

Book Review

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (eds). *Anthology of African Christianity*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 2016. 1240 pp.

This quantitatively and qualitatively impressive volume on Christianity in Africa belongs to a series in which in 2013 an equally weighty volume appeared: *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*. The two books show clearly that, more than ever, African Christianity is on the global map. The important editorial involvement of the Malawi theologian Isabel Apawo Phiri reminds me of the meaningful position of the church in her small Central African country, in which I have been privileged to serve for quite a number of years. I also noted her essay on the church in Malawi, which she wrote together with Chimwemwe Harawa and Gertrude Kapuma (634–40).

The clear message throughout the book is that the African origin and character of the Christianity of the continent needs to be recognized as such. This is seen in the remarks in the first pages of the book by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, who stresses, “I am an African,” as well as the comments by the veteran African theologian John S. Mbiti in the first of a series of “Forewords and Words of Greeting.” He offers a reminder of various gloomy prognoses of the 1960s – which suggested that African Christianity was destined to disappear – only to point to its enormous momentum and mushrooming development since then.

In Part I, various experts introduce the reader to important subjects of (recent) research, such as James Tengatenga’s article (12–22) on the periods in African Christianity since antiquity. Part II offers regional surveys of Christianity in northern, western, eastern, central, and southern Africa (about 100 pages). Part III surveys the various denominations, including those of the

classical main streams of Christianity, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox, and their indigenous variants, not forgetting the African Independent Churches and the rapidly growing (New) Pentecostal churches. Presentations of Christianity in almost all African countries are offered in Part IV (more than 300 pages). The volume concludes with discussions of ecumenism in view of relationships with Christianity in other continents (Part V); other important issues and themes, such as gender, sexuality, family life, racism, economics, and migration (Part VI); and the public role of African Christianity (Part VII). In addition to the bibliographies to each chapter, a separate list (Part VIII) of resources recommended by the editors has been added.

The two most useful parts of the book are probably sections IV (the country survey) and II (the regional survey). These enable African Christians on all parts of the continent to introduce themselves to one another and the world at large. Apart from the national and regional surveys, Parts I and III are perhaps the most interesting ones from historical and doctrinal angles.

I look at this book from my vantage point in a Western culture where Christianity is eroding in the midst of a pluriformism that has embraced the equality of all religions, seeing them together either positively or negatively. What does African Christianity have to say when challenged by the situation in the continents from where much of it originally came? What can Western Christians learn from their African brothers and sisters? How does African Christianity relate to its own cultural environment and to other religions and ideologies, including those in the Western world?

These questions drew my particular attention to the chapters on the relevance of theology and the Bible in Africa, such as those by Gerald West, James Kombo, and Ian Nell, mostly at the very end of the

volume, as well as to the chapters about African Christianity facing African Traditional Religions (ATRs) (Tabona Shoko), Islam (Jacob Olupona), and the West (Jesse Mugambi), with a special reference to African Christianity in the diaspora in Europe and America (Afe Adogame).

Considering these (and other) chapters, I wonder whether the readers of the anthology could have been assisted by a more comprehensive treatment of the status of non-Christian cultures, ideologies, and religions, such as ATR and Islam, in comparison to the Christian faith.

How should Christians look at such non-Christian cultures, ideologies, and religions? Let us consider in particular the suggestion that ATR and its cultural environment can be used to help people in finding the God of scripture. This is not a hypothesis that can be proved (or rejected) without taking a position in the age-long discussion about the “points of contact” (91, 310) between Christianity and other religions. Others speak of “meeting points” (97) or “points of interface” (999). African Christians cannot avoid this theological debate. Although it started in the Western world, it affects global Christianity as a whole.¹ Basically, there are three positions.

The first position is that there are no points of contact because the Christian faith is different in all respects. This is Karl Barth’s view, defended in his discussion with Emil Brunner.² However, Barth’s position – although honouring God’s particular grace in Christ – denies or underestimates God’s general grace. After the Fall, God left us remnants of the original goodness and righteousness of his creation. I do not think

Barth’s view has generated many sympathizers among Africans. In the anthology, David N.A. Kpobi (838) characterizes the Evangelical theologian Byang Henry Kato as approaching this view by suggesting that Kato’s “only reason for studying the primal religions of Africa was to expose its idolatry and falsity, and not to treat it as *praeparatio evangelica* as the AACC [All Africa Conference of Churches] was doing.” However, Kato in the first place feared a liberal theological approach – undermining the uniquely Christocentric thrust and final authority of scripture – which in his view paved the way for syncretism.

