

CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH AFRICA¹

For purpose of definition, North Africa refers to the Part of Africa forming the southern shore of the mediterranean, to the west of Egypt. During the Roman times, North Africa comprised 4 Roman provinces or colonies:

1. Cyrene: or present day Libya
2. The city state of Carthage or present day Tunisia.
3. Numedia or present day Algiers.
4. Mauretania or present day Morocco.

Christianity spread into these lands very early on, but the course Christianity took differed in the eastern North African province of Cyrene from that of the other 3 western provinces. It is for this reason that we will deal with each of these separately.

CHRISTIANITY IN WESTERN NORTH AFRICA:

Christianity started in the province of Carthage (present day Tunisia) and from there spread to Numedia and Mauretania (present day Algiers and Morocco) According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Christianity grew much more rapidly in those provinces than in any other western province. It was firmly established in Carthage and other Tunisian towns by the Third century. The brand of Christianity that developed in these provinces was, however, peculiar. It was a fanatic, uncompromising and fundamentalist type of Christianity.

One of the major figures of Christianity in North Africa was Tertullian (145-220) Tertullian became a presbyter around the year 190. Tertullian left us wonderful writings but unfortunately, towards the end of his life, his extreme views were considered heretical by the rest of the Christendom and he died anathemized. Tertullian espoused a very austere mode of living. He was married but as soon as he became a presbyter he shunned sexual relations with his wife, considering them as unbecoming of a man of God. He even sent his wife an epistle extolling the virtue of celibacy and advising her not to marry after his death. Of course the church never accepted this or his other extreme views. The North African Church always maintained its independence. The African Bishops had many quarrels with the Bishops of Rome whom they considered weak and compromising. A council was held in Carthage in 256 A.D. and was attended by 80 Bishops including the great St. Cyprian who was Bishop of Carthage from 248 A.D. till his martyrdom in 258. The council met to decide on the matter of re baptizing those who were baptized by heretics. The Bishop of Rome at the time was of the opinion that those who were baptized by heretics and wanted to join the mainstream church were to be accepted without re-baptism. The African Bishops thought otherwise and they appealed to the Bishop of Alexandria and the Bishops of the East (Antioch, Asia Minor and Palestine) Those Bishops unanimously backed the African Bishops against the Bishop of Rome. The quarrel went on until the Council of Nicea which was held 325 A.D. The matter was discussed in the Council and a decision was made in favour of the African Bishops, and against the Bishop of Rome.

In the early fourth century Christianity spread from Carthage to Numedia (present day Algeria) so that by 312 A.D. there were 70 Bishops known in that province. Later on, Christianity was introduced to Mauritania (Morocco).

¹An address by Father Athanasius Iskander to the Orthodox Christian Fellowship at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, January 9, 2002

Unfortunately, because of the un-compromising stance of the North African Bishops, a schism occurred in 313 A.D. known as the Donatist Schism. The problem this time was, whether the Church should accept those who lapsed (weakened) during persecution and then want to return to the Church after the persecution is over. The Bishop of Rome was of the opinion that they should be accepted readily, while the North African Bishops took the extreme view that they should not be accepted at all. Bishops of the East as well as the Bishop of Alexandria took a middle of the road approach, they decreed a certain period of discipline, of several years, where they were allowed to attend the Liturgy as penitents, but not allowed to take communion until the period of penitence was successfully completed.

The situation became critical when a bishop who weakened under persecution tried to reclaim his cathedra, backed by the bishop of Rome. The North African Bishops took one of them called Donatus and installed him as bishop of Carthage. The Church Universal did not stand by the African Bishops this time but considered them schismatics. The situation remained until St. Augustine became bishop of the Tunisian town of Hippo. He used his diplomacy to heal the rift between the other North African Bishops and the rest of Christendom, and in a council held in 411 A.D. North Africa came in line with the rest of the Christian Church.

Soon after that, some Germanic tribes called the Vandals started attacking the western provinces of the Roman Empire. In 429 A.D. the vandals attacked Carthage. And a year later they advanced to Hippo, which they took after a siege in which St. Augustin died. By 435, the Vandals had conquered Numedia and Mauretania.

The Vandals were Arians and they tried to convert the North Africans, but the obstinate and fanatical North Africans resisted them.

In 533, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian invaded North Africa and within a year, he destroyed the Vandal kingdom there. Justinian tried to annex the North African Church to the Byzantine Church, but the North Africans asserted their independence from Constantinople, as much as they had asserted their independence from Rome.

The Arabs invaded in the 7th century, but we will come to that later, now let us shift our attention to the eastern North African province of Cyrene.

CHRISTIANITY IN CYRENE

Cyrene, or present day Libya, was also a Roman Province in the time of Christ. Administratively it was divided into two parts, the Northern part was called Pentapolis and the southern part was called Libya. There were many Jews in Cyrene, who formed the nucleus of the Christian Church in its beginning. We are all familiar with Simon the Cyrenian, who was compelled to carry the cross of the Lord (Matt 27:32)

The Book of Acts tells us that among those who were converted to Christianity on the day of Pentecost were “Jews from, the parts of Libya about Cyrene.” (Acts 2:10) Those must have preached Christianity in their home land after returning.

