

Christianity Was Never White

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Abstract

Christianity's presence in Africa dates back to its earliest days, illustrating the continent's central role in the faith's development and dissemination. This paper challenges the common narrative that Christianity arrived in Africa solely through European missionaries, instead highlighting its apostolic origins and the contributions of African communities. Key milestones include the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion in Acts 8, marking Africa's initial documented encounter with the Gospel, and the establishment of the Alexandrian Church by Mark the Evangelist, which became a theological and intellectual hub. Early North African theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine profoundly shaped foundational Christian doctrines, including Trinitarian theology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. Despite persecution, African Christians exhibited remarkable resilience, leaving a legacy of theological innovation and spiritual depth. Reclaiming this heritage is vital in countering misconceptions that Christianity is foreign to Africa, while affirming its historical and theological roots within African culture. The study concludes by emphasising the need for further research into Africa's pivotal role in the global church and its continued influence on Christian theology.

Apostolic Foundations of Christianity in Africa

Christianity's arrival in Africa dates to the earliest years of the faith, underscoring the continent's integral role in the spread and development of the Gospel. Contrary to the often-assumed narrative that Christianity was introduced to Africa solely through European missionaries, historical and biblical evidence demonstrates that African Christian communities emerged directly from apostolic outreach. This paper explores the foundational moments of African Christianity, focusing on its biblical and theological origins and the roles played by African individuals and communities in the early church.

The Ethiopian Eunuch: Africa's First Convert

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, recorded in Acts 8:26–39, represents the earliest documented instance of Christianity reaching Africa. The eunuch, a high-ranking official in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, encountered the apostle Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. After Philip explained the prophecy of Isaiah, the eunuch expressed faith in Jesus Christ and was baptised:

"And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:38–39).

This encounter is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights Africa's direct inclusion in the early Christian mission. Scholars such as Thomas C. Oden argue that the Ethiopian eunuch likely brought the faith back to his homeland, thereby establishing one of the first

African Christian communities.¹ Additionally, Ethiopia's prominence as an ancient civilisation ensured that the Gospel message could spread across significant regions of sub-Saharan Africa. The Ethiopian eunuch's story demonstrates how Christianity began to integrate into African cultural and social contexts from its earliest days.

Mark the Evangelist and the Alexandrian Church

Tradition holds that Mark the Evangelist, one of the authors of the Gospels, founded the church in Alexandria, Egypt, around 42 AD.² The Alexandrian church quickly became one of the most influential centres of early Christianity, particularly in theology and biblical scholarship.

Alexandria's strategic location as a cultural and intellectual hub facilitated the synthesis of Greek philosophical thought with Christian doctrine. By the second century, Alexandrian theologians such as Clement and Origen had developed robust theological frameworks that emphasised scriptural interpretation, the nature of Christ, and the Trinity.³ The Catechetical School of Alexandria, established during this period, trained leaders who would shape the global church.

The theological contributions from the Alexandrian church laid the foundation for key doctrines of the faith. For example, Origen's allegorical method of biblical interpretation profoundly influenced Christian hermeneutics for centuries. Furthermore, the Alexandrian church played a vital role in the development of the Nicene Creed, as the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) included bishops from Egypt and surrounding regions. This underscores the foundational role of African theologians in shaping orthodox Christian doctrine.

Christianity in North Africa: Carthage and Beyond

Beyond Alexandria, North Africa became a vibrant centre of Christianity, particularly in regions such as Carthage (modern-day Tunisia). By the second and third centuries, Carthage produced influential theologians who significantly shaped early Christian thought. Tertullian, often called the "*Father of Latin Theology*," coined the term Trinity and articulated the doctrine in response to heresies such as Modalism.⁴ His writings laid the groundwork for Trinitarian theology and established a framework for addressing theological controversies. Similarly, Cyprian of Carthage emphasised church unity and the sacramental nature of baptism. His work, *On the Unity of the Church*, remains a foundational text in ecclesiology.⁵

These theologians were not isolated contributors but part of a broader North African Christian community characterised by its resilience under persecution. For instance, the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas in 203 AD exemplifies the commitment of early African Christians to

¹ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), pp. 102–105.

² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book II, Chapter 16. See also "Mark the Evangelist" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1018.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 83–90.

⁴ Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, Chapter 2. See also Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 63–65.

⁵ Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Church*, Chapter 4. See also J. Patout Burns Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 113–115.

their faith, even in the face of Roman imperial opposition. Their stories highlight the depth of Christian conviction and the socio-political challenges faced by African believers in the early centuries.

Theological and Biblical Foundations in Early African Christianity

The theology of early African Christians was deeply rooted in Scripture and shaped by the socio-political realities of their time. African theologians contributed to the development of doctrines such as the Trinity, Christology, and ecclesiology, and they defended the faith against heresies, establishing a theological legacy that influenced the global church.

For example, Athanasius of Alexandria was instrumental in opposing Arianism during the fourth century. His defence of Christ's divinity in *On the Incarnation* was pivotal in the formation of orthodox Christian doctrine at the Council of Nicaea.⁶ Similarly, Augustine of Hippo, a North African bishop, profoundly shaped Western Christianity with his writings on grace, salvation, and original sin. Augustine's theological works, including *Confessions* and *The City of God*, continue to influence Christian thought and practice.⁷

Reclaiming African Heritage in Christianity

In contemporary discourse, Christianity is often misrepresented as a “white man's religion,” a misconception that undermines the deep historical roots of African Christianity. The early church in Africa—from the Ethiopian eunuch to theologians like Tertullian and Augustine—demonstrates that Africans were not merely recipients but active shapers of Christian theology and practice.

Kwame Bediako, an African theologian, advocates for the reclamation of Africa's Christian heritage as essential to countering this narrative. He emphasises that African Christianity must reconnect with its roots to inspire confidence and pride among African believers.⁸ Bediako's work highlights how integrating traditional African cultural values with biblical theology can build a robust and authentically African Christian identity.

Reclaiming this heritage is not just a historical exercise but a theological imperative. It challenges the colonial narrative that has often portrayed Christianity as foreign to Africa and calls African Christians to embrace their identity as inheritors of a rich and ancient faith. This recognition empowers African Christians to engage their communities with confidence, knowing that their faith is deeply intertwined with their heritage.

Conclusion

The apostolic foundations of Christianity in Africa demonstrate the continent's integral role in the early church. From the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion to the theological contributions of figures like Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, Africa was not merely a recipient of Christianity but a key participant in its development. These early communities and

⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 45–49. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 250–254.

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book IX, pp. 198–203; *The City of God* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), Book XIV, pp. 567–572.

⁸ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 42–47.

theologians established a biblical and theological legacy that remains relevant today. Recognising and reclaiming Africa's place in the history of Christianity is essential for understanding the faith's global and multicultural dimensions. Future research should continue to explore the interconnectedness of African Christianity with broader theological and historical developments, highlighting its enduring influence on the global church.

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