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of
African
Christian
Thought

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Vol. 7, No. 2
December 2004

*Muslims and Christians in African
Perspective*

Journal of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre
for Mission Research and Applied Theology, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana

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FACT

Journal of African Christian Thought

is a publication of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology, P.O. Box 76, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana. Tel: +233-27-556718; Fax: +233-21-513188 E-mail: jact@acmcghana.org

It is published bi-annually, in June and December. ISSN: 0855-3262

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¢50,000 for one year; ¢95,000 for two years; ¢135,000 for three years, postpaid.

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Muslims and Christians in African Perspective

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This periodical is indexed in *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, the *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*, *Religion Indexes: Ten Year Subset on CD-ROM*, and the *ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr, Chicago, IL 60606, USA; e-mail: atla@atla.com, WWW: <http://www.atla.com/>.

Themes of future issues:

Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2005)

Christ in African Experience - Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora

Vol. 8, No. 2 (December 2005)

Christian Worship in African Perspective



Editorial

In this issue, we begin to explore a new theme, 'Muslims and Christians in African perspective'. Yet it is not a new theme on this continent, since religious plurality is a daily experience for the majority of Africans and has been so for many centuries. For to speak of Muslims and Christians, is to speak also of persons who share in the time-honoured primal religious traditions of Africa, whether as active practitioners or as those for whom it forms the substratum of their own faith. What may be new, perhaps, is the perspective from which the writers approach their themes.

For all the writers, whether Muslim or Christian, Islam, Christianity and African traditional religions are not closed systems, unrelated to one another. They are dynamic entities that impinge upon each other and interpenetrate in what may seem surprising ways, as they are embodied in lives lived and choices made in faith, in response to Scripture, religious memory and tradition, within a particular cultural environment. Several writers are concerned to show how it is the primal religious environment that makes this possible and how it constitutes a valuable heritage that needs to be appreciated more deeply and drawn upon in the current quest for a more irenic inter-religious engagement. Other writers focus on the elements in the contemporary scene that threaten to undermine that heritage and draw Africa more deeply into the web of hostility and suspicion, spun out in the realm of global geo-politics.

Thus, all the writers consider Africa as a unique environment for thinking creatively about the issues of religious engagement and as a privileged arena for learning new ways of relating and working together. Africa provides the conditions for dialogue and engagement on terms set by the respective faiths, rather than on the terms of a socio-political agenda set elsewhere. Yet Africa is clearly also vulnerable – to pressures from outside, to the consequences of inadequate appreciation of its heritage and potential, as well as to the negative forces that operate within these religious traditions when they are seen primarily as systems set over against other systems.

Kwame Bediako's article, 'Christianity, Islam and the Kingdom of God – Rethinking their relationship from an African perspective', first given as the third in his series of five Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, USA, in October 2003, may be seen in some sense as the lead article. It touches, quite independently, upon most of the issues that are raised and explored in the subsequent articles. His particular concern is to explore how the African theatre for Muslim-Christian engagement may be said to be unique and what challenges this unique environment raises for Muslim-Christian engagement in Africa. By relating Muslim-Christian engagement to the Kingdom of God, he seeks to articulate how Christ may in reality constitute a redemptive paradigm for all peoples and religions. Christ may be seen to answer to their highest aspirations and to be the standard by which to measure all traditions, including the various strands within Christianity itself.

Tahir Sitoto's article, 'The ambiguity of African Muslim identity with special reference to Christianity', is the one article by a Muslim in this issue. It provides an interesting Muslim and South African counterpoint to Kwame Bediako's article, in that it shares the awareness that the religious identity of many Africans, whether Muslim or Christian, is complex and derives from many streams of religious inspiration. What is also noteworthy is his appreciation of the work of African Christian writers and theologians in their concern to discover their African Christian identity, within his own quest for an African Muslim identity. His perception that it is the African expression of Christianity that makes Christianity now a world faith, raises a number of issues for African Muslims in their own quest for authenticity.

Lamin Sanneh's article, 'Translatability in Islam and Christianity, with special reference to Africa: Recapitulating the theme', is reproduced with the author's permission, from his book, *Translating the Message, The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989). We include it here because it is a sterling example of an irenic and judicious treatment of a specific theme in relation to both faiths, drawing from an African experience of religious plurality that enables a sympathetic understanding of both religious traditions. The theme of translatability is also extremely important in its own right with respect to mission and conversion, reform and renewal. Sanneh's historical and theological survey serves to highlight significant differences of approach within the two missionary religions in Africa, as well as raising issues of identity that are paramount for African converts. His conclusion that 'in their contrasting strengths and weaknesses, Islam and Christianity are perfect mirrors of each other, and their wholehearted adoption by Africans affords a unique opportunity to observe their authentic character on common ground', provides a helpful intellectual framework from which to engage in the study of the two faiths in the African context.

John Azumah's article, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim relations and their implications for theological formation in Africa', considers the issues that inter-faith engagement in Africa raises for the training given in Christian theological institutions in Africa. He seeks to chart a course away from the usual approaches to inter-faith engagement inherited from the Western tradition. His personal experience of religious plurality within his own family, and, in particular, the fact that his Christian theological studies were funded by his Muslim uncle, clearly raise for him new issues that the old perspectives and methods are ill-equipped to address. He is also concerned that the Arab-Islamic legacy in Africa and the Western Christian legacy should be seen in their true light without romanticisation or demonisation. His conclusion is important: 'If we are talking about Christian-Muslim relations in Africa, there must be a different kind of approach that deals with themes that reflect the collective memories, concerns and aspirations of African people, of whatever religious persuasion'. It is a conclusion that echoes the sentiments of the earlier articles in this issue.