

RELIGION

Peter Paris, ed. *Religion and Poverty: Pan-African Perspectives*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009. xxiv + 360 pp. Notes. Contributors. Index. \$89.95. Cloth. \$24.95. Paper.

According to the foreword by Jacob Olupona, this book represents a culmination of several Ford Foundation–sponsored seminars, lectures, and discussions held over the course of four years in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Jamaica, and the United States, where various academics of religion and society interrogated issues related to the causes of poverty and the intersection between poverty and religion among African peoples, with an attendant focus on “poverty alleviation.” As suggested, too, in Esther Mombo’s chapter, “Religion and Materiality: The Case of Poverty Alleviation,” the inference is that “poverty eradication” is viewed as a distant ideal, and that food aid and other philanthropic antihunger organizations are forced to accept poverty alleviation as the only feasible goal, given the widening chasm under globalization and neocolonialism between the haves and have-nots in the world, particularly in Africa and the African diaspora. One does wonder, though, how, if organizations like the World Bank and the IMF advance antipoor policies like Structural Adjustment that in fact exacerbate poverty, the same organizations could be expected to alleviate poverty in “partnership with religious organizations, particularly churches” (xvii). A further question is “Why do religious traditions not demand the outright *eradication* of poverty as a *sine qua non* for ethical existence of their various adherents in the world?” Perhaps writers like Kossi Ayedze in the chapter “Poverty among African People and the Ambiguous Role of Christian Thought,” who proposes a materially oriented Christian gospel that caters to both souls and bodies (208), make us realize that Christian theologians still struggle with the injunction of Jesus to surrender everything to the poor and live a materially and spiritually selfless life. But the question still remains: Why does poverty exist in the world and Africa in particular, to the point that the modest United Nations Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015 is now viewed as unrealistic and unattainable?

Religion and Poverty is a broad-based text that charts the historical roots of poverty in Africa and the diaspora through genocidal processes like the trade in enslaved Africans from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries (see Katie Cannon’s chapter, “An Ethical Mapping of the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” and Barbara Bailey’s instructive discussion of the subjugation particularly of women, “Feminization of Poverty Across Pan African Societies: The Church’s Response—Alleviative or Emancipatory?”). The book highlights the challenges of economic globalization, which champions the transnational spread of corporate capitalism at the expense of informal entrepreneurs, especially women, who foster the survival of mil-

lions of families, youth, and children in the underdeveloped world (see “The Informal Economy and the Religion of Global Capital” by the South African theologian Takatso Mofokeng), and it also investigates the contradictions between such imported notions and indigenous African religio-cultural understandings—as, for example, in Maasai practice—that decry poverty and require collective access to land that cannot be owned (see Elizabeth Amoah’s “African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty”). Lewin Williams criticizes the globalization regime and the “Washington consensus” policies in the Caribbean, where the phenomenon of trickle-down wealth is clearly more trick than treat. Similarly, Dwight Hopkins and Linda Thomas discuss the combined horrors of economic impoverishment and structural state violence in Jamaica and South Africa; they note that these citizens are empowered not by CARICOM policies and nuances of “neo-liberal democracy,” but by Rastafarian and indigenous African Christian spirituality. Throughout the book this theme is expounded upon by many writers, particularly Madipoane Masenya in “The Bible and Poverty in African Pentecostal Christianity” and by Nyambura Njoroge in “The Struggle for Full Humanity in Poverty-Stricken Kenya.” Njoroge calls for “holistic and interdisciplinary” means by which poverty can be tackled through transformations in the “political, cultural, spiritual, material, and psychological” arenas.

The final section of the book, titled “Practical Theories for Combating Poverty,” includes contributions from theologians such as Laurenti Magesa of Tanzania, who analyzes the historical role played by *Ujamaa* in Julius Nyerere’s pursuit of social and economic justice in the 1960s and 1970s. Noel Erskine elucidates the historic role that churches in the Caribbean and in African American communities played in advancing struggles against racism and for economic emancipation. Simeon Ilesanmi probes the need for holistic approaches to human rights in Africa that are not only civil and political but also social and economic, while Peter Paris argues that the history of self-initiative in African and African diasporic struggles for emancipation and justice points the way forward for African national self-realization and extrication from the shackles of material poverty.

Religion and Poverty is an important book for all students of religion and poverty, particularly given the devastating impact of globalization on poor peoples in this new millennium. Its weakness, however, is its neglect of the Islamic world (since almost 50 percent of the African continent is Muslim) and especially its inadequate analysis of the formation of the African state itself, which functions as the most formidable obstacle to the emancipation of African peoples. All African states and governments, fragile and economically dependent as they are, are direct carryovers from the colonial era and continue to function as surrogates of Western imperialist powers. How can one expect such entities to promulgate human rights, let alone rights of the poor, when African regimes view their principle right as the right to exist and exploit the poor? It is no exaggeration to contend that impoverished

African peoples have survived in spite of the parasitic African states, living off the sweat and blood of the continent's toiling people.

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Gerrie ter Haar. *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. pp. ix + 120 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Cloth

Gerrie ter Haar's *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* provides new insight into the processes by which Africans refashioned Christianity to conform to Africa's unique spiritual needs while remaining faithful to the message of the Bible. Drawing on a variety of disciplines, including anthropology and neurological sciences, ter Haar highlights the complexity of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical worlds to show how Africans' acceptance of the mutual interactions between these two worlds demonstrates not only the uniqueness of African spirituality, but also the universality of beliefs often associated with magic or miracle. While modernity has driven the West, for example, to frown upon public discourses about beliefs in miracles, such beliefs persist in the private realm, further demonstrating the resilience of such beliefs in spite of modernity. Moreover, new discoveries in neurological science appear to support the validity of miraculous healing. The resilience of Africans' beliefs in the cohabitation of the human and the spiritual worlds, the author maintains, does not imply the absence of modernity, but rather the appropriation of modern material discourse to explain the realities of the human universe in ways that reinforce Christian beliefs. After all, the beliefs in miraculous healing powers, the language of charismatic African evangelists, and their liturgical practices are drawn not from indigenous beliefs (though these beliefs facilitate local receptivity to the message), but directly from the Bible. It is this holistic approach to Christian doctrine that facilitates the growth of Christianity in Africa at a time when Christianity is declining in the West. Yet the Western Christian world, we are reminded, yearns for a new spirituality that does not write off miracles as part of human pursuit for happiness. Africa is thus in the position to return a "pristine" Christianity to the West in subtle but dynamic ways.

The book comprises seven chapters. The first three expose the reader to the African spirit world and how this cosmology relates to the larger paradigm of the Christian scriptures—belief in miracles, spirit possession, and spiritual healing. Each chapter focuses on specific themes that tie African spirituality to Africans' material existence. Chapter 2 discusses the concept of "inculturation." Referring to ideas expressed earlier by the