

Book Reviews

Introduction to Africana Philosophy. By L.R. Gordon. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Pp. 275. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

This book is, as its author rightly characterizes it, the “first comprehensive” work to present the different areas, questions, problems, and issues of the “species of Africana thought” which is to be called “philosophy.” Thus, Lewis Gordon’s *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* had a particularly crucial function to carry out: outline a field still in the process of being constituted. Gordon has accomplished this.

Each of the subfields explored in the second part of the book—“African-American philosophy,” “Africana Philosophical Movements in the USA and Britain,” Afro-Caribbean philosophy,” and “African philosophy”—is treated in such a way that the reader has a good grasp of the central questions and issues around which philosophical thinking is deployed in those areas. In the first part of the book, Gordon explains in a particularly enlightening way why there exists, outside any essentialist thinking, a distinct feature of Africana philosophy which is the centrality of anthropological considerations and questions. Kant has famously written that the four problems of philosophy—What can I know? What ought I to do? What can I hope? What is Man?—could be reduced to the fourth, which is their common “root”: “what is Man?” or rather, as Gordon formulates the anthropological question: “what does it mean to be a human being?” The difference between the two ways of posing the question is abysmal. The Africana philosopher is not asserting the primacy of anthropology vis-à-vis epistemology, ethics, and religion: she is responding to the de-humanization that is integral to slavery, colonialism, and racism. One can abstract away from considerations of anthropology, sociology, or history and deal with Justice in general, Man in general, Meaning in general, and other notions unquestionably philosophical “in general”; and from such a vantage point judge that there is something of too “particular instead of universal significance” (p. 31) in a thought that “takes modern concerns such as race, racism and colonialism seriously” (p. 14). That is what Africana philosophy does, Gordon explains, because it has been confronted with the question of the human-ness of the human.

There are two aspects taken by the question “what does it mean to be human?” in African and Africana philosophy. In relation to African cosmologies (and Gordon insists quite rightly on their indisputable commonality) the question is about the place and function of the human being in the ontological chain of life forces from the Force of forces to the minerals through the ancestors, the living men and women, the animals, and the plants. In relation to the historical circumstances of slavery and colonialism the same question has now become the crucial, intertwined philosophical issues listed at the end of the first part of the book: the centrality of philosophical anthropology, the problem of modernization and the meaning of “civilization,” the importance of freedom and liberation, the significance of identity questions, the emancipating significance of knowledge, the weight of history in identity formation, the metaphilosophical question *a propos* method and thought itself.

Why not study pre-Socratic conceptions of the “radical origination of things” in connection with perfectly comparable cosmogonies in Chinese or African thought? Because pre-Socratic worldviews are prevented from that horizontal opening to other philosophical discourses by their vertical and teleological orientation as the absolute—i.e., miraculous—beginning of a unique, incomparable philosophical adventure identified with what has been invented, quite recently in fact, as “Europe.” One purpose of the study of Africana thought as well as other philosophies is precisely to re-establish the dialogue with others that Socrates knew to be the very condition of that singular and demanding activity of examining what we do not know and what we think we know. In that sense Africana Philosophy, so well outlined by Gordon’s *Introduction* to it, is not a field to be visited *in addition* to “philosophy.” Rather, it is a way to explore the eternal question: what is philosophy? Thus, Gordon’s *Introduction to Africana Philosophy* is, simply, an introduction to philosophy.

SOULEYMANE BACHIR DIAGNE

Columbia University

Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda. By Timothy Longman. African Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 350; bibliography, index. \$90.00 cloth, \$72.00 Adobe eReader.

A basic tenet of the Christian faith is the prohibition of murder. Yet, in 1994 in Rwanda, thousands of Christians murdered as many as one million people and nearly all Tutsis in the country. Many observers have concluded that this lapse in Christian action must be attributable to an insufficient impact of Christianity on Rwandan society. Rwandan Christians must not have been well enough educated in their faith, or they would not have engaged in murder on a massive scale. In this new book on Christianity and genocide in Rwanda, political scientist Timothy Longman explores the relationships among the church, the state, and civil society in Rwanda. He answers the fundamental question: why were the churches so deeply implicated in the genocide?

Based on long-term fieldwork in Rwanda before and after the genocide, this book makes a major contribution to the literature on religion and conflict as well as on the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Along with *Leave None to Tell the Story* (1999)¹ to which Longman contributed two chapters on the unfolding of the genocide in southern Rwanda and a large amount of data from his two years as a researcher for Human Rights Watch, this new book is one of the few studies of the 1994 genocide available in English and based on research done in Rwanda before and after the genocide. Longman’s long-term engagement with Rwanda, as well as his familiarity with the literature in French and English on the country, has made him one of the leading American experts on the African Great Lakes region and also on religion and conflict.

¹ Alison Des Forges, ed., *None to Tell the Story* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Copyright of International Journal of African Historical Studies is the property of African Studies Center and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.