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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2006

Olson's Arminian Myths #4-7

Continuing on the heels of [last week's post](#), here are myths #4-7 about Arminian Theology according to Roger Olson's [book](#).

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

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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

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"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.

Next week: Myths #8-10 and the conclusion of the series on Arminian Myths in conversation with Roger Olson's new book.

Any Thoughts?

Have you encountered these four myths? Any funny stories?

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?

What do you think of my alternative problems regarding #5 (God) and #7 (Grace)?

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

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:14 PM

[5 comments](#)

5 Comments:

At [8:21 AM, September 21, 2006](#), [WTM](#) said...

One key point that I see bubbling up here just beneath the surface (and one that many so-called 'Calvinists' forget) is that Arminianism is within the Reformed tradition. I think that many 'Calvinists' inseparably link Arminians and Pelagians in their minds, and thus end up doing a disservice to Arminians (and likely to Pelagians as well!). Your recapitulation of Olson's work here should serve to remind us all that Arminian theology has basically the same instincts as Reformed theology.

The one fundamental distinction is God's universal will to save. This is incompatible with (1) the notion of limited atonement and (2) the notion of double predestination. Not even Calvin believed in limited atonement (though some hints toward it are there). I think that it would be reasonable to describe the Reformed tradition as a spectrum, arranged from left to right in the following manner: Arminians - Calvin himself - Infralapsarians - Supralapsarians. This leaves something to be desired (it should be more like a tree with Calvin at the top, the Arminians shooting out down and to the left while the Infra's shoot out down and to the right, and with the

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Supra's coming off of the Infra's even further to the right somewhere) but it makes the point that all of these positions bear a family resemblance.

In any case John, I've really enjoyed reading this series.

At [7:29 PM, September 22, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Hear, hear!

By the way, how long will it be before it will take about twenty minutes to type in the word verification?!

At [2:52 PM, September 23, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

At the grass roots of the church where amateur theologians rule I see each one of these Arminian myths actually functioning which in some ways justify the charges of Calvinists. At the same time, I also see among many grass roots Calvinist amateur theologians teaching that justifies the myths we charge them with. All this reminds me of the need for solid theological work and dialogue. Which your blog is aiding.

At [12:38 AM, September 26, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

John,

Nice work. Thanks for the intro to Olsen's book. I'll have to pick up a copy.

We have Joel Green here this week doing our Holiness Lecture Series. His first two lectures were from I Peter and James -- following a basic motif of the people of God as exiles, not geographic exiles, but social exiles -- having been transformed by the holiness of God, they remain in their former homes but in such a way that they have become exiles from the existing order because of the holy character formed in them.

Hope all is well with you these days.

David Wright

At [3:05 PM, January 07, 2007](#), [Mindy](#) said...

I have been reading the phrase "black coffee calvinist" in several articles. What does this mean? Googling hasn't even been a help with this one.

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