unlike the ruling classes, escaped assimilation to Semitic culture. Thus, they worshipped different natural objects like giant trees, rivers, lakes, high mountains or animals. These were believed to be the abodes of good and evil

spirits to whom various annual or seasonal offerings and sacrifices were made.

The other fairly advanced groups, mainly the people of semitic origin, who did not inherit the Kushtic cult and the semitized Kushites, worshipped nature in its pure celestial and terrestrial forms – the sun, moon and stars, the land and the earth. This religious practice was in the form of the triad, Mahrem, Beher and Meder.<sup>19</sup> These were known to have fiercely rivaled the foreign or semi-national gods of South Arabia or Assyro – Babylonia such as Almuquh Awbas, Astart. The gods were in turn assimilated to the Greek gods Zeus, Ares and Poseidon. This assimilation process was probably permitted by certain kings of Axum whose cultural origin was Greek. However, this did not in any way affect the divinity of Mahrem, the national god.

Indeed, available evidence in the form of old Ethiopian texts dating from the time of king Amde Tsior (+ 1313 to + 1342) suggest the existence of a cult of the serpent 'Arwe' with the law of Moses.<sup>20</sup> This serpent was variously recognized as a dragon – god and dedicated to the first reigning king, Arew – Negus, father of the Queen of Sheba. The semites from South Arabia also brought several Arabian cults evident in copious epigraphic and numismatic documents.

However, whether these traditional beliefs were essentially of royal and aristocratic preserve or open to all subjects is difficult to ascertain. It should all the same be admitted that several factors testify to the presence of many cults and even the existence of Judaism, a religion that preceded Christianity in Palestine. This was the religious scenario until the emergence of Christianity.

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE NILE VALLEY**

### **Christianity in Egypt**

A tradition resting on the solid authority of Eusebius, the historian, records that John Mark, the evangelist was an active missionary in Egypt and must have established churches in the city of

Alexandria. This position, though popular, is not easily confirmed. However, in the New Testament, we find allusions to Egypt. For instance, it was reported that Christ was taken to Egypt by his mother. Similarly, there is another allusion to Egypt in *Acts of the Apostles* regarding one Apollos a preacher who probably came from Egypt.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, Christianity was already in existence in Egypt and many people were probably practicing it. How it came there we do not seem to know for certain. But it must be admitted that both the nearness of Egypt to Palestine and the large population of Jews who settled there seem to make it highly probable that Christian activities began quite early there. For instance, the pioneer Christian missionaries went first to the synagogue, a symbol of Jewish or Judaic religious tradition. Again, the Jews in Alexandria itself numbered 20,000 while throughout Egypt the Jewish population reached a million.

The city of Alexandria was particularly strategic and important to the spread of Christianity in Egypt. Its status as the capital of Graeco-Roman Egypt and seat of government of the Ptolemaic dynasty made accessible meeting place to travellers from all parts of the Mediterranean world.<sup>22</sup> Again, its strategic location at the crossroads of Graeco-Roman trade made it the greatest port in the Mediterranean and the best city of the Roman empire.

These accounts notwithstanding, how Christianity actually started in Egypt is still shrouded in antiquity. It is perhaps only with the episcopate of Demetrius of Alexandria (AD 189 – 272) that the Christian church in Egypt appeared on the page of history. It was then sufficiently established to have an influential head in the bishop of Alexandria who seemed to have jurisdiction over the whole Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Demetrius was apparently the first to appoint three other bishops, a number later increased to 23 by his successor.

In the early Roman period, the religious atmosphere of Egypt had become favourable to Christianity. The religion developed in Egypt in two different environments. First was the Greek speaking population of the towns of the Delta and notably of Alexandria, which shared



the religious and cultural influence common to the Hellenized province of the empire. For instance, the educated Greek speaking elements after centuries of religious syncretism, had become monotheistic, thinking of their several deities as merely different aspects of God and turning to mysticism and ascetism in their hunger for spiritual support.<sup>24</sup>

The native Egyptian population (copts) provided the other type or environment which helped Christianity to emerge in Egypt. The masses (Coptic elements) tended to worship only a few of the traditional deities namely the trinity of Osiris, Isis and Horus. Some of the outstanding features of the popular religion were:

- (1) a belief in resurrection and judgement in the next world
- (2) a belief that life after death could be obtained through the god Osiris, the conqueror of death and divine symbol of the triumph of good over evil.

