

RESPONSE TO THOMAS C. ODEN,
"THE LONG JOURNEY HOME"

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR.*

It is a pleasure to respond to Tom Oden's long journey home. Once upon a time Tom wasted his substance in riotous thinking in a far country, but he found no soul food there. So Tom has come back where he always belonged.

Maybe somewhere there are evangelicals who want to stand in for the elder brother, Pharisees who want no parties for postliberals. To any of them Robert Farrer Capon has the right word in his commentary (*The Parables of Grace*) on the Luke 15 parable. To Mr. Respectability, to the elder brother, the Father says, "Lighten up, Harold. Find the punchbowl, put on a funny hat, and come inside. Somebody you know has just come back from the dead."

Tom's theology aims to be irenic and consensually ecumenical, and on both these scores it strikes me as remarkably successful. Theologically, we Christians have been in the habit of defining and defending ourselves as different from other Christians. We keep forgetting, as Thomas Ryan says in an acute essay, that these differences, though familiar, are not normal: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ asserts that our real identity is not at the edges of our Christian existence where we can brag about our specialties, but at the center where we are rooted in Christ and where the bond of the Spirit yokes us together."¹

Tom Oden's theology is in exactly this respect centrist Christian theology: irenic, massively traditional, ecumenically attractive, and spiritually vital.

In this connection I should like to add a word of appreciation for Tom's irenic confession that he does not mind occasionally slouching toward Grand Rapids. He states his desire to find rapprochement between the sons and daughters of Dort on the one hand and those of the Remonstrants on the other. In the same spirit let me say in return that, for us Calvinists, Arminius is not just some heretic. No, he is *our* heretic, a *Reformed* heretic, for whom we cannot help feeling great fondness. And, seriously, great respect. One reason is that Arminius conducted himself in a gentle, peaceable way. His opponents did not.

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¹ T. Ryan, "Ecumenism and Compassion," *Mid-Stream* 25 (1986) 184.

Tom Oden's writing first got my attention in his *Agenda for Theology*, published in 1979. There and in *After Modernity . . . What?* Tom offers intelligent, angular, often devastating criticism of much of modern theology—its faddishness, for instance, and, accordingly, its instability. I might add that because of its debts and certain especially Teutonic habits of thought and expression, some modern theology moreover suffers from an exasperating lack of clarity. It sometimes displays all the definition of a fog bank. Suppose a theologian says something like this: "Here we have both an essential and an existential dynamic merged in the concrete, self-transcendent ambiguity of the Now." You feel like saying, "Could you give some examples of that?"

Contemporary liberal theology has lost its traditional object, sources, norms and audience. It has also lost clarity and nerve. The result, as Tom observes, is a sometimes depressing melange of fashionable but temporary movement theologies, each as enduring as teenaged slang.

Tom is pulling another way. In the first two volumes of his systematic theology he offers the classic ecumenical consensus on God and Christ. This is rich, meaty, satisfying theology that is alarmingly learned and yet accessible to students.

In his discussion of the great classical questions of theology Tom not only draws upon but also displays the patristic consensus on these questions—what he calls "the shared rootage of early exegesis." This method is chastening not only to contemporary theologians who start Christology with, say, Jon Sobrino. It also offers inflight correction for any fundamentalist tendencies to jet nonstop from Scripture to 1990, as if Hilary or Gregory of Nyssa have little to teach us, as if we did not have to struggle with the sometimes desperately difficult thought of Augustine in order to gain, at minimum, purchase and perspective on contemporary theological issues.

For instance, although it has become a commonplace of evangelical criticism of modern theology to trace the agnostic streak in much of it back to Kant—and to what Kant modestly called his Copernican revolution—we may find a similar epistemological shyness in some of the Church fathers. Here the motives are pious instead of proud, but it is nonetheless revealing to note the formal similarity between some lines of thought in Plotinus and Paul Tillich, for example, and then to recall that the fathers did not hesitate to borrow from Plotinus.

I think we therefore have to admit risks as well as advantages in mining the Church fathers. Just as contemporary theologians exhibit certain alloys in their thought—strains of Kant, Hegel, Whitehead and Marx, for instance—so the Church fathers sometimes present us with mixed theories. This is especially true of the greatest and most learned of them, such as Augustine. If you compare Hilary and Augustine on the doctrine of the Trinity you cannot help noticing that what complicates Augustine's trinitarianism—what complicates it far beyond the relatively straighter trajectories from the gospel of John to a Trinity theory in Hilary—is,

ironically enough, an aggressive doctrine of divine simplicity that owes less to Scripture than to neo-Platonism.

For this reason I applaud Oden's attempt to give us the consensus of the patristic tradition on the great theological questions and not just the particular and troubled theories of its giants.

But even then I think it doubtful that we must accept the patristic consensus without question. After all, the Church fathers and mothers knew not only Bible but also philosophy and, in particular areas, did not hesitate to shape theories accordingly. Must we simply accept the patristic consensus on God's relation to time, for instance, as if theories of God's having created time, or God's being outside time, or God's existing in all times simultaneously were the only or even the most natural way to state theologically the Biblical testimony on God's transcendence with respect to time?

No. We receive the classical consensus with deep respect and hospitality, but also with a proper Biblical and scholarly reserve. We cannot assume that the patristic consensus gives us Scripture unalloyed, nor that hellenistic alloys are obviously more desirable than Hegelian ones. The same alertness we bring to Moltmann or Gordon Kaufman must mark our reading of the classical tradition.

Still, the differences in mood, method, and Biblical faithfulness and fruitfulness between patristic theology on the one hand and modern theology on the other are often spectacular. One of the rare and special qualities of Tom Oden's systematic theology is that in it we can spy not only the great lines of genuine continuity between Scripture and the early ecumenical consensus but also some of the sheer spiritual beauty of patristic thought.

What impresses the modern reader of Augustine, for example, is the constant, visible blend of exegesis, dogmatics, polemics and piety. Above all, what impresses the modern reader is the chastening evidence, throughout, of Augustine's conviction that even difficult and technical theology is always done from and for catholic faith. Accordingly, after turning again and again to John's prologue as the center of his incarnation theory, Augustine at one point of the *De Trinitate* suggests a rehabilitation program for those who struggle with the doctrine of the incarnation. They must gain understanding and love by faithfully purging their minds, by abstaining from sin, by doing good works, and by "praying with the groaning of holy desires."²

This is a regimen seldom prescribed in contemporary theology. And its absence reminds us all of a sobering question: Do we theologians refuse regular hearty prayer because God seems unreal? Or does God seem unreal because we refuse to pray?

² Augustine *De Trinitate* 4.21.31.

Augustine himself concludes fifteen books of trinitarian theology with a prayer of great humility and beauty: "O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that comes from Thee, may they acknowledge who belong to Thee. If I have said anything that is simply my own, may it be pardoned both by Thee and by those who are Thine."

Here is Augustinian theology—toughminded, intricate, wide-ranging in erudition—that is, after all, played in a devotional key. I should like to suggest that in this and many other respects Tom Oden has been following awfully good precedent.