

“Faith” in Charismatic Christianity: The Case of Togo, West Africa

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- Research background

Charismatic Christianity is a Christian denomination that places great importance on the believers’ experiences of healing and the miracles derived from the power of God and the Holy Spirit. For charismatic Christians, evil spirits cause all sorts of misfortunes and troubles in everyday life and the Holy Spirit drives out these devil’s servants and brings success and prosperity to believers’ lives. Charismatic movements in West Africa have mainly been active in the Anglophone countries of Nigeria and Ghana since the 1980s. In recent years, however, it has been spreading rapidly in other coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea, including Francophone ones, such as Togo.



Fig. 1. The pastor trying to deliver a woman from evil spirits by touch

- Research purpose and aim

During sermons in charismatic churches, it is repeatedly stressed that true Christians are supposed to devote themselves absolutely to transcendent existence, that is, to have strong faith in God. On the other hand, church members often say, “Strong faith allows miracles to happen” or “With faith in God, you will recover from illness.” The idea of “faith” here is not in agreement with that of the western religious view which often regards it as the individual inner belief based on the self-searching mind referring to Christian morals and ethics. Rather, it is seen as a kind of tool with which people can realize what they are longing for in their daily lives. This study aims to clarify the concept of “faith” in charismatic Christianity on the basis of field research conducted in Togo.



Fig. 2. A boy eagerly reading the New Testament at Sunday service

- Results and achievements by fieldwork

In charismatic churches, one can observe a variety of practices that can be described as “magical.” For example, church members apply “holy water,” which the pastor has prayed to in advance, on affected parts of their body for healing; they keep the paper on which miracle day is written always by their side and even pray to it so that the prophecy becomes reality; they have fetish idols physically broken by pastors in order to negate the power of evil spirits; and they are healed and delivered simply by the pastor’s spiritual “touch.”

It should be noted that, for charismatic Christians, not a small part of God’s power is embodied by pastors, that is, pastors have a certain kind of “charisma.” Members in a church say, “The pastor is a person sanctified by God. The power of God operates through him” or “Wherever you go, miracles will happen if you have faith in God. In T church, however, miracles take place quicker than in any other churches” and they try to visit the church where there are pastors who have stronger spiritual power and can perform miracles faster. There are quite a few people who visit churches only to be healed and delivered, saying “I have been to this church because *bokono* (a traditional diviner) could not resolve my problems.” Pastors themselves also affirm, “Here and now, I can bring about miracles!,” stressing the mightiness and fast-acting properties of their own power. While pastors preach that it is important for individual members to have faith in order to receive the blessings of God, they also offer a more simple way to enjoy it.

Pastors say “God gives more blessings to those who make more sacrifices” and members try to contribute as much money as possible. This can be interpreted as a practice of trying to manipulate the power of God physically and subjectively through the contributions. As seen in the members’ narrative, “If today you pay 10,000 francs as a sacrifice to God, tomorrow you will receive 100,000 francs,” the blessing of God is also often viewed as a concrete benefit such as wealth.



Fig. 3. A woman praying hard to receive the blessings of God

- Implications and impacts on future research

As discussed above, in charismatic churches, “faith” is often seen as a source of spiritual power. The concept of “faith” in this context can be understood as the combination of expectations of good results and a series of actions motivated by these anticipations. These actions are subjectively manipulable and selectable, and at the same time, they are a kind of gamble.

Most of the people who visit charismatic churches have concrete problems in their daily lives. In churches it is said that evil spirits cause these hardships and that the only way to defeat them is to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, there is a possibility that this good/evil (Holy Spirit/evil spirits) dualism encourages the tendency for members to try to access the power of the Holy Spirit through magical practices. Further research is needed to explore this point in more detail.



Fig. 4. Church members praying collectively on the initiative of the pastor