

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Oliver O'Donovan, *Ethics as Theology*

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

Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking. Ethics as Theology 2* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014).

Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest. Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

This trilogy is an important work that will linger and last; it displays sustained, rich theological depth and erudition that is not only exemplary (it surely is that) but also a constructive, faithful witness to the Gospel. While the substance of a major project like this trilogy defies concise description, there are several ways of providing orientation to it. O'Donovan himself provides helpful guidance in a published interview, where he characterized the set this way: volume 1, “And now these three remain...”; volume 2, “. . . faith, hope, and love...”; and volume 3, “... but the greatest of these is love...”¹ More specifically, Volume 1 addresses Ethics as ordered reflection on moral thinking and on its place in the life of faith. Volume 2 shifts to moral thinking itself, exploring progress from the consciousness of agency to the world as the structure of value and to the time that determines the moment of decision. The third volume turns to the object of moral thinking—“the forward horizon with which moral thinking engages.”²

¹ “Five Questions with Oliver O'Donovan,” *EerdWord* (blog), March 17, 2015, <https://eerdword.com/2015/03/17/five-questions-with-oliver-odonovan/>.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest. Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 81-87.

Another way in is to say that *Ethics as Theology* does for Christian ethics what O'Donovan's previous two-volume work—*The Desire of the Nations* and *The Ways of Judgment*—did for political theology and ethics; namely, it deals with horizons.³ For example, *The Desire of the Nations* described the task of political theology as “pushing back of the horizon of commonplace politics to open it up to the activity of God.” *Ethics as Theology* sees the sequence of faith, hope, and love as

open[ing] up to a further horizon, that of accomplishment, the satisfaction of moral agency at its end. It is the horizon of a second reflection, a point of rest on the far side of deliberation to which practical reason may look as its goal, not alien to practice or superseding practice, but pushing its horizon back to the accomplishment that life itself is offered.⁴

This concept offers one point of orientation. We are watching the horizon being pushed back to see God's activity, which in turn calls us to see, think, deliberate, discern, and act more faithfully in light of this perspective.

It is important to view this trilogy as a continuation of O'Donovan's two-volume political theology and ethics work. There the author wanted to move “beyond suspicion,” the belief that politicians corrupt morality and that politics is corrupted by theology. Here he wants to move “beyond criticism,” to use a phrase that surfaces in his treatment of sanctification understood as integration and completion. A sanctified person is “one in whom the balance of whose communications there is no dissention or incongruity, a completed work of the God of peace.”⁵ That is the eschatological possibility.

A further connection to the political theology project consists in O'Donovan's ongoing pursuit of “an architectural enterprise,” which is what he considers ethics to be. He presents trains of thought possessing different inner logics. However, the more explicit and direct connection of the trilogy

2017), vii.

³ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998). Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 2.

⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking. Ethics as Theology 2* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014), 106.

is to his earlier book, *Resurrection and Moral Order*,⁶ to which he makes explicit reference, revealing that he now wants “to ask further about the gift of the Spirit and its implications for the forceful moral objectivism” of that book.⁷ He is taking stock of, and seeking to give a better account of, what he now sees as a flat, this-worldly account of authority in that work, and he wants to give a fuller account of the resurrection for ethics-as-theology.

Although Stanley Hauerwas famously critiqued *Resurrection and Moral Order* as having too much order and not enough resurrection, that critique does not hold for the trilogy project. Here O'Donovan uses the language of “Pentecost and Moral Reason” to describe this work, in which he gives less emphasis to the ordered moral world that makes thinking and acting possible, and places more emphasis on the logic of thinking and acting. This new emphasis centers on being and acting that is undertaken in the Spirit and embedded in narratives and descriptions of resurrection and Pentecost. These narratives and descriptions need each other in order to survive and function. *Ethics as Theology* is a perpetual finding and seeking, a demand that the Spirit and Giver of life lays on us. In acknowledging this reality, we accept it as a demand of both our existence and God's existence.⁸

The “sovereignty of love” is central to the vision of *Ethics as Theology*. This sovereignty should not be taken to be a fundamental theological concept that might provide an immediate answer to every practical question without giving space for deliberation to look around and understand the world and time in which we live.⁹ Though not *fundamental* in that way, love is *foundational* nonetheless.¹⁰ While focusing on the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love, O'Donovan resists methodological monism. He does not champion one approach over all rivals, and despite the extensive treatment of love, his project cannot be labeled an ethics of love.¹¹ In his view, if love is

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time. Ethics as Theology 1* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2013), xii.

⁸ O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-65. Here O'Donovan claims that Jürgen Moltmann uses hope in just this way.

¹⁰ O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

sovereign, then it is a “statement about the finality of community,”¹² a matter to which I return below.

O’Donovan grants the sovereignty of love foundational status, and yet resists a monism of love, virtue, liturgy, or hope. He discusses these and other emphases, gives them their due, and offers trenchant criticisms without being overtaken by, or beholden to, any one concept. While the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love supports the entire effort of the trilogy, there are many other structural elements to keep track of: body, soul, spirit; world, self, time; material, social, and hermeneutic; power, love, moral instruction—and this is not a comprehensive list. The connections of these elements are sometimes difficult to track, and their nature and significance are not always transparent. This raises the issue of “architectonics,” understood as a sort of slavishness to an elaborate structure or system, and a line of criticism that has dogged O’Donovan for some time. He addresses it explicitly in discussing “occasional” versus “architectural” organizations of ethics.¹³ He resists Duncan Forrester’s notion of a “fragmentary” method of pursuing ethics, arguing that such an occasional approach tends to drift with the stream, never getting a sense of where we have been and where we might go. Instead, “[t]he imaginative architecture we need . . . must be constructed on categories of theological interpretation.”¹⁴ In response to the criticism of architectonics, O’Donovan contends that in order to think freshly and to preserve order in thought, “One must be able to think one thing in relation to another according to some pattern of which an account can be given.”¹⁵ For him, such structure is not absolute and serves only a heuristic purpose, since to be a slave to one’s own organization is to talk only to oneself, and to be a slave to whatever happens to be on one’s mind at a given moment is to end up talking not even to oneself.

