
BOOK REVIEW

Müller, R. 2011. *African Pilgrimage: Ritual Travel in South Africa's Christianity of Zion*. Farnham: Ashgate. viii + 213pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-3082-7. Hbk. £65.00.

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African Pilgrimage looks at the vast and wide-ranging appeal of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), an African Independent Church (AIC) that appears to many outsiders to combine elements of orthodox Christian theology, spiritualism, various traditional cultures and quasi-political sloganing.

The church was officially founded by Engenas Lekganyane in 1925 with under one thousand followers, its membership growing by 2001 to 4.9 million, just over 11% of South Africa's population (Chidester, 1992: 134; Venter, 2004: 30). Now the largest religious denomination in southern Africa, the church has assumed the dual status of ubiquity and enigma for most South Africans (and particularly for white South Africans), who know the church only for the striking military-type uniforms and the colossal traffic jams caused when members travel for annual pilgrimages to Moria, the church's headquarters. It is this pilgrimage that Müller takes as the analytical lens through which to view the group, which he argues "provides an alternative community of belonging" (p. 47) for its members, caught up as they are in the problems that shaping a new democracy has entailed for a fragmented South Africa.

The central chapters consist of a synchronic narrative of Müller's personal experiences as a participant-observer at various ZCC meetings across South Africa and Botswana. He describes the events of four separate pilgrimages and multiple Sunday services that he attended between May and November 2005. Pilgrimages to sacred rural and secular urban spaces are undertaken for differing reasons, members re-imagining themselves through obviously religious as well as socio-political motivations. Preparation for these journeys occurs through local congregational life, and Müller describes the importance of personal prophecy in this. The ethnographic detail embedded in his anecdotes and the autobiographical

style gives a real sense of saga as well as the personal pilgrimage that the author himself underwent when conducting anthropological research with the ZCC. Structuring the book as an extended narrative framed by various broad themes is not without its limitations, however, as within the ethnographic exchanges, analysis is often relegated to footnotes or the brief conclusion (of two or three short paragraphs) at the end of each chapter, which inevitably curbs its scope and depth.

A dominant theme that the author uses to both structure his ethnographic material and prompt much of the discussion in the Conclusion is the intersection of notions of “tradition” and “modernity.” It is the view of this reader that central to understanding these categories is knowing that scholarship appears to have entered and passed through two specific stages, and has now entered a third. From the point of asking whether AICs are “modern,” scholars moved on to asking whether this “modern” was necessarily a mark of something progressive or good. This second stage intersected – not coincidentally – with deconstructions of the secularization thesis. However, more recently, anthropologists of religion have entered a third stage, asking whether “tradition” and “modernity” are valid categories for us to be employing at all. Müller’s analysis does not appear to have entered this third stage.

Müller argues that the ideological assumptions of many studies of AICs simply ask whether these churches are “*getting with the program or not*, the program being modernization” (p. 182). This is certainly true for much of the scholarship up until the turn of the millennium. But the unquestioned premise (“Are AICs traditional or modern?”) now marks those more elderly texts out as just that – elderly – and has been exchanged in recent work on AICs by historians and anthropologists like Peel, Engelke and Venter for the premise that what we instead require is exactly the sustained interrogation of these shifting categories that Müller fails to provide. Müller’s raising this as a criticism of other studies marks his own analytical voice as rather superseded; his contention that “there might be alternative courses for Africa to take other than the polarised positions of traditionalism and modernity” (p. 183) feels insufficient and his critique of “modernity” being used “as code for *the West*” (p. 183), something of a straw man.

Müller indubitably does seek to deconstruct these polarities and offer some new definitions. Indeed, on p. 47, he rejects the bridge metaphor first raised by Sundkler and later resurrected by Venter, stating that the image is guilty of “reducing a multiform reality to the polarized terms of tradition and modernity.” But certainly the impression given in the concluding chapter is that his dispute is with what he sees as scholarship’s “ideologically charged” use of the terms (p. 183), rather than the use of these categories in the first place.

The “drama” metaphor is equally problematic (“African Christians...might indeed be said to oppose certain aspects of modernity, but then only as actors caught up in a drama, which is not of their own creation”; “When the actors refuse to play the parts assigned to them, opting instead to create their own lines, the whole play degenerates into chaos. This, I would suggest is the role played by some AICs in contemporary society” [pp. 183–84]). The metaphor appears to be employed entirely without irony, and the qualifications offered (“To conclude from this...that they are essentially conservative, reactionary social agents would be barking up the wrong tree” [p. 184]) unfortunately might be seen to resemble backpedalling.

As the ZCC’s “single most distinguishing characteristic” (p. 7), pilgrimage is a fascinating category for studying the religious culture of the church – this is attested to by the detail of this case study. Readers will make what they will of the execution of the analysis of pilgrimage, but the real contribution that this book provides is a rich repository of ethnographic narrative on the goings-on of a little-understood church.

References

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