
Book Section:
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CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN EXPERIENCE WITH CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is at the heart of the dynamics of cultural, social, political as well as religious change taking place on the African continent in the twenty-first century. The African population being incredibly young, Christianity is enormously vibrant and is at the heart of the ways in which many Africans – young and old – perceive their identity, construct community, engage the world, and shape the future. This section begins by giving a statistical overview of Christianity in contemporary Africa, before sketching a more qualitative, in-depth picture of the variety of Christian expressions on the continent.

African Christianity in Numbers

On the African continent as a whole, the growth of Christianity has been d, both in terms of the total number of Christians and of the percentage of the population that is Christian. According to a report by the Center for Global Christianity (2013),

- in 1910, on a population of 120,000,000 there were 11,000,000 people Christian (9%).
- in 1970, on a population of 368,000,000 there were 143,000,000 people Christian (39%).
- in 2020, on a population of 1,278,000,000 there will be an estimated 631,000,000 people Christian (49%).

Obviously, these numbers reflect a dramatic process of religious change in the course of one century.

Where the northern part of the continent is overwhelmingly Muslim, by far the greatest part of African Christians today live in sub-Saharan Africa. In several countries in that part of the continent over 90% of the population is Christian, such as in Democratic Republic of Congo (95%), Angola (94%), Burundi (93%), Rwanda and Lesotho (both 92%). In absolute numbers

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the largest Christian populations live in Nigeria (95,695,000), Democratic Republic of Congo (80,919,000), Ethiopia (60,754,000), Kenya (43,068,000), and South Africa (42,926,000) (source: Center for Global Christianity, 2013).

Major Christian Traditions in Contemporary Africa

Contemporary African Christianity is enormously diverse – to such an extent that some scholars argue for the plural term 'African Christianities' (Kollman 2010). Five major traditions can be distinguished, while acknowledging that the boundaries between these can be rather fluid (meaning that the reliability and usefulness of the statistics quoted below can be twisted).

Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. These traditions represent ancient forms of Christianity on the African continent, going back to early Christian history. Their ongoing existence to date means that there have always been living Christian traditions on the African continent, relatively independent from the West. Historically and theologically, these churches are closely linked; they both belong to the monophysite tradition, holding the belief that Jesus Christ has a single (combined divine and human) nature. In Egypt the Coptic Church is now a minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim society, although it has remained a constant factor in Egyptian public life; in Ethiopia the Orthodox Church comprises about half of the population, is firmly established in society, and defines the country's history and sense of identity to date. With their distinct liturgy, culture, literature and spirituality, both traditions make a unique contribution to African Christianity.

Catholicism. Modern Catholicism in Africa is the result of the work of European missionary congregations that became active on the continent from about the 1840s. Obviously this work

has been quite fruitful, as the estimated number of African Catholics to date is 176,000,000, meaning that about a third of all sub-Saharan African Christians are Catholic (Pew Forum 2011). Originally introduced as a Western form of Christianity, the Catholic Church since Vatican Council II has adopted the idea of inculturation, seeking to develop a 'genuinely African' expression of the faith through an indigenization of worship and theology (see below). Because of the significant role that the Catholic Church plays in African societies in sectors such as education, health, democracy and economic development, Paul Gifford (2015) speaks of an 'NGO-ization' of Catholicism in Africa, suggesting that it presents a form of Christianity that brings not so much redemption as development. He simultaneously acknowledges the existence of 'enchanted Catholicism' – popular religiosity concerned with healing and exorcism – but argues that the official church hierarchy is rather suspicious about this. That might be true to some extent, but Catholic in Africa has been quite lenient in accommodating indigenous beliefs and practices (Obeng 1996).

Protestantism. Reliable data of this form of Christianity are difficult to find, partly because of the conflation of categories. The Pew Forum report (2011) puts mainline Protestant, African Independent and Pentecostal churches together under the umbrella of 'Protestantism' which in their estimation comprises of 295,510,000 people (57% of all Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa). For the purpose of this overview, Protestantism refers to mainline Protestant denominations that, like Catholicism, have their roots in mostly European missionary activity: Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other churches. Protestant missions, mostly from an evangelical snit, became active in Africa around the turn to the 19th century; they were often closely related to colonialism. After independence they often played a crucial role in the process of democratization. In many countries, these churches are united in national councils of churches, usually associated with the World Council of Churches.

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Like the Catholic Church, Protestant churches and their ecumenical bodies are also often involved in education, health and development activities, with Gifford (2015) suggesting that his thesis of NGO-ization also applies to mainline Protestantism. However, many churches have lately incorporated charismatic influences as they are competing for members with the popular Pentecostal churches.

