

# Christianity in Eurafrica



Steven Paas

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A History of the Church in Europe and Africa



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## Preface

Nothing has bound Africa and Europe more together than the history of Christianity. From Paradise onwards the Church has been the communion of believers. As the Body of Jesus Christ she started in Jerusalem. Through the proclamation of the Gospel the Church reached soon parts of Africa and the Atlantic Coast, from where – after the Middle Ages and particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries – she took deep root in Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, in post-modern times African Christianity is being challenged to re-plant the Church in secularized Europe.

This textbook for learners and teachers of the History of the Church focuses on the West and the South, on Europe and Africa, the continents whose histories have been increasingly intertwined since Antiquity. Since the 1960s the classical dependence of the South on the North has changed dramatically. Kalu, when stressing the growing importance of African Church History, refers to the Afro-American Liberian missionary and statesman Edward Wilmot Blyden (†1912), who ‘foresaw the coming shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity from the north to the south Atlantic, and its import for African Christianity’.<sup>1</sup> I would add that the future of European Christianity largely depends on a much-needed shift to mission-mindedness in the African churches.

The present book is based on two textbooks<sup>2</sup> that I composed before 2007 for theology students in an African context. They have been widely used at various institutions for theological and pastoral training, particularly in Malawi. Their titles are used for the two parts in the present work, *From Galilee to the Atlantic*, and *The Faith Moves South*. The idea was born when I taught at Zomba Theological College, an institute for the training of ministers of the Word of God in South-Central Africa, mainly in Malawi. I arranged the text in such a way that it may be profitable for students at tertiary institutions of theological education. The prescribed curricula of theological colleges in Central Africa were taken into account. However, I trust that the book will also serve students in a wider region within or outside Africa. It is meant as an introduction to the study of the field of Church History from the New Testament era to the end of the 20th century, especially targeting Western Europe and Southern Africa. I am confident it is a tool for (future) pastors who are called to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who in Jesus Christ, through the Word and the Holy Spirit, planted His Church, and continues to look after it. Moreover, I trust that any individual having an interest in the History of the Church will find the book useful.

Writing a textbook is not possible without using the work of others, which I have profusely done, as can be seen in the footnotes. Bibliographies and footnotes contain literature for further study. In the bibliographies, I have consciously mentioned English titles only, except for a few titles in Chichewa, as this book was originally written for students in South-Central Africa. The illustrations I mainly collected from various free sites at the Internet. Specific sources were only mentioned when apart from the website address more details were given and when copyright-regulations were referred to. If

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<sup>1</sup> Kalu, ‘Ethiopianism’, in: Kalu, O.U. (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story*, University of Pretoria, 2005, p.272.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Paas, *From Galilee to the Atlantic: A History of the Church in the West*, Zomba: Kachere 2006 [first 2004] and *The Faith Moves South: A History of the Church in Africa*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006.

unintentionally some pictures have not been duly accounted for, please accept my apologies.

Remarks and questions from students throughout the years have helped me to improve the text. *Zikomo kwambiri abale!*<sup>3</sup>

I am especially indebted to Mr. Andrew Goodson, Head of Classics at *Kamuzu Academy*, in Mtnthama, Malawi. He contributed greatly to the weeding out of writing errors and style mistakes while his critical questions and remarks enabled me to improve the logical flow and content of the text.

I gratefully cite Rev. Mark Thiesen (MA), formerly Director of *Namikango Mission* in Thondwe, Malawi, now Church of Christ pastor in the USA. He carefully checked most of the text and he made various suggestions for correction and clarification.

Rev. Dr. Willie Zeze, Presbyterian minister of the Malawian CCAP, now teaching at *Mukhanyo Theological Seminary* in South Africa assisted by proofreading some chapters and he suggested important additions to chapter 1, on historiography, which I gratefully incorporated.

Rev. Willem-Henri, den Hartog, Director of the Distance Department of the *Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary* obliged me with some valuable corrections and additions.

