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## BOOK REVIEW

### *New frontiers in contemporary missiology: Southern African perspectives*

Mbaya, H. (Ed.), (UJ Press, 2024), pp. 128, ISBN  
978-1-7764896-3-3

The book is intended for those involved in the field of missiology, whether academics or practitioners. It consists of six chapters written by scholars in the field of missiology. The issues covered in the book range from African identities, gender, human sexuality, prophecy, prosperity, to health (Mbaya, 2024: iii). The authors of the respective chapters write from South African perspectives and are from diverse ecclesial contexts, a truly ecumenical book.

Chapter 1, entitled “African identity, personhood, and missional innovation”, is written by John Klaasen, who highlights an African notion of personhood in African anthropology, using it as a theological concept that provides an identity that has implications for missional transformation. Klaasen (2024:3) finds a correlation between an African anthropological and theological model of personhood that sets aside European missiological approaches to Africa, in favour of a dialogical approach to mission that is self-critical. Such a model is innovative. Klaasen (2024: 11) elaborates at length on the shift in an understanding of development in the world ecumenical movement and how it relates to diakonia, showcasing how the church, as a grassroots movement, can be innovative to address poverty and social responsibility.

In chapter 2, entitled “Betwixt Jesus and ancestors? Christianity in Southern Africa”, Henry Mbaya (2024: 23) explores the relationship between Jesus and ancestors in African cultures, spirituality, and Christian practices. He examines the paradoxical nature of the Hebrew traditions with regard to ancestors, and proposes the cosmological and Christological views on ancestral veneration. Proceeding from Klaasen, who argues for an African identity, Mbaya (2024: 24) argues that, unless the church’s African culture, values and practices are taken seriously, the church will remain foreign to the African context. After surveying some important African beliefs and practices (life after death, veneration of ancestors, the unity of life, and the law of harmony), Mbaya (2024: 39) concludes that the veneration of ancestors is practised and tolerated in some Christian traditions and rejected in others. This implies that this practice is important for an African spirituality. Engagement thereof in different traditions implies cross-cultural mission. Part of such an African spirituality is the significance of continuity of life and communality, reciprocity and mutual interdependence. A correlational relationship between Jesus and ancestors implies that ancestors are revered but not worshipped.

In chapter 3, entitled “Whose *Umntu* anyway? *Ubuntu* in relation to gender and human dignity: Missiological implications”, Penxa-Matholeni (2024: 47) uses indigenous storytelling as a framework and tool that can collect, preserve, analyse, and disseminate information, that testifies to the richness of diverse cultures and contexts. *Umntu* implies the interconnectedness of personal history, cultural heritage, and communal identity in the African context. *Umntu*, an essential aspect of *ubuntu*, embodies interconnectedness, human dignity, local wisdom, and so on. African rituals display all these and embody their ways of knowing and being. Penxa-Matholeni (2024: 51, 58) finds in the term “*endleleni*” a metaphorical space for growth and mutual understanding between individuals that moves beyond gender binaries, and a place for collective transformation that embraces risk and vulnerability. A pathway is created for individuals and community to migrate and challenge normativity, the possibility to transcend, and redefine oneself and one’s destinations.

Human sexuality, already implied in Penxa-Matholeni’s chapter, is taken up by Isabel Apawo Phiri in Chapter 4 entitled, “Conversations on the pilgrim way on matters of human sexuality: African women’s missiological perspectives”. Phiri further explores the concept of a “migratory journey” and “safe spaces”, first, through the eyes of early and modern missionaries who framed African sexuality initially as unacceptable, especially its initiation ceremonies. Later in postcolonial times through enculturation and indigenisation, African culture and religion were recognised as important for selfhood and identity, but still with a narrow view that sex is only for procreation purposes. With the help of intersectional viewpoints from African women theologians, human sexuality

was more broadly defined. It was progressive and foregrounds gender justice. The ecumenical movement, through its framework of the *Pilgrimage of justice and peace*, urged churches to create missiological and practical spaces that are safe for all on this journey together. Participating in the journey towards life places controversial issues within a safe space of love and mutual respect. The agency of people from the margins is recognised, and all forms of discrimination are rejected. A broad-based approach to human sexuality creates a safe space where dialogue is possible, with careful listening and discernment.

