

The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Ecumenism, Feminism, and Communal Practice by Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein

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SHORT BIO

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Introduction

This book provides a thorough examination of the life and work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, one of the first African women theologians to publish substantive theological reflections on African women.¹ Oredein's work significantly addresses a gap in understanding the history and value of African Women's Theologies (AWTs) to the continental and global theological enterprise by tracing the story and deliberations of one of its founding mothers. The author conveys how a lack of recognition of African scholarship and the exclusion of African women skews religious and theological discourse due to the absence of marginalized voices. As such, the author's aim to trace Oduyoye's cultural and theological odyssey is so valuable, spanning decades of the development of AWTs through one of its most influential proponents.

¹ Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "'Treading Softly but Firmly': African Women, Religion, and Health," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 2.

Oredein's Methodology

The first half of the book, chapters one through three, weave together strands of Oduyoye's family story and cultural heritage that shaped the contours of a unique theological path, creating a road for many to follow. Oredein paints a detailed picture of the key influencers of a woman who forged a trail through patriarchal culture and church spaces that did not recognize the validity of her call to serve theologically or educationally. The author documents the unique circumstances of the history and culture that formed and shaped Oduyoye's assertion of equality for women, resisting patriarchal interpretations of what women could do and be.

The section traces a fascinating portrait of Oduyoye's theological origins from her early years and pivotal moments that led to strong realizations about her Ghanaian Akan heritage. Her roots in the church as the daughter of a highly respected Methodist pastor and a mother who was marginalized in church leadership led her to question the ways church failed to recognize the value of women's efforts. Equally influential was her awareness of a determined matriarchal line that embodied endurance and suspicion of a church that sidelined their participation and contributions. Her inclusive vision defied patriarchal logic, advocating for the experiences and voices of women, aligning with faltering steps taken in Ghana towards national independence that included female leadership.

Oredein's biographical exploration of Oduyoye's journey presents the origins of her feminist formations through her questioning of religious and cultural practices that diminished the value and restricted the participation of African women in ecclesial spaces. Oduyoye encountered African women's creative expressions of agency in their religious and cultural communities despite those who sought to preserve colonial and cultural beliefs and attitudes adverse to African women. Such encounters drove Oduyoye to explore a broader vision of African women's traditions in pursuing the wellbeing of all, finding empowering language and practices in inhospitable spaces, and fostering an African feminist worldview. Subsequently, Oredein traces how Oduyoye was able to carry her noteworthy learning from her academic career into important ecumenical spaces, significantly broadening the conversation and inclusion of African women's concerns in theological discourse. The author traces Oduyoye's sizable influence through her participation and commitment to organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians

(EATWOT), and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (often referred to as the Circle).

The establishment of the Circle is arguably one of Oduyoye's greatest spheres of influence, carving a trail for African women theologians to connect, learn, and publish in the community. The Circle remains an enduring conduit for producing academic theological works grounded in the plight of African women and their communities, simultaneously encouraging the development of African women theologians across the continent. Oredein highlights how this compelling history sparked Oduyoye to analyze and reform Christian faith, doctrines, and practices through challenges faced by African women.

In the second half of the book, chapters four through eight, Oredein provides an erudite exposé of Oduyoye's systematic understanding of key doctrines that helped shape the development of African women's theology (AWT). Oredein's comprehensive focus on Oduyoye's scholarly re-examination of key Christian dogmas in light of the wisdom and experience of African women round out this scholarly tome. This in-depth overview of Oduyoye's theological constructions of the doctrine of God, Christology, Theological Anthropology, and Ecclesiology present life-giving interpretations for women to resist systemic exclusion in theological discourse dominated by African male and Western Christian theologians.

Oredein portrays how Oduyoye challenges the traditional delivery of theological frameworks, disputing Christian theology that tends to overlook or even denigrate the African person, and women in particular, in relation to God.² Thus, Oduyoye's first theological task was to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion in reading Christian doctrines and views on culture. Oredein demonstrates how Oduyoye challenges ethnocentric European norms that bleed into the packaging and delivery of theology in the African context, favoring European over African and male over female, largely reinforcing hierarchical ideals.

² Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Ecumenism, Feminism, and Communal Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 67.

Oredein highlights how Oduyoye's simultaneous examinations of the doctrine of God and Christology, as well as African cultural practices, challenge oppressive structures that promote colonialism, ethnocentrism, classism, racism, patriarchy, and sexism. Oredein expounds how Oduyoye presents the affinity of African women with Jesus, who experienced cultural estrangement and social marginalization, overcoming oppression. More so than critiquing, Oduyoye promulgates alternative humanizing modes of theological reflection inclusive of African women and all groups experiencing marginalization. Thus, Oredein's expositions of Oduyoye's theological anthropology, including the "fullness of African personhood" and "narratives rooted in women's experiences" promoting Africa's wellness.³ This includes explorations on conceptions of the Creator and Akan cosmological thought and Akan feminist claims in favor of holistic communal life "towards communal equity".⁴ Oredein unpacks how Oduyoye reclaims the view of the divine within Akan and broader African worldviews, while holding cultural practices and interpretations accountable for troubling gender biases that skew African Christianity.

