
The study of African Pentecostalism is growing at almost the same speed as Pentecostalism itself on the African continent. During the last decade, numerous studies have been published on various aspects of the subject, and a major survey of the field has appeared in Paul Gifford’s *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London, Hurst & Company, 1998), which opened a new phase in the study of African Pentecostalism and contributed to defining the research agenda for the following decade. Its focus was on the growing public role of Pentecostal churches, not least their political role, and on their special theology, all of it discussed in relation to two sets of dichotomies: the local versus the global, and the western/North American versus the African. African Pentecostalism has caught the attention not only of theologians and historians but increasingly also that of social scientists, and, although a great deal of interdisciplinary work has appeared, disciplinary thinking still tends to shape the questions and interpretations being applied to the new Pentecostal churches. Theologians focus on dogmatic characteristics in relation to universal theological trends, while many social scientists prefer to see Pentecostalism through the concepts of modernity and globalisation.

David Maxwell’s new book *African Gifts of the Spirit* incorporates many of these discussions and insights, but is also a major original contribution that takes research a big step forward. The book is a detailed historical study of a Zimbabwean Pentecostal movement, beginning as a prayer band under the charismatic leader and prophet Ezekiel Guti in the 1950s, and later developing into a major transnational church, the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA). Maxwell follows this transformation in exciting and rich detail and the result is the best historical book available on an African initiated church.

Maxwell’s introduction is an admirably explicit exposition of his approach, as well as a brief but distinct debate with other scholars in the field, which may also serve as a useful introduction to research on Pentecostalism in its own right. Two general points stand out in Maxwell’s approach. First, his study is historical, placing ZAOGA and similar Pentecostal movements firmly in time, partly in relation to transnational Pentecostalism as it developed from the early twentieth century, partly in relation to the religious and social history of southern Africa. Maxwell’s historical approach enables him to offer an important revision of the understanding of African initiated churches, stressing more than other scholars that African Pentecostal movements were always transnational, and that transnational Pentecostalism was always able to take on local forms wherever it settled. Secondly, Maxwell warns against a simplifying reductionism that tends to see Pentecostalism in purely instrumental political and economic terms. Political and economic analysis does indeed feature prominently, and he places southern African Pentecostalism firmly into its socio-historical context, but, unlike many other scholars, he also accepts the view of Pentecostals themselves that what motivates them is first and foremost their spiritual life. It is this subtle blend of social and religious history that gives the book its original character and its great value. Maxwell succeeds much better than other scholars in presenting African Pentecostals both as being shaped by the material conditions under which they live and as being active individuals who make their own lives, prepared to ‘act decisively on their faith’ (15).
The author begins his story with the well known origins of the Pentecostal movement in nineteenth-century North American Evangelical Christianity and the Azusa Street Revival, followed by its international expansion, facilitated especially by religious networks already in place and by the explosion in religious print in the second half of the nineteenth century. From its very beginning, then, the two characteristics usually applied to contemporary Pentecostalism were present: transnational networks and migration and an effective use of modern information technology. Maxwell also points out that early Pentecostalism shared two types of internal tension with its later manifestations, including ZAOGA: on the one hand a tension between forces of homogenisation and localisation, and on the other between early ideals of egalitarianism and later forces of hierarchy and authoritarianism.

When Pentecostal missionaries arrived in Cape Town in 1908, the new faith spread rapidly and brought about a major Pentecostal revival of southern Africa. Maxwell makes the fundamental point that too many scholars have tended to see the African Independent Churches of southern Africa as ‘authentically African’, and he demonstrates convincingly that they were all part of a broad Christian movement with a global character. In that respect Maxwell’s book is an important revisionist contribution to the study of Independence, which clearly needs to reconsider what was African and what was global in early twentieth-century African Christianity. The new Pentecostal movement attracted local converts who searched for personal security in a time of great social upheaval in southern Africa, and in these churches they could continue to encounter their traditional religious universe. Unlike other scholars who have stressed the North American character of southern African Pentecostalism, Maxwell stresses the conjuncture between Pentecostalism and African traditional religions. They populated the same religious space but interpreted it in very different ways.

Maxwell follows the history of ZAOGA from its origins in Salisbury in the 1950s, a time marked by poverty, social upheaval and political unrest but also by a rising African middle class in search of respectability. A small prayer band around the prophet Ezekiel Guti gradually broke away from the Apostolic Faith Mission and eventually, in 1968, founded their own church. Maxwell discusses the important question of why this group developed into a major transnational movement when so many comparable movements failed. His explanation is partly that Guti’s movement succeeded in creating its own social space, partly that it was more successful than others in mobilising external theological and material resources without becoming dependent upon them. This point is made throughout the book, that a key to understanding Guti’s success as a leader was his ability to mobilise external resources and at the same time to stay independent. In addition to this, Maxwell insists that ZAOGA first grew so fast because it provided people with the religious doctrines and practices that suited them in a time of great social and political change. This is one of the few points in the book where one might have wished for a deeper comparative discussion of the rise and fall of other religious movements in the region, interpreted in the context of the politics of the time and of the interaction between Christian movements and local traditional religions.

