

## CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM AND THE AFRICAN WORLD. EDWARD WILMOT BLYDEN (1832-1912) AND CONTEMPORARY MISSIONARY THOUGHT\*

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In many parts of the African continent the religion of the Crescent preceded the religion of the Cross and the struggle between Islam and Christianity became a prominent feature of nineteenth century missionary thought. The publication of E.W. Blyden's famous work *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* in 1887 created an uproar in missionary circles and the wider public and Blyden's Islamic preferences and the question of the suitability of Islam or Christianity for Africans were very much commented and discussed.

The title of the present study borrowed and is a paraphrase of the famous work *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* written by Edward Wilmott Blyden (1832-1912) and first published in London in 1887. Blyden, whose active career in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Lagos spanned the years 1851-1912, has been considered by many to be "the most brilliant and articulate Negro spokesman on Africa in the half century preceding his death".<sup>1</sup> In his *magnum opus* *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* Blyden summed up his political and cultural theories, based on a rich fund of living experience and profound study. This remarkable volume and Blyden's most influential work contained many challenging and stimulating ideas on the themes touched upon and discussed also by the present author. They concerned the influence of Christianity and Islam on Africa, the role of the Christian missions in the "regeneration" of Africa and Africans, the character and achievement of the African or, in Blyden's terminology, Negro race and the role, past and future, of the New World Blacks in Africa. Blyden's life, work and achievements have received much scholarly attention. He has been celebrated as "the First African Personality", father of

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, Hollis R.: *The Attitude of Edward W. Blyden to European Imperialism in Africa*. In: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. III., No. 2, 1965, p. 249. See also Lynch, Hollis R.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden. Pan-Negro Patriot 1832-1912*. London, Oxford University Press 1967. 272 pp.

a total philosophy of Africanness which not only had a great appeal for his contemporaries, but for future generations of Africans as well.<sup>2</sup>

Both Christianity and Islam entered the African continent during the earliest days of their existence. Africa has had some of the oldest forms of Christianity<sup>3</sup> and the Muslim presence in some regions of Africa has very deep roots, too. Islam can claim to have been by far the largest of the pre-colonial African religions and it continued to expand during the colonial period and after Independence. In many parts of the African continent where the religion of the Crescent preceded the religion of the Cross, Christian missionaries were late arrivals.

Cultural contacts of African peoples with the West were no doubt led by Christian missions, the missionary enterprise was a part of the European involvement in Africa. Cultural contact is a two-way affair and the meeting of two civilizations, European and African, was also a two-way process. The attitudes of Europeans towards Africa and the Africans in this period of cultural contact can be better understood only if they are seen as a part of a wider intellectual system, a total world view. This world view, which Europeans derived from contemplating their own European societies and on which European cultural tradition was based, served to distort and tint the cultural filters through which Europeans observed other parts of the world, and especially Africa. To quote Paul Ricoeur, "The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European centre has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture. Its superiority over other civilizations seemed to provide the experimental verification of this postulate."<sup>4</sup>

Many elaborate theories of race and culture, which came to be accepted by most Europeans, were put forward in the course of the nineteenth century and quite a few in England. As England in the nineteenth-century re-shaped itself into a class-conscious society based on a hierarchy of social grades, the new social order provided a ready foundation upon which to build a hierarchy of races and a set of racial assumptions which became part of the social, cultural, and intellectual baggage carried into Africa by the British and other Europeans in the few decades before and after the "Scramble for Africa".<sup>5</sup> The concept of

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. July, R.W.: *Nineteenth Century Negritude*: Edward W. Blyden. In: *Journal of African History* V, No. 1, 1964; also July, R.W.: *The Origins of Modern African Thought*. Chapter II. *The First African Personality*. Edward W. Blyden. New York, Praeger 1967; London, Faber 1968 and July, R.W.: *An African Voice. The Role of the Humanities in African Independence*. Durham, Duke University Press 1987. Also see Lynch, Hollis R.: *Edward W. Blyden: Pioneer West African Nationalist*. In: *Journal of African History*, VI, 3, 1965, pp. 373-388. Also see Senghor's foreword to Lynch, H.R. (Ed.): *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*. New York, KTO Press 1978, pp. XV-XXII.

