

## **24. Rise of Islam & the Islamic Conquest of North Africa from AD 600, including Ethiopian holdout & Islamic Slave Trade**

Mohammed, the founder of Islam, was born in Mecca, Arabia about 570. Observing the pagan polytheistic religions of the Arab tribes, and the decadent Judaism and Christianity about him, he rejected all of these and began to claim “visions” from God. His teaching forced him to flee to Medina in 622 (celebrated by Islam as the Hegira or flight). He soon became a successful political leader and warrior, leading what he claimed to be a world-wide crusade against idolatry and infidelity. He enflamed the prejudices of the wild Arabian armies, ordering them to exterminate all heathen and apostates. Jews and Christians were to be offered a threefold choice: convert to Islam, pay tribute to Islam, or die. The armies of Islam set out to obey their prophet’s instructions, and swept across North Africa destroying the church.

Beginning in 639, the Arabs (Saracens and Moors) invaded Egypt, establishing both Islam and the Arabic language. From 639 to 649 the Arabs conquered all of Egypt, however the Fatimid rulers accepted Coptic and Nubian Christians with some degree of tolerance. The great library of antiquity at Alexandria was destroyed systematically by the Muslim conqueror Amr in 642. He used it over a period of six months as fuel to heat the city’s 4,000 public baths. Although Christians were persecuted and Islam was in control, the church was not wiped out. Mass conversions of Egyptians from Christianity to Islam took place in 660, however. Okba bin Nafi and his Arab army reached the Atlantic shore of Morocco in 683 and many of the Berbers promptly succumbed, partly because the life the Arabs offered them – one of looting and conquest – appealed to them. Carthage fell in 698, Morocco in 684, and Gibraltar, Spain (mostly Berber forces) in 710.

With North Africa securely in Islamic hands following the fall of Carthage, large numbers of Christians were annihilated by the Saracens throughout the land.

The Arab armies were finally turned back in 732 with the crushing defeat of their armies by Charles Martel and the Frankish soldiers at Tours, but their control over North Africa remained.

In 996 Caliph-al-Hakim destroyed 3,000 churches in Egypt and forcibly converted thousands of Copts to Islam in a violent persecution. Not until 1415 did any other power regain control of any portion of North Africa, and then Prince Henry won domination of only one city, Deuta.

With Islam, a much harsher type of slavery than Africa had previously known was introduced. Early African slavery had always been a temporary matter, a punishment or a result of being taken as a prisoner of war. Even then, although bound to serve his master, the slave’s total time and being were never regarded as belonging to his master, and he was not stripped of property, dignity and family and could not be abused. In contrast, Islam introduced a perpetual slavery that took away all hope. Arabic slavery was total humiliation, castrating the men and denying property and basic human rights as they felt unrestrained in dealing with those they considered infidels. Islamic slavery was chiefly centered in eastern Africa. It did not extend, for example, to the Congo River basin.

In 738 the first history of West Africa was written in Arabic by Wahb ibn Munabbih. He lists as descendants of Kush the people of Sudan called the Qaran (maybe identified with the Goran who live east of Lake Chad), the Zaghawa, the Habesha (Abyssians), the Qiby (Copts) and the Barbar (Berbers).

In 837 Islamic rulers in Egypt prohibited all Christian education and all celebration of Christian festivals. All churches were demolished, and Christians were ordered to wear five-pound crosses around their necks. Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, nominal Christians throughout North Africa and the Middle East continued to apostasize to Islam. By 949, half of all former Christendom had been captured by Islam, including the nomadic Berbers of Mauretania. There were still, however, some Coptic bishops in Egypt, although the number declined from 16;8 in 550 to 110 in 950. In 996 the Caliph-al-Hakim (985-1021 destroyed three thousand churches and forcibly converted thousands of Copts to Islam in a violent persecution. By 1,000 A.D., most of North African Christianity was wiped out. By 1050 there were only 47 Coptic bishops left. In the twelfth century, the Saracens invaded North Africa from Syria. They followed a much more militant type of Islam and were entirely intolerant of Christians and those of other faiths. In 1276 they overtook the throne of Nobatias, the northern Nubian kingdom, and took Makuria, the middle Nubian kingdom a century later. Alodia, the southern kingdom, however, did not fall to Islam until the fifteenth century, and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia never did fall. In 1301 all churches in Egypt were ordered or destroyed by the Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517). Even in Syria, Copts suffered a century of systematic persecution. In 1321 almost all remaining Coptic churches and monasteries were burned or destroyed in a mob fury, and there were mass executions of Christians.

