



Harri Englund, ed. *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011. ix + 238 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1945-8.



Reviewed by Dianna Bell (Florida State University)

Published on H-Pentecostalism (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Tammy Heise (Florida State University)

The selection of papers in *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa* offers thoughtful ethnographic and historic investigations of Christian communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa and their role in African public life. The work's editor, Harri Englund, begins with an overview of key scholarship on Christianity in Africa, with a particular focus on how Christian churches in Africa have been depicted by researchers as sites of political protest, and then introduces the central contention of the volume: that rethinking and understanding Christianity in Africa is achieved more decisively when the concept of religion is paired with the concept of publics rather than politics (p. 8).

Accordingly, each of the ten essays presented in this volume offers a clear depiction of public life and culture among African Christians. The book is organized into three parts, each of which examines a distinct aspect of the historical and contemporary role of the public in African Christianities. The chapters in part 1 consider missionary and nationalist encounters in Africa by exploring the onset of missionary work in rural Africa and the role of Christian missions and African writers in advancing pan-African nationalism. Part 2 explains how public culture and Christianity shape gender relations, sexual mores, and the empowerment of women

and children. Part 3 examines the plurality of Pentecostal publics by emphasizing doctrinal malleability and continual changes in membership in Pentecostal congregations in Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa.

James A. Pritchett begins part 1 with an overview of two mission stations in south-central Africa. Pritchett offers historical and ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the material contexts through which Christian mission stations operated, while emphasizing that public frameworks for dealing with outside encounters and change existed prior to the arrival of Europeans in Africa. Chapter 2, written by Marja Hinfelaar, explores discourse between Christian leaders, civil society, and politicians in Zambia from 1976-2006, a period when Zambia's public discourse shifted from dissecting the potential establishment of a Marxist state to arguing about the actual declaration of Zambia as a Christian state (p. 51). Chapter 3 turns to the role of African writers in both expressing and contesting public culture. With a particular focus on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novels, Nicholas Kamau-Goro expounds on how Ngũgĩ's writing develops themes of Christian fervor and later, after denouncing Christianity, anticolonial and secular struggles in Kenya and greater sub-Saharan Africa.

Barbara M. Cooper opens part 2 with an account of reproductive politics in the context of Christian minorities in the Muslim-majority city of Maradi in Niger. Cooper explains how monogamy and the challenges in raising youth as dedicated Christians have slowed the growth of Christianity in comparison to Islam. Cooper also details how the Christian public uses media to gain visibility while reinforcing group ties between Christians. In chapter 5 Ruth Prince reviews the role of Christianity in public debates over widow inheritance among the Luo population in western Kenya. Prince particularly considers how the HIV/AIDS pandemic and struggles for gender equality in Kenya have led international advocacy groups, NGOs, churches, and Christian mission groups to encourage widows to reject the Luo traditions of sexual cleansing and in-law inheritance, in which a male relative of a woman's deceased husband is permitted to have sex with her as part of a ritual to cleanse new widows. Chapter 6, by Damaris Parsitau, presents three case studies that feature female leaders in Christian churches and ministries in Kenya and assesses the impact these women have had in encouraging women's overall participation and influence in public life.

Part 3 explores the host of Pentecostal ministries across Africa. The section begins with a theoretically and ethnographically rich chapter by Birgit Meyer about the popularity and public presence of Pentecostalism in Ghana. Meyer stresses the material dimensions of Pentecostalism and calls for scholars to rethink both religion and the public sphere by "taking leave of idealist, elitist, Eurocentric and all-too-abstract" approaches to these subjects (p. 163). In chapter 8, Harri Englund discusses the role of evangelical radio program-

ming in informing discourse between the majority Christian and minority Muslim populations in Malawi. The topic of Islam often figures into Christian broadcasts and, although Islamophobia among Pentecostals elaborates on the association between Muslims, demonic spirits, Satanists, and witches, the testimonies by former Muslims call for an engagement with Muslims (p. 184) and often prompt public discourse between Christians and Muslims on matters such as healing and salvation. Chapter 9, by Ilana Van Wyk, nicely illustrates the plurality of Pentecostal-charismatic churches by presenting the "ethnographic anomaly" (p. 189) of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) in Durban, South Africa. UCKG pastors and bishops dissuade socializing and charitable work among UCKG members and, rather, teach congregants the primacy of financial sacrifice as a means of receiving blessings from God. Michael Perry Kweku Okyerefo's essay on the public image of popular Ghanaian Pentecostal churches concludes the volume. By detailing the social services that these churches offer, which includes operating schools, orphanages, and medical clinics, chapter 10 shows the prominent and indivisible place of religion in public life in Ghana.

With its emphasis on the public and its well-rounded survey of Christian groups throughout sub-Saharan Africa, this volume serves as a valuable contribution to the study of religion in Africa. Each of the ten essays provides an ethnographically and historically vivid overview of a discrete study, and the strength of this work rests on how these scholars' research combines to offer readers new and comprehensive insights into Christianity across sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars of religion and culture in Africa should consider this work essential reading.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pentecostalism>

Citation: Dianna Bell. Review of Englund, Harri, ed., *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*. H-Pentecostalism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37847>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.