

# Latimer Trust

## Monthly Reading List – Feb 2026

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others. This time Martin has not focused on newly published books, but on five books he has been reading recently and which he thinks are very valuable.

In this edition:

Author	Title	Martin's opinion
Sherif Gergis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George	<i>What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense</i>	This a hugely important piece of Christian philosophical apologetic that Christians need to be aware of and make use of in seeking to defend the traditional understanding of marriage in today's world.
Thomas Oden	<i>A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir</i>	<i>A Change of Heart</i> is a book that is well worth reading by anyone who wants to understand the history of the Church during the period which it covers. This book gives an insider's view of liberal Protestantism and consensual Christian orthodoxy and shows how it was by the unexpected grace of God that the second movement arose to challenge and correct the errors of the first.
Thomas Oden	<i>Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology</i>	A book which should be owned by every serious student of theology and by everyone with responsibility for teaching theology. Oden shows you that orthodox Christianity does actually exist and what it teaches. A must buy.
R R Reno	<i>Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West</i>	A brilliant piece of Christian political and social analysis and critique. Reno explains that the way to combat autonomous individualism and the growing dissolution of Western society is to return to the two historic pillars of Western civilisation: the traditional family and religious faith. Highly recommended.
R R Reno	<i>Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society</i>	Reno's book is a powerful challenge to speak up for God in a society that has become increasingly pagan, and one that that as many Christians as possible should read and act upon.

Sherif Gergis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage?: Man and Woman: A Defense*, Encounter Books, ISBN 978-1-64177-147-4, £11.49 (e and audible editions also available).

Overview:

The starting point for this book by three American conservative scholars is that the debate about whether it is right is to recognise same-sex marriages is fundamentally a debate about the nature of marriage itself. Their argument is that marriage has a distinct meaning which would be undermined by same-sex relationships being legally recognised as marriages and that this undermining would be harmful to society.

They declare that:

Marriage is, of its essence, a comprehensive union: a union of will (by consent) and body (by sexual union); inherently ordered to procreation and thus the broad sharing of family life; and calling for a permanent and exclusive commitment, whatever the spouse's preferences. It has long been and remains a personal and social reality, sought and prized by individuals, couples, and whole societies. But it is also a moral reality: a human good with an objective structure, which it is inherently good for us to live out.

Furthermore, they say:

Marriages have always been the main and most effective means of rearing healthy, happy and well-integrated children. The health and order of society depend on the rearing of healthy, happy and well-integrated children. That is why law, though it may take no notice of ordinary friendships, should recognise and support marriages.

The reason they oppose the redefinition of marriage is that:

If the law redefines marriage to include same sex partners, many will come to misunderstand marriage. They will not see it as essentially comprehensive or thus (among other things) as ordered to procreation in family life but as essentially an emotional union. For reasons to be explained they will therefore tend not to understand or respect the objective norms of permanence or sexual exclusivity that shape it. Nor, in the end, will they see why the terms of marriage should not depend altogether on the will of the parties, be they two or ten in number, as the terms of friendship and contracts do. That is, to the extent that marriage is misunderstood, it will be harder to see the point of its norms, to live by them, and to urge them on others. And this, besides making any remaining restrictions on marriage arbitrary, will damage the many cultural and political goods that get the state involved in marriage in the first place.

As these quotations indicate, *What is Marriage?* is a detailed philosophical defence of the nature and importance of the traditional understanding of marriage. It begins by explaining the essential features of marriage as traditionally understood that mark it off from all other types of human relationships and the benefits the existence of this kind of relationship brings to society. It then argues that same-sex relationships lack these essential features and that their recognition as marriages will result in the undermining of the traditional understanding of marriage and the loss of the social benefits this brings with it. Gergis, Anderson and George are Christian writers and although their book does not appeal to the authority of the biblical teaching about marriage, what it does do is explain very clearly the nature of the sort of marriage that the Bible teaches was ordained by God, and why this form of marriage is uniquely socially beneficial and should therefore be supported even by a religiously pluralist society.

Martin's opinion:

This a hugely important piece of Christian philosophical apologetic that Christians need to be aware of and make use of in seeking to defend the traditional understanding of marriage in today's world.

