Equiano's Turks and Christians: An Eighteenth-Century African View of Islam

Ian Duffield
Paul Edwards

Since the eighteenth century there have been schools of thought, both black and white, advocating the idea of Islam as the "natural" religion of Africa. One such school can be traced back to the work of Edward Wilmot Blyden,¹ the mid-nineteenth-century Liberian scholar, who saw the Christianizing of Africa, at least when undertaken by white missionaries and their auxiliaries, as demoralizing and deracinating, damaging to the African personality and culture. Blyden's writings can be ambiguous, even contradictory, but in one of his most important works, Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, a controversial study which caused considerable distress to his Methodist friends and colleagues, he is quite explicit on the subject.

On the other hand, one of Blyden's contemporaries, the explorer and Negrophobe Sir Richard Burton, regarded Islam as appropriate to Africa for different reasons, as did the colonial officials of Lord Lugard's school. To Burton and the colonial administrators, Islam could be seen as a restraining element upon an inferior and vicious race incapable of assimilating and practicing the higher morality of nineteenth-century Europe (indeed, Blyden himself at times adopts a view in some ways akin to this). But, as with Blyden, these views often took on an ambiguous quality. While Lugardian officials might regard Christianized or westernized Africans with abhorrence, and the African of the interior as bloody and depraved, in more relaxed or philosophical moments they could rhapsodize upon the virtues of the unspoilt native. And Blyden too, within one paragraph, can speak

society, also showed the patriotic spirit with which every member played his part in defense of the community. And Equiano ascribes the motivation of these wars to the corrupting influence of trade goods filtering through from the coast. The picture he draws of nineteenth century Igbo society seems generally a very accurate one, and without extravagance, but with understandable pride he shows us a society which is, within its own terms, rational, pious, virtuous, frugal, hygienic and industrious. Equiano offers us the earliest defense of African social order to be written by an African and addressed to a white audience. In this he can be said to anticipate much that has taken place recently in African fiction, notably in the work of Chinua Achebe; but also, in standing outside Islam yet looking in, he anticipates a historical pattern set by such figures as Blyden, Mojola Agbebi and Orishatuke Faduma.

---

West Africa and the American South: Notes on James E. K. Aggrey and the Idea of a University for West Africa

THOMAS C. HOWARD

At a time when higher education in Africa continues to develop at a rate which would have astounded the most optimistic observers during the colonial era, it is perhaps the occasion to assess the idea of a university for Africans as advanced by James Aggrey of the Gold Coast and North Carolina, the most widely known African educator of his generation and the individual who probably more than any African of his century personified the educational ties of Africa with the Southern states of America.1

It is of special importance as we approach the centennial of Aggrey's birth in 1975 to analyze with the perspective now possible not only his controversial role as an exponent of the adapted educational policy of Booker T. Washington in Africa, but also the inspiration he gave to thousands of Africans to seek higher education abroad, as well as his influential part in the successful founding in 1924 of the Prince of Wales College at Achimota in the Gold Coast. Achimota was perhaps the single most important colonial experiment in West African education during the period between the world wars, and the institution which more than any other was officially promoted and accepted as the nucleus of the long-awaited University of West Africa. Aggrey's career contained many paradoxes, but none more fundamental than the one created by the tension between his intense black pride and his determination to work within the limits of the closed systems of colonial Africa and the American South. Aggrey

---

of Africa in terms of its “verdant plains and flowery fields, the salubrious highlands in primaeval innocence and glory” and at the same time one of the “waste places [to be] raised from the slumber of ages and rescued from a stagnant barbarism.”

Blyden, we believe, might be recognized as a great nineteenth-century propagandist for Africa rather than as a founder of any coherent system. In practice, European rhapsodies about the “unspoil native” were only the reverse of a coin which also showed the Christian African, especially if educated, as one who did not know his place and presented a threat to a previously unchallenged authority. Blyden’s own experiences on the West African mail-boat in confrontation with a white missionary, described in From West Africa to Palestine, are an illustration. The Muslim, in contrast, struck the officials especially in northern Nigeria as docile towards authority, and as a conservative gentleman when a member of the precolonial ruling class. The Emirs and their armies were, after all, great horsemen and possibly only the state of the pitch prevented the rise of cricket.

