

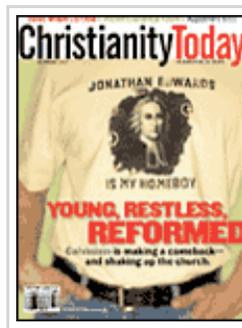
drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 06, 2006

Roger Olson's Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities (part one)

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,

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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 expounded 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 beg 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.

I hope to follow up these methodological comments with more

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material discussions of Olson's ten myths in the following week(s). In the meantime ...

Any thoughts?

What do you think of Olson's approach?

Is myth-busting the best way to present Arminian theology?

What are benefits and costs of constructing a history of the "best" of Arminian theology?

Labels: [Book Reviews](#), [Olson](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 5:21 PM

[9 comments](#)

9 Comments:

At 9:59 PM, September 07, 2006, [coach d](#) said...

What a welcome book...especially for Calvinists, but also for us--I want it.

Is there an equivalent myth-busting book about Calvinism for Arminians to read?

At 12:06 PM, September 08, 2006, [David Drury](#) said...

Great review. This will be helpful in published form for sure.

To answer your question from my perspective, I believe the 'myth busting form' is what is needed today, so it's welcome.

Perhaps a myth-busting book on Calvinism is more needed. In one sense, I think Arminianism seems to be "on the defensive" more anyway. The original TULIP being a definition of what in Calvinism "went too far" is a somewhat defensive position in itself. And Calvinists, for some reason, seem more inclined to be on the offensive rather than becoming apologists for their position. For that reason I've always felt the calvinist theologians had less generosity in their tone... and a book that is "myth-busting" in tone is at least "recognizing the opposition."

So I don't expect the myth-busting Calvinist book to hit the shelves soon.

GOod point, John, on using this text as a supplemental text of generosity. That is needed. I would have like that in my "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility" class at GCTS.

-David

At 2:35 PM, September 08, 2006, [tse horng](#) said...

Very helpful to me. look forward to your upcoming reviews. I tend to

[The Ethics of God \(Bible Brain Busters\)](#)

[The Ethics of God \(Bible Brain Busters\)](#)

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

[Even what is impossible with God is possible with ...](#)

[Suggestion Box: Bible Brain Busters](#)

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feel that Arminianism is always on the defensive. It is not a real debate over here in Singapore but we tend to hear more preachers taking a Calvinist perspective. Being a member of a Methodist Church here, I can only remember one pastor preached on Arminianism. The bad thing is we missed out on our heritage, the good thing is we avoid the 'confusion' and debate.

At [10:31 PM, September 10, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Excellent post, very insightful in its distinctions! It makes me ask myself what I mean when I call myself an Arminian... because I don't really have to. Do we really have to invoke Arminius to describe Wesley's theology, despite the affinities between the two? At least in my mind, my own theology stands coherently on its own, despite its affinities with Wesley. So while so many of us can rightly be deemed Arminians, maybe this term is most helpful as an anti-term--its function in such language games is to say that we aren't Calvinists?

At [10:18 AM, September 12, 2006](#), [Eric and Brandi Ebbinghaus](#) said...

JD,

Awesome to see that you're still the smartest man on the planet! Seriously? I'd would really be interested to see a brief synopsis of Olson's 10 myths, if you have time, may just a cliffnotes style. I think even seeing those would make me want the book more!

At [11:41 AM, September 12, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

EE,

That's exactly what I'll be doing this week on drulogion: listing the 10 myths with a quick synopsis and short response!

Thanks!

John

At [4:48 PM, September 13, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

New post this week continues the discussion of Olson's book on Arminianism with a summary and response to his first three myths.

<http://drulogion.blogspot.com/2006/09/olsons-arminian-myths-1-3.html>

At [7:05 AM, December 13, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Some good points here on both the Calvinist and Arminian understandings of theology. I think that somehow Olsen was even quite sympathetic to the Calvinist consensus. As a system Calvinism does seem to display a "special pleading" in particular with the doctrine and/or the articulation of divine providence, in an attempt to pre-empt the charge of double predestination. And I think that this is where Arminianism strength lies. I would have liked to see the

strenghts of Arminianism developed more.

At [2:49 PM, January 02, 2007](#), [Rick](#) said...

I'm reading this book right now and it is a gem. However, Olson misunderstands Finney. Finney was NOT an Arminian. He preached against both Calvinism and Arminianism. Yet Olson is closer to understanding him than most of his other critics.

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