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Piet Naude. *The Zionist Christian Church in South Africa: A Case-Study in Oral Theology.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995. vi + 145 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-9147-2.

H.L. Pretorius. *Historiography and Historical Sources Regarding African Indigenous Churches in South Africa: Writing Indigenous Church History.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995. iv + 142 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-9149-6.

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These two volumes represent attempts by South Africans writing within the Christian tradition to incorporate approaches from the secular social sciences into church history and systematic theology. Pretorius's work, composed of a literature review and program for further research, calls on church historians to avail themselves of a variety of hitherto underutilized methodological and theoretical approaches, and reviews available sources on the history of African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated Churches (henceforth the more economical AICs). Naude's work attempts to develop an "oral theology" based on fieldwork and analysis of the hymns of a Venda-speaking Zion Christian Church (ZCC) congregation in the northeastern Transvaal. Both studies reveal that a rapprochement between social scientific and theological approaches to the study of African religion may lead to more fruitful research for all involved.

H.L. Pretorius's slim but thorough volume will be useful to scholars studying the AICs in South Africa and elsewhere. Pretorius's previous work (e.g., 1985, 1991) has consisted of empirical studies of a number of Zionist Churches in the Transkei. Here, he focuses on broader questions concerning the historiographical approaches and sources necessary to study AICs. As Pretorius explains, his scope is limited to South Africa; however, his work raises theoretical and methodological questions of relevance to the study of AICs elsewhere in Africa.

Pretorius aims to review historical research and writing on the South African AICs and offer direction for the improvement of such scholarship. After an introductory discussion of the ongoing debate over what the "I" in AIC should stand for (independent, indigenous, or instituted?), and a statement of his missiological perspective, he approaches the task of reviewing and refin-

ing AIC historiography in the four chapters that make up the body of the book. First, he examines historiographical developments that have affected the study of AICs in South Africa, considering denominational and ecumenical church history, secular African history, and approaches from anthropology, sociology, and the phenomenology of religion.

Second, Pretorius reviews in more detail critiques of research on the AICs by a number of authors: J. Manyoni, E. Kamphausen, B. Tembe, G. Kruss, T. Ranger, and D. Chidester. Third, he examines the promises and pitfalls of literary, oral, and iconographic sources. Finally, he restates the methodological and theoretical issues raised in the previous chapters, and offers his recommendations for future studies.

As an extended literature review, primarily summarizing others' work, the first three chapters of the book are difficult to summarize. Pretorius frequently does not address the content of the works discussed in enough detail to allow the reader to evaluate whether the authors actually succeed in achieving their historiographical goals. While Ranger (1986), in reviewing a similar body of literature, summarized the material with sufficient details to permit the reader to see the relationship between theory and practice, Pretorius's first chapters frequently read like a series of summaries of the introductions of books, conveying relatively little of their content. Throughout, Pretorius writes with a courteous reluctance to criticize strongly many of the works he discusses, which leads him to a very broad set of recommendations. I will focus on Pretorius's final chapter, where he draws together the various strands of arguments that he has highlighted through the literature review.

The author opens his chapter by asking "whether the history of the indigenous churches in South Africa has

been studied sufficiently” (p. 81). Although Ranger (1986: 37) has argued that for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, contemporary scholarship has focused on the AICs to the neglect of movements within mission churches, in South Africa the reverse appears to be the case: the AICs have been neglected relative to the mainline churches. In Hofmeyr and Cross’s bibliography of the *History of the Church in Southern Africa*, covering material published through 1985, fewer than two percent of the entries refer to ICs, despite the fact that these churches account for over thirty-five percent of the black population (p. 57). Pretorius’s first conclusion, then, is that given the “importance and prominence of South African indigenous churches...they have...not received the attention of church historiographers which they deserve” (p. 83).

