
Maria Frahm-Arp’s book draws heavily on the growing role of professional women in Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches as well as on her many years of sojourn, especially in post-Apartheid South Africa where she took up a Mellon postdoctoral fellow at WISER (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research). She has published on women and religion in South Africa and has particular interest in the connections between the world of work and religion. She currently lectures at St Augustine College in Johannesburg. In the present book, the author looks at the new role that Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity plays in the lives of young, professional black women who are enjoying career success and becoming part of South Africa’s new middle class. Among these women an interesting relationship has emerged between work and religion as they feel that the social networks and self-confidence they gain from their religious communities are as important as their spiritual experience. But not all the women who join these churches remain, and this book explores why some women leave the churches in which they had previously felt they gained so much.

Divided into ten chapters, the book by Maria Frahm-Arp, *Professional Women in South African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches*, opens with an excellent foreword written by David Martin (a Fellow of the British Academy and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics). The appendix has three distinct sections: a) *Table of Interview Details* (pp. 263-268), b) *Professional Women in South Africa* (pp. 269-270), and c) *Research Questions* (pp. 271-274). The bibliography has twenty pages (pp. 275-295). The aim of the present book, as the author noted in chapter one, is to explore the reasons behind the correlation between religious belonging, expressed in church attendance, and upward economic mobility by focusing on the life experiences of a group of young professional women who went to two Pentecostal Charismatic Christian (PCC) churches in the Gauteng area of South Africa: “The book is therefore about the daily, on-the-ground-experiences of religion, society and economics in the making of South Africa’s new black middle class” (p. 2).

Generally speaking, Maria Frahm-Arp discusses in the book what she regards as two main surprises that emerge from the scenario of socio-religious post-Apartheid South Africa. In doing this, she looks at the years since the end of Apartheid and concentrates primarily on the socio-cultural changes that have followed the political revolution. According to her, the first surprise was that the end of Apartheid was supposed to usher in a new era of equal opportunity for all South Africans in which everyone would benefit from the country’s wealth. By the mid 2000s, however, it became obvious that the previously disadvantaged sectors of South African society were not all sharing equally in the economic freedom which had been promised them by their democratic leaders. When the data of the elite group of economically successful black people was analyzed more closely, another surprising fact emerged: a majority of this black population was primarily Christians who went to Pentecostal Charismatic Christian churches. In the years leading to the demise of Apartheid, South Africa was a deeply “Christian country” with over 70% of the population attending various forms of Christian churches on a regular basis. The most numerically dominant churches were the African Independent Churches, for example the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) which had a membership of about three million people in the mid 1980s. One of the smallest groups was the PCC churches which only attracted about 10% of the general South African population. The book details what might account for this interesting scenario and what can be learned about the relationship between religion and the world of work from this group.

The author makes the powerful argument that for the understanding of South Africa’s current situation and the particular factors that influenced the life of upwardly mobile young black professionals the legacy of Apartheid, which established economic, social and political inequalities based both on race and class, is particularly important. She opines that black people were disadvantaged because they received an inferior education and very limited access to social and
cultural capital. Only with the demise of Apartheid did the education available to young black students begin to improve. This new development has resulted in the emergence of better educated men and women who could make their way through good schools onto universities and finally into professional careers. In particular, the book underscored how young black women negotiated the new opportunities open to them, and how for many of them the most difficult thing about their new success was finding access to cultural and social capital. Maria Frahm-Arp argues further that for the women she interviewed and studied in the book, the two Pentecostal Charismatic Christian churches, His People and Grace Bible churches which they attended, offered them the skills, training, and mentoring they so desperately needed and, above all, the ongoing positive affirmation that they were “worth it” and could do the jobs they were employed to do. In offering their members this help, these churches were mending some of the social destruction wreaked by the Apartheid project.

