BOOK REVIEW


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Thirty years ago it would have been difficult to find more than a handful of new academic books or articles on African Pentecostalism. Today it is nearly impossible to keep up with the burgeoning literature on the topic. In part, of course, this efflorescence reflects the runaway expansion of this form of Christianity on the continent, seen in everything from the regular appearance of new churches to the oft-mentioned Blood of Jesus Hair Salons and Victory Tailoring Shops. It is in the context of this ever-expanding body of work that Martin Lindhardt’s edited volume, Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies, attempts to take some soundings, as well as raise new questions.

Pentecostalism in Africa comprises thirteen relatively short essays, as well as an introduction by Lindhardt and an afterword by William K. Kay. Contributors include anthropologists, theologians, and political scientists. The first half of the book is focused on Pentecostal theology and ritual life and their effect on African Christianity more generally. The second half moves beyond the space of the church to discuss Pentecostalism’s relationship to the social and cultural life of the places it is taken up – how this religion impacts on gender relations, politics, and development. While the topics addressed in this volume are quite diverse, a few key themes emerge across the text.

First, a number of authors raise the important question of classification, of just what kind of Pentecostal – or, to use a term favoured by several contributors, “pneumatic” – Christianity we are talking about. Are the churches or believers in question classical Pentecostals, charismatic Catholics, or perhaps members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a group that Ilana van Wyk points out is significantly different from most (other) Pentecostal churches? While historians have generally been good at distinguishing between different types of Christianity, the same cannot be said for Pentecostal studies across the board, and the more fine-grained distinctions offered by several of the authors in this volume, most notably Allan Anderson, are therefore a welcome addition to the conversation. Efforts to classify different types of Pentecostalism...
also face some challenges. As Anderson notes, Pentecostalism is something of a moving target, difficult to pin down – thanks, I would add (following Smith, 2010), to its constant pursuit of the novelty and surprise. In Anderson's words, "African Pentecostalism continues to renew and reinvigorate itself in countless new forms of expression" (p. 69), and this means that any kind of taxonomy of Pentecostalism must have adaptability built in from the start.

The second theme that emerges across this book is the relationship between Pentecostalism and African culture, broadly defined. Most of the contributors argue that one of the main reasons for Pentecostalism's success on the continent is its affinity with African culture – its affective and eudemonic aspects, its focus on how spiritual forces impact human life, and its pragmatic emphasis on this-worldly problems. The one clear exception to this view is the piece by Jean Comaroff, which, in a move that echoes some of her earlier work with John Comaroff, describes Pentecostalism as more closely connected to the inner workings of late capitalism than to the particularities of African culture.

While this volume raises some important issues for the future study of Pentecostalism, I felt that it did very little to enter into the territory that it seeks to open up. On the whole, the book covers quite a lot of well-trodden ground, rather than push the boundaries of the field. Apart from a few key exceptions – including Katrien Pype's stimulating discussion of "liveliness" and John F. McCauley's work on Pentecostal "big man rule" – what is missing from this volume is a larger set of intellectual questions that would compel people who are not interested in Pentecostalism to read this book. Here, scholars of Pentecostalism would do well to take a lesson from the anthropology of Christianity. At its best this sub-discipline has engaged with questions at the heart of anthropological thought. In particular, the issue of conversion has allowed us to think more critically about how to theorize radical cultural change, to interrogate the extent to which anthropology is a "science of continuity," as Joel Robbins (2007) puts it, unable to recognize the kind of "break with the past" that believers claim to have experienced. It is no accident that the thing most people know about the anthropology of Christianity is that it is concerned with rupture. What makes people who do not study Christianity pay attention to this disciplinary sub-field is precisely its capacity to ask questions that reach beyond its borders.

As we look to the future of the study of Pentecostalism, it may be that we are at a crossroads. The data gathered by scores of scholars are extremely rich, pointing to a religion whose multi-layered character many of us are only just beginning to appreciate. The question is what we will do with this amplitude, this seemingly endless internal diversity. What questions will drive us as we think more deeply about Pentecostal expansion? What kinds of arguments does Pentecostalism allow us to make about religion, about Africa, about social change, or interpersonal relationships? While this volume suggests a few such lines of inquiry, it does very little to develop them in a way that will serve scholarship on Pentecostalism going forward.
References
