
Jane E. Soothill’s book, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power*, is a welcome addition to the growing number of studies on African Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity. It studies ‘the interaction between charismatic Christianity, social change and gender in contemporary Ghana’ (ix). The book reads like an unintended sequel to Brigid M. Sackey’s *New Directions in Gender* (2006) which, as its subtitle indicates, dealt with *The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches* (AICs). The charismatic churches are the newest form of AICs in Africa. Soothill’s study therefore pioneers gender issues as significant factors in Ghanaian charismatic Christianity. Gender politics in Ghana, she observes, are characterized by the concept of ‘gender complementarity’. This, Soothill notes, is reproduced in the discourses of the charismatic churches under study (ix). The theology of gender in Ghana’s charismatic churches, she illustrates with appropriate examples, is a careful synthesis of their understanding of charisma, biblical teachings on womanhood, traditional notions of leadership and African gender politics.

The introduction summarizes the nature of charismatic Christianity against the backdrop of the histories of the three churches studied: the Christian Action Faith Ministry (CAFM), Solid Rock Chapel (SRC) and Alive Chapel International (ACI). The female faces of these churches are Rev. Dr Mrs Francesca Duncan-Williams, wife of the founder of CAFM, Mrs Moha Amoako, wife of the founder of ACI, and Rev. Dr Christiana Doe Tetteh, founder of the Solid Rock Chapel. The examples are well selected. Duncan-Williams and Amoako are wives of founders but the former is also a pastor and Doe Tetteh is the first woman founder of a charismatic church in Ghana.

The book is in two parts. In chapters 1-3, Soothill establishes the intellectual, phenomenological and religious context for studying gender in African charismatic Christianity. The next three chapters analyze the cases studied and the conclusion summarizes her findings. Chapter one is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between religion in an African context and the way in which its gender orientation is reinvented in contemporary charismatic Christianity. In African religious traditions, what is primarily real is the spiritual and ‘those in possession of spiritual power, therefore, are both revered and feared’ (11). Like religion in traditional Africa, Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on spiritual experience and charismatic performance, is less concerned with the prescription and authorization of gender roles than other forms of institutionalized Christianity (cf. 11). In chapters 2 and 3, Soothill takes on such critical background issues as the characteristics of charismatic theology, the links between Pentecostalism and modernity, and gender politics in Ghana. This is a movement which, as David Martin submits, enables the marginalized to ‘divest themselves of backward and dissolute stereotypes and leap over the local national environment to embrace global modernity’ (45). Modernity is taken to another level in these churches. It is interpreted in the light of the Bible, which serves as the primary source of appeal in justifying an affirmation of women’s ability to speak for God as vessels of the Holy Spirit (54). Soothill’s discussion on gender politics is also illuminating because she is able to demonstrate how changes in gender understandings and roles have been affected by the transitions from colonialism through independence to the revolutionary days of Jerry J. Rawlings. The roles of the wives of today’s charismatic pastors, Soothill shows, are akin to the prominent roles that wives of heads of state have come to play in
African politics. Through the influence and ministries of these women, Soothill discusses how the charismatic churches have generated a new type of gendered leadership, ‘women of God’ and ‘first ladies’, to whom members, especially the female ones, defer as icons of spiritual power and support. Charismatic pastors covet the title ‘Dr’. Its use by Duncan-Williams and Doe Tetteh is illustrative of the extent to which these female leaders are redefining gender equality in contemporary African Christianity.

In the rest of the book, it is clear that the charismatic churches have redefined Christianity and gender. Biblical ideas that women must submit to their husbands have not been challenged in charismatic discourse (113 ff.). However, as Soothill points out, in most cases the ‘submission discourse’ is largely rhetorical because in practice women, especially the leaders, ‘enjoy an independence and personal status far beyond that which their public rhetoric implies’ (119). In principle, the book argues, there are no barriers to women becoming leaders because charismatic Christianity is explicit on the spiritual equality of believers (109). Thus the bottom line in charismatic gender discourse and activity is ‘women’s empowerment’ (222). Although certain traditional notions such as witchcraft and the demonization of childless women still persist, Soothill concludes that the new charismatic churches may be doing a better job at gender equality than may have been happening in the older historic mission denominations.

This is a very useful study but there are a number of generalizations, deficiencies and inaccuracies. In the opening page, for example, Accra’s population is given as ‘just over one and a half million’ but in the footnote the figure jumps to five million. The background history of the three churches studied in the book is too brief and there is no attempt to engage with gender discourses in the older AICs. A large percentage of the literature on gender with which Soothill engages is not particularly focused on religion. These reservations notwithstanding, we have here a very useful study on an aspect of charismatic Christianity that has so far escaped the attention of scholars.

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