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'But God is not defeated!': Learning from the Sudanese Church

Despite a context of struggle and persecution, the church in the Sudan has continued to grow, spiritually and numerically. Andrew Wheeler, who has spent several years living and working in Sudan with the Church Mission Society, reflects on lessons Christians worldwide might learn from the experience of the Sudanese church.

The phrase 'But God is not defeated!' is famous in Sudan as the constant refrain of Canon Ezra Lawiri, Bible translator, scholar, pastor, friend and counsellor to several generations of Sudanese Christians, who loved to tell the story of the Sudanese church.¹ Confronted, as he unfolded the story, with difficulties and failures, betrayals and disappointments, as well as triumph and growth, Canon Ezra, with his characteristic self-deprecating smile, would repeat, 'But God is not defeated!' The phrase captured, as Ezra intended it should, a sense of God's grace, his greater and loving purpose, overarching and transcending our stumbling efforts to follow in obedience.

What should we be learning?

Over the last twenty years in particular the Sudanese church, perhaps more than any other, has by its suffering and resilience drawn out the committed support and affection of Christians in Britain. But what should we be learning from the Sudanese church? Is the dynamic growth and witness of the Sudanese church merely an intriguing and somewhat bewildering event in a remote and alien part of the world? Or does it have some vital lesson for the western church, struggling with secularism, the collapse of traditional institutions, beliefs and values, and faced with a multitude of new world-views, spiritual experiences and lifestyles?

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From one centre to many centres?

Viewed from the perspective of the wider world, British Christianity seems a strange mixture of stagnation and exploration and enquiry. There are several strands to this exploration. There is a great interest in tools for personal understanding and growth – Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram, for example. There is great openness to each new phase of the charismatic movement and the experiences that go with it (captured in place names such as Toronto and Pensacola that are associated with the movement). And there is a great interest in forms of Christianity that escaped the desiccating winds of the Enlightenment and modern rationalism – most notably, Orthodoxy and Celtic Christianity. Much of this is good: it is not likely that we will recapture one central consensus as to what it means to be a Christian in the modern world. Rather we are on a journey towards finding our place within the new reality of the world church which does not have one centre but many, and in which there is an infinite variety of cultural responses to the Gospel.

It is in that context, and with those resources, that Western Christianity struggles to find a new authenticity and new relevance within its setting of growing cultural diversity. One valuable resource that has been little used so far is the vital contemporary experience of the African church. The Sudanese church's current experience is particularly significant here as the widespread and profound transformation taking place is happening in primal societies only minimally affected by western education and western values. As the western church attempts to build a more holistic sense of Christian faith, that somehow reaches beyond the constriction of the Enlightenment, it has available to it a contemporary and living experiment in Christian life and faith, which stands outside our own tradition, and represents something in a sense more original, due in large measure to the special blend of influences and circumstances that have shaped it. This may prove more energizing and inspiring than the rather archaeological enquiry into our Celtic roots because it is a contemporary reality, a living community whose life we can share.

Describing Sudanese Christian spirituality

Since 1996 I have been involved in a major attempt to conduct research and to gather materials concerning the history and the contemporary experience of the Sudanese church. This has given a rare opportunity for reflecting both broadly and in depth on the nature of the Sudanese encounter with the Gospel.

One conviction that has developed is that, despite differences arising from culture, history and missionary tradition, there is something that could be called a 'shared Sudanese Christian spirituality', a large common ground of faith and practice that all Sudanese Christians, of whatever culture or denomination, share. Reflecting on the divisions and denominations in the church in Sudan, one Moru elder recently compared the situation to a village gathered around a well. Each family lives in its own home and has its own bucket, but they go to the same well and they drink the same water. Is it possible to describe the 'Living Water' that Sudanese Christians drink? And is it possible that this same water could refresh the roots of our own faith in the West?

I have attempted to describe ten 'parameters' of this shared Sudanese spirituality in the hope that some such refreshment may take place.

i) Sudanese Christianity is highly biblical.

