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AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY – DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS

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Introduction

From Catholic and Anglican cathedrals to Pentecostal mega-churches in the cities; from rural congregations in small church buildings to groups gathering in the bush; from pastors in Western suits and bishops in the latest African fashion, to prophets and healers in white gowns; from preachers of the prosperity gospel to priests advocating liberation theology; from women proudly wearing their colourful church uniforms, to students meeting in inter-denominational fellowships: contemporary African Christianity is enormously vibrant and diverse.

The explosion of Christianity in Africa in recent decades is phenomenal, both in relative and absolute numbers. Clearly, Africa has made a major contribution to the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity to the global South taking place in the twentieth and early twenty-first century (Jenkins 2007). According to a recent report, in 1910 only 9 percent of Africa's population was Christian, which in 1970 had grown to 38.7 percent (143 million people) and by 2020 will have gone up to 49.3 percent (631 million people) (Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2013: 22). Different from a century ago, by far the majority of African Christians now live south of the Sahara, in the Western, Eastern, Central and Southern parts of the continent. Alongside this numerical growth there has been a proliferation of many different churches, movements and denominations. This increasing diversity has led some

scholars to speak of African Christianities in the plural, to emphasise that “different strands or traditions ... may not be compatible one to another” (Ukah 2007: 2). Hence the question of classifying African Christianity has become highly complicated, as the recent dynamics and new realities “disrupt previous classificatory approaches” (Kollman 2010a: 5).

Exploring these dynamics and emerging realities, this chapter is not concerned with the question of classification as such but rather uses broad categories such as African Independent, (neo-)Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, while at the same time highlighting the fluidity of these categories. The first part explores five major developments in African Christianity in recent decades. The second part discusses some trends and topical issues in contemporary African Christian contexts that are particularly relevant to Christianity’s public role: the relation to Islam, the response to the HIV epidemic, and the recent controversies over homosexuality. The focus is broadly on Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, leaving the northern and north-eastern parts of the continent—with such a distinct Christian history, represented by the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church—out of the discussion.

The Seeming Demise of African Initiated Churches

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the emergence of so-called African Independent, Indigenous or Initiated Churches (henceforth, AICs) was one of the most fascinating religious developments in Africa, contributing heavily both to the growth and indigenisation of Christianity outside the Western-initiated mission churches. An umbrella term for a great variety of churches that are political reactions to colonial and missionary Christianity and/or local appropriations of Christianity emphasising spiritual power, the AICs represent a variety of liturgies and rituals, more formalised or more charismatic forms of organisation, and different approaches to African traditional religious beliefs and practices (Meyer 2004). Their

historical and theological significance has been well-captured by Allan Anderson (2001: 5) with the term African Reformation, meaning that “the entire AIC movement in all its many forms throughout the continent ... represents such an indigenous Reformation and transformation of Christianity on a continental scale unprecedented in the history of the worldwide church”. Initially seen as a uniquely African phenomenon, there is a growing consensus that the AICs—often referred to as spiritual or prophet-healing churches—because of their general pneumatic and charismatic character can be considered as an indigenous African manifestation of global Pentecostal Christianity. They are phenomenologically related to, but not necessarily historically originating from, the Azusa Street Revival (1906) that, in a dominant, American-centred narrative, marks the beginning of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004a).

A fascinating form of religious innovation, the AICs became central in scholarship on African Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century. More recently, however, the focus of this field of studies has shifted to the emergence of more ‘modern’, internationally oriented neo-Pentecostal churches. Whether this shift in scholarly attention corresponds to an actual demise of AICs is not always clear. Indeed, some churches are losing members, while others have successfully rebranded themselves as neo-Pentecostal churches (Ukah 2008). At the same time, however, many AICs—with their use of symbolic objects, the performance of ritual ceremonies, the wearing of white robes and their emphasis on prophecy and healing—continue to represent a form of Christianity that is rather distinct from both neo-Pentecostal and mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, and they still attract a significant following especially in rural areas. Recent studies present examples of such vitality among spiritual churches in Zambia (Kirsch 2008) and Ghana (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004a), the Nazarite Church and Zionist Church in South Africa (Muller 2013; Cabrita 2014), the Masowe Apostles in

Zimbabwe (Engelke 2007; Mukonyora 2007), and the *Aladura* churches in West Africa (Crumbley 2008).

