BOOK REVIEW

Title IGBO CATHOLICISM: The Onitsha Connection, 1967-1984
Author Ikenga R.A. Ozigboh
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This title book deserves attention for several reasons: it shares with a number of other books a focus on Roman Catholicism in Igboland during her centenary celebration, and a collection of these works gives an illuminating pattern to "Catholic historiography". L. Ugwuanyi Nwosu of Alvan Ikoku College of Education has recently done an M.A. thesis in the Department of Religion, University of Nigeria on this subject.

The book also is a piece of contemporary church history and breaks away from the tendency to write African church history merely in terms of what missionaries did or did not do and thereby neglecting the post-missionary era when whites left and blacks took over the helm of affairs - when it was "we on us". It poses the key question: what has happened to the church in Igboland in the post-missionary period? Specifically, how have Igbo Roman Catholics responded to the gospel?

But the question is not posed in this general manner, rather, it uses the career of the most prominent Igbo Roman Catholic as the fishing line. It makes pretence to being a biography of Cardinal Francis Arinze, but it is not really a biography and could not be judged by the canons of the art. Arinze is a transitional figure in the change of batons between whites and blacks in the administration of the Roman Catholic Church in Igboland. The focus on him is an artistic ploy. The real aim is "an appraisal of the historical circumstances, fortunes, dilemmas, prospects and missed opportunities of the Catholic Church in Igboland since the mid 1950's when

the Igbo people began to regain the independence they lost to the British fifty years earlier. It is a critique of how Igbo Catholic leaders perceived the Catholic Church in Igboland" (p. xiii). This is from the horse's mouth (without any intention of mistaking the "Father" for a horse).

The little book also deserves attention because of its daring - given the hierarchical structure of power in the Roman Catholic church, the Igbo cultural habit of praise-singing and the reverence in which many hold Cardinal Arinze, it is quite interesting that a Roman Catholic priest and scholar is willing to risk to evaluate the career of a living superior who is still in office. The sycophancy and patronage system bred by the structure of power is so alarming that this book must have evoked innumerable curses followed by confessions. It will not be surprising if doubts are cast on his sincerity or scholarly interest Talk about scholarship: the book has a good eye to historiography in its organization, periodization and effort at analysis and interpretation.

The structure falls into three movements: a profile of Cardinal Arinze, the historical background and an assessment of key policies in the period under consideration. The first part avoids the cardinal sin of hagiography while the second part, the historical excursion is marred by several factors: there are too many avoidable details in the discussion on the vertical growth of the church. It is as if the author spilled his index cards onto the pages of the book. A table of the growth pattern showing years of foundation, pioneer priest, local sponsor and such-like could have sufficed. Analysis of broad patterns would, then, guide the reader. Rather, we are faced with a strong attachment to the style of C.P. Groves, boring us with the gory details of the Planting of Christianity. For instance, what does it change matters if he made it on the 6th or 10th instant? Such details distract from the flow of the narrative.

However, it must be acknowledged that the author shows a meticulous attention to accuracy of dates, terms and titles. It may interest you to know that Arinze was the second, not the third, Bishop of Onitsha if you are one of the misinformed! The reason is that Bishop Heerey was both Bishop of Onitsha and later Archbishop of Onitsha after being "Bishop of Balanea" while his predecessor, Bishop Shanahan, was only the Vicar Apostolic of Southern Nigeria, (dates provided). Protestants weaving and bobbing through the maze of vicariates would wonder why Calvin's God created footnotes.

In the encyclopaedic tradition, many crucial matters are mentioned without full treatment or explanations, perhaps space constrained the author; otherwise, the founding and closing of brotherhoods without reasons boggles one's attention span.

