

solutions to poverty tend to take a back seat to the pleasures of exhortation. As for the evangelical bromide that believers are more ethical than Catholics, which Max Weber picked up with his observation that Baptist churches serve as reputation banks, this may have been true in late nineteenth-century Omaha, but it is not true in late twentieth-century Caracas (or where I work in Guatemala, for that matter). To the contrary, Smilde finds, evangelical probity is undercut by competing obligations, men on the mend but not yet mended, and the expectation of favoritism. At least in Caracas, therefore, conversion produces less a “disciplined self” than a “caring self” (80). Nor are the women necessarily impressed when their partner becomes born-again; Smilde sees cases where women reject the new moral order as a power move. From the perspective of profane Venezuelans, evangelicals are unconvincing hypocrites because they claim to break with the opportunistic personalism of Venezuelan social life but often get sucked back into it.

David Stoll

Middlebury College

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How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Recovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity. By **Thomas C. Oden**. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007. xxi + 206 pp. \$19.00 cloth.

In his small volume, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Thomas C. Oden argues that the origins for the varieties of Christianity practiced among peoples of Western European descent can be traced back to the varieties of Christianity practiced in pre-Islamic Africa. Modern Western Christianity evolved from African “seeds.” The “fathers” of the early Christian tradition, men such as Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine, were and should be recognized as Africans. Thus, instead of viewing the Christianity introduced to Africa by European and American missionaries as something foreign to African consciousness, it is more accurate to appreciate that Western missionaries have been bringing home a (decadent) offspring in desperate need of renewal.

Oden advances a case for an ignored and wrongly denied legacy. “My core hypothesis,” he explains, “is that much intellectual history flowed south to north; from Numidia to Sicily to Italy to France; . . . from the Nile to the Euphrates to the Danube; . . . from Pelusium to Gaza to Cappadocia” (72). Oden identifies seven intellectual gifts from Africa to the Western Christian world, the most important of these being the idea of the university, the form followed by Christian spiritual exegesis, the basic substance to Western

Christian dogma, and the ecclesiastical structures associated with Western Christian monasticism. In the volume's most whimsical passage, Oden suggests that if Thomas Cahill is indeed correct in arguing that Irish monks saved Western civilization, then Africa should be given credit for introducing the Irish to monasticism (73–74).

European racism is one reason this intellectual legacy has not been recognized. Such prejudice, Oden argues, maintains that the Christian intellectuals who lived in Africa “were not Africans at all—merely Europeans in disguise” (62). In response to such presumptions, Oden challenges, first, all arguments that assert any racial or cultural distinction between Africans north of the Sahara and Africans south of the Sahara; and second, all arguments that assert that the culture which evolved in Africa north of the Sahara had non-indigenous roots. The two challenges work together. Over the course of the centuries, the northern littoral of Africa has been conquered by waves of outsiders. The Christian culture that emerged in the region, however, was a homegrown product, the great intellectuals who shaped this culture having been nurtured by the Egyptian, Libyan, Berber, and Punic communities into which they were born. Further, these communities were shaped by the same spiritual ethos that shapes present-day ethnic communities south of the Sahara. The great intellectuals of early African Christianity were ancestors to modern African Christians in both a Western intellectual sense and an African spiritual one. Oden realizes that one of the responses to this assertion is that he is positing a symbiotic relationship between oral and written cultural traditions that needs to be demonstrated. He does not provide such demonstration, arguing an absence of information. Evidence will be found, he suggests, when, instead of denying the possibility of its existence, scholars go looking for it.

For Oden it is essential that the scholars doing the looking be African, Christian, and young. The first part of Oden's book is the above case for the African origins of Western Christianity. The second part is a biting critique of modern Western Christianity from a conservative perspective. Key to the critique is the opposition Oden sees between what he labels “early African Christianity” and “ultramodern” Western Christianity, ultramodern because it exaggerates the modern instinct toward moral relativism, and thus has allowed a “tolerance of evil” to become a virtue (116). Early African Christianity was powered by a reverence for the sacrifice of the Christian martyrs, an early articulation of the African veneration of the ancestors. It reconciled differences between groups and communities through an appeal to truth, truth being the centrality of sacrifice to Christian spirituality (119). Oden bemoans the misguided condemnations of Christianity by modern African intellectuals, whose minds, trained in the basic tenets of modern Western secular thought, cannot see that Christianity is the religion of their ancestors and, as such, a necessary basis for their own intellectual maturation. These intellectuals cannot lead the charge to reclaim Africa's intellectual legacy. Likewise, Western Christian intellectuals

have too much of their own baggage to direct the reclamation of Africa's Christian past. What is needed is for the "young Africans of today" to "sit at the feet" of the "young Africa of their ancestors" (125).

As already suggested, the great weakness of Oden's ideas is the thinness of the evidence upon which they are constructed. Oden characterizes the Christianity that was practiced in early Christian Africa as the source to which contemporary Christianity has to return if the latter is to free itself from the moral turpitude brought on by accommodation to modern secular values. Yet nowhere does he ever describe early African Christianity in an empirical or historical way. In his defense, he sees the discovery of the evidence to support his claims as the task of generations of young African scholars to come. Oden has thoughtfully appended to his volume a research agenda for them to follow, one based on the research he has led in the recovery of ancient texts as director of the Early African Christianity Project at Drew University. Perhaps of more immediate value to scholars will be the book's second appendix, a 40-page-long "Literary Chronology of Christianity in Africa in the First Millennium."

Oden's efforts to enlist future generations of African scholars in his mission highlight the most problematic aspects of his ideas. The lands where early African Christianity thrived are now for the most part Muslim. Oden dedicates his last chapter to the topic of "Seeking the Reconciliation of Christianity and Islam through Historical Insight," but the chapter never spells out why Muslim states should help in the recovery of a Christian past that would only aid the further Christian evangelization of Africa. Again, to be fair to Oden, Islam is not the intended target of his assault. It is a detail Oden is determined not to let get in the way. "Ultramodern" Christianity is Oden's true culprit. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* is best appreciated as a plan for the regeneration of Western Christianity through the rediscovery of its African heritage.

Andrew Barnes
Arizona State University

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Christians in Egypt: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Communities Past and Present. By **Otto F. A. Meinardus.** Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006. xii + 179 pp. \$24.50 cloth.

The late Otto Meinardus is best known for his insightful and informative efforts presenting Egyptian and Eastern Christianity to a wide audience. *Christians in Egypt*, the third in the Meinardus trilogy on Egyptian Christianity,