

Academic Works on the History, Growth and Development of Christianity in Africa: A Retrospective and Perspective Appraisal

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Abstract

The large volume of existing literature on the history, growth and development of Christianity in Africa have been addressed to different categories of readers at different periods in the history of the continent. The purposes of each of the writers differ, depending on their fields of specialization and the objectives that they intend to achieve through their works. This paper categorizes some of the works on African Christianity into various fields such as: history, sociology, politics and comparative. It also discusses the content and context of the works in terms of their contributions to the existing body of knowledge. The paper reveals the inadequacies of the works under examination and lists areas in African Christianity which have not sufficiently engaged the researchers' pen.

Introduction

Christianity in Africa has consistently been enjoying serious publicity and attention in terms of written literature as from the last quarter of the 19th century up to the present day. In the major cities of the western countries, journals of various Christian missions, many of which dated back to the early days of the founding of these missions have regularly reported to interested subscribers the successes of institutionalized Christianity in Africa. Besides, missionaries from the headquarters of the various mainline churches used to conduct on-the-spot assessments of the activities of their agents in Africa. However, it is important to note that written assessments of the state of institutionalized Christianity in Africa, have never been the exclusive preserve of the Christian missions and their agents.

In fact, after the second world war, when academic study of the history of Africa started to become a serious affairs, educated Africans in particular began to write on the problems and fortunes of Christianity in Africa through series of publications in journals, magazines, newspapers, periodicals and books.

From the 1940s up to the present days, scholars of various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, politics, Christian theology, history, economics, comparative religion, etc. have been involved in the study of some aspects of the past and present days' manifestations of institutionalized Christianity in Africa. Scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds have used different approaches and methodologies to discuss the impact of Christianity in Africa. This paper is an attempt to categorize these scholars based on their approaches to the study of Christianity in Africa.

Sociological Approach

Some of the scholars in the sociological school of thought who have written extensively and carried out various researches on Christianity in Africa are: D.B. Barrett¹, J.D.Y. Peel², R.J. Hackett³, J.K. Olupona⁴ and J.W. Fernandez⁵. Barrett postulates that the cause of the emergence of African Independent Churches was the translation of the Bible into the vernacular of the local African communities. He considers this as the first major step in the process of indigenizing Christianity in Africa. He notes that the availability of the Bible in indigenous languages has made it to become the basis of African spirituality and theology which are unique and not patterned along the line of western systematic theology.

There is a high degree of unanimity among the scholars in the sociological school of thought that the new religious movements in Africa are catalysts and potent instruments of social change in their various areas of influence. They seem to agree that the myriads of African Independent Churches are the by-products of the cross-fertilization between African traditional values and Christianity.

Peel identifies the following as the major Aladura Churches in Yorubaland, where he conducted extensive research. They are: Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), The Church of the Lord (Aladura) (CLA), the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement (C&S), and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). He argues that in spite of certain obvious diversities in their liturgy, organization and spirituality, the Aladura Churches still possess many common identities that justified their being distinguished from other group of churches. These attributes include interest in intense fervor for “energetic” prayer, faith healing and the contextualization of Christianity in African culture.

Hackett laments that in spite of the attempts by the mainline churches in Africa to inculturate, the results that have been recorded so far represent only a mere superficial form. This is so because the liturgical patterns and doctrinal context remain virtually the same with western models.⁶ She submits that the slow pace of indigenization cause a mass movement of disenchanting members which resulted in the emergence of an avalanche of independent churches. She agrees with Barrett⁷ that one major factor responsible for the proliferation of churches in Africa was the impact of the translation of the Bible into various indigenous languages.

In his phenomenological study of the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) in Ondo, Olupona attributes the rapid growth of the church to the charisma of the founder. He states further that members of the church were able to share common milieu with the founder because his (Oschoffa’s) background reflects both the African traditional religious cosmology and the biblical worldview. The shortcoming of Olupona’s methodology can be seen in his failure to do a detailed comparison of the Celestial Church of Christ with other Aladura Church in order to determine its level of development. The author also claims that the CCC enjoyed rapid and appreciable growth and acceptability in Ondo (his research area). He however fails to provide verifiable statistical evidences to justify his position.