He then considers a range of methodological issues, beginning with a call for critical reflection on method by church historians. He embraces an interdisciplinary approach, arguing against the reductionism that may accompany adherence to a strict theoretical program. He similarly embraces a holistic approach (pp. 86-88). Indigenous church history, Pretorius argues, must be “decolonized” and recognition given to African agency. Church historians should avoid the tendency toward ahistoricism that may accompany the employment of functionalist or phenomenological approaches, instead recognizing the concrete social and historical background of AICs, and their precedents in pre-colonial religion. Similarly, the desire to classify AICs (for example, Sundkler’s identification of Zionist and Ethiopian types) should not be allowed to lead to the neglect of important historical and social differences within such categories. Insisting on historical periodization of social phenomena, he argues, offers a counter to such ahistorical approaches (pp. 98-102, 109).

Pretorius makes several recommendations as to the scale of analysis. He urges church historians to adopt a “global framework,” both by examining AICs in comparison with similar movements elsewhere, and by examining events internationally that have contributed to the history of South African AICs (for example, J.A. Dowie’s founding the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, in Chicago in the 1890s, or the Free Church of Scotland secession in the latter half of the nineteenth century, p. 101). At the same time, church historians should work at the level of individual congregations, away from the centers of church power: “studies of high profile AIC bodies or of the headquarters of churches...need to be supplemented by studies at the local level” (p. 110; cf. p. 114).

The most promising section of his concluding chapter, I would argue, is where Pretorius considers the relationship of church history to Marxist-influenced historiography. He views Marxist approaches as comprising a useful set of conceptual tools, while insisting on the fundamental incompatibility of Christian and Marxist perspectives. He thus offers a number of propositions derived from revisionist South African historiography, the Marxist-influenced South African Black Theology movement, and other materialist approaches (e.g. van Binsbergen’s work on religious movements in Zambia). Church history, he argues, should consider 1) historical and economic context; 2) the effects of social change, historical discontinuity and the role of conflict in social change; 3) class alongside race as a factor in South African history; 4) “the significant differentiation between rural and urban historical situations, including the distinction between ‘peasant’ and ‘proletarian’”; 5) characterizing AIC members in terms of their working-class background and not merely their ‘African culture’; and 6) “the history of the community and ordinary people, the interaction between power structures and the common person, history from below” (p. 109). In proposing that theologically-minded scholars should draw on the strengths of historical materialist approaches in writing church history, Pretorius is in keeping with the innovative work of church historian James Cochrane (1987) and theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio (1988) on the history of the English-speaking mainline Protestant churches in South Africa, as well as the historical articles that have come about the black theology movement.

Nevertheless, for Pretorius, church history is not to be merged with secular history. He writes, as he puts it, from an explicitly missiological perspective, concerned with “the church crossing frontiers, be they geographical, cultural religious or other boundaries” (p. 6). He is, therefore, concerned with questions of how to conceive and write about the “divine factor” (p. 28) in history. Invoking Popper’s critiques of positivism and Kuhn’s claim that all research questions and findings are paradigm-dependent, he argues that the theological paradigm employed by church historians is no less valid than those of secular disciplines “even though the church as object thereof is believed and cannot be completely observed” (p. 90).

He is also concerned with the evaluation of the AICs using theological criteria that define a Christian church. While both of these concerns may seem inappropriate or misguided to the secular scholar, they are clearly urgent both for Pretorius and his colleagues writing from a missiological perspective (e.g., Oosthuizen and Sund-

kler) and for the members of AICs themselves (cf. Ngada 1985: 16, who writes in a pamphlet, "Speaking for Ourselves," that "there is one enormous omission throughout the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history has simply been left out....We would like to write our own history from the point of view of the Holy Spirit").

Pretorius offers several proposals for criteria for the evaluation of the status of a church, but focuses primarily on J. Verkuyl's suggestion that there are "images of the church in the New Testament against which churches of every age should be tested" (p. 11).[1] Whether or not one agrees with the validity of such a venture, the writing of history is, of course, part and parcel of social and institutional struggles for power and authority. In this respect, for authors so inclined, making theological evaluation an explicit part of the writing of the history of AICs can only lead to a more honest author-reader relationship and, therefore, better enable the critical placement and evaluation of the empirically based arguments made in such a work.

