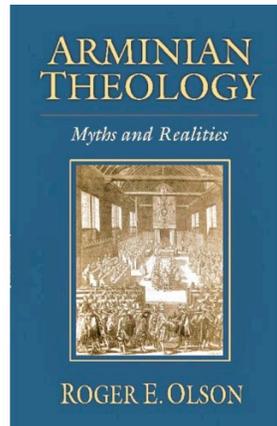


Review Essay: Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*

By John L. Drury



The most recent issue of *Christianity Today* addresses the resurgence of Calvinism among younger evangelicals. Accompanying any such Reformed resurgence is the re-appraisal of the status of Arminians within the Evangelical camp. Although it seems odd to even question whether Arminians are welcome among some of the very institutions they established, the question is being raised and cannot be ignored.

Roger E. Olson's timely book *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* offers a sustained description of Arminianism as a genuinely Evangelical and Protestant tradition. His motivation is both theological and sociological. Theologically, he intends to clear up misunderstandings about what Arminians actually believe. Sociologically, he aims to prevent any impending squeeze-out of Arminians from the Evangelical camp that the recent Reformed resurgence may entail. The result is an accessible introduction to Arminian theology that could be used in both Arminian and Calvinist circles: as a formative textbook for the former and as a supplemental text promoting generosity among the latter.

I am in the process of reviewing an advance copy of this book for *Koinonia Journal*. I am half way through it and would like to "think out loud" about its strengths and

weaknesses. I may continue these thoughts next week after I finish reading the rest of the book.

Myth-Busting Structure. The structure of the book is particularly interesting. Instead of laying out a deductive presentation of Arminian theology, Olson walks through ten common myths about Arminian theology. This "response-to-critics" approach reveals the polemical context which generated this book (Olson works at Baylor, a moderate Baptist institution that has become a haven for fallouts of the fundamentalist forms of Calvinism in the recent SBC takeover). Unfortunately, some may read this book as overly defensive and so miss the alternative vision Arminianism offers. This defensive position may serve to perpetuate the assumption that Calvinism is the gold standard by which all theologies are to be judged. However, a generous reader will discern that Olson is wisely engaging in a strategy of *ad hoc* apologetics: address the common objections to one's position in order to show that it has been misunderstood. Thus read, Olson's book is less a *defense* of Arminianism than it is a *description* of Arminianism. Such an accurate description is much needed for all the parties involved.

Historical Mode of Argumentation. Within each chapter, Olson dispels the myth at hand by tracing the "true" Arminian position as explicated by Jacobus Arminius, Simon Episcopius, John Wesley, 19th Century Methodists, and 20th Century Evangelical Arminians (esp. Nazarenes). Thus he offers a historical mode of argumentation: he is identifying the tradition of genuine Arminian thought, distinguishing it from Calvinism on the one side and its supposed bad reputation on the other. Such a historical approach allows the classical authors to speak for themselves through copious quoting, and accordingly initiates the reader into the Arminian tradition. However, Olson's approach tends to give the impression of a united Arminian theological heritage that may overlook the genuine diversity of Arminians. Arminius, Wesley, Miley, and Dunning are all different thinkers working in different contexts with different approaches and assumptions. They form more of a web than a line, both in their relationship to each other and vis-a-vis Calvinism. Furthermore, the construction of a "true" Arminian line requires the exclusion of the "false" Arminians. For Olson, this includes the later proto-liberal

Remonstrants, the "vulgarized" Arminianism of Finney, and contemporary process theology. The complex historical relationship of Arminianism to Protestant liberalism, progressive revivalism, and process philosophy is very real, and these marginal figures cannot be simply set aside as aberrant or fallen Arminians. Olson's explicit exclusion of Finney is particularly suspect. Can such a significant and influential evangelical Arminian can be so easily excised from the story of Arminian theology? This story serves Olson's ends well by distancing Arminian theology from figures and movements on the current Evangelical hit-list. But such exclusionary tactics raise the question: on what basis does Olson differentiate a "true" from an "false" Arminian? It seems that for Olson the current strictures of American Evangelical identity are in the driver's seat, rather than anything inherent to Arminianism. Thus, Olson ironically engages in the very theological politics practiced by Calvinists which drove him to write this book in the first place.

