but on ways of thinking and rethinking the nature and power of ritual healing.


This book came out of a September 1993 conference at the University of Leeds on the Churches' role in democratisation in Africa. The meeting brought together a number of distinguished African Church leaders and academics to discuss how and whether their Churches had shaped the challenge posed to authoritarian governments by the democratic wave that swept over Africa during 1988-1993. It was intended partly as an opportunity for African Christians to take stock of their experience in promoting democracy and to analyse the lessons for the future.

Books of this kind, spun off conferences, are notorious white elephants. But against this poor track-record, Gifford's collection of papers must be claimed as an exception. They offer a valuable resource to students of the contemporary Churches in Africa, they bring together a wealth of information, and, at times, not always intentionally, they are quite amusing.

With the exception of a witty summary of the conference by Terence Ranger which asks the questions, and Gifford's introduction, which courageously fails to answer several of them, narration outweighs analysis. Adrian Hastings outlines the history of the problem and De Gruchy sets it in a theological context obviously inspired by South Africa. Gifford is the first to give 'civil society'—which is ushered approvingly on stage at all respectable conferences these days—its curtain call, and the Churches win applause as one of its key stage props. The book displays a variety of opinion about whether all Churches, especially the pentecostals, are worthy of such an accolade, with Church leaders showing up as most openly critical of the 'evangelicals.' A slightly more sophisticated account of what might be meant by civil society—rather than assuming that everyone knew and agreed—would probably have avoided some apparent disagreement here.

Ruth Marshall provides the most compelling account of the complexity of pentecostalism in an excellent study on Nigeria. It dispels the simplistic pentecostalism-as-tool-of-right-wing-politics equation. She starts with a glorious quote from Jean Copans which illustrates how French
intellectual discourse more often than not suffers in translation; francophone flourishes perform like promotional balloons—translate them, the air leaks out, and the message shrivels. 'We must strenuously reject political reductionism or symbolic expansionism,' Copans declares, 'yet if there is an organised community which at the moment is part of the foundations of the democratic field of tomorrow, it is the Church, in the generic rather than institutional sense.' Could this be an example of the deflationary subordinate clause?

Were the Rwandan Churches generically or institutionally complicit in genocide and did the South African Church foster democratic values in a generic or institutional way? Does generic simply mean 'the approved part' or what Ranger, Marshall and others refer to as 'those left out,' the part of the Churches that could not be described as clerical, centralised, elite? For here does seem to lie an important distinction. The account of 'the Churches' provided by Church historians is in many cases the account of actions undertaken by an elite in the arena of national, not local, elite not mass, politics. The political behaviour of members of the (Independent) Spirit Churches urgently needs more research and analysis; David Maxwell's work on the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God will be valuable.

One striking omission from a collection which on the whole looks at what the urban elite does, is any systematic account of the role of Church-sponsored mass media in democratisation. This is surprising given the importance of journalists in African civil society. For, from Kinyamateka to New Nation, the Church in Africa has repeatedly surprised the world with its radical and independent print media—though, unlike Latin America, with few sorties into community radio.

But the question which this book never quite comes to grips with is one that it initially sets out to ask: can the Churches move from conflict with autocratic governments beyond a commitment to formal democracy into being schools for what I have heard called 'high intensity democracy'? John Mary Waliggo seems to think not: the Churches' recent commitment to democracy would be little more than a contingent response to special historical circumstances. The Churches would get sucked into the vacuum, and once the vacuum fills up, withdraw with relief. The implications for the Churches' own internal government, from gender to lay initiatives, are obvious if something more than a transitory interest in democracy is intended.

So, are the Churches today the 'foundations of the democratic field of tomorrow' or better described as the flying buttresses of the Gothic cathedral of ethnic politics? Gifford's collection leaves the reader much