

Faith in Sudan

Recent work on the history and theology of Christianity in the Sudan

By Grant LeMarquand

In 1997 an ecumenical conference was held in Limuru, Kenya. The meeting brought together researchers, some Sudanese and others deeply interested and involved in Sudanese church life. The conference was entitled "The Church in Sudan - Its Impact Past Present and Future." Many of the papers presented at that gathering have subsequently been published in a set of volumes under the general editorship of Andrew Wheeler and William Anderson. By 1998 Paulines Publications Africa of Nairobi had published the first six volumes of the "Faith in Sudan Series." The conference and these six initial publications have spurred further research and writing so that by the time of this review there are now eleven volumes in this important series. Although these works are not described specifically as 'historical' both of the series editors are church historians with the result that most of the volumes have a strong emphasis on the history of Sudanese Christianity.

Given the situation of war, genocide, famine and the displacement of massive numbers of people over the last decade and a half in the Southern Sudan it is amazing that any substantial research on the history and theology of Sudanese Christianity could be accomplished at all. That these volumes, several of them substantial works of scholarship, have appeared is a remarkable achievement. The deliberately ambiguous title of the series, "Faith in Sudan," reflects a profound hope, for these books are not merely a testimony to the faith of the churches in the Sudan, they also express the joy of the Sudanese and their partners around the world that God is in their midst. As in any series involving multiple authors the volumes are rather uneven, nor is there an apparent grand design to the shape of the series. Rather, the volumes are a rich set of studies and stories. Some of the work here is carefully documented historical research, some is on a more popular level and includes anecdotal information which would be very difficult to verify, some is frankly a bit hagiographic. Each of these volumes, however, contains valuable material.

The first volume, *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War* (1997; pp. 152) edited by Wheeler, presents seven studies, most analyzing a particular case study. An introductory article by Wheeler surveys the phenomenon of the massive influx of traditionalist African people into the churches between 1983 and 1996. "The Church in Sudan has been described as the fastest growing church in Africa and the Episcopal Church of the Sudan (ECS) in particular has been described as the fastest growing church in the Anglican Communion." (11) This growth is obvious to any visitor to the Sudan. The rapid growth of the Sudanese churches is now also evident as Southern Sudanese refugees organize their worship life in refugee camps throughout eastern Africa, and in cities of the Middle East like Cairo and Beirut, where attendance at Christian churches is swelled by large numbers of refugee Sudanese worshippers. As the displacement continues, Sudanese have begun to settle in Europe and North America. This volume is limited to the study of the growth of churches within the Sudan, but there will soon be further scope for study as Sudanese Christianity begins to interact with the more settled (and declining) traditions of the churches outside of the Sudan.

As with each of the "Faith in Sudan" volumes, the material here is ecumenical in its scope. Interesting studies of the work of the Sudan Interior Mission among the Uduk and the Reformed Church of America among the Murle people provide insight into the complex questions involved in the interaction between gospel and culture. Three articles should be of special interest to Anglican readers. Oliver Duku's essay "The Development and Growth of Mayo Congregations" is a study of the growing congregations (of various denominations, including the ECS) of displaced Southern Sudanese living on the outskirts of Khartoum in Northern Sudan. Marc Nikkel has contributed two essays. The first, "'Children of our Father's Divinities' or 'Children of Red Foreigners'", examines some of the early history of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) among the Jieng people. Nikkel focuses on some of the major obstacles to evangelization, especially the problems inherent in the most popular methods used by the missions, the education of children. Interestingly, the Jieng view of cattle, which was at first viewed as an obstacle to conversion, was later restored as a positive image of divine salvation. In his second study, "The Cross as a Symbol of

Regeneration in Jieng Bor Society," Nikkel examines the image of the cross in Jieng hymns, prayers, rituals and sculpture and shows how, in the midst of years of civil war, the cross has become a unifying symbol for many in Jieng society, a society once resistant to the Christian message.

