

AFRICAN WOMEN, RELIGION, AND HEALTH: ESSAYS IN HONOR OF MERCY AMBA EWUDZIWA ODUYOYE

**By Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds). 280pp. New York:
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The book takes a broad look at the daily gender-related struggles of African women in their quest to find answers to their emotional, social, and health challenges as they seek out to commune with God. In other words, the authors wrote about the intersections of health and religion among African women in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye's conceptualizations of African women theology. This was done as a way to pay respect for Oduyoye's contributions to the discipline of religion and culture, and theology. Through her timeless work, Mercy has earned a title for herself as a leading African woman theologian among her colleagues at the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (also known as the Circle).

The prevailing paradigms of cultural and religious conditions which impact marginality along gender margins affect women's health in African communities. Through utilizing methodologies created by Mercy Oduyoye, each of the contributors in this book, motivated by her work, have penciled out the different unique ways African women respond to gender- and health-related issues in an attempt to answer Mercy's famous call for "echoing the call of Jesus to the daughter of Jairus"; but this time this invitation is extended to the women of Africa to raise—Talitha cumi (cf. Mark 5:41).

The idea behind the book is to encourage the women of Africa to tread softly but firmly in sharing their unique stories while "doing theology." The thrust of her argument is clear, as she has demonstrated in her fruitful works; thereby encouraging fellow African women theologians in the Circle click and indeed the world to listen to and remedy the calm whispers that are coming from African women in the rural communities whose stories are not appropriately represented within the spectrum of religion. Basically, the concern of the contributors in this book is for the healthy relationship between the church and culture within the African communities in the context of health and gender conversations.

The idea of the whole book is geared toward encouraging African women theologians to walk in a "soft but firm" theology when pursuing the cause of gender-justice and liberation for women, especially in Africa. This is a method that Mercy has famously used to pry open theological debate among her colleagues in her writings and reflections in respect to African women. This approach was described by Isabel Apawo and Sarojini Nadar in the book as a hermeneutic and theology of liberation.

Through their collective voice in this book, the authors demonstrate a unique togetherness in their exploration of gender-related issues in the context of health and religion, as they interrogate and appropriate this dominant theme in their reflections. Furthermore, they were able to gauge the significance of health and religion for gender-functioning theories proposed by some

elevated members of the Circle such as cultural hermeneutics, African women theology, post-colonial perspectives, communal theology, bosadi hermeneutics and womanist theology.

To settle the scores, the authors approached the concern of African women marginalization on three different levels. First, the contributors collectively explored the need to name the work of African women theologians by a hermeneutic and theology of liberation. Secondly, by conceptualizing a theology or hermeneutic of liberation the authors within the different streams of thoughts investigate the various ways in which the work of African women theologians relates to African and womanist theology in particular and its nexus as a relevant field of study. To complement the discipline of theology from which the founding members of the Circle originally emerge from, the authors relate their stories and theological reflections to the wider discipline of theology, paving ways for African initiated forms of theological beliefs and anxieties within the church. In particular, interrogating the different ways in which this forms of belief systems occupy and operate its theoretical space as a theological framework.

The authors have all adopted a methodological approach based on “Treading softly but firmly” which utterly is a new innovative model within which African women theologians and women in rural Africa can do their work using a narrative method of storytelling to culturally engage the interpretative process of gender, health, and religion.

It is important to note here that this book is divided into five different parts that all share the concerns of Mercy Oduyoye in their various unique ways and deals with issues that are passionate concerns of Mercy Oduyoye. The development of the arguments of the authors in these chapters is thus briefed below.

Part 1 takes into account the paper of Musimbi Kanyoro titled “Beads and Strands: Threading More beads in the Story of the Circle,” where Musimbi celebrates Mercy as a visionary leader of the Circle and tells the story of the beginning stages of the organization and some “background” stories behind the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She also shares the new direction the Circle is taking with regard to the formation of the four study commissions, namely: Cultural and Biblical Hermeneutics, Women in Culture and Religion, History of Women, and Ministries and Theological Education and Formation. At the end, while also presenting her role as a co-founder, she wraps up by raising crucial rhetorical questions vital to the future of the Circle and even African women theologians in general. She describes the Circle as leading agents in creating a climate in which gender-justice will prevail.

