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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2006

Olson's Arminian Myths #8-10

This week I will conclude our [summary and discussion](#) of Roger Olson's [book](#) *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* with myths #8-10.

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

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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 substitutionism 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

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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.

Any thoughts?

Have you encountered these last three myths?

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

Why do you think Olson neglected to discuss eternal security?

What rules of engagement for dialogue would you add?

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

posted by JohnLDrury @ [4:46 PM](#)

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8 Comments:

At [12:53 PM, September 28, 2006](#), [Richard H](#) said...

I've done the most work on the doctrine of assurance, so I'll comment on that. As a United Methodist pastor I pastor churches in which theology has, for generations, usually been whittled down to something like "God loves you," "Be nice," "Don't judge." With this "foundation," my folks have no means to deal with the baptists (usually the biggest herd here in E. Texas) have to say about "once saved always saved," and how THEY believe it and Methodists don't.

When I teach on the subject I observe that from a phenomenalistic

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point of view, we all have the experience of people who at one time in their lives appear to be self-avowed, practicing Christians, clearly people of faith, who later in life would claim no such thing. Baptists (who are at least 3 point Calvinists around here) would say that person was never really saved but was just "fooling himself," or "playing games with God." The Methodist - if he or she said anything - would stereotypically describe the person as "falling from grace," or "backsliding." Same phenomenon, two explanations.

A quick glance at the bible doesn't help much here - both sets of ideas can be found fairly easily.

In this context, however, the common baptist approach to "eternal security" seems to undermine "assurance." Eternal security is something I can have - in theory - but I cannot have assurance that I have it, because it is always possible that I am "fooling myself" or "playing games with God."

Wesleyan theology (moving beyond the bare folk theology of many contemporary Methodists) puts its pivit foot on assurance rather than "eternal security." Through the work and witness of the Spirit, the believer can have assurance of salvation. Can this assuance ever be clouded? Yes, plainly. Can one lose the acceptance of God? I think the Wesleyan tradition (at its best) is fuzzy here.

How can it possibly be good to be fuzzy on such an important subject? My take is that such fuzziness is a proper stance to take in light of the biblical teaching and its contrast with the modern expectation of certainty. Descartes and his successors (he has many children in theology) tell us he need certainty - even absolute certainty. From what I see of the way this modern epistemological yearning has worked itself out, it has been reduced to absurdity. Sure you can have certainty - if you go no further than solipsism.

So - to sum up all this verbiage, I see a bi-polar doctrine of Assurance/Security, with one tradition putting its foot down on one pole, and the other tradition on the other pole.

At [7:25 PM, September 28, 2006](#), [Larry](#) said...

I've encountered your myth 11 frequently and number 9 occasionally, mostly from seminarians and Baptists.

In my experience, most laypeople, whether Reformed or Arminian, are less dogmatic and quite willing to accept the valid points of the "opposing" system.

My [wife](#), bless her heart, is not only Reformed but Dutch Reformed-- and actually Dutch.

She's more Wesleyan than I am.

At [10:08 PM, September 28, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Dear John,

This is Brandon Warmke from Trinity Wesleyan days. If that doesn't ring a bell...well, that's alright.

At any rate, I keep a blog as well, and a Calvinist guest stopped by today and did a drive-by "demolition" of Wesleyan theology, in which he refers to something your father wrote a few years back. This prompted me to do a little interweb trolling. And here you are. I am glad you are well, buddy!

Best,
Brandon Warmke
xanga.com/bdwarmke

At [4:51 PM, September 30, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

You got my e-mail on this. Sorry it wouldn't post here earlier in the week.

I love this series... great review.

FYI - Scott Mcnight is doing a series on the same book right now at his blog (he's behind you though, only through myth 3)

<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?cat=7>

there's the link.

dd

At [8:45 PM, September 30, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

John,

As always I read your site as part of my ongoing theological education. Thanks so much for making a blog worth reading.

Teaching Wesleyan Church History this semester I have been struck again with how significant assurance was to Wesley. it seems he did not believe himself justified until he had it...prayed for months and months for salvation (a little different than decisionism I suppose). Yet I don't believe I have ever heard a single sermon on it. Interesting. Perhaps it is a theological myth and a practical reality?

The fact that the two systems will not easily mix has become more

readily apparent to me than ever. Working with an interdenominational ministry which attempts to practice a narrow ecumenism I have been struck by how far "out" these theological foundations have effects in the theology-praxis arrow. Relative unreflective individuals who do not seem to care much at all about theology per se, show remarkably consistent praxis conflicts with one another which in my mind are rooted in the foundational differences between Arminianism and Calvinism.

Have you noticed the same?

At [6:00 PM, October 02, 2006](#), [coach d](#) said...

Dave,

I've seen that. The two approaches are "in the air" it seems. Even a novice minister will "practice theology" based on assumptions and propositions they may be totally unaware of.

At [11:18 AM, October 03, 2006](#), [OnceaWes](#) said...

Certainly you must agree that the view that has God predestinating people based on His foreknowledge of their embracing Christ is a much different doctrine than that which sees foreknowledge and predestination as complimentary ideas rooted in God's sovereign free will to set apart His elect based solely on His good pleasure.

The Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine is really post-destination. In a Theological schema where God 'predestines' upon foreseeing certain behavior God is destinating after (post) seeing the decision in the future. It is as if God learns something that is going to happen and responds in light of it.

Also, there is the struggle that Arminians have with this arrangement and their doctrine of libertarian free will. If a person has been foreknown by God to choose Christ then that person can't do anything but choose Christ. That person's will is bound by God's foreknowledge every bit as much as it is 'bound' by Reformed understandings of predestination. Both arrangements in the end leave the person's libertarian free will dead in its trespasses and sins so that they can only do either what they've been predestined to do or what it's foreknown that they'll do. I mean, how can a person have free will when they can't help but do what it has been foreknown that they will do? They are locked in.

Finally, what's really frustrating when looking at the Wesleyan arrangement from the outside is that it doesn't accomplish what it, understandably, wants to accomplish. It seems that what it wants to accomplish is lift the accusation against God that He is somehow responsible for somebody being damned. Wesleyans want to stand apart from the mean hearted Calvinists and insist that people only

damn themselves. And yet, if God foreknew that many many people would be damned and He created the World anyway, it is still the case that God, in His foreknowledge and creation, predestined them to be damned.

I know...I know... this has been batted around for centuries, but it just strikes me that Olson doesn't accomplish what he set out to accomplish.

At [6:55 AM, December 13, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Some good points here on both the Calvinist and Arminian understandings of theology. I think that somehow

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