The Phenomenal Rise of Neo-Pentecostalism

Pentecostal Christianity in Africa is often considered to have come in three waves (Kalu 2008): the spiritual or prophet-healing churches discussed above (from the early twentieth century), the churches resulting from American Pentecostal denominations' missionary work (from the first half of the twentieth century), such as the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Faith Mission, and the wave of so-called Pentecostal-Charismatic or (the term I prefer here) neo-Pentecostal churches (from the 1970s–1980s) which has recently attracted so much scholarly attention. The boundaries between these categories are not clear-cut: some AICs have historical connections with American Pentecostalism and/or have recently reinvented themselves in a neo-Pentecostal style; furthermore, some 'classical' Pentecostal denominations such as the Zimbabwean Assemblies of God Africa (Maxwell 2006) gradually shifted from their traditional holiness teaching to the prosperity gospel, and their leaders have become part of the global Pentecostal jet set—characteristics generally associated with neo-Pentecostalism. However fluid the boundaries may be, neo-Pentecostal churches (henceforth, NPCs) as part of their politics of self-representation often draw a clear line between themselves and the earlier AICs which they label, and sometimes bluntly demonise, as 'syncretistic' (Kalu 2008: 75–82).

Neo-Pentecostalism itself is an umbrella term for a variety of churches that began to emerge in the 1970s–1980s in various parts of the continent, especially in the urban areas where they are highly visible in the public space with large church buildings (accommodating thousands if not ten thousands of people) and billboards advertising their message. The

popularity of the NPCs is a signal that “the appropriation of Christianity in Africa has entered a new phase” (Meyer 2004: 448). Often-mentioned characteristics are these churches’ global orientation and their advocating of a break with ‘African tradition’, their participation in transnational circuits, their strong missionary drive, the extensive use of modern media including radio, television and the internet, the practice of ‘spiritual warfare’, and a this-worldly orientation reflected in the emphasis on prosperity and success as divine blessings for believers. Speaking in tongues—often considered a key characteristic of Pentecostalism—is not always required in these churches. Their names often reflect their international or global aspirations, and indeed many churches have set up branches in other African countries and in the West. Hence Meyer (2004: 453) concludes that NPCs “are a global phenomenon that calls for comparison with similar churches in other parts of the world, most notably South America”. Noteworthy here is that some South American churches, such as the originally Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, recently have also spread to Africa (Freston 2005).

Much research on neo-Pentecostalism in Africa focuses on its socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions, exploring the links of these churches and their programme of born-again conversion to modernity, globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism (Meyer 1998; Gifford 2004; Adogame 2011); as well as their response to the crisis of the post-colonial nation-state (Van Dijk 1998; Marshall 2009), their contribution to development (Freeman 2012) and impact on gender relations (Soothill 2007; Van Klinken 2012). Detailed studies have been conducted on churches in various countries, such as Ghana (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004a), Nigeria (Ojo 2006; Ukah 2008) and Zimbabwe (Maxwell 2006), examining their fast growth and (inter)national proliferation over the past few decades, their expanding imperium with church-related businesses and universities, their media-presence and political affiliations, etcetera. These studies highlight the transnational networks and discourses of which these churches are part

but at the same time show how the NPCs present local appropriations of the Christian faith in their specific socio-cultural and political contexts. Thus, the neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel, initially considered by some scholars to be an American import to Africa, is now increasingly acknowledged to be “a response to socio-economic changes” and to resemble “traditional African cultural values” (Ojo 2006: 208). Likewise, in spite of the rhetorical break with ‘the past’, the popularity of NPCs is related to their spiritual worldview that very much resembles traditional ones: it does not ignore spiritual realities such as witchcraft and evil spirits but, through a discourse of demonisation and practices of deliverance, these realities are preserved and ‘the past’ in fact is kept alive (Meyer 1998). Precisely this complex dynamics of (dis)continuity and modernity, and of locality and globalisation, makes neo-Pentecostalism such a fascinating religious phenomenon in contemporary Africa.

