

A Review Article on Books with an African Christian Theme

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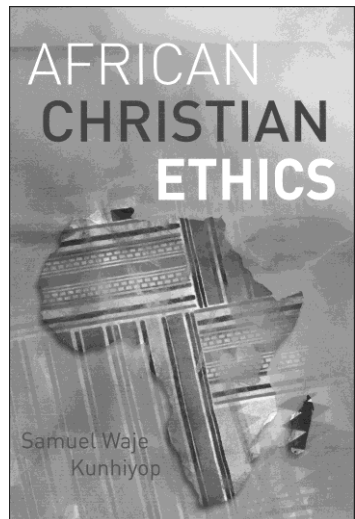
I am convinced that Christian leaders in the West must not ignore Christian books of a theological nature coming from Africa or closely related to that continent. Philip Jenkin's thesis is now well known, and I will not repeat his research other than to say it is time for Western church leaders and theologians to take note of some of the books that I will give brief digests upon in this article. The church of Africa has much to offer the Body of Christ, and this includes the authors and scholars there. College professors in the West must begin to integrate this literature into their class reading lists. It will truly help us to be a global people of God.

I turn first to three books written specifically for the African context.

African Christian Ethics

Here is a major work of four hundred pages by African educator Dr. Samuel W. Kunhiyop which is destined to become standard fare for ethics courses in evangelical African colleges. Yet I believe it will garner a large readership well beyond African colleges. It will serve as an invaluable text for Western institutions in missiology and ethics. Mission boards preparing candidates for Africa will certainly want their candidates to read this book in advance of their going.

This particular edition is a major expansion of the author's original 2004 edition, *African Christian Ethics*. The 2008 edition has a very fine foreword by noted



African theologian and scholar Yusufu Turaki. Turaki is to the point about Kunhiyop's work in writing that it ". . . is deep, thorough, expansive, relevant and persuasive" (p. xi). It is published by HippoBooks, an imprint of WordAlive (Nairobi, Kenya), ACTS (Bukuru, Nigeria), and Zondervan (Grand Rapids, Michigan).

Kunhiyop, now the head of the Postgraduate School of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS), formerly taught theology and ethics at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary, Nigeria. He has divided this book into two parts – Part One: Ethical Foundations and Part Two: Contemporary Ethical Issues. Part one is a "survey" of the study of African Christian ethics and what constitutes the "Foundations of Contemporary African Ethics" (pp. 7-26). This latter chapter is truly foundational to grasping ethics in Africa. He then proceeds to look at "The Foundations of Western Ethics" (pp. 27-44). Other foundational matters are addressed, and then the bulk of the book focuses upon the contemporary ethical issues in Africa. Kunhiyop organizes these into six categories: political issues, financial issues, marriage and family issues, sexual issues, medical issues and religious issues. Western Christians will be struck by some of the chapters here which are generally not standard fare in Western Christian ethics texts; for example, chapters eleven and twelve, "Corruption" and "Fund-Raising".

Generally speaking, I found myself in agreement with the author's conclusions. He writes with a very clear style. It will be most helpful as a class text, and I will certainly promote its use in colleges. The author makes reference to select works both in print and electronic form. I was disappointed that an index was not included, as I think this would add to the book's value for students. Readers may want to compare Kunhiyop's chapter on "Prostitution and Sex Trafficking" (pp. 282-292) with *Escaping the Devil's Bedroom*, reviewed in a book notice elsewhere in this volume of the *Haddington House Journal*. Each chapter ends with "Questions" which could be used for discussion purposes in a seminar or as written student assignments.

God's road map for human sexuality

Last October I had the pleasure of speaking at a marriage enrichment conference with Derrick Mashau and Josh Mack in South Africa. I appreciated listening to Dr. Mashau's insights into Christian marriage in the African context. I also want to say that what Dr. Mashau said, while appropriate to the African context, was much larger than just that – it had universal implications.

This particular book, *God's road map for human sexuality: discipling your child to make sexual choices that honour God* by Dr. Mashau, was a blessing to me, a Western Christian father; and so it should be, as it is based upon biblical principles. The illustration on the front cover of the book intrigued me – a compass laid upon a Bible. That certainly is communicating a clear statement.

The book has nine chapters:

Chapter one – God's beautiful design for human sexuality

Chapter two – The art of Christian parenting, children and human sexuality

Chapter three – Mentoring your child through different stages of life

Chapter four – Spiritual warfare on your doorstep

Chapter five – Perspectives on love, courtship and marriage

Chapter six – Premarital sex and cohabitation among Christian youth in South Africa today

Chapter seven– Homosexuality and same-sex marriage

Chapter eight – HIV and AIDS in the family context

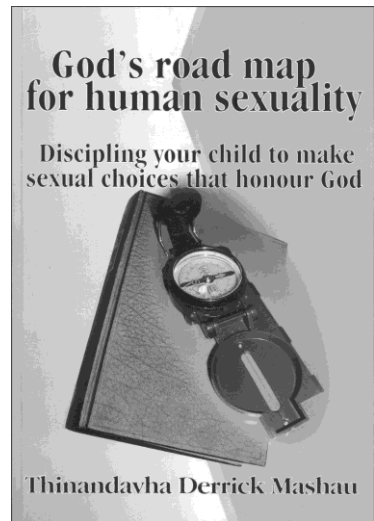
Chapter nine – Divorce and remarriage

This book is only 95 pages, so do not expect it to be exhaustive. It is very much a survey of the subject and as such is most helpful for parents and youth workers.

