

Oliver O'Donovan. *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.

Oliver O'Donovan, professor emeritus at University of Edinburgh, here begins a projected three-volume study of Christian ethics by considering its framework before moving on in future volumes to explore ethical actions (*Finding and Seeking*) and ends-of-action (*Entering into Rest*). This first volume “is concerned primarily with the form and matter of Christian ethics as a discipline, in relation to its material (moral thought and moral teaching), its setting among the humanistic faculties of study, and its proper shape, a triadic trajectory in which self, world, and time are reflected and restored” (xi).

The present book serves as an “induction,” not so much as an introduction. The difference is significant for O'Donovan. A standard introduction shows the grounds and scope of something entirely new; an induction signals that we are being made more aware of trains of thought, inquiry, and communication that were part of us long before we were conscious of them (1). O'Donovan wishes the reader to be alert to agency, world, and time; indeed, the controlling metaphor of his first chapter is that of waking, understood as a New Testament imperative, a metaphor that “stands guard over the birth of a renewed moral responsibility” (9).

The “triadic trajectory” allows the author to stress what he believes must be part of the pursuit of ethics as theology. The emphasis on the *world* underscores the importance of searching for the truth about the world in which we find ourselves; we have a “vast stake in description” (11). Ethics as theology must also pay attention to the *self* as an active agent. Attention to *time* forces us to face the future immediately before us, the next moment in which our moral action may be expressed. Without attentiveness to these three dimensions of ethics as theology, O'Donovan argues, we face potential moral mishaps: lack of reference to the world generates action that parts company with the conditions of nature; ethics without the self becomes mere problem-solving; and morality without reference to time fails to concentrate on what is fit to be done in this time and place (17, 18).

Having laid the groundwork, the author then addresses moral thinking understood as practical reason, moral communication and the

social dimension of ethics, and moral theory, which reaches out toward both the doctrinal and the practical. In his final chapter, he offers a transition to the projected second and third volumes. In the present volume he shows that self, world, and time structure *moral reasoning*; once recovered and converted, they can form the structure of *theological ethics* as it pursues faith, hope, and love. Volumes two and three will “explore these stages on action’s way” (103).

This first volume of the trilogy continues O’Donovan’s work in political theology—*The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (1999) and *The Ways of Judgment* (2008). He has worked hard to resist any substantive separation of political theology and political ethics; his resistance to a false dualism was especially evident in *The Ways of Judgment*. This resistance is on full display in the new project.

A further connection to his political theology project consists in O’Donovan’s embrace and pursuit of what he terms as “an architectural enterprise.” He means to bring together trains of thought that have different inner logics. This is similar to his approach in *The Desire of the Nations*, which displayed an impressive architectonic structure. However, there as here, it is not always obvious to me that such an impressive structure is necessary; in some cases, it seems potentially distorting to the material under discussion.

The more direct connection of the present volume is to O’Donovan’s earlier study, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (1986; 2nd ed. 1994). He refers to it a number of times, revealing that he now wants “to ask further about the gift of the Spirit and its implications for the forceful moral objectivism” of that work. He wants to take stock of, and give a better account of, what he now sees as a flat and this-worldly account of authority. He also seeks to give a fuller account of the resurrection for ethics as theology.

*Self, World, and Time* is a continuation of O’Donovan’s work on evangelical ethics, but to think that his political theology work was a kind of interlude would be a mistake. O’Donovan continues here to contribute to Christian thought and practice in an exemplary way, combining immense learning in order to refine a serious vision for faithful Christian discipleship.

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