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Ministry among the Afar: Implementing Holistic Strategies

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REL 432 World Mission Area Studies

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1. Introduction

The challenges to proclaiming the gospel and its reception in Djibouti are numerous. As a whole, the country suffers greatly from various social, political, and economic issues. Famine often causes many to go hungry, and the numbers of unemployed citizens are staggering. Islam is also dominant in the region, and the societal and familial pressures associated with it cause tension for kingdom workers, believers, and potential converts alike. While some in Djibouti have been reached despite these obstacles, the Afar people remain mostly unreached. Outreach to the Afar is laced with more specific obstacles in addition to those already prevalent throughout the country. Ethnic tensions between the Afar and Somali peoples continuously run high and often result in conflict, and the increasing urbanization of the nomadic Afar poses cultural concerns for sharing the Good News. Despite these, and other obstacles, many organizations and individuals continue to minister among the Afar, employing a variety of strategies. This paper will analyze these current strategies, Christian history and current practice, challenges for Christianity, and the Djiboutian cultural impact on Christianity, along with the country's religious context, in order to determine the most appropriate strategies for reaching the Afar.

2. Djibouti's Main Religious Context and Worldview Traits

Religious adherence in Djibouti is not unusual. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 98.7% of the country's population is religious, with 97.5% adhering to Islam (252). Islam began to take over the region in the mid-600s after Muhammad sent some of his followers to become refugees in Ethiopia under Ella-Sahama, a Christian Aksumite king (Garrison 70). By 700, all of North Africa was under the Islamic Caliphate and by 1400, Islam was dominant in Northern Africa. (Jacobsen 42). The religion was definitively established in Djibouti in the 12th century, and currently, all of the 97.5% that adhere to Islam in Djibouti also

adhere to the Sunni sect (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252). Islam in this context is also often practiced alongside traditional religious beliefs. In the case of the Afar, Islam is often combined with the beliefs that “certain trees and groves have sacred powers,” spirits of the dead possess great power, and offerings to the sea and leather amulets ensure safety. A festival, Rabena, is even celebrated among the Afar in order to honor the spirits of the dead (“Afar in Djibouti”). These traditional beliefs point towards a fear-power cultural orientation, where living objects, including “animals, plants, and even rocks, sand, and water are thought to have personalities, wills, and life forces” (Hiebert 411). These objects are to be feared, and therefore appeased, because of the power they possess.

Because of the dominance of Islam, Djibouti is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of Christians in the entire region (*Christianity in its Global Context* 24). However, this is not due to the country’s lack of religious freedom. Although Islam is dominant and has been set as the state religion, the constitution “requires the government to respect all religions and guarantees equality before the law” (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252). This being said, evangelism is not illegal, but it is discouraged because within Islam, apostasy is seen as a serious crime whereby apostates fall outside the faith (Mandryk 304). When professing Islam as one’s religion, “one undertakes to do so wholeheartedly, consciously and freely, and thereby undertakes not ever to renounce the faith” (Wood 163, 170). If Muslims renounce their faith, they face intense persecution and pressure from their families, who view such renunciation as dishonorable (Mandryk 304). This honor-shame cultural orientation is common among the cultures of the Majority World, especially within Muslim societies. This orientation consists of the moral values that dictate how people are to act towards one another. Within honor-shame cultures, “people avoid disgrace and seek status in the eyes of the community” (Georges). Those

who leave Islam are breaking a commitment and not only bringing shame upon themselves but also bringing shame onto their families and communities. Despite these challenges of worldview brought on by Islam, there are Christians among the largely unreached Afar. Current data suggests that there are approximately 450 believers in local groups with another 100 being on their own (Young).

3. Christian History and Past Notable Outreach

By 1000, much of Christianity had been eliminated from North Africa due to the desire for religious uniformity in Islam (Jacobsen 42). After much time, Christianity began to slowly be reintroduced to the region. The French government did not allow Christian workers in the Muslim-dominated regions due to the religious and political tension doing so would cause, but in 1883, Catholic priests arrived in Djibouti from the Vicariate of Arabia (Jacobsen 49). Following this, the Catholic Diocese of Djibouti was created in 1955. The Protestant Church of Djibouti began in 1960, largely related to the Reformed Church of France. It consisted entirely of Europeans, and the majority of Christians currently in Djibouti are of Ethiopian or European descent (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252). There have been three known attempts to establish an indigenous church within the region. French rulers ruined the first attempt in the 1960s, and two others failed primarily due to young and inexperienced leadership (Mumper).