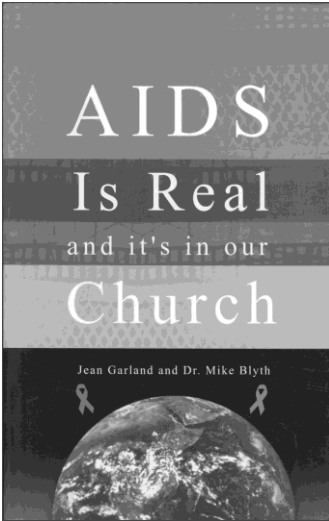
Dr. Mashau serves as the Chair and Professor of Missiology in the Faculty of Theology, North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus), South Africa. He has also written two other books related to the one digested here: *Love, Courtship and Marriage: Biblical Solutions to Problems Confronting African Youths in the 21st Century* and *Unlocking the mystery of marriage: Issues in premarital counseling*.

Aids Is Real and it's in our Church

Aids Is Real and it's in our Church by Garland and Blyth is the best book I have read yet on AIDS. It is not overly technical, not filled with reams of statistics and not just theological niceties and platitudes. It is balanced, realistic, sincere, humble, firm and God-honouring. Yes,



contextually it is rooted in Africa, but one will quickly find out that it does not just set out an agenda for Africans. Its message is both contextual for Africa and universal for all continents. This is often the mark of good, practical theology – contextually relevant yet universal and catholic at the same time – not easy to achieve but what will make for biblical balance.



The book is written by two healthcare professionals who have served long-term in Nigeria. It is published by Oasis International, which “Exists to meet the unique needs of English speaking, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean”. The book is distributed through Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS). The subtitle of the book on the inside title page is long yet a perfect description of the book’s content: “Information about AIDS in Africa, how to prevent HIV infection, and encouragement towards a Christian response to the AIDS epidemic”. The book covers seventeen chapters, starting with “What are HIV and AIDS?” to the last chapter, “AIDS and the Church”. The work is a combination of text, narrative and illustrations. These are well-balanced. I found myself coming away with several ponderous quotable quotes, such as:

I often say statistics about AIDS are ‘numbers with the tears washed off’. (111)

Forgiveness, grace and redemption are the wonderful truths of the gospel we preach. (139)

I encourage senior high school and college Christian youth to study this; I encourage mothers and fathers to read this; and I encourage every pastor to read it. It should be standard reading in every Christian college and seminary.

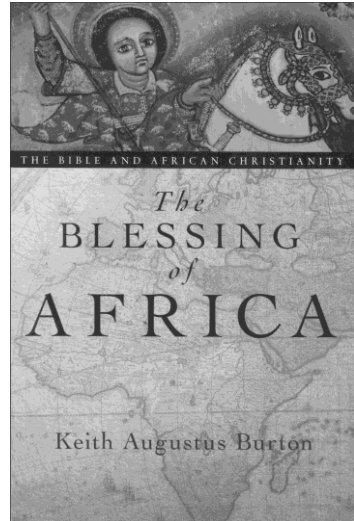
. . . If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:14)

The Blessing of Africa

Now we turn to the two last books to review that are related to Africa yet written and published in North America. When *The Blessing of Africa* was sent to the *Haddington House Journal* for review, it immediately intrigued me. The author is an African-American Seventh Day Adventist theologian who had formerly taught at Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama. I am familiar with the African-American Baptist writer Thabiti Anyabwile¹, whose views are closer to my own theological convictions, but I must admit I was not familiar with African-American Seventh Day theologians until I started reading Burton's book. I had no idea that there was a significant community of African-Americans in that group. I guess this goes to show how we are all rather insulated in our contacts.

The agenda of the book is to examine the biblical descendents of Noah's son Ham, the father of the Africans. There have been many bizarre theories about Ham and the "curse". This book rejects those and correctly so. Burton begins with "Part One: The Land of Ham: *Defining Biblical Africa*" (17-109). This is a most fascinating section and it helps us to think through contemporary continental geographical concepts from biblically defined constructs. Then Burton logically takes us to "Part Two: Family Reunion: *Africans in the Bible*" (57-109). This reads somewhat like a survey, which is fine and does organize the subject well for the reader.

Having settled what he defines as "Biblical Africa" in part one, Burton then deals with "Part Three: Growing Pains: *The Bible in Emerging African Christianity*" (111-144). The logical flow of the book now is clear, and any reader that misses part one will be somewhat baffled given that there is much contemporary confusion on the overall subject. The author helps us to come to understand with



¹ See two works of note by Anyabwile: *The Faithful Preacher: Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), and *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

broad strokes the development of Christianity in Palestine, Egypt, North Africa, Arabia and Ethiopia. Much of this is based upon the presuppositions encountered earlier in the book.

