Book Reviews


In the rapidly expanding book series *Companions to Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell has now published a volume on African religions. This is edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba, Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, USA, and President of the African Association for the Study of Religions. Religion is thriving in Africa, plays a vital role in many people’s lives and in societies, and is a major factor in public and political issues in African countries and the continent at large. Equally thriving is the academic study of religion in Africa, and the present Companion demonstrates the breadth and depth of scholarship in this interdisciplinary field. Bongmba has compiled a massive volume that introduces readers to various methodological perspectives on, and thematic issues in African religious studies. Most essays are written in an accessible style, which makes this volume a helpful resource for teaching courses in African religions.

The volume consists of thirty-six essays, with an introduction by the editor and a foreword by the doyen of African religions scholarship, Jacob Olupona. Many contributors are prominent scholars in the field, such as Musa Dube, Gerrie ter Haar, Rosalind Hackett, Birgit Meyer, Isabel Phiri, Afe Adogame, James Cox, Jean and John Comaroff, David Westerlund, to mention just a few. Except for one author (Penda Mbow from Senegal), all contributors are Anglophone, meaning that African Francophone and Lusophone scholarship and traditions are hardly represented in this volume. According to the series description, each volume of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion* ‘draws together newly-commissioned essays by distinguished authors in the field.’ Contrary to this statement, the present volume includes at least six essays that have been published previously, and only one of these has been slightly revised, that is, an afterword has been added (Meyer’s influential article ‘Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches’). In some cases, such as with Tinyiko Maluleke’s 1997 article ‘Church and Reconciliation’ which is a time-document of theology in early post-Apartheid South Africa, it is not really clear how these reprinted essays are relevant to the contemporary study of religion in Africa. In line with the series description, most essays in the volume have been newly-commissioned. Some of them offer helpful and up-to-date surveys of religious traditions, such as neo-traditional religions in Ghana (Marleen de Witte), Hinduism in South Africa (Pratap Kumar), Coptic Christianity in Egypt (Jason Zaborowski), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Christine Chaillot). Some chapters, such as about ‘Christianity in Africa’ (David Ngong) and ‘Islam in Africa’ (Yushau Sodiq) are too broad in their scope to really be useful. In some cases, chapters would have benefited from a more critical approach to religion. Is David Ngong, for
example, really serious when he concludes with the general evaluation that ‘in spite of some shortcomings, improving the overall wellbeing of people has been central to Christianity in Africa’ (p. 215)? What about the history of colonization and Apartheid, and the current stories of stigmatization of people living with HIV and discrimination against gay and lesbian people — to mention just a few issues that have been and/or still are fuelled by Christian theologies?

In addition to articles about specific religious traditions, other chapters are organized more thematically and explore crucial topics in the study of African religions, such as African rituals (Laura Grillo), religion, the body and the economy (James Cochrane), religion, illness and healing (David Westerlund), religion and development (Steve de Gruchy), religion and politics (Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar), religion and globalisation (Asonzeh Ukah), religion and same-sex relationships (Marc Epprecht), etcetera. Many of these chapters explore new grounds and open up new perspectives for the study of African religions in contemporary contexts. One would think that other issues, such as religion and human rights, religion and violence, and interreligious relations are also topical in Africa, but these are not discussed in dedicated chapters. As far as gender is concerned, the focus is only on women, either in ‘the Church’ (Isabel Phiri), in African feminist theologies (Sarojini Nadar) or in Islam (Penda Mbow). It is not taken into account that gender is about women and men, and the volume does not reflect the emerging scholarly interest in religion and masculinities in Africa.

