Afrique et présente un état des lieux des recherches actuelles sur cette thématique. Il intéressera donc l’étudiant qui entame des études africanistes, car il lui offrira une base synthétique à partir de laquelle il aura tout le loisir d’approfondir certains aspects au moyen de lectures plus spécifiques.

Yvan DROZ
IUED, Genève


Competitive Spirits is a worthy sequel to Andrew Chesnut’s first book, Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty. Chesnut casts his net more widely here — examining “pneumacentrism” among Pentecostals, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), and religions of the African diaspora (Umbanda and Candomblé in Brazil; Vodou and Santeria in the Caribbean). “Pneumatic religion” is defined “any faith-based organization that puts direct communication with the Spirit or spirits at the center of its belief system” (5), and all three groups are grounded in practices of spirit possession — either by the Holy Spirit or by a host of other spirits in the African diaspora religions. The success of these groups in gaining adherents from the popular classes over the past fifty years reveals spirit-centered religion as dominate in the pluralism of the spiritual marketplace that has taken the place of the centuries-old Catholic monopoly on spiritual products in Latin America.

Employing the model of the religious economy, Chesnut analyzes why pneumacentric religion has prospered at the expense of movements such as the comunidades eclesiales de base (CEBs or base ecclesial communities) tied to liberation theology and the historical Protestant traditions that were in the forefront of the modern missionary movement in Latin America. Expanding upon rational choice theory used by Anthony Gill in Rendering unto Caesar, the one book that has employed the model in the region, Chesnut shapes his project with the belief that “[a]n understanding of the basic operational principles of unfettered religious competition allows for better understanding of the fate of any given spiritual enterprise and overarching trends that give definition to the market” (149).

In seven brief chapters Competitive Spirits takes the reader through the history of the break down of the Catholic Church’s monopoly on religious goods in Latin America (chapter 2), a description of the three successful “religious firms” (chapters 3-5), and a discussion of the spirit and faith healing as these are directed at the primary consumers of religious goods in the region — women who are said to make up two-thirds of Latin America’s consumers of spiritual goods (chapter 6). The name of the chapter dealing with each religious group illustrates the use of economic language in the analysis: “Cornering the Market” (Pentecostalism); “A Preferential Option for the Spirit” (CCR); “Entrepreneurial Spirits” (African diaspora religion).

The text is well written and compelling on a number of levels. The his-
tory of the development of the CCR is particularly useful as it developed during the ascendency of liberation theology and has to some extent challenged the institutional structure of the Catholic Church. In that context, readers are introduced to figures such as Marcelo Rossi, the religious entrepreneur and pop star priest who has produced best-selling CDs out of “samba-inspired religious music” (64). On the more popular end of the spectrum, Chesnut provides composite portraits of adherents of Pentecostalism and the African diaspora religions. While these portraits are of women, Chesnut argues that for both women and men faith healing proves to be the product “that initially leads prospective religious consumers to the door of the terreiro or temple. Having failed to resolve their affliction through secular resources, ... men make their way to Pentecostal churches, Charismatic prayer circles, and Umbanda terreiros in search of supernatural succor for their drinking problem, illness, or employment woes. Likewise, women knock on the same doors for their poverty-related maladies,” especially those having to do with illness or family conflict (132). The description is clearly one of response to various kinds of deprivation common in Latin American social life, and one strength of the work is the demonstration of the manner in which the three groups provide a space for women to exercise authority, including the assumption of the role of “priestess” in the case of spirit mediums in the African diaspora religions (156).

Of course, differences between the groups are as important in defining their niche in the market as is the similarity of providing access to the spirits. Chesnut highlights these differences in various ways, e.g., by pointing out that Pentecostals are larger than the other two groups put together with some 50,000,000 adherents in the region (40), and that they are decidedly more likely to come from the popular class than charismatic Catholics whose practice initially grew out of the middle class and work its way down the social ladder (74-79). In another vein, he notes that there is a distinction between the essentially benevolent character of the Christian Holy Spirit and the ambivalent or amoral character of some of the African spirits (153). It is precisely this amorality that makes them useful for people who are not interested in Christian conversion, or even for those who might need protection in some illicit activity (109-110). The prevalence of alcohol in African diaspora ritual, on the other hand, makes it less likely that a person will venture in that direction in search of a cure for alcoholism (113-114). The key for analysis in all cases is the nature, packaging, and marketing of religious goods – access to the spirit(s) and the type of healing being offered.

The work often takes a polemical tone, and Chesnut is an advocate for the “explanatory power and parsimony” (149) of the religious economy, which he believes is unfairly reduced by some from a model of “religious competition to spiritual opportunism” (7). The polemic at times threatens to overwhelm the historical work he has done, as when at one point he seems to buy into Gill’s argument that liberation theology itself was a marketing