

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**TITLE: THE WILL TO ARISE: WOMEN, TRADITION AND THE  
CHURCH IN AFRICA**

**Authors:**

Oduyoye, M. A., and Kanyoro, M.A., (Eds)

**Place of Publication:**

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545, USA

**Year of Publication:**

1992

**Number of Pages:**

230 Pages

**Reviewer:**

Rev. Fr. Dr. PhilipMary Ayika, C.S.Sp  
Spiritan International School of Theology,  
Attakwu, Enugu.  
ayikas@yahoo.com

Has the woman any contribution to make to religion in Africa, which has maintained their "death" in membership? An African woman theologian retorted to Anglican Bishops at their Lambert's Conference in 1988 that until women's vies are consulted and given in a free atmosphere of expression, the truth about insoluble subjects such as polygamy, culture and authority in the Church will remain enigmatic. Also the call to respond positively to the Kingdom of God will never be challenging. This is the contribution of this book to the academic library as it retells with a feminist touch the patriarchal inclined stories or myths that have evolved within the African culture bespeaking vital instances of some communities' understandings of widowhood, sexuality, polygamy, prostitution and marriage, which has mutilated the faith systems of African Christian culture. Having the Scripture and modern challenges of freedom as the springboard, *The will to arise* is a call from African Women Theologians to all African Women urging them to rise from the quagmire of men's inhumanity to women and thus respond positively to the call of God, to action and wholeness (not inactivity and pretense), which challenges the will and the intellect.

The book is a collection of thirteen articles written by Christians and only one Muslim woman. This anthology is divided into three parts based on the subjects of the articles. The first group of articles talks on **Women in African Culture**, the second on **African Women and sexual practices** and the third on **African Women and the Christian Church**.

The book underscores the central place of religion and ritual in an African person's life. This is a re-saying of the African being incurably religious, whereby every aspect of life, social, political, educational, and economic sectors are regulated by religious taboos and sanctions. Rituals are thus fashioned as vehicles for the internalization of these religious constructs and for identity. It is a contextualized way of being human. This is a sphere dominated by male authorities and thus the multifarious taboos are designed merely to keep the woman secure for procreation. The number of birthing rituals is designed to uplift the woman's soul so that she feels fulfilled with this male-assigned work and thus remain in patriarchal shackles. This is otherwise deemed as intentional imprisonment of women by men because the latter are afraid of the former with a deep-lying mythic consciousness. This myth as reflected in Tobit 3:7-8, 14-15; 8:1-9 has associated sexuality with violence to the extent that the menstrual blood becomes a representation of sexual violence. This is why the flow of blood has religious and cultural implications.

The description of women from their biological role as reflected in 1Tim 2:9-15 should be seen as truncating the personality of women and this is translated into the Church under the pretext of inculturation. The Church has assumed some of the cultures of some areas like being in seclusion, shaved, clad in mourning clothes and spending heavily during the long period of burial of a widow's husband. Nwachukwu Daisy believes that in contextualizing Christianity within the African milieu, the African Christian theology must seek to minister effectively to the woman (widow) as a "total person" and to her children. As such, women should be given a chance to express their satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction over some cultic aspects of religion that affects their lives drastically. This is to say that inculturation or contextualization should not come between the Word of God and the personal freedom of a person, the body, soul and spirit. Therefore "ultimate and absolute authority in matters of faith can and must reside only in the Word of God, who was made flesh, died and rose again for our salvation and abides forever in His Church" (p. 69). Christ preached deliverance to

those in bondage and freedom to those in captivity of body, soul and spirit and thus the Church should emulate in this prophetic role.

This should begin with the dilemma of the Bible translation and interpretation, which hinges on whether to mould a text to reflect one's cultural value system or whether to translate the passage literally even if it is not understood. This is evident in the Kenyan translation (amongst many others) of the Hebrew *pilegesh* into the Kenyan *ebiroro*. The practice of *ebiroro* entails the introduction of the youth to sexual activity (through intercourse) by an older married man or woman. The Hebrew concubinage, *pilegesh*, of course refers to polygamy. For Kanyoro, this is a translation infiltrated by patriarchy because Bible translation has until now been a preserve of men. Polygamy was culled by men from the injunction: *Be fruitful and multiply* in order to satisfy their sexual desires. This is so because men needed compensation for those times of sexual abstinence by women because of their menstruation and childbirth and also to have descendants in their names and not in the woman's names. Of course, women are taken as sources of pollution in both the Jewish and African cultures. The signs of life in her are the point sources of this pollution, which are rather pronounced in them than in men.

