

CHRISTIANITY
AND POLITICS
IN DOE'S
LIBERIA

PAUL GIFFORD



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1993
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Gifford, Paul, 1944-

Christianity and politics in Doe's Liberia / Paul Gifford.

p. cm. - (Cambridge studies in ideology and religion)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 42029 6

1. Christianity - Liberia. 2. Church and state - Liberia -
History - 20th century. 3. Christianity and politics - History - 20th
century. I. Title. II. Series.

BR1463.L7G 1993

261.7'096662'90948-dc20 92-15834 CIP

ISBN 0 521 42029 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52010 X paperback

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Introduction

In early 1988, when I was teaching in the Religious Studies Department of the University of Zimbabwe, I was offered the opportunity to study developments in some independent churches in Liberia. In the following months I read all I could on Liberia, and I eventually arrived in mid-1988 to begin the task. Of the next sixteen months, I spent the greater part in Liberia. My original project, for various reasons, fell through after a few months, and gradually my research evolved into the wider study presented here. Much of the material I had gathered in the course of that original project is included here, in a reworked form, in the section on independent churches.¹

I came to Liberia with a particular perspective. For several years I had been interested in the phenomenon within Latin American Christianity which goes by the name of liberation theology. The term is used here in a general way to refer to theology that tries to relate Christianity to the social structures and systems in which Christians find themselves. I had lived in Southern Africa for some years and become interested in such theological developments there. The foundation document of this theology in South Africa is the *Kairos Document*, in which several South African theologians sought to distance themselves from a state theology which supported government policies, and from a church theology that merely turned in on itself, and to elaborate a prophetic theology which addressed the social evils

¹ And see Paul Gifford, 'Liberia's Never-Die Christians', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30, 2 (1992), pp. 349-58.

in which they lived.² Statements issuing from the South African Council of Churches, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference, and from Johannesburg's Institute for Contextual Theology, all manifested similar thinking, as did statements and writings of individual Christians, of whom Desmond Tutu, Denis Hurley, Alan Boesak and Beyers Naudé were just the best known. This contextualised theology inevitably encroaches on the domain of sociology, for this theology admits that Christianity is a force in the socio-political realm, and tries to make its socio-political involvement as rational and as conscious as possible. It tries to ensure that its inevitable social involvement is a force for justice within public structures. Even in Zimbabwe there was some interest in this kind of theology. I had attempted to analyse this contextualised approach in the statements of Zimbabwe's first President, Rev. Canaan Banana, an unashamed proponent of this theology.³ As will become obvious from every page which follows, my sympathies lie with this general approach. I thus came to Liberia interested to discover how Christians related to the particular issues of their own society; I wanted to learn what role Christianity played in the socio-political system of Liberia.

Students of third-world Christianity have long found Africa a fruitful field of research, because of the thousands of traditional African Independent Churches. These churches have given rise to a whole body of literature, some of which we will refer to below. However, it is one of the contentions of this book that the accepted picture of African Independent Churches has been rendered obsolete by the world-wide Pentecostal explosion of the 1980s. The impact of this explosion has not been widely studied in Africa. There have recently been two extended treatments of this phenomenon in Latin America: David Martin's *Tongues of Fire: the Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990) and David Stoll's *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*

² *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, Braamfontein, the Kairos Theologians, 1985.

³ Paul Gifford, 'The Role of the President: the Theology of Canaan S. Banana', in C. F. Hallencreutz and A. Moyo (eds.), *Church and State in Zimbabwe 1965-1985* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1988), pp. 411-40.

(Berkeley, California University Press, 1990). Stoll's study is based on considerable fieldwork; Martin's is more an overview of the relevant literature. Although the field work for this study was completed before these books appeared, the writing up has been done with these studies in mind. I have constantly asked myself to what extent this study bears out the findings of these two books. The answer will become clearer in the conclusion, but here I can note two important points of difference. Both Stoll and Martin emphasise the 'spontaneity' of this Christian revival; I would want to balance this by drawing attention to the extent to which this revival is controlled, funded and orchestrated from the USA. Also, both Stoll and Martin are generally positive about the social effects of this Christianity; I would argue that Liberia provides a particular instance in which this Christianity was at least a contributing factor in the oppression, impoverishment and destruction of an entire country.

