

Prenotandum; This review was published in *AASR-Newsletter* 19 (May 2003): 41-46. I have slightly amended the text, added a footnote, and inserted the pagenumbers in bold between square brackets.

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GHANA'S PENTECOSTALISATION

Omenyo, Cephas NARTH, 2002, *Pentecost outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana*. Zoetermeer [The Netherlands]: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 345 pp., ISBN 90.239.13445.0 (= PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 12.09.02; Missiological Research in the Netherlands, 25)

This well-written and well-documented PhD thesis traces the history of the 'unprecedented integration of charismatic features in the ethos of the mainline [42] churches of Ghana' (297), into their church services, promotional activities, pastoral care, and lay and ministerial training programmes (197-301). Thereby 'the hitherto sharp distinction' in Ghana between mainline churches and Pentecostals is blurred (219). Omenyo regards Pentecostalism as 'a phenomenon which is [...] fast becoming the most dynamic religious movement in the country' (11). 'No church can shield itself from it' (291). It 'cuts across all denominational boundaries' (291) and entails 'a major paradigmatic shift currently [...] in the spirituality, theology, practices and programmes of Ghanaian mainline churches' (301, 306). Omenyo, moreover, puts the 'charismatisation' of these – by history and background anti-charismatic – churches (302) in the perspective of the century long growth of Pentecostalism in Ghanaian Christianity. It began in its margins with the *Sunsum Asore*, 'Spirit Churches', a century ago, and is emerging now in its very centre.

Summary

The book is divided into four parts and fifteen chapters. Part I consists of chapters one to four. In it, Omenyo first discusses the problem, method, scope, structure and sources of this thesis (3-13). Then he surveys the socio-political situation and religious scene of modern Ghana (14-41), and surveys the history of Ghanaian Christianity (42-75). He concludes Part I with a survey of Pentecostal developments world wide in the 20th century as the framework of 'revival movements' in Ghana (76-98).

These he orders into four categories. They are, in chronological order, the AICs or 'Spirit Churches', emerging in Ghana since 1914; the classical Pentecostal movement, appearing in the 1920s; the neo-pentecostal non-denominational fellowships outside the established churches, manifest since the late 1960s; the independent, neo-Pentecostal churches emerging from some of the latter in the harsh economic conditions of the 1970s and 1980s; and the charismatic renewal groups in the mainline churches, which – leaving aside some 'early revival movements' – began to spread from 1965 when the several Bible Study and Prayer Groups in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana amalgamated into a national body (140).

The latter are discussed in part II, in chapters five to ten: in the RC Church (101-110), in the Anglican Church (111-126), in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (127-153), in the Methodist Church (154-168), in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (169-188), and in the Baptist Church (189-198). In part III, chapters eleven to thirteen, their spirituality (201-219), doctrinal emphases (220-246), rituals and programmes (247-273) are discussed.

In the fourth, concluding part, Omenyo investigates the present position of the 'charismatic renewal groups' in the mainline churches: whether it is one of 'dis-harmony' – tension, stigmatisation and separate status – as [43] in the past, or of 'harmony' – recognition, integration and control. He studies their spread in these churches with the help of theory about the 'diffusion of innovations'. Charismatic renewal is easily transmitted among church members because it perceived as an innovation with significant advantages for those practising it, such as healing and spiritual fervour. In addition, they view it as compatible with Christian tradition; and it is highly visible. Lastly, it is in particular attractive to them because it fits in closely with 'African spirituality', Omenyo's term for the traditional Akan world-view which persisted among most 'ordinary' Ghanaian Christians. Their pragmatic, existential concerns caused them to seek health and healing as the main salvific goods, and to practise the expulsion of 'evil spirits' a major means towards obtaining them (278-280, 30, 294-296, 302).

Attraction for church members does not, however, necessarily amount to recognition by church leaders, for institutional leadership is habitually not well disposed towards bottom-up innovations, particularly of the 'disorderly', ecstatic, faith-healing kind. They perceived them as exotic and extraneous (302) and often regarded them as 'time bombs for breakaways' (284). Only in churches with a centralised structure, in which the charismatic renewal groups organised themselves into a nation-wide structure, did they gain formal recognition and incorporation. In de-centralised churches, charismatic groups achieved informal recognition only, either because they were themselves decentralised too, or because church leadership continued to view them as potentially schismatic, or as 'spiritually elitist' and intent on imposing their Pentecostal spirituality on the whole church (280-289). Omenyo stresses that 'charismatic renewal groups [need to] be further integrated',

for ‘so far, the groups have not completely dominated their churches, rather they have been tolerated, recognised as they try to integrate’ (305).