In the sixteenth century, Libya came under Turkish control, and remained a part of the Ottoman Empire until colonized by Italy in 1911.

The Arabs contributed to our knowledge of geography. Ibn Haukal, an Arab from Baghdad, was the first known outsider to explore West Africa. He did make some big mistakes, however. He saw the Niger River flowing east and confused it with the Nile. He mentioned black Africans only in passing, but other later Arab scholars spoke more about the blacks and showed a more positive attitude toward them. Some of those were El-Bekri, El-Edrisi, Ygut, El-Omari, Ebn-Battuta, and Ibn Klaldun. The Arabs called the Berbers “The Christians of the Desert.”

Our modern term Sudan comes from the Arabic phrase, “Beled es Sudan”, the “land of the blacks.”

In 1822, Muhammed Ali established an Islamic printing press in Egypt.

### The Crusades Fail to Liberate North Africa

Attempts were made by the church to liberate North Africa as well as the Holy Land from the Islamic clutch. The Fourth Crusade (1202) was launched against Islamic Egypt by Pope Innocent III, but it failed. The Children’s Crusade of 1212 was a disastrous venture by over 20,000 children. Many of them ended up as slaves of Islamic rulers in Egypt.

Why was Islam so successful in North Africa?

The Arabic way of life had many similarities with that of the Berber culture of North Africa, so it appealed to the Berber people, probably far more than Romanized Christian culture did. The Arabic language was more flexible than Latin and closer in structure to Berber. The less formal Arabic administrative structure was better suited to the Berbers' clan structure than Rome's military-based structure.

Unlike others, the Arabs did not colonize by setting a people apart from themselves. Instead their rulers married local women and gave the rule to their sons, thus becoming one with the people. Their rule was never based on racial or cultural supremacy, so they allowed the people to maintain their cultural pride and human dignity, so long as they became Muslim.

Why did the Church succumb to Islam in North Africa?

Internal divisions led to fighting one another.

Fighting over Christ's deity—(Arianism)

Christianity flourished in Egypt until the Arian controversy beginning in 321 A.D. This brought several hundred years of trouble and division, so dividing and weakening the church that in 640 it fell easy prey to Islamic conquerors. Arius was an Egyptian presbyter (256-336) who taught that Christ was a created being, less than truly divine. The Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. condemned Arianism.

Fighting over Christ's divine and human natures—(Monophysitism & Nestorianism)

Nestorius, the patriarch of the eastern church at Constantinople, had fallen into heresy by teaching that Jesus could not be perfect man and perfect God at the same time. He was condemned by the Council of Ephesus and went into exile in Egypt in 431 A.D. After the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) excommunicated Dioscorus, patriarch of Constantinople, Egyptian Coptic Christians became divided, most becoming monophysites. In 640 A.D., for example, there were three million Coptic Monophysite Christians, but only 200,000 Orthodox believers. Dioscorus was replaced by Proterius, a Melkite or anti-monophysite. He was assassinated by the Copts in 457 A.D. Later, embittered because they had been persecuted by the Orthodox Coptic church, decadent monophysite Christianity moved to Arabia and assisted Islam in conquering Egypt. They were actually persecuted worse by the Orthodox Copts than later by the Islamic Arabs. Monophysitism divided not only Egypt, but also Ethiopia.

Fighting one another—(Nestorianism)

Too frequently, Christians fought one another. For example, in Egypt between 631 and 641, those who emphasized one or the other aspects of Christ's nature persecuted Christians who emphasized the human and divine nature of Christ equally, killing hermits, ascetics, pastors, and thousands of lay believers.

