

BOOK REVIEW OF

Paul Gifford:

*Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*¹

1994, 1995

When this book came to my attention, I was thrilled by its content but turned off by its price of 40 UK pounds. I could not afford that, but still felt I needed that book because it describes situations so parallel to those in Nigeria. So I bartered with the publishers: They give me a free copy and I promised I promised to place the review in magazines in three different countries--Nigeria, USA, and South Africa—in magazines that had international readerships. The Cambridge publishers agreed and supplied the free copy, while I worked hard for many hours on writing and placing the review just to save a measly L40! The real reason I made this arrangement, of course, was that the topic strongly affirmed my wholistic ministry in Nigeria. Wide-spread reading of the book itself as well as of the review would further my ministry and extend its reach.²

Paul Gifford, a New Zealander, has lectured in both Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom. He has written extensively on African Christianity and has been published in Zimbabwe, Nigeria and the United Kingdom, among others. This particular work is member of the Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion.

According to the book jacket, this is an analysis of "the socio-political function of Christianity in Liberia under the corrupt and oppressive regime of Samuel K. Doe." And so it is in great and painful detail. If it were only about Liberia, a rather insignificant country, Gifford's painstaking efforts would not have attracted my attention. However, Liberian politics and religion are representative of many Black African countries. It is its representative character that makes this book a must for all interested in African Christianity and politics and their interplay with American Christianity and politics. Not only is this a representative case study, but also a very wide-ranging one.

One of the flyleaves summarizes the thrust of Gifford's argument as follows:

Gifford shows that, in general, Liberian Christianity, far from being a force for justice and human advancement, diverted attention from the cause of Liberia's ills, left change to God's miraculous intervention, encouraged obedience and acceptance of the status quo, and thus served to entrench Doe's power. This Christianity, devised in the USA and promoted largely

¹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 340. £40. See Section 2 on this Boeriana page for information about where this review has been published.

² The review has actually been published in five magazines. See Boeriana, Section 2, Book Reviews. See also our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 456-457.

by American missionaries, thus had the effect of furthering the regional economic and political objectives of the US government, which was committed to supporting Doe.

In the course of developing this argument, Gifford gives us a guided tour through Liberian politics and through the various groups of Liberian churches, from mainline through evangelical to independents and "health and wealth" gospeleers. Apart from mainliners, he goes to pains to show their connections with their US counterparts, connections that may be tighter in Liberia than in most other African countries, given their unique US-related history.

Another major point of the book, according to the General Editors of the series, is that religion has "become a renewed force, recognized as an important factor in the modern world in all aspects of life.... It is no longer a surprise to find a religious factor at work in the areas of political tension (p. xi)." This quote is, to me, an example of the very reductionist view of religion that, according to Gifford, is the major culprit that has led most Liberian Christians astray! Religion always is a force in politics. It is just that the West's religious tunnel vision usually fails to recognize it.

Gifford begins his journey with a description of Liberian politics. If you've ever wondered how this African political corruption you've heard about really works, here is your chance. The chapter constitutes a veritable textbook on the subject.

Next, our attention is drawn to the so-called "mainline" churches. These churches consist mainly of the coastal descendants of freed slaves returned to West Africa. These are the churches you know: Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian. Gifford identifies two reasons for the traditional lack of social concern among these Liberian churches. First is their history of slavery. Their slave version of Christianity sought to make their suffering more palatable rather than seek relief from it. This tradition discouraged the development of a more socially militant stance on the part of these churches.

The second reason is the fact that many prominent Christians were also prominent in government. Many pastors were civil servants. State and Church seemed to flow into each other. Liberia's President Tolbert was President of the Baptist Church for 15 years. President Tubman was a leading member of the Methodist Church. Earlier in the 20th century, a lawyer hired by Protestant churches to oust the Catholic Society of African Missions later became President of the country. In short, these mainline churches were "part of the structures of dominance." All these saints were enthusiastic participants in the status quo with all of its corruption. It was only during the regime of Doe, when the descendants of the slaves and their churches lost control over the government, that these mainline churches began seriously to criticize the government. They simply followed their class instincts.

The claim is not that these churches did not contribute anything to the nation. They participated in the traditional community services and ran educational and health services. However, these were within the system and did not challenge it. Even education was domesticated in that it did not induce a critical attitude.

Gifford then turns his attention to the evangelical churches. The classification is their own, since they all belong to the Association of Evangelicals of Liberia (AEL). Many of its members also belong to the Association of Evangelicals of Africa (AEA) and to the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF). This group includes a wide variety of denominations and missions: Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Scripture Union, Campus Crusade, some Pentecostals as well as the Christian Reformed Mission of Liberia (CRML). Gifford classifies the whole lot as fundamentalists, but, I am happy to note, clears my church, CRML, of that "charge."

In terms of the subject at hand, the main difference between the mainliners and evangelicals is their opposing attitude towards government and politics. While the mainliners were closely involved in and associated with government and politics, the evangelical stance was to stay clear of both. They strongly advocated separation of church and state as well as separation of religion and politics. Evangelicals believed mainliners were too political and should get out of the political arena.

