

International Bulletin of Missionary Research

OCTOBER 2008 [32:4]

Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship in Africa

Andrew F. Walls

Andrew F. Walls, founding director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, is Senior Research Professor at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture, Akropong, Ghana. A contributing editor, he is Honorary Professor, University of Edinburgh, and Professor of the History of Mission, Liverpool Hope University. —a.f.walls@ed.ac.uk

Manasseh Kwame Dakwa Bediako, late rector of the [Akrofi-Christaller Institute for Theology, Mission, and Culture](#), in Akropong, Ghana, was born on July 7, 1945. He died, following a serious illness, on June 10, 2008. Over many years he pointed others to Africa's proper place in contemporary worldwide Christian discourse. He charted new directions for African Christian theology. He labored so that generations of scholars, confident equally of their Christian and their African identity, might be formed in Africa, and to that end he created a new type of institution where devotion to scholarship and understanding of the cultures of Africa would be pursued in a setting of Christian worship, discipleship, and mission.

<< *Kwame Bediako*

These were huge undertakings, and he was called from them at the height of his powers, when still full of visions and plans for their implementation, the institution that was meant to model and facilitate all those visions still in its youth. It would be premature, therefore, to pronounce upon his legacy so soon after he has gone from us. All who knew him or his work are still achingly conscious of the gaps caused by his departure, the business unfinished, the books half written, the plants that have budded and blossomed but are yet to bear their intended fruit. His achievements, great as they are, point to a future not yet realized. He was both a visionary and a skillful entrepreneur, but he was also an inspirer and encourager of others, holding out a vision for the whole church in Africa and beyond, sending out a call to those who would heed it to dedicate themselves to scholarship as a costly form of Christian service. His life, his vision, and his objectives can be set out, but we do not yet know how far others will take up what he has laid down. It is as though we are present at the reading of a will; decades must pass before it will be manifest how others, in Africa and elsewhere, made use of what Kwame Bediako bequeathed to them.

Early Life

Kwame—he always used his traditional Akan “birth-day” name, indicating his birth on a Saturday—was the son of a police inspector and the grandson of a Presbyterian catechist and evangelist. Though his parents came from the central region of what was then the British colony of the Gold Coast, he grew up in

the capital, Accra, at the Police Training Depot. His first schooling was thus not in his beloved mother tongue, Twi, but in the Accra language, Ga, in which he was also fluent. An outstanding pupil, he was able to gain secondary education at Mfantasi-pim School, Cape Coast, founded in the nineteenth century by the British Methodist mission. Missionary emphasis on education and an exceptionally enlightened period of educational policy under an exceptionally enlightened governor had given the Gold Coast some of the best schools in colonial Africa, and Mfantasi-pim was one of the best of these. Kwame received an excellent education of the English type. The period of his secondary education coincided with the transformation of the Gold Coast into Ghana, the first of the new African nations, led by Kwame Nkrumah, with his emphatic rejection of Western rule in Africa and high sense of Africa's past glories and future destiny. Kwame Bediako left Mfantasi-pim as its head prefect and in 1965 entered the University of Ghana, set up after World War II with the aim of being an Oxbridge in Africa. There he developed as an eloquent orator and debater, a person who could make a mark in politics; he also attained the academic excellence in French that won him a scholarship for graduate studies in France and the promise of an academic career. By this time he was a confirmed atheist under French existentialist influence, apparently deaf to the pleas of Christian classmates.

In France he gained master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Bordeaux, not surprisingly choosing African francophone literature as his area of research. During his time in France he underwent a radical Christian conversion—so radical that at one stage he thought of abandoning his studies in favor of active evangelism. Happily, he was persuaded otherwise; the time was coming when he would recognize scholarship as itself a missionary vocation.

His new life brought him new associates—above all, a fellow student of French, from England, who joined him in a mission to migrant Arab children. In 1973 Kwame and Gillian Mary were married, forming a wonderfully happy partnership that was rich both intellectually and spiritually. The following year came the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, enlarging Kwame's world vision and deepening his acquaintance with other Christians from the non-Western world—or as he liked to call it, the Two-Thirds World. His studies now moved from literature to theology, and their base from France to London, where he took first-class honors in his theological degree. Then it was back to Ghana, to teach for two years at the Christian Service College (the name of the institution precisely describing its purpose) in Kumasi. Here the family links were rebuilt with the Presbyterian Church, where his grandfather had given signal service, and he was accepted for ordination in that church.

