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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Resilient religion: Resilience and heartbreaking adversity*

C.A.M. Hermans & K. Schoeman (eds.), (Berlin: LIT  
VERLAG, 2023) 195 pages, ISBN 9783643915009.

The exploration of resilience has surged across various disciplines, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which inflicted worldwide adversity and trauma. Disciplines such as ecology, business studies, development science, social work, and notably, religion studies and theology have all engaged with this theme. The work edited by Chris Hermans and Kobus Schoeman, *Resilient religion: Resilience and heartbreaking adversity*, assembles contributions from several theological disciplines, including mission studies, systematic theology, Old Testament studies (particularly African Biblical Studies), and practical theology (pastoral care, homiletics, empirical theology).

The book effectively underscores the significance of reflecting on resilience within theology and religion studies. The structuring of the chapters and the specific contributions from various theological disciplines constitute a valuable addition to these fields. Although the book provides substantial insights into resilient religion, its selection of contributions leans more towards theological studies than broader religion studies.

The initial section, titled *Mapping the field*, offers a comprehensive theoretical discussion on a theology of resilience. Chris Hermans provides a deep and complex methodological examination of adversity, processes of resilience, and resilient

religion (Chapters 1-3). He describes resilient religion as “religious systems – in a dynamic relationship with other systems – that can prevent the loss of the good and/or absence of God as a possibility in and of life events ...”. This serves as a crucial foundation for developing the concept of resilient religion. The editors have structured the book to facilitate interaction with Hermans’ comprehensive methodological ideas, fostering valuable critical engagement. This discourse, alongside various constructive critiques of Hermans, represents an important exchange of ideas between Western epistemologies and African and southern world perspectives on constructing a post-colonial methodology in theology and religion studies.

The subsequent subsection (Chapters 4 and 5) delves into the dynamics of thinking about resilience and resilient religion. Rian Venter, a systematic theologian, explores Christian resilience and the centrality of the God symbol by examining four major historical conditions and trajectories: the Babylonian exile, the Patristic period, modernity, and the “post-Auschwitz” horizons (Chapter 4). Venter critiques Hermans’ theoretical approach as ahistorical and perceives resilience as overly privatised, reflecting Western epistemology. Venter’s historical insights reveal that theologians have responded to adversity with God as a central orienting symbol throughout the ages. The Trinitarian discourse arises in his description of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century confessions and substantial Trinitarianism, and modernity and social Trinitarianism. Interestingly, many of the other contributors developed the same strand and referred to the importance and relevance of Trinitarianism.

Dion Forster (Chapter 5) joins Venter in advocating for a more communal and contextual approach to resilience. Forster emphasises the “ability of translatability” of resilience, centering on broader realities and experiences. He underscores the importance of African decolonial discourses in reimagining, liberating, and transforming communities. Forster proposes three movements for a more authentically (South) African conversation on resilient religion: (1) addressing the perverse logic of coloniality; (2) focusing on epistemology, methodology, and language, and (3) centering African reality and experience.

The next subsection (Chapters 6-8) addresses the theme of *Acting: Preaching, narrating, and discerning*. Martin Laubscher (Chapter 6) engages with South African homiletician Johan Cilliers in discussing resilient preaching. Laubscher argues for preaching as the embodiment of resilience, emphasising the threefold grace of God and advocating for a homiletic that “pre-senses the moving God in the present”. Laubscher’s approach is perhaps summarised in his conclusion that “resilient preaching is thus first and foremost in engaging with the act and practice of preaching itself”.

Eugene Baron (Chapter 7) adopts a narrative approach to communicate the *missio Dei* as a story of resilience, aligning with Bosch's efforts to balance reason and narrative. He also engages with the introductory work of Hermans, emphasising approaches that incorporate the values of community, dialogical interaction, and narrative as means to build resilient religious communities. Baron's contribution, read alongside Juanita Meyer's final chapter, highlights the importance of personal stories of adversity within congregations. One senses the emergence of an important extension of the quest to construct and understand resilient theology. He appreciates the imperative of personal stories of adversity in the life of congregations (testimonies) and suggests that the typical propositional reformed approach and confessions must be approached as the verbalisation of particular stories in the life of the church and its members. This dialogical interaction between personal stories and the sacred story assists communities of faith in finding ultimate meaning.

Kobus Schoeman (Chapter 8) focuses on congregations as communities of discernment and practice in response to adversity. He presents a valuable empirical study conducted within a South African denomination during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative research provides insights into the pandemic's impact, congregational leadership roles, the significance of networks, and the effects on worship services. Schoeman concludes that discernment and effective congregational practices enhance resilience and underscore the importance of leadership.

The final section (Chapters 9 and 10) follows Hermans' theoretical guidance to address feeling. Funlola Olojede (Chapter 9) offers a contextually relevant and hermeneutically diverse approach with her *African socio-economic hermeneutical reading of the Book of Job*. She connects Job's resilience and vindication to contemporary African experiences of tragedy and trauma. Resistance goes hand in hand with resilience, more so in the Book of Job, a "hermeneutical goldmine" regarding issues of theodicy, human tragedy, and pain. Hope is the key, as Job's resilience and ultimate vindication serve as inspiration for those experiencing similar situations of tragedy and trauma.

Chapter 10 by Juanita Meyer serves as an excellent conclusion to the book. Even though much of her focus is on lived experience retold in narrative, the chapter serves as a kind of corrective and expansion of the introductory chapters. With reference to Hermans, the conclusion is that, through narration, the "good" is connected with events and facts of our life. Resilience is to seek the sense of good that has been lost. A journey of reframing, reauthoring, to plotting and narrating opens new horizons and possibilities. She argues that a theology of resilience is a collection of stories that tell us something about the character of the triune God as revealed through the stories in Scripture. For her, life is a narrative, and the distinct features of narratives are applied

to heartbreaking adversity: the author, the audience, the purpose, and the story itself. The book concludes with a very appropriate application of the economic Trinity to define thematic contours of the master narrative of religion to reframe the story of trauma: earth-making and reading (the economy of creating); pain-bearing and reauthoring (the economy of redemption), and life-giving through authoring and narrating (the economy of sustaining).

Overall, *Resilient religion: Resilience and heartbreaking adversity* is a significant contribution to resilience studies. Its themes and discussions are valuable for transdisciplinary discourses, such as using narrative to cope with trauma and employing contextually relevant hermeneutics to unlock biblical stories for those facing adversity. The building blocks established by Hermans, coupled with the critical engagement from other contributors, exemplify methodological rigour and the systematic construction of a resilience methodology. This book will undoubtedly serve as a key reference for academics and practitioners involved in trauma, tragedy, and adversity, as well as those interested in resilience studies and religion studies. I highly recommend this book to researchers and practitioners in the fields of theology, religious studies, and resilience.