

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

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Olson RE 2006. *Arminian theology: myths and realities*. Downers Grove: IVP. (The review is based on the Kindle edition of the book, which has section numbers instead of page numbers.)

1. Introduction

From the perspective of an Arminian, the publication of Roger Olson's *Arminian Theology* is most welcome. It is welcome because of two trends that are powerfully evident in churches across South Africa, and no doubt, in other countries too.

Firstly, Semi-Pelagianism exerts a pervasive influence amongst traditionally Arminian churches. Many churches that would consider themselves Arminian, as opposed to Calvinist, actually preach and practice their Christianity in a way that shows their core beliefs are not consistent with classical Arminian doctrine. Olson highlights the critical distinctions between classical Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism throughout his book. If semi-Pelagianism is a serious deviation from evangelical doctrine—as it certainly is—then a comprehensive corrective is much needed.

Secondly, there is a strong move towards Calvinism in churches which have historically held Arminian views. Under the influence of popular

writers and teachers like John Piper, Mark Dever, Mark Driscoll, and Don Carson, many independent Pentecostal-Charismatic congregations have embraced a kind of Reformed-Charismatic belief and practice. Their turn is partly due to their inadequate understanding of their Arminian heritage. I am not an anti-Calvinist crusader about to denounce this trend as heretical. However, I am sad that many of the pastors making this shift do not fully understand the issues addressed in Olson's book.

I shall now give a fairly detailed summary of *Arminian Theology*, before offering a personal evaluation of the book.

2. Summary

Olson's purpose is simple: *to provide a clear description of the major tenets of classical Arminian theology*. Olson is deeply troubled by two things. First, the lack of a benevolent spirit or fair representation of alternative views which characterises much of the debate between Calvinists and Arminians, on both popular internet forums and in scholarly circles, bothers him. Second, he realises that friend and foe alike propagate various myths about Arminian beliefs. Both Calvinist critics and self-proclaimed Arminians have a tendency to confuse true Arminianism with semi-Pelagianism. This confusion has given classical Arminianism a bad reputation, and Olson hopes to set the record straight regarding Arminian theology.

Olson's book is arranged around 10 common myths about Arminian theology. He uses the myths as an organising scheme to provide a comprehensive and systematic synopsis of Arminian theology. One chapter is devoted to each myth. In the early part of each chapter, he summarises certain misconceptions about Arminianism and offers a clear, lucid synopsis of what classic Arminians really believe about the

topic at hand, being careful to distinguish classical Arminians, who are faithful to Arminius's teachings, from aberrant schools that have arisen within Arminian circles, but which represent deviations from classical Arminianism. Next, Olson provides a chronological survey of selected Arminian theologians' views on the topic of the chapter, beginning with Arminius himself, and moving century by century.

I shall now summarise the book's ten main chapters, before proceeding with some reflections on the book as a whole.

Myth 1: Arminian theology is the opposite of Calvinist or Reformed theology

Arminius himself, and classical Arminians in general, fall within the broad spectrum of Reformed theology. If high Calvinism, with a strict adherence to monergism, were understood as the only expression of Reformed theology, then Arminians would not be considered 'Reformed'. However, Olson takes pains to show that strict monergism is not the only form of soteriology which can lay claim to belonging within the Reformed tradition.

Olson deplores the way that the differences between Calvinists and Arminians have been magnified to the point that the two are considered opposite belief systems. Classical Arminians share many core beliefs with Calvinists, including belief in the total depravity of human beings and its corollary, the bondage of the unregenerate will. Both believe in the Trinity, the inspiration of the scriptures, the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, and 'justification through Christ's death on the cross alone by grace alone through faith alone' (§659). With some differences, both hold a high view of divine providence and sovereignty, and both believe in 'humanity's absolute dependence on grace for any spiritual good'

(§657). The differences are smaller, and the points of common ground greater than is often acknowledged.

Myth 2: a hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism is possible

Many well-intentioned believers strive for some kind of hybrid between Calvinism and Arminianism; Olson calls it 'Calminianism'. No such hybrid is possible. The two belief systems are incompatible alternatives. They diverge on three key points: (a) whether election is unconditional or conditional; (b) whether the atonement is limited or unlimited; and (c) whether grace is irresistible or resistible. Those who claim to hold a hybrid position are usually Arminians. 'Some are simply inconsistent, and willing to embrace contradictory positions' (§753). Every Christian must choose between two legitimate forms of Christianity. Neither dialogue nor appeals to scripture will resolve the tension. Both systems can muster impressive scriptural support, and 'both systems contain difficult if not insurmountable problems' (§800). Our perspective as we study the scriptures shapes whether we lean towards the Calvinist or the Arminian way of seeing the big picture.

