



The Transformative Power of Grassroots Theologies

African voices shaping faith, spirituality, and praxis

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

White, Peter, ed. *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. London: Routledge, 2025. Pp. 290 + xx. US\$59.99 (hardcover).

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Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis is described by **Afe Adogame** in the Foreword as comprehensive in its approach, providing a holistic understanding of the African theological landscape, and intended for scholars, theologians and practitioners. The book consists of eighteen chapters, divided into five themes:

1. *foundations and evolution of African theologies;*
2. *grassroots praxis, socio-economic impact, and social justice;*
3. *spirituality, healing and music;*
4. *theological identity and cultural integration; and*
5. *theological shifts, comparative and interface studies.*

These five themes serve as an outline for my review. The book successfully brings together “a robust, diverse range of voices to explore the theological reflections and interpretations emanating from the African context, which is a testament to this rich theological landscape” (Afe Adogame, xvi), being “made up of contributions that explore the dynamics of faith, spirituality and praxis in African grassroots theology and churches” (Peter White, 3). Four questions guide the book’s conversation:

1. How African grassroots theology and churches reflect and respond to the challenges and opportunities of their socio-political, economic, cultural and religious contexts;
2. How they engage with the historical and contemporary expressions of Christianity in Africa and beyond;

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3. How they develop and communicate their theological and ethical practices; and lastly,
4. How does it shape and challenge the forms and functions of the church in Africa?

In his “Introduction—Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches,” **Peter White** provides information on the research gap the book intends to address, the methodologies utilized by the authors, the theoretical framework that is centred around African grassroots theologies, faith and spirituality in the African context, and the praxis in theology. This chapter also outlines how the chapters are organized, which makes it a user-friendly book, not just for those in the academic audience, but for all interested in the audiences of the church and society, many of whom struggle with questions around what it means to be a Christian in the African context today. As White rightly points out, the book is a collective narrative that weaves a tapestry as vibrant and diverse as the continent itself, demonstrating the transformative power grassroots theologies have in socio-economic realms and social justice, with potential for faith to inspire community and societal upliftment.

In chapter 2, “Unraveling the Roots and Theological Evolution of African Initiated Churches,” **White** unravels the roots and theological evolution of the African Initiated Churches (AICs), describing them as churches that were not founded by missionaries but emerged during the colonial period when black converts to Christianity could not reconcile their beliefs with those of their church leaders and thus split from them. There are various reasons for these splits, ranging from the socio-political and economic (to escape white control), the marginalization of the black race,¹ the euro-centric disposition of the Western missionaries and mainline churches in Africa, and the need for contextualization of Christianity in Africa among others. White gives an overview of the different (typologies) of AICs (Ethiopian, Zionist, Spirit-types, and Messianic churches, identifying a shift from Western dominated interpretation of Christianity towards an African centered one, and appreciating its transformative role.

Thomas A. Oduro describes the emergence of an African grassroots ministry and praxis from the life and contextual ministry of Prophetess Agnes Amanye Okoh of the Christ Holy Church International in Nigeria in chapter 2,

¹ Editors’ note: *Race* only exists as a social construct. The modern idea and theory of *race* is unscientific, unbiblical, and anti-Christian. As a social construct, however, it has of course been historically powerful. While ethnocultural distinctives exist and should be celebrated, we should recognize that both scientifically and theologically, there is only a single human race.

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“African Grassroots Ministry and Praxis: A Study of the Life and Contextual Ministry Approaches of Prophetess Agnes Amanye Okoh and the Christ Holy Church International.” The origins and development of Prophetess Okoh’s ministry’s is shown to be an example of how a particular grassroots theology developed, and how she employed practices familiar to Africans to minister and interpret the Bible.

In chapter 4, “African Indigenous Methods for Christian Mission and Theology in Contemporary Africa,” **Humphrey M. Waweru** provides a theological understanding of the importance of African indigenous methods for Christian mission and theological development in Africa. The most important indigenous tool identified by Maweru is the use of African languages in mission which promote literacy. Vernacular languages are also a useful tool to loosen control of the Western academy on the production of knowledge in Africa and to develop local hermeneutic strategies relevant to their contexts. Such readings are collective, contextual, and based on the interdependence and the interconnectedness of the readers’ cultures. African indigenous methods in Bible interpretation locates African heritage as an agent not as the other, addressing various issues like patriarchy, Afrocentricity, and de-ideologization of the Bible as a book for the middle class. The aim is not to negate already existing Western methods, but to generate and create new knowledge relevant to the African context.

