

Challenges for writing Church History in Africa in a global age: A Zambian perspective¹

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the six big challenges which should be taken into consideration in addressing the issue of doing and writing church history in Africa. The thesis of the article is that these challenges are not taken into sufficient consideration by the outside world as from a Third World perspective. Experts in the field of writing church history, in general, have stated and clearly articulated that no history is ever easy to write. What makes it particularly difficult to write church history in Africa, are the different perspectives on the establishment of the church on our continent. What we have, are pieces of information that have been distorted by prejudice and bias as each generation came to be. Addressing these challenges will, however, help us to overcome certain barriers in our study of African church history.

There are numerous current challenges in doing and writing church history. These range from: the need for theological consideration; ecclesiological awareness; ecumenical openness; missiological sharpness; an indigenous realization; and scientific upliftment. A better understanding of these challenges could be of great help to scholars, church leaders and policy makers in the African context, in an era of globalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Church history in Africa is a subject that should never be overlooked, because it provides great insight into the events which could contribute to our contemporary understanding of the church's operation in general, and the growth, for instance, of evangelicalism as a pervasive force on this continent. However, I can point out quickly that there are enormous challenges, which, once not taken into consideration, could pose great difficulties to the doing and writing of church history in Africa. Scholars in the discipline of church history have battled for a long time, and are still

battling to put together the pieces of church history in Africa. The issue of objectivity has, for instance, been risen because church history in Africa often carries a western interpretation, due to the understanding that it is those who came to the so-called dark continent who began the history of the church in Africa. While this can not be refuted as a fact, one wonders whether objectivity can be maintained in such an approach.

The purpose of this article is therefore to discuss the six big challenges which should be taken into consideration in addressing the issue of doing and writing church history in Africa. My thesis is that they are not taken into consideration enough by the outside world as from a Third World perspective. Experts in the field of writing church history, in general, have stated and have clearly articulated that no history is ever easy to write. What makes it particularly difficult to write church history in Africa are the different perspectives on the establishment of the church on our continent. What we have are pieces of information that have been distorted by prejudice and bias as each generation came to be. Addressing these challenges will, however, help us to overcome certain barriers in our study of African church history. Addressing these challenges will also help us to keep a balanced view of looking at our continent's exposure to the Lord's gospel which brought the church in Africa into being.

2 CHALLENGES FOR WRITING CHURCH HISTORY IN AFRICA

2.1 Theological challenge

Church history's authenticity of lies in its theological interpretation. In writing church history in Africa, the historian should take this challenge very seriously, because it is in its theology that the church history in Africa finds its meaning. Various books have been written on the coming of the church to Africa. These books are written by people who have little understanding of the theological implications of the church's inauguration on African soil. The end result of such a church history has led to a wrong focus in the work of the church in Africa. A number of free lance African writers have also given their own interpretation of church history in Africa. They have concentrated more on the humanistic work of the missionaries, rather than taking the whole purpose of the church in Africa into consideration.

It is therefore suggested that theology should be part and parcel of the research in the doing and writing of church history in Africa. We have

heard a great deal from the laity on the history of the church in Africa, but the time has come to give a theological meaning to such findings and writings. It will be a great tragedy to ignore the theological input in doing church history in Africa. In addition to this, the validity of our writing of church history is determined by the contribution it made to the spreading of the Gospel on the continent. This is where the theological challenge comes in. The basis should be theological research into what occurred during the coming of missionaries to our continent. We should start with our ancestors' "theology" of God and creation, and we should go further to detect their acceptance of the gospel. What were the hinderances? How did they respond? How did they change their way of living according to the new demands made by the Gospel on their lives? It is from this that we can discern a theology which will eventually become the foundation of our writing and doing church history in Africa.

The question of how the church has managed to exist in Africa since her inauguration on the continent, is to be found in the theological meaning she has brought. Without a proper theological understanding, the writing of church history in Africa will still remain more of a dream than a reality.

2.2 Ecclesiological challenge

The church has to interpret itself in Africa. It seems that the church has often accepted the way it has been defined by scholars from other disciplines. The writing of church history in Africa has become very difficult because of this, due to the fact that the church has borrowed the understanding of its work from sources that have, sometimes, little regard for its existence.

The ecclesiological challenge is one of the major current challenges of writing church history in Africa. The historian will have to find out about the meaning of the church in Africa. Has the coming of the church among the African people brought any change in the economic, social, cultural and religious life of the people? If it has, then the historian is justified to say that the church has the right to continue with its influence among the people. And if the church has failed to bring change then it is more expedient to state that the church has indeed failed in this respect.

In our view the writing of the history of the church in Africa faces this challenge of interpreting the meaning of the church and its existence in Africa. It is like taking some reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the church in Africa.

The ecclesiological challenge also looks at the growth of independent churches in our African context. The struggle to become more indigenous

calls for great reflection on the part of the historian if he had to come up with a balanced view of church history in Africa. Facts on how western ideologies have contributed to a more “contextualized church” in Africa should not be ruled out in the writing of history.