Myth 1: Arminian Theology Is the Opposite of Calvinist/Reformed Theology.

Reality: Jacobus Arminius and most of his faithful followers fall into the broad Reformed tradition; the common ground between Arminianism and Calvinism is significant.

Comment: This chapter is helpful because it reminds us that, at least genetically, Arminianism is a branch of the Reformed tradition. However, as a Wesleyan I find this version of the story a bit misleading, because although Jacobus Arminius and the Remonstrants are best understood as a revision within Calvinism, the Wesleyan tradition (fathering the world Methodist movement, grandfathering the American Holiness Movement, and great-grandfathering the Charismatic movement) is best understood as an independent tradition with its own spirit, governing ethos, and trajectory of development. Arminianism could be regarded as a speculative theological foundation commandeered by most (but certainly not all) Wesleyans. In other words, I'm not Wesleyan as an expression of my Arminianism; I'm Arminian because I'm Wesleyan!

Myth 2: A Hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism Is Possible.

Reality: In spite of common ground, Calvinism and Arminianism are incommensurable systems of Christian theology; on issues crucial to both there is no stable middle ground between them.

Comment: This was one of my favorite chapters, because it cut through the sloppiness of many attempts to resolve the tension between these two traditions of thought. Olson makes a great case for rigorous doctrinal reflection. I believe there may be resolutions to some of these problems, but not without revising the foundations upon which these systems of thought are built. For instance, Karl Barth performs a massive overhaul to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, but he does so by means of a Christocentric actualistic ontology that is a serious departure from classical theism. In the same way, there may be a distinctively Arminian (or at least a Wesleyan-Pentecostal) revision of these doctrines, but not without some kind of break from the traditions out of which these two systems emerged. So I am in complete agreement with Olson on the diagnosis of the issue: the two traditions are incommensurable and any Frankenstein Monster drawing on pieces from both will just terrorize the village. I differ with Olson only on the matter of prognosis: that we should consider revising the foundations that created these differences. Whether comparable differences will remain after the revision remains to be seen (because this work is unfinished).

Myth 3: Arminianism Is Not an Orthodox Evangelical Option.

Reality: Classical Arminian theology heartily affirms the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy and promotes the hallmarks of evangelical faith; it is neither Arian nor liberal.

Comment: This chapter is probably the most important in achieving Olson's aim: making space for Arminian theology within the Evangelical movement. Dispelling the ridiculous myth that all Arminians are Arian in their Christology and Rationalistic in their approach to the Bible is particularly helpful. My only response is to suggest that Arminian forms of

Evangelicalism may differ enough from their Calvinist brethren to justify an honest inheritance dispute. Olson implies that the Calvinist and Arminian accounts of the inspiration of Scripture are indistinguishable. Since the Arminian-Calvinist debate circles around the problem of divine and human agency, it would seem that each side would have a distinctive take on the divine inspiration of the human words of the Bible. This is a case where Olson - in order to achieve his primary purpose of de-stigmatizing Arminian theology - has managed to avoid the deeper issues at stake.

Myth 4: The Heart of Arminianism Is Belief in Free Will.

Reality: The true heart of Arminian theology is the character of God as love and justice; the formal principle of Arminianism is the universal will of God for salvation.

Comment: This may be the most important constructive chapter in Olson's book. Why so? Whenever Arminians treat the abstract philosophical concept of "Free Will" as their starting point, they get into trouble. I may have a minor nit to pick over Olson's choice of the technical phrase "formal principle" to describe God's universal will for salvation (is this a "principle," and, if so, is it "formal"?). But this technical attribution does not over-determine the argument of this chapter. His point is quite simple yet significant: Arminians *start* with a particular understanding of God, which then leads them to affirm free will. Keeping this straight is not only helpful when dealing with Calvinist critics; it's just a good idea to start with God in any theological discussion.

