

## BOOK REVIEW

ONYINAH, Opoku, *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana*. Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2012. 370pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9781905679065. £27.95/€39.

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Up to a point some years ago one can say that most of the research on African churches was devoted to the mainline churches and African independent churches. Today the broader focus of research seems to have changed. The dramatic spread of Pentecostalism throughout the world has been one of the focuses of research of many scholars in the last decades. Anthropologists, theologians, sociologists and historians of religions are carrying out research on this phenomenon, whether focusing on a single church or attempting to emphasize the transnational dimension of it and its mobility. *Pentecostal Exorcism* is part of this stream, giving a very good analysis focused on the history and the development of a specific Pentecostal church: the Church of Pentecost of Ghana.

The author – Opoku Onyinah – is himself a pastor of that church, and the book is a slightly modified version of his PhD dissertation. Being a pastor of the Church has allowed him to have easy access to the minutes of the meetings and the chance to have very deep discussions with members and leaders. This allowed him to conduct an accurate and well-documented analysis. Since the author is himself a pastor, he has carried out an analysis “from within”, but this did not prevent him from having a critical look at the phenomenon.

The current debate on Pentecostalism tries to understand the main reasons for its growing appeal. The answers may greatly differ, depending on the disciplinary and theoretical lens of the different authors, and they cannot be summarized here. Many scholars, however, stressed the plasticity of Pentecostal idiom, which allows the churches to easily deal with different social and cultural contexts, and to adapt themselves to various cultural traditions. This point is crucial in presenting Opoku Onyinah’s book. Its main aim is to understand why witchcraft and exorcism persist in Ghanaian Christianity. At the same time it is an attempt to give theological framework to the exorcistic ministry, by using the Church of Pentecost as a case study.

The book is structured in seven chapters. I will try to give some commentaries describing each chapter. After introducing the problem and the hypotheses in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 the author provides a summary of the Akan religious beliefs. The term “Akan” combines a certain number of ethnic groups, living

mainly in the southern part of Ghana, which have a common historical origin and share some aspects of their languages, social structures and beliefs. The author describes their cosmology and the beliefs on witchcraft. As he clearly states, his account relies on the most well-known Akan group: the Asante. My criticism is that he often assumes that the beliefs are quite the same in the various Akan groups, which is not the case in my experience: there are significant differences in beliefs and social structures among them. It is true that we can find a “family resemblance” among the various groups, but we must not forget the differences.

In analysing witchcraft, which is a central point in Chapter 2, he often tries to interpret it by using a psychological and psychoanalytical framework (e.g. invoking Jung). In my opinion a closer confrontation with the anthropological debates (which are discussed, however) could have led to a different interpretation, better able to emphasize the local views about witchcraft and how they deal with the system of values, as well as with the daily practices.

Chapter 3 focuses on a historical account of the development of Christianity in Africa. The author discusses well the interpretation of local religious beliefs by missionaries and the “diabolization” they made of the traditional religions. This is a salient point to understand how exorcism has been managed by churches. A brief account of the development of exorcism in spiritual churches is offered.

The role of exorcism in the Church of Pentecost is the focus of Chapter 4. The author investigates, through archival sources and interviews, how the exorcistic ministry developed. He gives a complete account on the disputes and controversies about this practice. Special attention is given to the influence of global debate within the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

Chapter 5 deals with what the author calls “witchdemonology”. He uses this term for combining witchcraft and demonology as a unique phenomenon, even though it has blurred boundaries. It reflects the current use of the term witchcraft, which seems to be far from its traditional meaning, and fits the Ghanaian context. Due to the evangelism of the missionaries earlier, and of Pentecostal and Spiritual churches later (as well as other cultural influences), today the witches are often associated with the work of devil, as is evidenced across the continent. Central features of witchdemonology are the idea of the effective activity of the spiritual world (witchcraft, demons, traditional gods), the belief in territorial spirits and in the ancestral curse, and the need of healing camps for deliverance.

Chapter 6 contextualizes the exorcistic ministry in a biblical perspective, giving an account of witchdemonology from this point of view. The final chapter then summarizes the main points of the book.

The book is interesting and very stimulating. The author takes advantage of his “insider” perspective to give a deep account of the historical development of this ministry in the Church of Pentecost, stressing the traditional roots and the role of missionary preaching. He demonstrates how this ministry is strongly based on Akan cosmology; he also raises the problem of the synthesis of Akan traditional religion(s), preaching and practices of some Western evangelists, and other Christian beliefs and practices. It is important to stress, finally, how he deals positively with a very large literature coming from different disciplinary fields.