2023-04

Churches of Christ: a history of the Restoration Movement in Malawi 1906-2011

Churches of Christ: A History of the Restoration Movement in Malawi 1906-2011. *Written by Mark Thiesen. Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2021. Paperback. Pp 604, available for £47 at African Books Collective (https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/churches-of-christ)*

Literature about different branches of the Churches of Christ is rare in Malawi and historical writing about these churches is very limited in scope. Yet, branches of the Churches of Christ are spread throughout Malawi and the membership of these churches contribute greatly to the spiritual, educational and healthcare landscapes of Malawi.

This book is important because it covers the history, existence, and growth of several branches of the Churches of Christ found in Malawi. The book also highlights three different pillars of the Churches of Christ Restoration Movement, namely, truth, unity, and evangelism, the pursuit of which has resulted in splits in the restoration movement. It also considers the contributions of different missionaries in various mission stations across Malawi and different views taken by members of the Churches of Christ in regard to other denominations in the country.

Mark Thiesen, the author, is well placed to write this book not only because of his long experience in Malawi but also because he has a keen interest in bridging the gap that exists in so far as the fundamentals and history of the Restoration Movement are concerned. His non-judgemental approach in expressing the views of different church leaders on the three pillars makes him exceptional.

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter One, "*The History of the Churches of Christ in America and Britain"* covers the following topics: Historical and Theological Background, The Revivals, Churches of Christ in the United States of America and Churches of Christ in Britain. This chapter addresses the origins of the American Restoration Movement and its leaders, including Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell, Bartone Stone and others from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean whose aim was "to restore the original Christianity of the New Testament in faith, practice and structure" (18). The founders of the movement felt that the faith that was instituted in the first century church was corrupted first by the Roman Catholic Church then by the Protestant churches (19). The movement had three original aims, namely, "1) restoring primitive New Testament Christianity, 2) achieving Christian unity, and 3) bringing the world to Christ through evangelism" (46). Simply put, the three pillars are: truth, unity and evangelism. Notably, the pillars which were intended to be unifying factors in the West became divisive and this resulted in the formation of branches of the restoration movement in Malawi.

Chapter Two, "*Beginnings (1906-1930),"* is divided into these subheadings: The Birth of Malawian Churches of Christ, Emergence of more Malawian Leaders, Years of Repression 1915-1923, Churches of Christ Suspected, The Church continues under Persecution and Years of Recovery. In this chapter, the birth of Malawian branches of

the Churches of Christ is explained while following the missionaries who established Namiwawa Mission with other local leaders such as Ellerton Kundago and several others. Another important aspect of this chapter is the suspension of missionary work at Namiwawa due to the Chilembwe Rising of 1915. The colonial government suspected that some missionaries and local leaders of the church were involved in or sympathized with the Chilembwe Rising. This resulted in the closure of missionary work at Namiwawa mission.

Chapter Three, "*Baptist History of Gowa Mission,"* includes the following subheadings: Origins and Establishment, Spiritual Work at Gowa 1895-1914, Leaders, Leadership Training, and Decline of the Baptist Industrial Mission. This chapter explains how the Baptist Industrial Mission (BIM) fared at Gowa Mission and its decline which resulted in it being purchased by the Foreign Mission Committee of Britain Churches of Christ. The transition was done smoothly without any problems.

Chapter Four, "*Expansion and Diversification (1930-1960),"* covers: The Return of White Missionaries, New Direction of Churches of Christ, Diversification, The African Church of Christ, The Church of God, The Sons of God, Gowa and Namiwawa Missions and other branches. In this chapter, Thiesen explains the division of churches due to a clash of personalities among the leadership as some opted to embrace the "truth pole" in opposition to the elite clergy hierarchy (297). Branches of the Churches of Christ who embraced the "truth pole" viewed other denominations such as the Dutch Reformed Church members as heathens (300) since they were involved in growing, smoking and sniffing tobacco. In addition, this part also affirms the work of other missionaries from the Churches of Christ in Malawi who promoted the "unity pillar" like Ernest Gray who cultivated friendly ties with members of Providence Industrial Church (PIM) to the extent that in 1933 he was asked to deliver a sermon at the dedication of a new PIM church building (368). The chapter concludes by stating that, on one hand, the Churches of Christ in Malawi, the African Churches of Christ, the Church of God inherited centralized forms of church governance established by British missionaries. On the other hand, One Cup Church of Christ and Mpingo wa Khristu vehemently rejected centralized forms of church governance mirroring their American founders (375).

