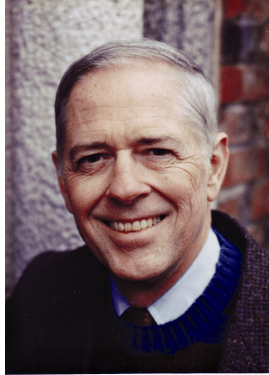


Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



Thomas C. Oden (Ph.D., Yale) recently retired as Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology at The Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. He is general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture and the author of numerous theological works, including a three-volume systematic theology.

IVP: *Your new book has what for many will be a rather provocative thesis. In brief, how would you summarize your main contention?*

Oden: The thesis can be stated simply. Christianity has a much longer history than its Western European expressions. Africa has played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture from its infancy, a role that has never been adequately studied or acknowledged, either in the Global North or South.

IVP: *How did the African mind shape the Christian mind in the earliest centuries of Christianity?*

Oden: Christianity was profoundly shaped by the intellectual understandings that developed in Africa between A.D. 50 and 500. It is folly to study church history while ignoring Africa. Yet this assumption has been common in the last five centuries in a way that would have seemed odd during the first five centuries. The classic Christian mind bears the stamp of philosophical analyses, moral insights, forms of discipline and scriptural interpretations that bloomed first in Africa before anywhere else. The seeds spread from Africa north.

IVP: *Tell us a little of the story behind the story. How did you become interested in this topic? What makes you so passionate about it?*

Oden: I did not catch this vision from Euro-American mentors. They steered me consistently away from classical African Christianity toward modern European intellectual history. I learned it only from reading the ancient African sources directly. So I come personally to this subject through a unique experiential route—by reading for three decades in early African exegetical sources at a time when they were being grossly neglected. I became fully persuaded of the power of African orthodoxy while residing on the other side of the earth from Africa. This is the painstaking discipline through which I have been going since the early 1970s.

When I first became intrigued with this subject during the early years of researching the texts of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, I thought it would be possible for

Media Contact | For more information and to schedule an interview with our featured author contact: Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com, Heather Mascarello, print publicity at 800.843.4587 ext. 4012 or hmascarello@ivpress.com, Adrainna Wright, online publicity at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com.

Visit ivpress.com/media

Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

me to write a simple, short historical summary of early African Christianity. But even that proved impossible. During the entire year of 2005 I narrowed my focus strictly to early Libyan Christianity, which I thought might be a manageable piece of the picture. But even that piece of the history and archeology was so complex that a lengthy volume would be needed even to do modest justice to Cyrenaica and Tripolitania alone. So in these pages I have had to trim my scope even further to deal only with stating the key thesis, inviting others to offer their own skills in solving its problems.

What has been a challenge for me, I now put as a challenge for my readers. Simple awareness of the condition of Africa is the first step to turning the heart to Africa. Finding a heart for Africa is the precondition of taking any other step. There is a stirring of the tender and compassionate awareness of our Christian brothers and sisters in Africa. It is not just a question of historical scholarship but also of moral commitment as some of our Christian family will indeed be out there on the firing line risking life and limb. Others will remain in a safe place yet with a lively conscience attuned closely to those who are sacrificing.

What do Western scholars know about these matters? Little in terms of suffering, but enough in terms of historical attentiveness to see that many have been deeply moved by classic African theology.

IVP: *In many ways your book is a call for more research, even a generation's worth. Why is such research needed?*

Oden: The common misperception is that intellectual leadership typically moved from the North to the South, from Europe to Africa. But in Christian history, the flow of intellectual leadership seems much more to have moved from Africa to Europe. But this has yet to be fully demonstrated. These arguments await explicit unpacking, but sifting the evidence remains the task of a generation of future scholars, many of them from Africa, to restudy the flow of ideas from Africa to Europe, and better describe their impact.

I am convinced, however, that when the evidence is rightly digested, it will again reshape modern African Christian identity and motivation. The Holy Spirit is awakening an enormous body of believers in Africa who have found their way into Scripture, but not yet found their way into the stories of early African saints and martyrs and especially teachers. Africa is now poised to rediscover its own history, its deeper identity and its renewed vocation within world history.

Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

IVP: *There seems to be a groundswell of interest in your topic. Tell us about the international response to the Early African Christianity Project.*

Oden: This early African Christian heritage has in fact had huge subliminal impact upon all Christian history. But its impact has not been consciously recognized, even if appropriated. The evidence for this impact will take decades to uncover properly and make it understandable to the children of Africa. Young African scholars are called to engage in this labor of love for all of global Christianity.

The story of early African Christianity needs to be told to African children in villages and cities. The story deserves to be told in a simple way. Though it will be heard by a global audience, it first must find a way of reaching African children.

It is a story of heroic proportions, replete with intrepid characters and surprise endings. It is not a myth, but a real history, laden with mystery, full to overflowing with unanticipated providences, heavy with sacrifice and miracle, with unrepeatable choices to be confronted, and much to be learned. It has the capacity to once again illumine personal struggles everywhere.

Global Christian believers are intrigued by modern Africa but most have not thought of it in the light of its history. Least of all have Africans had the opportunity to hear their own full story told.

When I speak of early African Christianity, I am referring to all the antecedents of Christianity in the first millennium in the millions of square miles of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and possibly further south than we now know. The geography of the continent shaped the fact that African Christianity happened first north of the Sahara in the first millennium, and then its second millennium saw exponential growth in the south. Both north and south have been blessed by an enduring heritage of centuries of classic Christianity. Early African Christians spoke many indigenous languages and were not limited to the major commercial languages along the Mediterranean coast.

IVP: *Why does this topic generate such resonance?*

Oden: The Christians of Africa are growing exponentially. It is to their future that this effort

Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

is dedicated. Debates in the West are appearing trivial in relation to what lies ahead in the Global South. The world Christian population is predominantly located in the Southern hemisphere. Yet Christians of the Global South have had far less opportunity to appreciate or even learn of their history than have Western Christians. All Christians on the continent of Africa have a birthright that awaits their discovery. But in subtle ways they seem to have been barred access to it as a result of long-standing preconceived notions and biases. So their heritage has remained sadly unnoticed, even in Africa.

This is a scholarly project seeking to resource global Christian scholars about African Christianity, and African scholars about early African Christianity. Africa has a story to tell to the world church that has been embraced by providence since the times of Isaiah and Jeremiah. This is a story to which the whole of global Christianity may rightly claim ownership. Many are ready to hear it rightly told.

It is unworthy of the international and transracial character of Christianity to view northern African Christianity as intrinsically alien from southern African Christianity. The orthodox and the charismatic traditions need each other. North African Christianity needs sub-Saharan Christianity. Each one complements what tends to be partially unobserved in the other.

IVP: What are your long-term hopes concerning the Early African Christianity Project?

Oden: Early African Christianity has added incalculable value to the Western intellectual tradition. It adds value to African religious communities by helping to restore the confidence of Africans in their own early African textual tradition.

A new task is now incumbent upon emerging African Christianity. It is to embrace its own brilliant intellectual heritage, to reclaim what is rightfully its own. This can only be done properly by showing through critical analysis how this forgetfulness has occurred, and through hard evidence how the facts confirm the extraordinary intellectual generativity of early African believers.

There need be no apologies, only factual clarity leading toward verification. Let the data speak louder than the prejudices.