J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity. Interpretations from an African Context.* Series: Regnum Studies in Global Christianity. Eugene, Oregon (USA): Wipf & Stock, 2013, ISBN 13: 978-1-62032-898-9. XVI + 191 pages. $ 26,00.

One of the most exciting phenomena in contemporary world Christianity is the birth of various fast growing churches in sub-Saharan Africa, which belong to the Pentecostal blend of Christianity. The phenomenon has been the subject of academic research, and several outstanding introductions have been published, for example the works of Allan Anderson and the late Ogbu Kalu.

This publication written by Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu is a welcome addition to these introductions. It is not so much a survey of the historical development and description of these churches, but does highlight the main characteristics of what the author calls ‘modern Pentecostalism’ or ‘pneumatic Christianity’ and a thorough theological reflection on this new phenomenon.

The author, professor at Trinity College in Accra (Ghana), has previously published a study on the some African Independent Churches and their decline: *African Charismatics: A Study in Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill 2005).

In this study he focuses on newly developed Mega churches, lead by charismatic leaders, who are sometimes called: Bishops or Archbishops, Apostles or Prophets, who attract thousands of followers, often younger middle class people.

The book is based on the author’s personal research on the development and the worship of churches in Ghana like: *Living Streams Ministries International, World Miracle Church International, Light House Chapel International, Christian Action Faith Ministries, International Central Gospel Church, Fountain Gate Chapel International.* It is the author’s opinion, that these churches are also representative for similar churches elsewhere in Africa. He tries to discover what moves the numerous attendees to gather in these churches, often leaving behind the traditional, historical churches founded by European missions, and he seriously tries to explore the particular contribution of these churches to present Christianity.

In nine very readable chapters, most of them based on articles or presentations published previously, he covers several main characteristics of these churches. The titles of some of these chapters already indicate that Asamoah is more than an excellent observer; he also is an open minded theological interpreter: Signs of the Spirit: Worship as Experience; Jericho Hour: Prayer as Theological Inventionist Strategy; The Cross and Prosperity; Unction to Function: The Reinvention of Theology of Anointing; Miracle Meal: the Holy Communion.

Asamoah’s approach could be defined as that of critical appreciation, or even: critical admiration. Asamoah is convinced that the new churches represent the new face of Christianity in Africa: ‘Each of the themes discussed in the chapters of this book serves to illustrated how the movement of the Spirit has changed the face of Christianity in Africa since the days of the establishment historic mission denominations (179). Asamoah refers to these churches as ‘an ecclesiastical experience’, rather than just a denominational movement (6). He carefully describes in which manner these churches that are often very hostile to African traditional religions, still operate from within these religious traditions, or, using the term of Bediako, from their ‘primal imagination’ which transcends primal religions (23). Elements that were found in what was originally called the African Independent Churches (AIC’s): spontaneity, total commitment, primitive responses that arise from the depths of life, are also present in the new Pentecostal movement (9).

It is impossible to summarize in this review the rich number of observations and the profound theological reflections on the phenomena that the author describes carefully.

I therefore limit myself to two chapters, which seem to me exemplary for Asamoah’s approach. In Chapter Two, entitled ‘Signs of the Spirit: Worship as Experience’, Asamoah develops what in his view, is basic for pneumatic Christianity: worship, as auspicious context in which people encounter the living and transforming God, and therefore the place of experiences of the joy of the Spirit, healing, prophetic messages about destinies, revelations about impending dangers, and deliverance from an array of negative emotions, burdens and encumbrances (18). Asamoah quotes Rudolf Otto, who in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) had stated that Orthodox Christianity had not been able to keep the non-rational element in religion alive, and relates this idea with what Eric Kwapong, a leading Pentecostal pastor in Ghana, has written: that worship that is done because of tradition and modeled on liturgical formulae can be hypocritical, ritualistic, empty and devoid of God’s true presence (30). He also indicates that it is particularly in the realm of worship that these forms of pneumatic Christianity have a growing influence on the historical denomination Churches.

Chapter Five is a well balanced account on the ideas and principles of giving in Pentecostal circles. Asamoah presents the Pentecostal concept of giving tithes as a form of bargaining with God, in order to receive wealth. ‘Tithes, offerings, gifts to men and women of God, often cast as sowing and reaping, have become a virtual subculture within contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa‘ (80). Asamoah points out that the concept of a successful ritual in African religion resonates in Pentecostal giving (110-111). Starting by Philipians 2, Asamoah develops the idea that the theology of the cross is lacking in this understanding of the Prosperity Gospel.

Notwithstanding my appreciation of this book, I have some comments to make.

Firstly, I think that the book is not critical on the ecclesiology behind the new churches. Asamoah speaks about a new understanding of ecclesiology and indeed stresses that in the new Pentecostal churches the emphasis is put on the mobilization of laity who have experienced the gifts of the Spirit, whereas in the traditional churches the clergy have often monopolized the ministry. However, he does not touch the problem that many new churches are dependent on one single charismatic leader, who leaves his own personal mark on ‘his’ church, so that it seems more like a modern enterprise than what traditionally is has been called a church. What happens if the leader is not any longer there, or will be involved in a dispute with his colleagues? Asamoah does not touch these questions. The careful reflections within the ecumenical movement during the 20th century on the function of the ministry in the transmission of the Gospel through the ages, does not play any role in his assessment of the organizational forms of the new Pentecostal churches.

Another point of criticism is that the author seems to overlook that in the Pentecostalism that he describes, the eschatological vision is often rather restricted to the current difficulties and problems of the believers, as if the Biblical message does not open a much wider horizon, including political peace and justice, for which all Christians carry a great responsibility.

This book is highly recommended for all those who try to understand where Christianity in Africa is going. As the author states: the face of Christianity will change in the course of the 21st century into that of the actual Pentecostal movements of the Third World. Asamoah has clearly drawn the contours of this new area of Christianity.

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