

The Nigerian Church since the 1840s

The story of Christianity in Nigeria reveals a tightly woven narrative of the process of beginnings, growth and change. First, there were, and still are, the denominational churches of the Protestant mission era with their deep roots in Western forms and theology. Then arose the so-called African Indigenous Churches (AICs) that gave witness to religious independency and a more authentic kind of African thinking. And lastly, there have come the more eclectic Charismatic/Pentecostal churches, revealing both Western and contemporary African expressions. These can be described as a “continuum,” where the past, with its older traditions, flows together with the present, epitomizing religious innovation in 21st century Nigeria.

In this book, *The Transformation of African Christianity: Development and Change in the Nigerian Church*, Prof. Komolafe goes back to the very beginning of Protestant Christianity in Nigeria and provides an appraisal of the complex interplay of church, gospel, and culture that has shaped these transformations. By calling attention to the role of Scripture in the task of the church, the value of past theological constructs for the twenty-first century, and the effect of Nigeria’s pluralistic context on the contemporary mission of the church, the book shows that transformation is what “being the church” is truly about.

From the Foreword

Sunday Komolafe’s book, *The Transformation of African Christianity*, provides lucid missiological and historical interpretations of the nature of Christianity in Nigeria, and the cultural and socio-political contexts it operated from the 1840s to the first decade of 21st century. The first part of the book made up of the first seven chapters examined the historical, socio-cultural and ecclesiastical factors that have shaped Christianity in Nigeria, while the second part is a theological examination of the concept and nature of the Church.

In the first part, by focusing on three ecclesiastical traditions, the mainline Protestant churches, the Aladura churches and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, the author has excellently shown how the church, gospel and culture have interacted over the past 170 years to shape Nigerian Christianity. Indeed, the transformation has occurred as Christianity re-ordered African traditional worldviews, and as the doctrinal emphases and practices of the three ecclesiastical traditions influenced one another, and all together producing continuous transformation of the faith, the structure of the church, and the contexts in which the faith operate. This transformation, according to the author, has not come to an end; it will definitely shape the future Nigerian Church.

The second part reflects the ministerial interest of the author. In this regard, one finds that the book possesses both the theoretical contents for scholars as well as the practical perspectives for ministers of the gospel. The author is also sensitive and sympathetic to challenges the Gospel has faced under changing circumstances in Nigeria. In fact, this sensitivity to the practical perspectives has largely informed the examination of the history of the Early Church as well as the biblical understanding of the church. Indeed, the book explored the biblical understanding of the Church by looking at the Christian Church in the Apostolic era, the contextual challenges it contended with in defining and maintaining orthodoxy, and the theological responses to these challenges. According to the author, this exploration is

important because whatever the Church means to Christians in the contemporary period cannot be separated from historical events that began in the primitive or earliest Church. In this regard, the author deserves commendation for developing a transforming ecclesiology that is biblical, missional, and contextual for the church in contemporary Nigeria.

Certainly, this is an impressive account of mission history, of the role of African culture and agency in the historical transmission of the Christian faith, of the understanding of the nature of the Church, and of the different ecclesiastical paradigms that have emerged from different experiences, practices and theological thinking. The book has made its mark as an important interpretative account of Christianity in Nigeria. It deserves to be read by scholars of African Christianity, Christian missions, and those interested in religious change in Africa.

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More about the Book

The story of Christianity in Nigeria reveals a tightly woven narrative of the process of beginnings, growth and change. First, there were, and still are, the denominational churches of the Protestant mission era with their deep roots in Western forms and theology. Then arose the so-called African Indigenous Churches (AICs) that gave witness to religious independency and a more authentic kind of African thinking. And lastly, there have come the more eclectic Charismatic/Pentecostal churches, revealing both Western and contemporary African expressions. These can be described as a “continuum,” where the past, with its older traditions, flows together with the present, epitomizing religious innovation in 21st century Nigeria.

These ecclesiastical variations have not been particularly helpful in suggesting a corresponding awareness of the essence of the Church. A casual reader of Nigerian church history, for example, may sometimes puzzle over the reasons that theological platitudes of an earlier era could have gotten people so excited only to lose their effect later, and by so doing, lay the groundwork for new expressions with their particular values, beliefs, shapes and forms.

In a context like Nigeria where religion has traditionally been associated with everyday needs and realities, it is appropriate to hypothesize that the context sets the boundaries within which the church has to function. Yet, regardless of what the church feels prompted to do more specifically within the context, her responsibility to address the ethos and the cultural values must be guided by the supra-cultural nature of Scripture. The complex task, therefore, is about engaging in a systematic ecclesiological reflection with responsibility to the dynamic interplay of church, gospel and culture. The problem of where and how to begin the investigation is exquisitely problematic. This, however, is not a question of epistemology. Rather, it has much to do with understanding the ecclesiological task of what it means to be church in radically different contexts.

