



# A Systematic Theology for All African Christians

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

**Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje.** *African Christian Theology*. Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2012. Pp. vii + 249. £15.99.

Kayle PELLETIER

ORCID: 0009-0004-1317-7056  
South African Theological Seminary,  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
*Kayle@sats.ac.za*

## Summary

*African Christian Theology*, authored by Dr Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, a professor of Theology and Ethics at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary (JETS), is a greatly needed resource for the African church today. Written as a simplified and condensed systematic theology which outlines major theological themes, Kunhiyop composes a systematic theology that differs from those of a Western perspective dominating the theological landscape. Specifically written through the lens of an African worldview, Kunhiyop desires an African Christian theology not just for the Bible scholar or the theological student, but one that addresses concrete realities, and not abstract concepts, so that ordinary African lay Christians can understand and apply this accessible theology to their lives. Unapologetically believing that biblical Christianity is superior to all religions, Kunhiyop takes the African context seriously with a goal to communicate a theology built upon a high view of soundly interpreted Scriptures for application into everyday African lives.

Having to carefully determine which aspects of theology to give attention to and how much depth to apply, Kunhiyop covers the relevant theological categories in his clearly presented systematic theology that progresses logically from creation to final judgment. In chapter 1, he begins by laying a foundation of what theology is, how philosophy can contribute to theology, and how ethics is the end goal of theology. In chapter 2, knowing that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) believe that God reveals himself in dreams and visions, the author looks at biblical revelation, both general and specific, to understand how

Kayle Pelletier  
**A Systematic Theology for All African Christians. BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:**  
*African Christian Theology,*  
**by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop**

God has revealed himself to us and how he continues to guide believers today. In chapter 3, the author lays down a theology of God. An ATR concept of God, though similar to Christianity, lacks an epistemological understanding of the triune God who is powerful, yet incarnate and intimately present, mediating between God and man. This chapter also examines the African view of the spirits, both good and bad, to see how they align to the biblical revelation of the Spirit, angels, and demons.

In chapter 4, Kunhiyop describes creation and the fall. Though concepts of creation are similar, the author points out how the African concept of sin differs, often seen as breaking cultural communal codes or upsetting the ancestors. In contrast, the biblical perspective of sin demonstrates a breaking of our relationship with God and others, completely corrupting the human race. In chapter 5, a christology is presented that emphasizes both Christ's divinity and humanity, his prophetic, priestly, and kingly roles, as well as his work of atonement since "the concept of god dying on behalf of humanity is very rare" (5). Chapter 6 speaks to the Holy Spirit's salvific role and sanctifying work as well as tackles what anointing means in traditional belief and practice compared to biblical teaching. Chapter 7 deals with living out the Christian life, addressing common teaching in the African church, such as blessings and curses, praying in the name of Jesus or pleading the blood of Christ, as well as ancestral worship.

The book closes out with chapters 8 and 9 both addressing the Christian community. Chapter 8 speaks of the Church as a unified community, a concept familiar to Africans, reflecting God's glory through ordinances such as baptism and communion, as well as the missional role of the Church. Chapter 9 addresses beliefs and practices specifically relevant to the African church, such as spiritual gifts, church discipline, pastoral ordination, and women in ministry. Finally, Chapter 10 ends the book with death, judgement, and eternity. African concepts of death and ancestral afterlife are presented alongside a biblical perspective of a sovereign God in control of death and the grave, where believers face eternal life and non-believers face eternal damnation.

### **Evaluation: Strengths**

As the author advances from creation to final judgment, he demonstrates his goal of communicating a systematic theology sensitive to the African context. In this pursuit, Kunhiyop asserts that "theology must be focused on the personal God revealed in Scripture and affirmed by historic biblical Christianity" (16). Believing theology constructed upon general revelation of God and the supernatural in ATR is flawed, the author points out the problem of contemporary African theologies that build upon the African worldview as starting points (with its human culture, experience, and beliefs) rather than

