

Contextuality, Contextualization and the New Christians of Tunis

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Abstract

In the last few decades a substantial number of Tunisians have converted to Christianity. This article seeks to better understand their context and based on two weeks of fieldwork in Tunis in the summer of 2014, this article outlines the history of three of the principal churches in the city—one Catholic, one Anglican, and one Reformed—describes some facets of their worship and spiritual life, and then, based on interviews with church leaders and members, explores key challenges facing the churches. Utilizing the framework of Shoki Coe's contextual theology, the findings are then analyzed in order to better understand the priorities, aspirations and ministry strategies of the local churches.

Key Words

Christianity in North Africa; ex-Muslim studies; Contextualization; Shoki Coe; Berber and Arab studies; Tunis.

Introduction

Christianity arrived in Carthage in the first or second century CE, and the city became a famed center of Christian mission, witness and apologetic. Carthage itself had been founded centuries earlier by the Phoenicians. It produced notable martyrs like Ss. Perpetua and Felicity (martyred in 203),ⁱ skilled orators and defenders of the faith like Tertullian (flourished in the early third century), and wise and charismatic leaders like Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (martyred in 258). Carthage became a sort of unofficial patriarchal see for Africa Nova, as the Romans called the region. This referred to North Africa excluding Egypt.ⁱⁱ Local councils of bishops could count on scores of bishops, even up to a hundred. In spite of occasional persecution the religion flourished.ⁱⁱⁱ

How and why Christianity in Africa Nova declined is not entirely clear. There are a number of factors that have been suggested to explain why, for instance, the Coptic Church (Egypt) could survive the Islamic conquests while the church in Carthage did not. Reasons suggested include 1) the reliance of the Church of North Africa on Roman and (later) Byzantine power, 2) the Latinophone nature of the Christianity there and their failure to translate Scriptures and liturgy into the indigenous language of the Amazigh (Berbers) as well as Punic, 3) the church's failure to evangelize among the Amazigh, 4) the Vandal conquests (5th Century) and the subsequent persecution of Trinitarian Christians by their Arian conquerors, and finally 6) Christian conversions to Islam after the 7th Century conquests,^{iv} whether forced or procured by the attractive option of escaping the poll tax (*jizya*) and the state of dhimmitude. Related to the extinction of the church after the Islamic conquests is 7) the lack of monastic communities to keep alive

learning, art, liturgy, and language (as existed in the land of Egypt, which etymologically means *land of the Copts*), as the Christianity in Africa Nova was apparently more urban.^v What we do know is that a constellation of various causes and conditions did cause the decline of the indigenous church in what are today Algeria and Tunisia to the point where by the twentieth century almost all, if not all, Christians belonged to families of French settlers or other foreigners, but not to the majority Arab and/or Amazigh populations. Beginning some-time in the 1990's or so the indigenous church began to grow. The bulk of this growth has taken place in Algeria, where there are an estimated 40,000 indigenous Christians, mostly Amazigh.^{vi} But this growth has spilled over into Tunisia as well where scores of congregations of converts (and their children) worship around the country, sometimes in church buildings, often in homes or commercial space. This article hopes to present an initial exploration of the Christians in Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia. The intention is primarily descriptive, and only secondarily analytical, because almost nothing exists on the topic and the time I had for research was relatively brief (if eventful).

Three principal churches (with church buildings) will be compared to each other to discern their commonalities and how they are unique. Areas of inquiry are related to conversion, how the church relates to the government, and what the aspirations of the people and their leaders are for the future.

Methodology

The author was in Tunis for two weeks in the summer of 2014 to present a course focusing on the history of Christianity in North Africa. All the students were 'new Christians' (as they call themselves sometimes [Madany 2009:49]), which is to say, converts from Islam. Some of them had been devout Muslims before their conversions, others had been non-practicing or nominal Muslims. During this time the author was able to visit with leaders and some members of the three churches explored in this article: the Cathedral Church of St Vincent de Paul (Roman Catholic), St George's Anglican Church, and the Reformed Tunisian church which is generally referred to as the Charles de Gaul Church because it is located on a street of that name. There is also a Russian Orthodox Church and a Greek Orthodox Church, but I was told they are very small and for foreigners only. I was able to see the interior of the Greek church thanks to the kindness of the Muslim caretaker, but the archbishop, who apparently lived there alone, with no monks or nuns or other clergy, was gone for the summer. None of the new Christians or leaders interviewed knew of any converts at those churches.