Finally, Oredein's discussion of Oduyoye's ecclesiology rounds out her doctrinal reformulations to include African women's full participation in the church. Oduyoye elaborated on the incomplete nature of a church that sidelines parts of itself, asking "who are the bodies the 'church' must step on in order to procure its greatness"?⁵ Oredein examines how Oduyoye, along with other African women theologians, advocate for a household of God that is attentive to all its members, bearing witness to God's primary concern for the world and the collective diversity of all who are made in God's image.

Oredein ends with two noteworthy chapters. The first considers subjects for further exploration raised by Oduyoye's work, where others must further challenging conversations about sexuality, African men's accountability, other voices in the diaspora, African feminist theology, and Christian ethics. The second concludes on the way Oduyoye's work and practice call for adjusted lenses and correctives from which to examine Western

³ Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 120.

⁴ Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 120.

⁵ Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 151.

interpretations furnished by African feminism, liberating those who have been intentionally or unintentionally silenced in cultural and ecclesial spaces.

The Enduring Value of this Text

While this short summary of some of the key point of Oredein's volume is insufficient to cover the depth of her investigation, it serves to highlight some key ideas propounded by this helpful exposition of Oduyoye's life, theological scholarship, and ecclesial work. The enduring value of this text is exhibited by several key features.

First, this text provides essential documentation on the extraordinary life of Oduyoye and her substantial scholarly and ecclesial contributions as an African woman and theological innovator who centered God's spacious directive to care for all creation with deep concern for the marginalized. It demonstrates the wide embrace of God for all image-bearers to embody love for all cultures and genders who reflect God's image to one another and the world. Through Oduyoye's life and witness, it calls for embodiment as an essential part of theological reflection, embracing the lived experiences of woman as worthy image-bearers whose stories bear witness to eternal truths of justice and compassion.

Second, this can be used as a textbook to systematically comprehend the contours of AWT and appreciate the breadth and depth of AWTs practical application for post-colonial understanding. It does so by inviting readers to consider critical questions that are essential to exploring post-colonial realities in Africa, in conversation with sacred texts. This includes noting contextual encounters in the Bible at moments in time "with the divine, with the self, and with others", which are filtered through the socioeconomic and cultural lens of its readers.⁶ Continual cognizance of contextual reading has tremendous bearing on the theological enterprise and the future of Christianity to avoid the pitfalls of racism, imperialism, and tribalism.⁷

⁶ Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 108.

⁷ Esther Mombo, "Considerations for an Inclusive Global Theological Education," *The Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 4 (2019): 450. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12442>.

Third, Oredein carefully examines key conceptions of Oduyoye's work formed in communities of mutual influence that have become pillars of African Women's theological scholarship spanning four decades.⁸ Oredein shows the strength of Oduyoye's methods of theological reflection that are never conducted in isolation but, rather, in communities of practice for the wellbeing of African peoples and the church. Oduyoye's life and her scholarship demonstrate how African women's lived experiences and wisdom—grounded in shared challenges such as racism, sexism, violence, or marginalization—are at the heart of God's concern for the world. Oredein's work demonstrates Oduyoye's resilience and creativity, validating the collective wisdom of African woman's theologies to forge paths towards liberation and inclusion.

Fourth, Oredein amplifies the way's Oduyoye's body of work impresses self-examination upon her readers, compelling consideration of one's context and formation. This includes drawing attention to social and cultural location and proximity to marginalized voices, such as those of African women. Oredein's writing style draws the reader in to ever expanding questions about the development of a valid and necessary theological expression that allows for the world to be seen through the lens of neglected voices. This significant aspect establishes Oduyoye's work as a valuable resource for the African continent in a world still haunted by colonial and patriarchal legacies.

Finally, by framing God within the everyday context of African women's lives, this book calls for embodied scholarship and practice in theological and ecclesial spaces that includes women's voices and reflections on their experiences.⁹ Oredein's careful description of Oduyoye's reconstruction of key Christian principles may well be a decolonial roadmap to navigate the deeply entrenched legacies of Western hegemony and patriarchy tethered to the missionary expansion of Christianity in Africa. Oredein shows how Oduyoye subverts dominant narratives that serve to keep African women invisible and subservient in systems that enforce oppression, sexism, and the devaluing of insightful contributions made by African women in church and society.

⁸ Selena D. Headley, "Black Theology in Theological Education: Expanding the Boundaries through African Women's Theologies," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022): 636. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12728>.

⁹ Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 107.

Oredein's systematically illustrates the foundation and substance of the key doctrinal positions that Oduyoye formed over the course of her life in collaboration with a growing group of African women scholars. Oredein's approach creates a razor-sharp critique of the detrimental imprints of a Western colonial mission enterprise that degraded the worth of African culture and cosmology. Simultaneously, Oredein explains Oduyoye's history and frameworks that gives shape and form to liberating foundations upon which to build a decolonial ecumenical theology for African culture and the church at large. Oredein comprehensively covers the life's work of a woman who is a forerunner of a branch of theology that not only serves African woman but is a gift to the church and religious scholarship around the world. This book provides enduring value to the academy and the church and is highly recommended as a prized reference for theological educators, religious scholars, and students who want to incorporate a fuller understanding of theology in a post-colonial world.

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