There are a few areas in which the editorial presentation of the text is unsatisfying. First, Pretorius does not translate the various Afrikaans, French, and German quotations that are interspersed throughout the document. In my opinion, this only has the effect of making the work less accessible, both to international audiences not versed in Afrikaans, and to members of the AICs themselves. Second, the volume could have been better edited: the hyphenation in the text is frequently irregular or absent, and the index is incomplete and/or inaccurate in a number of places.

Nevertheless, these weaknesses are outshone by the work's strengths. Its bibliography covers a range of theological and more recent (up to 1992) historical works not included in Ranger (1986), and its appendix lists twenty-six institutions in South Africa, Europe, and North America housing historical documents pertaining to AICs. Pretorius identifies some written sources (novels, court cases, journals, newspapers, and magazines) not commonly used in the writing of church history, and provides a review of the promises and pitfalls of oral history that will be useful for those unacquainted with Vansina's work. Moreover, lamenting the disorganized state of written sources to date, he describes the inception of a database of sources on the AICs, maintained at his institution, the University of South Africa. He writes,

It would be highly appreciated if readers acquainted with additional information would make it available to the author at the following address: AIC Database, Re-

search Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria 1001, South Africa (p. 131).

This effort to create a single register of historical sources on the history of the AICs will surely be of benefit not only to church historians but to all scholars working on religion and social change in southern Africa. Equally importantly, however, Pretorius writes as a credible voice within South African missiology, calling on his peers to engage their work with the perspectives of Marxist and other secular historians and social scientists. To the extent that it reaches an audience within church history and leads to a more fruitful collaboration between social scientists and theologians in the study of the AICs in South Africa (and religion in Africa in general), this book will be a success.

Piet Naude's *The Zionist Christian Church in South Africa: A Case-Study in Oral Theology*, while not a historical work, takes up Pretorius's suggestion that theologians make more use of oral material. Naude's work, an intriguing if problematic attempt to construct a systematic theology from ethnographic fieldwork, is composed of three parts: first, a justification of his effort to derive systematic theology from religious experience and worship; second, a number of hymns in Venda, Sotho, and Zulu and accompanying translations and commentary; and third, a discussion of the role of the "outsider-theologian" in formulating "local theology" (a deliberate allusion to Clifford Geertz's "local knowledge") and a preliminary attempt at doing so.

As had Pretorius, Naude appears to write primarily for an audience of theologians. Naude's first chapter examines the role of experience in three theological traditions: post-Enlightenment European theology, Latin American and South African Liberation Theology, and African theology. In European theology, the responses of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Rahner are typical of responses to Kantian rationalism "with an emphasis on human experience as religious experience" (p. 12). Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Mokgheti Motlhabi likewise "assign a pre-eminent methodological position to experience. Broadly speaking, the experience of oppression (poverty, sexism, racism, etc.) serves as the concrete starting point for doing liberation theology" (p. 15). Such authors appeal to Marxist analysis against "the rationalistic-idealistic tendencies inherent to Kantian and Hegelian philosophy" (p. 19). Similarly, in African theology (e.g., the work of John Mbiti or Gabriel Setiloane) an appeal is made to "experiencing rather than formulating and expressing religion in set

terms” (Setiloane, quoted on p. 20). This common appeal to experience, Naude argues, provides a justification for his own attempt to construct theology from the religious experience of his Venda informants. In so doing, he explains, he focuses on doxology—that is, religious experience as expressed in hymns of praise and worship; such a focus, he argues, has precedents among the writers of the Old and New Testaments and may provide opportunities to find ecumenical common ground in the South African context (pp. 47, 21-26).

