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Preface

In the century and more since they arrived in Central Africa, the Christian churches have inevitably come into contact with a wide variety of other institutions. These range from socio-religious ones, such as the *Nyau* societies and M'Bona cult of Malawi, to political ones, such as the Colonial Administration of the former Northern Rhodesia, and the settler régime in Salisbury. In each case, the churches have had to work out their attitudes, and to a greater or lesser extent have influenced the other institutions, and been influenced by them. These interactions are important for historians, and, indeed, for all who wish to understand society and the churches as they exist today. As the list of its contents shows, this book consists of a number of case histories, describing the encounters mentioned, and others besides.

A glance across to the list of the authors themselves shows that the churches are now in contact with yet another group of institutions. Half our contributors are employed by the churches, half by the universities, and there is an editor in each category. Publication is the climax of a project which included a Workshop held at Chilema Lay Training Centre, Malawi, in August 1971, giving ample opportunity for dialogue between the two groups. The universities are among the most recent institutions to be set up in Central Africa, but it already seems clear that the churches' contacts with them will prove no less important, at least for local Christianity, than the earlier encounters which are described in this book. It is possible to suggest some of the ways in which it seems likely that this influence will operate.

Firstly, the universities are likely to make the churches look very much more carefully at the way in which they write their own history, and teach it. It may be useful to set out the ways in which previous methods seem to require improvement; each is a challenge to seek a more adequate balance.

1. Geographical Balance

A Seminary teacher who has received his own training in the West, as most have done, is tempted to pass on what he has learnt, taking his students through events which occurred at Nicaea, Chalcedon, Wittenburg, Geneva, and Trent, and then adding a short appendix at the end about the evangelizing of Central Africa. Even if he feels the necessity to give greater prominence to local Church History, the lack of adequate textbooks is likely to discourage him. A recent survey of the teaching of Church History in the seminaries of Central Africa¹ showed that scarcely any have yet begun to devote a really significant part of their course to events which occurred in their own areas. The colleges which

PREFACE

give most attention to local events are those which are required to do so because they are preparing their students for the Central Africa Diploma in Theology. Even this syllabus, however, only devotes the last of its nine terms to Central Africa, though it adds a further three terms for an optional, unexamined Research Project.²

In East Africa, the situation is entirely different. Most seminaries have for some time followed a syllabus laid down by Makerere University,³ and this devotes one of its two Church History papers entirely to African Church History, requiring a full year of study. The syllabus even includes a statement justifying the presence of non-African Church History as the subject of the other paper. So the universities will certainly challenge the churches to give a very much greater prominence to Africa in the teaching of Church History.

2. *A Balance of Periods*

Not surprisingly, the churches have devoted a large proportion of their attention to the period when the first missionaries were bringing the Gospel to the people of the area. Their heroism made stirring reading in books produced primarily for the attraction of funds and recruits for the Missionary Societies, and provided much of the material when the first serious historical studies began to appear. Easily the most widely used book on African Church History in local seminaries is Groves's four-volume work with the significant title *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*.⁴ Yet much has happened since Christianity was planted, and much happened before it was planted; as my fellow-editor has pointed out,⁵ it is not difficult to find examples of distortion arising from an inadequate time-scale.

3. *A Denominational Balance*

The time is mercifully drawing to a close during which the different denominations have been maintaining separate seminaries, and studying and writing Church History in isolation from one another. Not every church body has gone as far as the one which in 1945 produced a book entirely devoted to its own denominational history, and entitled it *The Church in Southern Rhodesia*,⁶ yet many of the earlier books confined themselves to a single Mission. The present-day historian has the task of combining these sources in order to present a balanced and coherent picture, and his task is by no means easy; some denominations have written more about their history than others have done about theirs, and it is not always easy to fill gaps from primary sources, which may be inaccessible, or in a language not at the command of the historian, or both.

4. *A Balance of Viewpoints*

The early missionaries were articulate people who wrote letters, magazine articles, and Annual Reports, kept diaries, and thus produced much material of great value. Few of their converts did any of these things. The consequence is that the historian is tempted to base his work on the sources that are most readily available, with the result that the missionary, not the convert, is the key

figure. Yet it is what the convert heard, rather than what the missionary thought he had said, which really determined subsequent events. A good deal of oral research needs to be done before the impact of Christianity can be described with real accuracy.