<sup>3</sup> Christianity in Egypt, the Maghrib, Nubia and the Aksumite kingdom in present-day Ethiopia pre-dated the introduction of Christianity in most of Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur, P.: *History and Truth*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 277.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Lorimer, D.A.: *Colour, Class and the Victorians*. Leicester University Press, 1978 and Cairns, H.A.C.: *Prelude to Imperialism. British Reactions to Central African Society 1840-1890*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, pp. 35-72 and 147-167.

progress, which was such a prominent feature of the nineteenth-century European set of ideas and of evolutionary theories of historical change of human society, also implied the existence of a social hierarchy and a scalar ordering of societies perceived as a progression from primitive savagery to civilization. Since the white race had reached a higher rung upon a symbolic ladder up which all societies were climbing, and was advancing at a faster rate than other races, described as "lower" or "primitive", the European self-declared mission of leading non-white races along the road to civilization, conceptualized not as European civilization, but as "civilization unqualified and sole", knowledge, and true religion through Christian evangelization and colonization was considered as a natural right. For those who had to confront "the other" in a foreign setting, an elaborate ideology and a set of practices designed to control and change "the other" was inevitable.<sup>6</sup> The characterization of subordinate races by the dominant race was expressed in various conceptions of the subject race. The justifications, assertions and domination of the conception rested upon theories of science, evolution, culture and civilization. Deep-seated prejudices inherent in European cultural tradition towards dark-skinned people and beliefs about proper relationships between races based on alleged white superiority and an assumption of the white man's civilizing mission had grown up to rationalize them. Within the framework of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century all discourses on alterity or otherness could only be commentaries or exegeses on special traits of societies and cultures encountered and explanations of the possibilities of reducing non-Western otherness to Western sameness, defined and understood in terms of a model and a value standard determining attributes which emerged as classifiers with the power of measuring the social, cultural, historical and psychological distance from the "same" to the "other".<sup>7</sup>

Most Europeans were thus poorly equipped for either the intellectual understanding of African cultures or for any degree of empathy with the way of life they represented. Africans, African culture, religions and artifacts were classified according to the grid of Western thought and imagination in which alterity was a negative category of the same. European representations of Africans or more generally of the African continent, demonstrated this ordering of otherness. Descriptions of African inferiority and commentaries on the Africans' backwardness, mental retardation, indolence, etc. formed part of the series of oppositions and of the levels of classification of humans demanded by the logic of the evolution of mankind and the stages of progress and social development. Travellers, missionaries and early administrators in the nineteenth century and their successors in the later period spoke using the same type of signs and sym-

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<sup>6</sup> Burton, R.F.: *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*. London: Longmans, 1860. 2 vols; Cameron, V.L.: *Across Africa*. London, Philip, 1885, pp. 540-541; Lugard, F.D.: *The Rise of Our East African Empire: Early Efforts in Nyasaland and Uganda*. Edinburgh, W. Blackwood, 1893. 2 vols, pp. 381, 471.

<sup>7</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 12.

bols and acted upon them. In Mudimbe's words, "The African has become not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same."<sup>8</sup>