Vocation to Theology

Kwame's evangelical convictions and credentials were manifest, but he was wrestling with issues that were not at the front of most evangelical minds, or on the agenda of most evangelical institutions at that time. Could Africans become fully Christian only by embracing the mind-set of Western Christians and rejecting all the things that made them distinctively African? Ordinary African Christians daily faced acute theological issues that were never addressed in the sort of theology that apparently served Western Christians well enough. It was not that the theology was necessarily wrong; it simply could not deal with issues that went to the heart of relationships with family, kin, or society, nor deal with some of the most troubling anxieties of those who saw the world in terms different from those of the Western world. Africans were responding to the Gospel, and in unprecedented numbers, but the received theology did not fit the world as they saw the world. Great areas of life were thus often left untouched by Christ, often leaving sincere Christians with deep uncertainties. Much evangelical thinking was not engaging with the issues of culture, or was doing so simplistically or superficially.

It was such concerns that brought the Bediakos back to academic study, and Kwame to a second doctorate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. At the same time Gillian took first-class honors in the master of arts in religious studies; she later went on to complete an Aberdeen Ph.D. in the area of primal religions.

Kwame's studies pursued two lines of investigation. One lay among the then quite small body of African academic theologians. Why did the starting point of their thinking so often lie in the pre-Christian religion

of their peoples, so rarely in the sort of topic thought interesting or important by Western theologians? Why did the efforts of pioneers such as Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti cause equal disturbance in the evangelical stables in which they were nourished and among African intellectuals such as Okot p'Bitek, who had rejected Christianity?

Kwame pursued such questions in parallel with another question: how had the early church faced such issues? How had theologians in the Greco-Roman world dealt with questions that arose from Hellenistic culture, how viewed their pre-Christian intellectual, literary, and religious heritage, and their cultural ancestors? How far was it possible to be both Greek and Christian? His doctoral thesis, approved in 1983 and described by the external examiner as the best thesis he had ever read,¹ explored how second-century theologians faced the issues posed for Christians by the Greco-Roman past, and how twentieth-century African theologians dealt with the African past. The similarity of the issues was striking; consciousness of identity was at the heart of both processes. The second-century question was the possibility of being both Christian and Greek; the twentieth-century question was the possibility of being both Christian and African. We are made by our past; it is our past that creates our identity and shows us who we are. We cannot abandon or suppress our past or substitute something else instead, nor can our past be left as it is, untouched by Christ. Our past, like our present, has to be converted, turned toward Christ. The second-century quest was the conversion, not the suppression or replacement, of Hellenistic culture, and in that case conversion had led to cultural renewal. Today's quest is the conversion of African culture, and perhaps thereby its renewal. And second-century theologians discovered that God had been active in that past; with the same conviction African Christians could recognize that God always goes before his missionaries. Over the years that followed, Bediako was to develop these ideas in his teaching and writing. The activity of the Divine Word, the signs that God had not left himself without witness in the African past, the multitudes of Africans coming to Christ in the here and now, all pointed to a special place for Africa in Christian history; but this special place lay within, and not separate from, the history of the church as a whole. All Christians share the same ancestors, and those ancestors belong to every tribe, kindred, and nation.

The Department of Religious Studies at Aberdeen at that time contained the embryo of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, better known in its later manifestation at the University of Edinburgh. In a lively mix of graduate students from many parts of the world, Africa was particularly well represented. For the most part their research topics fell into two categories that in many cases overlapped. Many were working in the area of the primal religions of traditional, usually preliterate, societies; others were engaged with the history, life, and thought of Christians in some part of Africa, Asia, or the Pacific. Increasingly, Kwame Bediako was drawn to the study of the primal religions and their relation to Christianity. These religions were primal in the sense of being anterior to the so-called world religions.

Kwame had a clear vision of what his ongoing work was to be, and pastoral concerns were at its heart.

Throughout Christian history they have proved the most fertile soil for the Christian message, so that they form the background, the substructure as one might say, of the faith of a high percentage of the world's Christians and influence their worldview. And the Bible, the Old Testament in particular, shows us a good deal about primal worldviews in action, instantly recognizable in Africa and many other parts of the world. Thus they are primal in a second sense, of being basic, elemental, reflecting fundamental elements of human response to the divine. Studies of writers of the conversion period in Europe, Bediako discovered—Gregory of Tours, for instance, or Bede, or Boniface—reveal how Western Christianity emerged in the inter-action between the biblical tradition and the primal worldviews of the peoples of northern and western Europe. Western Christian history was also a story about the conversion of the past.

