

REVIEW ARTICLE

Politics, Gender and the Global: New Directions in the History of Christianity in South Africa

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Convening Black intimacy. Christianity, gender, and tradition in early twentieth-century South Africa. By Natasha Erlank. (New African Histories.) Pp. xvi + 272 incl. 12 ills and 2 tables. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022. £29.99 (paper). 978 0 8214 2499

A prophet of the people: Isaiah Shembe and the making of a South African Church. By Lauren V. Jarvis. Pp. 440. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2024. \$53.95 (paper). 978 16 118648 47

Kingdom come. The politics of faith and freedom in segregationist South Africa and beyond. By Tshepo Masango Chéry. (Religious Cultures of African and African Diaspora People.) Pp. xiv + 247. Durham, NC–London: Duke University Press, 2023. £23.99 (paper). 978 14 780199 30

Two contradictory tendencies mark the historiography of Christianity in South Africa. First, the country has been a rich crucible for important scholarship on Christianity. In a country where 80 per cent of the population currently claim Christian affiliation, it is not hard to imagine why this would be the case. The country has a centuries-old Christian presence, spanning the Protestantism of early Dutch settlers in

I would like to thank the Department of History at the University of Houston for their invitation to give a talk in early 2024; I presented a partial and earlier version of this paper on that occasion, and I am grateful for the helpful comments I received from audience members.

the Cape to the many European and North American missionaries of all persuasions who descended upon South Africa in subsequent centuries (some estimated that the south-eastern region of Natal in the nineteenth century was the most missionised area in the world at that time).¹ An equally great magnet for scholarship was the size and diversity of the independent church movement in South Africa – or those Christians who broke away from missionary oversight to form Black-led congregations, many affiliated with other Black Christian organisations in the Atlantic world. By the mid-century, thousands of churches labelling themselves as Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian filled South Africa and attracted a commensurately rich scholarship; many such studies focused on how Christianity was Africanised *via* the independent church movement.² In a darker vein, a further impetus for scholarly interest was the way in which Protestantism was wielded by (some) Afrikaners to justify the apartheid regime. Unsurprisingly, this led to an expansive twentieth-century literature on state power and Christianity, both social scientific as well as theological.³ Finally, historical studies in general have tended to cluster more densely in South Africa than is the case for many other regions of the African continent – a phenomenon that is due to the country's thriving research scene and its many tertiary education institutions. Viewed from this perspective, the large number of histories of Christianity in South Africa should be seen as a smaller subset of the extensive scholarship on South Africa itself.

Yet this is not the entire story. Alongside this large and lively scholarship on Christianity, there exists a contradictory thrust. Since the 1970s, a dominant stream within South African historiography has been disinterested in religion, and indeed at times even actively antagonistic towards it. The unique political conditions of twentieth-century South Africa – a minority white government holding repressive sway over a disenfranchised Black population – placed onus on historians to produce work that met the needs of the liberation struggle. Studies of class, capital and labour abounded, often inflected by a Marxist emphasis. This materialist focus tended to preclude attention to religion, in general, as well as to Christianity, in particular. Even more strongly, some scholars identified Christianity – particularly that of the independent churches – with false

¹ For a sample of important scholarship on Christian missions and missionaries in South Africa see the works of Jim Campbell, Jean and John Comaroff, Elizabeth Elbourne, Richard Elphick, Norman Etherington, Robert Houle, Lize Kriel, Paul Landau and Hlonipha Mokoena.

² I review the independent church scholarship for South Africa in the introduction to my *Text and authority in the South African Nazaretha Church*, Cambridge 2014.

³ For example, John de Gruchy, *The church struggle in South Africa*, Grand Rapids, MI 1979.

consciousness, a means to keep South Africans soporific and depoliticised.⁴ The initially close alliance between the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church and the apartheid regime hardly helped matters, nor did the cosy stance of several large independent churches towards white apartheid officials, who seemed to court white Afrikaner officialdom with extravagant ceremonies and awards at huge church meetings.⁵ In the eyes of many leading historians of South Africa, Christianity, at best, seemed a distraction from the liberatory intellectual work demanded of the academy by a society in tumult.