The early missionaries and administrators thus expounded the model of African spiritual and cultural metamorphosis and based their actions upon a general ideological framework according to which they saw themselves transforming the Africans through a civilizing process into people like themselves.<sup>9</sup> Conceptions of Africa's regeneration consistently involved reduction of differences into a Western historicity.<sup>10</sup> Stressing the discrepancy between "civilization" and Christianity on the one hand and "barbarism" or "primitiveness" and "paganism" on the other, means of "evolution" or "conversion" from the lower stage to the higher stage were searched for and various theories of the steps of colonization and subsequent methods for Africa's "regeneration" were proposed as an ideological explanation for forcing Africa and Africans into a new historical dimension. Theories of colonial expansion, of "the white man's burden" on the one hand, and philosophies of otherness and discourses on African primitiveness which flourished in Europe during the nineteenth century, emphasized the promotion of a particular model of history. In much of the early literature on Africa the nature of the Europeans' mission was described as the bearing of the gifts of civilization, Christianity, peace, justice and good government to the natives.<sup>11</sup> The four C's – Commerce, Christianity, Civilization, Colonization – were deemed by many liberal-minded Europeans to provide the most effective recipe for the transformation and regeneration of Africa.<sup>12</sup>

The foundation documents of many new missionary societies pointed towards an adaptive missiology, advocated a pluralistic understanding of Christianity and even suggested that the Christian Church in Africa should develop its own forms of expression, however, the praxis of the missionary movement in general turned out to be different and the missionary enterprise was of prime importance in the westernization of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Edward W. Blyden tried to see the problem in its entirety. He was a West-Indian of pure African descent, born in what was then the Danish island of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Blyden came to Liberia, the black American colony on the West African coast founded in 1822 and independent since 1847,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Roscoe, Rev. J.: *Apolo Kagawa, Katikiro and Regent of Uganda*. In: Church Missionary Gleaner, July 1, 1902, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa*, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Lugard, F.D.: *The Rise of Our East African Empire*, op. cit., p. 381, 471.

<sup>12</sup> Hallett, R.: *Changing European Attitudes to Africa*. In: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, ed. J.E. Flint, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 458-496, esp. 488-492

<sup>13</sup> Pawliková- Vilhanová, Viera: Christian Missionary Enterprise in Africa. A Synonym for "Cultural Imperialism"? In: *Asian and African Studies*, 11, 2002, 1, pp. 49-68.

as a very young man at the age of eighteen in January 1851 via the United States. Hoping to gain a higher education he spent seven months in America attempting vainly to enrol first in Rutgers Theological College and, failing in his effort, in two other theological Colleges both of which refused him admission on racial grounds. Disappointed by the racial discrimination he encountered in the United States due to his colour, he decided to emigrate to Africa at the expense of the American Colonization Society.<sup>14</sup> The destination was the young Republic of Liberia, where he hoped to complete his studies. In Liberia he attended Alexander High School in Monrovia where he studied theology, geography, mathematics and the classics. He proved to be a brilliant student who excelled especially in the last two subjects. In 1862 he was appointed professor of Classical languages at Liberia College, the first secular English speaking institution of higher learning in tropical Africa, and remained there as a Professor until 1871.<sup>15</sup> After 1871, Blyden divided his time in West Africa between Liberia and the British colonies of Sierra Leone and Lagos and his influence spread rapidly throughout English-speaking West Africa.

Blyden was no doubt a man of extraordinary commitment and many talents.<sup>16</sup> Despite a relatively short and limited formal education he developed into an outstanding scholar – historian, sociologist, theologian, classicist and linguist, who could read Greek and Latin fluently and besides all the Romance languages also mastered several West African languages as well as Arabic and Hebrew. Blyden was also a prolific writer though not always consistent in his views, which developed, matured and even changed over the years.<sup>17</sup> His most active years spanned the period of major European penetration and control of Africa, that is roughly the half century preceding the outbreak of the First World War. His major works were

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<sup>14</sup> The term was used by the Hon. Samuel Lewis in his Introductory Biographical Note to the first edition of Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Himself "a Negro, of unadulterated African blood", he claimed that Blyden was also "of the purest Negro parentage". See pp. VII and VIII. It was the father of Romeo Blyden and grandfather of Edward Blyden who came to the West Indies from Iboland. See also Esedebe, P.O.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) as a Pan-African Theorist*. In: Sierra Leone Studies, New Ser. No. 25, July 1969, pp. 14-23, esp. p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Blyden, who had long acted as adviser to Liberian Presidents, in 1864 also became Secretary of State and between 1864 and 1866 had to combine his position as Professor at Liberia College with his official position in the Liberian Government. Blyden hoped that Liberia College, the first secular English-speaking institution of higher learning in tropical Africa, would eventually become a University of great international renown serving black students and scholars from all over the world.