Contextualisation and Pentecostalisation of the Mainline Churches

The rapid and continuous growth of neo-Pentecostal churches, and their high visibility in the public domain, may leave the impression that the so-called mainline churches are in demise. However, as Ogbu Kalu (2008: 5) points out, “The astonishing growth [of Pentecostalism] in Africa must be understood within the larger perspective that all religious forms are growing”. Likewise, Paul Kollman (2010b: 119, 140) draws attention to the fact that “Africa houses ever-larger groups of Christians belonging to mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church”, and hence he bemoans “the ongoing tendency [in scholarship] to overlook African Christian vitality in mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church”.

Though having their origins in Western missionary activities during the colonial period, it is no longer appropriate to refer to the African mainline churches as European or Western. Not only has their leadership during the twentieth century been indigenised and have they become increasingly independent from their ‘mother churches’ in the West. Inspired by

theologies of contextualisation, liberation and/or inculturation (Martey 1993) in many cases they have also actively sought to engage with local social and political contexts and cultural traditions, to 'Africanise' their liturgy and spirituality, and to address the needs of their communities. Moreover, members of these churches, whether first, second or later generations, often have shaped their African Christian identity in relation to and in dialogue with, on the one hand, the original missionary foundation of their church and the denominational tradition with which they identify, and on the other hand, their traditional religious heritage and cultural realities, demonstrating various levels of independence and creative agency (Ward 2005). Maybe not coincidentally, the relatively few recent studies on this grassroots process of appropriating Christianity, or 'inculturation' from below, in the mainline churches do focus on women (Hodgson 2005; Martin 2009).

In scholarly literature, sometimes an opposition is created between the process in Catholic and Protestant mission churches to come to terms with local traditions and develop a "genuinely African synthesis" of Christianity, and the rejection of tradition and culture by neo-Pentecostal churches (Meyer 1998: 317). There is indeed some truth in this, but it overlooks two key issues: first, the heavily anti-traditional stance of the NPCs is mainly rhetorical while in fact they tend to take traditional spiritual world-views more seriously than the mainline churches tend to do, and second, the popularity of Pentecostalism does not leave the mainline churches unaffected. A pentecostalisation of the mainline churches (Omenyo 2005) can be observed in various denominations in many African countries, and in fact this development can be considered as one key form of contextualisation in the mainline churches, often emerging from a grassroots level but increasingly recognised by and embedded in the official church structures. As much as this is a relatively recent development, it should be noted that throughout the twentieth century there have been revivalist movements within the

mainline churches, most famously the Bakolole movement in Anglican churches in East Africa (Ward and Wild-Wood 2012).

From the 1970s the emergence of neo-Pentecostalism also stimulated charismatic renewal in the mainline denominations, manifesting itself in various ways: from locally initiated prayer groups organising charismatic prayer and Bible study meetings to formally recognised renewal movements aiming at the charismatic and evangelistic renewal of their denomination, and from individual lay or ordained members offering healing and deliverance services to whole congregations who have adopted a charismatic fervour. These charismatic renewal groups affect and challenge the mainline churches in various areas (Omenyo 2005: 48–55): liturgy and church life, with more expressive and embodied types of worship; theology, with a greater emphasis on the spiritual power of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit; prayer and Bible reading, which becomes more central in church life; a growing sensitivity to African consciousness of the realities of evil spirits, with the introduction of healing and deliverance; and an increased emphasis on mission and evangelism as well as on social services, often through specialised lay ministries. It is difficult to assess the extent to which charismatic renewal groups reshape the faith practice, beliefs and structures in the mainline denominations such as the Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican and Lutheran churches, but it is clear that they often have a profound effect which of course gives rise to all kinds of tensions in these denominations (Koning 2003; Asamoah-Gyadu 2008). An early but historically significant example of such tensions is the controversy surrounding the healing ministry of then Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo in the Catholic Church in Zambia in the 1980s (Ter Haar 1992).

The above outlined developments have made it increasingly problematic to distinguish between the AICs, the NPCs and the mainline churches on the basis of who presents the most ‘authentic African’ or Westernised expression of Christianity—as far as such essentialising

terms are useful at all in contemporary contexts where trans-nationalism, post-coloniality and globalisation shape African cultural dynamics. As much as these developments reflect the processes of socio-cultural change African societies are going through, they also show how Christianity has become part of these societies and has become, if it not already was, an African religion (Bediako 1995).