The first known kingdom worker to reach out to the Afar was Enid Parker. Originally from Edenfield, England, Parker began work among the Afar with the RSM* Team in the 1950s. She served among them for approximately 38 years, translating the Scriptures into the Afar language. At the time of her service, “the Afar language had no written script, and so she dedicated herself to the time-consuming and arduous work of studying the language minutely,” eventually producing an English-Afar and an Afar-English-French dictionary (“Dr Enid Parker”). Throughout history, the Afar have also been affected by tension between Muslim

militarists and Christian Amharic forces in Ethiopia. The Muslim militarists have sought to push into the highlands and establish a Muslim empire while the highland Christian forces have sought to expand Amharic land and influence. The Afar have participated in these Muslim military campaigns, which have often resulted in the devastation of the highlands and the establishment of sultanates (Jenkins).

4. Types, Size, and Growth Rates of Christians and Other Religions

Since 1900, the percentage of Djiboutians who are Christian has grown from .5% to 1.1%. This percentage consisted entirely of Catholics in 1900, but as of 2020, .8% of the population is Catholic, .2% is Orthodox (Greek Orthodox and Ethiopians), .1% is Independent, and .1% is Pentecostal/Charismatic. There can also be Pentecostal/Charismatic movements found within the other traditions mentioned. In spite of the growth between 1900 and 2020, which was mainly due to the existing Ethiopian immigrant and refugee communities, it is projected that the percentage of Christians will drop to .9% by 2050. Since 1900, there has also been a change in the percentage of Djiboutians who adhere to Islam. In 1900, this number was 99.5%, but in 2020, it is 97.5%. This percentage is expected to further decrease to 97.2% by 2050. The largest projected increase will be among the nonreligious. Since 1900, the percentage of nonreligious Djiboutians has increased from 0% to 1.3%, with the total 1.3% being agnostic. This number is expected to increase to 1.7% by 2050, with 1.7% being agnostic and .1% being atheist (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252).

5. Non-Profits with a Major Presence and Current Strategies

Although there is a projected decrease in the percentage of Christians, there are many non-profits at work within the country. RSM* has officially been in Djibouti since 1975 and was, until recently, the only evangelical organization there. They are said to be the first mission

organization to reach out to the Afar, and their work primarily revolves around agriculture, medicine, and education, including bookstores where the Bible is sold (Mumper; Young). In 1978, Caritas Djibouti was founded by Bishop Bernardin Offman, and it “distributes humanitarian aid to combat food shortages, responds to natural disasters and helps resettle refugees” (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252). GM*, which is a Seventh-day Adventist organization, has been serving in the area since 1980 and currently has four workers serving there (Newell 454). Their ministry involves a study center that helps “create materials and models to help Adventists explain their beliefs to people with a different worldview,” as well as an eye and dental-care clinic (“GM”*; Mandryk 305). Other agencies with a presence include HF*, which uses the Self-Sustaining Samaritan Strategy to equip local churches and currently has one kingdom worker serving, and AGWM*, which ministers primarily through English learning centers (Z*). Despite the presence of all of these agencies, the Catholic Church is the most active within Djibouti and has been the only one to have a significant number of converts (*World Christian Encyclopedia* 252). The work of these agencies demonstrates that Christians are involved in almost every area of life, with present ministries in education, public health, literature, Bible translation, literacy, and youth work (Mandryk 305). This is also true for work specifically among the Afar, with agencies “active in various economic, medical, educational or cultural assistance work among [them]” (Jenkins). Ministry to the Afar also includes radio broadcasts in the Afar language. These radio ministries, specifically FEBA and TWR, broadcast 7.5 hours a week and work to story the Bible, starting with the Old Testament (Jenkins; Mandryk 306).