By this I do not mean that Sudanese Christians have a developed biblical theology as we might aim to have in the West. Rather, Sudanese Christians approach the Bible in a way that is more true to its nature, as story with divine meaning. The stories and the images of the Bible are used continually as models, paradigms and parallels by which everyday life is understood, spiritual experience tested and action for the future shaped. Life is lived by daily interaction with the biblical story. Particularly prominent, of course, is the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection, as well as the Old Testament narratives of exodus and exile.

The people of Yei offer one example of this process at work. From Yei to Kaya, into exile in Uganda and back again to Yei – a journey that, in all, took seven years – they have continually given meaning to their journeys and sufferings through identification with the stories of exodus, of exile and return, of jubilee, and of death and resurrection. In a recent workshop in southern Sudan, Sudanese Christians responded with great energy to an invitation to write their own psalms and lamentations, in close identification with the Israelites in exile. Many of these writings were spontaneously set music. The relevance of the scriptures was given edge by the fact that immediately before, we had taken shelter in holes and trenches from a government bombing raid, singing and reading from the Psalms. The Bible paralleled our own experiences with startling relevance and evoked similar outpourings of grief and faith, of doubt, debate and confidence.

Those of us from more analytical societies can endeavour to listen more to the Bible as narrative, as story that parallels our own journey, illuminating it and giving hints of God's purpose within it. I have been particularly helped by imaginatively exploring parts of the Bible that previously I had not read closely: Lamentations, some of the Psalms, and some books of the prophets, for example.

ii) Sudanese Christianity is tuned to the spiritual world.

For Sudanese Christians, God speaks through the Bible, but also through dreams and visions which give guidance for everyday life.

People frequently give testimony to being warned in dreams against some life-threatening danger that they are then able to avoid. Prophetic words, hymns and spiritual songs are also commonly given through dreams. Significant dreams are an ever-present indication that God is a present God, constantly in communication with his people so as to guide, guard and inspire. As a western Christian I have been particularly challenged by Sudanese Christianity to enlarge my awareness of spiritual reality and the surrounding and indwelling presence of God in the natural world, in dreams, in meetings with friends and strangers, in the encounters and experiences of life.

iii) Sudanese Christianity is prayerful.

One consequence of God's guidance, guardianship and inspiration, and of the spiritual awareness and sensitivity characteristic of traditional life, is that Sudanese have a profound and instinctive sense of the immanent presence of God and his continual availability to them in prayer. This dependence on God in prayer has been deepened by the extreme deprivation and uncertainty of life in Sudan and in the

refugee camps. With unpredictable military activity all around, with the collapse of all medical services, prayer to God is a lifeline on which personal and communal survival depends. Every new situation is an opportunity for prayer. With this dependence has come a deep conviction that God is truly present with his people to save and uphold. Prayer, in such desperate straits, concerns all aspects of life and survival: health, family welfare and safety, rainfall, fertility of crops, herds and family, protection from oppressive forces, both human and spiritual. And the testimony of countless Sudanese is that the God on whom they rely answers prayer, and upholds, protects and heals. I have been challenged by the way in which Sudanese Christians allow prayer to permeate every part of life, and have tried to open myself more to God in the same way they do.

iv) Sudanese work out their theology in hymns and songs.

Over several generations, and in many different parts of Sudan, Sudanese Christians have given expression to their faith, and wrestled with its meaning in the composing of songs. There is today an abundance of such songs, perhaps unrivalled on the African continent. Women are particularly prominent among the new hymn writers. It is probably true that the theology of all Christian communities is contained in their hymns rather than in the writings of scholars and academics. What is significant about contemporary Sudanese hymn writing is that among songs of praise and songs of evangelistic challenge, there are songs that dialogue and wrestle with God, songs in which the theology of the people is worked out through engagement with the tough issues of the day: the meaning of the war, the significance of the suffering of the people, the confrontation with traditional spiritual powers, the hope for the establishment of God's justice. Often, added expressiveness is given to the songs through dance and mime. Many of the new Dinka hymns, for example, are sung to a complex choreography. Mind, body and emotions are all invested in the task of praise, of witness and of the struggle to shape meaning out of the chaos of experience.

