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A REVIEW

Minimal & Marginal: Christianity in The Gambia

Martha T. Frederiks 2003, *We Have Toiled All Night: Christianity in The Gambia, 1456-2000*. Zoetermeer (The Netherlands): Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 453 pp., maps, glossary, summary in Dutch, index, curriculum vitae, ISBN 90-239-1534-8, € 29.90 (= PhD Utrecht University, 16.10.2003, cum laude; Missiological Research in The Netherlands, vol. 33).

The book

In 1910, the Methodist missionary in The Gambia, William Maude, wrote the following remarkable lines in his *Memorandum on Mohammedanism*:

‘For myself I can come to no other conclusion than that, despite all our resolutions and regrets, unless something very remarkable takes place, something there is no sign of, West Africa, outside the present spheres of Christian influence, will be Mohammedan [...] before very long.

It seems to me as if the first thing to be done, if we are to win these Mohammedan people to Christ [...], is *to make ourselves neighbourly*. We must show that, differences notwithstanding, we are their friends. We must gain their confidence, ministering to their bodily needs, familiarising them with Christian ideas, getting the children, humbling ourselves, after the manner of our Master, and making ourselves of them [*sic!*] as far as we can innocently and healthily can [*sic!*].’¹

¹ Quoted in Frederiks 2003: 252; italics in Frederiks 2003. The *Memorandum* itself is in the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Archives, Box 295 H2709, microfiche 426, at the World Church Office in London (Frederiks 2003: 18-20, 252n238, 414-415).

Maud's analysis and proposed missionary strategy went unheeded for half a century. Only at the time of independence, in 1965 (394), did another expatriate, the Anglican bishop Olufosoye (a Nigerian by birth), present a similar analysis. By then, he saw only 'little Christian islands in a great sea of Islam' (357) and 'conventional methods get[ting] nowhere at all' (364). So he contacted the Islam in Africa Project (IAP) in Nigeria in 1967, because there was need for innovative thinking. For in The Gambia, as 'in most Muslim countries, people find a great gulf fixed between the Christian Church and the Muslim community which they simply cannot bridge' (364). But Olufosoye's views and sentiments proved not at all to be those of the commonality of the various tiny Christian communities in the Gambia at that time, for 'good rapport [prevailed] between Christians and Muslims at the grassroots level' in The Gambia throughout the 20th century (382-383).

It took another two decades and two more expatriates before Christian-Muslim relations in The Gambia became an explicit object of study and policy (390-391). In 1985, the RC bishop Cleary made them a major object in his accession speech (346-350). And Olufosoye's successor, J. Rigal Elisée (1972-1986), became instrumental in 1986 in the appointment of an IAP-worker to the Gambian Christian Council. She was Rev. Cokkie van 't Leven, who served from 1987 to 1992 (364, 380, 383-385). After her term (1987-1992), [31] the author of this volume served in that position from 1993 to 1999. This book is the rich outcome of her historical research and theological reflection in that post and as a PhD student of IIMO (Interuniversity Centre for Missiology & Ecumenics) at Utrecht University from 1999 to 2003. All this meant, however, that, 'reflection on the role of the Gambian Christian churches in society and [... their] relations to the Muslim community happened from the late 1960s onwards at the GCC [Gambian Christian Council] rather than at the denominational level' (333, 356). That is, it remained expatriate and top-down, and did not reach the grassroots, even though it had become clear by the 1960s that the Gambian context had shaped the Christian churches in stead of The Gambia being transformed by the churches.

Her book has three purposes. Its first aim is to present a history of five and a half centuries of Christianity in the Gambia: from 1455, when Cadamosto – a Venetian captain in the service of the Portuguese crown – met with a Muslim Wolof chief in present-day Senegal who was eager 'to hear the articles of our faith recited', but met with hostility in the estuary of the river Gambia (163); till 2000,

when roughly 95 per cent of the Gambians were Muslim, and Christians still counted merely 3,5 per cent of the population (1-2, 4, 5, 113n1, 153, 157, 389n274, 397). This history is presented in chapters 5 to 9 (159-391). It is a very exhaustive and often quite minute one, for it is based not only on a wide study of secondary literature, but also on an extensive and intensive research of the relevant archives, in The Gambia – often badly kept and mice-eaten – and in missionary headquarters in Europe. These two sources were supplemented with interviews, unpublished theses, pamphlets and other ‘grey literature’ (17-20, 414-429). All this material is well documented in the over 2000 footnotes which have been appended to the ten chapters of the book.

