WRITING THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY:
REFLECTIONS OF AN EDITOR

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature on African Christian Studies from the 1990s onwards and suggests new directions for research. The field has drawn great impetus from a series of historical/anthropological debates over conversion and the relative significance of missionary imperial hegemony and African agency. But there is a great need for work on twentieth-century missionaries and their contribution to colonial science. And there are too few studies of African leaders within mission churches, particularly in the era of decolonisation. Research on Pentecostalism has flourished but needs to be historicised. New areas for research are: African Christian diaspora and its impact on host communities; the impact of development and human rights agendas on the church; the effects of the AIDS pandemic.

As the African Church becomes a more prominent part of World Christianity, scholars need to assess how African moral sensibilities are recasting the theology and politics of the historic mission churches.

To mark Adrian Hastings’s retirement as editor in 1999, the Journal of Religion in Africa (30.1, 2000) published his ‘Reflections’. My attachment to the JRA has been a long and pleasurable one and I am pleased to help consolidate what will, I hope, become an important editorial tradition. Hastings’s piece had a valedictory tone, a survey beginning in the 1960s with the founding of African studies and the birth of the JRA and leading up to the 2000s. It was a review of a literature that had grown enormously throughout that period and one to which he himself had made an immense contribution. This reflection will review recent developments from the 1990s when my association with the JRA began, and look towards future directions for research.

Although the JRA specialises in Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions, Hastings shrewdly chose to focus, in his reflection, on ‘African Christian Studies’. A survey of all three would have been difficult within the confines of a short article. Specialisation also made sense because it was in African Christian Studies that most (but by no
means all) of the exciting new research had focused. Hastings’s essay charted two broad themes. The first was the growing scholarly tendency to distinguish between African church history and the history of mission. The second was an even broader project engaged with the uncoupling of mission from Empire.

By the end of the 1980s these two projects seemed to be reaching fruition. Terence Ranger’s research on Eastern Zimbabwe enabled him to develop themes that had arisen out of an earlier influential body of work on mission interactions in colonial Tanzania. Although Ranger’s Zimbabwean work was never synthesised into what would have been a fascinating book on Christianity and the Eastern Shona, his essays advanced an influential model of popular Christianity. Mission Christianity became African when it re-sacralised the landscape and made use of local agents in proselytism, preaching and propheticism, and also when Africans seized hold of Christian symbols and powers, especially literacy.2

In 1990 came an important collection of essays by Richard Gray entitled Black Christians and White Missionaries. Like Ranger, Gray shifted the focus away from mission stations to the villages and the black evangelists and catechists who worked in them. One of Gray’s essays was a particularly subtle and humane exploration of cosmology, analysing the conjunctures between African and Christian patterns of thought, the absorption of Christian ideas and their relevance to African struggles with death, disease and misfortune. Historians of African Christianity were coming to grasp that Christian belief ‘flourished only when it worked with the grain of social change in Africa itself… Christian doctrine was most successful where it subtly adjusted to African predilections’ (Bayly, 2004: 335).

Ranger and Gray are just two important exemplars of the sort of research that was being produced. There was a great deal more and much of it was discussed in Hastings’s review. While Ranger and Gray had consistently written on African religions (amongst other things), they were joined by a host of others who had ‘seen the light’. By the 1980s scholarly concern with political economy and relations of production had shifted from the grand narrative of class to ‘local’ stories about the environment, ethnicity, gender and domesticity, health and healing. Christian ideas and practices made an important contribution to all of these and so the spectrum of work on missionary Christianity and African appropriations broadened further.

Another impetus to African Christian studies came with the linguistic turn, a growing concern with texts and representation. There was no one better at producing texts than missionaries and their converts, who
were often the first literate Africans. As Richard Gray observed, missionary publications were the most widely circulated reading matter in the Victorian era (1990: 88).

Africanists began to analyse religious texts not just for their content but also in terms of their audiences and their stylistic devices. Tracts and journals, spiritual autobiographies and hagiographies were ‘read’ as legitimating charters or propaganda intended to establish the identity of emergent movements and root them in existing traditions. Here, some of the most provocative work has been done not by religious historians but by literary scholars. Elizabeth Gunner wrote with remarkable insight on the Zulu hymns, meditations and laws of Isaiah Shembe and the adherents of his Nazaretha Church in twentieth-century South Africa. While Gunner interrogated new canonical African Christian texts, Isabel Hofmeyr reconsidered the classic ones. She produced an exceptional study of the absorption of the Bible into indigenous storytelling in a South African Transvaal Chiefdom, and then a brilliant book on the reception of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress in Africa (Gunner, 2002; Hofmeyr, 1993, 2004).

