

# *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi?*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Elizabeth Isichei follows in a grand tradition of single-author one-volume histories of Christianity in Africa. It is written in the current ecumenical tradition from “an African perspective” and follows the canons of the “new historiography”. In terms of periodisation and regional divisions, she follows generally accepted categories with some local variations. What is distinctive and innovative is the selectivity of some of the themes she chooses to discuss. In the absence of similar works emanating from black historians, she expresses her concern about being a “white” interpreter and interlocutor. Nevertheless, she offers a history of considerable distinction.*

## **1. AIM AND METHODOLOGY**

This book is hailed as “the first one-volume study of the history of Christianity in Africa” (back cover). This is not quite true (cf Baur 1994; Hastings 1994<sup>2</sup>; Hildebrandt 1981; and more recently Sundkler & Steed 2000). Though the author adopts a “predominantly regional organisation” (Isichei:ix A Note on Terminology and Chapter Arrangement) in the work, it is also arranged with clear attention to the issue of periodisation, as can be seen from the table of contents (see below).

Isichei gives a brief introduction to the background to her historiographic approach in the *Prelude* by challenging the western “invention” of Africa (Isichei 1995:7) and raises issues relating to selectivity in the themes and groups to be studied. Despite being white herself, though with an intimate knowledge of life in Nigeria and in Tanzania (Isichei 1995:11), she criticises the validity of a totally etic approach which has to create the Other who is the subject of study. However, the same may result when history is written from

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<sup>1</sup> Review article: Elizabeth Isichei (1995), *A history of Christianity in Africa: from antiquity to the present*. London: SPCK.

<sup>2</sup> Though Hastings’s title refers to the period 1450-1950, he does consider the earlier history of the continent. His earlier work (1979) deals with a recent period (1950-1975) which is not often treated in such detail.

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an emic point of view where the “insider” has been trained in the canons of Western historiography and offers nothing distinctive. She picks up some of these ideas at the beginning of her third chapter:

Much writing on Christianity in Africa – my own included – has been shaped by a reaction against a tradition of missionary biography, where the foreign Christian is the heroic actor, and African communities merely the backdrop for his or her good deeds. Often, Africans are depicted as savage and degenerate to highlight the beneficial impact of Christianity.

(Isichei 1995:74)

She notes the reaction of writers such as Ajayi and Ayandele (as do Sundkler & Steed 2000:1) who, at the other extreme, focus on African agency with a strong critique of European intervention. This was a reaction to the inherent racism of the hagiographical accounts. A more balanced approach is necessary in her opinion for the bringers of the message did not do so in a vacuum and their context has to be understood as well as that of the new *milieu*. This chapter is devoted to considering the impact of these change agents. While noting the relativistic view of missionaries, Isichei acknowledges that they probably had a deeper perception of black people than did any of the other white people in the community.

In terms of periodisation, Isichei (1997:5) accepts that “History ... refuse to fit neatly into chronological or regional categories.” The twelve chapters of this book can be divided into seven sections, and these are further reduced to three main periods (see below):

- North Africa in antiquity (Ch1)
- Churches of the middle years (Ch 2)
- Mission renewed (Ch 3)
- History to 1900: southern Africa, east and east central Africa (Ch 4-6)
- History to 1900: west central and northern Africa (Ch 7-8)
- History from c 1900-1960 (Ch 9-11)
- Independent black Africa since 1960: Church and state (Ch 12).

Isichei generally adheres to (though she expands somewhat) the general periodisation established by the Working Commission on Church History of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT 1985):

- History prior to European expansion
- End of fifteenth century to end of eighteenth century
- Nineteenth century to c 1880
- High imperial/missionary period (1880-1920 [1940])
- Post-1945 period (Vischer 1985:5-6, 131-132).

As a guide in the contents, this periodic division is rather confusing. A detailed table of contents would have revealed some innovative material and approaches which are not easily accessible to the untrained eye, such as Christianity and culture, the Christian village, purity and gender, Christians and Marxists: the “opaque reality” and encounters in the heart. These do reveal the new approach to historiography but they are not easily accessible. Like most authors in this field, she concentrates on the period post-1800 though most give little attention to the early Christian period. Yet Isichei gives greater attention to this era than any other comparable historian does.

But how does this compare with other similar books on African Christianity? Hildebrandt’s (1981) relatively brief survey sets out to challenge the false assumption that Christianity is a recent arrival on the African continent and stresses the continuity of the growth of Christianity in Africa in terms of a “relationship which in the past has often been overlooked” (Hildebrandt 1981:x). Written from a conservative evangelical standpoint, the survey follows the traditional patterns of periodisation (up to 1975) and regional division.

