

MARTIN PROZESKY AND JOHN DE GRUCHY (EDS.)

## **Living Faiths in South Africa**

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This book presents the rich diversity of religions in South Africa. It is an ambitious undertaking to give a full range presentation of the country's faiths and their histories. The main aim of the twelve writers is to give a better understanding of what they perceive as the neglected story of religion(s) in South Africa. As religion and faith are lived in daily life, the religious situation in South Africa thus shows a resemblance to the inequalities and injustices of the political and economic profile of the country. This fact is clearly shown by the various authors. The book is a reflection of the painful history of the people living in South Africa. For a long time, up until the last decades of Apartheid, the religious situation in South Africa was indeed a division between dominant kinds of Christianity and lower ranked, if not neglected, other faiths. On the other hand, due to the great movements of people, African, European and Asian, that have in historical time radically changed the human fabric of South Africa, the religious situation in the country today is a very interesting one. Virtually all of the major faiths, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Chinese religions, are present along with African traditional religions and African Independent Churches. Some of the religions are tied to specific ethnic groups, others have established themselves throughout the country.

The religious situation cannot only be understood in the light of the political and economic framework of the history of South Africa. Equally important are the religious aspects of European and Asian settlement in the country as well as the religious context in Europe. The earliest European settlement on the Cape did not happen for primarily religious reasons, but as a commercial enterprise. European impact was thus neither in its origins nor in its subsequent main line of development primarily motivated by religious conviction and not by any great missionary concern for the soul of Africans. The religious landscape and mentality of post-Augsburgian<sup>1</sup> Europe was transferred to South Africa: the restrictions on non-Calvinists at the Cape were severe up until a moderate opening due to the spread of the ideas of the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century and the proclamation of religious tolerance by the Commissioner of the Batavian Republic,

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<sup>1</sup> To solve the religious conflict in Germany during the first stage of the Reformation, the 1555 peace treaty of Augsburg declared that territories should follow the religious affiliation of their rulers.

J.A. de Mist in 1804. However, the spread of English-speaking Christians with their various faiths as well as missionary Christianity and the subsequent conversions of Africans took place only after the second British occupation in 1806.

As for the other religions, their history in South Africa is also reflected by the economic and political framework. The beginning of the Muslim community goes back to the early Dutch period, when Muslim slaves and exiled Muslim leaders from the East Indies were moved to the Cape. Until the nineteenth century, however, Islam was very restricted. A second wave of Muslims from northern India arrived at Natal after 1860, mainly establishing themselves as merchants, thus forming a culturally distinct community. The immigration of Hindus and a small minority of Buddhists from India to Natal started in the same period, adding a further dimension to the religious landscape of South Africa. Chinese immigration to the Witwatersrand started at the end of nineteenth century. However, as the authors have pointed out, the non-Christian and non-African religions were much more vulnerable to white and Christian pressure and domination, both because of negative Christian perceptions of them as well as their members, being much fewer and often also poorer than the Christian majority. As a consequence, these communities directed all available resources inward at sustaining a religious identity. Thus, their engagement in the anti-Apartheid struggle was ambiguous if not lacking, at least in the eyes of the African majority. However, as the authors underline, a more emphatic reading of the same realities can detect a form of basic resistance, that of the maintenance of a religious identity judged alien and inferior by the conqueror.

For the African majority in South Africa, Christianisation started after periods of armed conquest or other kinds of violent dislocation. However, at the same time as the Christianising of the Africans was in progress, the Africanising of Christianity as well as the adaption of African traditional religions were a reality, too. According to statistical data, African Independent Churches have the largest following in South Africa (about one third of the members of all Christian churches), whereas African traditional religions, although not statistically counted, are proved to be extremely resilient and capable of adaption to new circumstances.

Prozesky and de Crunchy have edited a very interesting book. It is easy to read and contains at the same time a bulk of information. Each author has added to his/her chapter a selected bibliography for further readings. Instead of a conclusion or summary, the book summarises the most important events in the history of South Africa's religions in an appendix. Its comprehensive style and in depth research makes the book a useful tool for both students and scholars but also for a wider audience who want a fuller grasp of the complex realities of South Africa.