In chapter 5, **Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh**’s “The Role of Water in the Gospel of John and Its Echo in Prophetic Ministries in Africa: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation” provides a socio-rhetorical interpretation of water in the gospel of John and how it is re-appropriated in prophetic ministries in Africa. After a thorough exegesis of John 2:1–12, Aryeh finds that Jesus did not just solve a shortage of wine problem, but that this text implies that Jesus can be invited to socio-cultural events, not just to those who are religious. In an evangelistic sense it attracts followers to Jesus, but present Jesus also as the one who can miraculously provide their existential needs. The use of water in the narrative “portrays a unique theology of water that miracles are not limited to deeds of healing, exorcism, etc. but the supply of consumables during joyous occasions” (66). Water is offered in prophetism in Africa; given to aid miracles and used as a medium of communication between spirits and deities. The narrative of Jesus converting water into wine to meet an existential need is welcome in the African context, a form of grassroots theology performed by prophets. It makes the biblical passage a lived narrative, a contextualized version of the use of water.

In “Nigeria’s Neo-Pentecostals’ Religious Creativity and Innovations through the Lens of Indigenous Ontology in the Development of Grassroot Theologies,” **Babatunde Adedibu** investigates the religious creativity and

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innovation of Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostals, and how that contributes to the development of grassroots theology. Grassroots theology is understood as the democratization of theology, with the view that every Christian can reflect and is thus a theologian, irrespective of their educational level. This is in line with Oduro, who emphasized in the third chapter that Prophet Agnes Okoh was an illiterate woman who founded a church under God's instruction. In the African context, reading the Bible through an ontological lens is practical, functional, and contextual, not founded on written creeds or teachings, but an oral Christology, based on tradition. Adedibu shows how Neo-Pentecostals appropriate indigenous beliefs and turn them into socio-religious views that resonate with the lived experiences of people, thus attracting large membership, and that have popular styles of worship and innovative strategies as "pastorpreneurs." Their engagement with invisible cosmological forces in everyday life resonates with the biblical view and incorporates a holistic ontology that is attractive in the African context.

In chapter 7, **Benson Ohihon Igbion** (2025:89) engages faith and spirituality as social-spiritual epistemology in the practices of Nigerian Pentecostalism in "Faith and Spirituality as Knowing, Being, and Doing in Nigerian Pentecostalism." He emphasizes the importance of grounding faith and spirituality more in doing than in knowing, deployed in the socio-economic and political spheres through violent prayer. After explaining how faith is both universal and relational, and how it forms an empirical and epistemological basis for developing and making meaning, Igbion explains how faith becomes an expression of trust in the invisible demonstrated in existential affairs. Spirituality is made possible through the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, with faith as the foundation of spirituality, connecting faith as knowing, spirituality as being, and religion as doing. Igbion highlights how such a Pentecostal spirituality extends to political association and political friendships that transcend boundaries of race and ethnicity, although competition among them sometimes threatens it. Power is conceived both spiritually and politically: a this-worldly approach to human flourishing rather than a hereafter one. Dominion in those areas are achieved through violent prayer, an apocalyptic device used to contest, disband, disrupt, destroy, and overthrow spiritual agencies that menace the social lives of believers. Such prayers ensure personal deliverance but not socio-political redemption.

Chapter 8 is "Reconnoitering Sierra Leone Christians' Theological Perspective of 'Na So God Want': A Contextual Grassroots Interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5:18." **Prince Sorie Conteh** engages the theological perspective of the will of God (*na so God want*, 'God orchestrates all that happens in life') in the context of Sierra Leone. The frequently quoted 1 Thessalonians 5:18 commands believers to "give thanks to God in everything, for it is the will of

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God in Christ Jesus.” Conteh reports some findings on how the text shapes the spiritual and social engagement of Sierra Leonian Christians. On questions posed to participants from four churches about their interpretation of the text, how they reconcile this belief in the will of God with misfortune, and how it affects their lives socially, some interesting results came out. All of the participants revere the Bible as the word of God, find inspiration in the text as uplifting news, and acknowledge the statement *Na so God want* as the sovereign plan of God for individuals and communities. For Conteh this leads to a fatalistic mindset, resulting in their not seeking solutions to challenges, which impacts how they see their socio-economic and political rights and results in a perceived inability to act.