For part II, on Africa, I owe particular gratitude to Prof. Dr. Klaus Fiedler, of the *University of Malawi* (now of *Mzuzu University*), who is an experienced teacher of Church History and Missiology, specialised in Africa. He helped by advising, proof reading, and making corrections and improvements, showing his hand especially in sections of chapters 51, 55, 57, and 60.

Dr. Harvey Kwiyani – the Executive Director of *Missio Africanus*, a Journal of African Missiology – contributed meaningfully to the concluding part of the book. I also thank Dr. Gideon van der Watt of *Christian Literature Fund*, the Publisher of this book, for weeding out writing errors and punctuation mistakes.

At early stages of the composition of this work the following persons, mentioned in alphabetical order, read parts of the text, made corrections and gave valuable advice: Ms Elizabeth Ritchie (MA), Rev. David Kawanga (MA), Mr. Frackson Ntawanga, Mr. Arie van der Poel (MA).

Despite these important contributions, of course, the responsibility for the contents and the language of this book is mine.

My brother Wim Paas made the layout of the book and assisted in finding useful illustrations and inserting them properly into the text.

My wife Rita has played an important role. In many aspects she has facilitated my functioning. I owe her much for her love, loyalty and practical wisdom.

We praise God who in Christ, through the Word and the Spirit, is known to us as our dear heavenly Father. In Jesus Christ He revealed Himself by entering human history as the Son of Man, the Alpha and the Omega. His Name be glorified in the lives of the readers of this book.

Steven Paas

Veenendaal 2016

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<sup>3</sup> Chichewa for: Thank you very much brethren!

# 1. Characteristics of Church History

## 1.1. Defining Church History

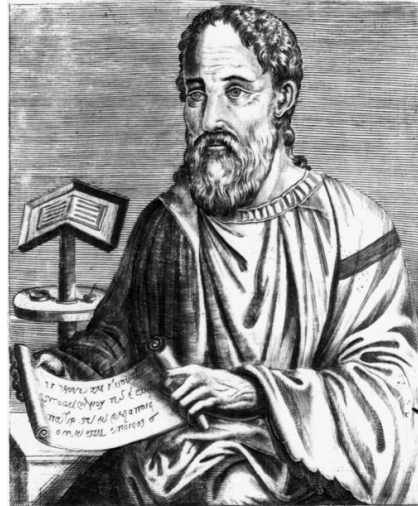
This book is an introduction to the study of Church History. It is particularly focused on Western Europe and Africa, but the birth site of the Church in the Holy Land and its early extension to other parts of the Near East and later to America<sup>1</sup> have certainly not been left out of sight. Students who are entirely new to the field of Church History may feel like strangers in a foreign land. They need an introduction to the introduction. Therefore, the first chapter provides some preliminary notes and remarks, which will hopefully facilitate a first encounter with the subject.

Definitions of Church History differ greatly, depending on the writer's view of Theology, of the Church and of History. At the outset we should take note that the compound term Church History suggests that the Church unquestionably has a story. Let us look at how some writers have defined the term.

H.M. Gwatkin defines Church History as the 'spiritual side of the history of civilized people ever since the Master's coming.'<sup>2</sup> One would wonder how the word 'civilized people' could be a synonym of the Christian community, because those parts of the world that have become known as civilized often have not behaved in a Christian manner. Therefore, a more neutral definition should be preferred, for example describing Church History as the story of the wider Christian community and its relationship to the rest of the world throughout the ages.

For A.M. Renwick and A.M. Herman Church History is 'an account of a success and failure of the Church in carrying out Christ's great commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature and teach all nations.'<sup>3</sup> The use of the word 'account' intelligibly indicates that Church History is both a process and a product of past events, both in and with regard to the Church.

Earle E. Cairns suggests that Church History is 'the interpreted and organised story of the redemption of mankind and the earth.'<sup>4</sup> In this definition, Church History comprises interpreted historical data of the origin, process and impact of Christian faith on society, based on organised information gathered by scientific method from



*Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-c.340) is called the 'Father of Church History', because of his Ecclesiastical History, which is seen as 'the principal source for the history of Christianity from the Apostolic Age to his own day'.*

<sup>1</sup> For example: the Middle East, Eastern Europe, America.

