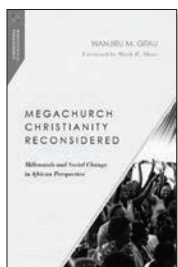


Book Reviews

Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective, by Wanjiru M. Gitau (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2018), xiv, 188 pp.

—Reviewed by Darren Duerksen



I remember the experience of attending a Pentecostal megachurch in a large city in south India. Up to that point, most churches I had visited were either smaller village churches or larger churches which held traditional worship services in the local language. This megachurch, however, was comprised primarily of young urban call center workers and other professionals dressed in the latest urban Indian fashion, chatting with each other in English and texting on their cell phones. The pastor's English-language sermon was being live-streamed for people to watch around the world, and a band with guitars and drums led the congregation in the latest English-language praise songs from Western churches. At one point I closed my eyes and could almost imagine myself singing in a church in my home in California.

As a missiologically-oriented Western visitor, and one who had spent a great deal of time contemplating and critiquing the colonial and foreign legacy of Christianity in places like south Asia, it was a perplexing experience that left me with many questions. This was intensified by my own personal critique of the megachurch model and its consumerist tendencies, particularly in the U.S. and other Western countries. But I couldn't deny that the church I attended was obviously popular among a segment of young, urban, middle-class Indian professionals in that city. Why? Were they mainly Christians "hopping" over from more traditional churches? Was its attraction part of the overall allure of shopping malls, night clubs, coffee shops, fancy cinemas, and other signs of growing affluence to which they now had access? Was this a bad thing? Was the church's embrace of Western church styles exacerbating the reputation of Christianity as foreign and disconnected from the cultural and religious traditions of the region? And, if so, why didn't these people care?

Though I couldn't answer these questions fully, my criticism of megachurches, my postcolonial lens, and my concerns for (traditional) cultural relevance predisposed me to view such churches with a degree of skepticism.

But Protestant megachurches such as these continue to develop and grow throughout the Global South, and because of this they deserve more careful analysis than the surface-level critiques that I was drawn to make. In light of this, Wanjiru Gitau's book *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered* is an insightful and important contribution to the conversation of ecclesiology in the Global South. Gitau traces the origin and development of Mavuno church, a megachurch in Nairobi, Kenya that was started in 2005. It grew from an initial congregation of 400 people (who had branched off from another church) to approximately 4,000 people by 2012. By 2015 it had started five additional campuses across Nairobi, five in other African countries, and one in a European country.

Though its astoundingly quick growth could be attributed to any number of programs and innovations that the church had initiated, Gitau does us the favor of looking for a broader explanation. Her thesis and main explanation for the growth of megachurches like Mavuno is that "they provide a map of reality for [millennials] to navigate a world that is otherwise experienced as deeply volatile" (5). The millennials of Mavuno's context are educated and upwardly mobile, and have

found themselves in transition through several worlds all at once—the vestiges of the traditional world of their grandparents, the modernizing and largely urbanized world of their parents, and the global, technologically advanced world of their own time. (5)

Nairobi, and African countries in general, have experienced rapid and deep economic, political, and cultural changes that have destabilized successive generations and left them to feel that their maps of reality do not work. And, Gitau argues, it is this sense of dissonance and volatility that helps us understand the rise and growth of megachurches like Mavuno.

To make her argument, Gitau, in Chapter 1, traces the origins of Mavuno church against the backdrop of the wider trends and shifts in Kenyan and African Christianity. For example, she discusses how African churches in the 1960s and '70s were rightly focused on transitioning Christianity and its structures from missionaries to African leaders. Gitau also assesses various economic, political, and cultural changes in Africa and how different "generations" of Christians and churches, such as the initial converts, the

Darren Duerksen is Associate Professor of Intercultural and Religious Studies at Fresno Pacific University, USA. He has authored Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India (2015) and with William Dyrness has co-authored Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom (2019).

By the 1990s “there was not so much a foreignness problem as a generational one” where young people felt the church was out of touch with the ongoing and rapid changes occurring in wider society.