Patrick Harries is a good example of a scholar whose work has embodied all these paradigm shifts from political economy to texts and representation. Having mined the archives of the Swiss Mission in Lausanne for material on labour, language and ethnicity, he has more recently used his sources to write a study of the Swiss Missionary Society as a site of knowledge about Africa in an age before the popularisation of this knowledge though university education (1983, 1989, 2007).

Much of this new work was incorporated into Hastings’s magisterial The Church in Africa 1450-1950, which was a monument to how rich the scholarship had become (1994). But by this time, some of these new orthodoxies about African Christianisation had been challenged by the work of Jean and John Comaroff.

Throughout the 1980s anthropologists had become increasingly interested in conversion, the study of how one set of religious ideas comes to replace another. Two influential publications marked its growing importance. The first was a special issue of American Ethnologist (AE) (1987), the second a collection of essays edited by Wendy James and Douglas Johnson entitled Vernacular Christianity (1988). Much of this new work built upon existing research. Ranger had always engaged with and been read by anthropologists and was called upon to write the concluding comments on the AE special issue (1987). Tom Beidelman had long before highlighted the importance of ‘the ordinary activities of and organisation of . . . missionaries at the grassroots . . . their social
backgrounds, beliefs and day-to-day problems, economic attitudes or patriotism’ (1974: 236). And the influential anthropologist, Johannes Fabian, had been moving from the study of African religious movements to a reconsideration of the connections between religious and secular colonisation, particularly the discourse missionaries shared with secular agencies (1990). In the Comaroffs’ case, one can trace the genealogy of their interest in missions to a moment a good deal earlier than the 1980s, to the figure of Isaac Schapera. Although Schapera had no particular liking for missionaries, he had argued in the late 1920s for the need to include them (along with the native commissioner and labour recruiter) in studies of African populations in a South African context in which segregation was impossible within a common economy (1928). Four and a half decades later the Comaroffs studied under Schapera at the London School of Economics.

But whatever the source of their interest, when the Comaroffs published the first volume Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa (1991) their academic prominence and that of their institution, Chicago, marked the subject of the missionary encounter as one of the supreme anthropological topics. The extraordinary and unpredictable nature of cultural encounter, in which the actors found themselves out of place, presented situations where the struggles of human existence were amplified. And because of their penchant for proselytising literature and other types of literary production, Protestant missions provided an excellent window into such moments. If, as Hastings observed, Ajayi’s (1965) and Ayendele’s (1966) monographs defined the pioneering period of African Christian studies, the Comaroffs’ two volumes made the running in the 1990s (1991; 1997). In an important and widely cited article, Norman Etherington had observed

secular historians have reached a virtual consensus on the question of Christianity and colonialism. Phrased in different ways by different authors, it is that the missionaries, who aimed to replace African cultures with European ‘civilisation’ and who frequently allied themselves with colonial governments, nevertheless transmitted a religion which Africans turned to suit their own purposes: spiritual, economic and political. (Etherington, 1996: 209).

The ‘verdict’ is not in, the Comaroffs retorted the following year in the introduction to their second volume on the missionary encounter (1997: xiv). To some scholars their thesis appeared a sophisticated restatement of the connections between ‘Christianity, Capitalism and Civilisation’. By means of an extended case study on the London Mission Society in South Africa they argued that mission Christianity had an unspoken, symbolic relation to empire. Missionaries implanted
the state of colonialism before the colonial state. Through the use of western commodities, architecture, biomedicine, literacy and numeracy, missionaries inculcated cultural imbalances, which made colonialism possible. To illustrate their argument about the everyday and multifarious nature of missionary colonial authority, the Comaroffs deployed a range of evidence to construct a hegemonic master narrative of science and empire: new styles of dress, new agricultural equipment and architectural techniques, timetables, clocks, calendars and meteorological instruments. Doubtless some historians, particularly those still in political economy mode, were unnerved by this new cultural history, an embodied history which deconstructed the imperial record by using artefacts as texts. But others were unsettled by their traditional anthropological approach to religion. This approach gave ‘primary attention to rites rather than beliefs’ (Radcliffe Brown, 1952: 155) and sought to understand the rituals in terms of ‘the social relations’ involved within them (Gluckman, 1962: 14-15). Although the notion of rites was used very broadly, their work left little room for consideration of religious ideas and narratives, the indigenous agents who transmitted them and the converts who adopted them.

