Early African Christianity – Class II

Africa Played a decisive role in the formation of Christian Culture. Decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood first in Africa before they were recognized in Europe, and a millennium before they found their way to North America. - Dr. Thomas C. Oden

Contrary to popular belief, Christianity has a much longer history than its Western or European expressions. Long before the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century (1517 AD), or the conversion of Constantine in the 4th Century (312AD), Christianity not only existed, but it was thriving in Africa. Our Faith was birthed in the Middle East in the 1st Century, but it was without question cradled and nurtured in Africa in the years following its inception. Christianity would not have its present vitality in the Two-Thirds world without the intellectual understandings that developed in Africa between 50 A.D. and 500 A.D. During this class session we are going to examine African Christianity, and how the contributions made by African Christians on African soil have shaped the Christian mind.

I. The Gospel to Africa

a. Hellenization - the spread of Greek culture and the assimilation into Greek culture of non-Greek peoples. It was a notable trait of ancient Greek civilization. This included Greek language, writing system, and technology. This was the culture of the Roman Empire. From 336-326 B.C., Alexander the Great set out on the greatest conquest that would eventually result in him conquering a land mass that stretched from Egypt to India. This conquest would set the stage for the Roman Empire that we encounter within the New Testament during the 1st Century A.D.

b. Ancient Africa - The early Christian historical memory was formed on three land masses- Asia, Africa, and Europe. Only three, not seven. That came later. These three massive land masses met at a single point, the crossroads of Jerusalem (Ancient Palestine).
   - Asia - Asia in the ancient sense is Palestine, Syria, and all that lies east.
   - Europe - the territory north and west of the straits of Byzantium (Turkey). Europe stretches all the way from Thrace (European portion of Turkey) to Ireland.
   - Africa - By Africa, in its ancient sense, we refer to the massive continent that stretches far to the south of the Mediterranean. Geographically, Africa is a continent. Culturally, Africa is a vast medley of diverse cultures and languages.

c. John Mark - Mark is the author of the oldest Gospel account, the book of Mark. In the dispersion of the apostles for taking the gospel to different parts of the world, after our Lord’s ascension into heaven, Mark was by Peter sent into Egypt, where he soon planted the church in Alexandria. After planting this church in Alexandria, Egypt around 50 A.D. Mark led the charge of leading many converts to faith in Jesus Christ. Mark is credited for bringing the Gospel to Africa and sparking revival in what would soon become one of the greatest Christian cities in world history, Alexandria.
II. Great Christian African Cities

a. Alexandria - Alexandria was an Afro-Hellenistic city located in Egypt. The church of Alexandria, founded according to the constant tradition of both East and West by John Mark was the center from which Christianity spread throughout all Egypt, the nucleus of the powerful Patriarchate of Alexandria. Of the three great Christian cities of the Ancient world: Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria... at its peak, Alexandria was larger and more influential than any other Christian city in the world. Christian scholarship was born in the leading academic center in the ancient world, Alexandria. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was established in 185 A.D. and it was a hub for Christian thought, Philosophy, and literature. This incredible school in Alexandria was home to the leading Library in the world for more than five centuries.

b. Carthage - Carthage was another Afro-Hellenistic city located west of Egypt in North Africa (Tunisia and Algeria). Carthage was a very famous city in the ancient world. First settled by the Phoenicians, this crucial city was right on the Mediterranean Sea. Carthage came to be known as the master of the Mediterranean Sea trade. Carthage rivaled Alexandria as the greatest city of that time. At any given time in these centuries, the population of Carthage could be 250,000 people. It had all the telltale signs of a Roman city. There were theaters in the Republic buildings. There were the extensive baths. There were aqueducts for getting water across the city and even out into the fields for farming. There was an extensive Roman road system. Soldiers were kept at Carthage. It was a busy port city and a prosperous city. The first mention of the church at Carthage came in 180 A.D. by Tertullian. Carthage was home to one of worlds most renowned Christian scholars, Tertullian. It was the home of Tertullian, the great church father, from 160 to 220. Carthaginian Christianity was so strong and foundational that it had great influence on the theological controversies of the next several centuries within Western and Eastern Christendom. Carthage in the present day is a suburb of Tunis, the capital city of the northern African nation of Tunisia. Tunisia is the first government of North Africa to give protection for religious freedom, but the nation itself is still dominated by Islam (Coming in the 600's). And while there is a church there going back to those early centuries, the church suffers persecution in our present day.