Jerry Pillay and Daniel Oregun explore the prophetic actions of African prophetic healers in Chapter 5 entitled “Prophets and Prosperity: African Perspectives on Christian Mission”. Pursuing an ongoing theme in the book on human dignity, personhood, and African identity, Pillay and Oregun (2024: 88) derive, from the incarnational model of Christ, an imperative for upholding, affirming, and celebrating it. One can be African and Christian, but it requires sober reflection and a kenotic process of self-emptying and relearning. Observing the way in which African prophet leaders use prophecy as a business tool to make money from followers, Pillay and Oregun (2024: 89) see no service to humanity or that God be glorified through their practices. The triggers of these activities are poverty, economic crisis, injustice, commercialising of miracles, poor health services, and spiritual circumstances. These imply that prophets receive material gain, with their healing activities working negatively on public health and safety. Pillay and Oregun (2024: 99) view these activities as far removed from the saving of souls (evangelism), service (diaconal), worship (liturgical), transformation of society, and humanisation. Some of the considerations offered for mission by Pillay and Oregun (2024: 102) range from a fresh understanding of the task of God’s mission (*missio Dei*); the need for prophetic ministry that is selfless after the example of Christ and Word-based; the need for collaboration between different stakeholders, and accountability and responsibility by all involved in mission activity that affirms human dignity and an African identity.

In the final Chapter 6, entitled “The impact of COVID-19 on liturgical worship: The case of the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe”, Tabona Shoko reflects on the impact of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. Shoko (2024: 109) observes that the pandemic affected human dignity and African identity. It also turned the church as a place of healing into a “contagious place”, thus also affecting liturgical practices. The COVID-19 pandemic violated people’s human rights through restrictive government measures, suspension of gatherings, virtual services, and the digital divide, face masks, and quarantine. Church events (Easter), sacraments (holy communion), rituals (home fellowship, music and dance, funerals) were all affected. In the section on social, economic and

medical matters, Shoko (2024: 121) tends to defend the loss of power and dominance of men during the pandemic, while he expresses concern over the way in which vulnerable groups such as the poor, the elderly, persons with disability, youth, and indigenous people were affected. Deterioration of the financial situation in society also affected the income of the church (Lutheran), and the church shifted towards appreciating traditional medicine to save people. Some of the benefits for the church were the call for enculturation of the gospel in the African context and a shift to technological advancement and innovation. Shoko (2024: 126) argues that the pandemic not only disrupted the church but it also focused on the role of the church to restore human dignity and identity, by recognising vulnerability, interconnectedness, and cultivating self-respect.

## CONCLUSION

The book is a must-read for those who are serious about a “contemporary missiology” that takes the African context seriously. In their respective chapters, the authors build on the interrelatedness of human dignity and identity, personhood and the missional role of the church in society. All of them recognise the legacies of missionary Christianity on current frontiers in missiology, but find that, within African culture, values and religion, as well as rituals are important elements to deal with current challenges.

A Foreword/Introduction could be helpful to draw the thread running through the chapters together, but this becomes clearer as one reads all the chapters. The book is wrestling with the post-colonial/decolonial issues presented to the field of missiology and come up with interesting ideas as to how the voices from the local context (African) can be prioritised. It also focuses on intersectional questions, integrating human sexuality and gender with cultural and socio-economic realities that affect missional transformation. The authors also wrestle with the influence/impact of the ecumenical movement on these new/old frontiers and combine the past, the present and the future seamlessly in tackling the current challenges.

Some topics such as the relationship between culture and patriarchy need to be engaged further because not all women share the space or regard it as creative and safe. The final chapter seems rather late in the aftermath of COVID-19, but it deals in part with digitalisation and digital justice, a concern that is becoming increasingly crucial in ecumenical conversations. The book is a welcome addition to the growing conversation about the new frontiers in missiology. Both academics and practitioners working and thinking together in theology will appreciate this book.