The Changing Public Role of Christianity in Africa

The active involvement of churches in the public sphere in African societies is now widely acknowledged. That churches would come to play such a prominent social and political role, however, is not as self-evident as it may seem. As Paul Gifford points out, churches—specifically the mainline churches, except for in Southern Africa (Chitando 2008)—did not play a key role in Africa’s liberation from colonialism, and “[a]t independence it was commonly thought that Christianity in Africa would become ever less significant, because it was associated so closely with colonialism, and depended so strongly on its school systems, which would be taken over by the new African governments” (Gifford 1998: 21). It is evident from the above that this prediction has proved demonstrably false: not only has there been an enormous proliferation in the number of Christians, but also has Christianity over the past decades increasingly engaged the public sphere and interfered with politics, as a contra-example to the Western narrative of secularisation and the marginalisation and privatisation of religion.

The severe economic difficulties and political challenges faced by African states in the 1980s provided the mainline churches—who after independence often lost control of schools and hospitals—with an opportunity to return into the public space. They not only took up the provision of social services in sectors like education and health, but also became increasingly critical of authoritarian regimes and contributed to democratic change (Gifford 1995; Phiri

2001). In his study of Christianity's public role in four African countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda and Zambia), Gifford (1998: 311) concludes that the mainline churches in post-colonial African societies have taken up the role of "agents of modernisation", promoting—whether or not encouraged by Western donors—an agenda with priorities such as education, human rights, democracy, and the empowerment of women. This conclusion to a considerable extent still holds true: up to date these priorities are reflected in the work of mainline Christian bodies such as national Councils of Churches as well as Catholic Commissions for Justice and Peace all over Africa, though some of the priorities have changed (for example, because of the emergence of the HIV epidemic). At the same time, this social, public and political involvement is not only a success story as became most painfully clear in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (Longman 2011). More recently, the churches' commitment to human rights has shown to be ambivalent when it comes to issues of homosexuality. With a decade or two of a relatively stable and democratic political climate in many African countries it has become more difficult for the mainline churches to play a prominent public role. Furthermore, the growing popularity of Pentecostalism revealed that the priorities of the mainline churches as agents of modernisation and democracy did not necessarily reflect the concerns of their members. As recent debates about the prosperity gospel and its impact on socio-economic development show, Pentecostal churches themselves in a different way also act as "agents of modernisation", offering people an entry into the global neo-liberal capitalist economy (Freeman 2012).

Regarding Christianity's role in Africa's political restructuring in the 1980s–1990s, Gifford (1995: 5) contrasts the role of the mainline churches "that have challenged Africa's dictators", to what he calls "the newer evangelical and Pentecostal churches" that opposed political reforms and supported dictatorial regimes. This view has later been nuanced by Terence Ranger who observes a considerable overlap between the categories of mainline and

evangelical churches distinguished by Gifford, and who assesses the democratic potential of evangelical and charismatic Christian traditions in Africa slightly more positive. According to Ranger (2008: 22, 28), against the background of weak African states experienced by their citizens as “violent, bankrupt and immoral”, the newer churches contribute to the development of a democratic culture by encouraging individual agency and participation: thanks to their contribution, “the personal has become the political, and the moral has become the democratic”. In her book *Political Spiritualities*, Ruth Marshall offers a study of the political significance of (neo-)Pentecostal churches in Nigeria along similar lines. Pointing at the ambiguity of Pentecostalism in its relationship towards democracy, she critically observes that “Pentecostals have a contemporary *a priori* preference for the institutional forms of democratic political life” because they provide the legal conditions for the project of evangelism and conversion, while at the same time they are “opposed to the humanist assumptions of democracy” and fear the moral ‘lawlessness’ of the liberal state (Marshall 2009: 209).

Marshall’s analysis specifically focuses on how the Pentecostal programme of born-again conversion is concerned with moral subjectivation, that is, “the transformation and control of individual conduct and the creation of a particular type of moral subject” (Marshall 2009: 131). This is essential to their broader political project because the transformation of individuals is considered key to healing the land and building a ‘Christian nation’ (cf. Phiri 2008). As much as Pentecostalism is concerned with individuals, it presents a political theology in which the nation as a whole needs to be born-again and dedicated to Christ, and in which politics is considered a primary field of the cosmological battle between God and the Devil. Hence the discourse of spiritual warfare as a way to combat the influence of Satan in the life of the nation enters the public domain, for example in debates on Islam (Englund 2011) and homosexuality (Van Klinken 2013a). In this way, Pentecostalism does not just

