

NAMING THE PHENOMENA: THE CHALLENGE OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

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Abstract

The academic study of religion emphasises the accurate description and naming of religious phenomena. Using precise and unambiguous labels has been particularly encouraged. However, the study of Christianity in Africa has, over the years, used a variety of terms for African Independent Churches (AICs). This article surveys the dominant labels and analyses the methodological difficulties that emerge from adopting some of them. The essay maintains that utilising insights from the history of religions may mitigate some of the terminological difficulties that characterise the study of Christianity in Africa.

1 Introduction

As an academic discipline, religious studies highlight the need for its practitioners to employ accurate and value-free terms when describing religious phenomena.¹ It actively discourages the use of pejorative, ambiguous and misleading labels. Scholars operating from within the phenomenology of religion endeavour to select names or categories in a manner that avoids distortion and makes sense of the religious phenomena (Cox 1996:33). This practice has, however, been difficult to follow in the study of Christianity in Africa. Here, one witnesses

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terminological complexities as the myriad forms of Christian expression are reduced to 'mainline' churches, that is, Catholic and Protestant; African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated/Instituted Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches.² One of the leading scholars in the study of African Independent Churches (AICs), Harold W. Turner, has emphasised the need for accurate terminology. According to him, "A name may prejudice the issues by saying too much, or fail to delineate the field concerned by being too vague" (Turner 1979:49).

This article utilises the specific case of AICs to highlight the need for applying terms more consistently in research within religious studies. After reviewing some of the dominant and problematic names used in studying Christianity in Africa and for AICs, the essay calls for the use of the tools of critical application from the history of religions. It argues that the study of Christianity in Africa stands to benefit from adopting principles developed within the history of religions. Although the phenomenology of religion faces the dilemma of verbally representing religious beliefs (Olsson 1999), it may help in organising and categorising material from AICs in a more consistent manner.

2 Terminological plenitude: The case of Christianity in Africa

The study of Christianity in Africa has been dominated by church historians, theologians, missiologists, and other specialists. While historians of Christianity in Africa have utilised insights from anthropology and sociology, they have remained suspicious of the often reductionist approach of these disciplines (Verstraelen 1996:326). Theological commitments have tended to obtrude, and the classification of material has

followed latent religious convictions. Such trends have diminished the field's stature in the academic study of religion.³

Debates over appropriate terminology in the study of the history of Christianity in Africa emerge as soon as one begins to search for the overall category that describes the field. Does one describe the area as 'Christianity in Africa' or as 'African Christianity'? Are there any deeper issues involved or is the case merely one of preference? There is variation amongst the various scholars in their use of titles. While some scholars such as Kwame Bediako (1995) apply the more popular 'Christianity in Africa', other writers, such as Harvey Sindima (1994), Paul Gifford (1998) and Ogbu Uke Kalu (2000) make references to 'African Christianity'. Extended discussions of the labels adopted are not always forthcoming, ostensibly because authors are keen to move on to descriptions of this vibrant phenomenon. Issues are further compounded by references to the interface between 'Christianity and the African imagination' (Shorter 1996:26; Maxwell 2002:3). It is not clear whether 'the African imagination' is uniform and whether Christianity has inspired it in an even manner across the continent.

The distinction between 'Christianity in Africa' and 'African Christianity' is sometimes made on ideological grounds, although the terms can be used interchangeably. While 'Christianity in Africa' refers to the historical reality of the religious tradition called Christianity as it is found in Africa, 'African Christianity' has resonance beyond the descriptive label. Thus, "... African Christianity is undoubtedly *African* religion, as developed by Africans and shaped by the concerns and agendas of Africa; it is no pale copy of an institution existing somewhere else" (Walls 1996:3). 'African Christianity' has sometimes been deployed to refer to the 'Africanisation', 'indigenisation' and 'adaptation' of Christianity in Africa (Kaplan 1986). Rather than merely