These dynamics created a strange siloisation of the scholarship whereby much of the important late twentieth-century historical work on Christianity was produced by academics based outside of South Africa. Many of these US and Europe-based scholars were influenced by the turn of the 1980s and 1990s towards cultural history, and clearly not subject to the same pressures as local scholars were to write more politically apposite narratives (many of these authors, admittedly, were South Africans, but were living and working outside of South Africa). On the other hand, the scholarship on Christianity within the country was largely (but never quite entirely) championed by theologians and religious studies scholars, who were all too easy for secular historians to ignore due to the former group's emphasis on theological interpretation and biblical exegesis.⁶ As long ago as 1996, a leading historian of Christianity in South Africa, Norman Etherington, 'tentatively' hoped there was finally a growth in interest in religion 'among secular historians ... after decades of neglect'.⁷ Unfortunately, the last thirty years have not proved Etherington's prediction to be right. In 2018, in our introduction to a special issue on Protestantism in South Africa, my colleague Natasha Erlank and I still noted a continued 'pervasive neglect by many historians of South Africa of Christianity'.⁸

In sum, then, the scholarship on South African Christianity has been characterised by a great many tensions. First, there is the tension between local scholars who have focused largely on material and cultural histories to the expense of Christianity, on the one hand, and of foreign scholars writing frequently ground-breaking studies that explicitly centre Christianity, on the other hand. Second, there is the tension between

⁴ For example, Matthew Schoffeleers, 'Ritual healing and political acquiescence: the case of the Zionist Churches in Southern Africa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* lxi/1 (1991), 1–25.

⁵ Lauren Turek, *To bring the good news to all nations: Evangelical influence on human rights and US foreign relations*, Ithaca, NY 2020, ch. vi.

⁶ Joel Cabrita and Natasha Erlank, 'New histories of Christianity in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal* lx/2 (2018), 315.

⁷ Norman Etherington, 'Recent trends in the historiography of Christianity in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* xxii/2 (1996), 203.

⁸ Cabrita and Erlank, 'New histories of Christianity', 315.

approaching Christianity with a secular approach *versus* a more theologically informed perspective; third, the tension between a focus on politics, society and worker history *versus* a focus on belief, faith and ideas. Above all, there is the tension between those who see Christianity as worthy of study as an irreducible religious phenomenon, and those who do not (or who only concede value where they see the political utility or valency of the religious tradition). These are, of course, large-scale generalisations. Some scholars have easily straddled these dynamics; many more are easily identifiable as coming down on one side or another of the divide. Important exceptions can be found for just about every claim I have made above. But these are broad patterns and trends rather than immutable laws, and thus exceptions are to be expected.

The three texts I am reviewing today mark a welcome break with this older tradition of cleavages, tensions and scholarly silos. Taken together, these three books mark the distance historians of Christianity in South Africa have trodden in the last decade or so (if we take ten years as the period during which the present books, published between 2022 and 2024, likely found their genesis, inception and eventual production). The books share much common ground, not least that all three are first monographs arising out of doctoral research; all three authors are historians by training and by profession. But they are also very different. For one, each deals with a different denomination and a distinct kind of Christianity, namely mission churches (Erlank), so-called Ethiopian Christianity, an early form of Independency intent on Black leadership but often quite closely aligned with older style Christianity (Masango Chéry) and finally Zionism proper (Jarvis), an Evangelical-inspired faith-healing movement that in typically reformist fashion denounces what came before it. I briefly outline what each of these texts tries to do. I then comment on the ways in which they mark new intellectual territory, and in many ways significantly dissolve the binaries structuring the historiography.

To briefly summarise the books in the order that they were published. First, Natasha Erlank's *Convening Black intimacy* is focused on what Erlank dubs 'Black intimate life', or 'a set of thinking, behavior, and feelings tied to sexuality, fertility, the moral dispositions associated with both of these, conjugal and family life, and the gendered roles that shape them'.⁹ While South African historians often link practices and ideas about intimacy to economic and political transformations (most of all the mineral revolutions of the late nineteenth century that ruptured relations between rural and urban residents, as well as between women and men), Erlank argues through six carefully conceived chapters that in fact

⁹ N. Erlank, *Convening Black intimacy: Christianity, gender, and tradition in early twentieth-century South Africa*, Athens, OH 2022.

