

# Christian-Muslim Relations in Sudan – An Update

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## The Background

### 1. Sudanese Christians:

In a population of about 30 million people, Christians in Sudan represent 16%, thus constituting the third largest religious group after Muslims (62 %) and followers of traditional religions (22%). In the South however Christians are about 48.4% (Source: Atlas du Monde Arabe, November 1992). These statistics only refer to baptised Christians, and do not take into account the number of displaced people (some estimates refer to about 4 million refugees since the beginning of the hostilities in 1983, half of which internally displaced).

Represented in the Country are the following Churches:

Roman Catholic Church, with over 200 church buildings, many more places of worship, schools, junior seminaries and a theological college.

Episcopal Church of the Sudan, with 24 dioceses, 275 church buildings, 400 priests and a theological college.

(Between them these two Churches constitute the substantive majority of the Christian community in the Sudan)

Coptic Orthodox Church.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Greek Orthodox Church.

Armenian Apostolic Church.

Presbyterian Church of the Sudan.

Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church.

Sudan Pentecostal Church.

Sudan Interior Church, with 111 evangelical congregations, running the Gideon Theological College in Khartoum.

Africa Inland Church.

Sudan Church of Christ.

These form the Sudan Council of Churches, a Khartoum-based round table organisation founded in 1972, following the Addis Ababa peace agreement that brought an end to the first civil war after

independence. As many dioceses have become isolated from the capital during the present conflict, the New Sudan Council of Churches was formed in 1989 by the Roman Catholic, the Episcopal, the Presbyterian, the African Inland, the Sudan Interior, and the Pentecostal churches, based in Nairobi and operating in rebel-held regions of Sudan. Both organisations, as well as the mainstream churches – notably the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches – are very outspoken and have exerted a strong influence on both the Government and the rebels through these past two decades, denouncing religious discrimination or persecution and human rights violations, and encouraging negotiations towards lasting and just peace and reconciliation.

Christianity in Sudan boasts of tracing its origins back to the apostolate of a eunuch minister of the Kandake, or Queen of the Ethiopians, whose baptism is described in Acts 8:26-39, and that local legends see appointed Patriarch of Nubia by the Evangelist Matthew. We have no historical evidence of this. There is evidence, however, of some Nubians converting to Christianity when monks arriving from Egypt visited the kingdom of Nobadia between 300 and 500.

According to John of Ephesus (516-586), an officer at the Byzantine court and later Bishop, the Roman Emperor Justinian sent Melkite missionaries to Nobadia in the year 543, while his wife Theodora sent Monophysite preachers (Ecclesiastical History, Part III). Reportedly, the Nobadians preferred the men of the Empress and the Orthodox missionaries might have moved to the neighbouring kingdoms of Muqurrah and Garamantes, as also reported by John Abbot of Biclarium (d. 610) in his Chronicle. According to John of Ephesus the kingdom of Alwa was also evangelised by Longinus, Monophysite bishop to the Nubians, in 580. The Begas, situated between the Nile and the Red Sea, became Christians in the 7th century. The Nubian Christian kingdoms were gradually absorbed into the Muslim culture of neighbouring Egypt. The war with Egypt in 1275 only accelerated their decline. The last one to succumb was the Kingdom of Alwa, which fell in 1504.

Fresh attempts to re-evangelise the Nubians were made by the Catholic Church in the 16th and 17th centuries, and then in the 19th century, when eventually Pope Gregory XVI erected the Vicariate of Central Africa in Khartoum in 1846, entrusting it to the care of the Maltese Bishop Casolani.

