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(22) AN INTRODUCTION INTO THE TYPOLOGY OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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Christianity has, since the middle of the twentieth century, developed as a non-western and non-white religion. In the meantime, Africa, as we indicate in these anthological essays, has emerged as one of its major heartlands. The essays in this section of the *Anthology to African Christianity* provide a bird's eye view of the different strands, trajectories and developments regarding how this has happened. An important dimension of the section is that the historic mission denominations that have been virtually neglected in the study of Christianity in Africa are represented here. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fear of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference was that Islam was going to overwhelm the rest of the continent from the north, and sub-Saharan Africa was going to become what was referred to then as a 'Muhammadan' enclave. One hundred years later in 2010, the world was faced with a different scenario when another missionary conference met in the same facilities that had housed the 1910 event. The non-western presence could not be ignored. The continent had, perhaps to the surprise of many observers, emerged as a Christian one. The surprise element lies in the fact that following the evangelization efforts of the west, African initiatives in Christianity now dominate the landscape and this is set to continue well into the future.

Today, Christianity in Africa is offered as a major course in seminaries and universities across the globe and this constitutes an important reason for the production of such a volume. Readers and researchers can follow up the issues raised for further study. Across the world, many have set up schools and institutes for the study of World Christianity with a major focus on the faith as it has developed in Africa. In almost every case, studies in World Christianity give primacy of place to Africa alongside Asia and Latin American as fertile soil for Christian faith. Additionally, a number of writings have emerged that draw attention to the importance of Africa in the fortunes of World Christianity today, with Andrew Walls even suggesting that it is now impossible to talk about Christianity without Africa and to talk about Africa without Christianity.¹ The development of Christianity as a world religion, Kwame Bediako wrote, has given the faith a new lease of life in the non-western world. What these contexts have in common is that they have retained affinities with the living world of the Bible and of the experience of the reality and actuality of the Living God, as Jesus and the apostles experienced them and as recorded in the Scriptures.² The name 'Christian' as applied in Africa, as indeed in other parts of the world, covers a considerable diversity of entities and phenomena. It encapsulates churches of both local and foreign origins, as well as para-church movements of different persuasions and liturgical orientations. Western denominational specificities that were inherited from the early missionary eras are no longer paradigmatic for many African ecclesiological traditions.

In the development of Africa as a major heartland of Christianity therefore, it is important to note that the faith has not developed as a monolithic ecclesial institution. In spite of the influence of western missionaries, Christianity has never been alien to the African experience. Historically, it is impossible to talk about Christianity in Africa without reference to the naming of Libya and Egypt among the nations that participated in the biblical Pentecost (Acts 2). Much later, the Acts of the Apostles records the

¹ See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Turning That which is Already There Towards Christ: The Contribution of Andrew F. Walls to Understanding African Christianity", in William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornick and Janice A. Maclean ed., *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 195-210.

² Kwame Bediako, "The Emergence of World Christianity and the Remaking of Theology", *Journal of African Christian Thought*, vol. 12, 2 (2009), 50.

encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch who comes to faith and experiences baptism at the hands of the Apostle. That biblical record explains the iconic status of Ethiopia in African Christianity. The modern missionary era may therefore in a sense be considered a period not just of re-evangelization but also of the institutionalization of Christianity in terms of denominations. In western Christian thought, it often makes sense to categorize the presence of Christian churches and movements in terms of Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and so on. Such typologies have very limited application today, given the ways in which Christian religious innovations in Africa have developed and influenced each other.

The Roman Catholic Church remains a distinct and centrally governed Christian church throughout Africa. Post-Vatican II 'reformations' in the liturgy however means that the oldest Christian denomination in Africa, except for that of Ethiopia, has also changed considerably. An important work that looks at the liturgical innovations of Ghanaian Catholicism led by Archbishop Emeritus Peter K. Sarpong of the Kumasi Diocese and entitled *Asante Catholicism*, is representative of some of the changes that have taken place in that otherwise highly liturgical tradition. Additionally, the ministry of exorcism led by the former Catholic Archbishop of Lusaka, Emmanuel Milingo, enables us to appreciate how the sort of innovations occurring through the incorporation of the African traditional religious worldview into the independent church traditions have not been limited to those churches.

With its highly revered papal authority and clearly defined episcopal governance structure, the Catholic Church remains strong and its influence is seen in the numbers of basic, secondary and high schools and universities established on the continent. Additionally, the Catholic Relief Services is recognized as an important religious outfit in places where natural disasters and famine have occurred. The Church's credibility took a battering during the genocidal wars in Rwanda and Burundi but on the whole this is a denomination that has quite a respectable following in Africa. The Catholic Church shares with the historically older Protestant mission denominations the description 'mainline churches' in Africa. That description now makes sense only in terms of historical establishment but no longer in terms of numerical strength. The most popular and recognizable historic mission Protestant denominations in Africa would include the Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican churches. These denominations established by various western mission bodies from London, Basel and Bremen have existed in Africa for close to two centuries. East and Southern African Methodists have churches that can trace their roots to both the UK and the USA, such as the United Methodist Church with its mild episcopal tradition. Similarly, Anglican churches in Africa exist in both 'high' and 'low' versions. Together the historic mission denominations, as I like to call the mainline churches, have been at the forefront in the provision of formal education and medical care in Africa. The collaboration with indigenous agents of the Protestant tradition in the translation of the Bible into various vernaculars has had a direct bearing, not just on the growth of Christianity but also in opening the way for Africans to introduce innovations into Christianity that bridged the biblical and African worlds.