This study is partly theological and partly sociological. It is theological in that it is primarily concerned with what was said, written, preached and taught. (This gives it a slightly different focus from both Stoll's and Martin's work.) It is sociological in that it tries to analyse this message in terms of its sources, its cultural matrix, its agents (and their motivation and self-understanding), its mode of diffusion, its social role, and its political and economic effects.

It is thus a case study of the socio-political role of Christianity in a modern African country.

The study is restricted to Liberia, admittedly a very small country. (This constitutes the major difference from Stoll's and Martin's work: Stoll surveyed an entire hemisphere; Martin ranged even wider, covering literature from all round the world.) This narrow focus however, brings some advantages. In larger countries or regions the mission churches, or the traditional evangelical churches, or the new pentecostal churches, would constitute a separate study in themselves. Liberia was sufficiently small to enable all the branches of Christianity to be covered in a single study. Here I have been able to relate the new pentecostal explosion to the various

sectors of Christianity already existing in Liberia. I have attempted – I hope without oversimplification – to describe all these sectors, their differences and similarities, the dynamics of their interrelations, their relative strengths and weaknesses, and their likely developments.

A word is required on the method adopted in compiling this case study. First, to establish the various kinds of theology offered in Liberia, I attended as many different Sunday services as possible. Sometimes it was possible to attend five different services on a Sunday, beginning at 6 am and ending about 9 pm. Besides Sunday services, Monrovia offered on week nights an almost continual series of crusades, Bible studies or prayer meetings. Besides participating in these meetings, to build up a picture of local theology, I spent a good deal of time listening to Christian radio and watching Christian television programmes. I have drawn on these programmes to build up a picture of the Christianity preached to and absorbed by Liberians. For the same purpose I collected all the literature I could; newsletters, tracts, magazines. I also bought Christian books available in bookshops, and as many newspapers as possible, for in Liberia the Christian content of national papers was often considerable.

I also interviewed as many Liberians as possible – especially church leaders, pastors, missionaries, church workers, members. Many of these interviews were arranged; by the nature of things, far more were unscheduled. I simply moved around churches, hoping to find a pastor or church worker nearby. When in Monrovia I spent most of my time lodging at the Lutheran, Methodist or Mid-Baptist guest houses. These were always well patronised by church workers from the interior, missionaries in transit, or aid volunteers. All these people provided a wealth of information. Also, there were one or two restaurants in Monrovia where visiting missionaries would eat; I became quite shameless in foisting myself on likely missionaries over meals. Almost without exception they seemed genuinely interested in a study of Liberian Christianity, and were invariably very forthcoming with their impressions and experiences, even when they disagreed radically with my perspective.

I also travelled widely in the interior and along the coast; on many of these trips I stayed with pastors or missionaries. Again, I am particularly grateful for all that they shared.

The more academic elements in this study were elaborated outside Liberia, mainly at the universities of Leeds and Uppsala.

I left Liberia in October 1989, two months before the outbreak of the civil war which was to bring complete destruction to Doe's Liberia. Since then I have been engaged in projects researching developments in African Christianity, first for the Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa (EDICESA), based in Harare, Zimbabwe, and then for the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), in Nairobi, Kenya. The EDICESA project took me to all the countries whose Christian Councils operate EDICESA (Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa). The AACC project took me across the entire continent – even to Liberia again. On these visits to other African countries, I was grateful for the insights I had gained through more prolonged research in Liberia. Conversely, although these projects considerably delayed the completion of this study, they have given me a wider context in which to set this study of Liberia, and have retrospectively sharpened my perception of some of the things I experienced there. In light of this wider exposure, I am confident that in many respects (to be elaborated in the conclusion) this study of the function of Christianity in Liberia sheds light on developments on the continent generally.

There is one problem that the reader should be aware of from the outset. This book contains several statistics and dates. Statistics for African Christianity are notoriously unreliable. Many African Churches have no records at all. Often their statistics are not calculated to provide information, but for purposes (like obtaining financial assistance) which encourage considerable exaggeration. Wherever possible I have tried to confirm figures from other sources; where this was not possible I have at least satisfied myself that the figures were reasonable.