## **2. Christian-Muslim Relations:**

Article 24 of the 1998 Constitution of the Republic of the Sudan states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the right to manifest and disseminate his religion or belief in teaching, practice or observance. No one shall be coerced to profess a faith in which he does not believe or perform rituals or worship that he does not voluntarily accept." Nor can religious criteria be taken into consideration in the assigning of public offices. Other Constitutional decrees affirm that "Islam is the guiding religion for the overwhelming majority of the Sudanese people", but also that "revealed religions such as Christianity, or traditional religious beliefs may be freely adopted by anyone with no coercion in regards to beliefs and no restriction on religious observances. These principles are observed by the State and its laws". ('Principles, Regulations and Constitutional Developments for 1993', Government of Sudan, Khartoum, 16 October 1993). The 1962 Missionary Societies Act that used to put a great amount of legal constraints on the activities of foreign-based Church organisations has been repealed in 1994. Every year the Ministry of Culture sponsors the Holy Book Floating Festival, a Bible festival on the river Nile, in Khartoum. The teaching of Christianity to Christians in government schools is part of the curriculum. Indeed the churches run several hundreds schools in the country, some of which are prestigious, such as the Roman Catholic Comboni College in Khartoum. In the North of the Country Friday is the day off for Muslims and Christians; the latter, however, also benefit from two hours break on Sunday to attend Church services. In the South, Sunday is the official day of rest. Several Sudanese Christians have always played a very active role in the political life of the Country, many serving over the years in posts as high up as those of ministers both in Federal and in State governments, the most prominent among them being the Vice President Professor Moses Machar. Other Christians have served over the years as ambassadors, magistrates and police and army senior officers. The governors of the ten Southern Provinces are also all Christians.

Pope John Paul II visited the Sudan in February 1993, invited by the Government. The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey also visited in 1995 and 2000. Large gatherings of Christians in Khartoum also took place in the years 2000 and 2001. In 2000, during a week-long Easter event organised by the German evangelist Reinhard Bonke, an estimated 60,000 people attended the

meetings on the first day alone. The President Bashir had to intervene on public television to calm down public feelings following the claims by the event organisers of thousands of conversions to the Christian faith. In October 2001 evangelist Sammy Tippit held a large meeting in the main Khartoum stadium with about 20,000 people attending, and about five thousand reported conversions. In 1996 Human Rights Watch/Africa reported that 6000 adults had been baptised on Easter night the previous year in one Roman Catholic Church alone.

On this background of apparent religious freedom, however, relationships between the Church and the military Government of General Omar Ahsan Bashir, who came to power in 1989, have been marked by reciprocal distrust. The Government stands accused of having over the years conducted a policy even of attempted genocide and forced islamisation of the Southern populations, perpetrating, through its armed forces or Government-sponsored militias, horrible acts of indiscriminate aggression towards innocent civilians and Christian communities in particular.

Christian mission activity and the planting of an indigenous church in Sudan began after 1899, following the defeat of the Mahdist revolt in the Country and the formal occupation of Sudan by Anglo-Egyptian forces. The Roman Catholic (mainly Italian and German) and Anglican (through the Church Missionary Society) alliance with the British colonial power, and their concerted and overtly expressed efforts to halt the advancement of Islam in the south, has given the Sudanese Government, since independence in 1956, plenty of arguments to accuse Christians, financed by foreign interests abroad, of subversive activities and intentions. This culminated with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries in 1964. In the years that followed, until the missionaries were allowed back in the 80s, numerous cases of Sudanese Christians, including clergy, being arrested, tortured and killed, were reported and documented in great numbers.

### **3. The War:**

The present hostilities in Sudan are actually the second phase in a conflict that began in 1955, lasted until 1972 and flared up again in 1983. Their roots however are to be found in the remote past. Firstly in the invasions by cattle raisers Nilotic (such as Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk) and pastoralist Nilo-Hamitic (such as Bari, Mundari, and Latuko) groups (fifth-sixth century?) into the Nile valley in Southern Sudan, that violently pushed aside the original agriculturalist Sudanic groups (such as Ndogo and Fertit) - much of the violence perpetrated in the south over the last two civil wars has been happening along tribal lines. Secondly in the deep distrust by the Southern population of Sudan for the Arabs in the north, even tribes that in their alliance to the Government during the war have found a way to continue their fight against their ancestral tribal enemies; distrust that goes back to the days of Arab slave raiders' and traders' penetration into the south in the first half of the 19th century. This same distrust for all that is Arab is often behind the generalised resistance of the Southern tribes to embrace Islam. The arabised Northern tribes, on the other hand, reciprocate with generalised prejudiced attitudes of contempt towards the population of the south. Both convictions are not just perceived by outsiders, but are very real and expressed explicitly in conversation by the people, often with the help of colourful or even abusive epithets. One cannot fully understand the root causes of the war, nor appreciate the nuances of the Christian-Muslim relations in Sudan without paying due attention to these issues.