During the past 14 years civil war has brought unprecedented destruction and upheaval among the indigenous societies of Southern Sudan. Among the Nilotic Jieng, who maintained their cattle-centered life in relative isolation for centuries, social upheaval has been accompanied by religious change. Large numbers have repudiated their ancestral jak (singular jok), the unseen "powers" of Jieng tradition, and sought Christian baptism. As sacrificial shrines to jak have been destroyed the cross has arisen as the stabilizing "centre post" for a wide range of new values and aspirations. Bristling over Christian gatherings, metre-long wooden crosses are held in processions, pulse in unison to songs of worship, and assume an aggressive tone at exorcisms. Hundreds of new vernacular songs reveal an evolving theology of the cross as flag, as symbol of initiation, as weapon against malign powers, as memorial to sacrifice, and, indeed, as the tangible affirmation of Christ's victorious presence in turbulent times. (86)

The second volume of the series, *Seeking an Open Society: Inter-faith Relations and Dialogue in Sudan Today* (1997; pp.104), edited by Stuart Brown, is a set of essays which attempts to grapple with one of the major problematics of Sudanese life: the existence of a religiously plural community in which the majority is Muslim. The authors of this volume provide examples of religious pluralism in other parts of Africa, and studies of figures and movements from Sudan's past and present which attempt to provide hope that Christians, traditionalists and Muslims may someday be able to live together. The need for inter-religious dialogue is necessary, urgent and obvious. As the editor says in the concluding essay to the book, "If these neighbours are not to be condemned to an eternity of confrontation and tension, they will have to learn to live together." (99) Unfortunately this volume gives little hope for the immediate future. Although there is a profound desire for peace and reconciliation on the part of all of the authors, there is little willingness to own up to the reality of the version of aggressive Islam which controls the ideology of the present military government of National Salvation of the Sudan which took power in a coup in 1989. Only Ezekial Kutjok's article "Christian-Muslim Inter-religious Dialogue: Sudanese Experiences and Thoughts" seemed to own up to the present reality,

Many Christians...suffered because of the effect of Islamic Shari'ah Law. Some Christians suffered not because they had committed a crime, but because they were Christians. That is why one of the Church leaders asked, "How do you dialogue with somebody who is holding a sword in his hand?" He was thinking about Jihad and Mujahidin fighting in the South Sudan. (80)

Dialogue must be affirmed as the only way to build a just society in peacetime. In the present situation some who speak most vigorously in favour of dialogue may be in danger of copying the example of Neville Chamberlain. Some talk of 'peace' can be a welcome smoke screen used by some in power to continue oppressive and even genocidal practices.

Volume 3, *In Our Own Languages: The Story of Bible Translation in Sudan* (1997) by Janet Persson, is a slim volume (only 48 pages) describing 150 years of painstaking labor by missionaries and indigenous Christians who have endeavored to render the Christian scriptures into Sudanese languages. The task of Bible translation in Sudan is far from complete, as Persson points out. Of the 118 language groups in the country, only eight have a complete Bible in their own tongue. Some other groups have the New Testament or some portion of scripture. Even the largest group of Sudanese Anglicans, the Dinka (Jieng), as yet has no Old Testament, although a translation is now in preparation.

Two Roman Catholic missionaries, Frs. Gino Barsella and Miguel A. Ayuso Guixot have contributed the fourth volume to this series: *Struggling to be Heard: The Christian Voice in Independent Sudan 1956-1996* (1998; pp.128). Although it is the fourth book in the 'Faith in Sudan' series, this brief volume serves as a useful introduction to the whole series. Barsella and Guixot provide a chronicle of events spanning the first forty years of 'The Republic of Sudan' (now 'The Democratic Republic of Sudan') from its independence from Britain in 1956. The major contribution of the book is its documentation, decade by decade, of ways in which the Christian churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church and the ECS

have responded to the political structures and realities of the country, which have been dominated by Muslim interests.

The chapter on the 1990s is most important for understanding the present situation. The authors discuss the 1989 coup in which President, Omar Al-Bashir and his 'Revolution of National Salvation' government came to power, the policies which have been initiated since the coup, including the implementation of Shari'ah (Islamic Law), the creation of the Popular Defence Forces, the radicalization of the government through the involvement of the National Islamic Front under Hassan At-Turabi and the proclamation of Jihad (Holy War). The cumulative result of these political events has been that, although the government of Sudan has always said that it guarantees freedom of worship, the church has found itself in the midst of intense persecution. The churches have responded by repeated appeals for mutual understanding between practitioners of Islam and Christianity. Pastoral letters of Bishops have "exhorted Christians to maintain their calm and prudence, because violence and hatred are not characteristics of Christians". (78)

The major lacuna in the book, perhaps, is its lack of appeal to the international community to take responsibility to encourage just structures that would lead to peace in Sudan. The authors quote a pastoral letter issued by the Catholic bishops of Sudan on Ash Wednesday, 1993 which reminds the Church and the government that "peace without justice and respect for human rights cannot be achieved." (94) The book offers no strategy for achieving either 'peace' or 'justice' beyond an appeal for religious dialogue. In the face of the extermination of two million people in the last fifteen years such an exhortation seems empty.

