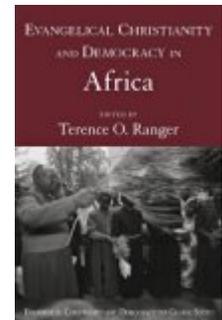


Terence O. Ranger, ed.. *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xxx + 267 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-530802-0.



Reviewed by Asonzeh Ukah

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Commissioned by Gene Mills (Florida State University)

Many evangelical Christians in Africa frequently insist that “Christianity is not a religion; it is a way of life.” As a way of life, evangelicalism, and particularly its Pentecostal-charismatic subset, is assumed to influence the totality of life of a believer. It is in this sense that evangelicalism is expected to have an impact on social, economic, and political ideas and actions of believers. While a good number of scholarly publications exist on the emergence and rapid expansion of a new form of Christianity in Africa during the later part of the twentieth century, there is a paucity of empirically based research on the impact of this new Christianity on the political economy of Africa. The collection of seven essays (six of which were research reports and one a response) edited by Terence O. Ranger is a welcome volume in an area that desperately thirsts for such refreshing insights. Unique to this volume is its embeddedness in the African reality. With the exception of the introduction and a brief response written by Ranger and Paul Gifford respectively, the core chapters were written by African researchers, many of

them living and working in Africa. Perhaps this is the first and only volume in which expatriate scholars and researchers have not dominated studies of African politics and culture.

The fundamental theoretical issue foregrounding any treatment of the relationship between religion and politics in Africa is “the issue [of the] relationship of the sacred to the temporal.”[1] As Ogbu Kalu argues, “Pentecostal theology of [political] engagement [in Africa] is a trend that became more visible and overt in the 1990s”; and quite fittingly, the project that gave birth to the volume under review covered the contemporary period of the 1990s and early 2000s.[2] The case studies contained in this volume are in some sense a more empirically nuanced continuation of some of the cases treated by Paul Freston’s *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (2001).

In a useful and lengthy introduction to the six case studies in this volume, Ranger states that the authors of the different chapters adopted a broad

definition of “evangelicalism” based on David W. Bebbington’s four pillars of conversion, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism, discussed in his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989). The adoption of this definition, not unproblematic in itself, broadened the scope of investigations to include evangelical strands in mission churches as well as Apostolic and Zionist movements in southern Africa and their Aladura counterparts in western Africa. The issue with this inclusive scope of coverage, which lumps together African Initiated/Indigenous/Independent Churches (AICs), evangelical movements within mainline churches, and the newer Pentecostal-charismatic churches, is that it becomes difficult knowing what is excluded in the Christian traditions in Africa. Practically and in the sense used in this book, evangelicalism is every Christian tradition other than Catholicism.

Another definitional problem tackled in the introduction is that of “democracy.” According to Ranger, democracy is not a set of doctrines or structures but “the achievement of participation in voting, in discussion, in self-assertion and self-help, in the establishment of a democratic culture both within church and state” (p. 6). This volume, therefore, aims at examining the complex ways in which evangelical Christianity—in all its complexities, contradictions, and mutations—deploys political theology and praxis in the critical phase of Africa’s Third Democratic Revolution principally concerned with the cultivation and sustainability of democratic culture. The six case studies are based on Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The first chapter on Nigeria by Cyril Imo deals with the reaction of evangelical Christians to the expansion of Sharia law in northern Nigeria by “evangelical” Muslims since 1999. The chapter claims that high profile evangelical Christians have made considerably positive contributions to Nigeria’s Fourth Republic while “increasingly radicalized Muslim[s]” in northern Nigeria

have sought to undermine the expansion of democratic space by the introduction of Sharia law in some states because a Christian southern Nigerian was the president of the country (p. 49). The chapter concludes that militant Muslims have radicalized evangelical Christians who are now prepared to, and in some cases do, initiate violent anti-Muslim attacks. There is an irony in the situation as the author contends that violent attacks initiated by evangelical Christians have deescalated violence in the region. The more important contradiction here is that Muslims have set the agenda, context, and *modus operandi* for evangelical political activism in Nigeria.

