

BOOK REVIEW: *An Understanding of Sin and Redemption in Traditional Christianity and in Unification Theology.* Doctoral thesis by Alfred O'Connor, University of Wales, 1995.

Published in *Journal of Unification Studies* Vol. 1, 1997 - Pages 139-142

Alfred O'Connor's Ph.D. thesis, "An Understanding of Sin and Redemption in Traditional Christianity and in Unification Theology," is, in my view, a ground-breaking effort in the process of affirming academic respectability for the discussion of Unification theology in scholarly circles. The Faculty of Arts of St. David's University College at the University of Wales, Lampeter, Great Britain, and in particular the thesis supervisor Prof. Paul Badham, have to be commended for their pioneer spirit of approving an in-depth comparative analysis between Unification theology and traditional Christian theology on the Ph.D. level.

The major thrust of this work can be seen as an attempt to engage the reader in an ecumenical dialogue between Unification theology and mainline Christian doctrine. Rather than following an apologetic approach, merely showing the reasonableness of Unification teachings against the background of Christian doctrine, O'Connor seeks to present a productive ecumenism that takes into account the unique innovative characteristics of Unification theology. In other words, according to O'Connor, differences between Unification and Christian teachings are not to be perceived as irreconcilable but present occasions for a constructive dialogue.

Following the outline of any traditional Christian systematic theology, the thesis discusses three major topics, namely, (1) the origin of sin and evil, (2) the person and work of Christ and (3) the process of redemption. O'Connor has to be commended for his thorough treatment of these topics based on extensive research that includes arguments from scripture, historical theology and the natural sciences. Both the Christian and the Unification positions are presented with theological acumen allowing the reader to discern doctrinal agreements and differences while intending to develop an ecumenical approach by affirming an essential continuity between the two traditions.

The question arises as to what degree O'Connor is successful in carrying out his ecumenical agenda. In my opinion, O'Connor provides the best foundation for ecumenical dialogue when presenting issues related to the origin of sin and evil, but he is less convincing in his discussion of Christology and the process of redemption. Why the reader could arrive at such an evaluation is shown in the following reflections.

(1) In order to show the compatibility of a sexual interpretation of the Fall with traditional Christian teachings, O'Connor emphasizes Augustine's view on the cause of the Fall, and in particular his assertion that the wilful disobedience of the first couple was closely connected with concupiscence. For Augustine, concupiscence is an uncontrolled emotional desire that shows itself especially through the experience of sexual lust in procreation. The important point in O'Connor's argument seems to be Augustine's insistence that Adam's offspring were born through carnal lust, which in

turn is perceived as a punishment "in the likeness of his (Adam's) disobedience." In other words, for Augustine, the nature of Adam's disobedience resembles uncontrolled sexual desire as the distinct manifestation of the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit. Based on these observations, O'Connor affirms that the sexual interpretation of the Fall in Unification theology has sufficient resonance with traditional teachings on the Fall.

In addition, O'Connor identifies three issues for the origin of evil that are essential for both traditional Christianity and Unification theology, namely, the teachings about one original human couple as our common ancestors, the literal historical Fall, and the inheritance of our fallen condition in terms of the propagation of original sin. These three doctrines have been acknowledged by systematic Christian theology and Unification theology as the indispensable foundation for our understanding of salvation through Christ. O'Connor quotes Augustine, Hans Kung and the most recent edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in order to demonstrate the validity of these teachings not only in the context of historical theology but also with regard to the contemporary theological discussion. Thus, O'Connor seems to be successful in pointing out the foundation for ecumenical dialogue based on the full agreement between Unification theology and Christian theology in terms of the systematic presuppositions for the doctrine of redemption.

Although O'Connor's general argument is effective from a systematic viewpoint, the reader is surprised to find in the conclusion of chapter one and in the concluding chapter a sudden shift from theological argumentation to scientific reasoning in support of the biblical truth of one common pair of ancestors for humankind. Citing the evolutionary theories of the mitochondrial African Eve and Y-chromosome African Adam, O'Connor shows that a part of the scientific community would favor monogenism over polygenism as the more plausible theory for the origin of the human race. However, even though such scientific support of a revelatory truth about our first ancestors seems helpful in drawing the interest of non-believers, in my view it does not advance the ecumenical agenda of showing the compatibility of Christian and Unification doctrines. Theological discourse presupposes belief in revelation, while the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, which aims primarily at showing the compatibility of revelation with scientific data in order to invite a non-believing audience to grant theological doctrine a fair hearing, is a different project.

(2) In his discussion of the person of Christ, O'Connor seems to get entangled in a number of Christological and Eschatological doctrines that emerge from a traditional approach to Christian theology, namely, to see the Christ event as central to all theological thinking. Rather than treat particular doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth or the manner of the Second Coming by means of a direct comparative approach, it would have been more effective, in my view, to start with an explanation of the shift from a Christ-centered to a creation-centered systematic theology when discussing the Unification position. In other words, for Unification theology the doctrine of Creation is normative for the doctrine of Christ. Through understanding the Adamic mission, the person and work of Christ becomes comprehensible. Within traditional Christian theology it is the doctrine of the Incarnation that implies the importance of creation. Today, new interest in Incarnational and Creation-centered theologies within the Christian tradition is greatly facilitating the ecumenical dialogue with Unification theology. O'Connor could have avoided a rather confrontational style of argumentation in his discussion of Christological

issues by investigating the contribution of Incarnational thinkers, rather than supporting Unification views with modern liberal theology.

(3) The effectiveness of emphasizing the systematic consistency of Unification theology in terms of its Creation-centered approach also holds true for discussing the process of redemption. Instead of focusing on the First Article of the Creed that affirms God as Creator, O'Connor starts his discussion of redemption with the vicarious death of Christ, salvific grace and the forgiveness of sin. That is to say, it would have been more effective to focus on the ideal of creation with its subsequent concepts of spiritual and physical rebirth as the central paradigms for the process of salvation, instead of presenting the Unification doctrine of restoration against the background of the Second Article of the Creed that deals with the redemptive work of Christ. In fact, O'Connor ends up abandoning his intended ecumenical agenda when he tells the reader how traditional Christianity and Unification theology "display great variance" in their understanding of redemption. His ecumenical purpose is further compromised when he refers to the influence of Confucian teachings in order to explain the centrality of the family for the Unification understanding of the redemptive process. In short, the reader cannot clearly see the systematic power of the Principle of Creation for explaining the compatibility of traditional Christian and Unification teachings.

The above mentioned weaknesses with reference to a consistent systematic treatment of theological doctrine, jeopardize, in my opinion, O'Connor's overall intention for advancing an ecumenical dialogue between Christian and Unification theologians. However, based on the richness of the presented material and the in-depth comparative analysis of Christian and Unification teachings, the reader can at least agree with O'Connor that traditional Christian theology and Unification doctrine have much more in common "than either of them with modern liberal thought." Despite its systematic shortcomings, this thesis can still be seen as a significant contribution to the academic discussion of Unification theology. It is a contribution in support of the vision for a progressive mutual interaction between the Christian and the Unification traditions.