

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Calvinists in the Hands of an Angry Arminian

A Brief Response to Roger Olson
(Part 1 of 3)

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Roger Olson has established himself as a prominent voice in the pages of *Christianity Today*, and as the author of a number of books that have served to enhance his reputation as a leading spokesman for both Post-conservative Evangelicalism and Evangelical Arminianism. But he has also acquired an equally well-deserved reputation for his pugnacious and combative style. Millard Erickson, who served as a colleague with Olson, nonetheless took exception to Olson's repeated use of pejorative and inflammatory language that frequently appear in his writings. (See his article in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodations in Post-modern Times*, eds. M. Erickson, P. Helseth J. Taylor. Crossway 2004.)



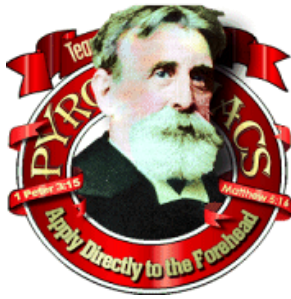
His most recent book, *Arminian Theology: Myth and Realities* (IVP, 2006), Olson's reputation as a voice to be reckoned will no doubt be further substantiated, but despite the claims on the dust jacket about Olson's "gracious and irenic spirit," this volume will also serve to show that he is as bellicose as ever.

Olson's main complaint throughout the book is that Calvinists, almost without exception, are guilty of misunderstanding, misrepresenting and distorting the true character of Evangelical Arminianism. All the representative Calvinists that Olson cites in this book are guilty as charged: James Boice, Edwin Palmer, R. C. Sproul, Louis Berkhof, Robert Peterson, Michael Williams, Richard Muller, Robert Letham and especially the

¹ Pastor, The Church Of The Redeemer in Mesa, Arizona. With Phil Johnson in Florida and the other Pyros nearly burnt out for the week, Gary L.W. Johnson (no relation to Phil) is guest-blogging today. Gary's contribution elevates the academic level of the blog considerably. He is co-editor (with Fowler White) of *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?* (P&R, 2001); co-editor (with Guy Waters) of *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* (forthcoming from Crossway, February 2007); and editor of a book on B. B. Warfield scheduled for release by P&R in Spring 2007. He is guest-blogging at *PyroManiacs* for the first time.

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individuals associated with *Modern Reformation*, i.e., Mike Horton, Robert Godfrey and Kim Riddlebarger.



Olson however, reserves his most rancorous *flagrante delicto* for the Old Princeton duo of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, with Warfield in particular singled out for special malevolent treatment.

It is not my intention to write a full-blown review of Olson's book. I know of others who will undertake that task. My long-time friend and fellow Calvinist, C. Samuel Storms will begin shortly a chapter-by-chapter analysis of Olson (these will be posted at his website).

Sam and I may sound a lot alike on this subject primarily because we were both privileged to have been students of one of the most accomplished Calvinistic theologians of the 20th century, the late S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. I instead will have a somewhat narrower focus: (1) Olson's assessment of Warfield, (2) his neglect of some of the most important Calvinistic critiques of Arminianism and (3) his evasive tactics concerning the charge of semi-pelagianism.

Olson takes umbrage with Warfield's review of his contemporary, the noted Methodist theologian John Miley, which appears in the *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield II*, ed. J. Meeter (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) pp. 308-320. Olson calls this "a lengthy attack" (26) and elsewhere a "caustic attack" (278) declaring that Warfield's criticisms "were stated in such an extreme way as to raise questions about Warfield's own generosity of interpretation and treatment of fellow Christians. Many twentieth-century Calvinists know little about Arminianism except what they read in nineteenth-century Calvinist theologians Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. Both were vitriolic critics who could not bring themselves to see any good in Arminianism. And they blamed it for every possible evil consequence they could see it possibly having" (26).

Is this a fair assessment not only of Warfield's review, but of him overall? Is this significant Calvinistic divine really the ill-mannered theological ogre that Olson makes him out to be? Let the reader judge. The first thing you notice is that Olson does not give a single example of what he accuses Warfield of doing. When we actually read Warfield's review, even the most sympathetic Arminian would be hard pressed to read into it what Olson claims is there.