describe the presence of Christianity in Africa, 'African Christianity' seeks to underline the fact that Christianity has in fact become an aspect of African identity (Ranger 1987:29). Scholars who uphold the use of this label endeavour to emphasise the African acceptance and ownership of Christianity while effectively putting aside the popular notion of Christianity as 'the white man's religion' (Bediako 1995:120-121). A similar distinction has been made between 'Islam in Africa' and 'African Islam' (Rosander 1997:1-3). 'Islam in Africa' represents a 'purified' understanding of the tradition, while 'African Islam' seeks to capture the contextualised or localised forms.

Although it can be argued that the term 'African Christianity' has both sociological and hermeneutical value in that it projects African Christianity as a historical and sociological variant in the development of Christianity (Shack 1979:xii), it brings with it considerable difficulties. When the term 'African Christianity' is used as an ideological label to describe the longing for Christianity in Africa to experience "a newness, a freshness, an originality, a difference like a 'spice that brings a new taste to food'" (Healey & Sybertz 1996:20), its theological value comes to the fore. African theologians have been insistent that Christianity needs to "drink from African wells" (Maluleke 1998) if it is to thrive.⁴ However, such theological reconstructions are of limited value to the study of religions as an academic discipline. The descriptive force of 'African Christianity' has thus been blunted by its ideological baggage (Chitando 2002:228).

Alongside the difficulties relating to the overall concept that characterises the study of the Christian religious tradition in Africa, the delineation of the modes of expression has also been problematic. The general trend has been to emphasise the three main strands, namely, 'mainline' churches, Pentecostal Churches and African Independent Churches.

Each one of these terms has its own limitations. However, it is possible to highlight the elasticity of the first two labels before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of 'African Independent Church' as a descriptive label. An appreciation of the controversies regarding terminology in Christianity in Africa is necessary for one to put the debates concerning AICs into their proper context.

Although Christianity has had a very long presence on the African continent, and there are indications that it penetrated places such as Ethiopia, Egypt and Cyrene during the first century (Pato 1994:152), it was owing to missionary endeavours during the nineteenth century that the religion took root in the continent. While the African church contributed such influential figures as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian and Cyprian during the second and third centuries,⁵ it was the efforts of foreign missionaries and local agents in the nineteenth century that prompted the religion's contemporary monumental growth. Various missionary bodies sent personnel from Europe and North America with the express aim of converting Africans to Christianity. Although it is too simplistic to attribute their success entirely to the colonial project (Sanneh 1989:4), it remains true that in most places missionaries benefited from the patronage of colonialists.

Various labels have been used to describe the churches that emerged from the efforts of missionaries. While the term 'mainline' has enjoyed currency, other labels have also been applied. These include, 'mission', 'traditional', 'orthodox', 'historic' and 'established' churches (Ayegboyin & Ishola 1999:18). The effect of these terms is to draw attention to their link to external missionary endeavours and to emphasise their fidelity to 'orthodox' Christian beliefs. To regard them as 'mainstream' (Weller & Linden 1984) and 'established' is to contend that they are an integral part of the social order in Africa. Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Salvation Army and other

mission-derived church traditions are often classified as 'mainline'.

Popular labels used to distinguish the older churches from AICs are indicative of the terminological difficulties bedeviling the subject. The fixation with European missionaries in the establishment of the dominant denominations threatens to efface the role of black evangelists. One of the leading scholars on the history of Christianity in Africa, Adrian Hastings, reasserts the importance of African missionaries by insisting that, "The Christian advance was a black advance or it was nothing" (Hastings 1994:437-438).⁶ In many countries, AICs attract more members than the mission-derived churches. This also problematises the contention that 'mainline' churches are 'bigger'. In Zimbabwe, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) has built a mission school, Mbungu High School, thereby undermining the assumption that only churches set up by European missionaries have schools. In Nigeria and Ghana, some Pentecostal churches have built universities. The distinction between 'established' churches and AICs and Pentecostals is therefore difficult to sustain in the face of these realities.

