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(64) CHRISTIANITY IN GAMBIA

Chammah J Kaunda
(with a contribution by **Ralphina Phillott-Almeida**)

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	75,300	4.4%	118,000	4.4%	3.1%
Independents	12,500	0.7%	20,700	0.8%	3.4%
African initiated	4,200	0.2%			
Orthodox	570	0.0%	700	0.0%	1.4%
Protestants	11,600	0.7%	18,000	0.7%	3.0%
Roman Catholics	47,600	2.8%	75,000	2.8%	3.1%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	16,200	1.0%	30,000	1.1%	4.2%
Evangelicals	4,600	0.3%	7,500	0.3%	3.2%
Muslims	1,501,000	88.7%	2,431,000	90.1%	3.3%
adherents of traditional African religions	92,800	5.5%	110,000	4.1%	1.1%
Baha'is	13,800	0.8%	22,000	0.8%	3.2%
Hindus	270	0.0%	400	0.0%	2.6%
people professing no religion	9,600	0.6%	16,100	0.6%	3.5%
Total population	1,693,000	100.0%	2,698,000	100.0%	3.2%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Introduction

Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa, bordered to the north, east and south by Senegal, with a small coast on the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Until 2015, when the country was declared an Islamic state,¹ it was a secular state, with religious freedom still enshrined in the constitution.

¹ Recently, Gambian President Yahya Jammeh declared Gambia an Islamic republic, saying the move marks a break with the colonial past. BBC News, "Gambia declared Islamic republic by President Yahya Jammeh," (12 December 2015), www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35082343 (accessed 26 Dec. 15). He has stressed that the rights of the Christian minority would be respected and that women would not be held to a dress code. But many feel there is an ulterior political motive and are uncertain as to whether an Islamic state would ensure that the rights of all citizens and non-citizens are respected especially because of the history of human rights abuses. The 89-page report recently published under the title, "State of Fear: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Killings," describes the human rights situation in Gambia since President Yahya Jammeh took power in 1994. It demonstrated how he has ruthlessly repressed all forms of dissent and how the State security forces and paramilitary forces have carried out unlawful killings and arbitrarily arrest, detain, and disappearance people, causing hundreds to flee the countries. Most of the human rights abuses documented in the report are from 2013 to 2015. See, the Human Rights Watch, "State of Fear Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Killings," https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/gambia0915_4up_0.pdf (accessed 26 Dec. 2015). Thus, the declaration brings uncertainty to the small Christian population in the Gambia. The global Christianity family is urged to pray for the peace and continuous religious tolerance in the Gambia.

Christianity arrived in Gambia with Portuguese sailors in 1456 when they sailed up-river and landed on James Island. In 2010, Christianity was 4.7%² in various denominations. The Christian community is situated mostly in the west and south among the Creoles or Akus who are the descendants of freed slaves brought to Gambia from Sierra Leone in 1787.³ Christianity is fundamentally Roman Catholic with some Protestant groups including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various small evangelical denominations. Islam is the majority religion, accounting for about 95.3% in 2010.⁴

The History of Christianity

Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Church first came to Gambia through Portuguese sailors in 1456 who arrived on James Island. In 1849, a Catholic mission station was established in Bathurst on St Mary's Island (later named Bathurst). The Roman Catholic missionaries of the Order of the Holy Ghost (Spiritans) arrived in the country in 1822. But missionaries struggled to convert local people in Gambia. The work started growing only when freed slaves who were converts came to settle in Gambia after the creation of Bathurst. But tangible results came only in 1905 when the Irish Father (Giovanni) John Meehan arrived in the country. In 1931, he created the Vicariate Apostolic of Senegambia⁵ and separated it from Dakar. In the 1950s, the church gave highest priority to the urban areas of Bathurst, Georgetown and Basse.⁶ Missionary activities along the Alahein River valley were initiated by Fr Matthew Corrigan in 1958, but this was done from a base in Bathurst. Fr Andrew Carroll took over this work in 1960 and established himself in Kartong under two agreements: the first was that he directed evangelistic efforts exclusively at the 'pagan' Kalorn and did not try to convert Muslims. The second was that he was to establish an elementary school open to all children in the community which he began in 1961 while the church was raised in 1964. Over the years, mission work was extended to include eight other villages in this area.⁷

The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church is one of the oldest churches in Africa and has a history going back to 1821 when John Baker arrived at Tendaba and was shortly joined by John Baker from Sierra Leone. They were

² Pew Forum Center, "Table: Christian Population as Percentages of Total Population by Country," (December 19, 2011), www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian-population-as-percentages-of-total-population-by-country/ (accessed 26 Dec. 15).

³ Paul Jenkins and Lamin Sanneh, "Gambia," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Volume 2*, eds. Erwin Fahlbusch et al, 378-399 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

⁴ Pew Research Center, "Table: Muslim Population by Country (January 27, 2011), www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/ (accessed 26 Dec. 2015)

⁵ Senegambia was a loose confederation in the late twentieth century between Senegal and the Gambia.