Not only in Sudan but all around the world there is a great upsurge in new Christian music. But what does our Christian music teach about God and the world? And, when we think about it, do we agree with what it teaches? Do deeper and truer songs need to be found or written, perhaps addressing justice issues?

Theology in Sudan belongs to the people of God. It is something that takes place in the community and finds expression in the hymns of the people. It is a challenge to the church in the west (as well as other parts of East Africa) to recover theology, Christian thought, and wrestling with the purposes of God as an enterprise of the local Christian community. I see a need in many western settings to reclaim 'theology' as an activity of the local Christian community. Congregations can be encouraged to be thoughtful, reflective and courageous in giving expression to their conviction about God's presence and activity in the world. And the need for action accompanies such reflection.

v) Sudanese Christians are in debate with the surrounding culture.

War and the intrusion of the outside world, represented by the availability of guns, new ideologies, planes carrying food aid, expatriate aid workers and so on, is producing rapid cultural change and disturbing established world-views. It is a time

of great spiritual insecurity, in which Sudanese communities struggle with the diversity of world-views before them: traditional primal religion, Christian faith, Islam, secular materialism. On many fronts and in many places the Sudanese church is in energetic engagement with rival claimants for the loyalty of the people.

In Bor Diocese the encounter has been confrontational, resulting in the destruction of countless traditional shrines. In northern Bahr el Ghazal, Catholics and Anglicans take different approaches, the young firebrand evangelists of the ECS urging the destruction of traditional shrines, the Catholics avoiding destructive confrontation and presenting Christianity as the fulfillment of traditional sacrifices and prayer. Among the Zande, along the southern border with Congo, still another approach can be observed. Here, the church, aware of the destructive effects of the war on traditional custom, has made itself a guardian, actively preserving traditional wisdom and story-telling, traditional dances, knowledge of medicinal herbs and so on. Even a museum to preserve traditional implements, weapons, baskets, pots and so on has been established. In Khartoum and other government towns, the Catholic Church, in particular, engages, through public statements, pastoral letters and public debate, with all the assaults of the government. The forms that this encounter takes are many, and the approaches are diverse, but Sudanese Christianity shows little sign of being cowed into silence and retreat. In many and diverse ways it insists that it is part of the public debate about the religious, moral and political future of the country.

Despite the political and military harassment to which the church, as well as southerners in general, are subjected, there is a confidence in what Christians believe, its relevance to the issues that people face, and a willingness to face up to difficult issues even at considerable personal cost. Sudanese Christians challenge us to interact courageously with our surrounding culture, and to be willing to challenge destructive values and world-views.

vi) Sudanese Christianity is communal rather than individualistic.

One of the issues of which Western Christians are aware is the need to recover a deeper experience of community. While the evangelical churches in Sudan do use the language of personal salvation, the experience of most Christians is that to be a Christian is to participate in the Christian community. This gives great strength at times of displacement, suffering or loss. Families, clans and communities develop a story, a sense of overarching divine purpose, that transcends the anguish of the individual and enables hope to be sustained and faith nurtured. While the West needs to recover the solidarity of faith lived in community, it is also true that Sudanese Christians often need to grow in their grasp of the challenge and cost of being personally converted to Christ, and the personal transformation that should result.

vii) Sudanese Christianity is inclusive rather than exclusive.

Sudanese Christians are reluctant to draw boundaries round the Christian community, to mark anyone as excluded. For them it is a 'church without walls'. The boundaries between denominations are very fluid, and sometimes the boundaries even with Muslims and traditionalists can be obscured by a spirit of inclusiveness. This can result in a lack of commitment where teaching is poor and

leadership is weak; but it is also very welcoming, and enables people to draw closer, without obstacle, to Christian faith. We might say here that Sudanese and British Christians, particularly Anglicans, face a common challenge: how to retain a clear sense of the core and challenge of the Christian faith while remaining inclusive and welcoming. No easy task!

viii) Sudanese Christianity is lay rather than clerical.

