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# BOOK REVIEW

## *Christian Faith and Namibian Liberation: An Ethnographic Biography of Salatiel Ailonga*

Williams, C., (Suffolk: James Currey, 2025), pp. 224, ISBN 9781847013613

### I

I first read Williams' book, *Christian Faith and Namibian Liberation: An Ethnographic Biography of Salatiel Ailonga*, over the Easter holidays of 2026. It had not occurred to me at the time, but later when writing this review, I became aware of its significance: one could not help but see in it the resonances and continuities between, on the one hand, a "Christian faith" – the kind of conviction that operates not through self-assertion of the truth, but one of active self-effacement that occurs in light of the truth of Christ's witness – and, on the other hand, the necessity of freedom or "liberation" that is promised and inextricably linked to it, and to which Easter is the principal act of commemoration. Thus, despite its stated anthropological, historical, and ethnographic aims within the context of southern African liberation anti-colonial history, I would suggest that there is a theological arc simmering not so much in the background of the book, but in the in-between, the silences, the relationships, the networks, the patient acts of service, and the difficult moments of witnessing to the truth that flow from and through the life of Salatiel Ailonga. In this respect, one can recall Saint Augustine, for whom

> religious truth belongs to a different order, to the order or sphere of what Augustine called '*facere veritatem*', 'making' or 'doing' the truth (Caputo 2001:115).

For the purposes of this review, I provide a short overview of the biographical content of Williams' book, followed by a set of methodological reflections and questions that may be important for theologians and religious studies scholars, given the audience of this Acta Theologica Journal.

*Christian faith and Namibian liberation* is a richly researched text, tied to interests stretching back to Williams' doctoral research on the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) exile camps.[1] The text is situated within this anti-colonial and liberation struggle history: between SWAPO and the Christian churches for whom South African apartheid policy in Namibia would be considered irreconcilable with the Christian faith. In particular, however, it focuses not so much on church-state relations, or the history of church-institutional struggle, but rather on the under-appreciated role of Salatiel Ailonga (1932-2015) – as a figure within these liberation movements – and through a feature of historical narration, namely the experiential quality of faith as integral to political life. This intervention places Williams' book alongside research that has focused on the influence of Christian discourse in nationalist liberation struggles, Black liberation theologies, and biographies of struggle icons "bound by faith" (Walshe 1995).[2]

The first introductory chapter will be of interest to historians, ethnographers, and theologians concerned with questions of methodology – especially the difference between "archival ethnography" and "ethnographic biography" (Williams 2025:24-31). It also sets out several of Williams' central theses regarding the role of faith in anti-colonial liberation struggles; the way in which historiography has shaped the interpretation of this legacy of resistance and exile, as well as the function of "solidarity" as defined by interpersonal, transnational relationships, and networks, as opposed to merely international forms of solidarity revolving around nationalist organisations and their archives. For Williams, this book is an attempt to address these lacunae within the historical literature on Namibia's liberation struggle, what one might call historiography based on an underlying "poetics of relation" (Glissant 1997). In this instance, through the study of archival material outlining the concrete relationships and connections with organisations such as the Finnish Missionary Society, Lutheran World Federation, and other Protestant ecumenical organisations, in which Ailonga participated, a more "cosmopolitan

1 This was later published. See Williams (2015).

2 See also Magaziner (2010); Couper (2010); Battle (2021).

nationalism" – dynamic and at times conflictual – emerged, in contrast to a strict "exclusive nationalism" that formed around SWAPO (Williams 2025).

The remainder of the book follows five chapters in chronological order. Chapter two covers the period from Ailonga's birth in 1932 at Nakayale, the Finnish Lutheran mission station in Ombalantu, until the early 1960s. The chapter focuses on the early Christian formations of Salatiel's childhood and youth; from his teenage conversion as part of the first generation of converts in the Ovamboland region to later early-adulthood, where he was contracted into the harsh labour system of South West Africa. In these early theologically formative years, Williams stresses the Protestant pietism evident in Finnish Lutheranism that would express its sensibilities throughout Salatiel's life, but with the crucial difference that he would never adopt only an interior approach to his Christian faith. Ailonga came to believe that to be a "Christian" and a "freedom fighter" were not mutually exclusive, much to the chagrin of both SWAPO members critical of Christian missionaries, and of missionaries critical or distanced from liberation politics.

