

BOOK REVIEW

YONG, Amos and Estrelida Y. ALEXANDER (eds), *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 271pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780814797310. \$30.

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Beyond the pomp and enchantment that eclipsed the 2006 centenary of the American Pentecostal movement, the spirited celebration marked a momentous milestone within the gamut of American religio-cultural tapestry. Perhaps an interesting religious ferment that has been remarkably sidestepped is the mobility and ubiquitous influence of African American Pentecostalism, adumbrated as Afro-Pentecostalism, a microcosm within the macrocosmic purview of African American civil society. *Afro-Pentecostalism* provides a critical elucidation of the African American Pentecostal movement, perceptibly the most dynamic brand within contemporary black church tradition and ritual compass.

The historiography of Afro-Pentecostalism is best charted with contributors exploring the contours of historical trajectories (Part I); gender and culture (Part II); Afro-Pentecostal ethics (Part III); pneumatology, intersections with popular culture (Part IV); its missionary activities, global dimensions and changing theological discourses (Part V). The interdisciplinary and multifocal lenses are remarkable. Contributors come from diverse traditions, including practitioners, veterans of black Pentecostal scholarship from within, and doyens of modern Pentecostal history who stand outside the tradition. Each contributor brings an illuminating perspective to our empathetic understanding of an eclectic religious tradition.

The book weaves a concise historical thread of continuity and discontinuity between the Black Holiness movement and the charismatic movement, exuding Pentecostal spirituality that projected beyond Pentecostal circles into black mainline and non-denominational communities. These religious entities “engaged broader social, political and economic cultures while formulating discursive practices of worship and spirituality consistent with their self-identities, and ethical and ideological commitments” (p. 9). The contributions demonstrate how Afro-Pentecostalism negotiated race, class, and gender but in some sense legitimized those dichotomies.

Contrary to popular imagination, Cecil Robeck underscores how the African American community or its Christian community in Los Angeles is far from homogeneous, drawing upon the Azusa Street Mission and Historical Black Churches as two worlds in conflict (p. 21). “The African American Christian

community was and still is comprised of at least two very different worship traditions, often following lines drawn by their respective social classes” (p. 30). These heterogeneous “African American worlds” were reflected in the city’s black churches, but also in the wider tapestry of African American community. As David Daniels hints, “The growth of Afro-Pentecostalism would change the religious landscape of black Protestantism, making it a predominantly Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal phenomenon rather than the Baptist and Methodist phenomenon that held at the advent of the twentieth century” (p. 43).

By privileging the African American provenance, experience and expressions of Pentecostalism in the United States, the book foregrounds the import of the African American contributions to a global Pentecostal enterprise, a gripping narrative largely undermined within global discourses. The book had its main focus on the core impact of African American Christianity, the role of black Christian agency and praxis in the watershed event of Pentecostal revivalism that laid the foundation for twentieth century Pentecostalism. It highlights how different strands and intergenerational clusters proliferated and made enduring impact on the American religious landscape, but also beyond with noticeable international constituencies. The book also charts the development of the charismatic tradition occasioned by the popularity of a Pentecostal theology that incorporates a robust pneumatology and domesticates spiritual gifts in individual and corporate ritualism. The implosion of a non-strict personal piety and a non-rigid glossolalic conditionality for Holy Spirit baptism into mainline Christianity and para-church networks results in the unboundedness of Pentecostal praxis and in the fluidity of the concept. While an emergent Pentecostalism was earlier located within two interrelated events – Topeka in 1901 (Charles Parham) and Azusa Street Revival in 1906 (William Seymour) – recent scholarship demonstrates that Pentecostal outbursts occurred in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America contemporaneously, even well before the twentieth century. Historically, the Azusa Street event was very significant in its capacity to launch into global networks, such as the pre-existing networks of immigrant and missionary networks.

The last section interrogates ways in which Afro-Pentecostalism has enriched and been enriched by engagement in the global Pentecostal milieu. Ogbu Kalu, the only non-American contributor (pp. 209–32), and to whom this book was deservedly dedicated, epitomizes this global dimension. He opines that the narrative of African American Pentecostal–Charismatic missionary enterprise to Africa in the twilight of the twentieth century must be set within the larger framework of African American missionary engagement of Africa, which commenced in the nineteenth century (p. 209). He demonstrates how “missions within black Pentecostal constituencies have evolved from a monologue dominated by the American context to a discursive give-and-take between American and African cultures” (p. 16).

Leonard Lovett aptly echoes Mitchell that African American religion is a continuation of African traditional religion (p. 157). He hints unequivocally at the enduring marginalization of Afrocentric perspectives, remarking prophetically:

The spiritual cloud of divine effusion that hovered over North America during Azusa Street Revival appears now to be hovering over Africa, Asia and Latin America. America in our time will be evangelized by those who have been despised for centuries as the “wretched of the earth” ... (p. 161)

Kalu’s observation that “the volume of the missionary impulse from the South is increasing at the same time that the Northern missionary impulse is declining in its intensity...” (p. 226) seems unnoticed. As Dale Irvin remarks, “the West itself is undergoing significant transformation under the impact of global transnational migrations” (p. 242). Yet, the book does not capture the visibility and impact of the new African Christian diaspora, propelled by recent immigrants who claimed to have found the United States as a new abode and a promising mission field. Are the African-led Pentecostal churches to be located outside the Afro-Pentecostalism rubric (cf. p. 162)? Irvin demonstrates that while the groundwork for a fuller dialogue between black theology and black Pentecostalism has hardly been laid, “black theology has undergone its own fuller global engagement over the last several decades, primarily through its sustained dialogue with other liberation theologies around the world” (p. 234). As Afro-Pentecostalism is perhaps not totally different from the Pentecostalism practised by recent African immigrants, it may pave the way for dialogue towards an ingrained Afrocentric perspective.

The editors and contributors deserve commendation in putting together this seminal work, a vital contribution towards reconfiguring the historiography of African American Pentecostalism, and locating it within discourses on American religious history and global Pentecostalism. This is a “must read” for scholars and practitioners, but also for all interested in the local/global currents of Pentecostal Christianity.