

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality

Marcia Pally

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans (419 pages)

Commonwealth and Covenant sets out to develop a “theology of relationality” as an organizing principle for contemporary society. Marcia Pally walks a tightrope between two opposing sanctities of American thought—liberty and community—and picks a careful path through the recent history of ideas to articulate a fundamental crisis in our current political thinking. For Pally, reading Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, the problem is this: Through an excess of freedom, we are losing our rootedness in the cultures and capabilities that make such freedom and self-identity possible. Pally argues that we need a fundamental revision in the way that we understand our own being and its relationship to others. She would like to see a new ontology based on a notion of shared covenant and underwritten by a theological understanding of how we come to be as persons.

Pally sets out from the claim that the West has had too much of a good thing, which she calls separability, but that we might equally call individualism or disembeddedness. Separability contrasts with situatedness: one’s embeddedness in place, community, family, or social context. Pally is right to point out that too much situatedness is also a bad thing, leading to totalitarian state-over-individual government or the suffocating and exclusionary conservatism of the premodern village. Thus, separability offers a counter to situatedness and vice versa. The first part of the book focuses on situatedness-among-separability in the social sciences (in the most part), seeking to elaborate the construct against a backdrop of structure-agency skirmishes. One has to admire the chutzpah of

anyone seeking to show that Rawls and Nozick invoke situatedness as an essential part of their arguments, or that the poststructuralist is motivated by a desire for separability (though Pally is surely correct in both cases).

But Pally moves beyond a purely sociological reading of these ideas by introducing the pairing distinction/relation, offering a philosophical and theological reading of the same constructs. The engine room of Pally's argument comes in the second part of the book and takes the form of a sustained engagement with theological tradition, drawn from contemporary Christian theology—both Protestant and Catholic, early patristics, as well as the Hebrew bible and its exegesis, and medieval Islamic theology. (As Pally notes, the methodology of the book reflects its telos: deliberately ecumenical, seeking to achieve its own distinction within the relations of theology.) Pally argues that God in existence is an act, and that his self-expression is being and all possible being. Humans, made in God's image, partake of God's distinction-among-relation; we take our being from the source of God's being, yet remain ontologically, permanently distinct. As Pally puts it, the very "structure of being is distinction-amid-relation" (129). It follows, therefore, that we are subject to a theological mandate. Our creation in the image of God means that we are, at the core of our being, unable to avoid our relation to the Divine and to one another. There is no escape from this "gift" (142).

Getting to this point requires some theological heavy lifting. Pally invokes the *imago dei* to develop a theory of covenant as the basis of distinction-amid-relation: We are distinct from God and from other beings inasmuch as we have uniqueness and individuality, yet we are bound to each other through the *imago* with chains of hospitality and obligation. Here she finds herself alongside such thinkers as Levinas, who have seen the humanity (the "face") of the other as the basis for ethical obligation. Pally cites the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who argues that humans can only realize our "special task" as the image of God if we recognize the "community of creation" from which we spring (168).

In the final part of the book, Pally moves to develop an ethics of relationality and to offer some practical suggestions for policy, her stated endeavor being to move the reach of the book beyond a purely academic audience. She argues throughout the book that ontologies and theologies of relationality can offer up an ethical framework for economic and political policy and that theological inquiry has much to say to such a debate. The recognition that ethics is immanent in our own personhood (for personhood is only achievable in relation to others) tempers our ability to act exactly as we choose. Such nonteleological freedom is replaced by a teleological freedom, where we are free to act only in accordance with the "inviolable obligations set by the twinned covenant with God and among persons" (310), offering an ethics that resists relativism and solipsism. Pally argues that we are bound, through covenantal, agapic relations, to nurture alternatives to the dominant discourse and culture around us and—in a wonderful phrase—to "puncture the numbness of the status quo" (317).

Importantly, Pally does not labor the truth-claims implicit in theology, simply stating that the discipline's contributions in terms of providing "insights and paths forwards"

(8) are substantial whether it is regarded as truthful revelation or metaphor (though, she concedes, these are not the same). Readers may not be convinced by such a step. The metaphorical reading of *imago* can only be that we have a shared moral responsibility on account of our shared nature as persons—a much weaker claim than the ethical mandate that results from the bold statement that as the image of God we are called upon to complete his work of creation and bring about his kingdom on earth.

Concrete proposals are, in the end, somewhat limited and less original than the rest of the book: a call to bring civil associations into policy making, to develop local stock markets and some kind of social-consequence reporting for large firms, as well as more radical proposals for a basic income and some kind of luxury tax. Pally's point is that such methods are already known and available to us, yet we lack the political will to implement them. That lack, she suggests, is the result of a weak ontology: a failure to "believe—in the way that we believe we breathe" that the other side is worthy of consideration. Yet a reading of the theology on which Pally builds her arguments might imply far more radical transformations than the suggestions made here: a genuine commitment to rebuilding an economy in the image of the kingdom is perhaps more likely to be seen in a grassroots rethinking of economic practice than in tinkering with the trimmings of global capital.

Having worked so hard to move beyond mere functionalist notions of what covenantal economic stewardship might entail, it is disappointing to see Pally step back at the last moment. Nonetheless, this erudite and original book offers a substantial contribution in its articulation of the political and economic implications of a theology of covenant and relationality.

—Philip Roscoe (e-mail: pjr10@st-andrews.ac.uk)
School of Management, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom

The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age

David Cloutier
 Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015 (315 pages)

Readers of contemporary retrievals of Christian ethics are familiar with works on hidden vices, for example, *acedia*. Such works typically draw from patristic authors and renew a moral critique of modernity from a theological perspective. David Cloutier's recent book on the vice of luxury stands apart from these accounts in its sophisticated analysis from economic, philosophical, theological, and marketing standpoints.

As anyone who is familiar with the New Testament can see, Christ's teaching about the peril of riches is rife. Dives and Lazarus show the tendency of wealth to desensitize one to the poor. The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21) shows that excessive saving is sinful because it promotes selfishness and carnal attachments. Yet Cloutier notes that the Church has done little to repeat this message in modernity until the pontificate of Pope Francis.