Myth 3: Arminianism is not an orthodox evangelical option

Although some Calvinist writers acknowledge Arminians as brothers in Christ and regard Arminianism as an evangelical theology (e.g. Peterson and Williams 2004), many label Arminians as heretics, and identify Arminianism with 'Arianism, Socinianism, Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, humanism or liberal theology' (§895). None of these identifications are just treatments of classical Arminianism. Both Arianism and Socinianism deny the Trinity; Arminians affirm it. Pelagians claim that natural man can do God's will without the help of God's grace; Arminians flatly deny it. Semi-Pelagians acknowledge

that sin affects natural man, but hold that man is still able to initiate reconciliation with God; Arminians believe in total depravity, as a result of which only the operation of God's grace can initiate a person's salvation. Finally, the allegation that Arminianism is a human-centred philosophy that inevitably leads to liberal theology is patently false.

With the exception of the doctrines that are central to the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, 'Arminians affirm [all of the] fundamental tenets of classical Christian orthodoxy, such as the authority of Scripture, the transcendence of God, the deity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity' (§934). 'Classical Arminianism is a theology of grace that affirms salvation by grace alone through faith alone' (§1104). Only an excessively narrow definition of Protestant orthodoxy—'God as the all-determining reality and salvation as monergistically decreed and determined by God' (§1074)—can exclude Arminianism.

Myth 4: the heart of Arminianism is belief in free will

A common caricature holds that Calvinists believe in predestination, while Arminians believe in free will. Many Calvinists believe in compatibilist free will, and all Arminians believe in conditional predestination. Critics often allege that the starting point and controlling principle of Arminian theology is its belief in human freedom; this 'is simply wrong' (§1111). The point of departure for Arminian theology is not free will, but its view of the goodness of God. Arminians cannot escape the conclusion that if God determines all human actions, then God is the author of evil; indeed, God would then be the first and only 'sinner'. Arminians believe in free will because of their understanding of God's goodness. 'Arminianism begins with God's goodness and ends by affirming free will. The latter follows from the former, and the former is based on divine revelation' (§1137). It is because they believe

that the Calvinist doctrine of election contradicts the character of God as revealed in scripture, not because they are obsessed with fairness or freedom *per se*, that Arminians believe in free will. Arminians' doctrine of free will is rooted in their theodicy, not in their anthropology or soteriology.

Myth 5: Arminian theology denies the sovereignty of God

Again, this is simply not true. Arminians emphatically affirm the sovereignty of God. When Calvinist theologians claim that Arminians do not believe in God's sovereignty, they are working with a narrow definition of sovereignty—that God determines everything. But why should sovereignty require God to determine every event?

Neither is it true to say that Arminians believe only in general providence. Classical Arminianism goes far beyond belief in general providence to include affirmation of God's intimate and direct involvement in every event of nature and history. The only thing the Arminian view of God's sovereignty necessarily excludes is God's authorship of sin and evil. ... God governs the entire universe and all of history. Nothing at all can happen without God's permission, and many things are specifically and directly controlled and caused by God (§§1340-41).

If the definition of sovereignty requires us to understand that God absolutely, meticulously, and deterministically controls everything, then how are we to avoid making him the author of sin? Arminians believe God has absolute power over all creation, but that he also has the power to give his creatures (human beings) freedom to make some real choices, without threatening his overall plan and purpose for the world.

Myth 6: Arminianism is a human-centred theology

Calvinist critics often accuse Arminians of downplaying the devastating effect of the fall and believing that the human will is free to initiate good will towards God. Classical Arminians, however, believe in inherited corruption, total depravity, and the bondage of the will in essentially the same way that Calvinists do. Human beings are born with a corrupt, sinful nature, and are unable, in themselves, to turn towards God.

