

**Elias Kifon Bongmba, *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, London, New York: Routledge, 2022, 535 pages, ISBN 978-1-03-233613-8.**

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This comprehensive monograph – devoted to African theology from many inspiring perspectives – is the work of thirty-three authors specializing in various disciplines related to theology on the African continent. The editor is Elias Kifon Bongmba, based at Rice University in the USA. The book is structured into four major thematic sections in over five hundred pages. The first part deals with the method in African theology. The introductory chapter, from the pen of the monograph's editor, reviews the basic ideas and message of the entire work, reveals the structure and logic of the parts, and introduces the issues under investigation. Central to contemporary African theology, according to Bongmba, is the debate on the continent's 'postcoloniality'; postcolonial discourse is not only about critiquing and rejecting colonial crimes against African culture, religion, human rights, and society in general, but also about redefining and re-establishing specifically black thinking in theology, black life, and black approaches to the world.

In the second chapter, Odomaro Mubangizi reflects on the relationship between theology and traditional African philosophy. He also seeks to bridge Western philosophy with African philosophy, emphasizing methodological pluralism as the starting point of his approach. He uses a holistic approach to knowledge, building on local philosophical systems, mythology and rituals, and argues that there is a trinitarian cosmic system in traditional African religion compatible with Christian concepts. According to Mubangizi, African theology must necessarily be rooted in traditional African symbolism and be truly African, as Pope Paul VI also said in Uganda in 1969. Mubangizi engagingly introduces African philosophy and theology of the time, which is very different from Western concepts, and goes on to point out such realities as ritual drumming, which is now – after a long period of rejection, of course – part of African Christian liturgy as an integral element of African philosophy and worldview. In the following chapter, Laurenti Magesa follows up with a reflection on the history, meaning and implications of the theology of inculturation, emphasizing that the invitation to accept Christ has been given to all peoples and cultures of the world. Magesa views evangelization in relation to indigenous cultures in light of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, which explicitly links evangelization to local culture. According to the author, the Gospel does not privilege any world culture over others but is an incarnation of the Christian message in

a local cultural context that always has its own original richness, which should not be stifled – as unfortunately happened in Africa for centuries during the colonial era – but developed.

In chapter four, Chammah J. Kaunda focuses on the sources of African theology and emphasizes contextuality as the basis for a diversity of theological reflection that avoids grand all-encompassing narratives. According to the author, African philosophical systems and indigenous African religions are legitimate sources of contemporary African theology. The denial of indigenous religions as diabolical by earlier missionaries and the unification of different African cultures were huge transgressions against Africans and their approach to theology; the African context builds on the immense diversity of cultures as a necessary source of theology. Kaunda analyses some definitions of African theology arguing that most theologians hold that African theology should be made up of African life, realities, cultures, philosophies and beliefs, in an African historical context. Such a theology should reflect the gospel in the light of African cultures and indigenous religions. According to Kaunda, theological thinking is to grow out of the Bible, African religious culture, African philosophy (or rather philosophies), Christian history in Africa, which is rich and rooted in the very beginning of Christianity, and the ideas of great African thinkers. The author cites the Bible as the first source of theology but recalls how it was used in the deplorable domination of blacks by whites during the colonial occupation, and adds that it is legitimate to read the Bible through a pre-understanding of African philosophy and traditional African religions, since the African is not bound to think theologically through Greek philosophy, which is distant to him. He regards indigenous African religions as the legitimate and essential source of African theology. Kaunda criticizes Mbiti's well-known view that traditional African religions were merely a preparation for the coming of the gospel and emphasizes that Christianity can draw significant inspiration from African indigenous religions for their salvific dimension.

The chapters of the second comprehensive part deal with selected theological movements in Africa. Part Two opens with one of the strongest chapters in the entire monograph, by James N. Amanze, on the relationship between theology and African religions. Amanze argues that dialogue between Christian theology and traditional African religions is essential for the survival and development of the church in Africa. The Europeans, colonial missionaries not excluded, restricted traditional African religions in an attempt to eliminate them, but the religions survived. A breakthrough to the openness of Europeans to African thought was the famous book *Bantu Philosophy* by missionary Placid Tempels, which helped missionaries begin to understand African religions and worldviews more clearly, although it was also later criticized for categorizing black thought in Western terms. There is no place in African theology for the destruction of diverse indigenous cultures. African theology does not use the apparatus of Greek philosophy, does not favour unifying catch-all solutions, and certainly does not dismiss Africa's pre-Christian past as something mistaken

or merely preparatory. In this chapter, the reader will learn the most about traditional African religions and their unifying key elements.

African theologian Alice Yafeh-Deigh follows Amanze with a chapter on feminist theology in Africa. She looks at some of the major women's theological movements such as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, raising the issue of gender in theology and the legacy of traditional African patriarchy and colonial hierarchy, which she critically analyses. The author calls for gender equality in Africa, especially in the field of academic institutions, where she believes it is failing miserably. In chapter six, James R. Cochrane discusses public theology, stressing that theology has always been linked to the public and political spheres. The author divides public theology into two levels: symbiotic and antagonistic. Timothy van Aarde completes the section on African theological movements with his contribution to so-called black theology in South Africa in the context of political struggles. The most important work of South African liberation theology – black theology – is considered to be *The Cry of the African Man*. In the context of liberation, a distinction is made between African theology (ethnographic approach) and black theology (anthropological approach) with different methodological approaches. The author presents four elementary waves of black theology and their starting points. Then in the second part comes James R. Cochrane on African theology in relation to politics, Galia Sabar on political theology in Kenya, Jesse N. K. Mugabi on African theology in peacetime, Jacquineau Azétsop on the relationship between African theology and public health in sub-Saharan Africa, Julius Gathogo on theology and the rebuilding of Africa, Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa on ecumenical African theology, Stan Chu Ilo and Idara Otu on theology in relation to development in Africa, and Peter Kanyandago on African theology after Vatican II.

