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Post-Modern Orthodoxy

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POST-MODERN ORTHODOXY: A REVIEW ARTICLE

By JoAnn Ford Watson*

Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*

Systematic Theology, Vol. One. Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1987.
430 pp. \$29.95.

Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*

Systematic Theology, Vol. Two. Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1989.
583 pp. \$32.95.

This review will briefly discuss the contents of each of these volumes by Oden. These works represent the first two of a three volume systematic theology written by a major Protestant American theologian. Volume III will be titled, *Life in the Spirit* and will deal with the Holy Spirit, Church, sacraments, and the Christian life. Oden's theology focuses on the development of "post modern orthodoxy" first stated in his *Agenda for Theology* (1979). "Post modern orthodoxy" for Oden is a contemporary reappropriation of classical orthodoxy. Oden states in *The Living God*, "Post modern orthodoxy is Christian teaching that, having passed through a deep engagement in the assumptions of modernity, has rediscovered the vitality of the ancient ecumenical Christian tradition" (Vol. I, p. 323). "Post modern orthodoxy," Oden declares, stands in contrast to pre-modern reformed systematic theology such as Charles Hodge's or modern accommodationist systematic theology such as Paul Tillich's (Vol. I, p. 329).

Oden's systematic theology then has rediscovered the early Christian tradition. Oden organizes his work in each volume around a pyramid of sources in which Scripture and early patristic writings serve as the base. In Vol. I Oden writes, "The weighting of references may be compared to a pyramid with Scripture and early patristic writers at the base and the most recent references at the narrower apex." (Vol. I, p. xiii). In Vol. II, Oden gives an actual pyramid which represents the ordering of sources with Scripture at the base, then Ante-Nicene, Post-Nicene Writers, Medieval Sources, Reformation Writers and finally Modern Interpreters on top (Vol. II, p. xv).

In Vol. I, *The Living God*, Oden states that his "aim is to present classical Christian teaching of God on its own terms and not in diluted modern terms" (Vol. I, p. xiii). This first volume on the doctrine of God is organized into four parts. Part I, "The Living God," has three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the naming of God as it comes to us from the Scriptural witness. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the nature and character of God and focus upon the divine attributes of God. Oden speaks about the nature of God in terms of the Divine

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Sufficiency and the Divine Majesty. Oden describes the character of God as: the Divine Thou and the Divine Goodness (p. 51).

Part II deals with the reality of God. Chapter 4 fleshes out five types of arguments for the existence of God which are predominant in classical Christian theistic reasoning: cosmological, teleological, ontological, anthropological, and moral or aesthetic arguments. Oden defines the viewpoint of each argument yet affirms the existence of God — as Scripture attests. Chapter 5 deals with the Trinity because it is so central to Christian faith. He draws beautifully upon biblical material especially “NT unfolding of Truine Teaching” (Vol. I, p. 194).

“The Work of God” is the title of Part III. The work of God as Creator is the subject of Chapter 6. Oden emphasizes the goodness of God’s creation and of creatures. Theological Scriptural truths about God as Creator and the goodness of creation as found in the Genesis 1 account of creation are given. His treatment of Genesis and his reference to modern scientific inquiry blend into an integrated discussion. Oden states, “Christian faith in God the Creator relies primarily on Scripture’s attestation of divine revelation, but partial witness to the truth of revelation may occur through scientific investigation and rational inquiry.” (Vol. 1, p. 227).

Chapter 7 discusses God’s care for the world. Oden centers upon the doctrine of providence and deals with God’s divine preservation, co-operation and divine governance of the world. He touches upon related problems such as fate, sin, evil.

Part IV focuses on the method of the study of God. Following ancient ecumenical tradition, Oden first studies the nature of God. Then, in Chapters 8 and 9, Oden asks questions of method and rationale. For Oden the Living God is prior to and more crucial than methods of inquiry. Oden states, . . . “methodological reflection best occurs as a retrospection upon the actual practice of the study of God rather than an arbitrary limitation upon practice before study has begun.” (Vol. I, p. 319).

Oden’s Systematic Theology, Volume II, *The Word of Life*, “plunges into perplexing issues of whether the Word became flesh, whether God has entered history in Christ, and whether that has saving significance for us.” (Vol. II, p. x). Oden points out that this volume though integrated into a larger system of theology can be read as a self-standing argument. He states, “It commends but does not require the reading of its companion volumes.” (Vol. II, p. x).

In this volume, Oden speaks of his mission as to deliver the “core of consensual belief concerning Jesus Christ that has been shared for two hundred decades” . . . (Vol. II, p. x). For Oden, his systematic ecumenical theology looks for a “cohesive grasp of the whole of classical Christian teaching” as it pertains to Jesus Christ. (Vol. II, p. x). Oden states that his study and task is to unapologetically set forth “in an undisguised way the apostolic testimony to Christ in its classical consensual form.” Oden wants to show that what is most valuable in contemporary biblical exegesis was discovered by the fifth century (Vol. II, p. xi).