A longer narrative is required to comprehensively illustrate the limitations of the terms associated with mission-derived churches. Notions such as 'orthodox' or 'traditional' churches are steeped in theological discourses and are of limited value to the academic study of religions. They reinforce the conviction that Catholic or Protestant versions of Christianity are the 'prototype of religion' (Smith 2000:41). These become the benchmark against which the beliefs and practices of AICs are measured. It is within the same theological context that a Catholic historian of Christianity in Africa, John Baur, can identify 'defective and exaggerated teaching' and 'deficiencies' amongst most AICs (Baur 2000:67, 358). More

non-theological work on classifying mission-derived churches in Africa is thus urgently required.

Nor has the Pentecostal strand of Christianity in Africa escaped the predicament of classification. Recent publications by Allan Anderson (2004), Paul Gifford (2004) and Birgit Meyer (2004) have not settled the challenge of defining African Pentecostalism. Although Pentecostalism enjoyed a high profile in Christianity in Africa during the 1990s (Gifford 1990), debate concerning the characteristics of this phenomenon continues. As I shall illustrate below, distinguishing AICs from Pentecostal churches has proved contentious. The term 'Pentecostalism' itself may be misleading, and "there is very little agreement among researchers about terminology" (Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001:4). Some researchers have emphasised the role of electronic gospel music, the gospel of prosperity and attraction of young converts as key features of Pentecostalism in Africa. How to apply one label to such a widely proliferated and diverse phenomenon has proved to be a major scholarly challenge. Thus:

There are nagging questions about the African character of the movement, given the tendency toward eclecticism; there is need for a proper typology, understanding the interior structures, vertical and horizontal expansion, the external linkages and response to the socio-economic and political challenges. (Kalu 2000:104)

In this section I have sought to highlight the intractable difficulties that have characterised the study of Christianity in Africa. Scholars continue to grope for succinct and precise terms that delineate the research area, describe mission-derived churches and denote Pentecostal churches. A wide variety of competing terms has been applied, leaving writers in the discipline unsure of the nuances of these terms. Although the 'mainline' and Pentecostal labels have generated

terminological disputes, they have been surpassed by the confusion that surrounds the third strand of Christianity in Africa, namely AICs. In the following section I select AICs for detailed examination. I seek to illustrate the extent to which they challenge the phenomenological assumption that the phenomena of religion readily manifest themselves to the observer (Flood 1999:143).

3 Multivalency as a methodological problem: The case of AICs

The study of AICs has witnessed rapid expansion since the publication of Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets* in 1948. Sundkler attempted a typology, dividing AICs into 'Ethiopian Churches' and 'Zionist Churches'. While 'Ethiopian Churches' retained the structures and practices of mission-derived churches, 'Zionist Churches' emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit and had a completely different outlook (Sundkler 1948). Since its inception as a viable area of academic research, the study of AICs has faced a persistent problem of the appropriate use of terminology. Sundkler's tentative typology has been taken up and amplified by other scholars such as Martin West (1975:19) and Marthinus Daneel (1987:30). The field has, perhaps grudgingly, upheld this general division between 'Ethiopian' and 'Zionist' types of AICs. Studies on Ethiopianism (Chirenje 1987) and Zionism and faith-healing (Daneel 1970) have sought to outline ideological differences between these strands of AICs.

Like the earlier descriptions of African Traditional Religions, AICs have had numerous negative labels applied to them. They have been condescendingly described as native cults, separatist, syncretist or splinter groups (Sindima 1994:127).⁷ Missiologists, keen to distinguish them from 'authentic' versions of Christianity, certainly used such negative labels. Although he

later revised his conclusion, Gerhardus C Oosthuizen maintained that most AICs in South Africa were 'post-Christian movements' (Oosthuizen 1968:xi). Likewise, some colonial administrators and missionaries painted negative images of AICs, caricaturing them as childish aberrations from 'real' Christianity.

