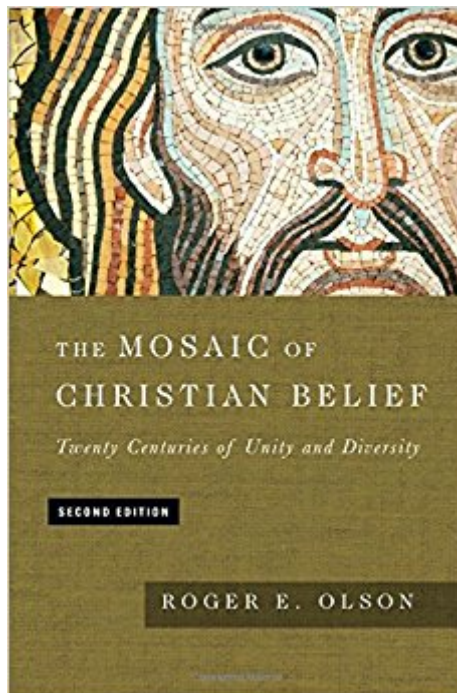




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# The Mosaic Of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries Of Unity & Diversity



## Synopsis

In *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* Roger E. Olson thematically traces the contours of Christian belief down through the ages, revealing a pattern of both unity and diversity. He finds a consensus of teaching that is both unitive and able to incorporate a faithful diversity when not forced into the molds of false either-or alternatives. The mosaic that emerges from Olson's work, now updated throughout and with a new chapter on the Holy Spirit, displays a mediating evangelical theology that is irenic in spirit and tone. Olson, writing with nonspecialists in mind, has masterfully sketched out the contours of the Great Tradition of the Christian faith with simplicity while avoiding oversimplification.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This book serves as an excellent thematic introduction to what Christians have historically believed." (Andrew K. Gabriel, *The Pneuma Review*, October 24, 2016) "What evangelicals have needed, and what [Olson] has provided, is a basic, relatively comprehensive, nontechnical, nonspeculative one-volume introduction to the Christian faith. The book offers a mediating and Arminian perspective within the broad evangelical tradition that underlines both shared beliefs and real diversity. At a time of extreme opinion, it is a godsend." (Clark Pinnock, author of *Flame of Love*) "This book helps us to appreciate all the diverse theological colors that make up the mosaic called 'the Christian faith' while showing us where and why certain beliefs don't fit the pattern." (Dennis Okholm, Azusa Pacific University) "The book is written in language that should be accessible to undergraduate students and serious-minded church members and will, hopefully, help

to stem the tide of theological ignorance that threatens the health of the church." (Terrance Tiessen, Providence Theological Seminary)"Anyone seeking help in maintaining a commitment to the truth of the gospel while also embracing genuine Christian diversity will find no better guide than this book." (Jonathan Wilson, Regent College)

Roger E. Olson (PhD, Rice University) is professor of theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He is the author of *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity* and *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology*. He is also coauthor of *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* and *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (both with Stanley J. Grenz), and of *The Trinity* (with Christopher A. Hall).

Roger Olson teaches theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, which is at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The book that I am reviewing here is the second edition of a book that was released in 2002. In the "Acknowledgements" section of this second edition, Olson states that he wrote this book to be a "very basic, relatively comprehensive, nontechnical, nonspeculative one-volume introduction to Christian belief." Olson felt a need to write such a book after "teaching introductory courses in Christian doctrine and theology in university, college, and seminary." The book is topical rather than chronological. It surveys the theological lay of the land on such issues as how the Bible is divinely-inspired; the Trinity and the incarnation; whether humans consist of body and soul or body, soul, and spirit, or neither; the church and the sacraments; salvation, faith, and works; the afterlife; and the Kingdom of God. Olson interacts with the arguments of prominent historical theologians and thinkers, but also with denominations and sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh-Day Adventists. Pelagianism, universalism, Arianism, the filioque, psychological and communitarian conceptions of the Trinity, and open-theism all receive treatment in this book. Olson's survey is judicious and informative. He displays a grasp of nuance, while keeping his narrative clear and down-to-earth. Here are some further thoughts about this book: A. The book is introductory, so those who have done a lot of reading in theology may not learn much that is new from this book. They may still find the book to be helpful as a reference work, however, that lays out different beliefs and who held them. Yet, there were areas in which the book did give me a new or a fresh understanding of certain issues. For example, Olson talks about the relationship between general revelation (i.e., God's revelation of Godself through nature and

