Oliver O'Donovan. *The Ways of Judgment.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

In this companion volume to the acclaimed *The Desire of the Nations,* Oliver O'Donovan puts forward the thesis that "the authority of the secular government resides in the practice of judgment" (3), which summarizes a characteristic biblical approach to government that has had a decisive effect in shaping the Western political tradition. While he disavows any necessary distinction between political theology and political ethics, suggesting instead that these constitute two moments – reflection and deliberation – in a single train of thought, this second 'moment' nonetheless treats matters primarily from the political side.

O'Donovan assumes here the theological framework developed in the earlier book, and seeks not to argue for the establishment of any church but to make political institutions intelligible and to clarify the coherence of political conceptions. He considers the act of judgment as the paradigmatic political act, then the forming of political institutions through representation, and finally the apparent opposition between political institutions and the church, the community instructed by Jesus to 'judge not.'

The author premises his discussion on the belief that Christ's triumph has created new terms that ground a distinction between secular and spiritual authority, between this-worldly and ultimate rule. It is in the secular theater, the secondary theater of witness to the appearing grace of God, that political rulers attest to the coming reality of Jesus Christ by way of their judicial service. Such judgment is "an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context" (7).

A political act is one in which both the interests and the agency of the community are in play. While the imperfectability of human judgment suggests limits in terms of truthfulness and effectiveness, nonetheless our judgment anticipates God's judgment precisely by not pretending to forestall it. Further, the use of liberal equality arguments in dealing with judgment tempts us to believe arguments can be settled without needing to judge their truth. O'Donovan contends the equality that should interest us is the theological assertion based on creation, which calls for differentiated

moral and social engagements. He also addresses issues of freedom, the possibility of mercy (although not forgiveness) within political judgment, and punishment.

No single kind of political institution is necessarily presumed by the political act of judgment, says the author. However, the question of legitimate representation is important. He claims that political authority arises as judgment is done, and therefore we simply devise political institutions to channel that authority. To recognize political authority is to recognize a particular bearer of authority, one that bears the common good: "political authority arises where power, the execution of right, and the perpetration of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency" (142).

Such authority arises where it meets a 'people,' a community not created by political invention, as in Thomas Hobbes or John Rawls, but reflecting the communal reality made possible by virtue of God's creation. Thus, "to see ourselves as a people is to grasp imaginatively a common good that unifies our overlapping and interlocking practical communications, and so to see ourselves as a single agency, the largest collective agency that we can practically conceive" (150). O'Donovan seeks to answer how the responsibilities of government are to be attributed justly, which leads to discussions of the power of the three branches of government and the role of international judgment.

The third part of the book addresses the relationship of the church and political institutions. O'Donovan wants to avoid any view leading to idealist politics, whereby ecclesial self-description is seen as the key to policy. Such a move corrupts politics and creates an ironic depoliticization, since the church is better viewed as counter-political or even post-political; the church has the judgment of God to which it defers. However, "a well-conceived political theology" cannot make that move, nor should it attempt to do so, since it "begins from the point of transition between the political and the counter-political, the defining limit where closure is imposed upon the act of judgment, an opening made for that free activity of not judging" (235). Judgment appears as a parenthesis between the pre-political society of God's creation and the post-political society of the church – an interim that is a definite something yet not identical to the church, which looks forward to the human race gathered around the throne of God, and looks

backward on the given sociality of creation.

O'Donovan takes up issues in a way that provides insight without requiring the reader to agree with a larger construct. For example, his treatment of the difference between late liberal individualism and evangelical concern for the person offers penetrating insight into contemporary culture and theology of the individual. Similarly, his discussion of the complex dynamic of the individual and the church offers a compelling account of both issues (despite how the church drops from view too quickly when secular politics is discussed).

While this book is very important for Western Christian political thought and impressively argued, I have several reservations about it. O'Donovan has the church play too indirect a part in political theology and ethics. At times the church is referred to as post-political or counter-political, but it cannot ever *be* political by its active presence as the community of the slain Lamb. A Christian political theology, he suggests, can profoundly affect the secular theater and offer to it truthful judgment, appropriate effectiveness, mercy, freedom and so on, but all in a provisional manner that distinguishes between the penultimate and ultimate realms.

O'Donovan's concern to resist idealistic depoliticization of the Christian political tradition without succumbing to Niebuhrian realism is well taken. Nonetheless, what follows from his view seems to assume a demarcation between private, public, and political that is too clearly drawn and does not give enough credence to the practices of the church as political.

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