**A Systematic Theology for All African Christians. BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:**  
*African Christian Theology,*  
**by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop**

upon God's special revelation as God has revealed Godself. With this belief as a basis, Kunhiyop pauses chapter by chapter to uncover the presuppositions of ATR worldview and beliefs his readers likely have lying beneath their Christian-professed identity, which greatly colors how an African perceives certain biblical concepts like anointing, sacrifice, blood, curses, ancestors, and death. The most relevant beliefs of an African worldview that differ to a biblical worldview are not ignored or demonized but are respectfully presented in the pertinent chapters and set alongside a systematic Scriptural review which serves as a sound biblical contrast concerning each of these strongly held culturally religious beliefs. Kunhiyop also does not ignore the fact that Catholicism has high rates of influence in quite a few African countries, so his systematic theology includes both Protestant and Catholic beliefs, as well as uniquely approaching difficult African contextual issues, like remuneration for pastors, and emphasizing familiar contextual concepts, like the concept of community.

The author continues his goal of communicating a contextual African theology through the sound interpretation of Scripture. Since a sound hermeneutic based on literal-grammatical interpretation is foundational to Kunhiyop's formed theology, particularly when contrasting the ATR worldview and beliefs with biblical beliefs, defining interpretation is important. African pastors commonly quote that "the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth" indicating that they adhere to a Spirit interpretation that emphasizes personal communication with God's Spirit as a basis for interpretation, thereby dismissing the role of serious study of Scriptures and the use of Spirit-inspired reason aiding understanding. Kunhiyop counters this misinterpreted understanding of Scripture by pointing to multiple examples of God's people commanded and praised for carefully examining and studying Scripture, through which God's Spirit has already communicated and revealed his truth. Kunhiyop also importantly distinguishes God's revelation from Spirit illumination. God's special revelation of himself through the inspired Scriptures is completed, yet his Spirit continues to give illumination — continued guidance and direction. However, any illumination claims of 'receiving a word from the Lord' or a 'special revelation' must be "scrutinized and subjected to the authority of the Scriptures" (36) which Kunhiyop emphasizes consistently throughout the book. God's special revelation of himself through carefully interpreted Scriptures is the ultimate authority by which all other thinking and "illuminations" must be subjected to.

Kunhiyop finally takes seriously his goal for theology to be applied into the lives of everyday Africans. In the introduction, the author instructs readers to be aware of their own cultural context which influences personal understanding, encourages readers to have a Bible and read all the relevant passages presented in each topic, guides readers to additional supplemental reading for each chapter

Kayle Pelletier  
**A Systematic Theology for All African Christians. BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:**  
*African Christian Theology,*  
**by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop**

if they desire deeper exploration, and most importantly has carefully crafted thoughtful application questions which helps readers to critically examine personal beliefs and process the presented theology, prayerfully asking God to transform their thinking and their lives.

**Evaluation: Weaknesses**

In a field dominated by Western-authored systematic theologies written from a Western perspective, Kunhiyop's goal is to write a systematic theology sensitive to the African context and its unique realities. However, there are many points in his book that perhaps still incorporate too much of a Western perspective on theology. Kunhiyop uncovers the various errors throughout church history regarding the divine and human natures of Christ, such as Nestorianism, Ebionism, Docetism, and Arianism, mentioning people still fall into these heresies today. Though one can appreciate rooting an African Christian theology within the greater scope of church history, mentioning these ancient historical heresies gives this systematic theology a Western basis that may seem irrelevant to today's African believers. An additional or substitutional inclusion of specific modern African heresies on the nature of Christ's humanity and divinity would be more relevant and contextual, scratching where Africans today are itching. Also, Westerners are often overly occupied with the future such that many Western systematic theology books have to spend an inordinate amount of time clarifying the varied views of eschatology. Most Africans, on the other hand, do not put much focus or importance on future time. Given these differences of cultures, one may need to consider approaching eschatology in a different way; yet Kunhiyop spends a disproportionate amount of time explaining in detail the multiple Western eschatological views on the rapture and the millennial kingdom that made this section feel like he was addressing a Western audience, reinforcing their categories, rather than approaching it afresh with African epistemological realities in mind.

Kunhiyop addresses church discipline as necessary to restore a brother in error and acknowledges many factors contributing to the decline of such discipline. One factor he mentioned is individualism. Though individualistic shifts are occurring more in urban settings combined with global influences, individualism is certainly a major Western problem inhibiting church discipline, rather than a major African problem. Rather a major unidentified factor hindering church discipline is that Africans are culturally communal people that highly value relationships. With a greater priority placed on preserving a relationship with a brother than to disturb the relationship or institution by addressing conflict, African believers often remain silent and church discipline goes unaddressed.