The second paper was written by Letty Russell, a very dear friend to the Circle. Letty continues with the story of Mercy in her paper “Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Wise Woman Bearing Gifts”. She tells the story of Mercy and analyses how she responded to situations during her time at the international ecumenical community; hence using her experiences and position as a woman from a “Third World” country to bear good fruits to African women despite the opposition she faced. Letty told her story using the story of Magi bearing gifts for the infant Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 2.

Nyambura Njoroge in her paper “Let’s Celebrate the Power of Naming,” situated her discourse on Mercy’s personal story and her courage for publishing the story of her pain as a childless African Christian. Upon this background, she furthers Mercy’s call for a life-giving theology of procreation and eschatology that terminates rejection and encourages healing, hope, and transformation for African women who are in the deep hole of rejection due to their painful motherless status. Hence, using this platform as a springboard to share her own agony as it relates to the “enriching power that radiates from the ability to name what is happening in one’s life and in the community in the context of injustice, indignity, and suffering” (p. 59).

Part 2 of the book introduces a very critical theme “African women, the Bible, and health.” It opens with “‘Texts of Terror’, The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church, and Society,” a striking title for a paper that looks keenly at the story of Esther and Dinah in the bible to reveal

the structural rape of women present in the biblical text and society. Sarojini Nadar in this paper writes passionately about sexual violence, which according to her, has been concealed within the Bible, and acted out in our society. She conceptualizes these biblical stories of sexual violence as “texts of terror,” which was discussed in light of two literary womanist analysis and expands on two concepts that hugely took the paper on another level: plot and time analysis. She analyzed the use of plot and time to demonstrate the systemic act of sexual violence in the Bible. She enjoins the church and the Circle to critically read and exposed such “Texts of terror” otherwise they might continue to hurt women of all races in our communities and the church.

Dorothy Akoto places into parallel the story of a poor widow in 2 kings 4:1–7 and the Trokosi practice of slavery of virgin girls to draft her paper, “Women and health in Ghana and the Trokosi practice.” The goal of the paper was to encourage the liberation of African women and accounts the inclusivity of women’s rights and health in relation to children’s right.

“Women as Traditional healers in Africa” was the focus of part 3. This section starts with a conversation led by Isabel Apawo in her paper, “Dealing with the Trauma of Sexual Abuse.” In this paper, the author gives an expose on the issues of rape and pregnancy as experienced by female traditional health practitioners who use traditional methods of healing to help hurting rape survivors in the Kwazulu-Natal province of South Africa. The paper was also spiced up as the author went further to discuss the issue of same-sex relationships among traditional healers, a claim according to her, “contradicts the commonly held view that homosexuality is a Western import into African societies.”

Musa Dube contributes a thought provoking paper in this volume titled “Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined together” where she constructively asks the question “How can African Indigenous Religion (AIR) lecturers become healer teachers by teaching AIR/s for HIV and AIDS prevention?” in an attempt to answer this all-important question, she went on to analyze the holistic approach of African diviners among the Batswana people. In her argument, Musa contends that if this method is used in HIV prevention strategies, the participatory process would lead the community to write its own diagnosis in a way that demonstrates the relationship of HIV/AIDS with that of sexual violence against women and girls, poverty, gender inequality, racism, sexual discrimination and so on.

In Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde’s “Women as Traditional Healers,” she gives an account of how every women from the Yoruba tribe (and other tribes) in Nigeria is considered a health provider through the instrument of care-giving and attachment for their families and even the community at large. Her argument was based on the biblical traditions or examples of the care-giving roles of mothers from the bible. In her argument, she challenged men to collaborate with women in their care-giving role as co-creators of the human race.

Part 4 of the book opens to papers from Sophia Chirongoma who explores “Women, Poverty and HIV in Zimbabwe” and takes the turn this time to humbly look at the experiences of African women in the context of inequalities experienced in accessing the limited healthcare resources within Zimbabwe. However, attention was mostly given to the economic instability in the country which Sophia suggests impact greatly on women and children from the rural villages.

