CHAPTER 2

Explaining the Growth and Legitimation of the Pentecostal Movement in Africa

Olufunke Adeboye

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of Christianity in Africa since the 1970s has been the subject of several publications and conferences in recent times. Observers within and outside the continent have come to a common conclusion that the center of world Christianity has gradually shifted from the Western to the non-Western world, namely, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Within this Christian epicenter, the Pentecostal expression has been particularly visible, vibrant, and impactful. It has generated considerable debate about its roots (whether indigenous or foreign), on the diversity of its manifestations, on its features, and its public significance. The spread and variety of African Pentecostalism continues to amaze experts—sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, historians, and even government officials—who have had to regulate its practices in numerous African nations.

This chapter examines the nature of the growth and contemporary acceptability of the Pentecostal movement in Africa. It explores the various factors that facilitated this growth. It examines the challenges associated with the growth and their implications for the future of African Christianity and the fate of the continent. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first examines African Pentecostal origins and later diversification; the second focuses on growth-related issues and tries to identify the factors responsible. The third discusses the issues of the movement’s legitimation and acceptability in sub-Saharan Africa, especially its relationship with the state and Pentecostal ecumenical bodies. The chapter concludes by raising questions on the downsides of the movement.

O. Adeboye (✉)
University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

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