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Deep Faith: A Review of Early North African Christianity

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Deep Faith: A Review of Early North African Christianity

Abstract

"One of the chief virtues of this book is how clearly and elegantly it is written. It is designed by an experienced teacher and an expert in his field."

Posting about the book *Early North African Christianity* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/deep-faith-a-review-of-early-north-african-christianity/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Deep Faith: A Review of *Early North African Christianity*

David Moser

March 22, 2022

Title: *Early North African Christianity: Turning Points in the Development of the Church*

Author: David L. Eastman

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One of my favorite parts about being a theology professor is introducing my students to “the deep faith of the church.” That’s an expression that my teacher and friend of blessed memory, Billy Abraham, used to describe the whole gamut of teaching, practices, and doctrine that has come down to us from the ancient church. Scripture is preeminent among these, being the inspired and (as I would argue with Billy over tea at a French restaurant in Dallas) inerrant word of God. But the deep faith of the church also includes the practices, liturgies, songs, and texts that we have received from our forefathers and mothers in the faith, many of whom lived before the Reformation.

I tell my students that the Church’s deep faith is a gift given to us by the Spirit of Christ. When we study it, we are looking for how the Spirit has been guiding the church into the truth in conformity with the teaching of Scripture (John 16:13). Through the lessons of the past, I try to instill in them deeper faith in Jesus’s teaching that he will be with the church to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20). No matter what challenges she faces, the gates of hell will not prevail against her (Matt. 16:18).

I was delighted to find a pedagogical ally in David L. Eastman, a church historian who serves as the Joseph Glenn Sherrill Chair of Bible at the McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Eastman has maintained a distinguished career as the author of several studies of martyrdom texts in early Latin-speaking Christianity. In this book, *Early North African Christianity*, he gives us an overview of the deep faith of Christians in Roman North Africa. It is an introductory work designed as a classroom text, with short chapters, plenty of maps and illustrations, and even photos from archaeological sites in Africa.

As I mentioned, by “North Africa,” Eastman means “Roman Africa,” the province of the Roman Empire, stretching from modern day Tunisia and Algeria east to Egypt (pp. 2-3). In contemporary theology, “Africa” tends to refer to the continent of Africa. And if we

hear about the impact of Christianity on Africa today, the assessment tends to be overwhelmingly negative. Christianity in Africa is the byproduct of vicious European colonialism, so the argument goes, and Christianity (the terrible thing that it is) ought to be rejected as the religion of oppressors. But Eastman reminds us that “Christianity has been in Africa since the beginning” (p. 5). And Christians in Roman Africa weren’t an annexed group in relation to the universal church; they were at the center of prominent debates and decisions that would shape the trajectory of the western church for centuries after the province fell to Muslim rule.

The book is divided into five parts. Each part has three short chapters that treat various aspects of the contributions of historical figures to which the part is devoted. The first part looks at the lives of the ancient martyrs in Africa. Persecution in Roman Africa occurred in several particularly intense periods in the third century. The accounts of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, which happened in 202 or 203 A.D., are striking examples of “choosing faith over life” during this period (p. 26). Whenever I’ve taught this material, students are particularly moved by the devotion and courage of these two female martyrs to Christ in the face of persecution. In part two, Eastman examines the life and teachings of the great Roman lawyer Tertullian. He is particularly fond of him and thinks that many don’t give him enough credit. He developed many apologetic works and was the first Latin-speaking author to use the term “Trinity” (*trinitas*) for God and used the term “person” (*persona*) for each of the three divine persons (pp. 60-2).

Part three looks at Cyprian (d. 258), the famous bishop of Carthage. In these chapters, Eastman gives a lucid and enormously helpful overview of the political and economic situation in North Africa in the third century, which supplies context for the waves of persecution (pp. 70-7). Contrary to some popular imaginings, persecution of Christians in Africa happened in short, intense bursts, and how bad they were depended a lot on who was emperor at the time. Cyprian courageously faced persecution and inspired many Christians in Africa to do the same.

Part four examines the Donatist Controversy, one of the worst schisms of the ancient church. As many bishops and pastors handed over their books to the Romans to avoid persecution, their legitimacy to administer the sacraments and preach was called into question. The Donatists held that bishops and pastors who handed the books over (and became so-called “traitors” (*traditores*) were impure and could not administer valid sacraments. The opposing party, informally led by Augustine, held that even impure pastors could administer sacraments like baptism, since they were doing it in Christ’s name. The final part is about the life of Augustine, the most influential thinker on western Christian thought. Eastman looks at his responses to the Donatist and Pelagian controversies (the latter of which had to do with the relationship of grace and free will), and his theology of the Trinity.

One of the chief virtues of this book is how clearly and elegantly it is written. It is designed by an experienced teacher and an expert in his field. I look forward to using it

in one of my courses when I teach the history of the Donatist and Pelagian controversies. I encourage anyone who is interested in the lessons we can learn from the deep faith of the church to take up and read. As Eastman reminds us, ancient African Christians are part of the communion of saints, those who are “in Christ” (Eph. 1:1, Col. 1:2; p. 165). We are bound to them in Christ and they to us, and we ignore the lessons they learned at our own peril. It’s far better to receive the gifts of their faith and to learn from them.