<sup>2</sup> H.M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History to A.D. 313*, London: Macmillan, vol.1, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Renwick and A.M. Herman, *The Story of the Church*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1997. p.7.8; cf. Mk.16:15; Mt.18:19.

<sup>4</sup> Cairns, E.E., *Christianity through the Ages: A History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, p.17,18.

archeological, documentary, or living sources. Given this, studying Church History is much more than an analysis of past data, because it is connected to the story of salvation of people through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Philipp Schaff considers Church History in an academic sense, as a theological discipline, a faithful and lifelike description of the origin and progress of the heavenly kingdom, aiming to reproduce in thought and to embody in language its outward and inward development down to the present time. On the one hand, Church History shows how Christianity spreads over the world and how it penetrates, transforms, and sanctifies the individual, communities and societies. On the other hand, it records the deeds of the heroes of faith as well as the acts of agents of the devil against the Kingdom of God. Considering these descriptions, we suggest the following definition.

Church History is a comprehensive description of the past progress of the Church of God, through Jesus Christ in the midst of this world, by the power of the Word and of the Spirit.

Some readers might question the word *progress* in this definition. Perhaps they would prefer the word *development*. We have not chosen *development*, because we want to evade its *evolutionary connotations*. In our view, the Church of the 21st century is not more advanced in quality than the Church of Antiquity. The term progress seems more fitting, because it denotes deployment, expansion or extension, which does not necessarily include qualitative evolutionary progress. Our definition implies that Church History belongs to *Secular History* in general (a), and also that it belongs to *Theology* (b). Let us look at these two aspects.

#### **a. Church History Belongs to Secular History**

Whether history in general should be defined as Secular History is debatable. It cannot be doubted, however, that history in general is intertwined with Church History or the other way round. But first we should address this question: What is History? We follow Elliot, who distinguishes three elements: (1) historical events themselves, (2) communication of historical events, and (3) historiography.

##### *Historical Events*

These are significant events that happened at certain dates in connection with certain persons. Some events have meaning in themselves; other events need to be highlighted and explained for their full meaning to be understood. Among historians, the choices of events and opinions on their effects can be very different.

Which events are significant? Those that influenced, or are influencing people? Those that are recorded and communicated most? Those that produced, have produced or are producing ideas?<sup>5</sup>

Christians are right in saying that History in some way or another reflects God's Providence, i.e. God's acts in the world. But how does God act in the History of the world? Does He act in History only through His Church, or also through other agents? Does God follow or lead events? Is History worked out by Him from a *starting point* in the past, as most historians have assumed? Or is it the reflection of an *aim* in the future?

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. M.W.Elliot, 'The Meaning of History', an address at Schloss Mittersil, August 1997.

Some Church historians such as J. MacIntyre believe that there is in History a *telos* (or purpose) which is being worked out and which is a projection in time of the *eschaton* (the last days), which stands at the end or at the edge of time.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Communication of Events*

This is the written or oral account of events. Its quantity and quality depend on the geographical and chronological place of the teller or describer, and on his or her scholarly abilities. Accounts of events also depend on the researcher's philosophical and religious assumptions and concepts. For example, among scholars there are different expectations as to the end of History. Will all events end by a man-made disaster or by divine interference, or is there no end to history?

Meaningful communication of historical accounts ends when historians are unable to see patterns, an intelligible order. This can happen when researchers are lacking information, because they are too far from events and primary sources. It can also happen, though, when they have too much information, because they are too close to the events. Some researchers are so biased by pre-determined conclusions or outlook that they can relate events only from a skewed perspective and not see other interpretations.

### *Terms Used in Historiography*

Historiography is critical reflection on the way historical events have been studied and communicated throughout history. Elliot describes two extreme views in historiography: *historismus* and *historicism*.

What Elliot calls *Historismus* is the belief that history is essential for understanding human beings and developments within cultures. *Historicism* is the idea that the only meaning we can get from history is what we already think. Historiography has shown the important difference between circular and linear views of history. History writers in Antiquity generally considered the cohesion of events as a circular pattern, in which history is more or less repeated. From Augustine onwards there has been an awareness of continuation from one set of events to another as a linear movement. Historiography also accounts for the many attempts that have been made to divide history into periods.

