

BOOK REVIEWS

African Christianity, Its Public Role By Paul Gifford. London, 1998, 368 pp.

The title of this book, *African Christianity, Its Public Role*, accurately reflects the essence of the investigation carried out by Paul Gifford. The author states the aims of his study:

First, it seeks to situate Africa's churches in their wider context, to see what light can be shed on recent developments in African Christianity by using concepts taken from political and social analysis. Second, it seeks to examine the public role that the churches are playing in Africa (p.1).

In Chapter 1, Gifford sketches the socio-political and economic context of contemporary Africa. From the sketch he adopts and defines the key conceptual tools that he later applies in his study. In Chapter 2, the author attempts to locate the African churches within global Christian developments. Subsequently, he spells out the foci of his investigation of the churches in Africa, viz, theology, a new Pentecostal wave, the Faith Gospel, and ecclesiastical externality. The first two chapters form the foundation upon which the subsequent four case studies of Ghana, Uganda, Zambia, and Cameroon are predicated. They also provide the key to the overall analysis of the churches' public role which the author carried out in the final chapter.

For his study, Gifford conducted structured and unstructured interviews with many church people, academics and politicians. He also observed many church services, crusades, Bible studies, workshops and conferences. The data were supplemented by a huge volume of literature that included academic and devotional books, magazines, newspapers etc.

Gifford's style is captivating. He presents to the reader church founders, bishops, and preachers who speak out their mind without interruption. He then comments and analyses his findings and assesses their public significance. At times the reader gets the impression that she/he is reading a fast-moving fiction. This is so because the author sometimes highlights the very minute details that range from anecdotes, sweet gossip, ditties and petty jealousies between church and state, church leaders and their followers, expatriate missionaries and the indigenous pastors etc. When all is said and done one realizes that all these 'juicy and dirty bits and pieces' constitute the reality of the African churches and their perceived public roles.

From his findings, three important points stand out. First, Gifford observes that on the political front, the churches in Africa basically mirror the society in which they are located. This is manifested in how they conceive and exercise leadership, which often thrives on patron-client relations while authority is given a supernatural mystique.

Second, is the observation that the churches in Africa are increasingly becoming alternative economic institutions replacing the shambolic economies of Africa. The churches are, because of their external links and continuing donor-support, becoming more and more associated with wealth and job creation as well as career and skills development. They are dependant on external donor support just like their counterparts in the public arena.

Third and lastly, Gifford sees an ambiguous relationship between the churches' theology and African culture. His overall view is that the churches in Africa play a limited public role because they lack a structural vision/framework for transforming the African society.

All things considered, this book will have a long-lasting impression on the study of Christianity in Africa. There are few observations, however, that this reviewer would like to raise in critique of the book.

First, while for justified reasons Gifford is interested in the African Churches' theology and its contribution towards the shaping of civil society, it is unfortunate that he approaches his study with ready-made ideas about the appropriate theology that Africa should adopt to solve its woes. For him this theology is liberation theology as in Latin America. Such a theology has to be 'an explicitly political theology'. Gifford's theological slant prejudices his perspectives.

Second, but related to the first point, is the author's bias towards churches that have (written) literature and whose crusades and sermons were delivered in English at the expense of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) whose liturgies are not written and are in local languages. The statistics of AICs from Ghana are clearly over-rated in their significance for measuring the growth rate of AICs on the whole continent. By any standards Ghana has never been in the top four of countries associated with the proliferation of AICs outside South Africa. Furthermore, there is more than meets the eye in the statistics and explanations offered by the Ghana Evangelism Committee. The author could have been more critical with his sources as statistics, be they for purposes of voter registration, birth and death registration or baptism, are a very complicated exercise in Africa.

Third, is the observation that although the author highlights some very interesting strands of mainline Christianity, one senses that he is more comfortable when he describes and discusses the Faith gospel and theologies of entrepreneurship and deliverance, all which are products of the evangelical and new-wave Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. He tends to lose his cutting edge, however, when he tackles mainline Christianity.

For instance, while Gifford makes mention of the 'enormous effect' that para-church movements like the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) on Africa's mainline

sector, he does not show how the latter's liberal theology as an external 'paradigm enforcing power' has been appropriated in Africa in the democratization discourse. An obvious oversight by the author is the role of the WCC's theology towards women and gender violence. This discourse has gained much currency in Africa in the wake of escalating gender violence mainly due to Africa's collapsing economies and the resultant economic emaciation that male bread-winners are subjected to due to retrenchment, unemployment, insecurity, etc. It would have been instructive to assess the impact of the WCC's Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women Programme among Protestant churches that are affiliates of the WCC in the countries studied. This programme was launched by the WCC in 1988 and ends with a celebration by women from all over the world in November 1998 in Harare, Zimbabwe. Is it not also ironical that although the church in Africa is, as Hastings aptly calls it, a 'women's church' (A. Hastings, 1988) Gifford totally marginalizes the role of women in his study. When he mentions them he only does so in passing and with little explanation. Surely, Gifford is no different from other historians on the church in Africa: while there is 'theoretical' realization that women dominate the churches in Africa, Christian historiography has not as yet changed to reflect this fact.

My fourth point has to do with what I view to be an unnecessarily combative and self-righteous streak of arrogance that characterizes Gifford's style of engaging fellow scholars. A clear example is his reference to Kwame Bediako 'whose analysis ignores much of what is happening in African Christianity today'. In the next line he goes on to say of another scholar, John Parratt, 'It is even more evident in Parratt's survey of African theology' (p.333). These observations are followed by trite, unsubstantiated but dismissive over-generalizations about how uncritical African Christians are with the Bible. That this is not borne out of any empirical objective evidence is clear on p.42 where he classifies African Christianity as fundamentalist. He writes:

In its classical Christian sense of denoting some belief in the bible as inerrant, *almost all African Christians approach the bible rather uncritically* (my emphasis).

In his substantiation of this opinion, Gifford writes, 'This was well expressed in a report on the history and theology of a group of independent churches, written by those churches themselves.' One wonders whether Gifford is being critical with his sources. To what extent is the so-called group of independent churches from South Africa true to themselves and 'true also of Christians of the mainline churches and doubly true of the (rest of African) AICs?' This is everyone's guess.

Coming back to Bediako and Parratt, Gifford is self-opinionated on the questions of Christian tradition and African culture as sources of African

theology. Gifford has only touched on the latter aspect but not the former. What I suspect he has in mind regarding 'Christian tradition' is Western Christian tradition. This sounds quite remote for a people with a conception of history different from Westerners.

The issues raised above do not, however, outweigh the invaluable contribution that Gifford has made to the study of Christianity in Africa. They only highlight one important point; that the author is not making the last testament on African Christianity. No one person has the monopoly of objective truth. The strains of Christianity presented in Gifford's book, based on the four case studies of Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Cameroon, provide a sound entry point (not exit) towards a better understanding of contemporary Christianity in Africa. I strongly recommend this book to students, academics and Christians.

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