

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Thomas C. Oden, How Africa shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2007, pp. 204, ISBN 978-0-8308-2875-3.

Professor Thomas C. Oden who recently retired as Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology at the Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, has provided strong evidence to firmly establish African foundations of Christianity. He seeks to pay sufficient attention to African antecedents of Christianity which is a *sine qua non* to arriving at a more balanced appreciation of the place and significance of African Christianity. The book endeavours to bridge the gap between early church in Africa and Western Christianity in a very comprehensive and easy to read fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The author rightly indicts both African and Western scholarships for neglecting the crucial subject of Africa's rich experience in ancient Christianity and the crucial intellectual dimensions on the role it has played in shaping world Christianity. He celebrates the works of ancient African intellectual giants such as Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine who pioneered the development of scientific methodology in biblical hermeneutics which for a long time have served as universal blueprint for biblical interpretation. Little do most students of theology realize that in grappling with issues like theology, Christology,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*, Oxford, Regnum Books, 1992, pp. 304-307 for a more detailed discussion on the subject of the roots and significance of African Christianity.

pneumatology, harmartology, soteriology, ecclesiology they are in fact not reinventing the wheel but actually building on the solid and unavoidable foundations laid by the great African scholars, thereby revisiting works that emerged from ancient African Christianity. It is noteworthy that at the climax of African influence on world Christianity (193-211), the world was virtually ruled by African-born leaders: Septimus Severus as emperor of Rome and Victor I (186-197) serving as the pope.

The book is organized in two parts and nine chapters; part one deals with 'The African Seedbed of Western Christianity' while part two deals with 'African Orthodox Recovery.' Oden begins by positing in chapter one that strong Afro pessimism coupled with the prevailing political barriers in parts of North Africa that makes research into early African Christianity practically problematic. However, he feels there are many historical sources available which archaeologists, linguists, and students who have working knowledge of Arabic, Coptic and Ge'ez could work on. Thus, he is convinced that resources abound for a sustained research in the field of study but western scholarship has not shown much interest.

In chapter two the author outlines seven major dimensions which form the core parcel Africa donated to World Christianity. These are as follows: academia, exegesis, dogmatics, ecumenics, monastic communities, philosophy, and dialectics. He acknowledges that all these significant spheres need further illumination by unprejudiced scholarship.

Oden attempts to come to grips with the issue of whether or not North Africa is legitimately Africa in chapters three and four. The significance of this subject lies in the fact that if the north is not part of Africa then the early Christian writers who hailed from this region could not be



classified as Africans. He however believes that despite the reality of geographical and demographic differences both the north and south are parts of one authentic Africa. Nevertheless, while African Christians can legitimately lay claim to their rich early African heritage there is the need for dialogue between the two Africas (north and south, Coptic and sub-Saharan). He proposes the agenda for such a dialogue. He then appeals for the need of African voices in scripture, which is often overlooked or ignored, to be taken seriously.

The author opens chapter five by indicting European historical scholarship which produced form criticism and which, though based on oral traditions, yet dismisses the reliability of oral traditions of Africa. He challenges African scholarship to harness resources of oral traditions of the Upper Nile Valley without proceeding in a 'chauvinistic Afrocentric way...' (p.90). He advocates African Christian scholarship which uses African and ecumenical sources and which is guided by the catholicity of the faith. He calls for recognition of African voices in Scripture and an awareness of the profound intellectual depth of early African Christianity.

In chapter six, Oden makes a remarkable point that African Christianity should receive the gift of 'rediscovering its own historic genius' early enough before it is taken away, diluted or completely avoided. He revisits and develops the themes he raised earlier to underscore the significant role Africa has played in the past and continues to play in the development of global Christianity.

Chapter seven focuses on the history of Christianity in Africa from the perspective of martyrdom and persecution through the various epochs: Romans (the third century); Arabs (the seventh century); the colonial powers (the nineteenth century) and the jihads in Sudan, Nigeria and

Somalia (in contemporary times) and how the blood of the martyrs became the seed of Christianity and how it shaped the Christian view of universal history. Further, he demonstrates the integral role played by people of African descent in the development of Christian history right from the Old Testament times.

Chapter eight makes a case for an enduring 'African Orthodoxy' in Christianity which takes the form of African expressions of classical Christian orthodoxy (common and universal baptismal faith, psalms, scripture, and confession of Jesus as Lord). This orthodoxy is older than the Western, Latin forms and older than or at least contemporary with Eastern Greek forms.

In the final chapter, he discusses the relationship between Christianity and Islam which African Christians have experienced over thirteen hundred years. He challenges African Christian scholars to do further research on African evidence of African roots of Christianity and points to the various requirements that would be needed for such an enterprise.

The author adds an appendix which challenges African Christian scholars to commit themselves to a sustained contemporary wide-ranging research project on various aspects of early African Christianity and points to the various requirements that would be needed for such an enterprise. To this end he has a vision of a consortium of scholars deeply committed to the right perception of African Christianity who would in turn pass it on to the ordinary African Christian.

Oden fills a gap (the absence of a good chronology of early African Christianity) by providing a useful chronology of events, persons and texts that throw light on the neglected subject of the pre-Islamic history of African Christianity and post-Arab conquest of African Christianity at the end of the study.



Oden does an excellent work in setting forth the basic vision for a renewed initiative in the theological and historical reassessment of early African Christianity. He provides cogent responses to those who argue that Christianity is not very African but an imposition by European colonialist with the assistance of missionaries. In corroborating Africa's John Mbiti<sup>2</sup>, he makes a significant point in chapter five in his argument for the recognition of Christianity as an African indigenous or traditional African religion in view of the fact that it has consistently been sustained in Africa for over twenty centuries. He further opines that in view of the fact that early Christian thought developed in African pot the end product which was transmitted worldwide could be said to be distinctly African.

This useful text could have been more detailed but the author clearly admits that it is only a preliminary attempt. He has therefore opened a Pandora's box for future scholarly work in this dimension of African Christianity. He posits that a study of this nature would serve a vital ecumenical purpose by helping both Christians and Muslims in the region understand each other better, a pre-condition for a fruitful dialogue and peaceful co-existence.

This book is a must for all who are interested in all dimensions of African Christianity, from antiquity to present. Systematic theologians of all descent should not ignore the issues the book raises, particularly on subjects like incarnational theology in Africa. - CEPHAS N. OMENYO, Gaborone, Botswana.

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<sup>2</sup> As early as 1969, John Mbiti made the point that 'historically, Christianity is very much an African religion.' In J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London, Heinemann 1969, 229.