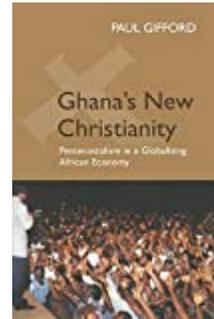




Paul Gifford. *Ghana's New Christianity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 230 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21723-3.



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The Charimatization of the Economy in Ghana

With *Ghana's New Christianity*, Paul Gifford offers us a detailed and vivid view into the social, political, and economic dimensions of charismatic Christianity. This type of Christianity, which others may call neo-Pentecostalism or born-again Christianity, flourishes in many urban centers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The book follows other publications by the same author, who has become an authority on African Christianity.[1] Having published a monograph on the diverse faces of Christianity in Ghana, Cameroon, Uganda, and Zambia (1998), and one focusing on Liberia's Christian culture (1993), Gifford now investigates the local dynamics of charismatic Christianity in Ghana, and more specifically in Great Accra. Names like Nicholas Duncan-Williams and Mensa Otabil, which were introduced in his 1998 publication, appear again, and they will probably become household names in African religious studies. Gifford is very careful to emphasize that his book only offers a very temporal snapshot of Accra's charismatic scene, which is not only extremely diverse but also continuously changing. The public role of Ghana's charis-

matic churches is enormous. Gifford even suggests that Christianity is the biggest employer in Ghana's economy apart from the aid business (p. 81). Although it is probably difficult to validate such a statement with hard data, it is indeed important to open our eyes to the political and economical dimensions of these widespread Christian communities. Much money circulates in transnational networks that are established on Christian ties, in the acts of gift giving during prayer gatherings, as well as in the local media business whose growth depends to a great extent on these churches. Significantly, charismatic leaders often become national figures, and thus attain political authority.

Importantly, these aspects are not unique to Accra's society, but are a reality in many urban African centers. Therefore, one of the most challenging questions that students of Africa's religions are faced with today is to understand how religion, politics, and the economy thrive together. Scholars like Birgit Meyer, Rijk Van Dijk, David Martin, and David Maxwell have already pointed to the charismatic re-signification of money and commodities.

Yet Gifford's book is the first to systematically locate charismatic Christianity within larger national contexts and to search for its dialectical relationship with local economies and politics.

In the preface of the book, Gifford sets out two aims: first, he wants to engage in the debate on the sociopolitical role of this type of Christianity. The second goal is to define the scope and range of this charismatic Christianity. Both issues are of utmost interest for current scholars studying this widespread phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, the book will probably become, like the author's other monographs, a key text in studies of Africa's religions.

Anyone familiar with Africa's charismatic Christianity will not be surprised to read the author's observation that, given the wide variety in themes, styles, and practices within these churches, it is extremely difficult to offer a clear definition of this charismatic Christianity. Gifford even wants to avoid the impression that there might exist some unified charismatic movement. Therefore, the author prefers to write about "the charismatic scene." Although Gifford does not offer an elaborate discussion of why he chooses the label "charismatic," the text is dispersed with semantic reflections. He discards commonly used appellations like "millennial" (p. 81), "evangelical" (pp. 82, 110), and "fundamentalist" (p. 19), but does not engage in a systematical way with this semantic issue.

The broad spectrum of Accra's charismatic scene has made the choice of informants and the selection of discussed churches and church leaders extremely difficult. The data derive from six churches, five being the most important churches in Accra (in football metaphor "the acknowledged premier division"). The selected churches are not only the major ones in Accra, they also reflect the different waves of Ghana's charismatic Christianity, which Gifford identifies as "the faith gospel," "the teaching wave," "the miracle healing," and "the prophetic wave." Next to these churches, Gifford has also included one young prophet. The argument for following that particular prophet is not given, and the author acknowledges that he "might well have selected another" (p. vii).

The gathered material derives from nineteen months' fieldwork in Ghana between 2000 and 2002, during which the author assisted at a range of religious gatherings (sermons, Christian conferences, and so on). Interviews with the church leaders, the prophet, and their followers as well as their media output (television, radio, newspapers, books) have also provided the author with first-hand material.

The book includes a preface and eight chapters. In the first chapter, Gifford traces the political history of Ghana's economy from independence to the new millennium, emphasizing the rise and decline of Rawlings' political power. The following chapters study the main themes in the preaching and religious performances of the pastors and the prophet. Gifford contrasts the charismatic churches with the mainline churches (Catholics, Protestant, Pentecostals, African Independent Churches), who remain significant bodies, although they face an increasing challenge from the charismatic groups. The gatherings of Catholic groups have even become similar to those of the charismatic movements. Gifford calls this tendency the "charismatization" of the other churches (p. 38).

Much attention is paid to the continuation of aspects of so-called traditional Ghanaian religion. The author also often points out that these are combined with American influences (the American dream, the entrepreneur) and, but to a lesser extent, characteristics of Nigerian evangelization campaigners.