6. Greatest Challenges for Christian Ministry

The challenges for Christian ministry are many. To begin with, there is limited access to the gospel. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* reports that the percentage of non-Christians who know a Christian is only 13%, and the percentage of those who have access to the Christian message is only 40% (253). In addition to this, along with other countries in the region, Djibouti continues “to experience difficulty in meeting many Millennium Development Goals, such as reducing maternal and child mortality, ensuring access to safe drinking water, and combatting malnutrition” (*Christianity in its Global Context* 25). Large social, economic, and political issues linger, including widespread famine, extreme unemployment, human trafficking, prostitution, and drug abuse. The physical context is harsh, and kingdom workers are often discouraged by physical and spiritual oppression, economic disparity, ethnic tensions, and the scarcity of believers (Mandryk 305). The culture of the Afar has also impacted Christianity in a number of ways. The Afar are a nomadic people, living within one of the least urbanized regions on the continent (*Christianity in its Global Context* 25). This characteristic is strongly tied into their sense of identity, but they are facing economic pressures to urbanize. The ethnic tensions between the Afar and Somali peoples also pose many problems for outreach and creates a barrier between believers of both ethnic groups (Mandryk 305).

7. Appropriate Strategies for Holistic Outreach

In recent years, there have been many movements of Muslims to Christ in East Africa. In his book *A Wind in the House of Islam*, David Garrison outlines some of the strategies that have helped to catalyze these movements, all of which pertain to the Afar. Because of their honor-shame orientation, Muslim societies regard authority figures highly and make decisions collectively. One strategy to navigate this is to train Muslim leaders using the discovery

approach. This approach invites Muslim leaders to form small groups and use the Qur'an to debate and discuss the person of Muhammad. Garrison notes, "At the end of the day, the groups return and report 'Muhammad is not fit to be a prophet of God'" (76). The groups are then asked to discuss and debate the personhood of Jesus, turning to both the Qur'an and New Testament. The groups usually conclude that Jesus is the Son of God. After conversion, these leaders are encouraged to maintain their cultural identity as Muslims and continue going to the mosque, where they can testify concerning their newfound faith in Christ (Garrison 73-7). A broader strategy for navigating the honor-shame orientation includes incorporating the worldview into the various aspects of mission strategy, such as evangelism, discipleship, peacemaking, development and aid, partnerships, prison ministry, and church planting. To do so, it needs to be emphasized that "all people stand ashamed before God, but Jesus Christ offers an honorable status via adoption into God's family" at every stage in the process (Georges).

Strategies established to reach the Afar will have to navigate their traditional African religious practices and the fear-power orientation that accompanies them. The dependence upon local imams because of the fear of the power of evil spirits also needs to be considered. This fear must be recognized and validated, and the power of Christ must be emphasized so that the people can be liberated, not only from their fear but also from their dependence upon the imams. Within these movements to Christ, "Village Muslims who, generations ago, embraced Islam as another means to manipulate the ever-present threat of spirits and demons, are finding in Christ a power greater than the fears that beset them" (Garrison 79). Along with this emphasis on the power of Christ, Paul Hiebert suggests that kingdom workers develop more holistic theologies "that deal with all areas of life, that avoid Platonic dualism of the West, and that take seriously both body and soul" (413). In doing this, workers should be careful to avoid both secularism and animism,

the first of which can result from an underemphasis on the reality of the spiritual realm, and the second of which can result from an overemphasis (Hiebert 413).

Any adequate strategy should also be sure to address the various political, economic, and social challenges faced by the Afar. East African movements to Christ have often seen this accomplished through “open-air evangelistic meetings” that are paired with relief and community development projects (Garrison 78). Within the specific context of the Afar, joblessness and illiteracy create a great need for literacy and vocational training (Mandryk 305). To reach many and serve the community holistically, it is possible for ministries to provide such training sessions and follow with open-air evangelism. Doing so will show that Christ is concerned about the whole person, not just one’s spirituality.

8. Conclusion

The Afar of Djibouti live in a context that has a longer history of Islam than Christianity. The majority of the people around them and among them adhere to Islam, with very few professing faith in Christ. Mission agencies and non-profits work hard to minister despite the many challenges that the area poses for the spread of Christianity and the predicted decline in believers in the years to come. In such a context, holistic outreach is essential. It is necessary for effective strategies to take into consideration the unique worldview held by the Afar, their identity as nomads, and the history of ethnic strife between them and their Somali neighbors. Both their fear-power and honor-shame cultural orientations and their Muslim background must also be addressed. Kingdom workers should seek to show the Afar that Jesus is the Suffering Servant, carrying their shame to the cross in order to restore their honor, and Ultimate Victor, conquering the power of fear, evil, and death. They must show Christ to be the Provider, who takes care of all of their needs, whether it be social, political, economic, or spiritual, and

strengthens them. In doing so, they will show the Afar that the love of Christ is honoring, powerful, authoritative, and holistic, applicable to all areas of life and stretching beyond all worldly challenges.

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