it was Christianity that primarily drove intimate transformations, largely in the Eastern Cape region (in this respect, Erlank sits in a venerable lineage of studies of Christianity in the Eastern Cape, finding her company amongst authors who have long highlighted the creativity with which converts mobilised Christian ideas to animate older social aspirations).¹⁰ Erlank covers changing twentieth-century conceptions around masculinity (chapter ii), love and sex (chapter iii), marriage and bride wealth payments (chapter iv), weddings (chapter v) and polygamous marriage (chapter vi). She argues that all these issues may only be fully understood in connection with the religious revolution brought about by the largely mission church actors whom Erlank studies

As a side note (and qualifying my point about dissolving historiographical boundaries), the independent churches are largely absent from Erlank's otherwise fine study. Indeed, all three books still largely operate *via* a traditional typology of churches, largely cleaving to denominational boundaries as the unit of their analysis (or to clusters of similar churches, in Erlank's case) – and this despite the widespread recognition that ecclesial mobility was, and is, an important feature of Christian life in South Africa.¹¹ It is true that one of these denominations – the African Orthodox Church considered by Masango Chéry – is hardly studied at all by scholars. A study of an Orthodox organisation in Africa (that is, a church that explicitly links itself to the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Greek and Russian Churches) is a valuable first, regardless of the potential limitations of a denominational lens. And there are instances of institutional blurring offered by the authors considered here – for example, Lauren Jarvis's discussion of the independent church founder Isaiah Shembe's close relationship with mission church 'kholwa' believers. Yet none of them seriously consider what it might mean to analyse Christianity across – rather than only within – institutional boundaries. Thus Erlank's chapter on polygamy labels this issue as largely a dead issue amongst mid-century Africans. That might have been true for the mission-affiliated Christians Erlank studies. But it certainly was not true for the Nazaretha Christians who are the focus of Jarvis's book, for whom debates around polygamy continue to animate the Church into the present day, and who lived side by side with the mission church Christians described by Erlank. Considering debates such as these across denominational boundaries, as well as within them, may well illuminate quite different religious configurations.

Second, Tshepo Masango Chéry's *Kingdom come* is a pioneering analysis of an important yet until now little-studied organisation. This is the African

¹⁰ For example, the work of Jeff Peires, Janet Hodgson and Elizabeth Elbourne.

¹¹ An important early analysis of this was Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, London 1948.

Orthodox Church, a Caribbean and North American Church founded in the US in 1918 by the Caribbean cleric, George McGuire, and closely affiliated to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (although never quite collapsable to a religious wing of the UNIA). While both Erlank and Jarvis's work respectively sit within the intensively researched areas of Christianity in the Eastern Cape and Natal, there is simply no study to date of the important and influential Orthodox tradition in Black South African Christianity. The book's early chapters relate to South Africa, explaining the beginnings of the independent church movement in this region and the racism of the establishment white-led missionary churches (chapters i–iii). The second half of the book pivots to the Americas, looking to the Caribbean Church leaders who founded a new Church in the US (chapters iv, v), and then back again to South Africa (chapter vi) and finally East Africa, focusing on the growth of the African Orthodox Church under Daniel Alexander (chapter vii). Despite the global reach of the book, Masango Chéry's focus is squarely on South Africa (and more briefly towards the end, on Kenya). She is not interested so much in how Caribbean Church leaders shipped an American religion to Southern Africa as in how South African Church leaders laid hold of and transformed a Caribbean-American religion for their own ends and purposes, using the largest global Black movement of all time to articulate their aspirations for equality in a deeply racist society.

Third, Lauren Jarvis's *A prophet of the people* echoes Masango Chéry's biographical and church leader-focused approach by offering a penetrating study of a single – albeit extraordinarily influential – South African church leader. This is Isaiah Shembe (c. 1870–1935), the founder of the KwaZulu-Natal based Church of the Nazaretha. Jarvis's approach is to link the personal with the political, or the solitary with the society, using Shembe's story to illuminate the multi-layered realities of twentieth-century South Africa; likewise, Jarvis compellingly shows how we only fully understand Shembe's innovations with gender, sexuality, work and politics if we understand the largely isiZulu-speaking community that he was rooted in. Tying these two ideas together, thus, the title of the book *A prophet of the people* makes the intimacy between a religious leader and his society explicit. Jarvis gives us eight chapters, each covering not only a different period of Shembe's life, but also a new geographical region and a correspondingly variant social and religious role for the founder. For example, in chapter v we have a 'A landowner at Inanda' (the area where Shembe bought land for his Church headquarters Ekuphakameni in the early 1910s), and in chapter vii we have Shembe as a 'A dissident in Southern Zululand'. This regionally rooted approach helps Jarvis realise her aim of explaining and analysing Shembe robustly within the context of his place, time and compatriots.