The second position is that points of contact do exist and should be considered positive realities because they bestow upon the other religions some salvific quality. This view is adhered to by many modern African and Western theologians. They think there is continuity rather than discontinuity between the concepts of the Christian faith and other faiths. Shoko (91) presents some examples:

Kwame Bediako is of the view that God as proclaimed by the missionaries was already worshiped in ATRs. This is to say that even before the advent of Christianity in Africa, the Africans were already aware of and were worshiping the God which the missionaries thought they were introducing to Africa. African theologians such as J. S. Mbiti and E. B. Idowu argue that there are many points of contact between Christianity and ATRs, including the concept of God, morality, communalism, and other aspects. They criticize the foreignness of Christianity insisting that ATRs are a vital source of theology in Africa. They are guided by a theology of continuity, maintaining that Christianity fulfils the religious longing found in ATRs.

Thus, John Mbiti writes in the anthology (xvii) that he considers ATRs as one of the “factors contributing to the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa:

¹ Van E. Sanders, “A Theological Study of Point of Contact Theory,” *Global Missiology* 4:1 (2004), 1–52; <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/viewFile/109/313>.

² See Alister E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), chapter 4, “Natural Theology? The Barth–Brunner Debate of 1934,” 90–132; <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118569276.ch4/summary>.

African religion acknowledges the same God who is depicted (similarly and differently) in the Bible. The attributes of God in the Bible have many parallels in African concepts of God. Adherents to African religion do not find stumbling blocks to continuing their belief in God as presented in the Scriptures. They take the Word of God in the Bible as the Word of the same God they know through African religion.

In general, this description appears acceptable to most of the authors of the *Anthology*, although opposing insights are referred to. I think here is the crux of the matter, where I would have liked a representation of views more clearly positioned in their relationship to biblical hermeneutics and exegesis.

The third position is that points of contact do exist, but they are not only positive ones. The other religions do not possess any salvific quality. In my view this is the biblical position.³ Although sometimes there is continuity, there is discontinuity in the first place. Non-Christian religions have elements of the Law of God (Rom. 2:14, 15), on the one hand, but their character is demonic, on the other hand (Eph. 2:2, 3, 12; Eph. 4: 18, 19). This is not a position that was invented in the 19th-century encounter of Western Christianity with ATRs and Islam, but was defended long before by John Calvin, for example.⁴ In his general grace, God left “sparks” of righteousness to his fallen creation, including to natural humanity, and its religions. These remnants do not lead to salvation, nor are they in any way partially salvific. God left them so that it would be impossible for human beings to apologize for not repenting and accepting Christ. On the positive side, the Holy Spirit

uses these points of contact as instruments to enact the miracle of getting people to know Jesus as their saviour and convert to him. This miracle pertains to Christ’s work of *justification* and *sanctification* for believing receivers, who understand that without Christ they are left without hope.

In this connection, I think that more of the concepts of biblical scholars such as Byang Henry Kato (57, 58, 837, 838) and Tokunboh Adeyemo (430, 837, 840), as well as ATR scholars such as Yusufu Turaki (1104) and Richard Gehman (89, 91, 94) and other theologians who consistently operate from the position of the supreme authority of the Bible and the uniqueness of God’s way of creation and salvation in Christ – which is so basic to Christianity – would have meaningfully increased the value of the anthology.⁵

These remarks, however, should not discourage anyone from taking seriously the rich contents of this interesting multifaceted presentation of African Christianity. Handling the considerable weight of the enormous volume, however, requires some physical stamina. An index of names and subjects would have made the book more accessible, although this is compensated for to a significant extent by the detailed table of contents.

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³ See Steven Paas, *Christianity in Eurafica: A History of the Church in Europe and Africa* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017), 25–28 (“Characteristics of African Historiography”), 295–96 (African Traditional Religion), 507–14 (Conversion in Africa, the “Continuum” and Calvin, etc.).

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998). See esp. I.3.1, 43.

⁵ Christina Maria Breman, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa: Its History, Organization, Members, Projects, External Relations, and Message*, Missiological Research in the Netherlands Series (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996). On Byang Kato: see 383–446, 429–430, 532–543; Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975); Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979); Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006).