African Indigenous Churches (AICs), those who grew under the colonial church, and those who transitioned the postcolonial church helped develop and renew Christianity in important ways for their times (Chapter 2). By the 1990s, however, “there was not so much a foreignness problem as a generational one” where young people felt the church was out of touch with the ongoing and rapid changes occurring in wider society (23). Churches by and large had failed to adapt to the particularly rapid changes and stresses brought on by a large population of young people who had access to good education, technology, and media but less access to guaranteed jobs. This created a “social homelessness” among middle-class millennials that begged a response.

As a result, Mavuno’s founder, Muriithi Wanjau, started Mavuno in a middle-class district of Nairobi. He and his team created a “profile” of the type of person they wanted to appeal to—persons who did not attend existing churches, had consumption habits and corresponding social norms like partying on the weekends and sleeping on Sundays—and called these “Mike” and “Makena.” Recognizing that “this person is a consumer,” (73) and using these profiles to guide them, they developed styles of worship, preaching, activities, classes, and programs to attract and challenge such persons to follow Christ and become part of the church (Chapters 3 and 4). Through these programs, Muriithi has challenged people to rise above complacency and has sought to turn them into “fearless influencers of society” (66).

The impact of Mavuno can be seen not only in its rise in membership and congregations, but also in the impact its “fearless” members have had on the wider society (Chapter 5). For instance, though the church uses Western music (African American songwriter Kirk Franklin was an early favorite), the church has also developed its own songwriters who have in turn produced music that is listened to more widely. Others have started leadership programs seeking to influence future political and business leaders, and organizations seeking better to rehabilitate prisoners.

Though Gitau’s main focus throughout the book is on helping to interpret the growth of Mavuno against the backdrop of its context, she suggests that Mavuno and other megachurches are also offering something important to the global Christian community (Chapter 6). The Western church, and the church as a whole, “lacks a consistently developed theology of how to be Christianly prosperous” that engages and nuances—but doesn’t reject wholesale—the prosperity theologies that have risen in recent decades (151). Though economically successful Christians in the

West tend to idealize those who have chosen downwardly mobile lifestyles or opted for monastic-like living, most people in places like Nairobi

want to know how to make it in a cutthroat workplace, secure a future, raise kids in the world of contemporary education structures and media...and handle whatever other mundane issues come with living, especially in the city. (152)

Here again she says critics of megachurches need to realize that these churches are working out a needed theology that helps people navigate these changing realities, even if imperfectly.

Some of the strengths of this book have already been hinted at. Gitau provides an important perspective that frames megachurches in light of the way they help their people orient themselves in the midst of a destabilized context, particularly those in the Global South. As a member of the church herself, Gitau is able to provide valuable insider perspective while also analyzing the church’s place in its wider context.

But at times Gitau’s closeness to the church also creates some weaknesses in the book. One missing element is that she provides very little, if any, actual critique of the church or its leaders. She acknowledges that the leaders did not have all the answers for what church should look like and were learning as they went, but we hear little about any failures or shortcomings they may have encountered. And although she admits that many people do leave (and have left) the church, the only reason she gives for this is that they inaccurately perceive Mavuno as not teaching a “deep word” (118).

Gitau’s reluctance to scrutinize her own church may also be why there is a curious lack of discussion about the origins of some of Mavuno’s ideas and programs. There seems to be an apparent influence from churches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek. Nevertheless, despite briefly mentioning that Muriithi studied at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California for five years just prior to launching Mavuno church, Gitau places little emphasis on that experience of his. Instead, she frequently presents Muriithi’s innovations as coming purely from his own experience. While Gitau’s emphasis on Muriithi’s agency is understandable and important, it would not invalidate this to discuss whether some of his ideas were adapted from other sources, including other megachurches.