Myth 5: Arminian Theology Denies the Sovereignty of God.

Reality: Classical Arminianism interprets God's sovereignty and providence differently than Calvinism without in any way denying them; God is in charge of everything without controlling everything.

Comment: Although for a thoughtful Arminian this myth is laughable, it is repeated so frequently that it requires attention in a myth-busting book. Of course a Calvinist might

claim that Arminians logically undermine the sovereignty of God. But Arminians certainly do not deny it! The sovereignty of God is the Calvinist watchword, and they are correct to observe that Arminians do not place as great an emphasis on it as they do. But a different approach is not a denial. This distinction is easy to see but hard to remember. So this chapter performs a great service for the continued dialogue.

They only concern I would like to raise is whether a black-coffee Calvinist has an inherently more consistent position when arguing from a foundation in classical theism. Arminians (like many Christians before them) are forced to introduce subtle distinctions such as God's "ordained" versus "permissive" will (John Damascene) or God being "in charge" of everything without "controlling" everything (Roger Olson). Calvinists have an uncanny ability to cut through this mishmash and follow through on the deterministic implications of classical theism. I don't want to go there with them, but I don't care for all the cooked up distinctions either. Could it be that the whole way of thinking about God in the first place is creating the kinds of problems solved by Calvinists on the one side and Arminians on the other? Could a revised understanding of God's identity and his relationship to the world avoid determinism without introducing dubious distinctions?

Myth 6: Arminianism Is a Human-Centered Theology.

Reality: An optimistic anthropology is alien to true Arminianism which is thoroughly God-centered; Arminian theology confesses human depravity including bondage of the will.

Comment: This is another helpful myth-buster, simply for the wealth of textual evidence Olson brings to the table to establish that the Arminian tradition has strongly affirmed Total Depravity. Despite many charts and graphs to the contrary, the "T" in TULIP has never been a major point of contention between Calvinists and Arminians. Arminians are pessimistic about humanity and its sin; they are optimistic only about grace - which makes one very optimistic indeed! I have nothing to add to or subtract from this chapter.

Myth 7: Arminianism Is Not a Theology of Grace.

Reality: The material principle of classical Arminian thought is prevenient grace; all of salvation is wholly and entirely of God's grace.

Comment: Olson here presents the classical Arminian position on grace. This may be one of the clearest explanations of prevenient grace on the market right now. A must read. After reading this chapter, however, I am beginning to wonder whether this little term can really do all the work assigned to it. Arminians try to solve every problem by invoking prevenient grace as a one-size-fits-all soteriological concept. If you fall asleep in a theology course at a Wesleyan-Arminian college and are woken by a question from the professor, just say "prevenient grace" and you'll probably be right. Olson goes so far as to identify prevenient grace as the Arminian "material principle," which seems a bit heavy-handed. I do not wish to reject the notion of prevenient grace, but I am looking for an adequate reformulation set on more secure ground. Fletcher's Proto-Charismatic personalizing of Wesleyan soteriology by assigning to the Spirit (the third person of the trinity) the work of prevenient grace (a mediating term lacking semantic concreteness) is perhaps helpful, although we must remember that the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ and that he is the prevenience of grace. Some kind of robustly trinitarian personalizing of the concept of prevenient grace is needed to refuel Arminian theology at this point.

Myth 8: Arminians Do Not Believe in Predestination.

Reality: Predestination is a biblical concept; classical Arminians interpret it differently than Calvinists without denying it. It is God's sovereign decree to elect believers in Jesus Christ and includes God's foreknowledge of those believers' faith.

