

**A Review of *A History of the Church in Africa*
Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*
(Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 1232 + xix pp.**

By Grant LeMarquand

Sundkler and Steed's (hereafter S&S) magnificent work *A History of the Church in Africa* opens with a quotation from two Nigerian scholars which has become an oft-quoted line among African church historians in the last few years: "A bitter pill which the majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa should swallow is that they have not been writing Africa Church History" (p. 1, quoting from J.F. Ade Ajaya and E.A. Ayandele, "Writing African Church History," in P. Beyerhaus & C. Hallencreutz, eds. *The Church Crossing Frontiers*; Lund & Uppsala, 1969, 90). The point, of course, is that the majority of popular and scholarly writing about African church history until very recently has been Eurocentric, almost exclusively devoted to the exploits of missionaries and the work which they did in bringing the gospel to Africa. The classic work of C.P. Groves (*The Planting of Christianity in Africa* [4 vols.; London: Lutterworth, 1948-58]), for example, is a marvelous piece of missionary history, but tends to leave one with the impressions that Christianity in Africa is simply the result of Western vision and Western effort. In contrast, the thesis of the present volume is clear, "This book deals with the African response to the Christian message and with African initiatives in the conversion of the continent" (p. 100). This does not mean that missionaries from outside of Africa are ignored – far from it – missionaries remain an important part of the story which S&S relate. The work of Westerners is, however, 'put in its place' as it were. The work of African evangelists, church planters, prophets, martyrs, scholars, and church leaders is appropriately put in the foreground. The story of the church in Africa cannot be understood as merely an invasion of a foreign religion.

S&S are not the first to attempt a church history of the entire continent. In the last years of the twentieth century several scholars have produced more or less comprehensive reviews of African church history. Each of these volumes is conscious of the criticism that past histories have marginalized the Africanness of African church history and each has succeeded in various ways in redressing this imbalance. Adrian Hastings' impressive 700 page contribution, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), deals with the 500 years of Christian history in which the message of the gospel has spread and become rooted in sub-Saharan Africa. The disadvantage of this kind of approach is that it can sever the modern history of Christianity from its forebears in the ancient churches of Egypt, North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia. Hastings is not unaware of this danger and in fact devotes the first two chapters to ancient African church history. One of the important contributions of Hastings' volume is his ability to relate the history of the church in modern Africa to its context in such a way as to underline that African history itself is not intelligible without an understanding of Africa church history. John Baur's *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History 62-1992* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994) is somewhat shorter (over 550 pages) but attempts to do justice to the entirety of the African church history. Most helpful are the country by country surveys in the last section of the book. Elizabeth Isichei's *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) at just over 400 pages is probably the best choice if one is looking for a text book for a course, but the author does have a bit of an 'edge' at times. Rather than always arguing her case on various matters she tends to be dismissive of views with which she disagrees (see p. 52, for example, where hundreds of years of debate on the two natures of Christ are simply swept aside). Mark Shaw has also made an important and unique contribution with his 1996 volume, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker). Taking H.R. Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* as an exemplar, Shaw uses this theological theme as a heuristic device for understanding the diversity in African Christianity through its 2000 year history. Obviously at about 300 pages Shaw's book is much less detailed, but it is a worthy contribution, especially in its theological perception.

With this wealth of African church history published in the 1990s one might think that another volume might simply be redundant. Not so. This is a marvelous work which will probably be the standard for a generation. Perhaps the best way to sum up the volume is to examine two major motifs which emerge as Sundkler and Steed present the story of the founding and growth of the church in Africa: on the one hand,

they describe the ways in which the growth of the church was facilitated and, on the other hand, they highlight factors which have impeded the spread of the Christian message.

S&S spend much of their book examining bridges to church growth. It becomes obvious that there is a multiplicity of reasons that the church has grown almost exponentially, especially during the last 150 years (for statistics see their chart on p. 906). I shall mention six reasons here, the last (according to S&S) being the most crucial.

One factor is African culture and religion and the many ways in which it coheres with the biblical tradition. In an insightful section early in the book dealing with "African Religions" (pp. 91-96) the authors point out that African religious traditions actually aided the transition of Africans to Christian faith. Throughout the volume are examples of the various ways this took place. In Liberia, the former Anglican catechist, William Wadé Harris experienced a series of dreams and visions involving the angel Gabriel and others. These dreams were instrumental in his calling to preach, a ministry which he undertook in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and the Ivory Coast over seventeen months. During that preaching mission over 100,000 people were converted to the Christian faith (p. 197-201). A missionary named Zimmerman reported that in Nigeria in 1857 an African medium priest named Owu was converted after having a vision in which he was called to faith in Jesus (p. 211). But dreams, visions and prophecy are small parts of the important matrix of religious ideas which found kinship in the Christian story. Blood covenants (pp. 548, 604), the importance which both the Christian story and African tradition place on healing and wholeness (pp. 677-79), and the corporate nature of African identity (pp. 600, 606) have all facilitated the movement of Africans into the churches.

