Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent

Jonathan J. Bonk

Among the better-known medieval maps is the Hereford Mappa Mundi, from about 1300, a striking example of historical and theological projection onto an image of the physical world. The map provides an abundance of European and Mediterranean detail and is congested with familiar towns and cities from Edinburgh and Oxford to Rome and Antioch. Onto this familiar terrain all of the significant historical and theological events are projected—the fall of man, the crucifixion, and the apocalypse. As for the rest of the world, the greater part of Africa and Asia blurs into margins featuring elaborate, grotesque illustrations of prevailing myths and savage demonic forces.¹

The Catalan World Map some two centuries later was likewise more revealing of European ignorance than of actual geography. “The strangest geographical feature,” Whitfield notes, “is the shape of Africa: at the extremity of the Gulf of Guinea, a river or strait connects the Atlantic with the Indian Ocean, while a huge land-mass swells to fill the base of the map. No place-names appear on it.” The continent is replete with dog-headed kings, and paradise is located in Ethiopia. Beyond the gates of Europe, the laws of God and nature were apparently suspended, and anything was possible. This map represents, in Whitfield’s words, “a powerful, dramatic but not a logical, coherent picture of the world.”²

Africa as Ecclesiastical Terra Incognita

While considerable cartographic clarity has since been achieved in the realm of geography and culture, ecclesiastical “maps,” in contrast, continue to badly misrepresent, underrepresent, or simply ignore the actual state of affairs in much of the world, especially Africa.

One of the most astonishing religious phenomena of the twentieth century was the growth of Christianity in Africa. As Lamin Sanneh recently observed about Africa, “Muslims in 1900 outnumbered Christians by a ratio of nearly 4:1, with some 34.5 million, or 32 percent of the population. In 1962 when Africa had largely slipped out of colonial control, there were about 60 million Christians, with Muslims at about 145 million. Of the Christians, 23 million were Protestants and 27 million were Catholics. The remaining 10 million were Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox.”³ Forty years later, the number of Christians in Africa had multiplied by six to over 380 million, overtaking the Muslim population and now representing an estimated 48.37 percent of the approximately 800 million total population.¹ Between 1900 and 2000 the Catholic population in Africa increased a phenomenal 6,708 percent, from 1,909,812 to 130,018,400. Over the last fifty years Catholic membership has increased 708 percent.⁵

Yet, strangely, even the most recent attempts by mainline church historians to help seminarians and church leaders find their way in the terra firma of contemporary world Christianity include scarcely any note of Africa. In 2002, for example, Westminster John Knox Press published Randall Balmer’s 654-page Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism. The author of this volume, far from apologizing for his conspicuous lack of reference to African or any other non-Western subject matter, acknowledged simply that “the volume is weighted heavily toward North America.”⁶ Africa is represented by a token smattering of Western mission agencies such as the Africa Inland Mission.

Equally unsatisfactory on this point is the Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals, published in late 2003. This 789-page cornucopia of information on evangelical figures from the 1730s to the present indeed “brims with interest while providing reliable historical information,” as the inside flyleaf attests, yet only a single black African—Samuel Adjai Crowther—merits inclusion. “Geographically,” the introduction explains, “the scope is the English-speaking world, understood in its traditional sense as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. A few figures from non-English speaking countries have also been included if their ministries or reputations made a significant impact upon English-speaking evangelicals.” This focus meets the stated goal of including “those figures that would be of interest to scholars, ministers, ordinands, students and others interested in the history of evangelicalism.”⁷

Since cartographic studies are as much the cause as the result of history, continued reliance on such antiquated maps ensures the ongoing confusion of Christian guides attempting to locate themselves and their protégés ecclesiastically. Thus, despite the very modest results accruing from the prodigious efforts of nineteenth-century missionaries like David Livingstone, Robert Moffat, Mary Slessor, and C. T. Studd, these names are household words today; in contrast, while Christian numerical growth in Africa has burgeoned from an estimated 8.8 million in 1900 to 382.8 million in 2004, scarcely anything is known about the

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persons chiefly responsible for this astonishing growth—African catechists and evangelists.⁹

That such a state of affairs should persist despite world Christianity’s quantum demographic, spiritual, and intellectual shift from the North to the South, and from the West to the East, is partially explained by factors delineated by Andrew Walls in his 1991 essay “Structural Problems in Mission Studies.” Despite the global transformation of Christianity, Walls notes, not only do Western syllabi fail to adequately register this phenomenon, but they “have often been taken over in the Southern continents, as though they had some sort of universal status. Now they are out-of-date even for Western Christians. As a result, a large number of conventionally trained ministers have neither the intellectual materials nor even the outline knowledge for understanding the church as she is.”¹⁰

But might not this troubling lacuna in the existing reference corpus be partially due to an absence of basic reference tools providing convenient access to non-Western Christian data that instructors, desperate to keep pace with ordinary teaching demands, require? I believe this to be at least partially so. Since the new maps have not been created, the old maps must serve. The story of the church in Africa thus remains a mere footnote to the story of European tribes and to the West’s 500-year ascent to world military, economic, and social hegemony. Africa remains terra incognita, a blur on the margins of world Christianity’s self-understanding.

