

Orthodox Mission in the Central and Western African Region

Our Presence—The Difficulties—The Reality—The Potential

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Abstract:

This article presents an overview of Orthodox mission in Central and Western Africa, examining key issues of modern missionary activity, with a self-critical approach. It gives a broad historical outline, examines the relation of the Greek diaspora communities in Africa with the local people, describes the geographical context and the cultural diversity within the region, discusses the theme of inculturation. Furthermore, it critically examines issues of missiological methodology, pointing to inner shortcomings of the Orthodox, and sets priorities for the future from the perspective of the author's pastoral experience. The article concludes with the prospects and the potential for Orthodoxy in Africa, keeping an eye on the future and also taking into consideration the position and the claims of the African community within the Ecumene.

Introduction



It is difficult to cover every aspect of the Orthodox Church's missionary work in sub-Saharan Africa within the limits of this short article. The missionary task is, of course, constantly evolving without anybody being able to determine what its final form will be. It can be described as a large-scale work, not only because of the sheer volume of the work, but also because of the vast numbers of people involved and the numerous tribes spread over a vast geographical area and also across nations.

In practice, the missionary efforts are an impossible feat even for the very organised individual missions.

Despite the dark elements that can surface as the work is carried out, analysed and recorded, I personally believe that the prospects for our missionary work are not dependent upon external factors. They are dependent, rather, on how much the missionaries assigned there have the grace and insight to be constantly aware of *'the signs of the times of the African world'* as it stands today, and whether, at each and every moment, they can stand in evangelical truth and provide solutions and life-guidance that are consistent with the spirit of Christ.

The Example of the Holy Metropolis of Accra

The Vast and the Sporadic

My experience has been gained gradually in the course of my ministry in the Holy Metropolis of Cameroon, which was founded in 1959 and was initially intended to serve the then numerous Greek communities that were scattered all over Central and West Africa. At that time, the jurisdiction of the Metropolis covered the 22 states for which it was responsible, starting from Cameroon and stretching all the way to Senegal. These communities were served by itinerant priests who had to travel from one state to another in order to be able to serve the functional needs of all the communities. The end of colonialism at that time and the resulting bleak political situation forced the people to unify, and so Greek communities emerged in the big cities. This led to the impromptu beginnings of the Orthodox mission in Central and West Africa, because of the presence of churches within these communities.

With the independence of the African states after the colonial period, the Greek communities slowly began to shrink and the Holy Metropolis of Cameroon was forced to focus on the *'Fishing of Nations'* in order to survive; and so the Orthodox missions began. There was no plan, no basis, no specialised knowledge, supplies or organised support from Europe which could have provided some essential assistance in the form of human and financial resources, especially following the forced departure of the Egyptian Greeks. No one can deny the sacrificial efforts of those who worked in mission but, at the same time, no one can avoid pointing out the mistakes and weaknesses in the very foundations of this work.

In fact, the first African Orthodox communities would have to overcome vast cultural and social barriers in order to be able to proclaim themselves Orthodox. The beginning of this missionary effort was carried out without studying the different peoples and cultures or taking into account their differences and individual customs. To use the not-so-familiar language of colonialism, there were no informative pamphlets or special instructions. The entire effort was carried out across

a vast territory and the challenges of tending to the first African Orthodox Ecclesial Communities surfaced at a very early stage. So too did the need for the division of the then Metropolis of Accra, which was later renamed the Metropolis of Cameroon, and four new dioceses were formed:

- The Diocese of Nigeria, now Holy Metropolis of Nigeria
- The Diocese of Ghana, now Holy Metropolis of Accra
- The Diocese of Sierra Leone, now Holy Metropolis of Guinea and Sierra Leone, and
- The Diocese of Gabon and Congo Brazzaville, now the Holy Metropolis of Gabon and Congo Brazzaville.

This division initially helped to organise the missionary work and, of course, it would be desirable to continue the process by creating new dioceses within the existing Metropolises.

The Shrinking of the Greek Communities

The different political situations and the decrease in emigration from Greece mean that the old Greek communities of Central and West Africa are still shrinking and, in some cases, have totally disappeared. This is a drawback for the momentum of today's mission because it has always been the case that Orthodox communities, groups and organisations have played a supportive role in the daily practice of mission through their example, regardless of whether that example has been appropriate or not.

