

# Book Review

Resane, K.T. 2020. *South African Christian experiences: From colonialism to democracy*. Bloemfontein: SunBonani Scholar. 330 pages. ISBN (PDF): ISBN-13 (15) 9781928424994; eISBN: 9781928424994; ISBN (paperback): ISBN-13 (15) 9781928424987.

**Maria Frahm-Arp**  
**mariafa@uj.ac.za**

This book gives a sweeping overview of Christianities in South Africa from the first missionary movements up to the most contemporary forms of prophetic Pentecostalism. Throughout the book, Resane asks why the church is not doing more to bring about full and true liberation from poverty, corruption, oppression, and abuse, by preaching a true gospel of liberation, not grounded in personal and political agendas.

One of the strengths of this book is that it acknowledges and explores the different Christianities that have emerged in South Africa. Resane begins his history of Christianities in South Africa by looking at how the various language and cultural groups engaged with different missionaries that brought the gospel to them. This is a refreshing view of this history, as it has so often been written, focusing on the different missionary groups and their experiences. Resane explores how the different language groups experienced Christianity and how this has laid the foundation for the different expectations and experiences of Christianity that various people in South Africa have had.

Resane highlights that some missionaries spoke out against the colonial powers, but on the whole the early mainline churches were oppressive of all non-white people. Unfortunately, the book does not engage with the rich body of literature on the emergence of churches and different forms of Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This might be in part because the clear argument of the book is that, to a large extent, Christianity in South Africa, as

presented by the mainline churches, was an oppressive institution in which the liberative message of the gospel was lost.

Having laid this ground, Resane tackles the difficult questions of the Christ, the ancestors, witchcraft, Christianity as a white man's religion and the relationship of black South Africans with Christianity during the colonial period, the apartheid years, and finally the poverty-stricken post-apartheid era in South Africa. He argues that the God presented to black South Africans by missions and white Christian leaders was and to some degree still is at odds with the real God of the Bible – the God of liberation, healing, and hope. He shows how, through the last two centuries in South Africa, black Christian leaders and witchdoctors were and are not at odds with each other in the lived realities of black South Africans, but both are rather consulted as people who sought healing, prosperity, personal agency, liberation, and protection. Resane argues that this was necessary because '[t]he God of the white people is cruel, merciless, and lacks a sense of empathy and sympathy with the African masses. He is the God who sees "white" only, not "black"' (Resane 2020:52).

Through his detailed engagement with the questions that truly concerned the majority of people living in South Africa, he shows how black African Christians have begun to liberate the true gospel and real meaning of the Bible and God from the broken and destructive message of the white Christians. As theologians begin to understand the importance of African culture and allow African culture to be 'viewed as a historical continuation into Christianity rather than as its opponent' (Resane 2020:53), he argues that true healing is possible. Resane shows how this has been made possible when indigenous African Initiated Churches that are charismatic and preach the true gospel of hope from the Word that is life giving, are established.

One of the important contributions of this book is the overview of the history of African Independent/Initiated Churches, Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Movement, Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity, and the rise of prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa. Resane gives a sweeping overview of all these movements and churches and forms of Christianity in South Africa, showing how and why they emerged and how they have been working to establish a more African centered form of Christianity that, to a large extent, offers a gospel of hope, liberation, equality, and healing in which the African culture and thought are valued.

Subsequently he discusses the different types of theologies, such as liberation theology, black theology, African theology, and feminist theology that have shaped the theology in South Africa. This section would have been even stronger if the author had engaged in more detail with the research that has already been done on these different movements, churches, and theologies. The engagement on the Sephiri, for example, would have been so much stronger if it had been grounded in actual research that had been done on the movement, rather than on what the author seems anecdotally to know about it.

Throughout many sections of the book, the author mostly talks about African people as if they are a homogeneous group, and he speaks continually from his own perspective as a black African. While this in itself is not a problem, it becomes problematic when the author continually tells the reader what all black South Africans experience without acknowledging the different experiences that black South Africans have according to class, gender, education, employment, and geographic location, particularly in the post-apartheid era.

The lack of grounding in social research is most noticeable when Resane talks about the contemporary church and its challenges, particularly in its relationship to young people. Here the author makes many sweeping statements about how young black people in South Africa experience Christianity, and claims that many of the social ills of the country exist because young people do not learn about Christianity at school. Despite this weakness, the last section of the book is an important call for the church to take up its prophetic mission to help South Africans become liberated from poverty, corruption, fear, crime, and hopelessness.

Throughout the book, we find a call to preach the true gospel, grounded in African values and aligned with the African culture. This, Resane argues, will be the way in which the churches in all their forms in South Africa will be able to challenge the current government and bring about true economic, social, and political liberation for all people. Resane suggests that the churches should pick up their prophetic mantle and call for change through a theology of dialogue, reconciliation, and transformation. He boldly shows how, if the churches in South Africa were to unite under these forms of liberation theologies, they would be able to liberate South Africans and speak out against corruption, violence, poverty, and abuse. Then a new dawn would break in South Africa and the true gospel of healing, hope, liber-

*Maria Frahm-Arp*

ation, freedom, and prosperity would become a lived reality for all the people living in South Africa.

Prof Maria Frahm-Arp  
Department of Religion Studies  
University of Johannesburg  
Johannesburg  
[mariafa@uj.ac.za](mailto:mariafa@uj.ac.za)