A second factor is the ability of some missionaries to identify with African people. S&S report wonderful examples of missionaries who stood with Africans in times of suffering and injustice, thereby witnessing to the love of God for Africans. (pp. 139, 210, 606). Over and over the authors relate the stories of the many young, Western missionaries who came to Africa to serve and to preach who quickly succumbed to malaria and other diseases which were a mystery to the scientific community of the day. This witness was not forgotten.

A third factor often mentioned in this volume is welcome which the gospel message received among people who were marginalized. In Calabar in south-eastern Nigeria, for example, the missionaries "gathered round them people who had been given away as presents, twin babies rescued from the bush, and refugees from Efik justice who sought the protection of the missions" (p.240). In the Taveta area of eastern Kenya the Church Missionary Society "as in much of Africa...first attracted to the mission stations...not so much Taveta local, as refugees from outside the area" (p.558). As many of the Western mission societies were founded during the years when slavery was being abolished, many of the first converts were former slaves rescued from slave ships and brought to places such as Freetown in Sierra Leone and Freretown in Kenya. Many of these first African Christians became the first and most effective evangelists to their own people.

In some places persecution became a catalyst to church growth. Perhaps the best known example is the young Ugandan men, both Roman Catholic and Anglican who were a part of the Bugandan court who were executed in 1886 (pp. 564-77).

The place of the Bible is another factor in the growth and spread of the church in Africa. From the start literacy was linked to the scriptures. Missionaries taught young people to read so that they could read the Bible for themselves. Once the Bible had been translated into local languages, the missionaries themselves became less crucial to the mission – any African believer with a Bible immediately became a more effective witness than any missionary could be.

By far the most important theme in this work is the place of Africans in the evangelization of the continent. Time and time again African evangelists were the first missionaries into a new area.

To the Westerner, southern Kasai was then a forlorn outpost in pagan Africa. Yet when Fr Emeri Cambier of the Scheut Father arrived [in the Congo in the 1880s], moving along the Kasai River,

'from hippopotamus to hippopotamus', he discovered a Christian African community ready to assist him – a corroboration, it would seem, of a fundamental thesis of this book: the Western missionary arriving at any place in Africa always found that he had been preceded by some group of African Christians (p.299).

Groups like the former slaves who were 'repatriated' from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone in the late 1700s (pp. 179-81), and the freed slaves who became Christians in Sierra Leone and then evangelized Nigeria a generation later are the heroes of this story. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African to be consecrated as an Anglican bishop, the prophetic figure of William Wadé Harris, the saintly Apolo Kivebulya who was the first to preach to the pygmies in what is now the eastern Congo, these are the names which are the focus of S&S's exposition of the Africa Christian story. Yes, David Livingstone, Ludwig Krapf, Mary Slessor and many other Europeans also have an honoured place, but it is African initiative and African creativity which had produced the most dynamic church in the world by the end of the twentieth century.

Of course S&S do not gloss over the problems involved in the Christianization of Africa. Most of the problems which they deal with, however, can be subsumed under one category – the tendency of both Africans and westerners to see Christianity as a foreign, European thing. From the African perspective, Christianity came to Africa accompanied by white and some of those white people had colonial ambitions. From the European perspective, Africa was often seen as a place to be 'civilized' as well as 'Christianized'. The spectrum of attitudes from paternalism to outright racism is well-documented. From S&S's perspective, the 'social Darwinism' of the second generation of missionaries to Africa in the modern period was one of the greatest barriers to the emergence of a truly African Christianity (see, for example the sad account of white opposition to the episcopate of Samuel Crowther, pp. 244-46). Other factors which have challenged the growth of Christianity, such as urbanization and (especially) the role of Islam in Africa, are also well-treated, but clearly S&S see the negative attitudes and policies of Western governments and Western missions and missionaries as the greatest barriers to true mission in Africa.

A book of this size must have problems. Indeed it would be remiss not to mention several issues. Although the book was published in 2000, it appears that the research really stopped in the early 1990s. We find here very little about the AIDS pandemic and the churches' response (just a note on pp.914-16). The history of the church in the Sudan is almost completely neglected, in spite of the incredible growth of the churches in that country in the midst of the worst genocidal war of the late twentieth century which has killed over 2 million Sudanese (see the one paragraph on p. 910). The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is ignored. South Africa since majority rule is overlooked. The issue of 'globalization' and the place of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in setting policies for African countries is not discussed. These are important issues and one hopes that they will be treated adequately when the next 'definitive' work is produced. In the meantime, this book should be on the shelf of every theological institution in the world. Very few will read the book from cover to cover (it is not always as scintillating as reading a Harry Potter novel!), but it will serve as the standard reference work for many years.

The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.