Although the question of causative factors lies outside the scope of this article, the focus of which is on appropriate terminology in the academic study of AICs, it remains important. Terms such as 'separatist' or 'splinter' movements are directly related to discourses on reasons for the emergence of AICs. Indeed, the issue of why AICs emerged and how to name them constitutes a key methodological theme. Debates on religion and reductionism (Idinopulus & Yonan 1994) have a direct bearing on terms applied in the study of AICs. Various scholars have propounded numerous theories that try to 'explain' or 'interpret' (Penner 2000:57) AICs. Researchers have argued that AICs were a result of multiple factors that include disappointment of local converts with the premises and outcomes of Christianity. Other factors, such as the translation of the Bible, divisions within Protestant Christianity, need for holistic healing and the failure of mission Christianity to generate a sense of community led to the emergence of AICs (Jules-Rosette 1987:82).⁸

The variation in terminology used to describe AICs constitutes a pressing methodological problem. Terms such as 'prophetic churches' or 'healing movements' tend to emphasise specific aspects of some AICs. Directly related to the preceding discussion is the observation that names that are tied to the emergence of AICs may not capture the growth and dynamism that is embodied within these movements. Labels such as 'splinter churches' may well be indicative of the schismatic roots of earlier AICs. However, the term says little about the contemporary vitality of the phenomenon.

While multiple approaches to the study of religion have received scholarly support (Connolly 1999), they may engender a peculiar difficulty in the study of AICs. As David Barrett (1971:147) notes, scholars from various disciplines bring their own disciplinary axioms that bear on AICs. As a result, terms developed in specific disciplines may not clarify the full character of AICs. Political scientists may view AICs as 'protest movements' in a parochial way, overlooking the religious creativity found in the phenomenon. Similarly, the tag 'prophet' has been used haphazardly and indiscriminately, creating terminological confusion (Johnson & Anderson 1995:13). It is therefore important for researchers to be aware of the multidimensional nature of AICs and to clarify their methodological assumptions.

The terminological confusion surrounding contemporary AIC studies is also vividly captured in the variation surrounding the term itself. While the labels discussed in this section illustrate methodological difficulties that emerge from a casual application of terms, the title 'AICs' itself has witnessed considerable reflection. In the following section I seek to highlight the changing interpretations of the acronym.

4 The slippery 'I': Multiple readings of AICs

While the academic study of religion emphasises the importance of accuracy and consistency in naming phenomena, the area of AICs poses a significant challenge. In this section, I endeavour to demonstrate the ambiguity surrounding AICs. In the first section I will illustrate the multiple interpretations that have been associated with the acronym 'AIC'. In the second section I will draw attention to the distinction between AICs and Pentecostal churches in Africa. An analysis of the description of AICs as 'New Religious Movements' is offered in the third section. Overall, this section

captures the terminological complexities bedevilling the academic study of AICs.

The acronym AIC means different things to different authors, underlining the multivalency I referred to in the previous section. Thus it may stand for African Independent Churches, African Initiatives in Christianity, African Initiated Churches or African Indigenous Churches (Pobee & Ositelu 1998:3). One of the leading scholars on AICs in South Africa, Allan Anderson, contends that, while an initial explanation of terms is always useful, it may no longer apply to the study of AICs. Against our insistence in this article that it is crucial to clarify terms, Anderson is persuaded that “this is a Western debate which is probably no longer useful” (Anderson 2000:8). Is the academic study of religion in Africa to proceed without performing the ‘first task’ of assigning names to religious phenomena? As I have argued, it remains critical that terms and concepts be applied consistently in the study of Christianity in Africa.

