PATRIARCH MCGUIRE AND THE SPREAD OF THE AFRICAN ORTHODOX CHURCH TO AFRICA

BY

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A post-World War I demonstration of black independence and cultural nationalism was the establishment of the African Orthodox Church (AOC) in the United States and Africa. It was originally formed in the United States in 1921 by West Indians with linkages to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Through the medium of the UNIA's official organ, The Negro World, information on the AOC was disseminated to Africa. In 1924, William Daniel Alexander, a black South African former Anglican clergyman and member of the schismatic indigenous African Church, petitioned the AOC to open a branch of the AOC in South Africa. Alexander eventually became the Church's first bishop in Africa and in the 1930s he travelled to Kenya and Uganda where he ordained several priests and established further branches. The AOC, therefore, was an early display of successful ties fashioned between Blacks of the diaspora and Africa. The AOC of Africa was seeded by an Afro-American nationalist movement led by West Indians.

The AOC of the United States was created through the energies of George Alexander McGuire. McGuire, born on 26 March 1886 in Antigua in the British West Indies, went through a religious so-journ during which he was baptised an Anglican, educated by Moravians and became pastor of a Moravian congregation in St. Croix in the Virgin Islands. He migrated to the United States in 1893 where he first worked for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1895 he became an ordained minister in the Protestant Episcopal Church and for the ensuing decade he served in several congregations in Cincinnati, Richmond and Philadelphia. Because of his administrative skills and preaching presence, he was appointed in 1905 Archdeacon for Colored Work in the Diocese of Arkansas, the highest position in the Episcopal Church that a
Black, up to that time, had attained. He remained in Arkansas for two years and then went on to serve in Cambridge, Antigua and New York City. In 1919, while in New York City, McGuire broke from the Protestant Episcopal Church. By this time he was deeply involved in the black nationalist fervour generated by the UNIA. In 1920 he was elected its Chaplain-General and, in August 1921, McGuire founded the AOC.5

It is not certain at exactly what point in his life McGuire decided on a separatist course, but it is likely that a combination of factors brought him from the ‘establishment’ Protestant Episcopal Church to the independent African Orthodox Church. He arrived in the United States at a time marked in the South by the failure of the Populists to embrace the Black population, and the institution of discriminatory laws. In the North, the patterns of discrimination and segregation that were already established, were being strengthened by white reaction to the migration of southern Blacks to the industrial cities. This was the era of the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington whose doctrine of separate development was perceived by opponents as placing the Black population in a permanently servile status. This was the period of pseudo-scientific theories of race that relegated Black people to a subservient intellectual position for ever.4 This attitudinal, institutional and intellectual racism could not help but effect the dynamic and intelligent clergyman.

Second, racism also reared its head in the Church to which McGuire belonged. Since the Civil War, the Protestant Episcopal Church was unsure of its relationship with its black parishioners. It wished to evangelize among southern Blacks, yet it did not want this evangelization to imply equality. This quandary was exemplified in 1889 by an incident in Little Rock. When a predominantly Black congregation was admitted to the diocese, the wealthiest White parish withdrew its delegates and financial support from the diocesan council in opposition. With the hierarchy unable to resolve the dilemma, William Montgomery Brown, Bishop of Arkansas and McGuire’s superior, proposed his own solution dubbed the “Arkansas Plan.” He called for the complete separation of the Black and White membership, each having their own bishops, clergy and congregations. The autonomous Black church would accede to its White counterpart the position of honour. Brown’s plan was criticized both by conservatives who saw