Chapter 9, “Grassroots Theological Praxis and Socio-Economic Contributions: A Case of the Saviour Church of Ghana,” is written by **Peter White** and **Peter Boakye**. It provides a comprehensive narrative of the Savior Church of Ghana, focusing on its grassroots theology and practice and its socio-economic impact. The story starts with the vision that the first General Superintendent, Opanyin² Samuel Brako, received that Saturday was God’s Day of rest and worship. Through a long line of leaders that stretches over 100 years, the Savior Church has grown to become an indigenous church whose theology is rooted in the saving power of Jesus Christ, and that is manifested in various practices such as communal worship, prayer, and commitment to socio-economic development and healthcare. The aim of the church was not just to secure individual salvation for church members, but instilled in them “a sense of discipline, honesty, hard work, and mutual respect, which are essential for community living” (137).

Another church, the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe (UCCZ), developed grassroots strategies to address issues of poverty, as outlined in “Faith at the Frontiers of Poverty: A Study of the Grassroots Praxis of United Church of Christ Communities in Southeastern Zimbabwe” by **Robert Matikiti**, who reports on their comprehensive support to the community. After explaining why the reconstruction model of Jesse Mugambi³ is needed in the aftermath of

² *Opanyin* is a title given to elderly males in the Akan language in Ghana.

³ Editors’ note: See J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995); Mugambi, *Religion and Social Construction of Reality* (Nairobi University Press, 1996); Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, Theology of Reconstruction (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003); Mugambi, ed., *Christian Mission and Social Transformation* (Nairobi: NCKK, 1989); Mugambi, ed., *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997); Mary N. Getui, Emmanuel A. Obeng, and J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, eds., *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999); Jose B. Chipenda,

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missionary Christianity in Africa, Matikiti describes in broad terms the innovative strategies developed by the UCCZ, that moved beyond paternalistic approaches to more income generating practices (that included poultry farming, tilling, planting, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting), to secure sustainable development. Matikiti brings contextualization and indigenization together by adapting and utilizing African concepts and ideas, to mould a distinctly African Christianity.

Nomatter Sande challenges the Church's involvement in society to move beyond than just being a development agent to also bringing about social change through protest theology. In chapter 11, "Protest Theology: A Hope to Fight Injustices in Zimbabwe's Socio-Political Context," he studies the profile of Apostle Farai Talent Chiwenga, particularly how Chiwenga uses a "street gangster approach" (154) through his church and social media as a platform to criticize the Zimbabwean government and the state of Christianity. Although Apostle Chiwenga is in some instances a controversial figure, **Sande** detects in his statements a protest theology in which religious leaders advocate a new social theology that challenges society. It is a grassroots form of theology that calls for the re-establishment of sound social relations, affirms the dignity of the members of society, encourage people to find local solutions for their problems and active engagement with social justice in society. In such a process, the relationship between religion and politics is not always predictable, but the options are between support and resistance. Sande concludes that "the church's importance in maintaining a nation's political and moral conscience . . . brings a balance in countering injustices and abuse of power and provides checks and balances in the governing process" (166).

In Chapter 12, "*Iyi Na Wɔdze Frɛ Sunsum*': Spiritism and Musical Healing in the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana," Amos Darkwa Asare delves into the role that music plays in indigenous healing practices, focusing on the *Mfoba*, a Ghanaian sacred musical instrument. The *Mfoba* is believed to facilitate and mediate interaction between healers, patients, worshippers, and spirits. Asare asserts that due to the Pentecostal understanding of the Holy Spirit, and its role in spiritual warfare, the groundwork for African Independent Churches was laid that integrates Ghanaian indigenous values and structures into their worship. The chapter unravels the nuanced musical expressions and their role in

André Karamaga, J. N. K. Mugambi, and C. K. Omari, *The Church of Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1991); and Isaac T. Mwase and Eunice K. Kamaara, eds., *Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction: Essays in Honour of Professor Jesse N. K. Mugambi* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2012).

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traditional healing practices. Prophets and prophetesses do not claim healing power by themselves but attribute it to the divine influences of the Holy Spirit.

Continuing the theme of Spirituality, Healing, and Music, in chapter 13 **Genevieve Nrenzah** explores theological themes in secular music, considering how music serves as a soulful language. Nrenzah analyzes three case studies to support her claim that although secular music that is not religious in nature, being concerned with worldly issues, it also contains religious themes. Music in the Ghanaian context provides soulful language that expresses deep-seated beliefs and values. The three songs studied represent a part of the Ghanaian people's faith and lived experience, woven together in a web of cultural diversity and harmony. This chapter illustrates the role of music in preserving cultural heritage, expressing religious sentiments, and cultivating communal identity among grassroots communities.

