

## BOOK REVIEW

**African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement** by David Maxwell (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006) – XI + 250 pp., ISBN 13:978-0-8124-1738-6, Paperback.

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This book gives an exploratory account of the rise and operational development of born-again Christianity, Zimbabwe Assemblies of God, Africa (ZAOGA), which has now become a transnational enterprise known in its transnational incarnation as Forward in Faith Mission International (FIFMI). It traces the origins of this Pentecostal movement and its transformation from small beginnings in the townships of the 1950s under the leadership of Prophet Ezekiel Guti to the present dynamic transnational business enterprise, which is supported by a complex bureaucracy and whose membership in Zimbabwe and beyond is about 1.5 million.

Through a detailed study of ZAOGA and its antecedents, the book situates Pentecostal Christianity in the social history of Southern Africa devoting a significant portion of its content on the movement to the last two decades of the twentieth century. The full chronological sequence of religious change within African Pentecostalism, considering the local seeds and transnational moves that preceded recent globalization is explored and differentiated. The book gives an analysis of this movement's evolution through the colonial and immediate post-colonial eras putting emphasis on the antecedents and conditions surrounding the take-off and subsequent transformations of the movement in the neo-liberal era.

In the book the author warns against a common temptation of categorizing ZAOGA/FIFMI as 'global'. He prefers the word 'transnational' which, he claims, gives a clearer picture of what ZAOGA/FIFMI is in that it shows that while ZAOGA/FIFMI does transcend state frontiers, it does not have an effect which is worldwide and therefore not global. He also resists the description of ZAOGA/FIFMI as 'international' in that it does not involve

nations as corporate actors. Its main agents are economic migrants, refugees, African missionaries, roving bishops and pastors.

Tightly and compactly organized, Maxwell's book is a masterpiece of work which vivifies the examination of a religious movement which is often times seen as sub-cultural, peasantish in outlook and financially exploitative to the poor. Although mainly written from a religious perspective, the book is quite comprehensive in its scope. Among other issues it touches upon, are those relating to politics, history, economics and many others considered critical in helping readers to appreciate and understand the Zimbabwe's current socio-political and economic predicament.

One of the strong points for which the book is to be given credit, is its paradigm shift in its view of the capacity of Africans to enrich the world in one way or the other. Instead of portraying Africans as mere passive recipients of religious enrichment from the Western World, as it is often the case when issues of missionary religion are related to Africans, the book has, without any doubt, demonstrated that spreading religion beyond the confines of one's country or region in the world we live in, is no longer the monopoly of the Western World. This has to be understood against the background that while the appropriation of foreign cultural values has always been the best way of promoting mutual cultural enrichment in the course of the history of humankind, the worst has been to think that Africa has nothing worthy of consideration when it comes to such enrichment.

As they say, there is no wall without two sides; this book too has its own shortcomings, which however, have no significant bearing on what has been said about it so far. One such shortcoming is the author's failure to give the central meanings of some of the critical words used in the book such as "pentacostalism", "transnational" and others at the beginning of the book to make it easier for the reader to appreciate and understand their later usage throughout the book. The title of the book too could have been better formulated with the omission of the word "African" at the beginning of the title. Biblically problematized, the word may mislead the reader. For example: Are the gifts spoken of in the title, the gifts of the Spirit (which are biblically universal by nature) to Africans like to any other Christian believer or are they indigenous African gifts (special to Africans) made manifest by the Spirit? Which is which?

All in all, Maxwell's book provides an invaluable insight into this great religious movement from Africa. It is an indispensable material for both theologians/students of religion and those interested in missionary works and the influence of religion in society the world over.



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