Chapter Five, *"Spread across the Nation (1961-1981),"* describes several branches, as indicated by the subheadings: Wendewende Mission, One Cup Churches, Mpingo wa Khristu in the Northern Region, Central Region Mpingo wa Khristu, Mpingo wa Khristu in the Southern Region, Churches of Christ in Malawi, African Churches of Christ. The chapter affirms that the above branches of Churches of Christ which had their roots in the work of American missionaries, embraced the "truth pillar" to the core. This led them to view other branches of the same family as heathens and to reject any forms of church "unity." There were also differences in church administration. For example, Churches of Christ in Malawi, the African Church of Christ and Church of Christ Wendewende Mission had church sessions for planning and decision making while in Mpingo wa Khristu there weren't any (385). The role of women was visible in the Churches of Christ in Malawi where they took leadership positions while in

Mpingo wa Khristu, One Cup Church of Christ, and the African Church of God, the role of women is invisible up to now (573).

Chapter Six, *"Assessment and Recent Developments,"* summarises elements of the branches of Churches of Christ representing all three pillars of the Restoration Movement – truth, unity and evangelism – that were well established in the country (581). Different opinions on topics such as tobacco, *thobwa* (local beer), choirs, the use of musical instruments, the role of women in the church, and the use of flowers at funerals caused separation between churches (584).

The author fails to mention that the branch known as Churches of Christ in Malawi also spread to the Central Region especially to the city of Lilongwe during the 1980s. Today it has seven congregations in the city with an average membership of 150. It also has three branches in the northern region, in the city of Mzuzu. Another point that has been overlooked is that, although Mpingo wa Khristu does not pursue the "unity pillar," nevertheless, due to its work with the community, it is a member of the Christian Hospitals Association of Malawi and Christian Literature Action in Malawi.

Despite these omissions, the book is comprehensive in its coverage and can be highly recommended to readers who are interested in the origins of the different branches of the Churches of Christ found in all corners of Malawi.

Goodwin Zainga
Zomba Theological University, Malawi[65]

* * *

A comparative review of Sara J. Fretheim, *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship: Emerging Religious Discourse in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Pickwick Publications, 2018) and Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2022).

These books offer distinct approaches to understanding Kwame Bediako's scholarship that each seek to represent Bediako fairly and to take his context seriously. Their audiences, methods, and motivations, however, seem quite different. This paper will briefly review each monograph before relating them to one another and suggesting their implications for further studies.

Primarily, Fretheim's *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship* offers a creative and insightful attempt at elucidating Bediako's texts by means of analyzing his historical contexts. In so doing, she simultaneously outlines the development of African Christian scholarly discourse on the study of African religions, and is the first to deeply interrogate the influence of Bediako's *négritude* scholarship on his later work. Fretheim

[65] Goodwin Zainga is an ordained minister and general secretary of the Churches of Christ in Malawi. He holds a MTh Degree in Gender and Religion from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. His email is: zaingag@hotmail.co.za

accomplishes this in four main movements. Firstly, she situates Bediako's scholarship in the development of African Christian discourse on the study of African religions. Fretheim discusses the work of Geoffrey Parrinder, Andrew Walls, John Mbiti, and E.B. Idowu in viewing African traditions positively and believing that faith enabled a more empathetic and therefore accurate analysis of religion. She then outlines the debate between African Christian scholars and non-Christian scholars over this epistemology and resultant methodology. While she does not attempt to settle this debate, she acknowledges that there is admirable scholarship on both sides, and calls for mutual engagement between both parties.

Secondly, she presents the history of the Basel Mission to Ghana and its contributions to the development of education there. In particular, she highlights the missionaries' emphasis on vernacular Bible translation, the colonial administrator Gordon Guggisburg's positive view of African traditions, and the collaboration of African and Western scholars at Achimota school. Following this, Fretheim examines the history of Kwame Nkrumah's use of religion in his attempts to consolidate political power after independence. She highlights how Nkrumah made use of Christian motifs, such as the Lord's prayer, as well as traditional African practices, such as oblations, to sacralize his leadership. Fretheim then interrogates Bediako's experience as an undergraduate during Nkrumah's fall from power, and the ways in which that experience connects with his arguments for desacralizing political power in Africa.

