
The book Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power. Charismatic Christianity in Ghana by Jane Soothill discusses the impact of charismatic Christianity on its membership vis-à-vis its perceptions on femininity and masculinity and the position of women. By means of fieldwork in three new charismatic churches in Ghana—Solid Rock Chapel International, Action Chapel International, and Alive Chapel International—Soothill explores the thesis that frequent academic discussions on Pentecostalism, being that new charismatic churches have “the power to transform gender relations and gender-specific behaviour” (p. 59). Leading scholars on Pentecostal Christianity such as Salvatore Cucchiari and David Martin have purported that charismatic Christianity is “a women’s movement,” a “sisterhood of shared experiences” (p. 137). Soothill in her book starts out to prove that the reality in Ghanaian charismatic churches is much more complex and ambiguous than Martin and others seem to suggest.

Soothill’s book begins with a concise, yet meaningful discussion of the theoretical framework of the study, thus positioning her research in contemporary academic debates on ‘religion and gender’ and ‘charismatic Christianity’ and the interrelatedness of the two issues. Before launching into a thematic description of the findings of the fieldwork, she sketches the wider context of gender discussions in Ghana by outlining gender relations in pre-colonial and colonial Ghana and Ghanaian gender politics since Independence.

In chapter four Soothill explores the concept of womanhood as defined and proposed in charismatic churches. Prominent in Soothill’s description features the ambiguity of the teachings of Ghanaian charismatics, which seems to create a “tension between women’s social role and their individual trajectories” (p. 137). On the one hand traditional values like female submissiveness and self-sacrifice are encouraged, on the other hand the equality of all believers is preached and women as well as men are pushed to strive for individual success. Besides, men are encouraged to cultivate qualities which were once seen as only traditionally female, such as submissiveness and obedience. Soothill concludes: “In born-again models of womanhood, then, a ‘real woman’ or a ‘woman of worth,’ is not defined solely in terms of her domestic roles. A woman’s role as a wife and a mother is not totally undermined by the discourse. (…) However, in addition to being a wife and a mother, the ‘woman of worth’ is also a public figure, a political decision-maker, and a nation-builder. In contrast to
traditional interpretations of Proverbs 31, to which the charismatic churches also adhere, the virtuous woman is the kind of woman who is a world changer and a history maker” (pp. 134–135).

Chapter five critiques Martin’s idea that Pentecostalism is a ‘women’s movement,’ a ‘sisterhood of shared experiences’: “my book questions assertions about the role of the new churches in encouraging participation and the development of social capitalism among women” (p. 139). In the chapter, Soothill tries to show that in the churches she researched, the rhetoric of sisterhood is neutralized (if not undermined) by a discourse of distrust which projects fellow women (sisters) as potential seducers of husbands, witches, and/or gossips. Thus, Soothill concludes, church fellowships are not conducive environments for women to build solidarity networks where women share their most intimate problems with other women.

Soothill also questions the presumption that new charismatic churches offer women opportunities for democratic participation and developing leadership skills. Alive Chapel exempted, she observed that in the two other women’s fellowships ‘regular’ women are not called upon to experiment with leadership skills in the church. Only the women leaders and their direct clientele (a remnant of traditional power structures) are ‘in power.’ Rather, Soothill observes that there is a heavy demand (uniform, contributions, hosting of guests etc.) on ordinary women to contribute to the churches financially, which causes a number of women to opt out from the fellowship.

After an analysis of the female leadership in the three case-study churches, Soothill in chapter six discusses issues of men and masculinities, drawing on materials from the wider Ghanaian charismatic scene. This chapter leans heavily on materials and sermons by Mensa Otabil (ICGC), David Oyedepo (Winners Chapel), and Samuel Kisseadoo (a speaker in Action Chapel). The chapter endeavours to show how Ghanaian charismatic churches purport the images of men and masculinity which draw on the image of the servant leadership, urging men to take care of their wives (sexually as well as economically) and children, encouraging partnership in marriage and rejecting abuse and promiscuity. Thus according to Soothill, though the new charismatic churches in theory promote patriarchy, in practice they endorse consensus (p. 62). This explains some of the appeal charismatic Christianity has for women and makes reborn men attractive marriage partners.

Soothill ends her book with a discussion whether—from the point of gender relations—Ghanaian charismatic churches should be considered inculturated forms of African Christianity. Disagreeing with the Ghanaian feminist theologian Mercy Oduyoye’s stance that Ghana’s charismatic movements are “poor