Not surprisingly, the Comaroffs’ work provoked a rich new vein of research from a new generation of scholars, which in turn refined understanding of the missionary encounter. Elizabeth Elbourne challenged their dialectical model of cultural engagement embodied in their notion of ‘the long conversation’ between missionaries and the Tswana. She advanced instead a decentred perspective, which made room for the mediating effects of frontiers peoples such as the Khoi, Kora and Griqua (2003). In a similar vein Paul Landau argued from a study of the Northern Tswana that long before the arrival of missionaries Africans began to create their own understandings of Christianity, gleaned from rumours, reports of returning migrants and the occasional passage of African itinerant evangelists (1995). The missionary frontier often ran ahead of empire (Barker, 2005). Moreover, Landau shows how, once Christianity had arrived in the Ngwato Kingdom of Northern Tswana, the new church, which transformed the social position of women and youth, was drawn into the politics of the monarchy.

The problem with the Comaroffs’ idea on colonisation of consciousness was that it was too stuck in a racial mode (Harries, 2001). White Christians colonised the minds of black pagans, in a state that belonged to white colonists. In reality, some Africans had already appropriated Christianity and some of the tools of a modernising state.

Other scholars brought new insights to the study of the missionary encounter by considering some of the mental transformations involved
in conversion. I myself focused on processes of demonisation, borrowing, gleaning and recoding amongst Shona Pentecostals and Catholics in Eastern Zimbabwe (Maxwell, 1999). Meyer showed how Ewe Christians in Ghana broke from their cultural heritage by appropriating the negative missionary stereotypes of their religion (Meyer, 1999). Thus both books demonstrated how African Christianity emerged out of a complex series of conjunctions and disjunctions, making connection with traditions of incorporation and destruction within African Christianity. Similarly, Peter Pels explored how Christianity was indigenised amongst the Walunguru of late colonial Tanganyika through being grafted onto traditional male initiation processes. He also showed how Dutch Catholic missionaries who worked amongst them were drawn into local systems of exchange and came to be understood as local ‘big men’ (Pels, 1999, see also Spear & Kimambo, 1999). This new body of work differed from that of the Comaroffs in that it gave more consideration to the religious content of mission in making new local and national identities.

Lamin Sanneh’s work does fit easily into the historical/anthropological tradition in which the debate over religious encounter has been framed. Nevertheless he was keen to challenge what he saw as the essentially ‘metropolitan’ viewpoint of the Comaroffs, which focused on the ‘transmitters’ of the message at the expense of the recipients. His approach was more theological, focusing on Scripture. While acknowledging the connections between mission and cultural imperialism, Sanneh argued that there were cultural characteristics in African societies into which Christianity needed to be inculcated. Using the notion of ‘translation’, he argued that in the same manner in which signs were found to transmit the words of English or French Bibles into African languages, so means were found to transmit the meaning of Christianity into different African cultures (Sanneh, 1993: 91). More recently, historians have considered the processes involved in the production of vernacular scriptures, illustrating the extent to which Africans were creatively involved in the translation process, placing their own ideas and images into the final texts (Lonsdale, 2002; Peterson, 2003). The value of all this work on translation was that it demonstrated how Africans came to possess the Christian faith through participating in the creation of their own vernacular scriptures.

J.D.Y. Peel’s study Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba was the most sophisticated of all the responses to the Comaroffs. By the nineteenth century the complex coastal kingdoms and polities of West Africa had a long tradition of trade and diplomacy with Europe. They also had a tradition of interaction with Islam. The Yoruba were not
so much crushed or colonised by a monolith of Christian doctrine and practice that they were forced to accept wholesale but rather they selected from it to enlarge and re-cast their existing world view, responding in particular to its modernising promises (2000). Before publishing Religious Encounter, Peel had engaged in a heated debate with the Comaroffs over the centrality of narrative, particularly the importance of indigenous or local narratives, which receive and re-pattern missionary signs and symbols (Peel, 1995; Comaroffs, 1997). It was a debate for which Peel was well prepared (1977), having reflected on the dynamics of West African traditional religions in a prior debate with Robin Horton (1971, 1975). Peel’s work represented an important continuity between what at first seem two very separate debates over conversion. In both, he asserted the salience of the local and particular over universal explanations.

