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A History of the Church in Africa

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Review Article

BENGT SUNDKLER AND CHRISTOPHER STEED

A History of the Church in Africa

Cambridge University Press, 2000 xix, 1232 pages
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In 1900 the Christian population of Africa was estimated at 4 millions out of a total of 118 m. people. Roman Catholics were estimated at 1m., Protestants at 1m. and Coptic-Orthodox at 2 m. Today Christians amount to some 351m. out of 770m., of which 175m. are Roman Catholics and 110m. are Protestants. These figures from David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopaedia, 1982*, must to some extent be speculative, but on any estimate the growth of the Christian Church in Africa in the last 100 years is spectacular. Now Bengt Sundkler (1909-95), the eminent Lutheran missionary bishop and church historian, has put flesh on these bare statistics in this *magnum opus*. The book has been edited by Christopher Steed, Sundkler's research assistant at the University of Uppsala.

Some may wonder why it is necessary to put together such an expensive book when there are more detailed histories available on a mission society, denominational or country by country basis. But to read this work, which treats not merely Protestant and Catholic history, but also that of the Coptic-Orthodox and Independent Churches, on a continental basis from the time of the Apostles to the present day is to marvel at the enormous erudition, magisterial judgement and comprehensive understanding of the authors. It will be a standard textbook, without which no library will be complete. It has a most extensive bibliography and excellent indexes which makes it user-friendly. Sundkler and Steed look at the various factors which have affected the phenomenal growth of the African Church.

'Christianity is an Eastern Faith'

'Christianity is an Eastern faith, from Galilee and Judea, very soon reaching the Nile Delta and Egypt and from there spreading west along the coast and south to Nubia and Axum-Ethiopia. At the end of the fifteenth century the faith reached sub-Saharan Africa – Kongo, Mutapa and Mombasa... in each case mediated by groups of young African witnesses' (1039). These words sum up two major themes of the book. Firstly that Christianity is essentially not a Western religion, and secondly that the principal agents of mission have been the African people themselves. The authors state that 'as late as the 1960s there were published ambitious surveys of Churches in certain parts of Africa where the African was - absent' (82). There is always likely to be controversy in a book of this kind as to whether it underplays the role of the expatriate missionary, or whether it remains basically Eurocentric. But I reckon that the balance is about right.

In looking at the first millennium of church history it is reasonable to ask why the flourishing churches of North Africa and Nubia succumbed to the might of Islam when the Coptics of Egypt survived. In North Africa the authors suggest that the Church used an alien language, Latin, which was never fully assimilated by the labouring masses, and in Nubia Christianity was a court religion, the concern of a ruling caste. How well have Anglicans learnt these lessons, I wonder?

Migrants and Refugees

For much of its history Africa has witnessed great movements of peoples across the continent. The slave trade contributed greatly to some of this movement. This trade was one of the most continuing influences in West, Central and Eastern Africa for over 400 years. It did not finally cease in Angola until the First World War, and there is plenty of evidence that it continues today in Southern Sudan. This 'open wound' on the face of Africa, aggravated by the widespread practice of domestic slavery, was brought to the world's attention through the efforts of Thomas Fowell Buxton, David Livingstone and others. 'Freed' slaves who found refuge with missionaries were susceptible to the gospel, and former slaves returning from America and the Caribbean to Liberia and Sierra Leone were preachers and evangelists for the faith.

The nineteenth century also witnessed great movements of peoples from the south of the continent. Some, such as the Mfengu, were agents of the gospel. In other cases, such as among the Tonga of Malawi, the missionaries became protectors against the invaders. In more recent days, civil war and ethnocide have led to great numbers of displaced and refugee peoples, so that Africa has 50% of the world's 5m refugees. Sudanese Christians have had to take refuge in Uganda and Kenya. Hutu Christians have fled into Tanzania and into Congo/Zaire, and Hambukushu from Angola into Botswana. All these displacements have helped with the spread of the gospel into new lands.