Baur (1994) aims to serve the general reader, as well as providing a textbook, and while the book focuses predominantly on the Roman Catholic Church (to counter a protestant bias in most other works) it also seeks to do justice to Protestant and Orthodox churches by creating “a better ecumenical climate” (Baur 1994:16). The final section on the twentieth century (up to 1997 in some cases) benefits from both a thematic and country-by-country approach. In terms of periodisation, Baur defines three periods, the first settlement of Christian Jews in Egypt to 1500, 1500-1800 and 1792-1992.

Hastings (1994:v) states his limitations quite clearly. This is a study “about the churches within black Africa” from 1450-1950 (delimiting the collapse of colonialism) though he also deals with the medieval period where appropriate. Its necessity stems from the absence of “a single, wide-ranging, reliable modern work” (Hastings:1994:vi). This is probably the best available work in the field it covers. In his work on the period 1950-1975, Hastings (1979) acknowledges the interrelatedness of the traditional, the Christian and the Islamic in the religious dimension of modern African history. The Christian churches have played a significant role in the political and social histories of

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African nations and for the universal Christian community. Only Hastings refers to the “geographical unity” (Hastings 1994:2) of the continent and its history. His intention is “to see black Africa as a whole” (Hastings:1994:2) and his overriding concern is chronological. In each section he begins with a political overview along with an examination of church-state relations and then proceeds to a consideration of Protestant and Roman Catholic concerns and finishes with a section on independent churches. His work is divided into three periods:

- 1450-1780: a medieval environment
- 1780-1890: from the anti-slavery to total subjugation
- 1890-1960: the Christianising of half a continent

Sundkler and Steed (2000:1) claim to attempt in an “unashamedly ecumenical” way to remedy the problem of non-Africans writing “as if the Christian Church were in Africa, but not of Africa” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:5). They declare their commitment to “re-interpret African religions and church history from a distinct African perspective” (Sundkler & Steed 2000:2) without relegating the role of mission churches to oblivion. This is a distinctive church history written about religious movements, religious institutions and religious personalities. In some ways it betrays the lengthy period of writing, for example in foregrounding the ecumenical approach – which is hardly innovative nowadays! However, he defends his emphasis on African agents as a corrective to earlier histories. In terms of being a single-volume history, the authors defend their work on the basis of the argument that any work involves a degree of selectivity where (like Baur) “distinct pedagogical needs determine this selection” (2000:5). However, Sanneh’s (Sundkler & Steed 2001:116-117) comment is apposite:

On its own logic and balance, the book should have had at least one African co-author. It would have made it a good deal easier to commend the book not only as a monument to the church *in* Africa but as a testament *of* the church in Africa.

It is interesting to note the variant uses of “Church” and “Christianity” in the titles of works on history. “Christianity” seems to indicate a wider meaning than “Church” and refers to movements, including the institutional church, whereas the term “Church” seems to point more to a purely institutional understanding. Isichei clearly prefers the broader term which encompasses a more inclusive approach to the growth of the Christian spirit. What is necessary in any attempt to write or read and understand African Christian

history is that the writer and reader both need to be aware of their own and the other's perspectives and commitments.

## 1.2 Issues raised in the introduction

The book opens with a chapter entitled Prelude. The context of this study is the remarkable growth of Christianity in Africa compared with the equally dramatic decline in the West which Walls has described as a “complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity” (Isichei 1995:1).

Three general periodisation themes become apparent in this work. First, what has often been overlooked is the significant role Africa has played in the development of the faith since its inception. It is amazing that, in earlier years, so little notice was taken of the fact that Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine were, in fact, African theologians – a historical oversight perhaps? It is also noteworthy that the perennial problems of Christianity were of concern in its earliest period, for example theodicy. It is impossible to write of Christianity in Africa without taking into account the onslaught of Islam. This caused the virtual disintegration of the faith in North Africa, with the notable exception of Ethiopia whose independence was to become the guiding symbol of the African Christian initiative from the late nineteenth century. Second, the penetration of Portuguese Roman Catholic mission from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century is considered as having only temporary and peripheral influence. Third, the impact of post-Reformation mission Christianity from the late eighteenth century as a result of the Evangelical Revival, suggests a consideration of several key issues, including the relation of Christianity to African traditional religion, autonomy in mission churches, African Initiated Churches, inculturation, the search for identity and contextualisation.

