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BOOK REVIEW

Religion and the Inculturation of Human Rights in Ghana. By Abamfo Ofori Atiemo. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 284. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781441199478.

How can the international human rights regime be implemented in Africa, and what is the relationship between this global legal system and religious values and customs in Ghana? In *Religion and the Inculturation of Human Rights in Ghana*, Abamfo Atiemo addresses these questions by highlighting the paramount role religion plays in shaping moral values and social relations in Ghana. He argues that religion is key to understanding how human rights and dignity is perceived in a Ghanaian context.

Atiemo adopts a broad approach to religion, seeing what he terms “popular religion” as “religious beliefs and practices common to believers of diverse background in a particular place and which are not under the direct guidance or control of any particular religious institution” (22). In this way, he does not approach religion from a denominational perspective; instead he is interested in the form of religion and religious belief that underlies values and norms in Ghana. He does not focus on doctrinal difference, such as how Christianity or Islam views justice or the right to privacy, but argues that there is a shared religious world view in Ghana that transcends the boundaries of denomination and informs the way a human being and dignity is perceived at a more fundamental and general level. This religious world view is, in short, a belief in spiritual beings that have influence on the everyday lives of people. Throughout the book, Atiemo analyzes in detail this world view, in particular how it relates to political arrangements as well as to ideas of what constitutes a human being. This analysis is a great strength of the book because it opens up broader debates about the relationship between the individual and the community, as well as ideas of worth and well-being, which are relevant to discussions of human rights but also part of scholarly debates on religion in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa.

Atiemo also builds on a broad definition of human rights, understood as the minimum resources and conditions required for human existence, which includes both material and nonmaterial resources, such as religious and spiritual resources (26). In this way, he does not employ a purely legal and secular definition of human rights, but instead draws on a contextual and cultural understanding of how human rights are perceived in Ghana. These human rights, Atiemo asserts, include religious belief. It is in this attempt to see where human rights and religion overlap and inform each other that the central argument of the book lies. In brief, Atiemo’s argument is that by being open to and recognizing contextual understandings of human rights, which in the Ghanaian case are informed by religious belief, the implementation of human rights could become more legitimate, could build on a validated and hence legitimate foundation. In other words, the human rights regime would resonate with already existing ideas about dignity and rights. Implicit in Atiemo’s argument is the notion that the current implementation of human rights law in Ghana is challenged by being based on a universal, legal, and secular understanding of human rights that does not take into account—or recognize as relevant—the religious beliefs that underpin Ghanaian society and culture.

An important aspect of Atiemo’s argument for the link between human rights and religion in Ghana is his effort to show that human rights, in its broadest sense, is not foreign to Ghanaian society. Through this analysis Atiemo widens the focus from merely implementing human rights to

gaining an understanding of the embeddedness of human rights thinking in Ghana. He analyzes how in precolonial Ghana, for example, there were social structures that enabled “participation in governance and a large space for individual self-expression” (114). He points to important historical features of the Akan society, for instance, where participation, representation, and election were part of the political system. In this way, he moves beyond a developmentalist understanding of politics in Africa that sees traditional political authorities as being undemocratic and autocratic. He argues that precolonial societies in Ghana were built around political and social arrangements that can be read as expressions of human rights, which suggests that human rights should not necessarily be understood as something of Western origin that were introduced to Ghana and are thus foreign to Ghanaian society. At the same time, Atiemo acknowledges that there are features of Ghanaian society and its religious world view that do not correspond to the fundamental ideas of human rights. He notes that some political authorities, such as chiefs, are seen as sacred, which implies that their source of power is located in the religious sphere. Atiemo makes the more nuanced point that many precolonial polities in Ghana contained both democratic and autocratic elements (118)—a point that facilitates discussion of the embeddedness of human rights in Ghana. Atiemo also rightly observes that political and legal systems can contain elements of both participation and openness and be founded on religious beliefs and that this is not always self-contradictory.

Atiemo touches upon a number of themes that shape current debates on religion in Africa. I touch upon three of these themes: the concept of popular religion, including a belief in spiritual beings, collectivity versus individualism, and lastly the issue of cultural appropriation or inculturation.