Fighting over how to treat those who fell away under persecution—(Donatism)

Two sects, the Meletian and the Donatist, developed over this question. Many who were at least nominally Christian denied their faith, and under varying degrees of pressure, converted to Islam. The modern Tuareg, for example, might have once been Christian. Their word for God means

Messiah, and several theological terms in their vocabulary bear resemblance to Latin terms. Sin, for instance, in Tuareg is *ibbekat*, and in Latin is *peccatum*. Passover in Tuareg is *tapaski* and angels *angellous*. In addition, the Tuareg use the cross symbol on their shields and swords. In fact, the very word Tuareg comes from two Arabi words, *Tariku Dinihum*, meaning the men who abandoned their faith. The Tuareg speak *Tamacheck*, a language once so prominent in North Africa that Monica spoke it to her infant son Augustine.

Fighting over church authority—

The Donatist controversy spawned questions over which churches were to be considered Christ's "true" church and therefore to be obeyed. The Church of the Martyrs had been established in Egypt by Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis, about 308, in opposition to leniency on the part of the established or Orthodox church toward those who had lapsed away in the time of persecution. The leader of the leniency party was Peter I, Patriarch of Alexandria. Peter was himself martyred in 311, just before the dawn of the Constantianian era. The Arians threw their approval behind the strict Meletian group, and the controversy lasted until 529. The issue came up again in the Donatist controversy that rocked the church in North Africa. The schism persisted until Islam invaded North Africa in 700.

Lagging in spiritual life and zeal—

One church historian has said, "Had the North African Christianity of those early days retained its spiritual life and missionary zeal, the subsequent history of the whole continent might have been very different."<sup>i</sup> Another historian suggests that the church became encumbered by theological bureaucracy, so that the Christian faith became a matter of power and politics rather than spiritual reality.<sup>ii</sup> There did in fact exist a tremendous paganizing tide from the time of the conversion of Constantine on. Part of the problem came from perhaps well-meaning but unguarded plans to attract pagans into the church. Baptisms were administered en masse, often without evidence of heart conversion to Jesus Christ, so that the church filled with the unregenerate and eventually began to choose its leadership from amongst those ranks. Some leaders encouraged the church to adopt and "Christianize" pagan customs so that pagans could become Christians without giving up their favorite festivals, idols, and methods of worship. Pagan temples were made into Christian churches. The Temple of Isis at Thebes, for example, became a Christian church. Unfortunately, however, the transition from paganism to Christianity was all too often superficial and ultimately paganized the church itself instead of vice versa.

It is unfortunate that Roman Catholic historians seldom recognize the paganizing influence within the church after Constantine. In a Catholic church history<sup>iii</sup> a chapter title says, "The State De-Paganized." The chapter ends with this statement: "Paganism, with Theodosius, dies never to rise again."<sup>iv</sup> Not a mention is made of the tremendous influx of pagan practices into the church!

Forced conversions were responsible for much of the lagging spiritual life and the rapid paganization of the church. The Roman influence was great, but not alone in this. The eastern emperor Justinian ordered in 540 that all pagan tribes on the periphery of the Byzantine Empire be forcibly baptized and made "Christian." This kind of action was common. By 640 A.D., 80% of the 6.5 million Berbers across North Africa had been Christianized by such means, but this was a very superficial "conversion." By 950 A.D., all of them had been converted to Islam.

Another factor in decreasing spirituality was the increasing Romanization of the church in a political sense. Rome became a center of power and authority for political reasons, since it was the head of the Empire, and the Roman bishop began to claim special power and authority. From this Romanization we get the pagan title which today is applied to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church—"Pontifex Maximus". It was first applied to the Roman bishops in scorn by Tertullian. Roman vestments for the priesthood, the word "bull" as applied to papal pronouncements, the whole idea as well as the actual order of church hierarchy, acolytes, and many other ideas, words and practices came into the church as a result of the infiltration of Roman politics. At the same time, as we discuss in more detail in another chapter, the words and acts of many bishops showed an increasing and sometimes overwhelming interest in political power and personal glory rather than service to the flock.

