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BOOK REVIEW

Uzukwu, Elochukwu E. *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012. Pp. xiii + 267.

Charles A. Ebelebe, CSSp, Ph.D

The book is divided into two unequal parts and seven unequal chapters. Both parts have an introduction and there is a concluding chapter. Part one is foundational and consists of only chapters one and two. The rest of the book make up part two and at 52 pages chapter three, titled "African Traditional Religion Rediscovered," is by far the lengthiest.

In this book Uzukwu takes as his methodological framework the traditional West African worldview of the principle of duality captured by the great Nigerian literary icon Chinua Achebe as, "Whenever something stands, something else will stand beside it." This principle embodies notions of plurality, flexibility, tolerance, accommodation, adaptability, etc, and includes the injunction to always take a second look at something as a call to a hermeneutics of suspicion and a caution against absolutism. These attitudes or insights are the wealth that West Africa and indeed Africa can offer the rest of the world, especially in the conception and practice of religion.

Uzukwu is sympathetic to the position of pioneer African theologians such as, Nyamiti, Idowu, Mbiti, and others who affirm that the God of African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the same

God preached by the early Christian missionaries to Africa, and for Uzuoku the adoption of the traditional African names for God by these missionaries to name the Christian God lends credence to this view. He however underlines a proviso namely, that “the radical dimension of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is not compromised” (56).

Uzuoku takes the reader on an impressive tour of the West African socio-religious landscape, discovering on the journey nuggets of religious wisdom that he recommends to the rest of the world as worthy of adoption. A key component of this West African traditional religious patrimony is “a flexible and dynamic hierarchy of divinity, an inclusive rather than exclusive supremacy” (80). This West African religious experience, Uzuoku believes, is in consonance with the Yahwistic (also found in pre-exilic and exilic) interpretations of the Hebrew experience of God in the Old Testament as against the Deuteronomistic interpretation that promoted an exclusivist mono-Yahwism. Unlike Christianity and Islam, West African religion is “kin-focused” and decentralized and allows for a diversity of approaches to the divine. Such an insight, Uzuoku advises, “should be retained for peace, human flourishing and good neighborliness in the world” (111).

For Uzuoku, “the Spirit is the most fertile entry point into Trinitarian theology in West African Christianity” (135). Here West African Christianity finds good company with Origen for whom God is Spirit, not in an ontological but in a relational sense. The Spirit gives life and makes for human flourishing. For Uzuoku, the closest appropriation of this “spirit-oriented and spirit-embedded” (138) Christian experience in West Africa are the African Independent Churches (AICs), who, “consciously or

unconsciously clothe the Holy Spirit with the qualities of the deities [of African Traditional Religion]" (169) thus preserving such deities and their wholesome services from being lost to humanity.

Many will find this book controversial. Conservative Catholics, Evangelicals and neo-Pentecostals will be uncomfortable with Uzukwu's reinterpretation of the "traditional" understanding of the Christian God. I am not in this company; I find Uzukwu's core arguments compelling and persuasive. But the book raises a few questions: Is the world of ATR that Uzukwu is trying to retrieve a world that is familiar with the majority of today's West African Christians or one that is of interest only to a vanishing minority or to religious and theological researchers like himself? It is instructive that none of the three young African theologians, Bede Ukwuije, Augustin Bishwende, and Benoît Kungua, that Uzukwu dialogues with at the end of his book is as receptive towards ATR as he is. Also, if "West African religious experience promotes harmony and not violence," (222) how does Uzukwu explain the incessant conflicts that have characterized independent Africa? Is he suggesting that we blame Christianity and Islam for this state of affairs? Again, when Uzukwu presents the AICs as the best examples to follow in the retrieval of the riches of ATR for world Christianity, is he suggesting that the members of the AICs have the wholeness and human flourishing that such a retrieval is supposed to engender, and this more than non-AIC members?

Uzukwu's book makes an interesting read. The breadth of research is impressive, traversing multiple disciplines including African Traditional Religion, Literature, Ethnography, Psychology, Anthropology, Bible, and Theology. The target audience is therefore not the average reader but one with some level of

familiarity with these subjects. It would be appropriate as a textbook for a graduate level course on 'The Christian God,' 'Pneumatology,' or even ATR in a theological faculty or a seminary, especially in Africa. There is no cover price on the book but it is listed on Amazon for \$33, meaning that it is not within the reach of the average seminarian or student of theology in Africa. An African edition would therefore be very much welcome.