

Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library

A Critical Evaluation of an Exhibition

by Arun W. Jones

To begin, let me thank and praise the Pitts Theology Library staff, and especially the curator Jennifer Aycock, for a most enlightening and stimulating exhibition on the histories of African Christianity as these can be gleaned through the archives here at Pitts. I cannot begin to imagine the hours and hours of work that went into curating and then mounting this exhibition – an especially demanding exercise for Jennifer, since she is a full-time graduate student in course work. Normally a project like this is a good excuse to put off working on one’s dissertation! We all are deeply in your debt for her service. There is so much to wonder at here, so much to learn, so much to ponder.

This evening I would like to offer two questions that an exhibition such as this – one that is culled from a library’s archives – raises for me. These are not questions demanding immediate answers; rather they are questions to help us begin to interpret what we see and hear in the exhibition as we tour it tonight and in the coming weeks. The first question has to do with the reading of non-western archival materials.

Allow me to wander for just a few minutes from Africa to Asia, a continent with which I am much more familiar. In an essay published in 1982, William Henry Scott, late historian of the Philippines, picking up on language of an “iron curtain” and “bamboo curtain” that was prevalent in those pre-perestroika years, wrote about a “parchment curtain” that pervades Filipino archives. Scott acknowledged, but also challenged, a common historiographical assumption of his day, namely that it is impossible “to write a real history of the Filipino people under Spain because the colonial government enjoyed a monopoly on the production of source materials.” Scott showed that the curtain of Spanish perspectives and biases covering Filipino perceptions and actions in Spanish documents, contain “cracks . . . , chinks, so to speak, through which fleeting glimpses of Filipinos and their reactions to Spanish dominion may be seen. *These are more often than not unintentional and merely incidental to the purpose of the documents containing them.*”¹ In other words, it is just as important to read archival materials for what they do *not* mean to tell us, as what they *do* mean to tell the reader. Scott gives the example from the report of a Jesuit priest in 1668, who was writing about the gold donned by a Visayan bride: “She was wearing so much gold it made her stoop,” wrote the priest, “and it seemed to me it reached 25 pounds or more, which is a great weight for a 12-year old girl.” The Jesuit was remarking on the gold; but as Scott puts it, “He incidentally let us know that upper class seventeenth-century Visayan ladies married at a rather tender age.”²

Scott’s insight is, of course, a theoretical commonplace today, but reading what is not meant to be conveyed is an art that too often evades too many of us historians.³ So it might behoove us to ask, what cracks and spaces

¹ William Henry Scott, “Cracks in the Parchment Curtain,” in *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain and Other Essays in Philippine History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982), 1. Italics added.

² Scott, “Cracks,” 8.

³ One accomplished practitioner of this art is the anthropologist and historian J. D. Y. Peel. For example, see his use of Church Missionary Society archives in *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

show up in the archival materials that are on display here at the exhibit? What do we discover about African Christianity – or anything else – that we are not really meant to discover as we walk around the room? How can we learn something by missing the point of the display?

In display case #12, there is a helpful explanation about frequent religious and diplomatic encounters between Africans and Europeans from the late 13th to the 15th centuries. In the labels in the case, visitors are told that, “Ethiopian monks traveled to Europe and were treated as diplomats and intellectuals, prestigious sources of knowledge on topics including theology, linguistics, and geography.” The illuminating information about Ethiopians and Europeans ends with a passing comment that is attributed to “historian Matteo Ricci (1552-1610).” Now Matteo Ricci was the pioneer Jesuit missionary to China, and the most famous, radical and controversial European translator and adapter of Christianity in China. Curious, I emailed curator Jennifer Aycock to ask her about the Ricci attribution. Back came the reply: the name is supposed to be Matteo Salvadore, not Matteo Ricci. Ah, no connection between Ethiopia and China here. But then I saw that in the same display case #12, there is a beautiful polyglot psalter from 1518, open to a page where a portion of Psalm 68 is written in four columns of Latin, Ge’ez, Greek, and Hebrew. The Psalm is significant; 68:31 says that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand to God” (KJV). This particular psalter was compiled by Johannes Potken (c. 1470-c. 1525) of Cologne, who had heard monks chanting in Ge’ez in Rome, and he set out to learn this language. Now it turns out that Ricci had also studied law in Rome, fifty years after the publication of Potken’s psalter. Being a humanist scholar, Ricci would probably have seen texts in Ge’ez, and likely even seen Ethiopian monks as Potken had. In this way he would have come across a tradition of Christianity that was quite radically different from European Catholicism. Could a group of Ethiopian monks in Rome have been one of the sparks that lit the fire of Ricci’s imagination as he translated and radically adapted Christianity to China?

