

EDITORIAL

Pentecostalism and the African Religious Imagination

Pentecostalism can be defined by the pneumatic emphasis of its spirituality. That means, at the heart of Pentecostal Christianity is the experience of the Holy Spirit. Although Pentecostalism and its younger progenies, the various charismatic movements have become worldwide movements the expressions of its spiritualities differ according the religio-cultural contexts in which they are located. Thus, within the African context, Pentecostals, whether consciously or unconsciously, function within two major worldviews, and these are, the biblical and the traditional. The pneumatic emphasis of Pentecostalism is seen both through the regular manifestations of the Holy Spirit in tongues, visions, and prophecies, and in a strong interventionist theology that gives attention to healing, exorcism, and deliverance.

At the center of Pentecostal/charismatic movements are mediators of supernatural power – pastors, prophets, and evangelists – people deemed to have been endowed “with eyes to see” into the invisible spiritual realm, and who bring communication from there to the human realm. All these Pentecostal/charismatic spiritual phenomena are present within African traditional religious practices too. Among the Akan of Ghana, for example, the traditional priest has an assistant, whose function includes the interpretation of the “tongues” spoken through the priest by the deity. The critical functions of the traditional priests always include the powers of divination, prophecy, healing, and exorcism. In other words, the credibility of the priest hinges on the extent to which he or she hears from the deity that is served and to be able to deliver authentic prophetic directions, including bringing critical medical or healing interventions to aid the afflicted.

In a sense, especially when considered from the viewpoint of the prophetic ministry, African Pentecostal leaders are

Christian charismatic figures who function as the Christian equivalents of traditional medicine and diviners and whose ministries, although intended to be biblical, also very forcefully reflect the ways in which religious mediations occur in primal societies. In the primal societies of Africa, as Ghanaian pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey points out, medicine has always been practiced by traditional priest healers and so to the traditional African the most important activity of the priest is the medical one—the ability to diagnose correctly and to prescribe accurate remedies for various diseases.¹ The process of diagnosis usually requires consultation with spirits and discerning from the spiritual realm, a process that has also come to be associated with the work of Pentecostal/charismatic Christian prophets.

Here in this volume, we have essays that are dedicated to the intersection between Pentecostalism and primal religions and how certain practices of the traditional context, literally influences the Pentecostal/charismatic agenda. A critical example of this development is what I refer to as the act of communicating with the supernatural in terms of “religious mediation” and how important it is to primal or indigenous religiosity. This intersection has led to a certain type of religious functionary within the African Christian church whose activities include healing, prophecy, and the reversal of negative destinies. In *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins makes the following observation that summarizes my thoughts on how primal spirituality has been reinvented in African Pentecostalism:

Considering the central role of healing and exorcism in Southern churches, it is tempting to look for older pagan roots, and to ask just how the emerging congregations justify their ideas. Of course, Southern churches thrive because of their appeal to distinctly African or Latin American ideas—their ability to work within traditional

1 Emmanuel Y. Lartey, ‘Healing, Tradition and Pentecostalism in Africa Today’, *International Review of Mission*, vol. 75, 297 (January 1986), 75.

culture—but these examples of accommodation do not amount to a betrayal of the faith, still less to syncretism.²

In other words, the primary intention of the Pentecostal/charismatic movements under study in the essays in this volume is to be biblical, but in the process, they have achieved contextual relevance by working within indigenous worldviews of spiritual causality and the use of supernatural force to interpret and counter the effects of extraordinary evil.

If integrations into or reinventions of primal religious and cultural ideas in indigenous expressions of the Christian faith do not amount to syncretism, as Jenkins notes above, then we are confronted with questions relating to modes of understanding these innovations that are said to be at work in the indigenous churches of the global south, especially, Pentecostalism. One suggestion is that we should look at how the Bible is translated, interpreted, and consequently understood and used in these contexts:

The rising churches can plausibly claim to be following abundantly documented precedents from the founding ages of Christianity. The Bible itself so readily supports a worldview based on spirits, healing, and exorcism. When Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, he did not give an abstract theological lecture but pointed to the tangible signs and wonders that were being done in his name. ...When Paul took the Christian faith to Macedonia, the first known mission into Europe, he was responding to a vision received in a dream.³

Healing, visions, and dreams are important religious categories in the sort of innovative Christianity represented by Pentecostalism and these phenomena have long been recognized as central themes in primal piety as well. Philip Jenkins concludes from these observations, as some like Christian G. Baëta, Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako did

2 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

3 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 148

much earlier, that 'in understanding what can look like the oddities of Third World churches, it is helpful to recall one basic and astonishing fact, which is that, they take the Bible seriously indeed.'⁴