Acts 11:19-20 tells us that when persecution broke out after the martyrdom of St. Stephen, Christians were scattered into nearby countries, preaching Christianity. “And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.” So, already before the conversion of St. Paul, Cyrenians not only had accepted Christianity but have become active in the preaching of the new religion. Some of them became prominent in the Christian Church at Antioch, as we are told in Acts 13:1, “Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was

called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene,”

St. Mark the Evangelist was Cyrenian by birth. According to Church history, sometime around 60 A.D. he went preaching Christianity in his homeland where he must have encountered small pockets of Christians. However, according to a vision he had to interrupt his activity in Cyrene to preach in Alexandria and the rest of Egypt, where he established the Egyptian Church which until today is called the Cathedra Markii or the See of St. Mark. St. Mark ordained a Bishop, 3 priests and seven deacons, then left to preach in other lands. He returned to Egypt after the martyrdom of St. Paul and St. Peter in Rome in 67 A.D., where he himself died as a martyr in Alexandria on Easter day of 68 A.D.

The Egyptian church carried on the work started by St. Mark in Cyrene, and Cyrene became part of the Cathedra Markii. Bishops were ordained for the Christians of Cyrene, who were always invited to attend the various councils of the bishops. By the middle of the 4th century, Cyrene had become mainly Christian. The Council of Nicea held in 325 A.D. recognized the Authority of the Bishop of Alexandria over both parts of Cyrene. Canon VI of the council decrees the following, “Let the Ancient customs prevail which were in vogue in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis, to allow the Bishop of Alexandria have authority over all these parts.” Note that the council is not giving the Bishop any new authority but recognizing an “ancient custom.”

One of the important figures of Christian Cyrene is Julius Africanus, who was born around 200 A.D., studied in the famous Theological School of Alexandria between 228 and 232 A.D. then became Bishop of Emmaus in Palestine. He left us some valuable writings including a Chronology that starts with Moses till the advent of Christ and continues to the reign of the Emperor Macrinus. Other important names include Theodore, Bishop of Cyrene who became a martyr in the year 302 A.D. Zephirus and Dathes were two Libyan Bishops who were among the Egyptian Church delegation to the council of Nicea, Zenobius bishop of Bernice (modern day Barqa) who attended the Council of Ephesus in 431. The most well known figure however is Bishop Synesius, who was born in 365 A.D. and was chosen as Metropolitan of Pentapolis in 409, who left us many homilies and poems, that were used as Christian hymns. During his time the church suffered greatly from attacks by the Berber that devastated many cities.

Monasticism flourished in Pentapolis and Libya Palladius tells many stories about Libyan Monks whom he had met during his travels, one of them had been a monk since 291 A.D. which is a very early date in the history of Monasticism. Palladius mentions another Libyan Monk called Stephen who was very old and who knew St. Anthony. Bishop Synesius tells us that Bishops were chosen from among the Monks of the area.

Many Libyans died as martyrs during the persecutions by the Romans these include Theodore bishop of Pentapolis who was ordained by Theona, 16th Archbishop of Alexandria (circa 300) and the three women Ciprella Lucy and Aroa who refused to bow down to the Roman idols and were tortured and killed. Their feast day according to the Catholic Synaxarium is July 5th

After the Council of Chalcedon, the church became divided into Chalcedonians (including the Church of Rome and the church of Constantinople) and non Chalcedonian churches, including the Churches of Egypt, Antioch, Armenia, Ethiopia and India. It was a sad chapter in the history of the Church. Each side hurling insults at the other. The Chalcedonians called the non Chalcedonians “Monophysites” and the non Chalcedonians called the Chalcedonians “Nestorians” Neither accusation was justified as we have all realized now. The Chalcedonian rift has been healed now and all parties recognize the orthodoxy of the others. But that rift led to a lot of damage to Christianity including the ultimate disappearance of Christianity from Northern Africa as we shall see.

The Byzantine rulers of both Egypt and Cyrene tried to force the Chalcedonian formula on the populace, Non Chalcedonian bishops were removed and imported Chalcedonian bishops were installed in their place. The long sparring between Constantinople and the non Chalcedonians weakened both parties and paved the way for the quick spread of Islam in the seventh century. Moslems invaded both Egypt, and Libya then continued westward to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and from there to Spain.

In the beginning the Moslems did not interfere with the Christian populace. They needed money to finance their ambitious military invasions. Christians and Jews had to pay tax but not Moslems, that is why the invaders were not keen on converting people to Islam in order to preserve the tax base. This went on till the 10th century when their conquest was completed. It was then that they started to force Islam upon the populace by the edge of the sword. The results were devastating. In the western North African provinces, which today form Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Christianity almost disappeared by the 12th century. The only thing remaining is the ruins of hundreds of churches and the odd Christian epitaph on a grave. In the eastern North African provinces of Pentapolis and Libya, the fate came a little later because of the proximity to Egypt. As late as the 13th century, the Egyptian Church, itself under persecution by the Moslem, tried to cater to the needs of the Christians of Pentapolis and Libya. The Moslem leaders realized that Egypt supplies the life line to the Christians in Libya, so they decided to cut this life line. They effectively cut all contacts between the church of Egypt and the church of Libya, and soon the fate of Christianity in Libya was doomed and the populations were assimilated into the Moslem religion. The only proof that Libya was once Christian is the many ruins of churches and the odd crucifix hanging on the wall of a Moslem house, which is nothing more than a family heirloom. Some of the Berber tribes of southern Libya still adorn their swords with crosses which they say bring good luck to them, without understanding where this habit came from.

In the late 19th and early 20th century North Africa was conquered. The French invaded Algiers in 1830 and later Tunisia in 1881. The Italians invaded Libya in 1911 and in 1912 the French occupied Morocco. Some attempts were made by the invaders to propagate Catholic Christianity but with very limited success. The tides turned later on when liberation movements started in these countries which ended in independence for Libya in 1951, Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and Algiers in 1962. Two of these countries, Libya and Algeria became the seats of a very virulent type of Islamic movements. True to their history, the North Africans who, 15 centuries ago, had their peculiar form of fundamentalist Christianity, have now adopted fundamentalist Islamic values