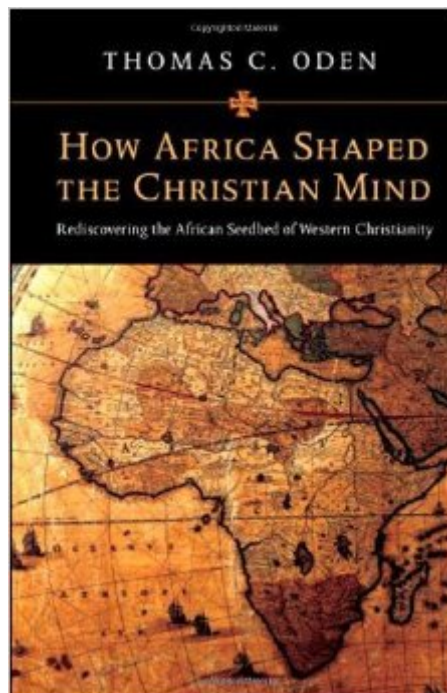


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How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind: Rediscovering The African Seedbed Of Western Christianity (Early African Christianity Set)



Synopsis

Africa has played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture from its infancy. Some of the most decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood in Africa before they were in Europe. If this is so, why is Christianity so often perceived in Africa as a Western colonial import? How can Christians in Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, indeed, how can Christians throughout the world, rediscover and learn from this ancient heritage? Theologian Thomas C. Oden offers a portrait that challenges prevailing notions of the intellectual development of Christianity from its early roots to its modern expressions. The pattern, he suggests, is not from north to south from Europe to Africa, but the other way around. He then makes an impassioned plea to uncover the hard data and study in depth the vital role that early African Christians played in developing the modern university, maturing Christian exegesis of Scripture, shaping early Christian dogma, modeling conciliar patterns of ecumenical decision-making, stimulating early monasticism, developing Neoplatonism, and refining rhetorical and dialectical skills. He calls for a wide-ranging research project to fill out the picture he sketches. It will require, he says, a generation of disciplined investigation, combining intensive language study with a risk-taking commitment to uncover the truth in potentially unreceptive environments. Oden envisions a dedicated consortium of scholars linked by computer technology and a common commitment that will seek to shape not only the scholar's understanding but the ordinary African Christian's self-perception.

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Customer Reviews

Thomas Oden's "How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind" was not the book I expected when I read the title. It was different, it was more, it was less, it was challenging, and it was and is important. Oden, recently retired after a distinguished professorial career, is perhaps one of the most renowned Church historians of our day. His four-volume opus on the history of pastoral care is a classic, for instance. Oden now sees as his life's work, for the remainder of his life, the uncovering of the buried treasure of African Christianity. Of course, what one means by "African" is crucial. Oden wisely steers clear of much modern and post-modern imbalance here. He avoids the Euro-centric approach that diminishes anything African as being simply borrowed from European culture and thinking. On the other hand, he equally avoids an "Africa first" framework that presumes that everything has its roots in Africa. For Oden, and for "How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind," the "Africa" he speaks of is anything that happened on the African continent and anyone who lived and ministered on that continent. This avoids the endless debate, for instance, about which Church Father was or was not "African." How does one define that? By skin color? And by what amount of pigmentation? By nationality? Why wouldn't any nation in Africa be by definition African? By ancestry? The ancestry issue coupled with geographical/cultural impact is Oden's most important contribution. In sum, he argues that even if Augustine, for instance, had a father whose ancestry was Greco-Roman, would that mean that Augustine, living his entire life in Africa was not African?

Thomas Oden writes, "Christianity would not have its present vitality in the Two-Thirds World without the intellectual understandings that developed in Africa between 50 and 500 C.E. The pretense of studying church history while ignoring African church history is implausible." (10) Yet, in his book "How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind," Oden purports that for centuries Western intellectuals have in fact ignored or downplayed the momentous contributions of African Christians to church history and theology. According to Oden, today's Christian mind has its roots in the writings and teachings of the early church leaders from Africa, in the struggles of the early church martyrs from Africa, in the lives of the desert Fathers of Africa, and in the early Christians who fled Africa taking their faith throughout the Mediterranean cities. Oden suggests that it is critical for

contemporary African Christianity to learn of its prestigious heritage--to learn that Christianity is a vital, traditional African faith rather than a foreign imposition. He writes, "The profound ways African teachers have shaped world Christianity have never been adequately studied or acknowledged, either in the Global North or South." (9) This is a story that Oden believes needs to be told throughout African villages and cities and must especially reach the African child. He believes it is a story best told fully by young African scholars. The story of African Christianity conveys extraordinary faith, courage, tenacity and intellect that must serve as inspiration and guides not only for African Christianity but for universal Christianity today. In its infancy, Christianity spread to Africa.

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