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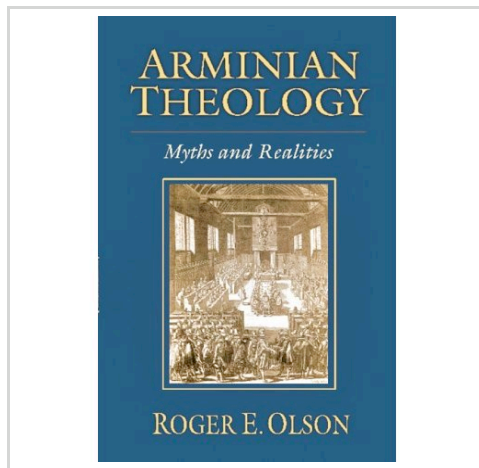
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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2006

Olson's Arminian Myths #1-3



Last week I began my review of Roger Olson's primer [Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities](#). The focus of last week's [post](#) was on the book's purpose, structure, and mode of argumentation. This week I will list and respond to Olson's first three myths and their contrasting realities. I am splitting up the ten myths in order to give me space and time to respond carefully to each one.

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

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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

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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 were Olson - in order to achieve his primary purpose of de-stigmatizing Arminian theology - has managed to avoid the deeper issues at stake.

Any questions?

Have you encountered these three myths?

Are Olson's theses describing the Arminian position accurate? Are they compelling?

Do my responses hit or miss the mark in their critical appreciation of Olson?

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

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:11 PM

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At [6:15 PM, September 13, 2006](#), [WTM](#) said...

John,

Nice summary of this book. Very helpful. I'm curious though - would you describe Arminian theology as semi-Augustine enough to get past the Council of Orange (or whichever it was)?

At [1:26 PM, September 14, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Travis,

Olson does not address the matter because he is (unfortunately) narrowly concerned with Protestant Orthodoxy and thus avoids discussion of broader Western canons. The Council of Orange is persistently ignored in Evangelical circles (including especially the current Open Theism debates).

I was taught in college that at least Wesley and the so-called "Wesleyan-Arminian" branch of theology is Semi-Augustinian: somewhere between Semi-Pelagianism and Extreme Augustinianism (a nod to Bud Bence is in order here). Although I find these distinctions sufficient to brand classical Arminians "orthodox," I am inclined to think the whole debate presupposes an understanding of grace as a "thing" in the soul rather than an "act" in the history of Jesus Christ which is witnessed to by the Spirit's work through us. In other words, the whole Pelagian-SemiP-SemiA-Augustinian spectrum can be set in contrast to an alternative "historicized" foundational vision of divine and human agency. Whether this can be justifiably described as "Revised Semi-Augustinianism" (which is how I would identify myself as a Barthian- Wesleyan) and thus be judged orthodox is a decision I will leave to a future church council.

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At [11:49 AM, September 15, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

My favorite line: "Any Frankenstein Monster drawing on pieces from both will just terrorize the village"

Your line or Olsons?

Well, for all the horror appeal of Frankenstein (did you know Robert Deniro even played old Franky once in a movie -- I have trouble seeing that one in my head)... I do agree that that patching them together is something less than desirable. It's a discussion cop-out that I've unsuccessfully tried myself in attempting to practice a generous orthodoxy.

I'm reminded of your post a year or so ago on how to have conversations with people in other traditions after you went to a conference with that ethos. It's best to admit the differences and then dialogue.

I'm always more interested, for instance, to find out the HOW and the WHAT of ministry when I talk to a true blue Calvinist than to debate their WHY. When it gets practical, it gets interesting for me. And when I read Wesley, it seems like his more emotional objections to Calvinism were highly pragmatic and having to do with the resulting "kind of Christians" it birthed in his day.

-DD

At [6:10 PM, September 20, 2006](#), [coach d](#) said...

Now I'm hungry to read the rest... I have heard these myths and (for his audience) his approach wins some space for Wesleyans..we may yet be able to be considered orthodox and not heretics by our Calvinist brothers!

(Hmmm, what was the council of Orange again?)

At [5:22 PM, September 26, 2006](#), [Michael Westmoreland-White](#) said...

About myth # 1) I agree that Arminianism as a generic term for any belief in free will is more than the Remonstrant version of the Reformed tradition. In addition to Wesleyan Arminianism and its offshoots, is the Anabaptist movement--most of which held to free will. The 17th C. General Baptists were also Arminian and this had more to do with their influence by Dutch Mennonites than by Remonstrants.

I am an Arminian because I am a Baptist in the Anabaptist tradition, not a Remonstrant.

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