Fernandez’s work deals with the influence of religion on politics as epitomized by the African religious movements. He opines that most of the separatist movements in the church in Africa arose as reactions against the political and ecclesiastical over-lordship of the Western powers⁸. He regarded the earlier missionaries of the mainline churches as agents of colonization. In his scholarly analysis, Fernandez classifies the African Independent Churches (AICs) into four main categories: Separatist, Reformatory, Messianic and Nativist.

Historical Approach

The history of institutionalized Christianity in Africa has enjoyed a bumper harvest of scholarly works. Scholars who have adopted the historical methodology in their research works on African Christianity included the following, among others: J.F. Ade Ajayi⁹, John Baur¹⁰, E.A. Ayandele¹¹, Akin Omoyajowo¹², C.O. Oshun¹³, Elizabeth Isichei¹⁴, David Olayiwola¹⁵, Adrian Hastings¹⁶, C. Steed¹⁷, Ishola Olomola¹⁸, Modupe Oduyoye¹⁹, Mathews Ojo²⁰, among others.

The works of the authors listed above have revealed the numerous ways in which Christian religious beliefs and practices have developed in Africa. Ade-Ajayi’s work covers the period between 1841-1891. Its main focus was the missionary activities of the following mainline churches: the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Catholic Society of African Mission. The author reveals that lack of unanimity among the various missionary groups constituted a major impediment to the success of early Christian missionary endeavours in Africa. The obvious inadequacy of this work is that the scope was too remote to take care of contemporary developments in African Christianity. It covers a period of fifty years, from about the middle to the beginning of the last decade of the 19th century.

In line with the title of his book, (2000 Years of Christianity in Africa), Baur’s work covers about two thousand years of the church’s experience in the African continent. The contents of the book seem to be addressed to a specific target audience, the members of the Catholic Church. In fact, he reveals the main kernel of the book and his intention in the preface to the book wherein he submits that the work “is a textbook of courses at the Catholic theological institutions”²¹

He however adds that students and scholars of protestant institutions would find the book useful in their academic pursuits as a mere complementary material. Though Baur discusses the prospects of inculturation and acculturation with reference to the church in Africa, his work does not give adequate attention to the mainline churches nor the African Independent Churches.

Ayandele and Oshun disagree with Peel's postulation that there was a logical connection between the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the rise of the Diamond Society at Ijebu-Ode in 1921. But both Oshun and Ayandele trace the history of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) to 1918. Nevertheless, they equally admit that the real impetus which prompted the rise of CAC was the historic Oke-Oye revival in Ilesa led by Prophet Ayo Babalola in 1930.

Akin Omoyajowo traces the origin and development of the Cherubim and Seraphim church. He reveals the spate of schisms which bedeviled the church within eleven years of its existence (1925-1936). During this brief period, according to Omoyajowo, there were about five schismatic groups, apart from the main body led by Saint Moses Orimolade. Onovughakpo paints a vivid picture of the appalling secessions in the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement:

To found one's own branch and headquarters is as simple as winking the eye. The procedure is to procure for yourself the power of vision and prophecy... The next step is to approach an Apostle or Bishop to receive the order of Apostleship. As you settle down in a neighbouring or far away town, your parlour becomes the Cathedral Church and your room the headquarters.

... Your house becomes the consulting chamber for all sorts of people, boys and girls anxious about love and students wishing to pass their examinations, clerks and executive officers seeking promotion... and the poor and the destitute seeking wealth.²²

Omoyajowo's work however does not cover sufficiently some parts of Nigeria such as Ekitiland, Okunland (in Kogi) and the Igbomina area (of Kwara). Given this, there is the need for further research in these areas.

Isichei traces the history of Christianity in Africa from the flourishing church in North Africa and Nubia. She contends that, it was a dynamic form of Christianity which produced great theologians such as Athanasus (298 – 373 AD), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD), among others. She further reveals how Christianity in North Africa gave way to Islam and surviving till today as minority in the form of the "Coptic Church" in Egypt. She discusses the distinctiveness or uniqueness of the church in Ethiopia and states that because the country was not colonized²³, the church has remained Orthodox and not corrupted by external influence. The work also covers the origin and growth of the church in East, North, Central, South and West Africa. Though Isichei's book is one of the most comprehensive work on the history of Christianity in Africa, it relies heavily on archival materials. Besides, the work does not take cognizance of contemporary developments in African Christianity, especially, events from the 1960s.

