

PAUL GIFFORD (SOAS, UK) Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa

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There is an important if largely unremarked diversity within African Christianity; on the one hand, an enchanted Christianity that views the world as pervaded by spiritual forces, and on the other a disenchanting Christianity that discounts such forces. An enchanted Christian sees his glorious destiny threatened by witches, marine spirits, spirit spouses, and ancestral curses. Churches catering for this worldview lay bare the workings of this spirit world, deliver those suffering from spirit attacks, and equip members to combat these forces. This enchanted imagination, far from disappearing, has found a new home, for it seems characteristic, to a greater or lesser degree, of much African Pentecostalism.

The enchanted religious imagination militates against development on several scores. First, it diminishes human responsibility and agency, for the forces against us are almost innumerable, and often can be identified only by a particularly gifted pastor. Second, it undermines social capital, for so often it identifies relatives, friends and associates as the agents of these dark forces, thus encouraging fear and distrust. Thirdly, it discounts the functional rationality underpinning modernity.

By contrast, official Catholicism, totally disenchanting, long associated with schools and hospitals, is now involved in development of all kinds, from microfinance to election monitoring, from conflict resolution to human rights. This 'NGO-ization of Catholicism', made almost inevitable by funding from secular donors like the EU, UN and USAID, even if defended theologically, comes at the price of failing to address the 'religious' needs of so many African Christians.

Thus 'African Christianity' comes in very different forms, with very different consequences for development.

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