H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Isichei. *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995. xi + 420 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-0843-1.

Reviewed by David Robinson (Michigan State University)
Published on H-Africa (December, 1995)

Elizabeth Isichei has accomplished a very ambitious task: to bring together, in one volume, an account of the history of the different Christian enterprises and communities on the African continent. Not since C.P. Groves wrote his four volume history (1948-1958) has anyone attempted anything of comparable breadth, or surveyed a more vast literature. Adrian Hastings' *A History of African Christianity, 1950-1975* (1979) is obviously more limited. Professor Isichei lived, taught and wrote in Nigeria for many years, and brings her own experience of research and teaching to bear on the subject. Students and scholars will be in her debt for some time to come.

Isichei has chosen a chronological and regional framework for the book. The first chapter describes Christianity in Mediterranean Africa, Nubia and Ethiopia in ancient times. The second deals with the "middle years" of c. 1500-1800, focusing on the Portuguese efforts to interact with and establish some Christianity among African societies, mainly at or near the coast. It deals with the vexed issue of the Atlantic slave trade and missionaries' associations with it.

Isichei then concentrates for the rest of the book on the modern missionary movement and responses to it over the last 200 years. Chapter 3, entitled "Mission renewed", is a chronicle and occasionally an analysis of evangelical Protestant, Catholic and interdenominational "Faith Missions" and their various backgrounds and implantations. In subsequent chapters she moves to the different regions of Africa and the practice of Christianity up to 1900, and then up to 1960. She concludes with an overall chapter (12) on Africa since independence, which does not include northern Africa.

While the work is abundantly documented, it does not contain a bibliography or guide to further reading at the end. The index is minimal, limited to personal and place names. The maps are not adequate. Two continental maps, dealing with the environmental and modern boundaries, decorate the beginning. A number of more specific maps can be found in the chapters, but no table warns the reader of their existence. All are general maps which do little to illuminate the situations of the Christian communities. Perhaps in their haste to make this important reference work available, author and publisher have not made this volume as useful as it might have been.

By choosing to write a survey, and to include in the definition of survey all instances of Christianity, of whatever persuasion, Professor Isichei has forced herself to move quickly and rather superficially over the mass of data and communities on the continent. Her chapters are typically broken into small sections of one to three pages each. She notes the ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism of most European missionaries and the very different understandings of African communities, and she affirms the variety of forms of Christianity which have emerged. She notes the controversies that have divided African Christians, including the knotty problems faced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, gives due emphasis to the independent churches that have emerged in Africa over the last century, and provides vignettes of a range of heroes, African and European alike, who have fought for the integrity of African societies and Christianities. Her sympathy for African struggles to create meaningful Christian lives is palpable.

Isichei is not able to take the reader very far into the dynamics of the Christian communities, their struggles with modernization, and the interface between the religious domain and social, economic and political realities. She addresses fundamental issues within the churches and communities, across gender and class lines, and between Christians and the larger societies and the state, but she does this in small sections buried in the regional and chronological chapters. To give a fairly typical example: in chapter 10, "West Africa c. 1900 to c. 1960," she has 25 section headings in 35 pages. Those headings include such topics as "Church and State," "Rivalry and cooperation," "Mission and society," "Marriage," "Schools," "Consistency," "Purity and gender," and "Literacy," in ad-

dition to treatments of religious leaders such as William Wade Harris. The thematic sections correspond to similar headings in other chapters.

A History of Christianity in Africa is, consequently, a very useful survey and reference work for students of African religions and Christianity in Africa. It justifiably places an African claim to the Alexandrian and North African fathers of the early Christian church as well as to Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Johann Ludwig Krapf, John Chilembwe, and Isaiah Shembe. In the words of Richard Gray, the student of African religion quoted on the back cover, Isichei has provided a "vigorous introductory survey, crowded with memorable characters and incidents." Her notes provide avenues whereby the interested reader can easily locate the relevant secondary literature. Her work will stimulate work of greater depth on the issues which she mentions in this work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: David Robinson. Review of Isichei, Elizabeth, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present.* H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. December, 1995.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=248

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.