

*Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist*. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ. New York: Orbis Books, 2018. 144 pp. ISBN:101626982767. \$22.00 paperback.

Most African scholars of religion will tell you that religion is a way of life, that Africa is deeply religious, and that as the Western world is turning away from religion, the number of religious adherents in Africa is growing. But what remains to be understood is the question of religious rivalry—can Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) coexist with less strife and, if so, what would that look like?

*Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* is A. E. Orobator's third book. His previous works were *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Orbis, 2008) and *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III* (Maryknoll, 2016). Orobator, a Jesuit priest, is among the leading voices of African intellectuals who are seeking constructive ways to make sense of the continent's triple religious heritage—African Traditional Religions, Christianity, and Islam. *Religion and Faith in Africa* came out of Orobator's 2016 lecture series, "21st Century Christianity in Africa: Promises, Prospects and Pathologies," presented at Boston College's School of Theology. Orobator informs us that he is Catholic, but that he still holds dear to his Igbo traditional beliefs. It is this perspective that makes this book stand out.

African scholars of religion are typically Christian or Muslim. Rarely do we hear from writers who embrace African Traditional Religions. There is, therefore, a bias in these works that Orobator helps to correct. He argues that we can best use the positive potential of religions in Africa by understanding how Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions work together.

Throughout the text, Orobator points out that, based on his experience with ATRs and Catholicism, he believes they can coexist. The book is divided into six chapters: Chapter 1 provides an overview of African Traditional Religions and considers the potential for interreligious dialogue. Chapter 2 makes the provocative point that Christianity and Islam have flourished in Africa because their foundations are fortified by indigenous spirituality or ATRs. Chapter 3 deals with religious conflicts. Chapter 4 highlights ATRs as a conduit for peace. Chapter 5 assesses the role religion can play in protecting the environment. Chapter 6 examines gender-based discrimination and why women's voices are needed in the Catholic Church.

*Religion and Faith in Africa* complements Laurenti Megesa's *African Religions: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis, 2001); *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob Olupona (Paragon House, 1991); and Sobonfu Some's *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (William Morrow, 2000). These works foreground the wisdom inherent within African Traditional Religions. The authors also attempt to destroy the negative stereotypes that have stigmatized ATRs by pointing out that for centuries their core canon has helped Africans to sustain life and the world in which they live.

The strength of Orobator's *Religion and Faith in Africa* is his ability to share his firsthand experience as a Catholic who also embraces indigenous Igbo religion (p. 82). This is unique because books written by most African Christians are frequently informed by anthropological research and other secondhand sources. And the authors are usually apologists for Western culture. For example, John Mbiti's classic work, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990) tries to legitimate African spirituality on Abrahamic terms—Africans believed in One God prior to their

encounter with Christianity and Islam. The claim of a sort of primitive monotheism is proof that Africans can be redeemed by converting to a superior and fully developed monotheistic religion. Orobator, by comparison, writes from the perspective of a former Igbo traditional religion devotee who still makes use of those traditions without viewing this as a contradiction.

Another strength of this book is Orobator's argument that the growth of Christianity and Islam do not necessarily mean the erasure of ATRs. In fact, he argues that because ATRs are a way of life and its adherents are uninterested in proselytizing, they are the solid foundation upon which Christianity and Islam stand. What does this mean? ATRs are lived religions. They are embedded in an African way of life. Therefore, evangelizing is not necessary. Additionally, indigenous spiritual systems have multiple deities. Foreign gods can be incorporated into the indigenous pantheon. Lastly, these systems were generally oral. There was no authoritative written text. This flexibility accommodated Christianity and Islam and allowed these religions to gradually flourish in Africa. This view counters works of scholars who argue that the rise of Christianity and Islam simply replaced African Traditional Religions. Here I have in mind scholars like Kwame Bediako who, in his book *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh, 1995), argues that ATRs were waiting for Christianity to complete and replace them.

My community in northern Nigeria is constantly dealing with religious violence between Christians and Muslims and, more recently, Boko Haram terrorizing my region. The followers of Christianity and Islam, every chance they get, make sure they demonize *dodo* (Hausa- "indigenous religion") as a way to show their "pure" religiosity. Like Orobator, I am a practicing Afrocentric Christian who incorporates the spirituality of my ancestors. Their proverbial wisdom teaches us that "a rolling stone gathers no moss." That is to say, time reveals truth. Therefore, we must stay true to our core cultural values—to abandon my traditions outright is a form of self-rejection. As a granddaughter of *myba* (a diviner within the Yotti/Bali traditional religion) and a daughter of founders of the United Methodist Church in Nigeria, my Methodist and Yotti/Bali religious identities are in constant tension. Much of this stress is created by the intolerance of Christian purists. This book bolsters my confidence in my religious journey.

I expected to hear more from Orobator about his upbringing and to read a more detailed elaboration of Igbo religious traditions. This minor problem aside, *Religion and Faith in Africa* is a significant contribution to the scholarship on religious pluralism in Africa and an important resource for anyone engaged in interreligious dialogue. I anticipate that this work will help communities break down many of the barriers that make these sorts of conversations difficult.

Universal Theology posits that the gospel of Christ is easily adaptable to all societies. The potency of the gospel is believed to be incarnate and transforms communities to what God has intended them to be—"Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, male or female "(Galatians 3: 28)—united in Christ. Similarly, the universal appeal of Islam is the promise that all are equal in the presence of Allah. Orobator turns this argument on its head by showing how, in fact, it was the flexibility of ATRs (for example, Vodun in Benin or Ifa in Nigeria) that facilitated the growth and spread of the Christian gospel.

I anticipate that *Religion and Faith in Africa* will be a valuable resource for educators and missiologists who seek to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamism of Africanized Christianity

and Islam. The straightforward prose also makes the text accessible to lay readers. This is a fresh and exciting approach to thinking about the ongoing evolution of religion in Africa.

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