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BOOK REVIEW

Mission: The “labour room” of theology

Knoetze, J. (ed.) (CLF Publishers, 2022), 364 pages, ISBN: 978-1-86804-525-9.

The book is intended for academics, practitioners, and scholars in the field of theology, religion, and mission studies (Knoetze 2022:23). It is, as the title *Mission: The labour room of theology* suggests and explained by Behera (2022:22) that the metaphor of “labour room” – a place where birth is given or a room where work is done – is fitting for the subject field covered by the book. Birth can take place in the most unlikely places such as a stable and a manger; that is how mission gives birth to theology.

The book is intended to give academics, practitioners, and scholars a view on the different contexts in which mission takes place and from where theology is done. The 21 chapters provide reflections from contributors working in the complex context of Africa as well as critical and practical suggestions as to how we should work in this context.

The book offers an ecumenical approach to where mission takes place, how mission is understood within those contexts, and how it is and should be done, in order to be relevant to the present time and context. Building on the aspect of “translating” the gospel in different contexts, Van Der Walt (2022:26) introduces readers to the first section on its translation by Protestant missionaries, arguing for the decolonisation of these narratives and how the gospel became incarnated in the African context. Badenhorst (2022:46) does the same with how mission is done from a Catholic



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perspective, pointing out how the unfortunate alliance of colonial power and missionary endeavours characterised Christianity as part of the European colonial project, with the cultural ethos of the church remaining Eurocentric (2022:59, 60). Openness to the new “intercultural” movement of the Spirit requires deep listening and continual dialogue. The silent years of Jesus before his engagement with mission can be helpful as a directive.

White (2022:62) builds on the idea of the movement of the Spirit “from the margins”, as indicated in the WCC’s *Together Towards Life* document, emphasising the pneumatological dimension of mission, missional grassroots ecclesiology, and an unstructured church-planting approach. Becoming part of this African Pentecostal understanding of the movement of God through the Spirit requires unity, diversity, and tolerance. Knoetze (2022:76) expands the idea of African independence further in his contribution on the role of African missionaries in translating the gospel for their own contexts, and how it is influencing world Christianity at present, as the fastest growing branch. Mpofu (2022:88) engages the Eurocentric approach to Christian mission that has dominated it for so long, arguing for contextualisation, decolonisation, and the reconstruction of mission as ways to rid it from this Eurocentric mould in Africa.

In section two, Meiring (2022:108) addresses the question about whose mission it is and what mission entails. He argues, based on developments towards the *missio Dei*, that the Triune God is the origin and foundation of mission and that the church follows God’s mission through proclamation (kerygma), fellowship (koinonia), service (diakonia), liturgy (leitourgia), and a multifaceted mission. Kritzinger (2022:129) elaborates further on the contextualisation of mission, arguing that the interrelation between text and context (social, economic, and political) should be considered when we do mission, especially with Africa’s unique and diverse challenges.

Kritzinger and Kwiyani (2022:149) explore the constraints that missiology as a discipline faces in the context of theological education in Africa and even its disappearance in some institutions. Missiology should remain a constant reminder of God’s mission as a liberating movement. Within the movements towards our common humanity and being an other-directed movement, not a status symbol, missiology has a place in theological scholarship.

In section three, Van Niekerk (2022:176) argues that urbanisation of Africa turns cities into wild spaces that can become new frontiers in mission. These wild spaces not only produce monsters such as risks to the most vulnerable, unemployment, crime, pollution, housing, and so forth, but it also offers ministering opportunities through art, transport, and networks.

Viewing these challenges from an intergenerational perspective, Beukes (2022:193) emphasises how youth agency can, at present, form the basis of moving youth from their marginal position to the centre point, given the challenges this youthful continent of Africa faces. Mostert (2022:209) explores collaboration and networking as a way in which we can do mission, going beyond denominationalism and dogma towards collaborative efforts to address poverty, recurring pandemics, violent forms of Islam that threaten people’s lives, and the future impact of Christianity.

Engaging the public space in Africa should remind us that it is an open space shared with everybody. Agang (2022:220) argues that this is not a no-go area for God, given the missionary nature of God. To be a mission-centred church in Africa, we will have to let go of the sacred-secular divide. Sukdaven (2022:235) argues that sharing the space with other religions will require dialogue that goes beyond mere communication and debate but rather share the space in hospitality with tolerance and respect. Evangelism and mission remain two sides of the same coin, literally being identical and distinctive, according to Knoetze (2022:248). Broadening the scope of evangelism as incarnational faith-sharing, comprehensive salvation, and the already not-yet-experiences of God’s kingdom, Knoetze encourages mission churches to do self-theologising from the scriptures, while they are sharing other theological insights in humility with one another.