Before presenting the hymns in his second section, Naude briefly discusses the familiar issues involved in working with oral sources, and concludes with “a few related and very agonizing questions...why de-oralize these hymns? Why move from orality to textuality? Why impinge on the genre as performed? Why engage in systematic theological categories” (p. 42). His preliminary answers are, to represent what the ZCC “actually believe,” to stimulate ecumenical dialogue, and to “explore African theology as autonomous theology...in South Africa” (p. 42). Moreover, oral theology, he argues, is a challenge to the hegemonic forms of systematic theology: it “serves as a vivid reminder of the development of creedal formulations from their oral base,” and “relativises the dominant textual-analytic modelling of theology which monopolises the field of theology” (p. 47).

Naude then turns to his actual fieldwork. While teaching in the northeastern Transvaal, in October-November 1989, Naude conducted fieldwork among a predominantly Venda-speaking congregation of the ZCC “Dove Church” (the faction of Joseph Lekhanyane in the 1948 ZCC schism) at Itsani, a village about fifteen kilometers from the Sibasa-Thohoyandou area. In collaboration with a translator and an ethnomusicologist, Naude made audio recordings of three services whose sixty-one hymns form the core of the book. They will likely be the most interesting part of his text for most H-Africa readers. He presents the hymns grouped according to their themes: hymns about Jesus, hymns about Engenas (Ignatius Lekganyane, the founder and first leader of the ZCC), hymns about love and unity in the church, hymns about Moria/Zion, hymns about the Holy Spirit, hymns referring to historical figures in the Scriptures, and hymns about prayer.

The types and distribution of hymns in Naude’s text contrast with other work on South African Zionism and the ZCC, and would provide useful data for one trying to reconstruct the history of the ZCC as a larger whole or understand the relationship between center and periph-

ery in the ZCC organization. As Naude notes, despite their performance at services which concluded with healing, there is an absence of songs about healing (p. 87). Surprisingly, there are also few hymns about the Holy Spirit (p. 107).

Naude draws attention to the predominance of “Christological” hymns, a contrast with the *Izihlabelo*, for whom references to Shembe have allegedly replaced references to Christ. From the anthropological literature, I would add that it also contrasts with Comaroff’s (1985: 237-251) account of the ZCC (referring to a congregation of the “Star Church,” the faction of Edward Lekhanyane in the 1948 ZCC schism), in which references to Christ are absent, and with Hammond-Tooke’s claims that Zionists focus on the Holy Spirit, leaving the position of Jesus ambiguous and ill-defined (Hammond-Tooke 1986: 166).

Pretorius’s point about the pitfalls of relying on typologies is apt here: clearly there is significant variation between the congregations of the churches broadly classified as “Zionist” and within the ZCC. Likewise, Naude’s study suggests that Pretorius’s insistence on studies of peripheral congregations along with church headquarters is well-taken. Naude observes that the hymn *Tsini Ha Murena* is “taken from the Phalaphala hymn-book which is widely used in Venda churches...It would be interesting to establish whether this hymn has been taken up at large” (p. 56).

As Comaroff observed of Tshidi ZCC members in the early 1970s, “in practical terms, they are participants in a bounded, face-to-face congregation which seldom meets with other nearby branches....The micro-structure of [the ZCC’s] constituent groups tends to define the main universe of action from a distinctly local perspective” (Comaroff 1985: 240). Assuming that a group’s theology can be inferred from its hymns, in the case of Naude’s informants, this micro-structure involves an emphasis on the person of Jesus that would appear to be relatively uncommon in the Zionist movement.

Naude presents the hymns in both the original languages (Venda, Sotho, and Zulu) and in English translation. The translation process, as Naude describes it, raises several hermeneutic and editorial questions. In transcribing the hymns, “the help of ZCC members [was] at some stages called in to ascertain that the transcriptions were as correct as possible” (p. 30). However, the translation also appears to have offered some room for a theological re-interpretation of the data he analyzes: the texts were translated by a Sotho Biblical Studies student, and submitted “for comment and possible corrections” to an

Afrikaner professor of Old Testament, who is a permanent member of the translation board for the Venda Bible (pp. 30-31). Moreover, I identified an inconsistency in the translation of one of the hymns that undermines my confidence in the rest of the text.

