

Sudan: The Christian Design  
Hassan Makki Mohamed Ahmed  
Markfield (Leicester): The Islamic Foundation, 1989.

Hassan Ahmed's study of the Sudan is neither the first nor the most comprehensive history of that troubled and strife torn land. Rather, the book focuses on a particular aspect of Sudan's history: the role of the Christian missionary movement in shaping the country's culture and politics. Ahmed's basic thesis is that the main source of trouble and civil war in independent Sudan is the fact that the missionary-educated elite in the South were not prepared for integration with their Northern co-citizens. This was no accident, says Ahmed; the Church saw Southern Sudan as its bulwark against the spread of Islam into equatorial Africa and propagated fear and hatred of the Muslim North among the people of the South. Thus he places the blame for the violence and animosity which has at times almost divided his country squarely at the door of the Western Church.

The book is composed of six chapters preceded by a Preface which does double duty as an Introduction. The first two chapters describe the spread of Christianity in Africa in four phases: 1) the peaceful introduction of the faith into Egypt, North Africa, Ethiopia and the Sudan in the five centuries following Christ's death; 2) the centuries up to and including the Crusades when Christianity shifted from a position of eliminating the Muslim infidels to one of seeking to bring them into the Christian fold; 3) the period from the 15th to the 18th century when European explorers ransacked Muslim coastal kingdoms, and the African Christian presence was strictly one of serving the needs of European settlers; and 4) the "scramble for Africa" period starting in the early 19th century in which colonial aspirations were accompanied by a desire to plant European Christianity. Ahmed documents the last phase quite extensively, starting with the 1820-21 conquest of Muhammad Ali which put the territory now known as the Sudan under the rule of a European influenced Turko-Egyptian regime. His point that the Church and its missionary works were often intimately tied to European economic and political considerations is well established: "... our mission is called upon to acquire the commerce of Africa permanently for Europe", said Monsignor L. G. Messai in a letter from that period to a French diplomat. Other embarrassing moments in the Church's history include

The Bulletin: Vol.10.2 April-June 1991  
Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies. Hyderabad. India.

its efforts to defame the charismatic leader of the Mahdiyya uprising, who most scholars today recognize as a deeply religious and rigorously ascetic Muslim, and its occasional attempts to arm the resistance movement.

The author, who is a senior research fellow at the Islamic African Centre in Khartoum, has done his research thoroughly; he draws on a wide body of sources, particularly - and perhaps surprisingly - orientalist literature, to provide solid documentation of the mission efforts and plans of the Church in the Sudan. Chapters three and four detail the missionary activities up until independence in 1956; chapter five outlines the growth of the National Movement and the escalating tensions which continued to divide North from South; and the last chapter brings the cultural and political situation up to date as well as presenting Ahmed's conclusions.

Ahmed points out that the cornerstone of Christian mission in the Sudan, as in many other under-developed countries, is its programme of education. Because of the strong and established Muslim presence in the North, officials in the pre-independence Sudanese government were adverse to allowing the potentially explosive work of Christian missionaries in that region. Such was not the case in southern Sudan, however, where diverse tribes following various animist traditions were most common. Mission work was permitted and even actively encouraged, and mission schools were eventually given monetary and other support from the government. The main problem with the arrangement, according to Ahmed, was that the type of education which was imparted failed to establish a unified Southern personality; instead it produced students who in many ways fit more comfortably in European rather than Sudanese society. Moreover, missionary education increased existing barriers by isolating Southerners from their co-citizens in the North: they were neither taught the language (Arabic) nor the culture of Northern Sudan but were encouraged to view their Muslim neighbours with suspicion and distrust.

Without some background knowledge of the history of the Sudan, it would be difficult to get a balanced view of events from *Sudan: The Christian Design*. This is not so much because what Ahmed says about missions, Christian activities and Western perspectives is untrue but because what he fails to say about the forces against which the South was reacting leaves some gaps. For example, the description of the armed resistance of the 1960's, does not clarify what the Southern rebels hoped to achieve nor the specific events which spurred them to frustration and ultimate violence. Similarly, when Ahmed describes the modern flight of refugees from the South, he glosses over the reasons for the terror-stricken exodus, having us believe that it was simply a case of a misguided people responding to divisive Christian propaganda. His point that the "self-seeking southern elite" were motivated by unrealistic aspirations of foreign culture gained through Christian missionary education, puts the blame on Christianity alone rather than taking into account the fact of a powerful colonial presence. By thus painting missionary activity as the sole cause of North-South discontent, Ahmed's main thesis loses some of its impact. His claim that missions are "the obvious cause of the South's an-



2

tagonism to the North and its Islamic culture", tries to simplify a complex situation coloured by centuries of interaction.

The book further loses credibility when it shifts from a style of incisive research and reporting to one of polemics and dogmatics. The stereotyping of Muslims as people who "have no racial prejudices", for example, simply does not hold up to close scrutiny. A recent explosive case here in India revolves around a minor girl who was married to an Arabian sheik because he would not consent to marry her elder but dark-complexioned sister. Elsewhere, Ahmed charges that Christianity failed to instill morality in the Southern elite; a point having some basis given the rampant corruption in Southern political circles. But his assertion that Islam could do it better gains little credence given that corruption also exists in the North, a fact which Ahmed himself acknowledges.

By ignoring the existence of prejudice and human error in an attempt to idealize Islam, Ahmed gives the reader little faith in his powers of critical thinking. When in the final chapter he lapses into the oft-heard diatribe against the Christian West where divorces, abortions, and AIDS are rampant, Christianity is dying, and only Islam has the answers, the reader just turns off. Ahmed's point is, of course, that "Islam" should be allowed its chance to "help redress the present human tragedy in Southern Sudan". His keenness to make this point, however, costs him dearly. This is unfortunate given that the book does make a substantial contribution to the study of the missionary movement in the Sudan.