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Jane E. Soothill. *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana (Studies of Religion in Africa) (Studies of Religion in Africa).* Leiden: Brill, 2007. x + 261 pp. $124.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15789-7.

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Power and Continuity in African Pentecostalism

In *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power*, Jane Soothill offers a detailed and thorough account of how Ghanaian women translate and negotiate gender roles through participation in church activities and through religious experience. The book additionally analyzes how power relations are established and re-established within charismatic/Pentecostal churches. The author argues that this new religious platform simultaneously enables change in gender relations and â[re-legitimizes] established normsâ (p. ix). The strength of the book lies in its discussion of this dilemma.

The book consists of a preface, an introduction, and seven chapters. The introduction gives a brief overview of charismatic churches in Ghana and sets the context among the larger charismatic churches in Greater Accra. The first chapter provides a rather lengthy introduction that goes through the theoretical concepts that are drawn upon in the book. Central to the subsequent discussions is the understanding that religion in Africa is about power. This understanding stems from the local worldview that there is a strong link and interdependency between the spiritual and the material worlds. Those who can mediate between the material world and the spiritual world are important figures, and this function is associated with power. The second chapter provides a thorough account of the charismatic Christian movement in Ghana from the 1970s until today, with specific focus on the concepts of deliverance, the Faith Gospel, and the increasing importance attached to pastorsâ prophetic skills and access to spiritual power. The third chapter analyzes how gender has been constructed historically in Ghana, and how the local understanding of gender relations is based on an ideology of gender complementarity. The complementarity in gender roles is explained as rooted in the dual roles of men and women in Asante society. One example cited in the text is the role of the queen mother as complementary to that of the king (pp. 80-81). Two things are highlighted: first, that certain values and virtues are related specifically to females, such as wisdom, support, and protection (so it is not a question of gender neutrality) and second, that the (political) roles of women were defined in relation to the other (the male).

Female values were balancing male values and hence establishing complementarity.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer in-depth analysis of how womanhood is defined within charismatic Christianity and how relations and hierarchies of power and authority are established and exercised in the churches. Soothill discusses power, participation, and democracy and how these issues are related to womenâs engagement in the church. She questions, in particular, the argument put forward by David Martin in *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (2001) that Pentecostal churches are more egalitarian than other Christian denominations and that this would lead to emancipation and democratic participation. On the contrary, Soothill argues that the informal and seemingly anti-hierarchical structures of the Pentecostal churches make them more open to local forms of power and that âthe new churches tend to draw on âtraditionalâ forms of authority and are susceptible therefore to reproducing the dynamics of local power relationsâ (p. 139). Soothill draws attention to the âFirst Lady Syndrome,â which refers to the role of a pastorâs wife and to a female version of the âPentecostal Big Man.â She interprets the role of a pastorâs wife as a reflection and adaptation of the gerontocratic gender structures in Ghana rather than as emancipation of women (p. 154). Soothillâs argument suggests a much stronger historical resonance and continuity, contrary to the emphasis on individualization and emancipation suggested by David Martin and others.

At a more general level, the book contributes to debates on the relationship between religion and modernity in African contexts as well as to studies of how religious ideas and practices are embedded and interpreted in local historical contexts. These discussions are centered on the tension (also reflected in the above-mentioned argument) in present-day charismatic Christianity between a strong emphasis on empowerment of the individual and a remaking of authority structures. There are concurrently tendencies of emancipation of the individual (in particular, women) and an emergence of a platform from which new forms of authority structures are built. In this way, the book contributes to the discussion of the ârupturea argument in studies of African Pentecostalism as well as to discussions of the idea that conversion to Pentecostalism leads to prominence of family values and feminine virtue.

The author argues that, although charismatic Christianity in Africa introduces new values with regard to gender roles, it is the focus on personal and social well-being (e.g., wealth and success) that is central, and she writes that âgender relations â¦ continue to be mediated primarily through perceptions of reciprocity between this world and the world of the spiritsâ (p. 12).

The book addresses these questions in a way that captures the fine nuances of altered Christian discourses on womanhood (introducing ideas of personal success and individual achievement) and how this relates to the establishment of power and authority structures within these new churches. It would have been interesting if the author had drawn more extensively on the particular and pre-existing notions of gender in relation to religion and spirituality. How are religious rituals and performances related to gender and do women represent specific roles and virtues when establishing access to the spiritual world in present-day charismatic Christianity?

Another, more methodological, concern of the book is to take seriously the worldview of Ghanaian charismatics and understand the churches within their local historical context. This approach enables the author to bring forth an analysis that moves beyond the more generalized discussions of modernity and individuality in scholarship on Pentecostalism in Africa.

The book is an important contribution to academic debates on gender and Christianity as much as to scholarship on the role of history in the understanding of charismatic Christianity in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, and, in that way, it fills a gap in the existing scholarship.

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