I do not read Venda or Sotho; knowing some Zulu, I was able to read the one Zulu hymn that appears. I was puzzled by the apparent mistranslation offered of the phrase “ngatola simayo mazioni”: “Zionist, you do not give thanks” (p. 69). The hymn, however, appears in the collection a second time, with the more comprehensible translation, “Zionists, I received healing” (p. 87). Whether this is an error of translation or editing, it would incline me to seek a native Venda or Sotho speaker before drawing conclusions from the material presented. Nevertheless, the collection of hymns forms a valuable primary source and will undoubtedly inspire further study.

Naude gives relatively little emphasis to the possible presence of indigenous religious concepts in the hymns. Despite his lengthy discussion of orality, many of his analytic footnotes on the hymns appear to be attempts to link the content of hymns to biblical passages, without reference to possible African sources. For example, the line “it is our sins which blocked our way” is described as “a clear reliance on Isaiah 59:2” (p. 60). As Chris Taylor has pointed out, however, metaphors of blockage and flow are common in southern and central African religion (Taylor 1992: 9-13). Likewise, a hymn that describes Satan as “the head of the snakes” is interpreted as “obviously an illusion to the Genesis-stories” (p. 65), without reference to the position of snakes in indigenous ideas about witchcraft and spirits. In other cases, however, Naude’s appeal to biblical referents seems indisputable, as in the variations on Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd”) in several hymns (pp. 70-75). The question of biblical vs. indigenous sources is, of course, not an either-or one; indeed, the salience of such symbols for worshippers likely derives in part from such double references.

Naude deals with indigenous religion positively in interpreting a later hymn, in which Jesus is referred to as *nanga*, or healer. This case appears to be another example of a general regional pattern: Matthew Schoffeleers has argued that in much of southern and central Africa, the “*nganga* paradigm” is an indigenous “framework within which to conceptualize the person of Christ” (Schoffeleers 1994: 85). He then asks, “why has this *nganga* paradigm, which is so tangibly and extensively present in folk theology, not been exploited by the professional theologians?” (Schoffeleers 1994: 86). The answers, he suggests, are that theologians have been reluc-

tant to introduce “syncretistic notions and practices” and “(recognize) the objective existence of witchcraft and evil spirits” (Schoffeleers 1994: 86). While Naude reluctantly acknowledges these associations of the term, he interprets them as a legitimate and valuable theological contribution:

(*Nanga*) is obviously a concept derived from the Venda culture with overtones of *vuloi* (witchcraft) and the manipulation of forces in the cosmos.... In this sense it does “determine” the meaning of Jesus. But in a semiotic approach, the *relationship* among symbols is of paramount importance in determining ‘meaning.’ If *nanga* is read in relation to *Murena* (Lord), *mulauli* (controller), *Yesu* (Jesus) and *murwa Mudzimu* (son of God), the distinctiveness of the gospel is confirmed (there is no other *nanga* like this!). But—and this is very important—the meaning of the gospel is also enhanced (Jesus is *ananga* of the spirit!) (p. 142).

In his third section, Naude attempts to synthesize the theological content of the hymns into a formulation along the lines of the Apostle’s Creed. As he explains, he aims to present a “local theology”—“the creation of a theology which corresponds to the experience of the community in which it arises” (p. 120). He tentatively evaluates his own work, emphasizing throughout that his study is only a preliminary experiment, intending it as the beginning of a dialogue rather than a final statement.

First, he asks do “the symbols and their interrelation as presented here as (the) result of theological reflection adequately express the underlying religious experience of the community from which they arose?”; his answer is humble: “this can only be (answered) by members of the local community themselves, and be tested by theologically trained people from the community” (p. 137). Second, he asks whether there is a congruence between the symbols of this local theology and the broader Christian tradition (p. 137). Here, Naude argues, the “outsider theologian plays an essential role,” putting local theology into credal formulations that can be critically evaluated (pp. 140-143).