Commendations:

David Novak writes:

What a joy to see this book by Sherif Gergis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, which presents the most philosophically astute and historically accurate defence of traditional marriage to date. It exposes the

incoherence of attempts to radically redefine marriage by showing the inherent wisdom in what is our oldest social institution.

Thomas Oden, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir*, Inter Varsity Press US, ISBN 978-0-83084-035-9, £22.62 (hardback and e editions also available).

Overview:

Thomas Oden (1931–2016) was an American Methodist theologian who taught at Phillips Graduate Seminary and Drew University as well as lecturing at a number of other universities around the world. He is regarded as one of the most influential theologians of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and is perhaps best known for his work as the originator and general editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* and the *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series, for his systematic theology *Classic Christianity*, and for his championing of the importance of early African Christianity.

His autobiography is entitled *A Change of Heart* because it tells the story of why and how Oden radically changed his theological approach in the middle of his theological career.

The first half of the autobiography explains how from the 1940s until the 1970s Oden enthusiastically supported theological liberalism within the American Methodist Church and the Christian Church more widely, supporting a variety of progressive political and social causes and seeking to understand Christianity in the light of modern approaches to human psychology. As Oden explains, in this part of his theological career, ‘the gospel was not about an event of divine salvation but about a human psychological experience of trust and freedom from anxiety, guilt and boredom.’

All this changed after he started teaching at Drew University in 1970. At Drew he met the Jewish philosopher Will Herberg who, having read Oden’s most recent book, told him, ‘that I was densely ignorant of Christianity, and he simply couldn’t permit me to throw my life away.’

In Oden’s words:

Herberg reminded me that I would stand under divine judgement on the last day. He said, ‘If you are ever going to become a credible theologian instead of a know-it-all pundit you had best restart your life on firmer ground. You are not a theologian except in name only, even if you are paid to be one.’

In response to Herberg’s challenge Oden began to read the classic texts of the Christian tradition, beginning with the works of the Christian writers of the early centuries. As a result:

I came to trust the very orthodoxy I had once dismissed. I found myself living within a much larger community of discourse populated not just by modern companions but radiant minds of many past generations from varied cultures spanning all continents for two thousand years. Through this discipline I became even more relevant, not less relevant, to modern partners in dialogue. As I began to immerse myself in classic Christian texts, I found myself standing with the blessed presence of the communion of saints of all generations. They were the antiphonal choir with whom I was singing.

From that point on, writes Oden:

... my reasoning gradually became a straightforward matter of identifying those apostolic teachings which believers from all places and times confessed and believed with one voice and for which they had been willing to die. That form of reasoning awakened in me a deeper form of critical reasoning that could penetrate and discern the deficits of modern naturalism. I became better prepared to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of modernity by viewing them in the light of consensual Christianity. At last, I realized that the world was best viewed from the vantage point of the glory of God revealed in history. The seed of the Word was being planted precisely within the fertilised soil of ever waning cultures.

In addition, Oden’s study of the consensual Christian tradition led him to try:

... to abstain from creating any new doctrine ... I realized that I could be a theologian simply by reflecting accurately out of the great minds of Christian teaching. That was 100 percent more fruitful than the expression

of my own imaginings. For once and for all, I knew my calling would be fulfilled through building bridges between the classic Christian consensus and the lost reality of the modern world.

The second half of Oden's autobiography explains how he went about trying to fulfil this new calling and how the theological work mentioned at the start of this review was the result of this endeavour.

Martin's opinion:

*A Change of Heart* is a book that is well worth reading by anyone who wants to understand the history of the Church during the period which it covers. Just as Oden was at the heart of liberal Protestantism in the first half of his career, so he was at the heart of the movement for the retrieval of consensual Christian orthodoxy in the second half of his career. This book gives an insider's view of both movements and shows how it was by the unexpected grace of God that the second movement arose to challenge and correct the errors of the first. We are where we are in the Church today because of the existence of both movements. *A Change of Heart* explains in a very readable fashion how this situation has come about and challenges us to choose to identify with the second movement rather than the first.