<sup>16</sup> Blyden, Edward Wilmot: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Edinburgh, At the University Press 1967. Christopher Fyfe's Introduction, pp. XI -XVIII. It was originally published with an Introduction by the Hon. Samuel Lewis in 1887 in London by W.B. Whittingham & Co., (second edition 1888) and reprinted eighty years later in Edinburgh.

<sup>17</sup> Very critical is Mudimbe who talks of "an unbelievable inconsistency in Blyden's thought". See Mudimbe, V.Y.: *E.W. Blyden's Legacy and Questions*. In: Mudimbe, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa*, op.cit., Chapter IV, pp. 98-134, esp. p. 115.

all written between 1851 and 1912 and expounded his views on the fundamental problems facing Africa.<sup>18</sup> Blyden's ultimate goal was the vindication of the African race. In seeking to oppose current racist theories he developed his own concept of race, stressing the virtues of the African race and fostering pride in its history and culture. The basic concept of Blyden's works was a successful endeavour to interpret the history and culture of Africa from the point of view of Africans themselves. Blyden continually had in mind the future of Africa and the Africans, but saw it always in terms of historical continuity. Blyden, a pioneer among African historians, realized the opinion that Africa was without history was demoralizing for Africans. He believed that Africans not only had a worthy past, they also possessed a unique culture and "in spite of all, the Negro race has yet its part to play – a distinct part – in the history of humanity, and the continent of Africa will be the principal scene of its activity".<sup>19</sup> An important pre-requisite in "regenerating Africa" and re-establishing its influence was thus in his view a dissemination of the knowledge that Africans had a history and culture of their own of which they could be proud. Blyden believed that "The Sphinx" which was for him a metaphor for Africa, "must solve her own riddle at last".<sup>20</sup>

Blyden had not only a wide knowledge of African history, thought, culture and traditions, but was also an outstanding publicist, a master of written English, and a brilliant speaker. By the time of the publication of *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Blyden's ideas had reached maturity. This collection of fifteen miscellaneous essays, written and first published between 1871 and 1887, was extremely well written. In an attempt to find answers to the urgent questions facing Africa and the black race, both Africans and the Negroes living in the diaspora, Blyden gathered an imposing mass of factual material, which was admirably sifted and worked up in brilliant style. Some readers even doubted that such a book could have been written by a Negro. In a long review published in November 1887, the prominent C.M.S. journal *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* commented: "...Dr. Blyden writes clearly, forcibly, often elegantly, not allowing himself to be betrayed into bombast... he can be congratulated on having written a book which can be read with satisfaction for its literary merits. He has also proved what we have always stoutly maintained – that under favourable, and indeed, as has been proved, even under unfavourable circumstances, the Negro can ably assert his position among other members of the human family".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> A list of his published writings drawn up by his biographer, Miss Edith Holden, contains nearly a hundred items. Holden, Edith: *Blyden of Liberia. An Account of the Life and Labors of Edward Wilmot Blyden, LL.D. As Recorded in Letters and Print*. New York 1967. See also Christopher Fyfe's Introduction to the reissue of the first edition of Edward W. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Edinburgh, At the University Press 1967.

<sup>19</sup> *Africa and the Africans*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>20</sup> *Africa's Service to the World*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. In: *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record, A Monthly Journal of Missionary Information*, Vol. XII, New Series, November, 1887, pp. 649-666, esp. p. 649.