These issues are evidenced in the tension between the view that there is a timeless corps of Christian belief and the notion that the world and reality are socially constructed. The methodology employed involves making value judgements on what forms of faith expression are Christian or otherwise. These value judgements raise questions about the degree to which Western value systems are imposed on the African context, compared with the degree to which dialogue takes place on the basis of mutuality. This has serious implications as black voice has been excluded as a result of Western objectivity speaking for and on behalf of the Other; African scholars have been as guilty as others in this regard.

The role of religion has been ignored in many areas because the subject has been subsumed under secular studies, consequently jettisoning the divine dimension. This results in an incomplete view of society since religion plays a pivotal role in all societies. The value of African Christianity

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derives from its prophetic (protest) and integrative role. Isichei notes the problematic false and recent ethnic divisions which complicate any study of the African context. The latest research has revealed the exceedingly complex nature of reality in Africa.

Clearly this is a work that is ecumenical in outlook in the sense that it is both: "interconfessional" and, at the same time "universal". It must transcend the confessional boundaries and, at the same time, embrace the history of the churches in ... Africa (Vischer 1982:5).

It goes beyond a narrow definition of church in its inclusiveness by considering perspectives on Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian history as well as the perspectives of movements which have for so long been denied the dignity of recognition.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENTS**

Chapter One concerns the history of early Christianity in North Africa. In geographical, political and economic terms, North Africa and the Mediterranean world form a unity. Culturally, the Roman and Greek influences cannot detract from the significance of early Christianity's role in the ancient world. Any consideration of the pre-history of Christianity in Africa must take into account the critical role of the Jewish Diaspora which constituted the first missionary incursion into the African continent. Myth and history are imperceptibly blended, each with its distinctive expressions of truth. Judaism proved to be a more durable faith during certain periods and contributed a great deal to the formation of a distinctive Ethiopian and African Christianity. The author traces the central place of Egypt in the history of gnosticism, an integral component of early catholic Christianity, which was later declared heresy.

The central role of the Catechetical School of Alexandria is affirmed as the intellectual birthplace of Christian theology. Its controversies culminated in the Council of Chalcedon with the challenge to the two natures of Christ, which gave way to the Monophysite churches, a predominantly African phenomenon. The Coptic church bequeathed to Christianity its monastic tradition in its eremitic and its coenobitic expressions.

The growth of Christianity in Nubia, Aksum and the Maghrib is outlined in the light of recent archaeological discoveries. Though Egyptian Christianity was influenced by Greek thought, North African Christianity was more susceptible to Roman influence, resulting in the emergence of the Latinist theologian Tertullian and church statesman Cyprian, who were both lawyers and possibly the source of legalism in the western church arising out of persecution and epitomised by the Donatist schism. North Africa was a prime

locus of martyrdom, including that of women. Perhaps more could have been said about the greatest of all African theologians, Augustine, who receives less than two pages of text. It is strange that Isichei uncritically accepts Constantine as a “sincere ... convert [who] saw Christian unity as a concomitant of a united empire” (Isichei 1995:37)! The church in North Africa was more introverted and divided against itself than evangelical. This probably contributed in part to its demise. This was less marked to the East where the Coptic church has survived in progressively declining numbers. In both cases the impact of Islam was a contributory factor to the dwindling numbers.

Chapter Two considers the development of the church in Africa during the period, 1500-1800. The Portuguese Catholics predominate in sub-Saharan Africa but the churches in the north, with the exception of those of Egypt and Ethiopia, succumbed to the depredations of Islamic advance. The author warns against over-romanticising the Ethiopian church whose relationship with the State was, at times, less than healthy and the source of injustice; at times it took the concept of “critical solidarity” to an unfortunate extreme. Yet it was an entirely African church with its distinctive monophysite faith. Its Hebraic practices probably originated in its self-perception as an alienated people, like the people of Israel, rather than as purely historic remnants. The power of custom and tradition was strongly resistant to change and the chapter emphasises the dynamic relationship between Christianity, its western cultural context and the cultural context of the recipient cultures.