There is another new church I did visit, but I have not included it here in this study. Details are sketchy, but this is what I procured from lengthy conversations with one of the key leaders: It was originally a home church but the police told them to move to a building. Research by the local New Christians and their foreign sponsors found that the Italian Assemblies of God owned the building and that it was legally designated as a church (a very rare and precious commodity). It had been in disuse for decades with a foreign woman living in the flat above it. The land was sold to the American Assemblies of God and now it is home to a small Tunisian congregation. The building is not marked in any way as a church though. It is called the House of Prayer, and has been significantly renovated and repaired and is now in good condition. I did attend this church one Sunday and interviewed more than one leader, but decided that limiting my article to three *publically identifiable* churches would be better. Otherwise, the

investigation of home churches would also be called for, and the time and resources for that research were not available.

Since these believers have not written much to date, and since the rebirth of indigenous Christianity here is so recent, there is very little to use in the way of journals or books. Rather, interviews and conversations with the believers was the main source of information for this article. All in all, about six leaders were interviewed, with half of those being Tunisian Christians, one a non-Tunisian Arab, and the two others being European. Three were evangelical, one was Anglican, and two were Catholic. Conversations and interviews took place with about a dozen other Christians, most of them being quite young—in their 20's.

I have chosen not to use individual names for this article for safety reasons, though this may be to err on the side of caution. I was told multiple times by the Anglicans and evangelicals that the government knows that people are converting and being baptized, and that as long as one doesn't openly insult Islam they are ok. The Catholic Church had a different message, as will be seen. I was also informed that the Tunisian Christians were common knowledge—they had been discussed on television and a couple of non-polemical articles about them had been published in local periodicals (also mentioned in Thomas 2007:1). This means that unlike churches in, say, Morocco or Libya, security is not a worry. Nonetheless, no individual names will be used.

Interviews ranged from formal, scheduled interviews to informal conversations. They lasted anywhere from fifteen minutes to over an hour. Notes were taken on a notepad or laptop or, when interviews were not scheduled beforehand, notes were recorded after the fact from memory.

By way of disclosure, I am an Anglican and taught at the Anglican church for five mornings. I do not believe that this prejudices me against the Catholic and evangelical congregations—I have been on the faculty of both Catholic and evangelical institutions over the years—but it warrants mentioning.

Churches

St George's Anglican

St George's Anglican is built on land that used to be the Protestant cemetery in Tunis. The precise date of the erection of the cemetery is not known with precision, but according to Jos Strengholt the earliest tombstone dates back to 1648 (307). The name of the earlier Anglican parish was St Augustine's, but eventually that church's land was sold and a building was erected on the land of the cemetery between 1899 and 1901 (Strengholt 312).

Presently, St George's has an English language service which is largely attended by sub-Saharan Africans and which meets on Sunday morning. It also has a Tunisian congregation. The parish belongs to the Diocese of Egypt, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa. That diocese is one of the four dioceses that make up the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, itself a province of the Anglican Communion. The diocesan bishop resides in Cairo. Because of the size of diocese the diocesan bishop has two assisting 'area' bishops: one over the Horn of Africa, and one over North Africa who resides on the grounds of St George's. This bishop is an Englishman, and assisting him is a Lebanese priest whose main responsibility is the Tunisian congregation.

According to the priest, the regular attendance is about 30, and a baptism of several new Christians recently took place. One day, while sitting with the priest and chatting at the St George compound, which also includes the bishop's flat, some offices, class rooms, grave markers, and a small room for the groundskeeper, a young Tunisian man walked in requesting to talk with him. He excused himself and I reviewed my lesson outline. It was this church that had invited me to present some lectures on the history of Christianity in North Africa to be taught in Arabic. And so, over the course of five days we covered topics from Tertullian's apologetics to the martyrdom of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity to the decline of North African Christianity under the Arian Vandal (4th C) and then Islamic Arab conquests (7th C).

