

## BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas J. Oden

***How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind:  
Rediscovering the African Seedbed of  
Western Christianity***

Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007. 204 pp, hb, \$19.00

Amid growing global interest in African Christianity, Thomas Oden's latest book must surely now take center stage. Oden sets forth the stirring thesis that the early Christian thought and theology which proved formative for the development of early Christianity and Christian culture elsewhere was distinctively African. The common perception is that Christianity in Africa is a relatively recent arrival from the West. Oden asserts the opposite: African Christianity is ancient, and the predominate theological processes of early Christianity were not north to south, but south to north, from Africa rather than to Africa. The support provided for this thesis is not so much an argument as it is an outline of an argument, one which Oden calls on African scholars to make and substantiate by extensive research into the early African origins of Christianity.

Oden's interests in early African Christianity emerged out of his work over much of the past fifteen years as series editor of the twenty-eight volume *Ancient Commentary on Scripture*. Oden states that he and the other editors "were astonished to find such a large percentage of texts from Africa or influenced by African writers among the patristic comments on verse after verse of Scripture" (45). The title and thrust of the book reflects Oden's sense, solidified through years of working in primary texts, of the profound extent to which writers on the African continent played a decisive role in shaping fundamental features of Christian thought and theology

If the title of the book properly reflects Oden's thesis, the subtitle is slightly misleading for two reasons: First, it may create the impression

that early African Christianity was the seedbed only for Western Christianity. But it is important to highlight also the extent to which early African Christian thought proved formative not merely for Western Christianity but perhaps even more so for Eastern Christianity, within which devotion to the early Church Fathers has been unstinting. Oden would not dispute this, but it is worth noting since Oden focuses principally on the influence of early African Christianity in the West. Second, the subtitle may suggest to some that the primary aim of the book is to reconnect Western Christians with their theological roots in Africa. Oden certainly has more than a few things to say to Western readers dismissive of any intellectual tradition originating in Africa, but Oden's principal intended audience is the multitude of African Christians who, he believes, must now lead the way. He is thus tireless in repeating his call for an entire generation of scholars in Africa to do the hard textual, linguistic, and archaeological work necessary to reclaim early African Christian theology as the foundation for African intellectual identity.

There are at least three features of Oden's skeletal argument that are especially worth noting. First, Oden highlights seven ways in which he believes early African Christianity influenced Christianity especially in the West: the Western idea of the University, exegesis of Scripture, dogmatics, conciliar patterns of ecumenical decision-making, monasticism, neo-platonism, and rhetoric. However, though Oden takes special pains to demonstrate the influence of early African Christianity on key features of Western Christianity and culture, it is also clear that Oden believes that something more fundamental is at stake. For Oden, the way in which Christianity was articulated on the African continent in the post-apostolic period is so foundational that it is not merely possible to find its traces in Western Christianity but rather also to find within early African Christianity the resources for a new ecumenism. "If asked to confess what is that sort of theology I most confidently name as my own, I could just as confidently turn to the generic term *African orthodoxy* as to *Antiochene*, *Roman*, *Byzantine* or *evangelical*"(130). So convinced is Oden of the integrity of the early African witness to the apostolic faith that he can see evidence already of a new "African ecumenism." "Whether from Catholic, Protestant, Coptic or charismatic perceptions, believers are growing ready to listen to the uniting voices of classical consensual African Christianity. It is amazing to see the new energies that are

emerging out of this uniting work of the Spirit—the vital communities of prayer, scholarship, preaching, teaching and discipleship” (p. 108).

Second, Oden makes the striking observation that the lengthy and unbroken history of Christianity on the continent means that it, as much as any other religion, deserves to be regarded as an African traditional religion. The tendency of many to make oral tradition an indispensable feature of traditional religion is prejudicial, given the lengthy legacy of the great written traditions of Christianity and Islam on the continent. While this may seem to many African Christians to place Christianity in rather strange and unwelcome company, Oden sees only gain. Many African theologians have sought ways of rooting Christianity in traditional religions as a way of demonstrating how an ostensibly foreign faith may be conceived as authentically African. But if Christianity *is* an African traditional religion rather than a late, cumbersome import, then African Christians need look no farther than the rich heritage of early African Christianity to discover what it means for Christianity to be truly African.

Third, though Oden is by no means anti-Pentecostal, it is clear that he sees the predominant form of African Christianity as rife with risk. “The rising charismatic and Pentecostal energies in Africa are stronger emotively than intellectually. They may not sufficiently sustain African Christians through the Islamic challenge unless fortified by rigorous apologetics.” (p. 99). One might add here also the challenge of the onslaught of Western popular culture and intellectual influence. For Oden the intellectual resources necessary for African Christians to meet the challenges of contemporary Christianity are available in abundance within early African Christianity.

