

Book Review

Kroesbergen, H. 2019. *The language of faith in Southern Africa: Spirit world, power, community, holism*. HTS Religion and Society Series, Vol. 6. AOSIS: Cape Town. 378 pages. ISBN 978-1-928396-94-9.

Mookgo S. Kgatle
kgatls@unisa.ac.za

This book is an interdisciplinary study, bringing together the disciplines of systematic theology, anthropology, and philosophy in interpreting the language of faith in Southern Africa. The main argument in the book is that even with careful consideration, scholars sometimes misunderstand the language of faith in Africa and end up falling into the trap of interpreting African religious experiences as strange. The book moves beyond two main schools in interpreting the language of faith. The first one belongs to critical realists who embrace the metaphorical approach in interpreting the spirit world. The second one belongs to postmodernists who embrace a realistic approach to African life and experiences. Kroesbergen argues that these two schools of interpretation are mistaken in connecting the African experiences to the 'descriptions of the world'. He uses African theology, anthropology, his experiences in Africa, and the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language to point out that the language of faith in Africa is not as strange as many scholars from the Euro-American contexts perceive it to be.

When proper attention is given to the concepts of the spirit world, power, community, and holism, it will become obvious that the language of faith in Africa is not an eccentric one. First, the spirit world is an important entity in religious spaces for African Traditional Religions (ATR), African Initiated Churches, and in various streams of Pentecostalism in Africa. An African in these religious spaces is aware that, in order to maintain anything in the physical, there is a need to influence the spirit world. This is because

‘[p]eople in Africa believe in a “mystical causality” – the spirit world is seen as the cause for everything that takes place’ (Kroesbergen 2019:22). Consequently, believers in Pentecostal circles would visit a prophet in the same way that an African would visit the diviner in ATR. The difference is that a prophet in Pentecostalism uses the power of the Holy Spirit to confront the spirit world while a diviner uses other powers to confront the same spirit world. Therefore, for the African in the African context, the spirit world exists and is real, as opposed to other contexts where it is viewed as superstitious.

Second, the concept of power also plays an important role in African religious spaces. In Pentecostalism, it is very common to refer to pastors and prophets as ‘powerful men or women of God’. This accolade is not given because of one’s ability to speak well or teach well in a church setting, but because of an ability to demonstrate the power of God in casting out demons, healing the sick, and at times, claims of raising the dead. Therefore, while the Euro-American context interprets religion as ‘a system of ideas and beliefs’ (Kroesbergen 2019:124), the African context interprets it as a space where power is seen to be working and manifesting among believers or adherents of religion. This power among Neo-Pentecostals in Africa, specifically New Prophetic Churches, is transferred to prophetic objects in the form of anointing oil, holy water, anointed calendars, and so forth. In buying them, the followers are accessing the very power of the man or woman of God.

Third, in Africa, as opposed to the individualized life of the Euro-American contexts, the communal life is important among community members in what is commonly known as Ubuntu. The concept of Ubuntu applies to churches and congregations where people see a need to come together and have fellowship. However, within neo-Pentecostal circles there is a growing trend of using the concepts of ‘man or woman of God’, and ‘international ministries’ as opposed to churches and congregations. These appellations change the way in which we understand the concept of Ubuntu because ‘Ministries International are not social institutions where someone belongs to a group, but everyone is invited to try out what works for them’ (Kroesbergen 2019:227). In addition, the focus is now on the pastor as ‘man or woman of God’, not necessarily on the community of believers. However, instead of forcing these men and women of God back to churches and congregations, we should rather ‘enable and encourage a dialogue of faith within this wide band of pilgrims’ (Kroesbergen 2019:277).

Finally, Africans view salvation as holistic, encompassing the body, the soul, and spirit in what others would call a ‘multi-faceted salvation’. Thus, to be saved does not only refer to redemption from sins or going to heaven, it also means the attainment of material things. This causes salvation and material blessings to be mutually inclusive. Hence, there is a strong emphasis among Neo-Pentecostals in Africa on the prosperity gospel of health and wealth – of ‘claim it to receive it’. While an outsider might perceive the prosperity gospel as very materialistic, the insider has a way of coping to their ‘dire circumstances’ when listening to such a gospel (Kroesbergen 2019:321).

Thus, through his new interpretation of the spirit world, power, community, and holism, Kroesbergen makes an important contribution in understanding the language of faith in Southern Africa and elsewhere in Africa. This comes at a time when scholars who are interested in African Theology are struggling to understand, conceptualize, and present the religious practices in Africa without bias. The book is significant, given the serious shift in the growth of Christian faith from the global north to the global south. While being written from a Southern African context with African theologians as primary target, the wider audience interested in the three fields of systematic theology, anthropology, and philosophy will find the book interesting and a worthwhile read.

Prof Mookgo Solomon Kgatle
Department of Spirituality, Church History and Missiology
University of South Africa
Pretoria
kgatls@unisa.ac.za