

Which ecumenism?

by [Jeffrey Gros](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Christians seek the unity for which Christ prayed by looking together to the "faith of the church through the ages." This gospel truth embodied in the scripture and Christian history is what is meant by Christian orthodoxy. Competing claims to this core of the Christian message have given rise to tragic divisions, all in the name of defending Christian orthodoxy.

The search for a common orthodoxy is essential to the ecumenical task. The transmission of the Christian faith is the core of evangelization. Says Thomas C. Oden: "Every generation is subject to being reminded when necessary where the center is." In this set of essays, the author attempts to contribute to this search.

Oden is known for his sociopolitical engagement in ecumenical debates through the Institute on Religion and Democracy. However, his substantive contribution has been to the patristic revival, especially among evangelical Christians, and in his earlier work on systematic theology. In this volume he draws on all of these interests to present a very personal, always engaging and sometimes learned argument.

The Rebirth of Orthodoxy includes a chapter on the author's personal spiritual pilgrimage, which helps the reader understand the disillusionment, anger and even sarcasm that permeate the book. He moved from a theologically superficial, activist and ideologically driven ministry to an appreciation of the tradition that is central to the faith of most Christians and to an academic enthusiasm for the Church Fathers. This conversion colors all of Oden's work. When it gives him positive energy for disclosing the glories of the Christian heritage, it is illuminating and makes a major contribution. However, when Oden projects his own Marxist, Freudian and Nietzschean past onto the individuals and ecclesiastical institutions with which he differs, his analysis falls far short of the facts and of the Christian fairness that is the scholar's calling.

Since its inception in the 19th century, the ecumenical movement was driven by the return to the sources of Christian worship and faith and by the impulse toward mission. Since the 1960s, studies by the World Council of Churches have proposed

visions of unity based in the ancient councils of the church.

Oden presents his personal alternative to this ecumenism of the churches. In doing so, he is very selective in what he attributes to the "old" movement. In the 1980s, extensive work was done on the Nicene Creed, producing the 1991 commentary *Confessing One Faith*. Twenty-six consultations of the WCC and 14 by the National Council of Churches surveyed Christian orthodoxy from the fourth-century "Constantinian shift" and the fifth-century divisions over Christology to the apostolic faith of African-American churches, peace churches and Pentecostals, whose orthodoxy does not rely on patristic formularies. In the author's critique of the "old ecumenism," he either avoids this corpus of literature or is ignorant of it. He writes off the World and National Councils with no attention to their contribution to research on Christian orthodoxy and to the emerging communion among Christians.

"Signs of Life," the second section of the book, still conceptualized in the frame of social analysis, treats more substantive theological matters, including patristic biblical interpretation as a resource for scriptural renewal. We have learned, as Oden notes, that patristic and other approaches to scripture are important complements to historical method. However, his claim that the majority of interpreters today have ceased to be faithful stewards does not correspond to the work of scholars like Raymond E. Brown, John Reumann, Joseph Fitzmyer and other practitioners of the historical-critical method.

It seems quaint to this reviewer, who spent much of the 1960s accumulating patristic texts for high school teachers' lesson guides on liturgy, to hear that these texts were "largely inaccessible during the last two secularizing centuries." Our work would have greatly benefited by the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series Oden has helped edit. Nevertheless, the Fathers' reflections on texts of worship and scripture have never fallen out of the repertoire of Christian resources. These texts are a good corrective to both fundamentalist and modernist tendencies in biblical scholarship.

Oden's chapter on inclusiveness in time as well as in space, gender and ethnicity may be his most stimulating. It provides a useful corrective to the individualistic and ahistorical ethos of American Christianity. What the patristic texts tell us about "governmental executive action, legislation, and judicial activism" is not immediately clear, however. It is strange to find names like Catholic bishops Raymond Hunthausen and Walter Sullivan arraigned with Episcopal Bishop John Spong as

"false teachers," with no bill of particulars provided as to the basis of such a judgment.

Questions of authority, the importance of boundaries and the limits of Christian identity are all key issues at the center of Christian life today, both in the U.S. and globally. The author's treatment of charitable admonition, speaking the truth in love and even "ecumenical polemic," is well formulated. In fact, the studies on authority in the WCC and NCC that contributed to discussion on the "Nature and Purpose of the Church" are precisely to this point. However, Oden immediately violates the principles he has laid out, characterizing the biblical image of Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom (the title of the great Orthodox cathedral in Istanbul), as the "prototype of idolatry." A discerning analysis of the literature might well judge between appropriate and inappropriate uses of this most Orthodox of divine names, but mere assertion with neither knowledge nor charity hardly qualifies as Christian authority.

Oden presents a very useful catalogue of the major dissenting groups among U.S. historical Protestant churches. This will be of particular interest to those who follow these ecclesiastical traditions. He documents in particular the ecclesio-political successes of the United Methodist groups in recent church life.

He suggests a paradigm shift in ecumenical methodology. Since 1952 the ecumenical movement has found the "christocentric" methodology to be most productive in resolving such divisive issues as justification, the person and nature of Christ, Christ's eucharistic presence, apostolicity in church and ministry and, more recently, some thorny ethical positions. Oden suggests considering the approach of Vincent of Lérins, the fifth-century monk who proposed as the test of orthodoxy: *In the worldwide community of believers every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all.*

This is a fascinating and fruitful line of inquiry. However, it remains to be tested as to whether it would be as productive as the christocentric method has been in producing the monumental bilateral and conciliar results we have seen in ecumenical research in the past three decades. Likewise, its application to new church issues such as biomedical ethics, women in ministry or global peacemaking remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting contribution to the much-debated question of ecumenical method.

The author's admonitions against anachronistic judgments, especially about the church's misogyny and anti-Semitism, are well placed. The Christian churches--evangelical, Orthodox, historical Protestant and Catholic--are at a yeasty and hopeful time in a search for the common core that can form a basis for their relations with one another. The ecumenical movement is characterized by a dialogue of charity which attempts to build trust and to understand the other church bodies as they understand themselves. It moves on from charity to the dialogue of truth, which demands competence and honest approaches to the sources of the Christian faith. This author fails in both of these tasks by caricaturing his opponents and by not taking account of the literature in the field.

Criticism of the churches and of their ecumenical program is welcome, especially now when there are signs of new possibilities. However, such criticism lacks force when it is not based on truth and competent scholarship. Unfortunately, these shortcomings vitiate what could be a creative contribution to one of the most important topics before the churches in our time: the recovery of the Christian heritage, the transmission of a common tradition, and the restoration of the unity of the church for Christ's mission in the world.