Perhaps the biggest objection to Oden’s thesis is the widely perceived distinction between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. To sustain his thesis that the early development of Christianity along the Nile basin and in the Maghreb is an “unreceived gift” to all African Christians, Oden seeks to demonstrate the unity between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. One significant hurdle for Oden is the question of both ancient and modern identity. Just as many in modern North Africa do not think of themselves primarily as Africans, neither is it clear that early Christians in North Africa thought of themselves as “Africans”. Oden is aware that in the early centuries of the Common Era the term “Africa” was the name of

a Roman province, roughly comprising an area from modern-day Algeria to Tunisia. To the extent that the geographically amorphous region stretching southward down the Nile was known, it was not called "Africa" but "Nubia" (by the Romans), "Ethiopia" (by Greek speakers) or "Cush" (by the Egyptians and Hebrews). However, for Oden, the unity of Africa rests simply on the singularity of Africa as a continent. Whether or not Augustine and Athanasius used the term "African" of themselves, their creative energies were nurtured on soil now known as Africa.

Here some questions remain. Oden's geographic argument for the unity of Africa butts up against a geographic absolute – the Sahara. The Sahara proved a far more imposing barrier than did the Mediterranean, breached only by the corridor of the Nile valley. As a result, the linguistic, political, cultural and religious affinity of N. Africa has always been with regions to the north and east. Further, it is not entirely obvious that a shared geography alone is a sufficient basis to assert a unified intellectual tradition. Geographically, Eurasia is a single continent, without anything like the internal barrier created by the Sahara, but would it make sense to suppose that Eurasians belong to the same intellectual or cultural or religious tradition?

Oden speaks often of *Western Christianity*. But "the West" is a conceptual construct made up of geographically remote societies which nevertheless have common cultural values and a shared history. At the same time, societies which are geographically proximate to Western countries are nevertheless remote in relation to the cultural values and histories which bind societies together. This is simply to recognize the fact that the ties that bind are much more complex than mere geography. Geography, it seems, may be a rather weak tie in comparison to the extraordinarily strong bonds which shared history, religion and culture can create.

And yet it is precisely for this reason that Oden deserves to be heard. Oden is aware of the danger of a reactionary Afrocentrism which embraces the work of the African fathers simply because it is African. To do this would undermine the catholicity of Christian faith and the convictions of the early African fathers. Thus, ultimately, Oden's call for Africans to rediscover their heritage in the African fathers lies in his conviction that the African fathers were faithful witnesses to apostolic truth. If Oden

believes early African Christianity must be given priority after centuries of neglect, his purpose is to provoke a corrective action which puts things back in proportion (p. 91). The early African fathers are to be valued by all Christians for their “accurate attestation of the truth, not the egalitarian goal of making all voices equal” (p. 92). Oden finds little reason to hope that Western Christianity, under the influence of post-modern moral relativism, has the resources needed keep its ecumenical promises. Rather, Oden’s great hope is that young African Christian scholars will lead the global church in a rediscovery of early African Christianity and, in doing so, will demonstrate the way in which the apostolic truth preserved in early African orthodoxy enables God’s people everywhere to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” If non-African witnesses to the truth prove also to be essential for this task, one can nevertheless embrace Oden’s optimism that African scholars will once more shape the Christian mind.

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**Alister McGrath**

***Doubt in Perspective: God is Bigger  
Than You Think***

Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006. 142 pages. Price

Alister McGrath’s *Doubt in Perspective* is an encouraging book for all who struggle to trust God completely or to accept the doctrine of the Christian faith. The book’s main theme is clear: Doubt is an invitation to grow in faith and understanding, rather than something we need to panic about or get preoccupied with. Generally Christians are reluctant to admit that they have any doubts. As McGrath says, ‘Doubt is a subject many Christians find both difficult and sensitive. They may see it as something shameful and disloyal, on the same level as heresy.’ He sees doubt as pointing to a faith which is built on weak foundations or a relationship

with God which has in some way been neglected but also as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

McGrath begins his examination of doubt by defining what doubt is, and isn't, before demonstrating that a search for certainty is actually a futile exercise. He then discusses how doubt is present in other world-views, with particular reference to atheism. His short chapter on the personal aspects of doubt leads naturally into a discussion of doubt in the Bible. This is followed by four chapters looking at specific doubts people may have and the book concludes with two chapters which help readers to put their doubts in perspective and to view doubt in a positive light.