Here are some examples: (a) the Kingdoms prophesied by Daniel; (b) six periods of 1000 years; (c) three periods of successively: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit of the Law; (d) division according to the centuries; (e) Antiquity (before 500 AD); Middle Ages (Early-/ High-/ Late-, 500-1500 AD); Modern Times (after 1500); (f) division into a period of allegedly uncritical history writing, and the Enlightenment (17th and 18th century) as the beginning of the era of supposedly critical history writing.

Depending on their varying views as to events, communication of events, and historiography, historians have come to very different conceptions of history. We would suggest the following definition:

History is a comprehensive survey of past events and movements in the divinely created reality of nature and humanity, a survey which within the framework of God's providence has significance for our understanding of the past and of the present, and that guides us when thinking about the future.

Let us have a closer look at this tentative definition of the subject of history and assess how its readers can benefit from it.

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<sup>6</sup> J. MacIntyre, *Christian Doctrine of History*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1957, pp.88,89.

*History is a comprehensive survey.* This means that the science of history aims at giving an intelligible story of events, dealing with as many aspects as possible, written, oral, pictorial, image, and even musical.

*History concerns previous facts and movements.* Historians study the events and movements of the past that we are able to know and to assess from the various sources of history. They keep in mind that these sources are varied and also limited. This also applies to the historian's ability to research them.

*History is about the facts of divinely created nature and humanity.* Historical facts derive their significance from God's creation of heaven and earth.

*History presupposes God's providence.* Although often not seen or not acknowledged by man, history happens within the framework of God's plan.

*History aims at understanding the past.* Students of history have to realise that the past has its own right, and that it has to be understood as being detached from the present.

*History leads to understanding the present.* When understood in its own right the past makes the present situation more transparent. Knowledge of the present is inseparably interwoven with comprehension of the past.

*History facilitates thinking about the future.* Without an understanding of past and present, man is blind with regard to the future.

Secular History cannot deny its dependence on the Bible, nor can it deny its connection with Church History. The account of God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures and in nature is the pilot history. There would have been no history without it. All history is rooted in it.

From a Christian perspective, Church History sheds light on other branches of the history of humanity and nature. The significance and place of Secular History in its varied aspects become clearer in the light of Church History. This helps to realise that 'the Church is the cork on which the world floats'. Church History also profits from Secular History. Knowledge of aspects of Secular History is indispensable when describing the history of the Church. In the conception of a Christian Secular History and Church History, both serve the honour of God and His Kingdom. This is not to deny the principal difference between Secular History and Church History.

The Church is a plantation by God in the midst of the world of Secular History. It is the most important reminder of the presence and of the advent of the Kingdom of God. As such, the Church is unique, and so is its history. Secular History, rightly understood, also acknowledges God, but it reflects the Kingdom of God in a less comprehensive and in a more indirect way. In the last analysis Secular History and its many branches and sub-branches, such as political history, cultural history, economic history, history of science, natural history, history of literature and even history of Christianity, have to be distinguished from Church History.

Secular History does not belong to the field of Theology, whereas Church History does. This 'dual home' of Church History is not an unhappy incident; it is of great theological significance. It runs parallel to the greatest fact of salvation: Christ's incarnation made Him to be fully man and fully God. Man's salvation hinges on this duality. The history of God's Church is fully divine and fully human. Only in that way can it reflect the work of Triune God in history.

## b. Church History Belongs to Theology

The Church is God's plantation in this world. It is the product of His revelation through the Word. Theology is the Church's scholarly approach of God's revelation. The main emphasis is on the Church. Church History being part of Theology aims at describing the history of the Church, not the *history of Christianity*, which aims at describing Christian culture, and as such belongs to Secular History. Although Church History and the history of Christianity are related, they differ fundamentally. Christian culture and the Christian Church are not identical; sometimes they even oppose one another. Students should notice the tendency among many writers to underestimate the Church in favour of *Christianity*.