The third chapter traces Ailonga's move in late 1963 to Tanzania, where he would live in this bustling junction of SWAPO exiles, study the Bible, and enter formal theological training at Makumira Seminary, where an emerging practice of liberation theology began to surface. Such practice would start to distinguish between an unconditional alliance to nationalist movements, on the one hand, and one that would transcend earthly political identities by remaining faithful to Christ alone, on the other. Crucially, the chapter not only positions Ailonga's early ministry through a social network of Bible studies and missionary influences, but it also introduces and follows the romantic relationship and later marriage which Salatiel began with his life-long partner, the Finnish missionary Anita Ailonga (née Smeds), whose oral testimony informs much of Williams' archival record.

Chapter four circles around events in Zambia and Salatiel's chaplaincy to Namibian refugees in Lusaka at the time of the "SWAPO crisis" from 1974, reaching a head in 1976, when thousands of so-called "dissidents" were arrested and some killed by SWAPO leadership working in tandem with the Zambian army and police forces. As one of the first SWAPO-affiliated religious leaders, Ailonga's chaplaincy to Namibians in exile grew exponentially in the mid 1970s, when thousands of political refugees – some "Christian" but almost all "Namibian" – found themselves in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Ailonga's extensive international church-aid networks and the growing internal ruptures within SWAPO's leadership placed Salatiel at the nexus of the developing crisis. In fact, Ailonga's ability to solicit aid outside of SWAPO influence and channel it to whomever he saw was in need – those on either side of the leadership schism – meant that he was able to enact a commitment

to his Christian faith that transcended political identity, while also becoming a target for political opponents. The latter eventually led to his and Anita's expulsion as "prohibited immigrants" from Zambia and their exile period in Finland from June 1976.

Chapter five discusses the 14-year period of exile in Finland from 1976-1989. Integral to it are the "works of solidarity", to which Ailonga committed himself at the margins of the international community in support of SWAPO and Namibian liberation. Williams reveals that, through the network of interpersonal relationships, detainees, and wider social networks, a foundation of solidarity was formed from which dissident SWAPO members, pastors, and diplomats could broker the release of hundreds of illegally detained Namibians, as well as restructure significant new flows of aid, despite living a relatively isolated and alienated existence as an African in Finland.

Finally, Chapter six adds an essential and illuminating addition to the discussion on Nambian post-liberation historiography and the discourse around national reconciliation. Attending to a meticulously preserved and organised archive of letters and correspondences kept by Anita, one learns of Salatiel's contributions to Namibia's difficult transition to democracy in 1989, following the repatriation of thousands of Namibians from exile, the Ailonga's included. Part of this difficulty was the process of reconciliation itself, whereby SWAPO's own humanitarian crimes had to be accounted for. Salatiel would play a pivotal role alongside figures such as the Lutheran Missionary Siegfried Groth, whose important work, *Namibia, The wall of silence: The dark days of the liberation struggle* (1995), detailed the extensive SWAPO atrocities in exile camps. In particular, Ailonga's letter, dating back to 1977, which Groth had initially published in the German church newspaper and then was picked up on by the Namibian press on the eve of their first democratic election in 1989, draws direct attention to the humanitarian crimes in the SWAPO camps to the church leadership, who had otherwise remained silent. The chapter traces some of the consequences set in motion for the national dialogue regarding reconciliation, one that could not be properly confronted if "truth-telling" was to be avoided.

In the next section, I want to move to some more open and methodological reflections on the book and pose some questions to be left unanswered by this review.