Olayiwola in his Ph.D thesis²⁴ examines the origins, developments, beliefs, practices, organization and the impact of the Aladura churches in Ijesaland. Using the phenomenological approach, he explains how the activities of these churches had affected the Ijesa people, socially, economically and psychologically. Elsewhere²⁵, he discusses the impact of African cultural values on the practice of Christianity by the Aladura churches. He opines that cultural adaptation as practiced by the Aladura churches ought not to be seen as syncretism because it has enriched rather than diminished Christianity. Olayiwola agrees with Rieber²⁶ that the independent churches emerged in Africa as from the second decade of the 20th century in response to the desire for churches where Africans might feel at home. The two scholars are unanimous in their views that this desire has shaped the worship, beliefs and practices of the African Initiated Churches to make them distinctively African. Also, both Olayiwola²⁷ and Webster²⁸ insist that the coming into being of the Aladura churches was occasioned by the complete rejection of the indigenous African values, be they culture or religion by European missionaries. They contend that the hardline position of the missionaries in respect of the condemnation of African cultural values marked the beginning of ecclesiastical and missiological crises that characterised the second half of the 19th century missionary activities in Africa and Nigeria in particular. In addition, Ade-Ajayi shares the stance of Olayiwola and Webster as he reiterates the view that the chasm, misunderstanding and dichotomy within the rank and file in the mainline churches fuelled the agitation for "native pastorate and its attendant spasmodic and sporadic schisms"²⁹ in the mainline churches.

The Church in Africa, 1450 – 1960 by Adrian Hastings gives a general survey of Christianity in Africa which dated back to Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches and the avalanche of African Independent Churches. Besides, the work examines the impact of African traditional values and civil politics on the church in Africa. However, the scope of the work does not cover events from 1951 to the present thereby creating a big lacuna.

The emphasis of Steed and Sundkler in their joint work³⁰ is to reinterpret the history of the church in Africa from a distinctively African perspective.³¹ The historiographical emphasis of the book stems from the authors' assumption that many books on the history of Christianity in Africa seem to have marginalized the notable contributions of Africans. The authors are not comfortable with the attempts by foreign scholars and some earlier African writers to give the impression that Africans were mere passive recipients of the gospel.

Ishola Olomola does a survey of the planting of the various Christian denominations in Ekiti. In this scholarly analysis, he reveals that the successes of the mainline churches in Ekiti were due to the impetus provided by the British colonial power through its policies and programmes. He acknowledges the role of Apostle Ayo Babalola in the establishment of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) in Ekiti. The author provides an estimated enumeration of the membership of the different Christian denominations in Ekiti as at 2000 AD thus: Anglican Church – 250,000, Catholic Church – 188,000, Methodist Church – 150,000, Christ Apostolic Church and other Apostolic Churches – c.140,000, Celestial Church of Christ – c.50,000, the Baptist Church – c.50,000, Cherubim and Seraphim Movement and other white garment churches – c.40,000, Jehovah Witnesses – c.5,000 and Pentecostal Churches – c.200,000. On the whole, Olomola estimated the population of Christians in Ekitiland, Nigeria, by 2000 AD to be in the region of c.1,140,000³². However, he does not provide the sources of all these statistical data. Apart from the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), the work ignores details about the beginning and growth of other Aladura churches in Ekiti. A more comprehensive work on the history of Christianity in Ekitiland by Peter Adebisi³³ has the mainline churches as its main focus, though he examines the beginnings of some of the Aladura churches in Ekiti. The scope of Adebisi's book (1893 – 1973) leaves room for further research in respect of developments from the early 1970s to the present.

Modupe Oduyoye's work *The Planting of Christianity in Yorubaland* seems to be in tandem with the core thesis of the encounter with Christianity. The kernel of her thesis is that the earlier encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Yoruba people was a civilizing and Christianizing one which was of great benefit to the latter. Such benefits, according to her included the introduction of western education, modern health care system, and certain aspects of western values and technology, among others.