III. African Church Fathers

A. Tertullian (160 A.D.– 225 A.D.) - Tertullian was born in Carthage, Tunisia. The son of a Roman centurion, Tertullian was the first prolific writer of Latin Christian literature, producing extensive works on a range of theological topics. Tertullian was known as the "Father of Latin Theology". Tertullian was an apologist, defending the Christian faith against both pagans and heretics. Tertullian staunchly distrusted the use of pagan philosophy in understanding Christian faith. His famous rhetorical question, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" captured Tertullian’s conviction that Christian faith is understood through the teachings of the Scriptures alone. However, Tertullian made some use of philosophical categories, especially in his teachings of Jesus Christ and the triune God. Tertullian was the first theologian to use the term "Trinity", in describing our Triune God. During his debate with modalists, those who affirm that God exists as a single monad that manifests itself in three “modes” or operations without having eternal distinction between them, Tertullian coined the term Trinity to describe the Godhead and adapted other Latin terms to explain that God eternally exists as one “substance” (substantia) in three distinct “persons” (personae).
B. **Origen (185 A.D.- 254 A.D.)** - Born in Alexandria, Egypt, Origen was the first theologian to expound Christian doctrine in a systematic way. Raised in a Christian home, Origen was educated by his father, Leonidas, who was martyred in the year 202 A.D. A student of the Scriptures, Origen became a prominent Christian teacher in Alexandria. Origen contributed to the Alexandrian school of allegorical interpretation of the Bible by writing extensive biblical commentaries. Origen laid the groundwork for what we now know as Biblical exegesis and Bible hermeneutics. Origen completed over 800 writings during his lifetime. Those writings include: Expositions of the Scriptures, Biblical Commentaries, Anti-Pagan books, Missions, and Hermeneutics. Origen knew both Greek and Hebrew and would train his students in the Biblical exegesis.

C. **Athanasius of Alexandria (296 – 373 A.D.)** - an archdeacon and secretary to the bishop of Alexander (d. 328) rose to acclaim by rigorously defending the full divinity of Jesus Christ and his co-equality with God the Father. Described as a very dark-skinned man of short stature, a hooked nose, and a reddish beard, Athanasius was known for his unrelenting convictions, especially his conviction that the eternal Son of God became human, famously penned in his most influential work *On the Incarnation*. Later Athanasius defended his position against the teachings of Arius. An Alexandrian priest, Arius (336 A.D.) taught that the Son, though divine, was a creature, thus sparking the so-called Trinitarian controversy of the fourth century. Arius coined the slogan which spread rapidly throughout Alexandria: “There was a time when [the Son] was not.” To counteract the spread of Arius’ doctrine, Athanasius argued that if Christ was not fully divine, he would have been unable to redeem humankind. Athanasius appropriated Origen’s doctrine of eternal generation and argued that the Son eternally exists and is equal with the Father while maintaining the Son’s distinction. The debate between Arius and Athanasius became so large that the Emperor Constantine I convened a church council at his palatial estate at the Anatolian city of Nicaea in 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea)

