

The Pimp and the Preacher
Gerald Gibbs, (2006)
Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, pp. 280

The last part of this novel's blurb on the back cover reads, 'After reading *The Pimp and the Preacher*, one may ask if this is just a scandalous novel or if it is possibly true". Gerald Gibbs provides us with a critical and penetrating view of the state of the church which preys on the ignorance of its members in America's black community that is itself in a state of decline. This story is, in many respects, similar to what obtains in African countries such as Botswana. In recent years in Botswana, there has been a proliferation of 'prosperity churches', mostly of West African origin whose priests aggressively demand tithes and hefty offerings from their congregations. The unsuspecting church members are in most cases desperate for employment, cure for sicknesses and general prosperity. In the past two years or so the government of Botswana has had to intervene by deporting some of the unscrupulous foreign pastors and closing down some of the churches after it was discovered that they were not registered with the relevant authorities.

The novel starts with the main character, Clyde Robinson, being released from prison after spending more than twenty years without communicating with the outside world. After telling his fellow inmates that he was going back to pimping, they advise him to get involved with the church because this is how money and fortune are made these days. On arrival at his home he finds that his mother had long died and his black neighbourhood in Philadelphia has deteriorated. Churches have mushroomed all over the place but the pastors are not doing anything to help lead the community to prosper, let alone provide alms to the poor. Instead the priests use the pulpit to amass personal wealth. Simon, Clyde's elder brother has become a pastor and tries his best to encourage him to come to church, but Clyde is taking his time.

He links up with “Peaches”, a divorcee and an old business partner during his pimping days. Clyde, who lives at his late mother’s house becomes Peaches’ close friend and she helps him open a profitable brothel patronized largely by priests. Clyde and Peaches also go to church together and she is quite impressed by his knowledge of the Bible which he read while he was in prison. He uses his biblical knowledge to show Peaches how the priests, whom he portrays as false prophets were “pimping” the church.

Clyde attends the annual black pastors’ convention in Tennessee where he witnesses, first hand, moral corruption of astronomical proportions, and some younger pastors’ debauchery. He is present at some well attended seminars where priests unashamedly deliver talks on how to make maximum profits from unsuspecting church members, and how to turn them into obedient and willing tithers. The shocked Clyde, who has recorded the proceedings at the convention and threatens to expose the rot that has taken place. However, the pastors plot his assassination by sending hit-men to blow up his house. This happens in his absence, and the innocent Simon who had paid a visit is the one killed instead.

Another important aspect of this novel is Gibbs portrayal of black people as not keen to support one another. He shows that they prefer to patronise businesses owned by Asians in the black community. For instance, when Clyde returns from prison he notices that a number of formerly black owned businesses have been taken over by Asians who make profit from the black community but do not have any social responsibility towards the community. “Pretty Boy, take some time and look around for yourself. You’ll find out we don’t own hardly anything in our communities. Asians just came to this country, but they own just about all the businesses in the black community” (p.79-80).

Worse still, when Clyde gets a job in a warehouse he realizes that the business owner is overcharging his clients. Clyde tries to be considerate and helps a black client by repairing his air-conditioner without charge. However, a few days later the client reports Clyde to his boss and he is sacked. A similar sentiment is usually expressed in African societies such as Botswana. There is a strongly held view that Batswana do not support each other’s businesses. Even until recently government departments preferred to acquire services and goods from foreign owned businesses or from outside the country.

Peaches believes that there is a conspiracy to deny black people

useful information about how they can improve their lot. She gives examples of how highly informative and useful television programmes were struck off unceremoniously because they were seen as empowering black people (p.78). Peaches also tells Clyde about a perception or stereotype held by non-blacks that "...every black man sits on a corner, drinks beer and gets high. They also think we are all lazy and don't want to work" (p.152). There is also a belief that a certain kind of alcoholic drink is deliberately sold only in the black community in order to be drunk by the black men who then succumb to prostate cancer (p.152-153).

The deplorable state of the black community is also blamed on the lack of what Clyde and Peaches view as incapable political leaders and preachers. This results in lack of confidence in the leadership by the black community. Low self-esteem on the part of the black people is not helped by the characters' derogatory reference to other blacks as "Negroes". In a number of instances Gibbs novel mirrors Chika Onyeani's polemical sledge hammer entitled *The Capitalist Nigger*.

Following Simon's death, Clyde, assisted by Peaches, opens soup kitchens and shelters to cater for the growing army of homeless blacks in his neighbourhood and beyond. He forces the Asian shopkeepers to make contributions to his course, and those who do not cooperate have their businesses boycotted, which leads to their eventual closure. His initiative is also meant to rebuild and empower the black community economically in order to gain self-respect and dignity.

While the novel presents an interesting and critical view of the materialism in the black church and the deterioration of the black community in an American city, it is not very well edited. There are some typographical errors. The novel is also written like an academic text book with subtitles in some parts of the chapters. These subtitles and chapter headings destroy the element of suspense as they hint at what a reader should expect next. Chapter ten is also far too long, and covers different themes. One feels that it should have been split into several chapters.

Information for the second paragraph of chapter eleven (pp.224-223) seems to be in a wrong place and should appear in a different chapter. The conclusion (pp.275-278) also spoils the flow of the story. It should have been brought somewhere in middle of the novel as a dialogue between characters not as a separate conclusion like in an essay or text book.

It could have been helpful for Gibbs to provide a historical dimension in his novel, for instance by demonstrating the role played by the church in the campaign for civil rights and other good courses in the history of African-Americans before it got derailed by self-serving pastors. Nevertheless, this novel contains some useful insights about the state of the black church and community in the United States in the twenty-first century. There are also parallels that can be drawn between the secular and materialist orientation of some preachers of the black church in the United States and some African societies as shown above.

Reviewed by

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