However, the book raises another interesting argument, namely, the discussion about the swiftly changing landscape of South Africa where these young people that were previously offered help by their mother churches are leaving them for PCC. There is an increasing, emerging young population that feels they have no future even in the new South Africa. The author, however, does not pursue this discussion in detail. But she sees it as a whole new area of study which needs to be explored in far more detail (cfr. p. 261). Though Frahm-Arp did not put it this way. But the challenge of her book looks like this: as Africa continues to face new forms of imperialism and neocolonialism which in turn have continued to perpetuate poverty, disease, bad governance and instability, how will the message of the Gospel continue to be taken up by members of various churches and Christian communities that operate in the continent and among people looking to make sense of their lives? For Frahm-Arp, this is a very important question Christian Churches in Africa today must confront themselves with. As the young Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole argues in his recent book, The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2011, see p. 105), Maria Frahm-Arp in her book also showed that the problem in Africa does not arise out of the lack of commitment by rural population or even by indifference of young people to school education – both which can be easily addressed through moral and spiritual motivation. Rather, the problem has to do with a social system “which has not been restructured from the bottom up to respond to the social needs of the majority”. As a result, a gulf grows between the living standard of the comfortable minority of the “haves” and that of the dispossessed majority of the “have-nots”. This is the context that frames the Christian Churches’ existence and work in Apartheid South Africa, a context that has, as such, not only radically changed in the new South Africa itself but also in other post-colonial parts of Africa.

From this perspective, the book by Maria Frahm-Arp is a guide to what is stake. The challenge that faces Christianity in Africa is very concrete: how can the African human being attain a condition that will enable him or her to escape misery and inequality, silence and oppression? If Christianity seeks to be relevant to the Africans, the churches on the continent must all join to come to terms with this question. Given this background, one might imagine that Maria Frahm-Arp’s response would be to call upon the churches in Africa to engage in more advocacy (like the NGOs) to help improve the existing economic and political institutions, which itself would be a bold suggestion. This, however, is not the direction in which Frahm-Arp’s missionary thought moves. Instead, she is primarily concerned with Christianity’s own existence and ministry among the people who have become the victims of such a history. In other words, Frahm-Arp’s missionary thought is not so much directed towards fixing the national, political, and economic systems as it is directed against the Christian churches themselves operating in Africa, their own self-understanding, history, and mission. Frahm-Arp invites the Christian churches operating in Africa to rethink their social mission so as to embody an alternative, more hopeful history than is proffered through the inherited colonial nation-state institutions which have continued to be a burden in modern African society. In other words, Frahm-Arp’s book discusses the challenge of the Gospel in modern Africa, which, among other things, may include “rethinking the whole question of
understanding and experiencing faith”. If, for some other authors, this task requires the courage to turn on old formulas, for Frahm-Arp this task requires nothing less than an honest and critical look at the current models of our vision of communities of faith and Christian practice in Africa.

It is from this point that Frahm-Arp employed the power of living stories of professional black women in inviting us to return to the source: the Gospel and the living stories of Africa. In this way, the link between religion and work in Christian mission will assume a new meaning and understanding, at least in an African context. If (or perhaps because) Maria Frahm-Arp was not able to step back from her Pentecostal Charismatic Christian background and interest, she was able to see clearly both the glaring contradictions of the dominant presence of Christian Churches in Africa and the abject misery and marginalization of the peasants at the hand of dominant political, economic, and sometimes ecclesiastical institutions. These contradictions and awareness serve as the basis of her reflection. Unlike the usual approaches that begin with a description of the reality and then proceed to see what insights or recommendations theology can throw upon the situation, because the way she sees and understands the situation is grounded in her field-work experience and experts’ data, the description of the situation is a theological task. From this point of view, much of what Maria Frahm-Arp tries to do in Professional Women in South African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches is to re-describe theologically the reality of emerging young people in Africa in a way that displays possibilities and limitations, the gifts and challenges, of the Christian churches operating in the continent.

This is an important book in search of a new Christian missionary engagement in Africa. The book is a landmark in the emerging fresh conversation about Christian social ethics in Africa and the imports of living stories in missionary enterprise. Francis Anekwe Oborji.