

BOOK REVIEW

Jesse Zink. *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan: Civil War, Migration, and the Rise of Dinka Anglicanism*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018. xxv + 259 pp. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$49.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9781481308229.

Jesse Zink's *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan* provides an insightful analysis of the various religious changes that have occurred in South Sudan since the beginning of the Sudanese civil war, with a particular focus on the rise and consolidation of Christianity over the last sixty years. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the driving question of this book is clearly put: How does one explain the rapid growth of Christian adherence in Southern Sudan in the 1980s and the 1990s? This is a particularly interesting question, considering not only the weakness of the missionary effort and the indifference of many Dinka to Christianity before the war, but also the weak penetration of modernity among Dinka communities. By telling the tale of other African countries which have struggled with the consequences of turbulent independence and state consolidation processes, often involving long periods of violent conflict, Zink zooms in on the particular experience of Sudan since its independence in 1955, focusing particularly on the long and turbulent civil war between the Muslim North and the predominantly Animist South. The underlying goal is to unravel the religious implications of the civil war which, in the author's view, have historically been neglected at the expense of a predominant focus on its political, social, and economic dynamics. According to Zink, the lengthy duration of many civil wars means that their impacts on society can be subtle, complex, and often contradictory. In the case of Sudan, war had "an impact on gendered and generational relations, prompted new patterns of migration, and led people to ask new questions about their social existence and cosmological beliefs" (4).

This book is thus about what influenced religious change in South Sudan toward Christianity based on, and organized along, three specific themes. The first one is displacement caused by the civil war and the extent to which it was also used by the Dinka to actively respond to catastrophe, influencing how Christianity took ground. The second refers to the significant damage and devastation caused by war and violence, disrupting traditional

modes of production and generational relations, and pushing for new ways of survival by those affected by it, leading them to question their beliefs and how they interpret the world and the cosmos around them. The third and final theme is related to the nature of new and emerging religious expressions and symbols—material and non-material—resulting from the civil war, particularly the hymns, the sermons, and the actions undertaken in the name of faith. All these issues, the author argues, are fundamental to the arguments put forward in the book: that the civil war created patterns of migration leading to the expansion of Christianity among the Dinka, particularly women and young people; that the devastation resulting from the civil war led many Dinka people to search for new resources and survival possibilities, often resulting in an increasing disbelief in traditional religious narratives; and finally, that the emerging Dinka Christianity maintained significant resonance with preceding non-Christian religious beliefs, particularly in terms of their institutions and practices.

Overall, based on his analysis and empirical knowledge, Zink considers the popular Christian movement to be a totalizing phenomenon, encompassing all aspects of Dinka society in its various forms and dimensions and narrowing the distance that had once existed between Christianity and Dinka beliefs. Contrary to what happened in other parts of Africa where the religious change involved Christian communities taking over existing sacred sites and making them holy in new ways, in South Sudan a new Christian community was created, thus avoiding engendering conflict and resentment. Throughout the book, there are various references to the way that Dinka converts came to apprehend and understand Christianity as “a new and important resource in a changing world” (214), often involving also a certain degree of rupture with existing religious practices. But to some extent, Zink also shows us how there were important elements of continuity in this process of religious change, both at the level of landscape and social practice as well as in the use of prophetic material.

In sum, by focusing in the particular case of South Sudan, Jesse Zink’s *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan* provides an interesting and timely analysis of the complex and often neglected dynamics behind the processes of religious change in conflict settings, seeking to “broaden conversations about religious change, violence and identity across sub-Saharan Africa” (225), while at the same time leaving an open door to future research on topics related to the analysis of the practices surrounding social organization for young men in Dinka society.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Collins, Robert O. 1999. "Africans, Arabs, and Islamists: From the Conference Tables to the Battlefields in the Sudan." *African Studies Review* 42 (2): 105–23. doi:10.2307/525367.
- Johnson, Douglas H. 2014. "The Political Crisis in South Sudan." *African Studies Review* 57 (3): 167–74. doi:10.1017/asr.2014.97.
- Reeves, Eric. 2011. "Humanitarian Obstruction as a Crime Against Humanity: The Example of Sudan." *African Studies Review* 54 (3): 165–74. doi:10.1353/arw.2011.0050.