

Book Review: *African Public Theology*

Agang, Sunday B. (ed.). 2020. *African Public Theology*. Cumbria: Langham. 1–422 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78368-766-4. Approx. 231 ZAR (14.99 USD). Kindle.

1. Introduction

This book was compiled at the initiative of Sunday Bobai Agang, who holds a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary, USA, in Christian Ethics, Theology, and Public Policy. He currently serves as provost of the Nigerian seminary JETS (Jos ECWA Theological Seminary), is a professor of Christian ethics and theology, and is a former pastor. Agang has engaged in multiple post-doctoral endeavors in connection with Wheaton College, Cambridge University, Oxford University, Theological College in Singapore, Asbury Theological Seminary, and Stellenbosch University, South Africa. His academic awards identify him as an exemplary scholar. He has authored multiple peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and books. These include *When Evil Strikes: Faith and the Politics of Human Hostility*, published in 2016, and *Globalization and Terrorism: Corruption as a Case to Ponder*, published in English in 2019 and re-issued in German and French in 2021. Agang has served as chairman, secretary, or member of multiple boards and commissions, including his current position as chair of the Executive Committee of NetACT (Network for African Congregational Theology).

African Public Theology evolved through the efforts of Agang in partnership with Langham Publishing and NetACT. Agang organized planning meetings and worked on this effort during a sabbatical year in 2018 at Stellenbosch University. There he connected with H. Jurgens Hendriks,

program coordinator of NetACT and professor emeritus of Stellenbosch, and Dion A. Forster, chair of the Systematic Theology Department at Stellenbosch, who became co-editors.

2. Overview

African Public Theology's method is to root itself in biblical theology while addressing a broad scope of issues facing African society, using theology as a voice for justice. The volume's thesis is that public theology is especially needed in the African context, as it addresses multiple needs: for theology to be reimagined as not only an understanding about God, but as a vision of God's desire for his creation and his people, specifically Africa; for the African church to undergo reform so it can be effective; and for Christians to take their faith public and engage in deliberate action to contribute to change.

Another pointed emphasis is that academically-focused theology is often merely cognitive and therefore irrelevant to the real-life experiences of everyday people. For this reason, the book's intention is to help readers comprehend the import of public theology, begin to grasp the issues that intersect this field in the African context, and catch a vision of the all-encompassing aspects of life that contribute to change.

The work has thirty contributors and is comprised of three sections, with twenty-nine chapters overall. Part One consists of five chapters and focuses on establishing the fundamentals of public theology, emphasizing a Trinitarian and biblical viewpoint. Part Two consists of the bulk of the work, with twenty-one chapters engaging the application of public theology within African society. The issues addressed include economics, education, poverty, land issues, work issues, rural community development, migrants, refugees, human trafficking, human rights, the armed forces, the state, democracy and civil society, leadership, media, the arts, interfaith

issues, gender, and intergenerational issues. It also addresses ecotheology including public policy regarding the environment, science, and health. Part Three brings all this together with three chapters regarding the role of the church, including a vision of the Africa God wants and a call for Christians to mobilize towards this effort.

This volume is self-described as a handbook encouraging theological schools and theologians to network and build on its ideas. The purpose is to empower African Christian leaders spiritually and theologically, spurring belief and action towards God's kingdom coming to fruition in Africa. Its intention is to feed into existing collaborative efforts such as the African Union's *Agenda 2063*, described in an Appendix, as well as groups engaging in related efforts including the African Leadership Study (ALS). This project is ambitious, passionate, and necessary. This work points out that though Africa is proud of its heritage, identity, values, and culture, it is hampered by war, corruption, terrorism, and the abuse of power. Many regions endure a lack of regard for constitutional government, leadership that promotes its own interests, and governments that steal from and inflict pain on their own people through armed forces. These governments fail to tend to their citizens' needs regarding issues of poverty, disease, refugees, orphans, violence against women, prejudice, and inequality. This is where the Church must step up and help. Individual Christians are called to live out their theology by affirming human dignity, being a family, offering charity, showing solidarity, and meeting spiritual and physical needs. Christian organizations can align in coalitions with other churches, universities, and institutions to band together and exert group influence toward enacting change in civil society and public policy. Taking action in this way is the essence of public theology, which carries out God's work in a practical and life-changing way.