D. **Augustine of Hippo (354 A.D. – 430 A.D.)** - Arguably the most influential of the North African Church Fathers is Augustine of Hippo (354 A.D. – 430 A.D.) who single-handedly shaped the entire Western Christian tradition throughout the Middle Ages. Augustine was born in Thagaste, an ancient city which is now Present-day Souk Ahras, Algeria. He was a preeminent scholar, Bishop, and Theologian. Augustine penned his journey of his life and his conversion to Christianity in the book *Confessions*, which is, arguably, the first biography written in Western literature. In 387 A.D. Augustine converted to Christianity. In 391 A.D. Augustine was ordained to the priesthood and a year later became bishop of Hippo, now Annaba, Algeria. Augustine served as bishop until he died on August 28th in the year 430 AD shortly after the Vandals sieged Hippo. Among Augustine’s other influential works include *On Christian Doctrine, Enchiridion*, and *On the Trinity*, a book which took Augustine twenty years to complete. Augustine’s fight with the Donatists over the meaning of the Church and his quarrel with the priest Pelagius over the doctrine of original sin and grace shaped the entire Western Christian tradition. Augustine’s other major work, *The City of God*, shaped the Western political philosophy.

IV. **7 Ways that Africa shaped the Christian Mind (By Thomas C. Oden)**

1. **The Western Idea of a University was born in Africa** - the unrivaled library in Alexandria was the model for University libraries all over Europe. This library was unexcelled for five centuries. This academic model would later be transformed into the Western idea of the university began in the community that surrounded the Alexandrian Library. It’s not proper to say that the University was born in Africa. If not born, it was at least conceived in Africa. The vast learning community of Philosophers, scientist, artists, writers, and educators that surrounded the Alexandrian Library of the Third century provided the essential archetype of the university for all of medieval Europe. Clement
of Alexandria would complete two writings in the second century, "Stromateis" and "Paedaogus" reveal the method and content of education that would be used in the medieval university.

2. **Christian Exegesis of Scripture First Matured in Africa** - Origen was the father of what we know as Biblical exegesis and Biblical hermeneutics. Three of Origen's most prominent students, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa introduced Origen's teachings of Biblical Exegesis to both Asia and Europe. The rules for interpreting Scripture that we use today were shaped by African theologians Origen and Augustine.

3. **African sources shaped early Christian Doctrine** - The African Church Fathers shaped the Christian doctrine for the church in both the East and the West. These doctrinal definitions such as "Trinity", "Christology", and role of the Holy Spirit, were shaped by the North African Church Fathers. These definitions were laid out based upon the exegetical work of Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine centuries before arriving to Europe. The major battles with heresy were fought out in Africa, before they were received by other churches around the globe.

4. **Early Ecumenical Decision making followed the African counsels** - The early African councils provided a practical model for ecumenical debate and resolution. The movement of councils coming together to solve theological issues that was first modeled by the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, would continue tangibly in African debates in Alexandria, Carthage, and Hippo. A century before the First Council of Nicea (325), these churches in Africa were firmly established, actively growing, courageously led, and were able to solve disputes that would potentially lead to division.

5. **Africa gave birth to worldwide Monasticism** - the sufferings of the martyrs, Mark in Alexandria and Cypren became the pattern for early Monasticism in Africa before it did elsewhere. The African Monks early understanding of the daily ordering of life of prayer, study, work, and radical discipleship was modeled and well-formed first in North African monasticism long before it arrived in Europe.

6. **Neoplatonic Philosophy emerged out of Africa** - “Neoplatonism” refers to a philosophical school of thought that emerged in the 3rd century that combined the teachings of Plato and elements of Christian though. It is seldom mentioned that philosophical literature that the earliest advocates Neoplatonism did not reside in either Greece or Rome, but rather in Africa. Many African born Philosophers honed their craft at the Alexandrian School.

7. **Rhetorical and Dialectical skills were honed in Africa** - the Advanced study of rhetoric begin migrating from Africa to Italy. This occurred because the teachings of Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine made their way to Europe. African Rhetors were often moving from African locations to Europe. They introduced many African communication talents, literary passions, and dialectical skills to Europe.