

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

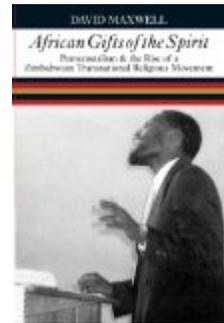
Matthew Eric Engelke. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 321 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24904-2.

David Maxwell. *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. 272 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1738-6.

Reviewed by Erica Bornstein

Published on H-SAfrica (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Peter C. Limb



## Two Views of African Christianity

These two outstanding books offer intersecting histories of African independent churches in Zimbabwe. Matthew Engelke's ethnographic study focuses on the Apostolic Friday Masowe church while Maxwell's book is a historiography of the Pentecostal Zimbabwe Assemblies of God (ZAOGA) church. The two churches are located in Zimbabwe, but have histories that extend across borders and continue to theologially influence Zimbabwean Christians and others in the African diaspora.

Engelke turns his ethnographic lens to the African independent church movement—specifically the work of one apostolic sect, the “Friday apostolics” in Zimbabwe, led originally by Johane Masowe. He does an extraordinary job of contextualizing this church both theoretically and historically. He situates the church in conversation with the legacy of colonialism and missionary Christianity in southern Africa, the history of Christian epistemology more broadly, the semiotic “problem of presence” in the language of religious belief, and the phenomenological question of how to reach the divine in churches that circumvent the Bible. If this seems a large endeavor, it is, and it is a worthwhile one. I recommend readers read through the sophisticated theoretical and historical landscape that Engelke maps out in order to appreciate better the rich portraits of leaders and members of the church he contributes later in the book.

The book is divided into two parts: the first examines the historical use of the Bible in colonial and postcolonial Africa—as a tool of subjection and liberation. The second part examines the ritual and everyday life of Friday Masowe apostolics through the ethnography of congregations in Harare and the neighboring township of Chitungwiza. The Johane Masowe church is “live and direct.” Its members and leaders do not read the Bible, and see themselves as following unfettered doctrines of Christianity. Why the Bible is forsaken and how its believers consider themselves to be participating in a more “true” version of Christian theology is the fascinating subject of this book. What Engelke does such a good job of providing with his ethnography is an understanding of apostolics in a distinct time and place. It is not an upstart, reactive, or fly-by-night religious movement but instead, a thoughtful church, a gathering of ideas and people, with proper genealogies of its prophets, and competing accounts of their own history. The book lays the ground for viewing apostolic faith as a key component in the landscape of contemporary African Christianity—one that continues to define and redefine itself in relation to “other” Christianities in the region that depend on the Bible and have radically different conceptions of spiritual truth. The “live and direct” faith, unmediated by the materiality of the printed word, of the Friday apostolics is intriguing. It seems to be no accident that at the

time of the author's research on the church in Zimbabwe (eighteen months over a seven-year period, 1993-99), the material conditions for most Zimbabweans increasingly meant political and economic struggle. As with the colonial era in which the Johane Masowe church emerged (1930s) the economic and political difficulties of material life in Zimbabwe of the late 1990s seem to urge believers to shed the shackles of the material world. What better time to throw off worldliness than when the world stings?

Engelke prefers not to dwell on the political economy of the Masowe weChishanu Church to explore its theology, particularly, what he calls "the problem of presence." Drawing on semiotic and poststructuralist theory, Engelke examines how believers experience the presence of the divine—that which cannot, by its very nature, be represented. He does a spectacular job of describing people involved in the church through a series of portraits. As one reads, one gets a sense of personalities, live and direct, filled with material desires and ethical contradictions. Engelke traces the rise and fall of particular charismatic leaders, and analyze the tensions of leadership in a church where personal fame within the church entails its own demise. He takes great effort to place this church in Christian theological history and philosophical context. I read this as an act of respect toward the church and its members. The writing is humorous, vivid, and fluid.

