

## Review 10

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Title: Mission in an African Way

Subtitle: A practical introduction to African Instituted Churches and their sense of mission

Authors: Thomas Octuro, Hennie Pretorius, Stan Nussbaum, Bryan Bom. ed, 2008.

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Other: Table of contents, index, foreword by TS Maluleke.

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The African Instituted Churches have always been notoriously difficult to research, mainly because of their inaccessibility from a cultural and theological perspective. Yet their presence in the African community continues to be felt because of their sheer numbers and their obvious appeal to those who still have an African worldview. Audiences of treatises on the AICs are usually the academic community (which inevitably means more sociological analysis) or mainline church leadership, which is trying to decipher what they are all about. This book attempts to get into the skin of the AIC mission in order to sympathetically present its essential message to the “ordinary” believer in the church. It is more than a book in the sense that it is presented in the form of a manual. The entire approach attempts not only to remain faithful to what the authors understand to be the message of the AICs but to present this message in a way that the AICs themselves would sympathize with. It is written in simple, non-academic English accessible to anyone. Each chapter starts with a story, or case study, which describes how a particular AIC approaches a certain issue, followed by a paragraph entitled “think about this” which raises key questions coming out of the case study that are relevant for the wider church. This is followed by commentary on the AIC contribution to the wider church around the issue that the case study raises, then a relevant bible study and some questions for a class or group discussion.

Clearly the intention of the book is to present the AICs in a way that addresses the prejudices that have emerged against them as a result of the western Christian mission. They are seen as the genuine representatives of African Christianity. They take seriously an African worldview and they meet the needs of African people, whereas theologians talk about contextualizing the gospel, the AICs are doing it. They address African issues in an African way, which also happens to resemble very closely a biblical way, as the bible studies that are presented clearly suggest. Salvation is a material issue involving the feeding, clothing, and healing of the body but it is also a profoundly spiritual issue involving the role of ancestors, spirits, demons, trance, and deliverance from witchcraft. Ministry and leadership is by

divine calling and gifting, worship is not only about singing and dancing but also about lifestyle, and teaching is about discipleship. Mission is about using all the indigenous resources that are at hand spiritual, cultural, and material, and not about mimicking the ideas, artefacts and methods that are the creations of another culture. In a section on the use of money for example, the book demonstrates how, although this is one of the issues that has caused division amongst the AICs, they have managed, in spite of their relative poverty, to use their own resources to achieve what the Mission Initiated Churches (MICs) have failed to achieve. This is the large scale evangelization of Africans with a message that takes seriously the demands of the Christian gospel without sacrificing an African worldview, and that instills a sense of dignity, self-worth, and self-reliance. Indeed self-reliance is one of the cornerstones of AIC mission and identity, unlike the mission of the established churches which apparently continues to be dependent on western aid.

While this book is the essence of simplicity, it should not be assumed that it is uninformed from a scholarly point of view. Indeed not only does it cover many of the essential issues involved in Christian mission in the world, but a healthy number of scholars are cited. One cannot help but agree with Andrew Walls who describes the book as a “model of its kind” in terms of balancing theological scholarship with: clarity of message and intentional praxis.

Make no mistake, books like this are not easily written, especially if academics are writing them. We find it enormously difficult to communicate simply without sacrificing scholarly integrity and without being patronizing. I think this book manages to do this quite admirably and signifies a challenge to those of us who are so used to writing for the academic community in a language that only it can understand.

There are a couple of questions that one is tempted to ask when reading the book. For example, given the fact that the AICs seem specifically to meet the needs of people living with an African worldview, will they continue to have influence when such worldviews are constantly under pressure in one way or another to bow down to modernity’s gods? Also, the suggestion is made in the book that the new Pentecostal churches are meeting the needs of the younger generation, the mainline churches of the older generation and the AICs of those who are marginalized. I think that the situation is probably far more complex than this analysis suggests. What is certain, however, is that for the moment the AICs and the Pentecostals are enormous forces on the socio-theological landscape, and the sooner we meet the challenges that they present us with, the better.

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