The failure of Christianity to penetrate the native culture—

Although Christianity spread widely in North Africa, it spread mainly in the Roman Empire, and its language and culture was predominantly Roman. Apart from the forced conversions mentioned, little if any attempt to reach the native Berber tribes or the Punic population was made. Worship retained a Roman form, Latin providing the sole vehicle for Christian preaching, and no attempt was made to make Christian worship understandable or attractive to the native population. The Scriptures were never translated into any of the Berber tongues until shortly after 1900! Yet, Berber tongues such as Tamachek were so prominent in North Africa that they were spoken even by Roman citizens. A minority of bishops in North Africa had Punic names, suggesting that they had Punic family connections which they failed to exploit for the spread of the Gospel. One observer has stated that the Punic and Berber population was Christianized only to the extent that they became Latinized.<sup>v</sup> The Bible did not begin to be translated into Arabic until 680 A.D., after the Islamic invasions of North Africa had begun, and the whole Arabic Bible was not completed until 750 A.D.

The church's failure to reach out to all peoples might have been partly a reaction to criticism. In 176 Celsus wrote "True Discourse" defending polytheism on a platonic basis and deriding Christianity for its inclusion of the hoi polloi (common people). This was such a significant attack that Origen felt the need to refute it specifically, so it must have cut deeply.

It is possible that as a result Christianity withdrew from further evangelism of what must have seemed to the Latinized peoples as uncultured people. Because of this withdrawal or neglect, and the strongly Latin flavor of the established church, the Berber tribespeople who were Christian sided with the Donatist churches who wanted to be strict with those who lapsed from the faith during persecution.

Ethiopia holds out against Islam.

Ethiopia was the sole North African land that held out against Islam. In 967 in Nubia churches and monasteries were very extensive, with 12000 monks in two remote monasteries in Tari. Beginning in 969 A.D., when the Fatimid dynasty conquered Egypt, they began putting pressure on Nubia to convert to Islam.

Yet in 1050, the King of Nubia erected many more churches and monasteries, at the same time that Coptic Christianity was declining sharply. About 1100, there were two rival Nubian Kingdoms, the Makoritae to the north, and the Alodiae to the south. Both were Christian, with about 400 churches between them.

Nubia was not exempt from Islamic attack. In 1180 the Kurdish sultan Saladin (1137-1193) sent an invading army to Nubia, killing or enslaving 7,000,000 Nubian Christians. In 1250 many new mosques were erected in Nubia, and Christianity was waning due to internal dissension, mass apostasies to Islam, the destruction of churches, and many martyrdoms. In 1315 a Muslim ascended to the throne of the formerly Christian kingdom Dongola, and the kingdom rapidly became Muslim after that. However, in 1400 Christianity was still widespread in Nubia, with seven bishoprics in the Makoritae north and 400 churches in the southern Muslim kingdom of Alodiae. Christianity was finally nearly extinguished in Nubia in 1499 due to the absence of local leadership and local-language worship services and Scriptures. The southern kingdom, Alodiae, finally became entirely Muslim as the capital Suba fell to the Fung and Arab armies.

Under Islamic rule, churches and monasteries were destroyed. In 1527 Muslim tribal leader Ahmad Gran destroyed Amharic Orthodox churches and monasteries in fifteen years of savage pillaging. In 1600 Christianity was finally extinguished there, having held out far longer than anywhere else in Africa.

In 1881 Mohammed Ahmed Ibn Syyyid Abdullah (1848-1885) proclaimed himself Mahdi. In 1885 he captured Khartoum and killed General Gordon. In 1899 the British finally defeated Mahdism.

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<sup>i</sup> The Progress of World-Wide Missions, p. 251.

<sup>ii</sup> Not in Vain, p. 5.

<sup>iii</sup> A History of the Church (Sheed & Ward: London).

<sup>iv</sup> A History of the Church, Vol. I, p. 284.

<sup>v</sup> Latourette, Kenneth Scott, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. I, p. 93.