The term Church itself does not appear in Scripture. But the words from which the English 'Church', Scottish 'Kirk' and French 'Église' derive, *kuriakè* (Greek: of the Lord) and *ekklesia* (Greek: *ek-kalein* = to call out), show that it designates the congregation of the people of God, as it has existed since creation in its various modes of existence, militant, triumphant, visible, invisible.

The Church has existed since Paradise. As God's revelation continued to fulfilment in Jesus Christ, there developed a difference in appearance between the Church of the Old Testament and the Church of the New Testament. Since Pentecost, in the *Apostles' Creed*, the Church has come to understand itself as the 'one, holy, catholic, Christian Church, the communion of saints'. This understanding of the Church has been the criterion of Christian faith, and the foundation of theological study.

*The Church is one.* This refers to the unity of the Church, spiritual unity in the first place, not necessarily unity in a geographical, organisational, visible sense. Disunity is caused by sin and error. The Church can be torn by disunity, although it appears as a geographical, organisational and visible unity.

*The Church is holy.* It is set apart; it does not belong to the world, although it is *in* it. It is not man's creation, but it is God's plantation through the Word and the Spirit. The Church is the most important sign of the existence and of the approaching of the Kingdom of God.

*The Church is catholic.* This means that the Church is common to all or universal.<sup>7</sup> As representations of the universal Church, every local church in principle has all characteristics of the Church. This rejects every claim of limitation of the Church to a specific geographical area or to a certain ethnic group of people.

*The Church is Christian.* Christ is the King of the Church. He is the Head and also the Body of the Church. There is no Church without Him being the beginning, the end, the foundation, the top, the inside, and the outside of it.

*The Church is the communion of saints.* The Church is a fellowship, a brotherhood of saved sinners, an unbreakable bond between men and women, rooted in fundamental relationship with God, that is to say in God's covenantal promises through Christ.

The scholarly study of God's revealed relationship with His creation and with His people comprises the various branches of Theology, including the study of Church History. Like all Theology, Church History is connected to the Bible in a special way. The Bible contains history. God has revealed Himself in two ways, in a particular sense by using history as recorded in the Holy Scriptures, and in a general sense in nature. The

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<sup>7</sup> 'catholic' contains the Greek word *holos*: whole.



Bible contains the history of the revelation of God's plan with world and humanity, the *historia sacra Divinae revelationis*. This includes the history of salvation. Church History overlaps with salvation history, is rooted in it, and continues describing it in the post-Biblical era. At the same time, Church History and salvation history are different.

The Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is therefore holy, infallible (trustworthy), authoritative, the highest rule for life and faith. This does not apply to Church History, nor does it apply to any history described by man. Written and oral accounts of Secular History and Church History can even oppose God's revelation. At best, they are guided by the Scriptures and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. This is also true for studies in any other field of Theology.

All other branches of Theology have historical aspects, although they remain distinguished from Church History.<sup>8</sup> However, the fact that all branches of Theology are embedded in history should not be confused with the position of the subject of Church History itself, which specifically deals with the history of the Church in all its aspects. The scholarly subject of Church History can be broken up into various fields and sub-fields. Some examples of the branches of Church History are:

the histories of Dogma, Ecclesiology, Old Testament research, New Testament research, Biblical archaeology, Mission, Preaching, Historiography (the history of writing Church History), Church art (e.g. iconography, painting, sculpture, architecture), State-Church relationships, Denominations, Awakenings, Schisms, Church music, Church leaders, Church Fathers, Popes, Monasticism, Reformers, common church members.