5. *Sacred and Secular*

The missions have constantly affected, and been affected by, the societies in which they have operated, so that Church History cannot be compartmentalized; it is interwoven with political history, economic history, educational history, in such a way that it cannot satisfactorily be studied in isolation from them. This fact has been well understood in East Africa. The syllabus for the Makerere Diploma in Theology includes the statement: 'Church History is not the history of Christian institutions, denominations, ideas, and doctrines. It is world history on which the Gospel through the Church is making its impact.' This syllabus goes on to spell out what this means in practice by listing thirteen themes which are likely to interest the examiners, and the first five are all concerned with the Church's impact on the world, not its domestic affairs. They are: 'Encounters between the Church and different cultures', 'Church-State relations', 'The Church and Social Problems', 'The Church and the Economic Order', and 'The Church and Nationalist Movements'. This 'outward-looking' emphasis is a feature of much Christian thinking today, with many people questioning the relevance and importance of interminable discussions of liturgical and ecumenical affairs; so the seminaries which adopt the Makerere syllabus will find a salutary pressure from a secular university towards reflecting this trend in their presentation of Church History.

Once the churches have accepted the challenge to seek an improved balance of historical writing and study along the lines described, a good deal of light can be shed on problems that have previously seemed baffling. Anybody who has been brought up on the type of literature that stresses the missionaries' heroic sanctity will be somewhat puzzled when he comes to read passages like the following extract from an article in the *Times of Zambia* by Dr Daniel Kunene, based on a lecture that he had given a few days previously at the University of Zambia:

The missionary's primary purpose was to tell the African that the God of Europe was superior to the Gods of Africa, that most African customs and ways went contrary to their [the missionaries'] religion and that, to be saved, the African had to abandon them all . . . Many Africans rejected the Christian religion with contempt. Others tried it and found it wanting . . .⁷

This charge of cultural and religious arrogance, delivered with greater or lesser degrees of bitterness, is one that is very commonly made. It is tempting to dismiss it, pointing out that Jesus warned the Apostles that they could expect to offend those who, for one reason or another, refused to accept the Christian message. Yet the fact that the charge is so widely made, and often repeated by those who have accepted the Christian faith, should warn us that the criticism needs to be taken seriously.

The professional historian can help us to reach a verdict. He may describe

PREFACE

events which involved arrogant missionaries, but he will also give examples of Christian workers who treated Africans and their customs with genuine respect. For example, Mabel Shaw of Mbereshi, Zambia, movingly describes how she learnt from David Livingstone: 'Already Africa *is* God's. God did not wait for me to bring him here. I found Him here in every village . . .'.⁸

The task, however, is a very much more complex one than the mere addition of examples to each side of the scales, in order to make possible a judgement about the past. Searching questions have to be considered about the extent to which Christianity in the present day can, and should, accommodate itself to local customs. This requires a comprehensive knowledge of Theology as well as of relevant History and Social Anthropology, and seems to cry out for an interdisciplinary approach. For example, the question whether polygamists should be required to send away all but one of their wives before baptism has often been the subject of debate. It can hardly be settled until the anthropologist has given his account of the likely social and economic effects of such a regulation, the historian has described comparable occasions when the issue has arisen in the past, and the theologian has given his account of the attitude to polygamy which he finds in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the history of the church.

The papers which form Part I of this book all adopt the historical, descriptive approach. Two of the writers, Ranger and Schoffeleers, give examples of the failure of U.M.C.A. missionaries to accommodate themselves sufficiently to what they encountered,⁹ but the complexity of the issues soon emerges. As Ranger rightly points out, the story of Tomo Nyirenda shows that it was possible to be 'too vulnerable to the pressures of Lala society', and that to be so can be even more disastrous in its consequences than not being vulnerable enough.¹⁰ The Christian churches are constantly having to decide upon the attitude to adopt to the customs and religions of the societies they encounter; the descriptions of past confrontations, and discussions about them, which make up this part of the book, are offered as a contribution towards ensuring that such decisions are well-informed ones.

The article by Dr Kunene, mentioned above, goes on to make a second major charge against Christian missionaries: 'The involvement of most missionaries with the military conquest and political subjugation of the African is well attested'.¹¹ This, too, is a criticism which is frequently made, and throughout Central Africa the Christian churches are widely held to have been badly compromised by their encouragement of the setting up of colonial régimes, and their failure to support moves to dismantle them. (The one exception is found among the white community in Rhodesia, where the diametrically opposite belief is held with equal conviction.)

Significantly, this subject, of the political effects of Christianity, forms the second major theme of this book. All the contributions in Part II, and indirectly those in Part III, are case histories which add to our knowledge of the ways in which Christian influences have operated. While they make no pretence of giving a complete picture, they give a strong indication that, as the colonial period recedes (north of the Zambesi) and more dispassionate judgements become possible, the popular image of a church blind to injustice and tamely accepting the *status quo* will need to be revised.

