BOOK REVIEW


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Caleb Nyanni is a second-generation Ghanaian Pentecostal in the UK and the Academic Dean of Birmingham Christian College. He is also an ordained minister with the Elim Pentecostal Church. Nyanni’s investigation of second-generation (SG) Ghanaian Pentecostals in the UK provides a fresh outlook on the subject of African diaspora Pentecostals in the West. His focus on the conflicting views of the Holy Spirit between first-generation (FG) and SG members of Church of Pentecost (CoP) points to the increasing need for scholarship that pays attention to the narratives and perspectives of second-generation Africans in diaspora. The CoP is the largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana with multiple branches in the UK and other nations. This book emphasizes the importance of bridging the inter-generational gap in relation to religious beliefs and practices in order to encourage the SG to remain within African diaspora churches. This is because this emerging generation of African Europeans, who constitute a large community of prospective members, understand western societies and could help create a transformed church fit for the multicultural Europe in which they were born or grew up in.

The introductory chapter discusses the issues of church membership and attendance in the UK, pointing to the increasing diversity and general reduction in youth participation. It presents the book’s central argument which centres around spirit beliefs and how the increasing multicultural nature of British society and the church challenges the home beliefs of the FG. Nyanni relates what the FG describes as the changing attitudes of the youth and the challenges of relating to them to the different socio-cultural and religious background of the two generations. In chapter 1, Nyanni introduces his qualitative research methodology and explains why he has chosen this approach. Although historical background information was collected from Ghana, the research was conducted in the UK. Four local CoP congregations were investigated in London and Birmingham between 2015 and 2017, three of which are dominated by the SG while the fourth operates as a first-generation “Ghana Church” in the UK conducting its services in the local Twi language.

Chapter 2 traces the cultural and traditional religious roots of CoP members in Ghana outlining their engagement with the spirit world. According to
Nyanni, their concept of the spirit is based primarily on the context of community which begins at conception and encompasses both the individual and community and their various rituals, norms and practices. Hospitality, particularly to strangers, is another important aspect. He summarizes the different categories and layers of spirits, describing them as messengers of the Supreme Being or God, who heads the hierarchic structure of the various spirit beings. Chapter 3 discusses how the Ghanaian socio-cultural and religious beliefs impact their Pentecostal beliefs and practices. It follows the introduction and establishment of Christianity in Ghana, the interaction between western Christian missionary teachings and indigenous beliefs, and the inability of the former to completely alter the cosmological outlook of the latter. This resulted initially in syncretic practices through the activities of the African Independent Churches (AICs) and prophets of spirit churches. This ultimately led to disaffection among the people which fuelled the emergence of Ghanaian Pentecostalism.

Chapters 4–6 present the results of the fieldwork. In chapter 4, Nyanni describes the four congregations in his study noting that three of them are SG-dominated Pentecostal International Worship Centres (PIWCs). The concept of PIWCs started in Ghana in response to the need for a different style of church suitable for westerners and “westernized” Ghanaians but the idea has now been exported globally. In a comparative analysis, he found that the PIWCs in the UK conducted services in English and, to an extent, were able to contextualise their liturgical practices. The control of leadership and power structures by the FG remains a source of suspicion and contention. Chapter 5 deals with the issue of spirit encounters, identifying beliefs and practices in the UK which have been influenced by the Ghanaian socio-cultural and religious background. Unlike the FG, the SG seeks the Holy Spirit’s power to achieve excellence in their secular and spiritual lives rather than to demolish demonic spirits. Nyanni describes this as a significant point of discontinuity of beliefs and practices among the second-generation.

Chapter 6 focuses on the “voices of the second-generation” addressing issues of identity, the influences of some Ghanaian Akan socio-cultural factors on the CoP and how these affect the SG’s church experience, engagement and membership. According to Nyanni, most SG—both those who had left the CoP and those who remain in frustration—would like to be identified as members of a church for all people rather than Ghanaians in a UK Ghana church. However, church is not an identity marker for the SG as it is for the first-generation. They do not share the same quest for identity amid racial tension and conflicts that their parents had as immigrants which made religion their core identity. Ethnically, most SG see themselves as Ghanaian-British, with emphasis on their Ghanaian heritage. Their Ghanaian cultural identity is based first on that being their parents’ origin from where they have adopted some cultural values; second, on their engagement and familiarity with African music and arts; and third, on transnational information about Ghana garnered from multimedia outlets. This however does not diminish their identity and lifestyle as British citizens in the UK with all the social and cultural implications making them people with fluid, complex and multiple identities.
In chapter 7, Nyanni examines the British social environment in which the SG are growing up and uses some key social theories and concepts like multiculturalism, globalization, and secularization as well as theological ideas to analyse the research data. In the concluding chapter, Nyanni summarizes the argument of the study. First, he reiterates that differences in cosmological and spirit beliefs constitute major reasons the SG are frustrated and/or leave diaspora churches and thus emphasises the need for special attention to issues around African theology particularly pneumatology. Secondly, the need for scholarship that engages the views of migrant children and their children, considering the multicultural and globalized western context in which they were raised. Third, that if the FG-dominated leadership is interested in retaining their children in church and engaging their [SG] help in (diaspora) church growth, it should relate to this emerging generations of Africans as “key players in the projection of the diaspora church in Europe and America” (p. 203).

As one of the earliest in-depth studies to investigate the practices of second-generation African Pentecostals in Europe, this is a timely work that serves as a basis for further research. The study would perhaps have benefitted from a focus group discussion between the SG and the FG. This would have provided a formal platform for a much-needed dialogue and an opportunity to observe the power dynamics at work.