McGrath identifies two kinds of doubt: intellectual and personal. He suggests that someone can have intellectual doubts related to the Christian faith or can have doubts related to God or Jesus Christ because of their experiences of life or what they read in the Bible. In regard to intellectual doubt, he shows how post-modernity, being a world-view which fosters doubt and cynicism, can cause people to doubt the validity of Christianity and whether it will survive for much longer. He also addresses the reality that many people in such a culture are reluctant to accept the gospel, which is very discouraging for those who are presenting the gospel to them. McGrath helpfully tackles these problems by taking us back to the Bible and by powerfully showing the efficacy of Christianity and the God who brought it into being.

The approach of this book is helpful because it takes doubt seriously and in fact suggests that it is understandable at times, given the culture we live in and the experiences we have in life. However, he does not condone doubt. Instead he sees it as a symptom that our understanding of God or ourselves needs some attention. Doubt is often a sign that we have neglected our relationship with God. He does not accept that it is helpful to become preoccupied with doubt, seeing such preoccupation as pointless and something which causes faith to stagnate. Instead having doubt is an opportunity to nourish our faith so that we can grow spiritually. McGrath does more than simply discuss this in a theoretical way but also gives suggestions of how we can confront doubt and what positive steps we can take to grow closer to God.

He takes a pastoral approach, showing his understanding of why people have doubts and what can be done to address these doubts. He offers his solutions to the problem of doubt as suggestions the reader might find helpful rather than taking a 'how to overcome doubt' approach and he uses examples of people who are struggling with doubt to illustrate a way through for his reader. He frequently cites biblical examples which help us to put doubt in perspective. His discussion of the Israelites' experience of doubt during their years in the wilderness and the disciples doubts after Jesus' crucifixion engender helpful insights which demonstrate that doubt can develop because of our inability to see the whole picture. His use of the parable of the sower to demonstrate that the problem is not with the seed, the gospel, but the healthiness of the soil in which it is sown. From this he offers suggestions on to how to make sure the soil of your life is healthy enough for God's message to take root and grow strong.

McGrath's book brings doubt into the open, discouraging us from suppressing it and thus becoming personally preoccupied with it. It shows the importance of doubt in indicating the condition of our spiritual health and that when viewed positively gives opportunity for spiritual growth. Doubt, he argues, can stimulate us to strengthen the foundation of our relationship with God and rediscover the depth of our faith.

*Doubt in Perspective* is both intellectually challenging and pastorally encouraging. It would be of benefit to those who are encountering doubt themselves as well as being useful for those counselling people struggling with doubt. It demonstrates the sufficiency of the gospel and the greatness of God while at the same time taking seriously the genuine doubts Christians experience. This book is a refreshing change from the plethora of books which urge us to 'just believe' and will surely be a help to many.

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Arthur W. Hunt III  
***The Vanishing Word: the Veneration  
of Visual Imagery in the  
Postmodern World***

Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003.  
272 pages, ISBN 1-58134 – 404 -X

The author of *The Vanishing Word*, Arthur W Hunt III, is a PhD holder in Communication from the University of Southern Mississippi and has been actively involved in Christian Education for more than seventeen years when he authored this book. His academic training includes both Speech and Mass Media communication; his articles have been featured in the *Christian Research Journal*.

In this book, Dr. Hunt III, shows that in the American culture images have taken the first priority over the written Word. He states that most people spend many hours watching television rather than read a good book. In chapter one, for example, he writes, "Although our communication technologies dazzle us, they also have the potential to unravel us and to make us a bewitched people." (p.19) He shows as an example that the Orlando society serves as an emblematic gauge of an image driven public, dependant upon movies, television, and video games. He shows that the theme of Orlando's theme park is primarily a reflection of the film industry.

The culture of the Americans like the rest of the world has an insatiable appetite for visual stimulation. America has had an ongoing love affair with technology. Virtual reality is deemed good because it represents progress. Technology has the propensity to change our beliefs and behavior. He continues to argue that for every expressed purpose a technology is designed to serve, there are always a number of unintended consequences accompanying it. He shows that while the society through its culture is dependant on images and visual imagery the Judeo-Christian heritage was supposed to be characterized by being word-dependent rather than image-



dependent. This is evident through church history as seen in the word-based movements like the protestant reformation, Puritanism, and the beginnings of the American experiment. *The Vanishing Word* advances the proposition that our image-saturated culture is at the risk of being preyed upon by a tyrant in waiting.

