

BOOK REVIEW

Tshepo Masango Chéry. *Kingdom Come: The Politics of Faith and Freedom in Segregationist South Africa and Beyond*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. xiv + 247 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$27.95 Paper. ISBN: 9781478019930.

This book surveys the history of African independent churches, notably the African Orthodox Church (AOC) of George McGuire and D. W. Alexander, in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, the West Indies, and the United States. Opening chapters treat oscillating definitions of “Coloured” identity that provided space to form and seek recognition of African-led churches; many figures in the book were so classified by the state. Chapter Three surveys the Manye sisters, Charlotte and Katie, emphasizing how Charlotte’s (now lost) correspondence of the 1890s sparked African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) entrance to South Africa. The main source is Katie’s memoir dictated to Margaret McCord in 1953, treated unproblematically, for McCord’s role in shaping the text was criticized. Chéry assumes Katie was an AME “organizer” (180) but she joined the American Board Mission. There is no use of Charlotte’s religious writings or African American press reports of her talks in US churches.

The religiosity of Diaspora migrations in the West Indies and the United States are the focus of Chapter Four. Black clergy suffered racism/antiblackness in established churches (“prejudice reflected the deep-seated racism that comprised the practice of Christianity” (93). The next chapter features McGuire’s foundation of the AOC in 1921 and close interaction with Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Chéry explores McGuire’s liturgy, prayers, and hymns in AOC/UNIA meetings, many drawn from Anglican catechism.

Chapter Six details AOC growth in southern Africa. Alexander established a South African branch in 1924 and was consecrated bishop by McGuire in 1928. They both warned clergy against involvement in politics but Alexander was a member of the African People’s Organization and Non-European Unity Movement, yet was funded by the Oppenheimer and De Beers’ companies. In Zimbabwe, where the AOC formed in the late 1920s, it was deemed subversive but withered away by the 1940s. AOC expansion to Uganda and Kenya is the subject of Chapter Seven. Little evidence is adduced to back some claims: “East Africa is the only place where Garvey’s dream for political freedom came to resolution, and it all came to pass through the church” (153); Alexander “laid the groundwork for an anticolonial movement” (178). Indeed some AOC churches were active in Mau Mau struggles but there were other potent components of the movement. The Ugandan AOC split and affiliated to the Coptic Church; by 2000, there were only 26,000 Orthodox members. An epilogue elaborates the author’s life journey from South Africa to America.

While these are interesting case studies, some claims about the primacy and initiatives of the AOC seem exaggerated. That Alexander was the first independent African Bishop needs measuring against rival claims of Zionist church bishops, though some had dubious credentialing. There may be substance to the claim that the AOC was the first independent church to develop a seminary in Africa.

Errors, misspellings, imprecision, and repetition (fourteen lines of p. 155 repeat on p. 158) should have been detected by author/publisher: Nstikana and Ntiskana for Ntsikana; Rubsana (Rubusana); Plaajite (Plaatje); Langibele (Langalibalele); Nonkutula (Nokutela); David (Davids); Bulwayo (Bulawayo); Julie (Julius) Nyerere; Mashini (Mashinini). The Treaty of Vereeniging was not signed “almost a decade after the [Boer] war” (3) but in 1902.

The author mines a solid selection of AOC archives and other sources, including a few state archives from South Africa and Kenya, but also could have used files on church schools, Anglicans, and the black press, which reported, for example, Alexander’s meeting with the Greek Orthodox Church and opening of new churches. *Negro Churchman* of McGuire is well deployed, yet Alexander’s *African Orthodox Churchman* (1929–48) is not. Oral history would have added depth, though the author synthesizes secondary sources that interviewed AOC veterans.

Attention to liturgy expands appreciation of the church but Chéry eschews deeper sociopolitical analysis in favor of a transnational/theological approach that closes off comparison with other Black clerics. Alexander kept a low political profile so as not to jeopardize relations with the state, which eventually recognized the AOC in 1941, yet this was hardly a strong “bridge” to 1980s activism of Archbishop Tutu as the author posits. The accommodation of independent churches with apartheid is not factored in. Others studied the AOC (Terry-Thompson, Natsoulas, Newman, Welbourne, West), on whom Chéry draws freely. What distinguishes her book is geographic sweep and emphasis on Coloured identity.

Questions remain. How significant was the AOC? Scant membership figures are given. In South Africa, it lacked traction in KwaZulu-Natal. The 2001 census counted only 42,251 Orthodox churches members. Great AOC religio-political significance is claimed but little empirical evidence adduced. Within the AOC, which gave freedom from racism, Chéry’s thesis holds up, but trying to extend this to black politics is unconvincing. In a book on “Politics of Faith and Freedom” there is, surprisingly, no comparative mention of Reverends Rubusana, Dube, Mahabane, and Calata, who held high office in the African National Congress (ANC) and led political protests while in established churches. We might forgive this omission in a monograph on the AOC yet the author fails to note politicized AOC figures such as Rev. J. S. Likhing, ANC national executive member and AOC secretary. Nevertheless, this is an interesting new take on transnational religious movements in countries connected through the AOC.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2024.215