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BOOK REVIEWS


Making predictions is a difficult business; it is a pity that Moorcraft failed to end his otherwise excellent review of modern African confrontations in, say, 1990; the release of Nelson Mandela would have been a good date, rather than the ethereal regions of the next century. To carry his discussion on to 2010 damaged a pretty good read — but only just.

My first question at the end of reading it was, Is this the same Paul Moorcraft who wrote A Short Thousand Years? It was a sort of laugh-along-with-me look at the Rhodesian war which didn't really add up to much but which did reveal Moorcraft's admiration for the White Establishment of Rhodesia which in 1979 was getting itself ready to go underground for a short thousand days or so.

African Nemesis is something else: a well-researched (on the whole) and ably-written book which I hope will win a place on the shelves of those involved in the re-shaping of the Southern African region. Hopefully, it will also land on the desks of editorial writers and columnists in this country who seem to have hazy recollections about what happened to whom and when. It is hard to remember such facts in Africa when you don't keep a diary.

Paul Moorcraft has an attractive, almost racy writing style and seems to know the difference between a story and propaganda fed to willing reporters eager to travel under the auspices of the SADF or Rhodesian defence forces. It is a very dangerous business to rely too heavily on newspaper cuttings from the 1970s, a time when nearly every reporter claimed a commitment to some large cause in this part of Africa. The reporting of the mysterious but still very important death of Herbert Chitepo in Lusaka in March 1975 is a case in point.

Yet, despite the excellence of some of the research and a few well-chosen interviews with people Moorcraft obviously liked at a personal level (including, for example, this country's former CIO boss, Ken Flower), I cannot see this book being much more than a handy reference tool in a decade's time. That is not a failure on the author's part; it is just that the title is too big and too ambitious to be wholly successful. History will not start being written in this part of the world for at least another 25 years — when the sinners and the sinned against are dead or in wheelchairs and are less ready to snap at authors through hungry lawyers.

We are just beginning to get truly fascinated by what went on in Stalin's Russia, which is a very long time ago when you compare those days with more recent events in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Personally, I'd have been happier to read a book entitled 'African Nemesis: A Personal Memoir' with Moorcraft calling upon his not

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1 P. Moorcraft, A Short Thousand Years (Salisbury, Galaxie Press, 1979).
inconsiderable journalistic skills in order to paint a picture of past and present events rather to prophesy future ones. I would have loved to have smelt an Angolan morning in Moorcraft’s book; tasted a meal of whatever with whomever around a table in Salisbury as Ken Flower gave his often amazing version of things that happened and things about to come; and experienced what it felt like to be on a long march in UNITA country during the Angolan Civil War.

To conclude: it’s worth having this book for its factual information — in which month did Mandela get released? When was the Jameson Raid? Pass me my Moorcraft, will you?

Hamre

T. Grundy

Religion and Society: A Text for Africa

By M. F. C. Bourdillon


Bourdillon is interested in the functions of religions in various societies and in the processes by which religions fulfil these functions. This well-organized, well-written book is also well designed to fill the purpose implied in the subtitle. It is ‘for Africa’ partly because some themes which provide the focus for the chapters, for example witchcraft, are of particular, though not exclusive, interest in Africa, and partly because a larger than usual number of illustrative examples are drawn from African societies.

Beginners in the study of religion will welcome the book’s overall thematic structure as it leads them fairly easily to subjects of interest, for example, ‘Authority and Power’, ‘Ritual’, and ‘Religious Change and Secularization’. Teachers will appreciate the way Bourdillon has integrated theoretical material with accounts of religious practices in various societies. Each chapter presents a selection of societal examples of the chapter’s theme and offers theoretical perspectives for interpreting them. These two aspects make it well suited for a college or university course introducing religious studies from a sociological perspective or introducing the sociology of religion as a discipline.

A further strength of the book as a scholarly tool is its documentation, which leads the reader on to a wide range of relevant literature, both studies of particular religious traditions (in Africa and elsewhere) and methodological works. Thus it can guide the student beyond the beginning particularly if he or she has access to an adequate library.

As I am trained in philosophy and theology I am not equipped to criticize the author’s approach or treatment of his subject itself. I can observe, however, that his approach seems inclusive, if not comprehensive, in as much as interpreters cited cover a broad range of analytical models. I like this. Bourdillon’s approach does not appear to be doctrinaire. He finds value for some interpretive purpose in all the methods to which he refers. Teachers with particular methodological preferences (or axes to grind) will thus not find their students confused by another strong bias but simply informed.
Also significant for the student of religion is Bourdillon's attitude towards his subject. While he appropriately suspends judgement when suggesting possible meanings or functions of a society's religious practices, he also allows explicitly for those meanings religious practitioners find in their modes of belief. That is, he does not reduce religious practice to merely social significance. Part of his concluding paragraph may serve to indicate the tone of the book in this regard:

One of the reasons for studying religion is to understand better how it works and what it does... The sociological study of religion is not primarily concerned with the truth value of different religions. We as individuals, however, must be concerned with the truth value of our own ways of thinking. This study is wasted if it does not help us critically to assess our own ideologies, in an endeavour to improve them (p. 373).

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