Finally, he asks whether the local theology is faithful to the “paradigmatic and normative role of the Scriptures.” He observes that the nature of oral performance makes it unlikely that direct or verbatim textual references will occur. However, he notes that the Itsani ZCC hymns omit “references to God’s creative work (and) the resurrection of the body...essential (parts) of the Biblical witness” (pp. 143-144), and suggests that “the challenge for the ZCC in general and the Itsani congregation in par-

ticular, is to allow their experiences to be increasingly shaped by the Scriptures” (p. 144).

Since Naude is a professor of Biblical Studies, his interpretation of the ZCC hymns in terms of scripture and his call for a more biblical basis for ZCC theology are not unexpected. Naude writes from a difficult position. On one hand, from the defenses of his enterprise, it appears that his approach is viewed with skepticism by theologians; on the other, his fieldwork and use of anthropology leave him open to critique from a contemporary anthropological perspective. By any anthropological standard, the duration of his fieldwork would be seen as far too short. Moreover, he relies heavily on Clifford Geertz’s theoretical works on interpretation and religion, and thus becomes vulnerable to the same criticisms that can be leveled against Geertz’s approach.

He focuses more or less exclusively on culture as a text, limiting his data to verbal performances. He does not provide detail, for example, on the order or the spatial arrangement of the service, the uniforms of the parishioners, their background and roles outside the church, their modes of recruitment, and so on. His data are limited to a subset of ritual performances. As Robert Hefner has shown (1985), Geertz’s focus on ritual neglects the essential role of actors’ prior socialization in shaping their receptiveness to and interpretation of ritual. So with Naude’s work—we learn of the Zionists’ hymns, but little about the Zionists who sing them and the place of religion in their lives. Nor do we learn about variation in individual interpretations of the content of the hymns. By focusing on texts, Naude also ignores the ways in which anthropologists like Comaroff (1985) have demonstrated the “embodiment” of cultural categories and the relationship between ritual spaces and cultural categories. Moreover, like Comaroff’s symbol-centered account, Naude’s work does not achieve Csordas’s (1994) methodological goal of “triangulation” of the accounts of ritual leaders, accounts of participants, and observation of ritual.

Finally, and unfortunately, the readability and usefulness of Naude’s text is hindered by what can only be described as sloppy editing. On at least four occasions in the first twenty pages, sentences abruptly begin or end without punctuation in the middle of a phrase, making a difficult philosophical argument even harder to understand. The book’s index is frustratingly inaccurate—of the six citations listed under *nanga*, only one referred to a page on which the term appeared (although most were accurate within two or three pages).

My suspicion is that the work was prepared on a word processor, and that the index was generated from an ear-

lier draft than the published text. As I pointed out above, there are also inconsistencies in the translation of at least one of the hymns. The Mellen Press has done a great service to scholars working on religion in southern Africa with their commitment to publishing new and innovative works; however, in the case of both these works, they have done the authors and readers a disservice through careless editing.

Naude’s work is innovative and provocative. He has made an important contribution to the literature on the ZCC and raised questions about the organizations’ growth and internal diversity. In a sense, however, he has taken up only part of the challenge posed by Pretorius (and Ranger 1986) for scholars working on the AICs: by focusing exclusively on theology—more specifically, only on that subset of theology that is expressed in hymns—he ignores the socio-political and economic historical contexts that Pretorius, and most social scientists, would see as essential for understanding the Itsani Zionist congregation. Nevertheless, given the study’s intended audience of systematic theologians and its stated goals, it can be judged a success: it is likely to increase the legitimacy of “oral theology” and provide ground for ecumenical dialogue between the ZCC and the mainline denominations.

Notes

[1]. Though I do not write as a church historian, it seems that it would be highly problematic to identify, let alone apply, such criteria. For example, the image of the church throughout the New Testament is not consistent: the Greek term *ekklesia* appeared only in Matthew among the four gospels, and its usage changed throughout the Pauline and deuter-Pauline letters as the incipient Jesus movement became the institutional church in the first two centuries C.E. (Kee 1993: 58-63).

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