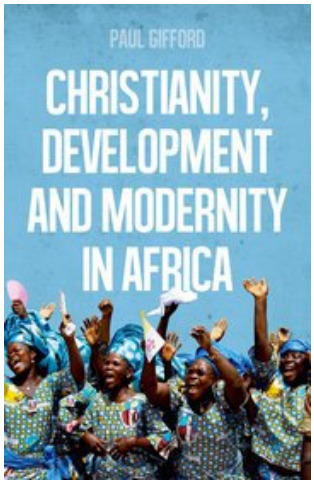
Book Review – Christianity, Modernity and Development by Paul Gifford

Liz Storer says this book highlights the connection between diverse forms of worship and developmental issues in sub-Saharan Africa.



In '*Christianity, Modernity and Development*', Professor Paul Gifford marshalls his extensive experience of more than 30 years research in African churches and religious communities to open a conversation as to *what exactly might constitute* 'African Christianity' in contemporary times.

Gifford argues that at present, much writing on the subject, instead of recognising the diversity of beliefs, practices and public significances, continues to depart from the essentialism that *'a Christian is a Christian is a Christian'.* In doing this, many scholars implicitly assume a conformity between denominational practices worldwide. This is particularly the case when popular statistics are used as a benchmark of Christian faith. Within broad statistical indicators, enormous variations in local and cultural practices are hidden. These differences have only increased with the spread of new groupings such as 'Evangelicals' or 'Pentecostals'. Gifford explains, *'the standard markers of 'religiosity (frequency of religious participation, frequency of prayer, stated importance of religion and claimed belief in heaven, hell, life after death, and souls) reveal little and miss everything about African religion'* (p.164). In fact, it is not self-evident what exactly might constitute African Christianity, particularly when many fail to acknowledge its 'enchanted' dimensions.

The book elucidates selected ideas and practices of a broad array of preachers and movements which have emerged in both Pentecostal and Catholic Churches in sub-Saharan Africa. Gifford contrasts the 'enchanted' imagination in the former with the 'disenchanted and internally secularised' Christianity of the latter (p.157), but shows that even within Pentecostal or Catholic delimitations, profound differences are apparent. Gifford is particularly interested in the implications of these differences. He argues that these emergent and diverse forms of worship have profound connections to developmental issues and the manner in which modernity continues to unfold across sub-Saharan Africa.

Gifford begins his exploration by taking the reader to the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFM) of Daniel Olukoya, which was founded in Lagos in 1989, but by 2012 had gathered a weekly attendance of 120,000 at the Sunday service. Gifford presents this Ministry not as necessarily emblematic of Pentecostalism per se, but as an enactment '*pushed to its limits'* (p.20). For Olukoya, his Christian congregation has a God-given right to success and health, but the attainment of this worldly destiny is blocked by the bondage of different spiritual forces, including witchcraft, curses, or the use of satanic powers or weapons by an enemy. It is this spiritual warfare that characterises Olukoya's ministry, and his offensive is prayer as the principal means of thwarting evil forces.

This approach is contrasted with Gifford's second example, that of David Oyedepo, the founder of the Living Faith Church Worldwide (better known as Winners Chapel) in Lagos. Oyedepo is openly inspired by prominent Western Pentecostal Preachers, where he learned the 'secrets to the Kingdom of prosperity'. Oyedepo places strong emphasis on being born again, and whilst his preaching is deeply rooted in Biblical wisdom, he draws heavily on those elements pertaining to prosperity. Giving tithe is a fundamental aspect of membership in Winners Church – attendees reap what they sow. Ideas about attack from the spiritual world form less of a core component of his teachings, compared with ideas about giving as a means of achieving 'victory'. His ministry is also reliant on the personal power of Oyedepo as a servant of God to perform miracles.

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Photo Credit: Liz Storer 2016, Annual Pilgrimage to the Roman Catholic Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Lodonga, Yumbe District, North-West Uganda

Even within the space of the same city, these two influential Pentecostal figures draw on biblical doctrine in very different ways, and emphasise different routes to attaining fortune and self-development in this world.