⁶ For detailed discussion of the history of Christianity in the Gambia see, Fr. William Cleary, *Reaping a Rich Harvest: A History of the Catholic Church in The Gambia* (Banjul: Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption, 1990); Bakary Gibba, "The West Indian Mission to West Africa: The Rio Pongas Mission, 1850-1963," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2011), Bakary Gibba doctoral thesis is particularly informative as he goes into greater detail of the Anglican missionary work in the Rio Pongas and demonstrated how racism between the white and black missionaries hinder mission progress.

⁷ For detailed documentation of missionary work of Roman Catholic going back to the sixteenth century, see, Peter Mark, *'Portuguese' Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Steven K. Thomson, "Christianity, Islam, and 'The Religion of Pouring': Non-linear Conversion in a Gambia/Casamance Borderland," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (2012): 240-276.

encouraged to leave and concentrate their work in Bathurst.⁸ They moved down to Banjul and established the first high school for boys. In 1935, the Wesley Church was built in Macoumba Jallow Street. Later, chapels and churches appeared in Serrekunda, Bakau, Georgetown and other areas of the Kombo St Mary District as well as in up-river districts.⁹ They erected a chapel for the small Christian community called Bethesda in August 1821. The missionary work against slavery and other oppression was very important. Sanneh notes that the church 'joined the struggle against slavery, social repression and discrimination against women with all their hearts and minds, however meagre the means, however uncertain the future and however hazardous the path'.¹⁰ The Methodist Church and Church of England took responsibility for the fate of the many freed slaves who had been brought to Gambia. Many of the Anglicans among them came from Sierra Leone, as the Church Missionary Society was active among the liberated Africans. In 1832, there was a station in MacCarthy Island with a resident assistant Methodist minister. The initial aim was to evangelize among the Fulas, an Islamic ethnic group, but this was unsuccessful. Thus, they shifted attention to the freed slaves.¹¹ Early Methodist evangelistic strategy focused first on education, and schools were built. Methodist education was ecumenical and interfaith. Anglican and Muslim children were all enrolled in school from the start. The Methodists devoted themselves to educating Muslim children and affording them equal opportunities. This trend has continued up to the present as Methodist education still caters for all Gambians, irrespective of their religion, creed or ethnicity. However, education has not helped to bring about significant growth in church membership.¹² Second, Methodists also invested in health care as part of its evangelistic strategy. Third, in the 1970s, the Methodist Church prioritized agriculture as another part of its missionary strategy.

The Anglican Church

The Anglican Church in Gambia had a rough beginning. There were missions in West Africa before 1855, but all the missionaries either died or left because of disease. It was not until the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) partnered with the Diocese of the West Indies that two missionaries, John Henry A. Duport and Hamble James Leacock, were able to make some headway in the country. The Anglican diocese of the Gambia and Rio Pongas finally made inroads in the country through the Aku. The Anglicans, together with the Roman Catholics and Methodists, found that evangelization of Gambian Muslims was next to impossible.¹³ The Anglican Church in Gambia was established after erratic early stages, when the British colonial administration provided a series of chaplains for the West Indian garrison which was stationed in Bathurst. The station was founded in 1816, as a home for the resettlement of liberated slaves from the West Indies and USA. There was no fixed Anglican church building in Bathurst, even by 1861, when an expatriate chaplain, Robert Hughes, and his wife were posted from Sierra Leone by the then colonial governor. Anglican worship was held in the Garrison (now the Quadrangle site) or the military Officers' Mess. By 1871, a government census indicated that there were 291 Anglicans in Bathurst, predominantly among freed slaves, settlers, soldiers, colonial traders and administrators. This

⁸ J Kofi Agbeti, *West African Church History: Church Missions and Christian Foundation: 1482-1919, Volume 1* (Leiden: E. J Brill, 1986), 51. This book also gives a good overview of the history of the church in Gambia.

⁹ Rodney L. Prom, "The Inculturation of the Gospel: Implications for the Methodist Church the Gambia's Quest for Church Leadership," (MPhil. thesis, the University of Manchester, 2013), 76; Martha T. Frederiks, *We Have Toiled All Night: Christianity in The Gambia 1456-2000* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2003), 194. Martha T. Frederiks' book developed from her doctoral thesis is one of the most detailed works on Gambian Christianity.

¹⁰ Prom, "The Inculturation of the Gospel," 77.

¹¹ Prom, "The Inculturation of the Gospel," 78.

¹² Prom, "The Inculturation of the Gospel," 84.

¹³ Christine Elizabeth Curley, "Anglican Stagnation and Growth in West Africa: The Case of St. Paul's Church, Fajara, The Gambia," (MTh. thesis, Wycliffe College and the University of Toronto, 2012), 33.

sporadic trend continued until the 1880s, but unfortunately, the Anglican African chaplaincy was closed on the departure of the West Indian Regiment from Gambia in 1884.