Commendations:

Mark Hansard comments:

Thomas C. Oden is a fascinating figure in the history of twentieth-century theology, and his new autobiography, *A Change of Heart*, is a fascinating read. Known for *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* and *Agenda for Theology*, Oden writes a riveting tale about his early commitment to liberal theology and socialism, and then a 180-degree turn as he embraced classic Christianity and conservative thought in the early 1970s. Truly a remarkable story, Oden's work is well worth the time.

Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*, Harper One, ISBN 978-0-06189-732-0, £43.00 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Thomas Oden's 2006 work *Classic Christianity* is a one-volume edition of his three-volume systematic theology, which was originally written between 1987 and 1992.

The combined volume is still arranged into three books.

Book One, 'The Living God,' is in four parts. Part 1 considers the knowledge of God, the nature of God and the character of God. Part 2 considers whether God exists and whether God is Triune. Part 3 considers God's creation of, and care for, the world. Finally, part 4 considers what is involved in the study of God.

Book Two, 'The Word of Life' is again in four parts. Part I considers the person of Christ and the manner of his incarnation. Parts 2–4 then consider Christ's earthly life, his death for our sins and his resurrection and ascension and end with a plea from Oden that the historical study of Jesus Christ must involve the premise that he is both divine and human (the 'theandric premise') because 'to attempt a history of Jesus without the theandric premise is like attempting sculpture without stone or mathematics without numbers.'

Book Three, 'Life in the Spirit' is also in four parts which consider in turn the person of the Holy Spirit, the nature of salvation, the nature of the Church and the final destiny of human beings.

As Oden explains in his Preface, his intention in writing this work is to say: 'nothing new or original.' Instead, the purpose of the book is to:

... set forth an ordered view of the faith of the Christian community upon which there has generally been substantial agreement between the traditions of East and West including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. My intent is not to present the views of a particular branch of modern Christian teaching such as Roman Catholic or Reformed, but to listen single mindedly for the voice of that deeper consensus that has been gratefully celebrated as received teaching by believers of vastly different cultural settings, whether African or Asian, Eastern or Western, sixth or sixteenth century.

My intention may be simply put: I hope to set forth what is most commonly stated in the central Christian tradition concerning God. This effort is therefore ecumenical in a larger sense than is usually assumed in the modern ecumenical movement. It proposes to follow that ancient ecumenical consensus of Christian teaching of God as seen in earliest creedal summaries of Irenaeus, c.AD 190; Tertullian, c.200; Hippolytus, c.215; Council of Caesarea, 325; Council of Nicaea, 325; Marcellus, 340; Cyril of Jerusalem, 350; Council of Constantinople, 381; Rufinus, 404; Council of Chalcedon, 451. These confessions still embrace and empower not only centrist Protestants and traditional Roman Catholics and Orthodox but also great numbers of evangelicals, liberals and charismatics.

Hence I am seeking to set forth key constructive arguments of two millennia of ecumenical Christian thinking – *that* God is *who* God is, and what that *means* for us today. I seek an internally consistent statement of classical Christian thinking about God so as to provide a reliable foundation for baptism, the life of prayer, scripture studies, and for the living of Christian life.

As Oden further explains, alongside constant references to Scripture:

Embedded in almost every paragraph of these pages are references to leading classical Christian sources. They point modern readers to a textual history of dialogue that rightly informs contemporary discussion. The most important service I can render readers is manifested in these quotations and embedded annotations. This follows the method of reference in classic Christianity, with constant orientation to Scripture and the tradition of exegesis of scripture.

Martin's opinion:

*Classic Christianity* is a book which should be owned by every serious student of theology and by everyone with responsibility for teaching theology. Oden succeeds brilliantly in his quest to be unoriginal. What he presents in the book is a detailed account of the 'mere Christianity' referred to by Richard Baxter and C S Lewis, the basic shared consensual faith taught in the Scriptures and handed down faithfully first by the theologians of the Patristic period and then by an unbroken succession of orthodox Christian writers in the centuries since. Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century defined orthodox Christianity as that which has been believed 'semper, ubique et ab omnibus' (always, everywhere and by all). Oden shows you that orthodox Christianity as thus defined does actually exist and what it teaches. A must buy.