Dr. Hunt III suggests several remedies to deal with our idolatrous predicament in the rest chapters of his book. Firstly, he says that there exists a longstanding and irreconcilable tension between the Word and the image. Secondly, that pagan idolatry is Biblicism's chief competitor because one thrives in the absence of the written Word and the other cannot exist without it. Thirdly, that America was born out of a print-oriented culture. The press invented by a German by the name Johann Gutenberg had completely changed or brought about a great change in society. It had ushered in movements like the Protestant reformation, Puritanism, and the American experience. Quoting Johann Gutenberg he reiterates, "Yes it is a press from which shall soon flow, an inexhaustible streams of pure truth, like a new star it shall scatter darkness of ignorance and cause a light heretofore unknown to shine amongst men" (p.77). And this had become prophetic for the dark ages were called "dark" because they lacked the necessary information systems conducive to democracy, namely, literacy, a printing press for serious public discourse, a passionate desire to deliberate, and the freedom to exercise all the above. America was born at the moment she possessed all these features while at the same time being plugged into an agreed directive of biblical moral virtue derived from the Word.

Fourthly, that there is the fact of the big shift with something in the air. He describes that this period was an age not only of significant technological upheaval but also of cultural upheaval. Their values, practices, and artifacts, which are remarkably interrelated, were affected greatly. A nation that was born in a revival of religion and became a great Christian nation was swallowed up in selfishness – a self-gratification became the norm. America, which thrived in the rural, turned urban where their values changed. The entertainment industry exploded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and altered the leisure time habits; Americans now spend more time entertaining themselves than they do working or sleeping.

Fifthly, that while middle class Americans hardly ever ventures into the seedy section of the big city anymore, the red-light district has now been

conveniently piped directly into the living room. He recounts the rise of modern media from the telegraph to the computer with a special focus on the leisure habits of Americans during the twentieth century.

Sixthly, the images-dominating components of today's media content: sex, violence, and celebrity worship conform to a pagan ideal. He says that Paul's epistle to the Christians at Rome is perhaps the most perceptive critique of human nature ever written. In the epistle's opening discourse, the apostle exposes the crux of humanity's turning away from God, what we may call the deliberate refashioning of the creator into the creature. He describes a pagan as someone who has engaged in a substitution process for suppressing the true God. He concludes by saying that our association with electronic images helps us sustain a certain way of life and a certain way of looking at the world while we run away from God.

Seventhly, on being post modern, the Americans are turning from rationality, and at the same time embracing of spectacle. In this process, doctrine is watered down either from neglect or more likely from willingness to compromise biblical truth to attract a following. He shows that the modern mind has a remarkable ability to hold at the same time two ideas that logically contrast each other. That is why he says it is difficult to define postmodernism because the cultural sands are still shifting beneath our feet.

In chapter eight, the author gives a formula which he calls *Fuhrer*. This can be understood to mean the fulcrum from which things are moved. He shows that a dangerous soup was cooking due to challenges that face human kind. He gives an example of Adolf Hitler and others who in his time developed a rejection for the Jews. This ultimately became to a larger scope the rejection of the transcendent God and His laws. Another example was that of Chalmagne, whom the author says that through his crown, orb and scepter unified Europe well over a thousand years earlier. The author shows the formula these two men used during their times and were completely different from the American experience. He shows that America was at a crossroad and choosing the right road could have made all the difference.

Finally, he talks about making values saying that if we know what lies behind a particular medium, we are able to point out how it works and why it sways people the way it does, and then we can lessen its power over us.

He offers some remedies for our idolatrous predicaments starting with the individual, the home, church, and finally the school. He shows that these solutions would form the strongest assault against the triumph of idolatry of accomplished cumulatively. The Christian is to walk by faith based upon the revealed Word, while parents control life under the roof of their home. The church must return to the Word as their final authority and practice it as the school resists the idolization process of the pagan cultures.

Dr. Hunt III sees this trend, as a direct assault on Christianity for people will spend many hours on visual imagery and lack time for Biblical teaching, which counteracts pagan influence in the society. He argues rightly that the media has propelled sex, violence, and celebrity worship into the limelight of our culture leading into pagan worship rather than the true worship of God. For this cause, the church must take this warning seriously otherwise it will be cut off from its Word-based heritage. The society is open to abuse by those who exploit the image and neglect the Word. Any thoughtful reader will find *The Vanishing Word* a challenging call to be critical about images bombarding our senses through the media and to affirm that the written Word of God is everything.

