CHAPTER 10

Pentecostalism and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

In the Office and in the Village

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In 2002 I started doctoral fieldwork in the Teso region of eastern Uganda. For eighteen months I was the guest of a Christian community-based organisation, based in the trading centre of Ngora an eight-hour bus journey from the capital, Kampala. The community organisation, with a staff of ten, conducted projects focused on health, education and agriculture. Funding came from a variety of donors, some religious, others not. The charity, Vision terudo, occupied a series of low-slung buildings near the one strip of tarmac road in the area. Vision terudo was set up in the mid-1980s just before the region entered into a long period of civil conflict.1 During my stay, a decade after the end of the conflict in 1992, I was able to observe, from the sidelines, what could be termed the “Pentecostal-isation” of the organisation. A number of those in leadership positions, notably the executive director and the finance officer, were members of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. Their Pentecostal faith made its presence felt in the day-to-day of office life: in the style of prayer that started a meeting; or in the way staff viewed each other. The Pentecostalisation of the organisation produced considerable criticism from those who were not “born again.” I was often told that the way Pentecostals talked and acted, placed them apart and made others feel that they were being looked down on.

My fieldwork was conducted in a village, Oledai, on the edge of the trading centre. Here, in a very different way, I was also able to see the growing influence of Pentecostalism. A new church attracted people from the area, mostly women and children, or students from the nearby high school. Most of the congregation were poorer people (staff members of Vision terudo preferred to go to the Assemblies of God church in the district capital). The influence of Pentecostalism also made itself felt in the style of worship in the historic mission churches. A number of Catholics and Anglicans described themselves as

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1 Terudo is a partial acronym for Teso Rural Development Organisation, hence the capitalisation. The word Vision suggests the Christian roots of the organisation.
“born again”: in the Catholic Church they joined “charismatic” groups, in the Anglican church they referred to themselves as balokole.2

In the village of Oledai, Vision Terudo was working on a child sponsorship scheme funded by an evangelical Christian charity from Norway. The project focused on schoolchildren from poorer families and helped them with the costs of uniforms, food and stationary. It was titled Hjertevenn – Heart Friend – and was meant to connect sponsors in Norway to “create a better upbringing for orphaned children” in the area. Villagers I spoke to saw this as little different from the work of other, non-religious organisations: it ended up favouring richer, rather than, poorer homes; children with two parents benefited, rather than orphans; and those who had good connections benefited, rather than those on the margins.

This chapter takes these two observations as a point of departure for thinking about the influence of Pentecostalism on the development sector in Africa. This is part of a larger story of the growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa in recent years, which in the case of Uganda has received particular attention because of lobbying around family planning, HIV/AIDS, and homosexuality (Ward 2013, Parkhurst 2012). The more usual expression of Pentecostalism and development is in the form of Christians engaging with the work of churches and community organisations, often around fairly conventional concerns such as education, health and farming. This sort of development work has a long history, though it is not always picked up in the social science literature on development in Africa. In certain instances the relationships involved collapse some of the layers through which assistance or charity is more usually channelled, with Christians travelling to Africa to volunteer for a church (cf. Ferguson 2006). In other instances, as in the Hjertevenn example, they follow the more usual development hierarchy of donor, implementer and beneficiary. A central preoccupation in the development studies literature has been the extent to which religion makes a difference to development work.

The first part of the chapter looks at the literature on religion and development in Africa. There is a particular focus on “born again” Christianity. Partly I discuss the difficult relationship between studies of development and religion, alongside the increasing interest in the subject of religion among development scholars and agencies, and the turn towards supporting Christian organisations under the presidency of George W. Bush. There is a certain degree of instrumentality to the way development scholars have looked at religion: faith

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2 Balokole refers back to a reform movement in the Anglican Church that started in the 1930s, and took on significance in the 1960s. Today it is increasingly used, in Ugandan towns, as a synonym for “born agains” of any denomination, though in rural Teso, it still refers mainly to Anglicans.