Gifford does not only sketch the political-economic context of the expansion of Accra's charismatic scene. He also discusses theological issues like moral responsibility, predestination, salvation, and absence of sin. Here again, the author emphasizes the linkages with traditional religious practices and beliefs, with which these churches share a focus on personal poverty, marriage, and health. This is, however, only one face of Accra's charismatic scene. Mensa Otabil, who might be "the most interesting Christian voice being heard in Africa" (p. 135), offers an alternative charismatic approach to the health, wealth, and success gospel. This man dares to bring nuance to crusades and conventions organized by fellow charismatic leaders. He even has become a national figure, and colleagues from the charismatic scene define him as "the nation's most respected and outstanding teacher of the word of God" (p. 138). While other pastors and prophets combine English with Twi, Mensa Otabil exclusively uses English, because he aims to reach a more educated audience. In his teachings, Otabil expresses a totally different attitude towards demonic agency, personal engagement in self-promotion, attaining wealth, and national prosperity. Reflecting the importance of this figure in Accra, Gifford contributes one whole chapter to Mensa Otabil (chapter 5).

Of utmost interest is that the author not only spends considerable time illustrating the diverging, at times even opposing, strands within the charismatic scene, but that

he also points to internal transformations. Whereas in the early 1990s, numerous prayer camps were organized, these began to decline toward the end of the decade. The change is not so much reflected in a new program (progress and success remain key goals), but rather in the ways to attain them. By the end of the 1990s, the crucial means toward this end had become located in prophetic gifts, which derive in the first instance from the pastor or prophet.

Chapter 6 and 7 are devoted to the second purpose of the book: identifying this religion's economic and political dimensions. Through a detailed analysis of the pastors' and prophets' sermons, Gifford scrutinizes different charismatic theories of work. Again, Mensa Otabil is the odd duck because most other preachers put a stress on miracles, spiritual forces, and exorcism. Here, Gifford makes an important remark: Mensa Otabil's performances subvert Max Weber's theory of Protestantism and capitalism. Gifford writes, "The obvious difference [is] that Weber considered the new economic order to be an unconscious side-effect of a new religious understanding; there is nothing unconscious here, for Otabil has deliberately made it a key focus" (p. 144).

All in all, Gifford is not convinced of the contribution of these churches to economic progress. He writes "it may be that Ghana's new Christians through their emphasis on faith, are similarly transforming Ghana's economic situation, but this cannot simply be presumed" (p. 156). If there is no clear indication that these churches and movements contribute to the city's economy, what about their political value? This question is the theme of chapter 7. Mainline churches are characterized by their direct political involvement in issues such as human rights and the training of election monitors. For the charismatic churches, the question is again not easy to answer. Gifford distinguishes between churches that have what he calls "an enchanted approach" (they speak about curses and territorial spirits) and "a biblical approach" (biblical verses are used as guides for political understanding and potential political action). Notwithstanding certain political utterances during sermons, Gifford suggests that these churches cannot contribute to social change, because they all perpetuate the "big man" phenomenon. This chapter is by far the most important one, because here, Gifford dialogues with other scholars (Meyer, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, Marshall, Martin) who have suggested the political value of these churches. The main reason why he does not agree with these authors is that Gifford himself closely follows Western understandings of political and economic progress.

In his conclusion (the final chapter), Gifford begins with the observation that many Ghanaians view their new Christianity with some unease. These churches are often even attacked for impeding economic progress. The author himself is again reluctant to state whether these churches really have any economic or political influence. He writes "My study of the religious situation in Ghana has not convinced me that much of Ghana's new Christianity leads naturally to many of the benefits sometimes suggested, benefits like a new work ethic. However, these churches often instill motivation or self-belief" (p. 196).

The book does not give us a clear answer to the question about the potential economic and political impact of the charismatic churches. When comparing *Ghana's New Christianity* with the author's previous monograph, we observe that he has not reached other conclusions. In this 2004 publication, Gifford states too many times that the answer cannot be given. As a result, the reader is left with an uneasy feeling. We thus need further investigation. Maybe the author would have reached other conclusions if he had focused less on the discourse of the pastors and prophet, and more on the quotidian lives of their followers. My own material on Kinshasa's charismatic churches convinces me that women's participation in *riz-tournes* organized by church leaders does have important economic consequences. This supports David Maxwell's remark concerning an earlier publication of Gifford.^[2] Maxwell, a scholar of Zimbabwean born-again Christianity, remarked in a review of Gifford (1998) that the author only studied elite charismatic Christianity. Maxwell suggested that the discourse and practices in churches outside of the top layer that holds its meetings in hotels and conference rooms offer another perspective on the public role of charismatic Christian churches. Surprisingly, Gifford does not engage at all with David Maxwell's critique.

Another question that comes to mind concerns the uniqueness of Ghana's charismatic scene. Do charismatic churches elsewhere in Africa have other roles in the political establishment and local economy? Such a question can only be answered through in-depth ethnographic analysis of other societies where charismatic Christianity sets the tune.

The book has a calm style and is very well written. Throughout the text, the rich empirical material is alternated with the author's personal reflections on the value of this movement and its leaders, and with theoretical points. The monograph is a must for anyone interested in

contemporary Africa, and also for those who study current variants of Christianity. Due to the debatable nature of Gifford's assumptions, the book might well open a whole discussion about the public role of Christianity. The abundant empirical material also makes the study a book not to be missed. Other scholars are now invited to offer comparative material on charismatic churches elsewhere in Africa, and beyond.

Notes

[1]. Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst, 1998).

[2]. David Maxwell, "Review Article: In Defense of African Creativity," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 4 (2000): 468-481.

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