A final critique regards the place of Mavuno, and the place of megachurches in general, in the ecclesial landscape. Though Gitau acknowledges and values the ecclesial adaptations of past generations and the ways these provided a “renewing influence” on Christianity for their time (37),

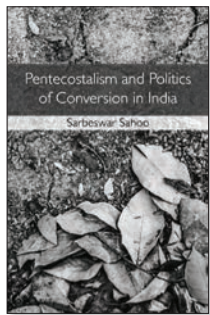
Are churches like the AICs, or those that were birthed out of concerns for contextualization, still important for the Kenyan context? Or was their import solely in what they offered in their time?

she does not seem to indicate whether these churches still have a place in Kenyan society, or how megachurches relate to these (older) churches. Are churches like the AICs, or those that were birthed out of concerns for contextualization, still important for the Kenyan context? Or was their import solely in what they offered in their time? Here Gitau, in her focus on interpreting and legitimizing megachurches, perhaps unintentionally glosses over the diversity existent in modern-day African countries and the ongoing need for various ecclesial responses to these differences. For while Mavuno's style of megachurch may be important for certain segments of Nairobi and other cities, it may not have the same relevance among, for example, some of the Muslim urban contexts in neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia.

This does not negate or seriously detract from Gitau's overall point. Megachurches in the Global South are best understood not as the result of the application of an effective church growth strategy, or as an over-accommodation to capitalist consumerism. Rather they are important, local responses to wider changes and forces. Similar research can and should be done on other megachurches, particularly from other parts of the Global South. Gitau points the way towards a better and more nuanced understanding of this form of church.

Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India, by Sarbeswar Sahoo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), xviii, 205 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is a highly recommended study on the controversies surrounding conversion in India today, and it is striking that it is written by a Hindu academic. Sarbeswar Sahoo did his doctoral research in the southern tribal region of the state of Rajasthan, looking at NGOs among tribal peoples. He returned there again to research the present work, as explained in the Preface.

This is not a broad theoretical approach to conversion, but a focused case study of the players and issues in south Rajasthan. The introductory chapter outlines the history of violence against Christians in India and the controversy over conversion. The difficulty of gathering data from Christians as a Hindu is discussed, and Sahoo had to rely on Christian leaders to give him access to local people in order for the latter to trust him (with the danger that he mostly heard what locals thought their leaders would want them to say). He acknowledges that “when I presented parts of this book at various academic conferences I was often told that my analysis is sympathetic to the missionaries’ perspective” (18).

In his second chapter Sahoo presents an overview of Pentecostalism and then focuses on the spread of this version of Christianity among the Bhil tribe. “Spreading Like Fire” is the chapter title, and Sahoo searches out reasons for this growth. Tensions between Roman Catholic and Pentecostal versions of Christianity are indicated. Sahoo never discusses the meaning of “missionary” despite often using that term, but it is clear that these are not internationals, rather south Indians; and yet the term is also used of local tribal people who, it is stressed, are most effective in winning others to Christ (35–36).

The key to Pentecostal growth is not only signs and wonders, although that aspect is prominent (37), but also a transformative ethic against bad habits including alcoholism, immorality, and violence (38). Yet development is also important, as educational centers and health care are also part of the church planting program (40). Sahoo concludes his second chapter saying that “Pentecostal conversion has positively transformed the lives of the tribals and helped them develop a new identity that is assertive and empowering” (48).

In his third chapter Sahoo looks at various perspectives on tribal conversion, particularly that of the Hindu nationalists, the Christian missionaries, the tribal converts, and the unconverted tribals. His book shows clearly that much of the development work being undertaken by Hindu nationalists is a direct response to Christian work. The Christian missionary case for conversion as spiritual transformation is well presented. Their accusations against the Hindu

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To their pleasant surprise, the compassionate and humane atmosphere of the church and the unique intermixing of daba (medicine) and dua (prayer) have acted as an alternative system of healthcare. —Sahoo

nationalist programs as true attempts at coercive conversion are presented. Sahoo concludes that

such accusations and counter-accusations by both Hindu nationalists and Christian missionaries have intensified tensions at the local level, which is often manifested in clashes between the two communities. (75)