manifest itself as a public religion in contemporary African societies but also reconceptualises the public sphere itself into a spiritual domain, challenging classic sociological distinctions such as between public and private, religion and the secular (Meyer 2011). Noteworthy here is also the way how Pentecostal churches skilfully make use of modern media such as TV, websites and social media (Hackett 1998; Asamoah-Gyadu 2004b). Of course this serves the purpose of effectively communicating their message on a highly competitive religious market to an increasingly international audience. However, the use of media also contributes to a delocalisation of messages and the formation of a transnational public, what reflects the imagined form of the faith community as a “Born-Again moral community with no definite ‘sense of place’” (Marshall 2009: 141).

The Globalisation of African Christianity

The use of modern media by Pentecostal churches presents one form of religious globalisation in African Christianity. Transnational migration presents another crucial one. Christians of African descent now live all over the world. Some of them have joined the established churches in their new home countries, but in many cases they established new religious communities of Africans in the diaspora (for an overview of this development, see Adogame 2013). Some of these new churches are independent, while others are associated with denominations in the countries of origin; some of them cater mainly or exclusively for African migrant communities while others—more or less successfully—seek to adopt a broader ethnic and cultural profile. Yet all of them present examples of the reconfiguration of religious practice as well as the negotiation of identity, which is intricately part of processes of migration and religious trans-nationalism.

Some originally African churches, particularly of the neo-Pentecostal type such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Winner’s Chapel International (both originating from

Nigeria), in recent years have actively embarked on international expansion in Europe and North America. Doing so, they often adopt a discourse of ‘reverse mission’ in which they are bringing back the Gospel to the ‘dark continents’ where they originally received it from. Whether reverse mission is mainly rhetorical or (also) effectively put in practice and bears fruit as yet is difficult to assess. However, as Afe Adogame (2013: 169–170) points out, “reverse mission as ‘rhetoric’ or ‘an evolving mission’ is of crucial religious, social, political, economic and missiological import for the West and world Christianity, as the non-Western world were hitherto at the receiving end of missions till the late twentieth century”. Clearly, the reversal, or at least the multi-directionality of mission is only possible because of the emergence of Africa as a crucial new centre of gravity in global Christianity, and it challenges the stereotype in which ‘the West’ is at the centre of the Christian world.

African Christian churches in the diaspora make a significant contribution to the vitality and diversification of Christianity in Europe and North America. Conceptualising their role, Adogame (2013) considers them as important sources of social, cultural and spiritual capital. This invites further analysis of the significance of these communities in the host contexts, both in a religious and secular sense. In the case of African migration to China and broader in Asia (which is a relatively recent development), African diaspora churches also contribute to the further spread and strengthening of Christianity in these regions.

Both forms of religious globalisation discussed above—through modern media as well as through migration—illustrate the increasingly transnational character of African Christianity. Moreover, they exemplify how African Christianity in the twenty-first century has become a crucial part of, and in fact reshapes world Christianity.

The first narrated encounter between Christians and Muslims on African soil, in the early seventh century in present-day Ethiopia, may have been “peaceful in nature” (Frederiks 2010: 263), but what follows is a history that at certain times and places was characterised by harmony but at many others by conflict and competition. Criticising the prevailing assumption, especially in theological scholarship, “that the ‘normal’ state of affairs is one of peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between Muslims and Christians”, Benjamin Soares (2006: 3) states that “interactions between Muslims and Christians, in Africa and elsewhere, cannot be understood as simply coexisting at a point on a one-dimensional continuum that runs from coexistence to conflict”. Acknowledging the complexity and dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa, recent scholarship offers detailed case studies of how the precarious relationships between adherents of Christianity and Islam—the two largest religious traditions in Africa—are in a state of continuous change, embedded as they are in wider processes of religious transformation, socio-cultural change, economic dynamics, and political transitions.