Later on the priest would tell me that the young man had come to see him because he 'was seeing Jesus everywhere', and not 'just in dreams', which it appears is quite common. Conversations with my students, all 'new Christians', revealed a number of motives for conversions. Lewis Rambo, in his influential *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993:14-17), cites six possible motives for religious conversion based on the previous work of Lofland and Skonovd (1981), and these conversion narratives fit into several of these motifs. They are:

1. Intellectual
2. Mystical
3. Experimental
4. Affectional
5. Revivalist
6. Coercive

One had a largely intellectual experience; another one came to Christianity after experimenting with Sufi Islam, Baha'ism, and even Buddhism. The mystical motif was also strong and dreams or healings appeared in their conversion narratives as well. The motifs of coercion and affection did not surface.^{vii}

In terms of conversion, the young man was illustrative. It does not appear that the churches here have actual, intentional programs of evangelism. Rather, they grow through relationships, visions, and miracles, and inquiries about those experiences. One of the young women mentioned how she had suffered from a sickness and her father brought her to the church to be prayed for. The priest prayed for her and she felt changed and healed, and she became a Christian. Her father was not a Christian to begin with, and has not converted. One narrative defied analysis, with a young lady explaining that one morning she woke up and simply 'knew' that she was Christian. Still another convert had a sister who became a Christian and planned on stabbing her to death, but a relationship and a mystical experience led to his conversion.

As to aspirations for ministry, the main project the church is working on right now is fundraising for the construction of the St Cyprian Center, to be built on the grounds of the St George's complex. The funds needed have almost been raised. The bishop explains that his vision is to have a lawful and legally recognized Christian place for education and fellowship, which is to say, a place approved for Christian ministry by the government. These places are reportedly few and far between and difficult if not

impossible to obtain today. The concept of opening one more church building in Tunisia for the Anglicans strikes the leaders as impossible. Meanwhile, the grounds they have are being put to good use.

During my conversations with the Lebanese priest, an interesting point arose: that Tunisian Christians are not allowed to give their children non-Arabic names, or Christian names—even if they are Arabic Christian names. Thus naming a daughter after Vibia Perpetua or a son after Cyprian is an impossibility. Indeed, even using the Arabized Christian names for Peter, Paul, Andrew, or John would be impossible. However, biblical names used by Muslims are permitted—Ismail, Ibrahim, Musa, and so on. The Christians I spoke with felt ambiguous about this—neither being particularly upset about it, but not being content with the rule either. The Lebanese priest did have a son with a recognizably Christian name (not uncommon in Lebanon) and said that he had to remove his children from the public school, because once it became known that they were Christians some students and even teachers would call them names—pig, infidel—and even spit on them. At the writing of this the children are being home schooled, as they can't afford the private schools (many of which are run by Christians, ironically).

On a reflexive level, it was a special experience for me to be able to speak about the Carthaginian saints to these new Christians. It is true that many of the Carthaginians were of Latin and Punic ancestry, but it is not unlikely that, say, Felicitas or Revocatus (slaves) were partially or entirely Amazigh.^{viii} Also, so many of the circumstances from the early days of Christianity have approximate parallels today: Tertullian defending the Christians against charged of being bad citizens in his *ad nationes*, Perpetua responding to her father that she was a Christian and could not be called by any other name, and so on.

On my penultimate night in Tunis the pastor had the weekly 'young adults group' which is a strange thing because the great majority of the Tunisian Christians are in their 20's and 30's. As a man of 35 I felt old. This was a very interesting experience and revealed the pastoral skill of the priest. After eating we returned to cushions on the patio area behind his house. All in all I counted nine of the New Christians, though one was from Libya. We sang songs that everyone knew, especially the priest, and these were interspersed with times of pray that included some speaking in tongues and a Coptic Orthodox hymn. The teaching centered around Paul's distinction between the fleshly man and the spiritual man, and he went around the patio, starting on his right, and asked each person (myself included) to share one *practical* principal that differentiated the Apostle's two archetypal humans. The answers came: some eloquent, some not. In retrospect, I believe the priest was trying (successfully, I think) to compel the New Christians to *interpret and apply* the passage/concept in question. This power—to interpret and apply the meaning of Scripture—is a closely guarded one in Islam. This teacher, whether he realized it or not, was showing them a different way to interact with a holy book.