A reader familiar with Liberia, or with African Christianity

in general, may be surprised that Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912), perhaps Liberia's most illustrious son, hardly features in this study. Blyden, born in the West Indies, spent much of his life in Liberia where in 1880 he became the president of Liberia College (later the University of Liberia). An ordained Presbyterian minister, he wrote prolifically on issues that have great relevance for this study. However, his significance for Doe's Liberia, or for modern Liberian Christianity, was nil. Not a single person with whom I discussed Christianity in Liberia brought up the name of Blyden. A few claimed, when asked, that they had read something of Blyden; some knew his name but had not read anything written by him; most, including a large number of missionaries, had no knowledge of him at all. This corroborates one of the main conclusions of this study, that the issues that interested Blyden (Africanness, a religion for Africans, the strengths of Islam) were not part of the agenda of modern Liberian Christianity; in fact, they were totally inimical to that agenda.⁴

This study follows what is intended to be a logical sequence. Chapter 1 gives a brief history of Liberia and then a more detailed description of the social, political and economic state of the country under Doe.

The next four chapters discuss the four branches of Christianity in Liberia. Chapter 2 studies the mainline or historical or mission churches, gives a very short history of each and outlines their function singly and together during the ten years of Doe's rule. This chapter focusses especially on the Catholic contribution, for this was so much more obvious than that of the other churches.

Chapter 3 studies the evangelical churches, primarily those which made up the Association of Evangelicals of Liberia, but also others preaching a theology with similar effects. This chapter analyses this evangelical theology under six headings.

⁴ For Blyden see E. W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1967, original 1888. Blyden is discussed in the chapter 'E. W. Blyden's Legacy and Questions' in V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, London, James Currey, 1988 and see Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot 1832–1912*, London and NY, Oxford University Press, 1967.

Chapter 4 discusses a new arrival on the Liberian scene, the faith gospel of health and wealth and deals with the American roots of this form of Christianity, its arrival in Africa, and then the form it took in Liberia. It analyses sermons, crusades and literature that promoted it, and explains the wide diffusion of this faith gospel.

Chapter 5 discusses the independent churches, arguing that clear typologies for African Independent Churches are no longer possible, after the advent of independent charismatic churches and ministries from America. This chapter argues that many of these independent churches were increasingly adopting the American Christianity discussed in the two previous chapters; they were influenced theologically by Bible colleges, pastors' workshops, correspondence courses and crusades promoting this Christianity.

Chapter 6 attempts something different. It argues that Liberia was effectively an American colony. It attempts to show that the Christianity spread in Liberia as 'biblical' or 'non-denominational' or simply 'Christian' was not some trans-cultural, timeless distillate from the scriptures. Its particular form could only be explained by American history, culture and preoccupations; this is argued in reference to dispensationalism, reconstructionism and Zionism, all characteristics of an American Christianity elaborated in response to particular American concerns. Thus this chapter suggests that this Christianity served as one more way of promoting American interests in Liberia.

The conclusion attempts to account for the explosion of Christianity in Liberia; argues that Liberian Christianity served essentially (if unconsciously) to divert attention from the social situation and to leave Doe unchallenged in his mismanagement and corruption; and attempts to relate developments in Liberia to Africa as a whole.

Countless people helped towards this book. I am profoundly grateful to the bishops, pastors, missionaries, church workers and assorted Liberians who so readily gave me their time, answered my questions, shared their experiences, and provided information. In particular I thank those who disputed my

suggestions and theories, and who even now would probably reject the whole argument of this book. For particular assistance of various kinds I thank Dr Haddon Willmer, Rev. Hartwig Liebich, Rev. José Belo Chipenda, Julia Kemp, Faye Sheehy Hannah, Lorrie Geddis, Dr A. Chennells, Véronique Wakerley, Dr Walter Cason, Rev. John Boonstra, Harold Miller, Dr Georg Retzlaff, Arthur Nat Yaskey, Cheryll Stringer, and the members of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, the University of Leeds, and the members of the Department of Theology, the University of Uppsala.