

Thomas C. Oden (1931-2016)

A Memorial Note for ATS, by Don Saliers

“Orthodox, ecumenical, evangelical” : three terms not easily conjoined. Yet these aptly summarize the theological work and sensibility of Thomas C. Oden. A United Methodist theologian and prolific author, he was born on October 21, 1931, and died on December 8, 2016, in Oklahoma. His 24-year teaching career was at Drew University, where he was Henry Anson Butz Professor of Theology and Ethics. He received a B.A. from the University of Oklahoma, a B.D. from Southern Methodist University, and his doctoral degree from Yale in 1960. He had served several Methodist congregations in Oklahoma and Texas before coming to Drew.

At the heart of his work was a turn in 1971 from liberal Protestantism to the patristic writers and to his full immersion in classical Christianity. In his 1983 *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry*, Oden characterized features of his earlier position:

“When sin is reduced to social determination, when history is viewed as having an inevitable trend upward, and when uncritical tolerance is the centerpiece of all human values ... you had best expect the act of confession to drop entirely out of the service of worship, as it did in pietistic liberalism.” (217)

In the many books and biblical commentaries that followed, he opened the richness of what he called “paleo-orthodoxy” -- obedience to and reliance on the faith of the ecumenical councils of the first five centuries of the Christian church, combined with a strongly Wesleyan concept of sin and grace. For Oden, theology and ethics were coinherent. He was admired as a teacher and as a theologian who cared deeply for the role of confessional theology in the local church.

While championed by more conservative elements within United Methodist and other churches, his broader legacy is as a vigorous advocate and scholar of classical Christian theology, grounded in his account of the “consensus” of ancient Christian writers and their interpretation of Scripture.

May Perpetual Light shine upon him.

Don E. Saliers

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