conscience) and special revelation (i.e., the Bible). Olson states that general revelation is unclear, but it sets the stage for special revelation by nudging people towards asking certain questions. Olson's discussion of the filioque was also informative. The Western church believes that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (which is in the filioque clause), whereas the Eastern church lacks the "and the Son" part. Olson discusses the possible origins of the filioque, and the problems that the Eastern church has with it. According to Olson, the Eastern church believes that it lessens the dignity of the Holy Spirit. Olson also talks about changing Catholic views on purgatory. Looking at the book broadly, it covers a lot of familiar territory; yet, there are times when Olson peppers this territory with some nuance or pieces of information that may not be readily familiar to a lot of readers.

B. While the book may be helpful as a reference work, it could have been more helpful if it had provided a bibliography, or more references to works in footnotes or endnotes. Olson occasionally referred to theologians' books in the text, but he often would discuss a person's thought, without telling the readers the exact books or articles where they can read those thoughts.

C. The book is topical, and several of the topics intersect with each other. Therefore, there are times when Olson rehashes previous discussions in the book. These rehashings are far from boring, however, for Olson manages to highlight a new dimension that he did not discuss in his previous discussions. At times, Olson compensates for inadequacies in previous discussions. For example, in initially discussing why many church fathers believed that Jesus' divinity was necessary for the salvation of humans, Olson was unclear about what exactly was at stake in that debate. Later, in discussing Jesus' incarnation, Olson was clearer and more specific. Some may think that Olson should have been clearer in the first discussion, and that would be a legitimate criticism. Still, the book did tie up loose ends as it proceeded.

D. Olson speaks in support of Christian consensus throughout history, since that determines what views Christians should accept, and which views deserve to be on the margins. Olson wrestles with apparent problems in this position. For example, Olson believes in justification by grace through faith alone, even though many church fathers may have had a different position. Olson's initial discussion of this problem was not very good, but his chapter on salvation being a gift and a task compensated for that, as Olson showed that seeing salvation as a gift from God is part of the historical Christian consensus.

E. One can ask if Olson believes that the consensus can ever change, and if the change can become authoritative, or at least allow certain beliefs to become acceptable within Christian orthodoxy. Olson states on page 199, for instance, that "so far there is no good reason to condemn [open theism] as heterodox; open theism deserves to be treated as one legitimate option for interpreting and envisioning divine sovereignty and providence." Open theism maintains that God does not know the future, and it is a

new view. Since it is new, can one argue that it goes against historical Christian consensus, and thus should be marginalized? Olson states that it "may be only an adjustment to limited providence," the idea that God imposes limitations on Godself, and limited providence has received more support in the history of Christian thought. That could be why Olson is reluctant to dismiss open theism as heterodox, that, and his possible view that it needs development before judgment can be passed on it. That said, my impression is that Olson did not consistently follow a firm criterion as to what is acceptable within Christian thought.F. Overall, the book is accurate in its presentation of different thinkers and points-of-view, at least in terms of my understanding. In his discussion of eschatology on page 381, however, he seems to confuse historicism with preterism. He states that historicism "sees the symbols and images [in Revelation] as codes for persons, entities and events contemporary with the apocalypticists." That sounds more like preterism. Historicism, by contrast, holds that the Book of Revelation has been fulfilled throughout history, even after the first century. I base my understanding of historicism on Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).G. The book is introductory, but would it be a useful text for undergraduates? It depends. Undergraduates with some knowledge of theology, who have wrestled with some of the issues that the book discusses, may find the text useful. Those without much exposure to Christian theology may find that the book goes over their heads. When I was an undergraduate, we used William Placher's History of Christian Theology: it was lucid, and it provided a chronological history of Christian thought. I would recommend Placher's book, but chapters from Olson's book may be helpful as a supplementary tool for teaching undergraduates.I received a complimentary review copy of this book from the publisher, in exchange for an honest review.

