

## Book review

**Martin Ott, *African Theology in Images*. Kachere Monograph No. 12; Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000. 604pp., paperback.**

Martin Ott's book is an updated and revised version of his German book *Dialog der Bilder. Die Begegnung von Evangelium und Kultur in Afrikanischer Kunst* (Freiburg: Herder, 1995) which is based on his doctoral dissertation. Recent developments in Christian art, the activities of the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre (Dedza, Malawi) upon which his research is based, African theology, and Malawian society and church compelled Ott to update and revise his German version.

According to Ott, this book is meant to be the first systematic theology constructed in and from Malawi; to establish a theology of symbolic expression in Africa; and to serve as a substantial contribution towards a theology of inculturation in Africa. The book has three parts (excluding the introduction and conclusion). Part one is entitled "The Challenge of Christian Art in Africa". This is an assessment of current literature on the debate on inculturation. In other words, this part situates the study within the larger context of the scholarly discussion on African theology, Christian art, and the theology of images. This part has four chapters: "Theology of Inculturation: Taking stock"; "Christian Art in Africa: An overview;" "The KuNgoni Art Craft Centre: History, Persons, Works," "African Christian Art: A Systematic Analysis". Part two deals with "Religion and History - The Malawian Legacy as a Challenge for Inculturation." This part tries to present in some detail the anthropological and historical background for the study of inculturation in the Malawian context. This concerns the works developed by the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre. The presentation draws heavily on the findings of cultural anthropology (for the theology and symbols of African Traditional Religions) and on the history of the Catholic Church in Malawi (for the historical background of Christianity). This part has two chapters: "Religion and Culture in Malawi: The Anthropological Perspective", "Catholics in Malawi: A Historical Overview". The last part of the book is entitled "Inculturation and Images: African Theology as Iconography". The issue here is the theology of inculturation arrived at from the starting point of the works of art created by the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre. These works are discussed in the light of the presentations in the first two parts. This part has six chapters: "Encounter in Images: The Dialogue between Malawian Life-Experience and Christian Faith", "Creation in Myth and Faith in Creation: A Theology of Home",

“‘God-Talk’ in Images: Toward a Malawian Theological concept of God”, “New Life in the Kachere Tree: African Images of Christ”, “New Life in Community: The Trinitarian and Ancestral Roots of the African Church”, “Keeping in Step with African Life: Sacraments, Values and Ethics”. At the end of the book, there are valuable maps, plates, list of works of the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre, and a bibliography.

In the words of the author, “The present study concludes that the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre holds a unique place in the Malawian and, indeed, the African church. According to our research, there is no other Center of Christian art in Africa within which the interaction of anthropology, art, and theology has yielded comparable results. The data also verify the old adage that truth expressed in the visual arts anticipates theological insights long before they become standard treatises in mainline theology. For this reason the KuNgoni Art Craft Centre can be credited with a prophetic role for Malawi, for the wider African context, and even for the universal church” (pp. 523-24).

This book has a Roman Catholic bias. The author himself is a Catholic who is conversant with Catholic terminology and theology. His Catholic background partly explains his interest in inculturation. This comes in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and more recently the African Synod. The KuNgoni Art Craft Centre itself is under the tutelage of the Catholic church. The author has thoroughly examined and documented the works of the center. He has critically analyzed the data available to him and has made insightful observations. Obviously, one will be justified to ask whether the works of one center are representative for an “African Theology in Images”. The answer will depend upon the discipline one subscribes to. What needs to be noted, however, is that the artists are lay people (without any theological training), but yet they have shown an amazing knowledge of biblical stories and the traditional beliefs and practices. They have managed to put these side by side without trying to assimilate them one to the other. The viewer is left to interpret and make his/her own observations on the works presented.

The work covered in the book combines insights from anthropology, theology, church history, and biblical studies. Those readers conversant with or interested in Malawian (African) Traditional Religions (cf. for example, A.J. Makumbi, *Maliro ndi Miyambo ya Achewa* [Blantyre: Dzuka, 1982]; J.M. Schoffeleers, *Religion and the Dramatisation of Life: Spirit Beliefs and Rituals in Southern and Central Malawi* [Kachere Monograph No. 5, Blantyre: CLAIM, 1997]; J.M. Schoffeleers and A.A. Roscoe (eds.), *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* [Limbe: Popular Publications, 1985] will be at home with or find valuable information on the cultural anthropology in the book. Those

familiar with or interested in the history of Malawi will definitely find helpful insights in the church history presented. For theologians and students of theology, the book is a very rich resource for issues like the theology of home (chap 8), "God-talk" (chap 9), African images of Christ ("Christ-Kachere Tree") (Chap 10). In short, this book has covered a lot of ground, hence it is a valuable resource.

This book is one of the first of its kind in Malawi on the discipline of inculturation, and and more especially on the role of visual art in theology. The works cited are excellent and informative, and they provide opportunity for further research. The book is a must for those interested in cultural anthropology, theology, and missiology vis-a-vis visual art. Despite being a translation from German, the book is easy to read.

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