Then of course there are other reasons behind the conflict rooted in unresolved political and economic issues that go back to the early days of independence and before.

In 1951 Faruk proclaimed himself King of Egypt and Sudan, but, in July 1952, he was dethroned by a group of young colonels, among whom was Gamal Abdel Nasser. In a conference held in Cairo, at which Egyptian, British, and Northern Sudanese officials were present (no one from the South was invited), the new Republican Government decided to support a united independent Sudan. Thus, in January 1953, an Anglo-Egyptian agreement ended the Sudan Condominium. In the meantime preparations were underway for the election of the first Executive Council. The two major parties were from the North: the Umma Party, republican and liberal, supported by the Mahdist sect of the Ansar and led by Sayyed Abd el-Rahman, and the National

Unionist Party, a political coalition made up of the Ashiqqua, the Socialist Party, and the National Party, and led by Ismail Al-Azhari with the support of urban professionals, advocating some form of

union with Egypt. The other groups were the Southern Party, the Black Bloc (for an independent south), the Southern political Association, the Socialist Republican Party, the Anti-Colonial Front (Communist), the National Front Party (pro-Egyptian), and fifty-seven independent candidates.

Elections were held on November 15 to 25, 1953, open to all registered male Sudanese over the age of 21, that is 1,687,000 people out of a population of over 9 million. In the south the limited number of people that were registered voted on badges with drawings representing the candidates, and, in some districts, by acclamation. The elections were won by the National Unionist Party. Of the twenty-two Southern delegates elected to the House, 17 were Christians and three Muslims. The eleven Senators were all Christians. The Prime Minister became Ismail Azhari, who, interestingly enough soon began to mitigate his political views and to talk of the Sudan in terms of an independent ally of Egypt, "as France and England". The new Sudanese Government took care of the internal affairs of the country while foreign policy remained under the jurisdiction of the British Governor General. But after the elections several incidents occurred which increased the tensions between north and south.

In February, 1954, a "Sudanisation Committee" was set up with the remit of replacing British officials with Sudanese ones in government posts. The Committee was made of three Northern and two British members. In October the names of the new Sudanese administrators were announced: out of 800 posts only six were assigned to Southerners. The highest of those six posts was that of Assistant District Commissioner. The Southern Party, in conference at Malakal, asked the Parliament to assign to Southerners three more posts of Governors, three of Vice-Governors, six of District Commissioners, eight of Vice-D.C., and twelve of Mamurs. The Parliament responded by assigning four posts of Vice-D.C., and two of Mamurs.

Tensions degenerated into open revolt in 1955. A bloody conflict ravaged the south until 1972, when an agreement signed in Addis Ababa gave the south some form of autonomy, under the regime of President Jaafar Nimeiri. In 1983, Nimeiri, pressurised by his political ally the Islamist National Islamic Front of Dr Hassan Turabi, imposed a version of the Islamic law. The south, already disaffected by a decade of perceived unfairness by the Government in Khartoum – especially in the two most contentious issues of the digging of the world's biggest canal in the southern marshes and of the investments in the north of revenues from the newly discovered oil fields in the south – took up arms again with a number of rebel movements, the largest of them being the Sudan People's Liberation Army of John Garang. This war has caused indescribable suffering, with over two million people killed, about four million displaced and innumerable reports of cruel mistreatment of the civilian population. Perpetrators of these atrocities have been the army (with indiscriminate bombardment of civilian targets and air raids) the irregular Government sponsored militias (a true plague that has disseminated horror and panic in the southern villages) and the rebels (who have been often engaging in actions of looting and reprisal against unarmed civilians of different ethnic background from their own). War brings about endemic malnutrition for large sections of the population, recurrent famine and a generalised worsening of standards of hygiene and health. In recent years the conflict has spread also to some areas in the north, such as the Nuba mountains in Southern Kordofan and the western region of Darfur, where, since last February, the Sudan Liberation Movement own war against Khartoum has already caused 400,000 displaced people, of which 65,000 have fled into already impoverished areas in Chad (UNHCR, September 2003).

