

THE DEVELOPMENTAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF AFRICA'S PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

Paul Gifford

DEFINITION

Churches in sub-Saharan Africa have proliferated since the 1980s. Although the historic or mission churches continue to flourish, and still have more members overall, they have been joined by countless newcomers. Nor are the newcomers the old African Independent Churches, which are still evident in many countries but probably peaked around the 1960s. Categorising these new churches is not easy. Fundamentalist, charismatic, Pentecostal, Evangelical are all labels that have been used, but they are all labels taken from Western divisions of Christianity; it is not evident that the dynamics that gave rise to the labels in their original contexts are the same here. Also, one cannot ignore the variety among these churches. They range from wealthy mega-churches with thousands of members and hundreds of branches, to small family concerns. They range from sophisticated organisational structures to struggling storefront groups. Some have lasted years; others seem fairly transient. There are obvious differences in clientele: some cater for the educated and affluent and middle class, others for the uneducated and poor; some incorporate both. Urban churches are obviously different from rural ones. Nor can one presume that the phenomenon is uniform across the whole continent. One may well wonder whether any one label can do justice to their diversity. Nevertheless, I will argue here that there is sufficient uniformity to discuss them as one category, and since we must use labels, I will here call them all Pentecostal while admitting the term's inadequacy, and certainly not foreclosing the issue of their similarities and dissimilarities in regard to classical Western Pentecostalism. As will be obvious below, almost every generalisation about them can be disputed; what follows is a



Paul Gifford is Professor (em.) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

personal analysis, though I would argue it is perfectly defensible.¹ My argument is that although they do not understand themselves primarily as playing developmental or political roles, they do; and in general these roles are not invariably positive.

VICTORY

I would argue that it is the vision of *this-worldly victory* that is common to virtually all these new churches. This emphasis is evident in the names of the churches themselves ("Victory Bible Church", "Jesus Breakthrough Assembly", "Triumphant Christian Centre"). The titles and themes of conventions, crusades and conferences repeat this emphasis ("Living a Life of Abundance", "Taking your Territories", "Stepping into Greatness"). In talking to these Christians, attending their services, studying their sermons, testimonies, and literature, the winning motif is characteristic.

The six ways in which Christianity is linked to success and wealth are not necessarily incompatible. Many churches combine many, even all of them, often at the cost of some tension.

I have distinguished six different registers on which this success refrain is played out. The six ways in which Christianity is linked to success and wealth are not necessarily incompatible. Many churches combine many, even all of them, often at the cost of some tension. Other churches are more associated with one or perhaps two ways, less with others.

First, motivation. In these churches the emphasis is to get on, to succeed, to prosper, to be important, to take control. Moreover these things are your right and inheritance as a Christian, which you should expect and can demand. Sometimes a racial element enters into this: you can succeed like Whites, and being African does not mean subservience and poverty.

Second, entrepreneurship. In many churches, at least once every service you will be invited to turn to your neighbour and ask: "Have you started your own business yet?" Business skills are explicitly lauded, and in bigger churches businessmen's fellowships are formed, and workshops for businessmen provided, even business fairs. Established businessmen in the congregation can be asked to assist those starting out.

1 | The points broached here are more fully discussed in Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, London, 2015.

Third, practical skills for personal living and business success – like hard work, commitment, assuming marital and family responsibilities, organising time, avoiding drink, integrity, budgeting, saving, investing.

Fourth, the faith gospel, or the belief that faith is all you need to share the victory Christ has already won for us over sin, sickness and poverty. In faith you simply claim what is already yours. This faith gospel swiftly became linked to the idea of “seed-faith”, that sowing seeds (essentially money) ensures your harvest and determines its size.

Fifth, the “anointing of the man of God”. Increasingly, success and prosperity are said to come through the special gifts of the “man of God”. Pastors now frequently make themselves indispensable. Many churches center on their leader’s “prophetic declarations” or “prophetic word” which bring about what they say. Testimonies of church members increasingly attribute blessings not so much to God as to the “Man of God”, or to God through the “anointing” of “his chosen servant”.

Sixth, defeating the spirits blocking one’s advance. For those operating with an “enchanted imagination” according to which spirits are pervasive and the primary causes of events and conditions in the natural world, churches counter the negative forces trying to undermine the success that should characterise a Christian.