In a recent issue of *Africa* anthropologists Marloes Janson and Birgit Meyer explore the possibilities and analytical advantages of using a comparative approach when studying Christianity and Islam in Africa.¹ They point to the many similarities between practitioners of both religions, as well as those of traditional religion, and thereby note that the boundaries between these religions are not always clear and well defined. Janson and Meyer propose to study “religious fields” rather than religious denominations in an attempt to focus on underlying trends in the study of religion in Africa. This is a move away from an analytical focus on syncretism to one of religious pluralism that does not build on the premise of religious distinction and boundaries. While comparative analysis of religion is not an issue that Atiemo addresses in his book as such, he does approach religion in a nondenominational way and religion as “a shared religious point of view” that transgresses the borders of institutions (21). According to Atiemo, it is the belief in spiritual beings and the concern about one’s relationship to spiritual beings that is shared ground in the Ghanaian religious context. This focus on religious plurality is a real strength of the book because Atiemo provides a detailed and nuanced discussion of what this religious pluralism is and how it influences social life. Popular religion is, as already mentioned, a belief in spiritual beings, but it also encompasses the idea that people can get access to the power of spiritual beings in order to improve their quality of life. It is in this interaction with the spiritual world—often mediated and channeled through figures seen as religious experts—that people seek influence in their lives to secure success, productivity, and prosperity. But it is also a relationship in which they are open to the power of evil forces.²

1 Marloes Janson and Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: Towards a Framework for the Study of Christian-Muslim Encounters in Africa,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 86, no. 4, 615-619.

2 See also Karen Lauterbach, *Christianity, Wealth, and Spiritual Power in Ghana* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2017), for a discussion of spiritual power.

Atiemo engages in a discussion of what potential for development or social and political transformation such a religious world view holds. He disagrees with the point of view that a religious world view that accords direct influence in human lives to spiritual beings is necessarily in contradiction of or antithetical to the features of a modern society, as argued by Paul Gifford.³ Gifford, a scholar of Christianity in Africa, is of the view that what he terms an “enchanted religious imaginary,” vividly expressed in African Pentecostalism, is dysfunctional and is a barrier to the modern development of Africa. In a sense, both Atiemo and Gifford work from the idea of a plural and trans-denominational religious world view that places high importance on the role of spiritual beings in both public life and people’s everyday lives. They disagree, however, as to whether this world view prevents or enhances individual autonomy and responsibility. Whereas Gifford interprets this religious world view as enforcing a belief in destiny that removes a sense of individuality and responsibility, Atiemo argues that this religious world view can foster an individualistic consciousness and autonomy (108). By bringing in a more detailed account of the role of religion in Ghanaian society, Atiemo moves beyond Gifford’s binary between modernity and an enchanted religious imaginary. There is a risk, when referring to belief in spiritual beings in a crude sense as something particularly African, without adequately historicizing and contextualizing such observations, of essentializing our understanding of religion in Africa.⁴ Consideration of the ontology of invisible beings and the ideological and moral consequences of human beings relationship to invisible beings, enables us to better understand how the political and the religious are intertwined and recognize that access to spiritual power can also be read as a local theory of power.⁵

This leads to the theme of the relationship between community and individual. Here, Atiemo takes a critical stance towards the idea that autonomy and individuality are traits that are foreign to African societies and more closely linked to modernity and conversion to Christianity (122). Along with questioning the dichotomy between communal and individualistic, Atiemo also critically debates the idea that human rights are fundamentally linked to societies that are more individualistic than community-oriented and consequently foreign to African societies. He argues that human rights “have emerged because of the social nature of human beings” and that one of the functions of human rights is to “mediate competing claims” in a social group or society (123). The issue of individualization has been a major debate in scholarship on Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity in Africa. Some scholars have argued that conversion to Pentecostalism is a way for people to distance themselves from social bonds and obligations, and they therefore read this form of conversion as a conversion to modernity.⁶ This argument builds on the same premise that Atiemo criticizes, namely that individualism is foreign to African societies and that it is a

3 Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2015).

4 See also Karen Lauterbach, review of *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa*, by Paul Gifford, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 86, no. 3 (2016): 604–5.

