

APPRAISING THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY FOR WRITING LOCAL AFRICAN CHURCH HISTORY

Jordan Samson Rengshwat, PhD

Abstract

Church histories, written by Africans on a variety of topics are currently in circulation in Northern Nigeria. Some of these reconstructed local church histories ignore some major rules guiding historical reconstruction. As a result, such local histories leave more questions than answers in the minds of their readers. This study appraises the value and role of the philosophy of history in the task of local church history reconstruction. The qualitative method of research was used for this study. The findings reveal that philosophers and scholars of history made critical reflections on the historical process, and the meaning and nature of history as a subject of study. Through these reflections, they were able to come up with methods, rules, standards, patterns and theories that should guide the historians in their task of reconstructing local histories. The findings also reveal that the German equivalent of the English word 'history', *wissenschaft*, means 'the systematic quest for ordered knowledge'. This suggests that history is a science, but not in the manner of the natural sciences. It is a science because it requires investigation and questioning. It examines evidence meticulously and is critical of received views. It also presents its discoveries analytically in a systematic fashion. The study, therefore, recommends that writers of local church histories should approach the task of local church history reconstruction with a critical frame of mind. Besides, African church historiography should not be an elective, but a core course in the departments of religious studies and seminaries in Nigeria, as these are the constituencies from which many African church history writers often emerge. It should also be made part of the orientation needed for new priests and church workers who may find themselves saddled with the task of reconstructing local church histories.

Keywords: Northern Nigeria, history reconstruction, church historiography, ordered knowledge, historiographical school

Introduction

Many written local church histories, currently in existence in Northern Nigeria are characterised by avoidable but gross flaws. Some of these flaws

include lack of rigorous examination of evidence (Lar 35), preoccupation with secondary sources (Bdliā and others 5-112), poor handling of dating (Lar 40, 43⁷; Gutip 3⁸) and poor referencing. Flaws related to the handling of sources and referencing often raise suspicion about the authenticity of some of the narratives. It is these brazen flaws in existing written local histories that informed the need for this particular study.

It is important to situate this particular study in the context of existing literature. The only known works that are close to the concern of this paper are those by Ikenga Ozigboh and Musa Gaiya. Ozigboh's 'Doing Church History in Nigeria Today' is documented in *Nsukka Journal of History*, Volume 2, June 1990. As relevant as Ozigboh's work is, the writer did not discuss the philosophy of history and its role in the reconstruction of local histories. Rather, he dwells on assessing the general terrain of church history teaching and learning in Nigeria (71). Similarly, Gaiya's 'Writing Grassroots Church History in Nigeria' in *Jos Bulletin of Religion* centres on and revolves around a paradigm shift in historiography, from a Western viewpoint to an African perspective. Gaiya also demonstrates how grassroots church history could be written. However, he does not discuss the insights that the philosophy of history could give to the task of writing grassroots church history (127-149). Therefore, this particular study is relevant. The study appraises the value and function of the philosophy of history in historical reconstruction to help non-professionals and students in their task of reconstructing local church histories that are devoid of the flaws pointed above. The study uses the qualitative research design with particular focus on discourse analysis (Nieuwenhuis 71); using available extant sources to show the nexus between the philosophy of history and the writing of local church histories.

The Need for Reconstructing Reliable Local Church Histories

Many of the vital questions that we ask today have their answers from the past. Benjamin Jules puts this more succinctly when he stresses that, "At least part of the answer to any question about the contemporary world can come from studying the circumstances that led up to it" (2-3). Equally, if local church histories are not reconstructed today, our descendants will not find answers to

⁷ By 1951 Mangu town was not a Local Government headquarters as mentioned on page 40.

⁸ While Gutip traces the origin of COCIN as a national church to 1948, the minutes of meetings of the European missionaries that established the church clearly points to 1951 instead (Rengshwat 162-163).

some of their pressing and essential questions. In this light, there is a need to reconstruct local church histories that follow the standards and rules of the discipline.

The writing of local church histories cannot be left to professional historians or church historians alone because they are too few to handle the multitudinous task at hand (Ozigboh 81). The Apostle Luke, who wrote the third gospel and Acts of the Apostles was not a historian, but he was able to furnish the universal church with the first history text which is today called 'Acts of the Apostles'. When Luke died, he did not know that a later generation would declare his history manuscripts as sacred. Luke was successful in his task because he followed a research approach which he discloses in these words:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplish among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed (Luke 1:1-4 RSV).⁹

From the aforementioned six lines of Luke 1:1-4, the following research essentials are discernable:

1. Luke has a literature review ('many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplish[ed] among us').
2. Luke identified a gap in the literature reviewed (others wrote haphazardly and so missed some important components. Therefore, he wants to 'write an orderly account').
3. Luke knew and obtained the kind of sources that could help him write authentic church history (he rightly chose primary sources 'just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses').
4. Luke has a reader or stakeholder in view ('most excellent Theophilus').
5. Luke mentions the significance of his writing ("that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed").
6. Other important things to note from the above texts are that Luke was rigorous in his investigation ('having followed all things closely for some time') and systematic in his presentation ('to write an orderly account').