Comment: I loved this chapter because this is such a common myth. The debate between Calvinists and Arminians is too often framed as between predestination and free will. The fact of the matter is that both Calvinists and Arminians believe in both predestination and free will. The question is how to define and relate the two concepts. The Arminian

position on predestination is characterized by assigning priority to God's foreknowledge. "Those he foreknew he also predestined." Olson dedicated the second half of the chapter to differentiating Classical Arminianism from Molinist "middle knowledge" and open theism. Although I am not committed to either Molinism or open theism, I do think it unfortunate that Olson has determined to cut such a narrow path for Arminians. Many Open Theist I talk to consider themselves "consistent Arminians" or at least "revisionist Arminians." Maybe they are wrong about that (and I think Olson makes a good case that the Arminian position requires an affirmation of foreknowledge), but the author's political intention to distance Arminianism from controversial territory even *within* the Evangelical camp is glaring.

Myth 9: Arminian Theology Denies Justification by Grace Alone Through Faith Alone.

Reality: Classical Arminian theology is a Reformation theology; it embraces divine imputation of righteousness by God's grace through faith alone and preserves the distinction between justification and sanctification.

Comment: This chapter is especially helpful as a corrective to the claim that Arminian theologies are by definition a Catholic compromise. This comes from Calvinists in the form of an accusation (which is Olson's obvious concern), but it is oft repeated by Arminians as a strength. Although it is true that Wesley has a "Catholic spirit" and many Arminians are more comfortable drawing on the Catholic spiritual tradition than their Reformed counterpoints, Arminians are at bottom Protestants. Even if Arminians come to conclusions that make *rapprochement* with Roman Catholics more likely, the questions they are asking reflect typically Protestant concerns. Hopefully this chapter will remind Arminians to speak in a more nuanced way about their relationship with Roman Catholicism. Beware of easy ecumenism; reconciliation requires work!

Myth 10: All Arminians Believe in the Governmental Theory of the Atonement.

Reality: There is no one Arminian doctrine of Christ's atonement; many Arminians accept the penal substitution theory enthusiastically while others prefer the governmental theory.

Comment: As a Wesleyan-Arminians who uses substitutionary categories to understand the atonement, I found this chapter especially reassuring. I had worried that my move away from governmental to more substitutionary (including but not limited to penal imagery) thinking put me at risk of abandoning my heritage. Olson collects sufficient evidence to the contrary. He does not outright reject the governmental theory, but his "enthusiastic acceptance" of penal substitution shows. Nevertheless, this is one of the strongest chapters simply because it (unlike some of the others) acknowledges and even explores the diversity within the Arminian tradition.

MISSING! - Myth 11: Arminian Theology Undermines the Assurance of the Believer

Reality: Not all Arminians deny the eternal security of the believer, and even those who do still teach a Biblical doctrine of assurance based on the internal testimony of the Spirit.

Comment: I am adding this myth because I find it almost ridiculous that a book on Arminian theology written in the American Evangelical context would not address the matter of eternal security. Olson is certainly right to turn his attention to other more foundation matters (eternal security may be a major point of contention at the popular level, it is not the crux of the matter between Arminians and Calvinists). But it should not be ignored wholesale! In an earlier book co-written with Stanley Grenz, Olson posits a spectrum of theologies with folk theology on one extreme as that which should be avoided. Maybe Olson has identified the argument over eternal security as matter for "folk theologians" and can thus be safely set aside. Perhaps the publishers wanted an

even 10 myths, and this one simply had to go. Whatever the reason, it's absence is disappointment.

Conclusion: Rules of Engagement for Evangelical Calvinists and Arminians.

(1) Understanding precedes evaluation.

(2) Avoid straw man arguments.

(3) Admit our own paradoxes and mysteries.

(4) Avoid attribution of beliefs not actually held by opponent; instead, identify perceived logical consequences.

Comment: Olson's conclusion contains the "payoff" of the book. He pleads with evangelicals to approach their polemics with proper charity. Following these four rules is a good place to start in treating each other with intellectual (and Christian) respect. Whatever one thinks of Arminian theology and/or Olson's version of it, any reader should heartily accept these rules of engagement. Olson has followed them in his description of Calvinists; I have tried to follow them in my description of Olson; I trust that we will follow them in the comment board and beyond.

September 2006