Charles de Gaul Church

My experience with field research in the Middle East is that you don't make appointments, but just show up and see if there is someone to speak to.^{ix} And so I dropped by the church and was pleased to meet a young man waiting to practice music with some other Tunisian Christians. This church building has been there for a long time, and based on what people told me is actually owned by the Reformed Church of France. Moreover, the church houses a number of congregations for foreigners who worship in

their languages, and the Tunisian congregation had been founded in the 90's by bringing together a number of home churches. According to the senior pastor of the Tunisian congregation, the police asked them not to meet in homes anymore, but in a church building. At first they met at St George's, but then moved to the Charles de Gaul site. This consolidation of the home churches unintentionally led to a significant increase in numbers as enquirers and unchurched converts now had an actual building with an address to come to.

The musician invited me to attend their church the following day since they would be baptizing some new believers. Even though I have known scores of converts from Islam over the years I had never actually seen a baptism, and so I attended.^x

The entire baptismal service was lengthy. Songs were sung. A sermon was given by an American guest preacher who spoke in English with translation from the senior pastor (whom I interviewed). The Scripture passage was from Ephesians 5, about the obligations of the Christian husband and wife to each other. He stressed the concept of sacrifice and love, that obedience does not imply inferiority, and so on. On the whole the sermon could have been preached at a moderate evangelical church in the USA or Europe and would say nothing new. According to my interviewees though, this vision of a husband who sacrifices his own wellbeing for the good of his wife is counter-cultural, representing an instance of 'Christ against culture'.

After this, the candidates for baptism were all called up to the stage to explain why they wanted to become Christians, and another one of the leaders (who was not interviewed) asked them the basic question of how they became a believer in Jesus Christ. Afterwards, he would ask them a further question like, who is Jesus to you? Or, do you believe your sins are forgiven?

After this, we all walked out to a small patio and there was a dilapidated inflatable pool filled with water to about a foot of depth. Two ministers stood there with the candidate between them in the pool, and the baptizer would say something like, 'Because of your testimony and faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,' and the baptized would lie down on her back in the water, each of her hands being held by the ministers. One of them would ladle water on her face to make sure that it had been entirely covered by water as well. The baptized would arise from the water and a sister would hand her a towel and she would rush off to change. There was no special garment or robe worn, but regular swimming gear.

The baptismal liturgy was sparse and uncoordinated. My Anglican sensibilities wanted more—a confession of the Apostles' Creed. My lecturer-in-theology sensibilities were alarmed by the confession of one of the baptized that "Jesus...is the Father...". But the strengths of Christianity, according to Saint Paul, are actually its weaknesses, "For the foolishness of God is stronger than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men," he wrote.

The previous day I had visited the ruins of Carthage with two Berber friends, who are, very nominally, Muslims. One of them attended this service and his comments are worth recording: "I note two things: they are very critical of Islam when they talk about it. And, there were so many children there. I saw the future of Tunisia."

The issue of family—the topic of the sermon—is one that surfaced several times, in fact. The Lebanese priest complained about the structure of the Tunisian family—that men

stayed out and did not take spend enough time with their families, or that daughters were not respectful of their parents, for instance. Tunisian leaders did not note the question of the family, but as a cultural outsider and experienced cleric this was his opinion.

The Cathedral of St Vincent de Paul

I interviewed the vicar and the archbishop of the Archdiocese of Tunis. The interview with the vicar took place in English, and with the archbishop in Arabic. Having served decades in Israel-Palestine where I too had lived we both spoke the same dialect of Arabic and it was a relief to me after struggling with the very different Tunisian dialect. I was not able to find any Tunisian Catholics, and my other contacts claimed that there were only a few—not more than a dozen.