Though some of Blyden's ideas, especially his criticism of missionaries and his Islamic preferences created an uproar in the missionary circles and the wider public and were much commented and discussed, the cultured sophistication of the author of *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* was greatly admired in Europe and the New World.<sup>22</sup> The publication of *Christianity, Islam and the Negro World* was widely acclaimed and the work itself made a significant impact on the English-speaking literary scene and scholarly world.

Still, some of Blyden's assertions could hardly be accepted. His Islamic opinions were really an embarrassment to his Christian readers. To quote the above-mentioned review signed by K. (Knox), "We are very far from agreeing with sundry of the views propounded by Dr. Blyden, but our difference of opinion cannot for one moment hinder us from bearing our distinct testimony to his merits as an author." The difference of opinion concerned "one chief topic ... prominently set forward in the volume... the vast amount of blessing which has been conferred by Mohammedanism on the Negro race."<sup>23</sup>

In much of his writings after 1870, including *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Blyden was highly sympathetic to Islam in Africa. Comparing it with Christianity he praised it as a unifying factor cutting across ethnic lines and having an elevating influence by bringing the Arabic language and literature to Africans. Though himself profoundly influenced by Western, Christian ideas transmitted through schooling, language and contact with the Western world, Edward Blyden was curiously one of the first Africans to stress the danger of cultural dispossession. Blyden criticized Christian missions for their sin of cultural alienation, for striving to completely Europeanize Africans and thus thwart the development of the "African Personality". Blyden's concept of Africanity or of the African Personality was developed to rebut European charges of African inferiority.<sup>24</sup> It was produced within a given historical period in reaction to a specific intellectual climate and the most intolerant racist interpretations of Africa, its history and culture. Africans, Blyden maintained, should not indiscriminately adopt European values and institutions and should appreciate and cherish their own customs and institutions. Western-educated Africans should not only retain pride in the African history, customs and institutions, they themselves should control the process of selecting and integrating aspects or modified versions of Western culture into a new cultural synthesis. He therefore preached a Christianity adapted to the African context. Christianity and European Christian missions, according to Blyden, created in Africans a sense of infe-

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<sup>22</sup> Some readers doubted that such a book could have been written by a Negro.

<sup>23</sup> The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record, Nov. 1887, op. cit., p. 649.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "African Personality" which Blyden used occasionally to describe the character and special inherent attributes of the Africans seems to have been used by him for the very first time in a lecture to the Young Men's Literary Association of Sierra Leone, entitled "Study and Race", delivered in Freetown on 19 May 1893 and published in the Sierra Leone Times, 27 May 1893. See Lynch, H.R.: Black Spokesman, op. cit., pp. 195-204, esp. pp. 200-201.

riority and servility and by their sectarianism were dividing Africans. On the other hand, Islam, Blyden argued, had brought Africans the benefits of a major world civilization without creating in them a sense of inferiority.<sup>25</sup>

Blyden had by then also concluded that Africans lacked education relevant to the goals and aspirations of Africa and this very fact represented the greatest obstacle to creative progress on the part of the black people. In the early 1860s Blyden began studying Arabic and in 1866 he made a journey to the East visiting Egypt, Palestine and Syria with the view of improving his knowledge of the Arabic language which he wished to introduce into the curriculum of the Liberia college.<sup>26</sup> An accomplished linguist, Blyden completely mastered Arabic, reading, writing and speaking it fluently. In 1867, one year after his trip to Egypt and the Middle East, he was proficient enough to be able to teach it at Liberia College. When he was appointed President of Liberia College in 1880 he strived very hard to introduce a curriculum which would answer Africa's peculiar needs and he planned to introduce Arabic into the University curriculum and institute a chair of Arabic and West African languages. However, during the short period he was President of Liberia College, he was not able to put his educational theories into practice. Nor did he succeed in Sierra Leone where he strived to found a secular West African University controlled by Africans themselves.