## II

Williams' book is, first, an attempt to problematise the relationship between "faith and resistance". Williams asks: What happens when the life of complex actors, who happen to be religious – one thinks of Ailonga, but also of

Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naudé, Trevor Huddleston, and so on – get shoe-horned into a dichotomy between their personal faith and the life of politics? Does such a separation or carving out of these actors properly account not only for their activism, but also crucially for the role their faith plays in such work? For Williams (2025:7), this tendency in scholarship not only "flattens" our understanding of faith and thus misses the "interior life of religious experience". It also crucially marginalises it in such a way that it can always be cut off from analysis, kept away in the privacy of one's own piety and private devotion. But, as Williams demonstrates, and which scholars of religion and theology have also articulated for some time (given questions over the validity and presuppositions of secular modernity), faith is, to some extent, always-already implicated in a political-public dimension.

In other words, faith cannot be separated from politics, but neither can it be reduced to it. This has crucial implications for understanding Ailonga, for in Ailonga's life, as noted, faith transcends blind nationalist commitment and rather universalises a commitment to justice in any, and all, particular contexts. In the case of Ailonga's faith, the scattered moments of which Williams' book deftly elevates – from his early years at the Ovambo Mission Station, to encounters with missionaries in exile, studies at Makumira Seminary, his impartial chaplaincy to exiled Namibians, and his ongoing advocacy and solicitation for support from church organisations abroad – all speak to an understanding of faith as, what Augustine called above, *facere veritatem*. Where the "truth" of faith is not found in an intellectual assent to a set of propositions but rather in a call issuing from the hyperbolic demands of the kingdom of God (*i.e.* to love thy neighbours and enemies as oneself), to which the Christian life is but an imperfect response and enactment. Indeed, Ailonga's life is also filled with imperfections, as Williams shows in an account that is far from hagiographical.

This point relates to some issues of methodology that is part of Williams' intervention into some of the disciplinary straight-jacketing which occurs in scholarship dedicated to the legacy of anti-colonial struggle in Africa, in general, and in anti-colonial struggle in Namibia, in particular. Thus, Williams aims to deconstruct a dominant historiographic strategy, whereby narrations of nationalist resistance – and the heroes thereof – can be told separately from the content of their faith commitments. Methodologically, this is where Williams' "ethnographic biography" comes into view. The latter gets into the grit of religious experience itself: mediated by the details of the relationships and texts to which the ethnographer is attuned. Such is particularly useful when the religious is *de facto* a point of reference for societies for whom secularisation is a foreign category.

However, if one can agree that the dynamic or distinction between faith and "the public"[3] is one that is essentially untenable, then what is one to make of the deeper claim about the relative contingency of "secular" life as such? This is a broader question which Williams' book does not aim to solve and one should not expect a resolution to be offered, given such a question's magnitude (and pugnacity in some circles). My hunch is that it is in the background, if not for the ethnographer, then at least for the scholar of religion or theologian.

This leads to another set of questions, to which Williams' book also provides only a tacit response. What kind of interpretive work does the category of faith do in ethnography? If faith is not simply an empirical datum which orientates a life in a political way, but rather is a religious experience mediated by Scripture and the interpersonal relationships that revolve around it, does it not still function, in this instance, in a highly cognitivist way? That is to say: Is faith merely the outcome, political or not, of a set of conscious decisions about the way in which the biblical text is to be interpreted and lived out?

It seems that an "ethnographic biography", in the way in which Williams presents it, is trying to undermine this gesture. Thus, the question could then be raised, what would a "theological ethnographic biography" then look like – one that explores the life of faith as it is lived out in all the multiplicity of its connections and relations (indeed through a Geertzian "thick description"), but from within its own grammar? A further question relates also to the efficacy of the anthropology of Christianity more generally: To what extent does the latter still treat "faith" as a category for social meaning as opposed to reading faith as an interpretation of cultural-social practices in relation to God or the transcendent? Another way of posing this question would be to say, perhaps to Williams himself: To what extent can the anthropologist interested in this type of investigation really extricate him-/herself from the ontological claims implied within it? Can one do this work from the "third person" perspective at all, as it were?