Gateway to the Heart of Africa: Missionary Pioneers in Sudan (1998; pp. 160), edited by F. Pierli, M.T. Ratti and Andrew Wheeler, the fifth volume, is a fascinating collection of essays dealing with the nineteenth century missionary movement in Sudan. As with several other volumes, Wheeler provides an introductory essay which provides a helpful context for the essays which follow. Three articles treat the story of Roman Catholic mission work and two discuss important Presbyterian figures. Two essays explore the lives of Anglican Church Missionary Society workers: Marc Nikkel's "Archibald Shaw 'Machur': 'The only white man with the heart of a Jieng'," and Roger Sharland's "Kenneth Grant Fraser: Mission, Evangelism and Development among the Moru." Shaw's life and ministry are also discussed in Nikkel's dissertation published as volume 11 of this series. Fraser's life is also treated in the short book written by his wife Eileen which has been recently reprinted and is reviewed below. Sharland's discussion, however, has the advantage of critical distance. Unfortunately an important study cited by Sharland as "Tingwa" as not annotated. It is to be assumed that this source is the locally published work by Peter Obadayo Tingwa *The History of the Moru Church in Sudan* (Sudan Literature Centre, n.d., pp. 28) listed in the bibliography in the volume edited by Wheeler and Samuel Kayanga (see below).

Volume 6 turns the reader from the previous book's focus on western mission activity to the often-neglected history of the African reception and appropriation of the gospel message. *Announcing the Light: Sudanese Witnesses to the Gospel* (1998; pp. 288), edited by Wheeler, is the most substantial of the six volumes published in 1997 and 1998. Although some of these essays tend to be somewhat the hagiographic (the account of Blessed Bakhita Josephine, for example) most are carefully researched.

Of special note are the articles about Sudanese Anglicans. "Salim Charles Wilson: 'Black Evangelist of the North'" by Nikkel and "'Whose Service is Perfect Freedom': The Story of Ibrahim Abdel Messieh (1855-1935)" by Wheeler examine the lives of two early Anglican converts both of whom were freed slaves. "'Faithful in Adversity': Manase Mbaraza Zindo (1910-55)" written by his son Bishop Daniel Manase Zindo discusses the ministry of one of the first evangelists among the Zande people. Three articles by Samuel Kayanga unfold the stories of early Moru believers: "'Son of the Soil - Man of God': Andaea Apaya (1908-1966)", "'A Vision of Family': Elizabeta William and Early Women's Ministry amongst the Moru" and "'Faith, Integrity and Freedom": Elinana Jabi Ngalamu (1917-1992)". The last article is of special interest not only because Elinana was the first Archbishop of the ECS, but also because he was a central figure in the temporary schism in the Church which occurred in the late 1980's, a divide which was only able to be healed after his death. Kayanga's article, while appreciative and respectful of the Archbishop's life and ministry, does not shy away from discussing this painful episode in ECS history. One of the most insightful studies in this volume is the essay by Sapana A. Abuyi "From the

Margins to the Centre": Jonathan Mamuru and the Evangelists of the Jur" which describes how the message of the gospel has helped to transform the life of a marginalized and neglected people.

Two volumes by Lillian Craig Harris *Keeping the Faith: Travels with Sudanese Women* (Volume 7; 1999; pp. 176) and *In Joy and in Sorrow: Travels among Sudanese Christians* (Volume 8; 1999; pp. 204) are not historical studies, but travel logs. Readers of the other volumes who may not have been to the Sudan will find in these pages a context in which to place recent Sudanese history. Harris' photographs and rich descriptions provide faces and names of real people struggling for life in the midst of so much death. Since her husband was the British Ambassador she was able to travel throughout the country and observe Sudanese Christians from a wide variety of stations and conditions. Due to their expulsion by the Sudanese government in 1998 Harris and her husband lived in Sudan for only three years. The historical researcher should not neglect these volumes for they provide a unique perspective on one of the most tragic situations of our day.

Michael Parker's *Children of the Sun: Stories of the Christian Journey in Sudan* (2000; pp. 191) is Volume 9 in the series. This book differs from the rest of the series in several ways - although it is carefully researched, it is lacking in any scholarly apparatus. It is much more a 'popular' work, written at a level which can be read by many English readers who might struggle with the more academically oriented volumes. In producing such a book, Parker made available to a wide audience a variety of stories about Christians and their struggles in the Sudan. As with the two volumes by Harris, the stories that Parker tells are not for the faint-hearted. They are stories of kidnapping, slavery, torture and murder. But there are stories of hope here as well - hope for those struggling under the power of witchcraft, for those whose families need reconciliation, hope even for Khartoum street children.

