Book Reviews

Wilfred Asampambila Agana


Alfred Asampambila Agana assesses the soteriological dimension of the global phenomenon of the prosperity gospel as preached and practiced in the context of charismatic/neo-Pentecostal churches in Ghana. He explains that the study had a twofold motivation: his pastoral experience with the prosperity gospel in different locations since he was ordained Roman Catholic priest in 1999, and the need to respond to ‘the church’s call, and to the prevailing world situation of Christianity’ (p. 3). He clearly indicates that his work is a direct response to the Pope’s call in 2011 on behalf of the church in Africa to investigate the prosperity gospel presented as ‘a serious challenge and threat’ both to the church and African people in general (p. 13). Agana was struck by the fact that the message of prosperity preaching churches appeals to people and is causing many to quit their former Roman Catholic parishes.

Agana reiterates the commonly admitted view that today ‘the pivot of Christianity has shifted from the northern (Europe and north America) to the southern hemisphere (Africa, Asia and Latin America)’ (p. 5). Following scholars like Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Paul Gifford and Allan Anderson, he argues that the prosperity gospel remains ‘the favourite theme and content of the Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches’ and that it has proven to be ‘the fastest spreading theological or ideological current in our times’ (pp. 5-6). Agana indicates that prosperity teachings have succeeded in Ghana partly because they have ‘found a fertile ground in the Ghanaian socio-cultural context’ (p. 6). He is convinced that Christian churches in Ghana and elsewhere can benefit from a dialogical encounter with the prosperity gospel proponents.

After the review of a huge quantity of literature available on the prosperity gospel in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and South East Asia, Agana notes that it covers the socio-economic dimensions of the phenomenon. He indicates that researchers have concluded that ‘there is a link
between the message of prosperity and the economic life of its adherents’ (p. 6). However, he feels that so far no assessment of its perception of Jesus Christ’s salvation, present and future has been carried out; this his research intends to provide. He agrees that some researchers have highlighted ‘personal conversion and a personal good relationship with one’s God as part of the concept of prosperity’ (p. 7).

In the second chapter the author strives to define the concept of the prosperity gospel and admits that it may include ‘different forms in different places and situations’ since the word prosperity itself contains nuances in different settings (p. 18). His overview of five different groups of Christian churches that have settled in Ghana so far, ‘mission’ churches in the 19th century, Evangelical churches of the 1940s, Classical Pentecostal churches in the 1930s, African Independent churches in the 1910s and charismatic or neo/contemporary Pentecostal churches under study in this book (pp. 19-20), gives a general picture of the Christian map of the country. The author prefers to refer to this last group of churches as ‘charismatic churches’ because it is how they are called in the country and their leaders term them as such. Agana observes that while these churches are the youngest in Ghana, they remain ‘the fastest growing group of churches’ in the country, the most popular and the most passionate for the propagation of the gospel (p. 21).

Agana explores the various names given to the phenomenon under study and justifies his preference for the designation ‘prosperity gospel’ (pp. 24-26). He also notes the various definitions given to it by different authors, its popularity among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians who have a ‘personalized faith’ (p. 27). The definitions emphasize that the intervention of God in everyday existential behaviour is mediated by the Holy Spirit. While examining the subject matter of the prosperity gospel, Agana reflects on the concepts of God, the human being, creation and salvation, and how these concepts are interrelated with regard to the issue of prosperity (pp. 31-86). He concludes that the prosperity gospel finds its roots in evangelical-Pentecostal and charismatic traditions that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. He argues that these traditions are themselves influenced by the New Thought metaphysical perceptions and science philosophical ideas of the late 19th century. He also maintains that the prosperity gospel and modern capitalism are influencing each other in the current globalized world (p. 87).

Chapter 3 is concerned with the prosperity gospel in the Ghanaian context. The Ghanaian society which is undergoing modernization like any other society in Africa is characterized by cultural and religious plurality. Ghana is depicted as a modern, market-based economy, democratic, largely globalized, and media-based society in which religion has played and continues to play a