Young Men and Women

Sundkler and Steed argue that in the nineteenth century the Church in Africa can be characterised as the Church of young men, and in the twentieth century as the Church of women. In West Africa and South Africa determined groups of young men would rally together in an aggressive evangelistic movement, seeking to break free from the pagan rule of their conservative elders and the secret societies. In Cameroon the 'God's boys movement' established their own chapels, schools and catechetical centres (265). David Livingstone had 'great confidence in the essential vigour of Christianity. It blooms in imperishable youth wherever it is untrammelled by the wisdom of men. Sow the seed and it never dies. The Divine Spirit will see to it' (433).

In the twentieth century the copper mines of Zambia, and the gold and diamond mines of South Africa have attracted large numbers of migrant male workers. Women and children have been left behind in the villages, and increasingly the maintenance of the life of the churches in rural areas has rested on women. The Mothers' Union for Anglicans, the *Manyano* for Methodists, the *Isilolo* movement for Congregationalists, and the Zionist women's fellowships have attracted large numbers of women. These movements often began as revivalist meetings with all

night times of prayer, but later took on more social and pastoral work. The Methodist *Manyano* were distinguished with their unvarying colour scheme of black, red and white, which, in those politically incorrect days, offered visual aids for sermons on the blackness of sin, the redeeming blood, and the whiteness of holiness. Through the Christian religion, African women found their self-esteem and their voice. This meant that in later years, politically involved women had almost always received their nurturing in public life through mission schools and the churches.

African Traditional Religions

It would be unwise to generalise about the effect of African religions on the reception of the Christian gospel. Sometimes they could be a hindrance and sometimes a help. Despite the fact that most Bantu religion was animist and worshipped the spirits of trees and waterfalls, most Bantu peoples had a perception of a supreme being. Mulungu or Lesa Mukulu was the name of this supreme deity used by the Bemba people of Zambia. As I know from living among them, part of their folklore recounts the building of a great tower of wood, which rises to a great height, before suddenly collapsing and killing many people. Another legend tells of mystic half-caste, called Luchele Nganga, who led the Bemba eastwards into their present territory. Luchele Nganga left the Bemba promising to return. Such was the Bemba respect for Luchele that, years later when a white man appeared, he was hailed as Luchele Nganga. The white man just happened to be the missionary Roman Catholic Bishop, Joseph Dupont, who was subsequently appointed regent of the Bemba chieftainship.

Dreams are very important to Africans. There are numerous examples cited in the book of people being converted through a dream involving an angel or Jesus. It also benefited the missionary if he could establish a reputation as a rainmaker. In South Africa, the Methodist William Shaw was challenged by Gqindiwa, the local Xhosa rainmaker. Shaw suggested a whole day of prayer and fasting, heavy rain fell over two or three days, and the local chiefs abandoned their traditional witchdoctors for the missionaries. But witchdoctors did not easily surrender their privileged position and have remained a resilient feature of African life.

In Malawi the M'bona cult with its legend of a prophet inspired by God but slain by a neighbouring chief offered parallels with Christ. But when a missionary trespassed on M'bona sacred grounds, conflict erupted. The White Fathers also clashed with the members of the Nyau dance society, who retaliated by making masks of St. Peter, St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary and holding them up to ridicule. Generally the missions frowned on African dances because of their associations with traditional religions. In Tanzania a prophet called Kinjikitile Ngwala, possessed by the Hongo spirit with reputed power over rain and fertility, led the *Maji Maji* rebellion against white rule. During the years 1905-07, some 750,000 were killed in the resulting violence.

Polygamy was always a tricky matter for the missionaries. African converts might point to its prevalence in the Old Testament, but were frequently refused baptism unless the polygamists put away all but one wife. In Kenya female circumcision became an issue which divided the churches themselves. Amidst much controversy, Bishop Heywood of the CMS bowed to the dominant opinion in the diocese and

allowed female circumcision if it was conducted privately, caused no physical injury and if all associated 'heathen practices' were abandoned. It was not until 1982 following the death of 14 girls in the Rift Valley that female circumcision was banned in Kenya. The blood oath of the Mau Mau in the 1950s was to be another highly divisive issue for the Kenyan churches.

