TOWARDS THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS INDEPENDENCY

BY

ROBERT CAMERON MITCHELL

(Department of Sociology-Anthropology, Swarthmore College, Pa., U.S.A.)

In 1957, David Barrett, as a missionary in Kenya, became acquainted intimately with a massive secession from the Anglican Church. Several years later as a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in New York he began to see the widespread nature of African independency. 1) What particularly struck him were the widespread similarities between movements which had arisen quite independently of each other in various parts of Africa south of the Sahara. The results of these and further studies in Africa are at last set forth in Schism and Renewal.

This book presents in a most encyclopaedic manner a mass of comparative information on African independency, including short summaries of the situation of independency in thirty-four countries, and estimates of the number of adherents for these countries, data on the independent church movements for each of 227 African tribes, basic data for 254 tribal units with independency, comparative membership statistics for a selection of nations and churches and a directory of addresses for about 125 independent churches. A large map is included in the book which locates all African tribes (G. P. Murdock), with those that have experienced at least one independent church movement coloured in red. His approach is comprehensive, to say the least, and he speaks in authoritative terms about 5,000 independent church movements in 290 tribes plus another 1,000 movements which presently remain within the "historical" (former mission) churches.

1) He defines independency as "the formation and existence within a tribe or tribal unit, temporarily or permanently, of any organized religious movement with a distinct name and membership, which claims the title Christian in that it acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has separated by secession from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded outside the mission churches as a new kind of religious entity under African initiative and leadership." Barrett, David B., Schism and renewal in Africa: An analysis of six thousand contemporary religious movements, Nairobi; Oxford University Press, 1968, 50. All page references in the text will be to this book.
In all Africa, including North Africa, he estimates that the independent churches have a total of 6,868,000 adherents (pp. 78-79).

The data on independency while useful (and controversial) are not the major feature of the book, however. Barrett has gathered these data with some very specific purposes in mind. In the beginning of the book he sets these forth as a set of basic, interrelated questions about African independent churches that he wants to try to answer.

To what extent (do) these bodies represent unrelated and autonomous religious changes... or to what extent they are explicable, and therefore predictable, in terms of common sociological categories based on their particular social contexts and histories?

What are the conditions necessary for independency to emerge in a given tribe or region?

To what extent can further outbreaks be predicated, and where will they take place? (p. 5)

His basic aim, then, is to develop an "overall theory" which would help to account for "this entire phenomenon of independency in all parts of the continent." (p. 5)

There is no doubt that these are important questions for the sociology of religion and that Barrett's theory deserves very careful attention. This review article will therefore restrict itself to a critique of his theory and its empirical foundation as developed in this book. 2) It will also discuss some larger related issues in the sociology of religion in Africa.

THE METHOD AND THE THEORY

In an attempt to develop a theory of independency there are several strategies open to the investigator. He can study one or a limited number of cases in depth and develop generalizations at as general a level as possible or he can get a narrower range of data on a larger number of cases in a carefully selected sample and try to find which variables differentiate (or "explain") the variance between the cases with respect to the dependent variable — independency. The choice of the latter, comparative, method obligates the further decision on the part of the

2) The reviewer, a sociologist and student of the aladura form of independency among the Yoruba, recognizes that Barrett had some further intentions in writing the book other than making a theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion, one of them being his desire to develop a useful predictor of independency as a practical aid to missionaries and African Christian leaders. The reviewer will leave these matters to theologians and missiologists and concentrate upon what seems to him to be both the core of the book in terms of its own claims and the area of the reviewer's professional competency.