
Those who worry about the future of the church should be reading Thomas C. Oden’s latest publication, The Rebirth of Orthodoxy. As he indicates in the subtitle, there are “signs of new life in Christianity.” Oden is not just referring to
Christianity in the Third World but also has in mind Western churches, including mainline Protestant churches. His claim is essentially that modernity and postmodernity, along with their secularism and their trendy interests, have had their day and that we are witnessing the resurgence of orthodoxy. There is a renewed fervent longing, Oden insists, for historical wisdom among believers today: “Their is a passion for roots, a yearning for depth, an appetite for prudence, a longing for tradition” (10). The young people who are turning their backs on the old ecumenism of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches are looking for something more meaningful, something more genuine, and something more concerned about faithfulness and truth than liberal Protestantism has been. In short, Oden believes that we are in the midst of a turn to a “new orthodoxy.”

I would underwrite most of Oden’s project. Judging by my experience in teaching undergraduate students, I think he is right that young people are looking for a tradition that goes back to the early church, for a meaningful liturgy that does not depend solely on the expertise of local worship teams, and for an apostolicity of truth that is willing to set boundaries on current fads. Oden, probably because of his wealth of personal experience with the old ecumenism, situates the new ecumenism against the backdrop of a worn-out modern liberalism. Now would be an ironic time to attach oneself to the values of the old ecumenism of the ecumenical movement, Oden rightly insists. Those advocating the freedom of moribund organizations like the World Council of Churches “have attached themselves to ultramodern values just at a time when those values are expiring” (155). At the same time, his insistence on the particularity of the gospel and on the significance of the tradition will no doubt appeal also to evangelical young people who are weary of reinventing the wheel, both theologically and liturgically. While they will find aspects of their conservative or pietist backgrounds affirmed by a return to tradition, their horizons will also be broadened by the “mere Christianity” of Oden’s “paleo-orthodoxy.” Says Oden, “Contrary to modern assumptions, orthodoxy grants a high priority to thinking freely out of a wide experiential base of faithful confessors of all times and places” (116).

Oden’s dealing with the question of boundaries is nothing short of delightful. While consistently pleading for an irenic attitude, over the years he has come to the recognition that irenics must be complemented by polemics (127). Maintaining that the tolerance of modernism is largely an illusion and that the tolerance of the “new orthodoxy” and of the tradition is far more real, he insists that communities must maintain boundaries if they are to sustain viability: “A center without a circumference is just a dot, nothing more. It is the circumference that marks the boundary of the circle. To eliminate the boundary is to eliminate the circle itself. The circle of faith cannot identify its center without recognizing its perimeter” (131). Oden’s plea for boundaries does not imply a narrow conservatism without an eye for how the Spirit may be at work in the church. It is precisely the abundance and variety of the Spirit’s gifts
within the church that implies, for Oden, that we do not know exactly what the configuration emerging from the new ecumenism will look like. The new ecumenism is truly ecumenical, encompassing the Spirit’s work throughout the church. The “Holy Spirit has been teaching Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical Christians that they are closer to each other than they are to modern liberal accommodative assumptions” (63).

Oden’s demand for renewed attention to boundaries implies, of course, that we ask what these boundaries are and how we locate them. At this point, it seems to me that Oden’s descriptions are at times somewhat one-dimensional. The book emerges to a large extent from his own familiarity and disillusionment with the ecumenical movement of the World Council of Churches. One wonders, however, whether the characterizations, both of the old and of the new ecumenism, always do justice to the complexity of the situation. The charts in the book, juxtaposing the old and new ecumenisms (56-57) and outlining evidences of the rebirth of orthodoxy (76-79) are no doubt helpful heuristic devices. At the same time, they have their drawbacks. Is it true, for instance, that the old ecumenism is “uncritically accommodating toward modernity” while the new ecumenism is “critical of failed modern ideas”? Is it fair to say that the old ecumenism was “chronically activist” while the new ecumenism is “patient amid historical turbulence”? Is it right to contrast the “realistic” new ecumenism to the “utopian” old ecumenism (56)? Sure, Oden acknowledges that he is pointing “to tendencies, not absolute distinctions” and that there is a degree of overlap, but I wonder whether the book sufficiently takes the nuances into account. No doubt, the WCC has fallen prey to relativistic forms of liberalism and pluralism, but has not the Faith and Order movement in the WCC also contributed in positive ways by patiently and realistically discussing possibilities of theological convergence? Additionally, what makes us so sure that today’s young people as they clamor for a different form of ecumenism will do so much better than the idealists who organized Amsterdam 1948?

While Oden’s project is most encouraging, it does contain elements that make me wonder what this “rebirth of orthodoxy” will look like if it continues to take root in the church. Let me explain. Perhaps the best chapter in the book is the last one, which deals with Vincent of Lérin’s ecumenical rule. It defines orthodoxy as that what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. Oden presents a wonderful analytic description of Vincent’s Commonitorium. On the basis of Vincentian rule, he argues that we need to return to the tradition to find what we have in common. In particular, we need a return to the first five centuries (29) or perhaps to the first seven ecumenical councils (48). However, the mention of these two historical boundaries lays bare huge obstacles among Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. Must we accept the first five hundred years as our common history and leave the rest up to individual believers? Such would largely be the Protestant option. Or, ought we to bind ourselves to the first seven councils leading up to the second Council of Nicea (787), as Eastern Orthodoxy argues? Or, should we perhaps acknowledge a
magisterium-led development of doctrine that continues even today (cf. Oden’s comments on divine faithfulness throughout the history of the church, 43-48)? It seems to me that Oden would likely opt for the first of these three, but this presupposes a Protestant ecclesiology that is willing to offer a “new ecumenism” on “our terms,” as it were.

All of this raises the question of what a new ecumenism would look like in practice and how Oden would translate his insistence on the significance of apostolic truth (62, 67). Oddly, when defining orthodoxy, he describes it as a “sociological type.” “It is a social process dedicated to the careful transmission of tradition. It makes truth-claims without apology” (13, 109). This seems to me to be a minimalist definition. It enables Oden to emphasize the commonality with Jewish orthodoxy and to maintain that Jews and Christians need each other (23) and should help each other preserve their respective legacies (22). I cannot help but think that the chapter “Serious Jews, Serious Christians” is out of place in a book on new ecumenism, which wants to face the hard (apostolic) truth questions in the dialogue among Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and evangelicalism. Is the real convergence that Oden is after a mere conservatism, after all? (Cf. his comment: “I would like my conservative Christian colleagues to empathize with the intention of my conservative Jewish friends on the question in this dialogue.” [109]) If social conservatism is what binds us, then of course we may wish to broaden the ecumenical dialogue also to conservative Jews.

The Vincentian canon does not offer an orthodoxy of a sociological type. Instead, it is thoroughly biblically and ecclesiologically based. What Vincent’s criteria are after is continuity with the apostolic teaching and with the church of all times and places. Oden’s adoption of this same canon is indicative that also he is concerned about maintaining the boundaries not just of any group but also of those of the church. It is theology, not sociology, that is ultimately determinative for Oden. It is Oden’s love for the church and for the truth of the gospel that gives this book its passionate character. It is a passion in line with the love of God for his covenant people: “The covenant of God with Israel is not threatened by human faithlessness. It is an eternal covenant, not limited to any particular time or ethos. It is held together by God’s own sovereign will” (42).

—Hans Boersma