

*A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church.* By Matthew Engelke  
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Matthew Engelke's book *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* is an ethnographic masterpiece. It represents a new trajectory in ethnographic study and reporting that demands the attention of anthropologists, but also linguists, sociologists, and theologians. It was awarded both the 2008 Society for the Anthropology of Religion Clifford Geertz Prize and the 2009 Victor Turner Prize in Ethnographic Writing. So what is all the fanfare about? Initially, Engelke's work appears to be a traditional ethnographic account of a rather obscure religious group in Zimbabwe, the Friday Masowe Church (an Apostolic church formerly known as the weChishanu Church). However, do not be deceived. This is not your common, run-of-the-mill ethnographic investigation of a particular people.

For Engelke, the great crisis of translation is not simply linguistic, geographical, or socio-political. Through his observations of the Friday Apostolics, he is faced with a fundamental theological question: How does God become present? The Friday Apostolics describe themselves as "Christians who don't read the Bible" (11, 198). Materiality is insignificant to them because it is spatially and temporally bounded. It prohibits the "live and direct" activity of God through the Holy Spirit. The Friday Apostolics' rejection of the Bible's textual authority triggers Engelke's examination of divine representation. How do Christians marshal God's presence through signs such as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, and the prophet, when a fundamental medium of revelation, the Bible, is absent?

In the opening pages, Engelke rehearses the history of the Friday Masowe. A man named Shoniwa Masedza founded the Friday Masowe Church in the 1930s after having a transformational encounter with the Holy Spirit, which led to a name change. The newly christened Johane Masowe, or John of the Wilderness, became the self-proclaimed John the Baptist of Africa (79, 92). This history has tremendous resonance for the particular Friday congregation Engelke ob-

serves, the Juranifiri Santa (meaning “place of healing”). Engelke’s narrative approach allows him to transform the historical circumstances of the congregation into malleable, usable data for querying how verbal words, physical action, and concrete objects generate (or not) an experience with the divine. Divine encounter is an elusive category for empirically focused, ethnographic study. Engelke overcomes this difficulty by employing both narrative and theoretical frameworks as lenses through which to describe and interpret the Friday Apostolics’ experiences and ideologies.

One of the first ideologies Engelke seeks to describe is *mutemo*. *Mutemo* is an essential, interior knowledge and law of the Friday Apostolics, which Engelke casts as “a certain kind of religious knowledge” (139). It is the epistemological framework from which the Friday Apostolics craft their worship services, conduct their daily affairs, view the larger world, and substantiate their rejection of the Bible’s necessity in their religious gatherings. *Mutemo* even assists them in locating themselves in the larger political institutions (African Independent Churches) and the political world of Zimbabwe. It is shared and propagated through a semiotics of sound that is comprised of a specific language and enacted song—but never written text (not even Scripture). The “true scriptures” of the community are beyond the biblical text. *Mutemo* emphasizes as authoritative, bodily experience and expression as enacted in sound, voice, song, language, speaking, and even indiscernible noise. Engelke resists the Western temptation to define *mutemo* according to familiar definitions and concepts. His descriptions are orienting summaries that never fully capture its meaning and experience. In this way, Engelke maintains the fluidity of *mutemo* found in the congregation and allows its indefinable nature to remain a tension in the work. He opts for ambiguity rather than reductionism.

A major theme throughout Engelke’s ethnography is the form and function of language as a conveyer of divine presence and revelation. For the Friday Apostolics, God comes to people through words that are voiced, including, among others, sermons, songs, and inner voices. They make a distinction between the Bible as an object and the message it conveys. Engelke references Hans Frei and Benedict de Spinoza in order to conclude: “It is in the context of the congregation as a community of practice, working to substantiate live and direct language that prophets are able to present the True Bible as something that exists beyond Scripture” (181). Explored through the context of the Friday Apostolics, language is the medium (albeit inadequate) for expressing what is ultimately paradoxical and indescribable (172).

The greatest appeal of Engelke’s work is its immediate relevance and challenge to Western Christian environments. Engelke raises a number of questions about the authority and function of the Bible in the lives of present-day Christians. What is the role of the biblical text in defining one as Christian, Jew, or Muslim, for example? How does the Friday Apostolics’ claim of not reading the Scripture challenge the Western Christian privileging of Scripture? Does this claim of not reading the text mean that Scripture is less important as an identity marker? How does the Bible mediate contact with God, representing God as one who is present, yet absent in the sense of not interfering with genuine human choice, agency, and/or freedom? By exploring the linguistic

register of religious experience in a specific context, Engelke reconfigures the role of language as a location from which religious meaning and experience can potentially be created, conveyed, or rendered static. Whether it is *mutemo*, a song that is sung, a dance that is performed, or the words and imagery of a written text, language is the exploration and adaptation of symbolic worlds. For Western Christianity, language is the ultimate paradox (28). It describes the symbols and images Christians use as markers of their faith and identity. Simultaneously, it conceals the essential meanings of these images, which are ultimately incommunicable.

Engelke strikes a brilliant balance between historical, ethnographic data and social scientific theory. He locates himself within the larger anthropological discipline by naming various scholars who challenge and inform his ethnography. He engages semiotic anthropology, history of religious movements in Africa, linguistic and textual studies, and Christian theology. His ethnography is designed as a thoughtful, critical exploration of a particular issue. The practices and propositions gleaned from his participant-observation among the Friday Apostolics are offered as conceptual options for navigating the theological quandary of divine absence. As a result, Engelke's ethnography is not simply a random report of a particular community. Through his focused and selective disclosure of the Friday Apostolics, Engelke attempts to promote among his readership a critical discussion about the authority of materiality and language—written or oral—within religious experiences.

As a result, Engelke's work challenges critical theological study to shift in two significant ways. First, it raises the question of global relevance. Theological studies needs to account not only for familiar Western traditions of Christianity and religious beliefs but also for non-Western and non-Christian categories. If the Bible is no longer relevant or useful for a particular Christian community, is that community still Christian? How does one describe and define that community now? Secondly, Engelke's work presents theological studies with another source for theological exploration—living communities. His work encourages theological and religious discussion to look beyond text-based, dogmatic expressions of religious experiences and to consider the “live and direct” religious experiences of real communities in the world. In other words, Engelke's work challenges religious thinkers, theologians, and textualists to look up from their books and see the world in which religious beliefs are practiced and embodied day-by-day.

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