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LONG BOOK REVIEW

ASAMOAH-GYADU, J. Kwabena, Mark S. AIDOO, and Esther E. ACOLATSE, eds. *Where Is Our God?: African Christianity and Responses to the Pandemic*. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2024. 173 pages. Paperback. ISBN 9781917059251. $ 16.00.

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The volume *Where Is Our God?*, edited by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and others, addresses a normative question structured into three parts comprising ten chapters. However, the subtitle, *African Christianity and Responses to the Pandemic*, is somewhat misleading. While the title implies a broad, African perspective, the contributors are primarily scholars from Ghana and Nigeria. Even those writing from the diaspora originate from these two countries, with the sole exception of Chapter Four, authored by E. Okelloh Ogera from Kenya.

Moreover, the volume disproportionately focuses on one stream within Pentecostalism—prophetic movements. While prophetism is indeed part of African Christianity, it neither represents the totality of African Pentecostalism nor the entirety of African Christianity. It is merely one movement within African Pentecostalism, and like many such movements, it is susceptible to fragmentation. Historically, African Christianity has seen the cyclical rise and fall of such movements. The scholarly emphasis should shift away from these movements per se and focus instead on the critical spiritual, socio-cultural, and theological factors that give rise to them. These movements tend to be sporadic and often burn out once the underlying socio-religious energies that sustain them diminish.

A second concern is the handling of the theology of the *hidden, absent, or veiled God*. This theological concept is well-developed within the Western intellectual tradition but has not been meaningfully engaged in African theological frameworks. The editors of this volume neither define nor critically examine this notion, instead assuming its applicability without justification. But is this indeed the case? How do African Christians, particularly within prophetic movements, conceptualize the idea of a 'hidden God'? For many African Christians, God is understood as a 'mystery' who engages reality according to divine prerogative. There is rarely a moment in African theological reflection in which God is perceived as entirely absent or hidden; rather, God is seen as a transcendent and mysterious present who defies human comprehension and expectations. Contemporary prophetic movements, however, have problematically redefined 'expectation' as synonymous with faith, thereby assuming that God must respond literally and predictably to human expectations. This raises an important theological question: what is the meaning of 'expectation' within African

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Christianity? A more thorough exploration of this notion would have greatly enriched the volume.

Another point of critique lies in Asamoah-Gyadu's illustration of Christian hospitality, found in his own chapter (13). He cites the example of an Italian Catholic priest who donated a ventilator to a young COVID-19 patient. While this gesture is indeed noble, using a European example in a volume focused on African Christianity inadvertently undermines the equally heroic and sacrificial efforts of African Christians—including some prophets—during the pandemic. This recurring tendency to critique African religious actors while holding up European examples as ideals reflects a colonial mentality that not only undermines but also betrays African agency. There were many 'Good Samaritans' across the continent, and scholars must intentionally seek out and amplify these alternative narratives. Emmanuel Katongole's (2017) work offers valuable guidance in this regard.

The remainder of my analysis is limited to two chapters that stand out in the volume—Chapter Two by Esther E. Acolatse and Chapter Three by Nimi Wariboko. These are the only chapters that are both insightful and methodologically rigorous. Acolatse's chapter is especially perceptive in its theological engagement with both Christian and African traditions. She skillfully explores concepts such as providence, sovereignty, free will, and divine judgment through the lens of African pastoral theology. She argues that divine sovereignty and human freedom are not mutually exclusive but are held in a 'tense unity' within the Old Testament, with conceptual priority often given to the latter (21). In her view, divine providence is consistently oriented toward good, even amid evil. As African Christians often profess, 'God is good all the time.' She thoughtfully connects the Old Testament with the COVID-19 crisis to reflect on how African Christians understand divine temporality—arguing for a multilayered conception of time analogous to African perceptions of lived time, where past, present, and future are deeply interwoven.

This understanding of temporality, she argues, is crucial for navigating epochal transformations. She interprets COVID-19 as a *kairotic* moment—an intersection of collapsed time that it creates new spaces of experience and horizons of expectation (draws on the work of Reinhart Koselleck). This view of time enabled Acolatse to critique Evangelical/Pentecostal theology for its inadequate response to the pandemic, rooted as it is in the belief that true believers should not suffer. Rather than making simplistic prophetic declarations, she urges prophets to draw upon biblical and African theological resources, such as *ubuntu*, which have evolved as frameworks for enduring suffering during turbulent and transitional periods. Her chapter, in its depth and clarity, makes a significant contribution to contemporary African pastoral theology.

Wariboko's chapter is also philosophically engaging, but it falls short in its engagement with African traditions. His analysis is heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy and Robin Horton's problematic 'closed predicament' model, which he fails to sufficiently deconstruct. While Wariboko offers profound existential insights, such as the distinction between fear and anxiety, his statement, 'there was a time when we were not, and there will be a time when we will not be' (35), is deeply problematic from both Christian and African theological perspectives. The first clause, affirming human creatureliness, aligns with theological orthodoxy. However, the second clause, suggesting post-death nonexistence, conflicts with both Christian eschatology and African beliefs in ancestral continuity and life-after-life or life on the other side of life. African traditions view death not as cessation but as a transformative transition. Christian theology likewise affirms resurrection and the eternal soul.

Acolatse and Wariboko thus diverge fundamentally in their conceptions of time. Acolatse sees the past as integral to both the present and future—*sankofa*—while Wariboko posits that

'the past is literally lost,' and 'one may not arrive in the future' (36). He constructs a radical temporality in which past and future are irreconcilably disjointed. Interpreted through an African existentialist lens, one might argue that Wariboko portrays COVID-19 as a moment of temporal death of time—an abyss of nothingness where 'No one can claim to be the same today, yesterday, and forever. No one can anticipate a collective destination for all' (36). He attributes this existential despair to an inherited 'closed predicament' mindset from African traditional religions, claiming that prophets operate within this prelogical, fatalistic worldview that resists self-critique (39).

