

Reviewer

Dr. Tshenolo Jennifer Madigele

Affiliation

Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies, UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa; Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana

ORCID link

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1044-9760>

Correspondence to

Dr. Tshenolo Jennifer Madigele

E-mail

madigeletj@ub.ac.bw

Dates

Received: July 23, 2025

Revised: October 15, 2025

Accepted: October 27, 2025

Published: December 20, 2025

How to cite

Madigele, T.J. (2025) 'Book Review: Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society edited by P. Öhlmann, I. Swart, B. Weyel, S. Kumalo and M-L. Frost' (2025), *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 38(2). 5 pages.

<https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2025/v38n2r1>

Review includes

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

Data availability

- Open data set
- All data included
- On request from author/s
- Not available
- Not applicable

Editors

Dr. Nelly Mwale
Prof. Lee-Shae Salma Scharnick-Udemans

Funding

No funding was received for this article.

© 2025. The author/s. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution License.

Book Review

Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds. (2025) *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 511 pages.

<https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666500718>. ISBN 978-3-666-50071-8 (digital); ISBN 978-3-525-50071-2 (print).

Abstract

This book review critically examines *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. The book honors Wilhelm Gräb. It explores the complex link between lived religion and development using interdisciplinary, empirical, and decolonial frameworks. The book offers insights into practical theology, indigenous epistemologies and ecological ethics. Its strengths include an African focus and theoretical innovations. Limitations exist in conceptual density and chapter quality. The book's importance for Southern Africa will be discussed. Recommendations for future scholarly inquiry will conclude this review.

Keywords: Contextual theology, decolonial theology, ecological theology, indigenous spirituality, development, religion, practical theology, symbolic hermeneutics

Introduction

This notable academic contribution pays tribute to Wilhelm Gräb (1948-2023). Edited by Philipp Öhlmann *et al.*, this book comprises 25 essays. It investigates the interplay between lived religion and lived development. These frameworks highlight a growing awareness of the deep interconnection of religious life and societal shifts. This connection is particularly apparent in postcolonial societies where change often follows a bottom-up approach. The editors avoid regarding religion as a static set of beliefs. They consider religion as a vital part of human life, pictured through symbols, actions, and cultural settings. By stressing these lived realities, the book widens the scope of practical theology, religious studies, and development discussions. It offers new views on how religion functions outside formal institutions. The editors masterfully blend theory with real-world examples, encouraging readers to view religion and development as intertwined realities that continually influence each other. This holistic and context-aware approach makes the work both intellectually stimulating and useful.

Thematic Structure and Contributions

The book unfolds into five parts: *Lived Theology*, *Lived Religion*, *Lived Theory*, *Lived Development*, and *Lived Ecology*. Each part reveals the expansive nature of Gräb's academic work, spanning theology, environmental studies, sociology, and anthropology. Collectively, these sections establish a connected account, moving from theoretical thought to practical instances and evolving from individual lived experience to collective shifts.

Lived Religion as a Hermeneutical Lens

In chapter 2, *Lived religion as a hermeneutical lens, or a decolonial approach to religion and development*, Gräb presents an interesting critique regarding how religion is often handled in modern discussions. He contends that religion is often diminished to merely being a functional instrument used within development policy, which unfortunately ignores its more profound importance. Instead, he suggests moving towards what he calls 'lived development'. This concept emphasizes things like local agency, symbolic meaning-making, and even embodied spirituality. Gräb argues that religion is not just something on the periphery of human experience, it is central to human culture itself and needs to be understood as such. This chapter is theoretically insightful and has practical applications. It introduces the idea of religion operating as a cultural program – a recurring theme in the book.

Practical Theology and Case Studies

This part of the book presents empirical research. It focuses on religious expression. Akca's work explores Ramadan among German Muslims. She argues that fasting encourages environmental awareness and spiritual renewal. This links rituals to environmental ethics. Similarly, Farah Hasan examines headscarves. These are worn by Muslim women in Berlin. Her research maintains that religious identity is expressed through consumer choices. Marcen, on the other hand applies Gräb's hermeneutics to chronic pain. She reveals how suffering disrupts meaning. Yet, it also fosters self-understanding and relational healing. Her call for a caring approach to medicine aligns with Gräb's focus. This makes her research impactful.

