

BOOK REVIEW

Isabel Apawo Phiri & Sarojini Nadar (eds) African Women, Religion and Health: in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye., Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2006, 280 pp.

The book, *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, comprises works written by African theologians (women in the majority) and others to celebrate the life of Prof. Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian, writer, mentor, mover, indeed, described as 'one of the first African women theologians ... to write and publish theological reflections of any significance, particularly with respect to African women' (Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro: 20).

Mercy Oduyoye, throughout her life, has been 'treading softly but firmly' (Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar: 1) through the field of religion and culture, with particular reference to how these affect women in the African context. Those who know Mercy know that she is a 'wise woman bearing gifts' (Letty M. Russel: 43) which she makes use of to lift up women, indeed, also men, from the doldrums of self or societal impositions as they reflect on religion and culture. The reflection is done not through a 'hammer and axe' theology (Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar: 2) which Mercy thinks is not the most fitting tool to use when pursuing the cause of gender-justice and liberation of women, but rather through 'a soft but firm' theology (Ibid.). This is because 'God may not be in the thunder' and one may have to listen to the 'thin calm whispers' (c/f 1Kings 19:12) (Ibid.).

The book is made up of many articles, written by notable African women theologians and others.

A Preface from Dr. Elizabeth Amoah gives the profile of Mercy Oduyoye, a woman born on a Ghanaian cocoa farm, who climbed the academic ladder to the University and has become 'a meticulous and modest person with an extraordinary sense of excellence.' (p. xix)

The book is divided into five parts. The very introduction of Part I brings up, among many other things, the characteristic approach of Mercy to theology and her visionary role in the formation of the 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.' The 'Circle,' for short, has to do with women coming together to do 'communal theology,' to reflect and 'dialogue with the cultures, religions, sacred writings and oral stories which shape the African context and define the women of this continent' (Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro: 20). Contributors in the segment include Nyambura J. Njoroge and Letty M. Russel.

Part II focuses on 'African women, the Bible and Health.' Practices of violence against women have to be 'read and exposed' and avoided rather than made to seem as if they did or do not matter (Sarojini Nadar). The segment, among other things, also draws attention to the fact that women's rights and health are so bound together with children's rights that both should constantly be handled (Dorothy B. E. A. Akoto).

Part III captures 'Women as Traditional Healers in Africa.' The health-care in this case has to do with wholistic healing, not only of the physical body, but also of the emotional, psychological and social healing, particularly with regard to the trauma of sexual abuse. Very good articles in this part were written by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Musa Dube and Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde.

Part IV, with the main heading of 'African Women's Experiences of Health And Healing, Endurance and Peacemaking,' highlights such issues as the inequalities experienced in accessing scarce health-care resources, efforts of African women to make peace, and a call on consecrated women not to live 'tiptoe at the periphery of the world to which they too belong' (Sr. Bernadette Mbuy Beya: 218). Instead they are encouraged to 'commit themselves to work toward the coming of a better world' (Ibid.). A very profound teaching, among many others, is one about prayer which states that, in the face of disappointment, particularly in times of praying for healing, we should remember that 'Each disappointment in prayer should be a challenge to develop new and deeper insights as we work to discern why God's answer contradicted our own' (Fulata Lusungu Moyo: 252; ref. Hunter and Walker: 1997:145). The personal experience that led to such a teaching is better read than told. Contributors in the segment include Sophia Chirongoma, Susan Rakoczy and Denise M. Ackermann.

Part V, the 'Postscript,' is the writing of a man blessed among women, the writing of the only male contributor to the quilt. Ogbu Kalu's article is a good sign that the women theologians are really not out to use 'a hammer and axe' theology to knock out male theologians, but rather it gives recognition to the fact that the women know that 'male and female' did God create humankind.

The writer provides a male outsider's perspective, one following the path of the female theologians to see how straight or crooked it is (since, as an African proverb points out, those cutting the path may not always be able to determine that). Prof. Ogbu Kalu has this to say: 'Mercy Oduyoye, fondly acknowledged as 'the mother of African Women Theologians', has provided solid leadership and has perhaps set the example' (Ogbu Kalu: 275). Kalu has also seen women as constituting 'a core aspect of the explosion of Christianity in contemporary Africa,' (Ibid.: 261) and urges that black women, including the African American women theologians, 'should intentionally develop creative and sustained linkages as they reflect about God's relationship with women confronted by challenges in varied eco-systems' (Ibid.: 261-262). He also cautiously asks the female theologians to make a distinction between 'secular feminist scholarship and Christian feminist theology because the two have different goals, assumptions, and methods' (Ibid. 267). Let me pause to point out here that the women, 'The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,' have not named themselves as 'feminists' or 'womanists' or the like. They have been struggling (as evidenced in the Introduction) with 'naming' which, among other things, would help in 'formulating new methods and theories appropriate to African modalities of theologizing that, although distinctive from those of the West, still maintain a critical approach' (Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar: 4). The African women theologians would, therefore, follow the sound teaching of their celebrant, Prof. Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, of treading softly but firmly, knowing that 'For African women, partnership, interdependence, and mutuality are as important as freedom in our struggle' (Ibid.: 7).

African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, is a book one cannot afford not to read. As a whole, the articles are an excellent collection, written by knowledgeable scholars. They constitute a superb source of knowledge not only about the life, thought and teachings of Mercy Oduyoye, but further insights and standpoints largely engendered by her works. All interested in

contemporary theological discourse, especially in African Theology, lecturers in University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies, Seminaries and Gender Studies, as well as research students cannot afford not to read such a book – **Dr. Rebecca Ganusah**, Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.

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