The companion is organized in three parts: Part I is entitled ‘Methodological Perspectives on African Religions’, Part II is about ‘Interpreting Religious Pluralism’ and Part III is called ‘Religion, Culture and Society’. My major criticism of the volume is that in spite of this clear structure, the arrangement of the individual chapters within this structure is far from clear, especially in part I and II. Part I indeed opens with three chapters that offer methodological perspectives on religions in Africa: phenomenology of religion (James Cox), philosophy of religion (V.Y. Mudimbe and Susan Mbula Kilonzo), and a social-scientific discussion of neo-Protestantism (Jean and John Comaroff). Many other chapters in this section, however, do not specifically discuss methodological issues and disciplinary approaches but are more thematic, such as the chapters about divination (René Devisch), rituals (Grillo), and religion and the environment (Edward Antonio). Furthermore, it is unclear why Meyer’s overview of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is presented in Part I, while Ojo’s overview of the same strands of Christianity is included in Part II. The chapters about African theology (Bongmba) and feminist theologies in Africa (Sarojini Nadar) explicitly discuss methodological issues and represent a specific discipline in the study of religion in Africa, but strangely enough they are not included in Part I but in Part II. An important methodological issue raised in Part I is postcolonial criticism, and I appreciate Musa Dube’s article in which she argues for the decolonization of the study of (and discourse about) African indigenous religion(s). However, postcolonial criticism questions not only the framework in which we study ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ African religions but also Christianity and Islam in Africa (which, interestingly, are argued by other authors in this volume to be also indigenous in Africa, so what does the term ‘indigenous’ mean?). The classifications that are developed, the concepts that are employed, and the questions that are raised in the study of religion in Africa often are informed by Western intellectual traditions and perhaps also by political
agendas, and this calls for a critical postcolonial sensitivity to our scholarly methods, research questions and conceptual frames. In the section about methodological perspectives I would also have liked to find attention being paid to the relationship between different methodological and disciplinary approaches. Both in theology and in cultural anthropology, for example, much research is being done on Christianity in Africa, but there seems to be little communication, discussion and exchange between both fields because scholars in these fields speak different languages, have different conceptual frames and research methods. This volume includes both theological and anthropological perspectives on religion in Africa, and I think this is important because in the secular framework of academia both disciplines are often perceived as conflicting or even exclusive instead of complementary; however, the volume does not help to enable dialogue and critical discussion between both disciplines in their respective scholarly approaches to religion in Africa.

The editor correctly notes that in a volume like this, it is not possible to cover all religious traditions that can be found in Africa. Understandably he focuses on African indigenous/traditional religion(s), Christianity and Islam. However, even when taking into account that not all traditions can be covered, I am critical of some editorial decisions. With regard to Christianity in Africa the editor follows the popular trend to focus almost exclusively on Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. Three full chapters are reserved for a discussion of these forms of Christianity in Africa. Catholic Christianity, on the other hand, according to the index is mentioned once in this book of over 600 pages. This is unjustifiable, given the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is among the most influential players in the socio-political sphere in many African countries, and that Catholicism as a lived religion is among the traditions with the largest numbers of practitioners in Africa. Also the Anglican church, another key player in the religious field, is only referred to one time in this book. The volume reflects, in the words of Paul Kollman, ‘the ongoing tendency to overlook African Christian vitality in mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church.’ Of course, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and movements have demonstrated an enormous growth and vitality on the African continent in recent decades, and indeed they are fascinating objects of study, among others because of their high visibility in the public space. However as Ogbu Kalu comments, the astonishing growth of Pentecostalism in Africa ‘must be understood within the larger perspective that all religious forms are growing,’ which of course is related to the enormous growth of the population on the continent. Christianity in Africa is not completely pentecostalizing, although this impression may arise from the scholarly literature, but it becomes even more diverse. This creates new dynamics and hybridities, with tensions and conflicts as well as alliances, between the various Christian movements and institutions, which deserve more scholarly attention than they currently receive.

As Bongmba writes in his introduction, the idea of this volume has not been to be exhaustive, but rather to be provocative and invite further research, reflection and dialogue. Indeed, I think that this Companion to African Religions is a valuable resource that lays the ground for further critique and future analysis. In this review I have already raised some questions

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and challenges to this thriving field of scholarship, and I realize that it is easy to offer criticism of a volume that, given the nature of the project, can never be comprehensive and satisfy all the interests and wishes of its reviewers and users. This volume is like a colourful palette, showing how fascinatingly diverse religion, and the study of religion, in Africa is. Bongmba has done an excellent job in providing us with such a rich resource. — ADRIAAN VAN KLINKEN, University of Leeds, United Kingdom.