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BOOK REVIEW

Towards the sustainable well-being of communities. Africa, the modern empire, and Christianity

Van Niekerk, A., (Aosis Publishing, Cape Town, 2024), pp. 392, ISBN 978-1-77634-242-6 (print); ISBN 978-1-77634-243-3 (ebook).

The book is available online at https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/284. The printed book can be ordered for R490 (shipping included).

The author grew up at the Stofberg Theological School, where his father trained ministers for the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. He studied theology and did his Doctorate on struggle poetry. In the biographical note of the book (p. xxi), more is mentioned about the PhD research:

> His book on four poets from Soweto and Alexandra in the 1970s, *Dominee, are you listening to the drums?*, was co-winner of the Sunday Times Literary Award for Political Writing in 1984. He has published several books and more than 50 academic articles.

After his studies, he spent his first five years as a missionary to the Venda-speaking people in the northern part of South Africa. He followed in his father's footsteps, becoming rector at the Stofberg Theological School (1988-1993) during the hectic period when Black students fought against apartheid. At that time, he wrote the influential

Saam in Africa (Tafelberg Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1992), which was translated as *Our common future in Africa* (Tafelberg Uitgewers, Cape Town, 1993).

Local realities and exposure to events in other African countries confronted Van Niekerk with the disturbing realisation that, although the church is growing strongly in Africa, it has hardly any impact on poverty, violence, and corruption. He was challenged to grapple with three realities: the African world and mindset, the modern capitalistic global empire, and Christianity. The tension between the values, culture, and interactions of these forces helps explain the problems in South Africa and globally. According to Van Niekerk, we must look deeper and try to understand traditional African cultures, as they have much to offer our multicultural society. Nobody can avoid the modern world, the internet, and mobile phones. Africa can help us deal with the negative side of global changes and challenges.

One of these challenges is the reality of poor and suffering people, people with hardly any to no hope of a better life. This reality is a massive challenge to the church. Can it foster community, trust, and dialogue that encourage the two cultural groups to listen to one another and collaborate towards finding solutions?

Van Niekerk summarises the two clashing cultures, identities or value systems (115):

> One of the most basic differences that African writers see between the African worldview and the modern Western one is that the former tends to search for continuity, harmony, balance, unity and synthesis, while the Western mind is much more interested in reductionist analysis, in making distinctions, in individualism and in differentiation and specialisation.

People in Africa are drawn to and disillusioned by modernity. Africans often struggle to find an identity that helps them endure. The atrocities of colonialism, Western individualism, and selfishness conflict with their innermost selves. Westernised Africans, Black and White, rarely realise that Africa has solutions to modern and post-modern dilemmas and issues. The book encourages the reader to listen to both sides and to understand what is happening to us. He explains this by means of case studies. The analyses employ an interdisciplinary research methodology. It is never superficial. The reader discovers an in-depth understanding of our societal realities.

To address these challenges, the writer and his colleagues played a key role in creating the Nova organisation. They explain their vision (nova.org.za):

> The Nova vision is household well-being across Southern Africa. Our overarching goal is to be the professional partner of choice for households and other stakeholders working towards improving the well-being of low-income communities responsibly.

A significant part of the book concentrates on case studies that outline the process of working towards sustainable well-being for communities. The realities of almost all aspects of South African society are found in these case studies and discussions! We have the distinct feeling that these case studies open windows to the often-unknown world of suffering and poverty around us.

Van Niekerk's understanding of the first two realities with which he grapples, namely the African world and mindset, as well as the modern, Western, capitalistic, global empire, is impressive. He grew up and studied in and between these worlds, personally experiencing the clash and confrontation between them.

I found that his way of dealing with the third reality, namely Christianity, was equally impressive. His Christian faith and understanding of the Bible are clear and focused. Christianity has a sad legacy of being misused by cultural groups to support their own nationalistic or economic dreams, colonialism, apartheid, and prosperity-based mega-churches being well-known examples.

Van Niekerk's chapter on theology (Chapter 13:243-278) refers to and uses mature and respected evangelical theologians. The approach can be summarised by referring to the section headed "How the Christian faith works" (247):

> In Luke 13:20-21, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to yeast that is mixed into a large amount of flour until it has worked through the dough … Elsewhere (Matt. 5:13) Jesus compares the kingdom of God to salt …

The next section is headed: The Kingdom of God, the fullness of life and the ethical quality of life (248). The Kingdom of God is the central message of the Bible. He refers John 10:10: "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly …" (248):

> 'Abundant life', just like 'the kingdom of God', can be understood as a life in which all relations are sound, honest and just.

The remaining chapters in the book illustrate how the Nova group operates. The case studies take the reader into the real world where people are struggling to survive. We are introduced to the forces that dominate many of our societies, and we become familiar with the typical stances of the African and modern global empire when they confront each other.

Towards the sustainable well-being of communities: Africa, the modern empire, and Christianity understands what is happening in our continent and can guide us to "let thy Kingdom come". Please do not leave it to theological schools to deal with this issue. Use it in your congregation. Congregations that focus on the survival of their own particular cultural group die within a generation or two. In contrast, even the smallest congregations can reach out to serve their communities, address needs, cross boundaries, and listen to, and work with "the other", as Christ did. Van Niekerk's book challenges us to rediscover life, to become beacons of hope, yeast, salt, and light!