Although clearly covering divergent topics, there are important commonalities and connections between these texts. First, all three books encourage the reader to reconceptualise the relationship between Christianity and politics. As discussed above, South Africanist (and particularly South African) scholarship has been troubled by the resistance paradigm – or the need to parse out every aspect of Black life in terms of political protest, both explicit and coded. Especially vulnerable to this tendency were, and are, the Black-led independent churches, in whose ranks the African Orthodox Church as well as Shembe's Nazaretha Church falls. These were churches that failed to articulate their religious aspirations in ways that were legible to both secular politicians and to Black nationalists.

The two books that deal with the independent, Black-led churches – Masango Chéry's *Kingdom come* and Jarvis's *Prophet of the people* – enjoy an entirely different relationship with the political. For one, as Masango Chéry shows, their seeming disengagement from politics requires an economic and class analysis. Less to do with political commitments, quietism was a product of the financially precarious nature of many of these churches. Unlike the more politically active mission churches, many independent churches simply did not have the benefit of a wealthy mother church in the northern hemisphere that would bail them out should they cause trouble domestically. Masango Chéry shows how Daniel Alexander of the African Orthodox Church received precisely nothing from the American Church by way of financial support, despite his hope and even expectation that it would be otherwise. In this light, political activism may be read as privilege rather than as virtue. The vulnerability of fragile independent churches – many led by working-class and formally unschooled pastors – led them to put down their heads and not visibly cause trouble.

Masango Chéry takes this argument even further, showing that strategic silence should not be read as apolitical disengagement from the realities of African life during colonial and apartheid rule. Of course, this did not always translate into action legible to a liberal-democratic tradition. Instead, Masango Chéry brilliantly outlines how Alexander and other African Orthodox leaders harnessed the imaginative resources of Christianity to imagine a world in which Black pride, self-reliance and autonomy ruled, and where white pretensions to supremacy were marginalised. Amongst the most potent tools Alexander wielded were the theological ideas around apostolic succession, episcopacy and orthodoxy. Both Alexander and George McGuire invested in an Orthodox tradition, thereby aspiring to access an ancient Christian lineage uncorrupted by its later association with Western colonialism and which enjoyed spiritual potency (a potency they argued the white colonial Church had lost in the Western Church's 'illegitimate' schism from the Eastern Churches in the eleventh century). It was for this reason that McGuire approached

(unsuccessfully) both Russian and Greek Orthodox bishops in 1921 to ask for their consecration, and it was also for this reason that the Ugandan head of the African Orthodox Church (similarly unsuccessfully) tried to establish a relationship with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria in the 1930s. Appealing to Orthodoxy – dubbing themselves Orthodox and attempting to affiliate with Orthodox organisations around the world – was these individuals' strategy to denounce white Churches as the schismatics and themselves – the African heirs of Christianity, standing in direct apostolic succession to Peter – as the only true leaders of the global Church. Instead of merely parsing out Orthodox believers as resistant to the colonial state, Masango Chéry carefully analyses the theological language of Alexander's Church and shows how the very Christian stuff of it provided a new way to imagine Black identity in colonial and later apartheid South Africa. Religion here is itself the very point – not just the incidental means for political action.