Seeding Problems

There are two ways to carry out missionary work in a country:

- The mission is undertaken in a well-organised manner initially in major cities where all the required facilities are available before it is then expanded to remote areas of the country.
- The mission starts from the remote areas of the country and, after several years, reaches the organised communities of the major cities. This option is incredibly difficult, complex and costly.

The Orthodox mission in Central and West Africa began from the countryside and tried to extend its presence to some of the major cities. The decision to start in this way demonstrates the inexperience of the first missionaries but is also testimony to the enormous difficulties in practising mission at the very moment when almost all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing widespread urbanisation, with villages being deserted and the cities filled with huge communities of people

living in huts. Missionary work in the countryside could be maintained and further developed where there is sufficient infrastructure in place such as adequate education, health care, power, transport and telecommunications – all of which will be hard to achieve for at least the next 50 years. But we would be unfair if we did not point out that in the countryside all over Africa we find more authentic people who are much closer—by their very nature—to evangelical principles, whilst in large cities we see populations that have entered into rivalry, within or even beyond the law, and into what in the Church is described as a ‘secular spirit’.

We should also not forget to mention the fact that before the Orthodox Church appeared in this region, alongside the Protestant and Catholic churches hundreds of self-proclaimed ‘churches’ had appeared which were the creation of individuals who had been previously rejected by the Catholic Church and subsequently proclaimed themselves patriarchs, priests, deacons, prophets, healers, exorcists, etc. These emerged out of an incredible plethora of African ideas regarding spirits, atonements, purges, therapies etc.

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The Obvious Problems

A problem that the missionary will face in the African countryside is the low educational level of the local population. Another problem is the existence of a vast number of tribes and, consequently, very many languages. Each tribe has its own customs and traditions as well as different perceptions of good and evil. Also, the languages spoken by these tribes are oral dialects, none of which currently has a written form. They are passed on orally across the generations which results in further distortion and confusion.

The Unseen Problems

The study of the ‘customs’ of a tribe is of fundamental and essential importance. The following have a special significance:

- birth
- the transition from adolescence to adulthood (initiation ceremonies)
- illness and the ‘evil-eye’
- marriage

- death (by natural causes or by accident, bloodless or bloody)
- memorial ceremonies
- the pursuit of fortune, success, fame

If all this is not studied in depth and on a daily basis, the Apostolic workers, the missionaries, will be surprised at how simple matters such as these can completely undermine their work.

The Word Given and the Word Received

A subject that no confession has paid attention to is the way in which the Word of God is transmitted.

Certainly, the first missionaries had to deal with a population that was poorly educated in European terms; they labelled the African populations 'barbarians' and 'uncivilised', and created an educational system in an attempt to 'civilise the barbarians'.

The mistakes the first missionaries made were to believe that the African people were uncivilised and not to take African culture into consideration; a culture that served the African tribes well, right up to the point when the Europeans discovered the continent.

The African tribes had always been differentiated into hunter-gatherer tribes and pastoralist tribes. For many centuries, these tribes formed their own system of administration, the so-called "holy-kingdoms", which consisted of:

- a rigid hierarchy and a strict division and decentralisation of administration, a system which still remains alive and active today
- a system of dividing land and of hunting
- a medical system
- views regarding the creation and the presence of 'good' and 'evil' in the world, and thus their own 'theology'
- astrology, with observations on the effects of the stars on crops and on other matters
- a teaching system, based on a tremendous number of educational stories (among which is the African Odyssey which I have heard narrated to me personally)

People's identity is still defined in terms of the above even today, a hundred and fifty years after the arrival of the first Europeans, making the transition from 'tribe' to 'nation' a very difficult matter.

The Christian kerygma, transposed into Africa by the Orthodox Church, by every missionary, was originally indisputably structured in the same way that it had been preached in Europe, and with the same unconsciously complex quality. Nev-

ertheless, it was a word addressing an unprepared audience, assuming wrongly that the listeners had had an elementary Christian education and were brought up with Christianity in their veins.

Of course, the African world at first mirrored the methods of the missionaries and then processed the data based on their own interpretations and considerations and on simplistic and sensationalised forms of Christianity such as the recently-emerging 'born again' churches, Pentecostals and others.

Nothing is easier and simpler for an African than to move from one Christian denomination and faith to another until they work out which one offers them the most favourable prospects for escaping poverty and illness.

