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*The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* Roger E. Olson

David L. Paulsen

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## Book Reviews

ROGER E. OLSON. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999. 652 pp. Notes, index. \$34.99.

Reviewed by David L. Paulsen

As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grows in influence and visibility throughout the world, interfaith conversations will no doubt increase.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, too few Latter-day Saints have sufficient knowledge of traditional Christian theology to carry on any but the most superficial of conversations with adherents of other faiths. Roger E. Olson's new book, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, can serve as a reliable resource for closing this knowledge gap.

*The Story of Christian Theology* is a very reader-friendly book. While the author, a professor of theology at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, sees his book as a "refresher course" for Christian clergy, his audience is primarily the "untutored Christian layperson or student" (14). The author hopes to contribute to Christian discipleship by increasing theological understanding (11–12). To this end, Olson writes in a clear and engaging style. He recounts the history of Christian theology in story form, presenting over eighteen centuries of Christian thinkers who had in their theologizing (as they saw it) nothing less than humanity's eternal salvation at stake.

Olson begins this epic history in the middle of the second century, continues it to the present, and even envisions how the story might unfold in the future. The book sacrifices depth for breadth but successfully holds the reader's interest and gives a clear and comprehensive grasp of mainline Christian theology.

This book's twenty-seven chapters divide into nine sections or parts. The titles of these parts help readers follow the narrative's main plots and subplots, which Olson unfolds in a sweeping, dramatic style. "The Opening Act: Conflicting Christian Visions in the Second Century" presents the book's central theme: conflict. Subsequent parts build on this theme, as can be seen in the following titles: "The Plot Thickens: Third-Century Tensions and Transformations"; "A Great Crises Rocks the Church: The Controversy about the Trinity"; "Another Crises Shakes the Church: The Conflict over the Person of Christ." Conflict becomes permanently divisive in part five, "A Tale of Two Churches: The Great Tradition Divides between East and West." Part six, "The Saga of the Queen of Sciences: Scholastics Revive



and Enthroned Theology,” shows how scholars and clerics attempted to eliminate sources of divisiveness. The futility of this attempt becomes clear in the book’s final three parts, “A New Twist in the Narrative: The Western Church Reforms and Divides”; “The Center of the Story Falls Apart: Protestants Follow Diverse Paths”; and “The Overall Plot Divides: Liberals and Conservatives Respond to Modernity.” Thus, as can be seen by these titles, a theme of theological tension pervades the book. This is a study of theologies that motivated dissension—dissension that Olson believes has peaked, rather than subsided, as Christianity begins a new millennium.

Five fundamental presuppositions, Olson says, drive his book. First is the assumption that beliefs matter. Olson argues that theology is inevitable insofar as a Christian (or anyone else) seeks to think coherently and intelligently about God. Indeed, he claims, “there can be no vital, dynamic, faithful Christian discipleship completely devoid of doctrinal understanding” (16). Second, sometimes beliefs matter too much, leading to needless divisions among Christians and inexcusable “burnings, drownings, and beheadings of people judged to be heretics.” Olson finds “no excuse” for such behavior and wants readers to believe similarly (17). Third, Christian beliefs are not all equally important, some being dogmas (such as the Incarnation and the Trinity), some doctrines (for example, the proper mode of baptism), and some merely theological opinions (the exact nature of angels). Olson concentrates his narrative on the important beliefs—primarily the dogmas, secondarily the doctrines (17–18). Fourth, the ideas of Christian thinkers who lived between New Testament times and today are very important. Olson sees his work as a foil to a revisionist movement of the 1980s that sought to “deny the existence of any kind of main line of influential thinkers” in Christian history (18). And fifth, God is providentially at work in establishing his people in truth and reforming theology when needed. The story of Christian theology, claims Olson, is much more than a mere human story, as critics have charged. He thus rejects historicism—the assumption that all ideas are reducible to cultural or historical contexts—in favor of faith in “God’s providential guidance (not necessarily control) of all events” (21). In Olson’s view, “God has never been absent from the Church, even in the dark eras when truth’s light shone dimly” (22). Thus the “hero” of the story “is not Constantine or Athanasius—as great and [as] influential as they were—but God himself” (22).