Because Arminians are synergists who believe humans cooperate with a free response to God's grace, many Calvinists allege that they believe in the freedom of the will, and do not believe salvation is by grace alone. However, Arminians hold that the will is bound by sin and completely unable to respond to the gospel, unless it is empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit. It is only the prevenient grace of God which frees the will to respond to the gospel. For this reason, Arminius spoke of *the freed will*. Prevenient grace frees the will to respond by way of non-resistance; it is not man seeking out God, but man being empowered by God's grace not to resist his grace. Thus Arminians 'believe in the absolute necessity of grace for even the first exercise of a good will toward God' (§§1636-37).

Myth 7: Arminianism is not a theology of grace

All true Arminians believe that salvation is *sola gratia*. Since man has no inherent good and the will is in bondage to sin, no good can originate with man; it is all by grace. Arminians have two distinctive doctrines with respect to grace. First, they believe in *prevenient grace*. Essentially, this is the operation of God's grace upon sinners before they are converted by which he, through the work of Christ and the

Holy Spirit, frees their wills to believe and receive the gospel.¹ Even man's ability to receive God's grace is an act of God's grace. Second, Arminians hold that *God's grace is resistible*. Although they are synergists, they limit man's cooperation to non-resistance of God's grace. There is nothing meritorious in man's cooperation, and all glory belongs solely to God.

Myth 8: Arminians do not believe in predestination

Although no scholar would accuse Arminians of not believing in predestination, many Christians believe this myth. The truth is that Arminians believe in several types of predestination. First, they believe in *predestination to service*; this may be irresistible and unconditional. Second, they believe in *corporate election*; unconditional election to salvation is corporate, that is, God has unconditionally elected a people for his glory—all those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. Third, they believe in *conditional predestination of individuals*. 'God foreknows every person's ultimate and final decision regarding Jesus Christ, and on that basis predestines people to salvation or damnation' (§§2125-26). What Arminians deny is that God unconditionally and irresistibly elects some people for salvation and others for damnation. Olson concludes: 'the idea that Arminianism preaches free will against predestination is simply false; it preaches predestination and free will as an instrument for inclusion in either election or reprobation, which are corporate and conditional' (§2299).

Classical Arminianism believes in simple foreknowledge—God simply knows the future because he foresees what will actually happen. This

¹ Some Arminian theologians associate the coming of prevenient grace with the proclamation of the Word of God, while others believe the death of Christ bestowed it universally to all human beings (Rom 5:12-21).

leads to a paradox in Arminian theology, namely, in what sense can foreseen actions be truly free? Olson concludes this chapter with a brief examination of two attempts to get around the problem, namely, Middle Knowledge (Molinism) and Open Theism. He rejects Molinism as incompatible with libertarian free will, and therefore incompatible with Arminianism. He seems cautiously amenable to the Open Theist approach, although not persuaded by it.

Myth 9: Arminian theology denies justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Deeming the Arminian understanding of the role of free will in receiving the gospel by faith as a meritorious work, some claim that Arminianism falls outside of Protestant evangelicalism, because it does not fit the Reformation belief in salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Some Calvinist critics accuse Arminians of believing that faith itself is imputed as righteousness, and that such faith is meritorious. Once again, this is a myth. Arminians do believe that salvation is *by grace alone through faith alone*. There is nothing meritorious about faith; indeed, it is the prevenient grace of God which empowers a person to exercise faith in Christ. This is pure grace, not merit. Furthermore, Arminians believe it is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers, not faith itself. Although Arminius occasionally spoke of 'faith imputed for righteousness', the expression was shorthand for saying that the active and passive obedience of Christ is imputed to the believer on the basis of his faith in Christ. Therefore, the scathing accusation that Arminians are clandestine Catholics with respect to their doctrine of salvation is patently false. Arminians are evangelical Protestants who believe in *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* just as strongly as Calvin did.

Myth 10: all Arminians believe in the governmental theory of the atonement.

This chapter deals with two issues related to the atonement: (a) limited versus universal atonement and (b) the governmental theory versus the penal-substitution theory.

Limited versus universal atonement. Calvinists believe in limited atonement (also called particular or definite atonement), namely, that Christ died only for the elect. Arminians believe the scope of the atonement is universal; Christ paid the penalty to atone for all human sins. Some Calvinists claim the Arminian view leads to universalism—if Christ died for everyone's sins, everyone will be saved. Others, conceding that Arminians do not believe everyone is automatically saved by Christ's death, argue that the implication is that his death does not really save anyone. It merely makes them savable; what actually saves them is their choice to appropriate its benefits for themselves. Arminians find both arguments strange, since they clearly teach that the elect are saved by the merits of Christ's atoning death.