⁹The Revised Standard Version (RSV) is used here because it is among the generally accepted translations that can be used for scholarship.

As pointed out in the introduction to this paper, many of those who are engaged in reconstructing local church histories in Northern Nigeria are not sufficiently equipped to do so, like the Apostle Luke. Luke knew his way around the task of reconstructing local church history, although he was a medical doctor. Thus, Ozigboh identifies the need for professional historians to help local history writers. In his own words, he points out that it is important to ‘[...] lend them a helping hand, by publicizing and popularizing the rules and guidelines of the trade’ (81).

Methods of Church History as Products of the Philosophy of History and How Church History Methods Work

Like all other disciplines or fields of inquiry, church history has its standards and rules of best practice. These rules and guidelines were manufactured through the process of critical reflection (philosophising). They were arrived at by scholars of history and philosophy through many years of critical reflection on the meaning and nature of church history as a discipline, and the task of the church historian (Dray 1; Walsh 12, 37).

One of the rules of church history is that the boundary between history and fiction must be maintained. The boundary between critical and objective history on the one hand and hagiography (writings about saints) and subjective history on the other hand must also be maintained. The best way to maintain these boundaries is tied to the identification of reliable evidence and how to use the evidence without hiding, destroying or denying the existence of those that have contrary information to what the historian sets out to write (Briggs *Weighing Up the Evidence* 34). John Briggs warns that the historian should not allow the poor handling of sources to taint his image. In John Briggs’ words: ‘[...] there is a razor-edge division between integrity and prejudice, between doing justice to the sources and doing justice to one’s personality. There can never be any excuse for handling documents casually or sloppily’ (*Weighing Up the Evidence* 36). Writers of history are required to ‘[...] give all the historical actors their due, not privileging those who had the most power, or for whom we have more data’ (Frederick 220). The historian should not focus only on what the ‘great men’ did while completely ignoring data or sources that show the contributions or roles of ordinary folks in the event that is being reconstructed (Smith 7).

The dependability of sources and the objectivity in the use of those sources determine the authenticity of a written history. However, there is no historical

reconstruction that is 100% objective. This is because the writer is writing from a perspective. That does not however mean that the historian should not strive to be objective (Briggs *Weighing Up the Evidence* 35-36). When the historian is subjective, his work is not history but propaganda, half-truth or misinformation (Walsh 19-20). Thus, at the risk of repetition, the best way to guard against subjectivity is the way the historian uses his evidence. That is why primary sources and how to use them cannot be jettisoned for anything else in historical reconstruction. Primary sources include oral narratives from eyewitnesses, minutes of meetings of churches and organisations, correspondences, diaries, reports of committees, gazettes, and any other past materials of an organisation that might be useful in reconstructing the past of that organisation (Bradley and Muller 39-49; Walsh 18; Quinlan 131).

Primary sources are generally found in private or public archives. Examples of public archives are the national archives situated in Enugu, Ibadan and Kaduna in Nigeria. Public archives are open to all those who wish to use them. Private archives are records and relics of the past of a private organisation or family. Private archives are obtained through request and explanation of the researcher's real intentions.

The need for authentic sources or evidence is one main thing that distinguishes history from other genres of literature. Thus, the methodology of history is not the same as that of English literature or sociology. While history's principal concern is the distant past; from events of about thirty years backwards, sociology is concerned about the recent past and the present. It is concerned about what happens when man meets man. Thus, it is not possible to use quantitative methods like sociology does to determine or measure what happened in the distant past.

The historian will be successful in his quest for authentic sources if he is aware that history is a science, but not in the manner of natural sciences such as biology, physics and chemistry (Walsh 29-38). History is a science because:

*[...] it is critical of received opinion, rigorous in examining evidence and systematic in the presentation of its discoveries. That is not necessarily to suggest that history imitates the method of the natural sciences. Rather it is to claim that history is a science if that word is given the force of its German equivalent, *Wissenschaft*, the systematic quest for ordered knowledge (Bebbington 4-5).*

History is 'critical of received opinion' and 'rigorous in examining evidence'. This implies that when a historian is shown 'original sources', '[...] he does not automatically accept it. His attitude to it, if he knows his job, is always critical: he has to decide whether or not to believe it, or again how much of it to believe' (Walsh 18). This critical evaluation of sources is necessary because even among the people of God, there are false documents, such as the famous 'Donation of Constantine', which gave the papacy immense power during the medieval period (Southern 91-94).

