

Book Review

Reviewer

Alapa Odugbo

Affiliation

Emory University, Department of Religion, Atlanta, USA

ORCID link

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4434-2641>

Correspondence to

Alapa Odugbo

E-mail

alapa.odugbo@emory.edu

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- Supplementary material

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Chéry, T.M. (2023) *Kingdom come: The politics of faith and freedom in segregationist South Africa and beyond*. Durham: Duke University Press. 264 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478024507>. ISBN 978-1-4780-2450-7 (electronic).

In this book, Tshepo Chéry delivers a powerful intervention in African religious historiography and postcolonial political thought. With remarkable clarity and archival depth, she chronicles how Christian theology and African spirituality converged in South Africa's long and complex history of racial segregation, nationalism, and liberation. Focusing on the pre-apartheid period through to the emergence of the anti-apartheid movement, she foregrounds the often-overlooked role of Black South African clergy who, long before formal resistance efforts, engaged in theological and political struggles for freedom.

Chéry's work is most compelling in its insistence that Christian belief was not merely a colonial imposition but also a medium through which African subjects reimaged spiritual and political autonomy. By centering the voices and actions of African Initiated Churches (AICs) and clergy, including early figures like Desmond Tutu, this book reframes the theological contours of South African nationalism. These religious actors did not simply internalize Western Christianity; they radically indigenized it, deploying it as a tool for resistance, solidarity, and redefinition of identity.

The book's historical sweep is wide-ranging. From the British seizure of the Cape Colony in 1806 and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, to the formation of the Union of South Africa and the rigid racial taxonomies that followed, Chéry outlines how political, theological, and racial regimes interlocked to marginalize African communities. Particularly illuminating is the analysis of 'Ethiopianism', a pan-African religious movement through which Africans seceded from European-run churches to form their own ecclesiastical spaces rooted in African theological visions. These spaces became not only sites of worship but also incubators of anti-colonial thought.

What sets this book apart is its rigorous challenge to the secular bias that often governs narratives of liberation in Africa. Chéry refuses to sideline religion as merely a reflection of deeper economic or political currents. Instead, she treats theology as a generative field of political meaning in its own right – a site where African actors crafted moral vocabularies of justice, freedom, and dignity. This is

specifically evident in her treatment of sermon archives and ecclesiastical debates, where spiritual idioms were inseparable from anti-colonial critique. Her work thereby expands the methodological possibilities for African religious historiography, encouraging scholars to take seriously the political capacities of faith not as a derivative domain, but as a primary engine of historical transformation.

Chéry's engagement with gender also warrants close attention. Although not the central analytic of the book, the roles of African women in religious and political spaces emerge with force and clarity. She carefully documents how women in AICs, often overlooked by both nationalist and ecclesiastical histories, acted as prophets, organizers, and theologians in their own right. These women not only animated spiritual life within their communities but also shaped visions of liberation that were attentive to familial, bodily, and communal forms of care. In highlighting these contributions, Chéry gestures toward a feminist theology rooted in African experiences – one that unsettles patriarchal assumptions embedded in both colonial and postcolonial religious institutions.

Finally, this book invites a rethinking of temporality in liberation histories. Rather than framing resistance as something that has suddenly erupted in the mid-20th century, Chéry traces a *longue durée* of spiritual insurgency that predates formal anti-apartheid politics. This move is historiographically significant: It pushes against teleological narratives that privilege secular nationalism as the inevitable endpoint of African political development. By recovering the theological preconditions of freedom, Chéry reveals how African religious actors articulated political futures long before they were legible to the state or to global observers. In doing so, this book not only reframes the past; it also opens new horizons for understanding the entanglement of faith and freedom in the present.

Chéry is at her strongest when exploring the transnational religious currents between South Africa and the African American diaspora. She skillfully traces how South African nationalists drew upon Black American theologies of freedom to articulate their own aspirations, forming transatlantic religious solidarities that unsettled imperial and white supremacist orthodoxies. This attention to global Black Christian networks offers a rich contribution to the field of diasporic religious studies and challenges prevailing geographic delimitations of African theology.

Yet the book is not merely a celebration of religious agency; it is also a critical examination of the contradictions within these movements. Chéry probes the racial hierarchies that persisted even within African Christian communities, primarily through the racialized category of 'colored', a classification historically granted social and political privileges in contrast to Black Africans. In doing so, she moves beyond simplistic binaries of Black and White, offering a more nuanced view of race, identity, and power within South African Christianity.

The book raises several vital and timely questions for scholars of religion, postcolonial studies, and African history: How do local spiritual imaginaries confront and reshape imperial theologies? In which ways do religious communities contribute to the construction of political consciousness before formal political movements take root? What does it mean to study African Christianity on its own terms, rather than as a derivative of European theological history? Perhaps most crucially, How might the South African religious experience reshape contemporary global conversations about faith, freedom, and belonging?

Methodologically, Chéry's work is anchored in a rich multi-method approach that blends historical analysis, textual interpretation, and a compelling autoethnographic vignette that opens the book. This personal framing underscores the stakes of the inquiry, as she situates herself within the legacy of the struggles she documents. The result is not just an academic monograph but a deeply engaged and emotionally resonant narrative that bridges the personal, the theological, and the political. Indeed, this book is a landmark contribution that reorients the study of religion in South Africa and broadens the conceptual landscape of African and African diasporic theologies. Chéry demonstrates that understanding the modern history of South Africa and the global Black struggle for freedom requires attending to the sacred as a site of political imagination and resistance. This book is an essential read for scholars studying African studies, religious history, and postcolonial politics.