The term ‘African Independent Churches’ has enjoyed a lot of currency in scholarly circles since the 1970s. Its emphasis was on AICs as being free from mission support and control. Consequently, an independent African church has been defined as “one which has been founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans ...” (Turner 1979:92). However, a clear difficulty has emerged, rendering this definition contestable. As I have outlined in a preceding section, naming ‘mainline’ churches has not been an easy task. Furthermore, the ideology of self-reliance that was prompted by the moratorium debate in the 1970s (Wakatama 1976) has meant that many ‘mainstream’ African churches are ‘independent’. Perhaps the ‘law of obsolescence’ is now operational as far as the term ‘independent’ is concerned. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed have observed, “But now, with all of Africa independent north of the Limpopo, and with most of the mission-related Churches being independent

as well, the question arises whether there is any reason for using this term 'African Independent Churches'" (Sundkler & Steed 2000:1032).

In the wake of problems associated with the label 'independent', alternatives such as 'African Instituted Churches', 'African Initiated Churches' and 'African Indigenous Churches' have gained popularity since the 1990s. These labels are meant to set off AICs from mission-derived churches. Although most authors apply these terms interchangeably, it is possible to attempt a distinction between 'independent' and 'indigenous' strands of the AIC movement. Thus, "Those AICs which 'split off' from the 'mainline' mission churches are referred to as 'independent'" churches, whereas churches which were indigenously self-initiated are 'indigenous'" (Oosthuizen 1999:158). Writing from within the AIC movement, Paul Makhubu (1988:2) admits that 'indigenous' can be used interchangeably with 'independent', although the latter term is limited in that some white churches have also broken away from their mainline families.

The 'babelisation' of the study of the AICs has been exacerbated by the addition of another term, 'African International Churches'. Turner's insistence that an independent church is one that has been "founded in Africa, by Africans, for Africans to worship in African ways and to meet African needs as Africans themselves feel them ..." (Turner 1979:10) is no longer tenable, since some AICs have found their way to Europe and North America. Gerrie ter Haar argues that this new type of churches should be called 'African International Churches' (Ter Haar 1998: 21-26; 2000:20-22). A good example is the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) which has burst its seams by flowing from Nigeria into the Diaspora. Afe Adogame (1998) contends that it provides a 'home away from home' for black immigrants in Europe. This phenomenon of 'strangers in the promised land' (Ter Haar 1995) has started

receiving scholarly attention. Though African in origin, AICs have become global and international (Pobee & Ositelu 1998:52). However, it is clear that this further complicates the terminological debate in the study of AICs.

As the middle term in 'AICs' continues to undergo mutation, some scholars have sought solace in the label 'Pentecostal churches'. Indeed, the Zionist churches in Southern Africa and the Aladura in West Africa place a lot of emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Anderson insists on using the label 'African pentecostals' (Anderson 1999:391; 2000:27). Similarly, Harvey Cox (1996:246) maintains that, "The African independent churches constitute the African expression of the worldwide Pentecostal movement." However, this loose application fails to separate AICs from the phenomenon of Pentecostalism that asserted itself in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. As I indicated above, the Pentecostal strand of Christianity in Africa has posed classification problems.

It is necessary to set off AICs from newer Pentecostal churches in Africa (Gifford 1998:33). The newer Pentecostal churches ride on the wave of modernity, attract younger converts, preach a gospel of prosperity and are confrontational towards AICs (Dijk 2000:13). The term 'African Pentecostalism' is too elastic and does not capture the phenomenon in its entirety (Oskarsson 1999). Crucially for this article, it does not mitigate difficulties surrounding the naming of AICs. Furthermore, the application of other terms such as 'charismatic' and 'evangelical' implies that adopting the 'Pentecostal' label suggests embracing its synonyms. Matthews Ojo (1996:93) admits that in most parts of Africa the terms 'pentecostal', 'charismatic' and 'evangelical' are not strictly demarcated.