This is how Warfield begins:

The high quality of the *Biblical and Theological Library*, now publishing by the Methodist Publication House, does honor to the great denomination which it represents. Dr. Miley's *Systematic Theology* is the latest issue in the series, and it is

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highly but not unduly praised when it is recognized as worthy to stand in company with Dr. Bennett's *Christian Archaeology* and Dr. Terry's *Biblical Hermeneutics*. It is clearly, directly, and strongly written; it is characterized by candor, restraint, and modesty; it is orderly in arrangement and lucid in discussion. It is altogether a good book, which the Arminian should find rarely satisfying, and with which the Calvinist should count it a privilege to join issue(308).

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Wow! Would that Olson treated his Calvinistic opponents as civilly as Warfield does Miley. Warfield goes on to commend Miley for his "very illuminating discussion of such topics as these: the nature of scientific treatment; the scientific basis of Christianity; the right of systematization and the value of dogma; and the method of systematizing—under which occurs a very sensible criticism of the so-called 'Christocentric' method" (309).

Warfield begins his review of the second volume of Miley's theology in a tone very reminiscent of his complementary remarks about Volume I, by saying that it "is conceived in the same spirit and executed with the same skill which characterized the first" (314).

Furthermore, Warfield's analysis of the historical Arminian development after Arminius runs parallel to that described by Olson. Warfield writes:

The Remonstrant controversy was a battle of giants. In its earnest grapple, the movement tentatively begun by Arminius tended rapidly toward its level in a distinctively Pelagian anthropology and Socinian soteriology. But in the great evangelical revival of the last century, the Wesleyan leaders offered to the world an Evangelicalized Arminianism. The rationalism of the Remonstrants, they affirmed, was not due to their Arminianism but to their Humanism. The essential elements of Arminianism, they asserted, were in no wise inconsistent with the great Evangelical doctrines of sin and atonement. On the contrary, they declared, the Arminian construction alone gave their full rights to the catholic doctrines of the condemnation of all men in Adam and the vicarious satisfaction for sin in Christ. An Arminianism zealous for these doctrines might well claim to stand on a higher plane than that occupied by the Remonstrants (314).

So far Olson would agree. But it is what Warfield goes on to say that irritates Olson and really constitutes the reason behind Olson's acerbic assessment of the great Princetonian.

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Warfield framed it this way:

The question, however, was a pressing one, whether the Evangelical elements thus taken up could consist with the Arminian principle. Calvinists earnestly urged that the union was an unnatural one, and could not be stable: that either the Evangelical elements ought to rule to the exclusion of the unharmonizable Arminian principle, in which case we should have consistent Calvinism; or else the Arminian principle would inevitably rule to the exclusion of the Evangelical doctrines forced into artificial conjunction with it, and we should have consistent Arminianism (315).

Neither here or anywhere in the review does Warfield resort to name calling or insinuate that Miley, and Arminians like him, are guilty of sloppy scholarship or the like. Instead Warfield sets out to show the differences between the two theological systems, something that Olson would admit is legitimate.

But here is where the plot thickens. Olson contends that Miley "introduced a somewhat liberalizing tendency into Wesleyan Arminian theology" and (somewhat reluctantly I suspect) admitted as well that "some of Warfield's criticisms of Miley were valid" (26), but as in the case of his accusations against Warfield, so too here he gives no examples of what he considers to be valid criticisms. Is Warfield guilty of Olson's charges simply because he spells out the dark family secrets that Olson would prefer stay hidden?

Warfield concludes his analysis by saying, "After a century of conflict, Dr. Miley's admirably reasoned volumes come to tell us frankly that the Calvinists have been right in these contentions. Arminianism, he says, has no logical place in its system for a doctrine of race sin, either in the sense of the participation of the race in the guilt of Adam's first sin, or in the sense of the infection of the race with a guilty corruption. Arminianism, he says, has no logical place in its system for a doctrine of penal substitution of Christ for sinners and of an atonement by satisfaction. If the Arminian principle is to rule, he says, the doctrine of race sin must go, and the doctrine of vicarious punishment must go. And, as he thinks that the Arminian principle ought to rule, he teaches that men are not by nature under the condemning wrath of God, and that Christ did not vicariously bear the penalty of sin. Thus, in his hands, Arminianism is seeking to purify itself by cleansing itself from the Evangelical elements with which it has been so long conjoined" (314).