Jarvis's book – *Prophet of the people* – approaches the political indignities of twentieth-century South Africa with an equally creative approach. Rather than focusing on either resistance or complicity (and Shembe and the Nazaretha Church have indeed often been accused by both scholars and the general public of complicity due to their largely quiescent stance *vis-à-vis* the apartheid regime), Jarvis describes Shembe's 'creative patterns for negotiating constraint'. The end game was not Shembe's overthrow of the state but rather his ability successfully to lead his Church and his thousands of followers who relied upon him. Jarvis thus argues that the state was a hindrance to the religious aspirations of the Nazaretha faithful, rather than the focus of their activities. And as an annoyance, the state did not occupy a privileged space in Shembe's religious imagination; it was just one hindrance amongst many others (admittedly, one of the most powerful). Jarvis thus writes that Shembe pursued his 'creative strategies ... whether the source of that constraint came from [Shembe's] own family or the South African state'.¹²

What were some of these strategies? Jarvis identifies three approaches pursued by Shembe in relation to the state and other constraints: movement, evasion, and compromise and concession. For those who sought to confine him, Shembe was an inveterate traveller who walked the length and breadth of eastern South Africa, priding himself on his 'collection of worn shoes and walking sticks'. Where he could have afforded a car, Shembe eschewed such extravagance, doubtless to display his ascetic piety but also to underscore his commitment to embodied mobility.¹³ Moving allowed Shembe to build up a national following of Nazaretha; it also meant he broke the state's efforts to confine South Africans to fixed

¹² Lauren Jarvis, *A prophet of the people: Isaiah Shembe and the making of a South African Church*, East Lansing, MI 2024, p. xxiii.

¹³ *Ibid.* 143–4.

ethnic polities. Evasion, too, enabled Shembe to lead the church amidst opposition. As trouble brewed with colonial officials due to his and his followers' resistance to vaccination, Shembe undertook the politics of hiding. He frequently disappeared for long periods of time in rural Zululand, far from the gaze of the not-so-all-seeing state. Concession and compromise were equally valuable: for example, ceding moral ground to male elders in the Church (where initially they had seen him as a threat to their daughters' morality) meant Shembe gained a power base amongst chiefs. South African historians have typically been more interested in opposition than evasion. As with Masango Chéry's book, Jarvis's analysis reminds us of the importance of reading religious movements on their own terms, rather than according to a predetermined political logic.

Of these three texts, politics is the most in the rearview mirror in Erlank's study. She is concerned with the constitution of the intimate – a realm many identify as far from the public sphere of politics, protest and resistance. Yet Erlank is clear that intimacy is both private and public. She is interested in how sex and marriage were 'created in public spaces [that] debate and dissect the nature of intimate life ... continual mediation between acts and feelings that occurred out of the sight of others and the same acts as subjects of public scrutiny'. In support, she cites Berlant and others' notion of the intimate public sphere.¹⁴ South Africa, more than many regions or countries of the world, has been vulnerable to a reductive reading of the public as exclusively the political. Erlank insists we do not have to choose between the two. Her book looks at love, fondness, jealousy, shame, aspiration, guilt, pleasure and lust – reading all in their own right, but also thinking about how these sentiments were shaped by as well as shaping more overtly political categories like race and class. Erlank's chapter on the Christian 'white wedding' with flounced dress and multi-layered cake is a masterful instance of knitting together the intimate with the political. She charts how emotions such as love, shame, pride, vanity and aspiration interlocked with considerations of money, social status and African respectability. As Erlank writes,

[weddings'] sum of their parts reflect[ed] a greater whole ... weddings were occasions for festivity ... opportunities to dress up and to celebrate. But weddings also point to the growing power of commodities to shape people's lives ... they also shed light on the changing meaning of wedding-exchange practices as Black South African Christians incorporated older forms and rituals into the new marriages they contracted.¹⁵

Leaving aside politics, these texts also offer rich food for thought around the intersection between Christianity, gender and sexuality (despite Masango Chéry's rich chapter ii discussion of the important church-

¹⁴ Erlank, *Convening Black intimacy*, 3–4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 160.