The term 'New Religious Movements' has also been applied to AICs. Popularised by Harold Turner, the term has been used mainly by scholars working in West Africa. Rosalind Hackett (1987) and Jacob Olupona (1989) have used the term to refer

to AICs. Arguing that the new religious system is different from the Christian or from the traditional African, Reiner Mahlke (1998:77) contends that the label 'New Religious Movements' is applicable to specific types of AICs. 'New Religious Movements' are seen as those that blend indigenous religious beliefs and practices with Christian ones. The encounter between African 'primal' beliefs and Christianity generates 'New Religious Movements', claim proponents of the label. Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe (1997:52) maintain the identification of AICs with 'New Religious Movements'.

It requires another narrative to exhaust the difficulties posed by the label 'New Religious Movements' to the study of Christianity in Africa. For our current purposes, it is important to note that, in 'global' religious studies the term is often associated with emerging spiritual traditions that include Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarianism and others (Bancroft 1989). The term also covers esotericism in Africa (Platvoet 1996: 833-85). Using the term without qualifying the sense in which it is applied will only add to the confusion. Although it is possible to refer to AICs as 'New Religious Movements' in Africa (as opposed to other New Religious Movements in the West) the term has a different connotation in other contexts. In addition, a survey of religious movements which came up in the history of Christianity shows that AICs are in continuity with other movements (Berner 2000:271). The label 'New Religious Movements' may, perhaps inadvertently, remove AICs from the Christian matrix to which they so consciously want to belong.

In an effort to distinguish AICs from other versions of Christianity in Africa, some writers have employed the term 'African Christianity'. As I highlighted in a previous section, ideological concerns have tended to diminish the value of the term. However, this term is often used to underline the perceived peculiar nature of AICs. It is argued that African converts have

developed their own brand of Christianity, one that is markedly different from mission-derived churches. Writing on the Nigerian situation, Benjamin Ray has maintained that Aladura Christianity is a Yoruba religion. According to him, "Aladura Christianity among the Nigeria is a distinctive form of Christianity that bears the full imprint of Yoruba traditional religion" (Ray 1993:266). 'African Christianity' may therefore refer specifically to AICs in the sense articulated by Ray.

From the preceding discussions, it is clear that the study of Christianity in Africa in general, and of AICs in particular, has been characterised by a multiplicity of terms. This terminological plenitude has in turn generated considerable confusion and uncertainty. When a popular acronym such as 'AICs' becomes subject to multiple interpretations, some ground-clearing becomes necessary. Furthermore, alternatives that have been proffered, such as 'New Religious Movements', 'Pentecostal Churches' or 'African Christianity', are also replete with difficulties. In the following section I contend that applying insights from a history of religions approach may mitigate most of the terminological difficulties in the study of AICs.

5 Towards consistency in the naming of AICs: Insights from the history of religions

The multiplicity of terms in the study of AICs and the attendant methodological problems arise from the fact that most of the researchers in this field are not trained in the history of religions. Missiologists, theologians, anthropologists and other specialists have been the dominant contributors on the burgeoning phenomenon. The history of religions has had a few practitioners in an African context. Peter McKenzie (1989:99) has rightly noted that "the study of religion as *Religionswissenschaft* arrived late in the day and is only in its early stages even today". Jan Platvoet (1989) has drawn

attention to the institutional environment of the study of religions in Africa south of the Sahara. Limited funds and governmental ideologies opposed to religion have been largely responsible for the paucity of material emerging from within the history of religions approach in Africa. Furthermore, the availability of scholarships in the area of Christian theology has attracted students and scholars, leaving the history of religions with few practitioners.

Although the distinction between history and phenomenology of religion is an important one, it is possible to consider the two as complementary (King 1972:39). The history of religions places emphasis on the historical development of specific religions, while phenomenology of religion concentrates on classifying the phenomena of religion. Some western scholars of religion have been highly critical of phenomenology of religion, although others have defended both the label and approach (Capps 1995:107; Sharma 2001:275-279). The debate, however, lies outside the purview of the present article, the focus of which is on the need for consistency in the naming of phenomena in Christianity in Africa.