The third comprehensive part of the book deals with contemporary pressing regional issues in African theology. In chapter sixteen, Eshete Tibebe and Tadesse W. Giorgis examine the theology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Jewish character of the approach to theology strongly related to Tanakh has influenced both the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Christian community there. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has developed a distinctive theology of salvation emphasizing the importance of the Ten Commandments, almsgiving and fasting (I can confirm from repeated personal experience that fasts are faithfully observed throughout the year in Ethiopia today and fast days are indeed numerous compared to the Catholic tradition) and a monophysite line of theology. The centre of Christianity there, with an exceptionally long and rich tradition, is the beautiful Lalibela. Perhaps the greatest divergence from Catholic doctrine was born in the 15th century, when the links with the local monarchy reached their peak. The chapter authors recall the successful 1961 translation of the Bible into Amharic and the subsequent mission to the world, particularly successful in the Caribbean. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church boasts an extraordinary monastic tradition, and its monks are vocal and respected moral critics of contemporary society.

In the following chapter, James Nkansah-Obrempong reflects on the roots of evangelical theology in Africa in the missions of the seventeenth century. He follows Ernst M. Conradie with a hermeneutical reflection on eco-theology in South Africa. Holistic soteriology in the African context is further explored by Martina Prosén. Other regional contemporary themes in African theology are addressed in the third part of the monograph by authors Joseph G. Healey, Tinyiko Malukele, Ezdra Chitando, Nisbert Taisekwa Taringa, Quentin Wodon, Masiwa Ragies Gubda, and Namakula Evelyn B. Mayanja. Arguably the strongest chapter is Malukele's text on postcolonial African theology, in which he views theology after liberation from colonial occupation by looking back at the period of unfreedom and dictatorship by Europeans not only in politics but also in religion, and then looking forward to a future in which African theology should emancipate itself and leave behind the atmosphere of subordination and dictated white supremacy (not only) in theology. Malukele argues that while some contemporary African theologians hold the view that traditional African religions must give way to Christian doctrine in order for the church to grow in Africa, most elite contemporary African theologians, on the contrary, argue that indigenous religions are an essential element of African theology and an integral part of it. Indigenous religions are inscribed in the identity of the African theologian and Africa must no longer be bullied by Europe and its earlier labeling of indigenous religions as diabolical.

The fourth comprehensive part of the monograph is entitled *Biblical and Doctrinal Theology*. In chapter twenty-six, Lovemore Togaresei reflects on the position of the Bible in African theology. According to the author, the authority of the Bible varies widely in different African churches: some newer Christian movements take the Bible as the ultimate authority and understand its texts literally and unquestioningly, including the legislative texts of the Old Testament; other movements see the Bible as the instrument by which colonizers conquered Africa and subjugated (and enslaved) its inhabitants, and thus take the Bible with due reserve; others read the Bible in a more traditional way, while various biblical movements offer a reading through the filter of ancestral cult, traditional religions, the dignity of the human person, or political liberation. Contemporary African biblical theology is extremely diverse. I see in this chapter the greatest inspiration for readers shaped by Western theology, for it offers unexpected perspectives and extremely inspiring insights into the Bible, and allows us to read the texts of the Old and New Testaments in a new, different, fresh way. Reading familiar texts through African glasses can bring much that is new, much that is good, to Western theology as well.

Martin Munyao follows up *African Biblical Theology* in the next chapter with another very inspiring work on *African Christology*, in which he also adds unexpected perspectives, such as a Christology built on the cult of ancestors or a comparison of Christian soteriology and the redemptive level of indigenous African religions that is essential to them. This theme is further developed by David Tonghou Ngong in chapter twenty-eight. This is followed by Mary-Anne

Plaatjies-Van Huffel's treatment of the patristic period in North Africa. The latter is well known to our readers and thus a new portion of unexpected inspiration is found rather in the next chapter, where Namakula Evelyn B. Mayanja works with a theological understanding of the human person with elements of African philosophy. After a brief summary of the Western conception of the human person, the author adds in the philosophically strongest chapter of the monograph the purely African elements constituting the person according to the traditional African conception, which are *okra* (the essence of the person containing the spark of the supreme God), *sunsum* (the individual, unmistakable character and identity of the person), and *nipadua* (corresponding to the body). From the realm of theology and philosophy, the author takes up the burning issues of recent genocides, especially in Rwanda, where human dignity has suffered tremendous blows.

Of great interest to our readers is another chapter from the pen of Elechukwi Eugene Uzukwe on African liturgical theology, where he emphasizes the centrality of religious festivals to the identity of Africans. The last chapter of this comprehensive monograph by Elias Kifon Bongmba discusses eschatology in Africa, thus symbolically concluding a very rich topic. Taken as a whole, the book will be of particular use to theologians on every continent of the world. It reveals unexpected inspirations and fresh new perspectives on traditional theological themes. The contributions show that the four leading currents of theology in Africa in the 21st century include: 1. African theology, whose main emphasis is on inculturation, 2. South African black theology, whose emphasis is on liberation, 3. African feminist theology, whose emphasis is on gender liberation, and 4. African reconstruction theology, whose emphasis is on the postcolonial reconstruction of Africa from a religio-social perspective. The monograph is indeed comprehensive and some of the themes revealing the grievous wounds inflicted by colonizing Europeans and European missionaries are not easy for our readers to read. This makes it all the more valuable for us. The relatively high price of the book is outweighed by the extremely inspiring and rich content from leading African theologians.

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