Mathews Ojo does an historical appraisal of the emergence of the Deeper Life Bible Church. In this work, he reveals that the Deeper Life Bible Church began as a "Bible Study Group" in Nigeria in the early 1970s. He notes that Pastor Kumuyi was brought up as an Anglican but later got converted to the Apostolic Faith Church. He was later expelled from the church due to his non-compliance with the church's stipulation that "only ordained ministers could preach and teach".³⁴ The author identifies two major stages in the church's developmental process. The first phase was the formative stage during which the church tried to draw Christians from various Christian denominations for its Bible classes and prayer meetings. He states that it was during the second phase of the church's growth that Kumuyi's followers could, in the strict sense be called "members" as they completely severed relationship with their former denominations. Also, in this phase, much emphasis was placed on miracles, healings and evangelism on the streets, in the markets, in public buses and lecture halls.

Ojo further observes that the emphasis on puritanism, exclusivist or separatist tendencies by the church have over the years affected the spirit of ecumenism in the church.³⁵ He explains that the church has consistently laid claim to a monopoly of the truth on Christian doctrinal issues. The author gives reasons for such separatist dispositions by the Deeper Life Bible Church:

The Separatist attitude is easily understandable. Once people have left their former churches and joined Deeper Life, they are expected to have nothing to do with those previous backgrounds which Kumuyi regards as worldly or sinful. The idea of separation is strengthened by the teaching on sanctification. To preserve one's sanctification, one must separate from the world. The world is often interpreted to mean anything that is not Deeper Life.³⁶

Finally, the work does not give any information about early converts and members of the church. As an historical work, it is also expected that it will attempt to provide a comparative statistical data of the membership in the first four decades of its existence in various provinces in Nigeria in order to confirm the veracity of the claim that the “church is still growing”.³⁷ Also, the author does not reckon with the impact of the emergence of other Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches on the growth of the Deeper Life Bible Church, especially in South Western Nigeria where we have a preponderance of such charismatic movements.

Christianity in Africa vis-à-vis Politics

Despite the fact that many African countries claim in their various constitutions to be secular states, in practice, the influence of religions on the political affairs of African countries are quite obvious. The church, for instance, has particularly played prominent roles in the chequered political history of most African countries as attested to by the works of some scholars on the history of Christianity in the continent.

Paul Gifford³⁸ examines the very touchy issue of church – state relations in Africa. In the work under reference, Gifford picks his case studies from Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Cameroun, though he fails to give reasons for his preference. He reveals that in all these countries, the roles of the church differed from one government to the other by insisting that the tempo of the relationship often depended on the religious inclinations of the political leaders. The author also adds that the various Christian denominations in the countries used as case studies always struggled for relevance in the political arena. This had made the church that should be a political, a moderator and an impartial umpire to be deeply embroiled in the murky water of politics in the African countries under reference. He concludes that the resultant belligerent relationship among the various Christian denominations had not provided the enabling environment for the church to play the role of a gadfly which would have improved the quality of governance.

Isaac Phiri, in his work titled: *Proclaiming Peace and Love: A New Role for Churches in African Politics*³⁹ reveals how the churches in some African countries had played notable roles in the institutionalization of democratic governance in their various states. He specifically examines the roles of the church in the democratic experiments of Zambia, Malawi and Kenya. He commends the positive impact of the church in the transitions to pluralism in these countries.

In particular, Phiri recalls the political impasse in Zambia in the midst of which Frederick Chiluba’s Movement for Multiparty Democracy threatened to boycott the election that ended Keneth Kaunda’s twenty seven years of one party rule. During the political imbroglio, Phiri notes that:

Zambian President, Keneth Kaunda of the United National Independence Party and Mr Chiluba agreed to meet in the Anglican Cathedral in Lusaka. The church provided an acceptable meeting place for both parties. Their meeting which began with shared prayer, resulted eventually in a redrafting of the constitution that opened the way for the electins.⁴⁰

In his conclusion, Phiri notes that during the actual election, members of the various churches or denominations in Zambia provided invaluable cooperation in the training and deployment of election monitors to virtually every polling station in the country. This assisted in no small measure to ensure a peaceful transition from civilian government to another.

Besides, some scholars consider African Independent Churches movements (such as the Aladura Churches in Nigeria and the Bantu Separatist Church in South Africa) as products of Africans’ reactions against the secular and ecclesiastical overlordship of the western countries. Some of the scholars in this school of thought are Baeta⁴¹, Owadayo⁴², Sundkler⁴³ and Ayandele⁴⁴. In their various works in which examples are drawn from different African countries, the authors argue from the political point of view that charismatic and independent church movements in Africa were reactions against racism and colonialism. Ayandele uses the concept of “Ethiopianism” as a symbol of African identity and self-actualization. It is also used to describe African nationalism expressed through the medium of the church.