Let us look closely at this polyglot psalter.⁴ In between each beautifully scripted column of the psalm is, as we would expect, blank space. Blank space is indispensable for writing, as silence is for music: you cannot have the latter without the former. Yet one wonders what those blank spaces, those gaps between languages, signified for Potken. Surely, they were not simply gaps for the convenience of writing. They also signified cultural gaps, racial gaps, ecclesial gaps, even theological gaps. Does the fact that Potken arranged the scripts side-by-side mean that he saw the different worlds of the different languages as equivalents? Or was he merely following literary and sacred convention, which visually implied that very different expressions of the faith were equivalent, and not hierarchically related? In any case, it was just such parallel gaps and silences between different linguistic and cultural worlds that allowed Ricci and other Jesuits in the early modern era to engage in their experiments of radical adaptation of Christianity to Asian contexts. Metaphorically speaking, Ricci and his confreres added a column of Chinese alongside the columns of Hebrew, Ge’ez, Greek and Latin. And so, an unintentional, no doubt embarrassing but also fortuitous, typographical error in a display case has provided for me a crack in the parchment curtain of these archives, to see a 16th century connection between African and Asian Christianity, via Roman Christianity.

There is a second question I would like to raise this evening that this exhibit prompts. There has been quite a good deal of historical work done on missionary and other exhibitions in the 19th and 20th centuries. One exemplary exhibition occurred almost a century ago, when, during the summer of 1919 in Columbus, Ohio, American Methodists put on “an enormous missionary exposition dubbed “The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions.””⁵ One of the many things that strike us, those who look back at exhibitions such as these, is how they reflected the thinking of their era. So, we pay attention to how they portrayed different races and nationalities, how they constructed gender, and the assumptions they held about social classes and even whole societies. What becomes clear from these exhibitions is that what people choose to

⁴ This particular psalter is call number 1518 BIBL in Pitts Theology Library’s collection.

⁵ Christopher J. Anderson, *The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions* (Lewistown: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 1.

display is deeply connected to how they see the world around them, and their place in that world. In a similar spirit, display case #17 in the current exhibition asks us to look at postcards from the past, and to use them to deduce European and missionary views of Africans from the era in which they were produced.

One question we can ask ourselves of *this* exhibition, then, is not simply what does it tell us about African Christianity in the past, but what does it tell us about the mental and physical worlds we all inhabit in the present? In other words, what does this exhibition say to us (and others) about ourselves? There have been, after all, plenty of displays about African Christianity – some of which have included African Christians – in the West. What is it about this exhibition that captures the religious, intellectual, social, material, and spatial peculiarities of our own day and age? Located in the USA, how is this exhibition very much also about American Christian thought and practice? The easy, and wrong, way to proceed would be to try and figure out what the curator had in mind when she put this exhibit together. Borrowing an image recognizable in places as diverse as Kenya and Korea, as Alaska and Australia, the curator is, in a very real sense, simply the medium that has channeled the spirit of our age. As the audience for the work of this spirit medium, our own appreciation of and satisfaction with this exhibition and its explanations of African church life are evidence of how wonderfully and correctly she has channeled us. So, the fact that the exhibit emphasizes the international and transnational dimension of African Christianity reflects our own globalized age, and the highlighting of the Kimbanguist Church and the African Orthodox Church reflects our own religious situation where the rapid reshaping and even invention of religious traditions is quite commonplace. Most importantly, the fact that we are having an exhibit of African Christianity in this time and place reflects our growing appreciation of Africa's importance in the worldwide expressions of Christianity.

The next step, of course, would be to historicize ourselves just as we historicize the past – in other words, to carry out the exercise encouraged in display case #17 for the whole exhibit itself. What might future generations say about this exhibition? Noticeably lacking in the display, for example, is any sign of conflict within African Christianity – except for the case of South Africa so powerfully represented. The conflicts in the exhibition involve Europe and Africa (this is even, in some ways, the case with South Africa). Such critical historicizing is not the work of the spirit medium of our age – she has accomplished her performance with virtuosity. This work comes afterwards, for all of us, as we ponder our own place in representing the histories of African Christianity, which have been so wonderfully presented here and now.