Blyden's views on the role and influence of Islam in Africa expressed in his work *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* triggered off an animated debate in the missionary circles and the wider public and also a vivid correspondence in the Times and on the pages of The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record. Christian missions believed that "paganism" in Africa must yield either to Christianity or to Islam, feared the danger of Islamic expansion and viewed this religion as their major antagonist for the spiritual control of Africa. Though some missionaries admitted that Islam had produced some social advance in Africa and together with secular Europeans debated the suitability of Islam for Africans – an inferior religion for an inferior race, the missionary attitude to Islam was hostile. The objective of Christian missions of all denominations was to improve Africans and since to them all hopes of the improvability of the Africans were connected with the introduction of Christianity, Christian values and Western civilization, Islam not only posed a threat to their missionary prospects and the work of evangelization but also constituted a barrier to real progress. The missionary confrontation of the expansion of Islam and the fact that the people of West and some parts of Eastern Africa were in the nineteenth century drifting

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<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Blyden, E.W.: *Mohammedanism in Western Africa*. In: Methodist Quarterly Review 1871; *Mohammedanism and the Negro Race*. In: Fraser's Magazine, November 1875; *Islam in the Western Soudan*. In: Journal of the African Society, 1902, pp. 11-31; *The Koran in Africa*. In: Journal of African Society, 1905, pp. 160-166; and relevant parts in *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

steadily more towards Islam than Christianity constituted a great threat to the integrity of Christendom. To the vast majority of missionaries their chief aim was to eradicate Islam and replace it with Christianity.

The struggle between Islam and Christianity became a prominent feature of nineteenth century missionary thought. As the reviewer of Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, Mr. Knox, grudgingly admitted, Blyden's opinion on the positive role of Islam in Africa "has of late years made some way, having been sedulously preached up by sundry men of intelligence".<sup>27</sup> "And thus the conversion of West Africa to Islamism goes merrily on," complained the same author one year later while summarizing the various advances of Islam in Africa, "while *dilettante* scholars at home complacently discuss the question as to whether that Faith or Christianity is the more suitable for the Negro;"<sup>28</sup> This change "in the sentimental attitude towards Islam"... "has been partly created by travellers sympathizing with departed greatness, but has chiefly originated with literary men... Now, chiefly led away by free-thinkers, men of this description fancy they have found a creed less trammelled with dogma than Christianity, and as Mohammedanism is no longer in any shape or way an object of alarm, they are ready to trifle with it in literary disquisitions".<sup>29</sup> "But no small portion of the blame attaches to Dr. Blyden," complained the same author, "whom they have unwisely trusted to as an authority. He is unquestionably a man of ability, as we have not been slow to acknowledge; but he is, to say the least of it, hopelessly wrong-headed, however misled, on the questions concerning which he professes to be an expert."<sup>30</sup>

At the Wolverhampton Church Congress, in October, 1887, Canon Isaac Taylor, "a respectable beneficed clergyman of the Church of England" read his famous paper on Mohammedanism in which "he stood sponsor to Dr. Blyden, with some considerable superadded extravagance of his own which the Negro Professor was far too wary to indulge in."<sup>31</sup> "While admitting that theoretically Christianity is immeasurably superior to Islam," Canon Taylor claimed at the Congress, "yet (that) for a large portion of mankind it is practically too spiritual

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<sup>27</sup> CMS Intelligencer and Record, Nov., 1887, p. 651.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from an extract from the Standard newspaper of October 10th, 1888 reproduced in extenso in K.: How Islam is Propagated in Africa. In: CMS Intelligencer and Record, Dec., 1888, p. 759.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 754. "We imagine that the most sanguine upholder of Islam in England, if hard pressed, would admit that it is neither an impossibility nor a great improbability, that the year 2000 might witness the Cross elevated above the Crescent in Stamboul, with an exodus, if not of all believers in Mohammed, yet of all ruling influences, out of Europe into the ruins and desolations of Asia Minor, if not driven into farther and yet wilder regions." Ibid., pp. 754-755.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 760.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from A Rejoinder: In: The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record, December 1887, p. 713.