While the defining feature of Friday apostolics may be that they reject the Bible, what is unique about the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God (ZAOGA) Pentecostal church is its transnational missionary zeal. Contemporary Pentecostalism, according to David Maxwell, not only answers the cries of neoliberalism, it speaks its language. Perhaps it is the opiate of global capitalism. ZAOGA neither inspires the remaking of society, nor the withdrawal from it (as do the Friday apostolics described above). Instead Pentecostalism speaks the language of accumulation, and promotes the successes of individual selves. Maxwell does a brilliant job of documenting the American inception of this discourse and its transnational linkages. Unfortunately, Maxwell does not dwell on the dangers of what it means to employ this discourse in Africa, particularly considering its emphasis on the nuclear family.

The map on the first page of Maxwell's book is a vivid image of ZAOGA's missionary expansion from 1961 to the 2000s. From Zimbabwe, arrows move north, south, east, and west, to neighboring nations in southern Africa, as well as across the globe to London, Germany, Glasgow,

and Texas. The book from the start documents Pentecostalism as a global movement, emerging from the work of early missionaries who took advantage of print mediums in Europe and America. Maxwell too, uses both historical and current printed pamphlets as material for his analysis. He begins the book with the birth of Pentecostalism in 1908 and, perhaps because he is a historian, the chronology of time leads his narrative. He takes us through nationalist struggles and African independence movements. Despite the political focus that contextualizes his analysis, Maxwell does not lose sight of more theological concerns of the church, including healing, evangelism, and church growth. ZAOGA emerges in the 1980s as a missionary force of its own, in Zimbabwe, in Africa, and in Europe. In contrast to the otherworldly focus of the Friday apostolics, the ZAOGA Pentecostals are positively worldly.

Maxwell is critical of Ezekiel Guti, the leader of ZAOGA, and with good reason. Maxwell documents how, in Guti's quest for power, he has turned himself into a cult-promoting his friends and family to leadership roles in the church while eliminating any leadership threats from within. There are obvious parallels to Robert Mugabe's style of state leadership, although the consequences might not be as dire as they are for threats to Mugabe's power. Many churches break away in the course of ZAOGA's growth. Maxwell's allegiance is clearly to church members of ZAOGA; he is critical of its leaders. Although Maxwell claims to present "both sides," he is not a neutral observer (and there is no need for a writer to be a neutral). At times the tone he uses to describe Guti's ascension to power in the church is scornful. Nevertheless, like Engelke, Maxwell has conducted extensive research and builds his argument through a wealth of ethnographic and historical examples.

Both books are concerned with the questions and political challenges of how to reach the divine, to go beyond the material conditions of life. Both churches are at once postcolonial and a product of colonialism. Combined, the two books offer snapshots of what Zimbabwean churches are today in the global political economy of African Christianity.

The books speak to a classic subject in the history of religion in Africa—the African church—but place the topic in the context of neoliberalism, charismatic leadership, and social movements. Addressing these two churches as movements provides a segue to discussing church concerns as contemporary social problems. The serious political and economic issues that Zimbabweans face to-

day are touched upon in the extensive historical accounts offered by the two authors. Both churches are in critical dialogue with colonialism, neoliberalism, poverty, and global inequality, and have different responses to technology—ZAOGA embraces it, while the Friday apostolics reject it. Both books focus on “a church” in a traditional methodological frame. Yet, they also attempt to go beyond church boundaries. The churches traverse two divergent paths: the Friday apostolics reject modern life (texts, technology) in favor of prophets, while the ZAOGA Pentecostals use modern technology to fos-

ter the charismatic reach of its leaders. In both churches one finds the importance of healing, speaking in tongues, cults of personality, and the importance of charismatic leadership. And in both churches, we learn how their priests and prophets struggle to mitigate church members’ desires for hope in Zimbabwe, for guidance, and for relief from the struggles of poverty.

These two books will be highly useful for readers interested in African studies, religious studies, the anthropology of Christianity, the history of African churches, and social movements in Africa.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** Erica Bornstein. Review of Engelke, Matthew Eric, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* and Maxwell, David, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24032>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.