HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA
IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN HISTORY -
FOUR RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS COMPARED

Frans J. Verstraelen

In Memory of Carl F. Hallencreutz and Adrian Hastings

Africa and Africans existed a long time before historical Christianity came into being, but Christianity, since its beginning, has been present in Africa. Because Christianity has been a reality in Africa for almost two thousand years, its history should therefore be reflected in the following four different historiographic categories: not only in works dealing with Africa’s General History and with the history of Christianity in Africa, but also in works dealing with the General History of Christianity, and with World History as well.

Whether and in which ways Christianity in Africa is reflected in these different types of works, depends on whether the historical genuineness and importance of Africa is accepted and whether the role and significance of Christian Africans are being recognized. It has been a dramatic process for Africa, and African Christians for that matter, to become more visible in their own right in these different categories of historiography since the middle of last century. A few remarks on that process will help to better assess some recent contributions to the history of Christianity in Africa.

Part One: History of African Historiography

A eurocentric approach until recently has in many instances blinded historians to see the full picture of historic reality:

Regarding the History of Africa: Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, made in 1965 the following statement about Africa, contrasting it with Europe, “Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. At the present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa.”

1 Carl F. Hallencreutz, former Professor of Mission Studies, Uppsala University, died March 18, 2001, and Adrian Hastings, Professor-emeritus, University of Leeds, died May 30, 2001. - Both served as Professor of Religious Studies, University of Zimbabwe, from 1985 to 1988, and from 1982-1985 respectively.


© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2002

Exchange 31,2
Regarding World History: Geoffrey Parker, a professor at Yale University and editor of an Atlas of World History (1994) remarked, “Most of the hundreds of atlases published before 1978 suffered from ‘Eurocentricity’, that is to say from a tendency to concentrate on the history of Europe (particularly Western Europe) and to refer to other regions or countries only when and where Europe impinged on them.”

Regarding the General History of Christianity we can discern a similar approach, for instance in a History of the Christian Church by Williston Walker, hailed as a ‘standard, highly serviceable textbook’. Since its first edition in 1918, it has been revised in 1959, 1970 and most recently in 1986, but it still follows the basic outline of Walker’s original text, recommended as “proven sound”. Yet, its concept and content are almost exclusively linked to the North Atlantic, Western Christianity. It ignores a great part of Christianity’s past elsewhere, by treating it as a small appendix when the West catches sight of it.

But even writing explicitly on the History of Christianity in Africa does not guarantee writing African Christian history. It is the view of the Nigerian historians Ajayi and Ayandele, expressed in 1969, that the majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa have remained a part of the foreign missionary presence instead of seeking “to explore what Africans have made of Christianity”. They therefore should “swallow a bitter pill that they have not been writing African Church history”.5

These two African historians rightly rejected a one-sided missionary approach to the history of Christianity in Africa, that neglects the African dramatis personae in the establishment and growth of the Church (p.93). They, however, overreacted by strongly suggesting that only the Independent African Churches represented truly African Christianity, thereby ignoring new forms of African Christianity developed in mainline churches.6

Meanwhile, the approach to African history has drastically changed under the influence of the political movement towards independence in the 1950’s and 1960’s. This change expressed itself, in formerly so-called dependent peoples, by a renewed consciousness, a sense of human equality and a desire to take history’s destiny into their own hands. It was a social change, a

---

5 J.F. Ade Ajayi and E.A. Ayandele, Writing African Church History, in Peter Beyerhaus and Carl F. Hallencreutz (eds), The Church Crossing Frontiers. Essays in honour of Bengt Sundkler. Uppsala: Gleerup 1969, 93,90. Writers criticized by them are: C.P. Groves, K.S. Latourette, F.B.V. Welbourn, J.V. Taylor, Adrian Hastings, Peter Beyerhaus and Cecil Northcott, “to name a few outstanding ones”, but without mentioning their publications.