Catholicism

I suppose that many Protestants like myself are largely ignorant of the story of the Catholic missions in Africa. We are just aware that in most places the largest local church happens to be Roman Catholic. Sundkler and Steed make it clear that the history of Catholic mission in Africa is a story of great heroism and self-sacrifice. But initially it was a story of conquest. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI divided the world, assigning the Americas to Spain and the East including Africa to Portugal. The Portuguese treated this as a sacred mission for Christian conquest, a spiritual and colonising crusade. Often after the barest instruction on the sign of the Cross in the name of the Triune God, rulers and their peoples would be incorporated by baptism into the Christian Church. The Portuguese adventurers and missionaries first came to the West Coast of Africa in the fifteenth century. By 1543, in the Kingdom of Kongo (near the mouth of the Congo river) some two million people, half the population of had been baptised. In 1497 Vasco de Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and Portuguese influence was extended up the West Coast as far as Mombasa. The ruler of Zimbabwe was baptised by a Jesuit in 1561, but within a month had reverted to paganism and the Jesuit was strangled. A similar set back occurred in Mombasa in 1631, when the king's son, reverted to Islam from Catholicism, and in the ensuing massacre, 250 African and Portuguese Christians were martyred.

It was these very early successes which persuaded later Catholic missionaries that their mission was one of a reprise for the Roman faith. In the nineteenth century the main missionary thrust came from a number of prominent French Catholics. Outstanding amongst them were Bishop Augouard of French Equatorial Africa, Father Charles Duparquet, of the Holy Ghost Fathers, or Spiritans, and Mother Javouhey, who founded the first order of missionary sisters south of the Sahara. But perhaps the most pre-eminent was Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, the Archbishop of Carthage, founder of the White Fathers. It was Lavigerie, who in 1878, persuaded Leo XIII to give him control of four new vicariates, two for the interlacustrine region and two in the Congo. Unlike the earlier Portuguese missionaries, Lavigerie insisted on a four-year catechumenate before baptism. But he was prepared to let polygamists be admitted as postulants, with the proviso that they might be baptised at the point of death. But it was church growth at a cost. As with all missions, sickness took a heavy toll. No fewer than five bishops or vicars apostolic sent out to Lake Tanganyika died in the same year as their consecration.

Protestants

In the forefront of Protestant missionary endeavours were Count Zinzendorf's Moravians, who sent missionaries in all directions, and who 'all went out in faith, with a song on their hearts and on their lips' (66). Their first missionaries reached the Cape in 1827. Moravian revivals were also behind German missionaries coming

out of seminaries in Berlin and Basle. Altogether Basle sent no less than eighty missionaries to the Church Missionary Society, which in its early days encountered a marked reluctance on the part of British Christians to volunteer for missionary service. Some of the best known CMS missionaries in West and East Africa were Basle men, including Krapf, Rebmann and Gobat. Ludwig Krapf arrived at Mombasa in 1844 and shortly afterwards laid his wife and newly born child in a 'lonely missionary grave'. It was Krapf who dreamt of a chain of Protestant mission stations stretching across the Continent from coast to coast. Livingstone was to show this was a possibility, and it was a dream finally realised at the end of the century.

It was Henry Venn of the CMS and Rufus Anderson of the Congregationalist America Board who together developed the concept of the 'Three Selves', the notion that the local church should aim to be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. This principle was to push mission churches towards independence long before independence was conceived at the political level. But the sad story of Samuel Crowther, the first African Bishop on the Niger, who came into conflict with zealous white missionaries who resented being subordinate to Crowther, brought a crisis to the CMS and showed the difficulty of implementing Venn's policy in practice.