The Comparative Approach

In African church history scholarship, there is another group of scholars with the conviction that the study of Christianity in Africa will most probably be incomplete if necessary attention is not given to its relations with African cultural values and African Traditional Religion (ATR). During the first encounter between ATR and Christianity, the pioneering Christian missions underrated the formidableness of the former. In fact, throughout the colonial period, the latter pretended that ATR had been subsumed under it.

However, in contemporary scholarship, researchers and scholars in the field of African Christianity and African studies as a whole seem to have accepted in all candour the need to study ATR as a separate or distinct field of study. Also, those who are seriously interested in African Christian theology are not likely to be surprised by researches on the encounters with or dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. The works of Jemiriye⁴⁵, Parrinder⁴⁶, Owoeye⁴⁷, Etuk⁴⁸ and Williamson & Smith⁴⁹, among others bear eloquent testimonies to this position.

Williamson & Smith reveal that in spite of the acceptance of Christianity by Africans, many of them still find it extremely difficult to sever ties with their background as they are still tied to the apron-string of African Traditional Religion. To give credence to their views, Williamson writes:

That Christians go to the fetish, that they exhibit all signs of a people not yet emancipated from the old fears, beliefs and interpretations of life is common experience.⁵⁰

Noel Smith also expresses similar view to the above observation:

After almost a century of the preaching on the Christian gospel and the establishment of Christian congregation, traditional religion shows an astonishing power of survival and rejuvenation. Outside the church, the Abosom shrines have been adopted to new ends, the drinking medicine cults have a wide vogue, the faith-healing sects effect a working compromise between Christian ideas and African custom and within the church, the background thought world still operate.⁵¹

It can be deduced from the above that one of the major problems confronting the church in Africa at present is the divided loyalties of many of its adherents between Christianity and traditional religion. Bolaji Idowu gives further revelation on this:

It is well known that in strictly personal matters relating to the passages of life, African Traditional Religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans. In hospitals, for example, people who on admission, have declared themselves Christians, and indeed are 'practising' Christians, have medicine prepared in the traditional way smuggled in to them simply because psychologically at least, that is consecrated medicine with the touch of the divine healer, in contrast the Europeans mere 'coloured water'. - - - In matters concerning providence, healing, and general well-being, therefore Africans still look up to 'their own religion' as 'the way'.

John Mbiti⁵² and Ayegboyin & Ishola⁵³ agree that one of the fundamental causes of the emergence of African Independent churches was that the mainline churches did not initially penetrate sufficiently deep into African religiosity in respect of their liturgies. They opine that part of the missiological pitfalls of the mainline churches was their failure to realize early enough the need to inculturate.

The submissions by Williamson, Smith, Mbiti and Ayegboyin & Ishola give considerable substance to Bolaji Idowu's postulation⁵⁴ that the acceptance and institutionalization of Christianity in many communities in Africa are due to the development of cultural values and traditional cosmology and their synthesis with Christianity in response to the dictates of the contemporary society. Idowu compares the role of Christianity in Africa to a catalyst that stimulates and accelerates changes. One can deduce from the work of Gehman⁵⁵ that the vocation of Christianity in Africa will be enhanced rather than diminished by the experience of cultural pluralism, inculturation and acculturation.

Conclusion

The works examined in this article have made significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge. However, researches on African Christianity are neither final nor exhaustive because the practice of Christianity in Africa has not reached a cul-de-sac. The African society is a dynamic one. History equally reveals that the various ethnic groups in the continent are changing, coalescing and developing. Thus further researches are highly necessary in the following areas: feminine theology, the effects of terrorism and religious extremism on the church, the role of mass media on church's growth, homosexuality, women ordination, church and the question of environmental pollution, the impact of the church on democratic values in Africa, the new phase of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism, and the attendant posterity theology, etc.

There has been a serious boost in information technology in recent times, and consequently, we have many churches that exist only on the airwaves: on radio, on television and on the internet, etc. We are living a changing world and thus, the church need to respond to the dictates of such change by adopting a new methodology that will not affect the elements and principles of Christianity. These new developments definitely call for a shift of focus by scholars or researchers in the field of African Christianity.

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