The huge growth in the Sudanese church during the 1960s and again in the 1990s is almost entirely the work of lay Christians. And in particular, during wartime, when many men are away at the war and many have been killed or injured, it is women who have taken the lead in all aspects of church life. Professionally trained leaders are few and the initiative for most aspects of church life rests with lay people, especially women.

Leadership belongs not to a professionally trained class but to those who emerge in the community as gifted in ways needed by the community. Local church communities confer the responsibilities of leadership on those whose 'track record' justifies it. The fact that, almost without exception, Sudanese pastors receive no salary, tends to break down any sense of professional superiority and to integrate the ordained leadership into other lay forms of leadership. Out of necessity the Sudanese church has taken steps to release the ministry of lay people, especially women and young people. What, for them, has been a necessary step is being grasped around the world as integral to our understanding of life within the Body of Christ.

ix) Sudanese Christianity is ethnic rather than denominational.

This is one aspect of Sudanese Christianity that is more difficult for Western Christians to understand. It is also more difficult to relate it to our experience as Western Christians. The key thing to grasp is that Sudanese Christians have grasped the faith through their vernacular, their mother tongue. This has made possible a deep interaction between the Gospel and the core of a community's identity. Challenge and conversion are possible because 'God speaks our language' and is, therefore, addressing us.

The ethnic nature of Sudanese (and much African) Christianity is, in the first place, a strength and not a weakness. It is essential for any deep transformation to take place. But it can become narrow and destructive unless a community becomes truly aware that the encounter it has had with God in the Christian gospel is only a partial description of the truth. It needs the experiences and perceptions of other peoples who have also experienced conversion deep within their own culture. Western Christians often fail to realize how much their own faith has been shaped, limited and often distorted by the cultural assumptions of their own society. Just as Sudanese Christians need other cultural experiences of the Gospel to enhance and broaden their own grasp of the Christian revelation, so do we as western Christians. Encounter with Sudanese experiences of faith is just one of the ways in which we can begin to transcend our own limited cultural perceptions and begin to explore what it means to belong to a world-wide community of faith with a myriad of cultural expressions.

x) Sudanese Christians have a strong sense of unity.

Despite the inescapable effects of living in a society riven by conflict and violence, the Sudanese church has managed to sustain a significant degree of unity. This is probably related to two factors. First, decades of suffering and desolation have forced Sudanese Christians to recognize and depend on spiritual basics: trust in a present and loving God, whose compassionate heart is shown to us in the cross and who calls us into a community of healing and service. And secondly, a common enemy, represented by the unrelenting policies of Arabization and Islamization of successive governments in Khartoum, compels people to draw together in common purpose and fellowship.

Endless war, rooted in the violent assault of the government by land and by air, forces Christian people to affirm all that they hold in common as followers of Christ. This results in a pervasive sense of shared faith and common experience between different denominations at the local level. At the national level it has led to the creation of Councils of Churches that are unusual in bringing Catholics and Protestants together and enabling a common voice to be raised on crucial national issues of human rights, religious freedom, reconciliation and peace.

The Sudanese church challenges us also to reflect on whether we fall short of exploring the full extent to which all Christian people can pray and worship together, witness to the Gospel, serve the community and address justice and peace issues together.

Vital and life-transforming exploration

It is not easy to sum up in a few words all the rich diversity of the life of a large and dynamic church. Neither do I wish to suggest that the life of the Sudanese church is devoid of conflicts, problems and failures. It is no better and no worse than other churches journeying in faith and frailty. But maybe the parameters I have described can suggest to us some new ways in which we, as Christians, can explore our faith in more vital and life-transforming ways through a prayerful and reflective response to our encounter with the Sudanese church. Nearly 30 years ago, John Taylor, then General Secretary of CMS, perceived that the vital experience of rural Sudanese Christians, hidden behind the 'Grass Curtain' of the previous civil war, was being ignored. Today, with a vaster and richer movement under way, we will only be the poorer if we fail to wrestle with its possible significance for our own lives.

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