DEVELOPMENT

For many observers it is almost axiomatic that African Pentecostalism is a major vehicle of modernity. For Peter Berger, the spread of Pentecostalism is probably the best thing to happen to the developing world. With its stress on motivation, entrepreneurship and discipline, this is the Protestant work ethic reaching the third world. This Christianity will do for the developing world what Calvinism did for Europe in the eighteenth century. Hence the revealing title Peter Berger gave to an article on third-world Pentecostalism: “Max Weber is alive and well and living in Guatemala.”²

2 | Peter L. Berger, “Max Weber is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today”, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 8, 2010, pp. 3-9.

Similarly David Martin can conclude his study of African Pentecostalism: "Pentecostalism in Africa is a collective raft pointed with determination towards modernity."³ Elsewhere he has spelt it out fully: "The lineage running from Pietism to Pentecostalism is linked positively to modernity in respect of the domains of gender, secular law, transnationalism, voluntarism, pluralism, the nuclear family, peaceability, personal release and personal work discipline, consumption, modern communication, social and geographical mobility – as well as changes in mediation, authority, and participation."⁴ In other words, in all these areas, from gender to law, from work ethic to exercise of authority, Pentecostalism is adapting Africa to the modern world.



A singer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God youth choir: This Pentecostal church is one of the largest in Africa. | Source: © Jessica Rinaldi, Reuters.

I am less positive. I think these optimistic assessments require that one focus on the first three of the six registers of victory outlined above. If one considers that the defining element of Pentecostal churches is their inculcation of motivation, entrepreneurship and personal life skills, the effects of Pentecostalism must of course be positive. Churches encouraging those qualities must inevitably form active, effective citizens of a modern polity. But these positive evaluations hardly advert to the fourth, fifth and

3 | David Martin, *Pentecostalism: the World their Parish*, Oxford, 2002, p. 152.

4 | David Martin, "Pentecostalism: a Major Narrative of Modernity", in his *On Secularisation: towards a Revised General Theory*, London, 2005, p. 144.

sixth of the registers I have distinguished, and which I regard as much more widespread and significant. To the extent that African Pentecostalism builds on the faith gospel, a pastor's anointing, and the enchanted religious imagination, the effects seem far less positive.

THE FAITH GOSPEL

Take the fourth register, that of the faith gospel. The faith gospel is pervasive in African Pentecostalism, especially its evolved form of the "seed faith" or "sow-so-you-may-reap" idea. This "seed-faith" theology is not an incidental or optional extra to Africa's Pentecostalism, but has been indispensable, for this has been the motor that has powered this explosion of churches. Of course, it is great to have overseas sponsors or partners, but for most churches this remains a dream. Yet all these buildings, programs, vehicles, musical instruments and sound systems have had to be paid for, in economically straitened circumstances. Moreover, although admittedly a good proportion of pastors are part-time, there has arisen an entire new class of religious professional or founder/leader/owner for whom the church is the means of livelihood. For this, seed-faith theology has proved extremely functional. Some churches take this "divine fund-raising" to extreme lengths, with the demand for money a prominent feature of services.

Although a good proportion of pastors are part-time, there has arisen an entire new class of religious professional or founder/leader/owner for whom the church is the means of livelihood.

Take one example, Nigeria's Winners' Chapel, founded by David Oyedepo in 1983 in Lagos and by 2013 boasting 6,000 branches in Nigeria, 700 branches in other African countries, and 30 in Europe and America. It claims that its mother church, just outside Lagos, is the biggest church auditorium in the world, seating more than 54,000. Oyedepo has spread his influence even more widely, through his books and TV programs (essentially films of his services).

Oyedepo presents himself as the quintessential entrepreneur, and he is effectively the CEO of a massive multinational enterprise which now embraces schools and universities as well as the church. Oyedepo stresses the need to work and even holds himself up as a model, working 18 hours a day, but victory and success in business, in getting jobs, in health and in life, do not depend on work. Success in these things is a supernatural gift of God. "Sweatless success" is not something to labour for.