While Wariboko rightly laments that 'Pentecostal pastors in Africa now largely occupy the position intellectuals should occupy in our society' (44), his generalizations are problematic. Many contributors to this volume, including Wariboko himself, are Pentecostal pastors, public intellectuals and theologians. It is important that Pentecostal scholars critique their own traditions from within rather than constructing false binaries that suggest they are outsiders to the very movements they seek to reform. Furthermore, the application of Horton's 'closed predicament' model misrepresents the dynamic and evolving nature of African religious thought. Far from being rigid or prelogical, African religious systems—including Pentecostalism—are marked by fluidity, moral responsiveness, and theological openness. Wariboko's uncritical adoption of this colonial framework overlooks the rich diversity and spiritual agency found in African religio-cultures. The idea of 'fixity,' upon which Horton bases his notion of the '*closed predicament*,' was foundational to colonial discourse and its ideological construction and representation of African religio-cultural systems (Kaunda 2016). Scholars have shown that this notion of closure or fixity was central to the colonial project of defining cultural and historical modernity, as well as constructing racial difference (Derrida 1983; Bhabha 1994; Kaunda 2016). It functioned as a paradoxical discourse and representational mode in which African cultures and religions were portrayed simultaneously as rigid and frozen in time, and as disordered, degenerate, and caught in daemonic repetition (Bhabha 1994).

Unfortunately, Wariboko appears to fall into this colonial trap and inadvertently reproduces its binary logic. In reality, African traditional religions—and much of contemporary Pentecostalism—are marked not by fixity or prelogical closure, but by cosmological flexibility and a high degree of fluidity. These systems often emphasize human agency to such an extent that divine sovereignty becomes secondary or, at times, functionally absent. Within these frameworks, human beings are seen as spiritually empowered agents who actively navigate and negotiate both material and immaterial realms in the pursuit of personal destiny, well-being, and communal flourishing. This overemphasis on agency often leads to what might be described as a theological imbalance—an implicit anthropocentrism that can distort the relational dynamic between God and humanity. Rather than viewing divine action as initiating or sovereign, prophetic discourses frequently portray God as one who primarily responds to prophetic declarations, expectations, and ritual performance. This creates a tension within prophesy theology of prophets, where faith becomes mechanized into expectation, and spiritual efficacy is judged by immediate material results.

Such theological imbalances are rarely subjected to sustained critical interrogation within prophetic movements themselves. Prophets and their followers often remain unaware of the internal inconsistencies embedded in their theological claims—particularly when these claims shift rapidly in response to turbulent and existentially terrifying epochal events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These theological shifts frequently result in acute contradictions, both spiritually and conceptually. For example, many prophets emphatically declared the absolute power of God over COVID-19, while at the same time suggesting that divine intervention was conditional—dependent on specific acts of faith, such as touching a television screen during a televised prayer, offering material sacrifices, or submitting to prophetic declarations. This

underlying cosmology, though dynamic and improvisational, remains theologically underdeveloped in several key areas, including divine sovereignty, theodicy, eschatology, and the integration of scientific wisdom. While prophets do not always reject science outright—indeed, many require medical documentation to validate their claims of healing—there remains a theological and epistemological gap. The problem lies not in an overt hostility to science, but in the lack of a theologically developed imagination capable of holding theology and science in constructive and creative tension. The result is a fragmented worldview in which empirical validation is selectively embraced, while theological interpretations remain insular and often mechanistic.

For scholars of African religiosity and Pentecostalism, this situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to move beyond inherited colonial interpretive frameworks such as the 'closed predicament', which flatten the complexity of African religious thought into static or irrational categories. The opportunity lies in critically engaging the nuanced, evolving theological landscapes within contemporary African spiritual movements. The contradictions observed within prophetic discourses should not be mistaken for a lack of intellectual or spiritual sophistication. Rather, they reflect deep and complex negotiations of meaning taking place in response to profound socio-political, economic, and spiritual upheavals.

What is urgently needed is a theological framework that does not merely react to crisis but is capable of sustained reflection on the paradoxes of faith, divine action, and human agency. It is precisely this theological ambivalence—the prophetic movement's struggle to articulate a coherent relationship between divine mystery, human responsibility, and scientific understanding—that demands deeper scholarly engagement. Among the contributors to the volume, it is only Esther Acolatse who gestures meaningfully toward this needed depth. Her work exemplifies the kind of theologically rigorous and contextually sensitive reflection that can illuminate the challenges and possibilities of African Christianity in times of crisis.

In sum, *Where Is Our God?* offers some valuable contributions but suffers from thematic, methodological, and theological inconsistencies. Greater care should have been taken to frame the volume within a broader and more nuanced understanding of African Christianity—one that neither conflates Pentecostalism with prophetism nor resorts to colonial tropes in critiquing African religiosity. The chapters by Acolatse and Wariboko stand out in their intellectual ambition, yet they also exemplify the volume's broader tensions between theological depth and cultural sensitivity.

Notwithstanding the critiques and personal dissatisfactions outlined above, this volume represents a valuable contribution to the study of prophetic movements in the context of pandemics. It offers insights that will be of interest not only to theologians and philosophers but also to students and scholars across the humanities and social sciences—particularly those engaged in African studies. I recommend this book as a resource for critical reflection on the intersections of theology, spirituality, and public health within contemporary African Christianity.

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