and too lofty; at present, at any rate, of little or no use in Africa.”<sup>32</sup> “A painful task,” he began, “has been assigned to me. It is pleasant, amid plaudits of a great audience, to proclaim the triumphs of the faith, but it is disheartening to tell the story of a lamentable failure.”<sup>33</sup> He lamented over the Church’s failure to preach the Gospel to Mohammedans whom he deemed to have been more neglected than the Heathen and affirmed “(1) that Islam was winning converts from Christianity, (2) that no nation or tribe that once embraces Islam ever afterwards becomes Christian, (3) that Islam ought to be commended and fostered as a step towards Christianity.”<sup>34</sup> Islam was presented as “not anti-Christian, but half-Christian”; as superior to Judaism, and ‘mid-way between Judaism and Christianity’; as more suitable to races like the Negro than Christianity, because ‘the Gospel of Christ is so lofty that only the higher races of mankind have as yet been able to receive it and retain it.’”<sup>35</sup>

Islam was in some respects described and perceived as a debased form of Christianity. “Moslems,” Canon Taylor claimed, “are already imperfect Christians; let us try to perfect their religion, rather than vainly endeavour to destroy it. We shall never convert the Moslems, but we may possibly transform Islam into Christianity.” “In some respects Moslem morality is better than our own,” he continued. “The Church of England,” according to him, “is too good for African. Islam, with its material paradise, or the Salvation Army with its kettle-drums, or the Church of Rome with its black Madonnas, may be able to descend to the level of the Negro; but the Church of England with its Thirty-nine Articles will not be the Church of Equatorial Africa for generations.”<sup>36</sup>

“Canon Taylor’s statements, although probably, a new revelation to many, were not after all novel,” commented K. (Mr. Knox) in an article dealing with the general question of the influence of Islam and published in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* of December 1887, “For the bulk of his address he was indebted to Dr. Blyden, whose assertions he has reproduced indiscriminately, sometimes almost verbatim... A more full confession of his large indebtedness to Dr. Blyden, whose name occurs once only in the address as reported, would have been graceful. The Doctor may console himself with the old *sic vos non vobis*.”<sup>37</sup> The same writer then continued to refute Canon Taylor’s statements by presenting roughly the same arguments he had used earlier when reviewing Blyden’s book.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Stock, Eugene: *The History of the Church Missionary Society. Its Environment, Its Men and Society*. In Three Volumes. London, The Church Missionary Society 1899, Vol. III, Chapter LXXXVII, pp. 345-348.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, December 1887, pp. 713-714.

After the delivery of his speech at Wolverhampton, described in some newspaper reports as an “epigrammatic and telling paper”, Canon Taylor was accused of yet another plagiarism. The publication of his speech fostered an animated correspondence in the Times, in the course of which Canon Taylor repeated many of his general assertions.<sup>38</sup> The Church Missionary Society replied by a long letter published in the Times of November 30th, 1887. Canon Taylor’s arguments were refuted under eleven points by her Editorial Secretary, who stressed the fact that one of Canon Taylor’s authorities on Africa was Edward Blyden and added, “It is a curious thing that a book chiefly consisting of old articles by him in *Fraser’s Magazine*, the statements in which were replied to at the time, should suddenly leap into a position of authority.”<sup>39</sup>