Networking and Pastorate

Kwame was meanwhile engaging in an activity that marked much of his life: building networks sustained by caring friendship. He established a link for mutual support and stimulus between African Christian

researchers in Britain. It was the germ of the Africa Theological Fellowship, now linking scholars across the African continent. Contact continued with like-minded people in the Lausanne movement, such as Vinay Samuel from India and Tito Paredes from Peru, embodied eventually in the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), an international body in which leadership came from the Two-Thirds World and which gave rise to the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Following the completion of his second doctorate, Kwame taught for a year as a temporary lecturer during a vacancy in the Aberdeen department. It was the first of a series of engagements that made him for some time part of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World. That center moved from Aberdeen soon after Kwame finished his temporary lectureship, finding a new home in the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Edinburgh, and for many years Kwame was a visiting lecturer there. But his immediate call was to Ghana and to the pastorate of the Ridge Church in Accra. In colonial times Ridge Church had been the church of the expatriate officials; by this time it had a burgeoning and very diverse congregation, where Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians in rotation provided the resident pastor. The three years (1984–87) that Kwame spent there were formative for him in what they revealed of the concerns, aspirations, and anxieties of African Christians, and in later years he was never less of a pastor for being a scholar and academic. Indeed, even before he left Aberdeen he had a clear vision of what his ongoing work was to be, and pastoral concerns were at its heart.

The Akrofi-Christaller Centre

With such formidable academic credentials as Bediako now had, a teaching post in the West could well have beckoned; in later years there were many such invitations, all firmly declined. In Ghana he could readily have returned to the university world; equally, he could have become a key figure in training for the ministry. But he had heard a call to theological scholarship of a sort that neither universities nor seminaries were yet able to mount. The assumptions underlying their programs frequently depended on Western intellectual models. But vast numbers of African Christians were continually facing situations that demanded theological decisions for which Western intellectual models provided no help. Fresh informed biblical and theological thinking, along with sensitive understanding of society, was needed to help in situations where the identity and obligations of Christians intersected with their identity and obligations as members of a family or a community or a state. In such cases textbook theology rarely provided answers.

Church tradition where Christianity had been received from Western sources in a period of Western dominance too often led either to blanket rejection of all things evidently African or to a division of life into parallel streams of “Christian” and “African” activities that never met. The end product could be a sort of religious schizophrenia, a fractured identity. The key theological issues of the day, as in the early Christian centuries, demanded integral identity, being simultaneously thoroughly African and thoroughly Christian, confidently Christian, assured that the Divine Word was taking African flesh and pitching his tent there. Theological reflection of this sort would require a new type of institution. Bediako had begun to visualize such an institution before he left Aberdeen. When he left Ridge Church in 1987, he found, with the full approval of his church and the support of friends in and beyond Ghana, an opportunity to put the vision into practice. The outcome was the Akrofi-Christaller Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology, later called the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture. Its establishment and development lay at the heart of Bediako’s work for the rest of his life.

Any consideration of the life of Kwame Bediako must take account of the institute and the principles on which it was based. Crucial to its purpose was the commitment to Christian scholarship in Africa. Bediako believed that Africa was now, as a result of its experience as a major theater of Christian mission, a major theological laboratory, with theological work to do that would not and could not be done elsewhere. Furthermore, the shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the global West to the global South that was such a feature of the twentieth century made the quality of African theological activity a matter of universal, not just continental, Christian concern. Africa needed scholars, and needed them not only for its own sake but also for the sake of the world church.

The Centre (as it was first named) came into being as a research institution. It was not long before it became a center of postgraduate study. Initially this was by means of an arrangement with the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu Natal) in South Africa. Under this arrangement students for the master of theology in African Christianity degree spent their first semester in South Africa and the second in Ghana, with Kwame and Gillian Bediako teaching in both places. Later, on the initiative of the Ghana government, the Akrofi-Christaller Institute became an independent postgraduate institution within the Ghana university system. It has seen a steady stream of success at the master's level, but the master of theology program was from the first designed to prepare those with conventional theological training for specialist study and research in the fields of theology, mission, and culture in Africa, and the institute now has a small but significant group of doctorates to its credit. The aim of the center, however, was never merely to produce Ph.D.s (there are many recipients of such who do nothing for scholarship) but to produce mature, disciplined, dedicated scholars who recognize the pursuit of learning as a calling from God and follow it sacrificially. The institute set itself against shortcuts and soft options. Courses of study were often longer and more demanding than those at other institutions.

Kwame Bediako was the outstanding African theologian of his generation.

The institute also recognized that the duties of scholarship go beyond the boundaries of the academic world and certainly extend to informing the life and work of the whole church. The program for the institute in any year has typically included activities for ministers, catechists, Bible translators, and Scripture-use specialists. There have been workshops on Gospel and culture for Christian workers from all over the country, consultations on the local history of such major issues as slavery, and regular meetings of those engaged in writing Bible commentaries in the languages of Ghana.

