

African theologian John Samuel Mbiti dies at 87

People in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue



(Courtesy photo)

John Samuel Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian and Anglican priest, died October 5 at a nursing home in Switzerland. He was 87.

Mbiti challenged the view that traditional African religions were “primitive,” arguing that they deserve as much consideration and study as other faith systems. His 1969 book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, explored this theme, and he elaborated upon it in 1980 for the *Christian Century’s* How My Mind Has Changed series.

“In Kenya I grew up in home, school and church milieus which held that the African religious and cultural background was demonic and anti-Christian. In this overpowering environment, one simply accepted this stand and looked at the world from its perspectives,” he wrote.

His theological education in the US and England did not challenge this view. “But upon my return to work in Africa, and upon careful study of the religious background of our people, there emerged gradually the demand to examine this issue and to form my own judgment.”

Mbiti taught theology at Makerere University in Uganda and later at the University of Bern in Switzerland. He also served as director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland. Through his many published works, he became recognized as one of the foremost experts on African theology. In 2014, Mbiti completed a translation of the New Testament from Greek to his native language, Kamba. —*Christian Century* staff