To begin the investigation from experience and then describe the church in Nigeria phenomenologically is to have a picture of the church in the framework of the context in which it lives. On the contrary, to examine the church from the perspective of historical theology is to benefit from insights into historical movements, agents that shaped the church, and the various changes through which it has passed. The latter seems to be the more probable approach given the fact that the theoretical concern of this book is about new insights in biblical, missional and contextual ecclesiology for Nigeria.

Consequently, this work is an investigation of the historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesiastical factors that have shaped Christianity in Nigeria. The title reflects the central issue quite accurately. With the aid of the word “transformation” the work is a systematic ecclesiological reflection on the extent to which the understanding and practice of “church” have changed during one and half centuries of Christianity in Nigeria. The transformation of theological paradigms, formed by three variations of ecclesiastical development, reveals the dynamic interplay of church, gospel, and culture from early mission history to the present African expressions.

Its method is as much provocative as narrative. It presents a chronological and relatively comprehensive history, ministry, and theology of the Nigerian church by highlighting certain peaks, valleys, and paradoxes in its evolution, while trying at the same time to situate these developments within an overarching biblical and historical framework of global Christianity. To facilitate this, two representative churches were selected from each of the three streams that make up Nigerian Protestant Christianity:

Protestant Missions:	Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) Southern Baptist Mission
African Independent:	Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) The Church of the Lord (Aladura)
Charismatic/Pentecostal	Deeper Christian Life Ministry The Redeemed Christian Church of God

Selecting the above churches as representatives of their particular ecclesiastical tradition is not to overlook the fact that each stream can still be further expanded to include typologies of various kinds through a bogus church-by-church analysis. Instead the discussions on these selected *representative* churches have been synthetic both in form and character. This is because churches within a particular tradition generally demonstrate certain traits that are unique and specific to that ecclesiastical tradition.

The book is, however, not just an analysis of the process of beginnings, growth and change, but also suggests that this transformation has not yet come to an end. It demonstrates that the Nigerian church is poised at a “strategic inflection point” where discernible strengths and limitations are juxtaposed with a fresh articulation of the task and role of the church in twenty-first century Africa. To this end, “transformation” carries a double meaning. It depicts

an essential feature of the Nigerian church, while also revealing genuine aspirations toward a renewed vision of the church that is contextual, biblical, and missional.

Constructed under the rubric of a textbook for use by pastors and in seminaries and universities, the book has both practical and theoretical sides. On one hand, it challenges the practitioner on the need to constantly engage in thought processes that provide interpretive framework for a contextual yet biblical way of doing church. On the other hand, the book provides the theorist with a missiological and theological compass to guide the work of theorizing, giving symmetry of understanding and interpretation in the ongoing appraisal of non-Western and global Christianities. In both cases, the approach throughout is intentionally inclusive rather than exclusive, while inviting reflection and dialogue rather than confrontation and conflict.

On the whole, the book is an evangelical, denominational ecclesiology done ecumenically and with sensitivity to the three ecclesiastical strands that make up Nigerian Protestant Christianity. An important missiological dimension of this book is that it is perhaps the first investigation of Protestant Christian history in Nigeria with the aim of providing interpretive framework for the way of doing church as Nigeria moves into the future. By calling attention to the role of Scripture in the task of the church, the value of past theological constructs for the twenty-first century, and the effect of Nigeria's pluralistic context on the contemporary mission of the church, the book shows that transformation is what "being the church" is truly about.

What Other Leading Experts Are Saying

Prof. Dean S. Gilliland

The dynamic characteristics of Christian churches in Nigeria present, in many ways, an ecclesiological model for the entire Continent. Dr. Sunday Komolafe has produced a much needed publication for his own context which, while located in Nigeria, is actually much broader than Nigeria. This is because the story of mission history, cultural expressions of African church and the more contemporary “Pentecostal”- type movements in Nigeria all have great implications for West Africa and Africa as a whole. This precedent work shows the author’s ability to synthesize historical, cultural and theological dimensions in the Nigerian Church. I commend this book highly as a product of excellence and integrity.

