Andreas Heuser (ed.)

Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond,

In Nairobi, Accra, Lusaka, Johannesburg, or Abuja, flip to any TV-channel and you will certainly encounter a local or one of Africa’s telegenic megastars of the Prosperity Gospel. They preach of miracles of financial abundance — no matter what your life circumstances are, no matter how poor you are — God will change your life, if you have enough faith to proclaim or name the blessings as yours. This is its basic trope, but the Prosperity Gospel is complex and controversial, and yet its most visible form and the source of its attraction in Sub Sharan Africa. In its contemporary manifestations and ferment, Pentecostal theologies of prosperity has contributed in no small way in reshaping the ‘spiritual cartography’ of the African religious landscape.

While the literature on Pentecostalism and prosperity preaching continue to grow, much of the scholarship has focused on internal dynamics of the movement or its socio-economic and political influences in the life of ‘believers.’\(^1\) However unlike previous studies that mainly focused on inter-Pentecostal dynamics of the Prosperity Gospel this volume goes a step further to suggest and convincingly argue, particularly by Heuser that because Prosperity Gospel is mediated in the public sphere its concepts influence a wider African religious landscape. The rhetoric of prosperity, which emanated as a Pentecostal discourse on well-being has thus transcended Christian discourse and influenced other actors in Africa’s diverse religious settings. ‘Prosperity Gospel is a theological locus with porous boundaries to non-Christian beliefs and practices . . . The Pentecostalization of non-Christian discourses on well-being and prosperity may be the most surprising insight into Prosperity Gospel “pastures of plenty”’ (p. 22).

In this edited volume Andreas Heuser brings contributors of diverse disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from theological, religious, anthropological and sociological studies, in a volume that is an inter disciplinary collection of mostly case studies, offering varying perspectives on African, but also Latin, North American and Asian examples of articulations of the Prosperity Gospel.

The book is divided into six parts. Part 1, which consist of three chapters, maps the Prosperity Gospel in Africa. Rainer Tetzler sets the scene with a survey of the historical and socio-political architecture of poverty in Africa but

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hardly engages the Gospel of Prosperity in any sustained way. This notwithstanding, with his detailed analysis of the socio-economic and political background of poverty in Africa it serves to introduce proceeding chapters.

It is best to describe the chapters by Jens Köhrsen (Chapter 2), and Giovanni Maltese (Chapter 3) as sections that begin to engage the inter-Pentecostal dynamics of the Prosperity Gospel. Köhrsen’s chapter is a comparative analysis of the literature / studies on the Prosperity Gospel, or what he terms ‘Pentecostal Improvement Strategies’ (p. 49), in African and South American settings. It is therefore not a case study but a literature survey on the exploring the regional differences in its articulation. He catalogues a number of strategies employed by Pentecostals in both African and South African settings, highlighting their contextual differences. He concludes that even though the range of strategies Pentecostals employ to improve their lives ‘is the same, the emphases are different’ (p. 62).

Giovanni’s chapter is the last one of Part 1, but the first to be grounded in ethnographic studies — in Dumaguete, Philippines. Ardent students of Pentecostalism, in ecclesial Pentecostal circles, and also in the literature, will agree that Holiness and Prosperity theologies are often seen as strange bedfellows. But as Giovanni shows in the Philippine context ‘holiness theology is prosperity theology as the latter is infused by the historically inherited holiness teachings, which morphed into a means of rationalization vis-à-vis the failures prosperity teachings’ (p. 79). It is a classic example of how contextual socio-historical and politico-culture issues (can) factor in re shaping the global Pentecostal discourse of well-being.

Paul Gifford begins part 2, entitled ‘Embattled Theology of Prosperity’ and consisting of four chapters, with a reconstruction of the theology of David Oyedopo, a quintessential example of Africa’s prosperity gospel megastars and the founder of the Winner’s Chapel with headquarters in Nigeria. Gifford brings to bear his over twenty years of extensive research experience and acquaintance of African Pentecostalism his analysis. He identifies three strands in Oyedepo’s theology of ‘covenant prosperity’, ‘word of faith, prophetic anointing, and signs and wonders’ (p. 84). Anyone familiar with Gifford’s approach here and elsewherese will immediately identify an enduring functional question for which his answer has always been negative — Is the Prosperity Gospel good (for Africa?), and their preachers up to any good? This question is implied,