The first African responses to missionary work in Africa came at the end of the nineteenth century when Nationalist or Ethiopianist churches were established. A century after the nineteenth-century missionary enterprise established its roots, a Black Nationalist elite group dubbed 'Ethiopianists' in Southern Africa and 'Nationalists' in West Africa seceded from their historic Protestant mission denominations to set up independent churches under indigenous leadership. On the whole, they retained much of the liturgical structures of the historic mission denominations but they were new in two important respects. First, Ethiopianist churches were under indigenous leadership, and secondly, they favoured the use of the vernacular in worship as part of the protest against European ecclesial leadership. One of the most popular Ethiopianist or Nationalist churches was pioneered by David Vincent Brown of the Niger Delta, who became known as Mojola Agbebi in the attempt to shed part of his colonial heritage acquired through the church in the usage of so-called baptismal or Christian names like 'David'. The Ethiopian or Nationalist

churches did not develop into mass movements but they are significant as the first known group of indigenous religious initiatives in Africa.

The second response was what became known as the African Independent/Initiated/Indigenous churches (AICs) of the early twentieth century. Indigenous charismatic prophets like William Wade Harris, Isaiah Shembe and Simon Kimbangu did much to inspire new initiatives in African Christianity. These AICs, *Aladura* (people of prayer) or Spiritual churches, were the first group of mass Christian religious movements to transform the religious landscape in Africa. Their major contribution to Christianity in Africa was the integration of charismatic experiences, particularly healing and prophecy, into Christian life. They recognized the leadership role of women in church life, and indeed many founders of independent churches were women. Until the early 1970s, when their activities seemed to have started plummeting, the AICs, for the best part of the twentieth century, would be considered the representative face of Christianity on the continent. During the period of the rise of the AICs, several classical Pentecostal denominations also emerged across Africa with many having roots in similar traditions from the West. Perhaps the most popular of these would be the Assemblies of God but there are many other churches sharing the designation 'Apostolic' that belong to this tradition of classical Pentecostalism.

At the end of the 1970s, Africa experienced a third major response in Christian innovation. This new form of independent churches is a hybrid of the older independents and North American contemporary Pentecostal traditions. Like the older independent churches, they emphasize charismatic renewal and create ritual contexts for the exercise of prophetic ministries and healing and deliverance. They are a bit more 'trendy' in outlook and perhaps their main theological emphasis is the fact that God is a God of prosperity. Their periodic campaigns and conventions frequently use secular themes that teach young people about how to make money and be successful in life. Although it is not preached in the same way by all its leaders, the attraction that this movement holds for Africa's upwardly mobile youth therefore include 'the prosperity gospel'. Their expressive and exuberant styles of worship, motivational messages of success and possibilities and extensive use of modern media have endeared them to many young people in Africa. In the words of Ogbu Kalu, with the rise of this third wave in African Initiated Christianity 'we are witnessing the implosion of a third force, moved by the wind of the Third Person of the Trinity in the triple task of the re-evangelization, intensification and reconstruction of Christian experience in contemporary Africa'.³

The church in Africa is a virtual religious zoo with all kinds of Christian wildlife. There are multitudes of different churches and denominations that are difficult to place neatly in the categories identified here. Thus, for example, we need to take account of the many interdenominational, non-denominational and ecumenical churches that exist in urban Africa. These consist mostly of middle class public servants who for one reason or another are uncomfortable with the historic mission denominations in particular and therefore come together to find a 'middle way' to worship in terms of liturgy. It is not uncommon to find members of these churches who still hold allegiance in their historic mother mission denominations and claim that heritage when required.

We started this introduction to Christianity in Africa with reference to the work of the historic mission denominations and their evangelization efforts. These churches, products of the evangelical missionary enterprise in Europe, are said to have failed at the meeting point of liturgy and proclamation to provide people with new materials that would 'fund, feed, nurture, nourish, legitimate and authorize a counter-imagination to the world'.⁴ The result was the rise of various independent churches that took the spirit world seriously and forged a new type of spirituality that remained loyal to both the biblical and African worlds. The Christian religious landscape in Africa is not simple to negotiate and the essays in this section

³ Ogbu U. Kalu, "The Third Response: Pentecostalism and the Reconstruction of Christian Experience in Africa, 1970-1995", *Journal of African Christian Thought*, vol. 1, 2 (1998), 3.

⁴ Kalu, "Third Response", 4.

should help somewhat to appreciate the different ecclesiological ways in which the body of Christ has transformed the African religious environment.

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