

BOOK REVIEWS

Christianity in a New Key: New Voices and Vistas Through Intercontinental Communication By Frans J. Verstraelen. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, xv, 322 pp., ISBN 0-86922-648-7, Z\$80,50.

In his new book Professor Verstraelen speaks of Christianity with many centres. In so doing he illustrates one of the specific questions, which a World religion (one that has transcended its traditional ethnic, cultural and linguistic context and has become a global religious movement) poses to Religious Studies.

Take the study of Islam for example. The attempts by Orientalists to identify the Arabic roots of that World religion have to be supplemented by specific studies of Islam in Africa or Europe, if we want to achieve a relevant understanding of what Islam is today. The same holds true for Christianity, though the geographical terms of reference differ. At the University of Zimbabwe, therefore, Christianity and Islam in Africa is taught parallel to courses on Christianity and Islamic History and Thought in their respective historical contexts.

In the study of Christianity in Zimbabwe we are accustomed to a distinction between Mission and Independent Christianity. Mission Christianity is seen to maintain its links to and, perhaps, dependency on its Northern centre. Independent forms of Christianity on the other hand are said to be authentic African attempts to appropriate and articulate the Christian understanding of Life in its fullness.

Like any distinction this, too, can be disputed. If I understand Professor Verstraelen correctly, his plea for a Christianity with many centres contains a more relevant alternative. In institutional terms centres such as the Vatican in Rome, the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva or the US Centre for World Mission in Pasadena are in the North. At the level of spirituality and theological reflection, however, the initiative has been taken over by the Church — i.e. both Mission and Independent Christianity — in the South, where new central themes and new institutional centres evolve.

Professor Verstraelen's particular scholarly contribution in his new book is his energetic attempt to identify and formulate these new central themes in global Christianity. He speaks of the concern for human and societal transformation in Latin America and the search for relevant spirituality in a multi-religious Asian context. He sees that African Christians contribute to the World Church their profound awareness of the Wholeness of Life. So far Professor Verstraelen concurs with a consensus in contemporary studies in Third World Christianity. His most original contribution is his analysis of the distinct environmental theology from within the Church in Oceania. I miss, though, references to John Garrett's substantial three-volume *Church History of Oceania*.

But this study does not limit itself to the level of descriptive analysis. Professor Verstraelen's main concern is to facilitate what he calls 'Global Intercommunion through Intercontinental Communication'.

Christianity in a New Key — or in New Keys? — raises many intriguing questions. One is where the new and more aggressive North American missions, which Paul Gifford studied some years ago, fit into this vision of a global Christianity with many centres. Another is more profound and has to do with hermeneutics. How are these new centres to be identified?

The classical issue of the relation of 'a portion of a text' to 'the text as a whole' returns in any attempt to define what are characteristic features of Christianity — or Islam for that matter — within as well as outside their traditional centres. Handling this issue Professor Verstraelen moves in the direction of defining main themes or core-motifs in different contexts, which can enrich each other in an exchange across continental and contextual boundaries. This is a loaded proposition and the purpose of the author had been better served if he had devoted greater attention to this issue of hermeneutics. Instead he moves fast on to resources and techniques for the kind of intercontinental communication which he pleads for.

The matter of interpretation is not just an internal academic issue. It has profound pedagogical implications. When we know what are representative theological concerns in different religious and social environments — and how to get access to them! — it is easier to convey these concerns in another context. Professor Verstraelen shares, of course, this pedagogical concern, as the book is presented as a handbook for 'anyone interested in the significance of Christianity in our world today and tomorrow'. Hopefully the reader will not go astray in the rich collection of loaded quotes and theological variations.

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The Mining Sector in Southern Africa Edited by Paul Jordan. Harare, SAPES Trust, 1994, 117 pp, ISBN 1-77905-006-2, Z\$70.

This book comprises a collection of papers presented at a workshop on 'Prospects of the Mining Sector in SADCC' held in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1991. It provides a detailed and analytical assessment of the past and present importance of the mining sector in the region and highlights the factors that have negatively affected its performance.

The book proposes that, in the light of the recent demise of apartheid and the birth of the new democratic South Africa, Southern African countries should devise appropriate strategies to make the region's mining