Though others have been positive with regard to the spread of Pentecostalism and market-based development, based on its insistence of motivation, entrepreneurship and personal-life skills (for example Berger 2010; Martin 2002), Gifford is less optimistic. Considering the implications of the enchanted explanations for a lack of worldly success, he fears that in response to explanations for misfortune based on invisible forces (characteristic of Olukoya's Ministry), for which the possibilities are almost infinite, *'despair or at least resignation to fate seems the most appropriate response'* (p.57). Moreover, since these explanations are always linked to human responsibility, Gifford suggests that this form of Christianity could actually diminish social capital, and serve to breed mistrust within families and communities. More directly, the obligation to give relatively large sums in churches such as Oyedepo have adverse implications for development and modernity.

If Pentecostalism is a more recent phenomenon brought to the African continent through its engagement with modernity, the Catholic Church has long been defined by its struggle against, or adaptation to, modern change. Gifford explores how this messy alignment with particular aspects of modernity and relatively recent centralisation of the Pope have influenced African Catholicism. Though he is highly cognisant of the epistemic transformation brought by the arrival of the Catholic faith, Gifford is more positive with regard to links between the church and development. In particular, he documents the cross-continental commitment since the colonial era to providing educational and medical services. This development agenda has since been expanded at the expense of evangelical priorities with service provision extending to 'everything imaginable' (p.96).

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Owing to the increasing number of Catholic-anchored entities providing for instance relief, rehabilitation, institutional building, strengthening food production and micro-finance initiatives, Gifford compares the Catholic Church to a '*super-NGO'* or a *'supreme example of global civil society'* (p.80). Though this is changing, much of this work continues to be facilitated, in contrast to Protestant Churches, by external funds. Of course, difficulties to this service provision do arise in relation to Catholic doctrine. For instance, though the Catholic Church provides half of all HIV/AIDS services on the continent, issues such as promoting condom-use present one (well-publicised) stumbling block. Moreover, this profound contribution to development and relief often places religious leaders in inescapably political positions.

However, though African Catholicism may be 'primarily characterized by development', Gifford notes that the 'countless' Catholics too live in an enchanted world (p.107). He draws on the work of Mary Douglas in (then) Zaire, and Heike Behrend in Uganda to show how Catholic-centred movements have emerged to combat witchcraft, sorcery accusations and dangerous spiritual forces. These quests have been shrouded in Catholic-inspired rituals and often involved the identification and confession of an individual suspect. One of these movements is the charismatic movement, which is rapidly becoming normalised into African Catholic churches, blending global acceptance of charismatic gifts with the need to respond to localised forms of individual and communal spiritual threat.

In my own research in Arua, north-west Uganda, I concluded that the protection offered by the Charismatic Catholic Renewal against malevolent invisible forces accounts in part for its rapid expansion since the late 1990s. Though Pentecostal preachers are sometimes treated with suspicion owing to their independence, demands for tithe and their claims to perform grandiose miracles, the Charismatic Movement is often considered a legitimate option precisely because of its connections to a trusted and established Catholic body.

Whilst anthropologists continue to study transformed and globalised spirit worlds for their own sake, this is not Gifford's intention in this book. He does not find perspectives espousing options for 'multiple modernities', which encompass spiritual ideas of progress or barriers to it, helpful. His view of development is an end goal close to the Western ideal of a rational nation-state. He states plainly *'my view is that Africa's only hope of joining the modern world is to transcend neo-patrimonialism, enforce the rule of law, build institutions, and adopt rational bureaucratic structures, systems and procedures.'* Gifford considers the 'enchanted imagination' to be counterproductive to this vision and fundamentally incompatible with scientific visions of modernity.

Whilst many actively engaged in the very religious practices depicted within these pages may conceive this proposition unthinkable, the book certainly achieves Gifford's aim of opening the conversation about the diversity, and public implication of emergent forms of Christian practice. This book is essential reading for those interested in re-conceptualising the links between changing currents of Christianity and development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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