Helga Dickow


The book is based on a large quantitative survey (2303 respondents) in South Africa from 2007, which was funded by the (Catholic) German Bishops’ Conference Research Group on the Universal Tasks of the Church. The survey was not limited to Pentecostal/Charismatic churches but included members of all religions. Since Dickow is interested in specific characteristics of “Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Reborns,” she complemented the survey with 50 qualitative interviews with South African Pentecostals and Charismatics conducted between 2006 and 2009. The amount of work that has gone into recruiting interview partners, interviewing, and evaluating the data is laudable, as is her focus on the religious and social dynamics of South Africa in the post-Apartheid years. Unfortunately the study has serious methodological issues which limit its merits.

The book begins with a brief introduction (9–20) explaining the background of the study and providing an overview of South African church history. The relevant literature about Pentecostals and Charismatics in South Africa is mentioned in footnotes here, but not engaged nor discussed further. (The references are not used in the remainder of the book as well, because Dickow does not link up her findings with the available literature.) The final paragraph of the introduction defines the terms for the study by proposing a two-tiered approach: on one hand Dickow differentiates between “old” and “new” Pentecostal churches, and on the other hand she introduces a “reborn” criterion, which allows her to include Charismatics in the mainline churches as well as a segment of African Instituted Churches. While this inclusive approach might be appropriate, an elaborate discussion of these categories, their merits and limits, and most of all their precise definitions for the purpose of the quantitative study are sorely missed. One does not find out which churches precisely were categorized as “Old” and “New” Pentecostals (p. 93 notes 56 + 59 offer only partial lists of churches). It is also not clear what exactly a respondent must indicate to be counted as “reborn”: is it simply self-identification as “reborn” (97) or an agreement to being “reborn in Christ and the Holy Spirit” (116)?

After the introduction, the book presents the findings of the qualitative study (21–79). Unfortunately there is no list of informants nor of their churches which would give detailed information about the selected group. Dickow quotes extensively from her interviews, including a full transcript which should better have been included in the appendix. This certainly brings the theology of her informants to life, but comes at the expense of an in-depth evaluation.
The analytical mode of this chapter is largely a sorted and commented collage, with Dickow writing a sentence or two about the start of new churches, ministry of women, ministerial training, financial issues, prosperity theology, to name a few, and followed by typically one to three verbatim quotes from her interviews. The goal of qualitative analysis, namely, to refrain from (a methodologically unwarranted) synthesis of responses in a uniform picture but instead demonstrating the wide and potentially contentious spectrum of answers, is sometimes missed and sometimes achieved; her discussion of racial reconciliation (58 f.) is an example of the former, while her presentation of voices on the death penalty (65 f.) exemplifies the latter.

The largest part of the study is Dickow’s presentation of the quantitative survey (81–183), beginning with the social and economic characteristics of her sample, followed by nine thematic sections, covering everything from religious attitudes to political orientations. The presentations are exhaustive and very detailed but not driven by hypotheses and overall interpretations; they read more like a survey report rather than a conceptual study. Occasionally, Dickow inserts excerpts from her qualitative interviews as interpretative gestures, but there is no overall systematic and comprehensive discussion of her most important findings. This is all the more striking as most of the presented survey results cover respondents from all religions, with Dickow remarking in a few sentences or a footnote how “new”/ “old” Pentecostals or “reborn” differ from the overall sample. Most importantly, there is a striking lack of established statistical methodology in this whole part of the book. There is no information about how the questionnaire was tested and validated, how the sample was generated, how the interviews were conducted, there is not even a copy of the (presumably extensive) questionnaire anywhere in the book. The statistical analysis is limited to the presentation of percentages (and percentage point differences). There are no measures of statistical significance regarding the sample characteristics, which is all the more surprising with regard to the study’s interest, since “old” and “new” Pentecostals together make up only 21 percent of the overall sample. None of the proposed connections between Pentecostals/ “reborns” and other characteristics are specified by a correlation coefficient (and its statistical significance). There is also no multivariate analysis to analyze possible other (and perhaps more significant) explanatory factors, such as social status, age, gender, etc. These are just the gravest statistical lacks of the study and in sum they make it impossible to decide by any standard methodology whether Dickow’s findings are reliable and valid, or rather false correlations and/or random effects of her sample.

Instead of a conclusion the book ends with a reprint of a comparative study between members of one specific “new” Pentecostal church and other...