



**Robert Mbe Akoko.** *"Ask and You Shall Be Given": Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon.* African Studies Collection Series. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2007. 239 pp. EUR 15 (paper), ISBN 978-90-5448-007-5.

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## The Relationship between Pentecostalism and Cameroon Society

This book, a PhD dissertation from the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, Holland, by Robert Mbe Akoko looks at the role of religion, particularly Pentecostalism, in the economic crisis of Cameroon. To a large extent, it is also a comparative study on the role of the established Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches in the country. Chapter 6, which deals with Christian churches and the democratization conundrum in Cameroon, reminds one of a similar study, *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America* (2008), by Paul Freston, which offers an unusual comparative perspective on critical issues about religion, state, and democracy. The often combustible interaction of resurgent religion and the developing world's unstable politics constitutes breeding ground for rapid expansion of revival churches. Evangelical churches are gaining ground in unstable political environments. Protestantism is increasingly challenging the Catholic and Presbyterian hegemony in the religious sphere. Established churches are facing stiff opposition or competition from emerging revival churches producing an "adversarial" style of Protestantism. This necessarily colors the role of evangelicalism in African civil society where Pentecostalism has gained ground in recent years.

In a similar study, Ogbu Kalu (*African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* [2008]) presents the state of Pentecostalism in Africa. While Akoko maintains that Pentecostalism was imported into and imposed on Cameroon, Kalu

argues emphatically that African Pentecostalism is distinctly African in character, not imported from the West. Both authors present the religion's many functions in African and Cameroonian life and offer a comprehensive look at Pentecostalism on the continent. Akoko's book touches on the role of missionaries, media and popular culture, myths and realities, conflicts, and other issues underscoring religious fundamentalism, positive or negative, within Cameroon society, and it highlights lessons to be learned.

This publication's central theme focuses on the strong uniting force of born-again Christianity, which alternates between asceticism and accumulation. The author points out that one striking difference distinguishing one Pentecostal group from another pivots on the economic message. Here, the author draws a line between early or classical Pentecostalism and a more modern variant. "Early Pentecostalism preached an ascetic doctrine, which stressed perfection, strict moral ethics and biblical inerrancy. The ways of the world were considered the ways of sin and believers exhorted to shun all unnecessary material and carnal pleasures. Modern Pentecostalism, on the other hand embraces a gospel of accumulation as the ways of the world, not as the ways of sin. It encourages believers to accumulate while on earth" (p. 2). While early Pentecostal churches embraced the "ascetic" doctrine of classical Pentecostalism, the new wave of these churches strongly emphasize a

gospel of accumulation, as noted by Paul Gifford, Ruth Marshall-Fratani, and Birgit Meyer.[1] While asceticism has received mixed responses among scholars of religion and religious practitioners, followers of this new wave of Pentecostalism, as well as some outsiders, have criticized this history of religious ascetic beliefs and practices. Akoko offers such an analysis in his book, as the respective chapters and sources provide sufficient evidence of such critical strands. He attempts to analyze the criticism of asceticism.

The book provides a comparative, analytical, and critical review of Pentecostal churches operating in other African countries. Pentecostalism in Cameroon, according to the author's findings, contrasts with the works of leading scholars in the discipline in African countries; for example, Gifford's work on Zambia maintains that Pentecostal churches largely give fledging support to ruling regimes, and studies by Marshall-Fratani on Nigeria and R. A. Van Dijk on Ghana hold the opposite opinion, that Pentecostals are critical of governing regimes. The situation and conclusion about Cameroon is that most Pentecostal churches in Cameroon refuse to get involved in political issues and debates. This is all the more striking because Cameroonian mainline churches have been making their voices clear on political issues through pastoral letters, sermons, and press interviews.

Akoko's conclusion begs a number of questions. Why are the Pentecostals silent or sitting on the fence in Cameroon when compared to other churches and in strict contrast to the situation in Zambia, Nigeria, and Ghana? Are they indirect advocates of the regime's policy of impoverishing the people? Is it because they propagate a policy agenda of prosperity for a select few compared to the ascetic doctrine of mainline Pentecostal groups and because they would not like to be seen as enemies of the regime? On what basis do these groups advocate prosperity? How do they intend to ensure shared prosperity in the country when government fails to create an enabling environment for all to equitably function within the system? Given that the churches are becoming self-financing with contributions from members making up a sizeable chunk of income, how do they relate this means of financing when the salary scale in the country has not increased since 1982, but suffered a slash of 70 percent, and the local currency has been devalued by 50 percent? Does a hidden agenda exist between these sectors of Pentecostal churches with the government? Why do Pentecostals strongly emphasize healing methods? Is this a source of attracting members, given that the modern medical sector remains inadequate in attending to the

health needs of the people? Are their healing methods successful or not?

Chapters 4 and 5 provide interesting discussions. Chapter 4, for example, undertakes a comparative examination and addresses reactions to the economic crisis by Pentecostal churches. In particular, Akoko examines the Full Gospel Mission in relation to mainline churches, especially Roman Catholic, Islamic, and Presbyterian places of worship. The position of the Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon as expounded through the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon in 1990 attributes the economic crisis to the structures of sin. The Men of God believe that "structures of sin are deep-rooted in personal sin and thus linked to the behavior of the individual (apparently referring to those in political authority) who introduce these structures, consolidate them and render them difficult to be removed" (pp. 103-104). The Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon in 1993 expressed similar worries concerning the economic crisis of the country, calling on the government to step up concerted policy actions in redressing the situation. Why are the Pentecostals silent on this issue? Why does the Full Gospel Mission attribute the economic crisis less to political mismanagement and more to the majority of Cameroonians' refusal to accept Jesus Christ as their savior or become born-again? Is it the result of God's sanctioning the people in the form of economic difficulties?