Of more immediate importance than the rather sterile task of 'saving face' about the churches' past, is that of giving to Christian leaders the information they need in order to make their contribution to the present-day affairs of their nations. Amongst those who have recognized the need for such a contribution is President Kaunda, and it is interesting to note how he includes the universities alongside the churches in what he writes:

We need the uncommitted intellectual whose mind is able to range widely and to occupy himself with ideas which, though not immediately germane to the business of nation-building, stimulate free thought and dialogue on every matter of human concern. I would expect such cross-fertilization of ideas to come from two directions, our institutions of higher learning and the Churches. In particular, the ministry of the Churches comprises the largest single group of uncommitted intellectuals, charged by the Gospel they proclaim to deal with ultimate questions, and by definition required to see society in the widest possible context – against the unchanging Laws of God. Let me be frank and state that I am disappointed in the failure of the clergy, with certain exceptions, to discharge this prophetic function.¹²

As the studies included in Part II of this book indicate, there are a number of ways in which this function can be discharged. It is possible to emulate the Old Testament prophets directly, by making withering denunciations of the political establishment. An alternative is to take the advice contained in one of Aesop's fables, and use the same policy of gentle persuasion as the Sun, who managed to make the Traveller undress. He achieved this, it will be remembered, with his 'genial rays' after the North Wind had only succeeded in causing the object of his fury to wrap his cloak more tightly around him. A third method, less direct and requiring much patience, is to educate a generation in ideals which will cause them eventually to secure political change. All of these methods have been used in Central Africa, and there seems to be a good deal of value in the comparisons which are made possible by the juxtaposition of descriptions of their use and effects in Part II.

In considering the *means* by which the churches carry out their prophetic function, we are dealing with problems confronting church leaders; in considering the *content* of the message, we are giving attention to the problems which concern political leaders. It is to issues of this second type that President Kaunda very reasonably wants the churches and the universities to apply their brains, and the study of national problems could well be a main item on the agenda for the next project which scholars from the two institutions carry out together.

For Part III of this book, we move on to what seem to be even more exclusively domestic affairs. Yet closer examination shows that here, too, 'sacred' and 'secular' are closely interwoven. Inter-church co-operation in the towns has had a political dimension from the start. The Rukwadzano is well on the way to becoming 'a formidable religious force . . . upon national life'.¹³ Most strikingly of all, spiritual renewal among members of Religious Orders is said to be likely to 'make the sisters more sensitive to the social, economic, and political needs of their neighbours'.¹⁴ Church and Society are interacting through these organizations, and academic studies throw light upon the processes.

PREFACE

Such, then, are the themes which attracted the attention of the writers from churches and universities as they collaborated in this venture. The value of such co-operation has long been recognized by the directors of the Theological Education Fund, and it was money kindly granted from this source which made the project possible. We are grateful, too, to all the twenty-one people who produced papers. The twelve contributions which were not selected for this publication all stimulated valuable discussions at the Workshop, and many were recommended for circulation in other forms. The remainder, together with three others previously unpublished, but known to the editors, constitute this book. While we cannot claim that they all satisfy the stringent conditions for historiography set out above, we have every hope that they will prove of value to those interested in the study of Christian influence in Central Africa.

NOTES

¹ J. C. Weller *Adapting the Study of Church History: A Survey of Progress in the Seminaries of Central Africa* Paper contributed to the Workshop in Religious Research, Chilema, Malawi, 1971 (not published).

² The syllabus for this Diploma may be obtained from the Registrar, Central Africa Diploma in Theology, PO Box 3566, Salisbury, Rhodesia.

³ The syllabus for this Diploma may be obtained from the Registrar, Makerere Diploma in Theology, Dept of Religious Studies, Makerere University, PO Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

⁴ C. P. Groves *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* 4 vols (London 1954-58).

⁵ T. O. Ranger *Christianity in Central Africa* An unpublished paper presented to the Workshop on the teaching of Central and East African History, held in Lusaka, August 1970. This paper contains a most valuable summary and critique of the state of the historiography of Central African Christianity: much use has been made of it in writing this part of the Preface.

⁶ H. St John T. Evans *The Church in Southern Rhodesia* (London 1945).

⁷ D. Kunene, 'Missionary Education and our Writers' *Times of Zambia* (24 April 1969).

⁸ Mabel Shaw *God's Candlelights* (London 1932).

⁹ Below, pp. 65ff and 18f.

¹⁰ Below, p. 67.

¹¹ *Times of Zambia* (24 April 1969).

¹² K. D. Kaunda *A Humanist in Africa* (London 1966) p. 100.

¹³ Below, p. 268.

¹⁴ Below, p. 235.