These aspects of Egyptian traditional religion no doubt prepared the established (Coptic) population for Christian religion. Again, by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., the traditional religion, apart from the cult of Osiris, Isis and Horus, had become formalized ritual. What was more, the lasting poverty of the peasantry created a need for the kind of hope offered by the new religion according to which the poor were "blessed and would inherit the earth."<sup>25</sup>

Another significant event that assisted the expansion of Christianity in Egypt was the persecution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. The outbreak of persecution under the Emperor Septimus Severan occurred with the edict of A.D 202, which forbade conversion to Judaism and Christianity. The evident intention was not necessarily to eradicate Christianity but to hold in check religious movements whose disruptive expansions were inimical to imperial stability. However, contrary to expectation, persecution increasingly promoted Martyrdom, which in turn strengthened Christianity rather than weakening it as was envisaged by the imperial authority.<sup>26</sup>

In the years immediately following the Severan persecutions, the Christian faith spread far, gaining new converts even in more remote areas as evident from the Payrus of this period. Similarly, the

ancient literature on the Decian (249-251) and Diocletianic (302-305) suggest continuing spread of Christianity. By the latter date, the religion had spread widely among the local population who became notorious for their fanatical and stubborn resistance to the persecuting authorities. It was a fact in Egypt that this persecution met with determined mass defiance.

In the last year of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century there were three new developments of great significance for the future of Christianity in Egypt. These were the rise of the Coptic speaking community of the land,<sup>6</sup> the appearance of the first Christian hermits and the fusion of Alexandrian Christianity with that of indigenous Coptic Egypt. Thus, to reach the non-Hellenized elements of the Egyptian population, the missionaries preached the gospel in a language and manner that would appeal to the mostly illiterates who spoke the local or Coptic language.<sup>27</sup> Initially, interpreters were used. A Coptic bible was in existence by the 300 century and in the next century, there was abundance of Coptic literature much of which was translated from Greek.

The use of the Egyptian language by the church is evidence of Christian expansion among the original Egyptian population of the Nile Valley. The Greek language was for several centuries the major medium of intercourse in the Mediterranean world (the canonical Christian writings and that of the Apostolic age were all in Greek). This continued to be so in Rome until the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The change was actually facilitated due to the mass conversion of the original Egyptian inhabitants who were non-Greek speaking. There was therefore the need to translate the New Testament books into native Egyptian dialects namely Sahidic (upper Egypt), the Bohamic (Nile Delta) and Barhmuric (intermediate of these). The Coptic elements played important roles in the 400C in Egyptian Christianity because of its numerical strength, language, steady maturity and contribution to Christian doctrine through monasticism.

## MONASTICISM

An outstanding contribution to Christendom by Egyptian Christianity is the development of monastic life. Monasticism therefore had its origin among the indigenous Coptic-speaking population of Upper Egypt. The movement started with isolated hermits (desert men) who, encouraged from philosophical perceptions of spirit as opposed to sense, abandoned the world around them and went into the desert to live solitary and ascetic lives. The first Christian hermit was Paul of Thebes in Upper Egypt. Another famous "Desert father" was Anthony, a Copt, who after hearing the story of the rich young ruler (Matt: 19:21) disposed himself of all earthly possessions and retired into the desert for a solitary ascetic life. Many were to follow his example and colonies of hermits sprang up.

However, the first real founder of the monastic life in the sense of an organized community of monks with strict discipline and definite rules was another Copt, Pakhom.<sup>28</sup> He was born in the Thebaid in Upper Egypt about the year 290 and was converted to Christianity at the age of 20 while serving in the Roman army. The monasteries founded by him reflected his military training. They were highly organized, efficient and self-sufficient industrially and agriculturally. For instance, each monk was allowed to practice his profession and common profits were channeled to charity. The monks came mostly from poor background and were barely literate. However, the literate minority educated the illiterates while the teachers preoccupied themselves with interpretation of the bible, translation of Christian literature from Greek to Coptic and writing original works in Coptic.

Monasticism spread so rapidly to the extent that fears became rife that it could become an escape from onerous social and civic responsibility. At the beginning, it started largely as a protest against current trends in Egyptian Christianity, which kept some old pagan habits and ideas such as mummification of the dead and other traditional burial customs. At Alexandria, a bishop was offered a professorship at the Pagan University. Such practices were reprehensible to the hermits and the solitude of the desert thus

provided the right environment to maintain the purity of Christ's teachings and ideas in order to save their souls from the temptations of the world.

## **THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSIES**

The Christian church in Egypt played a conspicuous role in the great theological controversies of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. This role no doubt affected significantly the relation of Egyptian Christians to ecumenical Christianity and to the imperial power at Constantinople. The unity of the church was threatened by an internal controversy on the relation of Christ the son to the father. Arius and Athanasius, two leading bishops were protagonists in the dispute.

In the doctrinal controversy that ensued, Arius held that Christ the son was only similar to, but not the same person as the father while Athanasius and his bishop Alexander defended the belief that Christ was of one substance with the father.

