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Book Review

Nenilava, Prophetess of Madagascar: Her Life and the Ongoing Revival She Inspired.

James B. Vigen and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson.

Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021.

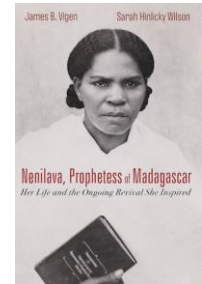
Madagascar has always held a fascination for me. Some of my relatives served as missionaries there in the first half of the twentieth century, as did a past president of the Lutheran Seminary in Saskatoon. Accompanying some students from our seminary to Madagascar one year, we learned from the Malagasy Lutheran Church, visiting congregations, *tobys*, and seminaries, and heard many stories about the prophetess Nenilava.

Revivals have played a major role in the history of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC), and one of the pre-eminent leaders of the fourth, Ankaramalaza revival (*fifohazana* in Malagasy) in the last half of the twentieth century was the prophetess Nenilava (1920-1998). Born with the name Germaine Volahavana, she later took the name Nenilava, a derogatory nickname thrown at her by envious church workers. This was not so different from the original use of “Lutheran” as a derogatory term in the sixteenth century.

The first half of the book is a hagiography, describing Nenilava’s ministry from the early 1940s until 1970, as recorded by Pastor Zakaria Tsivoery. His account of her life quickly falls into a familiar pattern of her ministry: going from place to place casting out demons, healing the infirm, teaching, and preaching. Readers conditioned by western perceptions are likely to find it hard to make sense of this unquestioned perspective of a spirit world filled with demons and beasts, trips to heaven, and being spoken to directly by Jesus the Christ. Yet her story is told in a very matter-of-fact way.

In the second half of the book, Vigen begins by giving an update to the autobiography recorded by Pastor Tsivoery, whose account ends in 1970. In broad strokes, Vigen fills in the story up to Nenilava’s death in 1998. This is followed by an analysis, interpretation, and appreciation for the prophetess’s life and the revival movement of which she was a major part. Nenilava and the Malagasy Lutheran Church successfully kept up the revival movement within the church, supporting and building it up. For the Malagasy, this was only natural, since healings, exorcisms, and charismatic leadership have been marks of the church from its very beginnings. The spiritual and physical worlds are intricately woven together. For example, the *mpiandry* (shepherd exorcists) regularly talk to a troubled person to determine whether the cause is a physical or spiritual matter, and then either refer the person to a medical facility or deal with it. This wholistic approach to health and healing was supported by Nenilava who, according to Vigen, encouraged the development of the Malagasy Lutheran Church health services.

In the concluding chapter, Hinlicky Wilson explores the challenges that these markers of the Malagasy Lutheran Church pose to observers from the Global North. Beginning with the classic Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” she briefly addresses the question of miracles (including exorcisms and healings) by observing that the Global North has created a false dichotomy between science and religion. Yet the real dichotomy, she notes, is between Creator and creatures. She states, “A miracle is not a matter of a ‘supernatural’ God abrogating his own otherwise good and reliable laws of ‘nature’ in order to effectuate a biased



intervention on behalf of an individual creature, possibly to the detriment of other creatures. What we call miracles are rather the ongoing manifestation of God's preservation of the created order that he made and loves, as well as testimony to his intention to bring it to eschatological fulfillment" (p. 124).

Hinlicky Wilson also explores the "offices of ministry" in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. The traditional threefold offices of ministry (presbyter/pastor, deacon, and bishop) do not easily fit into the Malagasy Lutheran Church offices of ministry. While deacons have traditionally been associated with a liturgical role or have been transitional, more recently they have focussed on "outward facing service in the last century." Thus, the traditional tasks of evangelism, catechization, and exorcism, carried out by the *mpiandry*, "do not figure significantly" in the deacon's role (p. 128). The Malagasy church has, in effect, replaced the deacon with at least four new offices: "evangelist, catechist, exorcist, and Bible woman" (p. 127). Hinlicky Wilson delves into these roles, relating them to the effective working of the church in the Malagasy context. Thus, her concluding chapter, albeit brief, explores some intriguing markers of an effective indigenous Malagasy church.

This is a helpful book to get a basic understanding of the Malagasy Lutheran Church and its interaction with one of the latest revivalist movements and the person of Nenilava. It is a startlingly different world from that of the Global North, but it reminds the reader of the importance of doing ministry in context, so that people can actually experience and understand the gospel in their own language and culture. It would have been helpful if a glossary had been included of the various Malagasy terms and acronyms used in the book, so that readers for whom this is a totally different 'world' could quickly check to see what the words or acronyms mean rather than having to go searching through the book to find out. It is, however, a book that ought to stimulate conversation and reflection on ministry.

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