

Alan G. Padgett

---

## Methodist Theology Today: A Review Essay of Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*

---

*Dr Padgett, currently a teacher in Bethel College, St Paul, Mn., but shortly moving to Azusa Pacific University, offers an extended discussion of an interesting work of systematic theology by an ex-liberal who has returned to evangelical orthodoxy.*

We greet the publication of a new three-volume systematic theology by Thomas Oden with anticipation.<sup>1</sup> This achievement represents the first major systematic theology in multiple volume by a member of the Methodist tradition in over fifty years. In the 30's Albert Knudson wrote two volumes of a systematic, and in 1940 H. Orton Wiley published his *Christian Theology*.<sup>2</sup> But Methodists have tended to be happy with systematics from other traditions. From Wesley down to our own day, Methodists have not been known as serious systematic theologians, although we have made important contributions to historical and biblical theology. Let us hope that these volumes may do something to assuage this criticism.

Oden is professor of theology at Drew University, and a Methodist minister with pastoral experience.<sup>3</sup> He is well known for his turn from previous 'liberal' and 'modernist' theology, to what he has called 'postmodern orthodoxy'.<sup>4</sup> Oden is a prolific author, and has written over twenty books. Before his about-face in the 70's, Oden was known for his books exploring the relationship between

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Living God: Systematic Theology Volume One* (London: Harper & Row, 1987), *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology Volume Two* (*ibid.*, 1989) and *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology Volume Three* (*ibid.*, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> A. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1930) and his *The Doctrine of Redemption* (*ibid.*, 1933); H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City: Nazarene Pub. House, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> One hundred years ago another Drew theologian, John Miley, published an influential, multi-volumed systematic theology: *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1893; rpt. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> *Agenda for Theology* (London: Harper & Row, 1979) rev. ed. *After Modernity . . . What?*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

psychology and theology. He has left that behind now, for the task of developing his postmodern orthodox theology. These three large volumes represent the major achievement of a lifetime of theological reflection. There is much to be learned from Oden, and his theological journey.

According to Oden, the American United Methodist church and denominations like it have been held captive to modernity. Oden understands modernity to include relativism, individualism, hedonism, and naturalistic reductionism. What Oden calls 'modernity' has a name: the Enlightenment, especially in France. Oden, then, is suggesting that theology must be 'post-modern', since 'modernity' is breaking up today (in modern times?). The Enlightenment worldview upon which American culture and politics has been founded is breaking up. Oden is suggesting an antidote to the pretensions of modernity: orthodox, classical Christianity. His contention, which I wholly endorse, is that classical Christianity holds the resources to meet the deep spiritual needs of modern people, if only we could learn to draw from it.

This three-volume work is a summary of the classical Christian consensus of the ages. Oden drank deep and long from the fountains of Christian tradition, that is, the seven Ecumenical Creeds and the great, 'classic' theologians of the past. He offers us a modern *Summa Consensus Patrum*: a summary of the great consensus of the Church's theologians.

Surely all systematic theology must begin, after Scripture, with a careful examination of what the Church has believed in the past. Oden has achieved this with style and grace. He offers this *Summa* not simply as an antidote to Liberal theology (which it is), nor as an outstanding textbook for Seminary students (it's that, too) but also as a foundation for Christian living in the world today.

The first volume surveys the topics of the nature and existence of God, Creation, Providence, and the doctrine of the Trinity. There is also a section on theological method in general. This includes an outstanding defense of what Albert Outler called the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, experience and reason. In the second volume, Oden develops his consensual Christology. Here Oden covers the traditional views of the person and work of Christ, including his atonement, resurrection and ascension. From his basis in the consensus, Oden addresses such modern issues as the possibility of miracles; gender, equality, and sexuality; poverty and liberation; and the quest for the historical Jesus.

The final volume of the trilogy covers topics related to the work of God the Holy Spirit, including pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology. Even as the Holy Spirit is barely mentioned at

the end of the Apostle's Creed, so in this last volume there is much less of a 'consensus' for Oden to draw upon. It is here where, more than in the other volumes, Oden is both modern and Methodist.

It might seem to some that Oden is writing outside the mainstream of American theology today. But in fact this is a timely systematic. American theologians of all stripes are beginning to see the import of knowing the Tradition, *viz.* the classical consensus of the past. Oden comes closest to defining the sense of 'tradition' when he writes:

The teaching office given to the church requires transmission of the history of the events of God's self-disclosure to subsequent generations without distortion, and in its original vitality and integrity. This effort at transmission in all its oral and written forms is called *tradition* (*Living God*, p. 345, his italics).

Whether practitioners of the Yale school of 'post-liberals' theology, the Chicago school of 'revisionist' theology, or various kinds of liberation and contextual theologies, all are recognizing the fact that they are part of a community that extends beyond the here and now. Knowing what we are 'up against' in the tradition has become important for American theologians. Perhaps this is, in fact, a part of the 'break-up of modernity'. Perhaps it is a part of the maturation of American culture. For whatever reasons, we are greatly in debt to Oden for this Herculean task.

I wish to ask three questions about Oden's work. First, does it really represent a 'consensus'? Second, is consensual, traditional theology all we need for life in the Spirit today? Third, is this really a Methodist theology?