building Manye sisters, *Kingdom come* is the outlier of these three texts in that it largely attends to male church leaders to the exclusion of female laity). Gender and sexuality are most obvious in Erlank's book, which argues that we cannot understand intimacy without understanding Christianity as well as considers the constitution of both femininity and masculinity (chapter ii). Erlank's approach to these topics has a decidedly textual and performative slant. She is interested not only in the content of debates around intimacy, but also in how these debates were constructed, performed and circulated. It is for this reason that Erlank's first chapter offers us a history of print culture in early twentieth-century South Africa. Focusing on newspapers as well as written court records, Erlank builds upon a recent interest in popular print cultures in Africa to think about how texts – and textual performances – made people, made religion and made religious communities. This is the 'convening' of Erlank's title, focusing on the social work texts did in bringing groups of people together around shared views – as well as not shared; disagreement is an important component of her description of ideas and practices of intimacy. Jarvis, by contrast, is largely silent on the significance of texts in the Nazaretha Church, a decision no doubt due to the significant attention paid to textual cultures of the Nazaretha in recent years by scholars. (Jarvis does, however, make extensive use of the isiZulu and English newspaper of the region, *Ilanga lase Natal*, wonderfully plumbing it for contemporary coverage – both critical as well as sympathetic – of the Nazaretha Church.)

But in contrast to the silence around texts, gender and sexuality do occupy much of Jarvis's book, although this is not explicitly signalled in the text's title nor in its introductory framing comments (and unlike Erlank, Jarvis takes gender to largely denote women, as there is little explicit analysis of masculinity in her book). In chapters v and vi Jarvis shows how as early as around 1911, the majority of Shembe's followers were women and girls. The composition of the Church reflected both the demographics of areas around Durban (evacuated of men *via* a migrant labour exodus) as well as the particular attraction of Shembe's healing ministry for women struggling with infertility and for young girls seeking religious itinerancy and adventure.¹⁶ Indeed, it was Shembe's success with female converts that initially led to his conflict with male homestead heads and both white and Black political authorities, who variously accused him of trafficking young women, being a seducer and destroying female morals. For women's part, though, joining Shembe's Church meant accessing a new repertoire of behaviour, ideals and morals: not (initially) rooted in home-bound domesticity but in a life of sacrifice, adventure, travel,

¹⁶ Jarvis, *Prophet of the people*, 65.

excitement – even landownership as women pooled pennies to help Shembe purchase property.

Erlank and Jarvis's attention to gender needs to be read against the backdrop of a startling silence about Christianity and women in historical work.¹⁷ And the silence around Christian women is a subset of a much larger silence around women. As my own work has recently shown, studies of women in Southern African history are still woefully scant in comparison with those of men. My recent biography of the activist, scholar and journalist, Regina Twala, counted only ten biographies of Southern African women published in the last thirty-five years or so in comparison to around 215 biographies of male figures.¹⁸ The political skew of the South African historiography is partly to blame, as men tend to be more visible in studies of organised politics and formal resistance to the state. The materialist thrust of the historiography is similarly culpable. South African historians have split much ink on the racialised economic underpinnings of the apartheid state and thereby tended to focus on male workers who moved away from families and womenfolk in the rural areas to work in the cities.¹⁹

Moreover, in the rare cases where Christian women have occupied centre stage, there is a tendency to resort to well-worn political tropes. This means scholars have favoured interpreting conversion to Christianity as a force for the good, a means for women to achieve and preserve cohesion in the face of migrant labour, urbanisation and racist rule, as well as to augment their status in relation to men. In a context where both pre-capitalist and colonial structures were thought to oppress women, Christianity could validate professional aspirations such as teaching or nursing; it could also legitimate a life of celibacy or singledom for a woman, investing her with a sense of vocation separate from her married or domestic identity. I have myself argued something similar in my own book on the Nazaretha Church, where I suggested that the militant spiritual ethos of the Nazaretha offered female adherents an outwards-turned identity distinct from the more confined realm of the home.²⁰ In parallel fashion, Carol Muller's study of the Nazaretha Church characterised it as for 'disadvantaged black women and girls – [as] a way to remake and reconnect to ancient sacred traditions disrupted by colonialism and apartheid'.²¹ And Deborah Gaitskell's important work on women's uniformed prayer organisations likewise argued that Christianity 'fostered a distinctive and fervent female group solidarity

¹⁷ Etherington, 'Recent trends in the historiography', 218–19.

¹⁸ Joel Cabrita, *Written out: the silencing of Regina Gelana Twala*, Athens, OH 2023, 7–8.

¹⁹ There are important exceptions including Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, London 1991.

²⁰ Cabrita, *Text and authority*.

²¹ See the blurb on the back of her book: Carol Muller, *Rituals of fertility and the sacrifice of desire: Nazarite women's performance in South Africa*, Chicago, IL 1999.

which helped to sustain them in times of personal and community upheaval'.²² The intersection between Christianity and women was far more likely to be studied if it could uphold the resistance-liberation dyad of South Africanist scholarship.