*The Vanishing Word* is a book that hits the African media problems head on as well for if the American culture has problems with the written Word because of images then the African cultures have the same or even deeper ones. Because of technology, what happens in America today will definitely find its way to Africa in a few days if not hours. *The Vanishing Word* has a direct challenge for Africa today. The book is very relevant in addressing the imagery versus the written Word needs in Africa. It is fit as a textbook for courses in both Communication and Christian Education considering the challenges that face the African church and Christian ministry. The book is also necessary for pastors who have a task in educating the church on the effects of media on the society. If the church is going to be effective in teaching the Word to its adherents, then the remedies given in this book can be useful for the pulpit and teaching ministry of the local church.

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**J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler**

***In Search of a Confident Faith:  
Overcoming Barriers to  
Trusting in God***

Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008.  
ISBN 978-1-84474-327-8. 230 Pages

Questioning the nature of Christian faith is something rare, and makes an extraordinary hard demand on anyone who is familiar with Christianity. It is true that what is meant by Christianity is only very vaguely understood. A faith that evades to questioning understanding is not real faith. J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, as long term educationists, are in agreement that, "The nature of faith is clouded so much in misunderstanding in our culture that it is difficult to grasp what faith really is and how it is related to knowledge and reason" (p.16). This volume is a simple yet powerful invitation to an adventure in understanding the Christian faith. In attempting to answer the question about the nature of the Christian faith, the book is clear in its sense of genuineness, openness, honesty, and expectancy.

*In Search of a Confident Faith* clarifies the meaning of the term faith from a biblical perspective. This meets the need caused by the confusion that prevails in our world today about faith. It is a demonstration of the real essence of biblical faith and how one accesses confidence in God and His truth. Its relevance is reflected in its practicality and the prescriptive measures it suggests on how one can grow in faith. As a means and a tool to increase one's confidence in God, this work shows that Christian faith is concerned precisely with this real life of ours in today's world. The profoundness of the book lies with its combination of both intellectual and emotional strands, which to most people are barriers to faith. These two have been weaved together creatively.

In the first section of the book, the meaning of faith and importance of faith to God is tackled. It does so by discussing three aspects of faith: classical faith, theological and philosophical aspects of faith. Faith as confidence, trust and reliance belong to synonymous class. Faith as knowledge, commitment, and assent belong to the category of theological triad. The three philosophical aspects are degrees of belief, confidence in and confidence that, and changing beliefs. The major thrust of the book is that, "Merely exhorting people to be more committed to God – 'just have more faith' – seldom produce greater confidence and dedicated trust in God. Rather, what is needed is a realistic picture of a flourishing life lived deeply in tune with God's kingdom. . ." (p. 22). The rationale that points us to the necessity of the faith include, the hiddenness of God, faith as the foundation of life and flourishing in the presence of others.

Part one which comprises three chapters explores more about intellectual doubts and emotional barriers to faith. Part two which also contains other three chapters focuses on increasing our expectations of God and building a case for how our God-confidence can grow. This section of the book looks at Jesus' teaching about faith and some New Testament promises that believers need to examine. Moreland and Klaus offer four fundamental points about biblical God-confidence as far as the New Testament is concerned. The first is that biblical God-confidence is belief in Jesus Christ. Second, that our minds can be transformed by God to match Jesus' view of reality. Third, that faith without deeds is dead. God-confidence will affect how we live. Fourth, God-confidence can be strengthened; it can grow. The authors did well to buttress all the points with scripture passages. The strength of the book lies in its proposal of mind renewal which in turn will influence our worldview. The last section of the book provides some contemporary examples and case studies that can help us increase our God-confidence to rely on what Jesus teaches about faith. The final stretch tackles one practical arena in which we can grow in our confidence in God, making life decisions as we seek God's guidance.

It is a book that challenges real doubts as far as faith is concerned. It is alright to doubt but even better to seek ways to adequately deal with doubts of faith. "There are critical moments in our journey in trusting God when we need to step out just like Peter into an

experienced realm, taking God's Word and promises as the 'real' representation of reality" (p.105). The strength of the book lies in its simple, easy to read style and the centrality of scripture in presenting its point of view. Faith, by its very nature, encompasses our intellect, emotions and our daily living. Proposals suggested for personal growth in God-confidence can easily be implemented. Though it addresses challenges in the Western context, the truth implied is universal. It is a book that can truly develop a biblical worldview in anyone who reads it with the seriousness it deserves. Moreland and Issler have not just put forth propositional truth but have also offered deep reflection of their personal commitment to God. They are witnessing to an experienced reality. I strongly suggest it as a text book for spiritual formation.

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