The early 20th century prophet, William Wadé Harris, took on the designation 'Black Elijah of West Africa' because like his Old Testament model he confronted people's ancient cult-figures or idols which he combated by calling upon the fire of God to burn as demonstrations of viable power. In the explanation of Jenkins, legend tells how pagan shrines actually burst into flames as Prophet Harris approached and their priests, like those of Baal "fled before the coming of such supernatural power."⁵ Jenkins proceeds to illustrate that parallels of contemporary Southern Christianity with ancient Christianity are just as clear when we consider prophetic leadership: "The vitality of prophecy in the contemporary South means that the rising churches can read biblical accounts with far more understanding and sensitivity than Northern Christians can."⁶

The calling, role, and modus operandi of the *ɔkɔmfɔ*, *babalawo* or *nganga* (traditional priests/diviners), as these religious functionaries may be designated within various African traditions, presents a particular poignant example of how the resonances between primal piety and indigenous revivalist Christianity works out in practice. When the *ɔkɔmfɔ* (priest) comes under the possessing influence of the deity, he or she does not speak in ordinary human language. The *Akɔmfɔ* speak the language of the gods because the gods do not communicate in human languages. Rather they do so in "unknown primal tongues" as a sign of their existence and presence. It lies in the power of religious functionaries with access to the language of the supernatural realm to relate to suppliants what the gods may be saying. Harvey Cox

4 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 148; Christian G. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of some Spiritual Churches* (London: SCM, 1962).

5 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 58.

6 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 149.

points to the meaning of Pentecostal tongues in the light of a phenomenon that has always been known within primal or indigenous traditions. He explained why the phenomenon of glossolalia constitutes a profound transcendental experience or a form of vital participation in the life of transcendence:

I believe that the inner significance of speaking in tongues or praying in the Spirit can be found in something virtually every spiritual tradition in human history teaches in one way or another: that the reality religious symbols strive to express ultimately defies even the most exalted human language. Virtually all the mystics of every faith have indicated that the vision they have glimpsed, though they try very desperately to describe it, finally eludes them.

It is within this context of the human inability to adequately capture and express the deep things of the spirit that St. Paul describes Pentecostal tongues as 'groans' or 'sighs' that are 'too deep for words' (Romans 8:26). This does not refer to silent prayer, as popular interpretations have generally cast it. Rather as Pentecostal New Testament scholar, Gordon D. Fee suggests, it "sighs too deep for words" refers to communicating languages that are humanly incomprehensible because "we do not know how to pray." Human languages are limited in their ability to articulate what lies deep within the human psyche. Interpretations of Pentecostal tongues are therefore given to those to whom the Spirit grants the required ability. In the traditional shrine, it is left to the *ṣṣṓfó*, who is the mouthpiece of the deity, to interpret what the *ṣkṣmfo* who assumes the position of the deity under possession may be saying to suppliants.

It is instructive that the Yoruba designation of the diviner, *babalawo*, literally means "father/custodian of secrets." The functions of both the *ṣkṣmfo* and *babalawo* include diagnosis, the prescription of appropriate remedies and when needed, a prophetic function that reveals the minds of gods and deities to peoples and communities. Understood this way, the reemergence of the prophetic role within African independent

and Pentecostal Christianity takes on a particularly important significance. Jenkins appropriately refers to the independent churches as critical in demonstrating the real spiritual hunger that Christianity encountered and sought to fill within its African converts.⁷ These particular types of Christianity constituted paradigmatic shifts from the rational and cerebral expressions of the faith associated with the historic Western-mission related denominations because they offered more reasonable and experiential forms of faith that were especially able to cater to the tensions that exist within people and communities as they sought to make sense of their physically and spiritually precarious African worlds.

Rijk van Dijk explains how this occurred when Pentecostalism in Ghana came under indigenous leadership:

When the mission Pentecostal churches were placed entirely in the hands of African leadership in the 1930s and the 1950s, the leadership accommodated to notions of the spirit world, the ways in which individual subjects were affected by such influences and forces, and it developed distinct ideas on how such afflicting forces could be counteracted in prayer-healing, speaking in tongues and similar rituals.⁸

Globalization, modernity, immigration to Western contexts and economic development have created new fears, anxieties and challenges that have made the resort to supernatural solutions to problems even more paramount for many Africans. The spiritual allies of the African Christian reside in the supernatural realm and their powers are mediated by the ministers of the church, that is, prophets, dreamers, and visionaries. The essays in the current edition of the journal do not exhaust the issues, but one thing is clear, African Christians generally, and Pentecostals in particular, need to reflect soberly on the importance of traditional beliefs in living out the Christian faith within a world in which people do not take off

7 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 54.

8 Rijk A. van Dijk, 'From Camp to Encompassment: Discourses of Transsubjectivity in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 27, 2 (1997), 140.

their traditional religious “clothing” even after they have come to Christ. The sorts of existential issues that are taken to our prayer camps are clear indicators of the issues we talk about in this volume of the Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission.

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