

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Zimbabwean Realities and Christian Responses**, By Frans J. Verstraelen, Gweru, Mambo Press, 1998, 152pp, ISBN 0-869-227-297.

Christian missionaries have a long history in Zimbabwe, some of them, such as Gonalo da Silveira and Robert Moffat, having lived and worked in the country long before the country became a British colony in 1890. Colonial occupation opened the door for greater missionary involvement in the life and society of the indigenous people of the country. Indeed, throughout the colonial period to 1980, Christian missionaries established numerous mission stations and schools and converted thousands of Africans to Christianity. For much of this period, the major denominations represented in the country were the well-known traditional ones, such as the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Methodists, among others.

In the past two decades, however, Zimbabwe has seen an explosion of churches or denominations going under a confusing variety of names, such as the New Life Centre, the Faith World Ministries, the Rhema Church, the House of Prayer Ministries, and the King's Church, among many others. Indeed, according to Verstraelen, there were no less than 220 different denominations in the country by the mid-1980s, clustered in four main groupings under the Zimbabwe Christian Council (ZCC), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), and what Verstraelen refers to as the New Religious Movements (NRMs). It is this confusing proliferation of Christian churches that *Zimbabwean Realities and Christian Responses* analyses and documents in its eight chapters, which are grouped in three parts.

Chapter 1, entitled "Diversity of the Christian Presence" lays the foundation for the book's subsequent documentation and analysis of Christian Churches in Zimbabwe by providing a detailed audit of the varieties of Christian churches in the country and the umbrella organisations which represent them. Among the umbrella organisations are the ZCC, ZCBC, EFZ, and NRMs. The ZCC, the biggest of the groupings, boasts a membership of twenty churches, "seventeen of which belong to Protestant 'established' churches", while three belong to "African Independent Churches". In its turn, the ZCBC, an all-Catholic organisation, comprises member groups that represent the diverse constituencies of the Catholic Church, such as the Zimbabwean Association of Diocesan Clergy, the National Council of Priests, the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Men, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Women. Meanwhile, the EFZ, "a fellowship of church-related organisations and

individuals . . . of evangelical persuasion", has a total membership of 86 churches and groups, including the Assemblies of God, Africa, Brethren in Christ Church, United Apostolic Faith Church, Living Bible International, and Youth with a Mission, Zimbabwe, among others.

Lastly, mostly of American origin and espousing a fundamentalist religious theology and openly antagonistic to older established churches, NRMs exploded on the Zimbabwean religious scene since the early 1980s. They include the Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, World Vision International, Rhema Bible Church, also known as "Hearing the Word" church, and the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International. While, sometimes, African Independent Churches are classified under the NRMs category, Verstraelen points out that the main difference between the two is that African Independent Churches "sprouted through African initiative", while the "New Movements have been imported from abroad with a pre-packaged mission and message". Moreover, as Verstraelen points out, these New Movements, "with their strong foreign orientation and foreign control, represent a rather neo-colonial type of mission which seems to be anachronistic in the post-Independence era in Africa", yet paradoxically, they seem to appeal to "a good number of people who feel insecure in the context of socio-economic and cultural changes taking place in the country".

Chapter 2 and 3 explore the visions and programmes of the various Christian groups and their inter-group relationships, respectively, while Chapter 4 analyses how Christian Churches have addressed "the issue of [the Zimbabwean people's] socio-economic context and . . . culture" in the context of a deteriorating economic environment in the 1990s, the growing controversy over the issue of homosexuality in Zimbabwean society, the role of African traditional religion and religious practices, witchcraft, and sexuality, marriage and the family.

Part II, containing Chapter 5, focuses on "Church-State Relations in Pre- and Post-Independent Zimbabwe", beginning with an in-depth analysis of the tensions between Church and State in Africa, followed by an examination of "some general principles and practices of Church involvement in politics", and concluding with a description and evaluation of "Church-State relations in Zimbabwe, from historical and missio-theological points of view". The Chapter ends with a very insightful observation that, in Zimbabwe, Churches have not always lived up to their ideals, which are "to exercise, when needed, a prophetic mission of denouncing policies of injustices supported by governments and standing up for the poor or marginalised in society, even at the risk of being persecuted". In Zimbabwe, past and present, "instead of taking a prophetic stance, . . . several church leaders and/or church members chose to remain neutral, or were co-opted, or accepted unworthy compromises,

or tried to mediate between 'good and evil' when they should have taken sides".

Under the heading "Missio-theological Reflections from Zimbabwe", Part III examines three issues in three separate chapters as follows: Chapter 6 discusses how Africans in general and Zimbabweans in particular have appropriated and interpreted the Bible to speak to their everyday lives and their society. Chapter 7 focuses on questions of socio-economic justice, particularly with respect to the land question in the context of traditional and Christian mores and concerns for the environment, while Chapter 8 analyses "how religious studies are conducted in the major institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe", focusing particularly on dissertations and theses produced in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy in recent years and their relevance to Zimbabwean society. Finally, in the "Postscript", which concludes the study, Verstraelen traces recent developments in Zimbabwe's socio-political experience and celebrates the rise and growth of civic society movements and organisations, and the increasing engagement of the churches in civil rights and justice issues. It concludes with the encouraging message that:

There are also joys and hopes as regards people and churches in Zimbabwe, notwithstanding the problems and obstacles hindering the church's effective response to these problems. But problems can be solved and obstacles removed (p. 136).

At this point in Zimbabwe's history when the country is faced with seemingly insurmountable political, economic, and social problems, this is a timely message of hope which suggests that the traditional Zimbabwean people's good sense will prevail so that all the people in the country will live in harmony and prosperity.

*Zimbabwean Realities and Christian Responses* is an insightful, informative, and well-researched book which contains a wealth of information on Christian churches in Zimbabwe, their programmes and missions, the historical, political, and cultural context in which they work and the constraints under which they operate. It is highly recommended to all members of various Christian churches in Zimbabwe, students of Zimbabwe's religious, political, and cultural history and policymakers.

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