R R Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*, Regnery Gateway, ISBN 978-1-68451-269-0, £23.45 (e and audible editions also available).

Overview:

R R Reno is an American Roman Catholic theologian and journalist. His book *Return of the Strong Gods* considers the way that a consensus about the future of Western society emerged in the years after the Second World War and why this consensus, although well intentioned, is something that now needs to be challenged.

In his book Reno quotes a speech made by the then American President George H W Bush to the United Nations General Assembly on 1 October 1990. In this speech the president looked forward to a new world after the fall of the Berlin Wall the previous year. He declared that his vision was 'a world of open borders, open trade, and open minds.'

As Reno notes, Bush's words expressed the essence of the West's postwar consensus about how to avoid a resurrection of the 'strong gods' of *militarism, fascism, communism, racism, and anti-Semitism*.

The consensus that Bush represented so ably at the United Nations held that to combat these evils and ensure that they never return we must banish narrow mindedness and cultivate a spirit of openness.

This consensus, which was rooted in the influence of books such as Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, viewed the way to avoid the mistakes of the past as being to combine an open-minded society with a globalised free market economy. Taken together these would combat totalitarianism, whether of the left or the right, and would ensure economic prosperity.

As Reno goes on to observe:

The post war consensus is more than political. Its powerful cultural influence is evident in the emphasis on openness and weakening in highly theorised literary criticism and cultural studies in universities, often under the flag of critique and deconstruction and in popular calls for diversity, multiculturalism and inclusivity, all of which entails weakening of boundaries and opening of borders. Nor is the cultural influence of the post war consensus confined to the left. The same insistence on openness and weakening is found in libertarianism as well, which seeks cultural deregulation so that individuals are not constrained by shared norms. It is felt in free market economic theory and sociobiological analysis of political politics and culture, both of which adopt a reductive view of human motivation that disenchant public life.

By 'weakening' Reno means an emphasis against the idea that any one viewpoint or idea should be seen as truthful and therefore authoritative. As he says elsewhere in his book the concept of 'truth' has become eclipsed by the idea of 'meaning.' I should live not by what is universally true, but what I find gives subjective meaning to my existence, what is referred to as 'my truth.'

The big point made by Reno in *Return of the Strong Gods* is that the Western intelligentsia are committed to trying to keep the postwar consensus just described going, insisting that it is the only safeguard against a resurgence of the authoritarianism of the 1930s and 40s. However, according to Reno this insistence misunderstands the real dangers facing Western societies:

Our societies are not gathering themselves into masses marching in lockstep. Central planners do not clog our economies. There is no longer an overbearing bourgeois culture bent on exclusion ... Instead our societies are dissolving, Economic globalisation shreds the social contract. Identity politics disintegrates civic bounds. A uniquely Western anti-Western multiculturalism deprives people of their cultural inheritance. Mass migration reshapes the social landscape. Courtship, marriage and the family no longer form our moral imaginations. Borders are porous, even the one that separates men from women. Tens of thousands die of heroin overdoses. Hundreds of thousands are aborted.

If Reno is right, and he surely is, what this means is that Christians should be prepared to break ranks with the Western intelligentsia and say that we should not persist in trying to defend the postwar consensus against all comers. Instead, we should replace an emphasis on weakening with one of strengthening the 'strong gods' of family and religion.

Throughout the history of the West communities of transcendence have pinioned the nation from above while the marital and domestic bonds of family loyalty have pinioned it from below. Let us learn from this history: the best safeguards against the dangers of love's perversion are the loves that ennoble and give us rest. The solidarities of domestic life and rich community are not at odds with the civic 'we'. On the contrary the strong gods can reinforce each other preparing our hearts for love's many devotions. A man who makes sacrifices for his family or for his faith is likely to be ready to give the full measure of devotion to his country.