Since the days of Blyden the debate has continued. The views of Malcolm X or of the Nation of Islam on the question hardly need repeating, while the autobiography of the veteran Pan-Africanist, Ras Makonnen, takes a fairly hostile line towards Islam. At the academic level, recent work by the British Orientalist, Bernard Lewis, only concedes a more or less clean record to Islam on the race issue in terms of theory; in practice, he argues, Islamic societies have since the earliest days been oppressive to black people.

The debate on Islam and the African has reached a stage, perhaps, where practice is too much seen through a blur of polemics and passion. In this article we propose to side step the debate a little, by going back to an eighteen-century observer of both Islam and Christiani
ty from an African viewpoint, Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–97), who published his remarkable autobiography in 1789, under the general colors of the British Anti-Slave Trade Society, and as a contribution to the society’s enthusiastic and effective propaganda campaign against the slave trade. A superficial reading of this book may represent its author as a man who first survived under slavery and then, gaining breath, obtained manumission by docile subservience to his masters. But closer reading reveals other elements, quite discordant with the initial impression, and clearly so in what the author has to say about religion and its practice.

By the time he wrote his autobiography, Equiano had been for many years a convinced Protestant Christian, deeply committed to the evangelical revival of later eighteenth-century England, the religion of many of the leaders of the Anti-Slave Trade Society. Yet embedded in this book are regular references to the religion and morals of the Igbo people, whom he recalled from childhood, and to the society and values of the Turks. The latter particularly might easily be overlooked since they are scattered, and the descriptions of Turkey comprise only a small part of the autobiography: nevertheless, taken along with explicit and implicit analogies with Igbo society and with the Christian society Equiano encountered in colonial America, the British West Indies and Britain itself, they take on considerable importance. We are convinced that the implied critical contrasts are deliberate, a convenient technique for an African writing under the aegis of a white organization and for a predominantly British Christian readership. Characteristically, Equiano’s tactic is not the direct assault upon Christian hypocrisy, but the more circuitous route of implication. Thus he habitually refers to his former masters, Captain Pascal and Mr. King, in the most effusive terms, apparently reveling in his own virtuous submissiveness to Providence, but at the same time, he is tongue-in-cheek and, through the device of feigned naiveté, exposes them for what they are. Thus he writes of the “humane” Quaker, Mr. King: “I have often seen slaves, particularly those who were meagre, in different islands, put into scales and weighed; and then sold from three pence to six pence or nine pence a pound. My master, however, whose humanity was shocked

---

2 Ibid., p. 129.

3 Blyden, From West Africa to Palestine (Freetown and London, 1873), pp. 27–34.


at this mode, used to sell such by the lump." But we propose to begin our study with Equiano at his more explicit, his descriptions of visits to Smyrna.

A good deal of Equiano's life, both as slave and freedman, was spent at sea. Having gained his freedom in 1766, he was determined to return to England and did so the following year. He spent much of the year apprenticed to a hairdresser and then, being short of money, in 1768 engaged himself as personal servant to a gentleman aboard a ship bound for Smyrna. Without further explanation at this point in the narrative he tells us, "I had a great desire to see Turkey." It may be that he had heard shipmates speak of their own visits, but it is quite possible that he had learned of Turkey by hearing about or reading the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,\(^9\) a literary sensation only a few years before and containing the best eyewitness account of life in Turkey available at that time in English.

This, the first of his two visits to Smyrna, was probably the most pleasant period of Equiano's life since he had been kidnapped at around the age of eleven from his native village. He found, to his undisguised pleasure, that his white companions were made far less welcome by the Turks than he was himself: "In general I believe they are fond of black people; and several of them gave me pressing invitations to stay among them, although they keep the Franks, or Christians, separate, and do not suffer them to dwell immediately among them."\(^10\)

Equiano shows himself elsewhere in the book to be fascinated by role reversals,\(^11\) but the reversal in this case was even more remarkable. Like all traditional Muslim societies, eighteenth-century Turkey was slave owning. It is not necessary to recapitulate here the well-known points about contrasting attitudes to slavery in Islam and in the West: but what struck Equiano forcibly was that in Turkey, white Christians were subjugated similarly to his own people across the Atlantic: "I was surprised to see how the Greeks are, in some measure, kept under by the Turks, as the negroes are in the West Indies by the white people."\(^12\) This impression is fully corroborated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's more extensive observations. On her journey from Belgrade to Adrianople in 1718, the Janissaries who accompanied her husband behaved to the Christian population in much the same manner as whites to blacks in Equiano's account of the West Indies. Her descriptions of the insolent seizure without payment of provisions by the Janissaries exactly recalls Equiano's accounts of the seizure by whites of foodstuffs, goods and money from himself and other black West Indians. In neither case did the oppressed dare to complain, nor had they any effective redress. It should be added here that Lady Mary was no vulgar detractor of Turkish society, which she found in many ways elegant, learned and moral: her picture was a more sympathetic one than that of the main eighteenth-century historical source in English of Turkish history and society, Cantemir's History of the Ottoman Empire.\(^13\)

