

Review Article

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Faith in Sudan

The ten volumes entitled *Faith in Sudan* are published by Paulines Publications, Nairobi as follows:

Vol 1: Andrew Wheeler, ed., *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 326 0, 152pp, US\$4.00

Vol 2: Stuart E. Brown, ed., *Seeking an Open Society: Inter-faith Relations and Dialogue in Sudan Today*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 332 5, 104pp, US\$4.00

Vol 3: Janet E. Persson, *In Our Own Language: The Story of Bible Translation*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 349 x, 46pp, US\$2.00

Vol 4: Gino Barsella and Miguel A. Ayuso Guixot, *Struggling to be Heard: The Christian Voice in Independent Sudan, 1956-1996*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 372 4, 126pp, US\$4.00

Vol 5: F. Perli, M.T. Ratti and A.C. Wheeler, eds, *Gateway to the Heart of Sudan: Missionary Pioneers in Sudan*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 374 0, 160pp, US\$4.00

Vol 6: Andrew Wheeler, ed., *Announcing the Light: Sudanese Witness to the Gospel*, 1998, ISBN: 9966 21 418 6, 288pp, US\$7.50

Vol 7: Lillian Craig Harris, *Keeping the Faith: Travels with Sudanese Women*, 2000, ISBN: 9966 21 485 2, 174pp, US\$5.00

Vol 8: Lillian Craig Harris, *In Joy and in Sorrow: Travels among Sudanese Christians*, 2000, ISBN: 9966 21 484 4, 204pp, US\$5.00

Vol 9: Michael Parker, *Children of the Sun: The Christian Journey of the Sudan*, 2000, ISBN: 9966 21 515 8, 191pp, US\$5.00

Vol 10: Roland Werner, William Anderson and Andrew Wheeler, eds, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church across 2000 Years*, 2000, ISBN: 9966 21 529 8, 687pp, US\$12.50

It is an enormous tribute to the immense creativity and vitality of the Sudanese church that out of its agony has emerged these volumes which tell its story from many different angles. While the writers are from within the church, they do bend over backwards to present the story as fairly as possible. At the same time it is evident that the account in these books has a purpose beyond the dispassionate recounting of history. The contributors, the blurb to the earlier volumes tells us, have 'faith in Sudan and the possibility of building a Sudan where people of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds can live together in mutual appreciation,

committed to creating a peaceful and prosperous future together'. As surely as the stories of the saints in the *Golden Legend* nurtured medieval piety so these books are intended to nurture piety in the Sudan. As surely as Foxe's *Actes and Monumentes* was subversive of the Catholic hegemony and was a challenge and inspiration for generations of English Protestants to return to the taproots of their self-understanding these volumes are subversive of the intended Islamic hegemony of Khartoum. Not that many Sudanese (or any other sort of people) will have read the 2000 and more pages of these books. Their importance lies not in their being read in their entirety. Their importance lies rather in their being available. They will consequently be a source and authority for stories which will surely be retold round many a bush fire, in many a passionate sermon and in many a gathering of the extended family in the Sudan and perhaps beyond – probably for centuries to come. While the stories they tell will stir hearts and minds, they will also provide a check on the wilder flights of imagination and storytelling. While these volumes have to be judged, in the West at any rate, by the same canons as any other history books, they will provide a frame and historical reference point for self-understanding which few histories even contemplate (and which most historians would reject if the idea was put to them).

In this sense we are treading on very different ground from the standard church histories of the last hundred years. Walter Brueggemann has brilliantly shown how deadening the Enlightenment has been to Old Testament studies. The problem was that it operated 'with naturalistic assumptions, so that everything could and must be explained without reference to any theological claim.'¹ Slavish acceptance of these same principles has arguably been equally deadening on the study of church history. In consequence the very last assumption that was allowable was God might be operative somewhere in history (if he was thought to be that was the private opinion of the historian only to be mentioned in the context of his or her devotional exchanges with like-minded people in a churchly context and never to be made overt within the respectable academic community) and consequently it followed that there was nothing that could be learned about God and his working in the life of the church in the past (or indeed in the present). Of course church historians did learn about God, about judgement in history, about the triumph of the Cross, about changed lives, about strength in weakness, about the supernatural breaking down of natural barriers and boundaries, about the Spirit-inspired courage of believers and about many other evidences of a divine footprint in our world but these things have generally had to be spoken of in code – if at all.

These books break with that tradition as strongly as Brueggemann breaks with it in his understanding of the Old Testament. Unlike Brueggemann they give no theological or philosophical or historical justification for so doing. The justification, and this largely implied rather than stated, is the telling and understanding of a story where the writers share the central belief commitment of the main participants – indeed have generally been participants at some level themselves –

1 *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1997, p 727.

and who want these belief systems to be strengthened by the story they tell. Open almost at random and you will learn not only about what people thought about God, you will read phrases such as 'God touched Morojani's heart' (vol 6, p 193) or 'I saw that Bishop Mubarak... walked with Jesus' (vol 4, p 81) or 'when God entrusts to us a share of His suffering over us, He also says "my strength is sufficient for you"' (vol 7, p 169) or 'The Bible constantly provides images, narratives, symbols, assurances and promises that enable a church on pilgrimage through a frightening landscape to find meaning and purpose.' (vol 10, p 568). And that is the strength rather than the weakness of these books. They tell of past history; they arise out of contemporary history and they are designed to play a part in emerging history – and always they are from faith and are primarily, though not exclusively, to faith.

