


REVIEWS

The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: ecumenism, feminism, and communal practice

by Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein
Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023.
Pp. x+232. US\$65 (hbk).

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Theology is a discipline that is often seen as marginal to African studies. The request to review a book about the life and thought of Ghanaian theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b. 1933), is an opportunity to reflect on the question what theology – women’s theology, for that matter – contributes to African studies. My own journey into African studies started when, years ago, as a white male student in theology in the Netherlands I stumbled on the work of Oduyoye and made it the focus of an assignment on Christianity, African culture and gender, making her the first African thinker I seriously engaged with. As a leading African theologian, a prominent figure in the ecumenical movement, and as a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Oduyoye is relatively well-known in circles of African and feminist theology.

The main value of Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein’s book is that it introduces Oduyoye’s work to a much broader audience, presenting her as an original and important African religious and feminist thinker. Clearly inspired by her own experience as a woman growing up in a Nigerian Christian family in the diaspora, and her subsequent quest for locating ‘African women’s voices in Christian theology’ (3), Oredein’s study is based on the premise that theology is always shaped by one’s social location and experiences (a premise that Oduyoye and other African women theologians have explicitly embraced as a methodological principle). Thus, the book’s first two chapters offer an insightful narrative biographical account of Oduyoye’s childhood, youth and formative years, which helps to understand her Christian upbringing and feminist formation in colonial and postcolonial Ghana as being shaped by Akan culture, Methodist Christianity and Kwame Nkruma’s African nationalism. The third chapter discusses Oduyoye’s role in the ecumenical movement, highlighting her contribution to the World Council of Churches (which she served as Deputy General Secretary, 1988–1995) and to the founding of the Circle of

Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 which under her visionary leadership became a major platform for African women religious scholarship.

The main body of the book (chapters 4–7) explores four key theological themes – respectively focusing on the doctrines of God, of Jesus Christ, of humankind and of the church – that are central in Oduyoye’s African feminist religious thought. Each of these chapters elucidate how Oduyoye’s thinking is concerned with reinterpreting and reimagining Christianity through a distinct theological hermeneutical lens that privileges ‘the experiences and wisdom of African women’ (5) and that is driven by an ethical quest for community, inclusion, justice and liberation. Chapter 8, then, offers a critical evaluation of Oduyoye’s work, its legacy and impact, identifying three critical questions for further conversation in African women’s theology: sexuality, male accountability and African diasporic identity. In relation to sexuality, Oredein rightly comments how Oduyoye’s primary concern is with women’s sexuality in heterosexual marriage, yet she appears to overlook how Oduyoye already in the early 1990s critically interrogated homophobia and heterosexism in African cultures, and how her work offers steppingstones for African queer theologies that recognise sexual diversity.

The book’s Conclusion addresses the question of ‘how to read Oduyoye properly’, suggesting a self-reflexive reading. Oduyoye’s contribution to African feminism is briefly mentioned here, yet I am left wondering why Oduyoye’s work has not had a larger reception and impact outside the circle of African women’s theology, in African feminist and gender studies more broadly. Could it be that her commitment to Christian faith makes her perhaps unfashionable in these more secular-oriented fields? Oredein’s book rightly and successfully claims Oduyoye’s work as an original and important contribution to Christian theology and African religious thought. By historicising Oduyoye’s life and examining key methodological and conceptual issues in her work, it also highlights her relevance to African feminism and African studies more generally.

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Roadblock Politics: the origins of violence in Central Africa

by Peer Schouten

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

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Roadblock Politics analyses the most fastidious, but also most central node of Central Africa’s contemporary war economic complex through an in-depth