Chapter 5 takes up the ensuing conflict within the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon (PCC) Yaoundé congregation—the rivalry between Dr. Michael Bame Bame and Dr. Isaac Elangwe. The author links the development within the PCC Bastos to a similar revival group within the Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon experienced in Bonjongo Parish of the Buea Diocese in the 1990s. It is interesting to observe that these developments took place at a time when the "wind of change" was blowing through the political landscape of Cameroon. Akoko offers a comparative analysis between Bame (Pilot Revival Movement [PCC-Bastos]) and Father Etienne Khumbah (Maranatha Movement) of the Roman Catholic Church, Bonjongo-Buea Parish Diocese. What occurred in the Cameroon Baptist Convention as well as revival activities in other churches would no doubt show a different face of the penetrating influences of Pentecostalism in the country. Where is the country headed spiritually and morally? Is God's mission in Cameroon failing—the reason why the country is undergoing serious economic, political, and religious crises?

The influence of Nigerian Pentecostalism is great in

Cameroon. Most Pentecostal groups in Cameroon, particularly in the Anglophone region, originated in Nigeria, thus making it a near mirror-image of what is happening in Nigeria. It is different, though, in that the Cameroon version sits on the fence, not critical of government activities in the economic and social domains, like mainline churches. Some churches preach the gospel for spiritual prosperity of the people, while others preach the word of God or propagate the gospel for making prosperity out of the destitution of the poor. Churches in Cameroon are under serious peril and need a new form of revival. Many conflicts in mainline churches show that all is not well within the Christian faith. Just like you find various interpretations of Islam, so also you find different aspects or fundamentalist groups within mainline churches.

This is an objective analysis of ongoing conflicts within the Christian faith in the country. Various case studies in chapters 3-5 exhibit in-depth analytical, comparative, and objective study in search for the truth. The study should spark further discourse on the role of different religious faiths in the socioeconomic transformation of Cameroon and other countries. This book has an extensive bibliography indicating the amount of work put into the research. Just like order and discipline should be brought into the structure of government, *Ask and You Shall Be Given* equally calls for order within the rank and file of various religious denominations. God meant the earth and all that it contains for the use of all human beings. Hence, three things were freely given to humankind, namely:

L = Land

A = Air

W = Water

->LAW: knowing the greediness of human beings, God gave the Bible or Koran to guide and temper human use of these gifts.

But today what was freely given is sold: land and water are sold, leaving only air as a free commodity. Unfortunately, air is being polluted. This implies that the poor have little chance of benefiting from nature's gift to humankind. We are citizens of our respective states, and each citizen has the right and duty to participate in the political, social, and economic life of his/her country. This study opens the Pandora's box on the state, religion, politics, society, and development. In a way, one can insinuate that religion is the most controversial organization on earth, and yet it remains the only rallying

movement embracing people of different political opinions, which, to a large extent, seem to compromise the teaching of the gospel. Different interpretations are accorded to the Bible or Koran, which gives rise to the kind of contradictory revivalism prevailing with various religious denominations. The current democratic experience in Cameroon fails to unleash productive forces of society, as citizens remain entangled in economic and political uncertainties and are constantly manipulated by the few.

This study brings to the fore the status of poor governance, characterizing Cameroon as the most corrupt nation in the world, with high levels of illiteracy, malnutrition, abject poverty, and squalor. Akoko penetrates into how the new gospel of accumulation and prosperity relates to the material predicaments of Cameroonians by investigating the proliferation of Pentecostalism and the continuous defection of members of mainline churches to new Pentecostal groups propagating the doctrine of prosperity, which is opposed by the doctrine of established churches. It is an interesting book on politics and religious influence. It paints a new face of Christianity in the country, and it challenges mainline churches to face the realities of emerging religious fundamentalism in a country craving constructive radical political, economic, social, scientific, and technological changes.

The author does not list the Islamic faith as a mainstream religion. He does not make references to its contribution to economic development, accumulation, and prosperity, and does not examine where fundamentalism became pronounced after September 11, 2001, with the United States launching the worldwide war on terrorism. All religious bodies are wrestling with God and wrestling with politics to acquire more power and influence. A new doctrine of repentance is called for to once again place Cameroon on the path of democratic governance and religious rectitude. This is the level to which the country has been subjected. It provides the right ammunition for the country to gather necessary strength and to galvanize itself to join the club of political pluralism and democratic governance with all the rights and privileges that belong to this gentleman's club with a leveling playground—power to the people with equal opportunities for all. Equality of opportunity for all should not remain a piece of political rhetoric, but the ideal that lies behind it is slippery to say the least. Importantly, the author presents firsthand knowledge by employing both field and archival research to develop analysis and dissect the role of religion in the evolving political climate of Cameroon. The result is a groundbreaking work and an indispensable treasure to anyone concerned with the

role of religion in politics and politics in religion.

Note

[1]. Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Paul Gifford, "The complex Provenance of Some Elements of African Pentecostal Theology," in *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, ed. Andr   Corten and Ruth Marshall-

Fratani (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 62-79; Ruth Marshall-Fratani, "God is Not a Democrat: Pentecostalism and Democratization in Nigeria," in *The Christian Churches and the Democratization of Africa*, ed. Paul Gifford (Leiden: Brill, 1995); and Birgit Meyer, "Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Post-colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 3 (1998): 316-349.

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