

Book review

James Tengatenga, Church, State and Society in Malawi: An Analysis of Anglican ecclesiology. Kachere: Zomba, 2006, 223 pp, paperback ISBN 99908 – 76 – 51 – 7.

In this book, which is a revised version of his doctoral thesis, James Tengatenga, Anglican bishop of southern Malawi and former University of Malawi theology lecturer, critically examines the theological traditions which have informed the behaviour of the Anglican church in Malawi in matters of church and state, and how these traditions have been interpreted and used in different historical periods. An understanding of these traditions would help the reader understand why the church has appeared to support the political establishment at times and at others found itself in conflict with it.

In chapter 1 the author seeks to establish the essential character of the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church in Malawi, as it becomes clearer in chapter 2, is a “child” of the Church of England. The church is a hierarchically organized institutional type of church in which the ordained are regarded as higher than the laity, and among the ordained the bishops are ranked higher still (p12). Although there are supposed to be checks and balances provided by synod which comprises, apart from the bishop, of clergy and lay members of the church, it is often easy for a bishop to ignore the rest of the church and assume that his words and actions are those of the church.

The nature of the relationship between the Church of England (the mother church), and the state is discussed in chapter 2. It is noted that while the Church of England was a product of the 16th century Reformation in Europe, it was different from the other reformation churches in that the English reformation was a political revolution. It was a struggle for the control of the church between the Pope in Rome and the King of England which culminated in King Henry VIII assuming ascendancy over the Pope in 1534. The effect of the various laws that were passed under the influence of the king was that the crown became an essential part of the constitution of the Church of England. The church became the Established Church effectively making the state part of the church and vice versa (p38).

The missionaries who were sent out to set up the first Christian mission in Malawi were members of this established church. This would inevitably affect the way they viewed church – state relationships. The story of the University Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) is told in chapter 3. The UMCA was a response to a call to the English Church by Dr David Livingstone, the renowned Scottish doctor and explorer in the Senate House of Cambridge University in 1857 “to carry out the work which I have begun” (p58). This uncompleted work was the introduction of legitimate trade and Christianity to end the iniquitous slave trade. The Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, Durham and Dublin formed a committee to provide funds for sending missionaries to African. The mission arrived in 1861, and set up at Magomero in present day Chiradzulu district, thus becoming the first Christian mission in Malawi. They soon found themselves embroiled in clashes with slave traders. In the absence of a state the mission found itself assuming civil authority over the Africans around the mission and those it rescued from the slavers. Death of many of the missionaries, including the leader Bishop Charles Mackenzie, compelled the mission to withdraw from Malawi in 1863, to which it did not return till 1885 when it set up its headquarters on Likoma Island. It is noted that Sir Harry Johnston, the British Commissioner in charge of protectorate administration appointed the Anglican priest, principal headman in 1895, with civil authority over the Africans. This situation continued for many years. The UMCA, it is noted, believed that good relationships with the government were conducive to mission work. It was also felt particularly important that the colonial administration which had been established in 1891, and many of whose officials were Church of England adherents, should be supported.

Chapter 4 discusses the involvement of the Anglican Church in the social and political arena in the post – independence period between 1964–1991. The major events of the period were the 1964 cabinet crisis and the political repression which followed. On 6th July 1964 the country became independent of Britain. In September of the same year, following policy disagreements between the Prime Minister and some of his ministers, the dissident ministers either resigned or were dismissed. Then followed detention without trial and repression of all who supported, or were perceived to support the dissident ministers. One of the dissident ministers was Henry Chipembere, son of Archdeacon Habil Chipembere. The detentions and other abuses perpetrated by state and party agents posed a dilemma for the church: to speak out and risk retribution from government, or to remain silent and keep hoping for the better.

According to the author, the church chose to remain silent while covertly trying to ensure the safety of its members. Thus the church under the one party system was effectively a prisoner of fear: it did what the state wanted it to do and remained quiet even when its own members were subjected to abuse, and often tried to rationalize its passivity (p146).

The period 1992 – 94 which is the subject of chapter 5 was marked by agitation for a multiparty political system and its attainment following a national referendum. The catholic bishops' pastoral letter read in all catholic churches on March 8, 1992 was a catalyst for this agitation. The letter exposed all that was wrong with the country's governance. The Anglican Church, along with other churches, supported the call for political change and actively participated in the many forums, including the Public Affairs Committee, in which this was discussed. The church had finally found its voice.