Its second purpose is to portray this story of the failure to Christianise The Gambia in the contexts of its ethnic composition, political history and in particular its successful Islamisation. Therefore, after the introductory chapter on the problem, the models (see below), method, and structure of the book and the sources (1-20), she surveys the odd ten major peoples of The Gambia and their indigenous religions in chapter 2 (21-75), and summarises The Gambia’s ‘general history’ in chapter 3 (76-112). She devotes chapter 4 to the history of Islam in The Gambia and the wider Senegambian and West African regions (113-158). She follows this up in the chapters 5 to 9 with the history of Christianity in The Gambia, paying explicit attention to the indigenisation of Christianity in The Gambia (205-213, 233-237, 253-269, 272, 277-282, 313-317, 331, 343-346, 350-356, 359, 361-363), and the attitudes of the missionaries and the Christian communities to Islam and the Gambian indigenous religions (161, 180, 216-217, 231-232, 247-253, 272, 273, 284-285, 295, 309, 318-326, 329-332, 334, 346-350, 356, 357, 363-365, [32] 365n158, 391). She distinguishes four ‘models’ in their theologies of religions.

The common one, prevailing from the 15th to the mid-20th century with the missionaries, was the ‘expansionist’ one: ‘pagans’ and Muslims must both ‘convert’, and Christianity must be ‘planted’, and supplant all other religions, Islam included (5-8, 81-83, 161, 163-166, 172-176, 180-182, 392, 396-398). The author notes the intimate connection of this model of thought with power throughout the history of Christianity, and more in particular with Europe’s maritime and colonial expansion in the period studied (7, 216-217, 397). And she also indicates that this missionary mind-set was virtually completely absent in the grassroots Christian communities of traders, Mulattos, freed slaves and recent refugees in The Gambia.

They exhibited mostly a ‘survivalist attitude’ (353), being quite content ‘merely’ to cultivate their several (Mulatto, Akou/Krio, Wolof, Manjago and other) Christian identities in isolation in the margins of The Gambia, cultural and spatial – e.g. in their ‘coastal captivity’ (274; 75, 166-171, 174-180, 182, 216, 231, 334, 335-340, 389-390, 392-394).

In the nineteenth century, a second missionary model emerged, termed *diaconia* by the author (8-10, 398-400). It is that of serving those to be converted with the several ‘works of charity’, ranging from buying slaves in order to set them free in the abolitionist era (198-199, 216) to providing them with education and health care in colonial times, to agrarian development programmes and other NGO-type of relief work in the post-colonial era. The author, however, recognises that these ‘charities’ were completely subservient to Christian expansionism until recently. They served, or were meant to serve, as powerful instruments of Christian mission (272-273, 284, 393, 396, 398) and are still used as such by Evangelicals in The Gambia (10, but see 334, 388). Only after the expatriate Christian leadership in The Gambia became aware after 1950 that Muslims would definitively not be converted (228, 232, 243, 250-253, 272, 282, 286, 295, 309, 317, 322, 330, 334, 347, 363-365, 386, 390, 392), did it continue *diaconia* towards them (not towards the ‘pagans’) without the ulterior purpose of their conversion (229, 286, 294, 331-332, 337, 347, 391, 397, 399). The separation of *diaconia* from the power purposes, however, seems far from complete. The author notes that even now *diaconia* is aimed ‘at spreading Christian influence in society and creating goodwill for the Christian community’ (284, 317, 322, 325, 330, 331, 342), by such secular means as development programmes and rebuilding markets destroyed by fire (399). She adds ruefully that ‘in an age [when] Africa is flooded with aid organisations, the Christian character of the diakonia has at times become difficult to distinguish’ (399).