The threat the church has posed to the traditional arrangement of our African villages should be part of the ecclesiological challenges. Again prejudice on the part of the historian should be done away with if an holistic and balanced perspective of the work of the church were to find its meaning in the history of the church in Africa.

The co-existence of church and society as well as the different churches’ cultural impact are interesting issues to be taken into consideration as one tries to evaluate the ecclesiological challenge of writing church history in Africa. How has the church for instance managed to accommodate the different ideologies and traditional roots of African people? The fact that the diversity has continued to be tolerated is another issue to be addressed in the history of the church in Africa.

2.3 Ecumenical challenge

For a number of years, the church in Africa has operated on a denominational level. If we are to be engaged in writing the history of the church in Africa, we are bound to meet the current challenge of ecumenism. The world has put a lot of challenges and demands on the church. This can be seen in the political, social and economic spheres. And if the church is to be effective in its prophetic voice, then something should be done in the area of unity. In order for this to happen, the church has to define itself from an ecumenical point of view. We cannot run away from this challenge because it affects us greatly in our present situation in Africa.

The following definition clearly underlines the need for an ecumenical focus on the church in Africa: “Thus, one could define an ecumenical church history as the history of the church of Jesus Christ, centred on the word, but also as a dynamic factor in interaction with other structures and forms of life instead of an isolated entity”².

The challenge of writing evangelical church history in Africa should be taken from the ecumenical point of view, so as to bring the whole church within the whole society of Africa into focus. It is a challenge because so many denominations are still maintaining their *status quo* in the society. The ecumenical focus of writing church history will function as a catalyst to addressing the issues of the church in Africa which have been hidden in the archives of retrogression. Churches should downplay their

denominational barriers and come together to meet the present day challenges of society.

The ecumenical focus will help the church overcome the “political nationalism, religious missionary thinking and denominational self-interest ...”³. We believe strongly that the history of the church in Africa will be incomplete without focusing on the ecumenical sphere or levels of communication. Lack of an ecumenical focus will also lead to a lack of objectivity in the history of the church in Africa.

We wish to echo the statements of Ogbu Kalu as he writes: “The ecumenical perspective in church history, therefore, reconstruct, from the grass roots, the experiences of men and women in community and the meaning of Christ in their midst. It assumes that as the Spirit of God broods over the whole inhabited earth, men increasingly recognise the divine presence and their lives are changed in the encounter”⁴.

The ecumenical focus of the church on its own history of struggles in Africa still stands as one of the greatest challenges in writing church history on our continent. It is time that denominations look beyond their liturgies and doctrinal standards, and join hands in writing the church’s perspectives on issues relating to the economy, social and religious life of the African church. This challenge will help break down the self-interests of denominations, and bring them to concentrate on the global mission of the church of our Lord.

History would indeed be fragmented without the fulfilment of the prayer of the Head of the church, Jesus Christ, “that all of them may be one, further, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21 NIV).

2.4 Indigenizing challenge

The question, the historian who intends writing the history of the church in Africa, should not avoid asking is, whether it is possible to write the history of the church in Africa without taking ideas from European history? This brings us to another challenge of writing the history of the church in Africa, and that is the subjugation of African history to European history. As Ogbu Kalu points out: “The dilemma is that African history cannot be written without the European fact which either disrupted her developmental faith or ensured her underdevelopment. This fact means that a combination of the traditional African history and a history of the European factor must be used in interpretation”⁵.

The challenge remains trying to write church history in Africa from the sources available without necessarily relying only upon the interpretation

from the European context. To do this, we have to consider what the missionaries in Africa have put down on record. We have to try and evaluate objectively what has been researched from the European perspective of doing missions, and translate it to the way we do missions in Africa.

This challenge poses a great problem for church history in Africa because from ages past European history, both secular and religious, has subjugated African history. African Christian scholars should help by offering a new interpretation of our church history, which is indeed indigenized. This might take long, but once it has materialised, more and more people will offer a balanced interpretation of the history of the church in Africa. There are many activities that have taken place in the church in Africa. These activities are worthy building-blocks creating a new history of the church in Africa. The involvement of the church in the political and economic struggles is sufficient in itself, as could be used as an important focus of the church in Africa. We do not need to rely on importing foreign ideas for doing church history, because we have so many resources right here in Africa. We believe strongly that the challenge of delinking African church history from the over-emphasis of western culture will help us develop a balanced and holistic church history in Africa. It is until we come up with such a reinterpretation of our history, that our church history in Africa will remain subjugated to European history and cultural understanding. African history must indeed be the history of African peoples and not only the history of the invaders.

2.5 Missiological challenge

The richness of church history in Africa can be found in its mission work. The church was born as a mission church in Africa and has continued to be so inspite of various theological winds that have blown across the nations. In writing a well balanced church history in Africa, the historian has to face this great challenge of defining the mission focus of the church in Africa.

The reduction of mission work to merely being the preaching of the Word has caused the church to be separated from the real issues of society. When the missionary dimension of the church is on shaky grounds, its history will also be in doubt. One cannot talk about the church without bringing in the aspect of missions. J J Kritzinger rightly states : "mission involves the whole life of the church. Not everything the church does has the intention of being mission but by and large everything the church does, has (or should have) a missionary dimension"⁶.