5 See for instance Florence Bernault, “Witchcraft and the Colonial Life of the Fetish,” in *Spirits in Politics: Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies*, ed. Barbara Meier and Arne S. Steinforth (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2013), 49–70; T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

6 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Birgit Meyer, “‘Make a Complete Break with the Past’: Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 316–49; Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 117–43; Joel Robbins, “The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions: An Introduction to Supplement 10,” supplement, *Current Anthropology* 55, no. S10 (2014): S157–S171.

trait of a particular time or way of organizing society (modernity) that is intrinsically linked to Christianity. More recently, several contributions have sought to bring nuance to this argument by pointing to the importance of interpersonal relations in Christian communities.⁷

In his discussion of individual and community, Atiemo contributes to the broader debate around personhood in Africa by discussing how the human being has been and is perceived in Ghana. He highlights three dimensions of the human being: the spiritual, the physical, and the social. Human beings are constituted of both physical and nonphysical elements—soul and spirit—both of which define how they relate to society (129). The soul is thought to be God-given, and therefore every human being possesses something divine, but is also thought of as unique and as having a unique destiny (130). In his discussion of what constitutes a human being and the related moral discussions of dignity and worth, Atiemo stresses that these are closely associated with Ghanaian religious world views and that this is why religion is important to integrate in an analysis of human rights in Ghana and Africa more generally. Atiemo explains that in Ghana, the human being is understood as sacred, as created by God, and hence worthy of respect and dignity.

Another aspect of how personhood is constituted among the Akan is related to the concept of *ntɔɔ*, which is believed to be a social unit a person belongs to through patrilineal lines. The *ntɔɔ* is closely associated with a deity, which sanctions an individual's behavior. Through this discussion, Atiemo both points to the importance of acknowledging the spiritual aspect of the construction of personhood and of seeing personhood itself as a relational, rather than a static, form of kinship structure.⁸ In this way, he seeks to avoid an opposition between the individual and community as is inherent in more legalistic approaches to human rights and some strands of scholarship on religion in Ghana.

Finally, Atiemo uses the theme of inculturation to discuss the role of religion in validating the implementation of human rights. Atiemo understands inculturation as the “engagement of relevant local ideas with the ideas underlying the international system of human rights” (164) and argues that building on a Ghanaian religious world view can facilitate the inculturation of human rights in Ghana. Atiemo takes the concept of inculturation from theology, which implies a concern about translating religious ideas and practices to local contexts. He seeks to avoid some of the romanticism inherent in this by applying a hermeneutical model of inculturation that focuses on dialogue, translation, and confrontation. In the attempt to apply this model, Atiemo seeks to establish to what degree one can talk about a common Ghanaian culture. Although he states that a Ghanaian culture cannot be viewed as static, the focus on inculturation as an encounter between local ideas and an international system risks bringing forth an essentialized approach to Ghanaian culture. In studies of religion in Africa that are anthropological or historical, there is a way of reading the past in the present that takes into account both change and continuity, resonance and innovation.⁹ Such studies also focus on encounters between, for example, Western

7 See, for example, Girish Daswani, “Christian Personhood in a Ghanaian Pentecostal Church,” Milestones: An AnthroCyBib Occasional Paper Series, *AnthroCyBib* (blog), October 2, 2015, <http://www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/anthrocybib/2015/10/02/occasional-paper-daswani-christian-personhood-in-a-ghanaian-pentecostal-church/>.

8 For a recent discussion of this see T. C. McCaskie, “The Enduring Puzzle of Patriliney in Asante History: A Note and a Document on *ntɔɔ*,” *Ghana Studies* 18 (2015): 162–73.

9 See for instance Ben Jones, *Beyond the State in Rural Uganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International Africa Institute, 2009); J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); J. D. Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Sandra E. Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

missionaries and local Christians, but they do so in a way that gives greater analytical space to the study of the encounter per se. Such encounters are seen as expressions of the ways in which new social and cultural forms emerge and, at the same time, the ways in which these new forms build on and resonate with the past. One of the book's strengths lies in Atiemo's attempt to analyze the encounter between Ghanaian religious world views and an international human rights system. His analysis could have benefited from drawing on the literature dealing with what religious and cultural encounters produce rather than with the more normative concept of inculturation that somehow unintentionally becomes based on fixed ideas of the local and the global.

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Book review: Abamfo Atiemo 'Religion and the Inculturation of Human Rights in Ghana'. In Journal of Law and Religion, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2016.32>. H-Net review: Denmark and National Liberation in Southern Africa. My H-Net review article on Christopher Munthe Morgenstierne's book. Save to Library. Download. Contemporary international human rights law and the establishment of the United Nations (UN) have important historical antecedents. Efforts in the 19th century to prohibit the slave trade and to limit the horrors of war are prime examples. Member states of the United Nations pledged to promote respect for the human rights of all. To advance this goal, the UN established a Commission on Human Rights and charged it with the task of drafting a document spelling out the meaning of the fundamental rights and freedoms proclaimed in the Charter. The Commission, guided by Eleanor Roosevelt's forceful leadership, captured the world's attention.