In an acerbic bibliographical note in The Church in Africa, Hastings observed that despite its title Of Revelation and Revolution, volume 1 was ‘largely a study of the LMS among the Tswana’ (1994: 655). However, both volumes do have a general utility. In a review of Religious Encounter, Ranger argues that, while Peel demonstrates how to write an exemplary ‘religious and cultural history of a peculiar people’, the Comaroffs ‘mainly tell us about the missionaries, and their analysis of mission rhetoric and ideology seems applicable to many other places in Africa and even other continents’ (2001: 654). Nevertheless, although the Comaroffs provide great insight into modern missionary movements and their relation to post-Enlightenment modernity, Andrew Porter’s recent book Religion and Empire demonstrates that nineteenth-century missionaries were as diverse as their social sources and theologies. What is particularly challenging about work on the missionary encounter is the combination of a number of shifting cultural contexts. Ultimately these differing equations produce very different patterns of Christianisation.

The first missionaries to evangelise north-east Zimbabwe were mendicant Catholic monks. They eschewed the paraphernalia of modernity, travelling with only a stick and a Bible. They relied on the generosity of African villagers for their sustenance and preached from natural altars in rocky outcrops. Unsurprisingly, they were perceived in the same way as itinerant traditional African holy men (Maxwell, 1999). In Belgian Congo, Catholic missions, along with the state and big business, were part of the powerful triumvirate of colonising forces, and Fabian rightly emphasises their strong connection to the broader imperial project (1990).

When it comes to writing histories of the missionary encounter there is no alternative to the combination of focused ethnography and archival
research. However, it must be acknowledged that the case studies are too often a reflection of the institutional imbalances and prejudices of the historical profession. Much has been written on the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society because their excellent archives are well preserved and readily available in Birmingham and SOAS, London. Until recently, Pentecostals and Evangelicals have been singularly uninterested in their history, preferring to view their mission work as a great leap back into the age of the Apostles. Nevertheless, even the splendid archives of the American Assemblies of God, Springfield, Missouri, remain underused by Africanists. Too many accounts of this movement give the impression that it has recently arrived when in fact it has been operating in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1910s. Historians often write about their own Christian traditions and so established churches tend to get more than their fair share of coverage. Few historians seem to have made use of the excellent Brethren Archives in the John Rylands Library at Manchester University, and yet this broad movement made a significant impact upon Central Africa (Crawford, 1912).

While the missionary encounter is firmly on the agenda we still know comparatively little about certain types of missionary. The work on the African agency and African indigenisation of Christianity raises the question: what activities were missionaries engaged in if Africans were doing most of the proselytism? Missionaries built hospitals, schools and churches, and administrated but they also devoted a good deal of time to colonial science. Scholars have studied missionary periodicals for imperialist discourses. They have investigated how images of darkness, primitivism and savagery were a means of ‘othering’ used to create hierarchies of race and class. But missionary periodicals were also full of fascinating science: descriptions of African flora and fauna, and landscapes. Mission publications also contained collections of African oral traditions, proverbs, folklore and music. This more positive picture of missionary activity is also found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century geographical and anthropological journals where missionaries made important scientific contributions: research that stressed the picturesque and romantic as well as the stereotyped dark side of African life.

As indicated above we now know a fair amount about missionary linguistics. And the history of medical missions is beginning to be written. But there is much more work to do on other aspects of missionary science especially with regard to Africa. We are just beginning to grasp the extent to which missionary ethnography contributed to the development of anthropology as a discipline (Harries, 2005). Patrick Harries's
assessment of the missionary Henri Junod as a central figure of the Swiss Mission will be an enormously important statement on the missionary contribution to colonial science (2007). But there were other influential missionary ethnographers besides Junod. Some of them have been considered in the JRA: Peter Forster wrote an important essay on T. Cullen Young’s work on the Tumbuka (1986) and Steven Kaplan explored the work of Bruno Gutmann on the Chagga (1986). But alongside these high profile missionary ethnographers there were numerous others who wrote for missionary and medical journals and native affairs publications.

