BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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A rather good book, with a second half that deserves to be very widely read.
Category: Reviews

I must admit that although The Transformation of African Christianity: Development and Change in the Nigerian ChurchÂ by Sunday Komolafae is an excellent book, I do have a couple of reservations about it. The first, as the sub-title makes clear, the book isn't actually about the African Church, it is about the Nigerian Church. The difference is an important one, and I feel that the title is unfortunate. My second reservation is that this is very much a book of two halves. The first is effectively a history of the development of the church in Nigeria over the last 180 years and the second is an extended biblical and theological reflection on the nature of the church and how it should be expressed in Nigeria. Both parts are excellent, but I believe that if the second half had been published separately, it would have deserved a very wide readership, but the book as a whole is likely to remain in the domain of the specialist.

The book is a large format paperback of 450 pages, the last 60 of which include an index and a bibliography. The book is pitched for an academic audience or at least one that is informed on the subject. It probably isn't something that a casual reader would want to pick up. I bought the book when it was on offer, but now it will set you back for about Â£13 for the Kindle edition and Â£25 for the paperback, which is expensive, but not unreasonable for a book of this nature.

The book is divided into eight parts, each of which consists of one or two chapters.

Part One covers Nigeria's Pre-Christian past. It is impossible to give a detailed overview of a country as large and diverse as Nigeria, so the author focuses on the Igbo and Yoruba as representative groups and gives an overview of the way in which these societies functioned and interacted with the outside world.

Part Two looks at the mission era, concentrating on the work of the Anglican CMS and the American Southern Baptist missions. A second chapter examines the rise of Nigerian ministry within the mission movement and explores some of the tensions between expat mission and local church structures.

Part Three details the rise of Nigerian Indigenous Churches in the twentieth century.

Part Four takes the story further by examining the development of Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria in the late C20. Anyone who is familiar with the plethora of denominations in West Africa will find the classification in this part to be very helpful.

Part Five considers the way in which the political and religious situation in Nigeria has led to a pragmatic form of ecumenismÂ which concentrates on countering perceived external threats. There is also a consideration of the nature of true ecumenism in the African context.

In some ways, Part Five provides a bridge between the historical analysis of the first half of the book and the more theological and biblical reflection which follows.

Part Six explores a biblical understanding of the church. The first chapter looks at the way in which

the wordÂ *ekklesia* is used in the Old and New Testaments and then examines the Church in Jerusalem from Luke-Acts. A second chapter considers the churches in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus as possible models for modern-day ecclesiology.

Part Seven takes the story on and looks at the post-apostolic church.

Finally, Part Eight draws the themes together and considers how the biblical reflection could be framed and developed in a Nigerian context.

The first half of the book gives a good overview of the development of the church in Nigeria and will make fascinating reading for anyone who is interested in mission history, or in the history of the church beyond Europe. However, to my mind, it is the final three sections which provide the real value for readers outside of the West African context. The way in which Biblical information is marshalled, reflected upon and applied is excellent. In the UK, our church structures still reflect a Christendom approach which is no longer valid. It would do us good to reflect on the nature of the church after the manner of this book and to consider from the ground up, what an appropriate ecclesiology looked like for out context.

So who should read this book? Obviously, students of mission and West African Christianity will want to have it on their reading lists. Equally, there is good material here for those who are thinking through their doctrine of the church. It should certainly find a place in seminary libraries and a number of students and teachers will want to own their own copies. However, if I could make a plea to Langham Publications; if the final three sections of the book were to be edited down to a short volume of their own, I believe they would be of wide interest on their own. As it stands, the book as a whole is rather daunting.