Sahoo is sensitive to the perspectives of the local converts, and points out that most are not converts in the legal sense of having declared a new religion in court. There are various approaches to relating to unconverted tribals, ranging from a superiority complex in some cases to secret believing in others, alongside types of cultural hybridity (80–81). Conversion disrupts families and undermines social solidarity (85) but the movement continues on as real needs are met by the new churches in contrast to expensive and ineffective tribal sacrifices (82). Sahoo's lengthy summary of this chapter is worth quoting:

What these four narratives show is that conversion is not a straightforward practice in which Christian missionaries go in and seduce people with material benefits, but that there are multiple and contradictory discourses surrounding it, which makes the practice complicated. For example, though Hindu nationalists reject conversion as violence and as a threat to freedom of religion, they have actively carried out *gharwapsi* or reconversion programmes. Similarly, while missionaries advocate spiritual transformation and self-transcendence, they have justified their role through the idea of civilizing the savage, which undermines adivasi [tribal] agency and freedom. The converts' rights and freedom to change their religion have often followed an instrumentalist approach in which the call of modernity, the moral economy of miracles and material benefits have justified their shift to a new-found faith. Finally, Hindu adivasis, despite being victims of the failure of the state, are caught between their moral responsibility to protect their community identity/traditional faith and their desire for modernity. (86)

Why tribal women convert to Pentecostal Christianity is the focus of the fourth chapter. One of the strengths of the book is the interaction with sociological literature related to Christian tribal ministry, and this bibliographical data alone makes the book essential for libraries of Christian mission where such material is easily overlooked. Again, Sahoo is very sympathetic to these convert women, and references literature about Pentecostal women across the world. He allows some women to speak for themselves, and this chapter is a strong testament to the validity of tribal Pentecostal ministry. Healing of course is central, as both modern and traditional tribal medicine are expensive and

ineffective. But women are also empowered and see changes in their marriages:

Such life-transforming spiritual and material changes do not just defy the "material incentive hypothesis" of conversion; they also stand as testimonies and credible explanations of why tribal women take a deliberate decision, in spite of knowing the adverse consequences, to "become believers" of Pentecostalism and "make a break" with the traditional belief system that they followed for generations. (119)

This chapter is a powerful case study of what Donald McGavran called "redemption and lift," the positive changes that come in life and society when people recognize Christ as Lord.

The fifth chapter then focuses on the Hindutva opposition to conversion. Historical and political factors related to the problems of tribals are also outlined: "The tribals of Rajasthan as well as India suffer from widespread poverty and marginalisation and are deprived of citizenship and welfare entitlements" (126). The relationship of state power, Hindutva ideology and missionary activity is explained historically with many helpful nuances. Sahoo clearly shows that state power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been on the side of the anti-conversion forces of Hindu nationalism in Rajasthan in recent decades:

The BJP has provided ideological, political, economic and legal support to the organisations of the Sangh Parivar [family of Hindu nationalist organizations] that are active at the grassroots. The BJP has also considered conversion as a threat to its electoral support base among the tribals. It has therefore passed the anti-conversion law that has empowered activists of the Sangh Parivar to resist conversion, often leading to conflict and violence between the two communities. This shows how the BJP-led state in Rajasthan was also partially responsible for the rising violence against Christian communities. (157)

In a brief concluding chapter Sahoo provides a helpful summary of his findings. A clear summary of his perspective on the centrality of healing is quotable:

In a context where the indigenous shamanic system as well as city-based modern healthcare systems have been exploitative and the state has failed to provide basic health care services in the villages, the tribals have, as a last resort, visited the Pentecostal church for cure and blessing. To their pleasant surprise, the compassionate and humane atmosphere of the church and the unique intermixing of *daba* (medicine) and *dua* (prayer) have acted as an alternative system of healthcare. (159)

But much more than this has kept many tribals true to their Pentecostal faith. Again, there are various levels of

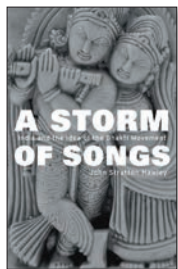
In the idea of the bhakti movement the nature or number of the deity/deities is secondary. What matters is the heartfelt, intrinsically social sense of connectedness that emerges in the worshipper. —Hawley

disconnect from traditional society, and there are various levels of opposition to the Pentecostal program both from traditional Christianity and from Hindu nationalists.