Historical reconstruction is not chronicling what happened nor is it merely plotting what happened against time (Briggs *Weighing Up the Evidence* 35); rather, "[...] history is a narrative of past actions arranged in such a way that we see not only what happened but also why' (Walsh 22). In other words, '[...] historians are not content with the simple discovery of past facts: they aspire, at least, not only to say what happened, but also to show why it happened' (Walsh 16). When the historian asks questions about why things happened at every turn in his task of reconstructing the past, and if he can get answers to his questions based on genuine evidences (authentic sources), such credible work is called 'analytical history'.

Related to this is the fact that historical writing is usually articulated in the form of an argument, a central thesis and supporting theses. David Bebbington notes that:

Historical writing is therefore structured in the form of argument. Even when an area of the past is explored for the first time, its historian [...] is arguing a case. That is why a research dissertation in history [...] is called a thesis – a contention that is set up and maintained against possible attack. Argument with real or imagined opponents is of the essence of history [...] As a general rule, the more cogent the argument, the greater the historian (13).

However, the arguments must be backed by reliable evidences. The central thesis and the supporting theses are arrived at, through the skilful raising of questions. An example may be helpful here. When one is writing on the Nigerian civil war, one may need to ask what led to the war. Genuine investigation may reveal that the first coup and the dream of a unitary form of government for Nigeria were factors. From this preliminary finding, the central thesis or argument could be that the war was Northern Nigeria's resistance to the perceived

domination of Southerners. One can advance several other arguments, necessarily with evidence, in support of this central argument (Booth, Colomb and Williams 117).

Mere narration or description of what happened in the past, without demonstrating why things happened may have its place when the audience we have in mind are primary school pupils, who have learnt how to read and write. Never the less, this type of history should not be the goal of the historian who seeks to reconstruct a local church history. This point is accentuated by Briggs in these words thus:

Although the evidence is crucial to the writing of history, evidence, without comment, does not constitute history. Nor is history a bare narrative presented like an account sheet. The historian will hardly ever be content with a mere description of past actions. Rather he will want to reflect what actually happened in terms of an explanation [...] in terms of causes and consequences, of development and decline, or of comparisons and contrasts (Weighing Up the Evidence 35).

The Origin of the Theories of History and their Roles in Reconstructing Local Church Histories

This section dwells on David Bebbington's *Patterns in History* and other extant sources to demonstrate the origin and function of theories of history in the reconstruction of local church history. Bebbington's work shows how scholars' critical thoughts on the past or historical process or course of events reveal five designs or patterns or assumptions about history. However, David did not show how these theories of history could be employed in the writing of local church histories in Africa. These five designs are essential for guiding the study of history as this study demonstrates.

One of the designs that Bebbington identifies as he reflects on the course of events in history is the theory that history is cyclical. This school sees history as a pattern of cycles where events merely repeat themselves. Kingdoms and civilisations rise and fall, epidemics emerge and wane, nations become prosperous and poor, and communities experience peace and insecurity in an endless repetitive order or cycle. Bebbington notes that this view of history was expressed by the Stoics and seemed to have its origin in the ancient worldview of India, China and Persia. The Asian origin of the cyclical theory of history is corroborated by Sherman Barnes who notes that, 'The early Chinese system of

thought known as the Tao had a circular, or cyclical view of time' (26). This view of time is not peculiar to the Chinese. Africans in antiquity believed that time or history is '[...] a circle or a spiral' (Fuller 8). This view of history was challenged by the Judaeo-Christian view of linear history (Bebbington 19-42), which this study explains. A principal proponent of the cyclical theory in the twentieth century was Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975), who was a professor of history at Oxford University. Reading through Arnold Joseph Toynbee's magnum opus, *A Study of History*, David Bebbington observes that:

Toynbee compared the fortunes of whole societies larger than nations [...] he had identified a rhythm in the rise and fall of his twenty-one civilizations [...] He was interested not only in cycles, but in how cycles fitted together [...] Toynbee set out a cyclical pattern according to which the disintegration of any civilization is marked by the emergence of a universal state, a universal church and barbarian war-bands (39).

