CHAPTER TWO

PENTECOSTALISM IN A DEEPLY RELIGIOUS CONTINENT

With his highly influential book *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins in 2002 made the larger academic public aware of the radical changes taking place within global Christianity. What Jenkins did was to summarise the many voices which had long tried to show that something important was at stake, that ‘global Christianity’ was more than a Western export article, that one of recent history’s most important social movements was in the making, and that the fuel of the expansion was distilled in the global south (Jenkins 2007). The present chapter takes a closer look at the development of this movement on the African continent and shows how the Pentecostal churches have become the major agents of these changes. From Azusa Street we follow the Pentecostal pioneers to South and West Africa, tracing the development of what have become the major themes in recent studies on African Pentecostalism: what is the relationship between global networks and local identities in the new churches? Why has the movement shifted its focus from oral evangelisation to higher education? Why has the gospel of prosperity been able to attract so much attention from such an economically deprived continent? These questions will be analysed while bearing several contextual issues in mind—namely, that African tradition and African worldview is the soil where these churches grow roots, that the devil and deliverance are important ingredients in religious discourse and practice, and finally that Islam is present as a social, political, and spiritual force to which many of the new churches have to relate.

*Sub-Saharan Pentecostalism—A Historical Sketch*

*Black Pentecostal Origins?*

Writing the history of the Pentecostal movement is a risky business, and the numerous recent attempts show us that history (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), theology, and ideology create a blend where the original ingredients are hard to discern. Pentecostal historians have themselves traditionally been part of the movement they have described, a movement in
which academic standards have never been given much value. As a result, a narrative and somewhat subjective theological approach to the rapid growth and spread of the new churches has been applied (Wacker 1986). The Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906 was the single most important event in Pentecostal historical self-understanding and has played the role of meeting point in most discussions of Pentecostal origins. Cecil M. Robeck Jr. has detailed the importance of this event for the global spread of the Pentecostal movement; his study is part of a new wave of academic contributions from Pentecostal scholars who re-interpret their own tradition (Anderson 2004; Cox 2001; Kay 2009; Robeck 2006). These scholars have shown that investigations of the incidents which led to and followed the Azusa Street revival have become ideological and theological exercises on their own and a discussion about the roles of two very different preachers—namely, Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929) and William Joseph Seymour (1870–1922). The traditional white North American claim that Charles Parham should be considered the founder of the Pentecostal movement has for some time been questioned by the previously mentioned scholars. It is generally agreed upon that Parham was an important pioneer, and that he formulated the 'initial evidence' formula of tongues as evidence for baptism in the Holy Spirit (Hollenweger 1997: 20). When one of his students in the Topeka-based Bethel Gospel School received 'the gift of tongues' on 1 January 1901, it was the spark that lit several smaller charismatic revivals in subsequent years. From a theological perspective, these events were important because they made way for Parham’s ‘third blessing’ framework which included the already mentioned 'evidential tongues' doctrine, which with some modifications has become “the hallmark of North American Classical Pentecostals” (Anderson 2004: 33–34).

The irony of the historical battle of Pentecostal origins does not only lay in the fact that Parham sympathised with Ku Klux Klan or that he was arrested for homosexual activity.¹ The African American preacher William Joseph Seymour was actually a student at Parham’s Bible School in Houston, but due to the practice of race segregation, he had to attend the classes through a half-open door (Hollenweger 1997: 19; Robeck 2006: 4). Inspired by Parham’s teaching, Seymour returned to His Holiness Church

¹ Parham was never convicted, and Hollenweger together with others find the charges and the missing court records a mystery which leaves us with more questions than answers (Hollenweger 1997: 21). Regardless, the result was that Parham lost his position in the movement and retired to Kansas, where he continued to lead his congregation (Anderson 2004: 35).