African Christian Independency

To date we have not yet received the study papers of this Workshop. Dr. Chirenje who has been away from Harare during a longer period has promised to send them. These papers as soon as they have arrived will be sent to participants in this Workshop only.


Introduction

The African Independent Church (AIC) movement has aroused much interest and concern in the course of its development. It has been described as "a phenomenon without precedent and unique in the history of Christian missions" and as "one of the most striking phenomena in Christianity". (1) It is not a new thing as the first schism occurred in 1819, some twenty years after the missionary impact began in Africa. Barrett estimated in 1968 that there were more than five thousand distinct ecclesiastical and religious bodies among two hundred and ninety different tribes in thirty four African nations, with a total of seven million adherents. (2) By 1971 total membership of the independent church movement had reached ten million people. (3)

The 1880's saw a great impetus to the movement with great expansion in South and Central Africa and Nigeria. (4) Various interpretations have been suggested to account for the phenomenon and the main stress is on the reaction of Africans to the missions. But as Adrian Hastings says, these movements are not to be seen purely or even primarily as a reaction against missionary Christianity since most of their numbers had never been full members of the latter. (5)

B.G.M. Sundkler

The first full account of the movement was written by a missionary, the Reverend B. Sundkler, who in his book Bantu Prophets in South Africa, classified the burgeoning independent churches in South Africa into Ethiopian Churches — those created as a reaction to the political situation — and Zionist churches, revivalist churches, which fulfilled the traditional needs of divining and healing through Christianity. (6) Sundkler, along with other writers has laid stress on the socio-political situation within which these movements arise. The fundamental causes were social injustices arising from racial tensions and land problems, and he maintains that "separatism in South Africa has been the result, to a very large extent, of the presence of the colour bar within the Christian church". (7)
Typology:

However it would be wrong to apply Sundkler's Ethiopian/Zionist typology—undoubtedly right in South Africa—to the rest of Africa as Parrinder points out. (8) To begin with, other areas do not have the same racial problems as South Africa. Similarly, it would be wrong to characterise all the religious movements in Africa as the "religions of the oppressed" as Lantenari has done. This is far from being the case in certain places like Southern Ghana and Southern Nigeria "where independent churches were rather becoming the resort of a new social elite". (9)

In his Marxist analysis of the cargo cults of the Pacific, Peter Worsley describes them as the protest of the oppressed races and classes. (10) This may have been true of some in Africa—George Shepperson notes the similarity between the cargo cults and religious movements in Nyasaland (11)—but certainly not all. Wide generalisations are not very helpful, nor accurate.

Barrett sees the common root cause of the movement as the failure of the missionary movement to demonstrate at all times the Biblical concept of love in the African setting and a lack of understanding of traditional religion and society. He shows how the reactionary element features prominently in the formation of the new All-African churches, especially in the lives of the founder members. (12) Welbourn and Ogot have shown how the failure of the Western orientated missionary churches to make the Africans feel at home has led to the creation of new churches. (13)

Though the reactionary element is a common theme of the movement, there is a great complexity of factors causing the AIC's which are the consequence of the variety of political, social and cultural situations. So pointing to colonial oppression or missionary intransigence will not do, since there has been little or no decline in the growth of the independents since the close of the colonial period and the weakening of missionary control.

Turner's Typology

Aylward Shorter finds the typology of Harold W. Turner the "most useful as well as the most theological". (14) Turner distinguishes three main types of AIC's: Christian, Hebraist and Neo-Traditionalist. The Christian type of independent church is closely similar to the mission churches in doctrine and practice and its differences are largely due to