At the time when *diaconia* became somewhat – at least in theological reflection – disentangled from expansionism in Christian-Muslim relationships in The Gambia, two more Christian ‘models’, ‘mind-sets’, or attitudes [33] towards Muslims emerged: those of ‘presence’ and ‘dialogue’ (10-15, 325-326, 331-332, 346-350, 362-363, 400-406). The author defines ‘presence’ as ‘silent testimony’ and ‘non-confrontational witness to Christ by sharing the ups and downs of life’ (11). She traces it to a number of role-models: Christ himself, early Christian hermits, Saint

Francis of Assisi; and in modern times to Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the missionary society of the White Fathers, and in particular to Charles de Foucauld who lived a hermit's life among the Tuaregs from 1905 to 1916. Max Warren's 'theology of attention' is presented as another version of this model (10-13, 317, 400-402).

The attitude of 'dialogue', aimed at 'mutual understanding and mutual growth' [!], JP] (13n57), emerged from the several academic liberal Christian theologies in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. They were shaped by their confrontation with the Western sciences, the secularisation of Western and other societies, and the paradox of an increasing and permanent religious plurality in the West and the world at large despite the huge numerical increase of missionary, 'theocratic' Christianity and Islam in the course of the 20th century.² Dialogue, says the author, 'advocates an attitude of openness and respect to people of other faiths and the willingness of Christians to be challenged and changed in the encounter with people of other faiths' as 'fellow pilgrims' who all, it is believed, have some grasp, however partial, of God through their respective religions (13, 347, 384). The Islam in Africa Project (IPA), and its successor, the Project for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), were inspired by this attitude (15, 317, 334, 383).

The third purpose of this book is explicitly theological. Its aim is 'to see dialogue as an opportunity to be challenged and changed and thus come to a *deeper understanding of God*' (391, my emphasis). To achieve it in present-day The Gambia, the author proposes that *diaconia* be resolutely freed from the unilateral, inherently polemical, expansionist dream, and that the three mind-sets of *diaconia*, presence and dialogue be complemented by, and subsumed in, a new theological model: that of *kenosis* (Phillipians 2: 5-11). She defines this Pauline concept as the attitude of being ready as Christians to 'empty oneself' as (in Christian belief) Christ did in incarnation by becoming man 'in order to show the love of God for humankind' (403). She briefly traces recent theological reflection on it (403-406) and concludes her book by advocating it as the theological panacea for 'the little Christian islands in a great sea of Islam' in The Gambia (406-408).

² This is mainly my analysis.

[34] *Appreciation*

It is plain from this summary that this book deserves a wide reception and thorough study in the Departments of Religious Studies in Anglophone Africa for a few reasons. One is the sobering fact that five centuries of Christian presence and missionary effort in The Gambia produced such a minimal and marginal outcome. It shows that the results of missionary efforts – Christian and other – are thoroughly context-bound. Their outcomes are contingent upon, and constrained and shaped by quite other, secular forces and factors than the (presumed) truth of a religion, the sacrifices its missionaries make for its propagation, and the ‘grace’ which is said to induce converts to accept this ‘one and only road to salvation’. This is true not only for the failure of Christianity in The Gambia, but also for the resounding success of Christianity in other parts of West Africa, as well as for the success of Islam in The Gambia and in many other parts of West Africa, and its failure (so far) in others.

Another is the expert manner, richly documented manner, in which this very full but well-balanced history is portrayed. Many will also be inspired by her pioneering theology of religions. In the face of an African Islam that has become markedly more able intellectually, doctrinally assertive, and in places politically aggressive, it may be felt that her theology of ‘kenotic presence’ (353), combined with unselfish service and a completely honest dialogue, may perhaps serve to defuse the growing tension.

Reservations

However innovative and attractive, it is precisely her theology, that raises a number of reservations in my mind. One respects her privileging, throughout her book, of (expatriate, elitist) reflective theology over against the lack of it, and disinterest in it, at the grassroots level of the ‘isolationist’ tiny Christian communities of The Gambia, which were ‘hardly “witnessing communities”’ (181, 183, 309, 390). She reports on the ‘inertia of the laity’ (341n36) and its ‘survivalist attitude’ (353). It turned Christianity into ‘a religion of and for foreigners’ (329, 334, 337, 366-367, 371-377, 390), ‘outsiders’ (325) isolated ‘from the *real* Gambian interreligious life’ (340, my emphasis). She complains that ‘the conscious and supervised theological reflection on the interaction between gospel and culture (inculturation from

above) is still in its infancy' in The Gambia even in 2000 (395, 334, 391). Gambian Christians 'consider dialogue a waste of time', and question openly 'the willingness of the Muslim community to engage in a true dialogue' (385). They fear, and feel threatened by, Islam (347), and see dialogue only 'as promoting respect and peaceful co-existence', and not 'as an opportunity to [...] to come to a deeper understanding of God' (402) and to 'challenge each other [viz. Christians and Muslims] in enriching ways' (403). The author rejects the inculturation of a Christian church in one ethnic culture [35] only. She wants it to 'take its roots in the wider Senegambian, West African soil, with its diversities of cultures and religions' (390, 396).