Also, the large number of Christian denominations, all of which appeared almost simultaneously in the same place, criticising and battling with the other confessions, essentially made it very easy for the African Christians (assuming they were not fanatics) to take a position on just about every Christian subject without any historical or theological knowledge.

Those privileged to be among the first and subsequent generations of Africans sent to Europe to study at the various universities became familiar with not only the lack of belief in the Christian faith in various communities and states, but also the outright hostility and war against the Church, and the indifference and often suspicion with which the Christian message was treated. And they also *created* a Church tired and disappointed with its own self, a Church which, with every opportunity it gets, and in all circumstances, 'misses the boat' of the times, uncertain whether tradition means mere repetition of what has been passed down, or creativity based on the experience of the past.

This experience has been transferred and has found fertile ground in the African psychology, which by nature is very simple and loves the simplest subjects and the easiest roads in its exploratory path.

However, this situation as a whole works to the detriment of the message of the Gospel and destroys every effort of the missionaries.

If we want our efforts not to go to waste but to bear fruit, we need, even now after a hundred and fifty years, to compromise on the 'quality' and forms by which the Word of God is transmitted.

The way we speak the Word of God must be based on the African cultural platform and should be gradually transformed from 'fluidity to solidity' in accordance with the Pauline method (cf. 1 Cor 3:2).

The Transmission of Tradition

(Architecture—Art—Music)

It is usual that when transmitting the Word of God, various means of expressing the essential elements of the Word through the sacred arts are also passed on and serve the practical needs of the ecclesial communities. These have been drawn from the European world and include church music, church architecture and decorative church art.

Of course, the missionaries usually forgot that all these arts presupposed a certain foundation, some pre-existing music, architecture or fine art which was expanded on and perfected in every historical period of the Church. Changes took place in terms of form, colour, design and style, and a theological theme was added, so that each change came with a justification of sorts.

These days we just repeat some expressions of former times and we call that being faithful to past tradition, whereas the element of creativity is completely missing! Or, once we end up with certain forms, everything is frozen and no subsequent change is deemed acceptable. So, an attempt is made to pass on these forms of church tradition faithfully and we require the African Christians to adopt them, to express themselves through them and ultimately to be saved by them.

Without assuming that African music is completely different, the sonic architecture of Byzantine music does not fit in with the architecture of villages and

towns and shanty towns, and the fine arts are treated like a riddle that the African cannot solve without a myriad of explanations. And, of course, depictions of white people are just 'stories about whites', something completely unintelligible and unrealistic.

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Few missionaries have actually tried to do something relevant and align themselves to the African people's reality and surroundings, and those that have done so have not continued.

Orthodox missionary work in Africa, unfortunately, has not yet grasped the matter in depth and keeps trying out forms and expressions that appeal to the conservative sectors of the European supporters of missionary work, but in a few decades, they will have disintegrated and will have been expelled and replaced by new local expressions of architecture, music and painting.

The same mistake has been made with the attempt to transfer monasticism

and indeed the form of Syro-Egyptian monasticism, which has been influenced in many ways by primal monasticism. There have been several attempts to establish a nucleus of coenobitic life in Africa, but they have repeatedly failed. Perhaps we should be concerned about the difficulty our African brothers and sisters have in appropriating monasticism in this form, and perhaps we should also be concerned about the fact that monasticism first appeared about four centuries after the presence of our Lord on earth. In Africa, we are still at 150 AD. Why do we demand this as an offshoot of our ecclesial communities when these communities themselves are not yet organised well enough to give meaningful testimony to the Gospel?

The Meeting of the Gospel with the Ancient African Spirit

It is considered a happy coincidence that the Gospel sprang forth at a time when three worlds coexisted in Palestine: the Judaic prophetic tradition, Roman social organisation and others, and Greek education.

In the world in which the Gospel first appeared, in the Mediterranean Basin, these same elements existed (through the Jewish communities of the Diaspora), which made it easy for the Apostles' early work. We would say that their way of speaking God's Word was readily understandable, and they presented their testimony with ease.

Which of these elements exist in Africa? None of them! Yet we still think that we will be understood using the same words.

We have learned nothing from the example of the Apostle Paul's speech in Athens; he spoke with the language of Plato and Aristotle, taking as his starting-point the altar to the Unknown God!

What bridges have we looked for in the vastness and unique diversity of Africa?