Chapter 14 contributes to our understanding of African spirituality and theologies in diasporic and transnational contexts, as **Ruth Vida Amwe** narrates the origins and development of the Bethel Presbyterian Reformed Church (BPRC) in America. BPRC came to exist in part through the lived experiences of congregants who wanted to express their Ghanaian culture and identity. Amwe reports on the role that women played in the origin and development of the church. The chapter agitates for African immigrant religious spaces to construct individual and communal identity and belonging and appreciates its potential to produce grassroots theologies that transform the religious and social landscape.

Jacob Mokhutso examines "The Integration of the African Philosophy of *Ubuntu* into John Wesley's Theology of Social Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA): A Black African Perspective" in chapter 15. He argues that the two concepts of ubuntu and social holiness are intrinsic to the identity and mission of the church in Africa. After a thorough evaluation of the doctrine of social holiness in the Wesleyan tradition, and its implications not just for personal but also for societal relationships, especially in the realization of human equality, freedom, equity, and equality in the use of natural resources, Mokhutso relates social holiness to missionary Christianity. The similarities between ubuntu and social holiness are explored — especially how they are expressed at the grassroots level through certain ecclesial practices related to baptism, death and bereavement, funerals, and the overall diaconal involvement of the MCSA. The chapter incorporates Christian and African epistemologies, not only to influence but also to shape and enrich the faith, spirituality, and praxis among black African Methodists at grassroots levels.

Rhodian Munyenyeembe outlines in chapter 16 the shift that took place in the Church of the Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), from its reformed

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theological roots to its charismatic spirituality renewal, which can be described as a mismatch between the historical identity of the CCAP and the contemporary experiences of denominations in the Synod of Livingstonia. Steeped in Reformed theology, tradition and spirituality, in which there are no altar calls and a structured and routine liturgy is followed with no space for spontaneous emotional expression during worship services, the CCAP was confronted by, and embraced over time, a charismatic spirituality. Munyenembe points out how both traditional modes of worship and this charismatic style became part of the CCAP identity; generational dynamics were a strong consideration behind the shift. Munyenembe also discusses certain challenges that come with a charismatic renewal: intergenerational concerns, ways of giving like tithing and/or pledges, and uncritical embracing of secular cultures like materialism. A positive side to these developments is that it shows the church's ability to contextualize the gospel to address the needs of believers.

In chapter 17, **Kelebogile Thomas Resane** addresses the issue of dubious faith among African Christians, who turn to traditional African religious practices in ways that challenges Christian monotheism. Resane specifically examines the growing rise of "sangomaism" in a multireligious (South) African context. *Sangoma*, an anglicization of the isiZulu term *isángoma*, can mean 'healer', 'diviner', 'ritual expert', or 'witch doctor'; in South Africa, sangomas are practitioners of African traditional medicine who also practice divination. Resane's central argument is that demographics will always shift but acknowledgement of God's unity should always persist and given the religious pluralistic nature of Africa (calabash or melting pot), it appears sometimes difficult.

The concept of God is further explored interculturally and interreligiously by **John Nat Tucker** in chapter 18, "Divine Interfaces: A Comparative Study of the Concept of God in Christian and Traditional Mende and Temne Beliefs in Sierra Leone." Tucker explores the similarities and differences between Christianity and the traditional religious views of the Temne and Mende ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. Both **Resane** (chapter 17) and Tucker find the worship of a Supreme Being as central in the religious they study, but when it comes to deities and divinities that serve as mediaries between the divine, the spirit world, humans, and nature those religions differ greatly. These final two chapters lay bare the dual affiliation and double faith experienced by many Christians in the African context.

Conclusion

Peter White and the other contributors to *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis* present a tapestry of African grassroots theologies that testify to the complexity

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of the lived experiences (praxis) of African Christians in different parts of Africa. Their reflections on grassroots African theologies from the perspectives of the Bible, the continued legacies of missionary Christianity in the present, and the possibilities such theologizing holds for faith and spirituality in the future helps to bridge the distance between indigenous knowledges and so-called formal Western education by their appreciation for the wisdom embedded in the diverse local African contexts. The book also engages critically with dehumanizing beliefs and practices that undermine the dignity and value of African Christians.