

Theology and Public Philosophy: Four Conversations

Kenneth L. Grasso and Cecilia Rodriguez Castillo (Editors)

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012 (187 pages)

Theology and Public Philosophy is an immeasurably valuable contribution to the ongoing contemporary debate on the role that theology can play in the development of an authentic public philosophy, especially given the theoretical and practical weaknesses of the liberal intellectual tradition and the models of social and political life that flow from within it.

The editors of the volume have organized the collection of sixteen essays—not including a fine editorial introduction by Kenneth Grasso and an epilogue by Jean Bethke Elshtain—into a series of four conversations, each centering on a major issue raised by a primary essayist (i.e., Charles Taylor, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Robin Lovin, and Jean Porter) and three briefer commentaries on or critiques of each of the primary essays. Neither the primary essayists nor the vast majority of the respondents disappoint the reader in terms of the significance of the issues raised and the quality of the discussion. The issues range, as Elshtain points out, from “how we order our moral lives within the framework of modernity” to “the nature of our moral traditions and whether they are grounded in the ephemeral or the enduring” (179).

For example, the question of how we order our moral lives is at the heart of Charles Taylor’s essay (chapter 1), an extended critique of what Taylor calls “nomolotry.” Taylor believes that the Christian way of life is deformed and eviscerated by those theologians and philosophers who would reduce to mere codes of conduct the possibilities and complexities of moral and political life. He traces this increasing code-fetishism to various sources, including certain elements of Latin Christendom during the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In his response to Taylor, Kenneth Grasso (chapter 2) wonders whether Taylor’s opposition to such moral and spiritual reductionism—not an incredibly controverted position taken by itself—reflects a deeper criticism of the moral norms on which Christians depend for sustenance. Grasso traces the deformation of the Christian intellectual tradition and the possible seeds of nomolotry not to the Counter-Reformation but to the nominalism and voluntarism of fourteenth-century philosophy, and he contends that those seeds have borne bitter fruit in liberal modernity’s reification of the autonomous self.

In the second primary essay (chapter 5), Protestant philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that a purely secularist account of the foundations of political authority is insufficient and argues that a “divine delegation” concept of the nature and limits of authority might succeed in providing a better foundation for limited constitutional government than Calvin’s own “divine deputization” theory. J. Budziszewski (chapter 6) and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler (chapter 7) agree with Wolterstorff that a secular humanist account of the nature of political authority is inadequate but wonder whether Wolterstorff’s own argument might not be improved upon by reuniting a legitimately biblical account of authority with the Thomistic concept of natural law (Budziszewski) or by moving beyond a theory of politics that traces the origins of political authority solely to human deficiency toward one that sees it as an essential aspect of human flourishing (Heffernan

Schindler). Joshua Mitchell (chapter 8) questions whether even consent-based theories of political authority could arise in anything other than a society grounded in a Christian differentiation on political things. This conversation highlights not merely the weaknesses of liberal individualism but the fruitful possibilities for Catholic/Protestant dialogue on political matters.

Robin Lovin's thought-provoking essay (chapter 9) attempts to situate the possible range of religious responses—"the witness," "the realist," and "the prophet" being what Lovin admits are simplified archetypes—to Rawlsian or Dworkinian liberal regimes' commitment to publicly acceptable modes of political discourse. He argues that religiously grounded public discourse provides real sustenance to any experiment in self-government, and his effort is supplemented by Jonathan Chaplin's excellent response (chapter 11) in which Chaplin brilliantly synthesizes Thomistic and neo-Calvinist arguments in defense of a truly plural structure of political society. Lovin's and Chaplin's models of vibrant public discourse contrast sharply with the Rawlsian liberal effort to limit the range of political discourse to those participants who conform to the liberal model of "public reason."

The last primary essay by Jean Porter (chapter 13) and the three responses to it focus on Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of the tradition-bound nature of moral and political inquiry. Each contributor to this conversation raises interesting questions about whether MacIntyre's critique of an Archimedean, neutral starting point for moral and political reflection can be employed to ground a form of moral and political realism that supports liberal political institutions while rejecting the underlying tenets of the liberal intellectual tradition.

If there is one weakness in this volume, it is the fact that it does not contain any responses by the primary essayists to their commentators' critiques. The inclusion of such responses would have enhanced the conversational tone and richness of an already excellent volume.

Those readers who seek immediate answers to particular public controversies over issues such as abortion, gay marriage, or the precise meaning of the relationship between church and state will find that the contributors do not directly address these issues. Nevertheless, this outstanding collection of essays will amply reward those who wish to explore what Grasso describes in his introduction as "broader and deeper questions of the possible contribution of theology and theologically informed moral reflection to the contemporary quest for a public philosophy capable of sustaining and advancing America's ongoing experiment in self-government and ordered liberty" (ix).

—Robert P. Hunt
Kean University, Union, New Jersey