

Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology, by Roger Olson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 247pp.)

—reviewed by Rick Love

Over a decade ago I wrote an article entitled “A Plea for Missiological Theologians and Theological Missiologists.”¹ I have not withdrawn my plea, and the substance of my call remains a major burden for me. That’s why I consider Roger Olson’s “Reformed and Always Reforming” a missiological treasure. He outlines an approach to theologizing that scratches where cross-cultural workers itch! Whether he realizes it or not Olson writes like a missiological theologian and he equips those serving among the nations to be theological missiologists.

I have chosen to write a brief review of Olson’s book, leaving the theological footnotes and debates to others. Instead I want to highlight four important aspects of theologizing that speak to a global setting:

Olson describes the four hallmarks of evangelicalism as the *authority of Scripture, the need for conversion, the centrality of the cross of Christ, and the imperative of evangelism/social activism* (p. 42). Nothing new here. But then he adds a fifth distinctive: *deferential respect for the “great tradition”*—the orthodoxy of doctrine developed by the early Christian church and the Reformers of the sixteenth century (p. 43). While acknowledging the importance of the great tradition, he holds unwaveringly to the authority of the Scriptures over every theological construct.

This is crucial for those contextualizing the gospel in pioneer settings. For example, there are now many communities of Jesus’ followers in the Muslim world. They are in the process of what believers throughout the history of the church have done, namely, developing theology that fits their context. Olson’s approach encourages them to understand and honor the theological deposit of the past, while being free to theologize within biblical parameters.² Thus, Olson affirms the best of the Reformation: “A basic Protestant principle going back to Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin is *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone is our ultimate authority. Another guiding Protestant principle is *reformata et semper reformanda*—reformed and always reforming” (p. 186).

Olson argues for the importance of narrative theology. Many evangelical theologians either build their theology with an emphasis on the expository or didactic portions of Scripture, like Romans or Ephesians, or talk of God in dulling abstractions, creating the “impression that God has presented us with a set of ideas, as if revelation were some kind of data bank.”³ For them, the narrative portions of Scriptures are mere illustrations at best. But Paul the apostle teaches that “all Scripture is inspired by God”

(2 Tim 3:16), not just the didactic portions. Thus, theology should be built on the whole counsel of God, both the didactic and narrative portions. A focus on narrative theologies offers great hope for those living and serving in the majority world. Most people in the majority world are oral learners; they learn best through stories. And more than half the Bible is story! So this emphasis on narrative theology,—as encouraged by Olson, has great promise for kingdom workers and for the communities of faith that are growing in new contexts.⁴

Olson adapts Paul Hiebert’s centered-set approach to theology (and ministry) as distinct from a bounded-set approach (p 59).⁵ Bounded-set thinking defines the Christian faith in terms of crossing “boundaries,” the most common being: saying the sinner’s prayer, attending church, and so forth. While there are important boundaries in Scripture (baptism for example), the focus of Scripture is on active discipleship: picking up our cross and following Jesus—daily! A centered-set approach is more concerned with “the direction of a person’s life,” the main question being, Is he or she drawing closer to Jesus and ever-increasing allegiance to him?

According to Olson,

The center is Jesus Christ and the gospel, but it also includes the four or five common core commitments identified above: biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, activism in missions and social transformation, and deferential respect for historic Christian orthodoxy. People gathered around the center or moving toward it are authentically evangelical” (p. 60).

This kind of thinking makes ministry more effective on the edges of kingdom growth.

Finally, Olson affirms “critical realism” as a presupposition for theology (pp. 89-90). To grasp the significance of this presupposition, it is helpful to contrast critical realism with naïve realism. Naïve realists enjoy 20-20 theological vision. They see things exactly, exhaustively, and without bias: no uncertainty, no ambiguity, no mystery. Critical realists, by contrast, affirm objective truth, but at the same recognize that truth is subjectively apprehended. Critical realists realize they know in part and thus acknowledge mystery along with objective truth, and thus display humility.⁶ Anyone who has lived for years in another culture realizes that the presuppositions of critical realism encourage an engagement with friends from other cultures that can be bold and prophetic, yet winsome, humble and open to correction.

Paul the apostle speaks about comprehending Christ’s love “with all the saints” (Eph 3:18). This implies that it takes the multi-cultural global church to grasp the full meaning of Scripture. The four principles outlined in this book enable us to do just that.

Some cross-cultural workers may think that these four themes are obvious. So what's the big deal? The big deal is that Roger Olson is a world-class theologian who outlines a theological agenda that fits kingdom workers where there is no church or where a church is emerging. This is good news . . . and it is a good book to read for serious apostles!

Endnotes

¹ A paper presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society West Region Meeting, April 7, 1995.

² My mentor, the late Harvie Conn, rightly points out that every creed and confession is historically conditioned contextualization. See *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* by Harvie Conn, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, pp. 211-260.

³ Alister E. McGrath, 1991. "The Biography of God." *Christianity Today* 35(8):24.

⁴ See two excellent articles by Jack Colgate on this topic: "Bible Storying and Oral Use of the Scriptures" in *From Seed to Fruit* edited by J. Dudley Woodberry, William Carey Library, 2008. "Relational Bible Storying and Scripture Use in Oral Muslim Contexts" Part one and two, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/25_3_PDFs/colgate.pdf http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/25_4_PDFs/25_4_Colgate.pdf

⁵ See *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* by Paul G. Hiebert, Baker Books, Grand Rapids 1994:124.

⁶ Since many have written on this subject, Olson does not mention Paul Hiebert as a source for his views of critical realism. But it is worth noting that Hiebert has written a whole book specifically addressing this topic: *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* by Paul G. Hiebert. Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA 1999. See especially pages 37, 69, 70. Presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society West Region Meeting, April 7, 1995.