Governmental versus penal-substitution views. Penal-substitution has become 'the orthodox view' of the atonement amongst evangelicals. It holds that Christ died as our substitute, bearing the penalty for our individual sins. The governmental theory was developed by Hugo Grotius, a Remonstrant leader. 'The governmental theory includes an element of substitution! The only significant difference between it and the penal substitution theory ... is that the governmental theory does not say that in their place Christ bore the actual punishment of sinners; it says that he bore suffering as an alternative to punishment in their place. ... God inflicted pain on Christ for the sins of the world in order to uphold his justice' (§§2667-70). Thus the governmental theory holds that Christ's death was a substitution for sins, but not a penal

substitution. Its purpose was to uphold God's moral governance of the world. Olson points out that many leading Arminians, including Arminius and Wesley, held to the penal-substitution view, so it is patently untrue to brand the governmental theory as 'the Arminian theory'. Several others embraced the governmental theory, or attempted to combine the two theories. Although Olson believes the penal view is best, he does not consider adherence to the governmental view as heretical.

3. Evaluation and Recommendation

As an unashamed believer in classical Arminian doctrine, I am extremely grateful for the publication of *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*. There was a pressing need for a clear, definitive statement of classical Arminian beliefs. Olson has met that need admirably, and in the process has clarified several key points (at least in my personal understanding). Even though I hold Arminian convictions, I learned much about Arminianism from his book.

3.1 Strengths

In addition to its obvious value—providing a comprehensive, well-researched presentation of evangelical Arminian beliefs, the book has three strengths that I wish to highlight.

1. It is written in an irenic spirit, rather than a combative one (similarly, Peterson and Williams 2004; Walls and Dongell 2004). As such, it serves as a good model for theological dialogue on divisive doctrines where tensions and emotions often run high.

2. The opening section of each chapter briefly and succinctly outlines the myths and realities. In so doing, it offers an alternative way of reading the book. A student or pastor wishing to get the bottom line on each issue could simply read the opening pages of each chapter, and not bother with the detailed discussion of various theologians. The detailed discussions do bring out some of the nuances and variations within Arminian thinking, but the short-cut of bypassing them would give the reader 90 percent of the facts about Arminian doctrine in summary form.
3. Conversely, for those who are interested in historical theology, Olson's synopses of representative Arminian thinkers from each century are thorough, informed, and enlightening.

3.2 Weaknesses

Olson's somewhat favourable treatment of Open Theism is disappointing. I am hard-pressed to accept that Open Theism falls within the boundaries of orthodox evangelical options, whether Arminian or otherwise. Open Theism seems incompatible with many foundational tenets of Christian theism (see Piper, Taylor, and Helseth 2003).

The lengthy synopsis of what various Arminian theologians taught became onerous and repetitive. It would be unfair to say that this is a 'weakness', since Olson's purpose is to show definitively what leading Arminian theologians through the centuries have actually believed about points on which there is widespread confusion. Therefore, the detailed surveys are necessary and helpful to his purposes. They are, however, rather repetitive as in many instances theologian after theologian says essentially the same thing. From the vantage point of a less technically-minded reader, the presentation of this information

could have been more condensed and user-friendly. What is needed is a more popular synopsis of the same content.

3.3 Recommendation

I am a Bible student (not a systematic theologian) who holds to classical Arminian views on almost all points of doctrine, yet, in my formative years of theological studies, I worked out most of my core beliefs by reading the scriptures in consultation with moderate Calvinist authors such as Wayne Grudem (1994) and Millard Erickson (1998). Why? Because I did not have access to an exposition of Arminian theology as lucid and coherent as the one Olson has now provided.

I strongly recommend this as required reading for every seminarian, teacher, and pastor, whether Calvinist or Arminian in persuasion. For the Arminians, it will assist with clearly understanding the distinctions between Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism, which is a critical distinction. For the Calvinists, it will ensure that they have a fair-minded concept of actual Arminian beliefs rather than one drawn from critics of Arminianism, many of whom either do not understand or do not represent Arminian teachings correctly.

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