BOOK REVIEWS


The co-operative project of the Universities of Wisconsin-Madison and Dar es Salaam on 'African Expressions of Christianity in Eastern Africa' has resulted in this exciting new collection of studies on East African church history, which, together with some others, were presented in a seminar in Madison in 1996. There are thirteen case studies, most of them (eight) from Tanzania, three from Kenya, one from Uganda and one from the DRC (former Zaire), preceded by two introducing chapters. For a work of comparable breadth on East (and Central) African Christianity, one probably has to go back as far as 1971, when David Barrett edited African Initiatives in Religion. Despite all that has changed in nearly 30 years, the two volumes share their concern for African initiative, as well as one of their contributors (Cuthbert Omari). Comparing the other contributors, one can say that the emphasis has shifted from Western missionaries to Africans and academic historians. It is good to see how the latter do not confine themselves any more to the material factors involved in the spread of Christianity, but also try to account for the role of Africans' spiritual and theological thought. This is related to what Spear emphasises in the first introduction: the need to consider the creative role of Africans in appropriating Christianity, not only in the "Independent", but also in the "historical" churches. He introduces a six-fold partition of historical processes, which is roughly reflected in the layout of the rest of the book: "Mission", "Conversion and popular evangelism", "Struggles for control", "Charismatic prophecy and healing", "Protestant revival and popular Catholicism", and "Christianity and society", providing some historical illustrations. In the second introduction, Gregory Maddox elaborates in some more theological detail on the dialectics of the African and the universal in African Christianity. Not surprisingly, the name of Lamin Sanneh is mentioned a lot, both here and elsewhere in the book. It is his work on the vernacular domestication of mission Christianity in (mainly) West Africa that has cleared the way for much research in East Africa as well, both in this volume and (hopefully) in work to come.

In practice, of course, the collaborative output of fifteen different authors does not always fit neatly into such a program: some of the
contributions are clearly more profoundly influenced by it than others. On the whole, however, what emerges is an admirably well-balanced survey of the whole gamut of African Christianity, from the missionary success story of Fipa Catholicism (treated by Kathleen Smythe) to the dramatic schism of the Meru Lutherans' African Missionary Evangelical Church (article by Omari) and from the "Zionist Independent" prophetic Church of the Kikuyu Arathi (Church of the Holy Spirit, by Francis Githieya) to the popular Catholicism of Felician Nkwer'a's Marian Faith Healing Ministry (by Christopher Comoro and John Sivalon). To some extent, the coherence of this volume may have been enhanced by the prevalence of studies from Tanzania, with its comparably high degree of national integration. Especially when reading the exposition of the Bundu dia Kongo's "Kongo fundamentalism" in the DRC by Ernest Wamba dia Wamba (who left his position at Dar University this year to assume political leadership in the rebellion against Kabila), one senses that one is entering a different world. It is nonetheless fascinating to see how amid the chaos and violence that have prevailed for so long in this country, new movements keep emerging with a profound and authentic spirituality. The three contributions from Kenya form a whole together, presenting the consequences of missionary failure to respond to the needs of their converts in three different contexts. That the same missionary organisation, the Africa Inland Mission, is directly or indirectly involved in all three adds to the coherence, coincidental though it may be. In Maasailand (described by Richard Waller), the social marginality and geographical isolation of the AIM converts made them defenceless against conflicting pressures from European missionaries and colonial administration, resulting in stagnation. Among the Kamba (contribution by David Sandgren), the breakaway African Brotherhood Church, supported by a dissident AIM missionary, succeeded in attracting a large following through its schools. The Kikuyu Arathi, finally, with AIM educated Musa Thuo as one of their most prominent prophets, found strong support for their rejection of both missionary Christianity and Kikuyu tradition in the new Kikuyu Bible translation of the 1930s.

Concerning the Tanzanian parts, one aspect might perhaps have merited some more consideration. Most studies depart from a specific ethnic or regional context. This corresponds to the way most missions started, by seeking to express "the" Gospel in one specific ethnic language and to relate it to the corresponding ethnic culture. Contemporary movements, however, like the Marian Faith Healing Ministry, as well as the revivalist Fellowship Church (presented here by Josiah Mlahagwa) have a clearly non-ethnic, nation-wide outlook, the former even referring to Tanzania as a "Chosen Nation" (p. 291). Evidence of such a shift can be seen in the "historical" churches, as well, e.g. in the increasing use of