At the ecumenical council OF Nicea in 325, Athanasius, supported by the monks of Upper Egypt, triumphed over Arius whose supporters were largely Graeco-Egyptians and foreign elements. In course of this controversy, the question of the nature of the union between the divine and the human in Christ arose. Admittedly, many factors other than the simple search for the truth entered into the ensuing controversies.

Indeed, in supporting monophysitism, the aim of the Alexandrian patriarchs was to humiliate the rival see of Constantinople for treating Alexandria, the seat of Egyptian Christianity with contempt by rating Byzantium (Constantinople) the city second to Rome. In this task, the Egyptian church was united and stood as a virtually solid Monophysite army behind its own Alexandrian "Popes". Thereafter, all attempts by the imperial government to dictate to the Egyptians against their own belief in matters of religion and doctrine were stoutly resisted.<sup>29</sup>

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN NUBIA (SUDAN)**

For centuries, Nubia was part of Egypt. But around 800 BC Nubia broke off and became a kingdom with its capital originally at Napata, until it was transferred to Meroe. At about 300AD the kingdom of Kush (Nubia) was extinguished by the neighbouring state of Axum. However, Axum for some inexplicable reasons did not occupy it and it broke off into four smaller kingdoms namely Nobodea, Makuria, Aludia and Blemmeys.

Little is known about Christianity in Nubia but some Christian refugees running away from persecution in Egypt must have taken the religion to Nubia. The official mention of Christianity in Nubia was by Origen (185-254A.D) who remarked in his commentary in St. Matthew that Ethiopia was not yet fully converted to Christianity. This suggests that there were some Christians in Nubia at that time. There is therefore strong evidence that before the official Christianization of Nubia, the Christian faith had reached there.<sup>30</sup>

Many related reasons could be advanced to explain the early Christianization of Nubia. First, as already pointed out, many Egyptians and perhaps Nubians who fled from Egypt in the wake of the persecution must have carried the faith there. Two, the traders' caravan that passed through Aswan in the southward route, probably carried the belief along with the rest.

The official introduction of Christianity into Nubia began with the imperial missions. John the Ephesus gives us a clear account of this mission to Nubia. He narrates that rival missions were sent by the Emperor of Constantinople, Justinian, who was a duophysite and the Empress Theodora, a Monophysite. This event, must have taken place in the wake of the doctrinal controversies, which inadvertently spread Christianity to Nubia through Axum.

The missionary party, which was sent by the Empress Theodora to Nubia under Julian, an old man of great worth and a presbyter in attendance on the patriarch of Alexandria (Egypt) Theodosius, a monophysite was successful. The Nubian people, because of imperial support, welcomed the mission party. The success however brought in a rival missionary party. The Emperor party, was sent this

time to Makuria. Thus, in contrast with northern Nubia which had adopted the monophysite doctrine, Makuria was converted to orthodox melkite by a mission which Emperor Justinian sent at about 567 to – 570.

The success of the mission encouraged Alexandria to send Bishop Longinus to Makuria. Under Longinus, attempts were made to indigenize Christianity. Thus, Christianity was well spread. In the liturgy local language was used to bring it very close to the local population. Finally, between 1680 and 1700, the Makurites also adopted the monophysite doctrine.

Towards the end of the 6thC, Nubia was a Christian country consisting of three kingdoms, namely Nobodia in the north, Makuria in the Centre and Alodia in the south. However, the rise of Islam in Egypt in the 6<sup>th</sup>C A.D and its spread to Nubia after a few years started a period of gradual but steady decline of Christianity.

### **CHRISTIANITY IN AXUM (ETHIOPIA)**

Axum is a part of modern Ethiopia. Historically, it Axum emerged in political horizon in the first century A.D. It would appear that the Arabs of Yemem were responsible for the rise of Axum. Yemem at one time had a very powerful kingdom called Saba. Obviously, the biblical reference to the Queen of Sheba was an allusion to Yemen. But because of this supposed connection between Yemen and Axum, in the 19<sup>th</sup> C when a new kingdom of Ethiopia was born, Ethiopia began to claim it was founded by king Solomon. From the first to 4<sup>th</sup>C A.D, Axum had become very powerful, politically and economically. It was however in the 4<sup>th</sup>C that Axum defeated Kush, extended the kingdom to Yemen and pushed into Ethiopia. It reached the zenith of its power in the 6<sup>th</sup>C A.D.

One of the oldest and most significant institutions in Ethiopian history is the church. Its establishment, in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, marks a new chapter in the history of the Axumite civilizaion. Indeed, there are strong indications that Christianity existed in the Axumite kingdom before it became official. It was