
Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library

An Introduction to an Exhibition and a Forum

by Richard Manly Adams, Jr.

From March 23, 2018, through July 20, 2018, Pitts Theology Library at Emory University hosted an exhibition of its African Christianity collection. The exhibition was curated by Emory PhD student Jennifer Aycock, and it drew upon print, manuscript, and archival holdings of the library. Though the exhibition has now closed, its presence continues. In the most practical sense, the exhibition was accompanied by the release of an exhibition catalog, which readers can access online at <http://pitts.emory.edu/africanchristianity>. Credit for this beautiful exhibition catalog should be given to Jennifer and to Rebekah Bédard, who was at the time the Reference Librarian and Outreach Coordinator at Pitts.

In a much more important sense, though, the physical exhibition has been the beginning of an important conversation at this library about this collection in particular and the general role of the library in collecting, preserving, and providing access to such materials. From the beginning of the curatorial process, it became clear that this exhibition would raise new questions for Pitts to consider, as an American institution that collects, preserves, and displays materials reflecting Christianity on the African continent. Even our name for this collection was called into question, as Jennifer rightly pointed out the problem with identifying something as “African Christianity,” as if it were a monolith.

In celebration of this beautiful exhibition, Pitts hosted an evening event on April 12, 2018, during which the audience heard from the curator and two Candler School of Theology faculty members whose work engages Christianity in Africa and the challenges of American documentation of the theologies and histories of Christianity outside of the US. This event allowed our curator to introduce her work to a public audience and explore the questions it raised for her, and it allowed the faculty members to raise important questions about the specifics of the exhibition and the general challenges libraries face as archival repositories.

Being one of the fortunate audience members at this event, my mind was frantic afterwards about the implications these three wonderful presentations had for how we do our work at Pitts Theology Library. I can only imagine that other librarians, who collect, preserve, and provide access to other collections, would likewise have much to consider in light of this important conversation. I was excited, therefore, that two of our presenters, the curator Jennifer Aycock and Arun W. Jones, Dan and Lillian Hankey Associate Professor of World Evangelism at Candler School of Theology, agreed to share their lectures with *Theological Librarianship*, which appear here with only slight changes. In addition, Professor Esther Mombo from St. Paul’s University in Limuru, Kenya, was at the event that evening. I invited her to offer her own reflections on the exhibition, given her leading role in theological conversations in Kenya and Africa more broadly. I am so pleased with her willingness to offer such a thoughtful response, one which not only offers us much to think about in terms of how we in America understand the diversity of “Christianities” in Africa, but also much necessary context to help us understand how the theological conversations continue to develop in Africa.

And so, I invite you to enjoy these three reflections, not only as a commentary on what we were doing in our exhibition gallery, but rather what we all are doing as we serve as the preservation sites for important

collections. In so doing, I invite you to consider the task of the theological library, particularly as it relates to those who do not have the ability to travel to our spaces and visit our collections. Of all the things that Jennifer and Profs. Jones and Mombo have taught me, perhaps the most significant is that we in the privileged position of holding these materials have a sacred duty to make sure they are as widely accessible as possible. My deepest appreciation goes out to these three, not only for their wonderful reflections published here, but also for their ongoing reminder of that sacred duty.