Throughout his telling of the story, Olson interjects his own metacommentary. The following points of this metacommentary are of particular interest to Latter-day Saints: (1) an explanation of the emergence of theology as a function of the loss of apostolic authority; (2) an acknowledgment of the profound influence of Greek philosophy in the shaping of that theology; (3) an admission that, in that particular theological development,



doctrines were formulated and accepted which lacked any explicit biblical basis; (4) a discussion of the perennial conflict between monergism (salvation is all God's doing) and synergism (salvation requires human cooperation), and his identification of this conflict as the most important yet-to-be resolved issue in Christian theology; and, finally, (5) predictions as to how the story will continue to unfold. It is on these five points of metacommentary that I focus my attention.

### **The Passing of the Apostles and an Emergence of Theology**

Interestingly, Olson openly recognizes that Christian theology in a strict sense did not begin until after the time of Christ: "The apostles were men and women of early Christianity with tremendous prestige and authority. They were eyewitnesses of Jesus or at least persons closely connected with his ministry or the ministries of his disciples. While they were alive, there was no need for theology in the same sense as afterward" (25). However, with the death of John the Beloved, "Christianity entered into a new era for which it was not entirely prepared. [For,] no longer would it be possible to settle doctrinal or other disputes by turning to an apostle" (25).<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the second century, theological reflection arose in response to confusion caused by a "cacophony of [conflicting] voices" within the Christian church and to challenges of the church's beliefs raised by outside critics (23). The need had arisen for orthodoxy, or "a definitive statement of Christian theological correctness" (23).

### **The Influence of Philosophy on the Formation of Christian Theology**

Olson candidly acknowledges that "*the story of Christian theology is deeply influenced by philosophy—especially Greek (Hellenistic) philosophy*" (54; italics in original)—and explains how and why this philosophical-biblical synthesis came about. At the same time, Olson wonders (nay, worries) whether this Greek influence has not been altogether too great.<sup>3</sup>

Olson traces Greek influence on Christian theology back to Philo, a first-century Alexandrian Jew who "attempted to wed Judaism and Greek philosophy" (55). In particular, Philo attempted to explain the Old Testament idea of God in terms of "the highest levels of Greek theology," which described God as "simple substance, completely free of body, parts or passions, immutable (unchangeable) and eternal (timeless)" (57).

According to Olson, Philo's portrayal of the God of the Bible, applying within categories of both Greek philosophy and Christian theology, appealed to Jews, Christians, and Romans alike. Philo's "approach to Jewish thought was already widely accepted (though not without controversy) among Jews of the diaspora, and Christian apologists of the second century

built on that foundation in order to show a similar consistency between the best of Hellenistic thought and their own fairly sophisticated versions of the Christian message” (55). These apologists sought to “defend the truth of Christianity on the basis of the philosophies of Platonism and Stoicism . . . that made up the common Greek philosophy of much of the Roman Empire in the second century” (56). The apologies were intended to convert educated Romans just as Philo’s philosophy was targeted at educated Jews. Philo’s work was thus “the Jewish precedent for the [second-century] Christian apologists’ task of persuasively communicating Christian ideas to educated and reflective Romans. They were simply standing on Philo’s shoulders and building a Hellenistic-Christian superstructure on his Hellenistic-Jewish foundation” (57).

While a few second-century apologists like Tertullian rejected formulating Christian beliefs within a Greek philosophical framework, most writers attempted just such a formulation. In order to “influence relatively humane Roman emperors such as Marcus Aurelius and Antoninus Pius to take Christianity seriously if not as true . . . most [Christian apologists] wrote open letters to these and other emperors and officials of the Roman Empire in which they attempted to explain the truth about Christian belief and behavior. . . . They thus created the basic method of traditional Christian theology” (58).

Olson believes that the second-century apologists’ reliance on Greek philosophical theology was, in many respects, for the worse. He instances this concern in his discussion of Athenagoras of Athens, the second-century Christian apologist who draws most explicitly on Greek philosophy. In *A Plea for the Christians*—an open letter to Emperor Marcus Aurelius—Athenagoras writes:

That we are not atheists, therefore, seeing that we acknowledge one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason who is encompassed by light and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable, by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and set in order, and is kept in being—I have sufficiently demonstrated. (Quoted in Olson, 62)

Olson comments:

Interesting to note is how Athenagoras described the God Christians believe in. While there is no debate about the biblical basis of such divine attributes as “uncreated” and “eternal” and few would question that God is “invisible” (apart from the incarnation in Jesus Christ), many Christian scholars have questioned whether Athenagoras was perhaps unduly influenced by Greek ideas of divinity when he characterized God as “impassible” (incapable of suffering or emotional feeling) and “incomprehensible” (beyond human understanding). Especially when he affirmed that the God Christians believe in is “apprehended by the understanding only and the reason,” doubts arise about the relative weight of Hebrew versus Greek thinking in his doctrine of God. (62)



Moreover, Olson suggests that such Christian notables as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas were likewise unduly influenced by Greek philosophical understanding. Of Clement, Olson writes:

More than any other early Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria valued the integration of Christian faith with the best learning of the day. His motto was “all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found,” and he attempted to bring together those stray rays of divine light that he believed were diffused throughout the various philosophical and religious systems while submitting all to the overriding authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (allegorically interpreted, of course) and the apostolic tradition. (87)

Nevertheless, Clement’s theology tipped the scale in favor of Greek philosophy:

Clement’s God was like the God of Greek philosophy—a bare unity without parts or passions that cannot even be described except negatively and who can only relate to the world of nature and history through an intermediate being called the Logos. . . . Clement’s doctrine of God is a third-century echo and elaboration of second-century apologist Athenagoras’s teaching. Both belong to that line of Christian thought that subtly shaped the Christian idea of God to fit Greek philosophical speculation. (90)

Clement and other Christian Middle-Platonists, in turn, profoundly influenced Origen, perhaps the greatest of the earlier Christian speculative theologians. Olson asserts that

the place to begin any attempt to understand Origen’s doctrine of God and why it became a troubling legacy for the church is to examine his view of God’s nature and attributes. For him, God is Spirit and Mind, simple (uncompounded), incorporeal, immutable and incomprehensible. God is “simple substance” without body, parts or passions. (108–9)

When he turned to Scripture and its interpretation, Origen showed his true Alexandrian colors by emphasizing the spiritual meaning of much of it and the allegorical method of its interpretation. (106)

One of Origen’s purposes in allegorical interpretation was to relieve the unbearable pressure put on Christians by skeptics like the pagan writer Celsus, who ridiculed many Old Testament stories as absurd and improper to God. . . . Long before Origen or even Clement, of course, the Jewish scholar Philo had already set the trend in Alexandria for relieving this pressure. Such passages that seem to describe God in ways unworthy of divine being are not to be taken literally. They are, for example, anthropomorphisms in which God is being described in human images as having hands and feet. Or they are allegories in which God is being described in human images as having certain emotions that Greeks would consider absolutely contrary to divine *apatheia* (serenity and self-sufficiency). Origen joined Celsus in ridiculing the literal interpretations of many such passages as absurd and impossible. (106–7)

Olson concludes that, like Philo and the second-century Christian apologists, Origen “was unduly influenced by the Greek philosophical theism of the Platonic tradition” (107).

Thus, the pattern was set. Later theologians relied on the writings of theologians before them. Augustine was profoundly influenced by Christian Platonists such as Origen and Ambrose. Although Augustine rejected the impersonality of the god of Greek philosophical theology, he accepted (for worse, in Olson's view) that strand of the Greek view that portrayed God as a timeless, impassible all-determining reality (342).

The merger of Christian theology and Greek philosophy culminated in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. By the late Middle Ages, Greek philosophical assumptions had become necessary conditions to Christian theology. Olson concludes that "Aquinas allowed his natural theology to determine his doctrine of God . . . [and that] the portrait of God that evolves out of it . . . seems quite foreign to the God of the scriptural narrative, who genuinely grieves and sorrows and even repents (relents) when people pray" (342).

### **The Formulation and Acceptance of Doctrines without Biblical Basis**

According to Olson, Christian theologians' heavy use of Greek philosophy in forming their conception of God "led to the standardization of certain beliefs that could not be explicitly found in Christian sources" (610). These beliefs included *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), God's trinity, and "the fully developed idea of the incarnation as a hypostatic union of two natures" (610). Nonetheless, Olson hastens to add his own view that the lack of a biblical base for these doctrines "does not take anything away from their truth. It is only to say that they represent the second-order language of the church. The first-order language is the language of revelation" (610).