Erlank and Jarvis both insist that we not over-determine the emancipatory potential of Christianity. Both books show us how Christianity could indeed be emancipatory for women – while at the same time providing a diverse range of players with a new vocabulary with which to constrain women. These books are important for the attention they pay to Christian women; they are also significant in their willingness to see the nuances, complexities and even costs of religious commitment for South African women. Chapter v of Erlank's book argues that the new institution of the Christian wedding created fresh opportunities for society to shame women, largely through disallowing white dresses to non-virgins and the insistence that they wear 'ice blue'. Whereas the 'transgression of sexual morality before the arrival of Christianity had a preceding set of resolutions', the loss of virginity in a Christian context had no such resolution: 'A non-white wedding dress did not mark the start of a process of reparations but rather proclaimed itself as a public statement of shame.'²³ In chapter vii of *A prophet of the people*, Jarvis describes how Shembe retreated from his initially progressive stance on autonomous independent women in the Church as he sought to bring hostile patriarchs on board with his religious project. This depended upon showing older men that young women's sexual purity and respectability would be safeguarded by Shembe himself and the Church as a whole. Shembe largely repudiated his earlier more relaxed stance on independent women travelling the countryside in favour of a more domestic-focused expectation that girls and women be domiciled at Ekuphakameni.

Finally, all three books – and here Masango Chéry's book especially shines – assist in articulating new questions around African identity and Christianity. Multiple scholars have noted how an essentialised African tradition has long been assumed by many studies of Christianity. While Europeans and Americans were free to just be Christian, African Christians were always just that – Christians who carried with them the weight of their pasts. Whereas prior generations of missionaries bemoaned syncretism, twentieth-century scholars assessed this more positively, holding up indigeneity as evidence of authentic Christianity. Of course, the scholarship has since made many important connections to a more global and transnational story of Christianity, significantly nuancing this depiction of African Christians operating in cultural isolation. But the independent churches – those Black-led organisations autonomous

²² Etherington, 'Historiography of Christianity', 205.

²³ Erlank, *Convening Black intimacy*, 160.

of missionary oversight – are still prone to these indigenising interpretations. Recent scholarship, by contrast, has proposed new ways of thinking about the intersection between Africanness and Christianity. For example, I have pointed to how engagement with a global Evangelical religious tradition enabled South African Christians to position themselves as part of a broader ecumene. This included mobilising ideas and practices around texts as well as healing (and the intersection of texts and healing in the case of faith-healing testimonial literature).²⁴

Masango Chéry pushes us to think about these topics in fascinating new ways. She identifies the transnational Marcus Garvey movement – the United Negro Improvement Association – as the conduit for global networks. This puts South Africa in conversation with the Caribbean, a move which few scholars have to date made, yet which Masango Chéry persuasively shows us is vital to understanding the full range of South African Christianity. As she compellingly demonstrates, Cape Town and other Southern African metropolises were teeming with individuals – sailors, mariners, whalers, port workers, clerics, organisers, farmers, artisans and barristers and journalists – from Antigua, Jamaica and Trinidad. These ‘West Indies’ people seem to have been disproportionately over-represented in the leadership of independent African churches in South Africa, including Danny Alexander himself, who identified as of West Indies origin. Black and mixed-race individuals from other areas of both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds were also represented in the clergy of independent churches in South African cities and towns, including African Americans, so-called West Africans from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), St Helenians, Mauritians, South Asians, individuals from the Arabian Peninsula as well as Swahili-speaking coastlines, and Indonesians.