At the same time the volumes are written by people with an impressive array of skills – some more journalistic, some more historical. The volumes themselves are not easy to categorize because they have none of the 'sameness' of approach of most multi-volume works. What binds them together is not their methodology, nor the fact that they are of approximately the same length, nor their sense of carefully staged progression, nor the fact that the writers are working to some precisely constructed style-guide, nor the fact that they have been trained in an essentially similar discipline – for the series demonstrates none of these things. What binds the volumes together is rather the story of Faith which they demonstrate, celebrate and make available for the wider church. 'Faith in Sudan' is thus very appropriately the running title for all the volumes. A fertile subsection of historical writing is historiography – the laying bare of the sometimes hidden and disguised and perhaps unconscious purposes of the 'objective' and 'dispassionate' accounts of the historian and how this fits within the wider frame of historical writing. Future historiographers will no doubt lay bare much of which the authors themselves were unaware about themselves and their intentions but they will also have much more to work on that is on the surface than is ordinarily regarded as good historical practice to provide.

Volumes 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 are a series of papers around different themes. They together with vol 4 – mainly a history of church and state relationships between 1956 and 1996 and vol 10 – an overview of the history of the Sudanese church across 2000 years – are most like the sorts of church history writing we are used to. Vols 7 and 8 are travelogues which are aimed to 'introduce a more warmly personal note' to the series and of these volume 7 is concerned particularly with Sudanese women. Vol 9 seeks 'to dramatize but not distort the truth of the events they depict' and thus 'to put human faces on a struggle that is often reported in the abstract terms of geopolitics and statistical analysis'. It includes dialogue some of which, the writer acknowledges, is 'pure invention' (p 9). Vol 10 is a massive history of the Sudanese church written by three scholars steeped in the Sudan and is a historical work of the first importance. It is therefore the volume to which we will give primacy of attention for the remainder of this review.

The story of the Sudan is one of the most heart-warming witnesses to the power of the Christian faith in the whole of the twentieth century. Prolonged war, systematic attempts at cultural obliteration, constant dislocation of peoples, severe

famine (often a consequence of some of the other elements) are part of the everyday news from Southern Sudan. As so often through the history of the church, the persecution has revitalized weak Christians, has produced heroes and heroines able to stand with any in the history of martyrdom in the two millennia of Christendom, has produced dramatic and sustained numerical growth of a sort which stands all rational explanation on its head and which is only paralleled in the whole of the twentieth century by the growth of the church in China – significantly too during a time of intense persecution by a totalitarian ideology.

Volume 10 tells this story in the measured, well researched way of the good historian. It is a work of careful scholarship. It is a pity in a work of this quality that the many sources of quotations and information are not always given. Whether this is a consequence of the speed of production or of the pressure of space is not clear. What is abundantly clear is the long history of the church in the Sudan – going back to the very earliest of times; then virtually disappearing and then almost but not quite beginning all over again as part of the missionary movement of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the very awareness of a Christian past has given shape and direction to the church in the Sudan. Certainly the cross was central in early Nubian Christianity (pp 79f) as it was to become again for the persecuted Christians in the last decades of the twentieth century (p 557). In this connection it is surely suggestive that the tall hand-held crosses so symbolic of the contemporary church in the Sudan seem to be very similar to those used by the Nubians many years before (p 101).

The story of the church in the Sudan lays bare issues not only of great missiological importance but of great relevance to many parts of the world-wide church. On the one hand it is evident that the church's amazing growth is in some considerable measure due to the fact that it represents and symbolizes a coherent spiritual, ideological and cultural counterpoint to the perverse policy of Islamization and Arabization pursued with such fixated zeal by the North. The Christian faith 'offered a universal alternative of comparable power to counter the invading forces of Arabism and Islam' (p 538). On the other hand, it is equally evident that the church has managed to hold its distance from a crude and simplistic southern nationalism. Indeed it only moved slowly and reluctantly to a closer political identification with the forces of resistance and it has always retained its capacity to be critical of those nationalist leaders who saw it as a useful ideological instrument the better to achieve their ends. That the church has resisted becoming an echo of the soldiers and politicians is a considerable tribute to its spirituality and its brave resilience.