Since the greatest surge in the history of Christianity occurred in Africa over the past one hundred years, and indeed continues its breathtaking trajectory into the twenty-first century, it is both disappointing and alarming that yet another generation of Christian leaders, scholars, and their protégés, relying upon existing and newly published reference sources, will learn virtually nothing of this remarkable phenomenon, or of the men and women who served (and who served) as the movement’s catalysts. Africa remains “the dark continent,” not because of an absence of light, but because the lenses through which the religious academy peers are opaque, rendering Africa barely visible.

Perhaps the editors of these otherwise useful reference tools are not to be blamed for their failure to include African subjects. In fact, information on Africa’s Christian founding fathers and mothers is often simply not available in published form, and such information as is available is often inaccessible to any but the most intrepid and assiduous researcher.

Such a gap is really not surprising, given the challenges associated with documenting the lives of persons who, even if literate, leave scarcely any paper trail.¹¹ But it compounds the troubling tendency of the global Christian reference corpus to perpetuate the illusion of the West as the axis upon which the Christian world revolves. To the notion that it is otherwise, ecclesiastical cartographers today seem as impervious as the Catholic Church once did to the radically new cosmology of Copernicus. In fact, there are no baseline reference tools to which one might turn for information on those whose lives and activities have produced in Africa a Christian revolution unprecedented in the history of our globe.

**Dictionary of African Christian Biography**

From August 31 to September 2 of 1995, a scholarly consultation of modest proportions was hosted by the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven. It was convened to discuss the need for an international dictionary of non-Western Christian biography. The title proposed for volume 1 was *An Oral History Christian Biography Register for Africa*. The official announcement issued by participants at the conclusion of the consultation summarized the raisons d’être and modus operandi of the envisaged dictionary:

A team of international scholars is planning a *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. While the 20th-century growth and character of Christianity in Africa is without historical precedent, information on the major creative and innovative local figures most vitally involved is virtually absent from the standard scholarly reference works.

The *Dictionary* will cover the whole field of African Christianity from earliest times to the present and over the entire continent. Broadly inter-confessional, historically descriptive, and exploiting the full range of oral and written records, the Dictionary will be simultaneously produced electronically in English, French and Portuguese.

The *Dictionary* will not only stimulate local data gathering and input, but as a non-proprietary electronic database it will constitute a uniquely dynamic way to maintain, amend, expand, access and disseminate information vital to an understanding of African Christianity. Being non-proprietary, it will be possible for material within it to be freely reproduced locally in printed form. Being electronic, the material will be simultaneously accessible to readers around the world.

Contributors will be drawn from academic, church and mission communities in Africa and elsewhere. The *Dictionary* will not only fill important gaps in the current scholarly corpus, but will inform, challenge and enrich both church and academy by virtue of its dynamic and internationally collaborative character.¹²

The prescience of this announcement has been borne out by subsequent developments, for the enterprise has moved steadily forward since then, so that as of this writing some ninety-eight African countries have joined the effort to produce a baseline, biographical memory bank by formally identifying themselves as Dacb Participating Institutions. It is hoped that by 2010 an additional one hundred African educational and research institutions will officially join in the task of researching and recording the stories of their continent’s church fathers and mothers.

**The Contours of the Dictionary**

Chronologically, the dictionary (which is available online at www.Dacb.org) spans twenty centuries of Christian faith on the African continent, thus counteracting the notion that Christianity in Africa is little more than the religious accretion of European influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “Christianity in Africa,” John Baur aptly reminds his readers, “is not a recent happening, nor is it a by-product of colonialism—its roots go back to the very time of the Apostles.”¹³ At the present time, a significant proportion of the stories appearing in the
The dictionary counteracts the notion that Christianity in Africa is little more than the religious accretion of European influence.
Africa clearly has a distinctive and growing place in Christian history.

production two years from now (collectors take note). The cost advantages of Internet publishing or publishing on CD-ROM are so great that the capital-starved, price-sensitive world of academic books and professional journal publishing will become primarily digital and net-worked long before the mainstream publishing giants convert most of their back lists to digital formats.22