African Initiated Churches and Indigenous Development

Compelling empirical insights emerge from African contexts. These are found in the *Lived Development* section. Here the focus is on African Initiated Churches (AICs) and indigenous belief systems. These challenge Western development paradigms. Van der Puije details how AICs promote self-determined development. This development is rooted in spiritual empowerment, communal ethics and ecological stewardship. She highlights religious actors as epistemic agents. Adufuli and Merle delve into the Ewe concept of *Dagbe*. Their work indicates how indigenous beliefs inform sustainable livelihoods. It also guides ancestor veneration and social cohesion. This offers a nuanced view of development. Chitando and Mlambo analyze 'cursed' goats in Zimbabwe. They explore how African Traditional Religions shape environmental care. They also examine ritual ethics and moral reasoning. This advances a postcolonial critique. These chapters align with Gräb's call for a decolonial theology. His theology values symbolic and spiritual dimensions of everyday life. It also values community agency.

Lived Ecology and Climate Theology

The final section explores the religion-ecology link. It specifically links to African contexts. Asamoah-Gyadu demonstrates how Akan cosmology informs eco-theologies. He argues that religious narratives shape ecological consciousness. Stork on the other hand examines AICs' responses to climate change. He highlights the role of embodied knowledge and ritual adaptation in resilience. Mapitsa presents a compelling case for ecological sustainability. This comes from the Balobedu traditional religion. It illustrates how traditional beliefs contribute to environmental ethics. They also support community-based conservation. These chapters emphasize lived practices and indigenous wisdom, also focusing on relational ecological care, asserting that contextually understood religious traditions are vital. They are crucial for climate justice and ecological transformation. This critical reflection considers their theoretical implications. It also addresses practical challenges. Furthermore, it examines their broader significance for academic discourse.

Critical Reflections

Strengths

A compelling strength of the book comprises its interdisciplinary depth, combining theology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, and development studies. This integrated approach captures the complexity of lived religion, reflecting Gräb's scholarly spirit and fostering a holistic understanding across cultural and institutional landscapes.

Equally noteworthy is the book's intentional and effective decolonial orientation. By foregrounding African voices and indigenous epistemologies, it offers a sustained critique of Western hegemonic frameworks in religious and development discourses. This is supported by grounded case studies and theoretical reflections, centering local agency and spiritual knowledge systems. The book effectively balances perspectives from the Global North and South, offering particularly strong African case studies.

The book also benefits from empirical richness, drawing case studies from diverse geographical contexts like Germany, South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and West Africa. These studies illustrate theoretical concepts by bringing to life how religion is lived, negotiated, and transformed. Chapters collectively demonstrate lived religion as dynamic, responsive, and deeply embedded in daily life, through fasting rituals, ecological practices, or urban spirituality. Furthermore, the book addresses pressing contemporary issues such as climate change, migration, gender, and digitalization through a nuanced religious lens.

Importantly, the book honors Gräb's legacy through critical engagement, with contributors building on his ideas and extending them into new domains like digital religion, ecological theology, and social work. This openness ensures Gräb's work remains relevant and generative, inviting further dialogue. The work is supported by a rich bibliography, engaging foundational scholars like Orsi, Ammerman, McGuire, Schleiermacher, and Geertz, as well as contemporary scholarship.

Limitations

Despite its insights, the book has limitations. A challenge is the philosophical density of certain *Lived Theory* chapters. While intellectually rigorous and grounded in figures like Ricœur, Kant, and Cassirer, their complexity can make them inaccessible or abstract for readers unfamiliar with continental philosophy or theological hermeneutics, sometimes obscuring practical relevance.