These cross-cultural alliances were neither seamless nor easy. Masango Chéry highlights the racism and assumptions of cultural superiority that governed relations between Black African Orthodox members in the US, on the one hand, and in Southern Africa, on the other hand. She also points to the fractures between the South African headquarters – with the erudite and cosmopolitan Alexander at its helm – and the hinterland outposts of the Church in Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and the difficulty clerics from these areas had in convincing the metropolitan bishop, Alexander, of their talents. None the less – fractured or not – Masango Chéry’s work shows without doubt that Christians from different parts of the globe were in constant conversation with each other – through travel but also through the mediating properties of the printed word. I want to cite one particularly illuminating snippet from *Kingdom come*, where Masango Chéry unpacks the importance of restoring these global stories

²⁴ Joel Cabrita, *The people’s Zion: South Africa, the United States, and a transnational faith healing Church*, Cambridge, MA 2018.

of itinerancy, migrancy and movement to our understanding of Christianity in South Africa:

Very rarely do scholars enunciate the ways in which rootedness is read as immobility rather than stability. Rootedness is conflated with stagnancy and indigence ... [these] historical narratives of stasis pathologize people of color, particularly Africans, whose movement away from the continent is predominantly characterized as one that was authorized, guided, and controlled by Europeans. This has reinforced the notion that Africa is isolated and primitive. Colored mobility, on the other hand, demonstrates the agency that people of color exhibited as they searched for employment, conducted their own philanthropic efforts, and seized entrepreneurial opportunities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Evidence of sea travel implies that Coloureds actively engaged the world around them.²⁵

Biography is an important method by which Masango Chéry charts the global history of Christianity in South Africa, including the 'sea travel' of members of the African Orthodox Church. The perambulations of a particularly mobile individual – or small group of individuals – are a compelling way to chart religious connections made across space. Masango Chéry thus showcases the itinerancy of Alexander between the Caribbean, the US and Johannesburg, as well as the transnational careers of the men who led the African Orthodox Church in its early years, individuals like George McGuire and Robert Josias Morgan, the former an Anglican minister from Antigua who migrated to the US, the latter a Jamaican Anglican clergyman who came to the US *via* Panama and Honduras. We also see this focus on itinerant elites in Jarvis's book, where she roots her analysis in the moving career of Isaiah Shembe, the founding prophet of the Nazaretha Church, considering each different geographical region he frequented as the basis for each chapter of her book. And while Erlank's clerics are largely confined to the Eastern Cape, we do see a glimmering of their international careers in their trips to ecumenical conferences in South Africa, but also further afield in Belgium and India.²⁶ As with any method, there are costs as well as benefits associated with using the pairing of biography and mobility as a route to understand religious transnationalisms. While this approach does refute the long-held insularity of South African Christians (especially of the independent churches), it none the less highlights the relatively elite and largely male individuals who had the material resources and social capital to travel as well as to subsequently report upon their travel

²⁵ Tshepo Masango Chéry, *Kingdom come: the politics of faith and freedom in segregationist South Africa and beyond*, Durham, NC 2023, 22.

²⁶ Erlank, *Convening Black intimacy*, 156, 174–5, 177.

experiences. It would be a great shame if the trans-regional story of South African Christianity were a solely male one.

Bound together by a common interest in the contingent and historically rooted nature of Christianity in South Africa, both *Convening Black intimacy* and *A prophet for the people* are akin with *Kingdom come* in offering similarly non-essentialising views of African Christianity. Echoing Masango Chéry, both Erlank and Jarvis treat tradition as an entity that was consistently created, managed and argued for rather than natural or innate. They also show the ways (Erlank in particular) in which the supposedly traditional was constituted in tandem with Christianity's spread in the twentieth century. As Erlank notes in her concluding comments, 'the distinction between tradition and Christianity that many South Africans draw upon routinely to explain everyday life ceased to exist in practice, although not in rhetoric, some time ago'.²⁷ In practices and ideas around male initiation and circumcision, female bride wealth, polygamy and marriage, there is an ongoing 'mash up' of the traditional and Judeo-Christian practices, rendering the line between the two ever more tenuous. Jarvis is similarly circumspect about the identity of the Nazaretha as an African or more specifically Zulu Church (an interpretation that the historiography has been far too quick to attribute to independent churches such as the Nazaretha). There is no entry for 'tradition' in her index, nor does 'Zulu' or 'Zulu kingdom' appear with any frequency. Where Jarvis does engage with the Zulu kingdom it is *via* carefully historicised arguments rather than sweeping generalisations about an essentialised Zulu identity. Taken as a trio, all three books powerfully remind us that there is no predetermined content to a South African Christian (nor to any kind of Christian); rather the permutations Christianity takes in South Africa are as endlessly varied and contingent as in any other part of the world.

²⁷ Ibid. 193.