Before summarizing the remainder of the book, let me comment on the writer's research style and approach. Secondary sources are by far the greater number of works consulted. Next, one starts to feel some "straw men" have been set up, and then the author strikes them down. Many authors appear to create their "straw men", and so I am not just accusing Burton of this. The problem, however, is when this occurs, nuance of meaning is often missed and a certain shallowness can emerge. Having said this, as one enters into parts four, five and six, there is a very positive aspect I want to highlight. Burton does present an older version of how Christians on occasion did see Islam – was it more a heretical variant emerging out of Christianity than a totally new religion? Burton surveys the subject, and readers will find it a helpful survey but will likely continue on elsewhere to persist in forming their conclusions.

I did find myself somewhat puzzled over some broad, sweeping lines in "Part Six: Free at Last: *The Bible and African Liberation*" (207-224), such as his praise of the Fort Hare University in South Africa and "the illustrious alumni roster includes...", and then we read "Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe", without any further comment (240-241). I really wonder how readers will interpret such a statement. I am not convinced this chapter has adequately considered the presuppositions of "liberation".

There is a new day with authors, publishers and the world from which I think some will retreat because the offerings are outside their camp. Black, Seventh-Day theologians are not part of my immediate circle, yet I am very thankful for having read *The Blessing of Africa*. Yes, I have some reservations; yes, I was edified by many sections; and yes, it has helped me think more about "The Bible and African Christianity".

How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind

Thomas Oden in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* works from a different definition of Africa than Keith Burton. Oden speaks of it geographically as a continent (see 15-17), whereas Burton speaks of "biblical Africa". Both books are from IVP, 2007, and the editors must have concluded that both ways are justified. However, I cannot help but wonder if this is somewhat confusing. It struck me that the publishers wanted a certain consistency in market appeal, because the

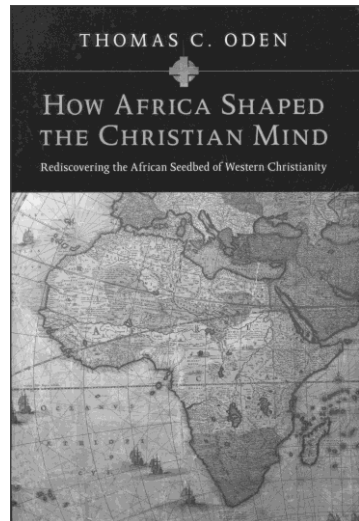
same map image by Joan Blaeu/Getty Images is employed, only with different colouration, on both book cover jackets. I realize Oden and Burton really have different theses – Oden to challenge western thought about the contributions of African theologians to the ancient church and to challenge modern African Christians to discover the apologetic role of ancient Christians; Burton to examine what biblical Africa was, almost as a biblical theology, and then to trace the growth of Islamic religion, colonialism and contemporary achievements and challenges in biblical Africa.

Oden writes with an easy-to-read prose style. I particularly appreciated his outline in chapter two, “Seven Ways Africa Shaped the Christian Mind” (42-61). I felt he was opening the door and then saying, “There, I gave you the idea; now write a book about each of the seven points.” He appears to be setting the agenda for future researchers to follow.

Does Oden’s thesis push the door too far? That is, is his reaction to Harnack (57) so strong that it perhaps swings too far? (Harnack’s thesis being that ancient African Christianity gave itself over to Greek thought as opposed to Oden’s thesis that “the literary richness of the distinctive African Christian [left its] imprint on proto-Europe and the formation of the Christian mind” [57-58].) It strikes me that there is actually more of a middle road here. Ancient African Christians were both contributors and borrowers. Globalization and nationalism are recurrent themes throughout history and are not just modern phenomena. Oden’s work is certainly one of the most significant books on an African theme in the last five years. Scholars worldwide are taking this book up with great interest.

Conclusion

My purpose in this review article was first to acquaint the reader with significant works about Africa or emerging out of Africa. I offer their inclusion as a challenge to the Western church to truly become the global people of God. Likewise, I hope it may lead to greater networking of theologians on the African continent through knowing a “little more” about one another and what is being published. All books



in this article are worthy of being consulted in evangelical theological training institutions in Africa. Clearly, one or two should be standard as textbooks in several institutions.

Books Under Review

Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje. *African Christian Ethics*. Nairobi, Kenya: HippoBooks, 2008, 400 pp., paper. ISBN 978-9966-805-36-2

Mashau, Thinandavha Derrick. *God's road map for human sexuality: Discipling your child to make sexual choices that honour God*. Kempton Park, South Africa: AcadSA Publishing, 2008, 95 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-92012-30-8

Garland, Jean and Mike Blyth. *Aids is Real and it's in our Church*. Bukuru, Nigeria: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2005, 326 pp., paper. ISBN 1-59452-026-7

Burton, Keith Augustus. *The Blessing of Africa*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007, 294 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8308-2762-6

Oden, Thomas C. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007, 204 pp., hc. ISBN 978-0-8308-2875-3

***“[It’s] time for the West to listen to
the voice of the global Church.”***

Christopher J. H. Wright