President Bashir took power in 1989; behind him the powerful figure of Dr Turabi and his National Islamic Front. Turabi was ousted from the Government in December 1999, for personal, however, not political reasons (The Economist; August 19-25 2000, Sudanese Contradictions).

Sudan, ostracised by the international community after the failed attempt to the life of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, was suspended by the IMF in 1993 for failing to pay interests on its debt. The suspension was lifted in the summer of 2000 and the Country has ever since enjoyed better relations both with its neighbours and with the West. The former in the past have often overtly financed the rebel forces, providing them with logistical support. The latter, eager to exploit the economic advantages of the newly discovered oil resources, is now praising Khartoum for its improved human rights records and freedom of expression. The Roman Catholic Church, that last winter succeeded, for the first time, in winning a court case against the Government for the police attack on its school and social centre in Dorushab six years ago, is also acknowledging that some progress has been made (G. Barsella. La visita della Campagna al Nord Sudan. Nigrizia on line. 12/2/2003).

## **4. Oil:**

Oil was first discovered in Sudan in 1975 by Chevron Overseas Petroleum Company. Production began in 1976, and terminated in 1984, when three foreign Chevron employees were killed in a rebel attack in Nuer territory. In 1992 Chevron sold its concession in Sudan. Among the buyers was Arakis Energy Co. of Canada, that later sold 75 % of its shares to China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), Petronas of Malaysia and Sudapet, to form the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC) in 1996. Pipelines were soon put in place to transport oil from the deposits in the south to Port Sudan and oil tankers on the northern shores of the Red Sea.

In 1998 Talisman Energy of Canada also joined the consortium buying out the remaining 25 % of the Arakis shares. Another consortium was later established for the exploitation of other oil fields, with the participation of large Western companies such as Lundin Oil of Sweden and TotalFinaElf.

Full scale oil production resumed in 1999 with 205 thousand barrels a day (145 thousand earmarked for export), with oil reserves estimated at 262.1 billion barrels, of which only 750 million recoverable, in sites situated along or over the border with South Sudan. At the present rate of extraction they will be exhausted within the next 10 to 15 years, hence the strategic importance of controlling areas of the south - where new oil fields are presumed to be located - and the Government's almost paranoid attitude towards civilian populations living along the pipelines, considered to be a security risk and being made target of continuous attacks. The cash flow into the Sudan treasury (over one billion Dollars annually) that oil export has determined, has allowed the Government to increase its arms budget exponentially.

It is because of these reports of human rights abuses against civilian populations that international pressure and internal critique on the part of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches have been mounting over the years forcing Lundin and Talisman to sell their shares in March this year to Petronas and ONGC Videsh of India. OMV of Austria followed suit at the end of August (IRIN. Nairobi. 5/9/2003).

## **Latest Media Reports**

## **5. Peace Talks:**

Much of the international press has been reporting extensively on the peace negotiations that resumed last January between the Sudanese Government and the Southern rebels. After months of great expectations and frustrating delays, last July, the two parts meeting in Nakuru, Kenya, discussed a proposed agreement for the establishment of an emergency Government that would remain in place for six months. After that a National Assembly will be based in Khartoum. It will be supported by two parliaments, one in the north and the other in the south. After six years a referendum will be held in which a decision concerning the independence to the south will be left to the vote of the Southern people. The Islamic law presently in force in the whole Country and one of the main issues of political contention, would be applied only where each parliament will decide to adopt it.