“Sorrow-free kingdom prosperity” comes primarily from giving money to God; in Oyedepo’s words, from being a “covenant practitioner”. The determining measure of covenant wealth is “the law of seedtime and harvest”. Oyedepo is listed in Forbes as Nigeria’s richest pastor, with an estimated wealth of 150 million U.S. dollars. He is clear that the origins of his wealth are not in any capitalist dynamic but in a biblical one. Tithes and offerings to God (in effect, to his representative Oyedepo) is the motor for success. This is clear from testimonies of members; for example, a man increases his tithes, and thereby becomes “the general manager of a company, with over 200 staff under me... This was a job I didn’t apply for!”⁵ Another hears Oyedepo calling for a sacrificial offering. “I brought my colour TV, video and sound system. These were the only things I had then... Two weeks after I gave the sacrifice, the Lord gave me another shop.”⁶ This is the logic of the standard testimony at Winners’ Chapel. It is unwarranted to equate such “covenant riches” resulting from tithes and offerings with the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.



Service at Winners’ Chapel: The church, just outside of Lagos, claims to have the biggest church auditorium in the world, seating more than 54,000. | Source: © Akintunde Akinleye, Reuters.

5 | David O. Oyedepo, *Signs and Wonders Today: a Catalogue of the Amazing Acts of God among Men*, Lagos, 2006, p. 440.

6 | *Ibid*, p. 173.

The example of Oyedepo illustrates the complexity of assessing the public effects of these churches. On the one hand Oyedepo is insistent that one work hard (so success through the second register noted above). Yet the centerpiece of his message is that success comes through giving to him (the fourth). Which of these two is the dominant message picked up by church members may depend on the individual member; but it is unsatisfactory to focus on the former exclusively.

PROPHETIC ANOINTING

This faith or prosperity gospel has come to be closely connected to the idea of the “prophetic anointing” of the special man of God. Oyedepo illustrates this point, too; he began his ministry as an exponent of the faith gospel, according to which success is the result of the biblical law of sowing and reaping, accessible to everyone obeying it. Yet in recent years, he has increasingly stressed his critical importance in the victorious living of his followers. His ministry actually brings this about. His “prophetic verdicts are divine verdicts... They are God’s commands given expression through mortal lips”.⁷ People are cured just by touching him. He claims “creative breath” which effects miraculous transformations. This enormous heightening of his importance has profound public effects. “Big Man Syndrome” is the curse of Africa. In August 2000, the same month as the president of Nigeria’s senate was impeached for, among other things, bringing the total of his official vehicles to 32, *Winners’* newsletter carried an article about Oyedepo’s acquisition of a private jet. Oyedepo now has four private jets, in 2011 adding a 35 million U.S. dollar Gulfstream V jet to his other three. One might argue that Oyedepo and his jets, for him proof of God’s faithfulness to those practising the covenant, is merely the Nigerian Big Man syndrome transposed onto a Christian plane. His message is that one can become truly rich only by obeying the Word of God (as interpreted by Oyedepo), which often amounts to donating huge sums to his enterprises. He reinforces his status with warnings: “Don’t curse God’s anointed. You have to follow them to the end, without any reservations.”⁸ And in some trepidation, since God has been known to kill those who dare challenge Oyedepo.⁹

7 | Ibid, p. 153.

8 | David O. Oyedepo, *Anointing for Breakthrough*, Lagos, 1992, p. 238.

9 | Cf. David O. Oyedepo, *All you need to have all your Needs met*, Lagos, 2004, pp. 105-107. A group opposed Oyedepo’s plan to move the church from its original site in Lagos to its present location at “Canaan Land” a little outside. Two adults in the ringleader’s family died in a short space of time, before God killed the ringleader himself in a car accident.

