
KELLER, Eva. *The road to clarity: Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 286 p.

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In this solid and well-written ethnography, Eva Keller provides insight into Seventh-day Adventism as it is manifested in Madagascar, more specifically in the town of Maroantsetra and the more rural setting of Sahameloka, both situated on Madagascar's northeastern coast. Seventh-day Adventism, a millenarian church rooted in nineteenth-century American religious revival but now a worldwide institution, is a recent phenomenon in Keller's field sites. Whereas in Maroantsetra the Seventh-day Adventist church has been operative since the mid-sixties, in Sahameloka most conversions have occurred quite recently, between 1995 and 1997. Despite the newness of the church in her field sites, Keller explicitly states that she is not interested in uncovering the motivations that underlie conversion. Instead she wants to address the question, less commonly posed within the social sciences, of what "people *come to see* in the religion that they have embraced as time goes on." (p. 7)

Keller offers a convincing interpretation of the nature of the longer-term religious commitment of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka Seventh-day Adventists, which she moreover presents in a clear and structured way. Her book is composed of three parts. The first provides necessary background information on Christianity and Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar. In the second, she moves to the core of her study by analyzing the church members' everyday religious practices so as to uncover the subjective value Adventism holds for them. She concentrates on the intellectual life of the church members, devoting ample attention to the importance of Bible study. "[T]he Adventists are not only committed to Bible study," she observes, "they also define what it *means* to be an Adventist in terms of knowledge of the Bible." (p. 117) The emphasis on the

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subjective meaningfulness of Seventh-day Adventism taken up in the second part of the book is further elaborated in the third and last part where Keller discusses what it means for Seventh-day Adventists to be a member of two worlds: on the one hand the Adventist world of the church and on the other hand the wider, predominantly non-Adventist, world of the larger society. In her view both worlds remain quite distinct. She therefore rejects a point of view that privileges continuity and syncretism, positing an explanation that “allow[s] for human motivations that may not be explicable by specific cultural contexts.” (p. 245) With regard to the nature of the religious commitment of the Adventists in Keller’s field sites, she argues that their enthusiastic intellectual endeavors should be seen as part of the human “desire for knowledge for its own sake.” (Lévi-Strauss 1972, p. 14; quoted on p. 245)

This tripartite structure allows Keller to clearly develop the main argument of her book. She concludes that the intellectual activities of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka “are not epiphenomena of some other hidden motivation to engage in Adventist practice. Rather,” she argues, “the primary attraction of Adventism is the intrinsic worth of the religious activity itself.” (p. 233) Because the emphasis is on communal investigation through dialogue, Keller sees Adventist Bible study as distinctively Socratic in nature. However, since the purpose is to better understand rather than to question the truth of the Bible, she suggests that the Adventist’s intellectual pursuit should be viewed in terms of what Kuhn calls ‘Normal Science,’ which he defines as “paradigm-based research” (Kuhn 1996, p. 25; cited on p. 128). The paradigm in which Adventists operate is that of the literal truth of the Bible. Given the fact that according to the Adventist cosmology “[e]verything that happened in the past, that is happening at the moment and that will happen in the future is a manifestation of the struggle for power between God and Satan,” (p. 157), the truth is not necessarily immediately visible since it is obscured by Satan’s lies and deception. Bible study is thus of essential importance in order “to remove the Satanic veil that blurs our perception of reality.” (p. 166) In this sense Bible study is, according to Keller, at the core of the Adventist experience because it places them on a “road to clarity” in pursuit of “an unclouded vision of reality.” (p. 167)

Keller’s cogent and convincing argument shows a deeply insightful understanding of Adventism as it is experienced in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. She focuses on the intellectual life of Seventh-day Adventists

because, in her view, this comprises the essence of the Adventist experience. The question nevertheless arises of whether, by concentrating on this one aspect of Seventh-day Adventism, she is offering a less comprehensive image of the church members' religious experience than could have been possible. For example, in comparison with other studies of Seventh-day Adventism, which usually emphasize not only the central importance of intellectualism but also that of health, it is striking that the latter is almost entirely absent from Keller's ethnography. She briefly points out that Adventist dietary restrictions are easily compatible with local practices since similar restrictions are widespread throughout Madagascar but she does not discuss if the pursuit of health is significant for local Adventists.

When comparing Keller's analysis with other works on Seventh-day Adventism, in particular Bull and Lockhart's (1989) lucid examination of American Seventh-day Adventism in *Seeking a Sanctuary*, another interesting issue arises. Whereas Bull and Lockhart highlight the predominance of the sense of hearing, which in their view implies that Adventists place themselves in time rather than space, Keller privileges the sense of sight. At the onset of her book she announces that she wants to uncover what people *see* in Seventh-day Adventism. Her argument revolves around the centrality of the quest for clarity. She compares being an Adventist to looking at the world through Adventist spectacles. Keller does not offer an explanation of why the sense of sight is privileged in her account and one can only guess why vision is favored in this way. Perhaps this is due to Keller's preconceptions, or perhaps vision is of central importance in Madagascar culture, or perhaps there is yet another reason. By focusing exclusively on the sense of sight, Keller falls short of giving a fully experiential account of what it means to *be* an Adventist.

Keller repeatedly states that her purpose is to examine what it means to have a long-term commitment to Adventism. Yet, as her ethnography unfolds, we are left with the impression that rather than being entirely faithful to this objective she is more interested in uncovering the discontinuities between the Adventist subculture as it is manifested in her field sites and the surrounding culture. By doing so she does not always give as complete of a picture as she could have. Again, the absence of a discussion of the centrality of health practices within Adventism leaves the reader who is familiar with Adventism with a sense of dissatisfaction. If health practices are not experienced as significant by Maroantsetra and Sahameloka Adventists, it would have been important to learn

why, since this would entail a significant rupture with global Seventh-day Adventism. If they are significant, the lack of treatment illustrates how Keller does not succeed in offering a comprehensive experiential account. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Keller's analysis is in many ways convincing and powerful. Her endeavor to understand the subjective value of what it means to be Seventh-day Adventist is valuable, and her emphasis on the intellectual life of Seventh-day Adventists gives her work a singular quality when compared to other approaches to the topic of Christianity in the social sciences. Without any doubt, Keller has made an important contribution to the anthropological study of Christianity.

References

BULL, Malcom; LOCKHART, Keith. *Seeking a sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American dream*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.