Many Christians dislike theology because they think it's divisive. "Let's just stick to the Bible," some would say, "and not get caught up in any unnecessary theology."And yet, if you disagree with a teaching that they deem "simply what the Bible says," then you had better believe that the theological fur will fly - even if they deny to the end that they're arguing theology.The problem is that too many well-meaning Christians have convinced themselves that they don't actually have to interpret the text or engage in the work of theology. In their eyes, they're simply reading the Bible and doing what it says. Unfortunately, Christianity is not so simple. Two people can read the same text, come to two different conclusions, and both still be faithful Christians.Does this mean that they're both correct? Is all truth relative? No and no.But it does mean that, as Christians, we should be willing to acknowledge that we are imperfect beings who "see through a glass, darkly" (1

Corinthians 13:12). We're doing our best to understand the Gospel and the scriptures but we will make mistakes. We will all, from time to time, believe things that are untrue or, at least, imperfectly true. So what does this mean? It means that we should always be on the lookout for areas of agreement rather than disagreement. It means that we should be willing to fully listen to those who disagree with us and carefully consider what they have to say (they may be right or, even if they're wrong, they may expose a weakness in our thinking). It means that we should be cautious when declaring anyone a 'heretic' or 'apostate' based on a different interpretation of Genesis 1 or the end-times or the gifts of the Spirit (you get the picture). I would encourage Christians to hold on to the doctrinal distinctives that make them unique among God's people. I would not, nor would I want to, give up my Wesleyan-Arminian perspective and heritage. But, I would also encourage believers to find the core of Christianity that we share with all believers, in all places, and in all eras. Though there is much diversity within Christian thought, there is also much unity. That unity is what Roger Olson tries to communicate in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*. Olson sees a common Christian tradition (of doctrine) that has been passed down and held by all Christians at all times. Though certain theologians, pastors, or groups may have allowed the pendulum to swing far in a certain direction, there is still a core that has remained unchanged since the Church's earliest years. Olson describes his book's purpose in the introduction as a work that "seeks to explain to uninitiated readers what that common tradition includes in terms of unity, what it allows in terms of diversity and what it excludes in terms of heresies" (page 12). And this is how each chapter is organized. Each chapter introduces a doctrine, describes the false beliefs that have arisen around it, looks at the different legitimate ways that Christians have understood it throughout time, and then offers a vision for how Christians can unite around the common core while acknowledging genuine differences. And he covers all of the basics: tradition, scripture, the trinity, creation, predestination, the nature of humanity, the work of the Holy Spirit, the divinity of Jesus, the atonement, faith and works, the church, the Kingdom of God, etc. This book would serve as an excellent introduction to Christian theology for any layperson. Olson defines all of the technical terms in simple language and does his best to simplify complex theological positions without turning them into straw-men. And though Olson readily acknowledges his biases (he's an Arminian Baptist), he is more than fair to those who disagree with him. As he touches on each doctrine, he looks at what scripture says, what the Early Church Fathers said, what medieval Christian leaders said, what the Reformers said, and what modern theologians have said. He quotes from a variety of sources: Clement, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Wesley, Moltmann, Barth, Brunner, et al. He notes heresies as ancient as the Marcionites and as

modern as the Unification Church - but he doesn't just note them, he explains why they cross the line from a piece of the mosaic into heresy both from scripture and Church tradition. Yet he doesn't use the term 'heresy' lightly. He's incredibly fair. In fact, some would probably say that he's too fair. Olson doesn't just include Protestants in his mosaic. He is willing to extend fellowship, and the title 'Christian', to both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers - something many conservative, evangelical Christians would be unwilling to do. Whether one agrees or disagrees with his willingness to recognize Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, all Christians would be better off if they would at least do a better job of understanding what others believe. And this is where Olson's book excels. He lays out the contours of a genuine core of Christian doctrine while acknowledging the disagreements that do exist. If the Church is going to achieve anything close to real unity, it will begin here. I'd encourage you to get this book and read it. It will help you understand what the scriptures teach, what you believe, and why you disagree with certain segments of the Christian population. It will also help you to see that none of us are merely "reading the Bible." We're all interpreting it and doing our best to understand what God has to say to his people and the world. Olson describes my feelings well in his chapter on the Church: "We hope and pray for the day when all true believers in Jesus Christ will realize this in such a way that sectarianism will fade away. As that happens, Christians of many different denominations will retain their specific, historical identities while joyfully worshiping with each other and eagerly cooperating with each other in mission and service" (page 335). May we be such a people.

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