

BOOK REVIEW

Hartman, Tim. 2020. *Theology After Colonization: Bediako, Barth, and the Future of Theological Reflection*

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Hartman's book delineates the arrival of colonization and Christendom in Africa as intricately linked, interdependent and mutually reinforcing phenomena that have wielded a profound influence on church history spanning the last seventeen centuries, particularly in the context of the unfolding Western pursuit of expansion and dominance. The book is divided into two sections. The first addresses the contemporary state of Western Christian theology. It elucidates the effects of pluralism and secularization, which have given rise to cultural hegemony; the deterioration of the inherent connection between Christian faith and political authority; and the transformative impact of globalization on the erstwhile objectives of colonization.

The second part examines theology through the lenses of Christological, contextual, cultural, constructive and collaborative reflection. This involves a comparative study of the responses of two twentieth-century theologians to the colonial-Christendom complex within their respective contexts. The first theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968), a Swiss-German scholar, addressed the challenges posed by Christendom and the escalating secularization of Europe. Barth grounded his dogmatic reflections on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, rather than relying on official institutional structures (including the church) or societal consensus.

The second theologian, Kwame Bediako (1945–2008), from Ghana, presented a post-colonial theology. Writing from the global South, where Christianity experienced substantial growth following the withdrawal of Western missionaries, Bediako espoused the belief in the infinite translatability of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He contends that the gospel could be incarnated in Africa as a non-Western religion, distinct from the influences of colonization.

There are striking similarities between their theologies: both couple Christianity with political power; both develop theologies that are independent of the

colonial-Christendom complex – even before it collapsed; their work indicates the way forward for Christological, contextual, cultural, constructive and collaborative theological reflection; both respond in the same way to nineteenth-century European Protestantism, in wanting to break the connection between the gospel and the colonial culture that had been forged in Africa, and a similar religion that was promoted in Europe; they are both interested in matters of revelation, religion and culture.

At the age of 25, Bediako underwent a profound conversion to Christianity that played a pivotal role in the rediscovery of his African identity and spirituality – he believed that turning to Christ made him more African than Western. Half a century earlier, at the age of 28, Karl Barth, then a pastor in Switzerland, also underwent a significant awakening that substantially redirected the trajectory of his life. Barth wanted the church to confront the state rather than align itself with its policies. When his theological mentors supported the military policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Barth lost faith in nineteenth-century theology.

Over the past five centuries, Christianity has witnessed a decline in Europe, attributed to the phenomenon of secularization, while the church in the global South has experienced remarkable growth in the last fifty years, following the end of colonization. Hartman, therefore, rejects the European-driven progress propagated by Christianity in the nineteenth century, supported by three pivotal failures: World War II, the Holocaust and the movement towards colonial independence.

Another shift identified by Hartman involves a transition from community-oriented values to an emphasis on individualism, where societal approval no longer served as the arbiter of meaning; individuals themselves assumed the authority to legitimize their own meaning. In anticipating this postcolonial critique of universalizing standards in Christianity, Barth and Bediako offered Jesus Christ, as the only universal truth, as the only alternative.

The second part of the book presents a fivefold approach to contemporary theological reflection.

Christological Reflection

In 1933, Barth authored a pamphlet critiquing church reform, the establishment of a national bishop and the collaboration of Christians with the Nazi government. He emphasized the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the exclusive theological authority. Prior to its confiscation by the Nazis in July 1934, over 37,000 copies of this pamphlet were printed.

Meanwhile, in Africa, Bediako confronted distinctly different challenges as he defended the centrality of Jesus Christ against syncretistic movements such as Afrikania, Islam and African traditional religions. He proclaimed a Christocentric theology,

with emphasis on the possibility of being both Christian and African; Christianity was a non-Western religion inherent to Africa; it was Christ who brought missionaries to Africa, not the other way around.