ENCHANTED IMAGINATION

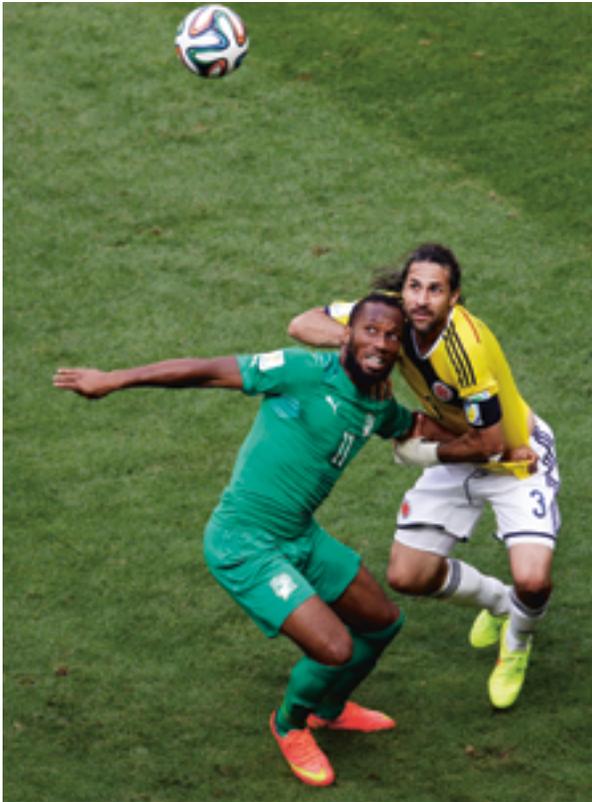
Even more important is the sixth register outlined above. By enchanted religious imagination, I mean the vision, with its roots in Africa's pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religions, and indeed the religions of countless indigenous people throughout the world, that spirits pervade nature, and are ultimately responsible for our misfortunes, aberrations and setbacks. Admittedly this is a difficult point to deal with, for this understanding of the world as pervaded by spiritual forces has effectively disappeared in the West, where it is associated with words like superstition and backwardness. Because of this, one can easily seem dismissive, even contemptuous, of such believers. Yet in Africa this imagination deserves much more prominence than it is normally given. This

The Enchanted Imagination is the greatest single reason for the spread of the newer churches.

mindset persists, and is to be seen behind phenomena like the killing of albinos in Tanzania, the child-witch accusations in the Congo, penis snatching or causing genitals to disappear or shrink on physical contact. It is pervasive in African football. I would argue that this imagination is the greatest single reason for the spread of these newer churches. The mainline churches with their centers of gravity in the West and considerable involvement in development, are reluctant to cater for those who seek spiritual causes for everything; this has frequently led to the phenomenon of "dual allegiance", whereby many members of mainline churches go to church on Sunday but slip away during the week to have these needs met by healer-diviners. In these newer churches, there is no need for dual allegiance; one can have these needs met during the Sunday service.

For an example of this enchanted Christianity, consider Daniel Olu-koya's Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, founded in Lagos in 1989. It claims that its regular Sunday attendance of 200,000 at its headquarters church makes it the biggest single Christian congregation in Africa. It too has spread throughout Africa and Europe (in 2012 it claimed 83 branches in Britain alone). Olukoya too is known for his media involvement; his publicity in 2012 listed 220 of his books. If Oyedepo's Winners' Chapel is a thoroughgoing faith gospel or prosperity church, Olukoya puts almost exclusive stress on combating the spiritual forces determined to thwart our glorious destiny. These spiritual forces range from witches to marine spirits, from the Queen of Heaven to the curses and covenants that even remote ancestors incurred or entered into in the distant past. Witches are people in league with the devil, whose

evil manipulation can be detected wherever we fall short of the greatness God intended for us. Even more powerful are marine spirits, found widely in Africa's riverine areas, and particularly associated with sex and female beauty; they control commerce, trade and the economy, and the world of fashion. Again their presence can be detected anywhere there is failure. Spirit spouses, or wives and husbands in the spirit realm, also thwart our destiny; according to Olukoya, 90 per cent of African women are "trapped spiritually" by spirit husbands. These spiritual forces are so powerful, pervasive and cunning, that often a powerfully gifted pastor is needed to identify and neutralise them. Churches like Olukoya's are geared to achieving exactly this.



Didier Drogba playing for Ivory Coast: Enchanted imagination is pervasive in African football. | Source: © Themba Hadebe, picture alliance/AP Photo.

I argued above that Christianity with its stress on prosperity through tithes and offerings, evident in churches like Oyedepo's Winners' Chapel, is dysfunctional. Similarly, the Christianity dedicated to combating pervasive spiritual forces is dysfunctional,

though for different reasons. First, take the idea of human agency or responsibility. Oyedepo constantly talks of forces of which we have no knowledge (for example, only ten per cent of those spiritually married are aware of the fact; 90 per cent would remain unaware without someone like Olukoya to tell them). Witches, marine spirits and spirit spouses are merely the best known. There are countless others, including dream manipulators, satanic caterers, night-raiders, star-hunters, money swallows, progress arrestors, poverty activators, to name just a few. The forces against us are simply innumerable. How much moral responsibility can one have in such a universe? Despair or at least resignation to fate seems the most appropriate response.

Olukoya, founder of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, insists that most of the people who pretend to be our friends are hidden enemies. Their gifts are entry-points for malignant spiritual forces.