The importance of adopting a history of religions approach in Africa has been noted by a number of scholars. Harold Turner recommended it in the study of AICs (Turner 1979:70-71). Stefan Schlang (1992) has also tentatively outlined the importance of the approach while examining AICs. He is convinced that applying insights from the history of religions will allow researchers to avoid theological reductionism. More importantly, he maintains that historians of religion will be better placed to capture the living reality of AICs (Schlang 1992:5).

As a discipline, the history of religions valorises conceptual ground-clearing before undertaking research. This task is particularly crucial in the study of AICs. In a context where a multiplicity of terms have been used for the phenomenon, the

classificatory thrust of the approach becomes significant. Applying phenomenological and historical principles, the proposed approach would minimise the use of pejorative and theologically-inspired concepts in the study of AICs. A history of religions approach would filter out those terms that imply that AICs are in one sense or another 'deviations' from 'standard' models of Christianity.

Adopting a history of religions approach in the study of AICs would also realign the study of Christianity in Africa towards the pursuit of scientific goals. The current terminological chaos is a result of the predominance of extra-scientific considerations. Thus,

Such a variety of names is problematic, however, if these names are to be used as scientific concepts. Discussion of this phenomenon will be very difficult and confusing if nobody knows, for instance, whether 'prophetic' and 'charismatic' are synonymous or whether 'movement' and 'church' are used interchangeably. (Berner 2000:267)

The expunction of theological and ideological biases in the study of AICs and inculcating a scientific spirit into the discipline should generate more consistent and accurate terminology. By isolating specific AICs for detailed investigation, the method minimises the danger of hasty generalisation. Too often, scholars want to apply the same term for the widely proliferated phenomenon of AICs. The history of religions approach is better placed to deal with this tension between intra-cultural intuitivity and cross-cultural applicability simply because of the detail it gives to methodological reflections. For instance, while the term 'Aladura' may be readily understood within a specific West African location, it should not be uncritically 'exported' to other contexts. In the same way, to

speaking of 'Zionists' in West Africa might be misleading, since they are a predominantly Southern African phenomenon.

In recommending a history of religions approach to the study of AICs, this article is not implying that the available literature is of limited value. If anything, this article is based on the observation that the sheer volume of material that has been proffered requires processing with special reference to the plurality of terms. However, this emphasis on the application of insights from the history of religions should not be misconstrued as implying that adherents of AICs are incapable of writing histories of their movements. Writing in the context of South Africa, where the call for blacks to be accorded space in the academy has been taken up, Hendrik Louwrens Pretorius has suggested that numerous factors militate against this enterprise.⁹ He maintains that, "Because Africans are to be involved in church history writing, a deficient sense of historical consciousness within the African worldview can be a stumbling block" (Pretorius 1995:22). He creates the unfortunate impression that there are inherent factors that inhibit Africans from becoming effective historians. Although adopting a more critical style, Franz Verstraelen (2002:32-36) also underlines the absence of magisterial works by African church historians.

The history of religions approach will facilitate the emergence of more historians from within the AIC movement. Without absolutising the importance of 'insiders' to the study of religion (Chitando 2001:51), it may be acknowledged that adherents have a significant say in the naming of their traditions. Terms that emerge from creative interactions with believers are likely to be less contentious than imposed categories. As more members of AICs take it upon themselves to designate their movement, more inclusive and acceptable labels may emerge. However, historians of religion should continue to classify types of AICs.

Historians of religion may also minimise the terminological confusion by undertaking historically-inspired comparative studies of AICs in the different regions of the continent. A comparative analysis of AICs in Southern Africa and West Africa, for example, would revamp the 'fired' typology of the phenomenon. Noting the historical development, similarities and difference between the 'Zionists' and 'Aladuras' promises new vistas for the discipline. It is from such studies that more consistent names may be developed.