In view of this history of tension and animosity between mainline church leadership and charismatic ‘renewal groups’ (302), Omenyo concludes his book by admonishing both sides. Charismatics should avoid ‘excesses’ and refrain from creating ‘counter-churches’. But on church leadership ‘it is incumbent [...] to be open to charismatic movements, acknowledge the charismatic gifts of their members, appraise them in the light of Scripture, and create spaces within their framework for their proper functioning’ (289-291, 305-306). They need to do so, for ‘the Charismatic Renewal as manifested in Ghana can be interpreted as a stream of a global movement initiated by the triune God as part of his sovereign plan for the world’ (294).

Evaluation

Basically, Omenyo traces the ‘long march’ by which the ecstatic rituals of indigenous religion and marginal Spirit churches have gained entrance into the hitherto Spirit-less centre of Ghanaian Christendom. It held them [44] in disrepute for a long time for the noise of their drumming, clapping, dancing, trances, exorcisms, healings and testimonies. His book deals with an instance of what I have called elsewhere ‘the revenge of the “primitives”’.¹ The pragmatic traditional religious orientation towards health, wealth, healing and protection from ‘witches’ (*abayifo*) and ‘evil spirits’ (*honhom fi*), termed ‘African spirituality’ by Omenyo, has persisted unabatedly among the rank and file of Ghanaian Christians. For most of the twentieth century, they could practise it only by means of ‘plural religious allegiance’, that is, outside the purview of the academically trained church leadership, who regarded it as ‘superstitious beliefs and [magical] practices’ (170, 220). Pentecostal healings and exorcisms are the latest thaumaturgical permutation of this traditional religion. This ‘innovation’ – if it is one – is now bursting in through the seams of established religion everywhere in Ghana. It contributes significantly to the bottom-up ‘localisation’, ‘Africanisation’ and ‘de-Westernisation’ of these churches (301-303, 306). Church leaders, however, continue to engage in top-down strategic countermoves to regain control over, and moderate, that ebullient ‘Spirit’, for they have always disliked charismatic ‘disorder’.

Such analyses are, however, mine. They are mostly alien to Omenyo. Though he is sympathetic to Pentecostalism and ‘African spirituality’, his scholarship is inspired primarily by his Christian mainline church faith. He is a scholar in Church History at the service of ‘the Church’ (77, 80, 82, 96) rather than a neutral historical

¹ Platvoet, Jan G., 1993, ‘De wraak van de “primitieven”’, *Godsdienstgeschiedenis van Neanderthaler tot New Age*, in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 47, 3 (1993): 227-243; English version: ‘The revenge of the “primitives”’, *History of Religion from Neanderthaler to New Age*, at <https://jangplatvoet.nl/content/uploads/2025/04/TheRevengeofthePrimitives-2.pdf>

scholar in a secular Science of Religions, which deals with 'the Church' as a belief notion about the meta-empirical, and grants no empirical church a privileged position. Of course, the history of academic research into humankind's religions teaches us that it comes in kinds: positivist-atheist, theologically inspired, and agnostic; and that each has its peculiar (descriptive and/or analytical) virtues and (methodological) vices. Omenyo's academic scholarship in religions clearly belongs to the religiously inspired type.

Crucial in Omenyo's theology is the *homo religiosus* tenet of modern Protestant liberal theology, which considers humans to be religious 'by nature'. Ghanaians are, therefore, says Omenyo, 'endowed with a religious ontology and epistemology' (24, 26) and a 'deep religious and spiritual quest' which causes them to search 'for an authentic spirituality' (74). Omenyo falls in line here with the commonality of modern Protestant African theologians which accepts the post-colonial pan-africanist 'invention of tradition', that Africans are notoriously and/or incurably religious. The first of these two positions causes him to present a 'Hellenising' (Okot p'Bitek) and Christianising picture of Akan indigenous religion. He 'Hellenises' by introducing Greek metaphysical concepts into Akan notions of *Nyame* ('God'). And he 'Christianises' by presenting the 'gods' (*abosom*) as intermediaries between humans and an 'omnipotent' and 'omniscient God', who perform specific duties [45] 'under God's control' (27). His *homo religiosus* position can also not be squared with the 6.2 % Ghanaians registering as 'without religion' in the 2000 census (25), and with the processes of secularisation afoot in Ghana and the rest of Africa.

