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The Living God: Systematic Theology, 1

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The final chapter of the book points toward the future as McDermott suggests "Prospects for the Theology of Grace" in the areas of religious experience, liberation, and the relation of humanity to the rest of God's creation. Here the strengths and weaknesses of the Augustinian/Thomistic tradition show through. McDermott handles well the areas where grace relates to human development but ignores those points where God's grace challenges human values. The revolutionary nature of the cross gets a bit lost.

Given the price of books these days, you will get good value for your money in *What Are They Saying About the Grace of Christ?* It is excellent.

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The Living God. Systematic Theology: Volume One Thomas C. Oden

San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987
xv plus 430 pp., \$41.95

Numerous systematic theologies appear and, often, fortunately disappear in every decade. A few remain as standard text books not because of brilliance or originality and not even because they succeed in grasping and addressing the crucial questions of an age—but primarily because they have none of these qualities and can, therefore, serve equally well (or poorly) in a wide variety of classroom situations. *The Living God*, by Thomas Oden of Drew University Theological School, is an important exception to these generalizations: we have here the first volume of a projected three-volume systematic theology in which the presentation of doctrine is normative without being antiquated, contemporary without being time-bound, catholic in breadth without being platitudinous. Oden comments in his preface (p. x) that "This book is especially for those who have become wearied with ever-changing modern theologies and who now hunger for a plausible restatement of classical Christian teaching of God". More specifically, the system is developed at an introductory level, suitable for use by beginning theology students, but directed (as the author indicates) primarily at pastors. Its intention, moreover, is not to be an ultimate or definitive statement of theology in and of itself but rather to be a point of entry for Christians into the great insights of the tradition of the church.

It is certainly in this underlying attitude and direction that the strength of Oden's work lies. He argues from the outset that theology cannot be a matter of personal preference or of idiosyncrasy. His discussions bear continuous and consistent witness to the resources of scripture and tradition

on theological formulation in the present, and he makes a point of stating that he presents "no revolutionary new ideas, no easy new way to salvation" (p. xiii)—and we might add, no easy new way to theology. Oden strives for the centrist, ecumenical teaching of the church, citing copiously from such writers as Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Basil of Caesarea, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Luther, Calvin, Wesley—and even such authors as the Protestant scholastics, Calov, Quenstedt, Turretin and Hollaz. The teaching here is orthodox in the best sense of the term and it continually points the reader toward the great tradition of the church. Students will gain much from this volume because of its clarity of theological argument: they will gain far more if they take up the challenge of the author to enter into dialogue with the church via his footnotes.

Ought this book to become a standard text? That, of course, is the basic question that must be asked of such a book—and it can be given with certainty only after the appearance of the second and third volumes of the system. For the present, we can say that Oden's work will probably become the basic text in places where the ecumenical, multi-denominational and traditional emphases predominate. The "post-modern orthodoxy" toward which Oden pointed in his insightful *Agenda for Theology* is given firmer ground here than in any other contemporary systematics—and the non-polemical catholicity of the book assures its broad usefulness. On the other hand, Oden's work will not carry the day in contexts where the distinctive features of a particular tradition demand close exposition in the basic course in systematic theology. Thus the more conservative Reformed schools will continue to use Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* while a somewhat less conservative school will probably favor Weber's *Foundations*; on the Lutheran side, Oden will not replace Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* in Missouri Synod seminaries or the Braaten-Jensen *Christian Dogmatics* among other Lutherans. In all of these cases, however, Oden's work should become a valuable adjunct, a collateral reading, that stands for the whole church, beyond the polemic. And in the case of the Barthian tendency of Weber and the Hegelian-Pannenbergian tendency of Braaten-Jensen, Oden can be used to provide not a view beyond the Reformed and Lutheran rootage of these respective systems, but beyond the time-bound "modern" tendencies underlying their arguments. Neo-orthodoxy has already ceased to be a major force in twentieth century theology, Hegelianism probably did not deserve to be resurrected, and Pannenberg's importance is probably also only temporary: the tradition to which Oden points and from which he draws materials for contemporary definition will stand as long as the church itself.

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