Apart from contributing to the specific case of AICs, the history of religions offers a valuable perspective on Christianity in Africa in general. Theologians, social scientists and other practitioners have been encumbered by the tendency to regard Christianity as a homogenous entity. As Ninian Smart (1979:146) writes, "From the perspective of the history of religions, Christianity is Christianities: it is how it is expressed in human history, in amazing variety." In generating accurate and durable terminology within the academic study of Christianity in Africa, scholars need to appreciate the tradition's variegation and vitality. The history of religions therefore brings a distinctive thrust to the study of Christianity in Africa.

6 CONCLUSION

The study of Christianity in Africa in general and AICs in particular has been characterised by a continuous search for terminological exactitude. Theological bias and the absence of methodological awareness of the need for consistency in the naming of religious phenomena are some of the key reasons for the malaise. In this article I have highlighted most of the terms that have been applied to AICs, a provisional label adopted throughout this narrative. I have also argued that appropriating insights from the history of religions would give

the discipline a sharper cutting edge. A more judicious and rigorous assigning of names within Christianity in Africa may constitute one of the discipline's most significant contributions to the academic study of religion.

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ENDNOTES

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 - 2 A number of histories of Christianity in Africa have been published in the last decade. These include Baur 1994; Isichei 1995; Hastings 1994 and, Sundkler & Steed 2000. Critical reviews of those publications include Ojo 2000 and Verstraelen 2002.
 - 3 Religious studies in North America and Western Europe is generally considered to be a dispassionate, non-ideological, rigorous and scientific discipline. It emerges, however, that this understanding of the discipline and of 'religion' is a result of a specific ideology. Thus, Timothy Fitzgerald argues, "Instead of studying religion as though it were some objective feature of societies, it should instead be studied as an ideological category, an aspect of modern western ideology, with a specific location in history, including the nineteenth-century period of European colonization" (Fitzgerald 2000:4).
 - 4 The entire project of African theology is built upon the drive to have Christianity in Africa reflect an African ethos. Gwinyai Muzorewa (1985:98) and Emmanuel Martey (1994:65) argue that African theology seeks an authentically African perspective on the Christian faith.
 - 5 Kwame Bediako (1992) has sought to derive enduring principles from the writings of these theologians and relate them to contemporary concerns in African Christianity.
 - 6 The historiography of Christianity in Africa has witnessed a shift from portraying Africans as receiving 'objects' of missionary efforts to Africans as actors and subjects. Africans took on 'the missionary's task' (Ranger 1999) and the work of African agents in the spread of Christianity has been acknowledged (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:81; Ruzivo 2002).
 - 7 Harold W Turner contends that a 'bewildering variety of names' has been used for AICs. These include syncretist sects, prophet cults, Zionists, aladuras, separatist sects, post-Christian movements, millenialisms and messianisms, proto-nationalist, protest movements, independent, Pentecostal or spiritual churches (Turner 1979:49-50).
 - 8 The emergence of AICs has generated multiple explanations. Racial discrimination in Southern Africa, responses to urbanisation, the quest for belonging or a place to feel at home, personal ambition by founders, doctrinal differences and a host of other factors have been noted as precipitating Aids. See for example Barrett 1971, Daneel 1987 and Makhubu 1988 for helpful discussions of 'causative factors'.
 - 9 Pretorius (1995:96) condescendingly argues that the relatively low level of education among AICs, their general shortage of facilities and opportunities for history writing; their lack of knowledge of the historical origins and development of the movement and its relationship to mainline churches; the shortage of trained historians and theologians; a deficient sense of historical consciousness within the African worldview, a lack of sense of modern histories and historical reflection; the Africans' genealogical concept of history as opposed to the geographical approach of westerners; and a different time concept than that of western scholarship vitiate the African contribution to the history of AICs. He presents AICs as the 'Other' in his catalogue of their implied limitations.