For Barth and Bediako, Immanuel, Christ with us, is the foundation and substance of theological reflection. We can learn the following from them about the rationale and methodology for a Christological focus of contemporary theology: (1) The gospel of Jesus embodies a prophetic and indigenous character; (2) all revelation is a manifestation of God's self-revelation; (3) this revelation is intended for all humanity; (4) it is an ongoing process; and (5) the universality of Christ serves as the grounding for theological reflection.

Contextual Reflection

Christina Afua Gyan (1900–1987), was a yam farmer, midwife and oral poet from Asempaneye in eastern Ghana. Her expressions of prayers and praises to God were inherently contextual, communicated in the Twi language. Images from her immediate environment served as background for the various names that she ascribed to Jesus, such as Hero, the Python, great Rock, big Tree, Chief of Police, the Elephant Hunter, and the Bravest of Muscle-Men. Bediako praises Gyan's work as an exemplary instance of contextual theology. By employing ancestral and royal titles to refer to Jesus, Gyan underscored the presence of Christ in Africa prior to the arrival of Western missionaries, challenging the notion that European vocabulary was necessary to encapsulate African theology.

It should be noted that the gospel and culture intersect in a specific locale, with the questions posed and the theological responses offered intricately tied to that place, a perspective both Barth and Bediako adhere to, notwithstanding the tendency to interpret Western theologians, such as Barth, without due consideration of their context. Barth asserts that much of his theology emerged as a response to the people, events and circumstances surrounding him. While recognizing context as the foundation of theological reflection, he maintains that it should not dictate or confine theology.

Context, as Hartman contends, inevitably shapes our comprehension, a fact not always appreciated by Westerners engaging with Africa. Both Barth and Bediako reject the notion of religion as mere projection, seeking to discern the essence of Jesus beyond human projections. They contend that God's revelation is accessible to all people, through the universality of Jesus.

Cultural Reflection

Culture is the location of revelation, though explaining the role of culture in theology is challenging and complex. Both Barth and Bediako emphasise the significance of culture but neither formulate specific methods for its analysis. For Barth the gospel was unique and identifiable amid culture, while Bediako believes that it is impossible to separate the two.

Constructive Reflection

At times Bediako goes too far in his emphasis on the interplay between the Bible and elements of African culture, like drawing a direct line between Jesus, the ancestors and the traditional Akan festival, in a sermon that he preached in 1990. Though Bediako claims that Western theology is more syncretistic than African theology, the opposite seems to be true when he claims that revelation occurs in and through culture. This elevates cultural theology above the pure gospel. In contrast, Barth emphasizes that there should be no synthesis of the Bible, Christ, ideas, religion or culture. There is no place for Christ plus culture; no system of thought should be placed above Christ or the Bible. Though Barth and Bediako have differing views on syncretism, the question must be asked whether there is not an element of syncretism present in all Christians.

Bediako promotes a new African theology that must make room within the historically inherited traditions for new ideas – an approach that starts with African culture and approaches the Bible from within culture. Barth holds that God’s self-revelation begins outside of culture and penetrates culture through Christ’s ministry.

Collaborative Reflection

In comparing Barth and Bediako, it becomes clear that contemporary theological reflection must be attentive to voices beyond one’s own immediate context. In the process one can learn valuable lessons:

- African Christians should learn to avoid the false dichotomy of either fully embracing or fully rejecting African traditional religions (ATRs), which will result in a balanced theology of ancestors, without embracing all the teachings of ATRs.
- Westerners could learn more about primal imagination.
- Westerners could be more self-critical about the combination of theology and culture that often becomes religion, more than revelation.
- Westerners should learn more about kinship with brothers and sisters in Africa.
- Changing contexts present a challenge to Western and African Christians to rethink and to rearticulate theology.

- Theological thought must move beyond the dichotomies of saved/lost, Christian/pagan, white/black and even Western/African.
- In our globalized, secular, pluralistic societies, the church must become outward-focussed.

The main contribution of the book is that for theological reflection to remain vibrant in a changing world, collaborative theology is not only a possibility, but a necessity.

About the Author

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