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Andrews University

GEORGE R. KNIGHT

Fisher, Robert B. *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*. Maryknell, NY: Orbis, 1998. xv i+ 198 pp. Paperback, \$20.00.

Robert Fisher, professor of ethics at Prairie View A & M University, gained an interest in African religious traditions while living among the Akan in Ghana. In this work, which appears in the "Faith Meets Faith" series, Fisher focuses on these people as a lens for viewing African traditions. He recognizes that there is a multiplicity of religions in Africa but feels that there is a common thread among African "approaches" to religion. The book has a consistent format, with a working bibliography and a study guide appearing after each chapter. There are also recommendations regarding films, a helpful glossary, and an index. Four handy maps at the front of the book help to put the scope and importance of the work into perspective.

The first two chapters cover the basic religious symbols in Akan society. Chapter 1, "In the Beginning was the Dance," examines the religious and social function of dance in West African communities. Dance is seen as a means of communicating with the spirit world. Socially, dance is associated with warfare, death, and issues in societal life. Often the entire community is involved in dance, particularly at commemorative events. Chapter 2, "Every King Has a 'Talking Mouth,'" covers the symbolic emblems in African traditional religion. Fisher investigates the role of the drummer, who conveys the history of the community through his "talking drum." He then looks at libation and prayer as offerings to ancestors, after which he examines the theological function of folktales, songs, and myths. Textiles are also important, particularly *kente* and *adinkra*. The chapter ends with a discussion about the relevancy of stools for community leaders and the symbolism behind staffs and masks.

The next three chapters detail the foundational presuppositions of Akan religion. In chapter 3, "All People Are God's Children," Fisher suggests that the African universe is not theocentric but anthropocentric. Everything in the community was created for and exists for the human. For the Akan, the human is comprised of *'kra* (life source from God), *sunsum* (a spiritual personality that is independently mobile), *ntoro* (father's semen), and *mogya* (mother's blood). Both male and female have an important role in the community, and kingly succession is matrilineal. Chapter 4, "Every Spirit is Reflected on Earth," explores the belief that the spirit and physical worlds are interrelated. Death is seen as a transition to the spirit world as the *sunsum* crosses the "river." The ancestors have a close connection with God and have the ability to bestow blessings on their descendants. Sometimes the ancestors return to this life via reincarnation. In chapter 5, "The Mouth of the Elder Is More Powerful Than the Amulet," Fisher challenges the European charge that Africans are obsessed with fetishes as he argues that the symbolic amulets used in ritual are merely a means to an end. The amulets are simply instruments used to conjure or appease the spirit powers. Fisher

also discusses the reverence for the earth that is foundational to most African religions, and the role of totems, taboos, witchcraft, magic, and medicine.

The following two chapters discuss the theology of the Akan and other West African traditional religions. Chapter 6, "Consult the Spirit Three Times," examines polytheism. Fisher notices that there are unique gods associated with ethnic groups, villages, village associations, and families. While there are thousands of deities, the means of approaching them is fairly similar: Deities have shrines and priesthoods, worshipers become spirit possessed, animals are sacrificed, worship involves drumming and dancing, and talismans and charms are used to represent deities. Some of these traditions have come to the Americas through the various expressions of Shango and Ogun. Chapter 7, "Except for God," addresses the issue of a "Supreme Being." After accusing the West of influencing African thought by heralding monotheism as the superior way of viewing God, Fisher acknowledges that in some religions there is a "supreme being" who is above the pantheon and is served by the other gods. For the Akan, this is Onyame, the creator, sustainer, and controller of destiny, and the center of life.

