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# BOOK REVIEW

## *Theology and identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa*

Kwame Bediako. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011). ISBN:  
9781506476926.

In this book, Kwame Bediako explores the theme of identity and Christianity from a broad perspective, addressing many issues modern scholars have battled with. Although Bediako's focus is post-missionary Christianity in Africa, dating from the 1960s to the present, he gives a foundational background to issues related to culture and identity since the birth of Christianity in the first century AD.

The question of African identity today permeates the thinking of Christians and Muslims alike, as well as religious scholars, historians, political scientists and gender advocates (pp.1-3). This is because of the lasting psychological impact that slavery and colonialism has had on Africans. This is aptly expressed by both the political philosopher Frantz Fanon and the American sociologist WEB Du Bois in their writings. According to Bediako, western missionaries implanted a Christianity that shied away entirely from the indigenous cultures, traditions, religions and daily practices of Africans in an attempt to make converts start life anew (p. 231). The author argues that there is little continuity between Africa's past and her present. This assertion is what raises the question of identity in African Christianity from the 1960s onwards.



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Some African scholars have rejected this notion and argue for the continuity of the African past into Christianity or the universality of the Christian religion (p. 231).

Bediako sets the scene by arguing that the question of identity predates modern times, but has existed since the early Christian period. His book first examines identity discourses in the early Christian period (p. 18). At the birth of Christianity, many Greco-Romans viewed Christianity as a sect in Judaism (p. 16). Known as the religion of the Jews, Judaism was believed to be among the world's oldest religions. Greeks and Romans had several encounters with Jews, so much so that their place in the Greco-Roman world was assured. Greek Romans started differentiating the two religions after the Jews rejected Jesus and crucified him, and the Jews claimed that he was blasphemous by saying that he was the king of the Jews. Realising Christianity differed from Judaism, the Romans persecuted Christians in record numbers because they identified their fledgling religion as a threat to their empire. It is probable that Christians living in a pluralistic Roman society set themselves apart from the Jews and other Greco-Roman religions (p. 16). Throughout the history of the early church, Christians attempted to construct an identity that distinguished them from any other belief system, especially Gnosticism.

In the first section, Bediako discusses in detail the works of four early scholars who engaged with issues of Christianity and its confluence with identity. These four Christian thinkers are Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr. Though tagged as a heretic by the western church, the Assyrian writer Tatian believed in a continuity between Christianity and the Barbarian culture. He advocated that Barbarians did not need to adopt Greco-Roman culture in order to best practise Christianity. Instead, he assured Babarians that Christianity could be situated in their culture and traditions (pp. 88-89).

On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria, a well-respected theologian of the early Christian period, affirmed a great appreciation of the Hellenistic tradition in Christianity (pp. 205-206). Justin Martyr disputed the transcendental philosophies of many Greek philosophers and called on Christians to be careful of assimilating their thinking into Christianity (pp. 159-160). Justin Martyr instead saw a continuity between the Old Testament and Christianity. He relates Christ to all nations (universality). Finally, Tertullian, an apologist of the second and third centuries, defended the Christian faith and viewed Christianity as a vindication of a new identity within the Greco-Roman world (pp.124-125).

In the second section, Bediako examines Christianity, culture and identity in modern times. He argues that missionaries in Africa needed a fresh understanding of the relationship between religion and identity (pp. 225-227). He notes that most missionaries who served in Africa were of the impression that Africa was a dark continent with an inferior cultural identity (p. 225). Some of them are very familiar with the works and theories of 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropologists and scholars of comparative religions who stigmatised African religions and cultures (p. 230). They averred that nothing good from Africa's past should be taken into Christianity. Africans needed to abandon their culture, indigenous beliefs and names to become strong Christians.

According to Bediako, the earliest African theologians to challenge this notion were Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti and Mulago gwa Chikala Musharhamina in the 1960s, followed by Byang Kato in the 1970s (p. 414). However, the author agrees more with Idowu, Mbiti and Musharhamina, who see a continuity with the African past, while affirming the universality of Jesus Christ and God the Father, which predates the arrival of missionaries. Bediako raises many questions about the views expressed by Nigerian theologian Byang Kato. For Kato, the only source of Christian theology is the Bible and therefore, he saw no continuity between Africa's indigenous cultures and Christianity (pp. 414-415). However, Bediako explains that Kato's theological training was very conservative, which could be why he did not allow his African heritage to influence him. For Bediako, Christianity is both universal and local. Therefore, Africans can contextualise Christianity to suit their culture, history, language and identity.

In discussing African Christian identity, Bediako is more modern and readable than either his predecessors or contemporaries. This book is a must-read for any scholar seeking to engage meaningfully with African theology and Christianity. I like the connections Bediako draws between early Christian thinkers and modern African scholars in discussing culture, identity and tradition. He has done what Thomas Oden demanded of theologians: to look at themes that connect the early church with the modern African one. Bediako's book is among the few that have drawn this kind of parallel. In contrast, most African scholars focus on the work of western philosophers, such as Emmanuel Kant, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. I believe many upcoming scholars will build on Bediako's work.