Olson deeply resents Warfield connecting the dots. This, to Olson's way of thinking, makes Warfield guilty of malfeasance. Olson wants desperately to separate "heart Arminians" from "head Arminians" (17), and that mean-spirited Warfield refuses to do so!

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Warfield insists that

The importance of Dr. Miley's attitude in this matter will not be properly estimated until we remind ourselves that he does not stand alone in it. Those who are familiar with recent Arminian theologizing will be aware that Dr. Miley in this is only a representative of a marked present-day drift in Arminian dogmatics. The nature of the impression which this drift will make upon us will doubtless depend, in part at least, upon whether our mind is upon the thinker or upon the thought. There is no one who will not feel regret to see one driven, by whatever stress of logic, from his hold upon fundamental Evangelical doctrine; it is better far to be inconsistently Evangelical than consistently Arminian. On the other hand, the line of thought by which Dr. Miley, for instance, clears away the Evangelical accretions from the Arminian core, commands our complete admiration. It is quiet logic, working its irresistible way to an irrefutable end. And as a matter of constructive reasoning it cannot be other than salutary. It is just as well that the world should come to know with the utmost clearness that these Evangelical doctrines are unconformable with Arminianism. It is just as well that the world should realize with increased clearness that Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism, and that every proof of Evangelicalism is a proof of Calvinism (315).

Incidentally, and this may be another issue that Olson wished was kept in the closet, Warfield commends Miley for rejecting the proposals of the nineteenth-century forerunner to what is today known as Open Theism, Lorenzo McCabe.

"The divine intellect is discussed under the caption of omniscience; and the perplexities which emerge from it for Arminian thought are not disguised (pp. 189 f.). Dr. Miley refuses, however, to be led by these perplexities into a denial of the divine foreknowledge of free actions, which he defends unanswerably against the arguments of Dr. McCabe" (310).

Olson has openly defended the Open-theists in the pages of Christianity Today (Jan 9, 1995, p. 30), and so it comes as no surprise to hear him say, "I consider open theism a legitimate evangelical and Arminian option even though I have not yet adopted it as my own perspective" (198). Olson acknowledges that Open-theists like his good friend (8) Clark Pinnock, argues that their view is consistent Arminianism (198). Why is Warfield charged with a lack of charity for drawing similar conclusions?

Warfield's review is measured, respectful and even complimentary, while at the same time he shows himself to be consciously Calvinist. Indeed, it could be said of him *fortiter in re sed suaviter in modo*, lit. "steadfast in what must be done, but gentle in the way he does it."

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What's wrong with that? Was Warfield a "vitriolic critic" who could not bring himself to see any good in Arminianism, as Olson claims? Not if we judge Warfield by this review, nor in light of the fact that Warfield actually had articles published in leading Methodist journals of the time.

In his review of F. J. Snell's *Wesley and Methodism*, to mention only one example, Warfield had this to say of the father of Evangelical Arminianism, John Wesley, "the reader lays the book down, feeling that he has listened to a very lively *raconteur* recounting with real reverence the very true story of a very noble man. Wesley's weaknesses are not hidden. Neither are his virtues. And the total impression is exceedingly good" (*The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* July, 1901 p. 489).

I am forced to conclude that Olson has in fact read very little of Warfield and what little he has, he has done so with a jaundiced eye.

Olson claims in the conclusion that he wants a sense of fair play, common sense, rules of fairness between Arminians and Calvinists, but I ask in light of Olson's treatment of Warfield, who is guilty of "misunderstanding, misrepresenting and distorting"? To all who are interested I say, Warfield's review is easily available, so *Tolle Lege* and let the reader judge.

(To be continued . . .)

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