When it comes to critical biographies of missionary thinkers our impressions are somewhat skewed. We have biographies of nineteenth-century missionaries such as David Livingstone who helped pioneer empire but usually failed in their endeavours at conversion. And we have studies of liberals or opposition figures such as John Philip, Bishop Colenso, or Joseph Booth who were exceptional figures in their criticism of colonial policy. However, relatively little is known about twentieth-century missionaries whose work coincided with Africa’s Christianisation. These new missionaries came to Africa mostly in the post-1915 period. This encounter followed the age of Imperialism, a time after the period of ‘culture contact’. This post-1915 era was the age of high colonial activity and identity formation for Africans. In the 1920s missionary ethnographers were steadily marginalised by professional anthropology but they continued doing ethnography for colonial states, thereby influencing ethnic construction. We need to determine precisely what was the effect of their work on ethnicity and how it related to African nationalism. More research is needed on missionary collecting and photography and how these provided the material basis for anthropology as a discipline. And research has barely begun on missionaries as cartographers and botanists and how this colonial science related to the broader imperial enterprise.

The necessity of serious study of twentieth-century missionaries does not for one moment mean that we ignore all the important gains we have made in understanding processes involved in the African reception and localisation of Christianity. There is a danger in simply pushing the pendulum back in the opposite direction. There is also a danger of simplistically pitting missionaries against Africans as if they were polar opposites. It is important to weigh up missionary hegemony against African agency, but, as some of the best work on religious encounter has demonstrated, it is equally important to study how missionaries and Africans interacted to create new cultural forms and new types of
knowledge. There is still much room for studies of African Christian leaders, particularly those who lived through and helped the Church manage the transition to independence. We already have Ranger’s study of Samkange (first trailed as a *JRA* article 1993 [1996]), and more recently Mandy Goedhals’s study of James Calata (2003). Hastings wrote an important cameo of John Lester Mbembe (1975) and Elizabeth Isichei of Michael Tansi (1980). But there is room for many more studies of such figures. Recently Kevin Ward has suggested Fr. Theophilus Hamutumpangela, an Anglican priest committed to Namibian nationalism, as a suitable subject (2003). Debby Gaitskell (2000, 2004) has done groundbreaking work on ‘Biblewomen’—female exponents of evangelism, revival and Christian domesticity—in South Africa but there were many other remarkable Christian women. In Southern Rhodesia, for example, the names of Ruth Chinamano, Victoria Chitepo, Angela Kamba and Mrs Parirenyatwa occur frequently as leaders of church and community and as early nationalists (Hallencreutz, 1998). These female Christian ‘re-cyled elites’ deserve biographies every bit as much as higher profile husbands. At present we know more about individual AIC leaders such as Shembe, Masowe, Maranke, or contemporary African Pentecostals such as Otabil, Mumba, Guti and Duncan Williams than we do about Africans involved in the historic mission churches. Yet as Sundkler has reminded us it is to historic mission churches that the majority of Africans have chosen to adhere (1985: 74).

In his ‘Reflections’, Hastings rightly observed that Christian Independency was the fashionable subject of the 1960s and 1970s. He also noted that much of the research on Independency or so-called New Religious Movements (NERMS) lacked rigour, drew too heavily on phenomenology and was often, ahistorical, asociological and non-theological. Jean Comaro’s 1985 *Body of Power* drew a useful line under South African Zionism and Independency more generally. The book stood out in its comprehensiveness and sophistication. Despite its somewhat impenetrable introduction, Comaro’s historised account reconstructed Zionism’s origins in the mid-West of the United States and situated its ritual practice in the political economy of twentieth-century apartheid South Africa. No one else had managed to do all of these things, though Sundkler’s *Zulu Zion* pointed the way (1976). In retrospect a weakness of Jean Comaro’s path-breaking book was its inattention to the religious content of Tshidi Zionism. More recent anthropological work on independency combines the desire of the phenomenologists to represent African ideas and idioms with Comaro’s sense of context. Matthew Engelke’s forthcoming study on a branch of the Masowe
Church in Zimbabwe engages with the fundamental Christian question of how God becomes present. He demonstrates how this question is a problem of representation, of how words, objects and actions get defined as such and, in the process, become significant (2007). In a similar manner to the literary scholars Gunner and Hofmeyr, Engelke’s work explores the meaning and social power of African spirituality.