African Initiated Christianity. The cultural and racial politics of European missions in the 19th/20th century was frequently disparaging towards African customs and African converts. As a result, from around the turn to the 20th century Africans begun to break away from the mission churches and start their own. These became referred to as AICs: African initiated (also: independent or indigenous) churches. The AICs became such a vibrant and fascinating part of African Christianity that Allan Anderson (2001) refers to their emergence as an 'African Reformation', of a similar impact as the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe. The majority of AICs have phenomenologically been described as prophet-healing or spiritual churches, which foregrounds their concern with orthopraxis instead of orthodoxy, and their emphasis on spiritual power manifested through healing, prophecy and deliverance. Many AICs are further characterized by the use of uniforms (usually white robes) and of symbolic objects (such as fruits, water, staffs and ropes), the prohibition of alcohol, tobacco and pork, and sometimes an acceptance of polygamy. Reliable data are hard to find, but especially in Southern Africa AICs continue to be a significant factor; however some of them have dwindled while others have reinvented themselves as Pentecostal churches. Well-known and still thriving examples of AICs are the Zion Christian Church in Southern Africa, the Kimbanguist Church in Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Celestial Church of Christ in Nigeria.

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Pentecostalism. Although classical Pentecostal denominations from America were planted in Africa from the early 20th century, the modern Pentecostal movement emerged from around the 1970s. Pentecostal churches share with AICs an emphasis on spiritual power and charismatic practices, but they tend to have a more 'modern' or 'western' outlook and orientation, as reflected in worship styles, leadership patterns, theology, and connections to global Pentecostal movements. They propagate a break with the past of African traditions, while presenting themselves as embodiments of modernity (Meyer 2004). Yet Pentecostal practices of deliverance from evil forces, as well as the preaching of prosperity, express Christianity in relation to local concerns. Pentecostalism is frequently associated with an ability to contribute to development because of its promotion of entrepreneurship, practical skills, work discipline, and the empowerment of women. Yet Gifford (2015) argues that the emphasis on prosperity, deliverance and the pastor's anointing makes modern Pentecostalism deeply enchanted and actually hinders development by encouraging fear and diminishing human agency. The total number of Pentecostals in Africa is estimated to be 122,000,000; in addition, there are 53,000,000 charismatic Christians in the mainline churches who engage in spiritual practices associated with Pentecostalism, such as speaking in tongues and divine healing (Pew Forum 2011, 68). Several African Pentecostal denominations – such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Winners Chapel International – have spread all over the continent and abroad, thus reshaping Christianity globally.

Key Terms for Understanding Contemporary African Christianity

Spiritual power. In the imagination of African traditional religions, agents of spiritual power – such as witches, ancestors, and spirits – are real and have a direct effect on people's health, wealth and well-being. Many European missionaries declared such beliefs to be superstitious, but of course in the worldview of African converts these spiritual forces continued to feature.

This explains the popularity of African independent churches and, more recently, Pentecostal churches, which both take these realities seriously. They do this, however, in a paradoxical way: by associating the spiritual forces of traditional religions with the Christian devil and actively opposing them. The paradox, according to Martin Lindhardt (2015, 14), and one of the main reasons for the appeal of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, 'is that processes of rejection and diabolization are simultaneously processes of preservation' of the underlying spiritual ontologies. Hence these churches address in a Christian idiom and by invoking the power of the Holy Spirit the spiritual anxieties many Africans have about their health, wealth and well-being.

Deliverance. The main religious practice for dealing with spiritual forces of evil – such as witchcraft, family curses, and occultic bondages – is usually referred to as deliverance (or, in more traditional terminology, exorcism). Especially modern Pentecostal churches devote much room for deliverance, with pastors claiming (and widely believed) to have a particular 'anointing' with power from the Holy Spirit to set people free from the satanic forces holding possession over them and causing bodily, material, relational, psychic and other problems. Deliverance is a ritualized performance of spiritual power, not seldom through an emotional and ecstatic spectacle publicly performed over screaming and shaking bodies. Deliverance sessions, according to Meyer (2004, 456-7), 'offer a version of African Christianity that does not make it necessary to (secretly) seek for help outside the confines of the church', such as with a traditional priest. As much as the way in which deliverance is performed in modern-day Pentecostal churches is new, it is important to remember that practices of protection against evil forces have been part of Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox traditions for many centuries. The same applies to the Catholic Church, with the former Zambian

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Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, who in the 1990s became popular with a ministry of exorcism and healing, as a well-known (though controversial) example.