In spite of her physical and mental fitness, a woman is usually excluded for her menstrual blood, her breast milk, and even for her ability to bear children. She is, therefore, unfit to touch holy vessels and dress in holy apparel - she cannot and must not "look" holy. These are male privileges that must be enjoyed by men only. (p. 139)

This is so if men are the pure breed and are closer to God than the women. In fact, the woman is deemed saved as a property of the man. The woman should thus be embedded in the husband in order to find a place in the society. The Igbo say: *Di bu ugwu nwanyi* and also *Nwanyi toghalu 'onye muru?' O zaba 'onye na-anu?'* (The woman passes from the father's umbrella to the husband's and if the husband is not there, the first son takes over authority. This represents a triad of subjugation for the woman: "in childhood a woman must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her husband is dead to her sons. A woman must never be free of subjugation" (p. 141). This reflects the extreme patriarchal dictum in the Bible that women will be saved by childbirth (1Tim. 2: 9-15).

However, it is mark of prudence to distinguish between God's Word and the human elements. Definitely, the author of the epistle above was invariably influenced by the cultural practices of his contemporaries. Kanyoro quotes:

When we talk about polygamy, we are simply talking about women. We can never understand why our ancestors were polygamous till we grasp the status of women in traditional society. This is because marriage in its diverse forms, is always closely linked to the status assigned to women by society and to the place they were occupying in the minds and hearts of men.

This is to say that polygamy is a patriarchal construct and it shows how women are relegated to the background (as mere property). Wasike picks up the baton and maintains that monogamy emerges in the Bible as God's initial and final will for humanity just as in many African myths of creation. All these show equality and partnership that has been depleted by polygamy. This is where the Church's prophetic role should be applied. However, the rights of women should be considered and their consent consulted in repairing a polygamous union in order to ensure that both men's and women's rights are respected.

How would the Gospel of Christ be applied to the situation of women? Christ was a Liberator and more or less a model for women. So also Christ as personal friend will help women get over their privations. However, women are advised to pick and choose from the many versions of Christologies, rejecting all those ones that are inimical to their cause. If the maleness of Jesus is nothing but the fullness of the image of God and according to Aquinas, an ontological necessity, then the woman is second-rate and naturally subordinate to man. In fact, women were asked by Mary Daly to achieve their freedom from a cultivation of confidence in themselves, such that their actions spring from themselves rather than being motivated by the imitation of any role models. The question is: *will such women remain Christians if they put Christ aside?* For women to make themselves models in a socio-religious context means more or less a deification of themselves. However, the soft tone of the above assertion is embedded in what Fiorenza (1983), says that God can reveal no text which "destroys the personal and human worth of women." (p. 33). This goes a long way to prove that the problem is not Christ but the interpretations of Christ. Thus women are asked to reject the time-honoured Christologies

which are inseparably warped and irredeemably entrenched in the quagmire of patriarchalism. Men are thus branded thieves because they steal the humanity of women through domination.

Must women remain ever bowed to the shackles of the dominating patriarchy? By no means. Women should be involved in interpretation as theologians through education. They are not sources of pollution and contamination. They should develop the **Will to rise** beyond the cultural frontiers like the Lucan woman of hemorrhage and touch Jesus. Should they be contagious, Jesus is the Spiritual Detergent that washes them clean. Women cannot defile God, otherwise, he is not God rather God sanctifies women. The life-giving powers of women manifested in the flow of blood should no longer be seen as contaminating but part of women's wholeness. They too are children of Abraham and deserve to "live in shalom".

The style of the book is simply feminist. It is a reaction by feminist women theologians of Africa to the male chauvinism.. It is often an over-reaction, which is evident in certain hyperbolic conclusions reached. However, the book puts across that African women are of age; they are no longer simple housewives, rather they can now read between lines and as the Igbo say decipher between rain water and poured-out water. They should be listened to by all and sundry but most especially the theologians.