Another aspect of Turkish life, the modesty of its women, particularly struck Equiano on his first visit. He was astonished that Turkish women were not to be encountered in the shops, rarely in the street, and even then always veiled. These impressions can be juxtaposed with what he recalled of feminine modesty and morality in Ibo society and with his first impressions of English women. Of the Ibo, he remarks, "Our women too were in my eyes at least uncommonly graceful, alert and modest to a degree of bashfulness; nor do I remember to have ever heard of an instance of incontinence amongst them before marriage." However, on his arrival in England, his immediate impression was, "I likewise could not help remarking the peculiar slenderness of their women, which I did not at first like; and I thought they were not so modest and shamefaced as the African women." It might be added that the women of Smyrna were not so modest that they could not lower their veils the better to see their black visitor: "They were covered with a veil from head to foot, so that I could not see their faces, except when any of them out of curiosity uncovered them to look at me, which they sometimes did." It is not surprising that Equiano concluded after his five-month stay, "All in all, I liked the place and the Turks very well."\(^14\)

These impressions were reinforced during his second visit in 1769, shortened by an epidemic in the city which caused his ship to leave before its lading was completed. On this visit he remarked particu-
larly the large caravan traffic from India, and observed that "the people of these caravans are quite brown." He also noted that he "always found the Turks very honest in their dealings." Only two pages later, he is back in the West Indies again, where the whites are once more up to their tricks and refusing payment for goods bought from Equiano. In this context, the honesty of the Turks to their brown-skinned merchant-visitors is more than the hint of a rebuke to the American and West Indian whites in their dealings with the blacks. Of such dishonest conduct Equiano offers a multitude of instances and adds, "Nor was this usage confined to particular places or individuals; for is all the different islands in which I have been (and I have visited no less than fifteen) the treatment of the slaves was nearly the same." Little wonder then that he was to conclude, during the greatest religious and emotional crisis of his adult life, that he found, "those who in general termed themselves Christians not so honest or so good in their morals as the Turks, [and] I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbours."17

Just as his experience of superior Turkish commercial morality provided a sharp commentary on, and contrast with, some deep and bitter memories, so did his experience of Turkish sexual morality. In the West Indies and colonial America, Equiano had witnessed a society in which it was highly perilous for a black man to be discovered in any sexual relation with a white woman, or even suspected of it; whereas black women were notoriously at the disposal of white men. Equiano worked as shipping clerk for his Quaker master, Mr. King, and writes:

I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them. When we have had some of these slaves on board my master's vessels to carry them to other islands, or to America, I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practiced to such scandalous excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account. And yet in Montserrat I have seen a negro man staked to the ground, and then his


ears cut off bit by bit, because he had been connected with a white woman who was a common prostitute: as if it were no crime in the whites to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue; but most heinous in a black man only to gratify a passion of nature, where the temptation was offered by one of a different colour, though the most abandoned woman of her species.

The Turks, traditionally associated with plurality of wives and the sensualities of the harem, treated Equiano very differently. During his second visit, a Turkish official took a liking to him, begged him to stay in Turkey, and offered him two wives in honorable Muslim marriage if he would do so. "However," he writes, "I refused the temptation." But he makes no censure of plural marriages despite his own Christian orthodoxy and indeed, earlier in the book, noted that his own Igbo men "indulge in a plurality, though seldom in more than two." Again, he does not censure the practice, "so sacred is the honour of the marriage bed, and so jealous are they of the fidelity of their wives."18 There appears to be an implicit parallel here in his mind, between Muslim Turks and Igbo.