But when it comes to analysis, Ozigboh writes with the flair characteristic of Ayandele or the Oxford historian, Trevor-Roper. Examples abound: for instance, on the Christian-village strategy in early evangelization, Ozigboh concluded thatThe Christian village, in effect, became a ghetto nurtured on monastic principles. It produced apparently pious Catholics who became culturally warped and disoriented... The system was an aberrant and unfortunate policy but it had some short-term benefits (p. 7)

He always shows a sense of balance in his analysis. This comes through also in his assessment of such legendary figures as Bishop Shanahan around whom "fabulous stories and myths" have been woven:

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The author, in fact, believes that Father Jordan's biography of Shanahan was propagandist white-wash, that while the school phenomenon was a key strategy to Catholic success, itpresented a perfect example of a game of mutual deception and exploitation between the mission and the Igbo people. (p. 10)

He followed with the same balanced assessment of Heerey (p. 24) before arriving at the Arinze regime whose accession to the bishopric was a felix culpa but who built up a vibrant Catholicism during the Civil War, years which made the American Newsweek magazine to exclaim:Never before has the fact of Catholicism appeared so attractive. (p. 29).

This credit would be shared by Arinze, the Holy Ghost and Marist Brothers and by the vibrant esprit de corps among the local priests. The church was now engaged in the care of souls and bodies, in healing as Christ did. Will it be heretical to think of a success built on rice and okporoko Christian? Even shell-shocked soldiers would hear if you asked them whether they have wanted stockfish.

But the stage is now set for the third part of the book, analytically divided into four parts: rehabilitation and reconstruction, 1970-74, the last decade, 1975-1984, the core issue of the Catholic School and the urgent crisis - the dilemma of leadership. Under each time-frame, the author identifies key themes - indigenisation, ministerial formation, role of the laity, development of infrastructure, formation of religious orders and monasticism, to put matters in broad terms.

The interest in this acid-tongued analysis is the historiography at the background. The conceptual scheme which undergirds the work is the success story of Roman Catholicism: they came late but overtook the Protestants. Ozigboh's articles in Journal of Liberal Studies and Ofo betray

this more clearly. It is a staple diet of Roman Catholic historiography in Igboland, a centenary mood, sounding as it were a reply to Kenneth Latourette who ended the seventh volume of the History of the Expansion of Christianity in 1947 with a confident Protestant note! Ozigboh's modified view here isthat Catholic larger vision of its mission seemed to have died with the war, the post-war years, nonetheless, had their success stories. (p. 30)

He tried to pursue the success conceptual scheme into 1970-74 period but had much difficulty and so x-rayed post-war policies as no other Roman Catholic scholar has done because, from the horse's mouth again, some of the advantages gained by Igbo Catholicism, in general, and the Archdiocese of Onitsha, in particular, by reason of the innovations and pastoral initiatives of the 1970-74 period, tended to be reaped in the administrative system, (p. 47).

He, however, went beyond the structural ills - canonical status and authority pattern of power (oligarchic concept) to eight other specific problems which we shall summarize as follows:

i) Ministerial formation: training and utilization of manpower. These have been characterized by planlessness and patronage;undue importation of religious congregations leading to duplication and what is more, jealousies and animosities borne of institutional pride and greed ... Omnibus congregations (jacks of all trades) with loads of non-trained members and mediocres, tend to squabble and quarrel over pastoral assignments and ownership of money-yielding institutions to the disedification of Christ's faithful. The apostolic liabilities resulting from the unhealthy rivalries and antagonisms between religious congregations themselves or between them and the diocese in which they operate negate whatever advantages and assets these congregations my have (pp. 52-53).

ii) unstudied excursion into monasticism, unstudied because of the opting of western monastic models (See p. 59)

iii) apparent predilection for cash-intensive prestige projects. He criticizes the expensive architecture of church buildings and the taxation of the congregation (see p. 62). But this is hardly the whole story. Archbishop Laud's "beauty of holiness" comes to mind. Personally, I love those monumental buildings if the designs are like Idahosa's tropicalized with better acoustics. Every culture needs monuments, and giving God our best is admirable. The opposite is to "blow" money in useless celebrations, especially during the oil boom. On a serious note, these cathedrals are an aspect of the age-long rivalry between Catholics and Anglicans, especially in the part of Igboland covered by Ekechi's Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland (London, 1971).