The negotiations, for many aspects similar in their content to the Addis Ababa agreement of 30 years ago, have been taking place under the auspices of USA (the main promoter of the agreement), UK (the former colonial power), Italy and Norway (over the years very much involved in humanitarian aid to the Sudan). Washington is pouring huge sums of money in financial aid to the two parties in the negotiations, hoping that a successful outcome will please other Arab countries, Egypt in particular. Cairo on one hand has always looked at the Sudanese political elite and its love affair with Islamic militancy with great suspicion, on the other hand is consistently opposed to any perceived threat to the territorial integrity of the Sudan for fear that the keys to the Nile, on which the control of vital water supply to the whole of Egypt depends, may fall into the wrong hands.

The Government's rejection of the terms of the agreement brought the negotiations to a standstill. An article by Bill Bowder on the Church Times on line (Churches Join to Call for Peace in Sudan,

8/8/2003) explained that the Government opposed some of the terms of the accord, notably the excessive length of the interim phase before the referendum, the idea of a separate army in the south and that of a free zone in Khartoum where the current Islamic law would no longer apply. The rift was serious enough to warrant a second meeting in Kampala (after that held in Nairobi in 2001) of leaders of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Sudan who issued a joint statement condemning the Government for its attempts to undermine the peace talks and reiterating the Church's commitment to peace at all cost. Among others, the Belgian based think-tank International Crisis Group has described this latest round of talks as "make or break" for the peace process in the Sudan and "the best chance for peace in 20 years" (Peace Talks Resume, Government Hopes for "More Reasonable" Accord. UN Integrated Regional Information Networks. 12/8/2003) in this the largest country in Africa and allegedly the world largest producer of displaced people during Africa's longest war (The Resumption of Peace Talks. Accra Mail. 13/8/2003). All agree that failure to achieve a stable solution to the conflict will certainly mean a resumption of the hostilities now stopped thanks to a cease-fire agreed last October that is generally holding (except for the North-western region of Darfur).

Sudanese Christians inside the Country and in the Diaspora were engaging in fervent prayer hoping for the resumption of the peace talks, especially after General Bashir was reported as dismissing the proposed terms of the agreement and saying in an interview to the Egyptian daily Al-Ahram, "We are not going to sign any peace agreement that does not implement justice" (O. Njuguna. African Church Information Service. 18/8/2003).

Negotiations were resumed on August 11 under the umbrella of IGAD (Inter Governmental Authority on Development, a regional institution comprising Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Uganda, Somalia and Kenya, that has overseen peace negotiations in Sudan for the last ten years), with 19 officials representing the Government, and 17 delegates attending on behalf of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) (C. Kinyungu. Debate Plan for Sudanese Peace Ready. The Nation (Nairobi). 13/8/2003).

IGAD chief mediator, ex Kenya Army officer Lazarus Sumbeiywo, chairing the talks in Nanyuki, Kenya, has declared that he has had ample consultations before the resumption of the peace talks, with the head of states of Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia who had approved of the terms of the agreement (P. Wachira. Peace Talks Set to Resume Tomorrow. The East African Standard (Nairobi). 10/8/2003).

Finally, on September 25, the parts signed an agreement on the issue of security arrangements. General Bashir and the leader of the SPLA John Garang reportedly had a telephone conversation expressing satisfaction for the historic accord. Dr Garang has been quoted as saying that "this process is irreversible and we are looking forward to resolving other key issues regarding the sharing of wealth and power with the same commitment and focus" (K. Masibo and M. Ithula. Parties Sign Pact. The Nation. Nairobi. 26/9/2003).

Negotiators will resume talks on October 6 outside Nairobi, the signing of the security accord being only a partial achievement, albeit on "the biggest sticking point", a "major stumbling block" in the negotiations. (Reuters. Naivasha, Kenya. 26/9/2003).

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