Of course, Equiano spent only a short time in Turkey, and we do not suggest that his record of his own experience necessarily fully reflects the true situation. There is evidence, in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters, for the power of wives and the comparative rarity of polygamy, apart from the sultan, in the upper echelons. We also learn that married women could and did have lovers, and that the veil was in this respect more of a help than a hindrance, since it made it almost impossible to identify an adulterous wife in public. Equiano may also have gained an unduly favorable impression of the status of blacks in Turkish society. But despite these caveats we maintain that Equiano's account shows that his experiences in Turkey helped restore his sense of his own humanity after the degradation and humiliation of his West Indian and American experiences. He believed that he had found, for the first time since his African childhood, a religion and a society that accorded the black man respect and worth, and kept the vicious and immoral world of hypocritical white Christianity at arm's length.

We have already suggested certain parallels between his experiences in Turkey and his memories of Igbo, and we wish at this point to pursue further the idea that Turkey was to Equiano an echo of the

Equiano's Turks and Christians

Homeland. He recalled Ibo tobacco pipes as "made after the same fashion and used in the same manner as those of Turkey." He speaks of a kind of earth used in Ibo (no modern use of this is on record) which when "thrown into the fire diffuses a most powerful odour," and adds a footnote, "When I was in Smyrna I saw the same kind of earth, and brought some of it with me to England; it resembles muslin in strength, but is more delicious in strength, and is not unlike the smell of a rose." The Ibo dances have "a spirit and a variety which I have scarcely seen elsewhere," and again we have a footnote: "When I was in Smyrna I have frequently seen the Greeks dance in this manner." Incidentally, Edward Wilmot Blyden made a similar comparison in From West Africa to Palestine with reference to the dancing he saw in Lebanon, and in Jaffa, where, says Blyden, "a veritable Nigritian took the lead. He was, of course, perfectly at home." In view of these parallels it is not surprising that the two places Equiano seriously considered, and attempted, returning to were Turkey and Africa.

In 1773, after coming home from an arduous voyage of exploration in the area of the North-East Passage, Equiano entered the most acute of those religious and psychological crises that were to mark his inner life. Troubled by desperate feelings of sinfulness and by the lack of unanimity of belief and practice among his Christian acquaintances concerning the true way to salvation, he began earnestly to tackle the question of how to become, in his own phrase, "a first-rate Christian." He began by attending Anglican services in the vicinity of St. James three or four times daily for several weeks. Still dissatisfied, he explored the practices of several creeds and institutions, trying in turn home Bible reading, Quaker meetings, Mass at a licensed Catholic chapel, and the synagogue. He describes his feelings at this time in the conventional but fervent language of eighteenth-century evangelical piety: "Fear of eternity daily harassed my mind, and I knew not where to seek shelter from the wrath to come." It is significant that twice in this crisis Equiano attempted to sail to Turkey, first of all in 1774:

Finding those who in general termed themselves Christians not so honest or so good in their morals as the Turks, I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbours: so that between hopes and fears I went on, and the chief comforts I enjoyed were the musical French horn, which I then practised, and also dressing of hair. Such was my situation some months, experiencing the dishonesty of many people here. I determined at last to set out for Turkey, and there to end my days.

Interestingly, during his previous visits to Smyrna his one disappointment had been that despite their cordiality, the Turks "let no Christians into their mosques or churches, for which I was very sorry; as I was always fond of going to see the different modes of worship of the people wherever I went." It seems likely, then, that his engaging himself as a steward on a Smyrna-bound ship, the Anglicania, was yet another aspect of his exploration of creeds during his religious crisis, and indeed the expression "there to end my days" hints strongly at his possible future conversion to Islam. But a tragedy not uncommon in the lives of London blacks intervened and prevented him from sailing. Equiano had procured a place as ship's cook aboard the Anglicania for a fellow black, John Annis, who had been the slave of a Scotsman, Kirkpatrick, in St. Kitt's. With the collusion of the Anglicania's master and mate, Kirkpatrick seized Annis before the ship sailed. Equiano at once contacted the leading abolitionist, Granville Sharp, and stayed behind in London to help Annis. It was not to be the only time that Equiano was to fail to reach a desired destination as a result of loyalty to his fellow blacks: he was dismissed from his post as Commissary for Stores with the 1786-87 expedition to Sierra Leone when he was over-zealous in seeking the rights of the freed slaves, and so never got to Freetown. In the Annis incident he failed to save his friend: Annis was sent back to St. Kitt's and so cruelly punished on his return that he died.

