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Jesse A. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan: Civil War, Migration, and the Rise of Dinka Anglicanism*. Baylor University Press, 2018, 259 pp. ISBN: 9781481309295.

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Using an extensive fieldwork spanning across several countries and complemented by archival research work, this book examines the contours of religious change amongst the Dinkas of South Sudan amidst a civil war. It weaves together a captivating story of the continuities and ruptures in the development of a home-grown Anglicanism in South Sudan with a focus on the 1980s and 1990s. It offers a rich narrative of how local agency was appropriated by Dinkas as they sought for purpose and a new identity in Christianity in the context of a civil war. The key thesis of the work is to trace religious change among the Dinka. It unravels the puzzle of how the Dinka embraced Christianity (Anglicanism) in order to cope with realities of civil war. This is contrasted with a lukewarm period of conversion in colonial times (p.2). The book contrasts the embrace and dynamics of conversion prior to the second civil war.

The book offers a lucid analysis of how the Dinka mediated their traditional religious practices to embrace Christianity in varied measures. For instance, they retained their prophets amidst their religious change (p.6). It provides an account of how a grassroots religious movement was established among the Dinka as a spiritual response to the civil war. The writer delves into an interesting argument of why this movement which had all the possibilities of growing to its own independence still stuck to its mission heritage (p.220). The reference to this religious change is linked to the agency of young men and women.

The central theme of religious change among the Dinka is debated in several contexts. These include: civil war, migration and displacement, and adaptability of local contexts. The book, in appropriating local agency, takes a prophetic theme with references to such scriptures as Isaiah 18, but also the activities of several 'prophets'. This 'prophetic' theme is used to offer hope amidst the suffering of the South Sudanese with a parallel to the people of Israel (p.175). Reference is made to key historical figures such as the pioneer Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary figure Archibald Shaw and Kon Ajith that inspired religious change among the Dinka.

### **Selected Themes**

Chapter Two traces the entry of the CMS in the Dinka region and its limited impact on Christian conversion. Reference is made to evangelization and conversion during this period through the path of education. This had a limited impact in an agro-pastoralist community that had traditional/indigenous belief systems. Conversion at this period was also limited by conditions of literacy and strict procedures on baptism (p.32).

A key theme pursued in Chapter Three is an explanation of how Christianity in the context of South Sudan's civil war made more sense than the religion of the Jak (used in the book to refer

to independent local divinities, p.17). In part, this shift of religious identity towards Christianity was informed by the practicalities that it offered- education and health (p.72).

Chapter Four examines how displacement by the war in the 1990s to Kenya and Ethiopia also inspired religious change. This chapter traces the so-called 'Lost Boys of Sudan' and how the church was established outside of Sudan's borders (pp.98-99). The story of Christian conversion among refugees became possible through lay evangelism, schooling, including hymns (p.108). The embrace of the new religion thus became possible among young people that were not constrained by the religion of the Jak. Christianity in years of displacement further offered a sense of community which helped to increase its appeal (p.112). In sum, Christian narratives in the refugee camps offered hope for the future (p.124).

Chapter Five documents women agency and varied roles they played in Dinka Christianity. It profiles the contributions of several women that took various leadership roles. The women led in public prayers and composition of church hymns in Dinka (p.148) with the most prominent of them being Mary Alueel Garang. These hymns were useful for conversion.

Chapter Six focuses on the subject of 'Prophets of Judgement and Change'. It engages with the readings of Prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, Archibald Shaw - the pioneer European missionary of the early twentieth century; and this include materials produced by the Nuer prophet Ngundeng Bong in the late nineteenth century (pp.164-165). It was particularly the translation of Isaiah 18 by the CMS missionaries claiming that the Dinka had been mentioned in the Bible that was appropriated for conversion. Conversion thus would come after suffering (pp.171-172). This narrative was shared orally and was a call for the Dinka to abandon their local divinities and call on Jesus Christ (p.172). Shaw is credited in the evangelization narrative for having observed that conversion to Christianity would rather be left to the local Dinka missionaries upon training (pp.179-180). Shaw's 'prophecy' even found its way in Dinka hymn compositions (p. 181).

Chapter Seven engages with the theology of several emerging church leaders who had taken on different paths in conversion and ministry outlook. It debates among others the outlook of Reuben Akurdit Ngong and Paul Kon Ajith; this demonstrated that in a changing context, education and cultural practices were no longer barriers to Christian conversion and service. Akurdit is outlined as an early Christian with formal theological training. More emphasis is paid to Kon who had no formal theological training. Kon is depicted in part as a 'prophet' opposed to the Jak and called for the construction of a church at Zion to mark Dinka's departure from the Jak (p.194) Kon's constant message was that a disaster would befall people if they did not destroy their Jak. The Bor Massacre of November 1991 was interpreted in this light (p.197).

### **Strong Points**

A key strength of the work is its rich and detailed synthesis of the history of the conflict in South Sudan and which helps to situate the circumstances under which Christianity expanded to offer hope in the context of the civil war. This historization contextualizes the theme of religious change among the Dinka.

In addition, the book engages the competing influences that existed between traditional beliefs and practices and Christianity. It particular, the book is compelling in showing how both Christianity and traditional structures such as the Nilotic prophecies (including prophets) co-

existed to offer hope and identity amidst the suffering brought by the civil war. In particular, localized narratives such as those of Isaiah 18 are appropriated and given a South Sudanese context so that Christianity would make sense. It is clear in the book too that embracing Christianity meant abandoning the religious practices of Jak. Previous studies such as Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) finds similar points around the tensions highlighted in the book on how Christianity would engage or counter prior existing practices such as traditional healers/diviners, polygamy among others

The book, in addition, appropriates local agency to illustrate the ways in which home-grown Christianity was entrenched in South Sudan and beyond. The book details the adaptability of the Dinka in molding their Christianity in the absence of external agency in the civil war years. This is clear from how hymns, church rituals and practices that were developed independently. Moreover, this home-grown capacity building included the setting up of the Dhiaukuei training and community center for Christianity formation (p.208). It is, however, puzzling that while local agency was clear in the growth of Dinka Christianity, the congregants continued their links transnationally with the Anglican communion.

### **Critique**

On a positive note, the writer is apt in reflecting on his own positionality in the work and how that has influenced the central question. The writer makes it clear to the reader that he is an Anglican priest, and thus his entry point to the study of Dinka Christianity (p.227). From this positionality, it then becomes possible to situate influences that in part drove the work. It would have been useful, however, to reflect more on this positionality and perhaps how this influenced the writer's interpretation of events as fieldwork continued and writing commenced (cf. Merriam et al, 2003; Miled, 2017). This is acknowledged, moreover, in passing (p.228). As part of navigating this dilemma of sometimes keeping a distance to find a sense of 'objectivity', a reading of previous seminal scholarship in the field helps the author to find his own voice in the debate.

The writer is candid on the methodology. He notes that his work, owing to logistical and security challenges of conducting fieldwork in South Sudan, was mediated. This meant that the researcher had to go through either a church, or an international non-governmental organization. He is right to note that this came with attendant limitations and, as such, the need to be reflective of how this shaped his sources (pp.228-229). The writer is thus candid on the methodological limitations of the work.

### **Overall evaluation**

The study on the overall engages the debates on religious change with special reference to Dinka Anglicanism. The evidence base of the work is compelling. It draws on voices of various participants, archival materials and extracts literature from eminent religious scholars. And it relies on primary documents and secondary material in order to advance the argument regarding religious change among the Dinka. This book would be of primary interest to religious scholars, theologians and historians interested in African Christianity themes.

### **References**

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