I think that all missions have fallen into the trap of believing that the transmission of Christian faith is easy because African states have entered the process of (slow) growth and this development gives a fictitious, superficial impression which we can relate to, which we are familiar with.

But, beneath the surface, the reality is very different.

Essentially, what we are experiencing is described to some degree in the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles. But African reality is very different, far more cruel and raw in its expressions, passions, attitudes.

Now the Gospel is actually confronted with the Ancient-Modern African Spirit, at all levels, and it is impossible to avoid syncretism and misinterpretations at every level and in all matters. When a hundred or so Christian heresies had been recorded by St. John Damascene (+749) in the Mediterranean region by only the 8th century A.D., it is easy to imagine just what will be faced in the future.

"Apostolic Work" in the Context of the Contemporary Reality of the Church

As regards "apostolic work" in the context of the contemporary reality of the Church, we could, in general terms, point out the following:

- Apostolic work is not a priority for any of the 'ancient' and 'new' local churches, except the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and for some it is totally unknown. Nor is it part of the total body of work undertaken by the Universal Church, but rather it is dressed in the ethno-racial colours of various local Churches and is sometimes used as a cover for the 'ecclesiastical consolidation' of foreign affairs
- In most cases, some local Churches enjoy a 'dividend' from the Apostolic 'missions'
- No local church seriously addresses the issue of the dissemination, exploration and resurgence of 'missionary vocations'
- Most missionary efforts are based on movements and initiatives of the people and of Church communities, which creates enormous problems in the areas of planning and implementation for the infrastructures and the very structure of the Apostolic work. Orthodox theological schools have, for decades now, either abolished or undermined teaching related to missionary work
- There is no serious initiative or movement of volunteers for Orthodox missions by Orthodox Churches apart from a few exceptions
- Volunteers in English-speaking missions are a hundred times more than in French-speaking missions where rates tend to zero
- The same relationship applies to financial assistance to English-speaking missions versus French-speaking ones. There is nothing to say about Hispanic areas because there are virtually no Orthodox missions there
- The approach of those responsible for missionaries from the financially powerful local Churches is governed by a Protestant way of thinking on missionary issues which was rejected many years ago by the Protestant Church itself
- Frequently, the images of Orthodox missionaries in Africa are used as a means of collecting money to send to the supposedly 'missionary' ranks of Europe, in countries that have been ruled for decades by Communist regimes and where there is a 'memory of faith', total religious freedom and financial ease
- The voices of some progressive and 'prophetic' persons in the sphere of mission are neither heard nor referred to, and are not treated as authorities for reflection and self-criticism for those who are engaged in and have devoted their lives to Orthodox mission on the African continent

The Potential of Missionary Work in (Central-West) Africa

The African community is now at an important stage in the process of claiming its position and identity within the world. Many important things are changing in the everyday life of Africa and much more is expected to change. Of course, it is a world that has to fight with many adversities and difficulties.

The fact that Africa has accepted the Christian message to a great extent should not give those responsible for the sowing of the Gospel an excuse to slacken their efforts, but instead they should constantly seek and discover new ways of communication and speaking that are accessible to African reality. They will have to be aware of the 'signs of the times' in Africa which should guide them in their next steps. If there is no such spirit on the part of the Orthodox Church, and if missionary work does not become a primary concern for the Orthodox Church, along with the internal changes that this requires, then all that has been done so far will survive for a few decades before it finally disappears, perhaps making way for a model of simplified African Christianity. However, if this spirit does manage to appear, Orthodox mission can perhaps evolve and become a significant balancing factor in ancient and new African societies, enabling us to avoid the mistakes made in the European region. ■

Key Words:

Africa, Mission, Orthodoxy, Patriarchate of Alexandria, Inculturation

George Stergiou (1961-) was tonsured as a monk (1984), taking the name Gregory. Ordained deacon (1984) and priest (1988), he served in the Metropolis of Megara and Salamina. He studied Design, Drawing, Icon Painting and Theology at the University of Athens. Director of the Private Patriarchal Office in Alexandria (2001-2002), parish priest

in Rome and Vicar for Central Italy from May 2003, he continued his studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University. In 2004, Archimandrite Gregory was elected Metropolitan of Cameroon, consecrated by the Patriarch Theodoros II at the Church of St. Sabbas the Sanctified, and enthroned in Yaoundé, Cameroon, on 21st January 2005.