From an outsider to Christian denominational sparring, Sahoo has done a remarkable job of understanding and explaining the inner workings of Christianity and its missionary concern and functions. He has documented state complicity in anti-Christian activity and has allowed tribal Pentecostal women to speak for themselves about the validity and integrity of their faith. This is not an apology for Pentecostalism, as weaknesses are apparent and criticisms are aired. But it is a valuable analysis of the conversion controversy in south Rajasthan which frames the national (and international) debate on this topic.

A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement, by John Stratton Hawley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), xiv, 438 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



Bhakti (devotion) has come to be recognized as a central concept in Hindu traditions and practices. This was a rather late discovery in the history of ideas, as nineteenth-century Indologists (encouraged by mostly Brahman informants) tended to focus on philosophy.¹ One of the pioneers of academic study of bhakti traditions, John Stratton Hawley of Columbia University, has written a history of the idea of the bhakti movement. This is a landmark study worthy of wide reading and deep discussion.

Hawley begins with an explanation of his “storm of songs” title, a phrase from Rabindranath Tagore. He then moves into an important discussion of bhakti:

“Bhakti” is usually translated as devotion, but if that word connotes something entirely private and quiet, we are in need of other words. Bhakti is heart religion, sometimes cool and quiescent but sometimes hot—the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often personal challenge, the sort of thing that coursed through the Protestant Great Awakenings in the history of the United States. It evokes a widely shared religiosity for which institutional superstructures weren’t all that relevant, and which, once activated, could be historically contagious—a glorious disease of the collective heart. (2)

The focus on a community of bhaktas is important as it contrasts with sterile Christian analyses of Hindu traditions. Hawley specifically rebukes an aspect of this once-popular misrepresentation:

Outsiders like the great linguist George Grierson sometimes confused it [bhakti] for personal monotheism, and modern-day Hindus have often followed suit, but in the idea of the bhakti movement we have the affirmation that the nature or number of the deity/deities concerned is secondary. What matters is the heartfelt, intrinsically social sense of connectedness that emerges in the worshipper. That socially divine sense of connectedness traces a pulmonary system that makes the nation throb with life.² (4)

But “the idea of the bhakti movement” is the focus of this book, and Hawley finds the idea lacking in historical validity. In the process of examining this idea and its historical roots, far too many interesting insights are developed for mention in this review. This is truly a book that must be read by anyone interested in the idea of bhakti.

Hawley’s alternative history to the idea of the bhakti movement is rather nuanced; he proposes a “bhakti network” (295–312, referred to as a “crazy quilt,” 310) comprised of numerous bhakti movements rather than a single bhakti movement. This might seem rather trivial, but it represents a significant shift in thinking, and some of Hawley’s suggested reasons (see later in this review) for the widespread acceptance of the standard construct of “the bhakti movement” are certainly not trivial.

Hawley presents the case that the idea of a singular bhakti movement can be traced to Hazariprasad Dvivedi (1907–1979).³ The standard form of the story is increasingly well known from the *Bhagavata Mahatmya* (a short poem of praise for the *Bhagavata Purana*), how bhakti was born in south India and grew up in Karnataka before migrating to Maharashtra and Gujarat. Then after a weakening phase there was renewal in Brindavan (Krishna’s holy land, in what is now the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh). Chapter 2 of this book is a fascinating discussion and deconstruction of this presentation, particularly pointing out that the idea of a single bhakti movement regardless of the focus of devotion (i.e., one movement whether the focus is on Krishna, Ram, Shiva or *nirguna brahman*) is very far from the intent of the *Bhagavata Mahatmya*, which is a distinctly Vaishnava text (89).

