

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

More Calvinists in the Hands of an Angry Arminian

A Brief Response to Roger Olson
(Part 2 of 3)

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GARY L.W. JOHNSON¹

Roger Olson's recent book, *Arminian Theology: Myth and Realities* (IVP, 2006) is a diatribe against "crusading Calvinists" whom Olson considers a major threat to Evangelicalism as it enters the twenty-first century. See his *The Story of Christian Theology*, IVP, 1999, where he declares:

Whatever the future of the story of Christian theology brings forth, it is bound to be interesting. It always has been. And there are as-yet unresolved issues for theological reformers to work on. The major one, of course, is the old debate between monergists and synergists over God's relationship with the world.

New light from God's Word is badly needed as the extremes of process theology and resurgent Augustinian-Calvinism polarize Christian thought as never before. While I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, I predict (with fear and trembling) that this issue will be the all-consuming one in Christian theology in the twenty-first century and that new insights and suggestions for resolving it will come from non-Western Christian thinkers. All the options of Western (European and North American) thought seem to have been proposed and have led only to reactions rather than resolutions. If this particular problem of theology is ever to be solved—even in part—the crucial insights will almost certainly need to come from outside of Western culture, with its dualistic mindset that insists on seeing divine and human agencies as in competition with one another (p. 612).

In his most recent effort, Olson sets out to show that Calvinists, especially the contemporary ones whom I listed in [the first installment](#), are all guilty of misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and distorting the true nature and distinguishing



¹ Pastor, The Church Of The Redeemer in Mesa, Arizona.

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features of Evangelical Arminianism. As a result, Olson's book is heralded by the various endorsements on the back of the dust jacket as having once and for all cleared away all the Calvinistic distortions and half-truths.

As I read through the book, however, I began to notice that with the exception of Warfield's review of Miley, the Calvinists Olson chooses to engage are his contemporaries. (And may I be so bold as to speculate, since Olson does this, that Olson's knowledge of Warfield comes from Kim Riddlebarger's article "Fire and Water," which appears in the issue of *Modern Reformation* [May, 1992], which greatly incensed Olson. In reference to Riddlebarger, Olson snidely remarks "I wonder whether the author even read Miley or only B. B. Warfield, his critic" [p. 40]).

Missing from Olson's book is any mention, much less interaction with, the standard Calvinistic critiques of Arminianism. Surely Olson is aware of these. Why did Olson not engage the great John Owen and his *A Display of Arminianism* (in volume 10 of his works)?



Nor does he mention Pierre du Moulin's *The Anatomy of Arminianism* (English trans; London, 1620). This is regarded as the best early Calvinistic response to Arminius and his early followers. Why did Olson by-pass this?

Likewise, Olson fails to interact with Jonathan Edwards' classic work, *The Freedom of The Will*, making only a passing reference and dismissing Edwards's concern by restricting the kind of Arminians that Edwards had in mind, calling them "Arminians of the head."

Augustus Toplady, John Wesley's arch-foe, wrote extensively on Arminianism of the Wesleyan type. Why no mention of his works? (Toplady's *Complete Works* in one large volume was reprinted a few years back by Sprinkle.)

John Gill, the acclaimed Baptist theologian and one of Spurgeon's predecessors (he pastored the congregation that later moved to New Park Street), produced a lengthy critique of Arminianism entitled *The Cause of God and Truth*. Why was this ignored?

The noted Southern Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century, John Girardeau, deserves special mention. His very substantial book on the subject, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism: Compared as to Election, Reprobation, Justification and Related Doctrines* (reprinted by Sprinkle, 1984), specifically addressed what Olson likes to call "Arminians of the heart." This would have been a perfect foil for Olson. Listen to how Girardeau lays out the very issues that concern Olson:

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The ground covered by the controversy between Calvinists and Evangelical Arminians has not been completely occupied. John Owen's *Display of Arminianism*, and similar works of the Puritan period, antedated the rise of Evangelical Arminianism. Jonathan Edwards was a contemporary of John Wesley. Principal Hill's comparison of Calvinism and Arminianism had reference mainly to the Remonstrant system, as developed by Episcopius and Curcellaeus, Grotius and Limborch. The same is, in a measure, true of Principal Cunningham's comparative estimate of Calvinism and Arminianism in his *Historical Theology*. (VI)

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Wonder why Olson *chose* to ignore Girardeau?

In addition to these older works, Olson conveniently overlooks two significant contemporary Calvinistic critiques of Arminianism. The first is J. I. Packer's "Arminianism" which appears in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, eds. W. R. Godfrey and J. L. Boyd III (P&R, 1985). Olson is aware of this, since he makes two opaque references to Packer, saying, "An influential evangelical theologian suggested that satanic deception may lie at the root of Arminianism" (p. 21) and "One noted evangelical Calvinist [who] noted Wesley's agreement with Calvinism (and Protestant theology in general) declared him a 'confused Calvinist' rather than Arminian" (p. 55). Why did Olson not footnote Packer's article and take issue with it?

Perhaps the most glaring omission is the two-volume work, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of The Will: Historical and Theological Perspective on Calvinism* eds. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Baker 1995). These volumes were designed to answer the two works edited by Clark Pinnock that defended Arminianism (the two volumes edited by Pinnock are repeatedly cited by Olson). Why no interaction here as well? This omission leave one with the impression that Olson would just as soon his readers not know about these Calvinistic works least they find them convincing!

Finally (and this is purely the passing observation of a student of the Calvinist/Arminian conflict), Olson omits from his discussion two of the greatest champions on the Arminian side. The noted puritan Arminian John Goodwin (whom Owen considered a worthy foe) and the highly respected Scottish exegete James Morison, whose labors in Romans my mentor S. Lewis Johnson (who taught through the Greek text of Romans for over thirty years) considered the best Arminian treatment available.

(To be concluded...)

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