PREACHING IN MAINSTREAM CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN MALAWI: A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The origins of the Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Malawi have been subject to a good deal of scholarly attention. By contrast their contemporary life and impact seem to have attracted little in the way of systematic study. Recent research has tended to concentrate on the African Independent or Indigenous Churches to such an extent that the ‘mainstream’ churches have been somewhat neglected. As A.C. Ross remarked, in a recent review, Little field work of the type done among ‘independent’ Christians has been done among the congregations of the ‘historic’ churches. If we are to begin to discern more clearly the development of African Christianity then this needs to be done.

The present study attempts to make a beginning in this direction. It is a broad survey encompassing the three very different Malawian churches, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic, which fall within the category of ‘mainstream’. Each one of these would be worthy of study on its own but there may also be some value in a comprehensive and comparative approach. The general objective is to provide a survey and analysis of the message being preached and its effects in the life of the people. More specifically, five aims were set. 1. To ascertain what are the characteristic emphases of contemporary preaching in the mainstream churches and to assess what significance might lie in these. 2. To examine the interface between traditional African beliefs and Christianity as this affects both the content of the message and the nature of its reception. 3. To assess how far the mainstream churches are sensitive to the protest of the African indigenous churches: do they make any concessions or do they remain impervious? 4. To assess how far the Christian profession of the people is a matter of out-
ward assent (*assensus*) and how far it is a matter of inward commit-
ment (*fiducia*). 5. To consider how far the message of the
mainstream churches is community-strengthening and nation-
building or how far it is restricted to the sphere of private morality
and spirituality. What follows is the result of pursuing these areas
of inquiry.

A two-fold method was adopted in order to gather the necessary
data. 1. A nationwide survey of sermons preached in mainstream
churches was conducted over 1990-92. Students were employed as
research assistants during vacations and produced successful
reports on 587 sermons (259 Presbyterian, 248 Roman Catholic,
and 80 Anglican). The content of these sermons has been analyzed
and the results appear below. 2. Interviews, based on question-
naires, were conducted with both 228 preachers (99 Presbyterian,
89 Roman Catholic, and 40 Anglican) and 244 church members
(102 Presbyterian, 102 Roman Catholic, and 40 Anglican). Again
students were employed as research assistants and conducted the
interviews in late 1991 and early 1992. The aim was to cover a
representative sample of church membership by sending students to
different parts of the country and instructing them to interview a
variety of people—male and female, old and young, educated and
illiterate. The interviews were conducted in the vernacular but the
results were translated into English for the purposes of analysis.
Most of this article is based on the analysis of the results of the inter-
views. The Anglican Church in Malawi is much smaller than either
the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian or the Roman Catholic
Church, each of which claims the allegiance of around one quarter
of the population. In order to be comprehensive I included some
Anglicans in the research but not enough to form a representative
sample for Anglicanism as a distinctive tradition. Therefore I have
not used the Anglican statistics for representative or comparative
purposes. On the other hand, I have made comparisons between
the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches on the basis of
interviews with 99 Presbyterian preachers and 89 Roman Catholic,
and 102 Presbyterian members and 102 Roman Catholic. It should
also be noted that the questionnaires included many ‘open’ ques-
tions so that the answers do not fall into mutually exclusive
categories but may involve more than one category. Much of the
data consists of percentages of answers which fall into various
categories but, in order to ‘put flesh’ on the statistics, I have
included some anecdotal evidence, drawing on the comments