

BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Hartman, Tim. *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*. Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021. Pp. xvii + 166. £15.99 (Paperback)¹

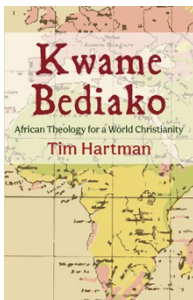
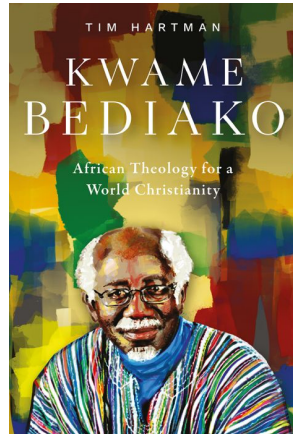
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Is the future of Western theology African? Tim Hartman's theological introduction to Kwame Bediako's work suggests that it might be. Hartman, an associate professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary (USA), describes Bediako as "an apostle to the West" (xiv) who "exposes how syncretistic Western theology can be while also offering concrete suggestions for the future of Western theology" (xvi).

Though Hartman describes his work as "a theological introduction rather than a biography" (xvi), biography is not wholly absent. After all, as Hartman notes, "Bediako's theology is deeply personal" (5). Bediako's rejection of Western theology was "informed and



intentional" (3). He had been trained in Western thought and done "his best to internalize Western ways of thinking" (6). Yet, as Bediako himself testified: "My exposure to Western intellectual culture . . . had not led me to find Christ; instead, it made me an atheist" (8). Bediako's "sudden and surprising conversion" (6) was "the defining event in his life" (7). As Hartman explains, it "opened up a way for him to become spiritual again" (8), so that, in Bediako's words, "in becoming Christian . . . I was becoming African again" (8). That statement defines

¹ A reprint for the North American market is available from Fortress Press (Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA), 2022.

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Bediako's project — to help "Africans feel that they were authentic Africans and true Christians" (9).

Bediako believed that Western culture, particularly the Enlightenment's emphases on reason and the individual, and the experience of Christendom, had corrupted the Christian faith. In its place, Bediako sought to develop an authentically African Christian theology, drawing on Africa's pre-colonial Christian past, especially second-century apologists — though only two of the four apologists (Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian) on whom Bediako relies were African, a point overlooked by Hartman — and on African traditional spirituality. Bediako saw African traditional religions as preparation for the gospel — Africans were worshipping God "even before they knew the name of God as Jesus Christ" (57). Bediako had a positive view of primal traditions. The primal provides a people's religious substructure, the substructure on which the Christian faith is built and expressed. One failure of Western theology was its replacement of the primal with reason. For Bediako, the primal (or spiritual) is always primary.

The incarnation — the eternal, universal Word of God becoming flesh — was central in Bediako's theology. It defined his understanding of translatability: Christ is translatable (able to take on flesh) into any and every culture. Bediako started "with the universality of Jesus Christ rather than from his particularity as a Jew . . . the incarnation was the incarnation of the Saviour of all people, of all nations, and of all times" (85). He distinguished between Christ and Christianity and between gospel and theology. Christ (or the gospel) is universal; Christianity (theology) is not. Instead, there are a plurality of Christianities or theologies as the singular Christ (or the gospel) is understood and expressed through the primal religious sub-structures and languages of different cultures.

Bediako emphasized the importance of mother-tongue Scriptures and vernacular translations. Just as the primal provides a religious sub-structure, so one's mother tongue is also "formative in shaping thought and religious ideas" (69). His emphasis on translatability extended to the Bible. Every translation "remains in every respect the Word of God" (68) through which God continues to speak directly to people, reinforcing Bediako's conviction that "the gospel has no permanent resident culture" (66). Thus, Bediako considered African Christianity an indigenous religion.

In addition to these key themes in Bediako's theology — identity, translatability, history, and mother-tongue Scriptures — Hartman also explores other themes in Bediako's work, often in contrast with Western theology. He notes, for example, that "Bediako's Christology defies Western categorization" (80). Bediako was more interested in translatability than the trinitarian and Christological controversies of the first Christian centuries. Hartman observes

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that “in Bediako’s published works there is a general lack of discussion of sin” (82) and that Bediako “preferred a *Christus victor* model of the atonement over a substitutionary model” (88). Hartman also includes a chapter on politics, highlighting Bediako’s potential contribution to Western theology in a post-Christendom era. Western theology’s captivity to Christendom has left it unable “to clearly articulate Christian identity in post-Christian societies” (113). The Western church can “learn from Africans who have never understood Christianity as a religious monopoly” (113).

Hartman’s hope is that his “book will encourage readers, Africans and non-Africans, to learn from Bediako for themselves, and to allow them to shape their theological thinking” (xiv). Though he writes of African readers, his book is primarily written for non-African readers, especially Western theologians. Hartman concludes with a helpful list of critiques of Western Christianity from Bediako: Its lack of a response to religious pluralism; its emphases on reason over revelation, the individual over collective and communal consciousness, and the present over the past and tradition; and its lack of a primal substructure and need to recover spirituality. For each critique, Bediako offers a prescription for Western Christians, who would be wise to embrace and imitate aspects of his theological methodology. If Western Christianity has indeed been corrupted by Western culture, especially Enlightenment rationalism and the experience of Christendom, Hartman’s prescriptions, rooted in Bediako’s work, may be just what it needs in this postmodern, post-Christendom time.

Hartman is clearly appreciative of Bediako’s work, yet his work is no hagiography. The book not only engages Bediako’s work, it also dialogues with his critics and includes some of Hartman’s own criticisms. Throughout, Hartman engages directly with Bediako’s corpus, relying primarily on Bediako’s own publications. Each chapter concludes with a “for further reading” section that directs readers to relevant works in Bediako’s corpus. The book also includes a chronological bibliography of Bediako’s work. Overall, *Kwame Bediako* provides a clear and comprehensive introduction to the work of an important African theologian, especially for Western readers. Bediako’s work, for which Hartman’s volume whets one’s appetite, provides a necessary critique of Western theology. The future of Western theology may be African, and it may begin with listening to and learning from this apostle to the West. Hartman’s volume is an essential introduction. It is highly recommended.