Second, this Christianity militates against any form of community or social capital. It breeds fear and distrust. Olukoya insists that most of the people who pretend to be our friends are hidden enemies. Gifts from others are often entry-points for malignant spiritual forces. Above all, his Christianity creates division within families; Olukoya teaches that most of our ills come from close relatives. Thirdly, this imagination seems incompatible with the scientific rationality that is required by modernity (this despite the fact that Olukoya claims to have a PhD in molecular genetics from Britain's University of Reading). Means-ends rationality or instrumental efficiency, the single-minded choice of particular means for given ends, seems to underpin the way the contemporary world operates. Olukoya's Christianity hardly encourages such thinking. For example for him, deaths in childbirth (all? some?) seem to be the work of spirit husbands.¹⁰ Also, "Most Caesarean operations which take place at the hospitals are the handiwork of spirit husbands"; and "The AIDS scourge... is nothing but punishment from the Queen of Heaven"; and "Deliverance leads to elimination of natural hazards because there are diverse wicked spirits that control the weather".¹¹ (Needless to say, Olukoya's Christianity reinforces the Big Man syndrome too; even if he does not promote himself to the extent of Oyedepo, it is understood that, prey as we all are to these myriad forces, we need a great man of God anointed with the gifts of discernment and spiritual power).

10 | Cf. Daniel Olukoya/Shade Olukoya, *Prayer Strategies for Spinsters and Bachelors*, Lagos, p. 52.

11 | *The Prayer and Deliverance Bible. The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: authorized King James Version. Study Notes by Dr Daniel Olukoya*, Lagos, 2007, pp. 86, 145, 160.

POLITICS

Above, I have been considering effects in the area of development generally. If we turn to more narrowly political effects, it helps to distinguish these new churches from the Roman Catholics and the mainline Protestants. Catholics, for example, have both a sophisticated social teaching, as well as institutions like national bishops' conferences and pastoral letters to promote it. The mainline Protestants normally unite in Christian Councils that function similarly. Admittedly, one mustn't exaggerate the influence of these institutions. Catholic pastoral letters, for example, are often characterised by a level of generality and avoidance of specifics ("Let us once and for all eliminate corruption..."; "Selfishness and greed must stop...") that make them almost evasions. Similarly, sometimes their ineffectiveness is manifest; in 2010 the mainline churches led the opposition to approving Kenya's new constitution (on the grounds that it allowed abortion in limited cases, and allowed Muslims to keep their *kadhi* courts), which in spite of that was approved by a huge majority in a national referendum. Nevertheless, often these mainline-church institutions have considerable political muscle. For example, in Kenya in 2013 the Catholic Church sponsored 5,766 public primary schools out of the country's total of 19,059, and 1,894 secondary schools out of Kenya's total of 7,311. Similarly, the Zimbabwe Association of Church-Related Hospitals serves 126 church-related hospitals and clinics, often in rural areas where mission hospitals and clinics may well be all that exist. Few African governments would unnecessarily antagonise or alienate such bodies.

These mainline-church institutions often have considerable political muscle, for example through investment in education and involvement in the health sector.

By contrast, the new Pentecostal churches tend to have neither social theology nor institutions. Consider the theology of the two churches whose development role we have considered above. Olukoya's Christianity concerns the individual, and is geared to bring about the personal victory that should be his or hers. Beyond this, Olukoya has virtually nothing to say. His attitude to the world is typically summed up: "The kingdom of man is now running to a close. It is the kingdom of human beings. You can see how confused and disorderly it is. The economists are sweating under a system that is no longer obeying their rules. The politicians are confused; they do not know which system will work. Thieves are being released, justice is being murdered; this is the kingdom of man. It is there that one would find human beings fighting

each other, causing problems for each other and challenging the Almighty. That kingdom is closing. A lot of things will close with the realisation that *all man is struggling for here is vanity. It is of no value, as far as God is concerned.*"¹²



The message of David Oyedepo: One can become truly rich only by obeying the Word of God. | Source: © Akintunde Akinleye, Reuters.

Oyedepo, too, has little interest in addressing the challenges or structures of the modern world. Politics and economics simply don't matter for a "covenant practitioner" with "Kingdom immunity". "The environment is irrelevant... For the upright, no matter how terrible the situation around him may be, no matter how terrible the economic condition of that country, God will single him out for a blessing."¹³ "Your business is not failing because there is a slump in your nation's economy, but because there's a problem with your covenant walk!"¹⁴ Let there be no misunderstanding – for Oyedepo, that means you have failed to pay your tithe and make your offerings.¹⁵

12 | D.K. Olukoya, *Contending for the Kingdom*, Lagos, 2005, p. 20. Italics added.