Omenyo occasionally slips from historical description into metaphysical theology when he pronounces faith-bound verdicts, which can neither be proved true nor false by historical research. Examples of such 'boundary jumping' between the empirical and meta-empirical realms are his discussion of the question whether or not Montanist ecstasy was demonically inspired, and whether Montanists can, or cannot, be branded as 'heretics' (81). Another is, whether Münster's interpretation of Scripture was 'fantastic' and that of Luther correct (84). A third is his assertion that 'there are excesses and deviation inherent in the beliefs and practices of some charismatic movements' (86) 'due to their radical and uncompromising approach' (137) and their 'inordinate concern for material well-being' (208-209). A fourth, that the reasons Pentecostals give for praying aloud are 'quite untenable', 'for God is not deaf nor does he slumber' (205). And a fifth, that those who attribute their 'uncontrollable' (viz. ecstatic) behaviour to their being 'led by the Spirit', which betrays 'lack proper understanding of how the Holy Spirit works' (205). Yet, he asserts, they are 'part of [the] sovereign plan [of the triune God] for the world' (294).

Omenyo also hands out prescriptions, particularly to unruly ecstasies. He holds that charismatics must be moderated properly, for they are liable to grossly distort

the truth; to indulge in ‘ethical rigorism’, ‘doctrinal eclecticism’, and extreme exclusivism. They also cause tension in ‘the church’ by their ‘spiritual elitism’ and the presumption that they alone have ‘the “full gospel”, and [possess] a monopoly of the Holy Spirit’. They also unduly emphasise their spectacular gifts (219, 230-231, 245, 272, 287, 288).

His theological inspiration makes him also reject recent important empirical approaches to Pentecostal developments in Ghana. He regards those of Max Asimeng and Brigit Meyer as merely utilitarian, mono-causal and reductionist, for they deal, he says, with charismatic religions as problem-solving mechanisms only. ‘Thereby [they] disregard[...] other causal explanations’ (232). He identifies those as the ‘crucial theological considerations [that] also occupy the attention of Ghanaian Christians: the desire to praise God and be loyal to Him, redemption from sin, and eschatological beliefs (desire to go to heaven), etc.’ (233).

Omenyo, therefore, adds ‘providential causative explanations’ (294), which presuppose the reality and operation of the meta-empirical realm as postulated by modern Ghanaian Pentecostal and other Christians. Omenyo suggests, therefore, that the Pentecostal developments need to be explained not only by empirical, testable data, but also by meta-empirical ‘causes’, the existence and operation of which can neither be verified nor falsified. These [46] include also ‘the reality of both Satan and demons’, and the ‘spiritual warfare’ between Christians and Satan. And he seems also to follow Asamoah in asserting that ‘witchcraft is real’ and part of that war with the devil (234-235).

In conclusion

Despite my reservations, it seems likely that Omenyo’s thesis may be reckoned soon as a milestone in the academic study of the religions of Ghana. It is a book that not only ‘church historians’, but any student of the religions of modern Africa, and in particular of Ghana – whether of positivist, religious or agnostic persuasion – will need to read carefully and discuss critically.

Such a discussion would raise important points, e.g. in respect of Omenyo’s assertion that the Pentecostalisation of the mainline churches of Ghana is ‘unavoidable’ (11): ‘no church can shield itself from it’, for ‘Ghana abounds with charismatic experiences and the environment favours it’ (289, 291). I would argue that that analysis, if correct – as it likely is –, needs to be complemented by another, to wit that such a development produces its own ‘seeds of destruction’. If Pentecostal developments in Europe in the twentieth century have any predictive value for those in Africa in the twenty-first, it seems likely that the Pentecostalisation of the mainline churches of Ghana will ‘churchify’ the Pentecostals in the mainline churches. Within a few decades, their victory will de-Pentecostalise them. Church leadership, unsympathetic with unruly ecstasies, needs only to give them positions in the leadership, and sit back and wait. One major outcome of world wide com-

parative studies in spirit- (and Spirit-)possession is that it needs 'peripherality' to flourish. Charismata flourish in the margins of institutions, but shrivel in their centres, for even more enticing bounties are to be found there.