Oden concludes that although he will use contemporary sources where per-

minent, he will not be preoccupied with speculative modern critical debates. He will rather center upon the historic Christian consensus concerning the doctrine of Christ. He states, "As one who has taught and studied and written on modern existentialism, psychotherapies, and social theories, I have paid full dues to modernity and now turn to the classic wisdoms concerning the way of Christ." (Vol. II, p. xii). His study holds to the central core of Christianity and teaching on Christ by focusing on "ecumenical consenses" within the classical Christian tradition. (Vol. II, p. xx).

Oden's systematic theology focuses on the person of Jesus Christ. Oden declares, "Christianity is a relation to a person. It is not essentially an idea or institution. It has defined itself in canon and tradition as a relation to Christ. He is the one to whom faith relates and in whom faith trusts." (Vol. II, p. 1).

Oden's systematic theology in the classic — ecumenic tradition is organized on the essential structure of the Nicaea — Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 — "Nicene Creed." For Oden, "The creed has a deliberate overarching structure of three articles of faith in one God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit." (Vol. II, p. 23). This volume examines in thorough detail the various topics of the second article on God the Son.

The creed's second article is ordered according to the essential two-fold division that sums up classic Christology: the person and the work of Christ. (Vol. II, p. 23). The creed provides the core outline of Oden's study. His Christology is ordered into 4 parts.

Part I is comprised of six chapters which center around the theological issue of the Word made flesh. Oden's study focuses on four basic questions: "*Who* assumed humanity in the incarnation? *What* nature did the eternal Son assume? *How* are deity and humanity united in one person? *Why* did the Son become flesh?" (Vol. III, p. 30).

To address these questions, Oden gives traditional arguments for the divinity of Christ which recur in classical exegesis of hundreds of New Testament texts in Chapter 2. Oden emphasizes the nature of divine Sonship, the pre-incarnational life of the Son, the humbling of God to servanthood in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 deals with the fact of incarnation itself. Oden states the essential key teaching . . . "the eternal Son assumed human nature without ceasing to be God." (Vol. II, p. 93). Oden concludes, "Incarnation is the necessary premise of any further episode of the unfolding Christ event." (Vol. II, p. 93). Chapter 5 discusses the virgin birth and notes the biblical witness of Luke and Matthew. Chapter 6 explores the Scriptural grounding of the theandric union and affirms two natures in the one person of Christ.

Part II is comprised of chapters 7, 8, 9 and focuses on Christ's earthly ministry. In chapter 7, Oden states that after considering the incarnation, it is now appropriate to study Jesus' earthly life and ministry. In this chapter Oden gives a "personal interlude" which defines his "post-critical" stance in his Christology. (Vol. II, p. 217). Oden states his reversal in thought from modernity to ancient ecumenical councils and patristics. Oden declares, "Only then in my forties did I begin to become a theologian. Up to that time I had

been teaching theology without ever having sufficiently met the patristic mentors who could teach me theology.” (Vol. II, p. 220).

Chapter 8 discusses events of Jesus’ ministry that primarily affect the Christian teaching of salvation. (Vol. II, p. 229). In chapter 9 Oden discusses the work of Christ in light of the three offices of prophet, priest, and king. Oden states, “Only one who *is* truly human and truly God in personal union is able to *do* what is needed for salvation. Hence the *person* of Christ is the requisite premise for the *work* of Christ.” (Vol. II, p. 279).

The death of Jesus and his atoning sacrifice on the cross are the contents of chapter 10 and chapter 11 in Part III. For Oden, these are central and essential in grasping the meaning of Jesus for our salvation. Oden states in chapter 10, “It was not an easy death. That he suffered punitively for us in his death is intrinsic to the meaning of his death.” (Vol. II, p. 317). In chapter 11 Oden focuses upon issues relating to the salvific work of Christ on the cross: such as Christ’s obedience, vicarious atonement. He gives various theories of the atonement with clear illustration in a thorough and detailed chart on pp. 412-413.

Part IV of Oden’s Christology is entitled “Exalted Lord” and is comprised of the remaining three chapters in this volume, chapters 12, 13, and 14. In chapter 12, Oden declares, “With the death of Jesus an old era ends. With the resurrection of Jesus a new era begins.” (Vol. II, p. 429). “The exaltation of Christ encompasses four teachings: descent to the nether world, (chapter 12), resurrection, (chapter 13), ascension, and session at the right hand of God (chapter 14).

In chapter 12 Oden states the thematic focus of his systematic theology — life. He points out that the title of volume II comes from I John 1:1-2. Oden states:

The central theme of the first volume of this series was God’s own life — *The Living God*. Now we speak of that same life — the source and ground of life itself — that has appeared and become known in history in an incomparable way through the Word spoken and embodied in Jesus, *The Word of Life*. (Vol. II, p. 431).

Oden is to be highly commended for his outstanding work in Vol. I and Vol. II of his systematic theology. His work in Vol. I is careful, detailed, and excellent. His Christology in Vol. II is absolutely exceptional. It is so thorough, so complete — truly a masterpiece. He interweaves in a beautiful mosaic the essentials of Christian faith. He writes of God and Christ in a classic ecumenical perspective appropriate for and much needed today.

Oden’s two volumes are recommended for clergy, laity, seminary professors and students who want to be enriched by the essentials of Christian faith in such a thorough and comprehensive fashion. I eagerly await the completion of Volume III, *Life in the Spirit*.

JoAnn Ford Watson