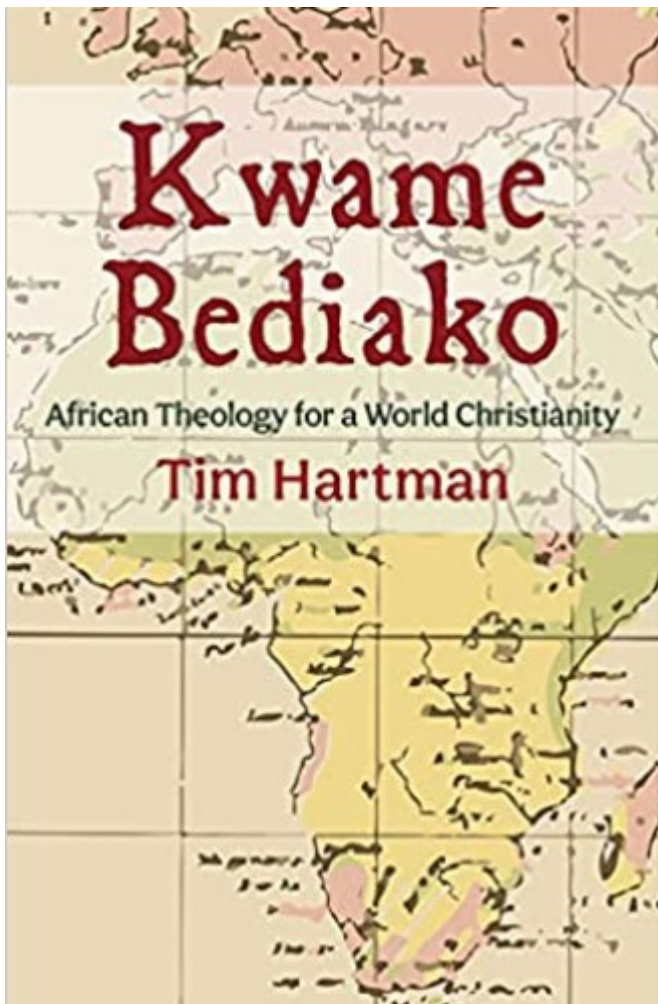


Kwame Bediako's Christianity without domination

The Ghanaian theologian offered new methodological approaches in the wake of imperialism.

by [Ross Kane](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

In Review



Kwame Bediako

African Theology for a World Christianity

By Tim Hartman

Fortress

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Theologian Kwame Bediako, who died in 2008, explored the intersections of identity, culture, and gospel by challenging long-standing assumptions about how to write theology. He modeled an African theology not beholden to Western Christianity, inaugurating a way of doing theology after imperialism. He was one of the most significant theological voices of his lifetime, not just in Africa but in the world—a distinction only necessary because Western theology's habit of operating as a self-enclosed discourse remains hard to shake.

Tim Hartman's book is an extraordinary introduction to Bediako's theology. He portrays the contours of Bediako's thought and carefully puts them within a wide framing, thereby illuminating Bediako's singular contributions. Bediako wrote mostly essays, aside from his published dissertation, and the specificity of theological essays can make such writers difficult to summarize. Yet Hartman's careful research ensures that we see a full picture of a profound theologian. Hartman also shares with Bediako an ebullient style that makes theology come alive, so this book is a joy to read.

As Hartman guides readers through prominent themes in Bediako's thought, we especially see Bediako's distinct contributions to methodology, how we approach theological discourse. Studying culture and identity was so central to Bediako because he saw them as thoroughly wrapped up in the theological enterprise. There is no pure, context-free gospel for Bediako, since we always receive the gospel as culture-bearing humans. God is outside creation, but divine revelation takes cultural forms.

It is not a flaw of revelation that it appears different to different people; rather, diversity of perception is part of how God chooses to show Jesus. Translation proves central to Christianity itself, a point that Bediako draws from Lamin Sanneh. Bediako takes Sanneh's point and makes it central to theological methodology: translation allows the gospel to speak to all people, without some cultural expressions taking precedence over others. Translation is the form universality takes in a Christianity that does not dominate.