Healing. Practices of deliverance and faith healing are closely connected, as they both reflect a worldview in which believers can be thwarted in their quest for well-being by spiritual agents. They also illustrate a particular soteriology, described by Anderson (2001, 233) as that salvation in Africa 'needs to be related to more than an esoteric idea of the "salvation of the soul" and the life hereafter' as it 'must be oriented to the whole of life's problems as experienced by people'. In the AICs, symbolic objects such as water, oil, fruits and candles are used in healing rituals to address health-related problems such as infertility, sickness and disease. Modern Pentecostal churches often have an emphasis on miracle healing, characterized by a similar spectacular manifestation of spiritual power as in deliverance practices. Both types of spiritual healing are popular, in particular (but certainly not only) to those who have little or no access to modern healthcare facilities. From the missionary period, mainline churches have been highly active in providing modern healthcare; the latter is based on a Western understanding of the body that failed to acknowledge spiritual realities. In recent decades, mainline churches have developed more holistic healing practices, not at least under the influence of Pentecostalism; at the same time, several Pentecostal churches have begun to provide modern healthcare services.

Prophecy. Prophetic practices are part and parcel of contemporary African Christianity. The AICs, as well as many modern Pentecostal churches, often center around charismatic figures referred to as prophets and believed to receive special revelations from the Holy Spirit. These prophets can be the leaders of the church, or they are members with a special office; they are consulted by the faithful in times of personal and relational difficulties and problems.

Somewhat comparable to diviners in African traditional religions, Christian prophets 'are seers, people with divine power to "see" the revelations of God' (Anderson 2001, 234). Their ministry is also closely associated with healing and deliverance. Where in the AICs prophets operate at the local level in the community, modern-day Pentecostal prophets often are prominent national if not international figures, presenting a spiritual commentary on social and political affairs. Well-known examples of this are Prophet T.B. Joshua from Nigeria, and Prophet David Owuor from Kenya. In the mainline churches, the terminology of the prophetic is also used, but not so much in a charismatic way but in the sense of public critique of social and political injustice. A famous example is the 1985 Kairos Document that offered a radical theological critique of Apartheid in South Africa. More recently, Catholic and Protestant theologians and church leaders have addressed the prophetic role of the church in the context of the HIV epidemic, to denounce stigmatization and to offer solidarity and healing.

Inculturation. Catholic and Protestant churches in Africa are the result of European mission activities that privileged Western styles and expressions over African ones. When in the second half of the 20th century these churches became independent, they often engaged in a quest for a more African expression of the Christian faith, variously referred to as Africanization, contextualization, indigenization or inculturation. Especially in the Catholic Church after Vatican Council II this was actively encouraged by the church hierarchy, allowing pastoral, liturgical and theological innovation and experimentation (Magesa 2004). Among others, Archbishop of Accra Peter Sarpong became a prominent figure experimenting with liturgical renewal, introducing African styles of music and dance in worship. Catholic theologians such as Charles Nyamiti from Tanzania developed theologies of inculturation in which Jesus Christ, for example, was imagined as the Great Ancestor or as Healer. Similar

developments took place in Protestant circles, with the support of ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches. Inculturation has sometimes been critiqued for adopting a static notion of African authenticity; however Edward Antonio (2006, 1) suggests that there is a political value in this, since 'Africanism is the mode through which inculturation participates in postcolonial discourse.' Another criticism is that efforts towards inculturation have often been top-down. Here it is important to remember that from the missionary period African Christian converts have engaged in what can be called 'inculturation from below' (not seldom referred to with the pejorative term 'syncretism', suggesting that European Christianity was pure while African appropriations were deviant).

Conclusion

At the dawn of political independence in Africa, many commentators believed that Christianity would lose popularity in the post-colonial era because of its association with colonialism and European domination. The opposite has happened, and Christianity is currently more diverse, dynamic, and vibrant than it has ever been before on the African continent. No longer seen as a Western religion, Christianity in multiple and complex ways has contributed to and shaped the quest for African identity in a globalized world. Within Africa, it competes with Islam in what is sometimes described as 'a battle for the African soul'. Globally, African Christianity through processes of migration, mission and expansion contributes to reshaping the face of contemporary world Christianity. Observers and critics alike will agree with Andrew Walls (2002, 119), that 'we may need to look at Africa today in order to understand Christianity itself. ... Africa may be the theatre in which some of the determinative new directions in Christian thought and activity are being taken.'

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