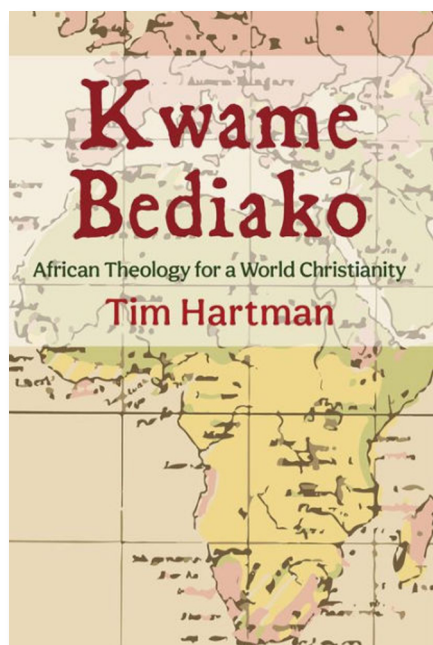


# REVIEW: *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* by Tim Hartman

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REVIEWED BY  
ABENEAZER URGU

Hartman, Tim. *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022. 209 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5064-8045-9\* \$29.00 paperback.



In his theological introduction to Kwame Bediako's thought, Tim Hartman explicates the major theological themes in Bediako's works. Bediako, "an apostle to the west," offers incisive critiques and guidance to the self-assured Western theology. Hartman notes that what motivated Bediako's theological task is that the Global South has become the center of Christianity.

Chapter 1 narrates Bediako's faith journey. Although he grew up in a religious context, he had imbibed a secular ideology that led him to atheism, but he eventually embraced Christianity while he was a graduate student in France. Loneliness, exhaustion and depression in a foreign land were instrumental for his conversion. Secular intellectual

thought almost erased Bediako's Africanness, but his concession to Christianity enabled him to embrace the gospel while also appreciating and embracing his African identity. Bediako stressed that while Western thought led him away from God, Christianity led him to God and his African roots.

Hartman highlights that Bediako's calling is to enable "African Christians to understand their identity in Jesus Christ as Africans" (p. 9). In other words, he envisions that they "can be authentic Africans and true Christians" (p. 10). The link between two strange bedfellows—Christianity and colonization—is the source of the identity crisis among African Christians. Colonization forced Africans either to dismiss or abandon

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\* The listed version is the newest edition. The reviewer read the 2021 version printed with Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021. Xviii + 166. ISBN: 978-1-8397-3073-3 £ 13.99. The UK version is not available in the US or Canada.

their heritage. The presentation of the gospel by missionaries did not take into account the African traditional religions as fertile ground for the gospel. As such, many Africans live “on a borrowed gospel” (p. 12).

Bediako strove to uncover the causes of the identity crisis among Africans. In this endeavor, his interlocutors were the Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam’si, the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the Kenyan theologian John S. Mbiti. These authors enabled Bediako to formulate an African Christian identity “based on Africa’s precolonial past and Christianity’s patristic (pre-Christendom) past” (p. 14). For Bediako, authentic African Christian identity lies in Africa’s pre-colonial history.

Chapter 2 discusses Bediako’s notable idea: translatability. The incarnation of Christ is paradigmatic for the translatability of the gospel in any given culture. Hence, translatability affirms the universality of the gospel. Unlike Islam, the Christian faith spread via translation by distinguishing between the message and the messenger. One example of translatability is the use of the name of an existing god in a given African culture to “[identify] that name with God in Jesus Christ” (p. 34). Bediako also stressed that the Bible has impacted Africa since it has provided “answers to Africans’ questions” (p. 36). Some African theologians, however, rejected Bediako’s understanding of translation, as it appears to downplay the agency of Africans and the neutrality of translation.

Chapter 3 presents Bediako’s notable idea: “Christianity as a Non-Western Religion.” Bediako sought to connect modern African Christianity with the early African Christian past, bypassing Western theologians. Both African traditional religions and the Christian gospel constitute African Christian identity.

Bediako’s examination of the historical African Christianity enabled him to contend that African Christian theology is not foreign to Africa. Bediako also attempted to construct African Christian theology without the taint of Enlightenment-influenced thought. Enlightenment philosophy is harmful and unhelpful to Africans. Instead, Bediako contends, African primal religion should be considered as fundamental. In so doing, Africans can avoid enlightenment theology that has not benefited the Western Church. In addition to this, Bediako asserts that African primal religions have served to prepare the way for the gospel.

Chapter 4 explicates the significance of Scripture in reading and interpreting cultures. Bediako affirms that African Traditional Religions were instrumental as *preparatio evangelica*, but he also insists that some aspects of a given culture contradict

the gospel. For Bediako, “Scripture is both text and context,” whereby the reader is invited to “participate in the meaning of the Scriptural events” (p. 65). Bediako posits that “God is still speaking,” but this time, he is speaking in vernacular languages. The availability of Scripture in African vernaculars has enabled Africans to spread the gospel and contribute to the growth of the church in Africa. Scripture translation also assisted in weakening the grip of Western cultural and theological hegemony.

Chapter 5 explores Bediako’s cogent argument that theology is dynamic and always contextual. The struggle between gospel and culture, Scripture in African languages and African Traditional Religions, as *preparatio evangelica* for the Christian faith have enabled Africans to produce contextual theology. This approach can be paradigmatic for producing contextual theology. Bediako, for instance, was more concerned with ancestor Christology than Nicene or Chalcedonian Christology.

Chapter 6 narrates Bediako’s observation of Christendom’s incapability to engage other religions because of its deleterious action against religious pluralism. Bediako contends that Africa could provide an alternative to remake Christian theology and be conversant with other religions. For Bediako, the task of remaking theology by Africans should not adhere to global Christianity (which is a reference to Christendom and its ideals) and postcolonial methodology. Rather, the effort needs to attend to indigenous and precolonial theological formulations. The remaking of theology enables us to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith and make it a non-western religion that is not dictated by the ideals of the Enlightenment. The endeavor to remake Christian theology will also assist us in answering contemporary questions.

Chapter 7 presents the motif of politics in Bediako’s works. Hartman—in agreement with Sara Fretheim—contends that Bediako’s political theology is under-explored. Bediako wrestled through various political themes in his writings. Some of the major political themes in Bediako’s works include religious pluralism, Islam as an African religion, desacralization of politics, democracy and liberation theology as the byproduct of Christianity.

In the concluding chapter, Hartman highlights three fundamental problems in Western Christianity. First, Western theology is too syncretistic and has no place for religious pluralism. Second, Western theology’s dependence on Enlightenment ideals has diminished the importance of the transcendent in everyday life. Third, Western theology “lacks the explicit embrace of the primal imagination” (p. 134). Hence,

Western theology has lost its spirituality. In order to address these problems, Bediako suggested that Westerners need to acknowledge their “cultural blinders,” avoid Enlightenment ideals and utilize primal imagination in their theological task.

In this invaluable book, Hartman has done a great service in introducing Bediako and his theological formulations. Bediako’s theological thought, especially his vehement rejection of the influence of the Enlightenment on theology, and Africa’s contribution to the discourse on religious pluralism are significant to the global Church, particularly the Western church. Hartman repeatedly highlights Bediako’s emphatic argument that theology is not done in a vacuum, and as such, Bediako has made a clarion call to western theologians that they should be cognizant of the presuppositions they bring to the theological task.

This book will be helpful both to the uninitiated and those who are digging deeper to understand one of Africa’s prominent theologians whose work wrestled with the relationship of the Gospel and culture, the place of African Christians at the theological table and the role of the Scriptures in the African continent.

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**Abeneazer Urga**