By this understanding, Christianity is indigenous to Africa; it is not a foreign religion brought from elsewhere. Hartman skillfully shows that for Bediako, Africa is not peripheral to Christian theology, because Christianity has no geographic center.

African thought and practice thus contribute to shaping a new Christianity. Aspects of African culture that were cast aside by European missionaries, such as respect for ancestors, can be seen anew. African primal religion should be the basis for building indigenous African Christianity (*primal* being a positive term for Bediako, not a derogatory one). Jesus Christ becomes the Great Ancestor, one who sums up the wisdom and virtue of past ancestors while removing sinful residue from the past, both theirs and ours.

Bediako sees no need for deference to established ways of doing theology, which he sees as corrupted by Western culture. If there is a moment in Christianity that can be called a Fall, it was Constantine using Christianity for imperial purposes, leading to its subsequent role in medieval Christendom and European colonialism. Hartman shows how Bediako views theology between Constantine and the mid-20th century as infected with imperialism, such that Western Christianity became little more than a projection of Western culture. He likewise rejects the Enlightenment, which he sees in part as an effort to colonize thought. A Christianity that is fully African, not beholden to Western concerns, becomes an imperative not just for African Christians but for Christianity itself, since it offers a means of overcoming the contradictions of its colonial past.

And so, Bediako believed, African Christianity provides ingenuity necessary for Christianity across the world. In addition to ancestors becoming more central to a full Christology, African Christianity provides models for engaging religious pluralism not beholden to imperialism. African Christianity has always existed in plural environments, so it can hold to the “ultimacy of Christ while accepting the integrity of other faiths and those who profess them,” as Bediako puts it. In political theology, African Christianity shows how to desacralize politics, thereby promoting democracy rather than authoritarian politics which ascribe religious reverence to leaders. For Bediako, Christian politics display non-dominating power.

Hartman brings Bediako’s thoughts together ably and cohesively, showing that along with great wisdom there are some unresolved tensions that are difficult to sustain. For example, Bediako starkly contrasts Western Christianity with African Christianity, portraying each as a cohesive whole distinct from the other. Readers

are left to interpret on their own *which* African Christianity Bediako means to praise. There is as much prosperity gospel in African Christianity as there is in American Christianity, for example, and some Christian pastors support authoritarian regimes in Africa just like elsewhere in the world. Bediako would recoil at those expressions of Christianity, but they bring into the question the usefulness of his sharp contrasts and broad strokes. Meanwhile, certain strands of Western Christianity have resisted imperialism and racism, many of which came from or were in conversation with African Christians in the diaspora.

Similarly, Bediako sharply contrasts the gospel's cultural form, which changes over time, with the gospel itself, which does not. Yet a historical approach to theology acknowledges that the gospel—Christology especially—has changed through events such as the Nicene and post-Chalcedonian debates. "Gospel" remains a quite static category for Bediako in ways that hinder his account of cultural change.

Hartman plays the role of arbiter amid such criticisms, but sometimes the situation warrants the role of constructive critic. Among Bediako's many conversation partners in Africa, for example, he did not involve women's voices, such as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. It would be interesting to push the spirit of Bediako's thought in new and suggestive directions that he failed to see, thereby moving through some of these limitations. (Surely a theology that does not dominate has the resources to challenge patriarchy!) The possibility that Bediako's theology could so easily absorb such concerns shows its immense possibility, as well as Hartman's skill in narrating it.

A Christianity where no culture dominates another, where there is no geographic center, where Jesus Christ meets us as ancestor and friend, and where Christianity can be rescued from centuries of imperialism: this is Bediako's Christianity. Across Hartman's book and Bediako's writings as a whole, we sense that Christianity may be experiencing a new beginning. After centuries of being tied to imperialism, Christianity has the chance for a fresh start, with African Christianity leading the way.