## 1.2. African Church History

### a. Southern Christianity

In terms of *Historiography* I have consciously tried to avoid bias and to honour *African Church History* in its own right. I am inclined to follow Verstraelen, who uses the term *Southern Christianity* for a great variety of churches and Christian cultures that came into being east and south of the *Roman Empire*. In the title of Part II of this book, *The Faith Moves South*, I have expressed this sentiment. Verstraelen stresses that 'Christianity was not an exclusive phenomenon in the *Roman Empire* in the North, but struck roots in different socio-cultural contexts in the Southern Hemisphere'. He pleads for 'new modes of rethinking and rewriting Christian History' by telling the full story of this non-Roman and non-Greek Christianity, 'and making it part of Christian history as a whole'.<sup>9</sup> Extending this thought, other historians derive from the flourishing

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<sup>8</sup> The other main branches of Theology include: the Bible itself (Old Testament and New Testament), Biblical Languages, Dogmatics (Systematic Theology), Ecclesiology (knowledge of the organisational structures and offices of the Church), Missiology, Exegetics, Hermeneutics, Homiletics, Pastoral Theology.

<sup>9</sup> F.J. Verstraelen, 'Southern Perspectives on Christian History', in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 53-1997/2, pp.100,101; F.J. Verstraelen, 'The Teaching of Christian History and Ministerial Formation Today', in: *Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA)*, Bulletin 2, 1993, pp.3-25. Verstraelen developed the ideas of his deceased wife, published in: Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia: The Scope for African Leadership and Initiative in the History of a Zambian Mission Church*, Franeker: Wever, 1982, pp.13-21: 'Recovering the African Perspective of Mission History', and 'Written and Oral Sources'; Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *A New Look at Christianity in Africa*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992, pp.77-98: 'Rewriting the History of Christianity in Africa'.

Christianity of today's Africa the idea that the epicentre of Christianity has critically 'shifted from the North to the South'.<sup>10</sup>

**b. Received from the Outside**

An important consequence of this observation is that African Christianity should not be considered as an appendix or an extension of Western Christianity. It is rightly stressed that 'Christianity was a non-Western religion in the first place'. For that matter, it is a non-Southern religion too. However, some historians have developed their ideas to the opposite extreme, suggesting that the beginnings of Christianity are in Africa, geographically and religiously. They have come to adhere to a completely 'new historiography' in which African Christianity is presented as 'an extension of African primal religion'. This approach is not helpful, because, as Kalu admits, it is 'based on many unarticulated assumptions'.<sup>11</sup> It distorts the picture of the course in history that Christianity took. But there is nothing wrong in emphasising that the Gospel of the joyful events of salvation went from Jerusalem either directly to the North and the North East of Africa, or much later, indirectly to sub-Saharan Africa through the churches in the West. After all, Christians, anywhere in the world, have received the Gospel from the 'outside'. The Church is rooted in a message that is imparted from the outside, spiritually, and for most of the Church geographically as well.

There is need to remember that the Christian Church did not start in Africa or the West, but in Jerusalem, and its foundation is located even outside history, it is not possessed by any world view, however primal it may be. Through Christ God has shown his love for the world, so that people of all nations, world views and religions may realise the superiority and the uniqueness of the Gospel of salvation, join together in His Church, and be saved, now in principle, and presently, after the *Parousia*, in perfection. This – in my view – is the perspective for the Historiography of Church History.

Given this, I need not apologise that this book is shaped in a European mind that is groomed by classical Biblical beliefs as re-iterated in the 16th-century Reformation and in the ensuing reformed and evangelical awakenings in the 18th and 19th centuries. My starting point is that Church History is not only part of Secular History, but that it is also an aspect of Theology, and that in both cases, from the perspective of divine Revelation in the Holy Scriptures, it shows the deployment or progress of the Church as herald of the ever approaching Kingdom of God. Elsewhere I have explained this view in more detail.<sup>12</sup>

**c. Textbooks**

African Church History is part of the discipline of Church History in general. Therefore, at the same time, it is a branch of Theology. To its descriptions belong the older works

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<sup>10</sup> Chukwudi A. Njoku, 'The Missionary Factor in African Christianity 1884-1914', in: Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story*, p.220. He refers to David B. Barrett, 'AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa', in: *International Review of Mission*, 59 (1970), pp.39-54, and to: Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2000, pp.3,4.

<sup>11</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, 'Ethiopianism in African Christianity', in: Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity*, p.259.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Paas, *Digging out the Ancestral Church: Researching and Communicating Church History*, Zomba: Kachere, 2006<sup>3</sup>, pp.11-22.