One month later, in December 1887, Mr. Bosworth Smith, a well-known writer and an author of *Lectures on Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, published an article in the leading British periodical *The Nineteenth Century* accusing Canon Taylor of a plagiarism.<sup>40</sup> This article became a subject of a lengthened article or review in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* expressing editorial opinion on many points raised by Bosworth Smith. Since Bosworth Smith himself had been compelled, with regret, to decline an offer advanced by the Bishop of Lichfield to read a paper at the ensuing Church Congress on the subject of Mohammedanism in Africa, Canon Taylor seemed to have “rushed” at the task “with headlong heedlessness” of all its danger and “without any adequate preparation or study of the subject at first hand”.<sup>41</sup> Bosworth Smith pointed out that “whole sentences of the Wolverhampton paper were simply copied out of his Lectures without acknowledgment, and yet so introduced as to eulogize Islam without the careful qualifications of the second edition of the *Lectures*, from which the citations were made”.<sup>42</sup> While admitting that “the views which Canon Taylor ‘thrust on a sensitive and exalted audience’ ‘were as nearly as possible identical with those which, thirteen years ago,’ had been promulgated in *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*,” according

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<sup>38</sup> Canon Taylor returned to some of his assertions with two articles published in successive numbers of the *Fortnightly Review*, the first in October 1888 on *The Great Missionary Failure*, the said Failure being the Church Missionary Society; and the second, in November 1888, entitled *Missionary Finance*, presented an analysis of the C.M.S. accounts.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from Stock, Eugene: *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, op. cit., p. 347.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, R. Bosworth: *Mohammedanism in Africa*. In: *The Nineteenth Century*, December 1887. In the Times of December 29th, 1887, B. Smith repeated in detail his accusations of the plagiarisms. His book *Lectures on Mohammed and Mohammedanism*. London 1874 was reviewed in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* and a “strong dissent was expressed from many of the comments and inferences which he had advanced”. See C.C.F.: *Mohammedanism in Africa*. In: *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, February 1888, p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> C.C.F.: *Mohammedanism in Africa*. In: *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, February 1888, pp. 65-66.

<sup>42</sup> Stock, E.: *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, op. cit., pp. 347-348.

Bosworth Smith “they were couched in an exaggerated form, and without any of the modifications or explanations” which he himself would have thought inevitable.<sup>43</sup> Bosworth Smith then proceeded to analyse the facts connected with the progress of Islam in Africa and enumerate many blessings that Islam had introduced, such as belief in one Almighty God, and noble and correct moral teaching, the Arabic language and literature, as well as the drawbacks to these advantages, the slave-trade, religious war and polygamy. With the exception of one or two isolated spots, he claimed, Christian missionary effort in Africa failed. “No benefits comparable in extent or character,” he continued, “have been, as yet, conferred on Africa by Christianity.” While anticipating that Christianity will eventually act upon Islam “by gradually and almost imperceptibly breathing into its vast and still vigorous frame a newer, a purer, and a diviner life”, the causes of the failure of Christianity he saw in the fact that Christianity came to the Negro in a foreign garb, with all the shortcoming and crimes of its professors. As he himself put it: “Christianity has, with very few exceptions, hitherto been offered to the Negro by the European missionary, not in its native simplicity, not as it must have appeared to the Disciples when they were following about their Master, from place to place, listening to His words of gentle wisdom, watching His acts of mercy and of love among the outcast, the poor and bereaved, and only very gradually gathering – and some of them not till the very end – truer and wider notions of His Divine mission – but as a complete whole, with its dust of circumstances and controversies and centuries around it, with its Prayer-book and its Thirty-nine Articles, with its orders and degrees, with all that it has done for civilization, and with all that civilization, for good or for evil, has added to it. As such it is altogether too complicated, too mysterious, too metaphysical, too vast for the Native mind.”<sup>44</sup>

The controversy over Christianity and Islam in Africa was not and could hardly have been settled then as now. Christianity has since made enormous progress in Africa. Both religions have continued to spread as more and more Africans have been abandoning their traditional religions to adopt one or the other great monotheist religion. African choices and needs were instrumental in the adoption of Christianity or Islam and in any attempts past or present to secure the roots of the two great world religions in the African context, Africanize them and influence the direction the religion of the Crescent and the religion of the Cross would take across the African continent.

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted from C.C.F.: Mohammedanism in Africa, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted from C.C.F.: Mohammedanism in Africa, op. cit., pp. 71, 67.