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Book Review

African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters

by Teresia M. Hinga

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Book Reviews

African, Christian, Feminist:
The Enduring Search for What Matters
By: **Teresia M. Hinga**

Publisher: Orbis Books (Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A.)

Year: 2017, *Pages:* 272 pp.

ISBN: 9781626982499

Price: \$45.00

Reviewed by: Mwaambi G. Mbûûi, Graduate Theological Union

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Every once in a while, we get the incalculable privilege to witness the beautiful and refreshing interplay of a scholar's academic and practical concerns—the perfect merging of their intellectual passions in concert with real rubber-on-the-road matters of life. This is a feature so expressly discernible in distinguished Kenyan African Religions and Feminist scholar Teresia Hinga's monumental work, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*. In this rather ambitious—yet incisive—undertaking, the author brings to bear her vast experience as an academic with a palpable passion for issues affecting the African continent, combining an impeccable commitment to scholarly rigor and integrity with an equally unmistakable urgency and empathetic appeal. From start to finish, it is abundantly clear that Hinga's assertion right at the introduction is indeed an authentic and indispensable component of her life's mission and teaching philosophy: "Becoming a concerned and engaged African theologian, specifically a concerned African woman theologian, is a privilege, a task, and even a duty" (xxiv). Clearly—as evidenced throughout the book—Hinga embraces all these ingredients of her vocation with an awe-inspiring zeal, coupled with a liberating joy. And it is to this very sacred duty that the author appeals to her audience—particularly African women—to become agents of life-giving change in their communities. All

this she does with great skill and compassion based on her vast experience spanning four decades and counting—a journey that began in the late 1970s in Nairobi, Kenya, to her current assignment as a global “teacher-scholar of religion” domiciled in Silicon Valley (219).

The book is divided into four parts that progressively build on one another. In Part I (chapters 1-3), Hinga offers an in-depth analysis of the work undertaken by Afro-feminist theologians across the African continent, primarily under the umbrella of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. The core mission of the Circle—as she so fondly refers to the enviable outfit—has been to work at dismantling the stranglehold of patriarchal dominance stemming from a colonial heritage that has consistently exacerbated the perennial subjugation of women, as well as other minority groups (1). Through the diligent scholarly efforts of the Circle members, women are urged to be intentional about actualizing “their desire to break out of their enforced silence” (6). This actualization is envisioned to proceed not from passively lamenting oppression, but through practical interventions that entail “self-naming not merely as objects and victims of injustice but also as moral agents capable of moral action for social transformation” (15). For this to effectively happen, there is an acute need to work towards fostering hospitable environments that give pluralistic coexistence a chance, to the end that difference is celebrated rather than demonized (29-33). This further presupposes a willingness to candidly and respectfully pursue common ground where the Other’s voice and position are fully embraced as a resource in enriching the greater good of all. As such, the author confidently opines that “the dialogical imperative is therefore central in the quest for just and sustainable peace and is a prologue to the much-needed solidarity within and outside borders” (37).

In Part II (chapters 4-8), the author continues her theme of women empowerment with a more sustained focus on the import of employing African indigenous strategies for scripture reading and interpretation, coupled with context-conscious theologizing. Based on a diligent analysis of biblical texts, Hinga posits that women’s “participation in social transformation therefore is not only theologically justified; it is indeed a theological imperative” (45). For her, executing the twin-methodology of

“critical and ordinary readings of the Bible” presents an invaluable chance to apply scriptural texts towards more liberative ends (51-58). However, this is not achievable unless African theologies are disengaged from the disempowering colonial “baggage” that works to curtail the freedoms of oppressed groups through creating “identity crises in the minds of Africans and a gross sense of alienation and rootlessness” (72). A key component of theology in need of an urgent reconstruction, argues Hinga, is Christology, so that Jesus is viewed not as an enforcer of oppression but rather as a catalyst for holistic, timely, and decisive liberation. Seen in this light, then, “Christ becomes the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless” (88).

Part III (chapters 9-15) serves as the apex of Hinga’s current phenomenal work. It is here that her brilliance as a scholar-practitioner is on full display, as she trains her rich theo-ethical analytical arsenal on practical challenges for many inhabitants of the vast African continent, women and children in particular. While highlighting the damage wrought by endemic poverty, war, HIV/AIDS, hunger, and domestic violence, among other challenges, the author is quick to warn against the tendency to give in to passivity and hopelessness, instead inviting all those concerned to be the change they desire to see. According to Hinga, this is even more urgent for adherents of Christianity who have a clear call to emulate the *border-crossing* Jesus of the Gospels, noting that “Christian faith mandates compassion and charity to the poor” (100). Consequently, the author urges careful attention to the intertwined character of the problems under consideration; for example: “The symbiotic nexus between food, water and energy must be recognized in efforts to seek sustainable solutions locally and globally” (120). Furthermore, to sharpen her edge as an agent of critically needful change, the African church needs to adopt a more “people-centric” disposition, than militate towards a “pyramidal ecclesiology” that stifles mutual enrichment (142).

In the concluding Part IV (chapters 16-17), Hinga makes an impassioned case for offering religious/theological education that serves to prepare readers for responsible, selfless, and compassionate global citizenship. Using the example of the important work taking place at Santa Clara University where she is based, Hinga draws on theorists like Freire,

Nussbaum, and Moshia to crystallize “the goal of education as nurturing the humanity of the students and by extension humanizing the world we inhabit so that life—both human and nonhuman—can flourish” (203).

While there are some portions of the book that could use some ironing out in case of a future reprint—for instance, overlapping material that becomes redundant at times (127), as well as a section that inadvertently associates the Kakuma and Daadab refugee camps with Nigeria even though they are in Kenya (120)—these are ultimately minor issues in an otherwise exceptional work. On the whole, Hinga has given the global community a priceless gift and immense resource in this seminal text—one that will hopefully go a long way in informing best practices in seeking to harness deep theological scholarship as a tool for much-needed social transformation, both in Africa and beyond.

Mwaambi G. Mbûûi is a PhD student in the Theology & Ethics Department at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, with research interests around constructive African public theology, liberative ethics, African sage/folk philosophy, African Traditional Religion/s and the arts as conduits of positive social transformation.

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A Language of Things:

Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination

By: Devin P. Zuber

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Reviewed by: Jeremy Sorgen, University of California, Berkeley

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