

Knut Holter (ed.), *Interpreting Classical Religious Texts in Contemporary Africa*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers 2007. 219 p., ISBN 9966-888-54-3.

This volume contains sixteen articles based on the papers presented at the conference organized at Makerere University (Uganda) in November 2005, on the theme given in the title.

The conference was the result of the 'Network of Theology and Religious Studies', initiated by the School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway, that had invited seven African institutions from various countries: Cameroon, Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa, and Uganda, that had formed a partnership through the course of history since its foundation in the 1840s. One of the objectives of the network was defined as the creation of a common 'research collaboration'. After a common study project focused on the Africanisation of Old Testament Studies, the network decided to widen the scope of this project and discuss on a more general theme: the role of classical religious texts. The term 'text' was used in a wider sense, so that also the unwritten 'texts' of African Traditional Religion, and the South African *Kairos* document could be included.

The essays in this volume cover a great variety of subjects that cannot all be mentioned here. They are collected under three general headings: hermeneutical contexts, classical religious texts in contemporary Africa, and classical religious texts in dialogue.

J.N.K. Mugambi of Nairobi University (Kenya) opens the series on hermeneutics with some critical remarks and conceptual clarifications, starting with the affirmation that the African identity, like the European identity is primarily an ideological concept. He then elaborates the concept of classical texts as manifestations of the most refined thinking of the elite, which may also include oral transmitted messages. These classical 'texts', whether in Africa or elsewhere, should be identified according to criteria such as author, content and form. In the concluding remarks he outlines the (limited) way through which the 'outsider', say: Western scholar, may have access to the process of defining African texts, which in fact consists of a re-definition of what African culture is about.

Another clarifying article in this section is that of Knut Holter, organizer of the conference and editor of the book. He outlines the history of the academic setting of theological scholarship and the study of the religious sciences in the West, and makes a plea for allowing room for both 'the inside perspectives of theology' and 'the outside perspectives of religious studies' in institutes of academic learning in Africa.

In the section entitled 'Classical Religious Texts in Contemporary Africa', several attempts are made to analyze some main ethical challenges facing Africa today. As examples I mention M.D. Biyela's (South Africa) exploration of the current appeal of the *Kairos* document (from 1985) on contemporary Africa after apartheid, and the analysis of the text on Moses and his Cushite wife (Numbers 12) by L. Lokel (Uganda). Lokel presents this as an example of black, African presence in Palestine in the first millennium BCE. The punishment of Aaron and Miriam is a criticism of their racist behavior. This may be viewed as similar to 'tribalism', a subtle form of racism, which can be discerned at various places in African, and even in Makerere University and other institutes of higher learning in Africa.

From the section about 'Classical Texts in Dialogue' I mention the text entitled 'The Old Testament outside the Realm of the Church', presented by G. Razafindrakoto (Madagascar), who comments on his research on the particular interpretation of the Old Testament texts

by tradition-practitioners in Madagascar. S.B. Kahakwa shows convincingly that African perceptions of religion have shaped and continue to shape African Christianity, and offers a very clear description from an African perspective of the reverence towards ancestors.

These examples may indicate the value of having the rapport of this conference available in libraries of institutions of religious learning in Africa and elsewhere. Apart from some fundamental questions dealing with the study of religion in Africa, the various in depth studies on particular subjects have merit and should be available for a wider public in Africa and beyond. — GERARD VAN 'T SPIJKER, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