According to the archbishop, who has only held that office for about a year, the *modus vivendi* agreement between the Vatican and Tunisia that was signed after independence from France governs all aspects of the church's ministry and witness in relation to Muslims. The Catholic Church originally had around 140 churches in Tunisia, and was left with five. It also still operates nine schools. The Church is not allowed to evangelize Muslims, and according to the archbishop changing the *modus vivendi* is tantamount to asking the state to "...change the red on the Tunisian flag to green."

The archbishop explained this saying that the government was perhaps intimidated by the Catholic Church, since it had been associated with the French who had previously controlled the country. He asked, "How many churches do the Anglicans have?" I answered, "One." His point was clear—the Anglicans were not intimidating to the government. Norman Horner's comment from 1980 appears still germane today:

The Tunisian government's relationships with the Catholic church are not altogether cordial, however. Memories of the colonial period, when that church attempted to make the entire neighborhood of old Carthage a solidly Christian enclave, are still fresh. (1980:85)

My information on Tunisian Catholics—the few that exist—is all second-hand, from Protestant sources and one former Catholic. Catechesis takes a long time, maybe years. Tunisians are sometimes not allowed to take Communion with the foreigners at mass, but must do so in private at a different time. On the whole, the Protestants were critical of the Catholics for their perceived sheepishness in relationship to outreach. But this does not appear to be related specifically to them being Catholic, but the fact that everyone appears to think they know the right balance between caution and boldness in Christian witness. Indeed, Protestants often criticized other Protestants for being too cautious, or being too bold.

In spite of this picture, which seemed rather grim, the vicar enunciated a theology of mission that he felt was appropriate for the allegedly restrictive ambiance of Tunisia. This drew on the narrative found in Luke 1:39-56, wherein Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visits her cousin Elizabeth, herself pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary is carrying within herself God's word, but she does not speak of this until Elizabeth first mentions it, exclaiming the words immortalized by their incorporation in the *Ave Maria*, "Blessed among women are you! And blessed is the fruit of your womb!" This, the priest proposed, was a fitting theology of mission in Tunisia for Catholics: to bring, without words, the presence of Jesus, the word incarnate, into the midst of the Muslim Tunisians, and then when they became aware of this, the Christian would have freedom

to respond, as did Mary who then divulged her hymn of praise, known commonly as the *magnificat*. “My soul exalts the Lord...” (Lk 1:46 ff).

In reflecting on this, the archbishop alluded to 2 Peter 3:8: “...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years...” The implication being that God had his timing and someday there would be freedom for the Catholics to welcome Tunisian converts, but that day was not today. The vicar of the archdiocese seconded this opinion regarding timing in relation to another issue: what about ordaining a Tunisian? He reflected that being a priest is not only a question of ministering to Christians, but also representing the Christian Church to the outside world, like the government or the press. In other words, while the Catholics might be happy to have a Tunisian cleric, society at large would not. The Anglican priest was likewise cautious regarding the ordination of a Tunisian. The Christians from Charles de Gaul of course already had their own clergy, but in their evangelical tradition being a pastor is more a functional role rather than a definite theological reality than in the Catholic and Anglican churches where ordination is considered an actual sacrament (Catholic) or a ‘sacramental rite’ (Anglicanism).

Challenges

One of the questions I asked the leaders I interviewed was regarding challenges (*tahadiyat*) facing the Tunisian churches in the future. Responses varied. There was, however, among the non-Catholics, one answer that was striking: the problem is within our own community. That is, rather than referring to obstruction from the state or the rise of radical Islam, the problem was found within their own communities.