### **Monergism versus Synergism: The Perennial Debate**

Monergism and synergism name the two most fundamental theological responses to the cluster of questions about salvation. Origen adopted a synergistic position:

He emphasized the free participation of the human person *and* the absolute necessity of God's grace apart from any predestination or determination of persons' free choices.

. . . [S]alvation is seen as a lifelong process of gradual transformation in which human will and energy cooperates freely with divine grace in the hope that eventually the person will reflect God's glory and participate in God's immortal nature. (112)

On the other hand, Augustine emphasized God's absolute sovereignty and man's total depravity in his championing of a radical form of monergism:

Augustine ended up attempting to refute not only Pelagius's alleged heresy of sinless perfection apart from assisting grace but also all forms of synergism. By the end of his life and career, Augustine would allow only his own monergism as the basis of an orthodox doctrine of salvation. (271)



Both Origen's synergism and Augustine's monergism have reverberated down through the centuries. Augustine's formulation profoundly impacted Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and other magisterial reformers, while modes of Origen's synergism have been championed by scholastic reformers as well as by such notables as Jacobus Arminius and John Wesley.

According to Olson, the essence of Luther's contribution to Reformed theology was his consideration of salvation as a "free gift of divine mercy for which the human person can do nothing" (380). Luther regarded the belief in human free will as

just one more manifestation of human pride standing against the cross that proclaims human helplessness. . . . His theology of the cross also led him to a passionate defense of the doctrine of predestination—monergism of salvation—which he considered "very strong wine, and solid food for the strong." (382–83)

Zwingli also held to a strong version of predestination, emphatically rejecting the medieval Catholic view that God foreordains to heaven or hell on the basis of his foreknowledge of the free decisions of his creation. Rather, as Olson interprets Zwingli's view, "God *knows* because he *predetermines*. And Zwingli does not hesitate to affirm that those individuals who end up damned forever in hell are also eternally damned by God for that fate" (403).

Similarly, Calvin's monergism closely mirrored that of Augustine, Luther, and Zwingli (410). Calvin affirmed that God "ordained from eternity those whom he wills to embrace in love, and those upon whom he wills to vent his wrath" (as quoted in Olson, 411).

Monergism's monopoly on belief was not secure. Synerism was revived by the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob (James) Arminius (1560–1609), whose teachings created a deep split within the Reformed community (see Olson, 454–72). He and his followers

vehemently denied that monergism is the only view of God's relationship with fallen, sinful human beings that does justice to salvation as a sheer gift. While rejecting unconditional election and irresistible grace, they upheld the central Protestant principles and affirmed that Christ's righteousness is imputed to sinners for their salvation on account of faith alone. (455)

In response to the Arminian controversy, Calvinists of the second half of the sixteenth century developed a system of thought consisting of five points which later became known by the acronym TULIP. These points were pronounced and made official doctrine of the Dutch Reformed churches at the Synod of Dort (1618–19). Olson summarizes the five points as follows:

- Total depravity—[H]umans are dead in trespasses and sins before God sovereignly regenerates them and gives them the gift of salvation. (This usually implies a denial of free will.)



- Unconditional election—God chooses some humans to save before and apart from anything they do on their own. (This leaves open the question of whether God actively predestines some to damnation or merely leaves them to their deserved damnation.)
- Limited atonement—Christ died only to save the elect, and his atoning death is not universal for all of humanity.
- Irresistible grace—God’s grace cannot be resisted. The elect will receive it and be saved by it. The damned never receive it.
- Perseverance—The elect will inevitably persevere unto final salvation (eternal security). (460)

With these five points officially endorsed, “Reformed Protestants everywhere,” Olson says, “tended to accept them,” though Arminians who rejected all five points were excommunicated and exiled from Holland (459). Nevertheless, as Olson points out, Arminianism survived and flourished elsewhere:

Though politically suppressed and later marginalized in the country of its birth, Arminianism took root and flourished on English soil in the late sixteenth century. Many leaders of the Church of England at first sympathized with it and then openly espoused it. Even though the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion includes affirmation of predestination, Arminianism became a permanent option within the Anglican tradition. . . . The early Methodist movement founded by John and Charles Wesley and many early Baptists represented [an evangelical type] of Arminianism, while the Deists and liberal Protestant thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented [a liberal or naturalistic type of Arminianism]. Through these movements Arminian theology gradually filtered into the mainstream of Protestant thought in England and the United States—much to the chagrin of more traditional Reformed Protestants. (472)