Thirdly, Fretheim examines the history of the *négritude* movement, primarily among black francophone intellectuals, including its origins and critics. She then analyzes Tchicaya U'tamsi and his poetry, before providing a history of Bediako's intellectual journey, connection with U'tamsi's work, and conversion to Christianity. She closes this section by highlighting similarities between the goals of *négritude* and Bediako's scholarship, namely identifying for African Christians a history, identity, and a connection between local traditions and Christian theology.

In the fourth and final movement, Fretheim studies Bediako's Akrofi-Christaller Institute (ACI) as a "text." From its curriculum, she concludes that the ACI demonstrates Bediako's high view of scripture, his strong emphasis on the importance of theologizing in the vernacular, and his belief that good theology is practical. She also considers weaknesses of the ACI, the most pointed of which seems to be that it neglects engagement with African politics.

From these chapters, Frethim draws a few conclusions. Primarily, she finds that Bediako's scholarship is a part of a unique African Christian intellectual discourse that transcends the disciplinary boundaries of the West. She believes that Bediako remains relevant for scholars today both in terms of his ideas as well as his methodology of theologizing locally and communally. Finally, she calls for thoughtful interdisciplinary scholarship and engagement between Christian and non-Christian scholars of African religions.

This book is thoroughly researched and "creatively written. Fretheim is right to conclude that the process of "situating African scholars within their historical

contexts…proves to be a fruitful one."[66] It provides a richer understanding of Bediako's insistence on desacralized political authority, as well as the influence of *négritude* on his methodology of connecting pre-Christian traditions to theology and African Christian history. Further, it helps the reader understand the underlying intuitions guiding Bediako's thought. At the same time, this book does not engage with Bediako's scholarship systematically, such that this book might better serve someone already familiar with the contours of Bediako's thought. This is not necessarily a weakness, however, and is a self-conscious corrective to overly narrow analyses of Bediako's ideas.

It is now possible to turn to Hartman's book, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity*. This very readable work concisely communicates Bediako's ideas on a variety of topics, and is an embodiment of the author's call for Western Christians to "begin the process of learning from those outside the West."[67] Hartman achieves this by outlining Bediako's thought thematically, in which each chapter addresses a specific motif of Bediako's corpus.

The first chapter focuses on identity, primarily regarding how Bediako attempted to understand his own. Of all the chapters, this seems the most historical in its approach, outlining the life of the theologian, his *négritude* scholarship, his conversion, and his return to teach in Ghana. While framing its discussion in terms of Bediako's personal and intellectual journey, Hartman uses this as a launching point to discuss Bediako's belief in the importance of formulating a distinctly African Christian identity.

In the second chapter, Hartman discusses the universal translatability of Christianity in Bediako's thought. Each translation of the universal Gospel is contextual, and therefore Bediako saw universalizing any contextual articulation of the Gospel as wrong. Here, Hartman articulates his conclusion that Bediako saw Western Christianity as syncretistic and corrupted, and that Bediako saw his work as pushing back against illegitimate attempts to universalize a Western instantiation of Christianity.

In the third chapter, Hartman examines Bediako's treatment of history. He artfully connects Akan proverbial thought, *négritude* influences, and Bediako's work on second century African Christian writers to lay out Bediako's construction of African Christian history. Bediako saw African Christianity as the African experience of the Gospel and of African pre-Christian traditions, with the entailment that Africans have a Christian past. Bediako sought to absorb traditional African spirituality into Christianity by finding Christ in the former. Next, the fourth chapter considers Bediako's theology of vernacularization. Hartman examines Bediako's belief that translation of the Bible enables the Gospel to speak to a culture, providing the grounds to theologizing locally. This section also explores Bediako's reasoning in identifying Christianity as indigenous to Africa.

In chapter five, Hartman outlines Bediako's ancestor Christology. He describes

---

[66] Sara Fretheim, *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship: Emerging Religious Discourse in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 194.