The final two chapters examine the impact of Islam and Christianity on West African religious traditions. Chapter 8, "*Dar al-Islam* of West Africa," describes the introduction of Islam to the continent and its successful spread. Fisher points out that the first Moslem missionaries were not orthodox. As a result, there are various expressions of Islam in West Africa. While Islam is more orthodox in urban areas, it is extremely syncretistic among rural people. The book ends with chapter 9, "The Green Mamba Dies at the Sight of Jesus," which discusses the Christianization of Africa. Fisher traces the beginnings of Christianity to the Christmas narrative when the family of Jesus fled to Egypt. After acknowledging that fourth-century Ethiopia was a Christian nation, he mentions the entrenchment of Christianity in North Africa in the early centuries until the Islamic conquests. The spread of Catholicism and Protestantism is critically examined, and a fair discussion is provided on Independent African Christian Churches (IACCs), which Fisher predicts will soon outnumber Catholics and Protestants combined. The success of the IACCs is credited to their ability to adapt to traditional African religions. Fisher invites discussion on ways in which traditional elements can be theologically legitimized for adaptation into a Christian context.

I recommend this book for those who desire an introduction to African approaches to religion. With his anthropological methodology, Fisher attempts to remain objective. The reader will also appreciate the study guides at the ends of the chapters that help to reinforce the material. While the book is well written, I did catch a couple of factual errors: Cecil Rhodes was the capitalist baron of South Africa, not "East Africa" (164), and the term "negritude" is more closely associated with Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. I also found that Fisher's view of reality is obscured by his assumptions about the normalcy of European culture. It is implicit that he sees his evolutionary assumptions about life in Africa as "scientific" (14), but he relegates the etiological stories of the Akan to "myth" (43). Also, I am surprised that a work that utilized an impressive number of secondary sources did not incorporate the monumental study of Kofi Owusa Mensa (*Saturday God and Adventism in Ghana*. Frankfurt: Lang, 1993). In fact, even in discussing the significance of days (22), Fisher never

once mentions that Onyame, the supreme being of the Akan, is also known as Onyame Kwame—the Saturday god. He says that there are no “shrines to Nyame” (49), but do shrines have to be physical? Can they be temporal? Hopefully a second edition will fill these significant lacunae.

Oakwood College
Huntsville, Alabama

KEITH A. BURTON

Grenz, Stanley J., David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. 128 pp. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999. Paperback, \$6.99.

The *Pocket Dictionary* was written by Stanley J. Grenz, professor of theology and ethics at Carey Hall/Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia; David Guretzki, professor of theology and dean at Briarcrest Bible College, Caronport, Saskatchewan; and Cherith Fee Nordling, a doctoral student in theology, King’s College, University of London. Grenz, a well-known author, has written on a wide range of topics, including the course of evangelical theology in the twenty-first century (*Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993]); postmodernism (*A Primer on Postmodernism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996]); the basics of ethics (*The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997]); and the central tenets of Christian faith (*What Christians Really Believe and Why* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998]).

The *Pocket Dictionary* is arranged in alphabetical order. The authors write from a “broadly evangelical, Protestant perspective” (5) and have focused on “basic, generally held definitions” (5). The authors’ goal is to provide a “basic understanding of the three hundred or so significant words and concepts you are most likely to encounter in the theological books and articles you are reading” (5). The entries are primarily English terms; however, key phrases in other languages are also included—“especially Latin and German.” For example, the *Pocket Dictionary* defines *Heilsgechichte* as follows:

A German term meaning “history of salvation.” Originally coined by Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752), the term was used to describe the nature of the Bible as an account of God’s working out divine *salvation in human history. Proponents of this approach rejected the idea that the Bible is a collection of divine “proof texts” for constructing doctrine in favor of seeing it as the history of God’s redemptive plan. In the middle of the twentieth century many theologians adopted elements of the *Heilsgechichte* approach to biblical interpretation (e.g., Oscar Cullmann, Gerhard von Rad), although there were some notable exceptions (e.g., Rudolf *Bultmann). (58)

The book is cross-referenced with an asterisk before a term or phrase indicating that it appears elsewhere in the book as a separate entry. Therefore, the definition of *Heilsgechichte* provides cross-referencing for “salvation” (105) and “Rudolf Bultmann” (22). Additional references point to entries that might provide further information. As demonstrated in the definition of *Heilsgechichte*, a select