The institute's aim was to promote scholarship rooted in Christian mission. The word "mission" occurs in both the old and the new forms of its title. It marks the deliberate rejection of Western attempts at detached or uncommitted scholarship; Bediako saw the Christian scholar as holding responsibility in the church, and the church as needing the measured scholarly quest for truth, the scholarly activities of investigation and testing. At the same time, Bediako advocated—and practiced—public engagement of theology with other disciplines. He was elected a fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences and was active in its affairs; he lectured for the academy on the religious significance of one of the pioneers of Ghana's independence, J. B. Danquah.

The institute was intended to function as a Christian community; not only teachers and students but also office and domestic and catering and garden staff attended, participated in, and led daily worship. In many institutions scholarship had become an individual, even a competitive, activity, with career enhancement the driving motive. Tapping into an earlier tradition of Western learning, Bediako looked to the worshipping community, living in a situation of mission, as the proper matrix of scholarship.

The focus of the scholarship of the institute was on Africa—its religious, cultural, social, and linguistic realities, and the history, life, and thought of its Christians. The preparatory courses in the master's degree program explored the principles underlying the interaction of Gospel and culture, the worldviews of primal societies, theology in Africa, the Bible in Africa, and Christian history in Africa from the early centuries and in different parts of the continent. The institute's students have come from all over Africa, with a sprinkling from Western countries. The small resident faculty is supported by scholars from other parts of Africa. But the focus on Africa was always against a wider background. A course on World Christian history took account of two millennia and six continents, and that on primal worldviews considered the primal worldviews of the peoples of Europe and their early interaction with the Gospel. Bediako was essentially a world Christian. In particular, he was an advocate of what he called South-South dialogue. Bilateral arrangements between Africa and a Western partner were relatively easy to arrange, but potentially mutually beneficial links between Africa and Asian or Latin American partners were much harder to sustain. One of his last major undertakings, still in progress, was a collaborative study of primal

religions as the substructure of Christianity, involving scholars from different parts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific.

The location chosen for the institute was itself significant. Akropong is a relatively small town, but it is the capital of the Akan state of Akuapem, where traditional patterns of rulership and the attendant rituals remain intact and there is great pride in a long and colorful history. The building that is the institute's nucleus retains many features of its nineteenth-century Basel Mission origin and of its long association with the training of teachers and ministers of an earlier time. Within a short walk are the palace, scene of traditional activities such as the great Odwira festival of national purification, the vast old church, and the place of assembly, where the first missionary was received by the king of that day. The church, compounds in the town, and the institute's own building carry names well known in the records of Akan church history. The whole town bears the marks of continuous interaction between the Christian Gospel and Akan society from the 1830s to the Internet age. It is a reminder of how richly stored Africa is with the materials for religious research. The linking of the names of Johann Gottlieb Christaller and Clement Anderson Akrofi in the institute's title is also significant—the one a German missionary translator who devoted himself to the Akan language and traditional lore, the other a Ghanaian reviser of the Twi Bible and author of a grammar of that language. The vernacular principle in Christianity, the significance of theological expression in the mother tongue, and the capacity of African languages to illuminate biblical concepts were themes that Bediako regularly visited.

The Legacy

Kwame Bediako was the outstanding African theologian of his generation. A distinguished academic himself, he knew that academics were not the only theologians, and he drew attention to the informal or, as he would say, implicit theology to be found among people of little formal education. He delighted in the vernacular songs of Madam Afua Kuma,² traditional midwife and Pentecostal poet, who sang the praises of Christ in the exalted language of praise songs to traditional rulers. He called them “a liberating force for African academic theology and for the academic theologian.”³ He did perhaps more than anyone else to persuade mainstream Western theologians and mainstream Western theological institutions that African theology was not an exotic minority specialization but an essential component in a developing global Christian discourse.

His all too few writings will continue their influence, as will his institute's Journal of African Christian Thought, to which he so often contributed. There are other books that he never completed, rich material lying in those electrifying lecture courses and biblical expositions. But much of his finest work has been written in the lives and thinking of his students, colleagues, and friends, in the concept of the institution he founded, and in the networks he helped to establish, enhance, and maintain. It is a rich legacy, much of it prudently invested for future use.

Notes

1. The thesis was later published as *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

2. An English version of some of the songs is available in Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, trans. Jon Kirby (Accra: Asempa Press, 1981).

3. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 59.