Niemand (2022:261) explains how the *missio Dei* became the foundation of a missional ecclesiology and how the Spirit gathers, empowers, and sends the church that should be incarnational, contextual, and enculturated. He provides two examples that portray how the value of the missional church is expressed, through the Fresh Expressions Movement and the African Initiated Churches. Another element highlighted by Potgieter (2022:277) is how the ethical behaviour of believers can also be regarded as missional. Emphasising how justice and power are distributed in society, she proposes an *ubuntu* ethical framework that can help the church address these issues. The use of digital resources, theological education, and ecological issues forms part of a missional ethics agenda. Knoetze (2022:292) views a missional diaconate as a way of providing a service in the church and the community, based on the triune nature of God as Father (creator and sustainer), the Son (sent by the Father as the incarnation of love and service to humanity and creation), and the Holy Spirit (that continues to serve the broken creation and empowers the believers for service). In this way, the church becomes a window of the Kingdom. Bowers Du Toit (2022:301) expands the service to how the church addresses issues of poverty and injustice and how a decolonised and holistic approach to development can provide us with a theological approach to church and development.

Building on the hints from previous contributors such as Kritzinger and Kwiyani (2022:149) on the importance of contextualisation and relevance in theological education, Knoetze and Mawerenga (2022:215) argue for the proper positioning of mission as theological discourse in curricula, proposing that it should help the formation of missional congregations in Africa that have a missional focus and employ a missional hermeneutic. There are numerous challenges of the African context, as pointed out by other contributors, thus emphasising the need for a missional spirituality, evangelism, discipleship, and public theology. Lombaard (2022:330) further explores the presence of religion in public life and argues that the public is inescapably religious. Given the integrated nature of the world, Africa has as much to give and to receive from the rest of the world. Lombaard (2022:341) encourages a mission of the mind to correct our misunderstanding of public life and to re-conceptualise what public involvement means for Christianity.

Part of changing the mind is to get an ecological vision that requires an ecological conversion, according to Conradie (2022:344). We should first have to accept earth-keeping as part of mission, that such a conversation is not restricted to Christianity, and that it forms part of interreligious dialogue and engagement, involving both ecological justice and conservation. We need an ecumenical consensus on these issues. Outlining the complexity of having a missional theology that is associated with earth-keeping, Conradie proposes that the ecological destruction of Christian mission with its colonial legacies should first be addressed, before a conversation between mission and ecology can be meaningful.

CONCLUSION

After a somewhat broad overview of the main ideas and themes emanating from the various contributors, the African context, with its deep colonial past and its persisting legacies, cannot be discussed separate from its relationship with Christian mission. Knoetze and his fellow authors delve deep into the denominational and ecumenical roots and developments of the “labour room” of theology, presenting challenges and opportunities to serve the *missio Dei* nowadays in the African context.

Evident from these contributions is how it affects Christianity at a personal and communal level, calling for intersectional, decolonial, intergenerational, and interdisciplinarian approaches to understand mission in, what Lombaard calls, the integrated world with its internal and external interaction, co-textuality, and contextuality. A call for conversion, a change of minds personally and publicly, is needed to have missional impact. As Knoetze rightly concludes,

it is beneficial to have all these different voices, in order to address the multidimensional challenges that confront mission studies, making the volume authentic.

The book *Mission as the “labour room” of theology* is one of the most comprehensive textbooks in theology, written in recent times in South Africa. It is an up-to-date scholarly work, written to introduce any first reader in mission studies to the missional basis of the Bible, the context in which the Bible is translated to the context of the readers, the socio-political, economic, and demographic factors that have an impact on the inculturation and contextualisation of the gospel message, how it developed in history, how it impacts on local contexts, and its relevance for the future of mission.

As chapters were allocated for certain key areas, although gender issues are mentioned, maybe a chapter on issues relating to it such as LGBTQIA+ and inclusion of women in ministry and leadership could also receive a space such as the ecological and intergenerational. The chapter on interreligious dialogue and co-existence is welcome and more engagement with it, especially to find common answers for societal transformation, could also be helpful. The growing xenophobia and Afrophobia, especially in the (South) African context, should also be given attention, maybe for another volume. Overall, the book is insightful, informative, and a must read for beginners and seasoned readers, practitioners, and simply “sent” ones who adhere to the call of the *missio Dei* to continue God’s mission in “bold humility.”