That said, does the criticism of “architectonics” still hold? It is certainly less applicable now than previously. O’Donovan takes care in the trilogy to relativize whatever organizational structures are used or, perhaps better put, to give an account of, and to assert the exploratory or heuristic nature

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

of, the structures pressed into service. Still, it seems that the “occasional” approach that he resists is not *only* fragmentary. It may well entail writing or communicating in response to a call from a community, in which case the heuristic device providing shape and order may be a real need of the church and not an instance of drifting with the stream.

Nevertheless, something in this project prevents me from pressing the architectonic criticism too hard. O'Donovan stands by his structure and the sovereignty of love as a starting point, but he also hopes that there could be other starting points, such as “the teaching of Jesus.” Here again his insights are worth quoting directly:

I hope, at any rate, that the time will come when moral theologians may dare to make Jesus their point of reference without being suspected, or guilty, of a ‘low’ Christology. . . . Lots of church thinkers have learned from Jesus how to reframe questions. . . . We should be able to do as much.¹⁶

A similar dynamic—asserting love’s sovereignty while acknowledging other possible starting points—surfaces in several places. Consider this example:

When we love a particular thing, we know it as an instantiation of form that has been given time and space. When we love a particular person, it is as an instance of the form we know, but this time in a unique subject of action, who expresses form by doing as well as being. And when we love Jesus as the Christ (the point of unity between love of God and love of neighbor) we find his life and teaching to be the form that the whole history of God’s saving work displays.¹⁷

Again, as part of a discussion of pastoral education:

If the clergy are to learn once again what it could mean to give direction to the Christian faithful, they must begin afresh from the moral categories and forms of moral speech that we

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁷ O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 126.

encounter in the evangelists and apostles.¹⁸

What interests me is O'Donovan's repeated and appropriate disavowal of the absoluteness of any specific starting point or foundation, even if one is chosen (e.g., the sovereignty of love), and the recognition that the teachings of Jesus may well have played the same foundation-making role. I can't quite see why the author did not pursue the fantasy he claims to entertain, that if he were to begin again he would "take my starting point from the teachings of Jesus."¹⁹

In a review of the trilogy's first volume, *Self, World, and Time*, Samuel Wells described it as "a lonely book."²⁰ Not that the author is lonely, but that the book is. Wells's complaint, his "form of discomfort," was that the church did not receive the attention it deserves. Would Wells's discomfort still stand after the publication of volumes two and three? I contend that it cannot. *Finding and Seeking* puts forward the notion of the Christian's pilgrim condition,²¹ and presents a compelling account of the community established by the Gospel.²² *Entering into Rest* displays the ecclesiological dimension of the trilogy at its most powerful, stressing living in community as the exercise of freedom in mutual service,²³ and developing deep, rich accounts of the church in passages on communication, sanctification, friendship, pastoral education, and other ecclesiological dimensions. Here too O'Donovan shows his concern to resist any sort of monism. For example, liturgy enters the discussion but does not serve as the structure for ethics. The church is not reduced to being only the bearer of sacraments and liturgy that in turn might function as the basis of ethics. These volumes do not put forward an ecclesiological or communitarian monism; they are not lonely.

O'Donovan's hope for ethics to be shaped by starting with the teachings of Jesus is interesting and even provocative. What would such a move change? Would more decisive shaping power perhaps be given to some dimensions

¹⁸ O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 195ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

²⁰ Samuel Wells, "Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology Volume 1*," *Theology* 117, no. 5 (September 2014): 392-94.

²¹ O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 101.

²² *Ibid.*, 132.

²³ O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, 20.

of the trilogy project which, while not absent, do not “carry enough weight”? For example, should the significance of suffering, which does surface in the account, receive further attention? What about confession and repentance, or the church’s pilgrim condition, and even dispossession (John 12:24), which deserves more attention—even on O’Donovan’s own terms?

All these dimensions of ethics as theology appear in this trilogy, but they are sometimes dealt with very briefly and cryptically. There is not enough about vulnerability, not enough about dispossession. In addition, I wonder if the notion of the church in a pilgrim state might extend further to thinking of the church as in a state of exile, resulting in a posture that does not and cannot rely on social standing or powerful status. I am not suggesting exilic status as a new form of ethical monism, but I am reminded of something suggested in another review of *Self, World, and Time*: “waking up involves a social and political struggle through which we come to be able to tell the truth about our world and ourselves; yet the sense of this being a highly contentious and precarious undertaking is glossed over in this volume.”²⁴ I would welcome a deeper sense of this contentiousness and precariousness, perhaps by more directly engaging with questions and sources addressing social location, privilege, marginalization, gender, and so on—issues that are fraught by their very nature. There is room for more of this fraughtness throughout.

O’Donovan’s trilogy is an important project that is deeply biblical and theological, constructive and comprehensive, and also richly pastoral, even devotional. It will reward readers seeking guidance on any number of topics, and will especially reward those reading it as a coherent whole in which we come face to face with faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.²⁵

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²⁴ Luke Bretherton, “*Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology, Volume 1: An Induction*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27, no. 3 (2014): 368.

²⁵ I am grateful to Denny Smith and P. Travis Kroeker for helpful conversations about O’Donovan’s work. This review essay was originally read in a public forum at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland (November 23, 2017), an event celebrating the completion of the trilogy.