To write church history in Africa the missionary dimension of the church stands out as a great challenge. The mission of the church when it first came to Africa through the missionaries has to be critically compared with the present day church. However, it becomes difficult to compare past mission work when the missionaries built schools and hospitals for the people, and the present church which is enjoying those already established facilities. The problem is that such facilities have been laid to waste by certain churches, because the aspect of a missionary oriented church seems to have been lost on the way. It is for this very reason that the church will find it difficult to write its history in Africa, because the original intent to do mission work among the people has sometimes been lost on the way. It is like history repeating itself in Africa, where the church seems to be slowly gathering courage to go back to its original intent of doing holistic mission work among the people.

The pressure of political changes and structural adjustment programmes followed by a number of nations in Africa are causing large scale unemployment and poverty among the people; besides this, many other problems are forcing the church to redefine its mission statements. This also poses a challenge in the course of writing church history in Africa.

Our suggestion would be that the church should look at its mission statements again and re-address them with the view of striking a balance in its mission work in Africa. Without this, the church will not be able to produce a well balanced history, which will be accepted on an academic level.

2.6 The scientific research challenge

One of the greatest challenges in writing church history in Africa lies in the area of scientific research methods. While church historians in the First World can dig into their archives for the collection of documents and information on the history of the church in their context, our archives are often not consistent in their recordings. The custodians of oral tradition in Africa have gone into their graves with information which cannot be retrieved for our research in recording church history in Africa.

Some of our great leaders in the history of the church in Africa have gone without notice, because they have not left much in the form of documentation and diaries. It is true that most of the great missionaries from the West have been recorded in the history of the church as great pioneers, but needless to say, many of those who interpreted and organized evangelistic meetings among the indigenous people were indigenous themselves. With-

out well balanced scientific research in the writing of the history of the church in Africa, some form of objectivity will never be attained. Oral tradition is providing us with information which is often not scientifically tested, thus being a major stumbling block. Quite often our grandfathers and grandmothers have told us how the white missionaries from the European countries came and settled among them to teach them the good news. It is often very difficult for a grandfather or a grandmother to account for a systematic and orderly type of information. They may easily remember the names of the missionaries (though pronounced in vernacular ways) but dates and years have gone with the passing of time. Certain information is connected to events of great importance, but it will often take scientific methods to try and trace the exact dates, months and years of the information given.

The question remaining for us to answer as we do and write church history in Africa is, whether we could rely on the oral sources of information and continue estimating the details of the events on African church history in Africa? Of course there isn't an easy answer to the question, but the same question helps us to evaluate our methods critically of writing church history in Africa.

My suggestion would be to try and get scientifically closer to the sources of our information so as to ascertain the validity of our information. There are a number of ways of doing this: we still have some of the "custodians" of our African history and traditions in the villages today, especially in those areas of mission work among the African people. We can sit down with these great "archives" of history and try to extract the information on the work of the church among them. Once the information is extracted in various areas of mission settlement, the historian should try to connect such information with the great events of the time (with the help of the owners of this information). This will indeed greatly stimulate scientific research for the writing of church history in Africa.

3 CONCLUSION

The current challenges for doing and writing church history in a multi-cultural context under the Southern Cross are indeed quite numerous, as stated in this article. These range from the need for theological consideration, ecclesiological awareness, ecumenical openness, missiological sharpness, an indigenous realization and scientific upliftment⁷. A better understanding of these challenges would be of great help to scholars, church leaders and policy-makers, in the African context in an era of globalisation.

In addition to all these, there are also some major paradigm shifts in the political agenda of Africa. Africa has moved from colonial to post-colonial independent states, which are mostly under one party governments. In the past five years there has been a great awakening in the democratic arena. African nations are witnessing multi-party systems almost for the first time. In many ways Africa stands on the verge of a new Renaissance. This again poses great challenges to the writing of history on this continent. While some nations are accepting these changes, others are involved in civil wars, causing the writing of history to become a very difficult task to undertake.

Once some or most of these challenges are taken into serious consideration, within a challenging context like that of Africa, we shall see some light in terms of writing and doing both evangelical and general church history in a global age.

NOTES:

- 1 This article is the combined effort of a seminar lead by professor J W Hofmeyr, a sabbatical guest lecturer at the Justo Mwale Theological College in Lusaka, Zambia and a postgraduate class of four senior students in African Church History at that institution (May 1997).
- 2 J W Hofmeyr. "The present status of church history in South Africa" in: O U Kalu, *African church historiography: an ecumenical perspective*, Bern 1988, 34.
- 3 Hofmeyr, *op cit*, 35.
- 4 Kalu, *op cit*, 21.
- 5 Kalu, *op cit*, 24.
- 6 J J Kritzinger, "Introducing missiology", in: H L Pretorius (ed), *Reflecting on mission in the African context*, Bloemfontein 1987, 5.
- 7 J E Bradley and R A Muller. *Church History: an introduction to research, reference works, and methods*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995, 33-62.