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Tel: +233-277-556718; Fax: +233-21-513188
E-mail: jact@acmcghana.org

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Editor
Gillian M. Bediako

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African Indigenous Knowledge Systems as Resource for Theological Education and Christian Scholarship

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Themes of future issues:

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Methodology in Gospel and Culture Research



Editorial

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Thought* comprises for the most part the papers and edited discussion from a consultation that was made possible through assistance from the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Department of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. The consultation concluded a two-year project of the African Theological Fellowship, entitled: 'Integrating IKS as Intellectual Resource in Theological Education and Christian Scholarship in Africa'. It was held at the Emaphetelweni Dominican Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, from 4 to 6 April 2006.

The purpose of this consultation was specific and forward-looking, in recognition of the *kairos* moment of a new phase in Christian history. As the preamble to the consultation programme stated:

A hitherto unquestioned assumption that Christianity as a faith is the religion of the West, an assumption that lasted for a thousand years and more, has now been succeeded by a realisation that Christianity is in fact a 'non-Western religion'. A 'world Christianity' beyond the West has emerged, in which African, alongside Asian and Latin American, perspectives have become the standard measure of Christianity in the world.

Most significantly, this new world Christianity is living and growing outside of the Western Enlightenment frame. Whatever else may be said about globalisation as the impact of the West upon the rest of the world, this is not translating into a generalised acceptance of Western value-setting for Christian faith and practice.

This realisation shaped the African Christianity programme, initiated and designed by the African Theological Fellowship (ATF) and offered at both MTh and PhD levels in collaboration with the School of Theology, University of Natal (subsequently the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal) since 1998. The teaching and research on this programme sought to demonstrate that Christianity is properly an African religion, having deep affinities with African traditions of history, culture, religion and language. It was this focus that attracted the attention of the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and on the basis of which, the ATF project was approved.

The consultation brought to closure a first phase of the ATF project. All paper presenters and invited participants had some connection with the African Christianity programme, either directly or as conversation partners. Accordingly, the topics treated could be said to be indicative of the new scholarship that has grown out of the African Christianity programme, setting a new agenda for the present and the future. As the preamble again noted:

This consultation therefore seeks to identify, to map out and to share our reflections on the pertinent academic challenges that face us as scholars with a commitment to serve our generation and so contribute to the shape of the future. In the process, we hope that we

can begin to develop new critical and intellectual resources for engaging more profoundly with our African indigenous knowledge systems. It is also our hope that we can attain greater clarity on both Africa's significance in Christian history, and on the character of that African significance within the world Christianity of our time.

As scholars who understand ourselves as both deeply African and deeply Christian, we may have, perhaps, no greater vocation.

The two-day programme was built around a small number of presentations, which became the launch pad for an extensive and wide-ranging discussion on many issues and challenges relating to the integration of African indigenous knowledge systems within theological education. This structure allowed both lecturers and students to air their concerns and struggles freely and frankly, and as a result, a considerable level of consensus was achieved on the desirability of pursuing these matters further and deeper and within the different sub-regions of the continent. The discussion helped to strengthen conviction as to the importance of recovering indigenous traditions and gave hope that, despite the obstacles, such projects were achievable. There developed also a clear sense that Africa has many vital resources for the enhancement of Christian faith, life and witness world-wide.

The four plenary papers covered a range of topics. Kwame Bediako's opening reflections, 'A new age in Christian history: African Christianity as representative Christianity – Some implications for theological education and scholarship', gave an overview of the historical moment in which African Christian scholarship is now set. The paper laid out some of the concerns and challenges that arise with respect to engaging with Africa's indigenous knowledge systems, as a basis for the ensuing discussion.

This was followed by a presentation by Maarman Samuel Tshehla on 'A Sesotho instance of 'the perennial challenge' of considering African indigenous knowledge systems from a Christian perspective', in which he showed how, contrary to what is usually assumed, the religious and cultural concerns that engage African Christian scholars today were also shared and expressed in the vernacular by some of the earliest Basotho converts in the nineteenth century.

Gillian Bediako's presentation, 'Indigenous knowledge systems as intellectual and spiritual resource: Learning from Africa for a new perspective on the European Christian story – the case of the *Heliand* in early Saxon Christianity', sought to show how the concerns of contemporary African Christian scholarship have a bearing on European Christian scholarship. They illuminate areas of European religious and cultural engagement that have hitherto been marginalised, and enable a fresh appreciation and a new understanding of the European Christian story.