3. Evaluation

Despite its myriad authors, the book maintains a unity of focus, refreshingly offering a voice regarding uniquely African challenges directly from African professionals and academics. It uses clear, understandable language and offers an opportunity for reflection through questions and suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter. At the same time, it remains scholarly and suitable for theological institutions. It tackles the difficult and extensive subject of the pressing need for tangible change in African civil society.

The ideas in this compilation are especially relevant in the context of its year of publication, 2020, the year that saw the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Contributors re-emphasize that Africa groans under the weight of its burdens, and that God has something better in store for its people and for the continent.

This was a massive project completed in a relatively short time, and understandably it gleaned from the network of resources available, including several contributors from NetACT and at least half of the contributors from connections with Stellenbosch University. The book's collaborators include men and women from multiple disciplines and countries, representing Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and at least five other African nations. In addition, rather than being written only by theologians, nearly half of the thirty contributors come from additional fields of expertise, including business, law, leadership, communication, Christian education, the arts, and intercultural studies. Several are ordained clergy, and many regularly interact with organizations that are actively enacting change. This adds a practical dimension to this project that is eminently suitable for its purpose.

With this in mind, a similar future project could be strengthened through even greater depth in the variety of contributors, especially African women. Seventeen contributors specialize in some form of theology, but of those, sixteen are male (five of those Caucasian), while only one female

theologian is included—Esther Mombo, who addresses the chapter on "Gender," rather than on theology generally. The more heavily theological chapters that bookend the volume in Parts One and Three are all written by men.

The project does include seven women overall, including Mombo. Two of these were graduate students at the time, one in Drama and Theatre Studies, and one in Journalism (they have since been awarded their Ph.D.s). Therefore, only five experienced, professional women were included in this collaboration. Only four of twenty-nine chapters are written solely by female authors: besides Mombo's chapter on "Gender," these include "Leadership" by Maggie Madimbo; "Democracy, Citizenship, and Civil Society" by Jane Adhiambo Chiroma; and "The Media" by coauthors Bimbo Fafowora and Rahab Njeri Nyaga, (the latter of whom sadly passed away in January 2022). Two other female co-authors contribute to the chapters on "Education" and "the Arts" alongside male counterparts. *African Public Theology* addresses inequity and the lack of inclusion of African women, so while the incorporation of these authors is commendable, the addition of at least one or two more female African theologians would offer an even more well-rounded representation of the female voice of Africa in this volume.

In addition, this begs the question whether the twenty percent of the volume (six chapters) written by Caucasian male contributors, all well-regarded professors, represent a paradigm that would be considered socio-economically privileged. Could these chapters have been offered to qualified contributors more representative of the broader voice of African experience, including female scholars?

One additional benefit would be a chapter devoted to prejudice. Ideas of racial tension are interlaced through the book, especially tribal and gender discrimination. In addition, chapter fifteen on "Human Rights" by Kajit J. Bagu identifies how the West first realized that the idea of racial superiority was evil after observing the Nazi holocaust during World War II. However,

it would be worthwhile and informative to address an updated view of the current dynamic between white and black people in Africa, as opposed to other parts of the world and a different time.

4. Conclusion

African Public Theology provides concrete application of theology and ethics with a focus on healing, including Christianity's relationship with globalization, terrorism, corruption, persecution, human suffering, tribalism, and sustainable economy. This book is eminently valuable and should be included in theological curricula, not just in Africa, but around the world. It is also useful for Christians everywhere as it points readers in the direction of becoming networked and empowered toward effecting change in civil society.

The editor acknowledges that for *African Public Theology* to have an enduring impact it must not only be read and understood, but it should inspire further collaboration and the active practice of public faith.

Michael Blythe¹

Nations University; United Methodist Church

michaelblythe@vaumc.org

¹ Mr. Michael Blythe, a former hospice and correctional service chaplain, currently serves in the United States of America as a pastor within the United Methodist Church. He holds appointments as an archivist and resident historian within the International Pentecostal Holiness Church in addition to the post held at the New Testament faculty at Nations University (USA). Blythe is a graduate of Africa Nazarene University (Kenya) and Reformed Theological Seminary (USA), and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. He has presented research at conferences including the British New Testament Society, Society for Pentecostal Studies, Society of Biblical Literature, and the Evangelical Theological Society. His publications have been featured in nine academic journals, and his work is included in the forthcoming *Dictionary of Pentecostal Missions* (T&T Clark) and the *Historical Dictionary of Methodism* (Rownman & Littlefield).