Since 1990 the new fashion has been Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and there is no doubt the JRA has been the dynamo for research on this exciting area. Given its vigorous approach to proselytism and its growing constituency, Pentecostalism has become difficult to ignore, and researchers find themselves writing about it even if they had never intended to. Work on Pentecostalism is far more nuanced than earlier work on New Religious Movements. Researchers have written about Pentecostalism in terms of political and cultural autonomy, civil society, fundamentalism, modernity and transnationalism. Two recent review articles by Meyer and Robbins in Annual Review of Anthropology in 2004 demonstrate the vitality of the debate. And, significantly, scholars well beyond the domain of the African religions have begun to engage with the literature on Pentecostalism. In an impressive but profoundly shocking essay entitled ‘Planet of Slums’, published in New Left Review, Mike Davis argues that ‘the twenty-first century’s surplus humanity’ might find emancipation in Pentecostalism. Marx, he suggests, may have got it wrong. Noting Pentecostalism’s capacity to remake the lives of the most marginal, Davis claims that it is becoming the ‘largest self-organised movement of urban poor on the planet’. ‘If God died in the cities of the industrial revolution, he has risen again in the post-industrial cities of the developing world.’ (2004: 28-32).

Paul Gifford has done more than any other scholar to highlight the significance of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Africa. One might not always agree with his provocative interpretations (Maxwell, 2000) but he has certainly spurred new research. Gifford’s recent book, Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy, is a rich and nuanced account of a spectrum of Pentecostal movements in Accra (2004). The book reflects the growing sophistication of work on this field and is a long way from his pioneering, but in retrospect rather reductive, Religious Right in Southern Africa (1991). What is particularly refreshing about the scholarship on African Pentecostalism is that African scholars have played a key role in shaping the paradigms. Matthews Ojo was perhaps the first to write on the subject in his London University doctoral dissertation (1986, 1988(a), (b)). Ogbu Kalu has had an important critical but measured input reflecting from the broader canvas of
African Christianity (e.g. 1998(a), (b), 2000). Other young scholars have followed, some publishing in this journal, often writing about movements that they had encountered on university campuses where they had studied or taught: Afe Adogame (2000) Azonzeh Ukah (2003), Rokopantswe Mate, Kingsley Larbi and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2005).

While it is important to understand this latest vital strand of African Christianity, the new academic fashion for Pentecostalism has encountered some of the same pitfalls as research on Christian independency. Much of the research is too self-referential and too ‘presentist’ in orientation. The recent literature depicts African Pentecostalism as urban, electronic, transnational and elitist, strongly associated with the values of neo-liberalism. There is truth in all of these characterisations but not enough research has been done on Pentecostalism in townships and rural locations where the majority of adherents lie, and where personal security rather than prosperity is the order of the day. Moreover, much of the recent work on Pentecostalism is ‘ahistorical’ in a number of senses. First, there has been scant research on missionary Pentecostalism, which has been active in Africa since the 1900s. Secondly, scholars have not paid heed to the developmental tendencies within Pentecostalism and the way in which it often begins as a sectarian, egalitarian movement based upon the poor but rapidly bureaucratises into denominations which embrace the world and advance their members through education and a puritan work ethic. Thirdly, while recent work does explore Pentecostalism’s engagement with neo-liberalism it has often ignored the transformative effects of colonial capitalism or African nationalism. Finally, recent work on African Pentecostalism often ignores its connections with Independency, or indeed makes no attempt to stand the movement in the broader sweep of Christian history. One only has to read David Hempton’s recent study on Methodism to grasp the extent to which Pentecostalism stands in its trajectory (2005). Scholars such as David Martin (1990) and Grant Wacker (2001) have already delineated Pentecostalism’s connections with nonconformity and radical evangelicalism, but far too few Africanists have taken notice of this work. If we take the lessons of Methodism seriously we must begin to think about what happens next. Has the Pentecostal ‘walk-out’ begun? So far, migration seems to be towards other charismatic churches but there is evidence that the children of Pentecostal leaders have begun to demystify their parents’ religion. This is one of the findings of my forthcoming book, African Gifts of the Spirit (2006(b)). The study also historicises African Pentecostalism by situating it within the broader story of Christianity in Africa and beyond, linking changes within the move-
ment to historical events from the Great Depression to decolonisation, and the emergence of neo-liberalism.

Two useful sets of recollections by anthropologists concerning their interactions with missionaries in the field (Stipe, 1980; van der Geest and Kirby, 1992) give the impression that many believed the missionary enterprise had all but ceased. The missionary movement is not over. It has simply taken on new forms. As missionaries from the historical mission churches turned themselves into teachers, medics, development workers, linguists and anthropologists and worked hard to develop inculcated versions of the gospel, they were replaced by a new generation of ‘non-scientific’ evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal missionaries. Some of these came from older Pentecostal denominations such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. But many missionaries came more recently, often from America. Most no longer do classical mission work on stations in the bush but stay in the plush suburbs of African cities, with their food imported in containers and their baseball matches beamed in via satellite TV. Often these missionaries have loose affiliations with large African denominations and teach in an associated Bible College, or run a para-church organisation, which serves a bigger Born-again community. Often they act as conduits of literature, the electronic media, and salaries for African pastors. It would be useful to have studies of how, for instance, an American Assemblies of God missionary conceptualises mission in postcolonial Africa. Indeed, ethnographies and social histories of Bible Schools within Africa and Missionary Institutes beyond the continent would be instructive given their contemporary influence.