In the 1970s and 1980s ZAOGA grew further and was transformed from a sect into a denomination with a growing concern for property, bureaucracy and leadership structure, the training of ministers, and formal procedures. The transformation from sect to denomination is a well known theme in the sociology of religion and Maxwell could probably have benefited from including this discussion more explicitly in his analysis, not least in order to
nuance the comparative analysis of ZAOGA. Another key to the movement’s success was that Guti was able to maintain a fine balance between the face-to-face virtues of the sect and the organisational efficiency and potential for growth of the denomination. He attracted substantial resources from the United States, which enabled the movement to stay autonomous in relation to Zimbabwean nationalism, but Maxwell stresses that external funds were not the main reason for the movement’s growth; this should primarily be explained by its ability to offer southern Africans the personal security they longed for. At the end of the 1980s, ZAOGA had 300 church buildings and houses and about 1,000 pastors as well as many Bible schools in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In this period the movement increasingly became part of the global Born-Again movement, and once again Guti demonstrated his talent for mobilising external resources and used them to strengthen his own power base in the face of leadership struggles inside the movement’s hierarchy. At the same time a leadership cult embedded in a new sacred history developed around Guti, whose growing wealth was also explained as a sign of the blessing of God. Likewise, Guti showed his never-failing ability of maintaining a balance between attracting international support and at the same time proving ZAOGA to be an ‘authentic’ and ‘indigenous’ Zimbabwean movement. Combining localism and internationalism was essential, in order to strengthen the church internally and to secure its survival vis-à-vis the nationalism of the Zimbabwean state.

At the end of the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, ZAOGA changed into a transnational movement with branches in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zaire/DRC, Tanzania, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Great Britain. Maxwell stresses that ZAOGA expanded as a movement of Africans evangelising other Africans, thereby providing a welcome revision of explanations which see the spread of African Pentecostalism as a result of external factors. In a concluding chapter Maxwell discusses the life of southern African Pentecostals in an age of neo-liberalism. He argues that Pentecostalism has provided ordinary Africans with the means to come to terms with neo-liberalism and poverty, marginalisation and insecurity. This view is not quite convincing, and the reason is methodological. When Maxwell argues that Pentecostalism and neo-liberalism are kindred souls, he mainly does so at the level of principles and less so on the basis of in-depth empirical analysis which could demonstrate more clearly how and to what extent Pentecostalism affects the careers and family lives of the believers. This should be seen as part of the recurrent debate about the actual political significance of African Pentecostalism. Brilliant as it is, Maxwell’s book also demonstrates the great difficulties of leading these discussions on a sufficiently detailed empirical basis.

Maxwell succeeds splendidly in writing the history of an African initiated church with a level of detail and nuance rarely seen in such studies. We meet a group of Pentecostals who all share a hope for personal security and for spiritual healing, and who create an African Pentecostalism firmly rooted in local traditions, while the leaders of the church simultaneously operate as international diplomats. We understand that the church is at one and the same time united by the prophetic leader Guti and split by tensions and struggles inside the church. Not least, Maxwell gives us a proper historical understanding of Pentecostalism, rejecting those who exclusively see African Pentecostalism as originating abroad, and rather seeing it as a new chapter in the history of southern African healing and cleansing movements. He succeeds, therefore, in telling the story of a Christian movement which is both very local and very transnational.
David Maxwell has written a splendid and important book. Other books have been written on individual Pentecostal churches, but none with the same historical depth and theological insight. The author has an impressive command of the literature on Pentecostalism and a critical and independent position in relation to other scholars in the field. His historical approach and his sensitive empirical analysis enable him to move beyond the stereotypical discussions of Pentecostalism, modernity and globalisation found in much recent literature. Likewise, he succeeds in taking seriously African Pentecostalism as a spiritual phenomenon and at the same time placing it firmly into its political and social context. At this point, however, it would have been interesting to have a more explicit and concrete discussion of the exact ways in which material conditions and religious concerns interact. A major virtue of Maxwell’s book is that he refuses to see African Pentecostalism as exotic. Because of his knowledge of general church history and of theology, it is easier for him than for other scholars of African Pentecostalism to place it in a comparative historical perspective.

In summary, this is a superb, original and important contribution to the study of the social and religious history of Africa. It is written in a clear and accessible language. Having recently had the chance to go through the book with a group of students, many of whom had no prior knowledge of African Christianity, I can report that the book may be read with equal pleasure and intellectual benefit by newcomers to the field and by specialists.

Niels Kastfelt
Centre of African Studies
University of Copenhagen
DK 1150 Copenhagen K
Denmark