One pastoral problem surfaced often during the interviews: that baptized Tunisians often stop attending church eventually, though there was no sense that they return to Islam. The pastor at Charles de Gaul estimated that only 40% of baptized Tunisians continue to attend church after two or three years. Another Christian opined that this figure struck him as optimistic. However, there was no clear program either at the Anglican or evangelical church to try to figure out why these people had stopped attending church. One young lady said that she still saw her friends who did not attend church, as they would meet over coffee. The pastor of the Anglican church said that if you called them they would not answer the call, or if they did, then they would say they would attend church, but then would not. Above all other problems that are actually within the power of the church to address, this is easily the main one. Some issues, like buying and owning land, are largely in the hands of various state actors, but this issue has nothing to do with the state.

Another challenge that was mentioned was related to the lack of church participation. The pastor from Charles de Gaul mentioned the need for discipleship, which is to say religious teaching that goes beyond the basic training required for baptism. Indeed, my invitation to teach about the history of the Church in North Africa was, in retrospect, an attempt to address this perceived need.

A point of contention was related to prudence in relation to Christian witness and security. One young leader, from a new church that I had not originally known about, approached the topic from an aggressive point of view: churches should openly request rights from the government, like the right to buy and own land officially recognized as a church. Alluding to Matthew 7:7, he explained, “We need to knock and then the door will be open to us.”

The question of landownership is clearly a contentious and thorny issue. The land of the Anglican church is owned by the British Embassy, the land of the Charles de Gaul church is owned by French Christians, and the church that the charismatic Christians worship in is owned by an American denomination. The Catholics own their land, but based on my interview with the archbishop, the Catholic Church *cannot even receive land as a gift*, much less purchase new land.

Shoki Coe's model of Contextualization and the New Christians

In the 1970's Shoki Coe, a Taiwanese educator who was involved with the theological education committee of the World Council of Churches, formulated a new word: *contextualization*, along with another word that did not become as widespread, *contextuality*. Coe was trying to address the issue that even though his local church of the Reformed tradition in Taiwan had undergone the process of indigenization, which is to say it was governed not by foreigners, but by local Christians, the church still had *structures* that were imported from abroad, and did not meet the needs of the local churches. In two articles in the journal *Theological Education* (1973, 1974) he outlined a model to explain how churches could go beyond mere indigenization.

A local church needs to wrestle (his word) with its own situated circumstances—social, political, economic, historical, artistic—and this is set of circumstances is summed up in the word *contextuality*. When the local church starts critically interacting with and reading its own contextuality it is “wrestling the world of God.” This wrestle, however, is what Coe calls a double wrestle, and part of a dialectical pair. The church must likewise engage wrestle with the *Word of God*. Critically and creatively reading Scripture and perhaps also the historical texts and liturgies of the church, and discerning a response to the church' contextuality, this is called *contextualization*. Coe is clear that this process of contextualization can and should be done in conversation with other Christians from other places and cultures, but it is primarily the prerogative of the indigenous Christians.

Later evangelical American missiologists either did not bother to read Coe, or they read him and did not understand him. Because of this, a number of them continued to use the word *contextualization* but with an entirely different meaning than the original one that Coe proposed. For them, contextualization was something that the missionary was supposed to do *for* the indigenous population which was being evangelized. The analogy often given was that the pure message of the Gospel needed to be stripped of its Western garb and re-clothed (contextualized) *for* the target population—whether Hindus in India or Muslims in Bangladesh or animists in South America. Needless to say, this misappropriation of Coe's original term defeats the whole point of his original project, which presupposed that the indigenous church could have insights into their own culture and into the Christian message that were unavailable or inaccessible to the missionaries, precisely because they were not indigenous. (And Coe was no advocate of ghettoizing Christian churches into ethnically 'pure' communities—indeed he emphasizes the catholicity of the faith, which while varied from people to people, nonetheless retains some discernible form.) Because of this it is necessary to further qualify that Coe's vision of contextualization with the word *organic*; it represents *theology by*, and in the case that foreigners are involved, it is at most *theology with*. The American evangelical misappropriation can be called *directed contextualization*, inasmuch as it entrusts the foreign agent (normally a missionary) with directing the process *for* an indigenous population: it can be referred to as *theology for*.