But she admits several times that precisely the 'isolationist' Christian communities, content to cultivate their marginal and/or 'foreign' (actually immigrant) Christian identities, have maintained cordial relationships and peaceful co-existence with their Muslim fellowmen throughout the 20th century (113, 114, 156, 158, 284-285, 325, 330, 348, 364, 365n157, 382-383). 'Only very few Christian families had no Muslim relatives' (383). Christians and Muslims not only 'joined in each other's festivities and laboured side by side on the work floor or in the fields' (346). They also 'participated in marriages, funerals, and name-giving ceremonies' (378), despite 'reformist' confrontation on both sides in the past (346-347), especially during the disruptive 'Soninke-Marabout' wars (1849-1900). 'The model of presence is mainly lived out in the small Christian communities in the rural areas, which are predominantly Muslim' (391). It is done by 'offer[ing] Christianity in a non-obtrusive and non-offensive way' (325), i.e. by 'teach[ing] the Gospel without preaching it' (326). And she agrees, that the Akou/Krio community, founded by liberated slaves in the abolitionist era, deserves to seen, after nearly two centuries, as an authentic Gambian culture (216, 389-390) with a distinct culture and language of their own (363). That is, or will in due time be, equally true, however, for the other 'ethnic' Christian communities. In brief, Gambian Christian minorities practised a deft religious variety of the 'consociationalism' which political theorists like Lijphart say works best in plural democracies, The Gambia (and The Netherlands) included (104-105).

But more importantly, I suggest that scholarly impartiality demands that the grassroots inarticulate intuition of these 'ethnic Christians' about how they may relate, in the pragmatics of daily life, to the overwhelming Muslim majority of their

nation, should have been examined and appreciated for its own historical merits in stead of being condemned on theological, normative grounds. Rather, their cherishing their Christian ‘ethnic’ distinctness as a safe haven because of a historically wellinformed suspicion should have been rated as another valid Christian attitude towards Muslim and ‘pagan’ fellowmen on a par with the models of an expatriate theology which has itself barely begun to indigenize (348-349, 364). It might have been examined as a prudent balance of neighbourliness and distance on the basis of accommodation to traditional beliefs, rituals and values, which these Christians (still) share with many Muslim fellowmen. That might have prevented the author from indulging in another top-down normativity when she writes that ‘the majority of the Gambian Christians (and the Gambian Muslims) live a double life, a life at two levels: one is the Christian level; the other is the level of African traditional religions’ (346). Top-down ‘inculturation’ [36] is approved and promoted but will not work. Grassroots accommodation is the perfect inculturation and works well but is condemned as syncretistic.

Preoccupation with theology also prevents the author from asking the hard-nosed but pertinent question why Islam succeeded so admirably in The Gambia where Christianity, despite its intimate connection to European colonialism, failed so dismally. Sociological and political questions about majority and minority, and consequent superiority and inferiority, are all the more pressing, as her eagerness to promote dialogue (i.e. equality) and to practice kenotic presence (i.e. humility) seem to incline her to underrate the changes in the Gambian Islam. More confrontational positions are fostered by the ‘development aid’ it receives from the wealthy Muslim oil-nations, and the Islamic training which Gambian Muslims are liberally given there. Marginality and accommodation may still prove more beneficial for Gambian Christians in the 21st century than the author’s well-articulated theology of *diaconia*, dialogue and kenotic presence.

Lastly, readers with an average knowledge of the topography of The Gambia would have been greatly assisted if the book had had many more and better maps, of the kind of the kind provided in chapter 2, than the folded map at the end of the book, which is confused and confusing. Despite these reservations, the book is much recommended.