Martin's opinion:

*Return of the Strong Gods* is a brilliant piece of Christian political and social analysis and critique. As Carl Trueman and others have argued, the dominant emphasis in contemporary Western society is 'autonomous individualism.' What Reno explains is that the reason that this emphasis has become dominant is because of reaction against the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century and a desire to avoid their return. However, this reaction has in turn unintentionally led to the growing dissolution of Western society and the way to combat this is to return to the two historic pillars of Western civilisation: the traditional family and religious faith. Only in this way can Western society be restored and the danger of a return to totalitarianism in the future be avoided. 'Openness' on its own is not up to the job. Highly recommended.

R R Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*, Regnery Faith, ISBN 978-1-62157-349-4, £35.81 (e and audible editions also available).

Overview:

R R Reno's book *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* can be seen as a companion volume to *Return of the Strong Gods*. It looks in more detail at the dissolution of contemporary American society and how Christians should respond to this situation.

The title of the book contains a deliberate reference to T S Eliot's book *The Idea of Christian Society* which was published in 1939 as a response to the rise of totalitarianism in Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union which Eliot saw as raising the fundamental question of whether the Western world would seek a Christian future or a pagan one.

Reno's argument is that Americans face a similar choice today. In his words:

Our crisis seems less dire than in Eliot's day but we should not underestimate the dangers we face. Democracy requires civic solidarity, the shared sense that we're all in this together. As economic and cultural transformation splits our society into unequal parts, it's difficult to affirm our solidarity any more. We are disintegrating into two increasingly estranged classes: a super successful elite and the rest, many of whom lead troubled lives and are dependent on government assistance to get through life.

I'm not a prophet, but I sense that we are leaving behind the democratic era and heading towards a meritocratic one. A meritocracy justifies the wealth and power of its elite on the grounds of their competence and achievements rather than on popular assent. At best, well-meaning technocrats keep the economic machine humming, distributing the material goods of an advanced industrial society and providing therapeutic assurances of inclusion. More likely, perhaps, is a darker future. Social Darwinism may return, this time in a libertarian guise. Opportunity becomes the watchword, and the 'losers' in society, their failure self-willed, are thought to deserve their place at the bottom. When a culture of freedom becomes a cult of freedom, injustice, suffering, and social dysfunction get explained away as 'choices.'

As Reno sees it, the scenario he has just described does not have to be the future: 'We can make a choice about choice. We can encourage the kind of freedom that serves a higher good. We can opt for the idea of a Christian society.'

Such a society, argues Reno, will be one that has a different notion of freedom than the libertarian freedom currently dominant in much American thought. This is because Christian freedom, the freedom for which we are set free by Christ:

is quite different from the freedom championed by modern liberal culture, the freedom of self-determining, even self-defining choice that ends up paradoxically reinforcing our slavery to worldly powers. It is a fundamental principle of the common good that Christian freedom grows in proportion to our obedience to Christ and the natural truths of the human condition. A society encourages human flourishing to the degree that the supernatural authority of God's revelation is proclaimed and the natural authority of his creation sustained.

This does not mean he says, 'establishing' Christianity, but being willing to speak up as Christians in the public square.

We need to say, out loud and with confidence that we are best off when we live under the authority of the permanence of marriage, accept the duties of patriotism and affirm the supernatural claims the Church makes on our souls ... Today's poverty is spiritual and moral. What's needed is the stability and permanence of moral truth as well as a renewed sense of the possibility of a faith that brings us into the everlasting household of God.

Martin's opinion:

Reno's book primarily addresses the current situation in the United States. However, what he says about the crisis facing American society also accurately describes the state of contemporary British society. Britain, too, is in danger of succumbing to a cult of freedom and facing a potentially very dark future. This means that Christians in Britain also need to read Reno's book and heed his challenge to be willing to speak up in the public square and put forward an

alternative Christian account of what a truly free society would look like. Reno's book is a powerful challenge to speak up for God in a society that has become increasingly pagan, and one that that as many Christians as possible should read and act upon.

Commendations:

Rod Dreher declares

R R Reno understands what many Christian public intellectuals today fail to see: that we live in post-Christian America, and we have to come to terms with that fact. Reno's analysis is sophisticated, but *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* is realistic, plainspoken, and compelling. Crucially, the book is not a counsel of despair, but rather a source of hope for faithful Christian resistance because it forthrightly deals with the nation as it truly is, not as old-school culture warriors wish it were.