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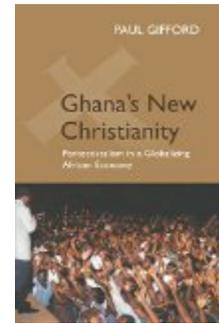
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Gifford. *Ghana's New Christianity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 230 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21723-3.

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Prosperity Gospel in the Superchurches of Accra

A culmination of years of intensive field research, Paul Gifford's *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* is an immensely rich analysis of a new type of prosperity gospel that is flourishing in Ghana today. Gifford, a professor of African Christianity at the School of Oriental and African Studies, immersed himself in the culture of the charismatic and Pentecostal churches of Accra by attending hundreds of services, conventions, conferences, crusades, and prayer sessions, in an effort to find out just why these churches are so appealing to Ghanaians. The resulting work provides insight into the novel forms of Christian worship that are developing in Africa today.

No two of these "newcomer" churches are exactly alike. Some of them are part of a global Pentecostal movement, with strong connections to the United States and Nigeria, while others are one-man churches built around a single charismatic pastor. What they have in common is their dogmatic divergence from the more conservative "mainline" Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches that emphasize salvation in the afterlife; the "new" Christian gospel is about gaining divine favor for wealth and success in the here and now.

Gifford focuses on the most prominent pastors and their corresponding superchurches—what he calls the "premier division" players within the multidivisional Ghanaian church leagues (p. 24). The big names include the erudite Mensah Otabil of the Central Gospel Church, born-again Nicolas Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel,

former physician Dag Heward Mills of the Worldwide Lighthouse International "Mega-Church," TV personality Bishop Charles Agyin Asare of the World Miracle Bible Church, converted Muslim Prophet Salifu of the Jesus Is Alive Evangelistic Ministry, and Bishop David Oyedepo, the local voice of Nigeria's Winner's Chapel. These men have become icons in Ghana and have spawned an industry of the gospel that uses radio, television, and print media to turn them into national celebrities. Their sermons promise heavenly blessings in the form of new jobs, cars, houses, and other types of achievements. They also offer protection from the "curses of Satan"—misfortune, unemployment, poverty, and other impediments to success. According to the new Christian logic, one can be blessed by making generous donations to these churches, and expect bountiful earthly gains in return, or, as Gifford phrases it, a "share in Christ's victory over sin, sickness and poverty" (p. 48).

This prosperity gospel is not completely new. Within the sermons of these pastors, Gifford finds themes borrowed from American preachers like Texan prophet Kenneth Hagin as well as rhetoric derived from self-help gurus like former preacher Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). However, the pastors of the new churches are also innovators, localizing their ideas according to the particularities of their congregations. Gifford describes how Bishop Oyedepo of Winner's Chapel inverts a Western reading of the scripture by telling his congregation not to be meek like sheep, but to be bold and assertive like lions. Oyedepo tells them

to roar and shout and claim what they deserve by divine right: “The boldness of my countenance is changed today. My sheep nature is changed to a lion nature” (p. 59). Indigenous concepts of evil are also reconceptualized with new metaphors in the new gospel. At Prophet Salifu’s Alive Ministry, the battle against invisible witches and water spirits is described as an ongoing war against Satan’s Air Force and Satan’s Navy (p. 194).

While every sermon is different, they all contain the stated goals of achieving wealth and success. In some cases, these pastors tell their followers that they can become wealthy by drawing on the same powers that made Jesus wealthy. Agyin Asare tells his followers that Joseph and Mary started out poor, but “as soon as Jesus came into their lives money started coming in,” (p. 76) a reference to the gifts of the Magi. Stories of wealth and prosperity from the Old Testament are also popular. As a biblical figure, King Solomon is lauded not for his wisdom but his wealth, measured in U.S. dollars. Agyin Asare estimates the value of King Solomon’s temple at \$100 billion, while Heward Mills averages King Solomon’s annual income at \$19 million (p. 77). Another pastor calculates David’s donations to the temple at \$32 billion. Gifford explains that the purpose of these stories is to encourage people to give generously to the new churches, in the form of tithes as well as additional gifts. In return for their financial commitment, the munificent are sometimes anointed with olive oil, a “transfer of unction” believed to bring exponential financial returns (p. 60). Of course, the churches (and presumably the pastors along with them) get rich too, but according to Gifford’s sources, this is only logical. As Agyin Asare phrased it: “When people see your church and pastor, they should say: ‘Their God is rich’” (p. 50). In this sense, the new Christianity is about literally building a new and prosperous Jerusalem, an expensive proposition that requires financing in the here and now.

Much of this is anathema to “mainline” understandings of the scripture. The Sermon on the Mount is rarely mentioned in the preaching of the new Christianity, nor is atonement for sin, redemption in the afterlife, or a millenarian concern for end times. The followers of the new churches are not storing up their blessings for the afterlife, but seeking to improve their lot today. According to Gifford, this message addresses the material concerns of people who have suffered through two decades of economic uncertainty.

Gifford is right on the mark by claiming that many people are attracted to the new churches by expectations

of financial return. Apart from the ample evidence provided in Gifford’s work, rumors abound in Accra today about how one can become rich by belonging to the right church. Of course, all of this jars with Western Christian sensibilities of piety. In my personal experience visiting Accra, I have been struck by the number of churches that have been built recently and how much gospel talk has entered the local lexicon. I have also noted how visitors to the city are targeted as Sunday prizes to be put on display at church, with the expectation that they will give gobs of money to the church and the person who brought them. For a practicing Christian from a mainline European or North American church, it can be discomfiting to be surrounded by people for whom the church is the lone vehicle for their personal aspirations.

On the other hand, there is also a lot of skepticism about the new Christianity in Ghana, and some prominent people in Accra are quite critical of the new churches. The leaders of the mainline churches consider their services undignified and former president J. J. Rawlings advocates an abandonment of the new Christianity for a “return to the shrines.” The general public is wary too. The local papers often carry stories of wayward pastors caught in corruption or sex scandals. As Gifford notes, even the Ghanaian government is watching developments in the new churches. For example, a government commission noted that places of worship were drawing people away from their jobs during the work week, and that churches are renting out spaces that could be used for export production, such as garment factories (p. 157). But despite the skepticism there has never been a concerted public backlash against the churches and they continue to grow.

Though Gifford effectively lays out the contemporary fundamentals of the new prosperity gospel, one of the weaknesses in the work is the lack of attention to the historiography on the subject. Missing from the bibliography are some major past works, such as Ione Acquah’s *Accra Survey* (1958), which contains a snapshot of break-away charismatic and Pentecostal churches in the early 1950s. It would have provided a wonderful fifty-years-on comparison to Accra today. Also missing are works that would have helped enrich his argument. Notably absent are Robin Horton’s *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (1993)—providing insights into the “this-worldly” emphases of African religions—and catechist Carl Christian Reindorf’s founding text on the history of Accra in the nineteenth century, *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante; based on traditions and historical facts comprising a period of*

more than three centuries from about 1500 to 1860 (1966). By excluding these seminal works, Gifford forces himself into using the misnomer “pre-Christian religion” to describe what was actually a dynamically mixed local cosmology influenced by Ga, Akan, Ewe, and European religious thought.

Also, Gifford offers only two pages on “indigenous religion,” based only on early Akan ethnographies. This presumes a stasis within religious thought as conceived of in local languages and begs the question, if the Christian gospel is changing in Accra, are indigenous understandings about the spirit world changing too? Gifford spends many pages on Prophet Salifu, who preaches both in English and Twi about topics like spiritual battles against crocodile and rat spirits. In English, the world of Salifu seems exotic and incommensurable with mainline Christian ideas, but perhaps it makes a different sort of sense in the local language. The reader is left wondering if the congregation is hearing one thing in English, and another thing in Twi.

Another stated goal of Gifford’s work is to assess the role of the new churches in Ghana’s political and economic development. This a difficult task because there are few concrete ways to gauge the economic or political outcomes of this new religious dogma. Gifford does show how the language of the new churches eerily crept into the political rhetoric of the presidential campaign of 2000. For example, when presidential candidate John Evans Atta Mills announced that he would not reinvestigate the infamous 1982 murder of the Supreme Court judges, he justified it by claiming that vengeance was the responsibility of the Lord, and then quoted Philippians 3.13: “I forget the past which is behind me. What I do is to strive for what is ahead of me” (p. 178). But whether this was a genuine tribute to the Christian allocutions of the new churches or just a cynical attempt to dodge his

responsibilities doesn’t matter because Mills lost the election anyway. And, as Gifford admits, it is too early to show the influence of the new churches on the current administration of President John Kuffour (who, incidentally, is a Catholic). Yet, despite the lack of economic data to back up his case, Gifford asserts that the new churches are neo-patrimonial structures that emphasize “sweatless” achievements over the benefits of hard work. This leads to some editorializing in the form of statements like “if Ghana is to join the modern world economy the greatest need is the development of transparent and accountable structures, systems, procedures and institutions to regulate all aspects of society” (p. 197). Here Gifford implies that the new churches are impediments to an SAP type of modernization of Ghana, but the hard data to back it up are not provided. What Gifford offers instead is a causal connection based on the idea that religious discourse is about “world construction,” which can include notions of the economy and politics (p.196). To convincingly prove that the new Christianity is retarding economic and political development in Ghana would require a rigorous empirical study, a very different sort of approach to the one that Gifford has taken.

In *The Next Christendom* (2002), Philip Jenkins awakened the world to the fact that Africa has become a place of renewal for the old-world religion of Christianity. What he did not address is whether the forms of Christianity that are developing in Africa will resemble the mainline churches that preceded them. *Ghana’s New Christianity* tackles this question head on. It is a vibrant work that brings the reader into the plastic chair pews of these new churches, within earshot of the illustrious pastors who are so famous throughout Ghana. Gifford knows his subject intimately and has produced an insightful work about the biblical hermeneutics that are shaping the future of Christian beliefs.

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