But as an African proverb wryly observes, “The darkest place in the house is beneath the candle,” for another, darker side to the rosy inevitability of electronic publishing was likewise identified a decade ago. Information available only in digital form can quickly find itself rendered passé, victim of a technology that is both expensive and doomed to rapid obsolescence. This point was eloquently made by Jeff Rothenberg, a senior computer scientist in the social department of the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California: “Although digital information is theoretically invulnerable to the ravages of time, the physical media on which it is stored are far from eternal. . . . The contents of most digital media evaporate long before words written on high-quality paper. They often become obsolete even sooner, as media are superseded by new, incompatible formats—how many readers remember eight-inch floppy disks? It is only slightly facetious to say that digital information lasts forever—or five years, whichever comes first.”23 For such reasons, consideration is being given to producing a printed version of the dictionary, in abridged and rigorously edited form, to be distributed to all participating institutions sometime after 2010.

From the very beginning, the DACB has maintained that publishing rights should be freely granted to churches, denominations, and national or international publishers wishing to produce a printed version of the entire electronic database or printed versions of any portion of the database deemed useful to them. Were the dictionary to be conceived as a proprietary, profit-making venture, it is highly doubtful whether it could gain significant Africa-wide circulation. Purchasing such a database would be out of the question for most Africans, making their stories unavailable to Africans themselves. The cost of producing and distributing the dictionary in its annually updated, nonproprietary CD-ROM form is borne by the project management office in New Haven.

Awareness of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography continues to grow. We are learning that the dictionary is increasingly utilized by instructors who require their students to get into the habit of using the database for their African church history assignments. As virtually the only central source of information on African Christian biography, the DACB Web site is experiencing steady and growing traffic, from a daily average of 493 “page views” in June 2003 to 731 in April 2004.24

Furthermore, the Dictionary of African Christian Biography has become a stimulus for similar data-gathering initiatives elsewhere. The Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (Trinity College, Singapore) is using the DACB as a model to produce an Asian Christian biographical database, as are the Don Bosco Centre in Shillong, India, and the Trinity Methodist Church in Selangor Dural Ehsan, Malaysia. In September 2003 I was officially notified that an editorial team consisting of members of the Contextual Theology Department of the Union Biblical Seminary, in Pune, India, coordinated by Dr. Jacob Thomas and supported by an all-India Council of Advisors, has likewise embarked on a biographical project modeled after the DACB but focusing on the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

One of the ongoing challenges facing the dictionary is the unevenness of its country, language, and denominational content. It is readily evident that while the numbers of stories in English are relatively plentiful, with French-language entries lagging far behind, the languages representing the other three lingua francas of Africa are not represented at all. This is due to neither oversight nor neglect but the linguistic limitations of the principals involved and the fact that the dictionary reflects only those stories that have been submitted. The DACB’s content does not emanate from the dictionary’s facilitators in New Haven. Rather, participating institutions and their liaison coordinators in Africa are the key to researching and writing dictionary entries.

Anyone browsing the DACB will at once be struck by the patchiness of both the quality and consistency of the over one thousand biographies that currently make up the database. Some of the stories are a mere one or two sentences in length, while others run to several thousand words. Scholarly exactitude marks some of the entries, but many stories have been contributed by persons who are neither scholars nor historians. But since this is a first-generation tool, and since the stories are nonproprietary, belonging to the people of Africa as a whole, and since it is assumed that some memory is better than total amnesia, the inchoate quality of some of the entries is to be expected, tolerated, and even welcomed. This being a first-generation memory base— an attempt to ensure that there is some kind of memory to which scholars and leaders of subsequent generations will have access—it will remain for another generation to redress the weaknesses and deficiencies inherent in the present dictionary.

The DACB’s approach to story research, writing, and publication is based upon the active cooperation of African participating institutions. Not all of the ninety-eight different educational institutions and research centers formally identified with the project have submitted stories to the dictionary. An effort is being made to encourage incorporation of biographical research and writing assignments into the syllabi of appropriate university or seminary courses, utilizing the standards provided by the DACB.

