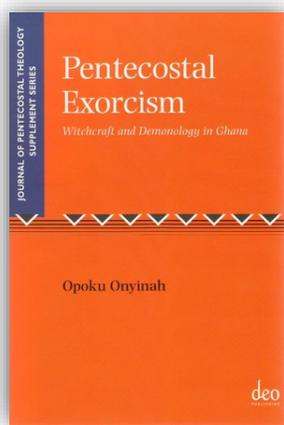


## BOOK REVIEW

# PENTECOSTAL EXORCISM: WITCHCRAFT AND DEMONOLOGY IN GHANA

*By Opoku Onyinah*

Reviewed by Robin Scott



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2012

It is possible that if you surveyed people from all over the world Christianity would be considered a universal religion, with a Western personality. And no matter where you are in the world it is likely that if you were to make a reference to Christianity you might automatically include a reference to the American church. It is hard for people to separate the West from Christianity. Yet, the World Economic Forum tells us that more Christians live in Africa than in any other continent in the world (Kazeem 2019). Additionally, The Pew Research Center concludes “By 2060 six of the countries with the top ten largest Christian populations will be in Africa” (McClendon 2017). The world’s eyes have stared far too long at Western Christianity. Opoku Onyinah commands our attention to Ghana and African Christianity in his writing *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana*.

The purpose of Onyinah’s work is to evaluate the function of exorcism, as it relates to witchcraft, within the Church of Pentecost (CoP) in Ghana. His study includes the origins and understanding of witchcraft within the context of African cosmology, along with the interworking of Christianity and traditional African religion in Ghana. The problem he sought to investigate

was “why witchcraft and exorcism continue to persist among the Akan people of Ghana in Christianity” (3). The method Onyinah decided to use was the breaking down of the “theological framework for the exorcistic ministry, using the CoP as a case study” (3).

In the first half of Onyinah’s work he lays the foundation with a comprehensive explanation of African cosmology and terminology. One of the things immediately noticeable in his writing is his position on how important the need for contextualization is within the framework of Christian evangelism. He writes “a good way of making the biblical message meaningful to a contemporary culture is to decontextualize the message to arrive at the supracultural element and then express it in the terms and contexts which are meaningful in the local culture” (11). You will find in the latter part of the first half of the text, it is not by accident that he expresses this position in the introduction. As he covers the development of Christianity in Ghana he clearly expresses his concerns with the manner in which missionaries delivered the gospel and Christian theology to the Akan people. There is a level of responsibility that he holds the missionaries to for the “contaminated” (88) version of Christianity that is expressed among the Akan people, or as he calls it “the appropriation of Christianity by the Akan” (88). However, he doesn’t release the Akan people from their part played in this contamination. The first half of the book is closed out with a well defined theory of how Pentecostal exorcism came to be in Ghana:

Ghanaians themselves had come to the realization that everything traditional was pagan. This sort of realization influenced the Akan society as a whole; and finally Christianity became associated with the white man’s religion, everything it contained was godly. Akan culture (and religion) was associated with the black man’s religion, everything it contained was devilish. The Pentecostal type of exorcism arises from this understanding. (107)

The final half of the book covers the practice of exorcism in the CoP, along with some case studies, and its evolution into the contemporary “witchdemonology.” This new practice, held through the deliverance ministry, was “viewed as a synthesis of the practices and beliefs of Akan witchcraft and Western Christian concepts of demonology and exorcism” (172). The major portion of the last half of the book addresses proper contextualization of Christianity into the Akan culture. Onyinah walks the reader through “witchdemonology” in a biblical perspective beginning with the Old Testament, and moving to the synoptic gospels, Johannine literature, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Pauline and other New Testament epistles. It is clear that he not only understood the necessity of proper contextualization but was prepared to do the work and provide the reader with an example of what proper contextualization of Christianity into the Akan culture looks like. After the decontextualizing of the Bible, Onyinah arrives at a solid closing argument:

The biblical writers and the early church believed in the existence of the devil and his allied demonic powers. If Christianity had been replanted in West Africa in this background, there would not have been the tension that goes on between Africans and the Western churches. By the time Christianity was firmly established in West Africa, the Western church had assumed a rationalist worldview and only retained what the Nigerian Evangelical theologian Osadolor Imasogie assesses as “a veneer of the biblical world view.” Consequently, salvation was presented as deliverance from the divine wrath on the final day and reinstatement in the glory of God which was lost through sin, but not as deliverance from all the powers of Satan including sin and demonic influences of controls. (251)

It is clear that Onyinah has a personal connection with Ghanaian culture and does a great job expressing it and navigating the reader through a complete understanding of it. He also clearly articulates his understanding of the Bible and Christian theology. I felt the book provided the reader with a kind of survey of the topic. It walked the reader through African Christianity as it is contextualized in Ghana.

A few portions of the book could have been separated and covered individually in more elaborate works. For example, in the chapter “The Development of Christianity and Exorcism in Ghana”, there is a lot of comparison to the Western church’s exorcism practices, but with little to no explanation of what exactly those practices are. One of the foundational positions Onyinah holds is upholding the missionaries’ influence in Akan Christianity and their responsibility for the way Christianity was shared. He talks about the

missionaries’ cultures and “minimizing the intrusion” of them (11) but only covers the matter briefly. His argument could have been strengthened had he spent a little more time elaborating the section “Home Base: Origins and Ideological Base of Missionaries.”

I think Onyinah’s perspective is an accurate depiction of the errors early missionaries in Africa made. Not only was this an issue in Ghana but in many parts of Africa. As Robert Priest, Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell mention in their article, “Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC” (2020), missionaries did not address the holistic needs of the people. They state, “foreign missionaries, often took the position that witch suspicions or accusations were without merit. They were not known to have any regular practices related to engaging witchcraft suspicions or accusations” (2020, 14). This is why churches such as the Revival Churches in the DRC and even Ghana focused not just on theology and salvation but, as Onyinah mentioned, on “deliverance of all powers of Satan” (251). Priest et al. suggest that “Rather than stress Bible knowledge and formal theological education as the foundation of pastoral authority, these churches placed a high value on gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2020, 14). It is only now that we are seeking to evaluate the consequences of those errors (worldwide). I believe the Western church is being responsible with that awareness and seeking to properly train missionaries and ministry workers in cross-cultural studies and contextualized evangelism.

*Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana* nestles itself right in the middle of the purpose of the *On Knowing Humanity Journal*. It respectfully evaluates the culture and traditions of the Akan people of Ghana with both anthropological and theological lenses. Opoku Onyinah objectively evaluates the Church of Pentecost through universal Christian lenses, and holds loosely his personal experience, understanding the limitations it might possibly bring. The work provides Christian anthropological insight into the Akan people of Ghana.

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