## III

Williams (2025:14) states fairly explicitly that studying the relation between Christian faith and anti-colonial politics is meant as a contribution to the understanding of (political) solidarity. In this instance, solidarity is found in the interstices of relations and social networks that are forged together in the fight against oppression, but that are crucially only tangential to the nation-state and its relationship to international or nationalist organisations. In this

3 It is arguable that the category of the "public" is basically no longer relevant in our digitally mediated and affectively-attuned age (see Clough 2018).

instance, conventional interpretations of solidarity are understood as enfolded into the "politics of statecraft" as opposed to what Williams is after, namely a solidarity forged through the networks of friendships. Indeed, the latter, for Williams, starts to become indistinguishable from solidarity itself.

However, if Christian faith is at least one kind of motivational force behind understanding anti-colonial politics, and particularly, the forging of solidarity outside dominant nationalist categories of social pressure, then within the context of this study – namely the life of Ailonga – what could be said about the distinctly "Christian" definition of solidarity or friendship at play in this instance? In other words: What difference does it make, with reference to the title of the book, to have "Christian faith"? One senses again that Williams provides only tacit answers to these questions, which one can perhaps draw out more concretely. For example, Williams highlights the communal nature of Christian solidarity for Ailonga – "transnational communities" such as the FMS, LWF, and other Protestant ecumenical organisations, on the one hand, and exile SWAPO dissidents, European friends, and missionaries, on the other. Crucially, the latter challenged the idea that allegiance to SWAPO was synonymous with being Namibian. But this point about solidarity is not limited to communality or relationships and is, indeed, also tied to a deeper theological claim over which one should hover. For example, one needs to only scroll social media feeds to find expressions of "solidarity" for victims of injustice, at once used to express support or sympathy, whether as a "moral intensifier" positioning oneself on the side of the victim, but also as a way of obfuscating one's own complicity. To "express" solidarity is sometimes to performatively make known that one is not the perpetrator (Williams 2026).

These dynamics, while rife in the world at present, were also at play in Namibia's democratic transition, where solidarity could be deployed as merely gestural to side, in principle, with the victim and to obfuscate one's own complicity. But for Ailonga, (Christian) solidarity is not necessarily a virtue that is cultivated, but rather an inexorable human condition that encapsulates two important truths. First, one cannot unequivocally identify with someone else – the community is not homogeneous, the "Other" must remain, to some extent, "other". This idea allowed Ailonga not to conflate anti-colonial struggle with SWAPO without critique. Secondly, to be in solidarity as a condition of existence is still to recognise the innate sociality of our being which demands threads of obligation and reciprocity. This idea allowed Ailonga to attend and open his home to everyone (regardless of their political standing or affiliation) and for which he paid a high price, as the aftermath of the 1976 crisis demonstrates. Christian solidarity is thus "hard work" – a work to recognise our fellow human beings in their implacable otherness (as inheritors just as much of God's image) as well as in their commonality with us.

## V

This review has not highlighted the relationship which Williams draws out between Lutheran Pietism – that Reformation tradition which stands behind Ailonga's Christian formation – and liberation theology, which Ailonga seems to have encountered only later on. Nor does it discuss how these movements became intertwined, and where, for Ailonga, within the context of the anti-colonial struggle, the latter did not efface the former, even though the established Lutheran churches were indeed initially fairly hostile to liberation movements and were not entirely helpful in the work of "reconciliation" after Namibia's liberation. Nevertheless, without resolving these dynamics, one can surely turn to the South African context, where, as Williams notes, reconciliation has been studied at length within the paradigm of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The successes and failures of this process are well known, but whatever they are, there is a sense in which "truth-telling or avowing truth" remains central (see Van der Riet 2021). In the case of Namibia, which never had its own truth and reconciliation commission, one can surely affirm that, in this book, Williams has offered a much-needed contribution to "truth-telling" or "doing the truth" – *facere veritatem.*

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