The strength of Portuguese Christianity could be attributed to its national identification with Catholicism and its negative attitude to Islam, under whose influence and rule it had suffered for centuries. Its missionary expansionist policies were closely linked to its desire to develop trade and discomfit the followers of Islam. Women and children were easy prey as converts. The close link between church and State through the *padroado* system contributed to the weakening of missionary work as the Portuguese empire disintegrated. With regard to the emergence of a Euro-African class, Isichei notes that in many cases, “they clung tenaciously to Christianity to establish the perimeters of an otherwise ambiguous identity” (Isichei 1995:56). This was to become a repeated pattern in South Africa in later years. The growth of an African clergy can be traced back to this period, though many ministered either to their black brothers and sisters or to an expatriate population. The eighteenth century marked the first Protestant missions to Africa. It is interesting to note the emergence of female prophets at times of political crisis, such as Appolonia Mafuta and Kimpa Vita in the Congo who conflated ideas of spirit possession in traditional religion with Christianity. The survival of Christianity came to depend on committed lay persons when

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priests were no longer available. From this early stage, the stage was set for the co-mingling of commercial and Christian interests among the Christian community as is exemplified in the Jesuits' involvement in the *prazos* estate system of the Zambezi valley. It is a blot on the history of Christianity in Africa that the church not only participated in but also actually benefited from the slave trade. Isichei concludes this chapter by stating her historiographical commitment: "Each generation of Africans has tackled the task of disentangling the message from foreign contexts, and inculturating it in African worlds" (Isichei 1995:72). The recurring themes that emerge here are the problems caused to evangelisation by insistence on giving up cultural practices, attachment to traditional stances, the lack of discipline of the masses whose leaders had converted yet who sought baptism, the lack of missionaries and the inability to recognise the potential of black agency linked to the manifest injustices visited upon indigenous peoples.

Chapter Three deals with the resurgence of missionary activity, particularly among Protestant evangelical voluntary organisations, mostly with a regional focus, such as LMS in South Africa. In terms of missionary staff, the author avers that they were "self-selected" (Isichei 1995:76). In secular terms this was probably so but this statement takes little or no account of God's calling. The wealthy were the sponsors of mission but it was the poor who funded it for the most part and it was the artisan class which provided many of those who served in Africa and elsewhere, thus granting them the opportunities and status denied to them in their homelands. However, they "often experienced a profound isolation and cultural dislocation" (Isichei 1995:78). This was probably as true of lady missionaries and missionary wives as of anyone in the field. Further distinctions were made between ordained and lay with a few exceptions being made for medical doctors! Small wonder that many missionaries were jealous of their power and authority, and failed to empower their developing black colleagues. Added to this were the various interpretations of the gospel and different perceptions of Africa, its peoples and their beliefs. Evangelical witness tended to link Christianity and commerce, not to mention civilisation. The development of markets was considered a positive counter-attack on the slave trade.

Jesuit (and also other religious orders') control of missions was progressively eliminated during the eighteenth century to be re-established under the direct authority of the pope in 1816 with the establishment of *Propaganda Fide*. The formation of missionary congregations was promoted as a foil to the impact of modernism. However, black applicants, both male and female, found difficulties with being admitted to these orders, and often had to enter separate orders.

A new Holiness Movement emerged in nineteenth century evangelical circles. This movement was epitomised in the Keswick Conventions, Plymouth Brethren and Africa Inland Mission, which promoted a middle-class type of missionary. They stressed the imminent *parousia*, rejected ritual and organisational structures, preferred evangelisation to education and focused on individual conversion. Their “holiness spirituality” and perfectionism led to an intolerance of the Other and excessive expectations. These indications of superiority were replicated in missionaries' collusion with imperial ambitions, though Isichei asserts that: “No one became a missionary with the conscious intention of furthering imperialism” (Isichei 1995:92). However, there were numerous incidents of conflict between missionaries and colonialists. And though there were areas of co-operation, there were also serious conflicts between missionaries and mission societies in the field, later necessitating comity agreements in certain places. Missionaries responded differently to issues of culture and civilisation and had varying expectations of their converts. It was these converts who wrested the initiative for determining the modus of African Christian life and how it related to education and technology. Although some swallowed the Christian message and its accoutrements wholesale, others rejected the Christian part of it and yet others adopted their own distinctive forms of Christian expression in the African Initiated Church movement. A recurring issue was how missionaries could meet the deep-seated needs of African people, needs which had been adequately met by their adherence to traditional faith.