iv) misdirected indigenization. The author tackles the problem clearly but did not take the sociological and theological problems of indigenization seriously. The literature is burgeoning and one expected a better analysis particularly (a) the unique claims of Christianity, (b) Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture or Niebuhr's Christ and Culture, and (c) dialogue.

vi) lip service to ecumenism. These strictures are fine but neglect years of rivalry, scramble, duplicity and lip service all round. Africans have been balkanized into denominational stripes and the call for saving the gospel from such captivity is not a Roman Catholic issue alone.

vii) unimaginative educational policy produced by a historical leaning on schools as a strategy for evangelization.

viii) crisis of leadership. This is the core problem which runs like a creeping plant throughout the work. He blames the priests, the bishops and

the laity who shrug off their opportunity. The weakness of African churches is alarming. He is particularly critical of the failure of the bishops and subscribes to the old adage: episco pans est opus. Only the daft, he said, will seek the mantle without realizing the amount of work involved. He argues that the Archbishop's Achilles' heels contributed, too; that in his last years Arinze became self-confident, all-knowing, overbearing and authoritarian. Democratic possibilities died while a theocracy monepiskopos reigned supreme. Sycophancy danced the dance of creeps and patronage became the only means of accession. Agents played poker and a few priests, like a cabal whose plums had ripened, enjoyed while other priests were either onlookers or were hounded from parish to parish, afterall, "there are no definite rules about postings and transfers of priests in the Archdiocese," (p. 121).

These may all be so. The annoying aspect is that the author leaves the awkward impression that the Anglicans are doing better. On the contrary, oligarchic structure of power produces the same effect. Most of the problems enumerated here plague every church in Nigeria. One reason is that little attention is paid to theory and practice of church administration. Anyone remotely involved in theological education would have experienced the same chaos in ministerial formation. The problem of indigenization, especially liturgical and theological, is getting out of hand with the resurgence of charismatic religious groups. The weakness of the laity is even more acute in churches which affirm the priesthood of all believers. The recent crisis in the Methodist Church underscores the tendency among church with egalitarian concepts of power towards oligarchic structures, gaudy vestments and impressive titles. Idowu actually captured imagination by ascending to Pre-Eminent Patriarchy and thus brought the resources of the early church in North Africa to Africa south of the Sahara in one fell swoop. He short-circuited any polity in a future discussion of church unity among Protestants.

Perhaps, Ozigboh's book should draw our attention to the need for a comparative, wholistic, ecumenical church history. We shall then see the

dilemma which faces all the churches. He has, indeed, raised the larger issue of significance on p. 114:Africans are flattered to learn that Jesus was a refugee in their continent some two thousand years ago (Mt. 2:14-15), but they are amazed that his religion has hitherto remained a stranger at home. On the contrary, Christ never set his foot in Europe and yet Christianity succeeded there in making itself European and at home. Why has it not been able to naturalise in Africa all these centuries?

Ozigboh has done for the Roman Catholics in Igboland what Pierre Berton did for the Canadian Anglicans in his The Comfortable Pew. The spirit of his criticism is quite akin to the critical wind blowing in the Roman Catholic church in other countries, for instance, in the United States. D.J. Nwoga, who wrote the foreword, has also examined this phenomenon of God as Stranger in Africa thought. Naturally, Roman Catholics were not embarrassed about this scholarly excursion. Now that Ozigboh had done the same thing with specific examples from the inner history of their church, many are embarrassed and angry. Admittedly, they do not have red faces because they are blacks. I hear that the way to feel the embarrassment of the African is to put your hand into the person's armpit.

This book has heated many Catholic armpits. It should heat more Protestant armpits because the level of disorganization in that camp is more alarming. All Africans should take this book seriously because while the failed spirituality of the mission-oriented churches has spurred charismatic movements, this group lacks organization, theology and ideological direction. No wonder they breed charlatans as fast as the AIDS virus.

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