Additionally, the contribution quality is uneven. While many chapters are well-structured, insightful, and empirically grounded, some attempt to synthesize too many theoretical strands without sufficient anchoring in lived experience. This can lead to conceptual overload, compromising clarity and coherence, and leaving readers struggling to discern core arguments.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this analysis are the following research ideas that build on the book's insights, particularly in Africa.

First, more research is needed regarding religion's impact. This includes its effect on economic development and business practices. The book generally touches on development. However, specific studies are needed to indicate how religious beliefs affect business outcomes within African companies. Comparative studies with regions like Latin America or Asia would also reveal religion's broader role in institutions.

Second, a deeper look into the coexistence of African traditional religions and Christianity is crucial. This is specifically important given Christianity's rapid growth across Africa. Comparative studies conducted across sub-regions could illuminate how new trends affect old traditions. Such studies might examine areas of agreement and disagreement, for instance in forestry practices.

Third, it is important to better understand how religious groups contribute to climate change adaptation and sustainable development. Research on faith-based organizations and specific religious communities, such as AICs, is key for climate adaptation. This research is also vital for achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. Detailed studies could assess the effectiveness of their projects in building resilience.

Fourth, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) must be integrated into environmental policies. Despite their recognized value for climate adaptation, IKS are often poorly utilized within African

national laws. Future research should identify practical ways to combine knowledge of IKS holders and scientists. This would ensure indigenous wisdom is recorded, safeguarded, and integrated with scientific methods for climate risk management. Studying the economic benefits of IKS in conservation would further highlight their sustainable development value.

Finally, future studies should explore how religious changes affect nature and society. They should also examine their role in resilience and vulnerability. Research among less-studied populations in the Global South will enhance our understanding. This will indicate how faith communities perceive and respond to challenges like disease and climate change, fostering global resilience (Wild-Wood *et al.*, 2023). Long-term, mixed-methods studies are also needed to demonstrate the lasting effects of institutional and evolving religious trends.

Conclusion

This book significantly advances our understanding of the religion-development link, emphasizing local perspectives, community empowerment, and decolonial views. Its strengths lie in its multidisciplinary approach, African focus, and emphasis on indigenous knowledge challenging Western paradigms. However, philosophical density and uneven chapter quality present limitations. The work provides rich avenues for future research, urging further study into religion's impact on African business, the interplay between African traditional religions and Christianity, religious groups' roles in climate adaptation, and the integration of indigenous knowledge into environmental policies. This book underscores religion as a powerful force for change, offering pathways to understand and foster true, localized development, especially within diverse spiritual traditions.

References

- Adufuli, D.M. and Merle, K. (2025) Indigenous beliefs and the decolonisation of development. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 41-55.
- Akca, A. (2025) What Ramadan is actually about. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 147-172.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, K. (2025) Religious faith and ecosystems in Africa. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 395-410.
- Chitando, E. and Mlambo, O.B. (2025) 'Cursed' goats in the urban landscapes of Zimbabwe. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 341-356.
- Gräb, W. (2025) Lived religion as a hermeneutical lens. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 41-55.
- Hasan, F. (2025) Luxury headscarves and Muslim identity. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 173-190.
- Mapitsa, C. (2025) Ecological sustainability in Balobedu traditional religion. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 411-426.
- Marcen, J. (2025) Wilhelm Gräb's hermeneutics of meaning and chronic pain. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 87-112.
- Stork, J. (2025) Climate change and eco-theologies in AICs. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 427-440.
- Van der Puije, N. (2025) Development alternatives in African Initiated Churches. In Öhlmann, P., Swart, I., Weyel, B., Kumalo, S. and Frost, M-L. eds.: *Lived religion and lived development in contemporary society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 317-326.

Wild-Wood, E., Way, Y., Baba, A., Kangamina, S., Falisse, J-B., Grant, L. and Pearson, N. (2023) 'Perceptions of COVID-19 in faith communities in DR Congo', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 17(1-2), pp. 79-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2235659>