Another issue which the story highlights is the reality and pain of living with an uncompromising and intolerant belief system. In this case the belief system in Islam. Islam is of course a complex religion which has shown many different faces through its history and still does today. There is little historical accuracy in denying that a constant, recurring and fairly dominant theme has been Islamic intolerance either of being in a minority or dealing with minorities when it is the majority. As Paul Vallely puts it Islam 'is programmed for victory. It has no theology for failure,

or of being a minority'.² It has no theology, he might have added, of accepting minorities as equals. Hence there has been a tendency to intolerance. At times this has been subsumed under a benign and generous appreciation of minorities – so long as they knew their place. At other times this tendency to intolerance has at least been held in restraint, only appearing in moments of threat. Quite often however it has not been held in restraint but has been expressed in active and sustained policies aimed at religious and cultural hegemony. It is this last form that is dominant in the Sudan for most of this story, triumphing as it did over more moderate and inclusive expressions represented by, for example, the Republican Brothers (vol 4, 52).

The attitude of this uncompromising creed to the Christian church in the South is described again and again in all its cruelty, barbarity, inhumanity and sheer unreasonableness in these books. It is by the way told with remarkable emotional restraint and a great desire to find a softer and more tolerant side to Islam. Such a side however appears rarely and is often suppressed almost as ruthlessly as Christianity. It is somewhat politically incorrect even to mention such realities in the behaviour of the followers of Islam in our society (though all may have changed since 11 September which occurred after most of this essay was written). Hence the recent BBC2 programmes on Islam have given us a perspective so positive, so airbrushed of all blemishes, so distorting of the complex realities of history that it is a nonsense – at any rate so far as history is concerned. There is of course a proper desire to avoid anything which might contribute to religious and cultural hatred. It has however taken a brave Islamic intellectual, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown to remind us 'that most Islamic states are scandalously inept and inhumane' and to point out how the BBC programmes 'dangerously glossed over the coercion, the forced conversions' which were 'also part of the expansion of the Islamic Empire.' 'We must', she continues 'reflect on our shortcomings past and present, otherwise we are being treated as children.'³ What the calm, restrained prose of these books has done is to establish that the Sudan is one major Islamic 'shortcoming'.

As we engage with the savage, murderous inhumanity of that story, we might reflect that it is echoed, if not replicated in scale, in quite a few other areas and that it is by no means confined to Islam. Indeed the most horrific examples through the last century came not from religious fanaticism but from the godless ideologies of Communism and Nazism. As anti-Christian (and perhaps anti-religious) forces grow in other places, not excluding the West, we may find ourselves turning to the Sudan not as a tragic but rather remote example of something that is unimaginable here but as an apposite case-study of how Christians should deal with an ideology which is interested in erasing them from the picture.

Another reality which emerges from the story is the power and vibrancy of a faith which is truly indigenous. As in so many places the dominant catalyst for this was the expulsion of the missionaries, but it was not the only factor. There were

2 'What the West Ignores about Muslim Martyrdom and the Great Satan', *The Independent: The Saturday Review*, 15 September 2001, p 13.

3 'Please don't make us out to be angels', *The Independent: The Monday Review*, 20 August 2001.

strands within the Sudanese missionary heritage which pointed in this direction. One of the very great missionaries of the nineteenth century was a Roman Catholic – Bishop Daniel Comboni. His slogan was ‘the regeneration of Africa by the Africans’. He therefore drew up a plan in 1864 to set up institutions where Africans could be trained as priests and lay workers ‘without being Europeanized’ (p 159). Those destined for the priesthood should not be expected to study all the subjects required in a European seminary but ‘only in the theological and scientific subjects of prime necessity, which are sufficient for the needs and requirements of these African countries’ (p 179).

Though these principles were not practised by most serving missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were echoed from time to time by, for example, the Sudan Interior Mission and by some great missionaries such as the revered and deeply loved Archdeacon Shaw who developed, for example, indigenous music, which later on was to become such a notable feature of the Sudanese church. How far an awareness of these principles helped a truly indigenous church to develop when the missionaries were forced to leave and when the policy of Islamization was at its height is unclear. It may well have been a far more reflex reaction prompted by the absence of missionaries and by the crude attempt to wipe out southern culture. By whatever route, the Sudanese church has emerged as a vibrant, immensely courageous, deeply culturally related church.

And this brings us to the last point and that is how, so perversely to its opponents, the Sudanese church so often demonstrated courage under persecution and has grown in the face of persecution. If the rulers in Khartoum had been a little better versed in the story of the church they might have thought twice before embarking on their campaign to wipe out the Christian South. They might, even late in the day, have concluded that practical self-interest dictated a different policy as they read, for example, the Sudanese Roman Catholic bishops’ assurances to the Pope in October 1992: ‘Most of our faithful, instead of showing fear or discouragement before what we rightly call religious persecution, have begun to profess and live their faith more meaningfully and courageously’ (vol 4, p 80). They took no heed. The reaction of the Sudanese Christians to their systematic cruelty is one of the great untold stories of the church in the twentieth century. It has now been told – at least in part. The wider church is the richer and the more challenged for its telling. Thank you.

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