13 | David O. Oyedepo, *Showers of Blessings: Rains of the Spirit*, Lagos, 1997, p. 57 f.

14 | David O. Oyedepo, *Commanding the Supernatural*, Lagos, 2006, p. 90.

15 | To the extent Oyedepo has a wider concern, it is for the triumph of the church over against the world; he sees this already occurring in the rise of wealthy mega-churches like his: "Soon the church will control the socio-economic life of the entire world." David O. Oyedepo, *Success Strategies: putting your Hand on the Scriptural Password to Unending Success*, Lagos, 2003, p. 44. This, though, is in my experience particular to Oyedepo and not characteristic of Pentecostal churches generally.

Institutionally, too, Pentecostal churches tend not to form blocs that can collectively exert political influence. Their independence (or fragmentation) makes it easier for them to be coopted by politicians, especially politicians prepared to make promises, either for society (like Frederick Chiluba's to declare Zambia a Christian nation if elected president in 1991), or more personal (like duty-free privileges for individual churches or their leaders). Moreover, in nearly all African countries the most prominent Pentecostal pastors have lifted themselves into the elite. Thus Oyedepo has had no difficulty bringing Presidents Obasanjo and Jonathan to speak at his church, opportunities which often enough they use as a platform for garnering political support. (I don't mean to imply that mainline churches are immune from such cooptation; in fact, their enormous role in development, with donor funds decreasing, means that they too increasingly make themselves vulnerable to dependence on politicians promising support).

COMPLEXITY

I began by highlighting the variety of Africa's Pentecostal Churches. I noted that their common element is the vision of this-worldly triumph, worked out on six different registers. If in this short article I have stressed the latter three (the faith gospel, the anointed man of God, countering adverse spiritual forces), this is because more usually scholars emphasise the first three, which easily leads to the positive appraisal of the entire phenomenon. I maintain that in fact the latter three are more significant. I have illustrated these qualities using Oyedepo and Olukoya as examples. I have chosen them because both are almost ideal types; they have taken their approach almost to its limit. Because of this, I do not claim that either is strictly representative, but do maintain that the elements they take to their limits are present in virtually all African's Pentecostal churches, on a scale from aggressively unavoidable to gently unobtrusive. (I do not accept the argument that these pastors' enormous success means they cannot shed light on the phenomenon at lower levels; precisely because of their success they are all the more imitated; something made possible by the considerable media outlay of both).

Looking into the last three registers of the this-worldly triumph reveals the less positive aspects of Africa's Pentecostal Churches.

Complicating the picture is the fact that the six registers come in all combinations and permutations – for this reason, a *priori* theorising about these churches can often be of limited value; only

extensive on-the-ground attention to the dynamics of particular churches permits a helpful assessment.

As is obvious, I have approached these churches from the side of their Christianity itself, its internal logic, if you like (though constantly alert that Weber's law of unintended consequences may also be operative). However, complicating things still further is the fact that the inherent logic of their Christianity may pull one way, while other more external factors pull in another. Thus even in an out-and-out prosperity church, with victory claimed to come through covenant tithing to the pastor, the fact that an individual may assume a function like deacon or cell leader, providing opportunity for leadership qualities never before given scope, may work positively towards development.

CONCLUSION

Primarily and immediately these churches are not aimed at development or politics; they are not NGOs or elements of civil society promoting the rights of a particular group, so it would be a mistake to judge them exclusively on criteria appropriate to such bodies. They are religious bodies, with religion understood in a traditional African as opposed to a "disenchanted" Western way. However, as I have shown, that does not mean they have no public effects, even considerable effects in the realms of development and politics. Among the enormous variety of Africa's Pentecostal churches, those that stress motivation, entrepreneurship and life-skills undoubtedly contribute to Africa's development. There are many such on the continent. However, even many of these churches combine those elements with a stress on the faith gospel, the anointing of the special man of God, and an understanding of the world as pervaded by malignant spiritual forces. And most have these latter emphases predominant or at least not far below the surface. To the extent that these Pentecostal churches promote the faith gospel, the spiritual Big Man, and our subjection to malign spiritual forces, their roles are far less positive.