Annual DACB-related trips to Africa since 1999 have taken me to scores of universities, seminars, and research centers in Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Namibia. Journeys to Sudan, Egypt, Mozambique, and Tanzania are contemplated in the near future. Ninety-eight academic centers in twenty African countries are presently registered as official participating institutions, contributing to a steady flow of biographical materials for the dictionary. In addition, the DACB has cosponsored a series of one-week oral history workshops in Kenya, Zambia, and Madagascar, attracting faculty members and academic researchers from scores of African countries. Increasing numbers of African churches and academic institutions are cooperating by encouraging their members and students to research and compose the raw narratives from which the database is being created. Finally, the DACB is actively cooperating with the International Association for Mission Studies to circulate an archives manual designed specifically for non-Western institutions.25
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Africa clearly has a distinctive and growing place in Christian history, yet many parts of the African Christian story are too little known, not least within Africa itself. Furthermore, in Western Christian consciousness, the continent continues to be regarded as a forbidding and dangerous mass, known chiefly for its capacity to generate the stuff of which newspaper profits are assured: rampant corruption, political dysfunction, recurring famine, and genocidal civil wars. A parallel and more significant reality, which features a richly diverse and thriving range of Christian congregations whose churches serve as centers of human normalcy, integrity, and hope, escapes notice. The Dictionary of African Christian Biography, the fruit of inter-African and international cooperation, is offered as a modest first step in bringing our ecclesiastical maps up to date.

Notes

11. Even a figure as significant as William Wadé Harris, hailed in 1926 as Africa’s most successful evangelist because of his astounding impact upon the establishing of the Christian faith among the peoples of the Ivory Coast, “left no writings except half-a-dozen short dictated messages.” See David A. Shank, “The Legacy of William Wadé Harris,” International Bulletin of Missionary Research 10, no. 4 (October 1986): 170.
12. The consultation, hosted by the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, was underwritten by the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Research Enablement Program (REP).
14. In a personal letter dated April 9, 1998, J. F. Ade Ajayi observed that “the issue of just who is and who is not a Christian” is not always so clear-cut in Africa as it is in some parts of the world. He illustrated his point by the following incident: a well-educated woman “moved from the Christ Apostolic Church to Jehovah Witness without necessarily realizing that she had thereby lost her initial focus on Christ.”
15. Andrew F. Walls identifies six persisting continuities within the varied emphases characteristic of Christianity across time: (1) worship of the God of Israel; (2) the ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth; (3) the activity of God where Christians are; (4) Christian membership in a community that transcends time and space; (5) use of a common body of Scriptures; and (6) the special uses of bread, wine, and water. In instances where a subject’s ecclesiastical orthodoxy might be doubtful, these criteria will be employed. See Walls’s “Conversion and Christian Continuity,” Mission Focus 18, no. 2 (1990): 17–21.
16. Since the cost of professional translation is prohibitive, the rendering of all biographical entries into the five stipulated languages must be voluntary, perhaps undertaken by religious studies or history departments.
17. These simple guidelines have gradually evolved into An Instructional Manual for Researchers and Writers (New Haven: Dictionary of African Christian Biography, 2004), a 64-page booklet that elaborates the essential techniques of oral history, as well as providing examples of a range of entries already appearing in the dictionary.
18. While there are no major problems in academia with research into oral tradition, a number of standard, common-sense guidelines need to be observed: (1) Oral data need to be collected openly in an open forum where they can be challenged or augmented; (2) what is told to the researcher must be told and repeated to others in the same area for cross-checking; (3) oral traditions may provide a variety of points of view on the subject; and (4) oral tradition will be used to augment written sources, and vice versa. One of the advantages of an electronic database over a published volume is the possibility of including a field for unsubstantiated complementary (or even contradictory) anecdotes relating to the subject. Such anecdotal information provides texture and depth of insight into the subject, or at least into people’s perceptions of the subject.
19. Norbert C. Brockman, An African Biographical Dictionary (Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 1994). Brockman’s dictionary “provides sketches for 549 prominent sub-Saharan Africans from all periods of history” (p. vii). A number of these sketches have been included in the Dictionary of African Christian Biography.
20. The DACB is not driven by Western funds. Its stories are the result of African ingenuity and enterprise, rather than a questionable by-product of foreign funds.
21. The DACB initially explored setting up an Arabic-language coordination office in conjunction with the Global Institute South at Uganda Christian University. Now, however, it anticipates locating the facility in Khartoum, the heart of Christian Arabic-speaking Africa.
23. Jeff Rothenberg, “Ensuring the Longevity of Digital Documents,” Scientific American 272, no. 1 (1995): 42. According to the National Media Lab (www.nml.org), “CD-ROMs have a certified lifetime of 10 years . . . [while] magnetic tape is good for 5 to 20 years, conventional CDs up to 50 years, and archival microfilm for 200 years. The longevity champ—[is] acid-free paper—[which] should last for 500 years.” Furthermore, print “avoids what University of Michigan data expert John Gray calls ‘the problem of unstable technology’—the likelihood that media will obviate the devices that can read them.” See also Stephen H. Wildstrom, “Bulletin Board: Data Life Span,” Business Week, June 17, 1996, p. 22.
24. This Web site information is from Gospel Communications International (www.gospelcom.net).