But by 1899, a growing and vibrant family of African merchants existed. This group was economically stable and appealed to the Bishop of Sierra Leone for a permanent priest to be assigned to the Anglican community in Bathurst. They offered to guarantee a residence and a stipend for the priest. Thus, the first African Anglican priest in Bathurst came to Gambia.¹⁴ The Church of England built the Anglican Cathedral of St Mary in 1901 and also proceeded to build schools and other places of worship. After 1935, this African Anglican Church became the centre of the new, amalgamated Diocese of The Gambia and Rio Pongas (Guinea), administered by its first bishop, an Englishman, John Charles Sydney Daly. This extended ecclesiastical authority of St Mary's Cathedral continued until the 1950s.¹⁵

Evangelical/Pentecostal Churches

The colonial government was conservative in its policy with regard to new churches in Gambia. As a result, Pentecostalism never became popular there.¹⁶ Today, Gambia has a handful of evangelical churches that struggle to make their present felt. The Churches of Christ from Roseville, Michigan, established the first congregation in 1974 in Gambia. Abiding Word Ministry (AWM), which was established in 1988, is the earliest Pentecostal church in Gambia, though most of its members are not Gambians.¹⁷ The Evangelical Church of Gambia (ECG) with its mission wing, House of Wisdom, with a focus on evangelising Muslims, is of South Korean origin, established in 1988.¹⁸ It includes the Omega Training Institute (OTI) where people are trained in a vocational skill and equipped to start sustainable businesses. Others are Winners Chapel, called Living Faith Church (Nigeria), established in 1996, the Deeper Life Church (Nigeria), Assemblies of God (Canada), Church of God, Christian Mission Fellowship (Nigeria), and Lighthouse Chapel (Ghana). Most of these churches are of recent origin and have remained small, and most of the churches founded by Nigerian and Ghanaian denominations have attracted the majority of their followers among those country's migrants.¹⁹

The Gambia Christian Council

The Gambia Christian Council was founded in 1965 as 'a fellowship of churches and Christian organizations that worship one God in the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; accept as scriptures the Holy Bible consisting of the Old and the New Testament; have an established organization that teaches the Christian way of life and exercises discipline; are prepared to encourage their members to participate in ecumenical activities'.²⁰ It is an ecumenical association of Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and other churches.

¹⁴ Frederiks, *We have Toiled*.

¹⁵ Ralphina Phillott-Almeida, "Christianity in Gambia: Historical Biography of St. Mary's Cathedral, Banjul," (Prepared for inclusion in the commemorative Programme for the Patronal Festival of St Mary's Cathedral that was held on 12th July 2015), Email: dietrich.werner@brot-fuer-die-welt.de (14 December 2015 15:48).

¹⁶ Marloes Janson, *Islam, Youth and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at* (London: International African Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2013). 262.

¹⁷ Frederiks, *We have Toiled*, 367ff.

¹⁸ Curley, "Anglican Stagnation and Growth in West Africa," 43-44.

¹⁹ Janson, *Islam*, 262.

²⁰ WCC, "The Gambia Christian Council," <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa/the-gambia/the-gambia-christian-council> (accessed 26 Dec. 15).

Interfaith Relations

Despite having one of the highest percentages of Muslim populations in sub-Saharan Africa, Gambia celebrates its religious harmony and tolerance more than most African countries. It is one of the few countries where intermarriage between Muslims and Christians exist, protected by the law and socially acceptable. In some areas, Islam and Christianity are syncretized with African traditional religious worldview. For instance, Marloes Janson observes the Pentecostalization taking place among the Tablighi Jama'at youth who present themselves as 'born-again Muslims', influenced by Chrislam preachers from Nigeria.²¹ The Chrislam is a new form of syncretistic religion which has integrated beliefs from both Islam and Christianity without taking side with either of them. It refers to a new form of interfaith religion. Janson did some brilliant research on Chrislam in Gambia which refers to a set of religious movements founded by Muslim leaders which were influenced by Pentecostalism in Nigeria. He concluded that there is a move toward 'Islamic Pentecostalism'.²² These movements have borrowed many features from Pentecostal Christians and yet remain Muslim. In short, Gambian Christians seem to realise that they have more in common with Gambian Muslims than they have in common with western Christianity. The same is true of Gambian Muslims. They appear to believe that have more common with Gambian Christians than they have with Arabian Muslims.²³ The Gambian worldview unifies them. There is also an Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace established by various faiths and church denominations to engage in matters of common interest.²⁴

Conclusion

Despite early predictions that Christianity would eventually be swamped by the Muslim majority, Christianity remains stable. The focus on evangelization and conversion in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries seems to have been slowly replaced by a focus on reinforcing the faith and the concept of mission for socio-economic progress.

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²¹ Janson, *Islam*, 262.

²² Janson, *Islam*, 262.

²³ This observation was made by Paul Gifford in African Christianity, see his recent book, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

²⁴ Access Gambia, "Religion," www.accessgambia.com/information/religion.html (accessed 26 Dec. 15); Arnold Hughes and David Perfect, *Historical Dictionary of The Gambia, fourth Edition* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 187-188.

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