Book Reviews


In the rapidly expanding book series Companions to Religion, Wiley-Blackwell has now published a volume on African religions. This is edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba, Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, USA, and President of the African Association for the Study of Religions. Religion is thriving in Africa, plays a vital role in many people’s lives and in societies, and is a major factor in public and political issues in African countries and the continent at large. Equally thriving is the academic study of religion in Africa, and the present Companion demonstrates the breadth and depth of scholarship in this interdisciplinary field. Bongmba has compiled a massive volume that introduces readers to various methodological perspectives on, and thematical issues in African religious studies. Most essays are written in an accessible style, which makes this volume a helpful resource for teaching courses in African religions.

The volume consists of thirty-six essays, with an introduction by the editor and a foreword by the doyen of African religions scholarship, Jacob Olupona. Many contributors are prominent scholars in the field, such as Musa Dube, Gerrie ter Haar, Rosalind Hackett, Birgit Meyer, Isabel Phiri, Afe Adogame, James Cox, Jean and John Comaroff, David Westerlund, to mention just a few. Except for one author (Penda Mbow from Senegal), all contributors are Anglophone, meaning that African Francophone and Lusophone scholarship and traditions are hardly represented in this volume. According to the series description, each volume of The Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion ‘draws together newly-commissioned essays by distinguished authors in the field.’ Contrary to this statement, the present volume includes at least six essays that have been published previously, and only one of these has been slightly revised, that is, an afterword has been added (Meyer’s influential article ‘Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches’). In some cases, such as with Tinyiko Maluleke’s 1997 article ‘Church and Reconciliation’ which is a time-document of theology in early post-Apartheid South Africa, it is not really clear how these reprinted essays are relevant to the contemporary study of religion in Africa. In line with the series description, most essays in the volume have been newly-commissioned. Some of them offer helpful and up-to-date surveys of religious traditions, such as neo-traditional religions in Ghana (Marleen de Witte), Hinduism in South Africa (Pratap Kumar), Coptic Christianity in Egypt (Jason Zaborowski), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Christine Chaillot). Some chapters, such as about ‘Christianity in Africa’ (David Ngong) and ‘Islam in Africa’ (Yushau Sodiq) are too broad in their scope to really be useful. In some cases, chapters would have benefited from a more critical approach to religion. Is David Ngong, for
example, really serious when he concludes with the general evaluation that ‘in spite of some shortcomings, improving the overall wellbeing of people has been central to Christianity in Africa’ (p. 215)? What about the history of colonization and Apartheid, and the current stories of stigmatization of people living with HIV and discrimination against gay and lesbian people — to mention just a few issues that have been and/or still are fuelled by Christian theologies?

In addition to articles about specific religious traditions, other chapters are organized more thematically and explore crucial topics in the study of African religions, such as African rituals (Laura Grillo), religion, the body and the economy (James Cochrane), religion, illness and healing (David Westerlund), religion and development (Steve de Gruchy), religion and politics (Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar), religion and globalization (Asonzeh Ukah), religion and same-sex relationships (Marc Epprecht), etcetera. Many of these chapters explore new grounds and open up new perspectives for the study of African religions in contemporary contexts. One would think that other issues, such as religion and human rights, religion and violence, and interreligious relations are also topical in Africa, but these are not discussed in dedicated chapters. As far as gender is concerned, the focus is only on women, either in ‘the Church’ (Isabel Phiri), in African feminist theologies (Sarojini Nadar) or in Islam (Penda Mbow). It is not taken into account that gender is about women and men, and the volume does not reflect the emerging scholarly interest in religion and masculinities in Africa.

The companion is organized in three parts: Part I is entitled ‘Methodological Perspectives on African Religions’, Part II is about ‘Interpreting Religious Pluralism’ and Part III is called ‘Religion, Culture and Society’. My major criticism of the volume is that in spite of this clear structure, the arrangement of the individual chapters within this structure is far from clear, especially in part I and II. Part I indeed opens with three chapters that offer methodological perspectives on religions in Africa: phenomenology of religion (James Cox), philosophy of religion (V.Y. Mudimbe and Susan Mbula Kilonzo), and a social-scientific discussion of neo-Protestantism (Jean and John Comaroff). Many other chapters in this section, however, do not specifically discuss methodological issues and disciplinary approaches but are more thematic, such as the chapters about divination (René Devisch), rituals (Grillo), and religion and the environment (Edward Antonio). Furthermore, it is unclear why Meyer’s overview of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is presented in Part I, while Ojo’s overview of the same strands of Christianity is included in Part II. The chapters about African theology (Bongmba) and feminist theologies in Africa (Sarojini Nadar) explicitly discuss methodological issues and represent a specific discipline in the study of religion in Africa, but strangely enough they are not included in Part I but in Part II. An important methodological issue raised in Part I is postcolonial criticism, and I appreciate Musa Dube’s article in which she argues for the decolonization of the study of (and discourse about) African indigenous religion(s). However, postcolonial criticism questions not only the framework in which we study ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ African religions but also Christianity and Islam in Africa (which, interestingly, are argued by other authors in this volume to be also indigenous in Africa, so what does the term ‘indigenous’ mean?). The classifications that are developed, the concepts that are employed, and the questions that are raised in the study of religion in Africa often are informed by Western intellectual traditions and perhaps also by political