The assumption of the cyclical school is that all the historical events being discussed today have examples from the past because what is seen today happened in some forms in some climes in the past. The practical application of this assumption for historical reconstruction is that the modern historian should be alert to these past examples and compare the narrative at hand with those past examples to identify human tendencies as mankind interact with one another and with their environment. This underscores the fact that no historical event should be treated in isolation (Briggs *God, Time and History* 16). The historian should not only study the events that produced the event he is studying. He should also compare the event he is studying with similar events in other climes.

There is also the linear pattern or theory where history is viewed as a straight line with a beginning and an end. This theory presupposes that between creation and eschatology, there was a divine intervention. This intervention was the coming of Christ. This view of history is Judaeo-Christian. Its champion was Saint Augustine of Hippo. This view of history contains three elements namely: linearity, intervention and eschatology. This historiographical school believes that by Christ's intervention, as more and more people become religious, there will be progress towards better and better days; a kind of terrestrial utopia to be climaxed by the bliss of celestial utopia. The belief that history is linear and progressing towards better and better days for mankind tallies with modern assumptions about

the idea of progress in human development (Bebbington 17-20, 51, 65). The idea of progress in human communities and the prospect of realising a utopia within the framework of 'Christendom' were shattered by the events of World War I and II. As the modern historian attempts to reconstruct the story of an event which took place in the past, he should establish whether we can discern elements of progress or decline in the conditions, conceptions, aspirations, actions and inactions of actors in the event at hand, when compared to those of an earlier period (Briggs *Weighing Up the Evidence* 35).

There is also the progress theory or design. This view was born in the Enlightenment culture. This school sees people, and not God, as agents of change. The progress theory is not the same as the linear theory but their conclusions are similar. Like the linear theory, the progress theory believes that, by their efforts, dispositions and a new understanding of themselves and nature, mankind as agents of change are working their way towards a perfect world (Bebbington 68-91). As pointed out under linearism, this view of history was shattered by the events of the two Great Wars. The practical applications of the progress theory are two-fold. First, in reconstructing local church history, we should look for why things happened the way they happened by studying human actions and inactions, as man is an agent of change. We should not unduly attribute every cause of events to God because humans are not made as puppets but as responsible beings in God's image. The bane of church history writing in the Middle Ages was that monks who wrote about the church cited God or some supernatural forces to make for lack of sources or because they were too busy or lazy to look for sources. Modern church historians rightly look at such history writing with disdain. Houghton calls it 'monkish history' (40-43). Secondly, as the historian studies an event in the past, he should discern evidence of progress from the event, by comparing the event with similar events in earlier epochs.

In historicism, history is viewed as the story of the development of distinct national cultures. This historiographical school was born in Germany. Human cultures may be similar, but no human national culture is the same as another (Bebbington 92-116). This theory should help the emerging historians to know that no two similar events are the same. Each has the potential to deliver a unique contribution to knowledge, and the historian should be on the lookout for such peculiarity. Additionally, no two distinct cultures share the same values and worldviews. So, the historian should be guided by the dictum of cultural

relativism. He should not use the yardstick of his own culture to pass value judgement on historical actors from other cultures (Pam 62).

The last of Bebbington's patterns in history is the Marxist pattern or theory. According to Marxism, '[...] the historical process is created by man as he labours to satisfy his basic needs' (Bebbington 17-25). In Karl Marx's own words: 'The entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour...' (Quoted in Bebbington 117). This theory holds a materialistic conception of history. This assumption gives the historian a clue to human motives and how these motives are the catalysts for history-making. In seeking to explain the course of human events in the past, the modern historian should always remember to be on the lookout for evidence of material motives. This is important because nearly all actions and inactions of mankind centre on and revolve around some material motives. For example, materialism has been a catalyst for the crusades of the 10th to the 12th century and the slave trade of the 15th to early 20th century. However, materialism is not the only motive for human actions or inactions. Thus, the historian should be on the lookout for other motives such as religious and political (Briggs *Weighing Up the Evidence* 35).

Conclusion

Reconstructing local church histories is an important endeavour. The professional historians who are trained in the task of reconstructing histories are so few and the tasks, so multitudinous. Sometimes also, the tasks are so urgent that the professionals cannot do it alone. Currently, there are many written local histories by those who were not sufficiently equipped to do so. Such writers needed the insight provided by the philosophy of history over the years.

Philosophising by historical scholars about the course of events and history as a discipline over a period of time has produced theories, standards, rules and methods, which are essential for guiding and perfecting the reconstruction of local histories. The theories, standards, rules and methods produced by the philosophy of history should be publicised and popularised, wherever potential local church history writers are found.

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