

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S BOOK AWARD

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour of presenting to you
Leonhard Praeg,
Associate Professor
in the Department of Political and International Studies,

for the **Vice-Chancellor's Book Award.**

One of the core purposes of a University is to produce new knowledge that enhances humanity's understanding of the natural and social worlds.

The Vice-Chancellor's Book Award seeks to recognize a recent book published by a staff member, that advances knowledge and understanding, and also brings undoubted credit to the University by virtue of the contribution it makes to scholarly literature, or the discipline within which it is authored.

Professor Praeg's research interests include African philosophy, complexity theory, continental theorists, and collective violence in post-colonial Africa. He has built a scholarly track record of books, chapters, research articles and reviews covering these topics.

This morning is the second time that Professor Praeg is being honoured with the Vice-Chancellor's Book Award – the first was in 2009 for his book *The Geometry of Violence*. He also has a celebrated record as a teacher, and is a past recipient (2006) of the Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching award.

In March 2014, UKZN Press¹ published Professor Praeg's book *A Report on Ubuntu*, a 320 page work of dense original research. It is published in the *Thinking Africa Series*, that itself is the brainchild of Professor Praeg.

The book questions the claim that, twenty years after the end of apartheid rule, democratic South Africa is founded on the 'spirit of law' of our shared humanity. Where some might dismiss all talk of Ubuntu (or African humanism) as a passing fad of an exhausted nationalism, Praeg offers a different response, one that proceeds from a temporary suspension of the nationalist matrix and all the dead-end questions that have resulted from it, in order to reposition Ubuntu in more cosmopolitan terms of a critical humanism that must always remain irreducible to the politics of the day.

It usually requires a year or two for reviews to appear in sufficient number and depth to attract the attention of the Vice-Chancellor's Book Award committee, but this book has attracted acclaim and admiration from a number of critical reviews locally and internationally in a relatively short time since its first publication, and the University of the Free State has announced its intention to convene an international conference to discuss it.

¹ UKZN Press, http://www.ukznpress.co.za/?class=bb_ukzn_books&method=view_books&global%5Bfields%5D%5B_id%5D=435

Not a light read, one viewer notes that “In the development of his broad argument Praeg ... displays his thorough knowledge of debates on Ubuntu over the last half-century or so, as well as an admirable engagement with his own context as a contemporary South African philosopher.”

Another reviewer² describes the book as “a necessary, important and unprecedented philosophical intervention into a debate that, for all the political posturing, has shown itself unable to think the politics of Ubuntu. Praeg’s text redresses that lack by interrogating, it would seem, every element, every possible contingency, every possible variegation, of the term. He is relentless in pursuit of rescuing Ubuntu from inanity and political nonsense and, moreover, instilling in it an intellectual integrity.”

A third reviewer declared: “This is the most brilliant work of postcolonial philosophy I have read in years. The way Praeg interrogates Ubuntu in order to rescue its emancipatory potential is mind blowing ... This is radical postcolonial philosophy at its best, drinking in the deep waters of irredeemable losses and absences’.

I end with the words of former Justice Albie Sachs, who comments that “an ultra-forceful, ultra-provocative and ultra-erudite mind is at work in this book – the journey is complicated and upstream, with a number of brilliant insights along the way.”

Mr Chancellor, I request you to award the **2014 Vice-Chancellor’s Book Award** to **Professor Leonhard Praeg**.

² Publisher’s reviewer.