
Thomas Oden here makes a strong and impassioned plea for the recognition of the historical role of Africa and African theologians in shaping Christian history. Such recognition, he argues, can become the focus of a global conversation that must include fresh generations of African scholars.

Arguments that the traditions of the past be recovered and given a prominent place in contemporary theological discourse have long been a prominent feature of Oden’s theology. It was this work, sometimes called paleo-orthodoxy because of its stress on ancient sources – in opposition to neo-orthodoxy, which is a product of reflection on modern and post-modern thinking – that has led Oden to this program. He recounts how the compilation of the series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* revealed to him that the documents being researched showed a flow of knowledge from African Christian centers which came to influence Byzantine and Western European Christianity. This paper trail flew in the face of most of the historical presuppositions dominant in modern European research, which suggest European origins for patristic and ecumenical theology.

Oden’s contention is that this consensus has played down or denied the role of a distinctive African dimension, a dimension which should not be viewed in ethnic or racial terms, but culturally, geographically, and philosophically. The modern distinction between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa is put aside in favor of a more comprehensive “Africa” justified on linguistic, cultural, and historical grounds. No doubt this is an area in which Oden’s thesis will receive strong criticism from some quarters.

Oden begins with an overview of the Eurocentric treatments of history and theology before looking at how the earliest documents locate the origins of phenomena as diverse as martyrdom, universities, and the monastic life in the two principle African areas of Egypt and the Medjerda valley (modern Tunisia and Algeria). He then traces how these ideas passed into European or more northerly contexts before being recycled and returning full circle to Africa, with their origins hidden under veneers of Western culture.

So far so good, and this might all seem to be an exercise in antiquarianism. But Oden sees vital points at which the recovery of this early African identity is of crucial importance for the modern church. First is the issue of truth and fairness, for better historical awareness leads to an honest global theology in which both the historical and contemporary contributions of the African church are no longer left on the margins. Second, the early African record shows a strong and positive form of ecumenism capable of embracing traditions from the evangelical to the Coptic, and vibrant compared to its modern counterpart, which Oden considers to have stalled in the midst of modern, post-modern, and political issues. Third, Oden considers contemporary theology to be unnecessarily preoccupied with the aridity of modernity and sees the ancient African tradition as bypassing that completely, for it has survived the short-lived pretensions of a number of modern schools of thought. Finally, there is an inter-faith dimension. He contends that courageous scholarship in ecumenical African theology will also share affinities with Islam, much of which was forged in the same crucible.
There is much in Oden's program open to debate, and his paleo-orthodox thesis will certainly not endear him to modernist scholars who will wish to challenge his remarks about the aridity of modern scholarship, as will those with strong vested interests in the contemporary ecumenical movement. Nonetheless, here is a provocative and bold thesis that will have to be addressed, irrespective of the ideological differences, by an academy that has neglected or downplayed the past role of African Christians. Hopefully, too, Oden's ringing endorsement of the positive values that African Christian scholarship can bring to theology will encourage modern African theologians to kick hard against the ingrained prejudices of research elsewhere, and bring their valuable work and reflections to the global theological debate. One place to do so might be the Early African Christianity Project, which Oden himself oversees. See it at: (http://www.earlyafricanchristianity.com/index.html).

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