**A Systematic Theology for All African Christians. BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:**  
*African Christian Theology,*  
**by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop**

Kunhiyop helpfully distinguishes between ‘revelation’ and ‘illumination’, making what I believe to be an important point for the African context. However, when summarizing chapter 2, the author terms everything as ‘revelation’ and does not carry out his previously argued distinction of terms when concluding the chapter, unraveling the distinction he sought to carefully create. Similarly, Kunhiyop went through a lengthy description to make a distinction between the ‘anointing’ of the Spirit which all believers receive, marking believers as God’s own, and the ‘filling’ of the Spirit which believers are commanded to continually seek in their Christian walks. However, when summarizing chapter 6, the author uses ‘anointing’ and ‘filling’ interchangeably bringing confusion to the very distinction he spent so much time creating. In both instances, maintaining the distinction throughout the entirety of the chapters would be beneficial to the readers.

Since deriving a theology based on properly interpreted Scripture is foundational for Kunhiyop, a rigorous task considering the vast number of Scripture passages referred to in this book, there are a few places where the soundness of scriptural interpretation is questionable. One example is when trying to argue that God revealed his divine self to all humanity before Christ’s incarnation by quoting Hebrews 1:1 — God “spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (NIV). Kunhiyop claims that though this verse was specifically speaking to the ancestors of the Jews, these words can be extrapolated “to apply to all our human ancestors who experienced divine revelation before the incarnation of the Son of God” (31), arguing that other Old Testament Scriptures also show how God revealed himself to non-Israelites. However, the author of Hebrews is not talking about God’s general revelation he gave to all humanity’s ancestors; rather, he is specifically referring to the special revelation God gave in the past to the Israelite people through many prophets which he contrasts with the special revelation he has currently given through his one and only Son (Heb 1:2). God’s general revelation to all humanity was not intended by the author of Hebrews and cannot faithfully be extrapolated from this verse.

A difficulty in writing a book like this is to determine which theological elements to focus on and how deeply to explore each topic or theme. Some topics Kunhiyop is rightly brief about, like biblical inerrancy, or is silent about, like the witness of multiple ancient manuscripts attesting to the text’s inerrant nature, since Africans do not have a hard time accepting the Bible as the inerrant word of God. However, Africans do struggle to understand what sin is. Though the origin and consequences of sin are briefly explained in chapter 4 when describing the fall, this section lacked a clear definition of what sin actually is. Having lived in Africa for nearly 20 years, I have often noticed that sin is only legitimized or tangible when being found out or when experiencing the shame

Kayle Pelletier  
**A Systematic Theology for All African Christians. BOOK REVIEW ESSAY:**  
*African Christian Theology*,  
by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop

of others knowing what one has done. But if sin is not uncovered, many do not see wrong or harm in one's own actions. Perhaps this is because Africans see sin in concrete terms rather than as abstract concepts, as Kunhiyop acknowledges. Millard Erickson offers a clear definition that "sin is any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law of God. This may be a matter of act, of thought, or of inner disposition or state."<sup>1</sup> Without such a clear definition and understanding of the very nature and concept of sin, Africans may struggle to see or acknowledge sin that remains secretly covered. Other missing elements are certain Catholic theologies relevant to the African context. Though many applicable Catholic beliefs are presented, like purgatory and transubstantiation, the theology of Mary and the reverence of the Catholic saints are not mentioned. With similarities to the African concept of ancestors and their intermediary role, addressing this belief is relevant for Catholic believers.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, *African Christian Theology* is highly recommended not only for students of the Bible, but for the audience it was intended for — the average African believer who desires to better understand and live out their Christian faith. This wholistic theological book, specifically tackling theological issues relevant to the African context, helps the African believer to identify what cultural and traditional religious patterns of this world they may still be conformed to, to differentiate them from the presentation of soundly interpreted scriptural-based theology, and to live out a transformed life that books such as these usher in through an effective renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2).

---

<sup>1</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker Academic, 2013), 538–529.