Another type of mission, little studied so far, is that which emanates from Africa itself and extends into the West by means of the African diaspora and the African missionaries and pastors who follow in its wake. The JRA published a pioneering issue on religion in the diaspora in 2004 (34.4). Rijk van Dijk examined how Ghanaian Pentecostals relate to the state, civil society and civic culture in the Netherlands, and Afe Adogame illustrated how European states and their so-called experts continue to conflate aspects of African Christianity with witchcraft and voodoo into a meaningless pastiche which serves to exoticise and ‘other’ the latest wave of African migrants. These path-breaking essays were important but much of the basic work on Christianity and the diaspora remains to be done. There is a need to map and catalogue the spectrum of African Christianities in the West. Along with data on the type and location of churches, research is needed on numbers of adherents, missionaries and pastors. One of the major questions
for research concerns reverse missionisation. To what extent have diasporic churches managed to extend beyond their ethnic communities and make converts from within the host population? The existence of ethnically bound Ghanaian, Nigerian, Congolese and Zimbabwean Pentecostal communities in western cities suggests that there has not been much progress. But Paul Freston’s work on the Brazilian-derived Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, active in Latin America, Southern Africa and Europe, suggests that ‘Southern’ missionaries can inculturate their gospel message in new locations (2005). Of course, African immigrants do not just import Pentecostal churches—many come to the West as Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and Baptists. We need to understand their influence on music, liturgy, exorcism, healing and evangelism. Will African Christians help revive European churches struggling in the face of secularisation or will the second generation become as secular as the host community?

There is a danger that the recent interest in Pentecostalism will lead to a neglect of contemporary mission churches. Catholicism remains as vital as Born-again Christianity (Gifford, 1998; Maxwell, 2006). But all the historic mission churches remain important key players in African civil society. Not only do they do significant work in advocacy and human rights, they are often also the most efficient and trustworthy organisations within African states. We do not know enough about the churches’ work in areas of social justice, political education and the formation of a democratic political culture in contemporary Africa. Terence Ranger has written an admirable introductory survey of the literature for the long-awaited Evangelicals and Democracy in Africa volume (forthcoming). But we need more detailed case studies along the lines of Harri Englund’s nuanced and provocative work on the spectrum of rights discourses in Malawi (2000, 2006).

The historic churches have emerged as major channels of foreign aid for international donors who no longer trust African states. In Kenya alone 40 per cent of the health sector is in the hands of faith-based organisations. Elsewhere the historic churches are often the major bodies dispensing the US$15 billion President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Enormous amounts of money originating from the UN and Bill Gates also enter the African continent via Christian faith-based organisations. It remains to be seen what effect these new resource bases will have on ecclesiastical structures and mission priorities. It is not simply the allure of money that restructures church agendas but also the conditionalities that often accompany these new resources.
The AIDS pandemic raises a host of new questions. In Medieval Studies the Black Death used to be the 'great fact' that explained all social and economic change in its era. Today historians are much more cautious about its effects. Declining land values and rising labour costs did cause change. Social differentiation increased, especially gentrification. A new yeoman class emerged. But these trends were already present in medieval society and their effects were not immediate because the administrative centre held for a generation. The state and its allies initially managed to bring about effective social closure through wage restriction and sumptuary legislation. The state itself grew in influence providing new avenues for enrichment and mobility through public service (Rigby, 1995; Morgan, 2003). Whether a similar set of trajectories will work themselves out in Africa is a key question. Is the African state strong enough to effect social closure? Do Africans place such an emphasis on social promotion as is supposedly prevalent in the West? Certainly prosperity-seeking Pentecostals seek social advance but codes of honour and commensality remain strong in many places. There are other questions too. How have the effects of AIDS been understood in African religious communities? How have religious leaders guided communities where perhaps one in four has died in the pandemic? How have they innovated in religious thought and practice to come to terms with this latest pestilence? Have religious movements, which enforce strict moral codes and bodily discipline, increased in prominence? (Garner, 2000).