In chapter 6, which is the concluding chapter, the author proposes what he terms an ecclesiology of engagement. He notes that in its involvement with the rest of society and in development work the Anglican Church has generally been consistent over the years. It is in its political involvement that it has not been consistent. This, can be attributed to the failure of the church to think through its engagement with state and society and formulate a theology of engagement (p191). The question before the church, according to the author, is not whether it should be involved in matters of state and society, but how to be involved in a manner that is faithful to its identify and mission. As he sees it the Anglican Church in Malawi cannot remain uninvolved in matters of state and society because its history, liturgy and common worship and faith in a gracious God compel it to be involved.

A number of observations are pertinent here. In his effort to establish the local understanding of the concept of "church" the author surveyed the views of a sample of church members, who it turns out were all priests. It is reported that 12% of the priests understood it primarily as a building; 15% as an institution; 2% as mystical communion; and 71% as a community (pp 13–15). The exact size of this sample is not indicated, nor is its representativeness discussed. In a study of this kind one would have expected the sample to include the unordained lay people who constitute the majority in the church. Differences in the conceptualization of the church between the clergy and the lay members would have been informative. By this omission the author is reflecting the

commonly held view among Malawian Anglican clergy that they and not the lay members are the church. The question that still needed to be answered is: what are the implications of the clergymen's understanding of the concept of "church" on the Anglican Church's relationship with state and society?

There is a clear missionary bias in this work. The author admits it but puts the blame on the dearth of material about the African lay people's participation in the political and social arena (p74). If the author were serious about documenting lay people's involvement he should have resorted to primary sources when published materials proved inadequate. Some of the Anglicans who took an active part in the anti-colonial struggle and the events following the cabinet crisis, for example, are still alive and are known within their communities. These known sources would have led the author to others that were involved with them. Through this "snowballing" process the author would have heard from many more participants in those critical events and thereby built a broader profile of the lay involvement in the political arena than he has been able to do in this work.

The criteria used to select individuals featured in the section "Some more Personalities and their Contribution" (p120) have not been disclosed thus raising a few questions in the mind of a reader who also happens to be a member of the Anglican Church. If it was deemed necessary to profile Mr John Mchaju Liwewe (for this is the correct order of his names), the former Anglican primary school teacher who became Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources (p124), then one wonders why Mr Michael Mlambala who was also Anglican, was active in the anti-colonial struggle, was detained, and also became a government minister, was not included among those that made significant contributions to the politics of this country. One would also have expected recognition of the contributions to the health and education sectors in both mission and government service of Anglicans such as Mr. George Kazembe, Mr Frank Kazembe, the Rev Canon John Malewezi and the Rev Noel Kalizang'oma (who while teaching at Domasi Teachers College was detained by Dr Banda in 1973); Mr Peter Pota (detained by Dr Banda's government in 1965 and 1973) and Mr Swinny Mtiesa (detained by Dr Banda's government in 1965). One could argue that Mr Mtiesa's contribution to the treatment and care of the sick in Malawi is far greater than that of Miss Joan Knowles or Miss Margaret Woodley whose work is acknowledged. Mponda's, Malindi and Matope Anglicans can attest to this fact.

It must be recorded that Henry Chipembere was at the time of the elections in 1961 serving a two year sentence for sedition. He was not in exile (p 72). The archdeacons' participation in politics cannot be taken as evidence that the people were expecting leadership from the clergy. Unlike Canon Oswald Chisa who used the pulpit to "preach politics", the Archdeacon avoided politics until he was pressured by his son's supporters to stand for parliament. The votes that he received were really votes for his son.

The author set himself the task of attempting to develop an ecclesiology of engagement having noted that the Anglican Church in Malawi did not have one. One expected an enunciation of the basic principles of the proposed ecclesiology in the conclusion, but this is not done. In the absence of an articulation of these principles, the reader is left to surmise it on the basis of what it is said in the final chapter

These flaws notwithstanding this book, the first by a Malawian Anglican theologian is a commendable effort to explain the behaviour of the Anglican Church in its relationship with state authorities and its engagement with society. It is an important contribution to the growing body of theological scholarship by Malawian theologians.

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