Volume 10, "Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of Sudanese Christianity across 2000 Years" (2000; pp. 688) by Roland Werner, William Anderson and Andrew Wheeler, must be considered (together with Nikkel's book reviewed below) the greatest achievement of this series. The work is divided into four sections, each treating a period in the history of Sudanese Christianity.

Werner, who was responsible for Part 1, introduces the reader to the ancient church of northern Sudan, the Nubian Church. Beginning with the story of the so-called 'Ethiopian eunuch' of Acts 8, Werner argues (on good textual and historical grounds) that this godfearer who was met by Philip on his way back to Africa from Jerusalem was actually a Sudanese, a Nubian. We have no evidence that this first Gentile convert to Christianity ever founded a church in Nubia, however. The founding of Nubian Christianity had to wait until competing Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian missionaries were sent down the Nile from the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in the sixth century. The story of the thousand-year existence of the Nubian church and the internal and external reasons for its demise are presented with care and clarity. This section of the book is further enhanced by color photographs of archaeological sites in Nubia and of icons and frescoes which have been discovered in the ruins of ancient Nubian churches in the Sahara of northern Sudan.

Parts 2 and 3 were the responsibility of William Anderson. Part two treats the establishment of mission Christianity during the nineteenth-century. In the minds of the Europeans who first conceived of a mission to the Sudan, the planting of Christian churches was connected with working towards the end of slavery. In fact much of the nineteenth century mission movement in Africa was an attempt to deal with guilt associated with the slave trade. It should not be surprising, then, that the first Roman Catholic conversions to Christian faith came from the ranks of former slaves. Although the results of these early mission efforts were meager in terms of numbers of conversions, they prepared the ground for the response of the Sudanese to the Christian message which was to grow in the early twentieth century - the subject of Part 3 of the book.

The final section of the volume, written by Andrew Wheeler, takes the reader through the tumultuous period from 1964 to the year 2000 when the book was published. 1964, just a few years after Sudan's emergence as an independent nation in 1956, marks the expulsion of western missionaries from the country. This period, with the exception of short periods of peace, has been a time not simply of civil war but of persecution which has now risen to genocidal levels. At the same time these decades have seen

an unprecedented growth in the churches. Wheeler documents both the suffering and the vitality of the Sudanese Christianity in the midst of horrendous suffering. Stories of martyrdom, slavery, displacement and forced conversions to Islam are interspersed with accounts of religious revival, lively prayer and worship and extraordinary work of ordinary Sudanese Christians who continue to build schools, churches, hospitals and centers of theological training not knowing whether these institutions have any chance of survival.

The book has some very helpful features including numerous photographs and maps, a summary of key events at the beginning of each of the sixteen chapters, a bibliography for each section and an index.

Marc R. Nikkel's *Dinka Christianity: The Origins and Development of Christianity among the Dinka of Sudan with Special Reference to the Songs of Dinka Christians* (2001; pp. 383) is, to date, the final volume of this series. This full-length study of Christianity among the Dinka people was the author's doctoral thesis completed at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World in Edinburgh written under the direction of Andrew Walls. A few editorial changes were made before publication but, tragically, Nikkel died of cancer at the age of 50, several months before the book's appearance in print.

Nikkel's study accomplishes several worthy goals. First, it tells the story of the reception of the Christian faith by the Jieng (Dinka) people of Southern Sudan through work of both Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries. The history of missionary outreach through such westerners as Daniel Comboni and Archibald Shaw is one important aspect of Nikkel's book. The focus of the book, however, is not on western missionary outreach in Sudan so much as on reception history. Stories of early Dinka Christian leaders such as Roman Catholics like Caterina Zenab (the first evangelist) and Daniel Sorur Farim Deng (the first Roman priest) and Anglicans like Salim Charles Wilson (author and former slave), Jon Arur e Thor (the first baptized Anglican) and Daniel Deng Atong (the first Anglican Sudanese Bishop) narrate how the Christian message was received, internalized and passed on in authentically indigenous ways. Nikkel's rich descriptions of the cultural and religious life of the Dinka provide a helpful context in which to understand the ways in which that culture has both been transformed by and given a distinctive shape to Dinka Christianity.

Nikkel's unique contribution is his translation and analysis of Dinka hymnody from every period of their Christian history, but especially of the hymns which have given expression to the joy and sorrow of the Dinka churches through their recent years of civil war, persecution and genocide.

*Cover us with your wings
Like a bird covers her chicks;
Embrace us intimately, O God, hold us intimately
In these bad years
So that we may have life through faith in you.
O God...*

*Look upon us, O Creator who made us.
God of all peoples,
We are yearning for our land,
That we may pray to you in freedom.
Hear the prayer of our souls in the wilderness
Hear the prayer of our bones in the wilderness
Hear our prayer as we call out to you
Hear the cry of our hearts in the wilderness.*

This monograph should be on the bookshelves of every theological institution and in the hands of as many theological tutors, theological students and church leaders as possible, in Africa and beyond. Nikkel's work is a model of careful scholarship that narrates a story of persevering faith in the cross and resurrection, a story that points beyond the suffering of this present evil age.

All eleven volumes of the "Faith in Sudan" series are complemented with maps and photographs. Some are indexed. All are difficult to acquire away from Nairobi where they are published. The series has no official distributor in Europe or North America. At present the best way to order these volumes (and the one by Wheeler and Kayanga discussed below) is through the office of the Church Mission Society in London.

A further volume, apparently not in this series because it was denominationally focused but also edited by Wheeler, this time in partnership with Samuel Kayanga, appeared in 1999. "But God is Not Defeated": Celebrating the Centenary of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan 1899-1999 (Nairobi: Paulines; pp. 288) is not a continuous narrative history of Sudanese Anglicanism but a collage of historical studies, theological sketches, poetry, and essays on a diverse range of issues facing the ECS. Especially enlightening are the essays in "Section C" which describe aspects of Sudanese church life: reconciliation and peacemaking, worship and music, revival and miracles, the ministry of women, theological education. The picture painted here does not focus exclusively on war and devastation, those realities which the Sudanese know too well, but on the presence of God reflected in the life of God's people. The title itself "But God is Not Defeated" reflects both the reality of war and the deep faith of Sudanese Christians that God is present with them in the midst of their suffering. The phrase is attributed to a much revered saint of the Sudanese church, Canon Ezra Baya Lawiri, for many years a priest and Bible translator, who was killed in a crossfire in 1990.

For the historian "Section B: Sowing the Seed, Taking Root 1899-1964" will be most of interest. 1899 was the year that Llewellyn Gwynne, the first missionary of the Church Missionary Society Gordon Memorial Mission arrived in Sudan. In 1964 the Sudanese government expelled all foreign missionaries from Sudan. Between these two events, this section argues, the church took root and grew to such an extent that when the missionaries were forced out the Sudanese Christians themselves were not only able to lead the Church but to bring it into a period of unprecedented growth. As Abe Enosa writes in the last chapter of the section,

...like a repeat of the "Feeding of the 5000," the expulsion of the missionaries led to a multiplication in the Church. Pastors, lay readers, women leaders and evangelists took responsibility for doing the work of God. This led to a dramatic growth in the Church. (96)

The book is made the more valuable by its inclusion of two to three page profiles of every diocese (21-80), a list of major events in the history of Sudanese Anglicanism (281-82), an annotated bibliography (283-85), and many photographs.

Finally a note should be included concerning the reprint of a small book originally published in 1938. Eileen Fraser's *A Doctor Comes to Lui: A Story of Beginnings in the Sudan* (Cape Town: Frontline Fellowship, 2000) is a brief (the reprinted version is 83 pages) biographical sketch of the author's husband, Dr. Kenneth Fraser. The book contains the original introduction written by Llewellyn Gwynne who, in 1938, was the Anglican "Bishop in Cairo and the Sudan." The preface to the new edition, in testimony to the tremendous growth of Sudanese Anglicanism, is by Bullen Dolli, Bishop of the Diocese of Lui, one of twenty-four dioceses in the ECS today. Fraser's work in the Sudan was remarkable both for its vision and for its success. As a medical doctor Fraser was able not only to provide treatment, but also to train many Sudanese in basic medical skills that were put to the test in out-clinics. The Frasers also began schools for boys and for girls, and engaged in primary evangelism, church planting and Bible translation. Each of these endeavors met with a remarkable response amongst the Moru people in the Lui area. We are told that when the church in Lui was found to be too small to hold all those wanting to attend Christmas worship in 1923, services were held under "Laro", the old 'slave tree' where Arabic slave traders had had their headquarters. A measure of Fraser's impact is that the Cathedral in the Diocese of Lui is named the Kenneth Fraser Memorial Cathedral. Sadly, shortly after the republication of this small book in 2000, an Antonov bomber of the Government of the Sudan destroyed the Cathedral. The people of the diocese are even now making bricks for the rebuilding.

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