This episode only served to strengthen Equiano's desire to leave for Turkey, but by now he had enemies to prevent him:

Suffering much by villains in the late cause, and being much concerned about the state of my soul, these things (but particularly the latter) brought me very low; so that I became a burden to myself, and viewed all things around me as emptiness and vanity, which could give no satisfaction to a troubled conscience. I was again determined to go to Turkey, and resolved, at that time, never more to return to England. I engaged as

---

19 Equiano, 1:12, 15, 11.
20 Blyden, From West Africa to Palestine, p. 146.
21 Equiano, 2:115-59.
22 Equiano, 2:118-19, 94.
23 See the editor's introduction to Equiano, 1:xxx-xlv, "Equiano's Appointment as Commissary of Stores."
This was his last effort to return to Smyrna, for during the crisis which followed, his Christian faith was slowly and painfully confirmed; but it seems likely that had it not been for the intervention of those very forces which prevented his peace in white society, he would have ended his life as a Muslim. Some may think that this was his loss: however, we may be forgiven for not regretting that he did not take what would have been, in all probability, a voyage into impenetrable obscurity, and that he remained in England to write and publish his book. His religious crisis continued for some time, however, eventually to be resolved in a manner typical of the evangelical revival. Calvinism, which constituted a major force in Equiano's belief, emphasized the concept that all purely human efforts and institutions—even membership in the Church—were essentially and inevitably sinful and corrupt. Salvation was to be found individually, on the basis of grace, earned for mankind by Christ's passion. Knowledge of this grace was to be arrived at through mystical experience, and this, not human effort, was the way to salvation. Needless to say, this was not a likely religious belief for a black activist, yet Equiano remained active in the defense of his fellow blacks, as we have said, and continued to be outspoken in the face of racial injustice even when this put him in danger.

In 1777 he left the service of an English doctor, Charles Irving, with whom he had spent some time among the Mosquito Indians in what is now Honduras. He paid for a passage to Jamaica aboard a trading sloop part owned by a man called Hughes (the same name but not the same man as the master of the Anglicania), but once Equiano was aboard, Hughes decided to use him as a seaman aboard another of his vessels bound elsewhere. Presumably Hughes did not think Equiano would stand up against him, for the status of freedman gave legal but no practical protection. Equiano's response was to tell Hughes, "I had been twice amongst the Turks, yet had never seen any such usage with them, and much less could I have expected anything of this kind amongst Christians. This incensed him exceedingly; and, with a volley of oaths and imprecations, he replied, 'Christians! Damn you, you are one of St. Paul's men; but by G—" except you have St. Paul's or St. Peter's faith, and walk upon the water to the shore, you shall not go out of the vessel." This is Equiano's last explicit reference to his Turkish voyages, but once more the sharp division is implied between what is expected of a religion and the society that supposedly practices it, and what is actually experienced.

If Equiano's Christianity did not make him subservient under oppression, neither did it make him hostile to the religion and way of life of his African past. We have already noted his unwillingness to speak against such un-Christian practices as the institutionalized plural marriages of the Turks and the Igbo. In a long section of the first chapter, he defends Igbo customs by comparing them with practices in the Old Testament, and throughout this chapter he refers to Igbo customs and habits which align them with Christian practice, or presents them as possessing virtues which his experience has shown Europe to lack. He informs the reader that the Igbo people believe in one supreme deity: swearing is unknown, as are "all those terms of abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people"; in agriculture, "everyone contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars" (a sharp reminder of the state of London streets at the time). His description of Igbo care in personal hygiene compares strikingly with what we know to have been the habits of most people in eighteenth-century Britain.

Drinking habits too contrast with those of the eighteenth-century gin drinker, though admittedly things were not as bad towards the end of the century as at the beginning, and as for eating habits, "the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery which debauch the taste." Even the warfare, which he admits disfigured Igbo soci—

---

26 Equiano, 1:13. Also on p. 106 Equiano expresses shock at the eighteenth-century English habit of eating with unwashed hands. Equiano's contemporary, Dr. Johnson, had an open disinterest in personal hygiene. See James Boswell, *The Life of Dr. Johnson,* (Oxford, 1934) 1:397, 1; and Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (Oxford, 1924), p. 43. Nor was public hygiene a feature of eighteenth-century Britain. Even the unfastidious Johnson found Edinburgh High Street, laden as it was with human ordure and besprinkled from upper apartments with urine, a daunting experience; see James Boswell, *A Journey to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* (Oxford, 1924), p. 173. But the most significant point about Johnson's uncleanness is that it was not odious to his friends, nor a particular point of ridicule to his enemies.
27 Equiano, 1:13–14.