Apolo Kivebulaya (1864-1933), a Ganda convert from Islam, is an example of an outstanding African evangelist who preached for decades amongst the Pygmies at Mboga in the tropical rain forest of Congo/Zaire. Apolo remained a faithful Anglican despite being a man of visionary dreams to whom Christ appeared shining like the sun and speaking to him: 'I Am That I Am, that is my name. It was a Scottish Presbyterian, Donald Fraser, who led the first Pentecostal-type crusades in Africa from 1898. These were large annual gatherings with up to 10,000 present in Ngoni country in Malawi. Huge Pentecostal crusades are still a feature of Africa today, but neither Reinhard Bonnke or Peter Pretorius are mentioned in the book. In Uganda and the intralacustrine region, the East African Revival, influenced by the Keswick holiness movement, was essentially a lay movement in which believers testified to their brokenness and their experience of salvation. In retrospect its tendency to pietism and failure to address social issues may have been one reason why it later failed to stop the ethnocide in that part of Africa. The book does not seem to take sufficient account of the extraordinary contribution of inter-denominational faith missions and the African churches which have grown out of them. This is well chronicled in Klaus Fiedler's *The Story of Faith Missions* (Regnum/Lynx, 1994).

Independents

Catholic and Protestant churches have spawned a vast proliferation of independent African churches. There are reckoned to be some 3,000 of these independent churches in South Africa alone. William Wade Harris of Liberia was one of the first of the African prophets. After a vision in prison of the Archangel Gabriel, Harris dressed in a white robe and carrying a Bible and a cross reached out to the Ivory Coast with a fiery message to burn fetishes and be baptised. His converts were said to number 100,000. Both the Roman Catholics and Methodists gained large numbers through Harris. A few weeks of revelation in 1921 in N'kamba brought

Simon Kimbangu to the attention of people throughout Congo as a great healing and preaching prophet, who founded the largest independent church in Africa. Kimbangu himself spent his last thirty years imprisoned in Lubumbashi by the Belgians. But this did not prevent the growth of the Kimbangu Church under the leadership of Kimbangu's son, Joseph Diangienda. Under Mobutu's authenticity campaign in Congo/Zaire, the Kimbanguists became one of the only four recognised denominations, along with the Catholics, Orthodox and the Protestants (all rolled into one). Kimbanguists were also admitted to the World Council of Churches.

The sheer numbers and variety of the Independents defy any simple description. In the Transvaal Legkanyane established the Zionist Christian Church which was to be the forerunner of countless Zionist Churches in Southern Africa. Such churches tended to be extremely prone to schism. In Zimbabwe, Joseph Mutendi's Zionists experienced no less than thirteen schisms between 1929 and 1961. In Kenya, a Roman Catholic catechist, Simeon Ondeto, proclaimed himself Pope and appointed six cardinals, seventy-five bishops and a great number of priests. In Nigeria the Aladura churches (the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Christian Apostolic Church and the Church of the Lord, Aladura) were brought in from the margins to take a central role in the life of the nation.

In South Africa James Dwane, an ordained Wesleyan Methodist minister, left the mission church. He was consecrated as an assistant bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But he was not satisfied that the AME was qualified to pass on episcopal orders. Dwane therefore entered into negotiations with the Anglicans. The result was the Order of Ethiopia which was formed in 1900 as part of the Church of the Province of South Africa. The Order of Ethiopia remains part of the Anglican Communion and sends its bishop to the Lambeth Conference. Valiant attempts have been made by Mennonites and by Dr. Beyers Naude of the Christian Institute in South Africa to forge links with the Independents.

Conclusions

The remarkable growth of the Church in Africa can be attributed to no one cause. Animism was clearly not a faith which could hold its own against the monotheism of Christianity or Islam. Catholic and Protestant missionaries sowed some of the seed, but its broadcast was largely the work of African believers, young men and later women being in the forefront. The mass movements of peoples caused by war, famine and the search for jobs and money broke down many of the old barriers and allowed the message to spread right across sub-Saharan Africa. At the beginning of the new millennium, the Church in Africa is strong numerically, but is weak materially. There is a lack of trained leaders and other resources. The Church faces the threat posed by poverty, corruption and the deadly effects of the AIDS pandemic. It is involved in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the youth of Africa in the face of militant Islam, renaissance paganism and materialist secularism. Who will be the prophets to lead the Church in Africa into the new age? Only a prophet can answer that question.

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