Hawley shows that the great omission in the *Mahatmya*’s account of bhakti moving from south to north is the centrality of the Muslim role in the development of Brindavan

Hawley raises crucial issues in modern India like the Hindutva and Dalit movements. His book is deconstructing a paradigm of “Hindu history,” and it undermines the Hindutva effort to homogenize Hindu traditions.

itself (74ff.) This writing of the Muslim period out of Indian history helped motivate the embracing of the idea of a bhakti movement that united India. The British had developed a rather simplistic pattern of history whereby ancient Hindu empires were taken over by Muslim rulers and the British came in to restore proper rule after the decline of the Muslim period. The bhakti movement idea tied together ancient and modern India while also providing a unifying basis for the movement towards independence. Such nationalistic concerns continue to be important in sustaining the idea of a bhakti movement, and these broader concerns are indeed of interest and importance.

Yet the focus on many aspects of many bhakti movements provides the true treasures of this book. Central to the history, as Hawley sees it, are Surdas and Kabir. (Ramanand, esteemed by tradition as the main link between south and north Indian bhakti traditions, is investigated and the traditions of his centrality are shown to be without historical foundation.) The followers of Surdas and Kabir were so many and so prolific that Hawley concludes “the poets we know as Sur or Kabir are actually bhakti movements in themselves” (274).

There is no evidence that northern poets knew of the earlier southern bhakti poets (307) but there was much borrowing of ideas, styles and even whole poems across the various bhakti movements (297–305). Even these are important ideas that leave one far from the heart of the bhakti network. Throughout the book, stimulating comments appear like the following on the centrality of music to the bhakti idiom.

Consider, too, the musical idiom. Isn't it striking that the principal nodes in bhakti's remembered network—the bhaktas of this world—are communicators who operated in a universe where ordinary words ride frequencies of sound that set them apart from their quotidian existence? Here is a mode of interpersonal connection whose very existence depends upon auditory frameworks that set it apart from conversational speech. In this realm of heightened feedback antiphons are frequent, refrains are repeated, and audiences are not only implied but participate in the work of the singer. The way we know who Mirabai or Namdev “is” is to enter into the world they are believed to have created. We pipe into the patterns of vibration—songs—that end with the announcing of their names. Because we do so, this musical network is never really past; it is always present. The fact that these bhakti songs are so often addressed to God, giving plot to divine actions or otherwise relating the bhakta to bhagavan through a process of “puranic” recycling, creates a shortcut for memory. It invites the hearer to act as a character in the story—to reenter

it, absorb it, and in a way become the story itself. Thereby, as Christian Novetzke has pointed out, the singer-saint in question turns out to be, on closer inspection, a public. (296–7, referencing Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Indian edition *History, Bhakti and Public Memory: Namdev in Religious and Secular Traditions*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009).

In his closing chapter, almost necessarily, Hawley raises crucial issues in modern India like the Hindutva and Dalit movements. His book is deconstructing a paradigm of “Hindu history,” and it undermines the Hindutva effort to homogenize Hindu traditions. He clearly feels empathy for Dalits who share the low caste status of Ravidas (333); but this is not a book denigrating the marvel of the bhakti movements that arose and still thrive across India. The standard historical paradigm of a single bhakti movement may be too simplistic and contrived to withstand scrutiny, but Hawley's closing words reveal his true sentiment about bhakti:

Every nation requires a narrative of itself. This one, incubated in a nation, pushes well beyond that nation. It touches and tests every heart. (341) **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Geoffrey Oddie wrote that “There was, indeed, comparatively little discussion of *bhakti* among European scholars for the greater part of the nineteenth century and it was only in the 1880s and 1890s that Ramanuja's philosophy, ‘dualism,’ and the ideas implicit in the *bhakti* movement appear to have received much more systematic attention” (*Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900*, New Delhi: Sage, 2006, 270).

² A “socially divine sense of connectedness” sounds like an excellent phrase for the New Testament ekklesia, but of course refers to bhaktas in Hindu traditions; one might be permitted to wish that this was a death knell to the idea that Hindu traditions have no community reality that resembles the church. Of course, the idea that the experience of bhakti is more important than the object of bhakti goes against biblical thought, which focuses on God and Christ as the object of bhakti.

³ Hawley uses a rather pedantic transliteration/spelling; more common is “Dwivedi.”