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Prof. Jehu J. Hanciles

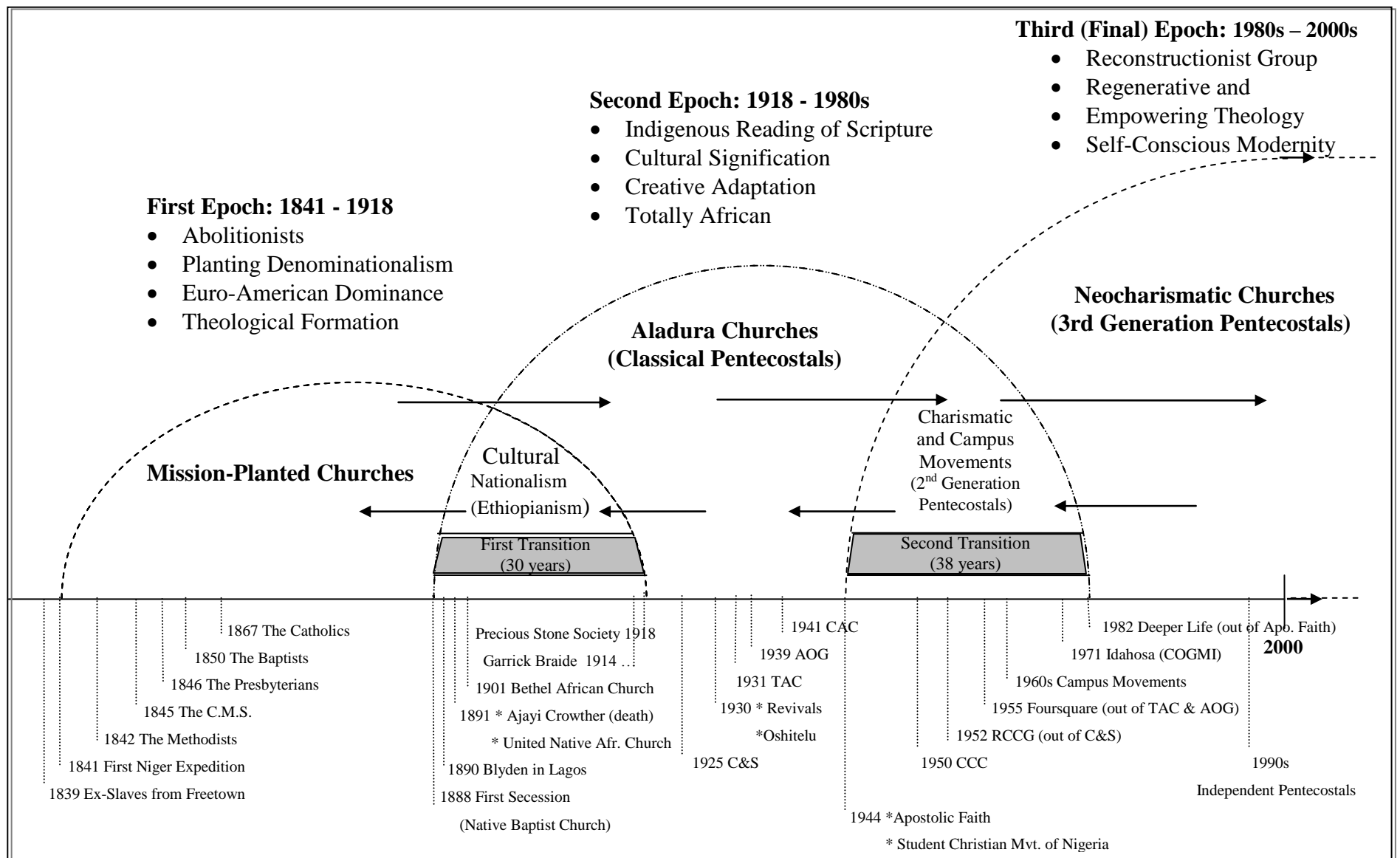
The story of Christianity in Nigeria remains one of the most remarkable of modern times. In this detailed study, Komolafe examines major factors that have shaped the church in Nigeria from the beginning and provides a meaningful appraisal of contemporary transformations from a biblical perspective. The treatment is insightful and the analysis is fresh. A welcome addition to the growing body of African scholarship.

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Prof. Matthews A. Ojo

This is an impressive account of mission history, of the role of African culture and agency in the historical transmission of the Christian faith, of the understanding of the nature of the Church, and of the different ecclesiastical paradigms that have emerged from different experiences, practices and theological thinking. The book has made its mark as an important interpretative account of Christianity in Nigeria. It deserves to be read by scholars of African Christianity, Christian missions, and those interested in religious change in Africa.

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TRANSFORMING ECCLESIOLOGY: THREE EPOCHS OF NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY