

SIGHS AND SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT: GHANAIAN PERSPECTIVES ON PENTECOSTALISM AND RENEWAL IN AFRICA

By J.K. Asamoah-Gyadu
Regnum Studies in Mission. Oxford: Regnum, 2015.

Review by Marius Nel

Research Unit of the Faculty of Theology
North-West University

J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church in Ghana, allowing him to be an objective observer of African Pentecostalism while he serves as a professor of Contemporary African Christianity and Pentecostal/Charismatic Studies at the Trinity Theological Seminary at Legon in Accra, Ghana. He is also the Seminary's Dean of Graduate Studies. He studied at the Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana and the University of Ghana, and he completed his PhD in Theology in 2000 at the University of Birmingham. He lectured at Harvard University in 2004 and at the Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA in 2007. He has written extensively on contemporary African Christianity and Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa. His articles include investigations into new immigrant congregations of Africans in North America and Western Europe and the resultant transnational networks: interpretations of contemporary African Pentecostalism in its diverse variety; the role of healing in African Pentecostalism; the way Pentecostal groups deal with what Africans perceive as the curse of barrenness; the effective utilisation of the media and especially the internet by African Pentecostalism; perceptions of the Spirit's power and evil; African Initiated churches in Eastern Europe; teachings about impoverishment and prosperity in African Pentecostalism; and other relevant subjects.

In this publication, Asamoah-Gyadu interrogates the core spiritual DNA of the religious phenomenon of Ghana's new Christianities, and the variety that comprises African Pentecostalism. He is convinced that the mission-founded churches in Ghana

UNISA | 
university
of south africa

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
Volume 43 | Number 1 | 2017
pp. 223–226

<https://doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265/2016/404>
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)
© 2016. The Author(s)



have fallen behind their Charismatic/Pentecostal counterparts and that the historical churches need to learn from the newcomers on the block.

According to Western historians, the Pentecostal movement started with classical Pentecostals in Parham's Bible School and at Azusa Street; was perpetuated in the charismatic renewal of the 1960s with Dennis Bennett, Kevin Ranaghan, and Kathryn Kuhlman in Van Nuys, California, only a few kilometres north of Azusa Street; and invigorated by the third-wave neo-charismatic movement of Peter Wagner and John Wimber. However, African Pentecostalism developed in other ways. Asamoah-Gyadu shows that Christianity in Africa followed another route, with a history of revitalisations and renewals. The single most important reason for the rise of revitalisation movements in Africa is the experience of the Holy Spirit. Other than in the Ethiopianist or Nationalist churches of the late nineteenth century, Christian religious innovation in Africa has mostly had a pneumatic orientation, in which the reality of God is encountered primarily through the power of the Holy Spirit. The history of African Christian churches cannot be written only in sociological and anthropological terms without referring to the point of view of the Spirit.

The title of the book, *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit*, reflects the fluid character of African Pentecostalism which is always a movement in transition, 'with pains and glories in equal measure' and linked to dynamic leaders who rise and fall.

African Pentecostal churches ('spiritual', 'Spirit-type', 'independent African Pentecostal', or 'prophet-healing churches') constitute the majority of so-called African Independent/Initiated/Instituted (or indigenous) churches (AICs) and they are growing fast. These churches and groups represent a wide diversity of phenomena but share the same DNA in their theological emphases, styles of worship and ecclesiology, according to Asamoah-Gyadu. Two aspects of the totality of Christian belief are emphasised: a pneumatological emphasis in which the Godhead is envisaged as present and powerful through the Spirit, who reveals the will of God and the destiny of the individual, guides through dangers, and fills people with power; and a soteriological emphasis where the spirits and deities of the traditional pantheon, along with the medicine-man with his magical powers and techniques, are rejected in favour of the Christian God and his protection from the host of evil forces that surrounds people according to the African worldview. The ancestors and spirits of traditional religion must be exorcised in order to 'redeem the land', along with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, who as oppressive servants of the devil contribute to Africa's economic problems and need to be resisted by prayer and the force of the Spirit.

Contemporary African Pentecostalism makes its presence felt within the public space with its magnificent church buildings, mega-size congregations, the youthful nature of its membership, an overwhelming presence in the social and popular media, charismatic high-profile leaders, a growing number of academic studies of the phenomenon, its influence on the worship style of the historic mission churches, and

a theology of dominion, empowerment and fruitfulness that middle-class Africans can easily associate with. Salvation is resolutely this-worldly, and preaching uses the Bible to offer practical information for personal development and self-improvement, with the pastor becoming a life-coach. The contrast with Classical Pentecostalism and the historical churches allows one to speak of African Pentecostalism as a primarily non-Western religion.

Its theology of dominion applies Scriptures in ways that encourage members to invest in financial markets and seize opportunities in education, business, politics and entertainment in order to enlarge their spheres of influence in the world. Pentecostals are encouraged to prosper and possess the land because the line between what is physical and what is spiritual has become thin, and sacred and secular have become inseparable.

Its influence is changing the face of African Christianity in ecclesiological and practical terms. For instance, young people seeking to express Christian ministry do not go through denominationally structured formal theological education to fit into monolithic clerical vocations; once their personal transformations and gifts of ministry are authenticated, they are invited to serve. The functioning of 'lay' people within their gifts of ministry seriously challenges the definition of ministry. Other examples are the missiological emphasis on the success of a global, international mission to reach the lost, where migrant churches are understood as 'New Mission Churches' planted wherever migrant Africans are found in order to facilitate the missionary calling from the South to the North; and the extensive deployment of modern media technologies for Christian ministry.

Asamoah-Gyadu is ambitious when he promises to provide a comprehensive examination of African Pentecostalism – a diverse and diversified movement with as many twists and surprises as there are leaders and churches. He groups together older classical Pentecostal denominations of both foreign and local provenance, and the various contemporary Pentecostal renewal movements. It is an open question whether their diversity allows that these groupings be investigated together because they share the same DNA.

The author characterises African Pentecostalism in terms of several factors; however, at no stage does he provide any more than a phenomenological description. For instance, Pentecostalism's *theologia gloriae* with its emphasis on health, wealth and prosperity does not allow for a *theologia crucis*, an appreciation of suffering as a means to the deepening of spirituality. Nor does he criticise occurrences of autocratic leadership prevalent among some of these groups, with absolute authority concentrated in the hands of a charismatic leader. He also does not discuss the dangers of subjectivity in 'private revelations' received by Pentecostals.

What is important is that Asamoah-Gyadu links African Pentecostalism to the context in which it originated and shows how it has grown to become primarily a non-Western religion. Harvey Cox in this regard states that Pentecostals have

rediscovered a powerful and primal form of religious expression by recovering 'primal speech' in ecstatic utterance, 'primal piety' in mystical experience, trance and healing, and 'primal hope' in the unshakable expectation of a better future.