Faber R 2025, Review of *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity* (Revised and Updated), M Shaw & WM Gitau, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 285-288

Review

Shaw, Mark & Wanjirau M Gitau, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity* (Revised and Updated). Langham Global Library, Carlisle, 2020. ISBN: 9781783688111, x, 368 pp.

Review by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

Since its publication in 1996, Mark Shaw's *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* has served well as a textbook for courses in African church history. The revised and updated version, co-authored by Wanjiru Gitau, will continue to do so. Shaw and Gitau provide a concise, yet comprehensive, account of a very broad topic. They survey nearly two millennia of history across a continent that is by no means monolithic.

As Shaw and Gitau rightly note, Africa is rapidly becoming a leader in global Christianity. Many expect that, by 2060, Africa will have a larger Christian population than any other continent. Non-African Christians do well to pay attention to African Christianity and its history. There are lessons to be learned here. Unfortunately, the revised and updated edition omits, rather than updates, the first edition's final chapter, 'Lessons from the Africa Story'.

Shaw and Gitau locate their work within the emerging field of World Christianity. They argue that 'a key concept of World Christianity is translatability' (9). The kingdom of God is 'a recurring and translatable core [in] the African story' (11). Just as 'no single church or individual or movement [can] capture the whole Christ' (17), so no period in African church history bears complete witness to the fullness of God's kingdom. The ancient period bears witness to 'the providential and theocratic rule of God' (14). In the

[1] Ryan Faber is a theological education developer at Theological Education by Extension Zambia and a research fellow in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University.

missionary period, the kingdom was primarily understood as 'the redemptive rule of Christ' (15). The post-colonial period prioritises the kingdom as 'the promotion of justice' (15).

These three periods roughly correspond with the first, third, and fourth sections of the book. The first section tells the story of Christianity in ancient Africa: in Egypt, North Africa, Ethiopia, and Nubia. The Nubian and Ethiopian stories return in the second section, which describes a 'clash of kingdoms' in Africa, especially Islam and African traditional religion (ATR), during the medieval period. The history of the church in Nubia and Ethiopia (and Egypt) 'dispel[s] the myth that African Christianity disappeared by the end of the middle ages' (91), though the church in Nubia did indeed disappear by the end of that period.

On the contrary, Christianity is 'deeply rooted in the African past' (83). Alexandria (Egypt) and Carthage (North Africa) were important centres in the ancient church. Each was home to leading theologians who made significant contributions to the development of Christian theology. The monastic tradition owes much to Egyptian desert fathers and mothers. Contra the prevailing theme of the period, the kingdom as theocratic rule, the latter 'witness to the kingdom as an inner spiritual experience' (41).

The second section of the book, medieval African Christianity (600–1700), includes a discussion of Islam and ATR. Shaw and Gitau argue that this period 'served to prepare the continent for the coming kingdom of Christ' (84). Both Islam and ATR share 'a longing for the kingdom of God' (101). Shaw and Gitau suggest that the concepts of kinship and kingship, especially the priestly role of the sacred king, in ATR were preparatory for the Christian gospel. Does this, in part, explain 'the dramatic spiritual turn in Africa' (2)?

The book's third and fourth sections discuss the missionary movement in Africa. Contra Shaw and Gitau's suggestion that their World Christianity approach overcomes the pitfalls of other methods, including missionary historiography, their history seems to employ that method. This part of their story focuses almost exclusively on the missionaries. The history of African Christianity is undoubtedly 'one of the most remarkable stories of church growth in the annals of church history' (239). Much of the credit, however, is

due to African evangelists. Shaw and Gitau acknowledge that 'most African societies first received the gospel from fellow Africans' (253), but their history does not tell those stories.

The book's final two chapters address post-colonial African Christianity. The first discusses the rise of African indigenous (or independent) churches (AIC). AICs are an important factor in African Christianity. Their inclusion reflects Shaw and Gitau's commitment to ecumenical historiography, just as their account of missionary Christianity included both Protestant and Catholic missions. However, Shaw and Gitau seem to fall into the pitfall of that methodology – it 'tends to be too uncritical of the kinds of Christianity it surveys' (8). They articulate well the kingdom visions that motivated the histories they recount, but do not evaluate those visions. For example, they fail to criticise the kingdom vision that inspired Afrikaner nationalism and supported apartheid.

One wishes that the book's final chapter on Christianity in post-independence Africa had been more thoroughly updated, especially its presentation of African Christian theology. The text remains largely unchanged from the 1996 edition. For example, in its discussion of black theology, the text still observes, 'whether this theology can survive the collapse of apartheid remains to be seen' (324). Surely now, thirty years since the collapse of apartheid, such an evaluation is possible.

Shaw and Gitau contend that 'millions of Africans still struggle with what it means to be both African and Christian' (2). They write about the apparent 'foreignness of Christianity in Africa' (2), even as they contend that Christianity is 'deeply rooted in the African past' (83), 'deeply rooted in African history and culture' (104). Yet their final chapter is silent on theological developments since publication of the first edition, such as the movement to recover the ancient African roots of Christianity. Shaw and Gitau say nothing about the decolonisation project, an important effort for 'the church becoming incarnate in the life of Africa', which they contend is 'the heart of the Christian story in Africa' (4).

The Kingdom of God in Africa remains a helpful introduction to the history of Christianity in Africa, even if, lacking updates that adequately account for

developments in African Christianity in the last thirty years, it remains largely a thirty-year-old text.