BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN AFRICA

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Category: Observations

I'm in my sixties and I've been a fairly avid reader of church history for over forty years, but it is only recently that I've started to appreciate how wrong I'd got the whole subject. Admittedly, the eurocentric view of church history that I had imbibed is a common one and any Christian bookstore in the UK will have lots of books that retell the same story. But it's not the whole story, not by a long chalk.

The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity is an excellent book, which is well worth a read by anyone interested in African Christianity or in church history.

The book is a fairly substantial paperback at just under 400 pages. Although it is an academic book, it is not a difficult read. For those who want to follow up the subject, there is a very rich set of references at the end. The paperback will set you back around fifteen pounds and the Kindle edition (which I read) about half of that.

The bottom line is that this is a substantial history of African Christianity that is well worth a read. However, I'd like to highlight three themes that run through the book that I especially found helpful.

Firstly, it shows that there is a continuity in African Christianity over 2,000 years. The traditional story is that the faith flourished in Africa for a few hundred years before vanishing and only being reinstated when European missionaries reintroduced it a thousand years later. However, the truth is more complex and nuanced than this. There has been a continuous Christian presence in Africa since Apostolic times and the modern missionary-founded churches have been impacted by the historic churches in North Africa.

Secondly, I appreciated the way in which the Kingdom of God was used as a theme to unite the story. The authors show that different interpretations of the Kingdom (God's rule through political structures, God's rule in individual hearts...) have had an impact on the way in which Christianity has been received and expressed over 2,000 years.

The last thing that I'd highlight is the issue of African agency. All too often, Western books and missionary publicity paint African Christians as being the recipients of largesse from the West, rather than as actors in their own stories. African Christianity is an African phenomenon and while Westerners have played an important role, they are essentially supporting characters to the main cast. We need to be continually reminded of this.

Who should read this book? I'd strongly recommend it to any African Christian leaders who are anxious to know their own story. Sadly, the price makes it unlikely that it will be read as widely as it could or should be. I'd also suggest that any mission workers who are in Africa or heading that way should read it. I'd also strongly suggest that anyone who is interested in Church history, but who thinks that this means taking an interest in the Reformation or some other European phenomenon should get a copy - you really do need to get out more!

A always a selection of quotes that I found interesting or inspiring.

> *â€œAs Christianity declines in Europe and grows in the South, historians need to recognize what the International Missionary Council saw in 1938: the future of world Christianity rests with the so-called younger churches and their daily struggles.â€*

> *â€œthe most interesting lesson from the missionary outreach during the Western colonial era is what happened to Christianity when the missionaries werenâ€™t looking, and after the colonizers withdrew.â€*

> *Missionary historiography tries to tell the whole story of the African church but in a way that emphasizes the role of the expatriate missionary as a church planter or discipler.*

> *The growth among non-Greek speaking segments of the population created a strong market for Bible translations in the vernacular. Beginning in the late third century, and continuing on well into the eighth century, a periodic stream of translations in the major Coptic languages (Sahidic, Bohairic, and Bashmuric) were produced. With vernacular translations and the multiplication of local churches, the roots of the faith began to sink deeper into Egyptian soil.*

> *At the heart of these evangelical revivals were three powerful convictions. The first was the centrality of the death of Christ for salvation. A second was the necessity of the new birth. The third was a new eschatology that envisioned the spread of Christianity around the world as a prelude to Christâ€™s personal return. These convictions reshaped the Protestant understanding of the kingdom of God and rekindled interest in global missions.*

â€œTell our friends at home,â€ Johann wrote, â€œthat there is now on the East African coast a lonely missionary grave. This is a sign that you have commenced the struggle. . . . As the victories of the Church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members, you may be more convinced that the hour is at hand when you are summoned to the conversion of Africa from its eastern shore.â€

The Christian understanding of disciple-making found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 may have been the rationalization for the tendency to turn the convert into a lifetime apprentice. An authoritarian style became normal even when Africans were capable of assuming leadership because â€œEuropeans were reluctant to give up their roles as pastors after evangelism bore fruit.â€

â€œThe main lesson of African ecclesiastical history,â€ observes Roland Oliver, â€œis that the core message tended to run far ahead of its expatriate preachers. Most African societies first received the gospel from fellow Africans.â€

...it should not be overlooked that most Africans became Christians because they wanted to. â€œAfrican Christianity,â€ writes Richard Gray, â€œe is not the result of brainwashing by foreign missionaries.â€ Rather, it was embraced freely and enthusiastically by thousands of Africans â€œbecause this faith was seen to meet . . . some of the long-standing needs and demands of African societies.â€

So dominant is the charismatic witness across African Christianity â€œit would not be wrong to say that although Christian evangelization took place under the auspices of historic mission denominations, Pentecostalism in both its older classical and newer charismatic forms has now taken over as the representative face of Christianity in Africa.â€

Alongside the increase in Western missions, there has been growth in African mission agencies such as the Nigerian ECWA churches that have nearly five hundred national missionaries under the able leadership of Panya Baba.

> *The real story of church growth and expansion in African Christianity in the closing decades of the century, however, goes beyond the story of foreign or national missionaries. It is a story of largely indigenous evangelical revitalization movements (ERMs) that have resulted in the explosion of pentecostal/charismatic churches.*

> *Though church growth abounds, poverty and injustice also abound. Local corruption and official greed remain an endemic problem in development. One role of the church as the sign of the kingdom in Africa is to assist in a moral renewal that will help fuel an economic, cultural, and political renewal in turn.*