African moral sensibilities can also profoundly shape western Christianity. It is quite clear that the pace of reform on issues of gender and sexuality has been slowed within the Anglican Communion in order not to alienate its conservative African heartland. And African Anglican Bishops have extended their influence into the United States as they offer their Episcopal services to evangelical American dioceses unwilling to submit to the authority of their own liberal church leaders. We look forward to more in-depth exploration of these issues in Kevin Ward’s forthcoming history of global Anglicanism (2006).

Paul Gifford is again the scholar who has done the most to keep us aware of developments within the historic mission churches in the contemporary period. He has used his considerable connections with church councils and faith-based organisations to bring fresh material to bear on issues of democratisation, development and church-state relations more generally. His work has provided remarkable coverage across the continent with books and chapters on Zimbabwe, Liberia, Ghana, Zambia, Uganda and Cameroon. Once Gifford has finished his current
research on Kenya, the challenge will be to synthesise his many case studies. There is a great need to update Hastings’s *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975* (1979). As yet, there exists no general text that charts church-state relations over the last three decades.

The *JRA* has always attempted to encourage debate across the disciplines but there are still frustrations. Despite the above body of work from social historians and historically minded anthropologists, articles are still submitted asserting that Christianity is not authentically African, or that AICs are somehow more African than other churches. As Etherington observed a decade ago, the main culprits are often clergy and religious studies departments, particularly those situated in Africa where founding statements take a long time to shift and where libraries are starved of new literature (1996). Functionalist anthropology with its emphasis on the pristine and exotic remains influential by default as it is often the only literature that African scholars can access. Even in the West it is striking how many theological institutions wanting to consider the importance of ‘Culture’ persist in recommending Vincent Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered* (2001, [1978]). A chapter or two from Gray or Hastings would be far better.

A more difficult form of joined-up thinking is to situate Christianity within a dynamic and plural religious system, which remains attuned to change within ATR and Islam. Despite its erudition and flashes of insight, Elizabeth Isichei’s recent *The Religious Traditions of Africa* is disappointing in that ATR, Islam and Christianity are discussed separately and presented as somewhat hermetically sealed traditions (2004). The challenge is to chart shifts and interactions between a number of historicised religions. I stoically attempted this in *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe: A Social History of the Hwesa People* (1999), and in *Religion and Politics in Nigeria* (1994) Niels Kastfelt took a similar approach. There are also useful essays in James and Johnson’s *Vernacular Christianity*, particularly those discussing the gleaning and wash back of religious ideas between traditions in the East and Horn of Africa. Nevertheless there does seem to be more interaction between some of the sub-disciplines. There is now a very healthy interplay between Africanists and imperial historians. As Africanists grow increasingly interested in issues of representation and the so-called construction of colonial science, they look to the work of cultural historians on the nineteenth century to understand the origins of typologies, classifications and hierarchies. And imperial historians look to Africa and other parts of Empire for networks of diffusion of colonial knowledge. This breadth is seen not only in some of the best work on missionary encounter but also in the recent
Missions and Empire, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Etherington, 2005). While scholars of African Christianity spent the first three decades separating church from mission and mission from empire, they are now putting them back together in new and stimulating ways.

There was a danger that recent interest in globalisation and global Christianity would ignore or reverse the rich contextualised work on Christianity discussed above. But, mercifully, the concept of global Christianity has given way to World Christianities—the study of Christianity in terms of its regional and national particularities. It is also gratifying that, while they do not always get the emphasis correct, World Christianity experts do interact with Africanist literatures. Philip Jenkins’s recent book The New Christendom has caused quite a stir (2002). But his conclusions will not surprise those who are familiar with the work of Walls, Hastings, Ranger, Sanneh, Kalu, Gray and others. The secret of Jenkins’s book is that it is a concise and readable summary of their conclusions. Slowly, western-based researchers are coming to grasp that the rest of the world has not followed the West’s trajectory into secularisation. World Christianities is the title of the last (ninth) volume of The Cambridge History of Christianity. In this volume edited by Hugh McLeod (2006) and volume eight edited by Brian Stanley and Sheridan Gilley (2006), African Christianity gets the representation it deserves alongside Asian, European and Latin American Christianities.

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NOTES

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2. For useful summaries of this work see Ranger, 1985 & 1986.


4. For a review of work on missionary medicine see Etherington, 2005.

5. This point is well made by Etherington, 1996.


7. I have begun to address the issue of reverse missionisation in African Gifts, chapter 7.