Chapter Four begins the regional history of African Christianity in earnest, with a consideration of southern Africa to the end of the nineteenth century. The predominant role of African agents is emphasised as is the dichotomy between service to settler and service to African Christians as a result of racism. Missionaries were faced with a challenge in terms of critical solidarity and critical distance when it came to responding to white injustice. Another significant feature is the comparative ease with which displaced peoples were incorporated into Christian mission stations, where missionaries, like the settlers, had amassed substantial land making them indistinguishable from the settler population. Missionaries appeared in the wake of the complex migrations of the late eighteenth century, the *Mfecane*. The first permanent European settlement dates from 1652, and throughout the nineteenth century Afrikaner and English-speaking people moved north and east into the interior. A twofold response emerged to white settler intrusion and the consequent weakening of chiefly powers. Prophetic figures appeared and wrested the initiative from chiefs, each inculturating the gospel message in a distinctive manner. The other approach was epitomised in the “improvers”

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who believed that it was through education that equality would come. Both approaches were doomed to fail dismally and education became a means of alienating black children from their families and their traditional roots. However, education was a double-edged sword, as resistance to missionary domination was spearheaded by the products of this system (Duncan 2003). Interestingly, similarities emerged in the worldviews of missionaries and blacks, particularly in the context of rain-making where the practice of Christian prayer prevailed and led to an undermining of the role of the chiefs, most of whom converted. Similar examples of African initiative are found in spirit mediums in Zimbabwe and diviners in Lesotho, such as Mantsopa Makheta. Whatever its benefits, Christianity was also a source of division in African society.

Traditional religion provided a bridge from African to Christian culture, largely through the medium of ritual which was a foil to the differences between oral and written cultures. For some, Christianity was the logical outcome of people's search for meaning. For others, it was a last resort when all else had failed in traditional religion. For improvers, their attempts at identity with western Christian values achieved only the pain of rejection, causing many to seek solace, acceptance and self-respect in the exclusiveness of Ethiopian churches. These churches struggled but those which adopted a more heavenly vision, the *Ama-Ziyoni*, tended to flourish.

The history of Christianity in east and in east central Africa is considered in Chapter Five and notes the particular successes of Christianity in Madagascar and Buganda beginning in 1820 and the 1870s respectively. Bugandan Christianity was largely the result of indigenous sacrifice and exertions. Otherwise, limited success followed in the wake of encroaching colonialism, in a context marked by competition with Islam, the effects of the *Mfecane*, the slave trade, the *rinderpest* and political developments (the formation of new states), giving rise to a class of prophets who sought to interpret current events in terms of tradition and modernisation. In response, individuals made their own syntheses in terms of a faith commitment. One such response was the formation of isolated mission enclaves where blacks would be saved from the contamination of their past lives for example in mission schools (cf Duncan 2003) but not from insensitive domination. Surprisingly, the inland missions met with far greater success than the planned coastal stations. This was the age of missionary giants – David Livingstone, Robert Laws and Robert Moffat, and of missionary institutions such as the Overtoun Institution and Livingstonia, where black and white missionaries worked side by side, including a team from Lovedale. What becomes evident is an almost imperceptible process of negotiation between

traditional leaders and colonial administrators and missionaries for the hearts and minds of the people, with all the derivative benefits of technological innovation and political support.

The development of Christianity in West Africa (Chapter Six) is intricately connected to Islam and traditional religion. From the perspective of the powerful, Christianity presented a threat to internal stability and external domination; therefore subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, co-option was adopted as a viable strategy. Such insights often come from reading between the lines of contemporary texts. Christianity also functioned as a catalyst for change in society, as in the case of the reform of the practice of human sacrifice in Calabar (Isichei 1995:158). Conversions had their source in various causes (cf Isichei 1995:168, Snow & Malachuk 1984). The renewal of the missionary enterprise in West Africa, both Catholic and Protestant, occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century but with limited success.

Sierra Leone and Liberia became the receptacle of black settlers from Canada, England and Jamaica who did not find a lasting home in their countries of "adoption". Along with the Recaptives from slavery, they followed Christianity or Islam. The Creole community attempted a synthesis of Christianity and African culture; their brand of Christianity did not endure partly because they did not integrate with the local people as their identity had been forged elsewhere. The Europeanised black person occupied a liminal place in society. However, they did provide missionaries to West Africa. This was the area marked by significant revivals during the early twentieth century.