This integrated analytical approach provides critical understanding, for example, of the situation in Nigeria—the most populous African country with an equal distribution of Christians and Muslims and with a recent history of increasing levels of violent conflict between adherents of both groups, which therefore makes “an auspicious case study for understanding the cultural, social, theological, economic, and political issues that are involved in Christian-Muslim encounters ... [and] an important test case for evolving patterns of Christian-Muslim relations” (Akinade 2013: 2–3; see also Iwuchukwu 2013). In the Nigerian context, the exponential growth of Christianity and Islam in recent decades—especially Pentecostal strands of Christianity and reformist movements in Islam—, in the wider context of colonial history, a fragile post-colonial state, growing socio-economic inequalities, and a democratisation of the public space, has given rise to a politicisation of religion and an

aggravation of competitive tendencies between Christians and Muslims. The introduction of Shari'a in northern Nigerian states starting from 1999 has been a catalyst of long-existing tensions, as it fuelled the fear of the Islamisation of Nigeria among Christians and posed a major challenge to the Pentecostal political imagination of Nigeria as a Christian nation and the subsequent project of national conversion (Ojo 2007; Ukah 2013). Indeed, the emergence of Pentecostalism is generally considered as one important religious factor contributing to growing tensions and contestations over public space between Christians and Muslims, not only in Nigeria but also in countries like Cameroon (Drønen 2013), Kenya (Mwakimako 2007) and Malawi (Englund 2011). Sometimes, such as in Drønen's study of rather small Pentecostal churches in the predominantly Muslim northern part of Cameroon, Pentecostals subtly negotiate rather than openly challenge Islamic hegemony, which however does not mean they are less concerned with the quest for spatial influence as reflected in the rhetoric of "taking possession of this town" (Drønen 2013: 194).

As much as contemporary relations between Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa often are characterised by tensions and conflicts, recent decades have also demonstrated steps towards greater mutual understanding, dialogue and cooperation. From Vatican Council II and its important document *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church has made inter-religious dialogue one of its priorities, establishing the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue that for almost twenty years was led by the Nigerian cardinal, Francis Arinze (1984–2002). As Laurenti Magesa (2007) points out, the significant change in official Church teaching towards Islam is not necessarily reflected among the faithful at a grassroots level, yet in various countries Catholic bishops have sought to foster good relationships with Muslim communities and have publicly addressed the fears and conflicts in Christian-Muslim relationships. A similar development can be observed among mainline Protestant churches in Africa that, often with the support of international partners or global Christian bodies such as the World

Council of Churches, have initiated projects for inter-religious understanding and co-operation. An example is the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) that is active in various West and East African countries, initiating peace-building initiatives but also joined responses to HIV and AIDS. Thus, in addition to the “concern over the increase in polarisation and polemics” and “debate on the implementation of Shari’a”, “joint social action programmes” has been considered the third major trend in Christian-Muslim relations in sub-Saharan Africa (Frederiks 2010), though their impact is difficult to assess. How the relations between Christians and Muslims in Africa will further develop largely depends on global religious dynamics, specifically in Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam, as well as on socio-economic and political developments in African contexts.

Churches and HIV and AIDS

The Christian churches in Africa “have a pandemic in their midst”, meaning that they are far from unaffected by the realities of HIV and AIDS that since the 1980s have had such a devastating impact on African societies (Bongmba 2007: ix). Although disease is certainly not new in Africa, the HIV epidemic has posed profound challenges to churches because of the large-scale suffering and death especially among the young adult population, the subsequent effects on families and communities, the pastoral and theological questions this raises, and not at least because of HIV being a sexually transmitted disease. Frederick Klaitz’ (2010) detailed ethnographic account of a small Apostolic congregation in the context of Botswana’s HIV epidemic gives insight in how a local Christian church understands the disease and deals with the challenges of illness and death among its members and in the community, and seeks to sustain love among survivors as a means of consolation and healing. As the epidemic is now over thirty years old, one would expect more such ethnographic studies of Christian

communities facing the challenges posed by HIV and AIDS as well as historical accounts on African churches and their various responses to the disease. There is, however, a significant body of literature from a theological perspective, with African theologians critically addressing the culture of silence and stigma surrounding AIDS in the Church. They call upon the Church to provide a more adequate response to the epidemic: breaking the taboos and talking about the disease and its causes, being inclusive of people living with HIV, providing care to those affected by the disease, engaging in advocacy work, developing pastoral theologies, and speaking prophetically about the socio-economic structures underlying the epidemic (Chitando 2007; Dube 2008).

