

BOOK REVIEWS

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: a church of strangers, by Ilana van Wyk, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 299 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781107057241.

Every now and then a book is published that unsettles common-sense assumptions about a particular field of study. Ilana van Wyk's *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: A Church of Strangers* is one such book. Van Wyk pursues an ethnographic study of one of the most controversial Christian churches in South Africa, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), which has its headquarters in Brazil, in order to question the widespread idea that much of what Christian religious practice is about is "socialising" and building community. Accordingly the book provides important insights into a religious organisation in which congregants are told to be suspicious of their co-religionists and in which pastors are discouraged from developing social ties with them. As such, this book is sure to surprise and promises to engender fruitful debates not only in the field of the anthropology of Christianity, but also among scholars interested in the role of religion in Africa more generally.

Writing about the UCKG is nonetheless a precarious undertaking. As regards South Africa, rumours and sensationalist media reports containing allegations of satanism and economic exploitation of the poorest sections in South African society make any attempt to isolate the church from this context of critical public perceptions futile. Moreover, as van Wyk shows, these perceptions have an influence on how the clergy address the wider public and how members of the church interact with non-members and reflect on their own religious practice. It is, therefore, a virtue of the book that van Wyk allows the reader to track her quest to understand this church by providing detailed descriptions of personal encounters developed to acquire intimate insights into the church members' points of view, an experience which in many cases left her with a certain sense of unease.

With an estimated membership of between 400 000 and one million just eleven years after the founding of its South African branch, the UCKG can be said to be not just one of the fastest growing churches in the country, but also a religious organisation that, over time, has acquired an unusual degree of public visibility through its spectacular church buildings in prime urban locations, as well as its extensive and professional use of media technologies. In general, the church is characterised by an intriguing tension between, on the one hand, the inductive rationality of its strategies when headquarters decide on the location of a new branch (involving market research, legal evaluations and considerations about urban planning) and, on the other hand, its hostility towards scriptural hermeneutics and its vague theological messages centring on elementary demonological ideas.

In contrast to previous work on the UCKG, which tends to analyse it in macrostructural terms by seeing it as "both a condition for and cipher of larger economic processes" (27), the aim of van Wyk's book is to examine the religious experiences of local congregants against the background of their sociocultural perspectives on life. Based on fieldwork conducted in the early 2000s, what lies at the core of the book is a case study of a branch in Durban supplemented by insights gained from other branches located in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg and Pretoria.

The main body of the book is divided into seven chapters, each of which focuses on a specific thematic dimension. The first chapter following the Introduction discusses aspects of the spiritual war against Satan as pursued in this church, highlighting that demons are seen here as constantly

adjusting their strategies in their attempt to “block the realisation of God’s blessings in people’s lives” (41), which also means that ultimate salvation is considered an impossibility. In addition, this chapter highlights the ways in which demonological ideas inform social interactions, especially given the widespread assumption that demons can be passed on like viruses. Van Wyk argues that the malleable and poorly elaborated theology of the UCKG allows its branches to assimilate themselves to different local contexts and the demonological ideas that prevail within them.

Besides an excursion into the Brazilian history of the UCKG and its transnational connections, the third chapter is devoted to a thought-provoking analysis of the mechanisms by which the clergy of the church are prevented from developing social ties and loyalties with local congregants. Never staying for more than a couple of months in the same location, pastors are regularly transferred from one branch to another. For the congregants, this creates a sense of unpredictability and conveys to them the idea that it is the church organisation itself that is the site of religious continuity, its representatives, by contrast, being exchangeable and ephemeral.

These findings stand in contrast to the role of the local “church assistants” who are discussed in Chapter 4. Focusing on the gender aspects of relationships, van Wyk examines the religious biographies of and interactions between these assistants, most of whom are female, as well as their role in supervising congregants and enabling the clergy to perform their tasks. She argues that these “assistants formed the only stable structure in the UCKG, creating the type of community commonly referred to in the literature on Pentecostal churches” (91).

Local concepts concerning the person, the body’s permeability and the use of magical substances that inform congregants’ ideas about demonic “infections” are at the centre of Chapter 5. What is fascinating here is that the clergy admonishes congregants to be wary of “emotional faith,” urging them instead to pursue an “intelligent faith” based on rational principles. For instance, the clergy promote an efficiency-oriented “two-step plan” which requires believers to make financial sacrifices and then “test God” (119) by demanding blessings from him, a form of interaction that can be interpreted as an attempt to force God into reciprocity.

Chapter 6 addresses representations of the UCKG as well as the use of language in it. Besides dealing with popular gossip and mass-media reports about the church, van Wyk argues that, in the UCKG, congregants “listened and talked in ways that suggested that language was not merely a medium of communication, referential or metaphorical, but an important lever in the intersections between visible and invisible” (157). This also explains why the UCKG sees public testimonials as a *practical* means of fighting demons.

Given the sensationalist tone with which the UCKG’s emphasis on tithing and giving donations is usually described, it is laudable that this aspect is only dealt with at greater length towards the end of the book (Chapter 7), thus ensuring that other aspects are not overshadowed by it. Van Wyk describes the perfidious methods used by the clergy to talk economically destitute congregants into making financial sacrifices, for example, by declaring donations to be a test of faith. Even worse, there is a sense in which the intensity of a given congregant’s desperation in giving more than he or she is actually able to afford is said to add power to the pledge thus made.

Finally, Chapter 8 recapitulates and gives more ethnographic substance to the most prominent theme of the book, namely the UCKG’s asocial, and in certain regards even anti-social, orientation. It is here that van Wyk spells out the varied manifestations and consequences of this orientation with regard to, for example, the church’s teachings concerning the “dangers” of empathy and the “uselessness” of helping other people in need, as well as the resulting tensions between congregants and their own families.

This is an ethnographically rich, multifaceted and broadly contextualised book that not only provides new insights into the UCKG, but also allows us to acquire a better understanding of how impoverished sections of South African society struggle to come to grips religiously with what is experienced as a highly uncertain and threatening life situation. Van Wyk has succeeded in navigating the difficult terrain of representing this controversial church and of showing how certain

aspects of its religious practice that are viewed in a critical light by outsiders are perceived and experienced by the congregants themselves. In this way, the book is very useful in allowing a more balanced assessment of the UCKG to be made. Also, as is evident in the review of its chapters above, the book offers important and original thoughts that promise to inspire further debate in the anthropology of religion.

That said, the way the book is structured does not make it easy for the reader to make the most of it. For example, in lacking an overview of the chapters to come, the Introduction does not give the reader any clear orientation regarding the range of issues to be dealt with. Also, the ordering of the chapters and of the sections within chapters is not made plausible enough, so that it is not always easy to detect the guiding thread of the argumentation. Nonetheless, in the final analysis this is a minor shortcoming compared to what one can learn from van Wyk's insightful analysis into a "not particularly nice church" (23) in present-day South Africa.

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