[67] Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 179.

the role of ancestors in Akan life and thought, before outlining how Bediako understood Christ to fulfill the role of the greatest ancestor. This chapter makes clear the connection between vernacular Bible translation and theologizing contextually, as Bediako began to build his ancestor Christology after reading a Twi translation of Col. 1:15-17. Next, chapter six describes the flaws that Bediako perceived in Western theology, primarily located in the elimination of religious alternatives in Europe, as well as the destruction of"primal" imaginaries of the peoples there. Rather than allowing African theology to be determined by the West, Bediako encouraged a grassroots approach to theology in which Africans theologize from their daily experience, particularly in regards to navigating their sense of personal identity.

In the final chapter, Hartman discusses the implications of Bediako's writings on public theology. Primarily, Bediako emphasized the valid (if incomplete) substance of non-Christian African religions, and therefore the need to engage their adherents with humility and respect. Additionally, he saw Christianity as helping Africans politically by preparing leaders who would end colonialism, as well as by desacralizing political power, which promotes democracy and the protection of human rights. From these overviews, Hartman offers a number of conclusions. First, he reiterates that Western Christianity is syncretistic, and identifies three resultant weaknesses: it has no answer for religious pluralism, it features too much Enlightenment philosophy and not enough living Church, and it needs to recover its "primal" spirituality to be meaningful again. Next, Hartman acknowledges aspects of Bediako's scholarship that may be difficult for Westerners to accommodate, such as Bediako's evangelical theology and use of male pronouns for God. Finally, he concludes that Bediako still offers a way forward by exemplifying how others can theologize locally, regardless of their context.

This book offers several strengths. Its thematic structure allows readers to approach Bediako's theology in easily accessible parts, and Hartman carefully weaves important criticisms of Bediako's work into each chapter. Accordingly, this work is an excellent introduction to Bediako's theology. It also goes a long way in connecting Bediako's insightful and corrective theology with a wider readership in the West. One topic that would have been interesting to see in this book is a discussion of Bediako's relationship with Evangelicalism, given his self-identification as an evangelical despite his strong criticism of Western Christianity. Additionally, Hartman's use of the term "syncretistic" to describe Western Christianity was notable, since it seems an unhelpful descriptor and Bediako himself apparently repudiated its use.[68] However, these small points by no means overshadow the value of this book.

Here, the two monographs can finally be put into conversation with one another. Both books take Bediako's life seriously as a context for understanding his scholarship. In their presentations of his biography, both interrogate the relationship between Bediako's *négritude* and theological writings. Nonetheless, these books differ in several respects. First, Fretheim's work is primarily historical, examining the histories of Bediako's cultural and political contexts in Ghana and France, and how those influenced his theology. Hartman, on the other hand, prioritizes the content of

[68] Hartman, 52.

Bediako's theology, summarizing it and those critical of it for the sake of understanding Bediako's work. The second difference seems to be in terms of intended audience. Hartman's book appears aimed at a readership beyond the academy that is primarily Christian and Western, and generally unaware of Bediako's work. In contrast, Fretheim seems to intend her book for scholars of African religions who are already familiar with Bediako's writings.

These books gesture towards exciting avenues for future research. Both present (and to a degree, join) those who critique Bediako for his lack of political engagement or public theology. Is this lack of political theology connected with Bediako's identity as an evangelical, and what insights might be gained if one applied Fretheim's approach to provide an analysis of the historical context of global evangelicalism that frames Bediako's scholarship and ministry? Fretheim's approach promises to yield better understanding of other theologians as well. Hartman's book encourages theologians to theologize from their experience, particularly in terms of wrestling through their experience of identity. As hybridity and pluralism become increasingly normal in Western cultures, Hartman offers Westerner Christians pointers for taking theology in new, pragmatic, and meaningful directions. Fretheim's coverage of the study of African religions calls for further exploration of postmodern epistemologies that are academically rigorous and congruent with the convictions of both scholars of faith and scholars without faith, Christian or otherwise. Her treatment of Bediako's emphasis on communal learning supports the idea of more collaborative projects between scholars across differences of faith, to provide more fair, nuanced, and insightful studies of religion. In these and other ways, both books further illuminate Bediako's life and thought, and provide the contours of helpful avenues for future research.

Luke B. Donner
Boston University[69]

[69] Luke Donner is a first-year doctoral student in World Christianity at Boston University School of Theology.