A major theme in this theological scholarship is the intersection of HIV and gender, with African women theologians criticising the Church for reinforcing gender inequalities that turn out to be detrimental to women in the context of the epidemic and calling for change in gender relations and conceptions of masculinity (Phiri et al. 2003; Chitando and Chirongoma 2012). Recent empirical research shows that the HIV epidemic indeed has been a catalyst for churches to address issues of gender, empower women and transform masculinities, although the underlying politics of gender often appears to be ambivalent—negotiating between cultural and religious patriarchal norms and modern conceptions of gender equality (Van Klinken 2013b).

In her systematic analysis of churches' role in AIDS politics in various African countries, Amy Patterson (2011: 177–178) argues that the response of churches to the epidemic has been ambiguous because of “the dynamic nature of church actions, the complicated factors that both strengthen and weak church AIDS mobilisation, and the disunity that is displayed at times among churches over proposed AIDS responses”. She distinguishes four key biblical frames that guide churches' stances towards the HIV epidemic: (1) AIDS as God's punishment for sin; (2) biblical rules for living a moral life; (3) God's power to heal disease;

and (4) Jesus Christ's love and compassion for all people (Patterson 2011: 66). These different frames motivate different actions: either no action at all but silence on the epidemic, or a narrow focus on sexual morality, that is, abstinence before and faithfulness in marriage as HIV prevention message, or efforts of faith healing of the disease and/or deliverance of its causes, or initiatives of home-based care and other comprehensive efforts to respond to the challenges of HIV and AIDS. Importantly, the respective responses cannot one-to-one be associated with a specific category of churches: Pentecostal churches, for example, often preach 'sexual purity', and some Pentecostal pastors engage in healing and deliverance activities as a response to the disease, but several Pentecostal leaders have more recently developed a holistic understanding of the epidemic and advocate a multi-sectoral approach in collaboration with national governments and NGOs. On the other hand, the mainline churches, especially the Catholic Church, were in the forefront of developing home-based care programmes for people living with HIV and AIDS, but their controversial stance towards condom use—though at a grassroots level often more flexible than in official discourse—does also reflect and contribute to a moralisation of the epidemic. In addition to the above mentioned biblical themes, Patterson (2011) points out that the scope and timing of responses to the epidemic are also shaped by church structures, the participation in national and global coalitions and the related access to funding, as well as by visionary pastoral leadership. Clearly, the ever-changing realities of HIV and AIDS provide a rich empirical lens to study the significance of Christianity in Africa through various angles: the socio-public role of churches in communities affected by the disease in relation to prevention, care and treatment; the collaboration and negotiation between churches, governments and NGOs in (inter)national AIDS politics; and the emergence of new, or revised, Christian practices, meanings and knowledge regarding sexuality, intimacy and gender, human suffering, care and hope, disease and healing, life and death, in local communities of faith.

Controversies over Homosexuality

Perhaps the most recent trend is that African Christianity in the twenty-first century has increasingly become the site of controversies over issues of homosexuality and sexual diversity more broadly. While in most of the twentieth century homosexuality was hardly a major issue for Christian churches or political leaders anywhere in Africa, in the past one or two decades this has changed dramatically. In many different African countries, from Nigeria to Zimbabwe and from Uganda to Cameroon, church leaders have publicly spoken out against the acceptance of homosexuality and the recognition of 'gay rights', Christian politicians have proposed anti-homosexuality legislation, and the popular opinion among the general public is that homosexuality is both 'un-African' and 'un-Christian'. Biblical texts and arguments dominate the societal and political debates, illustrating that in contemporary Africa the Bible has become "a site of struggle" where "the debate on homosexuality is being fought" (Gunda 2010: 22).

As much as the politicisation of homosexuality in Africa is a recent phenomenon, it is important to remember its historical background in the sexual politics of missionary Christianity and colonialism. In the case of former British colonies, the penal code criminalising same-sex practices is a residue of the colonial period and reflects the values of nineteenth century Victorian Christianity—even though that clause is now ironically defended as protecting 'African values'. It is only recently, however, that the legal prohibition of homosexuality has been actualised, and that efforts are made to broaden its scope and increase the penalties for offences. Explaining the suddenly emerging concern with homosexuality in African Christian circles, Kevin Ward (2006) identifies two series of events that were crucial. First, after the end of Apartheid in 1994, South Africa adopted a new constitution that explicitly outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, which finally lead to the

legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2006. Prominent Christian leaders, including the high-profile Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, supported the idea to acknowledge and safeguard the human rights of gay and lesbian people in the new 'rainbow nation'. In response to these progressive moves, political and religious leaders in other African countries distanced themselves from South Africa, making homosexuality a public issue. In South Africa itself there was also a lot of resistance, as became clear in the protests against the legalisation of same-sex marriage that were supported, if not mobilised, by popular Christian voices. Second, on the agenda of the 1998 Lambeth conference—the decennial meeting of all Anglican bishops—were two issues that turned out to be highly divisive: the ordination of clergy in same-sex relationships and the blessing of same-sex partnerships. A number of African bishops, such as Peter Akinola of Nigeria, became the leading voices effectively protesting against the in their opinion 'un-biblical' stances of churches in 'the West', and in the process they made homosexuality a key political issue also in their own churches and societies. The crisis in the global Anglican Communion has been interpreted as a reflection of the new realities in world Christianity, with a conservative global South that now outnumbers and overrules liberal churches in North America and western Europe (Jenkins 2007: 234–270). This interpretation ignores some of the complexity, such as the distinct position of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and the emergence of both conservative and liberal South-West alliances, but undeniably the current controversy in the Anglican Communion illustrates some crucial dynamics in contemporary global Christianity.

In addition to these two factors, the recent concern with homosexuality in African Christian circles must also be understood in relation to some of the developments discussed above, particularly the competition between Christianity and Islam in Africa and the rise of Pentecostalism. It is easy to imagine how African Christian leaders, especially in countries like Nigeria, who are critically aware of Muslim proselytising strategies, feel the need to

speak out vociferously against homosexuality, to prevent their Christianity from being associated with a ‘morally degraded West’. Pentecostalism has further contributed to public debates over homosexuality, the emergence of popular homophobia and the introduction of new anti-homosexuality legislation in various African countries. Not only does it put a great emphasis on issues of sexual morality as part of its programme of born-again conversion, and does it reject homosexuality out of a literalist reading of scripture. More importantly, it presents a political theology in which global politics of homosexuality and ‘gay rights’ are framed in a dualist scheme of good versus evil, God versus the Devil, and in which the Christian character of the nation needs to be protected against international pressures imagined as satanic forces (Van Klinken 2013a). Making homosexuality a major issue in public debate, Pentecostals also make it difficult for other churches to take a more nuanced position as this could easily be used against them on a highly competitive religious market. Yet there are several courageous Christian leaders in Africa—most famously Desmond Tutu in South Africa, but also Bishop Christopher Senyonjo from Uganda, and pastors from various denominational backgrounds who provide pastoral support to LGBTI people and address homophobia from a Christian perspective. This illustrates, again, the different theological strands and trajectories in African Christianity and how these impact on the ways in which Christianity engages with public and socio-political issues.

Conclusion

Contrary to general expectations at the time of transition from colonialism to independence, Christianity has established a strong foothold in post-colonial African societies. Far from being a ‘colonial leftover’, through complex processes of religious change that are intricately connected to broader cultural and socio-economic dynamics, Christianity has become an African religion, in the sense that in its various manifestations it speaks to the needs, concerns

and aspirations of many people in Africa (and the African diaspora) regardless of their age, class, education and economic status. Taking into account the plurality and mutability of African Christianities, we are only at the beginning of understanding the complex connection of different forms of Christian faith to African indigenous religions and cosmologies as well as to current African trans-nationalities and processes of globalisation.

It is clear, however, that Christianity's enormous capability of adjusting itself to cultural flows, social dynamics and ever-changing political circumstances is the basis of its popularity in Africa, while it is also increasingly clear that Christianity has actually become a major factor mediating and shaping these flows and dynamics in twenty-first century African societies. Referring to the dramatic expansion of Christianity in Africa, Andrew Walls (2002: 119) argues that "African Christianity must be seen as a major component of contemporary representative Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration of its character. That is, we may need to look at Africa today in order to understand Christianity itself". From this perspective, it is particularly important to see how Christianity, especially in its Pentecostal version, radically presents itself as a public and highly political religion in Africa, resulting in clashes both with Islam and with secular regimes of knowledge, power and politics. A significant part of the future of Christianity (Martin 2011), with paths to an alternative modernity not modelled after Western narratives of secularisation, is written in Africa, and it is being written right now.

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