Distressingly for Olson, the ancient dispute between monergism and synergism is again threatening to further divide Protestants. Olson explains:

Just when evangelical Christians in Britain and North America think the great theological debate among them over monergism and synergism is passé, it breaks out again. As this book is being written, the old controversy between evangelical Arminians like Wesley and evangelical Calvinists like Edwards and Whitefield is threatening to break out anew as evidenced in the formation of Reformed renewal movements such as Christians United for Reformation (C.U.R.E.) and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Both groups of evangelical theologians, pastors and evangelists see Arminian theology as a bane on evangelicalism’s existence and seek to elevate monergism in the Augustinian-Calvinist-Puritan tradition as the norm for evangelical orthodox. (636 n. 21)<sup>4</sup>

Given the persistent and divisive debate between monergists and synergists, no wonder Olson identifies God’s relationship to human beings as one of the major “unresolved issues for theological reformers to work on” (612).

## The Unfinished Story of Christian Theology

The existence of such major unresolved issues, coupled with the emergence in our time of a radical plurality of Christian movements and voices, leads Olson to acknowledge that “the story of Christian theology is not finished” and that “the contemporary age is a transitional one” (611). He argues:

For all the interest and “spice” that pluralism adds to the story, it cannot continue without some rediscovery of a central focus holding all the diverse theologies together as Christian. Many observers would argue quite rightly that the worldwide church of Jesus Christ is overdue for a new reformation. This time that reformation will need to be a reassertion of basic, or mere, Christianity that strikes a healthy balance between experiencing God and knowing about God intellectually. A new reformer of the universal church is needed—a great spiritual thinker . . . must step forward to provide a new unifying vision of Christian theology that is solidly based on divine revelation, consistent with the Great Tradition of the church and spiritually reinvigorating. (611–12)

Olson is of the opinion that “the European and North American wells of spiritual and theological renewal have run dry and need to be refreshed from new sources” (612). The needed “theological prophet,” Olson suggests, may well arise from “the younger Christian churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America” (612). “A vision of Christian theology unfettered by now-outmoded modern thought forms may have to arise from a non-Western Christian source if the story of Christian theology is to move on into the twenty-first century and third millennium with new vigor and vitality” (612).

## Conclusion

As Christians move into a new millennium, they have seemingly come full circle. Indeed, the cacophony of contemporary Christian voices seems even more diverse than that which gave rise to Christian theology’s birth in the second century. (See chapter 35, “Contemporary Theology Struggles with Diversity.”) In *The Story of Christian Theology*, Roger E. Olson has poignantly chronicled what happened to Christian thought following the passing of the Apostles. His hope that a new theologian will arise to bring unity out of the present diversity seems more poignant still, for, as his own version of the story convincingly shows, no such Christian theologian, regardless of his intellectual gifts, has ever been able to unify Christianity. What seems, then, to be *really* needed—perhaps desperately so—is not for God to send more theologians, but for the world once again to look to revelation through Apostles and prophets who, like the Apostles of the first-century Church, can resolve doctrinal disputes not as the scribes but (as Olson himself points out) as ones having “authority” (25).



David L. Paulsen (david\_paulsen@byu.edu) is Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Michigan (1975) and a J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School (1964).

1. Recent instances in print include Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Matthew R. Connelly and others, "Sizing Up the Divide: Reviews and Replies," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 163–90; "Reviews of Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*" *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (1999): 1–220. The author of the present review is presently editing an anthology of essays that carries on interfaith dialogue between twenty-two LDS and non-LDS scholars. The anthology is provisionally titled *Twentieth-Century Christian Theology: Launching Conversations between Latter-day Saints and Non-Restoration Christians*. The book will be published jointly by SUNY and BYU Press. For a classic instance of interfaith dialogue between an LDS and a non-LDS Christian theologian, see B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts–Van Der Donckt Discussion* (1903; reprint, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

2. Compare Olson's discussion with chapter one, "How Will It Be When None More Saith 'I Saw'?" in Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987).

3. This worry seems to contradict (or is at least in tension with) Olson's claim that God closely superintended the Church's development of doctrine.

4. Compare Roger E. Olson's recent article, "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Arminian," *Christianity Today* 43 (September 6, 1999): 87–94. In the article, Olson identifies himself as an Arminian and pleads with Calvinists not to oust Arminians from Evangelical associations.