What we have in these three volumes is certainly one reading of the Tradition. But there can be no question that Oden has interpreted, as well as recorded, Scripture and Tradition. Take the doctrine of the Trinity, for example. Oden's theology is far too Latin in his doctrine of the Trinity. It's not merely that he accepts the 'and the Son' addition to the Nicene Creed. The way forward for a modern doctrine of the Trinity lies, I believe, in abandoning the Augustinian interpretation in favor of the Greeks, especially the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil and the two Gregorys). The difference here is between a Social Model, which emphasizes the being of God as simply being the Triune Relationship Itself; and a Western, Latin model based on one individual human's faculties (such as, memory, reason and will). For the Greeks, there is no divine Substance other than the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Latin tradition has led to an emphasis on One God, a kind of divine substance that is 'behind' or 'underneath' the three Persons. This in turn leads to a theology that speaks first of the nature and existence of the One God,

and only later of the Trinity: as if the Trinity was a strange, separate doctrine which could be dispensed with. This is exactly the model Oden follows, and I believe it should be rejected in favor of the Greek tradition.<sup>5</sup> I have dwelt at length on this issue, simply as one example of the problem of trying to develop *the* consensus of the Church on some doctrine.

There are other areas where Oden is clearly modern, and does not follow the Tradition at all. The Tradition is patriarchal: Oden believes in the ordination of women, and is egalitarian. The Tradition insists on celibate clergy: Oden allows for married clergy. The Tradition is anti-Semitic: Oden is pro-Hebrew, accepting the validity of Judaism alongside Christianity. The Tradition is hierarchical (pun intended) in ecclesiology: Oden is communal and egalitarian in his ecclesiology. The Tradition is theologically rigid, even insisting on the punishment of heretics: Oden is a man of 'Catholic Spirit', called for toleration, and even allowing for truth in other religions. In short, Oden is modern, too.

I believe we do the Tradition a disservice by failing to indicate those places where we disagree with it. Is it really coherent to assert that God is absolutely timeless, and yet works in time? Must clergy be celibate? Are women allowed to be (Eucharistic) priests? Sometimes our disagreement is based upon Scripture, but for the most part it seems to be based on a different *reading* of Scripture. After all, the Fathers knew their Bible! Sometimes our disagreement will be based upon our reading of Scripture, combined with Reason and Experience. Is that wrong? Surely we must consult and understand the theology of the past: but just as surely we must be willing to re-interpret it, and correct it where it goes astray. I do not say that we should accommodate Christianity to the spirit of the age: God forbid! Here Oden and I would see eye to eye. I would simply make a greater plea for the contextualization of theology, and for the need to understand God and the world as modern men and women who live at the end of the twentieth century. Surely 'modernity' has things to teach us, even *qua* theologians. Where it does have truth to say, Christian theology must learn from it.

In the end, it will never do just to state the consensus. We must also defend it against modern objections: and this means taking-up the tools of modernity, including philosophy and the sciences, social and natural. Oden comes closest to this ideal in his addendum on historical method (*Words of Life*, 527-534). The Tradition needs to be carefully considered, critiqued, defended in its true core and marrow, but also *explained*. This, too, is a modern task which must

---

<sup>5</sup> See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: SPCK, 1985).

assume the nature of what we all 'know' to be true today. In places, Christian faith will need to be critical of the modern consensus of knowledge (e.g. early Christian thinkers rejected the view, prevalent in their day, that the body is evil in itself). But the opposite sometimes will also be true: new knowledge must be accepted in theology, and shaped into the overall Christian world-view, grounded in Scripture and Tradition. This new knowledge will sometime call traditional formulations into question.

One example of this would be modern natural science. Another excellent example would be the rise of historical science, and its effect on Biblical Criticism. Oden sometimes treats the Bible as if he were pre-critical, rather than postmodern, and surely this is a mistake. We have learned a great deal from contemporary historical-critical studies: what is needed is a balance of historical-critical and traditional theological approaches to the text, a kind of 'second naivete' (P. Ricoeur) in our reading of Scripture. This is a kind of balance, however, that Oden sometimes fails to give us (e.g. his discussion of the Trinity in the Old Testament).

When Oden errs, he errs on the side of tradition: but in fairness to him, this may be exactly the sort of 'error' that modern theologians, pastors and seminary students need! For too long we have been held captive by the modern spirit, and grieved the Holy Spirit. Oden helps us redress the balance. What he has provided, in fact, is a major step toward a theology that is traditional and contextual, consensual and modern.

One final question: is this a Methodist theology? Yes! First of all, the last volume in particular is Methodist. Lacking a clear consensus, Oden follows the Erasmian tradition of Wesley and the Church of England on such issues as election, prevenient grace, the order of salvation, the divine decrees, the Sacraments, and the 'Catholic Spirit' of ecumenism. This tradition may not be as well known (or if known, respected) by readers in the Calvinist tradition. They tend to associate these views with Jacob Arminius: but in fact they go straight back to the Greek Fathers, as Oden demonstrates. For a defense of this Erasmian tradition, I can only refer the reader to volume three: *Life in the Spirit*. In particular, Oden argues that such views need not denigrate the Sovereignty of God.

In the end, the 'deep grammar' of Oden's Summa follows in the spirit of John Wesley. For like Oden, Wesley was deeply concerned to know and follow the great *Consensus Patrum*, which shaped his own theological work.<sup>6</sup> In this effort Wesley was, in the end, merely

---

<sup>6</sup> See Ted Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood Books, 1991).

thinking as a priest in the Church of England: which, indeed, he was and always insisted on remaining.

In sum, we should be grateful to Prof. Oden for this excellent three-volumed Summa. This is not to say I agree with everything Oden has written, but simply to acknowledge the importance of his achievement. I hope and pray his work is widely used in seminaries and churches. Perhaps it will help us renew theology today.