Susan Rakoczy in “Women and Peacemaking,” looks at the peacemaking efforts by women as individual and groups in the context of the Christian religion. In order to create a good storyline the author uses the story of two women (Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day) who chose to work for peacemaking as her case study; hence highlighting the important work of South African women to peacemaking during the South Africa apartheid era in a manner that demonstrates the traditional efforts of white African women in brokering peace in times of conflict.

“Stand Up and Walk, Daughters of My people” by Sr. Marie-Bernadette Mbuy Beya shares the story of the Circle through the eyes of a Roman Catholic faithful who was living in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She lauds Mary Oduyoye who had inspired her to start her own organization the Bonne Esperance of which one of their aims is to further the goal of the Circle and through their work help African women within the Roman Catholic Church in the DRC to gain their voice and speak against all forms of oppression in the church and society.

The next paper by Denise Ackermann continues with the emphasis on women’s health and religion with a special interest in the gendered nature of stigma and HIV within the church and society. The paper “From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance” argues that if gender-related discussions is silenced by cultural taboos and does not take place within the religious institutions, then human sexuality will continue to be under attack and seen by many as something shameful, and any queer sexual behavior will automatically be stigmatized.

In “Navigating Experiences of Healing,” Fulata Lusungu Moyo enjoins her readers in her bold paper on Christian teachings about healing as she draws upon her own personal experience of nursing a terminally ill husband and her experience as a widow to analyze the contents of the sympathizing message she received from her well-wishers. She argues that even the terminally ill need to be involved in decision-making process of their last days and in the establishment of an eschatological hope in the present, instead of the typical imposition of words of encouragement and prayers for the person.

Part 5 opens and concludes with Prof Ogbu Kalu’s postscript “Daughters of Ethiopia” where he reflects and recommends possible areas of focus between African women theologians and African American women theologians. Kalu concludes the paper by identifying five reasons for a dialogical theological methodology between the African women and African American women theologians. The first been that it would be ideological since “most collections of essays that engage the two-thirds women have been organized by white women” (p. 274). The second reason he gave was academic in the sense that “emerging theologies need stronger and broader interpretative bases” (p. 274). Thirdly is the “need to engage global cultural and economic forces as they impact a variety of contexts” (p. 274–275). The fourth reason he gave was the need for Christian women to engage the Muslim women because many of such women live and breathe in difficult religious contexts (p. 275). And finally the fifth reason Kalu believes this collaboration is imperative was because “African American and African women have paid attention to charismatic religiosity” (p. 275). Although he applauded the Circle for making a difference, he, however, believes they can do more.

Ultimately, the book recommends a triple-bind model of race, class and gender, each of which is as important to African women as gender is to white feminists. Finding a balance between activism and theory is also stressed in the book as activism is a defining feature of the African women liberation struggle. Lastly, the directions in this book encourage Mercy’s narrative approach of “telling our own stories” and theorizing appropriate forms of theologizing African modalities which are often different from that of the West. Ogbu Kalu in his paper “Daughters of Ethiopia” stimulates this conversation by constructing a feminist discourse among African and African–American women theologians so as to engage global cultural and economic forces as they impact a variety of contexts and benefit from each other’s voice.

I am blown away with what I have learnt from this masterpiece. Indeed it is a book worth having. My best paper in all is “Texts of terror.” I love the way the author conceptualized the terms “plot” and “time” from a literary womanist analysis. However, I am not so confident with the conclusions of Fulata Lusungu Moyo in “Navigating Experiences of Healing,” where she argues that prayer and words of encouragement are not what a dying person needs but rather an involvement in the decision-making process. There is something about the statement that doesn’t sit well with me—perhaps because of my pastoral background; hence I might be biased.

But I think I might have to disagree with Moyo on that one because if the mental capacity of a sick person is weak and fragile and unable to clearly construct meaning then it might be unfair and tormenting to actually engage/involve such persons in the process of decision-making, especially when they are not mentally alert to make life-altering decision, and thus deny them the gifts of love and encouragement, and mostly, prayer—which might exert the power to regulate the experiences of illness.

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