
It is a virtue—universally acknowledged—for academic monographs to be erudite and for their authors to grapple with difficult issues in their fields. By that rubric, Thomas Kirsch’s *Spirits and Letters* is an even more than usually virtuous text, as he demonstrates in this book an extraordinary command of several scholarly literatures and takes up questions that have vexed the social sciences since at least the time of Max Weber. In particular, Kirsch wishes to understand how something as fundamental to the ‘religions of the Book’ as literacy could be so often overlooked in current anthropological discussions of Christianity in favor of electronic and other media. He also is interested in what, exactly, constitutes literacy for a group of Tonga Pentecostal Christians in the Gwembe Valley of Zambia—and is at great pains to explain to a wider scholarly audience why a discussion that may seem, at first glance, so specialized and local is actually of more general concern.

From the beginning of *Spirits and Letters*, it is clear that Kirsch wishes to problematize important Weberian categories through his ethnography, including routinization, charisma and what he considers to be a widespread misuse of Weber’s method of developing ‘ideal types’. One of Kirsch’s most intriguing insights, based upon the practices of the Tonga Pentecostals with whom he has lived and worked for a number of years, is that they have successfully constructed what we might call a bureaucratic charisma for their pastors, a very specific style of first harnessing, then passing along charismatic power that is dependent on the reading, writing and carefully controlled audition of biblical and other Christian texts. While in many international Pentecostal contexts the point seems to be that charisma must be individually won through personal, spiritual exercises and pleas to God, Tonga Pentecostals have routinized charisma through bureaucratic procedures that owe much to Tonga experiences of colonialism, missionization, global Pentecostal publications and the Zambian state.

Another of Kirsch’s useful points, among a proliferation of such points, is that ethnographers in Africa and elsewhere have not paid close enough attention to the specificities and materialities of reading and writing, especially among Christian populations. In what was for this reader the most fascinating part of the monograph, Kirsch demonstrates how Tonga Pentecostals relate to and use their Bibles. Besides turning to the physical object for spiritual and textual authority, the physical object’s condition may help to make possible what—for want of a more felicitous term—we might call the indeterminacy of biblical interpretation. Bibles that have survived accidents involving oil or water have almost transparent pages that allow words and even whole passages to bleed through, bringing new juxtapositions of text that are evocative to the Christian who reads on and through the page. Bibles that have been partially consumed by insects offer incomplete passages and chapters that also enable the Christian reader to move through the mutilated text in surprising ways.

Unfortunately, this is where the virtue of Kirsch’s text threatens to become its vice. The deeper ethnography the author wants his readers to comprehend is often submerged within the layers of erudition that bracket every chapter. Sometimes the ethnographic discussion feels rushed—particularly in the intriguing chapter on Pentecostals who are ‘betwixt and between’ international Christian practice and localized modes of healing and divination—and one wishes for more of the Tonga and less of European literacy theory. Nonetheless,
Kirsch has produced an impressive monograph here, one that ought to be read by Africanist anthropologists, religious studies scholars and by others interested in understanding the meaningful qualities of literacy for all ‘peoples of the Book’.

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