Gifford repeats time and again that the latter separation is impossible. In fact, he shows that these evangelicals were deeply political in their stance. Their fundamentalistic orientation diverted them from paying attention to the socio-economic problems of the country and their causes. Instead, they emphasized a form of spiritual warfare that was blind to all causation except the spiritual. As a result, their "solutions" to Liberia's serious problems were located only in the spiritual. To put it in classic Reformed terminology, they knew only grace, nothing of nature. Gifford describes them as "dualistic." The upshot is not "no politics," but a status quo politics that hardly challenged the Doe regime with its excessive oppression and corruption, even by Liberian standards.

Though Gifford points out the problem, he does not, unfortunately, offer an alternative theory of the relationship between the spiritual and the "natural," for example, socio-economic causes. This failure mars the discussion throughout the book and is, again, the result of the very dualism he so much derides. He has simply chosen the other extreme of this western pendulum, nature. I am flattered that the author does not classify CRML as fundamentalistic. He has some good words to say about CRML staff. He calls them "highly professional" and appreciatively quotes from their publications. He refers to the Christian Reformed Back To God Hour as "sophisticated." However, I am sad to note that he does not clear them from the rest of the problems described in this chapter. In view of the fact that he does clear Abba Karnga, a Liberian closely associated with CRML, from all these "charges," but not CRML itself and its American staff, it seems that he regards CRML as basically sharing the same perspective on religion and politics with the other evangelicals. As a Christian Reformed missionary myself, I find this highly embarrassing!

Gifford moves on to the "Gospel of Health and Wealth." Here we meet the same problems as among evangelicals, but even more extreme. These groups also deny any Christian involvement in politics, but were in fact deeply involved by offering the same spiritual solutions and ignoring the same socio-economic causes. Though they claim to transcend culture, we are shown how deeply they are influenced by American culture. The chapter is a "who's who" of this movement. Even if one is not interested in the main subject of this book, this chapter is a good basic critical introduction to the "health and wealth gospel" movement.

The same is true for the chapter on independent churches. The typology of African independent churches that has been developed over the years by Sundkler and others is no longer valid, alleges Gifford. Other dynamics have taken over. These are no longer the "truly" indigenous churches of yesteryear. They are, in fact, heavily dependent on and influenced by their American counterparts. They are not even on the way to indigenize. They are no different from the evangelicals and "health and wealth" movement in the socio-economic area. They, too, are diverted by their "theologies" from natural causation and solutions. Gifford goes to great pains to trace their tendency towards proliferation, both in the US and Liberia, by providing some almost ludicrous accounts of splits in the camp. He talks of the dynamics of fission and finds the basic cause to be economic.

The chapter entitled "The Geopolitical Context" takes a critical look at the US government tendency to support corrupt regimes when it is in the US's interest to have them as friends. Their support of Doe brought many questions to the minds of thinking Liberians. That bastion of human rights supporting their corrupt Doe? Unthinkable, but true. At the end, of course, the US government ran out of excuses and found it prudent to withdraw their support. Attention is also drawn to the tendency of the US government to use the Christian religion to further her foreign policies. In Latin America, this took the form of working against liberation theologies and of supporting more fundamentalist expressions of the Christian faith. The argument here is a bit thin when applied to Liberia.

This chapter also provides us with a good critical introduction to fundamentalism that, again, is worthwhile on its own merits. He pegs this discussion on three main terms: Dispensationalism, Reconstructionism and Zionism. As a true reflection of their ties to American fundamentalism and its Zionist connections, Liberian fundamentalism opposed any notion of peaceful existence and dialogue with Islam. Instead it tended to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment by accusing them of trying to take over the country without any facts to support these claims.

Gifford asks whether fundamentalist American missionaries were consciously conspiring to support American politics. His assessment is negative. The situation is worse. Their fundamentalist theology so diverted their interest away from political questions that they were blind to their own political involvement. It is the same conclusion I came to in my own book, *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context* (1979), a work dealing with evangelical missionaries in Nigeria. This is the height of missionary irresponsibility and the logical outcome of evangelical and fundamentalistic theologies.

One important lesson to be learnt from this study, if one did not already know the obvious, is the impossibility of isolating missions from politics. When missions argue that they are non-political, a red flag should go up immediately. It is no more possible for Christians in mission to be apolitical than it is for their supporting constituency at home. As one Christian sociologist put it, "No vote is a 'No' vote!" A mission that makes apolitical claims for itself is blind, has a reductionist view of the gospel and of mission, and eventually will find itself berated for an untenable and irresponsible "theology" that leads to a betrayal of its host people. That is exactly the charge the Nigerian Christians level at missions they have hosted. If we can believe Gifford, Christian Reformed World Missions has come close to compromising its constituency in Liberia.

Paul Gifford and Cambridge University Press, a thousand thanks. We owe you one. And Gifford, how about applying your massive appetite for detailed research to our situation in Nigeria? I pledge you my assistance.