Chapter Seven discusses the missionary expansion in the Congo basin during the "high missionary" era, though Isichei acknowledges the resurgence of missionary activity from as early as the 1840s when political and ecclesiastical powers were busy dividing up the African continent. This raised various issues of the relationship of the church and the State in a denominational sense. In this particular area, the Roman Catholics benefited from the signing of concordats which gave them a distinct advantage over the Protestant missions, especially in the close relationship between the Catholic Church and Portuguese colonialism. The role of black American missionaries and women is emphasised in a missionary perspective. Fundamentalist missions were commonplace and it is of note that Protestant missions came together in 1970 to form the Church of Christ in Zaire as the long-term result of ecumenical conferences and co-operation. Simon Kimbangu is discussed as an exemplary leader of a twentieth-century indigenous prophetic movement and the threat it posed to colonial powers. It gained respectability through government recognition in 1959, became a church and experienced the "routinisation of charisma" (Isichei 1995:201). Kimbangu eventually attained

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the status of a saviour. Renewal and revival movements often remained in the established mission churches, as in east Africa and the French Congo.

North African Christianity is the subject of Chapter Eight. It is marked by a transformation from a triumphalist approach to a “spirituality of ‘presence’” (Isichei 1995:209). In Ethiopia there was a thirst for Christianity – a combination of a genuine desire for theological dialogue linked to a desire for access to Western technology. The approach of Protestants was marked by a reforming tendency while that of Catholics emphasised conformity with Rome. Notwithstanding this, the historical process of inculturation continued. A particular weakness was the total identification of the church and the State. Recent history has recorded the proliferation of liberation movements. Coptic Christianity continued to be exemplified in its identification with symbols from the flight into Egypt, the actual or legendary foundation of the Coptic church by St Mark and the role of martyrs in the Diocletian persecution. Competition with Islam has been a feature of modern Christian history, though there have been periods of harmony. Recently the Copts have been relegated to the role of the Other in society.

The spread of Christianity during the colonial period was facilitated by improved communication networks (road and rail) and education. Chapters Nine (East and East Central Africa) and Ten (West Africa) demonstrate that western mission Christianity came into competition with the African- initiated prophetic and Zionist churches. Geographic mobility through migrant labour and urbanisation exposed black Christians to other options in the choice of Christian attachment and offered opportunities for indigenous lay leadership to develop. By contrast, the missionaries preferred the option of concentrating their work in rural areas. It is in the context of the rapid expansion of missions with the rivalry involved that comity arrangements were so easily made and broken. In the colonial context, missionaries played a variety of roles in their relationship with settler communities, including the roles of collaborator, pastor, racist and critic. However, their promotion of mission education had a subversive effect, whether or not it was conscious (Duncan 2003). Education and Christianity became synonymous with, and promoted, the separation from the traditional lifestyle and the development of (Christian) character, as well as increasing the prestige and authority of the “readers”. Apart from the mission stations, it is unlikely that missionaries played a major role in terms of their numbers. The responses to their work, and that of black agents, are varied but Isichei is probably correct in her assertion: “Many moved easily between two worlds with little conscious reflection, embodying the rituals and attitudes of the past in the churches of the present” (Isichei 1995:239).

Twentieth-century African Christianity has been marked by the revival movement which began in the 1930s in Rwanda and Uganda and spread throughout central Africa and also into southern Africa. It emerged as a response to worldly “churchianity” and transformed human sin from the individual into the societal realm. It displayed schismatic tendencies and women often played key roles. These bodies were marked by charismatic leadership, special sacred spaces and the use of artefacts as distinguishing features; they were inevitably syncretistic and often ethnically based. Needless to say, missionaries found this movement problematic! This was but one response to mission Christianity. Arcane societies also emerged during this period. In the mission churches there were distinctive responses, such as women's' guilds. In East Africa “Africanist” writings focused largely on black agency; missionaries often courted opprobrium as the result of their commitment to social justice. Side by side with the advance of various forms of Christianity went the progress of secularisation.

West Africa, marked by the paucity of a white settler community and a less obvious missionary community, was the context in which concept of *negritude* emerged. West Africa was also affected by the revival movement and suffered the changing fortunes of political rule in the early part of the twentieth century. This affected the churches too, as new faith communities were born. Comity arrangements resolved the competition between different denominations and mission societies. Ethnically divided churches became divisive and impeded integration in urban areas. Prophetic organisations emerged in the mission context, particularly among women's' guilds with their distinctive uniforms and revival meetings.

Prophetic churches were a distinctive feature of West African Christianity in the twentieth century, especially in Nigeria and Ghana. In Sierra Leone, Christianity found strong competition from Islam. The *Aladura* churches emerged from the elite class of society in Nigeria. These “praying” communities accept God's communication through dreams and visions, and believe that they are blessed by fasting. Their unity comes from their commitment to a national association. Foremost among West African prophets was the charismatic William Wade Harris who exercised a powerful though short-lived ministry. The impact of his work benefited the mission churches and the Harrist churches which also became susceptible to upward social mobility. Harris's success, like that of Garrick Braide and others, was derived from his concern and achievements in meeting their people at their points of deepest need. They all favoured indigenisation but eschewed supporting traditional religious practice. The Spirit Movement, in contradistinction to the prophetic movement, arose in the context of communal

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revival and often resulted in various forms of syncretism. Isichei notes the significant role women played in these movements, and also notes the resonance of New Age spirituality with African traditional religion, commenting on how the more recent mainstream Christian history represents the faith of the elite. Moves towards unity failed in a context of social and political disintegration.

In the penultimate chapter, the author reflects on developments in southern Africa during the twentieth century. She focuses on responses to oppression and notes how the earlier response of “improvement” continued to have validity and learned to co-exist alongside a revolutionary response. The rise of contextual theology arose from a radicalisation of black thought. The otherworldly response of indigenous Zionism, particularly among the poor, shows that the black response was far from homogeneous. Biko’s Black Consciousness, taken up theologically in Black Theology, empowered Africans in the post-colonial period. Black Theology went beyond African theology in the extension of its concern to social and political issues. “Civil religion” among the white Afrikaner class, where identity is defined in Christian terms, is also considered as is the weak and contradictory response of the English-speaking churches, well defined as “Servants of Power trapped in Apartheid” (Cochrane 1987; Villa-Vicencio 1988).

The radical nature of the Christian response to apartheid was ecumenical in scope as can be seen from the vital role of the South African Council of Churches, and the Institute for Contextual Theology and its flagship publication, the *Kairos Document*. Despite this, the black youth tended to eschew church involvement. Issues of the relation between the church and the State inevitably come to the fore, particularly in southern Africa with conflicts involving the Christian community. Such conflict also arose between the needs and aspirations of the settler community and the African peoples. Conflict also arose in the black community about the relative claims of Church and nation. Missionaries often found themselves torn between loyalty to the “*ancien regimes*” and the new dispensations. One missionary response was that adopted by the likes of Garfield Todd in the former Rhodesia, who became a politician. This chapter ends with a brief excursus on the birth of democratic South Africa.

The concluding chapter on independent black Africa post-1960 is a reflection on the Church, State and society. The new States tended to begin their rule with a considerable degree of optimism, but this was a prelude to later bitter disappointment – even the early euphoria of South Africa is being challenged by the enormity of the task confronting the State. Political freedom does not automatically presage economic development. The ethnic conflict

that has been long suppressed by colonial States has erupted in many places and become a perennial issue. International economic forces, well beyond the control or influence of African states, have frustrated attempts at growth and development. And all this is taking place in the context of the expansion of Christianity.

Massive changes have taken place in the missionary enterprise, including a decline in the numbers in mainline churches, an increase in Pentecostal/charismatic communities, as well as the State's takeover of education, medicine and agriculture. The greatest need is to work with local Christians in the pursuit of social justice. Current issues revolve around myriad social, economic and political problems. Matters of inculturation have challenged the established churches and also the African-initiated churches. More recently, the indigenisation process has been hampered by the proliferation of American Pentecostal/prosperity cults of the New Religious Right committed to maintaining the status quo and eschewing the real issues of Africa. In north and west Africa the impact of Islam in recent history is considered a challenge to the hegemony of Christianity. The chapter concludes with a survey of the latest developments in the church, state and society. Despite the many and varied problems of African nations, the Christian Church survives, not least in the birth and growth of locally initiated church movements, especially with lay leadership, alongside the established churches – all of which respond in their own ways to the crises of the African continent.

#### **4. EVALUATION**

Nowhere is this described as a textbook though it is difficult to see what its market might be other than people with a particular interest in the field. If this is the case, then the style and content of the book indicate that it is not meant for beginners. In too many cases it presupposes a knowledge of what is being discussed and “throws too many facts on unsuspecting students, but is a minefield for the informed graduate species” (Kalu et al 2004: Preface). As far as is possible for an outsider, Isichei deals well with the enormous scope of her project, though she admits elsewhere that “No single model does justice to the complexity of a multi-dimensional past” (Isichei 1997:3). She focuses where possible on communities instead of merely an individual agency, and to a degree rehabilitates the role of women after being empowered, especially in African Initiated Churches, and notes that women in western churches have had similar roles and problems.

*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi?*

In terms of regional divisions, what she writes about Nigeria is true of most of the rest of Africa:

Most of these states were mono-ethnic in character with unique systems of government, and rulers who wielded enormous power ... Inspired largely out of political expediency and administrative convenience, the British colonial authority began to weld the various sovereign nationalities together, first into the Southern and Northern Protectorate and later into one country.

(Nwaigbo 2003:62-62)

Unlike Hastings, Isichei tends to follow the imposed regional divisions. The book lacks illustrations although it does have twelve helpful maps. If another edition were to be published, it would benefit from illustrations as well as sections on developments in liturgy and art. Excerpts from primary sources would also enhance such a work.

The lack of a separate bibliography mars the worth of the book. Consequently it is difficult to assess the value of the sources, especially since the author mentions the difficulty with obtaining sources at a great distance from Africa. The endnotes, however, do reveal the extensive use made of relevant material, including primary sources. Nonetheless, a full bibliography would have been helpful, especially to students.

The author does deal with social and political realities in the course of her work and engages to a limited extent with the course of general secular history. This acknowledges that there is a certain inevitability operating here; but, more than that, "a certain involvement is even part of the Christian mission" (Verstraelen 2002:14). The evidence for this is to be found in the involvement of missionaries in imperialism, colonialism and nationalism. Yet she does give pride of place to the religious dimension (Isichei 1995:8-9). This allows her to go beyond a negative assessment of contemporary Africa and express a degree of hope: "... it is possible that upheavals and crises might have a liberating effect, fracturing the institutional Church, so that, through the cracks, living local communities might grow and flourish (Isichei 1995:352)."

Here the Christian historian is able to go beyond history towards hope for the future, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This is the interface between Christian history and missiology. Kalu et al (2005:Preface) present a very different approach which is:

ideologically driven: to build up a group of African church historians who will tell the story as an African story by intentionally privileging the patterns of African agency without neglecting the roles of

various missionary bodies. The effort was to identify the major themes or story lines in African Christianity, and comment on them in such a manner as to elicit new research approaches before a general text could emerge. To that extent, this work is a signal of a process ... This book opens the possibility that African scholars will co-operate to tell the story of where the rain of the gospel met our ancestors, its thick showers on us and the tornado that will meet future generations as the gospel deluges Africa.

What is novel in this approach is the co-operative nature of the venture, which Kalu acknowledges has failed hitherto (cf the single-volume histories of African Christianity written by Caucasian individuals). Isichei (1997:7) does acknowledge elsewhere that “all history is ideological because all history reflects the concerns of the individuals and societies that produce it”. However, this is in the context of a secular history of Africa.

All of this raises another critical issue which Verstraelen (2002:32-36) has commented on. This is the question: “Where are the African historians?” This question is critical, even though a number of authors have written on African Christian history from “an African perspective”, using the canons of a “new historiography” (cf. Duncan 2004). Certainly no African church historian has attempted a continent-wide history of Christianity. Verstraelen gives various valid reasons for this and suggests that the approach adopted by Kalu *et al* may be the most creative and productive. What is apparent is that African historians follow their above-mentioned white predecessors in stressing the uniqueness of the African Christian experience as well as seeing their history as integral to the ecumenical vision and one of its centres in a global perspective.

While this is a stand-alone volume, it would be helpful to use it alongside a companion volume written by Isichei, *A History of African Societies to 1870* (1997) [a second volume covering the period to 1995 is in preparation]. This work marks a considerable improvement on the approach to and presentation of *History of Christianity* and remedies a number of its shortcomings, such as giving a bibliography and a discussion on the subject of “Africa’s historians”. Of particular note is the far more adequate attention given to historiography (Isichei 1997:1-100), comprising nearly a quarter of the book. Its nature allows a greater engagement between matters secular and religious.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The day of single-author one-volume histories of Africa, which need to demonstrate an encyclopaedic knowledge of a vast array of topics in terms of periodisation and regionalisation, may well be gone. The disappointing volume by Sundkler and Steed (2000) attests to this. What the field urgently needs is the kind of work being pioneered by Kalu et al, which seeks to gather together the finest scholarship in all the areas considered and present it in a manner which is both informative and challenging. Isichei presents a bold and courageous attempt to cover the field encompassed, and does so with considerable distinction, considering her limitations described above. This book will be a helpful reference work for some time to come.

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