Coe's framework of contextualization as a double wrestle, or the dialectical pair of wrestling with God's *Word* and *world* was very helpful to me in analyzing and understanding the theology-making of other communities of converts from Islam. In my doctoral thesis I applied it to some communities of Iranian diaspora converts, and to a community of Arab converts in the Middle East. Another advantage to Coe's framework is that the result of the contextual theology need not be a traditional (Western) theological treatise. This is a dominant tradition in the West, and one might mention Aquinas' *Summas*, or Calvin's *Institutes*. These were books that attempted to present knowledge about God (theology) in terms of certain knowledge. But Coe's framework allows for other avenues whereby a church may express their knowledge about God: poems, songs, artwork, political and social action, and so on.

With that background in mind, in this following section I will use the material above to ask the questions: are these New Christians engaging in contextualization? And, if so, what is the content that they are proposing?

Given the material above, that the local churches are reading and discerning their contextuality is apparent. The Catholic contextuality is one wherein they are the big church, associated with French colonialism, and—at least they feel—actively hindered from flourishing. What then is the contextualization? How are those two church leaders (the archbishop and the vicar) wrestling with Scripture and their tradition in order to formulate a response to this—if they are at all. At this point it is appropriate to point out that churches don't have to engage in the 'double wrestle' of reading contextuality and engaging in contextualization. Churches may simply continue coasting, not interacting critically and creatively either with God's world or God's Word. But my interviews *do* reveal a wrestling with Scripture in the light of the contextuality. On the one hand, the vicar has appropriated a reading of the Elizabeth's meeting with Mary, a theology of mission that prescribes a holy presence that will then provoke a question, something that Catholics are allowed to do in Tunis. The Archbishop cites God's timing, and that a thousand years are to God as a day. The theological implication of this statement is that while he may not understand God's timing for the flourishing of Catholic Christianity there, God does have his time, and his job until that time comes is to make sure that the Church, however restricted, continues to exist.

Regarding the Anglican parish, I understood that my very invitation to teach was an instance of the double wrestle. The bishop and the Lebanese pastor had been offered a wide array of topics on which I could have spoken, but they zeroed in specifically on the history of Christianity in North Africa. Based on my interviews, along with extensive other research on the liminality of Christian converts from Islam in similar contexts, this is my understanding: The contextuality of the New Christians is one wherein they may be accused of being disloyal citizens and betraying their own homeland and people, wherein they may be estranged from family, friends, and employers, and so on.

The concept of liminality refers to the stage of belonging to neither world, of being 'in between,' and it comes from the Latin word *limina* meaning threshold. At the threshold of a house one is entering, but is neither outside nor inside of the house itself. (Miller 2014:54; see also Chapter 4 for instances of liminality among Arab converts and Chapter 6 for instances of liminality among Iranian converts). These converts, by departing from this historic religion of their ancestors, Islam, had placed themselves on the threshold or margin of Tunisian society. The contextualization, ironic as it may be to have an American come to teach them about their own local church history, was to invite

me, and to select ten lectures which were all related to their own local church history, and to be taught in their own heart language of Arabic.

This instruction—and this is my own interpretation of their actions—is to solidify a Christian identity. They had learned some basic things about their own heritage, and could respond that they were not in fact bad citizens (as Tertullian of Carthage argued so many centuries ago^{xi}), and that they were not betraying their people, but returning to a flourishing past age of their own history—not as an ethnicity, perhaps, but as the Christian Church. The early Christians in Carthage were mostly Latins but there were likely also some Punes (descended from the Phoenicians, founders of Carthage) and some Amazigh (that is, Berbers). I saw how this connection to their ancient local church was affirmed when the pastor endorsed the term “Islamic imperialism” over “Arab imperialism”, for most of them had some Arab ancestry, but they were not Muslims anymore.^{xii}

The ritual of baptism—Christian initiation—is likewise a key element in identity formation, though it is practiced by almost all Christian churches around the world and throughout history.

The identification by the Lebanese Anglican pastor of family ethics as a key locus of contextuality demanding contextualization is significant also. Significant because it is a facet of contextuality that he had identified, though the indigenous Christians, as far as this research could discern, had not identified it as such.