The second chapter by John Karanja describes the activities of evangelicals in the shaping of democratic discourses and practices in Kenya. Karanja observes that Christians from mainstream evangelical churches have played more important and decisive roles than those from less well-established churches whose actions have “tended to be shaped by more narrow considerations, such as self-interest” and survival (p. 67). The chapter details how Daniel arap Moi, who claimed to be an evangelical, was intolerant of dissent and pluralism or decentralization of power.

The “evangelical politics” of Frederick Chiluba, the erstwhile Zambian president, who declared the country a “Christian nation” on December 29, 1991, is the subject of the third chapter. Written by Isabel Apawo Phiri, this chapter chronicles the travails of a failed (evangelical) messiah whose politics and policies concretely demonstrate how *not* to mix evangelicalism and politics in Africa. Like in Kenya and Nigeria so also in Zambia; self-avowed “evangelical politicians” in positions of power brook no opposition or dissenting voice, nor willingness to respect the constitution or accept non-evangelical citizens as equals.

In the fourth chapter, which deals with nascent attempts by Zimbabwean evangelicals to

lay a democratic foundation for their country, Isabel Mukonyora surveys the opinions of mainline evangelicals from such large denominations as Zimbabwe Assemblies of God (ZAOGA) and the Family of God Church and discovers that the leadership of these churches hold views at variance with what their followers believe should be the “proper” relationship between the church and democracy (p. 139). The author further describes what she calls “other world Christians” who maintain that “Christians must pray to God about Zimbabwe and not get involved in politics” and that “it is not the business of evangelical Christians to sort out the affairs of this world” (pp. 141, 143). Another group of evangelicals who are involved in what she terms “Salt-of-the-Earth Evangelical Politics” adopt capacity building, advocacy, consultancy, arbitration, reconciliation, restoration, enlightenment, and empowerment. The chapter concludes that “evangelical Christianity [in Zimbabwe] provides an increasingly buoyant springboard for the discussion of important issues of justice and freedom” (p.159).

Chapter 5, written by Teresa Cruz e Silva, provides useful insights into the history of the interface between Christianity and politics from the colonial era through the postcolonial period to contemporary times in Mozambique. Although constitutionally a secular state guaranteeing separation of state and church and freedom of religion, postcolonial Mozambique developed a stronger relationship with Protestant churches than with the Catholic Church—which was the de facto state church during the colonial period. Focusing on two groups—Methodists and Zionists—which the author claims “are both evangelical and potentially democratic,” Silva describes a new culture of active citizenship training and advocacy as gradually being entrenched in the country (p. 162). The author concludes rather paradoxically that “even though evangelicals do not consistently practice their own values in their internal governance,” their activities are “conducive to basic democratic principles” (p. 187). If a church

contradicts in practice what it teaches, it compromises its authority to speak truth to political power.

In his chapter on South Africa, Anthony Balcomb describes the role of evangelicals in the democratization of South Africa. Balcomb asserts that the role of evangelicals in South Africa has been ambivalent and constructs five broad categories of responses from evangelicals: the conservatives, pragmatists, protagonists of the “Third Way,” protagonists of the alternative community, and liberationists. Illustrating each category with a representative figure, he concludes: “the role evangelicals have played in South Africa’s democratization has been varied, complex, and ambivalent, and yet significant nonetheless” (p. 220).

The final chapter is a “Response” by Gifford, who is renowned for his original research on Africa’s new Christianity. Because much of the six case studies were researched between 1999 and 2002 and the chapters written soon after, there was a pressing need to update the chapters before publication. An afterword by the editor does this but with some gaps still evident.

Some chapters in this collection needed to have made, but failed to make, a distinction between a civilian government and a democratic one. Evangelical Christians in Africa as elsewhere have been more pragmatic than principled in their varied relationships with the state. And when they embrace politics, they do not engage other citizens who are non-evangelicals as equal, thereby undermining the fundamental principle of democracy. As important as these chapters are, they failed to anchor their analysis within the broader space of the relationship between religion and the state. These shortcomings notwithstanding, this book deserves the attention of scholars and students of African culture, politics, and religion, and should therefore be in university and college libraries as well as on graduate and undergraduate syllabi.

Notes

[1]. Jeff Haynes, "Popular Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1995): 89-108, quotation on 93.

[2]. Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 213-214.

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