

BOOK REVIEW

BURGESS, Richard. *Nigerian Pentecostalism and Development: Spirit, Power, and Transformation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. xiii + 249pp. Hbk. ISBN: 9781315167299. £96.00.

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Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing religious movements of the world. As a consequence of this growth, the centre of Christianity has shifted to the Global South. Studies have noted that today there are more Christians living in Africa, Latin America and Asia than in Europe and North America. While some have rejected Pentecostalism as a “backward cargo cult”, it has emerged as a strong “modernizing force” not only in terms of economic development as Weber had suggested, but also as an agent of holistic governance. It is in this context, Richard Burgess’s *Nigerian Pentecostalism and Development* becomes significant. Nigeria, which has the fourth highest number of Pentecostals in the world after Brazil, USA and China, makes it an important case to understand the role Pentecostalism plays in people’s lives and in society. Given this, the book asks: what role does Nigerian Pentecostalism play in development, and how does it affect the way Nigerians understand and engage with development activities? Following an interpretivist approach and drawing on a large number of semi-structured interviews supplemented by participant observations, a questionnaire survey and a collection of media products, Burgess argues that not all Pentecostals contribute constructively towards the nation-building process. For him, an emerging section of Nigerian Pentecostal groups has contributed actively towards human development and national transformation, and this shift in orientation has occurred largely because of “a variety of theological, sociological, and contextual factors” (p. 2). Thus, by emphasizing the “heterogeneity” (p. 13) of factors and approaches, Burgess discusses the contributions of Pentecostalism towards Nigeria’s holistic development and governance process.

The book has eight chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction sets the context for the book by discussing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the literature on religion and development. Following a discussion of the role of faith-based organizations in development in chapter 1, chapters 2–8 address the way Nigerian Pentecostalism has contributed to the SDGs by combining the material and spiritual aspects of development. For Burgess, development is not limited to economic growth; it is about holistic “human development” that includes education, health, access to rights, peace and security, and several other aspects. Each chapter thus discusses one specific

aspect of the SDGs. In chapter 2, Burgess discusses the Pentecostal engagement with economics, entrepreneurship and capacity-building. According to him, some Pentecostal churches are seeking to transform the economic sphere by bringing in both cultural (i.e. hard work, integrity and self-discipline) and structural (i.e. building the capacity of the SME sector) reforms. Burgess discerns two emerging trends with regard to Nigerian Pentecostal approaches to economic prosperity: first, “a shift from reliance on ‘miracles’ to an emphasis on work and entrepreneurship; and second, a new understanding that the purpose of wealth is for it to be used for the common good rather than for personal enrichment” (p. 64).

The question, however, is: have the changes in the economic sphere brought any changes in the political sphere? In chapter 3, Burgess discusses the impact of Pentecostalism on political behaviour, electoral politics and governance. He shows how Pentecostal pastors are hosting conferences and using various media platforms to not only educate people on their civic responsibilities, but also to call for free and fair elections and to deepen democracy. However, Burgess notes that the continuing Muslim-Christian conflict has posed serious challenges to the quest for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. For him, not just ethno-religious conflicts, but the declining standards of education and healthcare also pose serious threats to citizenship and development in Nigeria. Thus, chapter 4 shows how Pentecostals are responding to the perceived collapse of morality in society by advocating holistic education (combining academic learning with spiritual development), and chapter 5 shows how Pentecostals are intervening in the health sector by “embracing a holistic model of healing that combines beliefs in divine healing with the use of modern medicine”, and by engaging in healthcare services (p. 126). Furthermore, in chapter 6, Burgess discusses the Pentecostal responses to human rights violation of women, children and young people, and in chapter 7, Burgess discusses the Pentecostal efforts towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

In chapter 8, Burgess shifts the attention from Nigeria to Britain and the United States and discusses the nexus between religion, migration and development, especially in relation to Nigerian diaspora communities. The question is: what role do Pentecostal churches play in the lives of the migrants? Burgess argues that while migrants work as “transnational development actors” (p. 202), they also face several problems, including poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. It is in such contexts that Pentecostal churches act as “social and religious support mechanisms for African migrants, enabling them to negotiate the migration process and become incorporated into host societies” (p. 219). The book concludes that “African Pentecostal churches and organizations represent a significant, if largely untapped, resource for development” (p. 235). In order thus to fully utilize the potential of religious actors like the Pentecostal churches in development, Burgess argues that more “forums for exchange” are needed where a dialogue between Pentecostal organizations on the one hand and academics, secular NGOs, donor agencies, state officials, and development practitioners on the other hand can be organized.

The book makes several important contributions. First, while research on faith-based organizations in development are increasing, I have hardly come across studies that link Pentecostalism to the SDGs. This is perhaps the first book-length study that emphasizes the “holistic” and “heterogeneous” approaches followed by “diverse” Pentecostal groups in their effort to contribute to the 2030 sustainable development agenda. Second, it examines the complex and dynamic interplay of structural, cultural and contextual factors associated with governance and nation-building processes in Nigeria. Finally, it provides well-structured, interdisciplinary insights on the nexus between religion and development not just in Nigeria but also in the transnational diaspora contexts. In summation, the book is analytically rich and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex interrelationship between religion, politics and development in Nigeria, and to discussions of Pentecostalism and development. It will be useful to scholars of religious studies, development studies, African studies and anthropology.