There is also what appears to be an example of reading contextuality while not going on to contextualization. I am referring to the problem identified at the Anglican and Reformed churches, that of Tunisians being baptized but gradually ceasing to attend church (though not returning to Islam, generally). The problem had been identified as a significant one, but when I asked how it was being addressed the answer appeared to be, it is not. This may well change in the future, but at the time of the research that was the case.

One area of inquiry I asked about was buying new church land. This is a question about contextuality—the world they live in. I wanted to know if this had been identified as a concern, a locus for action and contextualization. Largely, though, it had not.

A final word about the political situation in Tunis at the time of the research: the so-called Arab Spring had started in the country, and an obvious question is how the local Christians interpreted this even. Did they identify political change as a locus of their contextuality calling for contextualization? The answer, in general, was no. The overall desire of the Christians was for stability and security, which was the same as for most Muslims with whom I spoke during my visit. The Arab Spring had led to a decline in tourism and foreign investment, which in turn led to a significant weakening of the local economy and job market. This was a concern for all people, but it was not accompanied by a wrestling with the Word of God in terms of finding a way to interpret or address the issue. As such, we cannot say that it was an area for contextualization.

Conclusion

I have attempted to describe the three congregations with church buildings in the city of Tunisia and my experience of Christian life at the Anglican and evangelical ones. The Catholic Church in the country has a small handful of believers and describes itself as

not having freedom to receive Tunisian believers. (It is possible that the archbishop was communicating an overly cautious message, meaning that he was communicating what he wanted to see published in an article. I have no evidence to indicate this is the case, though.) Then, after summarizing the model of contextualization set forth by Shoki Coe, I analyzed some of these findings in order to discern how and where these indigenous Christians were engaging in the double wrestle of discerning their contextuality, and then engaging in creative contextualization. The main area of contextualization this research identified was the formation of a stable identity as the New Christians of Africa Nova.

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ⁱ The anonymous Patristic text that relates this is called *The Acts of Perpetua and Felicity*.

ⁱⁱ The *de jure* patriarchal see over Africa Nova was Rome, not Alexandria.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more in early Christianity in North Africa see Daniel 2010 and Donaldson 1909.

^{iv} Carthage was conquered in 693-694, with the conquest of Nova Africa being completed by the early 8th Century (Kennedy 2008:179).

^v See Shenk 1993 and Daniel 2010 for a more detailed treatment of this topic. Horner 1980 also touches on the topic.

^{vi} For a table with estimates of how many Christians from a Muslim background live in countries throughout the world see Appendix A of Duane Miller, *Living among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-making and ex-Muslim Christians*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2014.

^{vii} For a survey of studies on conversion from Islam to Christianity see Duane Alexander Miller, "An Exploration of Christ's Converts from Islam: Reasons Given for Their Conversions," *Journal of Asian Mission* 15(2), 2014, pp 15-25.

^{viii} Saints Felicitas and Revocatus were companions of St Perpetua and were martyred at the same time.

^{ix} For examples of field work in the Middle East see 'The Episcopal Church in Jordan: Identity, Liturgy and Mission' (2011), 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land' (2013) and 'Freedom of Religion in Israel-Palestine: may Muslims become Christians, and do Christians have the freedom to welcome such converts?' (2014).

^x My doctoral research through the University of Edinburgh was primarily concerned on researching the contextual theologies proposed by Iranian Christians (all converts from Islam) in the USA and the UK, and a group of Arab converts in a location that used to be part of the Ottoman Empire.

^{xi} In his apologetic *De Nationes*, herein he argues that Christians are not bad citizens of the Roman Empire, but, paradoxically, the best citizens.

^{xii} It is interesting to note that as I am writing this (May of 2015), I am in Chalcedon/Kadıköy, which is a suburb of the modern city of Istanbul, where I will be teaching about the history of Christianity in Constantinople to some Turkish Christians, likewise mostly converts from Islam.

^{xiii} Available as a PDF at the author's page at academia.edu.

^{xiv} Available as a PDF at the author's page at academia.edu.

^{xv} Available online in various translations and at various websites, including newadvent.org.